

*Buddhist
Romanticism*

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by

Thānissaro Bhikkhu

(Geoffrey DeGraff)

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“Both formerly and now, it’s only stress that I teach, and the cessation of stress.” — The Buddha

*“Religion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite.”
— Friedrich Schleiermacher*

“God hates the unbound.” — Friedrich Hölderlin

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The efforts of all these people have helped to make this a much better book than I could have managed on my own. Any defects it contains, of course, are my responsibility.

Two technical notes: 1) In all quotations from other texts, I have added emphasis—in italics—in only one case, which I have noted. In all other instances, the emphasis is present in the original.

2) In quotations from other writers, I have kept their spelling of Pali and Sanskrit terms.

I have found the research and writing of this book to be both an educational and an enjoyable experience. I hope that the reader will find the same qualities in the book itself.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu
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INTRODUCTION

Questioning Buddhist Romanticism

Many Westerners, when new to Buddhism, are struck by the uncanny familiarity of what seem to be its central concepts: interconnectedness, wholeness, spontaneity, ego-transcendence, non-judgmentalism, and integration of the personality. They tend not to realize that the concepts sound familiar because they *are* familiar. To a large extent, they come not from the Buddha's teachings but from their hidden roots in Western culture: the thought of the early German Romantics.

The names of the early Romantics—Schleiermacher, Schlegel, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Novalis—are largely forgotten, but their ideas are still very much alive in Western culture. They were among the first to analyze the problem of what it *feels* like to grow up in modern culture, where science teaches a dizzying perspective of deep space and deep time, and where rationalized economic and political systems foster a sense of fragmentation within and without. The Romantic analysis of how spiritual life, approached as an art of the emotions, can enhance inner psychological health and outer harmony in modern culture has continued to shape popular ideas on these issues up to the present day.

If the influence of early Romanticism on modern Buddhism went no further than a few isolated concepts, it would not be much of a problem—simply a matter of mapping familiar Western terms onto unfamiliar Buddhist terms so that Buddhist concepts would make intuitive sense to people with a Western background. The only issue would be determining whether the terms were properly applied, and tweaking any that were off the mark. And it might be argued that fitting Romantic concepts into a Buddhist framework automatically changes those concepts in a Buddhist direction. But the situation is the other way around. The influence of Romanticism on modern Buddhism has penetrated through the surface and into the bone, shaping not only isolated concepts but also the underlying structures of thought from

which those concepts take their meaning. In other words, Romanticism has provided the framework into which Buddhist concepts have been placed, reshaping those concepts toward Romantic ends.

When we compare the Dhamma—the teachings of the Buddha—to the religious thought of the early Romantics, we see that they differ radically on a structural level in how they define all the important questions concerning the purpose of religion, the nature of the basic spiritual problem, the cure to that problem, how the cure can be effected, and the effect of that cure on the person cured.

- For the Romantics, religion is concerned with establishing a right relationship between human beings and the universe. For the Dhamma, religion is concerned with gaining total freedom from suffering and stress, beyond “human being,” “universe,” or any relationship at all.

- For the Romantics, the basic spiritual problem is ignorance of human identity—that each person is an integral part of the infinite organic unity of the cosmos. This ignorance, in turn, leads to an alienating sense of separation: within oneself, between oneself and other human beings, and between oneself and nature at large. For the Dhamma, the basic spiritual problem is ignorance of what suffering is, how it’s caused, and how it can be ended. In fact, the Dhamma lists among the causes of suffering the attempt even to define what a human being is or a human being’s place within the universe.

- For the Romantics, the basic spiritual cure lies in gaining an immediate felt sense of unity within oneself and between oneself and the universe. For the Dhamma, a felt sense of unified awareness is part of the *path* to a cure, but the ultimate cure involves going beyond feelings—and everything else with which one builds a sense of identity—to a direct realization of *nibbāna* (*nirvāṇa*): a dimension beyond Oneness and multiplicity, beyond the universe, beyond causal relationships, and beyond the dimensions of time and space.

- For the Romantics, there are many ways to induce a spiritual cure, but they all involve inducing a sense of receptivity to all things as they are. For the Dhamma, there is only one way to *nibbāna*—the path of skills called the noble eightfold path—against which all mental states are judged as skillful and unskillful, with skillful states to be fostered and unskillful ones to be abandoned in whatever way is effective.

- For the Romantics, the cure is never final, but must be continually pursued throughout life. One's understanding of inner and outer unity can naturally deepen over time. With each new experience of that unity, one feels a natural desire to express it: This desire is the origin of religious traditions and texts. But because unity is infinite, and expressions of feelings are finite, no religious tradition has the final word on how infinite unity feels. And because any expression of a feeling has to be shaped by time and place, each person is duty bound to express the feeling of infinite unity in ever-new ways. Only this can keep religion alive as cultures change.

For the Dhamma, however, full, final awakening is possible in this life, and the texts cite people by the thousands who, in the Buddha's time, confirmed this fact for themselves. Once gained, full awakening is fully understood. The Buddha, in teaching, was not interested in expressing his feelings about the infinite. Instead, his interest lay in explaining the path of action by which other people could reach nibbāna and in inducing them to follow it. Because the path is timeless—and because it has stood up to repeated testing for more than 2,600 years—there is no need to formulate it in new ways. In fact, the greatest gift one can give to other people now and into the future is to pass along knowledge of the Buddha's path in as faithful a way as possible, so that they can test it for themselves.

When we examine the way Buddhism is currently being taught in the West—and, in some cases, in Asia to people with a Western education—we find that it often sides with the Romantic position and against the Dhamma on all five of these questions. And because questions shape the structures that give concepts their meaning and purpose, the result is that modern Buddhism is Romantic in its body, and Buddhist only in its outer garb. Or to use another analogy, modern Buddhism is like a building whose structure is fully Romantic, with Buddhist elements used as decorations, reshaped to fit into the confines of that structure. This is why this trend in modern Buddhism is best referred to as Buddhist Romanticism, rather than Romantic Buddhism.

From a Romantic point of view, even a structural change in the Dhamma is no serious problem, for such a change would simply fall in line with the Romantic notion that all paths of open receptivity lead to

the goal, so that replacing one path with another would make no practical difference. But from the point of view of the Dhamma, the Romantic goal offers only a limited possibility of freedom. If the Romantic goal is regarded as the one and only aim of spiritual life, it stands in the way of the further goal of total freedom.

In fact, as we will see when we examine the logical implications of the Romantic worldview, the idea of the universe as an infinite organic unity offers no possibility of genuine freedom of choice for any part of that unity. If your kidneys, for example, were free to do what they chose, they could go on strike to demand more dignified work, and your body would die. Similarly, in a universe where all are part of a larger Oneness, no one has freedom of choice even in common, everyday matters. People simply have to follow their nature, with no choice as to what that nature might be. But as the Buddha pointed out, if there were no freedom of choice, the idea of a path of practice would make no sense, because no one would be free to choose whether or not to practice it.

So, for anyone sincerely interested in the path to the freedom promised by the Dhamma, Buddhist Romanticism *is* very much a problem. It closes the path to two groups of people who mistake it for genuine Dhamma: those attracted to Romantic ideas, and those repelled by them. It teaches the first group a very limited idea of how much freedom a human being can possibly experience. It teaches the second group not to take the Dhamma seriously at all.

For both groups, the problem is a lack of awareness: not knowing that Buddhist Romanticism is one thing, and the Dhamma another. So, for the sake of both groups, it's important to raise awareness of how Buddhist Romanticism and the Dhamma are two different things—overlapping in some areas, but nevertheless coming from radically different assumptions and leading to radically different goals. In this way, members of the first group will be in a position to make an informed choice: Do they want to stay in the comfort zone of Romantic ideas, or do they want to strive for something more promising even though it's more challenging?

As for members of the second group, they will be in a better position to open their minds, gain access to the actual Dhamma, and judge it on

its own terms. In both cases, the advantage will be that, when choosing how much to take from the Dhamma, their choices will be informed.

Unfortunately, the ignorance that allows people to confuse Buddhist Romanticism with the Dhamma is very complex, and exists on many levels. First, there is simple ignorance about what the Buddha actually taught. This is partly the fault of past Buddhists, some of whom continued to create texts that they attributed to the Buddha many centuries after his passing. On top of this, there has been a tendency in the West to misquote traditional Buddhist texts, attributing the misquotes to the Buddha himself, often on the Romantic principle that to force an ancient text to speak to the needs of modern people is to do it a favor, even if that means radically changing what the text has to say.

Ironically, an even greater reason for ignorance about Buddhist Romanticism is a general ignorance in Western culture about its own history, and the history of Romantic ideas in particular. In some cases, this can be traced to a widespread belief that society and culture have changed so much in the 21st century that we are no longer influenced by the past; thus, there is no reason to know anything about what people in the past thought. This attitude blinds us to the fact that many of those ancient thoughts still actually influence the way we think today.

Another reason for our ignorance about the past is the belief that ideas alive at present have survived where other ideas have died because the survivors are more objectively true. Therefore there's no point in learning about ideas that perished along the side of the road, or about how the survivors came to survive. This belief, though, ignores the extent to which ideas can be forgotten even when they are true. It also ignores the extent to which ideas can survive not because they are true but because they are *useful*, and that there's a need to look into *what* uses and *whose* uses those ideas are being pressed to serve. Otherwise, when adopting the ideas around us, we risk serving purposes—both within us and without—that cannot be trusted.

But even among people who have some knowledge and interest in history there is a general ignorance about the Romantics and their influence on present thought. Even in scholarly literature, there has been no comprehensive study of Romantic ideas on religion and their

impact on later generations. This leaves us with nothing but popular perceptions of the Romantics, which often turn out to be misinformed.

For example, a common misperception of the Romantics is that they opposed science and exalted the emotions of the Self over the hard facts of the world. Actually, though, the Romantics responded positively to the sciences of their time, which—in the case of astronomy, biology, paleontology, and geology—saw the universe as an infinite, evolving, organic Oneness, and each human being as a part of that Oneness in an interactive relationship with its environment. From this view, the Romantics developed the theory of the microcosm: that because each human being was shaped internally by the same forces that operated externally, a study of one's inner emotions was neither self-indulgent nor egotistical. It actually gave objective knowledge about the forces acting on a larger scale in the cosmos. At the same time, knowing the latest scientific findings about external processes at work in the cosmos would give objective knowledge of the processes working internally, in one's own body and mind.

So, instead of gazing only inside and exalting the Self over the world, the Romantics looked both within and without for better ways to know both self and world so that they could better foster the forward evolution of both.

Because this fact is so poorly understood, we have the ironic situation in which some modern Buddhist teachers, while denouncing the Romantics for being unscientific and egotistical, propose that Buddhism should be altered to fit in with the paradigms of modern science or to place greater importance on our collective interconnectedness—unaware of the fact that both of these proposals are exactly what the Romantics themselves would have espoused. This is one of the reasons why modern Buddhist teachers, though sometimes open about the fact that they are altering and updating the Dhamma as they interpret it for the West, are nevertheless unaware of where their interpretations come from.

Given these many levels of unawareness, it should come as no surprise that Buddhist Romanticism has rarely been questioned. It is simply accepted as a valid version of the Dhamma for our place in time. Even the scholarly literature on Western Buddhism—to the extent that it

has taken note of Buddhist Romanticism—tends to view the rise of Buddhist Romanticism as both necessary and good in terms of the laws of cultural change. The scholars themselves rarely stop to ask where those supposed laws came from. And it turns out that they originated with the early Romantics. In fact, as we will see, the academic study of religion is one of the main vehicles by which Romantic views on religion have been transmitted to the modern world.

But there is a further irony. One of the principles of the Dhamma that *has* been adopted by Buddhist Romanticism is that the Dhamma should not simply be accepted on faith. Instead, it should be put to the test, in practice, to see if it really works. But if the Dhamma is filtered through Buddhist Romanticism, it won't get a fair hearing, for its message will be garbled. And if it doesn't get a fair hearing, there's no way to subject it to a fair test. At the same time, if Buddhist Romanticism is not recognized as something different from the Dhamma, there is no way that *it* can be tested in a way that allows for a fair comparison as to which body of teachings gives better results.

Thus this book.

Its purpose is to raise awareness about the fact of Buddhist Romanticism, so that people who are interested in putting an end to suffering will be able to ask informed questions, both about the Dhamma and about Buddhist Romanticism, and to gain a sense of the practical implications of choosing one over the other.

Part of the inspiration for this book came from studying the process by which Buddhism entered China many years ago. In their first three centuries of contact with Buddhism, the Chinese had Taoism as their Dhamma gate. In other words, when Chinese intellectuals first learned about the Dhamma, they interpreted it in line with Taoism, placing Buddhist concepts in the context of a Taoist worldview. In fact, early translators used the word *tao* to translate a wide range of Buddhist concepts, such as dhamma, yoga, awakening (*bodhi*), and path (*magga*). These and other Dhamma concepts were then applied to answering questions that arose from within the Taoist context. At the same time, the myth developed that the Buddha had actually been taught by the Taoist sage, Lao-tze, and that unfamiliar elements in the Buddha's teaching could be attributed to the fact that Indians, being barbarians,

had garbled Lao-tze's message. This was how isolated Buddhist ideas began entering Chinese culture.

However, in the fourth century, monks such as Tao-an (312–385) and his disciple, Hui-yüan (334–circa 416) began to realize that Buddhism and Taoism were asking different questions. As these monks rooted out and exposed these differences, they started using Buddhist ideas to question their Taoist presuppositions. This was the origin of a larger movement to try to understand Buddhism on its own terms, and to get the most out of the Dhamma by adopting the questions it asked. In this way, Buddhism, instead of turning into a drop in the Taoist sea, was able to inject something genuinely new into Chinese culture.

The question here in the West is whether we will learn from the Chinese example and start using Buddhist ideas to question our own Dhamma gate—Romanticism—to see exactly where the gate and the Dhamma are in alignment and where they are not. If we don't raise these questions, we run the risk of mistaking the gate for the Dhamma itself, and of never going through it to the other side.

So, to follow the example of Tao-an and Hui-yüan, we will adopt an approach in this book that reverses a common tendency in modern Buddhism. Instead of questioning the Dhamma from the Romantic point of view, we will question Buddhist Romanticism from the point of view of the Dhamma.

For the purposes of this book, I will treat Buddhism not as a single religion, but as a family of many religions, the primary three being Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. Although Buddhist Romanticism has shaped all of these religions as they have come to the West, my focus here will be on the Dhamma as taught in the suttas, or discourses, of the Pāli Canon, which forms the basis for the Theravāda. I do this for three reasons:

- 1) Of all the various sources of the Buddha's teachings, the Pāli suttas—together with the Pāli Vinaya, or monastic rules—seem by far to be the closest record we have of the Buddha's teachings.

- 2) This is the Buddhist religion with which I am most familiar and in which I was trained.

- 3) Of all the Buddhist religions, the Theravāda contains teachings that differ most sharply from Romantic ideas. Yet modern discussions

even of the Pāli suttas are strongly influenced by Romantic principles, which means that modern Theravāda provides a clear test case for how pervasive Buddhist Romanticism can be, even in a tradition that offers the fewest possible points of overlap.

To maintain this focus, when I quote from the writings of Buddhist Romantics, I will limit my sources to those Buddhist teachers who—whether they identify themselves as Theravādin or not—engage with the Pāli suttas when commenting on what the Buddha taught.

The book is arranged in seven chapters, followed by an [appendix](#).

[Chapter One](#) begins with some biographical sketches to give a sense of the people responsible for the ideas that are the focus of the book. It starts with a sketch of the Buddha's life—for, although it can't be said that his life story is unknown in the West, the version of the story that most people know dates from sources much later than the Pāli Canon. The Pāli version of the Buddha's life story, while somewhat less dramatic than the more widely known version, contains many details that make it psychologically more interesting.

As for the early Romantics, their lives—even their names—are largely unknown. They never called themselves “Romantics,” their friendships were volatile, and some of them embraced the Romantic worldview more thoroughly than others. So it's often hard to say who counts as an early Romantic and who doesn't. Still, five thinkers were by far the most influential in constructing early Romantic religious ideas, so we will focus on them: Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Friedrich Schelling.

[Chapter Two](#) provides a brief sketch of the Dhamma taught in the Pāli suttas. This is meant to act as a baseline against which Romantic ideas about religion in general, and about Buddhism in particular, can be assessed. The Pāli is the oldest extant canon of teachings attributed to the Buddha. Although there have been many efforts in the scholarly world to question its reliability, those efforts tend to reveal more about the people making the effort than about the Pāli itself. Three points in particular recommend it as an authority for understanding the Dhamma:

- 1) No evidence contemporary with the Buddha contradicts anything found in the Pāli Canon.

2) Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts presuppose the teachings found in the Pāli Canon, but the Pāli Canon doesn't presuppose the teachings found in them.

3) Where the Pāli Canon can be compared with fragments of other early canons, we find that many elements included in those other canons were often kept out of the Pāli Canon and placed instead in the commentaries that grew up around it. This suggests that the people who maintained the Pāli Canon, beginning at least at some point in time, tried to be scrupulous in drawing a clear line between what they had received from tradition and what was novel in their day and age.

So it seems reasonable to take the Pāli Canon as the best available primary source for learning what the Buddha taught.

The next three chapters provide a history of Romantic religion and its survival into the 21st century. Because, as I noted above, there has been no adequate scholarly overview of this topic, I have had to give it a fairly extensive treatment. My general approach to this history is similar to what Michel Foucault, following Nietzsche, has called *genealogy*: focusing on history not as a grand narrative showing a clear and definite purpose, but as a series of accidents and reversals, following a random and somewhat arbitrary course. Only if we appreciate how arbitrary the past has been can we sense our freedom to shape the present into something better than it is. Only if we appreciate the irony of history can we begin to distance ourselves from the ideas in which we have been raised.

Unlike Foucault, however, I take a somewhat Buddhist approach to genealogy. What this means is that I am interested in ferreting out the way in which individuals freely shape their environment, in addition to being shaped by it. This approach follows a principle common both to the Dhamma and to the Romantics: that people exist in a reciprocal relationship with their environment, and that influences between the two can go in both ways. But whereas the Romantics saw this sort of reciprocal relationship as a sign that individuals were part of a larger organic whole whose purpose was to work toward the wellbeing of all its parts—and that history thus has a goal—the Dhamma regards reciprocity as inherently unstable and without an overarching purpose.

This is why genealogy is closer to the Buddhist view of history than to the Romantic.

[*Chapter Three*](#) provides some background on the scientific, political, philosophical, and literary situation to which the Romantics were responding.

[*Chapter Four*](#) gives an outline of their thought and the type of *Bildung*—or training in art, culture, and character—that they hoped would foster freedom in Germany and among humanity at large. As the chapter points out, their notion of freedom is paradoxical, in that their view of the universe as an infinite organic unity provides no room for freedom. Nevertheless, each of the Romantics struggled in his own way to resolve this paradox, and as a result each bequeathed a distinctive and influential understanding of freedom to the modern and postmodern world.

[*Chapter Five*](#) shows how Friedrich Schleiermacher in particular took the Romantic views on artistic creation and applied them to the felt experience of the infinite that, in his eyes, constituted religion. It also shows how the other Romantics responded to his thoughts on religion to create a distinct body of thought that can be called Romantic religion. The chapter ends with two lists of twenty points: the first, enumerating the points that identify Romantic religion; the second, showing how the Dhamma differs from Romantic religion on all twenty.

[*Chapter Six*](#) traces the development of Romantic religion into the 21st century in four areas: literature, psychology, history of religions, and perennial philosophy. Here, too, the emphasis is on genealogy, showing how the survival of Romantic religion was contingent on many factors that could have easily gone otherwise, and yet how Romantic ideas—once they had become enshrined in scholarly fields—gained an aura of scientific objectivity.

[*Chapter Seven*](#) documents the existence of Buddhist Romanticism by quoting passages from the writings and talks of modern Buddhist teachers that conform to the defining points of Romantic religion. Because Buddhist Romanticism is a cultural syndrome—a widespread pattern of behavior that is socially reinforced—I have not identified the teachers quoted. One reason for this is that their audiences carry as much responsibility for the syndrome as they. Teachers tend to sense

when their audiences respond positively to a teaching, and can easily—often unconsciously—fall under the sway of what their audience wants and expects. At the same time, I am following a point of Buddhist etiquette: when teaching the Dhamma in public, not to criticize other teachers by name. It is less important to know *who* some of the main exponents of Buddhist Romanticism are, and more important to learn *what* it is, and how to recognize its tenets no matter who is expounding them.

Because one of the tenets of Buddhist Romanticism is that there is ultimately no practical difference between adhering to the Dhamma of the Pāli Canon or to Buddhist Romantic ideas—that both lead to the same goal, although Buddhist Romanticism may get there more effectively—this chapter concludes with a discussion of how choosing Buddhist Romanticism over the Dhamma actually leads to a lower goal that gets in the way of the higher goal that the Dhamma offers.

The [Appendix](#) contains many of the Pāli sutta passages on which the discussion in Chapter Two and the critiques at the ends of Chapters Five and Seven are based.

Some of the ideas presented in this book have already appeared in two published articles: “The Roots of Buddhist Romanticism” (also published under the title, “Romancing the Buddha”) and “The Buddha *via* the Bible.” In my original conception for this book, I planned simply to patch those two articles together. But after doing further research, I realized the need for a much larger work. This was partly to correct some of the mistakes in those articles (for instance, I originally identified Schiller as a Romantic, but now I understand why it’s more accurate to treat him as pre-Romantic), and partly to fill in a large gap in the existing literature on Romantic religion.

The earlier articles prompted some criticisms and objections, three of which I would like to respond to here.

- Many features of Romantic religion resemble Mahāyāna doctrines, so the question is: To what extent can Buddhist Romanticism really be traced to Romanticism, and to what extent is it simply the importing of Mahāyāna ideas into Theravāda? This question, however, begs two other questions: (1) Central Mahāyāna ideas, such as emptiness,

interconnectedness, and the innate goodness of Buddha nature, are interpreted in Asia in a wide variety of ways. Here in the West, though, the interpretations closest to Romantic religion are predominant. What is that, if not a sign of the influence of Romantic religion in Western Mahāyāna? (2) Why would a Western teacher trained in Theravāda want to import Mahāyāna ideas into the Dhamma if it were not for the fact that those ideas correspond to ideas already popular in Western culture?

- The approach adopted in the above articles and in this book is sometimes dismissed as fundamentalist. But this begs another question: What does “fundamentalist” mean in a Theravāda Buddhist context? Given that the term has been applied both to Buddhist monks in Asia who advocate genocide, and to Buddhist monks in America who argue against condoning any form of violence, even a “just war,” is “fundamentalist” anything more than a pejorative meant to put a stop to the conversation? The usual image of fundamentalism equates it with unquestioning faith in harmful and irrational beliefs. Although it’s true that we are here measuring Buddhist Romanticism against fundamental Dhamma teachings, I hope to show that those fundamentals are far from being harmful or irrational. And the whole thrust of the book, instead of advocating an unquestioning attitude, is to raise questions that haven’t previously been asked.

- The growth of Buddhist Romanticism is sometimes portrayed as a dialogue between ancient Buddhist and modern Western ideas, a dialogue that needs to happen if Buddhism is going to make sense in the West. But as I have already suggested, the term “dialogue” hardly applies to the current situation. Buddhist Romanticism has been more of a monologue, in which modern teachers and their audiences determine the topic, set the questions, and choose what the ancient texts are and aren’t allowed to say. In many cases, there is hardly any awareness that there might be another cogent side to the discussion: The claim is that the Buddha’s true message was about interconnectedness, wholeness, spontaneity, ego-transcendence, non-judgmentalism, and integration of the personality, while anything else in the texts is simply a flaw in transmission.

Only if we recognize that Buddhist Romanticism differs radically from the Dhamma, and allow the Dhamma to speak on its own terms,

can a genuine dialogue begin.

The *need* for this dialogue was shown by a question I was asked recently when I led a daylong discussion on the theme of Buddhist Romanticism. The morning had been devoted to listing the twenty points that define Romantic religion. The afternoon was to be spent showing the actual position of the Dhamma on all twenty. When we had arrived at Point 3 or 4 in the afternoon, one of the attendees—who had participated in many Buddhist retreats—raised his hand and asked, “So what you taught us this morning *wasn’t* the Dhamma?” The twenty Romantic points copied so accurately what he was accustomed to hearing as Dhamma that he had blocked out all my earlier comments to the contrary. This sort of confusion can happen only when the Dhamma is denied a voice in the discussion of modern Buddhism, and Buddhist Romanticism has the forum to itself.

The *type* of dialogue needed is shown by a comment made at two other daylong discussions on the theme of Buddhist Romanticism that I led during the past year. Toward the end of each day, after I had outlined the main tenets of Romantic religion, an attendee would say plaintively, “These are all the reasons I came to Buddhism in the first place.” I responded in both cases to the effect that “It’s like psychotherapy. There comes a time when you sense that some deeply buried ideas that may have worked for you when you were a child are now getting in the way of your growing up. If you can dig up those ideas and question them in the light of an adult intelligence, you’re in a better position to outgrow them and move on.”

The purpose of this book is to start a dialogue of cultural psychotherapy, so that people attracted to Buddhist Romanticism can decide if they want to outgrow their attraction to it in order to benefit more from what the Dhamma has to offer. And when more people can see the difference between Buddhist Romanticism and the Dhamma, people who are *not* attracted to Romantic religion will be in a better position to benefit from the Dhamma as well.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The heart of the argument can be found in [Chapter Two](#), in two sections of [Chapter Five](#)—“[The Religious Experience](#)” and “[Recognizing Romantic Religion](#)”—and in [Chapter Seven](#). If you tend to get bogged down while reading history, you can read these passages first. However, I’m inclined to agree with the early Romantics that every idea has a history, and that to really understand an idea you need to know where it came from. So even if you don’t like history in general, I would recommend giving the historical chapters a try. Otherwise, you’ll miss not only many of the subtleties of the issues surrounding Buddhist Romanticism and the Dhamma, but also the opportunity to meet some of the most fascinating individuals in the history of Western and Buddhist thought.

Dramatis Personae

On a very broad level, the Buddha and the German Romantics share two points of resemblance. Like the Buddha, the Romantics were born into a period of great social ferment: political, cultural, and religious. Like him, they were dissatisfied by the religious traditions in which they were raised, and they searched for a new way to understand and to cure their spiritual dissatisfaction.

There, however, the resemblances end. When we focus on specifics, the differences begin to appear. Some of the differences between the Buddha and the Romantics stem from differences in their respective environments: the precise nature of the social upheavals they experienced and the specific religious traditions that were dominant in their time and place.

In the Buddha's case, the main social upheaval resulted from the rise of a monetary economy. Kings backed by moneylenders were expanding their realms, assuming absolute powers and absorbing small oligarchic republics into large centralized monarchies. At the same time, a wide variety of new religions arose, asserting the right of reason to question all the basic tenets of the Brahmanical religion and promoting a wide array of worldviews in its place. Some argued for a strict materialist deterministic view of the universe; others, a universe of total chaos; others, a universe in which human action played a role. Some taught the existence of an unchanging, eternal soul; others, that there was nothing in an individual that would survive death. In short, every position on the nature of the world, of the human being, and of the relation between the two was up for grabs.

In the case of the Romantics, however, the main social upheaval came from the French Revolution, which occurred when the Romantics were in their late teens and early twenties. The Revolution was something of a mirror image of the changes in the time of the Buddha,

in that it attempted to replace the absolute rule of monarchies and oligarchies with a new order that would embody the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

As for religion, the Europe of the Romantics was much more monolithic than the Buddha's India. One religion—Christianity—dominated, and most religious issues were fought within the confines of Christian doctrine. Even anti-religious doctrines were shaped by the fact that Christianity was the one religion with which they had to contend. The century prior to the Romantics had witnessed the rise of a rationalistic anti-Christian worldview, based on the mechanical laws discovered by Isaac Newton, but as the Romantics were gaining their education, new scientific discoveries, suggesting a more organic view of the universe, were calling the Newtonian universe into question as well.

In addition to political and religious upheavals, though, the Europe of the Romantics was also going through a literary upheaval. A new form of literature had become popular—the novel—which was especially suited to exploring psychological states in ways that lyric poetry and drama could not. Having been raised on novels, young Europeans born in the 1770's tended to approach their own lives as novels—and in particular, to give great weight to exploring their own psychological states and using those states to justify their actions. As we will see in the next chapter, it's no accident that the term "Romantic" contains the German and French word for novel, *Roman*.

For all the social differences separating the Buddha from the Romantics, an even greater difference lay in how they tried to resolve the spiritual dissatisfaction from which they suffered. In other words, they differed not simply because they were on the receiving end of different outside influences. They differed even more sharply in how they decided to shape their situation. Their proactive approach to their times explains a great deal about the differences separating their teachings.

There is something both fitting and very ironic about this fact. It's fitting in the sense that the Buddha and the Romantics agreed on the principle that individual human beings are not merely passive recipients of outside stimuli from their environment. Instead, influences are reciprocal. People interact with their environment, shaping it as they are being shaped by it. What's ironic is that even

though the Buddha and the Romantics agreed on this principle, they drew different implications from it—which we will examine in Chapter Four—and they disagreed in action on how best to apply it to their lives, a point that we will examine here. Acting on their environments in different ways, they came to drastically different conclusions based on their actions—in particular, concerning how much freedom human beings have in choosing their actions, and how much freedom human action can bring about.

A few brief sketches of their lives will indicate what these differences were.

THE BUDDHA

The version of the Buddha's life most widely known in the West was first composed many centuries after his passing, when Buddhists in India wanted a complete biography of the founder of their religion. This was to fill in what they perceived as a lack in their tradition, because the earliest records—such as those in the Pāli Canon—contained glimpses of the Buddha's life story only in fragmentary form.

However, the various biographies composed to meet this felt need didn't simply fill in the blanks left by the fragments. Sometimes they introduced incidents that contradicted what the fragments had to say. A prime example is the story of the Buddha's childhood. The later biographies presented a somewhat fairy-tale like story of a young prince, heir to a king, kept captive in the palace until after he is married, and who leaves the palace secretly in the darkness of night—after seeing for his very first time a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and a wilderness ascetic—in hopes that the life of an ascetic might lead to freedom from the facts of aging, illness, and death.

As told in the Pāli Canon, however, the events surrounding the Buddha's decision to leave home and take up the life of a wilderness ascetic were much simpler and more realistic. In addition, they give greater insight into his character and the values that drove his quest.

These accounts carry a sense of immediacy in that they are told from the first person. In fact, they constitute one of the earliest spiritual autobiographies in recorded history. Because the Buddha's central

teaching was on the power of skillful kamma, or action, and the role of intention in shaping kamma, this is appropriate. In telling his listeners of what he did to attain awakening, and how this involved training his intentions to become more and more skillful, he was giving an object lesson in how they could develop the skills needed to reach awakening themselves.

In the Buddha's telling, his father was not a king. Instead, he was an aristocrat, a member of the noble warrior caste, living in a small oligarchic republic—the type of society that was fast disappearing during the Buddha's lifetime. The young *bodhisatta*, or “being in search of awakening,” was brought up in extreme luxury. Little is said of the education he received, but after he became Buddha he would illustrate his teachings with similes showing an intimate knowledge of the military arts and of music. And his skill at composing extemporaneous poetry shows that he was trained in the literary arts, too. Given the emphasis that the noble warrior caste placed on learning strategy and skills, it's possible to see the influence of his original caste background on the Buddha's eventual adoption of a strategic approach to the religious life as well.

With the passage of time, the bodhisatta came to feel great dissatisfaction with his situation. The texts describe his decision to leave the luxuries of his palaces—and to take up the path of a wilderness ascetic—as a result of three mind states.

The first is an emotion that in Pāli is called *saṃvega*, which can be translated as terror or dismay. The young bodhisatta was struck by an overwhelming sense of the futility of life in which people quarreling over dwindling resources inflict harm on one another only to die in the end.

I will tell of how
I experienced
dismay.
Seeing people floundering
like fish in small puddles,
competing with one another—
as I saw this,
fear came into me.
The world was entirely

without substance.
All the directions
were knocked out of line.
Wanting a haven for myself,
I saw nothing that wasn't laid claim to.
Seeing nothing in the end
but competition,
I felt discontent. — [Sn 4:15](#)

The bodhisatta's second mind state was a sense of sobering appreciation of the fact that he, too, would age, grow ill, and die just like the old, sick, and dead people that he had, up to that point, despised.

“Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: ‘When an untaught, run-of-the-mill person, himself subject to aging, not beyond aging, sees another who is aged, he is repelled, ashamed, & disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to aging, not beyond aging. If I—who am subject to aging, not beyond aging—were to be repelled, ashamed, & disgusted on seeing another person who is aged, that would not be fitting for me.’ As I noticed this, the (typical) young person's intoxication with youth entirely dropped away.

“[Similarly with the typical healthy person's intoxication with health, and the typical living person's intoxication with life.]” — [AN 3:39](#)

The third mind state was a sense of honor. Given that life was marked by aging, illness, and death, he felt that the only honorable course would be to search for the possibility of something that didn't age, grow ill, or die.

“And which is the noble search? There is the case where a person, himself being subject to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, seeks the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding (*nibbāna*). Himself being subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, seeks the aging-less, illness-less,

deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding. This is the noble search.” — [MN 26](#)

By framing his goal as the “deathless,” the bodhisatta was following an old tradition in India. However, as we will see, he broke with tradition in the strategy by which he finally reached this goal.

The Canon states that, having made up his mind to search for the deathless, the bodhisatta cut off his hair and beard in his parents’ presence—even though they were grieving at his decision—put on the ochre robe of a wilderness ascetic, and went forth into the wilderness.

His search for awakening took six years. When later describing this search, he kept referring to it not only as a search for the deathless, but also as a search for what was skillful ([MN 26](#)). And he noted that his ultimate success was due to two qualities: discontent with regard to skillful qualities—i.e., he never let himself rest content with his attainments as long as they did not reach the deathless—and unrelenting exertion ([AN 2:5](#)). Although he described his feelings leading up to his decision to go forth, he claimed that from that point forward he never let the pains or pleasures he gained from his practice or from his career as a teacher invade or overcome his mind ([MN 36](#); [MN 137](#)).

At first, he studied with two meditation teachers, but after mastering their techniques and realizing that the highest attainments they yielded were not deathless, he set out on his own. Most of his six years were spent engaged in austerities—inducing trances by crushing his thoughts with his will or by suppressing his breath, going on such small amounts of food that he would faint when urinating or defecating. When finally realizing that, although he had pursued these austerities as far as humanly possible, they gave no superior knowledge or attainment, he asked himself if there might be another way to the deathless. After asking this question, he remembered a time when, as a young man, he had spontaneously entered the first jhāna, a pleasant mental absorption, while sitting under a tree. Convincing himself that there was nothing to fear from that pleasure, he began eating moderate amounts of food so as to regain the strength needed to enter that concentration.

It was thus that he entered the path to awakening. On the night of his awakening, after attaining the fourth jhāna—a more stable and equanimous state—he gained three knowledges through the power of his concentration: The first two were knowledge of his own past lives and knowledge of how beings die and are reborn repeatedly, on the many levels of the cosmos, based on their kamma. The larger perspective afforded by this second knowledge showed him the pattern of how kamma worked: intentions based on one's views and perceptions determined one's state of becoming, i.e., one's identity in a particular world of experience.

By applying this insight to the intentions, views, and perceptions occurring at the present moment in his mind, the Buddha was able to attain the third knowledge of the night: the ending of the mental states that led to renewed becoming. This was the knowledge that led to his attaining the deathless.

The key to his awakening lay in his revolutionary insight that the processes leading to becoming could be best dismantled by dividing them into four categories—stress or suffering (*dukkha*), the cause of stress, the cessation of stress, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress. Each of these categories carried a duty. Stress, he saw, should be comprehended to the point of developing dispassion for its cause. Its cause was then to be abandoned, so that its cessation could be realized. To do all of this, the path had to be developed. As he later said, only when he realized that all four of these duties had been brought to completion did he affirm that he was truly awakened.

This strategy of reaching the deathless by focusing on the problem of stress in the present moment constituted the Buddha's radical innovation within the Indian religious tradition. The four categories he used in analyzing stress became known as the four noble truths, his most distinctive teaching.

The Buddha later used two formulae to describe the knowledge that came with true awakening. Although the two differ somewhat in their wording, the essential message is the same: Total release had been attained, there was nothing left in the mind that would lead to rebirth, and there was no further work to be done for the sake of maintaining his attainment.

“Knowledge and vision arose in me: ‘Unprovoked [uncaused] is my release. This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.’” — [SN 56:11](#)

“My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the effluent of sensuality, released from the effluent of becoming, released from the effluent of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, ‘Released.’ I discerned that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’” — [MN 4](#)

The Buddha then spent the next seven weeks experiencing the bliss of release: a release that was conscious but lay beyond the consciousness of the six senses—counting the mind as the sixth—and beyond the confines of space and time ([§§46–47](#); [DN 11](#)). At the end of the seventh week, and at the invitation of a Brahmā, he decided to teach what he had learned about the path of awakening to others. Even though his mind had gone beyond pleasure and pain, he had not become apathetic. Quite the contrary: He devoted himself to establishing both a teaching and a monastic vehicle for preserving that teaching that would last for millennia.

There are a few poems in the Canon that are traditionally held to express the Buddha’s feelings on reaching awakening. For example:

Through the round of many births I roamed
without reward,
without rest,
seeking the house-builder.
Painful is birth again
& again.

House-builder, you’re seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole dismantled,
immersed in dismantling, the mind
has attained the end of craving. — [Dhp 153–154](#)

Notice, however, that although this poem expresses a strong feeling of relief, it ends not with a feeling but with a fact: the end of rebirth has been attained through the ending of craving. Thus the poem teaches a practical message. And when we look at the Canon as a whole, we find that the number of passages expressing feelings about awakening are next to nothing compared to the number of passages where the Buddha teaches other people *how* to reach awakening, or at least to pursue the path to awakening, themselves. In other words, he focused on conveying the path as a skill for others to master. As he said, the things he came to know on awakening were like the leaves in a forest; what he taught—the four noble truths—was just a handful of leaves ([SN 56:31](#)). The leaves were chosen, he said, because they would be useful in helping others reach release. In other words, instead of *expressing* his feelings about the deathless, he focused on what can be called a more *performative* and *descriptive* style of teaching: i.e., using words that would have the effect of getting other people to want to practice for the sake of the deathless, and describing to them exactly how to go about doing it.

The Buddha spent the remaining 45 years of his life wandering over northern India, teaching the Dhamma and establishing a Saṅgha, or community, of monastic followers. In the first year, he trained a large number of men to become arahants, or fully awakened disciples, capable of teaching the Dhamma themselves. Then he returned to his home to teach his family. The Canon records that his son and several of his cousins eventually became arahants, and that his stepmother became the first member of the Saṅgha of nuns. The Commentary adds that his former wife and father became arahants, too. In this way the Buddha was able to provide his family with an inheritance much greater than anything he could have provided had he stayed at home.

Although the Buddha continued to meet with great success in leading others to awakening, his career was not without difficulties. Among them, there were the human difficulties of setting up Saṅghas—one for men, one for women—to provide a lasting system of apprenticeship whereby succeeding generations would be able to train in the Dhamma. There were also the difficulties of having to debate with members of rival sects who were jealous of his success and who didn't always content

themselves with debate: Sometimes they also leveled false accusations against the Buddha and the members of the Saṅghas.

There were also difficulties of a non-human sort. Having seen on the night of his awakening that beings can be reborn on many levels of the cosmos, he also realized that there is a being—called Māra—who exerts control throughout the realms of becoming, even to the levels of the highest gods ([MN 49](#)), and who jealously tries to prevent beings from gaining awakening and escaping his control. The Buddha also realized that Māra has allies within each unawakened mind in the shape of such unskillful qualities as sensual passion, craving, and hypocrisy. Māra had tempted the bodhisatta to give up his quest, and even after the Buddha's awakening kept testing him—and his disciples—to see if their awakening was real.

In the face of all these difficulties, the Buddha acted with honor and dignity. Even on the day he was to pass away, he walked all day—after an attack of dysentery—from Pāva to Kusinārā so that he could teach the one last person he knew he had to teach. His final teaching, which he gave to that person, was the noble eightfold path, the same teaching with which he had begun his first sermon 45 years previously. Throughout his last day, he showed great nobility and calm: comforting his disciples, giving them one last chance to question him about their doubts concerning the teaching, even ensuring that the man who had provided the last meal that had brought on an attack of dysentery, instead of being reproached for the meal, would be praised for having given such a meritorious gift of food. After encouraging his disciples to achieve consummation in the practice through being heedful, he entered the various stages of concentration and then was totally unbound from becoming of every sort.

After seven days of funeral celebrations, his followers cremated his body. The relics were then enshrined in monuments in the major kingdoms of northern India. In the Theravāda tradition, the Saṅgha of monks that he established has lasted until the present day.

FIVE EARLY ROMANTICS

When discussing the early German Romantics, one of the first problems is determining who counts as a member of the group and who doesn't. Here our task is made somewhat easier by the fact that we are focusing on a specific aspect of early Romantic thought—Romantic views on religion—so we can limit our discussion to those Romantics who focused on issues of religion in light of the Romantic worldview.

The obvious candidates to include in any discussion of early Romantic religion are Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Schlegel, as they were the Romantics who wrote most prolifically on the topic. In fact, Schleiermacher's *Talks on Religion for Its Cultured Despisers* (1799) was the first major book to treat religion from a Romantic standpoint. It is the defining text of Romantic religion.

Another obvious candidate for inclusion is Friedrich von Hardenberg, who is better known under his penname, Novalis. Novalis was Schlegel's philosophical and literary partner in the years during which both of them worked out the implications of the Romantic worldview, and his ideas on the topic of authenticity seem to have been a major influence on Schleiermacher's thought.

Two other candidates for inclusion are somewhat more controversial. One is Friedrich Hölderlin. Although his views on religion were very similar to Schlegel's, he is sometimes excluded from the category of early Romantic on the grounds that he was only tangentially connected to the circle of friends who, during the late 1790's, gathered in the university town of Jena at the home of August Schlegel, Friedrich's brother, and to whom the appellation "Romantic" was originally applied. However, Hölderlin's notebooks show that he was apparently the first German thinker to formulate what became the Romantic worldview. Also, the novel he published during his lifetime—*Hyperion*—contains many passages that deal with religious issues in line with that worldview. At the same time, his unpublished philosophical essays show that he worked out the religious implications of his worldview in many original ways, foreshadowing the thought of later thinkers, such as Carl Jung, who adopted and transmitted Romantic ideas on religion.

Hölderlin's philosophical essays were not published until the middle of the 20th century, so it can't be said that they were influential. Still, some of his religious views seem to have reached the Jena circle through *Hyperion*, through his poetry, and through conversation. At the same time, those views are of intrinsic interest in any history of Romantic religion in that they show how some of the strands of Romantic religion that came to light only much later were actually realized early on. So, for both of these reasons, he deserves to be included in the discussion here.

Another controversial candidate as an early Romantic religious thinker is Friedrich Schelling. Schelling was a member of the Jena circle, he had a strong influence on Schleiermacher and Schlegel, and he wrote extensively on religion himself, so it seems natural to include him as an early Romantic religious philosopher. The reason there *would* be some controversy around his inclusion is that there are two different criteria for determining who counts as an early Romantic philosopher and who doesn't. Schelling meets one of the criteria, but not the other.

The one he doesn't meet defines early Romantic philosophy by its *style*. Schlegel, Novalis, Hölderlin, and Schleiermacher all rejected the idea that an adequate description of experience could be built logically, like a building, on a foundation of rational first principles. After all, they sensed, there was so much in experience that was falsified as soon as it was expressed in a logical judgment. In particular, they believed that the most direct intuition of experience is that all Being is One. This intuition, however, cannot be adequately expressed in a sentence (or, as they called it, a judgment), even in the simple form of $A = A$, because judgments have to divide things before they can put them back together. For this reason, philosophy—which is composed of judgments—can approach the actual Oneness of experience only by approximation, without ever fully explaining or expressing it. As a result, instead of building philosophical systems, these four thinkers wrote philosophy in the form of dialogues, letters, novels, myths, and aphorisms. This style of philosophy is called anti-foundationalism.

Schelling, however, during the late 1790's, was a foundationalist. He agreed that the most direct intuition of experience was that all Being is One, and that this experience could not be adequately expressed in a judgment. Still, he noted that even to say this much is to assume a great

deal about experience. And for these assumptions to be persuasive, there was a need to show that they were consistent. To be consistent, he felt, they had to follow logically from a rational foundation. This was why, even though Schelling believed that philosophical systems couldn't express everything, he saw a need to write philosophy in the traditional style: building systems—and he built many different systems during the late 1790's—founded on the principle of $A = A$. Only in his later years did he become an anti-foundationalist himself. Thus on this criterion, Schelling would count as a late Romantic philosopher, but not as an early one.

However, there is another criterion for defining early Romantic philosophy, and that's by its *worldview*. All five of these thinkers agreed that the universe is an infinite organic unity, and that human beings are integral parts of that unity. Because these thinkers also defined religion as an issue of the relationship of human beings to the universe, this seems the most relevant definition of Romantic philosophy when discussing Romantic religion. And because Schelling meets this criterion, he, too, deserves to be included in any discussion of early Romantic religious views.

We will present the cultural reasons for why the Romantics developed this worldview and this understanding of religion in Chapters Three to Five. Here we will briefly sketch their biographies to give an idea of some of the personal reasons for the way they arrived at Romantic religion.

We will start with Novalis first.

Novalis (1772–1801)

Georg Philipp Friedrich, Freiherr von Hardenberg, the only one of the early Romantics to come from a noble background, was born on the family estate in the Harz mountains to parents who were devout Pietists (see [Chapter Three](#)). He studied law in Jena, Leipzig, and Wittenberg. While at Jena, he read philosophy as well. This was during a period when one of the major issues at Jena was how to interpret Immanuel Kant's philosophy. Kant had not built a philosophical system on first principles, and the issue for his interpreters came down to whether it should be rewritten so as to ground it with a first principle, to make it



more complete, or left without a single foundation, to stay faithful to Kant's style. Hardenberg's tutors belonged to the anti-foundationalist camp.

In 1793, while at Leipzig, Hardenberg became friends with Friedrich Schlegel. The two began a correspondence that was to last, off and on, to the end of his life.

1795 was Hardenberg's watershed year. He started reading the philosophy of Johann Fichte, a Kantian who proposed rebuilding Kant's philosophy on first principles (see [Chapter Three](#)). At first he was taken with Fichte's ideas, and this was one of his reasons for moving to Jena. There he met both Fichte and Hölderlin, who was studying under Fichte at the time. Later in that year, however, he started writing critiques of Fichte's philosophy in his notebooks, gradually arriving at what was to become the Romantic worldview. (This was a common pattern among many of the early Romantics: At first enamored of Fichte's philosophy, they ended up adopting the Romantic worldview in reaction to it.) Hardenberg in these early critiques also arrived at the basic Romantic view on genre: that this new worldview was best expressed through literature, rather than through academic philosophy.

On a more personal level, Hardenberg became engaged in March 1795 to Sophie von Kühn, who was only thirteen at the time. In September of that year, he entered the Mining Academy of Freiberg in Saxony, where he studied geology with Abraham Werner (see [Chapter Three](#)). In November, however, Sophie died, and Hardenberg spent many a night at her grave, mourning her loss. This experience led to an extravagant series of poems that were later printed as *Hymns to the Night* in 1800. A highly Romanticized version of Sophie, as the personification of wisdom, also became one of the main characters in a novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, which Hardenberg began writing toward the end of his life.

In 1796, he wrote to Friedrich Schlegel about his reasons for breaking with Fichte—reasons that also reflected the view of life he had

developed in the course of mourning the loss of his fiancée.

“I feel more in everything that I am the sublime member of an infinite whole, into which I have grown and which should be the shell of my ego. Must I not happily suffer everything, now that I love and love more than the eight spans of space, and love longer than all the vacillations of the chords of life? Spinoza and Zinzendorf have investigated it, the infinite idea of love, and they had an intuition of its method, of how they could develop it for themselves, and themselves for it, on this speck of dust. It is a pity that I see nothing of this view in Fichte, that I feel nothing of this creative breath. But he is close to it. He must step into its magic circle—unless his earlier life wiped the dust off his wings.”¹

Nevertheless, despite his break with Fichte’s philosophy, Hardenberg continued to be on good terms with Fichte the person. After meeting with him again in Jena in 1797, he wrote to Schlegel:

“At Fichte’s I spoke of my favorite topic—he did not agree with me—but with what tender consideration did he speak, for he held my opinion to be eccentric. This will remain unforgettable.”²

During this period Hardenberg started studying Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, and in the winter of 1797–98 he printed—under the name, Novalis, which means “one who opens up new land”—the only philosophical work that he was to publish during his lifetime. The work, called *Pollen*, was in the form of short thoughts and aphorisms. The title is explained by the poem that serves as its epigraph:

“Friends, the soil is poor, we must sow abundant seeds
So that even modest harvests will flourish”³

In this book, Novalis—as we will call him from here on—formulated what were to be his most influential ideas: that freedom consists of learning to romanticize one’s life—to make it into a novel (*Roman*)—and that only a person who can accomplish this feat is truly authentic.

Toward the end of 1798, Novalis became engaged a second time, but the marriage never took place. The following year he started work as a

manager of the salt mines in Saxony. Still, he found time to continue his philosophical and religious readings, in particular the writings of the mystic Christian, Jakob Böhme. He also commenced work on two novels—*Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and *The Novices of Sais*—but only the second was anywhere near completion when he died.

In 1800 he contracted tuberculosis, which was to prove fatal. During Novalis' final illness, Schlegel reported having kept him well-supplied with opium—which was available in tincture form in those days—to ease his pain. As his end neared, Novalis had little strength even to read. As he wrote to a friend, "Philosophy lies next to me only in the bookcase."⁴

After his death, Schlegel and the Romantic author Johann Ludwig Tieck published his novels. They also kept his poetry in print, and for many years Novalis' reputation was primarily as an author and poet.

Another friend extracted passages from Novalis' unpublished philosophical writings and printed them as a collection of fragments, but these left no great impression. Only in the 1950's and 60's were his philosophical essays edited and printed in their entirety. And thus it wasn't until the middle 20th century that he came to be appreciated as a philosophical thinker of great breadth and originality.

Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829)



Born in Hanover, the youngest son of a Lutheran pastor, Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel was apprenticed to a banker at an early age. Unhappy with this occupation, he pleaded successfully with his parents to be allowed to study law at the university in Göttingen, where his elder brother, August, was already studying the classics. The two brothers began to study aesthetics and philosophy together—Friedrich later commented that he read all of Plato in the Greek in 1788. From 1791 to 1793, he

continued his study of law in Leipzig, where he met Novalis and Schiller.

While in Leipzig, Friedrich fell into a severe depression, from which he partly recovered when he decided to abandon law and to focus on philosophy and classical literature instead. Shortly thereafter, August, then in Amsterdam, asked Friedrich to act as a guardian to his mistress, Caroline Michaelis Böhmer (1763–1809), who was staying in Dresden. Caroline—a woman with a vivacious personality and striking intellect, and who later became one of the leading members of the Romantic circle in Jena—convinced Friedrich that he should try a career as a literary critic: a very uncertain profession in those days, but one that appealed strongly to Friedrich’s normally effervescent temperament. Once he had decided on this career path, his depression was fully gone.

He began writing and publishing reviews and literary essays. From 1794 to 1795, he championed classical literature against modern literature, but by 1796 his preferences began to shift in favor of the moderns.

A major inspiration for his shift was Fichte’s philosophy, which he had begun reading in 1795. As he later said, the main attraction in Fichte’s thought was the latter’s support of the French Revolution and the cause of freedom in general. In 1796 Schlegel traveled to Jena and met Fichte for the first time, which turned out in some ways to be a disappointing experience. Part of the disappointment was an issue of temperament. Schlegel, a person of broad interests, was surprised to learn that Fichte had no use for history or science. In one of his letters to a friend, Schlegel reported what was to become one of Fichte’s most famous utterances: that he would rather count peas than study history.

The other reason for Schlegel’s disappointment in Fichte was more philosophical. Fichte, in his eyes, was too much of a foundationalist. In another letter, Schlegel compared the “transcendental” aspect of Fichte’s philosophy—concerning principles of thought that transcended the senses—to the “transcendence” of a drunken man who climbs up on a horse but then transcends it and falls down on other side. Still, as was the case with Novalis, Schlegel’s philosophical disagreements with Fichte did not prevent them from remaining friends. For a while, in fact, his term for his favorite social activity—

discussing philosophy in an open-ended manner with his friends—was to “fichtesize.”

To further his literary career, Schlegel moved to Berlin in 1797, where he attended the salons of Rahel Levin and Henriette Herz. There he met Schleiermacher and others who were later to become members of the Romantic circle in Jena. In fact, Schlegel’s friendship with Schleiermacher became so close that they shared a house with two other friends from 1797 to 1799.

It was in the Herz salon that Schlegel also encountered Dorothea Mendelssohn Veit (1764–1839)—the first woman he had met with anything like Caroline Böhmer’s intellect and charm. Dorothea, the daughter of the eminent Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (see [Chapter Three](#)), was trapped in a loveless marriage to a banker. In what was apparently a case of love at first sight, she and Schlegel began an affair. After obtaining a divorce from her husband in 1798, she moved in with Schlegel. The two did not become married, however, until 1804, because had they married before then she would have lost custody of the younger of her two surviving sons with Veit.

Based on the affair, Schlegel wrote a novel, *Lucinde*, which he published in 1799. Immediately denounced as pornographic, the novel provoked a storm of controversy in Berlin. By modern standards, there is nothing pornographic about the novel at all, and even by the standards of the time, the descriptions of lovemaking, though fervid, were very vague. What apparently offended the good people of Berlin was that the two main characters in the novel, Schlegel/Julian and Dorothea/Lucinde, were having an adulterous affair and yet were not punished at the end of the novel for their sins. Instead, the novel was an unapologetic celebration of a love presented as far more holy than formal matrimony.

The word “holy,” here, was not meant to be strictly metaphorical. Schlegel announced that he intended *Lucinde* to be the first of a series of books that would constitute a new Bible for modern times. However, as was to become a typical pattern in his life, he never completed the project. Still, *Lucinde* is an important document for the study of Romantic religion, and we will look more closely at its religious implications in Chapters Four and Five.

To escape the scandal in Berlin, Schlegel and Dorothea moved to Jena, where August—now married to Caroline—had become a professor at the university. There, at August and Caroline’s home, the “Jena circle” began to meet.

The core members of the circle were the Schlegel brothers and their wives, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Tieck, Clemens Brentano, and Sophie Mereau. Novalis would join their discussions when his work permitted, and even Fichte—who is best classed as a pre-Romantic—also met with them frequently. The members of the circle were quite young. Caroline Schlegel, at 36, was the eldest; Brentano, at 20, the youngest. Most, like Dorothea and Friedrich Schlegel, were in their late twenties. They met often, if on an irregular basis, to listen and respond to talks, to discuss what they had been reading, and to read their latest writings aloud to one another for feedback. Discussions ranged through philosophy, the sciences, culture, history, politics, and all the arts.

Historians have cited the Jena circle as a prime example of what can happen when a group of strong, lively intellects challenge one another—in an atmosphere of cooperation combined with competition—to develop their thoughts to a higher pitch of sophistication and originality than they might otherwise have reached had they been working in isolation. What they achieved as a group, even though they didn’t agree on everything, was to spark a revolution in Western thought.

Their meetings inspired Dorothea Schlegel to write to a friend in Berlin, “[S]uch an eternal concert of wit, poetry, art, and science as surrounds me here can easily make one forget the rest of the world.”⁵ Her husband, too, adopted a musical metaphor when he described Jena as a “symphony of professors.” And it was approximately during this period that he came up with a new term for the sociable, open-ended type of philosophical discussions in which the Jena circle excelled: “symphilosophy.”

During the years 1798–1800, the Schlegel brothers also published a literary journal, *Athenäum*. This journal was the primary vehicle through which the members of the Jena circle disseminated their ideas throughout the German-speaking world.

Friedrich Schlegel’s contributions were among the most provocative in the journal. In addition to essays, he composed *fragments*—pithy

aphorisms and short passages, often ironic, playful, and self-contradictory—that covered a wide variety of topics in literature, philosophy, religion, art, politics, and culture in a style that contrasted sharply with the more formal and pedantic discussions of these topics in other journals. Schlegel’s fragments alerted the public to the fact that the Jena circle was engaged, not only in new thoughts, but also in new ways of thinking.

The Jena circle didn’t last long. Fichte was forced to leave the university in 1800, after refusing to apologize for what some of his detractors had denounced as atheistic elements in his philosophy. Friedrich Schlegel lectured in philosophy for one year in his place, but the lectures were poorly attended and his contract was not renewed. In 1803, August and Caroline Schlegel were divorced so that Caroline could marry Schelling (see below), but the controversy around the divorce proved so relentless that all three left Jena for good. With their departure, the early Romantic period effectively came to an end.

Meanwhile, Friedrich and Dorothea had begun an itinerant life. In 1802, they had moved to Paris, where Friedrich studied Sanskrit and edited journals in German reporting on the arts in Paris. In 1804, the couple moved to Cologne, where he studied Gothic architecture and lectured privately on philosophy. Through these years, Dorothea engaged in translation work, which was apparently what kept the couple solvent during their wanderings.

The year 1808 saw two events that marked Friedrich’s public break with his Romantic period. The first was the publication of the results of his Sanskrit studies, *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*. This book, which praised Sanskrit as the original language whose excellence had led directly to the excellence of the German language, sparked a long-term interest among German scholars in Indian studies. However, despite its praise of Sanskrit and the Indian mind in general, the book also contained a strong denunciation of Buddhism, which Schlegel—based on his limited reading—characterized as a form of pantheism: “a frightening doctrine which, by its negative and abstract, and thus erroneous, idea of infinity, led by necessity to a vague indifference toward being and non-being.”⁶ It’s hard to tell where Schlegel got the idea that Buddhism is pantheism, but his own earlier Romantic ideas

about religion definitely *were* pantheistic. So, in attacking Buddhism, he was actually distancing himself from his earlier Romantic pantheism. This fact was underscored by the second major event in Friedrich and Dorothea's life in 1808: their conversion to Catholicism.

Little is known as to why they abandoned their Romantic religious ideas. One modern theory is that their stay in Paris had destroyed their earlier faith in freedom and progress. At any rate, Friedrich's only explanation to their friends—incredulous over the conversion—was that “To become Catholic is not to change, but only first to acknowledge religion.”⁷

It also enabled him to find steady employment. As a Catholic, he qualified for—and, in 1809, received—a position in the Austrian civil service. Moving with Dorothea to Vienna, he edited an anti-Napoleonic newspaper and aided the Austrian diplomat, Metternich, in drawing up plans to re-establish a conservative order in Germany after Napoleon's defeat.

At the same time, Schlegel began a second career as a public speaker, giving lecture series in Vienna on such topics as history and literature, and the philosophy of life, literature, and language. In 1823, when he and Dorothea published his collected works, they omitted *Lucinde* from the collection.

He died while on a speaking tour, in Dresden, in 1829. After his death, Dorothea moved to Frankfurt am Main, where she settled with her younger son, Philippe Veit, a painter in the Nazarene movement. She died in 1838.

In 1835, however, a leader of the Young German movement, Karl Gutzkow, had published *Lucinde* for a second time, together with Schleiermacher's defense of the book (see below). Even though—or perhaps, because—these books sparked another storm of controversy, they became rallying texts for the movement: an example of how early Romantic ideas, even when renounced by the early Romantics, were adopted by succeeding generations and given an extended second life.

***Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–
1834)***



Born in Breslau, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was the son of a clergyman in the Reformed church. His early education was with the Moravian Herrnhutter Brotherhood, the same Pietist group to which Novalis' father belonged. Suffering from growing bouts of skepticism about Christian doctrine, he transferred to the university at Halle, where he nevertheless majored in theology, with philosophy and philology as minors.

He passed his clerical exams in Berlin in 1790, but did not immediately apply for a position with the church. Instead, he worked as a private tutor for three years, after which he was fired for sympathizing with the French Revolution. During this period he began studying Kant in earnest, only to grow critical of Kant's rationalist approach to religion. After reading Herder's writings on Spinoza (see [Chapter Three](#)), he began composing essays on religion that combined Herder's interpretation of Spinoza with what he still saw as worthwhile in Kant's thought. These essays, though, were rather dry, and attracted little attention.

In 1794 Schleiermacher took on his first clerical position, as a pastor in Landsberg, and then in 1796 he was appointed chaplain at the Charité hospital in Berlin. His stay in Berlin marked his blossoming as an original religious thinker. Historians of religion credit his chaplaincy for his growing appreciation of the role of feeling in a life of faith. Historians of philosophy credit his exposure to the intellectual salons of Berlin for his growth as a thinker. He himself described the discussions at the salons as "the most colorful hurly-burly of arguments in the world."

In 1797, at the Herz salon, he met Friedrich Schlegel and, as noted above, the two became housemates. Their ongoing discussions led Schlegel to deepen his appreciation of religion—up to that point, he had been something of an atheist—at the same time leading Schleiermacher to realize that Schlegel's ideas on art could help him articulate his own

understanding of what it means to be religious in a universal rather than a strictly Christian sense.

The fact that Schleiermacher was straddling the divide between two worlds, religious institutions and the intellectual salons, put him in an ideal position to act as an interpreter between the two. His friends at the salons began urging him to put his ideas on religion on paper. At first, he simply composed fragments for *Athenäum*. Then, in 1798, Henriette Herz presented him with “a little box for your thoughts.” From November of that year until March of the following year he was called to Potsdam on a commission, a period away from his friends that gave him time to compose what was to become the defining book on Romantic religion: *Talks on Religion for Its Cultured Despisers*.

As the title indicates, the book was intended to defend religion to those who, in the salons, had come to view it with disdain. We will discuss the *Talks* in more detail in Chapter Five. Here we will simply note that the book argued, not for any specific religion, but for a transcendental idea of religion that had to be true for all people at all times and in all cultures. It contained two definitions of religion that were to become distinctive features of Romantic religion: One, religion is a matter of aesthetics: “a taste and sensitivity for the infinite.” Two, religion is not a relationship between human beings and God; it is “a relationship between human beings and the universe.”

The fact that the *Talks* displayed a knowledge not only of modern philosophy but also of modern science added to the book’s appeal. It was to go through many printings during Schleiermacher’s lifetime, and was widely read on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1799, Schleiermacher and Schlegel embarked on what was to have been a long-term joint project: the retranslation of all of Plato’s dialogues into German. But this, too, was a project in which Schlegel quickly lost interest, a fact that led to a cooling in Schleiermacher’s feelings toward him. The latter nevertheless continued the translations on his own, and although he didn’t complete all the dialogues, he managed to publish a large number of them in the years 1804–1828. His experience with the project led him to develop theories on language, translation, and hermeneutics—or the science of interpretation—that were to exert great influence even into the 21st century. In fact, he is

often regarded as one of the founders of hermeneutics, famous for first articulating what is called the hermeneutic circle: that to understand the parts of a text, you have to first understand the whole; but to understand the whole, you first have to understand the parts. The art of hermeneutics lies in working one's way back and forth between these two requirements.

Meanwhile, Schleiermacher had become involved with two scandals. The first was the uproar surrounding *Lucinde*. In 1800 he wrote a novel of his own, *Confidential Letters Concerning Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde*, in which he defended *Lucinde* as a holy book. Then, in 1804, his own seven-year affair with a married woman—Eleonore Grunow, the wife of a Berlin clergyman—came to light, forcing him to flee Berlin. For a few years, he lectured at the university in Halle, where he was accused of atheism, Spinozism, and pantheism. Nevertheless, the university officials supported him, and his lectures remained popular. In 1806 he published a short literary dialogue, *Christmas Eve*, which extolled religion as a matter of the heart that should be centered on the fellowship of the family rather than on the state.

When, in 1807, Halle fell to Napoleon's forces, Schleiermacher returned to Berlin. There he soon married Henriette von Willich, the young widow of one of his friends, and received an appointment as a preacher at Trinity Church.

In 1810, he played a part in the founding of the University of Berlin, where he was appointed as professor of theology. In 1811, he was appointed to the Berlin Academy of Sciences. In spite of his academic duties, he continued to preach every Sunday to appreciative crowds.

Also in 1811, he wrote *A Brief Presentation of Theological Studies* in which he outlined a course of studies that would prepare pastors to meet the needs of the modern world. The course was considered revolutionary at the time in calling for pastors to be conversant with the latest advances in philosophy and psychology. In line with this program, he lectured at the university not only on subjects obviously dealing with theological issues—such as New Testament exegesis and the life of Jesus—but also on dialectics, aesthetics, psychology, pedagogy, the history of philosophy, hermeneutics, translation, and politics. His forays into

these areas, however, brought him into conflict with professors in other departments of the university who resented his invading their turf.

Over the years, as the *Talks on Religion* continued to go through several printings, Schleiermacher would cite these later editions as proof that he had not abandoned his earlier views. Nevertheless, he kept making changes in the book that steered it away from a universal Romantic orientation and toward a more specifically Christian one. For example, his original definition of religion as “man’s relation to the universe” became “man’s relation to the Highest.” And in place of a passage in the first edition arguing that, given the infinite nature of the universe, humanity would have to invent an infinite number of religions, all equally valid, he simply stated that religion is “the sum of all man’s relations to God.”

Most important, he entirely recast his discussion of the concept of “God.” In the first edition he explained this concept as only one possible product of the religious imagination—and not even the highest product at that—whereas in later editions he insisted that there was no way to conceive of the universe as a whole without also conceiving it as existing in God.

This was a major retreat from his earlier espousal of Romantic religion. Despite this retreat, though, he remained liberal both in politics and in his interpretation of Christian doctrine. In the area of politics, he campaigned for the right of the Church to determine its own liturgy without interference from the state. In the area of doctrine, his most comprehensive book on theology, *The Christian Faith* (1821–22), became the founding document of liberal Protestant theology in the 19th century. This book focused on faith as a feeling of dependency on God that was transmitted, not through the Bible or through rational argument, but through a more personal contact with Jesus Christ via the fellowship of the Church. By taking this position, Schleiermacher returned somewhat to his Pietist roots. As a result, he found himself fending off attacks on two sides—from traditional doctrinal theologians on the right and from rationalists on the left—for the rest of his life. One of the rationalist attacks, from Hegel, we will discuss in Chapter Six.

Schleiermacher’s only son, Nathaniel, died in 1827, an event that, he said, “drove the nails into my own coffin.” He lived, however, for another

seven years, dying of pneumonia in 1834.

Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843)



A native of Swabia, Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin was the son of a manager of Lutheran Church estates who died when young Friedrich was two. His mother soon remarried, but the stepfather died when Friedrich was nine. The double loss left both mother and son emotionally scarred. Because of the madness that Hölderlin suffered later in life, the facts of his early childhood have been subjected to intense posthumous scrutiny as a likely source for his eventual breakdown. The bare facts seem to indicate that his mother became gloomy and pious, eager to offer her son to God as a form of penance; that

he was sensitive and prone to extreme swings of mood; and that her attempts to force some stability and piety on him, even well into his adulthood, exacerbated his condition.

At her insistence, in 1788 he entered the seminary at Tübingen, where he roomed with Hegel and Schelling. Because both of his roommates went on to become the preeminent philosophers of 19th century Germany, there has been some speculation as to what influence the three had on one another in their seminary days. Schelling—not one to easily give credit to other thinkers—regarded Hölderlin as his mentor in philosophical matters at least until 1795.

The curriculum at the Tübingen seminary was dedicated to finding harmony between Christian doctrine and the classics. Thus Hölderlin, in addition to joining a poetry club, wrote theses on the history of the fine arts in Greece and on the parallels between the Proverbs of Solomon and Hesiod's *Works and Days*. He soon realized, however, that his interests lay with the ancient Greeks and not with the Church. He

petitioned his mother to transfer to a university, but she refused, so he completed his studies and passed his clerical exams in 1793.

Despite her pressure to serve God and take a clerical position, Hölderlin began to pursue the intellectually more independent, if financially riskier, life of a private tutor. Had his mother wanted, she could have spared him the need to look for work, because his father had left him a substantial patrimony. She, however, intimated that the patrimony was very meager; even in later years when he was in extreme financial need, she would spare him no more than a pittance at a time. Only after Hölderlin's death was it discovered that, on paper at least, he had been a rich man all along.

With the help of Schiller, who was to be his hero and patron for several years, Hölderlin obtained a position in 1793 as tutor to the son of a widow who shared his literary interests. During this period he began writing his novel, *Hyperion*, which was to go through several drafts before its publication, in two parts, in 1797 and 1799.

In 1794, Hölderlin accompanied his pupil to the university at Jena, where Fichte had just taken up a position. Hölderlin signed up for a full schedule of lectures, but soon found himself so enthralled with Fichte's teachings—and especially with Fichte's espousal of the cause of freedom—that he neglected his other subjects. While in Jena, he also met Novalis, who was attending Fichte's lectures, too.

However, like Novalis, Hölderlin soon began to have doubts about Fichte's foundationalist approach to philosophy, and no later than May 1795, he wrote down a short piece, *Being and Judgment*. This was the first written expression anywhere of what was to become the basic Romantic viewpoint: that nature, in the form of Pure Being, is the original Absolute, embracing both subject and object, and transcending all forms of dualism; and that this Absolute can be comprehended, not through systematic reasons, but only aesthetically—i.e., through the feelings. He communicated some of these ideas to Schelling in 1795.

In 1796 he obtained a new position as tutor in Frankfurt am Main for the children of a banker, Jakob Gontard. Quickly he discovered a kindred sensitive soul in Gontard's wife, Susette (1769–1802), and the two began an affair that lasted until 1800. Susette Gontard, however, was more than a mistress or lover for Hölderlin. She was both the supportive

presence that he had lacked in his early life and the muse to inspire him to greater feats as a writer. Critics note that only during this period did Hölderlin begin to show true genius as a poet. He addressed many of his poems to Susette, calling her Diotima after the mysterious woman who was Socrates' teacher in matters of love. He also rewrote *Hyperion* so that the character of Diotima, Hyperion's lover, became a transfigured version of Susette: calmly attuned to nature and deeply wise.

While at Frankfurt, Hölderlin also helped his old roommate, Hegel, find a job with a nearby family, although little is known of the philosophical discussions they may have had at this time.

Jakob Gontard discovered the affair in 1798, and Hölderlin was summarily dismissed. He settled nearby, in Homburg, so that he and Susette could continue meeting clandestinely on an irregular basis.

While at Homburg, Hölderlin revived a friendship with another old schoolmate, Isaak von Sinclair, who was to provide him with financial and emotional support off and on for the next several years. In fact, the two of them, together with other friends, formed an intellectual circle that some historians have termed the Homburg circle, which was loosely connected with the Jena circle that had formed at the same time.

However, Hölderlin was not enamored of the journal *Athenäum* that the Schlegel brothers were producing. In addition to beginning a major new literary project, a drama on the suicide of Empedocles, he started writing philosophical pieces in preparation for a journal that he proposed to edit. One of the pieces was a review of Schleiermacher's *Talks on Religion*. Ironically, despite Hölderlin's differences in temperament from Friedrich Schlegel, his review came to some of the same conclusions as Schlegel's own review of the book: that because religion is concerned with a feeling for the infinite, and because language is finite, the only proper language for religion must deal in myths and allegories, as these are the only modes of speech that clearly point to something beyond themselves. During the few years of relative sanity remaining to him, Hölderlin was to write many religious poems in a prophetic tone that combined the myths and images of classical Greece with those of the Bible into a pantheism and polytheism of his own.

1799 proved to be a critical year for Hölderlin. His efforts to find backing for his new journal met with no success and he could find no other work near Frankfurt, which meant that the affair with Susette had to end. His old mood swings began to recur, and Sinclair was often called on to intervene when his periodic shouting rages and “strumming on his piano” provoked angry threats from his neighbors. Feeling rejected on all sides, Hölderlin abandoned his philosophical writings and decided to devote his writing talents totally to poetry. He accepted work outside of Germany, first as a tutor to a family in Switzerland, then as a tutor to the family of the Hamburg consul in Bordeaux. In neither case, though, was he stable enough to hold his position for long. In both cases, he walked to his new position and then back home to Germany alone.

On his return from France, in 1802, he received a letter from Sinclair with news that Susette had died of measles. The news of her death, combined with the rigors of the trip, left Hölderlin a broken man, both physically and mentally. Schelling, writing to Hegel after meeting Hölderlin at this time, diagnosed his state as “derangement.” Sinclair arranged for Hölderlin to obtain medical treatment with a physician who found that reading Homer to Hölderlin in the original Greek was most effective in calming his mind. As Hölderlin’s condition began to improve, Sinclair found him work that would not tax his health.

Despite his brittle emotional state, Hölderlin was able to complete, and get published, his translations of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. The translations were criticized at the time for being too strange—Hölderlin had hewn closely to the syntax of the Greek—but eventually they became more widely appreciated. He also continued work on multiple drafts of his tragedy, *The Death of Empedocles*, but the work remained unfinished.

He also put into writing, both in essays and poems, his thoughts on tragedy. True to his love for the Greek tradition, he saw tragedy as intimately connected with religion. Because he also felt that religion was primarily a matter of feeling, his writings on tragedy provide a window onto his feelings at this time.

A tragic poem, he said, is a metaphor of a particular intellectual point of view: “the awareness of being at One with all that lives.” Many people

would find this awareness comforting rather than tragic, but Hölderlin's view of Oneness was strongly colored by his emotional instability. Only during manic periods did he feel at One with the divine in nature, but while manic he had no understanding of what he was doing or saying. Only when the mania had passed could he understand what had happened, but that understanding was accompanied by a dark sense of isolation and despair. In his words,

“The representation of the tragic is mainly based on this, that what is monstrous and terrible in the coupling of god and man, in the total fusion of the power of Nature with the innermost depth of man, so that they are One at the moment of wrath, shall be made intelligible by showing how this total fusion into One is purged by their total separation.”⁸

Hölderlin's poetry during this period moved into new modes of expression, very intense and very modern in their disjointed syntax and striking imagery. One of the hymns from these years ends with a passage of warning: To communicate the divine was to play with lightning.

Yet, poets, for us it is fitting to stand
bareheaded beneath God's thunderstorming,
to grasp the Father's ray, the Father himself, with our own
hand
and to present to people the heavenly gift,
swaddled in song.
For if only we are pure in heart,
like children, with our hands unburdened with guilt,
the Father's ray, the pure, will not scorch
and, though deeply convulsed—the sorrows of the Stronger
One,
compassionate, the tumultuous storms of
the God when he draws near—the heart will stand fast.
But, ah me! When of
Ah me!
And so now I say

that I approached to see the Heavenly.
They themselves cast me down, deep down
below the living, into the darkness,
false priest that I am, to sing
the warning song of those who know.
There

In 1805, Sinclair was charged with high treason for plotting to kill the Grand Duke of Württemberg, and Hölderlin was implicated in the case. The shock of the accusations apparently drove him over the edge. Although the charges against both men were eventually dropped, Hölderlin was clearly in need of intensive medical care, and Sinclair was no longer in a position to help. In 1806 Hölderlin was committed, much against his will, to the Autenrieth asylum in Tübingen, where treatments included belladonna, digitalis, straitjackets, masks to stop patients from screaming, and forced immersions in cold water inside a cage. Friedrich Schlegel tried to visit him during this period, but was told that Hölderlin was “not presentable.”

Meanwhile, Ernst Zimmer, a carpenter living nearby, learned of Hölderlin’s plight. Having been deeply impressed by *Hyperion*, he convinced the doctors at the asylum that Hölderlin would respond better to a quiet domestic environment. So, in 1807, Hölderlin was released into his care. Zimmer and his family provided Hölderlin with a quiet tower room in their house in Tübingen, overlooking the Neckar River. Doctors expected Hölderlin to live for no more than three more years, but the Zimmer family ended up looking after him for another 36.

It was to be a life of leaden calm after the passing of the storm. At first, Hölderlin began drafting a continuation of *Hyperion*, in which Diotima—who had died of a broken heart in Part Two of the novel—speaks from the afterlife, but he soon abandoned the project. No longer giving vent to his wild mood swings, he would address visitors with exaggerated politeness and formality, writing short poems at request. A few of the more affecting ones hinted at a sadness he didn’t dare express, but otherwise they were nothing but surface. He would sign them “Scardinelli, or something of the sort,” and give them fictional dates, such as 1648 or 1759. Aside from one visit, from his step-brother, his family—including his mother, who died in 1828—never came to see

him. They did, however, insist that Zimmer take Hölderlin's poetry notebooks from him for them to put in safekeeping—a harsh but perhaps wise move.

Although there was some appreciation of Hölderlin's writings during the 19th century—Nietzsche, for one, was an avid admirer of *Hyperion*—only in the early 20th century were his collected poems published. Many poets at the time, including Rilke and Celan, were struck by the originality of Hölderlin's language and imagery, and came to regard him as one of their own: a Symbolist, an Imagist, even a Surrealist well before his time. Since then, his reputation as a poet has continued to grow to the point where many poets and critics regard him as one of the premier poets that Europe has produced.

His philosophical writings did not come to light until the mid-20th century, so only recently have scholars begun to appreciate him as a Romantic philosopher as well as a poet.

Because of the renewed interest in Hölderlin's writings, there have been many efforts at posthumous psychoanalysis to diagnose his final breakdown. The more common verdicts include schizoid psychosis, catatonic stupor, and bipolar exhaustion. However, what is perhaps the most perceptive diagnosis was a comment that Zimmer once made about Hölderlin's condition to a friend: "The too-much in him cracked his mind."

He died of pulmonary congestion in 1843.

Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854)

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, the son of Pietist parents, was born in Württemberg not far from Hölderlin's birthplace. In fact, the two first became friends at an early age when both were in Latin school, where Hölderlin protected the young Schelling from bullies.

A very precocious child, Schelling was admitted to the Tübingen seminary at the age of 16, four years short of the normal age of enrollment. There, as noted above, he roomed with Hölderlin and Hegel, both of whom sparked his interest in revolutionary politics and philosophy. In 1794, at the age of 19, he published his first book on philosophy, before completing his theological degree in 1795.



Schelling's early philosophical writings were well received, and even though he kept shifting his philosophical positions throughout his career, his reputation among German intellectuals and academics remained high. The constant revisions in his thought from one book to the next inspired Hegel later to remark sarcastically that Schelling had conducted his philosophical education in public.

The underlying tension that propelled the evolution of Schelling's thought can be illustrated by two declarations he made in 1795. Writing in *Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, a treatise that was intended to offer both support and a corrective for Fichte's philosophy, he declared, very much in Fichte's spirit, "The beginning and end of all philosophy is freedom!" However, in a letter to Hegel written in the same year, he declared, "Meanwhile, I have become a Spinozist!" Apparently, under Hölderlin's influence, he had been drawn to Spinoza's metaphysical system built on a principle of Absolute Being that transcended all dualities. However, in Spinoza's system, as we will see in Chapter Four, only God is free. People have no freedom of choice at all. The burden of Schelling's philosophical efforts over the next several years lay in reconciling these two irreconcilable positions on freedom. Despite his early enthusiasm for Fichte, Spinoza was to win.

In 1796, Schelling was employed as a tutor to two sons of an aristocratic family. A trip to Leipzig with his charges in 1797 exposed him to modern developments in science, particularly biology and chemistry. This exposure inspired him to take up an independent study of all the sciences. For many years, he kept abreast of the latest scientific developments, and during the years 1799 to 1804 he wrote several systematic treatises that tried to incorporate the sciences into the Romantic philosophical view of the universe as an infinite organic unity, founded on an Absolute principle of Identity transcending all dichotomies, even those of matter and energy, and of self and not-self.

It was during the Leipzig trip that Schelling also met Novalis and the Schlegel brothers for the first time.

In 1798, at the age of 23, he was appointed an extraordinary professor of philosophy at Jena—the “extraordinary” meaning that the appointment was funded by the Duke of Saxe-Weimer, who offered the position to Schelling apparently at Goethe’s suggestion. Thus began Schelling’s involvement with the Jena circle.

At first, his relations with Fichte were cordial. But, unlike Schlegel and Novalis, who quickly broke with Fichte over philosophical differences but were able to remain friends with him on a personal level, Schelling’s philosophical split with Fichte was somewhat protracted; when the break finally came, in 1801, it was total. In a letter to Fichte, demanding that the latter no longer regard him as a collaborator, Schelling wrote, “I am not your enemy, although you are in all probability mine.” Once the line was drawn, there was no possibility of friendly communication between the two. This pattern was to repeat itself several years later, in 1807, when Schelling had a particularly bitter break with Hegel.

In 1800, Schelling had become engaged to Auguste Böhmer, Caroline Schlegel’s daughter from a previous marriage. Auguste, however, died of dysentery later the same year. As Schelling and Caroline comforted each other over Auguste’s death, they fell in love. Caroline asked her husband, August, for a divorce, on the grounds that she had finally met the love of her life, and August magnanimously consented.

The townspeople of Jena, though, were not appeased. Rumor had it either that Caroline had poisoned her daughter to have the young Schelling for herself, or that Schelling was the one who had administered the poison. August stoutly defended the couple, but the scandal refused to die down, and the couple didn’t feel safe to marry in Jena. So in 1803, Schelling took a position at a new university at Würzburg, and the couple was finally married. As noted above, August Schlegel also left Jena in the same year; the departure of these three, the last remaining members of the Romantic circle in Jena, marked the end of early Romanticism. The year 1803 also marked Schelling’s last encounter with Hölderlin. He never visited Hölderlin during the latter’s final illness, and didn’t attend his funeral in 1843.

In 1806, Würzburg was annexed by Catholic Austria; Schelling, a Protestant, lost his job. So he moved to Munich, where he was offered a post as a state official with the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities; later, he was also appointed to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts.

In 1809, he published the last iteration of his philosophy to appear during his lifetime: *Philosophical Investigations on the Essence of Human Freedom*. In this treatise, he argued that the idea of freedom of choice lay at the root of all evil, and that only God was free. Virtue, he said, lay in obeying the impulses of one's nature, because the source of that nature was divine. But because one could not choose one's nature, this meant that virtue had no freedom.

Thus the retreat from his earlier position—that philosophy begins and ends in freedom—was complete. God may be free in the beginning and end, but human beings have no genuine freedom at any point in the timeline.

As the book was being readied for publication, Caroline died. Many commentators have suggested that her death killed Schelling's spark to keep on publishing. Nevertheless, he married again, in 1812, to one of Caroline's friends, Pauline Gotter, and the two apparently had a calm and happy married life. At the same time, Schelling continued to teach and to develop his thoughts on philosophy. Although he wrote prolifically, he never published his writings—perhaps because his positions continued to evolve, perhaps because he sensed that Hegel was ready and eager to pounce on whatever he might put into print.

The general thrust of his thought during this period was anti-foundationalist. He came to see that the search for a first principle on which to base all philosophy was a big mistake; the fact that an idea may be coherent in the realm of thought doesn't prove its truth in the realm of reality. Instead, he felt, religion and mythology were the true positive complements to the negative approach of logical and speculative philosophy. All truth, in his eyes, begins with the fact that God is free from all constraints, including the constraints of reason.

Hegel, who had been lecturing to great acclaim at the University of Berlin, died suddenly in 1831. Nevertheless, his influence continued to dominate academic circles in Berlin. The king of Prussia, concerned

about Hegel's unorthodox views and their impact on the Prussian public, summoned Schelling to Berlin to lecture on philosophy and religion to help "stamp out the dragon-seed of Hegelian pantheism." The fact that the king saw the fate of the Prussian state as resting on Schelling's lecture series, which he delivered in 1841–42, gives an indication of the perceived importance of philosophy in Germany at the time.

The lectures, however, were a failure. Schelling's increasingly conservative views on God and philosophy were completely out of step with the times, and his close association with the powers that be, both in Bavaria and Prussia, gave the impression that he was little more than their lackey. If anything, the lectures had a reverse impact, in that they inspired young left-wing Hegelians, such as Karl Marx, to regard the abolition of religion as the first order of business in bringing about human freedom and a just society.

However, the lectures were also attacked by traditional Christian thinkers. In 1843, Heinrich Paulus, a theologian who had developed an animosity for both Hegel and Schelling over the years, published pirated transcripts of the lectures to expose Schelling's views as incoherent. Schelling tried, but failed, to have the books banned. And so he stopped lecturing for good.

The conservative drift in his philosophy paralleled a similar drift in his political views. In 1792, he had celebrated a major victory in the French Revolution. In 1848, when another wave of revolutions swept through Europe, he suggested angrily that all the rioters be shot.

He died in Switzerland in 1854. His sons, in the years 1856–58, finally published authorized versions of the Berlin lectures, in four volumes.

Although Schelling's reputation as a philosopher quickly went into decline, his observations on the disjoint between thought and actuality—that just because reason says we have to think about things in a certain way doesn't mean that things actually *are* that way—was to provide inspiration for many modern and postmodern movements in European culture.

Shaping the Romantic Experience

Unlike the Buddha, who taught religion as a matter of skill—the skill of finding a lasting and blameless happiness—all five of these Romantic thinkers taught religion as a matter of aesthetics. In the language of their time, this meant two things: (1) that religion dealt with feelings and direct experiences, rather than reason; and (2) that it was an art. In line with their personal views on art, religion-as-art had to be expressive. In other words, religious ideas cannot *describe* the way things are. Instead, they can only express the *feelings* of the individual who has a religious experience.

Their position on this issue, of course, contains a paradox: It describes how religion has to act, while at the same time saying that descriptions about religion are not genuine. In Chapters Four through Seven we will explore this paradox and its long-term effects.

Here, however, we will take the Romantics' position at face value and ask a question that grows from placing it against their life stories: Given their view that religion must grow from a direct experience, on what sort of direct experiences did they base their religious views?

In general terms, their answer in every case would be that religion grew from an experience of Oneness with the infinite organic unity of the universe. For them, this experience lay at the basis of all religion. Schleiermacher, in fact, held that religion *was* the experience of the infinite, and that any expression of the feeling after the fact was simply a shadow of religion. The others, however, included the expressions of religious feelings under the term “religion” as well.

There was also general agreement that this experience came naturally during two activities: (1) in the act of creating a work of expressive art, during which one opened oneself to the infinity of nature and then, when an inner feeling naturally responded, giving expression to that feeling; and (2) in the relationship of true love.

From their life stories, though, we can see that these experiences were different for each of them. Take, for instance, their experience of love.

Love, for Novalis, was something largely disembodied and abstract. Apparently, his love for his first fiancée became especially intense only

after her death. Although sparked by a sad event, the sense of Oneness with nature that he gained while mourning her loss was eventually reassuring. He felt that he was still in touch with her because her spirit, like his, was One with the universe. In this way, the universe retained its magic. He felt himself to be a sublime member of an infinite whole. Even though this membership required that he suffer, his sufferings, he felt, should be embraced within the perspective of the larger whole and happily endured.

Schlegel and Schleiermacher, however, wrote of the divine sense of Oneness experienced in love at the height of their affairs. As we will see in Chapters Four and Five, in neither Schlegel's writings nor Schleiermacher's is there any hint of sadness in their experience of the Oneness of erotic love.

Schelling never published his feelings about love, but it is worth noting that his teachings on the necessity of following one's inner impulses as expressions of divine inspiration came after he had begun his relationship with Caroline, and did not change after her death.

Hölderlin, however, had a more conflicted relationship to love. Writing in *Hyperion*, during his affair with Susette, he allowed the character of Diotima to die inadvertently as a result of Hyperion's rash actions. Nevertheless, Hyperion states at the end of the book that he has found peace, secure in the knowledge that he and Diotima will never truly be separated—she is present throughout nature—and that the infinite dimensions of the universe embrace and forgive any mistakes that human beings might make on this small Earth. This seems to reflect his feelings about his affair with Susette: Even though their love was forbidden, the comfort it gave them both was all that mattered. The universe would ultimately forgive them for breaking social conventions. Thus the Oneness of the universe, as he experienced it in his love for Susette, was bittersweet but ultimately comforting.

However, after Susette/Diotima actually died, Hölderlin's perception of Oneness radically changed. He now sensed that the universe was punishing them both. Because their love was forbidden, he had had to leave her; yet, in his eyes, his leaving her had caused her death. Thus the sense of Oneness he had experienced in his love of Susette now carried a

sense of the divine as dangerous, a tragic sense missing in the writings of the other four early Romantics.

In particular, he struggled with a tragic view of love that called into question the existence of divine mercy and justice. In one of the poems written prior to his admittance to the clinic at Tübingen, he complained forcefully about the “sting of the gods”: Human beings live with dualities and do not know which choice is best; because of their ignorance, they are drawn to the gods in spite of divine injustice. However, in another poem, written after his release from the clinic, Hölderlin nevertheless expressed the wan hope that somewhere there was a god who, through harmony and recompense, would make whole the diverse and diverging lines of human life.

Thus, like Novalis, Hölderlin sensed the sadness necessarily contained within any sense of Oneness, given the vagaries of life and death. Unlike Novalis, however, he did not find the thought thoroughly reassuring. He held on only precariously to a sense that things somehow, someday, would be made right.

The differences in these writers’ experiences of love carried over into their experience of Oneness in the course of creating their art.

Schelling, though he wrote extensively about art, was not a literary artist at all, so he had no first-hand experience with the process of artistic creation.

For Novalis, Schlegel, and Schleiermacher, the act of creation was pleasurable. To create art, they said, one simply had to induce within oneself an attitude of open receptivity to nature, and to trust that the feelings that welled up within that state were expressions of nature as well. If those expressions broke all the established rules of what art should be, well and good. Instead of being a sign of their inferiority, it was actually a sign that they were at the forefront of the evolution of consciousness. This is why these writers tended to write spontaneously with a minimum amount of editing.

The important point in their eyes was for artists not to take their creations too seriously. As Schlegel liked to say, the point of creation was not the art produced, but the act of creation itself. To be truly free, an artist could not concern him or herself with the results of yesterday’s creation, for that would interfere with one’s ability to be open to new

creative inspirations today. It's hard not to see, in Schlegel's lack of concern for the consequences of his creative powers, a parallel in his attitude toward his affair with Dorothea.

For Hölderlin, however, the act of creation came after his manic periods, when he had gained a sense of Oneness with the divine expressed as a wrathful power. Only when the spell of the wrath broke was he in a fit state to reflect and put his thoughts on paper, but the period of reflection was also accompanied by a deep sense of separation and unworthiness. Thus, in his experience, even though a sense of Oneness could be ecstatic, it was also a curse. "If only one weren't so periodic!" he once exclaimed. Unlike Schlegel, he was dead earnest about his poetry. This was one of the reasons why *The Death of Empedocles* was never finished, and why his hymns and odes went through repeated revisions, often drastic. Each new experience of Oneness left him dissatisfied with what he had learned from earlier ones.

When we compare the way these writers approach the religious experience with the Buddha's approach, three points stand out.

- The first is that none of them approached the issue of religious experience with anything near the rigor and discipline of the Buddha's search for the deathless. Instead, they approached religion through symphilosophy—discussions that were pursued less with the purpose of coming to firm conclusions and more with the purpose of entertaining and exploring original ideas.

Schleiermacher is the only one of the five to recommend specific meditative reflections for inducing a feeling of Oneness, reflections that were primarily exercises of the imagination. As we will see in Chapter Five, one of his recommended exercises was to imagine stripping away every aspect of one's self to the point where nothing is left. Only then is there room for the infinite plenitude of the universe to appear where one's false attachments had previously been. Another exercise worked in the opposite direction: To look at every facet of the universe with an eye to realizing that everything that has ever existed or will ever exist in the world outside is already present within oneself right now.

In each case, though, Schleiermacher noted that the simple performance of the exercise was not enough to ensure an experience of

infinite Oneness. The Infinite itself also had to act, entering into the empty vessel. If it didn't, one simply had to try to maintain an attitude of open receptivity and acceptance until the propitious moment of Infinite grace arrived.

Schlegel and Novalis had another way of inducing an experience of Oneness that they mentioned only in their private letters, and not in their published works. That was their opium tincture. (As for the other three writers, I have found no clear record as to whether they used opium or not.) It would be a mistake to attribute the Romantic cult of Oneness to opium use—after all, ideas about Oneness were rife in the scientific and philosophical culture of the time—but still, the fact that opium was available and that these two writers were using it to put themselves in what they called an “Indian state” explains a great deal about their unquestioning confidence in Oneness as a Good Thing.

When in 1802 Schlegel had completed a drama, *Alarcos*, that was poorly received, he mentioned in a letter that the work would have been better if only he hadn't run out of opium while writing it. Other passages in his writings and Novalis', however, give the impression that their tincture was not always in short supply. One is Schlegel's essay, in *Lucinde*, extolling the virtues of “pure vegetating,” which we will discuss in Chapter Four. Another is the passage in Novalis' novel, *The Novices of Sais*, defining love as a desire to become liquid:

“Whose heart does not leap with joy,” cried the youth with glittering eye, “when the innermost life of nature invades him in all its fullness! When the overpowering emotion for which language has no other name than love, expands within him like an all-dissolving vapor and, trembling with sweet fear, he sinks into the dark, alluring heart of nature, consumes his poor personality in the crashing waves of lust, and nothing remains but a focus of infinite procreative force, a yawning vortex in an immense ocean? What is the flame that is manifested everywhere? A fervent embrace, whose sweet fruits fall like sensuous dew. Water, first-born child of airy fusions, cannot deny its voluptuous origin and reveals itself an element of love, and of its mixture with divine omnipotence on earth. Not without truth have ancient sages sought the origin of things in water, and indeed, they spoke of a

water more exalted than sea and well water. A water in which only primal fluidity is manifested, as it is manifested in liquid metal; therefore should men revere it always as divine. How few up to now have immersed themselves in the mysteries of fluidity, and there are some in whose drunken soul this surmise of the highest enjoyment and the highest life has never wakened. In thirst this world soul is revealed, this immense longing for liquefaction.”⁹

The fact that the Romantics did not pursue the experience of Oneness in any systematic or rigorous way helps to explain three features of their religious thought.

One, they could not teach religion as a skill. For them, Oneness was a communion between inside and outside forces. Thus, the outside contribution was just as crucial as the inside one. Ultimately, the outside contribution was the more important of the two, for—as these writers recognized—there were some moments when they tried to experience Oneness but could not, but other moments when Oneness was forced on them without their having prepared for it. This is why their religion, even though it accommodated a wide variety of concepts of the divine, nevertheless held that the existence of a single divine force at the heart of the universe is a necessary principle of religious life. There could be no religious experience, in their eyes, without it. Thus their definitions of religion centered on the word, “relationship”: In their eyes, a felt relationship between the individual and a divine principle was needed to make religion possible.

Two, because symphilosophy taught them that ideas did not have to come to specific conclusions, they allowed themselves to be satisfied with a religious goal that never reached a conclusive attainment. Religion, like an on-going discussion, was to be pursued as an on-going process with no need to arrive at a final goal.

Three, they offered no test for what counts as a genuine religious experience. One of the paradoxes of a felt sense of Oneness with the universe is that when an individual person feels it, no one else in the universe can feel that individual’s experience. A feeling of Oneness is not truly shared. Thus there is no external measure for judging whether the feeling is genuine, or if it actually proves that the universe is One.

What is needed is an internal measure—a series of guidelines for the person experiencing the feeling so that he or she can test, from inside, whether the feeling of Oneness is really and fully One. But because the Romantics simply accepted the truth of their feelings without testing them, they were able to offer no test to anyone else.

In fact, as we will see in Chapter Five, their philosophical beliefs on how a person acquires knowledge about the universe actually precluded the possibility of experiencing the Infinite as infinite, because finite means of knowing have no way of fully comprehending anything bigger than they are. Thus the Romantic idea of the religious experience was not only untested. It was also, in their system of things, untestable.

On this point, they differed sharply from the Buddha. Although he taught that the experience of *nibbāna*, or unbinding, is also purely internal, he was able to offer a series of tests to his disciples so that they could determine from within whether their experience constituted true awakening or not.

All of these points on the issue of religion as a skill, taken together, constitute the first point of difference.

- The second point of difference concerns the definition of what is noble in life, and the duties that nobility entails. For the Buddha, spiritual nobility consisted of the search for a happiness that is deathless, a happiness that was not only lasting but also blameless in that—because it depended on no conditions—it placed no burden or hardship on anything or anyone at all. The duty following on this principle was that the path of practice leading to true happiness had to be harmless to all beings as well. The principle of harmlessness carried further a principle of honor: that one would be ashamed to pursue, for the sake of one's pleasure, any action that would cause others harm. In other words, there were times when it would be necessary to sacrifice one's feelings for the sake of one's duty.

For the Romantics, however, spiritual nobility lay in attaining an authentic feeling of Oneness with the divine. Even though, in their experience, this feeling was only temporary, it had intrinsic worth—so much worth, they felt, that they need not concern themselves if their pursuit of that feeling harmed other people.

For example, Schlegel—speaking through Julian, his alter-ego in *Lucinde*—claimed that, after gaining an experience of Oneness through erotic love, he came to feel a fraternal love for all beings, and that this love inspired loving acts that had no need for rules. Thus the results of feeling One naturally led to sociable behavior. But the way he pursued that Oneness showed little concern for the effect of that pursuit on others.

Especially if they were philistines. The term “philistine,” which was actually first used in Jena to refer to townspeople not affiliated with the university, by this time had come to acquire its modern meaning as “a person of no aesthetic sensibilities.” Novalis, perhaps because his bureaucratic career brought him into constant contact with many philistines, strongly defended the superiority of people who were *authentic*—those who could romanticize their experience and see the infinite within the finite. Thus authentic people were of more account than philistines, who by definition were not authentic; and the feelings of the authentic—because they were more sensitive—mattered more. They, in his eyes, were the natural aristocracy.

Even Hölderlin, in his novel *Hyperion*, suggested that actions, in the long term, have no effect on the universe, and so no harm is ever really done by rash mistakes, regardless of their immediate effects. One’s quest for Oneness with the divine justified one’s actions, just as the feeling of Oneness provided solace that, despite appearances, all would be well. This attitude became conflicted in his mind after Susette’s death, but the odes and hymns he wrote during that period didn’t come to light until a century later.

Thus the concept of nobility in Romantic religion was concerned, not with the effects of one’s actions on others, but with the sensitivity of one’s feelings. Duty involved no sense of honor. Instead of requiring sacrifices so as not to harm oneself or others, duty simply required pursuing, in whatever way necessary, the ultimate feeling: that of Oneness with the divine.

That is the second difference.

- The third difference is that, whereas the Buddha didn’t teach until he had arrived at a timeless solution for what he saw as the basic religious problem, the Romantics published their thoughts about

religion before having tested their long-term consequences. Their focus was on making their ideas public while still timely and before going out of date. For Schlegel, who was trying to make a living off his writing, the pressure to publish his thoughts as quickly as possible was especially acute.

In arriving at their views, the Romantics used a standard that the Buddha called, “agreement through pondering views” ([MN 95](#)). In other words, according to this standard, truth can be found by comparing views and accepting those that make sense together—whether that sense is logically coherent or, in the case of Schlegel, cogent in a more ironic way. As the Buddha pointed out, however, the conclusions drawn by this method are sometimes true and sometimes not, so he refused to use this standard as his own standard for truth, as it was too irresponsible. A teacher who couldn’t speak responsibly on the issue of what is skillful or not, in his eyes, provides no true refuge to his listeners ([§8](#)).

The upshot is that the Buddha taught a consistent doctrine from his first sermon to his last, but the Romantics—if they lived and maintained their sanity long enough—all ended up repudiating their earlier Romantic views on religion, and returning to more traditional forms of Christianity. Yet even though they had abandoned Romantic religion, the writings in which they had expressed the principles of Romantic religion continued to spread through Europe and America, keeping those principles alive to the present day. Once the cow was out of the barn, there was no way to get it back in.

The Romantic justification for publishing views that they later disowned was that the truth, in their eyes, was not static. They had to publish their views while those views were still fresh, to keep their fellow Germans abreast of the latest developments of the human mind. Thus they saw nothing irresponsible in publishing something that seems true today even if it is no longer true tomorrow. And so, even in ultimately repudiating many of their Romantic views, they still remained true to the Romantic assumption that no truth discovered by human beings can be timeless.

The irony is that this assumption was the one truth they *did* regard as timeless. In many circles where Romantic influences have spread, even

though this truth has never been proven, it is held to be timeless even to the present day.

Thus what we have, growing from the Romantic experience of religion, is a body of religious teachings whose ultimate goal was untested and untestable; whose sense of duty involved no sense of honor—in that it focused not on the consequences of one's actions but on the sensitivity of one's feelings; and whose attitude toward truth offers no guarantee of truth over time.

It would be too flippant to say that these views were inspired solely by sex, drugs, and novels, for the Romantics were heirs to a sober European tradition of science, philosophy, and literature that provided them with the materials from which they constructed their worldview, and that taught them how to present their views in a subtle and sophisticated way. But the fact that a tradition of this sort has become one of the dominant currents in Western religious thought is enough to give pause. And the fact that this body of teachings has become one of the main standards against which the Dhamma is measured, and to which it is often forced to conform as it comes to the West, gives rise to two questions:

How did it happen?

And is this the best way to get the most out of the Dhamma?

The second of these questions is the more important of the two, so to provide some perspective on how to answer it, the next chapter will focus on what the Dhamma teaches, with particular attention to points that run counter to what the Romantics taught. That way, when we then address the first question, we can stand somewhat outside of our own culture as we watch the way that culture gave rise to Romantic religion and fostered its spread through the modern world. This will also help give us a sense of what is at stake in allowing Romantic religion the final word on determining what counts as Dhamma here and now.

An Ancient Path

The Buddha did not invent the Dhamma. As he said, he discovered an ancient path that Buddhas of the past had discovered, but that had since become overgrown. His job was simply to clear the path again and teach others to follow it (§1).

In describing the Dhamma as a path, he was pointing to the fact that he was not teaching a philosophical system. Instead, he focused all his instructions on how to solve a single problem: the problem of *dukkha*, which can be translated as “suffering” or “stress” (§2). His solution of this problem—a path leading to total freedom or release from suffering—he treated as a skill to be mastered (§3). All of his teachings converge on this topic; any issues irrelevant to the mastery of this skill he put aside.

Because a proper understanding of the problem of suffering is an important part of the skill he taught, he did address a number of philosophical issues, but only to the extent that they were relevant to his focus. This is one of the most distinctive features of his Dhamma: his careful choice of which questions he was willing to answer and which ones he was not. In fact, the skill of knowing which questions to address and which to put aside was an integral part of the skill required to reach freedom and release (§4).

Contrary to a popular misunderstanding, the issues the Buddha chose to address were not determined by his cultural environment. His focus on the issue of suffering was entirely new and distinctive to him, as was his unwillingness to address many of the hot philosophical issues of his day, such as whether the world was infinite or not (§5; §7). Even when taking on issues that were avidly discussed by his contemporaries—such as the question of the power of action (*kamma*) and its relationship to rebirth (DN 2)—he provided an answer that was unlike anything anyone else in ancient India had taught.

So, instead of being determined by his cultural surroundings, the range of his teaching was entirely determined by the problem of suffering itself. To understand his choice of which topics to address and how far to address them, it's important to understand his analysis of what suffering was, how it was caused, and how it could be brought to an end.

Suffering, Its Cause, Its Cessation

According to the Pāli suttas—the oldest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—there are three kinds of suffering and stress: the stress of pain, the stress of fabrication, and the stress of change ([SN 38:14](#)). The second of these—the stress of fabrication—is the stress that actually weighs on the mind, and so that is the stress that the Buddha's teachings aim to solve. Once it is solved, the other two types of stress do not burden the mind at all.

“Fabrication” (*saṅkhāra*) is a technical term that literally means, “putting together.” It carries many meanings in the Buddha's teachings, but the meaning most relevant to our purposes is that of the intentional activity of the mind through which it shapes its experience.

In the Buddhist view, the mind is not passive. Because it is responsible for a body with many hungers and needs, it has to take an active approach in satisfying those needs. Even prior to sensory contact, it conditions itself through its intentions to shape those contacts toward satisfying whatever needs it wants to fulfill ([§25](#)). Because it is active, it needs to keep itself nourished as well ([§26](#)).

This means that the mind is driven by hungers both physical and mental. To identify and satisfy these hungers, it fabricates five types of activities:

- its sense of the form of the body,
- feelings,
- perceptions,
- mental fabrications, and
- sensory consciousness.

These five activities, called aggregates (*khandha*), are always at play in the mind's search for food. It inhabits and uses the form of the body to find food; it tries to avoid feelings of hunger and to create feelings of satisfaction; it learns to perceive what kinds of hunger it has and what foods will assuage them; it has to fabricate raw experiences into a form that can be consumed as food; and it has to be conscious of all these activities for them to succeed.

Because these activities are so essential to feeding, the mind tends to feed on them as well (§19). This second level of feeding is called *upādāna*, a word that can mean both “sustenance” and “clinging.” Clinging can take four forms: clinging to sensual passion, clinging to habits and practices, clinging to views, and clinging to doctrines on the topic of the self.

The act of clinging to the five aggregates is the Buddha's definition of the suffering of fabrication (§3), and for two reasons: the act of clinging itself is stressful, and the things clung-to are constantly changing—alternating between pleasant and painful—so that the mind can find no rest.

The Buddha identified the cause of this clinging as the craving that leads to becoming (§3). “Becoming” (*bhava*) is another word with a technical meaning. It refers to the act of taking on an identity in a particular world of experience for the sake of satisfying a desire —“world,” here, meaning either a physical world or a mental world, on a large or small scale. Examples of large-scale becoming would include your sense of your place in human society or of your place in the universe at large. A small-scale becoming would arise in response to a particular desire. For instance, if a person desires an ice cream cone, the relevant world consists of whatever might enable him to get the ice cream or stand in the way of his getting it. Other aspects of the physical world would be irrelevant to that particular craving. His identity here would take two forms: identifying with a sense of self that will enjoy the pleasure once it's obtained (the consumer), and with the sense of self composed of one's range of skills or possessions that will either facilitate one's desire or get in the way of its satisfaction (the producer). Other skills or possessions are, for that particular becoming, irrelevant.

What this means is that becomings can change frequently, even from moment to moment, depending on the desires on which the mind focuses. Even large-scale becomings are fleeting, in that the mind is not always concerned with its larger place in the universe—as when chocolate gelato becomes an all-consuming desire.

However, becoming does not occur only on the internal, psychological level, because what starts as a psychological process can lead to rebirth on any of the many external worlds found in the cosmos. In fact, if the processes of becoming are not stopped, they provide the sustenance that can cause you to keep taking on different identities in different rebirths—in sensual realms, realms of form, and formless realms—indefinitely (§§9–10).

There are three types of craving that lead to becoming. One is the craving for becoming itself. Another is craving for sensuality, which means the mind’s passion for making plans for sensual pleasures. In other words, the pleasures themselves don’t cause suffering, nor do they lead to becoming. The mind’s obsession with thinking about how to gain sensual pleasure is the cause for both.

The third type of craving that leads to becoming is, paradoxically, craving for non-becoming, i.e., the desire to destroy a particular becoming once it has arisen. This actually leads to further becoming because, in pursuing this craving, you take on the identity of a destroyer. On the macro level, this kind of craving can lead to rebirth in an unconscious realm from which you will eventually return to consciousness and the processes of craving (DN1).

The cessation of suffering comes with the complete abandoning of the three kinds of craving. The resulting freedom is called *nibbāna*. This word, in common Pāli parlance, means the extinguishing of a fire. In the time of the Buddha, a burning fire was said to cling to its fuel (again, *upādāna*). When it let go of its fuel and went out, it was said to be released or unbound into a state of calm, coolness, and peace. Thus the best translation for *nibbāna* is *unbinding*. At the same time, the imagery implicit in the word “unbinding” connects directly to the image of feeding, and makes an important point: You are not trapped by your food. Instead, you are trapped by your own act of clinging and feeding. Freedom comes from letting go of the objects on which you feed.

Although unbinding is the ultimate happiness, it cannot be classed as a feeling, for it shows none of the signs that feelings exhibit of arising or passing away (§51; §§53–54). Nor is it a state of Oneness or non-duality, for—as the Buddha observed from practice—even the highest non-duality arises and passes away (§23). In fact, unbinding is not even classified as a world within the cosmos. Instead, it’s an elementary property (*dhātu*) or dimension (*āyatana*) that lies outside of space and time but can be touched by the mind (§52; §§47–48).

Furthermore, unbinding is not a return to the source of all things, for two reasons: (1) As the Buddha said, all phenomena originate, not in purity, but in desire. In fact, unbinding is the end of all things (§11). (2) If unbinding were a return to a source, then it wouldn’t be final: It could become a source again for further becomings. Similarly, unbinding is not a return to a supposedly innocent state of childhood. Because a child’s mind is ignorant and driven by desire, there would be no value in returning to that state (§34).

Instead, unbinding is totally unfabricated (§§50–51), so it totally transcends becoming. In fact, one of the first realizations on reaching full awakening is that there is no further becoming. This is why it entails total release from suffering and stress. Given that all fabrication entails suffering, only an unfabricated dimension free from becoming could provide that release.

Because unbinding is unfabricated, it cannot be caused by any acts of mind, but it can be reached through a path of practice, in the same way that a road to a mountain, even though it doesn’t cause the mountain to exist, can still enable you to get there. This is another reason why the practice is called a path. It consists of skills that strengthen the mind to the point where it no longer needs to feed, enabling it to develop a sense of dispassion for all forms of clinging and craving. Because passion is what drives the mind to fabricate, dispassion brings all fabrications to an end (§30).

The Path

The path to the cessation of suffering is called the noble eightfold path because it leads to a noble happiness—free from aging, illness, and

death—and because it is composed of eight factors: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (§58). Each of these factors is “right” in the sense that it actually works to put an end to suffering. Each is clearly distinguished from its wrong counterpart. A canonical analogy compares the factors of the wrong path to the attempt to get milk from a cow by twisting its horn. Following the right path is like trying to get milk from a cow by pulling on the teats of its udder (§59).

Because the path to the cessation of suffering is something fabricated, whereas unbinding is unfabricated, the path has to be approached strategically (§50). It requires desire and even clinging—to skillful habits and practices and to skillful views—that give rise to skillful states of becoming (§§11–13). Once these activities have done their work, though, they have to be abandoned. An image in the Canon compares this strategy to the act of going to a park: Desire is required to make the effort to go to the park, but when the park is reached, the desire is abandoned. Another image is of taking a raft across a river: You hold onto the raft while crossing the river, but when you reach the further shore you leave the raft there as you go on your way.

For this reason, there are many stages in the path, a fact reflected in the two factors of the path that, under the heading of discernment or wisdom, most directly concern us here: right view and right resolve.

Right view consists of the hypotheses that need to be adopted to follow the path. These fall into three main levels.

The first level, called mundane right view, adopts the principles that pleasure and pain result from your actions, that these actions can have results that carry from one lifetime to subsequent lifetimes, and that there are people who have practiced well to the point where they know these principles through direct knowledge, and not just through hearsay (§62).

These principles fulfill two functions. They explain how the path can work and they also give motivation for following it.

In their function of explaining, they take stands on three major philosophical issues: the nature of action, the workings of causality, and the question of freedom of choice.

Action, or *kamma*, the Buddha identified with the intention motivating thoughts, words, and deeds ([AN 6:63](#)). This is why any attempt to solve the problem of suffering and stress must focus on the mind's intentions.

In terms of causality, the Buddha taught that each person's happiness and pain result from past actions *and* from present actions. If everything came from past actions, nothing could be changed in the present, and there would be no possibility of following a new path of action ([§8](#)). There has to be freedom in choosing what one's present actions will be. For there to be such a possibility, causality cannot be linear or mechanical. The Buddha's depiction of causality is a more complex process—he compares it to the flow of water—in which results can turn around and have an impact on their causes, just as streams can have eddies and counter-currents.

From the aspiring student's point of view, freedom of choice has to be accepted as a working hypothesis, for otherwise there would be no motivation to make the effort required by the practice, or even to believe that one course of action was more skillful than another. Only with the attainment of awakening, and the total freedom that results, does one confirm that relative freedom of choice within the realm of causality is real.

These principles on kamma, combined with the teaching that kamma has an impact on the processes of rebirth, also provide the motivation for following the path to the cessation of suffering by fostering two emotions.

The first emotion is heedfulness: the realization that, because one's actions—even one's intentional thoughts—can lead either to long-term suffering or long-term pleasure, one must be careful in choosing to follow the skillful course of action at all times. As the Buddha notes, this realization is what lies at the basis of all skillful thoughts, words, and deeds ([§33](#)). In other words, he does not take a stand on whether the mind is innately good or bad. As he notes, the mind is capable of all kinds of actions, and can change so quickly that there is no adequate analogy for how quick it is to change ([§§31–32](#)). The only thing that keeps it acting skillfully is a sense of heedfulness: that its actions matter, and that happiness depends on choosing them wisely.

The second emotion elicited by mundane right view is *saṃvega*, a term that means terror, urgency, or dismay. When feeling *saṃvega*, you see that the round of rebirth is potentially endless, and that it provides no guarantee of safety—a person can work many lifetimes on skillful actions and attain a pleasant rebirth as a result, but then become complacent and heedless, falling back into unskillful ways. This sense of the overwhelming dangers of repeated births and rebirths is what provides the motivation for seeking a way out of the round entirely (§§27–28; AN 5:57).

Because these principles about kamma and rebirth are necessary for understanding how the path to the end of suffering could work, they constitute the main area in which the Buddha directly addressed metaphysical issues: the reality of causality, the reality of action, the power of action to shape experience and the power of craving to sustain acts of consciousness as they drop the body at the end of one life and head to another one for the next.

As noted above, the Buddha’s treatment of these issues did not simply follow the beliefs of his time. Questions of kamma and rebirth were hotly contested by his contemporaries. Some philosophical schools doubted the reality of both kamma and rebirth. Others, maintaining that both were real, denied that kamma had any impact on rebirth. Even among the schools that did teach that kamma determined rebirth, the understanding of the causal relationship between the two was linear and deterministic. Once you had done something, there was no way to mitigate or shape the results you’d experience (DN 2). You had no freedom of choice. Thus the Buddha’s teachings on these topics, and their relationship to the process of becoming within the mind, were totally new and distinctive.

It’s important to note that mundane right view deals in terms of becoming: people acting in ways that lead them to take on identities in one world after another.

The second level of right view, transcendent right view, drops these terms entirely. This is how it avoids the conundrum posed by the fact that both craving for becoming and craving for no becoming act as causes of suffering: It entirely drops all questions and concepts dealing with worlds and identities. Instead, it directs attention to viewing

experience in terms of the four noble truths about stress and suffering outlined above: that suffering consists of clinging to the five aggregates, that the three forms of craving are the cause of suffering, that the abandoning of those forms of craving is the cessation of suffering, and that the noble eightfold path is the path to the cessation of suffering. None of these truths involves issues of identity or worlds at all.

Right view on this level not only divides experience into these four categories, but also gives directions as to what to do with each: Suffering is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed (§3).

The third and ultimate level of right view is adopted when all these duties have been fulfilled and the only duty remaining for the mind is to let go of everything that arises and passes away, even the path, even right view (§63). In this way, the levels of right view lead to their own transcendence (§7). This is how a fabricated path leads to the unfabricated. It's also what makes right view right.

Right resolve, the second factor of the path dealing with discernment, also operates on mundane and transcendent levels, as it resolves to act on the mundane and transcendent insights of right view. On the mundane level, this means the resolve to abandon three types of unskillful resolves—sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness—and to replace them with their skillful alternatives: renunciation, goodwill, and compassion. These skillful resolves then provide the motivation for carrying out the remaining factors of the path.

Here it's important to notice two features of mundane right resolve: (1) As indicated by the first item in the list of unskillful resolves, there is no room for sensual passion in the path to the end of suffering. (2) Goodwill and compassion are no more innate to the mind than are their opposites, given that the mind is so changeable and has potentials for both skillful and unskillful actions. Thus there has to be the *resolve* to develop goodwill and compassion, and this resolve has to be motivated by the insights of mundane right view: that unskillful intentions will lead to suffering, and skillful ones to happiness. In other words, these skillful resolves all have to be motivated by heedfulness, the desire to act carefully so as to avoid suffering.

At the same time—again, given the changeable nature of the mind—the Buddha did not trust that skillful resolves, without further direction, would always lead to skillful actions. After all, an attitude of goodwill may be ignorant of the long-term consequences of actions that appear skillful on the surface. For this reason, he formulated specific precepts to define right speech and right action, precepts that he recommended be intentionally followed in all circumstances ([SN 42:8](#); [AN 4:99](#)). He also described the good and bad consequences of actions that did not lend themselves to being formulated in absolute precepts ([MN 135](#)). And he advocated ways of training the mind in *integrity*, so that his followers could learn how to observe carefully the results of their actions on their own ([MN 61](#)), and in *mindfulness*—the ability to hold things in mind—so that they could keep applying the lessons they learned to all future actions ([§35](#)).

In this way, mundane right resolve does not end simply with good intentions. Through the training of the path, it aims at carrying out those intentions skillfully in everyday life.

Once mundane right resolve has succeeded in dropping all three unskillful resolves, it leads on to its transcendent level: resolving on the mental qualities that allow the mind to enter and remain in right concentration ([MN 117](#)). Right concentration is a type of becoming, on a non-sensual level of form or formlessness, but because of its stillness and clarity it allows right view to ferret out ever more subtle levels of clinging and craving until all that remains is the act of clinging to the path itself. That is when the ultimate level of right view can do its work in abandoning all forms of fabrication, leading to release.

How the Buddha Taught

When we understand the way in which the Buddha approached and solved the problem of suffering, it's easy to see why he was selective in choosing which issues to address and which to put aside. The primary issues he had to address concerned issues of action and freedom of choice, for these were central premises for any path of action that would lead to the end of suffering. He also had to address the ways in which the mind, as an active process, arrived at knowledge and views, and clung to

its knowledge and views, for these issues were central to understanding how it creates suffering for itself and how that suffering can be undone from within. In other words, the solution did not require outside intervention. It required using skillful mental processes to abandon unskillful mental processes, and then refining those skillful processes until they opened the way to an experience beyond processes of every sort—physical or mental.

In this way, his approach can be called radically *phenomenological*, which means that it deals with your experience as you experience it directly—the part of your experience that no one else can look in to see, and that you can't share with anyone else. The main problem on this level is the suffering you experience directly, something that no one else can either feel or comprehend for you. The same holds true for the hunger that causes suffering: You alone experience it, so you alone can abandon it. The path for solving the problem also consists of processes you experience directly, which is why each person has to develop the path for him or herself alone. And the solution, when it comes, is also experienced on this level, which is why one person's experience of unbinding is something that no one else can directly know.

Because the Buddha's Dhamma is focused on this level, he had to develop a special vocabulary to describe it. He dealt with questions dealing with people's shared reality only when these questions helped to focus attention back to solving the problem of suffering on the phenomenological level.

For instance, in the case of questions framed in terms of becoming—the identity of the self, the nature or origin of the world—he treated these provisionally on the level of mundane right view. He made use of concepts of self on this level, always focusing, however, on issues of what the self could *do*, rather than what it *was*. This was so that he could convince his listeners that they had it in their power to follow the path. Similarly, he delineated the worlds to which actions could lead, so that people would be stirred to heedfulness around their actions. He observed that all worlds lacked an intrinsic purpose ([DN 1](#)), so that people—realizing that their sufferings served no higher plan—would feel free to make it their *own* purpose to put suffering to an end. But he never got involved in questions of where the universe came from or what

its ultimate dimensions in space and time might be ([DN 11](#); [AN 4:45](#); [AN 4:77](#)).

On the level of transcendent right view, however, the Buddha refused to address issues framed in terms of self and world entirely—aside from dismantling them—because the simple act of thinking in those terms, regardless of how you answered the questions they elicited, would get in the way of the end of suffering.

This was why he put aside many questions that obsessed the philosophers and theologians of his day, and that have obsessed thinkers throughout recorded history: What is the self? Does it exist? Does it not exist? Is it the same thing as the body? Is it separate from the body? How is it known? Directly? Indirectly? Is it essentially good? Essentially bad? Is the world eternal? Is it not? Is it finite? Infinite? Is everything a Oneness? Is everything a plurality? ([§5](#); [§11](#); [§§15–17](#); [§25](#))

The Buddha’s way around these questions was to recommend that his listeners look at the actions and intentions through which concepts of “self” and “world” are formed in the mind, to see that these actions necessarily involve clinging and becoming—and thus suffering. His most complex expression of the causal principle underlying these actions and intentions—dependent co-arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*)—explains how “self” and “world” are formed through processes that don’t have to be framed in terms of “self” and “world.” In this way, he showed how these terms are not basic to experience, and that experience can be usefully understood without having to fall back on them ([§25](#)).

As noted above, he also showed how the causal relations that give rise to these terms are neither deterministic nor purposeful. In other words, they don’t *have* to happen, and they don’t serve any larger purpose that takes precedence over the mind that creates them. This means that people are free not to create them. They are free to understand experience simply as actions leading to suffering or away from it, and free to decide which direction they want their actions to go. The purpose of this analysis was that once his students saw (1) the connection between the actions and intentions leading to concepts of “self” and “world,” (2) the suffering that resulted, and (3) the fact that they didn’t have to keep producing those actions and intentions, they would

naturally want to develop acts leading in the other direction, away from suffering.

Acts of this sort begin with the practices designed to develop dispassion for the clinging and craving that ideas of “self” and “world” entailed. Because clinging to notions of self is one of the most fundamental forms of clinging, the Buddha focused particular attention on showing how any possible assumption about self—that it possesses form or is formless, that it is finite or infinite—is ultimately not worth holding to (§§18–19). In particular, he singled out the idea that the self is identical with the cosmos as especially foolish, perhaps because it totally distracted attention from focusing on the sense of self as a mere fabrication or action (§§21–22). It also distracted attention from seeing this act of “selfing” on the phenomenological level, which is the level where the suffering entailed in selfing can most directly be seen. The purpose of all this analysis was not to come to the conclusion that there is no self, but simply to develop dispassion for any attempt to identify anything as oneself, because dispassion is what leads the mind to release.

In this way, both the content of the Buddha’s teachings—what he taught—and their tactical approach—how he taught—keep pointing to what he called the “unprovoked release of awareness.” This release is total and final in that it frees the mind from every possible burden or limitation (§39). It is *unprovoked* in two senses of the term: (1) It is not caused by the provocation of any causal factor. (2) It cannot be provoked to cause anything else. Once it is attained, there is no more kamma, no more hunger, and so no need for desire. This leaves no means by which the mind could ever return to becoming.

Because this release is neither cause nor result, it lies beyond all conditioned or fabricated nature (§§48–49). Because it is not a state of becoming, it does not belong to the realm of “world” or “cosmos” or any place in physical or mental space at all. This is why those who attain this release are “everywhere released” (§§42–44). Outside of time as well, it is not subject to changes in culture or human society, or even to the evolution or devolution of the cosmos as a whole. Thus the Buddha identified it as the essence of the teaching—the word “essence” (*sāra*)

also meaning heartwood, the part of the tree that remains standing even when the less permanent parts of the tree die away (§11; §§39–41).

Keeping the Path Open

Although the Buddha did not class the path to release as part of the essence of the teaching, he did see the path as having a special relationship to the essence, just as the softwood of a tree is directly connected to the heartwood. In this way, the freedom of this release is the common taste of all his teachings (§41).

One of the realizations that first occurs to a meditator upon the first taste of awakening is that there is no other path that can lead there, for the noble eightfold path is the only way by which the fabrications that stand in the way of release can be dismantled (§57). This is why the Buddha classed right view as a categorical teaching—true across the board—because it deals with mental processes in a way that transcends culture (§46).

Another realization following on the first taste of awakening is that this path is not found outside the teachings of the Buddhas (§§55–56). Other religious teachings may contain elements of the noble eightfold path, such as the practice of virtue or strong concentration, but because they lack right view—and thus fail to ask the right questions that would induce total dispassion for even the subtlest levels of fabrication in the highest states of concentration—they remain stuck in states of becoming.

The Buddha's claims for the exceptional nature of his Dhamma did not spring from pride or ignorance. After all, as we have noted, he did not claim to have invented the Dhamma, or even to have been the first to find it. The path is not true because it is "his." It's true because it's the only path that works in leading to full release.

In this way, the Buddha's authority is that, not of a creator god, but of an expert who has discovered and perfected a skill, and who wants to pass it on intact. And because this skill was not simply an education in understanding words, but a training of the entire character, he recognized that it had to be transmitted through friendship and frequent association with those who had already mastered those skills.

In fact, he cited admirable friendship—with people endowed with conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment—as the most effective external factor in leading to awakening ([§§64–65](#)).

For these reasons, the Buddha not only taught a body of teachings, but also set up a system of apprenticeship in the monastic orders he founded so that the skills could be passed on from generation to generation. Because sensual desire was an obstacle to the path ([§§13–14](#))—and because he wanted these orders to be unburdensome to their supporters—he formulated rules to make sure that these orders were celibate. And to ensure that the teachings were clearly understood, he established within these orders a culture of cross-questioning, where students were encouraged to ask questions about all the teachings so as to clarify any unclear points that would prevent their being put into practice. The Buddha contrasted this culture with that of a culture of “bombast,” where the teachings aimed more at poetic and expressive beauty, and students were not encouraged to question exactly what they meant ([§66](#)).

The Buddha knew that the ability to pass on his skills would be subject to the vagaries of time and civilization, so he established standards for judging whether teachers were reliable mentors, and whether the texts handed down were really genuine ([§67](#)). He also established standards showing students how to measure themselves as to whether they were worthy to pass judgment on these matters ([MN 110](#); [MN 113](#)).

Even then, he knew that there would eventually be those who would want to change his teachings. He did not regard this as a positive development, because the skills he taught were ones that transcended the conditions of time. Although he encouraged his listeners not to simply believe what he said, but to put his teachings to the test ([§61](#)), he also knew that any fair judgment of them would require that they be maintained intact.

So, to discourage and delay changes in the Dhamma, he criticized in no uncertain terms people who misquoted him, calling them slanderers ([§68](#)). And in particular, he warned the monks—the primary custodians of his teachings—that any changes in the Dhamma would make people doubt the legitimacy of the true Dhamma, just as the existence of

counterfeit money makes people dubious even of genuine money. Because false Dhamma could not give the same results as true Dhamma, it would eventually cause people to lose interest in Dhamma altogether. Thus the true Dhamma would disappear ([§69](#)).

This is why the Buddha stated, toward the end of his life, that the practice of the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is what would keep the true Dhamma alive ([§60](#); [§70](#); [§73](#)). As long as people continue to gain the genuine freedom that results from Dhamma practice, they will do their best—out of gratitude, loyalty, and respect—to keep the Buddha’s teachings intact to help leave open the possibility that future generations will find genuine freedom, too.

CHAPTER THREE

An Age of Tendencies

In contrast to the Buddha, the early Romantics intentionally focused on creating a body of thought that, instead of being timeless, was in step with—and a few steps ahead of—their times. So, to understand them, it's necessary to gain a sense of the times to which they were speaking.

Friedrich Schlegel once listed the three great “tendencies” of the age in which he and his fellow Romantics received their education, and to which their thought was a response: the French Revolution; Johann Gottlieb Fichte's philosophical treatise, the *Wissenschaftslehre*; and Goethe's novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The list was meant to be provocative in at least two ways. First, by placing two German books on a par with one of the defining social and political upheavals of the modern world, it insinuated that books and the ideas they contain can be as important as the actions of crowds overthrowing whole social systems, and that German ideas were on the forefront of European progress.

Second, as Schlegel explained in a later essay, he used the word “tendencies” to indicate that his entire age was an Age of Tendencies. Further, he referred to these tendencies as things to be “corrected or resolved.” In other words, the previous generation had moved the world in a certain direction, but had left it in an imperfect and unresolved state.

Schlegel questioned whether these imperfections would be resolved by his generation—or any generation—but his list of tendencies is useful in indicating three main dimensions of the background from which the early Romantics consciously drew and on which they hoped to improve: political, philosophical, and literary. We will use these three dimensions as the categories to frame the discussion in this chapter.

However, the list leaves out the component that most strongly influenced the contours of early Romantic thought: the sciences of the

late 18th century. There are two possible reasons for why Schlegel neglected to mention this influence: either he was focusing on provocative tendencies—and being provocative himself—or else the scientific influence was so pervasive in the educated circles in which he traveled that he took it for granted. But trends in the sciences of the time provide the key to understanding how the early Romantics framed their thoughts about politics, philosophy, and literature.

All of the Romantics, in their various ways, showed not only a knowledge of contemporary science but also a conviction that scientific knowledge was crucial for understanding themselves and the world in which they lived. Novalis, in his novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, stated explicitly that the education of every good poet should be solidly based on a study of the latest advances in the sciences. Schelling, when he switched his studies from theology to philosophy, spent several years reading up on the sciences, and continued to stay abreast of scientific developments throughout the early part of his career. Schlegel, on meeting Fichte for the first time, expressed surprise that such a preeminent philosopher would express no interest in science or history at all. Schleiermacher sprinkled his book, *Talks on Religion*, with frequent allusions to astronomy, chemistry, and biology. Even Hölderlin, the most poetically inclined of the Romantics, planned at one point to publish a journal whose mission was to unite the sciences with the humanities.

So it's completely in line with the Romantic worldview that we preface our discussion of Romantic views on politics, philosophy, and literature with a brief sketch of the scientific trends that exerted the strongest pull on the Romantic imagination.

There's a common belief that the early Romantics were anti-scientific, that they rejected the rationalist scientific approach promoted by the 18th century Enlightenment in favor of a more introspective, poetic approach, privileging the importance of their own emotions and imagination over the hard, dry facts of the material world. And although it is true that the early Romantics gave great importance to the life of their emotions and imagination, they felt that they had scientific reasons for doing so. As children of the Enlightenment, they

may have rebelled in some ways against their parents, but in other ways they inherited many of the Enlightenment's tendencies.

One of those tendencies was that, in exploring their emotions and imagination, they saw themselves as pioneers in the science of the mind. Furthermore, they saw each human body and mind as a microcosm of human society in general, and of the universe at large. This meant that in exploring themselves from within, they believed they were gaining objective knowledge that put them more in touch not only with themselves, but also with their fellow human beings and with nature as a whole.

The image of a microcosm draws directly from the currents in late 18th century science that distinguished it from the science of the earlier part of the century. The huge gulf created by these shifting currents can be illustrated by a simple image. Immanuel Kant, writing in 1789 and resisting most of the new currents in scientific theory, spoke of looking up at the nighttime sky and being inspired by the sublime sense of order he saw there in the stars. Friedrich Schleiermacher, writing ten years later, spoke of looking up at the same stars and seeing chaos.

SCIENCE

Isaac Newton, in the 17th century, had set forth his laws of motion with such rigor and clarity that they influenced European thought far beyond the realm of pure science. They promoted a view of the universe as a vast machine, operating in line with strict, invariable laws. The invariable nature of these laws promoted the idea that the universe was essentially static. The stars were fixed in their places, the planets in their orbits, and the coordinates of space had not been altered since the beginning of time. Matter was inherently inert, as it could not move unless something else moved it. God's role in the universe was reduced to that of a watchmaker who assembled the cosmic watch, wound it up, and left it to run on its own while he apparently turned his attention elsewhere.

The mechanical and universal nature of these laws promoted the idea that causality in every area of life was also mechanistic. This idea then led to a controversy in philosophy as to whether there was such a thing

as free will and, if so, how it could have an impact on a material world whose motions were already determined by fixed causal laws. Either the human mind was nothing more than matter itself, in which case free will was a total illusion inasmuch as matter was totally passive and inert; or it was radically different from matter, in which case it was, in a famous phrase, a ghost trapped in a machine. And if it was a ghost in a machine, there remained the question of how it could have any influence on the controls.

Toward the end of the 18th century, however, scientific thinkers began to question the mechanical worldview of Newtonian physics, and the strict division between mind and matter. This new line of questioning derived from new discoveries in the fields of biology, geology, paleontology, and astronomy.

In biology, the study of organisms had revealed two major discoveries: one, that causality within an organism, and between the organism and its environment, was reciprocal; and two, that electric currents were at work in the transmission of impulses along the nerves and in the movements of the muscles.

The first discovery resulted in a new view of causality that was not strictly deterministic. An animal responded to stimuli in its environment not in simply passive or mechanical ways, but through an active faculty called *sensibility*: its ability to organize its intake of and response to stimuli.

This ability had two implications. The first was that life was not simply passive. In constant interaction with its environment, it was alternately passive and active, adapting to its environment and appropriating its environment as sustenance. The same reciprocal passive/active interaction also took place within the organism, among the individual organs of which it was composed. The more advanced the form of life, the more complex the sensibility it displayed.

The second implication of sensibility was that life interacted with its environment with a purpose: survival.

The resulting view of biological causality thus differed from mechanical causality in two respects. It was both *reciprocal* and *teleological*, i.e., acting for an end.

The second discovery—of the role of electricity in moving living tissues—showed that matter was not inert, a fact that helped to erase the line between matter and mind. Instead of simply being dead “stuff,” matter was now seen to have a force or potency similar to that of the mind. This led some thinkers to speculate that mind and matter differed not radically in kind, but simply in the degree of their sensibility. Perhaps the physical universe was actually a less advanced form of life. Other thinkers removed the “perhaps” and treated it as a proven fact: Mind and matter were nothing but different aspects of a larger unified pattern of energy.

Although these currents of thought were not universally embraced, they were echoed in new theories appearing in German geology and paleontology. Geologists, when exploring caves or far-distant locations, had found fossils and old bones of animals—such as mammoths and giant lizards—that had never been seen alive. The question was, were these animals still living in unexplored regions of the Earth, or had they become extinct? And when the fossils bore a familial relationship to known animals, what was the relationship between them? One prominent German paleontologist, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), proposed that life *evolved*. In his eyes, the *Bildungstrieb*—drive to develop—forced plant and animal life to generate new forms and new species in line with the evolution of its physical environment, and had gone through three major epochs, paralleling those of human society: the mythic, the heroic, and the historical. In other words, the general trend was from larger and stronger organisms—the giant lizards of mythic times, the mammoths of heroic times—to the smaller, weaker, and more sensitive human beings of historic times.

This theory went hand-in-hand with a new geological conception of the Earth, as fossils were used to date the rock strata in which they were found, revealing a picture of the Earth as immensely old and changing radically with time. Two major German geologists, Johann Heinrich Merck (1741–91), and Abraham Gottlob Werner (1749–1817)—Novalis’ geology professor—proposed that the Earth had grown organically and was continuing to do so.

Many of these theories were hotly debated, both from the side of religion and from the side of religious skepticism. Fervent Christians

were offended by the huge time spans that the geologists were proposing, and by the idea that current forms of life didn't come directly from the hand of God. Religious skeptics objected to the idea of a life force imbuing all matter, in that it allowed God, as a living force, to play a continuing role in the affairs of the world.

The most decisive event in strengthening the organic view of the universe was the publication, in 1789, of a paper by the renowned astronomer, William Herschel, discoverer of the planet Uranus. Herschel, a native of Germany living in England, had curried favor with George III by originally naming his new planet "the Georgian star"—a name that fortunately did not stand the test of time. It persisted long enough, however, for his friends in the Royal Academy of Sciences successfully to lobby the king to provide Herschel with the funds to build an immense telescope outside of London, by far the largest telescope to that date in the world. Herschel's reputation—he was one of the early superstars of science—together with the size of his telescope, gave added authority to his subsequent discoveries.

In 1789, Herschel published some of his findings in a paper modestly titled "Catalogue of Second Thousand Nebulae with Remarks on the Construction of the Heavens." However, the observations he reported in the paper, and the conclusions he drew from them, were anything but modest.

Herschel noted that, with the improved power of his telescope, he had discovered that many of the "nebulae" in his catalogue were not really nebulae, but actually separate galaxies, and that our solar system was located in only one of the many galaxies within his newly-expanded field of view.

His most important observation, however, was that some galaxies showed signs of being more evolved than others, a fact that he explained by detailing how a galaxy might grow, develop, and die in line with the laws of gravity, an organic process that involved immense spans of time. In other words, the more evolved galaxies were far older than the less evolved, which in turn meant that the galaxies were not all created at the same time.

Herschel's paper accomplished several things at once. It turned astronomy from a science concerned primarily with navigation to one

focused on issues of cosmology: the origins of the stars and the evolution of the universe. In terms of the content of the science, it effected a revolution even more radical than the Copernican. Copernicus had simply moved the center of the universe from the Earth to the Sun, whereas Herschel argued that there was no center at all. Moreover—because galaxies were of different ages even though obeying the same laws of physics—it suggested that there was no single beginning point in creation or time.

These two propositions were a radical challenge to received religion in the West. They confirmed the large spans of time needed to explain geological and biological evolution, and questioned the centrality of human life in the general scheme of the universe.

Above all—at least in terms of what the Romantics did with this new discovery—Herschel's paper reinforced the organic view of the universe. As one modern writer has observed, the paper turned astronomy into a life science, concerned with the evolution of stars and galaxies over time. To emphasize this point, Herschel throughout his paper drew his analogies and imagery from the realm of plant life.

The universe revealed by his telescope, he said, was like a garden. "Youth and age are comparative expressions; and an oak of a certain age may be called young, while a contemporary shrub is already on the verge of its decay.... To continue the simile I have borrowed from the vegetable kingdom... the heavens are now seen to resemble a luxuriant garden which contains the greatest variety of productions, in different flourishing beds... and we can extend the range of our experience [of them] to an immense duration." Just as a person in a garden is able "successively to witness the germination, blooming, foliage, fecundity, fading, withering and corruption of a plant," in the same way, a human observer looking through a telescope was able to see, in a single moment and from a single place, "a vast number of specimens, selected from every stage through which the plant passes in the course of its existence."¹

This vision of our galaxy as a giant organism within a vast garden of other giant organisms was quickly popularized in the work of poets, including Charles Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin. As it spread through Europe, it provoked many questions: What is our place, as

organisms, in the life of the larger organism of which we are part? And what meaning does life have in a vast universe in which organisms are taking birth and dying, over and over again? Is there a single, larger organism of which the galaxies themselves are part, or is the garden random and chaotic? And what powers do we have to answer questions about such vast stretches of space and time?

The many analogies from astronomy that the Romantics used in their writings—such as Hölderlin’s reference in his novel *Hyperion* to the nighttime sky as a “garden of life”—show that they were familiar with Herschel’s work and took seriously the questions it raised. The answers at which they arrived drew on the other three areas of European culture that most influenced their worldview: politics, philosophy, and literature.

POLITICS

Friedrich Schlegel, in citing the impact of the French Revolution on his age, was simply pointing to the most dramatic political event that occurred during his lifetime. But other political events predating the Revolution had an even more pervasive influence in shaping the questions he and his fellow Romantics addressed and how they addressed them.

Germany during his time was still recovering from the devastation caused more than a century earlier by the Thirty Years War (1618–48). That war had pitted Catholic against Protestant countries all over Europe, but most of the bloodshed and destruction had occurred on German soil. Some principalities, such as Württemberg, had lost more than three quarters of their population. What was left of Germany after the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 was a patchwork of principalities—some, like Prussia, relatively extensive, others no larger than a village—each with its own laws, customs, and forms of government. In fact, some historians insist that the word “Germany” during this period should always be put in quotation marks, to act as a reminder that there was nothing—not even a fully common language—to bind together what we now know of Germany into a single political or cultural unit.

In most cases, these principalities were ruled by councils of nobles or petty monarchs, who—in each case—had been given the right to choose the established church in the land under their jurisdiction: Protestant or Catholic. Because they were independent of one another, some of the more powerful monarchs developed royal pretensions, seeking to turn their courts into small versions of the model that the French were creating at Versailles.

This required money. The solution, in some cases, was to adopt another model exported from France: the ideal, promoted by the French *philosophes*, of the enlightened despot, i.e., a monarch who ran his country on rational principles with an efficient bureaucracy. The *philosophes* had espoused efficiency and rationality with an eye to fairness, but the petty princes of Germany had their eyes more on another goal: efficient tax collection. This combination of efficient administration coupled with autocratic rule, as it developed on German soil, combined the worst of both the medieval and the modern world: arbitrary rule efficiently enforced. In fact, some of the complaints about rationalist government that we associate with modernists and postmodernists were first expressed by writers such as Novalis in late 18th century Germany.

To train the bureaucrats needed to staff their bureaucracies, the various principalities supported their local universities, or created new ones where they did not yet exist. The universities, however, found themselves split by dual requirements. To attract good students, they had to provide an up-to-date curriculum, which often meant keeping up with the latest liberal trends from England and France; but to maintain the support of their sponsors, they had to ensure that what they taught would not be so liberal as to upset the status quo. Thus the students at these universities found themselves in a schizophrenic environment of ever-changing standards for what could and could not be taught.

The schizophrenia did not end with their graduation. If they were lucky enough to secure jobs in the German bureaucracies, they found themselves dealing with the vagaries of the local monarchs or legislative councils, who often required their officials to act in direct contradiction to the principles learned at school. This, of course, has been a recurring problem in human history, but in late 18th century Germany it was felt

especially acutely, as German political realities lagged so far behind those of its neighbors to the west.

Historians writing about this period describe the prevailing mood among educated Germans as one of alienation and separation: feeling divided within themselves because of the disconnect between the liberal principles in which they had been educated and the conservative principles that still governed the society where they lived and worked; and divided from a larger sense of communion with like-minded people by the fragmented social and political landscape. In terms later popularized by the French Revolution, there was a felt lack of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

With little practical hope of attaining the first two of these three ideals, many educated Germans focused their energies on the third. Here, leadership came first from another consequence of the Thirty Years War: the growth of Pietism.

Although modern historians have suggested that the real causes of the war were economic, those in the midst of the war saw it as a life-and-death battle over the future of the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church had been eager to see the Reformation suppressed by military means, as had happened to earlier heterodox movements throughout the Middle Ages. The Protestant denominations, in response, recognized the need to become more organized and to seek military support of their own. In exchange for this support, however, they found themselves forced to become more and more subservient to the rulers allied to their cause. The altar, to use the terms of the time, became subject to the throne. To make this fact more palatable, participants in the war justified it in terms of the very minor differences of doctrine separating the Protestants from the Catholics. After thirty years of killing one another over questions of how to understand the oneness of the Trinity, or God's presence—or lack thereof—in consecrated bread and wine, people began to wonder if this was really what Christianity was all about. The jaded response was Yes, which led to the growth of the anti-Christian secular movements of the 18th century, especially in Scotland and France.

The unjaded response was the growing belief that the Christian message was one not of the head, but of the heart. As a true Christian,

one should be measured not by one's understanding of the Trinity but by one's right feeling of love for God, however one conceived Him. This, in turn, was to be measured in daily life by one's right loving relationship to one's fellow human beings. Various religious movements grew out of these convictions. One that developed in England from a parallel disillusionment with the organized church was Methodism. The prime movement in Germany was Pietism.

Pietism appealed largely to anti-intellectuals, but it also attracted people of a more scholarly bent, who used their philosophical training to show that, contrary to the school theologians, no human being could form an adequate concept of God, and so no self-styled authorities had the right to say that their concept was right and anyone else's wrong. Because the founding principle of the universe could not be adequately conceptualized, the best use of one's energies was to develop a provisional concept that worked in fostering the love that the Christian message clearly called for. In other words, religious truths should be judged by pragmatic standards: their ability, not to represent reality fully, but to inspire a correct relationship to one's God and one's fellow human beings.

Pietism was originally a movement within the Lutheran Church, but it soon sparked similar movements in Catholic parts of Germany as well. However, because the administration of churches in Germany was often subject to political interference from local authorities, the movement developed a loose relationship to existing church organizations. In fact, it fostered a perception that the Romantics adopted and has since grown common throughout the West: that organized religion is inimical to the genuine religious life of the heart—or what we currently call the split between religion and spirituality.

Large voluntary brotherhoods developed, crossing state boundaries, in which like-minded men and women could live and work together in their quest to develop the right qualities of heart. One of the prime activities of these brotherhoods was to hold Bible-reading circles in which members were encouraged to keep diaries of the state of their souls, to be shared in the (ideally) safe environment of the circle so that they could learn from one another how to develop the right attitudes of spiritual love. Other activities, designed to bring this love into the world,

included the founding of orphanages and hospitals for the care of the poor.

The Bible-reading circles of the Pietists soon inspired secular counterparts among the educated administrative classes of Germany: book-reading clubs in which people pursued their own further education and cultural improvement, beyond the rote-learning they had received in university. The German word for this ideal—a self-directed improvement of not only one’s knowledge but also one’s good taste, character, maturity, and overall culture—is *Bildung*. Because there is no English word adequate to translate this concept, we will keep the German word throughout this book. *Bildung* was central to the sense of a German cultural identity that, during this period, began to transcend state boundaries. In some ways, it was the secular equivalent of piety, in that it was a matter of the maturity and quality of the entire character, shaped by philosophy and literary sensibility, consciously cultivated in a self-directed way, and going far beyond the education organized by the state.

Although *Bildung* was acquired through one’s entire life experience, it was influenced by ideas picked up from books and discussed in the book-reading clubs. Book-publishing during this period expanded at a faster rate in German-speaking parts of Europe than anywhere else—a sign not only that more Germans were becoming literate, but also that they were looking more and more to books for their emotional and intellectual sustenance. The Leipzig catalog of new books, for instance, listed approximately 1,200 titles in 1764, but 5,000 by 1800. Favorite genres included plays, travel writing, essays, popular philosophy, and novels. Travel books allowed people to imagine and discuss alternate ways of life in a manner that the authorities did not find threatening. Annual essay contests provoked responses from all the German lands, and sparked widespread discussion of such topics as the meaning of Enlightenment, the relationship between reason and feelings, and the future of German literature. Popular philosophy books addressed the Big Questions of life, but without requiring technical rigor from their readers. Even Kant wrote a layperson’s guide to aesthetics that went through more printings during his lifetime than any of his other works.

Novels in particular, with their ability to explore subtleties of their characters' psychological and emotional development in a way that other genres could not, encouraged readers to see the importance of exploring their own inner emotional growth—a theme we will explore further below.

This was the environment into which news of the French Revolution burst in 1789. As might be expected, young German university students were originally among the most ardent supporters of the Revolution. Hölderlin, Schelling, and Hegel, on learning of an important victory in the Revolution, planted a “tree of liberty” and danced around it, in hopes that the good influence of the Revolution would take root in German lands. But even some older portions of the educated German public responded positively to the Revolution as well. Immanuel Kant, for one, maintained to his last coherent day that it had been a Good Thing in advancing the cause of human liberty.

But as the Revolution progressed into its darker phases—the Terror and the Empire—attitudes in Germany, even among the enthusiasts for freedom, began to change: What had gone wrong? Conservatives, of course, gloated over the failure of the Revolution, claiming it as proof that liberty and equality had to be stamped out wherever they reared their head.

More liberal thinkers, however, began to look for another answer, one that might show a safer route to a German society in which liberty, equality, and fraternity could ultimately prevail. One of the answers they ultimately proposed was peculiarly German in the sense that it grew from German conditions fostered by the Thirty Years War: The Revolution had failed because the French lacked the kind of *Bildung* needed to handle liberty. The follow-up questions then became: What kind of *Bildung* might that be? And how could it be fostered to take root in German soil?

These questions were the legacy that the French Revolution left to the early Romantics. To answer them, the Romantics turned to look at the state of contemporary German *Bildung*. Philosophy—at that time the queen of the sciences in German universities—was one of the first places they looked.

PHILOSOPHY

Four philosophers—three living and one dead—proved most influential in shaping early Romantic thought. The dead philosopher was Plato, whom we will discuss at the end of this section, because his influence was filtered through what the living philosophers were teaching.

Among the living philosophers, only one—Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814)—was a philosopher by profession. The other two—Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803)—were known primarily for their literary accomplishments, but their philosophical writings proved, in the long run, more influential than Fichte's in shaping the way the early Romantics thought about art and its relationship to freedom and life in general.

All three of these living philosophers had, at one point or another, been students or followers of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and all had broken with him for various reasons. The Romantics, in turn, ended up breaking in various ways from all three—in some instances returning to themes the three had discarded from Kant; in others, going even further away. So to understand the Romantics, we have to start with a sketch of what it was in Kant that they found most useful and most in need of correction.

Kant

The main theme of modern European philosophy was one that the Buddha would have classed as a question ultimately not worth answering, in that it was framed in terms of becoming: What is a human being's place in the world? In ethical terms, do we have free will to act in the world, or are we simply automatons who cannot know or control the reasons for their actions? As these questions were pursued, they sparked further self-reflective questions: Is there a self? Is there a world outside of one's own mind? How could one know these things for sure?

Some typical answers were these:

- *The world is just as we perceive it, and it can be understood by working down to first principles—about what things are in their essence, both in the*



world and in the mind—and then deriving our experience from those principles.

- *The world exists only in the mind, which is the only essential substance there is.*

- *There is no way that we can know the essences of things, for all we know are representations derived through the senses. We can't even know if causality is really at work behind our sense data, because causality can never be seen in action. Even our self is unknowable. It's simply an assumption that lies outside the range of our senses.*

Kant gained his reputation as a major philosopher because of the novel and provocative way he addressed these questions. Instead of focusing on a quest to confirm or deny essences outside or inside, he looked at the way consciousness interacted with the input of the senses, showing that the basic raw material of knowledge is composed not of sense data, but of judgments about sense data. In other words, what we perceive directly is not things-in-themselves in the world outside or the self inside, but the workings of reason in shaping experience in the middle ground. We *make* our experience, and—as Kant often said—we know best, not what *is*, but what we make.

However, this fact does not prevent us from coming to objective conclusions about our place in the world, for if we examine, through introspection, the workings of reason in action, we can penetrate beyond the subjective content of our experiences to their objective structure or form, which has to be the same for all conscious, rational beings. In other words, we learn objective facts about the world of experience by observing the ways our reason *has* to shape it. Kant called this approach *critical*, in that it took a critical view of the powers and limitations of reason, and *transcendental*, in that it sought to discover necessary, objective forms of conscious activity that transcended the purely subjective level; i.e., all subjective experience had to presuppose and follow these forms. (Kant's meaning of the term *transcendental* here

differs from the meanings that other thinkers will be using throughout this book, so take note of how these meanings change.)

One of the consequences of this critical, transcendental approach is that Kant developed a novel criterion for truth. Because things-in-themselves cannot be known, there is no way to measure the truth of a judgment by seeing how well it represents reality “out there.” Instead, its truth has to be measured by its coherence with one’s other judgments “in here.” Because coherence has objective, rational standards, one’s assessment of truth is not entirely subjective, but it nevertheless, by Kant’s reasoning, becomes an internal quality within consciousness.

In his search for coherence, Kant began by dividing reason into two sorts: theoretical and practical. Theoretical reason dealt with beliefs concerning such questions as the reality of causality, the existence of an immortal self, and the existence of God. Kant felt that, on the grounds of theoretical reason alone, causality—the mechanical causality of the Newtonian universe—had to be accepted as an objective, transcendental form of sensory experience, whereas the existence of God and an immortal self could neither be proven nor disproven.

Practical reason dealt with the area of action, and it, too, had an objective form that was universal for all rational beings: respect for one’s duty as dictated by reason in the form of what Kant called the *categorical imperative*, i.e., an imperative that was the duty of all rational beings. His primary formulation of this imperative was that one should act only on maxims that one would will for all other beings to act on as well. For this imperative to have power in practice, it required—and so justified—assuming two principles that theoretical reason could not prove: the existence of God to provide a purpose for moral actions (by having a purpose for the universe), and the immortality of the soul (to receive the rewards from helping to fulfill that purpose).

The imperative also gave practical justification for the assumption that human beings were free in two senses. The higher of the two senses was *autonomy*: the freedom from one’s passions that resulted from taking the duty of reason as the sole motivation for one’s actions. The lesser sense of freedom was *spontaneity*: freedom to act in ways not determined by the laws of strict causality so that one could choose to follow those imperatives or not. The assumption of these two forms of

freedom, however, flew in the face of one of the necessary forms of theoretical reason: that experience follow strict, mechanical causal laws. When this is the case, how can a person have free will to act in a way that influences experience?

Other thinkers might have concluded that freedom of will was thus an impossibility, but not Kant. For him, everything worthy of respect in each human being came from freedom in both his senses of the term. Anyone who believes that governments should not oppress people—that people deserve to be treated as ends in themselves and not as a means to one's ends—has to respect the principle that people have the dignity of freedom. If you have any respect for human thought at all—either your own or that of others—you have to respect the principle that people are free.

However, Kant did not propose that the principles of theoretical reason should be discarded to make way for the principle of practical reason. He expressed the conflict here as a genuine dilemma.

Still, he did propose two approaches for dealing with this dilemma, neither of which satisfied the Romantics—or many others, for that matter. The first approach was to state that there were two levels of self: the phenomenal self, or the self as experienced in the realm of nature, which meant that it was subject to the causal laws of nature; and the noumenal self—the self in-and-of-itself—which lay outside the world of nature and so was not subject to those laws. This distinction, however, created a divided self, with the relationship between the two selves left unexplained. It also meant that the self in-and-of-itself was unknowable—just as things-in-themselves, outside our experience, were also unknowable—and it further left hanging the question of how such a self could actually influence the world of experience.

Kant's second approach was to call in another area of philosophy: the field of aesthetics, or the study of beauty. The experience of beauty, he claimed, did not prove that there was a resolution of the dilemma, but it did intimate that freedom of will might, on a supersensible level, be compatible with causality on the sensible level. His argument here centered on two concepts.

The first was the *beautiful*. Beautiful things express freedom in that they excite the free play of our imaginative faculties as we contemplate

them. In fact, Kant insisted that there were no objective standards of beauty, probably with the purpose of maintaining that the experience of beauty was one of freedom. At the same time, though, beautiful objects express necessity in that they suggest that all their parts are meant to serve a single aim. In this way, they are like biological organisms. The word *suggest* here is important, because we can have no proof that the creator of a beautiful object had any purpose for it. Still, the beauty of the object excites a strong intimation that this is so. And thus, Kant argued, the same can be said for biological creation: The purposiveness of animal and plant life suggests that there is a purpose for the universe as a whole. In this sense, beauty is a symbol of the reality of the moral law. It is also a symbol of the fitness of the parts of the universe to one another, suggesting that the transcendental patterns of reason fit well with the way things actually are in and of themselves.

Kant's second concept—which had a long past history, stretching back to the Epicureans—was that of the *sublime*. Sublime objects go beyond being beautiful because they are so immense that they give rise to a sense of terror and awe. Typical examples include mountains, canyons, waterfalls, and sunsets. (As one wilderness writer has noted, the theory of the sublime provided the impetus for the American experiment in setting aside land for national parks. Only in the 1930's was a non-sublime piece of wilderness, a swamp, set aside.)

During the 18th century, when the concept of the sublime took on new life, thinkers were divided as to whether the sublime dimensions of nature were truly terrifying, in the sense that they called into question the possibility of any larger, benevolent force behind them, or if they were ultimately reassuring in demonstrating that, no matter how great they were, the benevolent God who created them had to be even greater. Kant fell into the second camp. The overwhelming immensity of sublime experiences, together with a sense of their orderliness in following causal laws, he said, excites within the mind a feeling that there must be a supersensible faculty at work in the universe. In fact, Kant felt that the sheer possibility of thinking such a thought without contradiction could be seen as a sign of a supersensible faculty, outside of time and place, at work within the mind itself. Thus, for him, the experience and thought of the sublime suggested—even though they did

not prove—both a benevolent God and an immortal self—and a connection between the two.

Kant's discussion of beauty is where he most clearly shows his Pietist roots. In fact, there is some justice in the view, occasionally expressed, that his philosophy can be read as a sustained attempt to provide Pietism with a rigorous, philosophically respectable form. Certainly, many of the inconsistencies and dilemmas he left unresolved can be explained by an underlying Pietist agenda, conscious or not.

As already noted, Kant's proposed ways out of the dilemma he posed between theoretical and practical reason did not satisfy the Romantics—or any of the three philosophers who had a more direct impact on the Romantics. But it was a tribute to the power and originality of Kant's reasoning that his philosophy, even though imperfect, excited so much thought throughout Europe and beyond in response. In particular, six aspects of his philosophy proved especially attractive to the Romantics:

- his approach of looking at the workings of the mind, as an active principle, to explain experience as a whole,
- his standard of truth as an internal quality,
- his insistence that many metaphysical issues could not be resolved by theoretical reason,
- his insistence on the centrality of freedom in any respectable philosophy,
- his proposal that aesthetics might hold the key for solving problems beyond the realm of the purely aesthetic, and
- his doctrine of the experience of the sublime as an intimation of the divine.

All of these themes provided the Romantics and their teachers with ample food for thought.

Fichte

One of the major flaws in Kant's philosophy was his insistence, on the one hand, that reason requires a complete, coherent explanation for all of experience, and, on the other, that reason has to recognize its inability to provide such an explanation. Many of his followers tried to



resolve this inconsistency, one of the most creative attempts being that of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who in turn taught philosophy directly to many of the early Romantics. Fichte felt that, in smoothing out many of the twists and turns in Kant's reasoning, he was being true to the critical spirit of Kant's philosophy even as he changed many of its basic outlines.

Fichte followed Kant in giving primacy to the need for philosophy to respect the principle of freedom, and he defined freedom in the same two senses that Kant did: autonomy and spontaneity.

In fact, in the areas where he departed from Kant, Fichte gave even more primacy to these principles of freedom than had his master. To begin with, he dropped the division between theoretical and practical reason, saying that in reality there was only one form of reason: practical. Following Kant's maxim that we know only what we do, Fichte argued that genuine knowledge can come only by doing, and not by pure thinking. Because practical reason has to assume freedom, the arguments of theoretical reason for deterministic, mechanical laws at work in nature have no validity.

This means that there is no need to say that freedom is in any way paradoxical or that the self is unknowable. Fichte argued that, in fact, the self is directly known through an act of "intellectual intuition," which meant that this knowledge was not mediated through the senses and their attendant concepts, but through a direct experience of the self's activity. This activity could be directly experienced as the self strived to impose its reason on whatever parts of nature were "not-self." Because this knowledge is direct, the self has no essence lying behind its activity of striving; in fact, the self is pure striving. It *is* what it *makes* itself, and its knowledge of itself is no different from what it makes itself.

This principle takes Kant's maxim that we know only what we make to an audacious extreme. Given that, in many Christian theological

systems—such as that of Thomas Aquinas, whose theology became the official doctrine of the Catholic Church during the Counter-reformation—the status of being pure activity identical with pure self-knowledge was reserved only for God, it's easy to see why Fichte eventually ran afoul of the authorities.

Although Fichte saw the self as free in the spontaneous sense—that it was able to strive to make itself anything at all—he did not believe that true freedom was totally arbitrary, for the only way the self could know that it was not a slave to its passions would be for it to exercise autonomy as well. In other words, it was truly free only when it took on Kant's categorical imperative as the principle guiding its actions.

Because what is not-self will never fully succumb to the striving of the self, the experience of the self is one of endless striving. This certainly was true of Fichte's own life, in that he lost two professorships—first in Jena, then in Berlin—as a result of standing up for his moral principles when university officials had asked him to compromise them.

Fichte admitted that there was a circularity to his reasoning: Because he denied the validity of theoretical reason, he could not provide a purely rational justification for the principle of freedom. So he simply asserted that there was a moral duty to believe in freedom. But for there to be such a thing as a moral duty, the principle of freedom has to be true. In other words, belief in moral duty requires a belief in freedom, but belief in freedom requires a belief in moral duty. Fichte offered no way out of this circle.

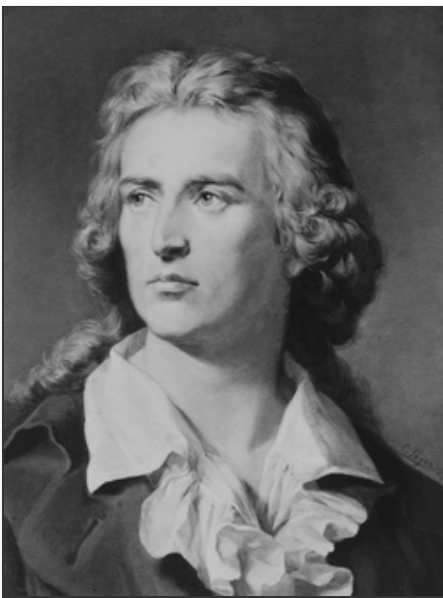
In the early years of the French Revolution, students were willing to overlook this circularity because Fichte's teachings on freedom provided an attractive rallying point for their revolutionary aspirations. His teachings on the self as being directly knowable in its spontaneous self-creation remained attractive to the early Romantics even as they eventually rejected other aspects of his philosophy. However, as the French Revolution entered its dark stages, the idea of the single-minded pursuit of freedom began to lose some of its luster.

As the early Romantics began to articulate their disenchantment with Fichte's philosophy, two issues stood out. First, his account of the self as nothing but striving—acting on the world while resisting being acted on *by* the world—struck them as narrow and one-sided. From their point of

view, developed partly from their lessons in biology, a full account of the self would also have to account for how the world acted on the self.

Second, in abolishing the dilemma between theoretical and practical reason, Fichte had also removed the need for aesthetics to play a role in his philosophy. And it was in pursuit of a serviceable understanding of the role of aesthetics in developing *Bildung* that the early Romantics returned to Kant for his doctrine of the experience of the sublime. But they found his concept of the beautiful too lifeless in that it ignored the role of desire. For a more adequate concept of beauty, they thus turned to two of Kant's other former followers—Schiller and Herder—and eventually to Plato.

Schiller



Friedrich Schiller was a playwright and poet, not a professional philosopher. In fact, he is best known to posterity for his Ode, “To Joy,” which Beethoven set extravagantly to music in the Ninth Symphony. Still, Schiller had a philosophical and medical education under autocratic conditions that inspired a life-long interest in the issue of freedom. In seeking to deepen his understanding of this issue, he undertook a thorough study of Kant's philosophy, at first agreeing with Kant's conclusions, and then finally arriving at a position of his own.

The main outline of Schiller's position paralleled Kant's: that the aesthetic is what mediates the split in human nature, allowing for the possibility of freedom. But because Schiller's view of what a human being is differed radically from Kant's, he came to a radically different conclusion about what freedom means and how it is found.

Kant had stated in his treatise, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, that each human being had three dispositions: animality, humanity, and personhood. *Animality* is the disposition to physical self-

love, expressed in the drive to survive, to propagate the species, and to engage in social activity. *Humanity* is the disposition to self-love that compares oneself to other human beings and competes with them, first to attain equality, then to gain mastery over them. *Personhood* is the innate disposition to respect one's duty for its own sake as a sufficient incentive to behave morally.

For Kant, only the third aspect of human nature was genuinely worthy of respect, as it was the only aspect truly free in an autonomous sense. Thus it had to be developed so that it could override the other two dispositions. In fact, Kant insisted that actions were authentically moral only when motivated by pure respect for duty. Actions in line with one's duty that also happened to be motivated by considerations that served one's animality and humanity—say, to survive or to be sociable—did not, strictly speaking, qualify as moral.

This was the point that eventually stuck in Schiller's craw. The short version of his response was a witty little verse whose "verdict" satirized Kant's position:

The Scruple of Conscience

'I serve my friends gladly but—sadly—with fondness.
So, often, I'm anxious that I am not virtuous.'

The Verdict

'There's no other advice: You must strive to despise them,
And then with disgust do what Duty demands.' (trans.
Beiser)

The long version of Schiller's response came in two books on moral issues: *Grace and Dignity* and *Letters on the Aesthetic Education [Bildung] of Man*. The basic position of these books, taken together, can be summarized as follows:

Schiller agreed with Kant that there is a strict dichotomy within each human being between animal drives (*Treib*) and the drives of reason. However, he came to the conclusion that Kant's picture of how these drives function within the human being—and how the moral drives are even known in the first place—was both unhealthy and untrue to the

facts. This conclusion is what led him to develop a doctrine of freedom that differed sharply from Kant's.

Schiller's views on human nature came from the theory of medicine—called philosophical medicine—in which he had been trained. This approach treated the body and mind not as radically separate, but as two different but interactive parts of a single organism, in which the health of one part is necessary for the health of the other. For a doctor, this meant that diseases in the body did not necessarily stem only from physical causes. Their cure often required that diseases of the mind be treated as well. Ideal health, even though it could never be fully accomplished, was to be pursued by trying to bring these two sides of the organism to wholeness and harmonious balance.

From this perspective, Schiller developed both a *psychology* of morals and a *genealogy* of morals—i.e., a theory of how people come to know the moral law and develop a feeling for it in their lives.

The psychology is based on the principle of the health of a human being as a whole organism. If, as Kant claimed, moral actions had to serve one part of the organism—one's personhood—at the expense of one's animality and humanity, they couldn't be truly healthy. Thus Schiller concluded that freedom was not a matter of one part of the human mind legislating at the expense of the rest of the human being. Instead, freedom was the ability to find harmony among the various drives—both physical and mental—that made up the human being as a whole.

This is a concept of freedom radically different from anything advocated by Kant or Fichte—and different from anything they would have recognized as genuine freedom. It leaves no room for freedom as autonomy, and places severe restrictions on the freedom of spontaneity. Freedom is now subject to the various competing drives that have to be brought into balance, with no way to liberate itself from those drives. By making freedom the pursuit of internal wholeness and balance, Schiller made it less an ethical category than an aesthetic one. In fact, in one of his earlier writings, he had cemented the concept of freedom to aesthetics by tweaking Kant's formula for the relationship between freedom and beauty: Instead of being a *symbol* of freedom, beauty in Schiller's eyes was the *appearance* of freedom—the way harmony looks,

both by inference to the observer and directly by the person who is able to act in harmonious ways.

Because freedom, for Schiller, is the pursuit of harmonious wholeness, it parallels the pursuit of the health of the individual in that it is an unending pursuit rather than a goal to be attained. This definition of freedom also affects Schiller's definition of the underlying motivation for the moral life. Instead of being inspired by an innate respect for duty, the moral life is now inspired by the desire for wholeness.

Schiller's genealogy of morals attempted to explain how this desire is cultivated in the first place. In doing so, he showed that beauty is more than just the appearance of freedom. An aesthetic sense, in his eyes, is actually what makes an ethical sense possible.

A human being, he said, does not start with an innate respect for the moral law. Instead, one starts with a jumble of predispositions that fall into three major categories: the *sense drive*, the drive to satisfy basic physical needs; the *play drive*, the aesthetic drive for pleasures that are freely creative; and the *form drive*, the drive for reason and morality. The play drive is the only drive free from compulsion, and it is what brings the sense drive and the form drive into harmony: i.e., the play drive is where freedom is found. In fact, the exercise of the play drive is what makes people aware of the form drive to begin with.

When life is nothing but a struggle to survive, people have no time or energy to be even aware of their form drive, much less to follow it. Instead, they are devoted only to the needs of their sense drive, which often brings them into conflict with one another. However, when their basic needs are met, they turn to play: singing, dancing, telling stories. As they do so, they find enjoyment in one another's company.

If done carelessly, the exercise of the play drive can lead to dissolute harm and further conflict. But if done with reflection, it can eventually lead people to think in moral terms: how best to live together with one another in fairness and harmony—*fraternity*, in the sense of the Revolution, or *wholeness* writ large—so as to find more enjoyment together over the long run.

What this means is that one's sense of morality does not develop in contradiction to one's feelings and social drives, as it does in Kant's

theory. Instead, the moral sense comes about as a *result* of one's feelings and social drives—when these are trained through a reflection on how one's long-term wellbeing depends on pursuing wholeness both within and without.

This is where aesthetic education comes in: training the play drive so that it leads in a moral direction. Schiller's own experience with state-sponsored education convinced him that governments were ill-equipped to provide the sort of education that people needed in order to become free. Ideally, governments would direct the economic order so that people were not alienated from their labor—as when they had no control over the objects they made—or from one another through unfair exploitation. At the very least, governments should provide the economic conditions whereby all members of society had their needs well enough met so that they had time and leisure to enjoy the arts, such as the theater and books.

Once people were ready for the arts, though, it was the *artist's* duty to provide their aesthetic education. The purpose of this type of education was to lead them to the “aesthetic condition”—a state of mind where they could step back from the immediate concerns of their sense drives and contemplate (1) the fact that they also had form drives, and (2) that they were in a position to choose whether to bring their form drives and sense drives into harmony. In other words, a true work of art should not preach morality, for that would be tedious and self-defeating. Instead, it should raise moral questions and get its audience to see their own lives as involving moral issues. Then it was up to them to exercise their freedom of choice to pursue the goal of harmonizing their various drives.

Schiller delineated two types of moral actions that can result when the moral sense is developed: those performed with *grace* and those performed with *dignity*. Actions performed with grace are the moral ideal: those in which one's feelings and preferences are in harmony with one's knowledge of what the moral law requires. You *want* to do what you know you *ought* to do. When inner harmony is achieved through self-training, the grace that characterizes the resulting actions is the appearance of freedom. This is one of the ways in which morality parallels art: A work of art is beautiful when there is no sense that the

author had to strain to force its various parts into a harmonious whole. In fact, in Schiller's eyes, the ultimate work of art is the beautiful soul, as displayed in the actions it freely performs.

Actions performed with dignity are those where one's feelings are at odds with what the moral law requires—you don't want to do what you ought to do—and yet one is able to overcome those feelings to do what is right. These actions lack the beauty of graceful actions, for they are obviously done under duress, but they are nevertheless inspiring to others who are also struggling with their own resistance to the moral law. As a playwright, Schiller knew that the depiction of these kinds of actions made for better drama than graceful actions—and for a more educational drama as well, in that they highlighted moral issues without shrinking from the difficulties that the pursuit of wholeness might bring.

Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* was written to address a question provoked by the failure of the French Revolution: how *Bildung* could prepare people for a society in which they could be genuinely free. Thus these letters spoke directly to an issue that fascinated the Romantics. In particular, they contained two maxims that had a huge impact not only on the early Romantics but also on many later generations of artists and psychologists: (1) "Human beings play only when they are, in the full sense of the word, human; and *they are fully human only when they play*." (2) "If man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom."² Taken together, these maxims outline the program the Romantics pursued: how to train the play drive so as to bring about freedom.

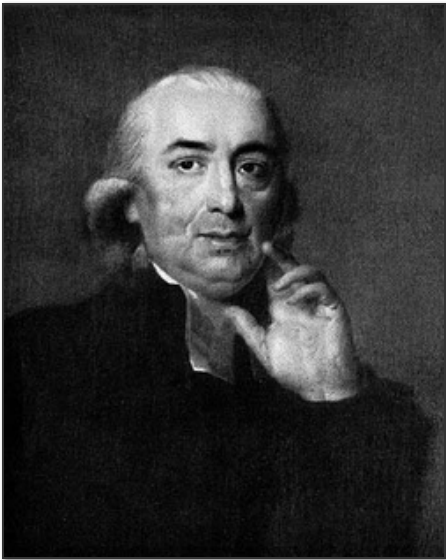
As noted above, Beethoven, too, was inspired by Schiller's dream of using art as a means to freedom. In fact, when he set the Ode "To Joy" to music, he chose the version that Schiller had revised in 1803 to better reflect his mature thoughts on how the joy of play leads to wholeness within the human race:

Joy, lovely spark of the gods, daughter of Elysium:
We approach, drunk with fire, your heavenly, holy shrine.

Your magic reunites what custom sternly rends apart.
All men become brothers where your gentle wing has spread.

Schiller knew that, because of the innate dichotomy in every human being, this brotherhood was a goal to be pursued even though it could never be fully achieved. This view too—that freedom and harmony were to be found in process, and not in any final attainment—had an enormous influence on the Romantics, even though they ultimately rejected the psychology on which it was based. For the basic premise of their own psychology, they turned instead to Herder.

Herder



One of the ironies of the Romantic movement is that one of its prime fathers—Johann Gottfried Herder—received so little explicit acknowledgement from the early Romantics themselves. Perhaps this was because his influence was structural: He provided them with the basic outlines for their worldview, for their understanding of art, and for their sense of their own place in the world and in history. Because structure lies under the surface, it often goes unnoticed by people standing right next to it.

Another reason was that Herder was actively disliked by Kant and people loyal to Kant, such as Fichte. Of the various students who broke away from Kant, Herder excited within Kant the strongest feelings of betrayal, for Herder—in Kant's eyes—had gone over to the enemy.

Herder had come from a poor background. Kant—seeing his talent—had arranged for him to attend his lectures gratis, and devoted a great deal of time to Herder's growth as a student. However, Herder came under the influence of a mystical thinker living in Königsberg, Johann Georg Hamann, and eventually decided that Kant's belief in pure, universal rational principles governing the entire life of the mind was far too narrow. In his eyes, the reasons of the human heart and mind—as

exemplified in the vast range of human culture over the long course of history—were much too wonderfully variegated to be adequately judged and understood by universal rules. He also rejected Kant's idea that aesthetic appreciation was to be treated simply as a subjective issue, for that would deny the possibility that important lessons could be learned by consciously developing one's aesthetic tastes.

Herder's life purpose thus became the quest for principles that would allow one to appreciate all products of human culture on their own terms—what he called the development of an “infinite sphere of taste,” not the narrow tastes of 18th century rationalism. As he wrote in his *Four Critical Groves*:

“To liberate oneself from this innate and enculturated idiosyncrasy... and ultimately to be able to relish—without national, temporal and personal taste—the beautiful as it presents itself in all times and all peoples and all arts and all forms of taste... to taste it purely and to be sensitive to it. Happy is he who can so relish! He is the initiated into the mysteries of all the muses and all the times and all the mementos and all the works: the sphere of his taste is as infinite as the history of mankind.”³

Through his writings and researches, Herder laid the groundwork for many modern and postmodern disciplines: cultural anthropology, folk studies, and intellectual history among them. He also revived, almost single-handedly, appreciation for the works of Shakespeare—who in the 18th century was at the nadir of his critical reputation—and he was among the first European philosophers to express admiration for the religions of India. He also devoted his spare time to collecting folk songs, first in Latvia, where he was briefly posted as a Lutheran minister, and then later, together with Goethe, in Germany. If diversity studies could have a dead white male as its patron saint, Herder would be the one.

Educated in philosophy, Herder tried to find philosophical underpinnings to justify his interests. The philosophy he eventually developed grew from three principles: *vitalism*, the theory that the universe is animated by an organic living force; *historicism*, the belief that something can be understood only through its own history and its

place in the larger history of the universe; and *monism*, the theory that the universe is all One. He derived these three principles from three disparate sources. The vitalism came from the organic views of science that were developing at the time (Herder was a friend of the geologist, Johann Heinrich Merck, and cited Albrecht von Haller's researches into the role of magnetism and electricity in biological tissues). The historicism came from the founder of art history, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768); and the monism, from Kant's nemesis, Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677).

On a general level, there is a logic connecting all three sources. Haller's vitalistic theories fit well with monism in that they claimed to erase any clear line dividing mind and matter; Winckelmann's aesthetic theory fit well with vitalism through his theory that styles of art developed historically in organic ways. However, when we look at the details, we find that Herder had to make major adjustments in Spinoza's philosophy for it to fit with the other two sources. Spinoza, had he been alive, would have been no more pleased than Kant was with the result.

Herder had been attracted to Spinoza's monism for its vision of a universe not only One, but also One within God. This justified Herder's interest in all things human, as they could be explained as expressions of the divine acting in and through human nature. However, Spinoza's monism had entailed some less attractive conclusions. He taught that the universe could have only one substance, which was God, and that everything else was just an accident of that substance. The physical world and mental world were simply two aspects of one underlying substance. Each aspect, observed on its own terms, could be seen to obey its own laws, but because the physical was not essentially different from the mental, those laws were actually parallel.

Now, physical laws, in Spinoza's account, were purely logical and mechanical, predetermined by necessity from the reason innate in God's nature, and acting without apparent will or purpose. This meant that everything happening in the mind was predetermined by necessity as well. Spinoza even wrote his major philosophical work, the *Ethica*, along the lines of Euclid's *Geometry*, to show how the behavior of things, in both the world of objects and the world of the mind, was derived necessarily from a single first cause.

Because God was the only substance, only God had freedom, which Spinoza defined as the power to follow one's own nature. Human beings, as "finite modes" of God's substance, had no freedom of choice because they acted, of necessity, in line with God's reasons. Freedom for them—for their minds—consisted solely in the power to form a conception of the universe that was adequate for helping them to recognize and assent to the necessity of the way things were. This would then free them from their passions and allow them to live in equanimous acceptance. Similarly, only God was immortal; a human being could taste immortality only by accepting the way things were—although how one had the freedom to choose to accept or not accept these things, Spinoza never explained.

Spinoza's philosophy is often seen as a reaction to the religious intolerance of his time. He argued that, as finite modes, human beings could never fully comprehend God or his purpose—if he had any—and so it was unreasonable to kill others whose conceptions of God and God's purpose were different from one's own. However, by identifying God with pure, necessary reasons, Spinoza had to explain away much of the Talmud and Bible, inasmuch as the God of those books was hardly the embodiment of reason. So he insisted that religious writings that defied reason had to be understood as nothing more than allegories, and their poetic effusions discarded.

Even though Kant had a similar view of the Bible, it's easy to see why he felt such animus for Spinoza's view of man's place in the universe: It was antithetical to everything Kant found inspiring in the human heart and mind. Freedom, in Kant's double sense of the word, was impossible in Spinoza's philosophy.

Herder's concern for freedom differed from Kant's. He was interested in freedom less as a moral issue than as an aesthetic one—the freedom to develop an infinite sphere of taste—but there was no room for even this sort of freedom in Spinoza's mechanistic view of the universe. So Herder simply updated that universe, replacing it with what he saw as the new scientific orthodoxy: the universe as organism, developing and evolving all the time. The laws of this universe were necessary, but they were also reciprocal, in constant interaction and interconnectedness, so that not everything was predetermined. And they acted teleologically,

like all of life, for the purpose of achieving ends. As the universe evolved, its laws evolved as well, for higher and higher purposes.

Because the universe, in Herder's view, was a manifestation of God's substance, this meant that changing the universe required changing God as well. God was no longer timeless and immutable. He, too, evolved over time. In fact, he was the force that, through the necessity of his organic inner laws, drove evolution, and had a will and purpose. As a force, his operations were to be found in everything, from matter on up through all the activities of the mineral, plant, and animal world. These levels differed from one another not in kind, but only in complexity. But because these forces formed an organic whole, everything was unified in leading to the best possible goal. As Herder looked upon this universe, he saw that it—and everything within it—was good:

“Everything that we call ‘matter’ is, therefore, more or less self-
animated; everything is a realm of active forces that *form a whole*,
not only in appearance for our senses but also in accordance with
their nature and their relation. One force dominates. Otherwise,
there would be no unity, no whole. Various forces serve on the
most diverse levels; but all parts of this diversity, each of which is
perfectly determined, nevertheless possess something common,
active, interactive. Otherwise, they would not form a unity, a
whole. Because everything is most wisely interconnected in the
realm of the most perfect power and wisdom; and because
nothing in this realm can combine, sustain, or form itself except
according to the inherent, necessary law of the things themselves;
we therefore see everywhere in nature innumerable organic
wholes, and each in its own way is not simply wise, good, and
beautiful but rather is something complete, that is, a copy of the
wisdom, goodness, and beauty such as can be made visible in this
interconnection.”⁴

As the overarching force reached higher and higher levels of evolution in the human heart, Herder felt that it showed its most advanced forms not only in principles of theoretical reason, but also in the emotions—which, as with everything else, differed from reason not in kind but in levels of complexity. In its highest form, this force became

the desire to be *expressive*. Its purpose was to communicate through its creative activity.

This point connected with Herder's view of art—and all human creative expression. Because God is ever-evolving, his expression through human creativity must evolve as well. Thus there is no single standard for judging human creations as right or wrong, beautiful or not. Everything is to be judged by how suitably it expresses God's force for the particular time and place when the work of art was created.

Here Herder borrowed a principle from the work of Johann Winckelmann, who had almost single-handedly invented the field of art history. Winckelmann, an ardent admirer and student of Greek art, had developed the theory—a commonplace today—that art should be appreciated, not in terms of eternal rules, but in line with its cultural and historical situation. This meant appreciating how, on the one hand, a work of art fit into the culture at the moment it was created, in relation to the philosophy, institutions, and mores of the time. On the other hand, it meant seeing how the work of art related to other works of art of a similar style that preceded and inspired it—or that it, in turn, inspired—to show where it fit into the organic laws of the birth, growth, flowering, or decline of that particular style.

To this theory of art, Herder added two elements. One, *all* human creative endeavors—this included not only the arts, but also science, philosophy, and religion as well—should be approached as art: i.e., not for their truth value, but for what they expressed of the heart motivated to bring them into being. Two, because God was the force shaping not only the artist's inspiration but also the context in which the artist worked, the study of the history of human creative endeavors was not simply a pastime for the idle, but a way of developing a broader appreciation of the divine will at work in the universe.

The vast distance separating Herder from Spinoza can be illustrated by how each treated the Bible. As noted above, Spinoza found nothing worthwhile in the Bible aside from universal, rational principles on how to behave morally. For Herder, the most interesting parts of the Bible were the poems, especially the Psalms, because they were the most accessibly characteristic expressions of the culture in which they were composed. He wrote a revolutionary book, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*,

showing how the imagery of the Psalms perfectly expressed the distinctive strengths of early Hebrew culture and gave an insight into God that was missing in later cultures.

This approach, now called *cultural relativism*, succeeded both in elevating and demoting the Bible—and everything else to which Herder applied it. It elevated aspects of ancient literature that his contemporaries found rough and barbaric, showing that they, too, had their inner logic and charm. However, it demoted them by denying that they might have universal validity or authority.

The idea that no human thought could have universal validity would have been repugnant to Spinoza, inasmuch as he identified God with universal principles of reason. Nevertheless, Herder was so persuasive in the way he presented his appreciation of Spinoza that for the many succeeding generations, “Spinoza” meant Herder’s recasting of the latter’s doctrine. When the early Romantics spoke of combining what they saw as the two opposite poles of philosophy—Fichte and Spinoza—into a new synthesis, they were actually trying to unite Fichte and Herder.

For all his differences with Spinoza on the issue of causality, it’s hard to say that Herder fully avoided the difficulties of Spinoza’s doctrine of freedom. Herder, too, saw freedom as nothing more than the power to act in line with one’s nature. Even though he broadened “one’s nature” to include far more than one’s ability to form adequate concepts of reason, this doctrine still placed limits on how free a human being could be. The chief limit was that one was not free to change one’s nature or the forces acting within one. As an artist, one had some freedom in expressing those forces, but no freedom to step outside of the bounds of one’s time and place, or to defy the laws of the organic evolution of human culture—which, for Herder, were as necessary as the eternal laws of logic had been for Spinoza. Herder did grant a greater measure of freedom to the interpreter of art, for the latter, through conscious *Bildung*, could comprehend the laws of cultural evolution and so rise above some of the limitations imposed on the artist. But this was an ideal more to be pursued than fully attained. And in *expressing* one’s appreciation, one was bound by the same restrictions imposed on the artist.

Herder was a more enthusiastic than a systematic thinker, so he failed to address many of the weaknesses and inconsistencies in his thought. The major weakness, from Kant's point of view, was that there was no empirical basis for erasing the line between mind and matter. As Kant argued in a review of Herder's work, the fact that matter possesses energy, in the form of electricity and magnetism, is no proof that it acts purposefully for any specific end. We know purposeful activity only within our own minds, in observing ourselves act for the sake of ideas and principles, but there is no way we can get inside matter to know if it acts for the sake of ideas and principles as well. This means that Herder's main principle for explaining the universe as One—a universal force acting for purposeful ends—explains things that are directly experienced by means of something that cannot be experienced at all.

As for the inconsistencies in Herder's views, one stands out: If we assume that God acts in all human creations, why do some creations of a particular time and place better express his energy than others? And why are some cultures more receptive to his influence, and others less so? Herder was satisfied with the typical monistic answer to the problem of evil: that to see something as evil simply meant that one didn't understand its role in the larger scheme of things. But he was bedeviled by the problem of the 18th century French: How could an entire culture be, from his point of view, so narrow and dismissive in its tastes? How could *they* fit into the larger scheme of things? What possible purpose could they serve? And what could a person bound in a narrow culture do to escape?

The difficulties in Herder's concept of freedom, and the weaknesses and inconsistencies in his thought, carried over into Romantic views of the world and human psychology: What proof is there that everything is an expression of divine force? Even if one accepts the divine origin of forces within and without, how is one to decide which to follow and which ones not? Is one really free to choose?

As for the problem of narrow-minded cultures, the Romantics' issue was not the narrowness of French culture. It was the narrowness of the German culture all around them. To gain insight into how to transcend those confines, they went outside that culture to the ancient philosopher most congenial to their project: Plato.

Plato

Plato, in his Socratic dialogues, had left a twofold legacy. On the one hand, there was Socrates the skeptic, who whittled away at the positions of his opponents until nothing was left, but then was coy about establishing a position of his own. On the other, there was Socrates the mystic, who spoke with great feeling on issues of friendship, love, beauty, and the eternal life of the soul.

The latter Socrates appealed to all the early Romantics, but the former had his Romantic admirers as well. In particular, Friedrich Schlegel extolled Socrates for his irony: his ability to take up a position, argue for it, then argue against it, and to keep moving on. This, Schlegel felt, exemplified philosophy as a living, dialectical process, rather than as a dead system, and provided him with the model for how he wanted to do philosophy, too.

But Socrates the mystic provided the Romantics with the positive goal for such a process: the search for inspiration in the creation of truly beautiful and expressive works of art. The two dialogues in which Socrates spoke most rhapsodically on these topics—the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*—were the ones the Romantics turned to most often.

Both dialogues taught that love of beauty was a conduit to the divine. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates addressed the problem of love as madness, explaining it as a madness with a divine origin. He delineated several levels of divinely inspired madness, the next-to-highest being the madness that inspired poets to compose; the highest being love for a beautiful person. This love was divinely inspired, Socrates said, because the sight of a beautiful person stirred inchoate memories of the gods as seen in a previous lifetime, along with associations that those memories provoked. Once provoked, those associations drove one to pursue the beloved. This pursuit, however, could lead in either an exalting or a debasing direction.

Socrates illustrated this point with an analogy. The soul, he said, was like a chariot yoked with two horses: one noble, the other base. If the base horse overpowered the charioteer and the noble horse, the love would lead to nothing but the pursuit of carnal pleasure. However, if the charioteer and noble horse maintained control, the love would lead the

lovers to abstain from such pleasures and to explore together the delights of philosophy instead. This would lead their souls on to a higher reincarnation after death.

In the *Symposium*, Socrates reported the lessons he had learned about love from Diotima, a mysterious woman from the East—and the only person, Schlegel noted, with whom Socrates never argued. Diotima taught that love was half-mortal, half-immortal: the medium through which human beings interacted with the divine. Love of beauty was driven by the purpose of finding immortality through procreation. On the lowest level, this meant creating babies. On the highest, though, it meant creating noble philosophical thoughts.

To achieve the highest level required training—*Bildung*, in the minds of the Romantics. It started with the love of a beautiful body, but then was to be trained to see the limitations of that particular beauty by detecting the same beauty also existing universally in other bodies, and on a higher level within many individual minds. Going beyond individuals, the soul was taught to appreciate higher and more refined levels of beauty—in customs, laws, and institutions—until it was able, in contemplation, to perceive the eternal form of beauty itself. From that contemplation one was able to give birth, “not to images of virtue—because one is in touch with no images—but to true virtue—because one is in touch with the true Beauty. The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it, and if any human being could become immortal, it would be he.”⁵

In both dialogues, Socrates was quite insistent on the point that although appreciation of beauty may begin with erotic lust, it quickly has to outgrow sexual activity if it is to lead upward. This point, though, went right past the Romantics. They were more struck by the fact that Socrates—unlike Christianity and philosophers such as Kant—taught that lust was far from being antithetical to the divine and was instead a necessary part of the path leading there. Love for another person activated one’s appreciation for the divine forces at work in the world. That appreciation was then extended, through love of humanity, love of nature, and love of art, to a level where one’s expressive artistic creations absorbed more and more of the universe, and so were able to transcend—as much as humanly possible—the limitations of one’s culture. In so

doing, they could inspire in others the sense of love and fellowship through which a truly free society could grow. As long as one's love could stimulate these higher dimensions, the early Romantics thought, there was no need to abandon the beauties of carnal pleasures.

This was where the ideology of Romantic love, as both a personal and a political program, began.

LITERATURE

With love such an important part of the growth of wisdom and a sense of one's true place—*vis à vis* the world and its creator—it became obvious to the early Romantics that philosophy, as taught in the universities, was not the best medium for expressing and generating the whole of wisdom. There was no place for love in the academic classroom. At best, academic philosophy could offer rigor in exploring only part of human nature: reason. The whole of human nature, in all its emotional variety, required a different and vaster genre entirely: literature.

Herder had argued earlier that—because human language dealt primarily in analogies, and because literature was more sophisticated than philosophy in its handling of analogies—one could learn more about human nature through literature than through philosophy. But for Herder, literature primarily meant poetry: dramatic, epic, and lyrical—the works of Homer, Sophocles, Dante, and Shakespeare.

The Romantics, however, had grown up in a culture that was more profoundly shaped by a new genre of literature that was concerned less with analogies than with psychological development. That genre was the novel: *der Roman* in German, *le roman* in French.

In the late 18th century, the novel was still a new art form. Because ancient Greece and Rome had had no novels, there were no ancient standards for judging what a novel should or shouldn't do. So novelists took almost everything as their subject matter, and experimented with a wide variety of styles, sometimes within an individual work. The experimental fiction of the present is no more experimental than what many novelists, such as Lawrence Sterne, were doing then. Officially—i.e., in the literary theory taught in the universities of the time—

dramatic poetry was considered the highest form of art. But because novels, unlike drama, were primarily intended to be read by individuals, novelists were free to explore subjects that drama did poorly at best: revealing the organically developing inner life and thoughts of their characters.

The fact that novels were expressing something genuinely new was illustrated by the unprecedented sensation caused by two novels in the latter half of the century: Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Héloïse* (1761) and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). *Julie*, in six volumes, told a story of doomed love in which the main characters described and analyzed the development of their feelings in extravagant detail. *Werther*, in the form of letters exchanged among the two main characters and their friends, told of a young man who, in love with a woman betrothed to another, ended up committing suicide. This latter novel struck such a raw nerve that a rash of suicides followed its publication—a fact that caused Goethe no end of regret. And both novels begat industries: Switzerland saw an uptick in the number of tourists wanting to visit locations where scenes in *Julie* had taken place; in Germany, it was possible to buy collectible plates illustrated with scenes from *Werther*. Because of the realism of both novels, many readers were convinced that they were not fictions, but portrayed actual events.

But what sort of realism was this? *Julie* had sparked a critical row in Germany when Moses Mendelssohn—one of the last great figures of the German Enlightenment, and Dorothea Schlegel's father—had argued that *Julie* was unreadable, first because its long discussions of emotion were hard to stomach. "I believe," he said, "that there is nothing more unbearable than when the pathetic becomes the loquacious."⁶ Even worse, he said, the novel's long declarations of love were totally unrealistic: Nobody in real life who was really in love would ever speak that way.

In response, Johann Georg Hamann, Herder's mystical mentor, replied that Mendelssohn had no appreciation for the "true nature of the romantic." Novels, he argued, exposed and explored a deep level of truth that the strictures of society usually kept hidden. It didn't matter whether most people talked that way. There was a part of the human

soul that wanted to—and novels provided the necessary outlet for its expression.

Mendelssohn was not silenced by this response. He took Hamann's phrase and rearranged it, saying that the "romantic nature of truth" had to abide by the rules of all truth: to be cogent, coherent, and orderly. Hamann was demanding a leap of faith in allowing for a truth that had no order at all.

This exchange marked one of the first times "romantic" was used as an adjective to describe a type of truth. And although Mendelssohn had the last word in this particular skirmish, Hamann's position eventually carried the day. The view that novels—even though their stories might be improbable and extreme—explored psychological development with a realism that no other genre could, became more and more influential until it was taken for granted.



Goethe, in his later novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96), tried to articulate what was distinctive about the genre by comparing it with drama. Drama, he said, is concerned with *character* and *action*; novels, with *sentiment* and *events*. In other words, novels focus less on the characters' motivation for action, and more on how they *feel* about events. In fact, sentiments should propel the story. If the propulsion was slow and organic, that was to be expected and even enjoyed. No matter how long the characters took to sort out their feelings, there was plenty of room to take the reader through all the steps.

Fate should play a major role in dramas, Goethe went on to say, but not in novels. Novels, to be true to life, needed to make room for Chance. In fact, the driving force of the novel should not be external Fate but internal emotional development in response to chance occurrences.

Finally, Goethe noted that novelistic—i.e., romantic—traits were not limited to novels. In fact, this discussion of genres in *Wilhelm Meister* was a prelude to a discussion of *Hamlet*, in which the characters note

that Hamlet was driven more by sentiment than by character, and so Shakespeare's portrayal of him was actually an "expansion of a novel." What made *Hamlet* a true drama in their eyes was the fact that Fate led to a necessary and tragic end.

This discussion is apparently what led Schlegel and his fellow Romantics to list Shakespeare as a "romantic" author, even though Shakespeare never wrote novels. Romanticism, as Schlegel defined it under Goethe's influence, was less a genre of writing and more a general approach to literature as a whole.

Wilhelm Meister itself is a prime example of this approach: a novel impelled by sentiment and chance events. The story is primarily concerned with the emotional development of the title character—it was one of the first German *Bildungsromane*, or novels of how a young person grows and matures. Wilhelm starts out bright, inquisitive, and articulate, but emotionally immature. As the events unfold, he makes many decisions about what to do with his life, but in almost all cases, the more his decisions come from his head, the more disastrous they turn out to be. In the end, events—and the kindly intervention of people around him—teach him how to find happiness by listening to his heart and learning to appreciate the wisdom of those who genuinely love him. Although the apprenticeship of the title seems at first to refer to Wilhelm's pursuit of a career in the theatre, he drops that interest toward the end of the book, after which there comes the revelation that his apprenticeship is really a series of lessons in how to master nothing less than the art of living itself.

As noted above, Schlegel cited *Wilhelm Meister* as one of the three major "tendencies of the age." As with the other tendencies, he felt that the book had its imperfections, but by and large he and his friends thought very highly of it, and regarded it—together with its author—as one of the few bright lights of German literary culture. Novalis, although he later changed his mind on the book, had a very favorable first impression of it, calling it the "Absolute Novel." Schlegel, in one of his critical fragments, added, "Whoever could manage to interpret Goethe's *Meister* properly would have expressed what is now happening in literature. He could, so far as literary criticism is concerned, retire forever."⁷ In both cases, the appeal seems to be that they saw it as an

inspiring example of how a novel can contribute to the *Bildung* of a reader who wants to master the art of living as well.

For Novalis, one of the prime lessons in *Wilhelm Meister* lay in its element of magic. The Abbé—wise, kindly, and old—watches over Wilhelm’s apprenticeship from afar without Wilhelm’s knowledge, and occasionally interferes from behind the scenes to alert Wilhelm to the fact that there is more to the world than he conceives. The Abbé’s knowledge of Wilhelm’s mind-states and activities—which he copies into a manuscript that he shows to Wilhelm toward the end of the book—cannot be explained by normal human powers, and Goethe seems to imply that no explanation is required. The attractiveness of the idea—that there is a benevolent, omniscient being overseeing one’s spiritual progress—is offered as explanation enough. Novalis later employed a similar device toward the beginning of his unfinished novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in which young Heinrich finds an ancient illustrated but incomplete book, written in Provençal, which clearly contains the story of his life. Novalis, however, does offer an explanation for this bit of magic when he states that nature contains magical dimensions that are closed to those who don’t approach it with a sense of imagination, but are open to those who do. In other words, imagination adds nothing false to nature. It simply brings out the magic already potentially and authentically there.

This sense of magic was what Novalis had earlier recommended when he stated that, “Life must not be a novel that is given to us, but one that is made by us.”⁸ As one saw the magical in the ordinary, one “romanticized” life—this was his term—and one thereby made oneself “authentic”—again, his term. The ability to turn the commonplace and ordinary into the mysterious and sublime was what confirmed one’s freedom and power to shape one’s experience, to taste one’s share of the infinite. *Wilhelm Meister*, even though Novalis later repudiated it for taking an ironic stance toward the arts, nevertheless had offered him lessons in what a romantic, authentic viewpoint could be.

For Schlegel, the appeal of *Wilhelm Meister* was more complex. In an extended review written for *Athenäum*, he stated that the novel’s lessons in *Bildung* operated on three levels.

The first level concerned the book's content. The stages in Wilhelm's *Bildung* illustrate many principles on how to educate one's own sentiments. And these principles are not merely implicit in the events. Goethe fills the novel with discussions among the characters about art, love, philosophy—all aspects of life, even the most tasteful way to decorate a home and entertain guests. (The German fashion of having music in the background during meals, but with the musicians hidden from view, was apparently inspired by Goethe's recommendations on the point.) As the characters reveal themselves in their words and actions, they offer the reader ample food for thought: both inspiring examples of lives well-lived, and affecting examples of lives gone astray, seeking redemption, and deserving compassion in unexpected ways. Simply to read the book on this level is to learn a great deal about life.

However, the second level of *Bildung* that Schlegel detected in the book went deeper. This was the challenge offered by the book's form—or rather, its lack of any easily discernible form. In line with Goethe's theory of Chance, the story is episodic and often causes the reader to wonder if it is going anywhere at all. Schlegel noted the randomness of the novel, but he called it a “cultivated randomness”: randomness with a higher purpose. He saw it not as a weakness but as part of the novel's strength as an agent of *Bildung*. In his eyes, a reader gained *Bildung* not only by being exposed to the events of the story but also by being forced to reflect and contemplate the structure of the novel on a deeper level so as to make sense of the whole. This exercise in imaginative reflection, then, trained the reader to see not only the wholeness and coherence of the novel, but to detect wholeness and coherence in his or her own life. In this way, even after leaving the novel, one would be a changed person. As Schlegel said in one of his fragments extolling the “synthetic writer,” apparently referring to Goethe:

“The analytic writer observes the reader as he is; and accordingly he makes his calculations and sets up his machines in order to make the proper impression on him. The synthetic writer constructs and creates a reader as he should be; he doesn't imagine him calm and dead, but alive and critical. He allows whatever he has created to take shape gradually before the reader's eyes, or else he tempts him to discover it himself. He doesn't try to

make any particular impression on him, but enters with him into the sacred relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry.”⁹

By entering into the “sacred relationship” of this dialogue with the author, one sharpens one’s critical powers and becomes co-author of the book. In so doing, one gains heightened appreciation of the processes of sensibility in all life that the Romantics learned from their biology professors: that one has to learn to be both *receptive* to outside stimuli and *active* in shaping them to participate fully in the ongoing, organic life of the universe.

This dialogue with the author leads to a third level in the novel’s lessons in *Bildung*: a deep exposure to what was, in Goethe’s case, a truly cultivated mind. Because the Romantics, through their scientific education, had come to see the human mind as a microcosm of the infinite, it’s easy to see why Schlegel viewed the opportunity for exposure to the great mind of a cultivated author as an opportunity to see the whole world anew. In one of his fragments, he stated:

“Many of the very best novels are compendia, encyclopedias of the whole spiritual life of a brilliant individual.”¹⁰

In his review of *Wilhelm Meister*, he added:

“The reader who possesses a true instinct for system, who has a sense of totality or that anticipation of the world in its entirety which makes Wilhelm so interesting, will be aware throughout the work of what we might call its personality and living individuality. And the more deeply he probes, the more inner connections and relations and the greater intellectual coherence he will discover in it. If there is any book with an indwelling genius, it is this.”¹¹

Part of this indwelling genius, Schlegel felt, was Goethe’s stance as narrator of the novel. Although the narrator shows affection for all of his characters, he maintains a somewhat ironic distance toward them throughout, giving them room to demonstrate their foibles and weaknesses. This allows the reader to form his or her own judgments and, at the same time, to experience directly the heightened view of life

that an ironic distance can afford. As we will see in the next chapter, the principle of ironic distance as a means of appreciating the wholeness of life was central to Schlegel's own philosophy.

Schlegel was convinced that the organizing principle behind *Wilhelm Meister* was Goethe's attempt to present a theory of art and its place in life. He also felt that, by presenting this theory in the form of a novel, Goethe had found a way to convey a philosophy that more than compensated for what it lacked in logical rigor by being alive and compelling.

"It was so much the poet's intention to set up a comprehensive theory of art or rather to represent one in living examples and aspects, that this purpose can divert him into introducing events which are really only episodes.... [Yet] it is possible, indeed, to find a system in the author's presentation of this physics of poetry—not by any means the dead framework of a didactic structure, but stage after stage of every natural history and educational theory in living progression."¹²

In other words, Schlegel felt that Goethe had learned how to exploit the strengths of the novel as a genre not only to convey psychological insights but also to communicate a total philosophy, including history and science, in a living, evolving, progressive way. *Wilhelm Meister* had combined "poetry"—i.e., fine literature—and philosophy into one. This, for Schlegel, was the most important tendency exhibited by the book, for it suggested a way to rescue philosophy from the stuffiness of the academy and bring it to life. As he said in one of his fragments, "Novels are the Socratic dialogues of our time. And this free form has become the refuge of common sense in its flight from pedantry."¹³

For this reason, the desire to unite poetry—i.e., any fine literature written in a novelistic style—with philosophy became one of the early Romantics' major crusades. Schelling was a notable exception to this desire, but the other four major early Romantics all wrote novels and other "romantic," "synthetic" pieces of literature as their primary vehicles for expressing their philosophic vision. And given the view of the universe they had adopted from Herder—as an infinite, organic

unity, in which the parts evolve through continual interaction toward an unknowable goal—an open-ended genre that allows for philosophy to be expressed through dialogue, irony, intuition, love, and psychological development was an ideal medium for conducting the philosophical enterprise in the context of that universe.

The early Romantics did not call themselves “Romantics.” Even though they used the term freely to describe the literature they admired, the first person to apply it to them was their first great French admirer, Madame Germaine de Staël, in her book, *On Germany* (1813). She herself was a novelist, and in calling Schlegel and his cohorts “Romantics” she meant to underline the way in which their philosophy took a novelistic form. However, she also regarded them as apolitical, which was something of a mistake. As Schlegel’s comment about the tendencies of the age suggests, he and his friends saw their engagement with philosophy and literature as having a political dimension, too. However much they disagreed with Schiller on the details of his aesthetic theory, they agreed with him that, “It is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom.” Toward this end, they wanted to combine philosophy and literature in a way that would provide Germans with the *Bildung* they needed to find liberty, equality, and fraternity while at the same time avoiding the mistakes of the French Revolution.

Madame de Staël may have dismissed the early Romantics’ political program because she was writing about them shortly after their group had disbanded without having produced any coherent political theory or tangible political results. There were several reasons for their failure on this part, and—as we will see in the next chapter—one of the main reasons was that the scientific worldview underlying their philosophy undermined the possibility of personal freedom. Their attempts to synthesize the tendencies of their age fell apart because some of those tendencies could not be reconciled with the lessons that William Herschel had seen in the stars.

The Romantic Universe

In Germany of the late 1790's, there was nothing unusual in the fact that the early Romantics met frequently to discuss issues of philosophy, literature, and *Bildung*. The taste for this pastime was something they shared with many of the other book-reading clubs of their time. What set them apart, though, were five factors:

- The speed with which they absorbed and consolidated the latest developments in many branches of the arts, the sciences, and revolutionary politics.
- The thoroughness with which they worked out the philosophical and artistic implications of their newly consolidated worldview.
- The imagination with which they tried to resolve the inconsistencies within that worldview.
- The radical nature of the implications of their deliberations concerning the major issues of philosophy—in Kant's terms, pure reason, morality, and aesthetics; in Plato's terms, truth, goodness, and beauty.
- Their sense that they were at the cutting edge of human consciousness, and the missionary zeal with which they communicated their front-line reports to the rest of the world. Novalis' words capture their sense of themselves: "We are on a *mission*. Our vocation is the *Bildung* of the Earth."¹

These five features of their "symphilosophy" transformed what could have been just another book club into a revolutionary force in European thought. The cultured public of Germany in the early 1790's had regarded Kant's work in philosophy as a revolution on a par with the French Revolution, and in fact saw Kant's work as the intellectual counterpart of the political forces that the French Revolution had unleashed. However, reading Kant today, it's hard to see him as

inhabiting the same universe we do. Reading the Romantics, though, it's obvious—allowing for some of the excesses of their style—that they were the first inhabitants of the universe we live in now.

Part of this similarity lies in the simple fact that, unlike Kant, they looked up at the nighttime sky and saw what we see there: an ever-changing universe of infinite dimensions in space and time. But beyond that similarity, their conclusions about what those dimensions meant in terms of the good life on Earth—the subjective nature of truth, the duty to be true to one's emotions, and the position of the artist at the forefront of the evolution of human consciousness—are still very much up-to-date. Their revolution went beyond Kant's and moved into the culture at large.

Three aspects of their thought were especially important in extending this revolution into the area of religion, and ultimately into Buddhist Romanticism: the worldview they developed in common as a result of their symphilosophy, their differing views on the role of human freedom within this worldview, and the type of *Bildung* through which they hoped to convert the rest of the world to their cause.

These three issues are the themes of this chapter.

SYMPHILOSOPHY

As the Romantics engaged in symphilosophy, their conversations developed a central, paradoxical theme. The theme's centrality is what provided the common ground for their discussions. Its element of paradox is what kept the discussions going, as each member of the group worked his or her own variations on the theme to make sense out of the paradox.

This central theme was one that the Buddha would have classified as defining a particular type of becoming—the nature of the cosmos and the place of the self in that cosmos. What is especially problematic from the Buddhist perspective is that they celebrated that type of becoming and denied the possibility of anything beyond it.

The theme is composed of two propositions:

Each individual is an organic part of a cosmos that is an infinite organic unity. Nevertheless, each individual has the capacity to be free.

We will treat the first proposition first, as it was the point on which the Romantics held views in common. Then, in the next section, we will treat the various ways they tried to reconcile this common view with the paradoxical issue of freedom.

Clearly, the Romantics derived their first proposition from currents in the astronomy and biology of their time: Herschel's theory of an infinite, organic cosmos, and the biologists' theory of a unified force bridging the gap between mind and matter. This proposition also bears a structural resemblance to Herder's worldview, although the Romantics put much more emphasis on the "infinite" than he. Further, the distinctive implications that they drew from this proposition concerning truth, beauty, and goodness will become apparent only when we examine in detail their understanding of the words, *infinite*, *organic*, and *unity*.

We will start with the last word first and work backwards.

Unity

The Romantics held that, although there appear to be many dualities in experience—between the individual and nature, between the individual and society, and between the various faculties within the individual—these dualities are actually nothing more than differences in degree, rather than kind. In other words, the two sides of each duality are not radically separate. They are simply two manifestations of force arising from a single original force and existing in a tension enclosed by a larger, harmonic Oneness.

To begin with, there is no real line in the act of knowing between subject and object. Because subject and object are actually different expressions of a single force, they are parts of a higher unity. On the external level, this means that there is no line separating oneself from other people or from nature at large. On the internal level, there is no line separating body from mind, or feelings from reason. Any tensions existing between the two sides of these seeming dualities can be reconciled because of their common origin and common nature.

In erasing the line between subject and object, the Romantics felt that they had healed three huge splits in European philosophy. The first was the split between mind and matter. If mind and matter are radically different, there is no satisfactory way of explaining how they could interact: how a material object could become known by the mind, or how the mind could have an impact on the body or on the external material world. You might easily explain how matter acts on matter—to move one billiard ball, you simply hit it with another—but if the mind is simply the capacity to know and represent the world to itself, with what means would this capacity “hit” the atoms of your arm to move them? And how would matter hit the mind so that the mind could know the presence of matter to begin with? But if mind and matter are explained simply as different levels of energy, then it’s easy to explain how one level of energy could interact with another.

The second split was the split between the mind’s internal world and the external world of things in themselves. If the mind stands apart from nature—as in Kant’s and Fichte’s philosophy—all it can know are its own representations of nature: the way it pictures the world to itself. And if that’s the case, how can it get behind its representations to check whether they accurately represent the world outside? Even if its representations are coherent, that would be no proof that they accurately represented the external world. The mind would thus be walled within itself. But if the mind is regarded as part of the world of nature—rather than standing apart from it—then it is not confined “in here,” in its own world. It can be understood as acting as a part of nature, in line with nature’s laws. One can learn about the mind by studying its objects, and about its objects by studying the workings of the mind.

Thus the Romantics took what Kant classed as a mere intimation derived from the experience of beauty—the harmony between mind and nature—and made it the first proposition of their philosophy. For them, though, this principle was more than an intimation. It was a direct experience—what Schelling, borrowing Fichte’s term, called an *intellectual intuition*: a direct perception of the self’s activity, unfiltered by concepts. In this case, though, the activity directly intuited is not the self’s striving against nature, as it was in Fichte’s philosophy. Instead,

it's the harmonious interaction between self and nature. We sense our interconnectedness with nature directly through perceiving that the self shapes nature at the same time being shaped by nature, and that the very existence of both self and nature lies in this interaction.

The third split that the Romantics felt they had healed was the internal split between feeling and reason. Feelings were no longer regarded as passions or weaknesses that posed an external threat to the freedom and independence of one's reason. Instead, feelings and reasons were placed on a unified internal continuum of mental forces that all followed the same laws, and so should naturally work in harmony.

By assuming that feeling and reason followed similar rather than radically different laws, the Romantics collapsed the various faculties that Kant found in the individual—animality, humanity, and personhood—into one. They even collapsed the distinctions that Schiller made between the form drive and the sense drive. Although Schiller had seen the need to harmonize these two drives, he still saw them as differing in kind. Moral law pulled in one direction; the needs of the senses in another. For the Romantics, though, these drives differed only in degree. Thus there was no inherent need for one's moral duty to conflict with one's feelings. They kept Schiller's motivation for moral action—the aesthetic drive for wholeness—but they removed any basis for actions that Schiller would have characterized as showing *dignity*. Instead, the Romantic moral ideal consisted solely of what he would have characterized as *grace*. And grace, for them, was not achieved through training one's feelings to learn to like the moral law. It was achieved through sensing that one's feelings and reasons, if informed by an insight into Oneness, would naturally fall into harmony.

This created a problem, though, in that it called into question the traditional basis for understanding what counted as a moral duty, and how that duty derived its authority. In the eyes of all the philosophers from whom the Romantics drew, the authority of moral duties came from the fact that duties were not derived from other, more subjective aspects of the individual person, such as feelings or bodily drives. Instead, they derived from objective reasoning, based on unchanging principles. Even Herder, despite his general belief in cultural relativity,

still believed in the universality and objectivity of moral law: It was one part of God's infinite substance that did not change. The Romantics, however, in collapsing the parts of the individual into a unity, denied any source for morality that was independent from feeling. Still, they felt, some feelings were more moral than others.

Their position on this issue—and their differences from their predecessors—can be illustrated by comparing Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* with Schlegel's *Lucinde*. In *Werther*, none of the characters even consider the possibility that Werther and Lotte might violate the latter's vows to her husband: thus the struggle and the tragic ending. In *Lucinde*, however, there is no tragedy. The only struggle is the struggle to articulate and give oneself over to one's natural feelings of genuine love, based on a sense of innate Oneness. Julius and Lucinde never mention the latter's vows to her husband—whose very existence is relegated to the shadows—and actually say that because their love is true, it is holier than empty wedding vows.

What makes it true and holy is that it is in line with the innate divinity and innocence of the unified force of life. As Julius tells Lucinde:

“There exists a pure love, an indivisible and simple feeling without the slightest taint of restless striving. Each person gives exactly what he takes, each like the other; everything is equal and whole and complete in itself, like the eternal kiss of the divine children.”²

“When one loves as we do, then even human nature returns to its original state of divinity. In the solitary embrace of lovers, sensual pleasure becomes once more what it basically is—the holiest miracle of nature; and what for others is only something about which they're justifiably ashamed becomes for us again what it is in and of itself: the pure flame of the noblest life force.”³

“We're not just sterile blossoms in the order of nature; the gods don't want to exclude us from the great chain of productive things; and they give us unmistakable signs of their will. And so let us earn our place in this lovely world, let us bear also the immortal fruits

which the spirit and the will create, and let us enter into the dance of humanity. I want to plant myself in the earth, I want to sow and reap for the future and the present, I want to use all my powers as long as it is day, and then in the evening refresh myself in the arms of the mother who will forever be my bride.”⁴

These attitudes, which the early Romantics all embraced, show that they kept the ideas of moral imperative and holiness, even as they rejected the previous generation’s understanding of what those ideas meant, where they originated, and where they derived their authority. Instead of coming from a basic duality in nature, these ideas now came from the imperatives of what it means to be part of a unity that is organic. One must follow, not the laws of reason, but the laws of organic growth. Kant would have argued that the Romantics were teaching duty without dignity—the Buddha might have said duty without honor—but the Romantics felt that the evolving universe was on their side.

Organic

From their study of biology and paleontology, the Romantics extrapolated three connected principles of organic growth and causality that they applied to the activity of human organisms within the larger organism of the universe as a whole.

1) The first principle is what defines an organism: An organism is composed of parts that work together toward a common purpose, which is the survival of the organism and the production of further life. Organic causality is thus not blind and mechanical. Instead, it is *teleological*—i.e., it strives toward a particular purpose. This purpose is what gives the organism its unity, and also what turns the *fact* of life into the *imperative* of life: Every part of the organism has the duty to further the purpose of the organism. Any action furthering that purpose is good; any interfering with that purpose is bad.

Because one of the purposes of each organism is to create more organisms, it is connected to the larger process of continuing life. Its purpose thus goes beyond its own survival. However, this fact alone does not connect the organism with life—or the universe—as a whole. It

connects the organism only with its own descendants. The larger connection, the interconnectiveness of *all* life, will come from the third principle, below.

2) The second principle is that organisms achieve their purpose by *evolving*. This principle applies most obviously on the individual level, in the development of an organism from an embryo to its adult form. But it also applies on the larger scale, to the history of life. As life evolves, the laws of organic growth and the nature of organic activity evolve as well. Thus early forms of life strived simply to survive, but as life has advanced it has grown more and more conscious: more aware of itself and its surroundings. From consciousness, it has developed—especially, in human beings, the highest form of life—the drive to *express* the forces within it through language and other acts of creation. Thus the peculiarly human contribution to the evolution of life, the contribution that puts humanity on the cutting edge of evolution, is the ever-advancing freedom and ability of human beings to express outwardly to one another the life force that they share within them.

3) The third principle is that organisms evolve through the principle of *reciprocity*. On the internal level, this means that the parts of the organism all exert a reciprocal influence on one another. Each part exerts an influence on the others, at the same time being influenced by them. On the external level, the same principle also applies: Organisms shape their environment at the same time that their environment shapes them.

Organic causality is thus not one-sided. Instead, it is a constant back-and-forth flow. A healthy organism is one that adapts to the influences of its environment just as it takes portions of that environment for its own sustenance and survival, producing new life back into the environment. In other words, it achieves its ends—at least in part—by helping other organisms achieve theirs, just as they achieve theirs—again, at least in part—by helping its.

At the same time, organic causality is not deterministic. In other words, the actions of the organism are not entirely determined by its surroundings or by physical/chemical laws. As Schelling observed, the fact that an organism, as an object, receives stimuli can be explained by chemistry. The fact that, as a subject, it organizes its reactions, cannot.

Here, Schelling said, the empirical study of organisms as objects, viewed from without, must end, and one must examine from within what it means to be both a subject and an object. The necessary result of that internal examination, he concluded, would be that all objects are also subjects, and all are animated by a single organic potency operating throughout nature.

This is how the *principle of reciprocity* led the Romantics to the idea of the *interconnectedness of all life*. Because no one organism can exist on its own, each is comprehensible only as part of a larger whole. Its very being is interconnected to all Being. From this principle, Novalis and Schelling in particular extrapolated the idea that the organic system of all individual living things forms a single individual living thing: the World Soul. All individual organisms thus must strive toward the advancement of the World Soul's ultimate purpose, even though they will not survive as individuals to see that purpose achieved. However, because life feeds on the dead remains of other life, all the parts of each dead organism become new life. This is the sense in which life is immortal.

Schelling—who, among the Romantics, thought most systematically about the implications of these principles—further stated that the purpose of the World Soul was to bring about unity within diversity. Being (with a capital B) had started from unity, had split into diversity, and would reach completion only when it achieved a higher, conscious, and fully expressed unity within diversity. Now, the phrase, “unity within diversity” had a long history in the philosophy of aesthetics: The quality that made an artwork beautiful was the fact that its diverse elements could be perceived to fit harmoniously into a unified whole. Thus, in Schelling's terms, the World Soul was primarily an artist, striving to create the ultimate work of beauty. It was also a philosopher, striving to become fully conscious of that beauty. Thus artists and philosophers were naturally in the forefront of the advancement of the evolution of the universe, showing the way—through *Bildung*—to others.

Of the three principles of organic growth, the third—the reciprocity and interconnectedness between the organism and its environment—was most central to the Romantic program for *Bildung*. To begin with, they saw it as the most immediately intuited of the three. In contrast to

Fichte, they held that the self knew itself not only in its striving, as it shaped its environment, but also in its openness to the influences of the environment shaping it. This, for them, was the most direct proof that the self and the environment had to be parts of a larger organic whole.

Here it's important to note that in seeing reciprocity as a *necessary* sign of organic unity, the Romantics were simply following the sciences of their time. More recent science has shown that reciprocal interactions can also occur within systems that are not organic, that have no general purpose, and in particular no purpose to work for the common wellbeing of all their inter-acting parts. In other words, interdependence does not always mean Oneness; interdependent activities do not always share a common goal. This point will be important to remember as we compare Romantic ideas of reciprocal causation with Buddhist ideas on the same topic.

Nevertheless, the Romantics also had another motive for focusing on the principles of reciprocity and interconnectedness as signs of a larger organic unity. That was because these two principles made the imperatives of life sociable rather than selfish. If an organism's brute survival were its only purpose, the laws of organic growth could not provide a usable paradigm for social harmony. But if human beings can be made conscious of the fact that, as parts of a larger organic unity, their wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of the whole, they will be more likely to exercise their powers for the good of all.

The experience of reciprocity—sensitivity to the effects of the environment upon one, and sensitivity to one's effect on one's environment—thus became the touchstone of the aesthetic and political imperatives that the Romantics wanted to express through their art for the sake of their own *Bildung* and that of others. Art, ideally for them, should spring from a direct experience of the interconnectedness of all Being, at the same time inspiring a similar direct experience of interconnectedness in their audience. Only then could art contribute toward the purposes of the universe.

From all three of these principles of organic growth, the Romantics developed three imperatives for aesthetic creation.

The first was that the artist needed to train himself to be *receptive*: to open himself to the healthy influences of his environment, such as the love of others and the beauties of nature. Only then should he allow his soul to respond to those influences naturally in creating a work of art, just as a plant would produce fruit only after being open to the influences of the world around it. In Novalis' terminology, the artist must practice *self-alienation*, making himself conform to his external object, which would then lead to *appropriation*, making the object conform to his will. "Self-alienation," he said in *Pollen*, "is the source of all self-abasement, but also just the opposite: the basis of all self-elevation." This he called "the highest philosophical truth."⁵

The result of this two-way process, in his eyes, was that each side would bring the other closer to the completion of its development. The self grows and extends itself by being receptive to the world, just as its activity in shaping the world aids in the world's evolution toward greater beauty. In this way, all three principles of organic growth—(1) a purpose (2) evolved through (3) reciprocity—are fostered by the act of artistic creation.

Schlegel also extolled the virtue of making oneself open and receptive to the influences of one's environment in preparation for a natural creative response. In a passage in *Lucinde*, he expressed the organic nature of this process in even more graphic terms. His choice of words for describing this process, however, was somewhat unfortunate, and may have been inspired by his "Indian state." He called the process "idleness" and "pure vegetating."⁶

"Really, we shouldn't neglect the study of idleness so criminally, but make it into an art and a science, even into a religion! In a word: the more divine a man or a work of man is, the more it resembles a plant; of all the forms of nature, this form is the most moral and the most beautiful. And so the highest, most perfect mode of life would actually be nothing more than *pure vegetating*."

Schleiermacher, although he didn't follow Schlegel's word choice, made this first aesthetic imperative—receptivity—the cornerstone of Romantic religion.

The second aesthetic imperative, which grew directly from the first, was that art should be *expressive*, rather than imitative. What this means is that the duty of the artist is not to imitate or represent what he sees outside him, but to express the feelings that arise within him in response to what he sees. This is because the aim of life as a whole, as it has evolved, is not to imitate other forms, but to express itself. In expressing one's feelings, one is not simply indulging in a subjective exercise. Instead, one is giving expression to the organic, unified force of life as it evolves, presenting itself freshly in the present moment. Only in this way could one inspire in one's audience a feeling for the shared life force acting within themselves. By identifying with the author/artist, they could empathize with his attempt at expression and feel a corresponding desire to express that same life force, too. This empathy is what brought a work of art to life, and inspired further life through the experience of art.

Thus Schlegel commented, in extolling the romantic—i.e., novelistic—style of literature, that “there still is no form so fit for expressing the entire spirit of an author: so that many artists who started out to write only a novel ended up by providing us with a portrait of themselves.”⁷ In other words, the purpose of romantic art was not to create an object of beauty for the free play of disinterested contemplation, as Kant would have it. Instead, it was to connect the audience to what is most alive in the author.

Caspar David Friedrich, a painter influenced by the Romantics, put the point more bluntly:

“The artist should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. If, however, he sees nothing within him, then he should also omit to paint what he sees before him. Otherwise his pictures will resemble those folding screens behind which one expects to find only the sick or even the dead.”⁸

Thus the only legitimate artistic activity—which the Romantics viewed as the paradigm for all human activity—is not to represent or imitate the true appearance or nature of things outside the mind. Instead, it is to express feelings within the body and mind. This point

would have an important bearing on how the Romantics viewed the activity of religion.

The third aesthetic imperative that the Romantics derived from organic principles was that art must *evolve*. An artist should not be bound by the examples or aesthetic rules of the past, but should instead find a form that is suitable to express each inner inspiration as it presents itself in the here and now. In fact, once he has created a work of art, the artist must abandon it so that it does not interfere with the evolution of his sensitivity to the life force as it will express itself in the next moment, and then the next. Otherwise, his art will not contribute to the evolution of human society or of life as a whole. This point, too, had a major bearing on how the Romantics viewed religion as a human activity.

These three aesthetic imperatives, taken together, provide what might be called a novelistic approach to the creation and reception of a work of art. In other words, they treat the artist and his audience as a novelist would treat his or her characters, focusing attention away from the work of art itself and toward the psychological processes that give rise to it and result from empathizing with it. Given that the Romantics learned from Herder the principle that all human activity should be regarded as works of art, it should come as no surprise that—as we will see below—the Romantics applied the same principles to their understanding of philosophy and religion: Truth in both of these fields was a matter, not of statements or texts, but of the psychological processes leading a person to create such things, and of the psychological response of those who read them.

All three of the Romantics' aesthetic imperatives were controversial. Finding a receptive audience among some people, they provoked the extreme ire of others. How could art inspired by idleness be superior to art achieved through training and a mastery of one's craft? Why are a person's feelings about the world more interesting than a depiction of the realities of the world? How can one relate to a work of art if one cannot discern within it any recognizable form?

Faced with these questions, the Romantics realized that they had to educate their audience to appreciate their art. As we will see below, they concluded that the *Bildung* they were offering to others had to depend

not on art alone, but also on other, ancillary ways of sensitizing their audience to the wonders of the laws of organic growth.

For all the difficulties that the Romantics encountered in trying to get others to adopt their aesthetic imperatives, the political imperatives they tried to develop from the laws of organic growth presented even greater problems. This was because these laws, even as they provided the general outline for those imperatives—everyone should live in harmony—undercut any individual imperatives about how to achieve that harmony. Further, they undercut the objective status of any truths on which even the more general imperatives could be based.

The general Romantic political imperative was that the ideal work of art should bring society closer to realizing the purpose of life as a whole. For Schlegel and Hölderlin, this purpose was freedom and harmony; for Schelling, unity in diversity. Although it is possible to view these two principles as simply two different ways of expressing the same thing—people should exercise their freedoms responsibly in a way that does not damage the unity and harmony of society—we will see below that the Romantics had many conflicting ideas of what freedom might mean in an infinite organic unity.

In trying to further articulate their political imperatives, the Romantics ran into even greater problems. The first was that a doctrine of constant evolution allowed for no objective universal principles to govern social relationships. If each individual was free to intuit the dictates of the life force within him, and the life force was constantly changing, how could other individuals say he was wrong when his intuitions conflicted with theirs?

Even more fundamental was the fact that, if moral imperatives were derived from the purpose of life, how was that purpose to be known? It's all very fine to speak of unity in diversity as the ultimate goal of life, but how can this principle be known, much less proven to others? This problem, in particular, was exacerbated by the third aspect of the Romantic worldview: that the organic unity of the cosmos was infinite. How could human beings, as finite beings, comprehend the true purpose of an infinite universe? It was in trying to answer this question that the Romantics came up with their distinctive conception of what constitutes a truth.

Infinite

The infinitude of the organic unity of the cosmos, an idea that the Romantics picked up from Herschel, is what distinguished their worldview from Herder's. For Herder, the cosmos was only one of God's potentially infinite aspects, meaning that there was more to reality than the organic unity of the cosmos. God had other, extra-cosmic aspects as well. For the Romantics, however, the organic unity of the cosmos encompassed everything—the infinitude of all Being—with no room for anything, even God, outside. The infinite God—the World Soul—was One with the infinite cosmos. By making this assertion, they felt that they were freeing humanity from the ultimate duality: the duality between God and his creation. For them, God was not something separate, transcending creation. Instead, he was immanent within it. As might be expected, this aspect of their worldview became a defining feature of their religious views. But it also presented them with many challenges as they worked out its implications in terms of their aesthetic and political program.

The first problem was how an infinite organism could be encompassed in a human concept. Finite organisms are defined by the fact that they have a purpose, which they achieve in interaction with their environment. But an infinite organism, by definition, has no external environment with which to interact. So what kind of organism was it? And what kind of purpose might such an organism have? Spinoza, in his contemplation of God as infinite substance, had already raised this question, and had suggested that even if there was an answer, no finite being could comprehend it. As he said, the purpose of such an infinite substance would be no more similar to our own conception of “purpose” than the Dog Star, Sirius, is similar to a dog that barks.

Schelling was the only Romantic who tried to tackle this problem, but his modern scholarly commentators agree that his proposed solutions were confused, and created more problems than they solved. One point on which he was clear, though, was that although the infinite organism was headed toward unity, it would never fully arrive there. Total, static unity was an unachievable goal. The universe, to be truly infinite, was to be forever in process—an idea that all the Romantics shared. This however, created a further problem in that the purpose of the organism

was what gave it its unity-in-process, but if the purpose was never to be achieved, wouldn't that mean that the unity was illusory? Schelling wrestled with this issue as well, but with no coherent results.

This is a serious weakness in the Romantic worldview. Their assumption that the universe had a purpose was what had allowed them to assert that it was an organic unity. The principle of organic unity, in turn, was what convinced them that the human mind could bridge the gap between subject and object. Only when this gap was bridged, they felt, could we know about the outside world by examining ourselves, and about ourselves by examining the outside world. But if the purpose of the universe as a whole is incomprehensible, then the underlying metaphor of Romantic thought collapses. Instead of healing the splits that made the universe "out there" unknowable, they are left with a universe unknowable in a different way: It can be understood only if it has a purpose, but its purpose cannot be achieved or even conceived. This means that nothing can be understood.

Another problem, which all the Romantics *did* tackle, was—supposing that the universe is an infinite organism—how finite human beings could know an infinite organism as a truth. As part of an infinite organism, each finite organism could see and understand only a small part. And because the infinite organism was changing over time, that small part was even further limited by the fact that its point of view was confined to a particular time and place. Thus there was no such thing as a privileged point of view from which a finite being could grasp and give an adequate representation of the infinite whole.

As we have already seen, the changing nature of the organic cosmos had ruled out the possibility that the laws of reason would be universally—always and everywhere—true. But by positing an infinite cosmos, the Romantics were also ruling out the other commonly claimed source for universal truths in the Western tradition: Christian revelation. The Christian tradition had maintained that God—as infinite Being, creator of a finite cosmos—was essentially unknowable by the finite beings within that cosmos, but the tradition had further maintained that God had circumvented this problem by making himself and his purpose known through acts of revelation to the human race. But now, with no God outside of the universe to explain his infinite point of view to finite

human beings, and with the World Soul nothing more than the totality of Being, there was no outside authority to explain the goal of the infinite universe in finite terms.

Thus the Romantics abandoned both of the received criteria for objective truth claims in the Western tradition: reason and revelation. The question facing them, then, was what criteria to offer in their place.

The general Romantic solution to this problem was to admit that finite beings cannot fully understand infinity, but because of the organic laws that finite beings have in common with infinite Being, human beings in particular can gain intimations of the universal purpose of infinite Being by looking inside themselves. The Romantics gave two reasons for why this is so. The first reason is that human beings are at the cutting edge of evolution. By observing themselves from within as they act creatively, human beings are able to sense the general thrust of where life is going. In fact, they are the agents who decide where it is going right now. As Schlegel said, “God is really only a task for us, and we create him through our own actions.”⁹ In line with Kant’s dictum that we know only what we make, the Romantics felt that we knew the direction of the infinite universe because we were agents in its making. This would be especially true when human beings developed their sensibilities through the proper *Bildung*.

The second reason why introspection is the best way to intuit the purpose of the cosmos is that each human being is a *microcosm*: a small replica of the cosmos, operating by the same organic laws, and exhibiting the same behavior. As Schleiermacher put it, every individual is a “representation of the infinite.”¹⁰ Or in Novalis’ words: “[I]s not the universe *within ourselves*? ... Eternity with its worlds—the past and future—is in ourselves or nowhere.”¹¹ The more one can become conscious of the inner workings of one’s body and mind, the more one can sense and express the analogous inner workings of the cosmos as a whole. This is why the Romantics felt that introspection led to truths that were not merely subjective, but also applied, by analogy, to the entire cosmos. Schlegel, borrowing the Christian term, called the truths derived from introspection “revelations,” indicating that they were by nature divine.

The problem, of course, was how to judge the relative merits of even divine truths that were, by the Romantics' own admission, partial and subject to change. In response to this problem they developed several distinctive definitions of what constituted a truth and how that truth was best conveyed.

Schelling was alone among them in following Kant's criterion for truth: that it be rationally consistent and coherent. He agreed with his fellow Romantics that the primary intellectual intuition was of the Oneness of all Being, but he also believed that this intuition had truth-value only if one could develop a consistent view of the universe from it. For this reason, he composed systematic treatises, trying to explain all knowledge—everything from concrete scientific facts to abstract philosophical principles—in line with the principle of the Oneness of all Being.

The primary feature of these systems was that they were *dynamic*, explaining not a static universe, such as Newton's, but an evolving one. Each of his systems was aimed at explaining how the Oneness of Being, as a thesis, produced its contradictory antithesis, and then through the tension between the two created a higher synthesis, which then, as a new thesis, produced a new antithesis, and so on, thus providing the impetus for continued evolution. The fact that Schelling was never satisfied with his efforts, producing and then discarding system after system, may have been what deterred his fellow Romantics from attempting to create philosophical systems themselves.

But they had other reasons for avoiding system-building, too. Schlegel, in his early writings, maintained that the drive to provide a systematic explanation of all reality was both necessary and impossible: *necessary* in that the mind by nature wants to see things whole; *impossible* in that its finitude keeps it from ever succeeding. Thus he took a novelistic approach to system-building—i.e., he looked at the system-builder as a novelist might present a character in a novel. The source of system-building, he maintained, was to be found not in abstract first principles, but in the system-builder's psychological drive for unity of knowledge. As he put it, all philosophy begins with the principle, "I strive after unity of knowledge."¹² In an honest philosophical system, everything should be aimed at exploring the

implications of the philosopher's psychological motivation. Truth was to be found, not in the system, but by turning back to look into the mind that wants to create it. As with art, the truth of philosophy lay not in a coherent representation of the universe, but in expressing and understanding the *desire* to represent it coherently.

Novalis also recommended focusing on system-building primarily as an issue of the psychological development of the system-builder, but his judgment of the underlying motivation was harsher than Schlegel's. He saw it as pathological, a "logical sickness." "Philosophy," he said, "is actually homesickness—the urge to be everywhere at home."¹³ In his eyes, to be at home was to be away from the cutting edge of change. The desire to have everything explained and familiar was an attempt to close oneself off from wonder and newness of each present moment. If the universe is truly evolving, no system—even a system to explain its evolution—can do justice to the authentic experience of being both a passive and an active participant in that evolution.

So instead of striving for truth as coherence, Novalis felt that one should strive for the truth of *authenticity*: being true to the fact that we are evolving creatures at our own particular place and time, while at the same time rising above those limitations, through our powers of imagination, to taste the infinite. For him, authenticity was the opposite of being a philistine, someone confined to the mechanical repetition of everyday habits. An authentic person was one who lived outside the commonplace, who was able to transform the experience of the commonplace into something continually magical and new.

Thus the primary guarantee of an authentic participation in the evolution of the universe was that it romanticized the commonplace—a process that Novalis admitted could not be explained even though it could be experienced. In his words,

"Romanticizing is nothing other than a qualitative raising to a higher power. The lower self is identified with the better self in this operation.... This operation is as yet quite unknown. By giving a higher meaning to the ordinary, a mysterious appearance to the ordinary, the dignity of the unacquainted to that of which we are

acquainted, the mere appearance of infinity to the finite, I romanticize them.”¹⁴

Romanticizing the commonplace, Novalis thought, encouraged a sensitivity to the twofold process of self-alienation and appropriation that allowed the mind to be both more responsive to the world and to be more self-directed in shaping the world through the imagination. Moreover, by providing a glimpse of the cosmic categories of the sublime—mysterious and infinite—in the microcosm of one’s experience, the act of romanticizing also guaranteed, at least subjectively, the truth of the parallels between the finite organism and the infinite organic unity of which it was a part. To sense what might be called the *microcosmic sublime* was to know one’s power, like that of an infinite being, to rise above the particulars of one’s finite time and place. Thus the powers of the imagination, rather than being empty fabrications and lies, were actually a source of truth. For Novalis, this truth was proven by the fact that ordinary existence is wretched, and thus unnatural. In his words,

“Do we perhaps need so much energy and effort for ordinary and common things because for an authentic human being nothing is more out of the ordinary—nothing more uncommon—than wretched ordinariness?”¹⁵

However, the mere act of romanticizing, even if natural and true, was powerless to convey the truth of one’s personal revelations to others. Because authenticity was to be experienced only from within, the truth of any moment’s revelation was totally subjective and could not be tested from without, inasmuch as no one else can occupy the same position in time and place as any other person, and no one person’s position in time and place is more authoritative than anyone else’s. The best a person can do to convince others of the truths of his or her own revelations, Novalis concluded, is to persuade them indirectly, through poetry and novels that portrayed the world as magical.

Schlegel, as his thought developed, came to adopt a similar position on the microcosmic sublime. For him, the feeling of the sublime in one’s immediate experience was the guarantee for the reality of the

infinite, but this feeling was a “fiction,” meaning that it could not be proven true or false.

Thus he, too, felt that literature was the best way of persuading others of the truth of the infinite. However, he developed his own line of thought on how best to communicate the fact that the infinite was constantly changing. As a result, he developed two connected concepts—*irony* and *idea*—that constituted his distinctive contribution to Romantic notions of truth.

The first concept concerned the stance of the author toward his works. To convey the incessant nature of change while at the same time trying to step outside it, one should assume a stance of *irony*. The author should create a work of art to convey a truth while at the same time realizing that the truth is destined to change. Thus he should be serious about his message and yet take a comic—and cosmic—distance from it. In Schlegel’s own words, irony “contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself; and yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary.”¹⁶ “Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is everything simultaneously good and great.”¹⁷ Irony, for Schlegel, was both an internal quality of the author, “the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius” and an external quality of the style of the author’s works, “the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian *buffo*.”¹⁸

Although Schlegel found irony in many genres—he saw the Socratic dialogue, for example, as the greatest philosophical genre because its sense of irony transcended the rigidity of philosophical systems—he perfected his own personal genre to convey the ironic nature of the truth. This genre was the *fragment*: a statement short enough to be pithy, but long enough to contain at least two contrary notions, and suggestive enough to hint at implications lying beyond both thoughts—the larger whole of which the fragment is just a part. The ideal fragment, he said, conveyed an *idea*: “An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony,

an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts.”¹⁹

In other words, an “idea” in Schlegel’s special sense of the term does not simply assert the dynamic nature of reality. It portrays that reality by presenting two opposite thoughts without committing to either of them. Furthermore, by presenting ideas in fragments with an ironic attitude, an author not only portrays and embodies the changing nature of reality, but also is able to suggest that the truth lies beyond the words. Schlegel called this ability to write with this ironic attitude, *versatility* and *agility*: “Versatility consists not just in a comprehensive system but also in a feeling for the chaos outside that system, like man’s feeling for something beyond man.”²⁰ “Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos.”²¹

Of course, even a philosophy of irony has its underlying assumptions about truth. In Schlegel’s case, that assumption was borrowed ultimately from the Pietists: Truth is to be judged by its pragmatic uses. In this case, as a “poet”—his term for any literary artist—he had to adopt a philosophy that encouraged the poet’s power to create. “Then what philosophy is left for the poet? The creative philosophy that originates in freedom and belief in freedom, and shows how the human spirit impresses its law on all things and how the world is its work of art.”²² This philosophy, which Schlegel was quick enough to label a “myth,” was a myth to be adopted as a truth because of the good effect it had on the people who adopted it.

Hölderlin, too, adopted a pragmatic criterion for truth, but his standards for “pragmatic” were focused not only on the truths needed by the artist or author. He was more concerned with the question of which truths an ever-changing individual should adopt in an ever-changing world. Given the fact that he later suffered a total psychological breakdown, there is a poignancy to his criterion: Each individual, he said, should choose the philosophy that best creates a sense of internal psychological unity and harmony. As the individual changes, the philosophy he or she needs will also have to change: a principle he illustrated in his novel, *Hyperion*, and explained in his philosophical sketches.

For instance, speaking of the conflicting philosophies of Spinoza—denying freedom of choice, and advocating passive acceptance—and Fichte—affirming freedom of choice, and advocating active struggle—Hölderlin maintained that Spinoza’s sense of the unity of nature represents a lost ideal, whereas Fichte’s view expresses the struggle to regain paradise. These opposing views are suited to different stages in life, although neither is necessarily more advanced than the other. In other words, one might find comfort and inspiration by shifting back and forth between these philosophies as needed. The image Hölderlin gave for this process was the elliptical orbit of a planet, now growing nearer to one focal point of the ellipse, now growing nearer to the other.

In other words, truth for Hölderlin was a matter of individual choice, which no one should force on anyone else. And no one else could require the individual to be consistent in sticking to any particular choice. Consistency, for Hölderlin, meant being faithful to the pragmatic need for inner wholeness and peace, with each person the best judge of which truth was most pragmatic at any given juncture in space and time.

This attitude toward truth works only if one believes that one’s ideas about reality—and in particular, about action—have no effect on anything aside from one’s peace of mind in the present moment. And, as we will see below, this is precisely the belief that Hölderlin advocated. In his eyes, the infinite, teeming life of the universe means that although individual people may be hurt by one’s actions, life as a whole is never damaged. Its overflowing energy heals all wounds. The conflicts of the world come from not realizing that our views of reality can offer nothing more than partial and fleeting glimpses of the truth. When seen from a larger perspective, conflicts of opinion—like all other conflicts—are no more than temporary dissonances in the evolving harmony of the entire cosmos.

This, however, raises two important issues with regard to all the early Romantic theories of truth: If the organic infinitude of the cosmos means that all human ideas can offer only partial and temporary glimpses of the truth, what does that say about the idea that the cosmos is an organic infinitude? Is that idea, too, only partial and temporary? If so, then (1) wouldn’t that allow for the possibility that the actual

structure of the universe was not an organic infinitude? And wouldn't that further allow for the possibility that the universe had a different structure, one that could be grasped by ideas that *did* offer adequate and universal views of the truth? (2) If the idea of an organic infinitude was only partially true, wouldn't it mean that the sense of comfort offered by the idea of the harmony of that infinitude is illusory? After all, the purpose of the organic infinitude is essentially unknowable, so how can it be trusted to be benevolent? Isn't it terrifying to be in a cosmos where life disposes so easily of life—where life actually feeds on death—and whose purpose cannot be understood?

In response to both of these objections, the Romantics insisted that the idea of the infinite organic unity of the cosmos had a special status. Unlike ordinary human ideas, it was not subject to the limitations of the senses. Instead, it was directly intuited by the sensitive mind. It, in a way similar to Kant's categories, was built into the structure of how a direct intuition occurred. And the experience, once obtained, showed that the miseries of life as perceived through the senses—aging, illness, and death—only seemed to be miseries. The larger view afforded by this experience was infinitely comforting. Despite all the miseries from which Hölderlin suffered, he had the narrator of *Hyperion* state:

“I have seen it one time, the unique spirit that my soul sought, and the perfection that we project far upward above the stars, that we postpone until the end of time, I felt its presence. It was there, the highest, in this circle of human nature and of things, it was there!

“I ask no more where it may be; it was in the world, it can return in the world, it is now only concealed in it. I ask no more what it may be; I have seen it, I have come to know it.”²³

And then again:

“O soul! soul! Beauty of the world! you indestructible, enchanting beauty! with your eternal youth! you are; what, then, is death and all the woe of men?—O! many empty words have been uttered by the strange beings. Yet all ensues from pleasure, and all ends with peace.”²⁴

Similarly, when Schlegel spoke of a chaos that lay outside of any systematic thought, he did not imply that the world beyond thought was one of danger or disorder. It was only one of *seeming* disorder. The direct experience of a person's organic interactions with the universe in the act of creation, he held, served as that person's own proof that the sublime infinite was harmonious, and nothing to be feared.

Still, this experience could not be proven to others. It could only be felt within. To prove that it was not purely subjective, though, the Romantics needed to induce other people to become sensitive to the same experience. And the only way to do that was to make the idea of such an experience attractive.

As a result, a large part of the Romantic *Bildung* for creating a free harmonious society lay in their attempts to make the experience of Oneness an attractive idea. To some extent, the burden of this task fell to their literary skills. But perhaps the most attractive part of their program lay in their explanation of what freedom meant in the context of an infinite organic unity.

THE ATTRACTIONS OF FREEDOM

Both Kant and Fichte had argued forcibly that the view of a monistic cosmos—a cosmos in which all are One—denied the possibility of freedom in the two senses of the term that were most vital to human dignity: *autonomy*, the ability to formulate the rational laws for one's actions; and *spontaneity*, the ability to exercise freedom of choice. If human beings were simply part of a larger unity over which they had no control, then the purposes of that unity, whatever they might be, would automatically override human freedom. With no freedom of choice, human beings could not be granted the dignity that comes with responsibility.

The Romantics were well aware of these arguments, and yet they each, in their own way, maintained that human beings were free even though they were parts of an infinite organic unity. The way they found around this paradox, of course, was to redefine what freedom meant. And when we examine the ways in which Schelling, Novalis, Schlegel, and Hölderlin attacked this paradox, we will see in each case that their

resolution was directly connected to their individual ideas of what constituted a truth.

Schelling—the only one who held to the criterion that truth should be logically consistent—came to the bleakest view of the four as to what constituted freedom. Arguing from the unity of the cosmos, he concluded that human beings, as finite beings, do not even exist, in the sense that nothing can exist in and of itself. From this conclusion he further argued that finite human beings have no freedom of choice. In fact, he ultimately concluded that the very idea of freedom of choice was actually the source of all evil. To foster the good of the universe, human beings had to accept that their only freedom was to be open to the divine force acting within them. Because this openness expressed their inner nature, as parts of the whole, freedom thus meant expressing one's inner nature.

This, of course, was Spinoza's definition of freedom, which amounted to no freedom at all. After all, one had no choice or responsibility for determining what one's innate nature was or for how the divine force would act. The only difference between Spinoza and Schelling was that, for the former, one's innate nature was one's rationality, whereas for Schelling one's innate nature was the sum total of all the forces—physical and mental, feelings and thoughts—acting through and within one.

Unlike Schelling, the remaining three thinkers, when defining freedom, openly denied that the principle of logical consistency had any authority over them. This, in fact, was part of their expression of freedom: If, to be logically consistent with the principle of an infinite organic unity, one had to deny oneself any freedom of choice, then one asserted one's freedom by declaring independence from the principle of logical consistency. This did not mean, however, that they made no effort to be coherent. They simply looked for coherence in other terms.

For Novalis, freedom consisted of one's ability to *romanticize* one's life. Only to the extent that you could use your powers of imagination to see the sublime in the commonplace could you know that you were playing a role in shaping the cosmos, and that you shared in the creative freedom of the infinite.

For Schlegel, freedom consisted in *versatility*, the ability to not be tied down by any side in conflicting issues. Thus he could maintain two totally contradictory ideas about freedom in a single “idea”: that, on the one hand, the Oneness and harmony of the universe was the sole idea of his philosophy; and, on the other, that human beings come to know themselves in the activity of trying to define themselves because that activity of self-definition, in and of itself, makes them what they are. The ability to hold both views at once in an attitude of irony, committed to neither, freed one from the confining conditions of one’s time and place, and enabled one to partake of an infinite point of view.

Similarly, for Hölderlin, freedom consisted of the ability to change one’s point of view as needed for the sake of one’s spiritual and psychological wholeness and health. This, in turn, was a function of one’s spontaneity, a term that Hölderlin borrowed from Kant while giving it a new meaning. Instead of absolute freedom of choice, *spontaneity* for Hölderlin meant one’s ability to impose one’s creative forces on the world around one. To be truly spontaneous, one had to believe that one could choose to view reality in any way one liked so as to foster one’s inner harmony.

Despite their attempts to assert freedom of choice in an infinite organic unity, all three of these thinkers ended up simply affirming the fact that freedom, for parts of an organic unity, can mean nothing more than the freedom to follow one’s own nature, yet with no freedom to choose or change that nature. The ability to romanticize life, to maintain an attitude of irony, or to be spontaneous in choosing one’s view of reality, may feel from the inside like an exercise of freedom. But if described from outside, as part of an infinite organic unity, these abilities can be nothing more than an expression of impulses over which one has no control.

So here again, the Romantics were caught in the conflict between description and expression. In claiming that expressions of feelings were true, they had to offer a description of reality that justified their claim. But their description of reality conflicted logically with another claim they wanted to make: that their expressions were free.

Having read Kant, all three of these thinkers seem to have recognized this conflict. This is why they abandoned the idea of logical coherence

derived from first principles, and replaced it with a principle of aesthetic coherence: one that made sense, not in logical or rational terms, but in artistic ones, expressed both *within* a work of Romantic art and *in the act* of creating such a work. On the one hand, this kind of coherence resembles the coherence of a character's motivations as might be presented in a novel: You can understand where the character is coming from, and what he or she is trying to achieve by a particular action, even if the character can't cite logical first principles to justify that action. On the other hand, the coherence of these doctrines of freedom resembles the coherence in the author's attitude when putting energy into the act of artistic creation: As Schlegel said, a poet needs to believe in the power of the human spirit to impress its laws on all things. Not to believe in that power would, for an author, be debilitating.

These doctrines on the meaning of freedom, whatever their validity as guidelines for aspiring artists, were totally inadequate as guidelines for implementing a social program. That's because, despite their differing emphases, they shared one point in common: They teach freedom without accountability. There is no discussion of the consequences of one's actions, or of how to resolve conflicts arising when one person's exercise of his or her freedom gets in the way of someone else's. A social philosophy that offers no means by which individuals would be held accountable for their actions and no means for adjudicating conflicts is no social philosophy at all. It's a recipe for chaos.

The Romantics, of course, insisted that if all people were to exercise their freedom from a direct intuition of the infinite organic unity of the cosmos, there would be no abuse of freedom and no conflicts. A sense of fellow-feeling would inspire everyone to treat one another with tenderness and compassion. But the disturbing feature of their views on freedom is not simply that issues of responsibility are not mentioned. The whole idea of responsibility and accountability becomes impossible.

It might be argued that Novalis, Schlegel, and Hölderlin—with their ironic, magical, novelistic approach to freedom and truth—were simply embodying Schiller's doctrine of the play drive: People find freedom and learn about morality through play. To take an ironic stance toward the world, or to look for the magical in the commonplace, is to exercise

one's freedom to play. From play, comes morality. But this Romantic version of Schiller's idea, when regarded from Schiller's overall viewpoint, is missing an important step. The play drive, in his eyes, had to be *trained* to lead to a sense of moral responsibility: the realization that, for play to be a long-term activity, one had to act responsibly, in line with rules of reason, and that one's feelings had to be trained to love those rules. Otherwise, the game of society would fall apart. But for the Romantics, there were no rules to play by, and no accountability if one's feelings of Oneness led to actions that other people might object to. For them, the objection, and not the feeling, would be wrong.

This point becomes even clearer when we compare the general outline of the Romantics' thought with that of Kant's. Like Kant, they stated that the purpose of the universe "out there" is essentially unknowable, and that the only thing directly knowable is the way in which the mind shapes its experience of that universe. Like him, they also stated that many of the seeming conflicts of human reason can be resolved by recourse to an aesthetic sense of the harmony communicated by the beautiful and the sense of infinitude communicated by the sublime.

However, these views on their own could easily leave people adrift, as they would allow people to shape their experience and to find harmony in the experience of beauty in completely arbitrary ways. Kant avoided this trap by insisting on the objectivity of the moral law. People are worthy of respect, in his eyes, because they are accountable to the objective demands of reason. It was this human sense of accountability that inspired Kant's remark about the orderliness of the nighttime sky: "Two things fill [my] disposition with ever new and increasing respect and awe the more frequently they engage [my] thinking: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."²⁵ The orderliness of the moral law within is what gives the individual an intuition of the orderliness behind the sublime nighttime sky. Respect for the moral law is what, in his eyes, raised a person above the level of human animality, and gave dignity to the human heart.

The Romantics, however, offered no objective principle to prevent their worldview from being used in arbitrary ways. This is what Schleiermacher meant when claiming to see chaos in the stars: The

organic nature of the infinite unity of their universe made the existence of universal moral laws impossible. The unity of that infinite organic process meant that no one individual could really be held accountable for his actions, and so there was no need for him to explain the reasons for his actions in universally acceptable terms. The only protection against arbitrariness, in the Romantic worldview, was faith that the forces at work in the universe were essentially good. Thus there was no need, they felt, for a moral law beyond the imperative to cultivate one's sensitivity to the unity of all things.

This is why the Romantic view denigrated any attempt to judge another's actions against any kind of moral law. Instead, the duty of the sensitive soul, also in tune with the unity of the cosmos, was to empathize with the psychological motivations for all kinds of behavior, regardless of what the consequences of those actions might be. In this way, the perspective for judging actions changed from that of moral philosophy to that of the novel. And the ideal novel, in this case, tried to present an infinite point of view in which even mistaken actions have their place in the glowing vitality of the whole.

Hölderlin's *Hyperion* is a case in point. The novel is a sad one, centering on the emotional upheavals of the narrator's life. A young Greek of the late 18th century, Hyperion finds an excellent friend, Alabanda, and falls in love with an even more excellent woman—Diotima, named after Socrates' teacher. Hyperion's main problem—much like the author's—is a tendency toward extravagant and impulsive swings of mood. Learning of an attempted revolution against the Turks, he leaves Diotima, much against her better advice, to join—and eventually, together with Alabanda, to lead—a group of revolutionary forces. The barbaric behavior of his forces on capturing a port town, however, leaves him disillusioned with the revolution, and so he decides to return to his love. But it is too late. She has learned false reports of his death and, heart-stricken, has taken ill and will soon die. Learning that he is alive, she writes to him, telling him not to return home, as her family will seek vengeance for her death.

In a similar vein, Alabanda—again, in a series of events initiated by Hyperion's actions—dies at the hands of a secret criminal brotherhood. Hyperion is thus forced into exile, but after many years returns home.

There he adopts the life of a hermit and finally finds peace, assured that he never really has been separated from Diotima, and never will be. Toward the end of the novel he concludes, “All the dissonances of the world are like lovers’ strife. In the midst of the quarrel is reconciliation, and all that is separated comes together again. The arteries part and return in the heart, and all is one eternal, glowing life.”

As Hölderlin states in his preface to the novel, Hyperion’s story is not to be read for the sake of the moral—which would obviously be not to trust one’s impulses—but to appreciate the “resolution of dissonances in a particular character.” From the infinite perspective that Hyperion develops at the end of the story, even his grave mistakes are nothing more than minor dissonances in the harmonic progression of the universe. They carry no harmful consequences, and Hyperion has to give no more account of his actions than that they were motivated by his character. The universe, in its infinite vitality, will—by returning everything to Oneness—take care of the rest.

This view of freedom without accountability became one of the prime selling points for the Romantic view of the cosmos. This is unfortunate, for it offered no lessons on how to learn from one’s mistakes. Instead, the only lesson it offered was on how not to suffer from the knowledge of one’s past mistakes: One should view them as unreal. Although this view of freedom taught that actions had no real consequences, the adoption of the view led to many unfortunate consequences in real life.

THE ROMANTIC PROGRAM

As we have noted, the Romantics adopted Schiller’s doctrine that human beings would achieve harmony and freedom only through an aesthetic education. But because their understanding of human psychology differed radically from his, their understanding of what was involved in that education was also radically their own. Instead of trying to make their audience aware of the need to bring harmony to two disparate parts of their humanity—as in Schiller’s program—the Romantics saw their duty as making their audience aware of the pre-existing unity and harmony within themselves, within society, and within the universe at large. Having made their audience aware of the

idea of this pre-existing unity and harmony, the next step would be to induce them to have a *direct experience* of the infinite organic unity manifesting itself within them.

Thus there were two aspects to *Bildung* in the eyes of the Romantics: *descriptive*—talking and writing *about* the infinite organic unity; and *performative*—talking and writing in a way that would *give rise to* an immediate sense of it.

The Romantics used many genres in the descriptive side of their program, such as literary criticism and essays on applying the perspective of organic unity to different aspects of life and knowledge. Also—in the manner of Goethe and other novelists—they inserted passages in their novels devoted to discussions of these topics, either among the characters or as narrative asides. These descriptions were often ad hoc and fragmentary, along the lines of Schlegel's observation that finite words are better at suggesting the infinite than at describing it.

Schelling, however, felt that because all things exist only as part of a whole, they could be understood only by showing in detail how they fit within the whole. That, in turn, could be shown only by offering a dynamic picture of how each thing was constructed by the unified force animating the whole. In other words, one had to show its place in the history of the universe.

This approach, as we noted when discussing Herder, is called *historicism*: the belief that something can be understood and appreciated only through its own history and its place in the larger history of the world. For Schelling, the past was not a random series of events. In contrast to Fichte's evaluation of history as more boring than counting peas, Schelling felt that history—when approached as the progress of the World Soul—was a vast and inspiring drama. All of his philosophical systems contained this historical element as an essential explanatory principle. Things could be understood and evaluated only by placing them on a time line, within their proper historical place.

In his *Method of Academic Study* (1803), he argued—with great influence in the German scholarly world—that all academic topics should be approached as chapters in the history of the World Soul, with the aim of furthering its purposes of unity and harmony. For example,

professors of law should inquire into the ways in which public and private life could be brought into greater harmony in the ideal state. Above all, the study of history itself should be conducted with reference to the laws of divine organic growth. As he said,

“History attains consummation for reason only when the empirical causes that satisfy the understanding are viewed as tools and means for the appearance of a higher necessity. In such a presentation, history cannot fail to have the effect of the greatest and most astounding drama, which could be composed only in an infinite mind.”²⁶

This type of historicism turns history from a collection of facts to an assigning of values. Depending on one’s view of the general trend of history—up, down, down-up-down, up-down-up—the simple fact that *x* precedes *y* comes to be seen as a judgment that *x* is either better or worse than *y*. With this value judgment, the description becomes prescriptive: The general course of the past shows not only what *has happened*, but even more importantly, what people *should do* in the present to follow the intentions of the infinite mind. This, of course, assumes that one can intuit—either before one’s investigation of the past or after it—what those intentions are.

Because historicism developed at a time when people knew that their knowledge of world history was still limited, the tendency was to intuit the divine plan of history before the facts were in. For example, Herder, the father of modern historicism, had a personal fondness for origins. Early things were good because they were closer to the original Oneness to which we should eventually return, and they purely and innocently showed the seeds of all that came later. Thus he inspired the view, adopted by some Romantics, that Europe’s current sick society could best be brought back to health by studying the cultures of ancient times and distant, more innocent lands. Thus, for Herder, the trajectory of history had been up-down, but could potentially be redeemed to become up-down-up.

Schelling’s view, which was later developed by Hegel and Herbert Spencer, traced a different trajectory: Modern things were better than primitive things because they were more evolved. The best way to intuit

the right way forward was through (a) seeing how modern Europe, as the most advanced society, had developed away from the primitive state of earlier times and distant lands, and then (b) continuing the arc even further away from the primitive. Thus for Schelling, the trajectory of history was down-up.

Herder's and Schelling's views on the general arc of history have both played a role in Buddhist Romanticism. When Buddhist Romantics want to dismiss teachings in the Pāli Canon of which they don't approve—such as kamma and rebirth—they follow Herder's trajectory, arguing that these teachings actually postdated the Buddha and, because they are later, are inferior. To bring Buddhism back up to its original message, they argue, these teachings should be discarded. However, when the same Buddhist Romantics want to adopt later Buddhist teachings not found in the Canon—such as Buddha nature or Nāgārjuna's interpretations of emptiness—they follow Schelling's trajectory, arguing that because these teachings came later, they are more evolved and thus superior to what came earlier. In this way, the historicism of Buddhist Romanticism bends the arc of history from up-down-up to down-up to down-up on a case-by-case basis.

As for the *performative* side of the Romantic program: Hölderlin spoke for most of the early Romantics when he wrote that the experience of the infinite organic unity was best induced in one of two ways: through love and through the apprehension of beauty. Here, of course, Hölderlin was inspired by Plato, but the Romantic view of the organic unity of reality caused him to depart from Plato in his understanding of the ways in which love and beauty work on the individual soul.

Remember that the most direct experience of the infinite organic unity of the cosmos was, for the Romantics, the principle of reciprocity in the organic part: the give-and-take of the organism with its environment, passively accepting outside influences from its surroundings and then actively shaping its surroundings in response to those influences. The recognition of the interconnected nature of this give-and-take is what, in their eyes, then leads to a sense of unity.

This is also, according to Hölderlin, the lesson taught by true love, because love requires both *responsiveness*—his word for the full acceptance of and receptivity to the other—and *spontaneity*—his word

for the freedom of one's active response. Love existentially solves the problem of how to unite these two impulses into harmony, as one freely wills to trust the free choices expressed by the other. When lovers find harmony with each other, the sense of distinctness that comes when each side is allowed to act freely is held in a sense of unity large enough to contain differences. This can then be directed toward a greater sense of unity with life as a whole.

Schlegel, in *Lucinde*, wrote in glowing terms of both of these aspects of what has rightly come to be called Romantic love. First, the sense of organic unity, which gives intimations of being part of a larger Oneness: Julius says to Lucinde,

“There will come a time when the two of us will perceive in a single spirit that we are blossoms of a single plant or petals of a single flower, and then we will know with a smile that what we now call merely hope is really remembrance.

“Do you still remember how the first seed of this idea grew in my soul, and how it immediately took root in yours as well?”²⁷

Second, the way in which the love of two people leads to a sense of unity with humanity and with nature at large: Here Schlegel describes the effect of Lucinde's love on Julius:

“Julius seemed to be inspired with a feeling of universal tenderness, not just some pragmatic or pitying sympathy for the masses, but the joy of watching the beauty of mankind—mankind which lives forever while individuals vanish.

“And he was moved also by a lively, open sensitivity to his own inmost self and that of others.... No longer did he love the idea of friendship in his friends but loved them for themselves.... But here too he found full harmony only in Lucinde's soul—the soul in which the germs of everything magnificent and everything holy awaited only the sunlight of his spirit in order to unfold themselves into the most beautiful religion.”²⁸

The fact that Julius keeps returning to Lucinde for spiritual nurture is where Schlegel's view of love—shared by the other Romantics—differs

from Plato's view that carnal love had to be outgrown. This is because, for Schlegel, the ultimate spiritual reality lies not in abstract, unchanging Forms of Beauty itself, but in the interconnected give-and-take of immediate experience. Thus, for the early Romantics in general, spiritual love never needed to outgrow carnal love. Instead, continued carnal love was precisely the *means* to make spiritual love more and more mature. In contrast to Plato, who saw erotic love as a temporary step in a progression leading from a temporal to an eternal realm, the Romantics saw love as eternity united with the moment. As Julius says to Lucinde,

“Love is not merely the quiet longing for eternity: it is also the holy enjoyment of a lovely presence. It is not merely a mixture, a transition from mortal to immortal: rather it is the total union of both.”²⁹

As for the second means for inducing a sense of the infinite organic unity of the cosmos—the appreciation of beauty—Hölderlin held that literary artists were the mediators who sensitized others to the physical beauties of nature and the beauty of the mind through their works of art. This is because art brings unity to what would otherwise seem to be the fragmented pieces of life. Although it might be said that philosophy, in trying to attain unity of knowledge, serves a similar function, Hölderlin felt that literature was much better suited to conveying the fact that Being is always in a process of Becoming—undergoing organic change—and only literature can portray this process in action, as the characters and narrators try to find balance and harmony among the changing dissonances of life.

There was little new in this part of his theory. After all, the role of art in conveying unity in difference and the resolution of conflicts has been recognized since the beginning of literature. The unique Romantic contribution was that the focus of literary art was primarily psychological: This is what Schlegel meant when he stated that all literature in his time, even lyric poetry, was romantic. All literature followed the novel in being focused on the issue of psychological development.

This focus was twofold. On the one hand, the *aim* of literature in the Romantic *Bildung* was to help the reader develop psychologically toward an intuition of the interconnectedness of the universe. On the other, the *means* to accomplish this aim was to portray, in empathetic terms, the psychological development of a character or narrator. This theme of organic psychological development was to be developed both in the content of a work of literature and in its form—which explains the Romantic insistence that works of art should not try to conform to established norms, but should grow organically from their particular message.

The early Romantics developed many theories about how literature should best embody these ideals, but the theories most relevant to their views on religion concerned the nature of the empathy ideally inspired by a work of art. Here Schlegel, in particular, followed two of Herder's dicta about how ideally to relate to art. To begin with, one should look in the work of art, not for a representation of an outside reality, but for an expression of the author's soul. As Herder had written in a piece called, "Treating of the Art of Making an Image of the Soul of Another":

"The first thing is to show the *unique manner* of my author, and to note the original strokes of his way of thought: a difficult but a useful endeavor.... I care nothing about what Bacon thought, but only about *how* he thought. An image of that sort is not dead; it takes on life, it speaks to my soul."³⁰

Schlegel was making the same point when he referred to authors who "started out to write only a novel ended up by providing us with a portrait of themselves." That portrait of themselves is what leads the sensitive reader to empathize with them; empathy is what then leads to a sense of interconnectedness, open to absorbing the authors' message and then inspired to respond creatively to that interconnectedness.

Schlegel also absorbed a second dictum from Herder, the idea of infinite taste, and developed his own creative response as to what infinite taste in terms of empathy might mean. In Schlegel's words:

"[T]o transport oneself arbitrarily now into this, now into that sphere, as if into another world, not merely with one's reason and

imagination, but with one's whole soul; to freely relinquish first one and then another part of one's being, and confine oneself entirely to a third; to seek and find now in this, now in that individual the be-all and end-all of existence, and intentionally forget everyone else: of this only a mind is capable that contains within itself simultaneously a plurality of minds and a whole system of persons, and in whose inner being the universe which, as they say, should germinate in every monad, has grown to fullness and maturity."³¹

Perceptively, Schlegel said that this capacity for infinite empathy was an aspect of irony. In other words, one could identify with another human being but at the same time maintain one's distance, simultaneously committing and yet not committing to the truth of that individual's expression. One found unity with the author by identifying with him, at the same time knowing that one was a separate person within that unity. For Schlegel, this double ability kept one oriented to the infinite that lay beyond both oneself and the author. However, the ironic aspect of infinite empathy stands in the way of committing to the lessons picked up from any one author. Applied to novels, this lack of commitment would be no serious problem, but as we will see, the Romantics proposed applying the same attitude to religious texts. If the text gives instructions on how to live one's life skillfully, an unwillingness to commit to its instructions long enough to give them a fair test *does* become a problem. And as we will further see, this attitude of ironic empathy has resurfaced in the Buddhist Romantic approach to ancient Buddhist texts.

Both means of inducing a sense of the infinite organic unity of the cosmos—love and an appreciation of beauty—were combined in the literary works for which the early Romantics are best known: novels and poems dealing with love. And the common perception—that the depiction of love in their writings was overwrought and unrealistic—is well founded. Lucinde, Julius, Diotima, and Hyperion, for instance, are all impossible to imagine, even with the best will in the world, as real human beings. Even later Romantics found the early Romantic depictions of love and lovers hard to take. For example, the poet

Heinrich Heine, writing in 1836, dismissed *Lucinde* as “ludicrously Romantic.” In a reference to Schlegel’s later conversion to Catholicism, he further remarked that although the Mother of God may have forgiven Schlegel for writing the book, the Muses never would.³²

However, if Novalis had been alive to hear these criticisms, he would have insisted that they missed the point. Of course the depictions were unrealistic. They were lessons in how to find the sublime in the commonplace. After all, it was only in this process of romanticization that one could know one’s powers to respond creatively to the influences of the cosmos as they manifested themselves in one’s consciousness, and to taste one’s share of the infinite. To romanticize one’s love was to express one’s freedom from necessity.

As noted in Chapter One, Schlegel disowned *Lucinde* later in life, but at the time of its writing he would have responded to criticisms of the book in another way: that a sensitive reader would have detected the implied infinite attitude of the author in the playful irony surrounding the depictions. They were not meant to be realistic. They were part of a self-conscious myth, and no self-conscious myth should be taken at face value. It, too, should be approached with an ironic attitude, both seriously and playfully at once. This approach came to mark the Romantic—and Buddhist Romantic—view of religious texts as well: that they should all be read, not for objective truths, but as myths to be approached with an ironic empathy.

In fact, Schlegel wrote *Lucinde* while beginning to see the connection between reading novels and reading religious texts. As also noted in Chapter One, he intended *Lucinde* to be the first in a series of books, planned but never finished, that would form the Bible of a new religion for the modern world. He formulated this plan from the realization that the aesthetic view he and his friends were developing had religious dimensions, too. Originally he had believed that, as people trained more and more in Romantic *Bildung*, there would be less and less need for religion. Now, though, he saw that religion was actually the highest *Bildung*, and that the means of Romantic *Bildung*—love and the appreciation of beauty—should be devoted to reviving a renewed spiritual appreciation of the infinite in the modern and postmodern world.

His inspiration in gaining this conviction came from another member of the early Romantic circle: Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Romantic Religion

Friedrich Schleiermacher, in the conversations that issued in his book, *Talks on Religion for Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), was the agent primarily responsible for convincing his fellow early Romantics that their view of artistic creation was actually an ideal model for religious experience as well. Just as artists should open themselves and respond creatively to the organic influences of the infinite unity of the cosmos immediately present to their awareness, all people should open themselves to an intuition and feeling of Oneness with the infinite, and then express that feeling creatively. That feeling, he said, was religion. In the same way that his fellow Romantics took a novelist's approach to art and philosophy, Schleiermacher took a novelist's approach to the religions of the world.

The "cultured despisers" in the title of his book were people who had become disillusioned with Christianity or Judaism, both from having read modern philosophy and from having witnessed, with dismay, the behavior of established religious institutions. Modern philosophy taught laws of reason and consciousness with a clarity and consistency that made the belief systems of conventional monotheism seem murky and crude. Religious institutions, tied to the state or to old customs and texts, seemed to betray what were recognized as the good principles in their teachings, such as harmony, forgiveness, and love.

At the same time, Schleiermacher thought that the efforts of previous philosophers to make religion respectable to cultured people by providing it with a rational basis had actually ended up debasing it. In particular, without naming names, he heaped ridicule on Kant's and Fichte's efforts to justify religion simply as a foundation for the moral law. This, he said, made religion a servant to narrow, time-bound strictures of right and wrong. To keep religion from being despised,

Schleiermacher saw the need to portray it, not as a means to a social good, but as an end in and of itself.

His solution to these problems owed an obvious debt to his Pietist roots. He defined religion not as a system of beliefs, a body of institutions, or a philosophical system, but as a feeling. And, just as the Pietist universe had room for only one genuine religious feeling—a feeling of God’s presence—Schleiermacher’s universe had room for only one religious feeling, regardless of one’s religious background. However, he, like his audience, had abandoned the views of the universe in which the Pietists and orthodox followers of every other monotheistic religion believed. So he explained the religious feeling, not in monotheistic terms as a felt relationship to God, but in terms of the psychology and cosmology of infinite organic unity: a felt relationship to the infinite.

Further, Schleiermacher claimed to provide an objective explanation, not of a particular religion, but of the universal laws of the religious feeling itself. In his terms, he was describing, “not only something that *may be* in religion universally, but precisely what *must be* in it universally [italics added].”¹ He was attempting a transcendental analysis—in Kant’s sense of the term—of what the structure of the religious experience, as a natural phenomenon, had to be for all human beings everywhere. In his eyes, there was one religious experience common to all—composed of an intuition combined with a feeling for the infinite—that individual people interpreted in various ways in line with their temperament, their individual *Bildung*, and the general culture of their time and place. However, these interpretations fell into a fixed number of types, based on the structure of human personality and the structure of how an intuition and a feeling occurred.

Schleiermacher presented these theories in line with the general Romantic view of the universe as an infinite organic unity, at the same time making specific references to the natural sciences on which that view was based. Some of his most striking images came from astronomy, chemistry, and biology; and these sciences influenced more than just his imagery. His understanding of the psychology of the religious experience and the place of religion in the ongoing development of the universe was strongly shaped by the biology and

astronomy of his time. These sciences provided the transcendental categories that, he felt, governed the way all religious experiences had to occur.

THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The object of religion, according to Schleiermacher, was the relationship of humanity to the universe. Now, metaphysics and morality also have this same relationship as their object, so Schleiermacher found it necessary to show how religion differs from them. Metaphysics, he said, is concerned with describing the place of humanity within the system of laws that govern the universe. Morality is concerned with formulating rules for how humanity should behave in the universe. Religion, however, is something more immediate and personal than either of these. It is a feeling derived from a direct experience of the infinite universe acting directly on one's consciousness.

Schleiermacher analyzed this direct experience as a combination of two processes—intuition and feeling—starting from a moment in which both processes are experienced as a single process and before they split into separate phenomena. On the one hand, there is the intuition of the infinite acting on one's consciousness. Here Schleiermacher is using the word "intuition" in his own technical sense. In line with the psychology that he learned both from Kant and from Schelling, he notes that every intuition of every kind is the impression of an object acting on one's consciousness. This impression does not tell you everything about the object, for two reasons.

First, it tells you only about that particular action of the object on your consciousness. It cannot tell you anything more about the object than that.

This right here raises the question of how one could know that the infinite was actually acting on one's consciousness, as there is no such thing as an infinite action that a finite mind could comprehend as infinite. All the mind can register are finite actions, beyond which it cannot see. What *feels* infinite may simply be Really Big but nevertheless finite. This problem is fatal to Schleiermacher's theory—how can one

have a taste for the infinite if one cannot know that what has left an impression is actually infinite?—but he brushes right past it.

Schleiermacher's second reason for why the impression does not tell you everything about the object is that the level of your receptivity to the intuition will determine how you register the impact and what you take away from it. This “what you take away from it”—your subjective response to the intuition—is a feeling. At the moment of contact, the intuition and feeling seem to be one and the same, but when the intuition ends, the feeling continues on its own. It then grows into a natural urge to express the feeling to others.

In a case of the direct experience of the infinite, the moment when intuition and feeling are One—when the individual feels totally One with the impact of the infinite—is the sacred moment of the encounter. This moment has a healing effect on the mind because, as Schleiermacher held, the human personality is divided into three parts: one oriented inward, to one's own self; one oriented outward, to the world outside; and a third, running back and forth between the other two and never finding rest until they are brought into union. Thus when there is a feeling of Oneness with the infinite, the personality as a whole is brought into Oneness as well, and all the parts find rest. Schleiermacher compares this moment to the brief length of time in a lover's embrace when one experiences the other as one's self.

This healing moment, however, cannot last forever. It is, after all, conditioned, dependent on actions both within and without—the inner receptivity of the individual and the outer action of the infinite—that can last only a brief span of time. Here again, Schleiermacher leaves unanswered the question of why, if the infinite is really infinite, it can act on an individual only briefly in this way. However, this issue is not central to his discussion, for even if the infinite were acting on the individual incessantly, the limited receptivity of the individual would be enough to support his conclusion: that even though one may intuit the infinite, one cannot experience the infinite as a *transcendent* dimension, i.e., lying outside of space and time. (Note that *transcendent* in this sense differs from Kant's use of the term *transcendental*.) The individual's intuition of the infinite, like all intuitions, is totally *immanent*, i.e.,

contained *within* the conditions of organic causality and the dimensions of space and time.

When the intuition inevitably ends, there remains just the feeling of having been healed. This feeling, according to Schleiermacher, is religion. As he phrased it in one of his most famous definitions of religion, “[R]eligion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite.”² In other words, religion belongs not to the category of knowledge or reason, but to the category of aesthetics: It is a taste, in Kant’s terms, for the sublime, but it senses the feeling of the sublime as a therapeutic rather than a terrifying experience.

From this feeling come all forms of religious expression—attempts to communicate truths derived from that feeling concerning the relationship of humanity to the universe—defining what a human being is and can know, describing what the universe is, and what the proper relationship is between the two. Often these expressions come in the form of worldviews, beliefs about the infinite, beliefs about gods, moral codes, etc. These expressions, however, are not religion, and they should not be taken as representing any eternal truths about the infinite. They are simply expressions of that particular feeling in that particular individual at that particular point in time.

In other words, the expressions of religious feeling are a branch of art: the creative expression of human feelings. For this reason, in Schleiermacher’s eyes, these expressions should follow the imperatives that the Romantics set for all art. We have already seen two of these imperatives at work in his theory—that religion must result from a receptive state of mind and that it must be expressive—but Schleiermacher gave even more space in his argument for the third: that religion must evolve. After all, the infinite as an organic unity is constantly evolving, so one’s understanding of one’s place within it must evolve as well.

For this reason, when one has expressed one’s religious feelings, one should not make a fetish of those expressions. Otherwise, one closes off the possibility of having further religious experiences. Even more so, other people should not take one’s expressions as authoritative or as imposing duties for them to follow, for that would stifle their innate potential for having religious experiences of their own. The more one

tries to systematize the expressions of religion into a coherent worldview or moral system, the further one grows from genuine religion and the more one is left with nothing but “dead letters” and “empty mythology.”

These are psychological reasons for not giving authority to any expression of religion. In addition, Schleiermacher also gives cosmological reasons drawn from the astronomy of his time. Because human beings are finite, any statement or system of rules formulated by finite human beings has to be finite as well. But the universe is infinite, so no finite ideas can encompass it. Furthermore, the universe is infinite not only in size, but also in its power to evolve and produce new forms of life and expression. Thus, what may be true for one moment in time cannot possibly hold true for other moments in time. This is why religious expressions from the past are, in his image, nothing better than flowers that have died after being pollinated. In his words, “Religion is never supposed to rest.”³ In this way, religion functions as an organism within the larger organism of the universe, and so has to evolve in order to survive.

The obverse side of Schleiermacher’s claim that no external expression of religion carries authority is his claim that all religions must be accepted and tolerated. No one person can judge another person’s religious expression, for no one can judge that person’s intuition of the infinite. One must accept all religious expressions as appropriate for their particular place and time.

Here again Schleiermacher gives both psychological and cosmological reasons for his claim. The psychological reason for tolerating all religions is that the more one is able to empathize with every possible expression of the experience of the infinite, the more one will be able to intuit the infinite oneself. If one’s views about what can and cannot be tolerated in religious expression are narrow, one’s mind will be too narrow to receive the actions of the infinite on it. As for the cosmological reasons for tolerance, Schleiermacher stated that because the universe is infinite in its power, it has to display that power by producing every possible form of behavior. Because it is infinite in scope, there is room for all these possibilities to coexist without infringing on one another. Each deserves its time and space.

Schleiermacher was quick to note that, to the uneducated ear, these claims may sound like every other view about human beings and their place in the universe that derives from the religious experience—in other words, these claims should be regarded as expressions of feelings, rather than descriptions of the truth. In line with his general dismissal of other religious worldviews, this would mean that they should carry no authority. But he asserts that this is not the case: His claims are derived from the very structure of what it means to intuit the infinite, and thus—like Kant’s transcendental categories—convey a higher level of truth. However, Schleiermacher does not explain this point any further, and as we will see, this issue was to become a continuing paradox wherever Romantic views on religion are found: They claim that no religious view about humanity and the universe carries authority, but their arguments for this claim depend on accepting as authoritative their views about how human beings relate to the universe as a whole.

RELIGIOUS *BILDUNG*

A similar irony marks Schleiermacher’s recommendations for how to formulate a *Bildung* that will encourage people to experience religion directly for themselves. As noted above, every intuition is shaped not only by the external object acting on the mind, but also by the mind’s receptivity to that action. In an age like his, he claims, where economic activity has consumed the attentions of all levels of society, the innate human desire and receptivity for contact with the infinite has been stifled. However, individuals can cultivate their taste and sensibility for the infinite and so reawaken their innate potential to be receptive to the sense of healing Oneness that an intuition of the infinite can provide—when the infinite is moved to do so. In fact, Schleiermacher states that this is the purpose of his talks: to induce his listeners to undertake this cultivation so that they will be prepared when the infinite chooses to act.

Here he faces a quandary, in that—properly speaking—no one person can teach religion to another, and no one can tell another exactly how to open to the infinite. Because religion is a matter of taste, each person will have to develop a taste for the infinite in his or her own way.

This is why there is no single path to the infinite, and each person has to take the path he or she finds most attractive.

Still, Schleiermacher hopes that there are some people who will resonate with his message, and for them he offers a religious *Bildung* that parallels the general Romantic *Bildung*. It has its *descriptive* side—talking about the religious experience in an inspiring way—and its *performative* side: recommending specific activities to induce a receptive mind-state that will allow an intuition of the infinite to occur. But more than to simply occur—and this is where the irony comes in. Despite his strictures that religious expressions should not be judged and that there is a place in the cosmos for every kind of religious expression, Schleiermacher believes that some religious expressions are more evolved than others. This is because the people who gain the experience on which those expressions are based were first primed to see the universe in a more evolved way. His proposed *Bildung* is aimed at priming his listeners in this direction.

In his analysis, there are three ways of intuiting the infinite. The least evolved is to see it as an undifferentiated unity—a single mass of chaotic events. This way of intuiting the infinite comes from not trying to look for laws governing its behavior, and tends to produce animistic religions, in which people worship idols and fetishes.

A more advanced way to intuit the infinite is to see it as a multiplicity, a system of discrete, separate things, interacting in line with orderly laws, but with no overall unity. This way of intuiting the infinite comes from looking for the laws that govern its behavior but not yet succeeding in finding any overarching system for those laws. This tends to lead to polytheistic religions.

The highest way to intuit the infinite is to see it as a multiplicity encompassed in an overall unity—e.g., like the organic unity of the Romantic universe. This way of intuiting the infinite comes from finding the overarching system of laws that governs all behavior in the universe. This level of intuition may yield a monotheistic religion, although Schleiermacher held that a higher form of this intuition dispenses with a personal God entirely, and sees the whole of the infinite animated by a World Soul. In other words, the highest religion sees infinity as entirely immanent, with no transcendent dimension outside the infinity of the

cosmos. Moreover, true religion does not seek personal immortality outside of the universe, for that would be contrary to the ideal religious desire: to lose oneself in the infinite. Instead, immortality should be sought in the moment: “To be One with the infinite in the midst of the finite,” he said, “and to be eternal in a moment, that is the immortality of religion.”⁴

Here, again, Schleiermacher maintains that his three categories are descriptive rather than merely expressive. They are not the result of a religious feeling. Instead, they derive, again, from the structure of what it means to intuit the infinite. But yet again, he does not explain his point further. However, he explains his ranking of these three categories—with mere unity as the lowest, and unity encompassing multiplicity as the highest—as based on an overview of how religions have developed and progressed throughout human history. In his words, echoing Schelling, history shows religion as “a work of the world spirit progressing into infinity.”⁵ Schleiermacher’s *Bildung* is designed to continue the arc of that progress, by inducing the mind to look for unity within multiplicity.

Just as the performative side of the general Romantic *Bildung* to induce an experience of the infinite organic unity of the universe was based on cultivating sensitivity in two ways—through love and through an appreciation of beauty—the performative side of Schleiermacher’s religious *Bildung* was based on cultivating erotic love on the one hand, and an appreciation of the beauty of the infinite on the other.

Love, he says, is a necessary preparation for religion in that when one has found another person who, in one’s eyes, reflects the entire world, one realizes that one’s own humanity is lacking if one desires only small selfish goals. One’s humanity will be complete only if one broadens one’s horizons and desires the infinite. This desire is what then opens one to the enjoyment of the infinite.

In fact, the experience of love, for Schleiermacher, is not only a preparation for religion. It is actually an image—and can be a direct manifestation—of the religious experience itself.

“The first mysterious moment that occurs in every sensory perception, before intuition and feeling have separated, where

sense and its objects have, as it were, flowed into one another and become one, before both turn back to their original position—I know how indescribable it is and how quickly it passes away.... It is as fleeting and transparent as the first scent with which the dew gently caresses the waking flowers, as modest and delicate as a maiden's kiss, as holy and fruitful as a nuptial embrace; indeed, not *like* these, but it *is itself* all of these. A manifestation, an event develops quickly and magically into an image of the universe. Even as the beloved and ever-sought-for form fashions itself, my soul flees toward it; I embrace it, not as a shadow, but as the holy essence itself. I lie on the bosom of the infinite world. At this moment I am its soul, for I feel all its powers and its infinite life as my own; at this moment it is my body, for I penetrate its muscles and its limbs as my own. With the slightest trembling the holy embrace is dispersed and now for the first time the intuition stands before me as a separate form; I survey it, and it mirrors itself in my open soul like the image of the vanishing beloved in the awakened eye of a youth; now for the first time the feeling works its way up from inside and diffuses itself like the blush of shame and desire on his cheek. This moment is the highest flowering of religion. If I could create it in you, I would be a god; may holy fate only forgive me that I have had to disclose more than the Eleusinian mysteries.”⁶

As for *Bildung* in learning to appreciate the beauty of the infinite, Schleiermacher recommends meditations that open the mind to the infinite both without and within. Although he does not make the connection himself, the meditations he recommends fall into two types that seem to correspond to the first two types of personal orientation—inward and outward—and, beginning there, strengthen within both orientations the third type of orientation: the one that moves back and forth between the two and will find no rest until they are brought together as One.

Some of the meditations are quite extended, but two short versions will give an idea of the longer ones. First, a meditation that begins

within and is aimed at dissolving all sense of self, leaving just the infinite:

“Observe yourselves with unceasing effort. Detach all that is yourself, always proceed with ever-sharper sense, and the more you fade from yourself, the clearer will the universe stand forth before you, the more splendidly will you be recompensed for the horror of self-annihilation through the feeling of the infinite in you.”⁷

Second, a meditation that begins with the world outside and, through a back-and-forth movement, finds that everything outside is inside as well:

“Look outside yourself to any part, to any element of the world, and comprehend it in its whole essence, but also collect everything that it is, not only in itself but in you, in this one and that one and everywhere; retrace your steps from the circumference to the center ever more frequently and in ever-greater distances. You will soon lose the finite and find the infinite.”⁸

To aid with this second type of meditation, Schleiermacher recommends a study of the infinite variety of the religions of the world. What is striking about the religions he mentions is that—even though Herder and others had made fragments of Indian religious texts available in German translations, and Islam had long been known to Europe—Schleiermacher’s list covers only five religions: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman religions, along with Christianity, and Judaism.

His main point, however, would hold for the study of any religion: One must be careful to approach all religions with the proper method. Instead of judging religions as right or wrong, high or low, noble or grotesque, one should look for the way in which every religious expression comes from an intuition of the infinite, seeing how each has its place within the infinite’s boundless productive power. This, as we have noted, is to approach religions as the Romantics would advise approaching a novel. When one tries to inhabit the perspective of others and to empathize even with what seems most strange, one sees oneself

within them, and them within oneself. This helps to break down the boundaries between what is inward and outward, and allows the mind to become receptive to an intuition of the infinite.

“From these wanderings through the whole realm of humanity, religion then returns to one’s own self with sharpened meaning and better-formed judgment, and at last finds everything in itself that otherwise was gathered from most distant regions.... All of the innumerable mixtures of different dispositions that you have intuited in the characters of others will appear to you as mere arrested moments of your own life.... There were moments when... you thought, felt, and acted this way, when you really were this or that person. You have really passed through all these different forms within your own order; you yourself are a compendium of humanity; in a certain sense your personality embraces the whole of human nature.... In whomever religion has thus worked back again inwardly and has discovered there the infinite, it is complete in that person in this respect.”⁹

Of course, the *Bildung* that Schleiermacher recommends aims at making religion complete in more than just that respect. When one has discovered the infinite within and without, one’s expression of the resulting feeling should ideally contribute to the continued evolution of religion. In this way, one’s relationship with religion becomes fully organic, falling in line with the general Romantic program: to grow by being open to the influences of the infinite, and to help the universe grow toward perfection by responding creatively to those influences.

A few more quotations from Schleiermacher’s *Talks* will help to round out his picture of religion and show its parallels with Romantic thought in general.

On the miracle of the commonplace:

“‘Miracle’ is merely the religious name for event, every one of which, even the most natural and usual, is a miracle as soon as it adapts itself to the fact that the religious view of it can be the

dominant one. To me everything is a miracle... The more religious you would be, the more you would see miracles everywhere.”¹⁰

On tolerance:

“When you have persuaded another person to join you in drawing the image of the Big Dipper onto the blue background of the worlds, does he not nevertheless remain free to conceive the adjacent worlds in contours that are completely different from yours? This infinite chaos, where of course every point represents a world, is as such actually the most suitable and highest symbol of religion.... Individual persons may have their own arrangement and their own rubrics [for arranging their religious intuitions] the particular can thereby neither win nor lose.”¹¹

On the danger of giving authority to religious texts:

“Every holy writing is merely a mausoleum of religion, a monument that a great spirit was there that no longer exists; for if it still lived and were active, why would it attach such great importance to the dead letter that can only be a weak reproduction of it?”¹²

On the illegitimacy of imposing religious duties or rules for behavior:

“Religion... must not use the universe in order to derive duties and is not permitted to contain a code of laws.”¹³

And on the need for religions to evolve:

“When we have found out what is everywhere preserved and promoted in the course of humanity and must sooner or later inevitably be vanquished and destroyed if it cannot be transformed or changed, we regard our own action in the world in light of this law.”¹⁴

SCHLEIERMACHER'S RECEPTION

Schleiermacher's *Talks* proved very controversial, and as he grew older he revised them, in 1806 and 1821, to soften some of their more unorthodox positions.

But among his early Romantic friends, the first edition of the *Talks* found an eager and receptive audience. Schlegel quibbled with some of Schleiermacher's points, but for the most part the Romantics accepted his ideas wholeheartedly. And they did more than just accept them. They responded to them creatively, as they began addressing the topic of religion themselves. In some ways, they simply echoed his thoughts, as when Schlegel wrote that "Every relation of man to the infinite is religion; that is, man in the entire fullness of his humanity."¹⁵ Schlegel also agreed that the experience of the infinite was prior to any concept of God, and that such a concept expressed a person's feelings more than it represented an actual being. In Schlegel's terminology, it was a product of the imagination: "The mind, says the author of the *Talks on Religion*, can understand only the universe. Let imagination take over and you will have a God. Quite right: for the imagination is man's faculty for perceiving divinity."¹⁶ And: "A definite relationship to God must seem as intolerable to the mystic as a particular conception or notion of God."¹⁷

In other ways, the early Romantics expanded on Schleiermacher's ideas. Hölderlin and Schlegel, for instance, writing independently of each other, drew similar conclusions from Schleiermacher's point that religious texts should be read primarily for their expressiveness. Because the feeling for the infinite was immediate and direct, and because finite words get in the way of that directness, they argued, there is no way that language can adequately express that feeling. And yet there is the felt need to express it. The solution to this dilemma was to realize that the only appropriate language for religion was that of *myth* and *allegory*, because these modes of language told stories pointing explicitly to meanings beyond them. Myth and allegory united the historical—concrete deeds and descriptions—with the intellectual—the meaning behind those descriptions. Because it was blatantly suggestive, their

language was the best way for words to point beyond themselves. This meant, in Hölderlin's words, that "All religion is in its essence poetic."¹⁸

Here Hölderlin was shifting Schleiermacher's meaning of "religion" from the *feeling* of the infinite to the *expression* of that feeling. Schlegel, in his *Ideas*, shifted the meaning of the word in the same way. This shift was to have important consequences for the academic study of religion later on. As we will see, humanistic psychology and comparative religion came to focus on these twin poles in their study of religion as a psychological and historical phenomenon.

In this area, too, the early Romantics led the way, primarily in Schelling's and Schlegel's programs on how the study of religion could function as a part of the *Bildung* that would further the progress of freedom.

The descriptive/prescriptive side of this *Bildung* lay in their program for how they and future generations should approach the academic study of religion. Schelling, in his *Method of Academic Study*, called for theologians to look at the history of religion, not through the lens of their belief systems, but from a "supra-confessional" perspective. The "supra-" here, of course, means "above." Schelling felt that his theory of the development of the universe through the activity of the World Soul afforded a higher vantage point from which all religious activity should be understood. Whatever truths were contained within a particular belief system should be viewed simply as products of that system's historical circumstances. Historicism was to have the final word on the value of those truths and how far their validity should extend.

Schlegel, in his article, "On Philosophy" (1799), had already outlined the basic assumptions on which such a study should be based. In a reference to Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, he called for a study of "religion within the limits of art." By this he meant that the study of religion should pay attention to how the finite and infinite were combined in mythic, symbolic forms "whose symbolism consisted... in that by which, everywhere, the appearance of the finite is placed in relation with the truth of the eternal and in this manner, precisely dissolved therein." Whether those finite symbols were originally *meant* to symbolize the infinite was not a question that Schlegel thought to ask. Religion was about one's relationship to the infinite, period. As for the

underlying assumptions of this course of study: “*The infinitude of the human spirit, the divinity of all natural things, and the humanity of the gods*, should remain the great eternal theme of all these variations.”¹⁹ In other words, whatever a particular religion said about these topics, Schlegel’s assumptions about humanity, nature, and the gods were to be treated as higher truths from which that religion should be judged.

In his *Conversations on Poetry* (1800), Schlegel offered the somewhat postmodern comment that these assumptions were a myth, just like the myths that they were meant to judge. But then he added that the historian’s myth served a pragmatic purpose: It furthered the progress of human freedom by offering a framework for understanding how the meaning and purpose of history headed in the direction of that freedom. Here the descriptive power of this study became prescriptive, as it was in Schleiermacher’s *Talks*: The study of the history of religions showed not only *the fact that* religions change over time, but also that they *should* change—or be changed. Schlegel’s program called for the liberation of religion. “Liberate religion,” he said in one of his *Ideas*, “and a new race of men will be born.”²⁰ And further, “Let us awaken all religions from their graves and through the omnipotence of art and science reanimate and reorganize those that are immortal.”²¹

For guidance on how religion should be liberated through art and science, Schlegel looked to India, because what little he knew of Indian religion convinced him that India embodied Romantic ideals. “In the Orient,” he said—and by this he later said he meant India—“we must seek that highest Romanticism.”²²

What he meant by Romanticism in this case, he further explained in *Voyage to France* (1803): “[T]he spiritual self-denial of the Christian and the wildest, most exuberant materialism in the religion of the Greeks both found their higher archetype in the common fatherland, in India.” This “sublime manner of thinking,” in which these extremes are brought together under the concept of “divinity without difference in its infinity” provided the foundations of a “truly universal *Bildung*.”²³ It was for this reason, Schlegel intimated, that he had gone to France, to study Sanskrit in Paris.

Now, as we've already gathered from *Lucinde*, Schlegel was obviously not interested in what Sanskrit texts taught about spiritual self-denial. His focus was more on India's exuberant side. This, he felt, would provide justification for the performative side of his *Bildung*: the claim that erotic love offered a genuine and direct experience of the infinite, and so should be regarded as a holy source of religious renewal within each person. Here Schlegel took a theme that Schleiermacher had touched on in his talks as an "Eleusinian mystery" and stated it openly:

"The religion I have returned to is the oldest, the most childlike and simple. I worship fire as being the best symbol of the Godhead. And where is there a lovelier fire than the one nature has locked deeply into the soft breast of woman? Ordain me priest, not so that I may idly gaze at the fire, but so that I may liberate it, awaken it, and purify it: wherever it is pure, it sustains itself, without surveillance and without vestals."²⁴

[Julian is addressing Lucinde:] "Everything that we loved before, we love even more warmly now. It's only now that a feeling for the world has really dawned on us. You've come to know the infinity of the human spirit through me, and I've come to understand marriage and life, and the magnificence of all things through you. For me everything has a soul, speaks to me, and is holy."²⁵

When *Lucinde* was printed, it met with a chorus of protest that it was immoral. Schleiermacher rose to its defense in 1800, writing an entire novel in the form of fictional letters, *Confidential Letters Concerning Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde*, to refute the criticisms and to assert instead that the book was actually a holy text, embodying the principles of true religion and showing that a taste and sensibility for the infinite could be developed through erotic love. As Ernestine—Schleiermacher's feminine alter ego in the book—comments, a physical embrace is actually an experience of the embrace of God:

"God must be in the beloveds, their embrace is actually His enveloping, which they, in that same moment, feel in communion, and for which thereafter they yearn."²⁶

Thus, when the Romantics described love as holy or as an act of worship, they were not engaging in mere hyperbole. They wanted to be taken seriously: that erotic love was a portal for the infinite and a source for renewing genuine religion and morality in a world where religious teachings and institutions had sent religion to its grave. By engaging in truly loving relationships—even if adulterous—they were not abandoning their moral duty. Instead, they were obeying a higher moral duty that would bring what is finite and divided back into infinite Oneness.

RECOGNIZING ROMANTIC RELIGION

Because the following chapters aim at showing how these Romantic views on religion survived into the 20th and 21st centuries, it will be convenient to have a short checklist to identify precisely what counts as Romantic religion. That way we will be able to recognize Romantic religious ideas as they are transmitted, to gauge the extent to which the transmission alters them, and to recognize them as they resurface in Buddhist Romanticism.

So here is a list of the twenty main points that characterize Romantic religion. The remainder of this book will make frequent reference to these points, so bear them in mind.

The first point identifies the question that all religion, according to the Romantics, aims to answer.

1) The object of religion is the relationship of humanity with the universe.

The next two points give the basic Romantic answer to that question.

2) The universe is an infinite organic unity. This means, among other things, that causation in the universe is (a) reciprocal rather than mechanical and deterministic; and (b) teleological—it has a purpose—rather than blind. However, what that purpose is lies beyond human capacities to know or comprehend. The assertion that the universe is an infinite organic unity also means that there

is no transcendent dimension outside of the organic processes of the universe.

3) Each human being is both an individual organism and a part of the larger infinite organic unity of the universe. As an organism, one has both physical and mental drives that should be trusted and satisfied. As parts of the organic unity of the universe, one has no freedom of choice, but only the freedom to express one's nature as part of the cosmos. Thus, to express and fulfill one's nature, one has the duty to trust that one's inner drives are good, and that the overall purpose of the universe is good, even if unknowable. One also has the duty to work toward fulfilling that purpose as best one can understand it.

These first three points are the basis for all the remaining points.

The next six points focus on the religious experience and the psychological illness that it heals.

4) Human beings suffer when their sense of inner and outer unity is lost—when they feel divided within themselves and separated from the universe.

5) Despite its many expressions, the religious experience is the same for all: an intuition of the infinite that creates a feeling of unity with the universe and a feeling of unity within.

6) This sense of unity is healing but totally immanent. In other words, (a) it is temporary and (b) it does not give direct experience of any transcendent, unconditioned dimension outside of space and time. There are two reasons for this. The first is that human perception, as a conditioned, organic process, has no access to anything unconditioned. The second reason is that, as already stated, there is no transcendent dimension outside of the infinite organic unity of the universe.

7) Any freedom offered by the religious experience—the highest freedom possible in an organic universe—thus does not transcend the

laws of organic causation. It is conditioned and limited by forces both within and without the individual.

8) Because the religious experience can give only a temporary feeling of unity, religious life is one of pursuing repeated religious experiences in hopes of gaining an improved feeling for that unity, but never fully achieving it.

9) Although the religious experience is not transcendent, it does carry with it an ability to see the commonplace events of the immanent world as sublime and miraculous. In fact, this ability is a sign of the authenticity of one's sense of unity with the infinite. This point parallels Novalis' definition of authenticity and the romanticization of the world.

The next four points focus on the cultivation of the religious experience.

10) People have an innate desire and aptitude for the religious experience—in fact, the religious experience is a totally natural occurrence—but the culture of their time and place may stifle it. Nevertheless, they can induce a religious experience by cultivating an attitude of open receptivity to the infinite. Because religion is a matter of taste, there is no one path for developing this receptivity. The most that any teacher can offer are his or her own opinions on the matter, in the event that other people will resonate with them.

11) One of the many ways to cultivate a receptivity to the infinite is through erotic love.

12) Another way to cultivate a receptivity to the infinite is to develop a tolerance of all religious expressions, viewing them as finite expressions of a feeling for the infinite, without giving authority to any of them. This point parallels Schlegel's instructions on how to empathize with the authors of literary works, and has two implications. The first is that it makes the study of religious texts a branch of the study of literature. The second is that one's empathy and tolerance contain an element of irony: One sympathizes with

the feeling-source that one is able to identify in the expression, but maintains one's distance from the expression itself.

13) In fact, the greatest religious texts, if granted too much authority, are actually harmful to genuine religion.

The final seven points deal with the results of the religious experience.

14) Because the mind is an organic part of the creatively expressive infinite, it, too, is creatively expressive, so its natural response to a feeling of the infinite is to want to express it.

15) However, because the mind is finite, any attempt to describe the experience of the infinite is limited by one's finite mode of thought, and also by one's temperament and culture. Thus, religious statements and texts are not descriptive of reality, but simply expressions of the effect of that reality on a particular person's individual nature. As expressions of feelings, religious statements do not need to be clear or consistent. They should be read as poetry and myths, pointing to the inexpressible infinite and speaking primarily to the feelings.

16) Because religious teachings are expressive only of one individual's feelings, they have no authority over any other person's expression of his or her feelings. The truth of each individual's experience lies in the purely subjective directness of that experience, and does not carry over to any expression of it.

17) Although a religious feeling may inspire a desire to formulate rules of behavior, those rules carry no authority, and are actually unnecessary. When one sees all of humanity as holy and One—and oneself as an organic part of that holy Oneness—there is no need for rules to govern one's interactions with the rest of society. One's behavior toward all naturally becomes loving and compassionate.

18) In fact, when one has a genuine appreciation for the infinite organic unity of the universe, one sees how that unity transcends all

ideas of right and wrong. The infinitude of the universe has more than enough room to embrace and encompass both right and wrong behavior, and more than enough power to heal all wounds. Therefore the duties implied by ideas of right and wrong behavior have no legitimate place in religious life.

19) Although all religious expressions are valid, some are more evolved than others. Thus religion must be viewed under the framework of historicism, to understand where a particular teaching falls in the organic development of humanity and the universe as a whole. Regardless of what a particular religion says about its teachings, those teachings are to be judged by one's understanding of the place of that religion in the general evolution of human spiritual activity.

20) Religious change is not only a fact. It is also a duty. Religions are organic, like everything else in the universe, and so people must continue to modify their religious traditions in order to keep them alive. This drive and duty to change—to *become*—is something to be celebrated and extolled.

So we have twenty points to apply in identifying the Romantic influence on modern Western Buddhism. Schlegel's concept of irony appears in the list, as one possible interpretation of Points 15–17, but there is a larger, unintended irony underlying the list as a whole, to which we have already alluded. Although Points 16–18 insist that no one person's religious beliefs about human identity and duties in the universe have any authority over anyone else's beliefs, all twenty points derive their authority from the belief system expressed in the first three. In other words, you are free to believe or disbelieve what you want, but not free to disbelieve the first three points.

There is also an underlying inconsistency in that Points 17 and 18 deny any specific duties of right and wrong in the religious life, whereas Points 3 and 20 insist on the duty to trust one's inner drives and to further the organic development of the universe as a whole. This inconsistency is further aggravated by the Romantics' own conflicting

ideas of what *duty* means for a human organism that is part of the infinite organic unity that is the cosmos.

These conflicting ideas come from the various ways the Romantics defined freedom and inner Oneness for such a human being. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Schlegel and Hölderlin maintained that freedom meant being free to contradict oneself from moment to moment. For Hölderlin, inner Oneness meant adopting whatever philosophy integrated well with one's emotional needs at any particular moment so as to arrive at a sense of inner peace. For Schlegel, inner Oneness meant adopting whatever philosophy allowed for the greatest freedom in expressing—again, at any moment—one's creative powers. Thus for both of them, one's duty was to follow the needs of one's inner nature, as expressed in one's emotions, so as to experience inner Oneness.

For Schelling, however, the whole idea of freedom was a pernicious myth. The belief in individual freedom of choice, he taught, was the source of all evil. As part of the overarching organic unity of the universe, one's duty was to renounce one's individual will and to accept the will of the universe as it acted through one's innate nature. Only then could one experience the freedom from inner conflict that, for Schelling, was what inner Oneness meant.

These are major inconsistencies. The Romantics, with their attitude toward inconsistency, might have argued that inconsistencies of this sort are actually a form of freedom, which—as Schlegel commented—is the whole purpose of formulating these religious views to begin with. But if you don't accept the general Romantic view about the nature of the universe, their arguments about inconsistency, duty, and freedom don't hold.

As we will see, these inconsistencies, the differing notions of duty, and the limited notion of freedom in the Romantic religious *Bildung* have carried over into Buddhist Romanticism. In particular, the inconsistency is manifest not only in the specific changes that Buddhist Romantics force on the Dhamma, but also in their justification for doing so. Some changes are justified on the grounds that Romantic principles of religion are objectively true, that all great religions should recognize them, so if Buddhism lacks any of them, people are doing it a

favor by introducing them into the Dhamma. Other changes are justified on the grounds that there are no objectively true principles of religion: Each individual has not only the *right* to create his/her own set of beliefs, but also the *duty* to change his/her tradition. So the tradition has no right to object to whatever those beliefs might be. Either way, the Dhamma loses out.

This connects with a second irony: Although most of the scientific and philosophical underpinnings for the twenty points have since fallen away, the points themselves have continued to exert influence over Western views on religion in general, and Buddhist Romanticism in particular, to the present day. This continued influence can be explained by the fact that, regardless of how science and philosophy are currently taught in the academy, these points have gained and maintained the status of unquestioned assumptions in three areas of thought: humanistic psychology, the academic study of the history of religions, and popular writings on “perennial philosophy.” The next chapter will examine how this has happened, and how these three areas of thought have helped to create—and justify the creation of—Buddhist Romanticism.

But first, to help clarify what actually does and doesn’t count as a Romantic influence on Buddhist Romanticism, it’s useful to review what the Dhamma teaches about the twenty points listed above. So here is a second list, drawn from Chapter Two, that will allow you to compare point-by-point where the Dhamma and Romanticism are similar and where they part ways. This way you will be able to recognize what is Buddhist and what is Romantic in modern Buddhist Romanticism.

These two lists diverge at the outset. They differ on the purpose of religion, the nature of the universe, and the place of the individual within the universe. Because these first three points are basic to the Romantic program, this means that the Dhamma and the Romantic program part ways from the ground up. However, it’s also important to note that they contain similarities in some of the more derivative points—similarities that have allowed for Dhamma and the Romantic program to become confused with each other.

On the object of the Dhamma:

1) *The object of the Dhamma is not the relationship of humanity with the universe, but the end of suffering and stress (§2). To focus on defining the place of humanity in the universe is to think in terms of becoming, which actually gets in the way of ending suffering and stress.*

On the individual and the universe:

2) *The questions of whether or not the universe is infinite, and whether or not it's One, are irrelevant to ending suffering and stress. In fact, to insist on the Oneness and infinitude of the universe is to stray away from the path to the end of suffering (§6; §25). Although it is true that causation in the universe is not deterministic, the universe itself does not have a purpose. To insist that it has a purpose and meaning allows for the idea that suffering serves a purpose, thus making it harder to see that suffering is best brought to an end.*

3) *To hold to a definition of what one “is” as a human being stands in the way of abandoning the suffering that every such definition entails (§17; §20). Not all human drives can be trusted—most come from ignorance—so there is a need to be heedful in choosing which desires to fulfill and which to resist. And, in fact, human beings do have freedom of choice. But because the universe has no purpose, they have no duty to further its growth.*

On the ultimate religious experience and the spiritual illness it cures:

4) *Human beings suffer from the craving and clinging that lead to becoming and that result from ignorance of how suffering is caused and how it can be brought to an end (§3; §25).*

5) *Along the path to the end of suffering, a meditator may experience a feeling of unity with the universe and a feeling of unity within. The Dhamma agrees with Romanticism that this feeling is temporary and inconstant. However, this feeling is not the highest religious experience (§23). There are many possible religious experiences. The Canon notes that teachers prior to the Buddha had mistaken the various levels of jhāna, or mental absorption, as the*

highest possible experience, but that these levels of concentration are all fabricated, and thus fall short of the highest goal. The highest experience is unbinding, which is not a feeling, but goes totally beyond the six senses (§§45–47; §54).

6) Unbinding is transcendent, an unconditioned dimension outside of space and time (§§48–49; §51).

7) The freedom attained with unbinding is thus free from all limitations and conditions (§20).

8) Although there are stages of awakening, when full awakening is achieved there is no more work to do for the sake of one's wellbeing. The goal has been fully attained. The healing and health of unbinding, because they are unconditioned, are not subject to change (§50).

9) A sense of the sublime—in Kant's sense of inspiring terror—is one of the goads to practice for the end of suffering. As for the ability to see commonplace events as luminous, that is a stage that some people experience on the way to awakening, but it is actually an obstacle on the path that has to be overcome. And to see all things as sublime is to erase the line between what is skillful and what is not, depriving the mind of a sense of heedfulness, and thus undercutting all motivation for the practice (§33).

On cultivating awakening:

10) The experience of awakening does not happen naturally (§50). It has to be consciously pursued, often in direct contradiction to “natural” desires and impulses. This pursuit involves much more than open receptivity. In fact, open receptivity can weaken heedfulness, which is the actual basis for all skillful action (§33). To attain awakening, all eight factors of the noble path—which is the only path to awakening—have to be developed heedfully to a point of consummation (§§58–60).

11) Friendship with admirable people is the first prerequisite in following the path, but because sensual passion is one of the causes of

suffering, there is no room for erotic love in admirable friendship. Erotic love is an obstacle, rather than an aid, on the path (§§64–65; §13).

12) Other religions may be tolerated, not with the view that they are valid alternative paths to the end of suffering, but simply as a point of good manners. The Buddha recognized that other religions can contain elements of the Dhamma, but the full path to awakening can be found only where the noble eightfold path is taught without contradiction (§60). He did, however, argue strongly against any religion teaching that action has no consequences (§8), and advised the monks to expel from the Saṅgha any monk who taught a view that seriously contradicted the Dhamma.

13) Simple respect for the Pāli Canon is not enough—its teachings must be tested by putting them into practice (§61)—but to grant the Canon provisional authority is not an obstacle on the path.

On the results of awakening:

14) The mind is an active principle in shaping its experience—on this point the Dhamma agrees with the Romantics—but its activity is more than merely expressive. It can accurately observe and describe how suffering arises and how it can be brought to an end, even though unbinding lies beyond words and so cannot be expressed. And although the Canon contains some poetic passages expressing the joy of awakening, it focuses most of its attention on the most useful response to awakening: practical instructions on how others may achieve awakening for themselves.

15) The truths of how suffering arises and passes away are categorical—universally true—and not specific to any particular culture (§6). Instructions on these matters are not simply expressions of feelings, nor are they myths pointing to the inexpressible. They accurately describe real actions that can be mastered. Because these instructions are meant to be carried out, they should be taught in a context where students are encouraged to ask questions about their

meaning with the purpose of understanding how to implement them (§66).

16) The Buddha has the authority of an expert, and his teachings do not simply express his feelings about how to end suffering. They are truths that can be tested in the experience of others. The extent to which they pass the test shows that those truths have been accurately reported in the Pāli Canon.

17) Although the goodwill and compassion fostered by the path inspire one to behave well toward others, here, too, heedfulness is needed so that these qualities don't get misled by ignorance. Thus they need the guidance of the precepts, which are an essential part of the path to awakening. And although awakened people no longer define themselves in terms of the precepts (MN 78), they abide by the precepts consistently and protect them with their life (AN 3:87; Ud 5:5).

18) One of the results of awakening is the realization that actions do have consequences, and that the principles of skillful and unskillful behavior are categorical truths (AN 2:18). Similarly, the duties appropriate to the four noble truths, although not imposed by outside personal authority, must be followed by anyone who wants to put an end to suffering and stress (§3).

19) The historical method is no judge of the Dhamma. The Dhamma can be known and tested only through one's own attempts to put it into practice.

20) The essence of the Dhamma is timeless and unchanging (§39; §§48–49). The teachings about the Dhamma will eventually disappear as counterfeit Dhamma replaces them (§§69–71), but this development is not to be extolled. The disappearance of teachings about the Dhamma can be postponed by practicing the Dhamma and by not “improving” it with new formulations (§§72–74). To keep the Dhamma alive, it is important not to change those teachings, so that others will have a chance to learn what the Buddha taught and give it a fair test for themselves.

Three of these points are especially important:

- Point 1, that the Dhamma is not concerned with the same question as Romantic religion, and that the Romantic question is phrased in terms that (a) place limitations on one's ability to experience the transcendent and (b) stand in the way of answering the question the Dhamma addresses;
- Point 5, that unbinding lies beyond the highest religious experience recognized by the Romantics; and
- Point 7, that the freedom the Dhamma offers is not confined by the limitations surrounding the Romantic notion of freedom.

These three points show clearly that the Dhamma lies *outside* the “laws” and “duties” that the Romantics formulated for the religious life. This is because the Dhamma focuses on an issue entirely different from the Romantic conception of the focus of religious life, and points to a freedom vastly superior to the highest freedom the Romantics proposed. It's ironic, then, that Buddhist Romanticism treats the Dhamma *under* Romantic laws. The following chapter will look at some of the reasons why this ironic situation came about, and why Buddhist Romanticism gives more authority to early Romantic theories than to the best available records of the Dhamma the Buddha taught.

The Transmission of Romantic Religion

People at present rarely read Schleiermacher. Most have never even heard of his name, and the same holds true of the other early German Romantics. Nevertheless, their ideas on art and religion have influenced many thinkers in the intervening centuries, thinkers whose names are more familiar and who have had a widely recognized influence on current culture—in the areas of literature, humanistic psychology, comparative religion, comparative mythology, and perennial philosophy. A short roster of these more recognized thinkers would include Sir Edwin Arnold, Helena Blavatsky, Joseph Campbell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, G. W. F. Hegel, Hermann Hesse, Aldous Huxley, William James, Carl Jung, J. Krishnamurti, Abraham Maslow, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rudolph Otto, Huston Smith, Henry David Thoreau, Swami Vivekananda, and Walt Whitman. And there are many, many others. These are the people who have transmitted Romantic religion to the present, and who—through their influence—have made Buddhist Romanticism possible.

Part of the Romantics' continuing influence can be explained by the fact that, even though some of them could be quite obscure in expressing their more abstract thoughts—William Hazlitt started his review of A. W. Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* with the quip, "The book is German," to give an idea of how impenetrable it was—they found champions in a number of English and French writers who, in the early 19th century, developed an enthusiasm for German thought and were able to popularize it with greater clarity in their own languages. Among the English, Samuel Coleridge (1772–1834) and Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) were the foremost advocates of German Romantic thought; even Hazlitt (1778–1830), when writing

about Shakespeare, borrowed heavily from the very book he had savaged for being German. Among the French, Madame de Staël (1766–1817), whom we have already met, was an early admirer of the German Romantics, and Victor Cousin (1792–1867) was another.

These interpreters presented early Romantic thought as a natural extension of Kant's philosophy, in that both Kant and the Romantics focused on understanding all aspects of human inquiry in terms of the psychology of the human mind making the inquiry. In other words, the emphasis was not on the world outside, but on the mind as an active principle, shaping its experience of the world both within and without. This conflation of Kant with the Romantics gave added authority to the thought of the early Romantics in Western culture at large, even though the early Romantics themselves had largely abandoned the theories of their younger days.

Another explanation for the Romantics' continued influence in 20th and 21st century thought is that, in some cases, the early Romantics themselves and the first generation of their followers actually initiated the fields of inquiry in which their influence has survived. One of the founding texts of comparative mythology, for instance—*The Symbolic and Mythology of Ancient Peoples* (1810–12)—was written by a scholar, Friedrich Creuzer, who was inspired by Schelling's *Method of Academic Study*. Similarly, the basic premise underlying perennial philosophy—the principle that monism is the central doctrine of all great religions—was first suggested by Herder after reading some English translations of the Bhagavad Gīta, which he then rendered into German in a way that emphasized the monism that he had read between their lines. Herder's premise was then expanded and popularized by Schlegel in his writings on India before he fully abandoned the Romanticism of his youth.

Perennial philosophy is still essentially a Romantic enterprise. As for the history of religion and comparative mythology, these fields of inquiry have since come to question many of the Romantic assumptions that engendered them, but traces of these assumptions still underlie the way they conduct their inquiries.

One of the ironies of these continued influences is that the basic scientific assumption of Romantic religion—the infinite organic unity of the universe—did not survive long into the nineteenth century.

However, largely through the work of the American psychologist William James, the principles of Romantic religion were divorced from the worldview that formed their original context and were given independent life and respectability in a new context: as scientific psychological principles with pragmatic value for the healthy functioning of the human mind. Thus, even as the paradigms for the physical and social sciences continued to change, the principles of Romantic religion were able to survive regardless of what shapes those paradigms took.

At present, there is no universally accepted scientific theory for understanding the universe, and yet this fact, too, has helped Romantic ideas to survive. Assuming that the purpose of the universe is unknowable, then the Romantic program of focusing on the mind—not as an embodiment of reason, but as a collection of organic processes, feelings, and emotions, in search of health and wellbeing—makes sense. If we can't understand the purpose of the universe over time, the thinking goes, we can at least try to find a sense of inner health in the present. And although the modern/postmodern study of the mind contains many currents of thought, the current that grants religion a positive role in the pursuit of inner health tends to think in terms of Romantic concepts, such as integration of the personality, non-dualism, receptivity, non-judgmentalism, and the spiritual benefits of erotic love.

Even though many of these concepts rest on very shaky assumptions, their absorption into academic fields has given them academic respectability. Because of this aura of respectability, they carry a great deal of authority when brought into the popular culture. This authority has made their underlying assumptions invisible—a fact that has given them power in shaping attitudes in many areas of Western culture. Those attitudes, in turn, have served to shape and justify the development of Buddhist Romanticism.

A thorough study of all the channels through which Romantic ideas have entered into modern Dhamma would be beyond the scope of this book. So in this chapter I will simply sketch the ideas of a few of the prominent thinkers who have transmitted Romantic religion to the present. My purpose is to show which parts of Romantic religion were altered in the transmission, which parts remained the same, and how

contingent the whole process was: Much of it was shaped by the personal concerns of the individual authors; things could have easily come out in a very different way. I also want to show how various thinkers picked up on some points of Romantic religion while rejecting others, and yet the cumulative effect—as we will see in the next chapter—has been that all twenty of the main points of Romantic religion have reconverged in Buddhist Romanticism. The process has been like a river that has split from one lake into many channels, only for the channels to reunite in another lake downstream.

I will deal with four main areas: literature, humanistic psychology, the history of religion, and perennial philosophy. Although I have organized the discussion to treat these areas separately, we will see that writers focusing on one area were often informed by the theories and discoveries of writers in the other areas as well. The psychologist Maslow, for instance, was heavily influenced by the perennial philosopher, Huxley; James and Jung were influenced by advances in the study of the history of religion. The channels of the river intermingled even before they reunited in the lake of Buddhist Romanticism.

In the area of literature, I will focus on one writer, Emerson, partly because he is one of the few major writers in English who directly read Schleiermacher—James was another—and partly because his influence spread into all four of the above areas of thought. His writings were the English-language lake from which many channels of Romantic thought diverged.

EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) was the leading figure in a group of New England thinkers and writers who became known as the Transcendentalists. Others in the group included Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, and Theodore Parker. The term *Transcendentalist* was first applied to the group to ridicule them, but the Transcendentalists quickly decided to embrace the insult, adopting the name for themselves to deprive it of its sting.



The original implied insult points to one of the ironies of their position in American literature. Although later generations came to regard the Transcendentalists as among the first genuinely American thinkers writing in English, their unenamored contemporaries saw them as blatantly aping the Germans in their thought. The term *transcendental* in this case came from Kant's transcendental categories as filtered through Coleridge's Romantic interpretation of them. The critics of the Transcendentalists were accusing them of

trying to be little Kants. As we will see, however, Emerson was much closer to the Romantics than to Kant both in the style and in the substance of his thought.

Emerson wrote many essays, but never a systematic treatise on his religious views. In fact, the idea of "system" was anathema to his sense of how religion worked. He took seriously Schleiermacher's dictum that because religion was purely a matter of internal experience, it could not properly be taught. At most, one person might try to provoke other people to look inward to find religion within themselves, but that was all. As a result, Emerson took on the role of provocateur, stringing together epigrams that would now take one extreme position and then another one, often in contradiction to the first, in hopes that this would induce his listeners to question their everyday assumptions and so become more receptive to the infinite within.

This aspect of Emerson's style has Romantic roots, specifically in Schlegel's "ideas" and sense of irony. Like Schlegel, he regarded the ability to contradict oneself as a sign, not of muddled thinking, but of an ability to rise above finite concerns and limitations and adopt an infinite point of view:

"...to look with considerate good nature at every object in existence, *aloof*, as a man might look at a mouse... enjoying the figure which each self-satisfied particular creature cuts in the unrespecting All." ("The Comic")

Emerson's adoption of Romantic religion, however, was not simply a matter of style. It was also a matter of substance. In almost all areas of religious thought—and Emerson was first and foremost a religious thinker—he followed the Romantic paradigm.

Like the Romantics, he defined the object of religion as “man's connection with nature.” Nature, for him, was an infinite organic unity, animated by the Over-Soul—an immanent, impersonal principle that, like Schelling's World Soul, was always evolving:

“... that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other.”
 (“The Over-Soul”)

“In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit.... No truth [is] so sublime but it may be trivial to-morrow in the light of new thoughts.”
 (“Circles”)

Each human being was an organic part of this ongoing, evolving unity, and yet suffered when feeling divided from it. This sense of division was endemic because each person also felt divided within him or herself. The basic cure—which, Emerson agreed with the Romantics, is available to all—was to regain a sense of the pre-existing unity through a direct intuition of its presence.

“The heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly in an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one.”
 (“The Over-Soul”)

“The reason why the world lacks unity is because man is disunited with himself.... We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meanwhile, within man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal One. And this deep power in

which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.” (“The Over-Soul”)

In describing this unity both as a pre-existing characteristic of the infinite universe and as a direct experience, Emerson placed more emphasis on its mental aspect, and less on the physical aspect, than the Romantics had. Individual minds were part of a unified universal mind. This shift in emphasis meant that he gave little importance to physical drives, and total importance to the messages the mind received as a result of the experience.

Emerson called these messages “laws,” which signals another shift of emphasis on his part. In fact, this particular shift was his most distinctive contribution to Romantic religion. For him, intuitions of the infinite were a matter not of aesthetic *taste*, but of moral and social *imperatives*. When the infinite impressed itself on the human mind, it yielded not just a general feeling, but also a direct intuition of one’s duty. Inner oneness expressed itself as the willingness not to resist those intuitions, wherever they might lead. However, unlike Kant’s sense of duty as a universal, immutable law, Emerson’s “duty” was constantly open to change. In fact, its changes were signs that it was in tune with the living universe. Because the universe was constantly in a state of Becoming, evolving with every day, no external laws should override a person’s evolving inner intuition of his or her duty, which would necessarily change on a daily basis.

“[The Transcendentalist] resists all attempts to palm other rules and measures on the spirit than its own. In action he easily incurs the charge of anti-nomianism by his avowal that he, who has the Law-giver [within], may with safety not only neglect, but even contravene every written commandment.” (“The Transcendentalist”)

“With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-

morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day." ("Self-reliance")

Emerson distinguished the mind's own inner laws from mere voluntary "notions," and he felt that everyone had the innate ability to discern which thoughts were of divine origin and which were not.

"Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due." ("Self-reliance")

Having intuited these inner laws, one then expressed the authenticity of one's intuition, not by romanticizing the world, but by following one's inner voice of duty, even when—*especially* when—the duties and customs of society pointed in a contrary direction. One romanticized one's *actions* first, and the romanticization of the world would follow.

In this way, Emerson gave a moral and social dimension not only to the intuitions of the infinite, but also to the idea of authenticity. Both of these shifts in meaning have had important consequences in shaping Romantic religion up to the present.

Emerson agreed with the Romantics that the experience by which people attain inward unity is essentially the same for all. He noted, though, that some individuals—and here he gave an ecumenical list of divinely inspired people, both Christian and not, such as Socrates, Plotinus, Porphyry, the Apostle Paul, George Fox, and Swedenborg—feel a stronger sense of transformation than others.

These intuitions of infinite unity, or "revelations" in Emerson's terms, cannot last. Coming from an immanent source, they are immanent in nature. Emerson, like Schleiermacher, did not posit a transcendent dimension outside of time, and rejected the desire for personal immortality as an act of wandering "from the present, which is infinite, to a future which would be finite." Thus even though he viewed revelations as transcending ordinary input of the senses in importance—this is the sense in which he is a Transcendentalist—he did not view them as giving access to a realm transcending space and time.

Because revelations can offer only finite, momentary glimpses of the infinite, religious life is an affair of continually pursuing repeated

glimpses, in hopes that one's comprehension of those glimpses will gradually deepen. Never will there come a point, though, where one can attain total comprehension. The religious quest is thus a continual process with no final attainment. And as we noted above, the sense of freedom gained from these experiences is limited to that of being true to one's nature and having warrant to defy social norms.

Even though Emerson measured the authenticity of these experiences by one's ability to speak and act in line with the duties they impose, he also had room in his thought for Novalis' sense of authenticity: the ability to transform the commonplace events of life into the microcosmic sublime.

"The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common." ("The Over-Soul")

"Thus revering the soul, and learning, as the ancient said, that 'its beauty is immense,' man will come to see that the world is the perennial miracle which the soul worketh, and be less astonished at particular wonders; he will learn that there is no profane history; that all history is sacred; that the universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time. He will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity." ("The Over-Soul")

As for the means to develop this sense of unity, Emerson agreed fully with the Romantics that the aptitude for a religious experience could be cultivated by adopting an attitude of open receptivity. He also agreed that this receptive attitude could be developed in a wide variety of ways, in line with one's temperament and culture.

Unlike the Romantics, though, he saw little role for erotic love in developing this attitude. His take on love was more Platonic: The early stages of love may bring the lover into a higher spiritual state, but one must outgrow one's fascination with the beauty of the beloved if one wanted to grow spiritually and appreciate the higher beauty of consciousness. And this, he taught, required that one go, in solitude, into nature. Only there can one abandon the sense of self that interferes with an open receptivity to the infinite.

“Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental... I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.” (“Nature”)

Emerson shared the Romantics’ ambivalent attitude toward religious traditions as sources for spiritual inspiration. His essay, “History,” illustrates this point well. An extended “idea,” in Schlegel’s special sense of the word, the essay first advocates the benefits of studying history when approached in the correct way. Because each mind is part of the universal mind, the correct way to understand history is to regard it as the story of one’s own development. When reading history, one is reading about oneself, and one should develop an ironic tolerance for all actions, good and bad, that have come from the universal mind over time.

Then, however, the essay shifts gears:

“It is the fault of our rhetoric that we cannot strongly state one fact without seeming to belie some other. I hold our actual knowledge very cheap.... The path of science and of letters is not the way into nature. The idiot, the Indian, the child and unschooled farmer’s boy stand nearer to the light by which nature is to be read, than the dissector or the antiquary.”

In other words, records of the past may have their uses, but they pale next to nature as a guide to true religious inspiration. This shift in gears makes the essay an “idea” in Schlegel’s sense of the term.

Even when sacred texts do offer sustenance during one’s dark hours, Emerson felt that they should be read, not as statements of fact, but as myths and poetry: symbols and allegories whose meanings the reader is free to interpret creatively as he or she sees fit.

“[One] must attain and maintain that lofty sight where poetry and annals are alike.” (“History”)

“The Garden of Eden, the sun standing still in Gideon, is poetry thenceforward to all nations. Who cares what the fact was, when we have made a constellation of it to hang in heaven as an immortal sign.” (“History”)

If granted too much authority, religious texts can get in the way of true intuitions.

“The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps... If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fullness and completion? Is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence, then, this worship of the past? The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul.” (“Self-reliance”)

Emerson also shared the idea, advocated by the Romantics, that the natural response to an experience of the infinite was to express it, and that this response would be dictated by one’s temperament and culture. As we have noted, however, he saw this response more in moral than in aesthetic terms—although, again, Emerson’s sense of “moral” was very much like Schlegel’s and Schleiermacher’s in that it allowed for no rules or codes of behavior. In ultimate terms, people could do nothing but follow their nature. Even if that involved doing harm, Emerson, like Hölderlin, held that the universe was large enough not to be wounded.

“On my saying, ‘What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?’ my friend suggested—‘But these impulses may be from below, not from above.’ I replied, ‘They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.’ No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily

transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it.” (“Self-reliance”)

“All loss, all pain, is particular; the universe remains to the heart unhurt... For it is only the finite that has wrought and suffered; the infinite lies stretched in smiling repose... There is a soul at the centre of nature and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe.” (“Spiritual Laws”)

Finally, Emerson shared with the Romantics the idea that the modification of a religious tradition was not only a historical *fact*. It was also a *duty* in light of the ongoing progress of the Over-Soul. This may sound paradoxical: If the universe is ultimately indifferent, what sense of duty could there be? Emerson’s answer was that in the living fact of change, the soul could best express its true nature. In other words, the duty here was a duty to one’s nature, and not to the rest of the world.

The theme of one’s duty to make religion evolve was one to which Emerson often returned, with even more feeling than the Romantics.

“When we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence.” (“The Over-Soul”)

“Yet see what strong intellects dare not yet hear God himself, unless he speak the phraseology of I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul... When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish.” (“Self-reliance”)

There were several discrepancies between Emerson’s thought and his life, which came largely from his desire, as a finite being, to express an infinite point of view. One is that, even though he preached tolerance for each person’s intuition of the infinite, he balked when other people actually took him at his word. One case was Walt Whitman, who—following Emerson’s dictum—was true to his inner nature when he expressed his sexuality frankly in *Leaves of Grass*. On receiving a copy from the poet, Emerson was shocked and advised Whitman to delete the offending poems.

Another case was Emerson's break with many of his fellow Transcendentalists over issues of social action. Although he insisted that religious inspiration was best expressed in words and actions, he chided Fuller, Brownson, and Parker when they argued that religious inspiration should first be expressed in social change, on the grounds that only when society was fair could all individuals be free to commune with their inner nature. From Emerson's perspective, social change would be genuine only *after* inner change had taken place. The issue of which should come first—social change or inner change—was to become a recurring bone of contention in Romantic religion, and has resurfaced in Buddhist Romanticism as well.

In both of these cases, the disparity between Emerson's words and actions stemmed partly from a dominant feature of his writing style. He wrote in epigrammatic sentences, each sentence polished so that it could stand on its own, and many of his essays read like a series of Schlegel's fragments strung together in a flowing but fairly arbitrary order. Thus it was easy for his readers to extract individual epigrams from their larger context, taking part of the message for the whole. Although Emerson might have objected to their doing this, saying that that wasn't what he meant, his readers could counter that that was what he had said.

Emerson, in his later years, derived congenial spiritual nourishment from Indian religious texts, primarily the Upaniṣads, but he never contemplated adopting an Indian religion, and his interest was more of an eclectic sort: looking less for new ideas than for confirmation of ideas that he already held. Ironically, the influence was reciprocal. During his lifetime many of his essays—in particular, "The Over-Soul"—were printed in India, where they inspired educated Indians who were in the process of developing a new universal Indian religion, now called Neo-Hinduism, based on the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gīta. We will return to this point below.

As a transmitter of Romantic religion, Emerson deviated from his German mentors on only two major issues: the moral rather than aesthetic import of religious experiences, and the role of Eros in inducing such experiences. Otherwise, his thought differed from theirs primarily in terms of five points of emphasis.

- He tended to dwell more than the Romantics had on the point that there can be no categorical standards for judging the reliability of religious experiences or of the sense of duty that one gained from them.

- Related to this point was his recasting of authenticity as a moral rather than an aesthetic quality: the ability to remain true to one's own sense of right and wrong, regardless of how inconsistent it might be from day to day, and regardless of what society might say.

- This further related to his implied definition of freedom as license to flaunt social norms in the name of one's inner nature, whatever that nature might be.

- He also placed more emphasis than the majority of Romantics on the idea that actions, in ultimate terms, have no real consequences in the overall economy of the universe.

- And he wrote more fervently than they in celebrating the constant evolution of the world and the soul as the highest aspiration of human life.

From the Buddhist perspective, all these points of emphasis are problematic.

- To say that there can be no standards for judging right or wrong is, in the Buddha's words, to leave people unprotected (§8). They will have no way to judge one intention as superior to another, and no way to protect themselves from engaging in unskillful actions. Emerson assumed that people can clearly distinguish between their individual notions and their trustworthy perceptions, but experience shows that this is not the case.

- Similarly, to deny that there are constant standards for judging one's daily intuitions of right and wrong, and to deny that there is anything of worth to learn from others, makes it impossible to learn any sense of skill in the conduct of one's actions.

- Freedom defined as the ability to defy social norms in remaining true to one's inner nature is no real freedom at all, and leaves one at the mercy of deluded states of mind.

- To say that actions have no real consequences in the long term is irresponsible, and again makes it impossible to give rise to heedfulness and the desire to develop skill in one's conduct.

- To celebrate the process of becoming—the repeated assumption of new roles and identities in the story of the universe—as the best use of human life is to stay mired in suffering and stress, with no possibility of gaining release.

Even though Emerson's emphasis on these points runs directly counter to some of the most basic tenets of the Dhamma, we will see below that their influence has spread through many channels to shape the basic tenets of Buddhist Romanticism.

PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

Romantic religion was transmitted to Buddhist Romanticism through several channels in the field of the psychology of religion, particularly through the branch that came to be known as humanistic psychology. One of the two main channels came, via Emerson, through the writings of William James; the other, drawing both on James and directly on the early Romantics, came through the writings of Carl Jung. Both of these psychologists in turn had a major influence on Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology and a direct influence on many Western teachers of Buddhism.

The way these psychologists adopted Romantic ideas about religion was determined by the dominant paradigms in the sciences of their times. As we will see when we examine James' thought, the organic view of science on which the Romantics drew, and which Schelling in particular had promoted, had quickly fallen into disfavor in the 19th century, as more materialistic hypotheses concerning physical events led to more useful experimental results. Based on these results, deterministic materialism became the dominant scientific paradigm, thus calling into question the possibility of any meaning to life: If the universe was driven by deterministic laws, how can there be freedom of choice? And how could the physical processes that make up the body—and perhaps drove mental processes as well—exist to serve a purpose?

In an attempt to answer these questions, James—and later, Jung—found Romantic ideas about religion helpful in fostering psychological health both for themselves and for their patients. To carve out room for these ideas in the face of a toxic scientific worldview, both James and

Jung started with the phenomenology of consciousness, i.e., consciousness as it is immediately experienced from within. Because, for every human being, consciousness is a more immediate reality than physical processes, which are known only at second remove, both thinkers argued that the reality of consciousness must take priority over the supposed reality of physical laws. And because consciousness is purposeful, any interpretation of the universe that denies purpose cannot be taken as ultimately true, and certainly not true for consciousness. “True” for any conscious being had to be defined as what was conducive to the healthy functioning of consciousness.

As for Maslow, he was writing at a time when, as he said, sophisticated theologians and sophisticated scientists “seem to be coming closer and closer together in their conception of the universe as ‘organismic,’ as having *some* kind of unity and integration, as growing and evolving and having direction and, therefore, having *some* kind of ‘meaning.’”¹ In other words, he saw himself as back in the organic, unified universe of the Romantics, in which biological facts could carry inherent meaning and purpose. Thus, given that human beings are born with certain potentials, he argued that we must assume that those potentials are meant to be actualized. In other words, the *fact* of any potential implied an *ought*: People ought to be trained, and society ought to be ordered, so that all human beings have the opportunity to fully actualize their innate potentials. The training he proposed thus came close to the Romantic concept of *Bildung*: a rounded education for a fully functioning human being hoping to find and fulfill his or her purpose in a purposeful universe.

It should not be surprising that Maslow found the organic Romantic view of spiritual life congenial to his approach, as it, too, was derived from the principles of biology. However, even though the phenomenological approach was not necessarily tied to biology, both James and Jung ended up adopting many of the organic principles of Romantic religion when fleshing out their approach as well. In fact, it was James who inspired both Jung and Maslow in this direction. Apparently, James adopted these principles because he saw them as the best example of a non-materialistic but scientific approach available in the West. At the same time, the Romantic concept of the divided self

also spoke to James' understanding of his own personal psychological issues.

But whatever the reason, even though Romantic ideas gave these psychologists tools to advance their cause against deterministic materialism, those ideas also ended up placing what were, from the point of view of the Dhamma, severe limitations on their thought. These limitations—which were then passed on to Buddhist Romanticism—will become clear as we examine which principles of Romantic religion these psychologists transmitted, whether intact or with modifications, to the 20th and 21st centuries.

James



William James (1842–1910) played a paradoxical role in the transmission of Romantic religion to the present: rejecting the monistic, organic Romantic view of the universe, and yet arguing that many of the principles of Romantic religion could thrive even when divorced from their original metaphysical context. In fact this was James' main contribution to the survival of Romantic religion: giving its principles scientific respectability—at least within the science of psychology—even as the fashions of the physical sciences moved away from organic

metaphors for understanding the universe and back to more mechanical ones.

Part of the paradox in James' accomplishment can be explained by his training both in philosophy and in psychology. As a philosopher, he rejected the monism that underlay Romantic thought. In fact, the battle against monistic idealism—the basic metaphysical assumption both of the Romantics and of Emerson—was one of the defining crusades of James' philosophical career. As a psychologist, however, he found useful

inspiration in the Romantic/Transcendentalist teaching on the religious experience as a means of healing divisions within the psyche.

As a result, James divorced the psychological aspect of the religious experience—a feeling of unification—from its original metaphysical context in a unified universe. He further argued that even if the experience told us nothing about the actual nature of the universe, it could—and often did—function as an important step in promoting the psychological health of the human organism. As such, it was a fitting subject for scientific inquiry.

To separate psychology from metaphysics—and, in so doing, to give psychology priority *over* metaphysics—was, for James, a deliberate and momentous act. In part, he was simply following a general trend in the study of psychology during his time. Instead of being the province of novelists, psychology had become a scientific field in its own right—even though, as we will see, it continued to frame some of its issues in terms that had originated in the Romantic novel. In fact, what we have termed the novelist’s view of reality—in which truth is a matter not of metaphysical statements, but of the psychological processes leading a person to *make* such statements—continued to provide the dominant paradigm within the field. In addition, psychology as a field of study was also beginning to divorce itself from the field of philosophy, particularly as it developed its own methodology for experimentation. Here again, though, there was still some overlap between the two fields, a fact that James himself was able to use to great advantage in his professional career.

However, the act of giving psychology priority over metaphysics also had great personal meaning for James. As a young man, he had suffered a prolonged and sometimes severe depression, which his biographers have diagnosed as both personal and philosophical in origin. The *personal* origin lay in his relationship to his family. Thwarted by a domineering father in his early career choices, James came to be troubled by the idea he might not have free will. The *philosophical* origin for James’ depression lay in his growing conviction that the question of free will was not merely his own problem; it was a problem for all beings in a materialist universe. His doubts about free will were further

exacerbated by the scientific education he had received in medicine and biology.

Here it's useful to take stock of what had happened in the physical sciences between the early- and the mid-19th century. Remember that, for the Romantics, biology, geology, and astronomy taught mutually reinforcing messages in which all aspects of the universe had an organic purpose. Schelling, in particular, had recommended a course of research for the sciences that would further explore the unity of all sciences in pursuit of knowledge about how the World Soul was bringing about its purpose in the universe, both as a whole and in its minutest operations.

By James' time, though, Schelling's program had become discredited. It had inspired some useful research in the field of electricity, but more often than not it had directed its followers down lines of inquiry that had proven fruitless. The most productive research in the early 19th century had either ignored Schelling's program or had been devoted to debunking it. As a result, science had progressed by ignoring larger theories of universal purpose and focusing instead on discovering mechanical laws of physical and chemical behavior.

In this way, the mechanistic model of the universe had again become ascendant, the biological model had been discarded, and the various sciences had gone their separate ways. In astronomy, Herschel's biological analogy for the development of stars and galaxies was pushed aside. The dominant view came to be that complex systems could grow and decay without our having to assume that they formed organic unities or that they were driven by a teleological purpose. This view came to govern not only astronomy, but also geology.

In biology, research had taken a different tack. Charles Darwin's work had convinced many if not all biologists that the theory of the evolution of life had a sound empirical basis. And although the philosophical implications of Darwin's work could be interpreted in many different directions, the young James focused on the *means* by which living beings evolved, noting that natural selection through accidents of environment and genetic mutation was a blind process. This seemed to imply no overriding direction or design to life at all. Life evolved, but not with a

purpose. Evolution was nothing more than an accident of mechanical laws—an idea that exacerbated James' sense of fatalism.

In other words, he was back in the mechanistic universe inhabited by Kant, Schiller, and Fichte. His solution to this dilemma—the solution that got him out of his depression and into a productive career—bears comparison with theirs. In fact, it was through reading the essays of a French Neo-Kantian, Charles Renouvier (1815–1903), that James came to the insight that started him on his road to recovery. Renouvier had argued for the possibility of free will based on an internal psychological observation, which James noted with excitement in his diary: “the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts.”² In other words, one's choice to think one thought rather than another showed freedom of will in action, something that no outside fact could deny. In his later language, James would call this a “lived fact.” It led to his Fichtean motto, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.”³

It also led to his choice of career, at the intersection of psychology and philosophy, focused on the issue of felt experience. As a psychologist, James had been trained primarily in physiological psychology, an outgrowth of the philosophical medicine in which Schiller had trained. But James' research interests came to focus less on the physiology of psychological states and more on their phenomenology: how those states felt from within and could be cured from within. Similarly, as a philosopher, he focused on the issue of what it *feels* like to be an acting, willing being. Philosophical issues should start within, with the fact of felt experience, and not from without, with metaphysical assumptions about the world, even if those assumptions were based on the sciences of the day.

In an important passage in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he argued, “So long as we deal only with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but *as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.*”⁴ For James, the realm of the private and personal was where life was actually lived. The knowledge provided by physical sciences was peripheral to the conduct of life; the knowledge provided

by his style of psychology and philosophy was where the conduct of life began. Thus his embrace of pragmatism—the doctrine that philosophical issues should be addressed only if they made a difference in the conduct of life, and should be answered in ways that were most helpful to that conduct.

Thus also his assertion, in *The Will to Believe* (1897), that there were two types of truth: what might be called truths of the *observer*—the facts that can be discovered only by suspending one’s desire that the truth come out one way or the other (this applied to physical scientific truths); and truths of the *will*—events and accomplishments that can be *made* true only through a unified act of desire and will. Truths of the will were the truths that mattered most in life. In fact, only through acts of will could human beings can make sense of what James famously called the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of sensory input. The experience of life even on the most basic sensory level thus requires an interactive process—which the Romantics would have recognized—of both passive receptivity and active engagement. James, however, viewed the achievement of meaning in life in much more heroic terms than had the Romantics, perhaps because he had needed to exert a heroic mental effort to cure his depression. Health, for him, was a truth of the will.

James saw that truths of this sort could be developed effectively only if there was a basic inner unity to the psyche, what we now call the integration of the personality. And this is where his interest in religious experience came in. Even though he had overcome his depression to the extent of developing a highly functioning will, he still felt a nagging division in his psyche. Unlike the Romantics, he cast this division—what he called the *divided self*—as a split not between reason and feeling, but as a split within the will itself. To be fully healthy, he decided, he had to heal this split.

In fact, James came to see—much like Emerson and the Romantics—that the sense of divided self was *the* primary spiritual illness. Emerson’s discussions of the malaise of a self divided against itself struck a personal chord in James; Emerson’s discussions of the healing power of a directly felt sense of inner and outer unity had him intrigued. So, both as a personal and as a professional pursuit, James began to research the topic—studying unusual religious movements, reading

autobiographical and other accounts of religious experiences, even exploring spiritualism and drug-induced ecstasies (his own and others')—to see if Emerson was right. Toward the end of his life, he summarized his findings in a series of lectures that he then put into book form as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This book was not only one of the founding works in the field of the psychology of religion. It is also still widely read for pleasure and education today.

Where the Romantics and Emerson had formulated their views about religious experiences by extrapolating from their own experiences, James in the *Varieties* quoted from many religious traditions—and from many untraditional sources. What is striking, however, is how he used a large number of terms reflecting Romantic assumptions about the nature and function of religious experience to analyze those sources. He actually reduced the variety of experiences he reported by squeezing them into a small set of Romantic categories. This was one of the main ironies of the book, and at the same time the main aspect of Romantic religion that James transmitted to later generations and to Buddhist Romanticism.

Like the Romantics, James defined religion as an issue of relationship, although in his case the definition runs: “Feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”⁵ James was not very precise in explaining what he meant by “divine” in this definition, although he did state that he intended the term to be broad enough to cover the Buddhist nirvāṇa (*nibbāna*) as well as the Judeo-Christian God, along with other conceptions of “divine” in other religions that do not posit a personal God—or any God at all.

The fact that James put the word *feelings* first in his definition was no accident. As he also stated, in introducing the working hypothesis of his research, “If the inquiry be psychological, [then] not religious institutions, but rather religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject.”⁶ With this statement, the Romantic assertion—borrowed from the Pietists—that religion is primarily a matter of *feeling* became enshrined as a fundamental tenet for professional psychological inquiry. This in turn brought the Romantic approach to

religion—viewing it as a novelist would, focused less on the truth value of statements than on the truth of the psychological processes leading to and resulting from those statements—into the basic structure of psychology of religion as a developing field.

Another Romantic assertion underlying the *Varieties* is the assumption that the apparent variety found in religious experiences actually masks an underlying identity: There is a single basic religious experience, one of inner unification. James offers no proof for this assertion. It is, for him, simply a fact. Borrowing a term from Methodism, he calls this experience of unification *conversion*, although his explanation of conversion is more Romantic than Methodist in that he denies that there is anything mystical or transcendent about the experience.

He gives two reasons for issuing this denial. The first is that a religious sense of unification is simply a more intense version of a process that every personality has to undergo at some point in adolescence: the integration of the psyche, bringing it from a “divided self,” with warring impulses and drives, to a unified self in which the inner drives have reached a measure of order and hierarchy. What sets religious experiences apart as special is that they often convey a strong sense that one has learned important truths about one’s relationship to the divine and/or the universe as a whole. This process can be either gradual or sudden and dramatic. The drama James attributes to a personality trait: People who have dramatic experiences tend to have a more active subconscious than people who don’t.

James’ second reason for denying a transcendent dimension to the religious experience is his sense of what a human being *is* and therefore can *know*: In his eyes, human beings, as finite organisms, cannot directly experience a transcendent, unconditioned realm. From a psychological viewpoint, religious experiences, like all integrative experiences, come from the subconscious. Although James leaves open the possibility that a divine force might be acting *through* the subconscious, such a divine input would, from the perspective of the knowing subject, lie on the “other side” of what can be directly experienced. Because it cannot be measured or experimented on, it

cannot, in a scientific psychological study of religion, play an explanatory role.

As for the information conveyed by the experience, James concedes that it has strong meaning for the person undergoing the experience, but cannot be taken as authoritative for others. This, too, follows the Romantic paradigm—although James differs from the Romantics in questioning whether, despite the strong sense of authority conveyed by the religious experience, the person having the experience really should take the information it conveys as authoritative even for him or herself. In particular, speaking as an outside observer, James expresses doubt that the experience actually does give knowledge about the divine. This doubt comes partly from his philosophical assumptions about what a human being can and cannot know, and partly from the historical fact that people undergoing religious experiences have come away from them with so many contradictory messages.

James also notes that people who have undergone religious experiences often describe, as one of their striking features, a heightened sense of the miraculous in commonplace events: what we have termed the microcosmic sublime. Here again, though, James does not see this sense of sublime as confirming authenticity of the experience. It is simply a psychological side effect of inner unification.

The many accounts of religious experiences that James quotes show that they can be induced in a wide variety of voluntary and involuntary ways—although, unlike the Romantics, he never mentions erotic love as a possible trigger for a religious sense of union. He does note, however, that a surrender of the will is often a crucial element in the religious experience, but for this point, too, he offers a psychological explanation. Because the experience is often brewing in the subconscious long before it breaks through to the conscious mind, the sense of surrender is actually the act of the conscious mind allowing the subconscious to surface. In other words, there is again no reason to assume a divine source for the sense of infusing power that comes with the act of surrender.

As for the results of the religious experience, James notes—and here again he follows the Romantics—that all religious interpretations of religious experiences should be tolerated, except for those that are

intolerant of others. He also argues that the plurality of religious explanations for religious experiences is a Good Thing, for two reasons. The first is that people have different temperaments—which he attributes largely to heredity—some tending to see the world always in a positive light; others, in a darker light. A religious explanation satisfying a person with one of these temperaments would not satisfy a person with the other. Thus the human race needs many interpretations from which people of different temperaments may choose.

The second reason is that societies and cultures change over time, and an explanation of divine power that would make sense, say, in a period of absolute monarchies, would seem crude in a more democratic culture. So, to keep up with changes in culture, religious traditions need to change. Here again, James is enshrining a Romantic assumption as a sociological truth, although he is subtle enough to question whether the changes that religions necessarily undergo are always objective improvements.

James' main interest in the expression of religious experiences, however, lies less in religious interpretations than in psychological interpretations of the effects that such experiences have over time. In particular, he focuses on what is required to integrate the experience into the conduct of one's life, making it the "center of one's personal energy"—in other words, how to develop the feeling of unity so that it actually yields a unity of the will in action.

To describe this latter phase of ongoing integration, James borrows another Methodist term—*sanctification*—while giving it his own meaning. This is an area where James breaks new ground, for his treatment of sanctification explores an issue that neither the Romantics nor Emerson had considered: What changes does the religious experience make in the personality? Reviewing a wide range of accounts, James notices four character traits that mark a person for whom spiritual emotions are the habitual center of the personal energy. If sanctification is genuine, he says, these traits should become consistent features of the personality:

- 1) a feeling of being in a wider life than that of the world's selfish interests, along with a sensible conviction of the existence of an ideal power;

2) a sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with one's own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control;

3) an immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down; and

4) a shifting of the emotional center toward loving and harmonious affections.

These character traits, in turn, have four practical consequences in how they are expressed through the actions of one's daily life: as (a) asceticism, (b) strength of soul, (c) purity, and (d) charity. This is one of the first attempts to list the personality features of a spiritually mature person and—as we will see—these lists tended to grow as they became a feature both of the psychology of religion and of Buddhist Romanticism.

In treating the four moral traits in his list, James observes that they can be expressed in either healthy or pathological ways. For instance, asceticism can be healthy as an expression of hardihood, temperance, and a happy sacrifice for higher aims. This side of asceticism appealed to James' sense of life as a heroic struggle, and his own dismay over what he saw as the weakened moral fiber engendered by the comforts of 19th century bourgeois life. As for the pathological side of asceticism, James attributed it either to a childish sense of expiating punishments for imagined sins, an irrational obsession with purity, or with a perversion of bodily sensibility in which pain actually registers as pleasure.

It's in his discussion of healthy and pathological results of the religious experience that James betrays his philosophical assumptions—and, in fact, his own personal views about what religion should and should not be.

Life, in his eyes, finds meaning in action for the sake of the world. As he stated in his book, *Pragmatism* (1907), the genuine pragmatist must see action as the true end of thought, and must believe that human actions will make a difference as to whether the world will reach salvation or not. Here he differs radically from Hölderlin's Romantic view that action, in the large picture, does not matter. For him, life has meaning only when action has meaning; and action has meaning only when it leads to a fuller and more accomplished life.

One of James' biographers quotes this passage from James' writings as the epigraph to the biography and as a summation of James' attitude

to life:

“If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem.”⁷

Toward the end of the *Varieties*, James supplements his original formal definition of religion with a functional definition formulated by one of his followers in the nascent field of the psychology of religion, James H. Leuba:

“The truth of the matter can be put in this way: *God is not known, he is not understood, he is used*—sometimes as a meat-purveyor, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as friend, sometimes as an object of love. If he proves himself useful, the religious consciousness asks for no more than that. Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, higher, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse.”⁸

Leuba here is making an empirical observation about how people choose their religion: How useful is it in leading to a satisfying life—as they themselves define satisfaction? For James, however, the reference to a more satisfying life suggests more than an empirical fact. It becomes a moral imperative. Religion *should* serve one’s impulses to conduct one’s life in a higher, more unified way. This is why, when discussing Buddhism in the *Varieties*, he expresses his approval of the doctrine of karma; but when touching on Buddhism in *Pragmatism*, he denounces nirvāṇa as a pathological goal that comes from abandoning one’s responsibilities to life with an attitude that is “simply afraid, afraid of more experience, afraid of life.”⁹ James’ views on karma did not transmit into Buddhist Romanticism, but his attitude toward nirvāṇa did.

James, like Kant and Fichte, believed fiercely in the moral life, and agreed with them that for such a life to make sense one had to assume a creator who took an interest in human action. Like Schiller, he believed that the divisions in the psyche came from conflicting drives, both for and against the moral law, and that a healthy, integrated personality was a means to living a satisfying life in line with that law. On these two points, James differed sharply from Emerson and Schlegel, who recognized no set moral law at all. Thus, for him, the doctrine of life for life's sake—and religion for life's sake—was not a hedonistic one.

However, when James was writing not as a moral philosopher but as a psychologist, he dropped the moral dimension of his beliefs. For instance, even though as a philosopher he felt that the best integration of the personality was around the moral law, as a psychologist he recognized that the personal integration of the will did not have to take that law into account. Any clear sense of hierarchy among a person's desires and aims could count as a successful integration of the self. Thus it was easy for his readers to take his psychological observations out of the context of his moral beliefs, giving them a more hedonistic interpretation—which is precisely what many of them did.

Similarly, even though James left open the possibility that there might be a divine source for religious experiences, he explained such experiences in such a way that they made sense totally in terms of the powers and needs of a living human organism. In fact, he even described religion as a biological function:

“Taking creeds and faith states together, as forming ‘religions,’ and treating these as purely subjective phenomena, without regard to the question of their ‘truth,’ we are obliged, on account of their extraordinary influence upon action and endurance, to class them amongst the most important biological functions of mankind.”¹⁰

Likewise, even though James personally assumed that there might be a transcendent dimension that took an interest in human actions, throughout the *Varieties* he judged those actions entirely in this-worldly terms. The upshot was that the transcendent dimension, both as a

source and as a result of religious experience, could be completely ignored as unknowable and extraneous.

This, despite his intentions, was what he bequeathed to the field of the psychology of religion: religion as a this-worldly phenomenon serving this-worldly needs and values. The Romantics, of course, would have recognized their own view in this part of James' legacy, even though he himself had not intended to leave this particular legacy behind.

Thus, when gauging James as a transmitter of Romantic religion, we have to look at the ways in which he voluntarily and involuntarily acted in that role.

We have already noted some of the voluntary assumptions that he shared with the Romantics:

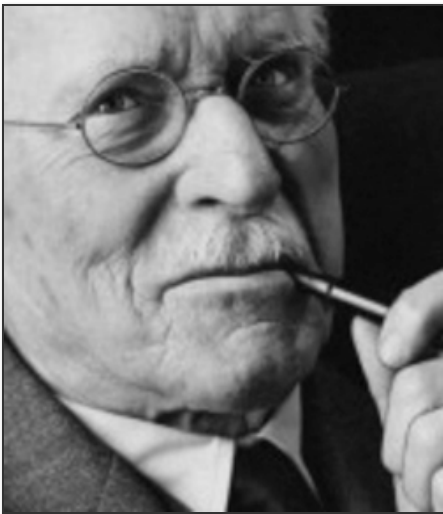
- the mind is not only passive, but also active in shaping its awareness of its environment,
- there is a single religious experience, marked by a strong feeling of inner and outer unity,
- this feeling of unity comes after a mental state of surrender or open receptivity,
- this feeling of unity helps to heal the basic spiritual illness, which is a sense of division within the psyche,
- this experience is immanent because the human organism can know only conditioned realities,
- the fact that this experience is immanent further means that it does not heal the psyche once and for all, so that religious life is one of pursuing but never fully achieving full psychological health,
- no single religious interpretation of this experience is authoritative,
- all religions should thus be tolerated to the extent that they foster a healthy religious experience, and are tolerant of other religions,
- all religions should change to keep up with other changes in culture and society, and
- there is much to learn from studying religions from the point of view of the experience from which they grew.

By divorcing these values from their original worldview and transmitting them as part of the field of psychology, James did a great

deal to keep Romantic religion alive and respectable into the 20th and 21st centuries.

James' involuntary contribution to the survival of Romantic religion related to the issue of morality. On the one hand, he rejected the Romantic worldview of a monistic universe in which human action, ultimately, carried no consequences. On the other hand, by discussing religion as a purely this-worldly, biological phenomenon—an organic activity to be judged by its ability to foster the health of the organism—James made it possible for later generations to ignore his personal beliefs about the larger moral consequences of one's actions, and to focus attention—as Hölderlin and other Romantics had—totally on one's inner sense of unity and health. In this way, James transmitted a signal feature of the organic Romantic religious worldview to later generations in spite of himself.

Jung



Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) was one of the pioneers in the use of dream analysis as a method of psychotherapy. Early in his career he took as his mentor Sigmund Freud, the father of dream analysis, but later split with Freud because he felt the latter's understanding of the mind and of mental health was too narrow. This much is very well known. What is less well known is that Jung credited William James, and in particular, James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, with providing him guidance

on how to go beyond Freud and to understand “the nature of psychic disturbances within the setting of the human psyche as a whole.”^{[11](#)}

From Jung's later work, it's easy to see that he derived several important assumptions from the *Varieties*: that psychic reality—the lived fact of consciousness—comes prior to one's consciousness of physical reality, and so need not be regarded as a product of physical processes; that “psychic disturbances” could be regarded as spiritual

illnesses, and not just problems of sexual repression; that the primary spiritual illness was a sense of a self divided within itself and from the rest of humanity; that the unconscious, instead of being simply a storehouse of repressed neuroses, also contained potentials and tendencies that, if allowed to develop properly, could work to heal the sense of the divided self; and that some of these potentials might be divine in origin.

James' influence on Jung was augmented by a book that appeared in 1917: Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige* (translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy*). Otto (1869–1937), even though he meant to correct some defects he saw in Schleiermacher, ended up transmitting four important features of Romantic religion in *The Idea of the Holy*, features that Jung picked up from reading the book.

The Idea of the Holy was focused on what Otto saw as *the* primal direct experience underlying all the religions of the world: that of a supra-rational, numinous power, wholly other, that was mysterious, overwhelming, and utterly worthy of one's full attention and worship. Otto meant his description of the religious experience to be a corrective both to Schleiermacher and to James. Schleiermacher, he felt, had failed to distinguish properly between the actual experience of infinite power and the individual's reaction of submission and desire for union with that power. In actuality, Otto felt, a sense of union is only one of the many possible ways of reacting to the experience. As for James, Otto felt that he had underestimated the objectivity of the experience. James, because of the constraints of his psychology, was limited to describing the subjective side of the experience. In Otto's eyes, an integral part of the experience was that the numinous was more objectively true than anything else.

But in offering a corrective to the work of these two thinkers, Otto was actually adopting and transmitting four of their underlying assumptions. From both he adopted the assumptions that (1) the religious experience is essentially the same for everyone, (2) this experience, variously interpreted, accounts for all the religions that have ever existed, and (3) religions evolve to express the implications of this experience in ever more advanced and adequate ways. From Schleiermacher, he also adopted the assumption that (4) this experience

is not in itself moral: Moral interpretations, if they come, come later. These four assumptions played an important role in shaping Jung's thought.

One of Jung's most creative additions to the history of Romantic religion was that he applied these assumptions to dream analysis, treating dreams that carried a numinous power for the dreamer as if they were—in James' terminology, which Jung himself occasionally used—*conversion* experiences. In place of James' category of *sanctification*—a term that Jung never used—Jung proposed that dream analysis be applied to these extraordinary dreams so as to help the patient integrate the conscious and unconscious factors of his or her psyche in a way that fostered the ongoing pursuit of inner unification and finding meaning in life: what Jung termed the “becoming of the self” or the “becoming of the soul.”

Jung insisted that he had adopted this strategy in dream analysis because it worked. This was all that his professional duties required. However, he also confessed to indulging in what he called his “scientific hobby”: “my desire to know why it is that the dream works.”¹² In other words, he wanted to develop hypotheses about the nature of the mind and of mental healing that would explain both why his methods of analysis worked and why dreams seemed to have a purpose and efficacy in curing the illnesses of the mind.

In doing so, he not only borrowed ideas from James and Otto but also adopted many other Romantic ideas—and in particular, Romantic ideas about religion—that both of them had put aside. In this way, Jung came to play an even larger role than either James or Otto in transmitting Romantic religion to the 20th and 21st centuries.

Jung's embrace of Romantic assumptions led his detractors to accuse him of being mystical and unscientific, but, like the Romantics themselves, he insisted that the scientific method had forced him to adopt these assumptions as hypotheses. His two main reasons for splitting with Freud, he said, were empirical: (1) In the course of analyzing his patients' dreams, he encountered many dream images that Freud's theories could not account for. In particular, he was struck by images that were obviously religious in import, containing symbols that could not be explained by the individual's neuroses or by anything

at all in the individual's personal history. The fact that these images had an import—that they seemed to be delivering a message, and that the message was concerned with far more than healing the individual's neuroses—led to Jung's second reason for splitting with Freud. (2) He saw that, although Freud's methods were helpful in treating specific neuroses, they did not provide a complete cure for the patient's deeper spiritual malaise, and if they were applied to the dreams that Jung and his patients found most meaningful, they would actually do more harm than good.

In Jung's own terms, the most fundamental difference between his approach and Freud's was that Freud contented himself with asking "why" a particular dream occurred—i.e., what pre-existing factor in the patient's psyche had given rise to the dream—whereas Jung also asked of the dream the more teleological question, "what for": i.e., what purpose the dream might have in bringing the patient to psychological health. By asking this question, Jung was going beyond the mainstream science of his day, which saw all causality in the universe as mechanical, deterministic, and purposeless. To carve out room for teleology in such a universe, Jung followed James in arguing that psychic reality, instead of being experienced as a product of physical reality, actually comes prior to it. As he stated in *Psychology and Religion*,

"We might well say, on the contrary, that physical existence is merely an inference, since we know of matter only in so far as we perceive psychic images transmitted by the senses.... Psyche is existent, it is even existence itself."¹³

Because psychic processes can only be understood in terms of what they *mean*, Jung reasoned, we have to assume that they have a purpose. Thus the question, "What for?" is the question most deserving of an answer. However, simply adding this second question to the psychological inquiry required that Jung give his own distinctive answer to Freud's first question of "why." Freud had satisfied himself that the "why" could be ferreted out by tracking down a repressed memory in the patient's unconscious. Jung decided that there was more to the unconscious than just that.

His eventual hypothesis was that there were three levels to the psyche. The first was the conscious level, which he also termed the *ego*. This was composed of all the emotions and memories that fit with one's persona: the face that one wanted to present to oneself and to the world. Any emotions and memories at odds with the persona were repressed and buried as neuroses in the second level of the psyche, the personal unconscious. This part Jung called the "shadow," the dark side of the person's unconscious that had to be faced before the patient could access the third and deepest level of the psyche, the collective unconscious. This third level contained not neuroses but *archetypes*: innate mental structures or patterns that were not personal in origin, but that acted as factors independent of the patient's conscious will, often on the principle of *compensation*: communicating through symbols the message that the patient's ego was out of balance and suggesting ways in which balance could be recovered.

In analyzing his patients' dreams, Jung found that there were countless varieties of archetypes, but that three types were particularly important for re-establishing mental health. The first were the archetypes of *life*, which Jung also called the *anima* in his male patients, the *animus* in his female patients. These represented the principle of the opposite gender contained in each person and, in Jung's words, craved life, both good and bad. In describing the message of this type of archetype, Jung stated that "Bodily life as well as psychic life have the impudence to get along much better without conventional morality, and they often remain the healthier for it."¹⁴ However, one cannot simply surrender to the amoral demands of this sort of archetype. Balanced health requires going deeper, to archetypes of *meaning*—wise ways of negotiating the demands of the ego and anima/animus—and ultimately to archetypes of *transformation*: indications that communication among the various levels of the psyche had been established, and that the ongoing process of integration had been engaged.

Jung presented a variety of hypotheses as to the nature of the collective unconscious and the origin of the archetypes and the symbols through which they communicated. In some of his writings, he suggested that the collective unconscious was a biological inheritance from the past; in others, that the collective unconscious had porous

boundaries connecting it with the collective unconscious of all other psyches existing at the same moment in time. As for the compensatory action of the archetypes, in some cases he suggested that this was simply an inherited biological self-regulating faculty; in others, that it had its roots in the totality of all contemporaneous consciousness; in others, that its origin was divine. In true Romantic fashion, he did not see these various possibilities as mutually exclusive.

When discussing the possibility of a divine origin for the archetypes and their messages, Jung stressed the need for symbols to mediate the communication from the divine to the human. The divine, he said, borrowing Otto's characterization of the holy, was an overwhelming and sometimes frightening power, something "totally other"—although in his view, the "other" was not something outside of one's self; it was, instead, a psychic factor from the unconscious that the conscious mind didn't recognize as coming from within the psyche. Without the mediation of symbols through the archetypes, the ego would be overcome by the power of this factor and potentially harmed.

Because these symbols were often ambiguous, Jung maintained that they required careful interpretation so that they could give wise guidance in the patient's *individuation*: the on-going process by which one integrates one's conscious and unconscious needs, providing both an inner sense of unity and an outer sense of purpose and meaning in life that is purely one's own. In other words, although one should learn how to listen to the unconscious, one should not identify with the impersonal forces it contains, for that would result in the psychic illness Jung termed *inflation*: the assumption that one was actually identical with the divine forces welling up from the unconscious. Instead, one should synthesize or actualize the wholeness of one's identity as an individual leading a purposeful life on the human plane. Psychological health should aim, not at a transcendent dimension, but at a sense of meaning that is wholly immanent: i.e., concerned with finding happiness in this world and not worrying about transcendent dimensions.

Jung saw the role of psychotherapy in this process as picking up and moving forward with the work that religions had done in the past. All religions, he said, were essentially "systems of healing for psychic

illness.” Like James and Otto before him, Jung saw that human religions had to evolve over time in order to better serve this function as humanity evolved. Unlike James and Otto, however—and here he was harking back to the early Romantics—he did not see Protestant Christianity as the ultimate endpoint of how far this evolution could go.

There were two main reasons for this. The first had to do specifically with Protestantism. In shedding the rich body of symbolism that had developed within the Catholic Church, the Protestant movement had deprived its followers of a clear symbolic vocabulary for understanding the messages of the unconscious. This lack of symbolic vocabulary had both benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, it allowed Protestants to have more direct confrontations with immediate religious experience. On the other, it left them defenseless and clueless as to how to read and integrate the messages contained within those confrontations.

To understand the spontaneous images and symbols that such people experienced in their dreams and fantasies, Jung recommended that psychotherapists become knowledgeable in the vocabulary of symbols developed in the religions of the past. In Jung’s own case, this meant studying not only Catholic symbolism, but also the symbolism of a wide range of heterodox and non-Western traditions, including alchemy, astrology, Egyptian religion, Gnosticism, the I-Ching, and Tibetan tantrism.

Jung’s second reason for seeing psychotherapy as an advance over Protestant Christianity had to do with the totality of Christianity itself. In his words, every religion is a spontaneous expression of a certain predominant psychological condition at a certain place and time. Christianity spoke to a psychic condition that required a dynamic of repentance, sacrifice, and redemption. But now, Jung asserted, that condition no longer prevails. As he wrote in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933),

“Modern man has heard enough about guilt and sin. He wants rather to learn how he is to reconcile himself with his own nature—how he is to love the enemy in his own heart and call the wolf his brother. The modern man, moreover, is not eager to know in what

way he can imitate Christ, but in what way he can live his own individual life.”¹⁵

Jung derived this observation from two recurrent patterns in the archetypes of transformation that many of his patients experienced spontaneously in their dreams. The first pattern was the predominance of a fourfold symbolism—sometimes in the shape of maṇḍalas, with their boxed circles and squares; sometimes in other forms. Jung interpreted the number four as more inclusive than the Christian symbolism of the Trinity. Four indicated the element missing in the Trinity—an element that Jung variously interpreted as the body, physical creation, the feminine: in other words, everything in the universe that had been excluded from the Christian idea of the holy. For Jung, these symbols expressed union and reconciliation between creator and created, the earthly and the divine sides of experience. This is one of the reasons why he saw psychological health as an immanent rather than a transcendent affair: His patients, to be healthy, needed to see the divine as something in no way separate from their individual lives on Earth.

The second pattern of dream symbolism to which Jung gave great importance was the fact that, in his patients who had dreams of maṇḍalas, the center of the maṇḍalas—in which a deity was traditionally found—contained no deities at all. Instead, there were symbols—such as globes or stars—that the patients immediately identified as standing for a center within themselves. In *Psychology and Religion* (1938) he reports:

“If you sum up what people tell you about their experience, you can formulate it about in this way: They came to themselves, they could accept themselves, they were able to become reconciled to themselves and by this they were also reconciled to adverse circumstances and events.... The place of the deity seems to be taken by the wholeness of man.”¹⁶

This means that the psychological condition of modern life has shifted away from a sense of *sin* that looks for help from a transcendent dimension outside, and toward a sense of *separation*—from one’s self

and one's surroundings—that looks inward for a healing sense of acceptance and inner reconciliation.

To treat this more modern sense of the psychic illness, Jung did not totally reject the religions of the past. After all, as we have seen, he relied heavily on them for their symbolism, although in many cases he converted that symbolism from its original context to serve what he saw as a change in the human condition. He also stated that traditional and primitive religions contained much of positive, psychological therapeutic value in their ceremonies, rituals, initiation rites, and ascetic practices.

Strikingly, he did not include the worldviews of traditional religions in his list of approved religious therapies, and he included moral teachings only with a proviso: that they are therapeutic solely when in accord with a patient's own insight and inspiration in the search for the right way to deal with forces of inner life. In other words, notions of right and wrong communicated through dreams had to trump any traditional standards of morality. One obvious reason for Jung's proviso here is that he had seen many of his patients develop neuroses by trying to live up to the moral standards of European society. Another is that he himself had chafed under society's standards of monogamy. His own mental health, he felt he had been taught by his dreams, required that he be polygamous.

As might be expected, Jung met with criticism from his religious peers just as he had from his scientific ones. Among the criticisms from the religious side were (1) that he had trivialized Otto's concept of the holy, and (2) that he was encouraging his patients to develop idiosyncratic theologies that left them defenseless against their very-much-less-than-divine impulses. With no solid standards of right and wrong against which to measure one's dreams, one's emotions could use the dreams to invent their own morality at will.

In response to the first criticism, Jung stated that his patients' dreams had great meaning for them: "To an empiricist all religious experience boils down to a peculiar condition of the mind.... And if it means anything, it means everything to those who have it.... One could even define religious experience as that kind of experience which is

characterized by the highest appreciation, no matter what its contents are.”¹⁶

In response to the second criticism, he asked, “What is the difference between a real illusion and a healing religious experience? ... Nobody can know what the ultimate things are. We must, therefore, take them as we experience them. And if such experience helps to make your life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfactory to yourself and to those you love, you may safely say: ‘This was the grace of God.’”¹⁸

In other words, Jung adopted the Romantic position that, because the ultimate ends of the universe are unknowable, people must focus on finding meaning and wholeness in the immediate work of their lives: the ongoing “becoming of the self.” That, for him, was the highest truth and happiness that a human being can expect.

As a transmitter of Romantic religion, Jung received influences not only through James and Otto, but also directly from the Romantics themselves. For instance, living at a time when Hölderlin’s poetry had finally become widely available, he liked to quote these lines from Hölderlin’s “Patmos” in connection with the practice of using neurotic dreams to cure neuroses: “Danger itself / Fosters the rescuing power.”¹⁹

Even though Jung gave his own twist to the various elements of Romantic religion he received from his sources, he nevertheless managed to transmit many Romantic ideas about religion to the 20th century and beyond. In fact, Jung’s modifications continued James’ work in keeping these ideas alive and respectable in a society where science viewed the universe in mechanistic terms.

We can summarize Jung’s relationship to the basic features of Romantic religion as follows:

On the universe: Although Jung never stated that the universe is infinite, he did state that all existence is psychic, and that the total range of psychic reality is an organic whole, aimed at an unknowable goal, and regulating itself toward that goal through the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The fact that the goal is unknowable makes Jung’s universe functionally equivalent to the infinitude of the Romantic

universe, in which the goal of the infinite universal organism is unknowable as well. Jung also agreed with the Romantic principle of the microcosm: that the living organism contains within it the organic history of all consciousness:

“The true history of the mind is not preserved in learned volumes but in the living mental organism of everyone.”²⁰

On the spiritual problem: Jung agreed with the Romantics on all the major features of the basic religious illness and the way in which a religious experience could work toward alleviating it:

- Human beings suffer when their sense of inner and outer unity is lost—when they feel divided within themselves and separated from the universe.
- Despite its many expressions, the religious experience is the same for all: an intuition of the wholeness of reality that creates a feeling of unity with the universe and a feeling of unity within.
- Although Jung did not give Eros a role in provoking a religious experience, he, like the Romantics, felt that its needs had to be accommodated in any true psychic unity:

“If we can reconcile ourselves with the mysterious truth that spirit is the living body seen from within, and the body the outer manifestation of the living spirit—the two being really one—then we can understand why it is that the attempt to transcend the present level of consciousness must give its due to the body. We shall also see that belief in the body cannot tolerate an outlook that denies the body in the name of the spirit.”²¹

- This sense of internal and external wholeness is healing but totally immanent. In other words, (a) it is temporary and (b) it does not give direct experience of any transcendent, unconditioned dimension outside of space and time.
- Therefore the freedom offered by the religious experience—the highest freedom possible in an organic universe—does not transcend the laws of organic causation. Jung shared with the Romantics the

inability to conceive of human nature in a way that could transcend the limitations of becoming. In fact, for him, the healthy becoming of the soul was what religion was all about.

- Because the religious experience can give only a temporary feeling of unity, the religious life is one of pursuing repeated religious experiences—in Jung’s case, this meant staying in touch with the messages from the collective unconscious—in hopes of gaining an improved feeling for that unity, but never fully achieving it.

- Unlike the Romantics, Jung did not insist that a numinous dream would carry with it an ability to see the commonplace events of the immanent world as sublime and miraculous. Still, he did regard the dream as something to be given the highest respect, and that the meaning it gave to life should be respected in the same light.

On the cultivation of religious experiences through numinous dreams: Jung agreed with the Romantics that an attitude of open acceptance was necessary for this sort of transformative experience. Here he cited Schiller:

“As Schiller says, man is completely human only when he is playing. My aim is to bring about a psychic state in which my patient begins to experiment with his own nature—a state of fluidity, change and growth, in which there is no longer anything eternally fixed and hopelessly petrified.”²²

Jung believed that dreams and consciously induced fantasies were the primary modes in which such a state of receptivity, free from the constraints of the ego, could be accessed. In fact, *The Red Book*, a diary of his consciously induced fantasies, shows the extreme extent to which Jung tried to access the contents of his own unconscious in this way.

He also agreed with the Romantics that religious texts of all sorts should be respected as possible sources of inspiration, but that none of them should be granted full authority, for that would prevent the patient from having an immediate experience of the psychic forces trying to do their compensatory work from within.

On the results of religious experiences: Like the Romantics, Jung believed that the creative nature of the mind wants to express these experiences—he often encouraged his patients to paint their responses to their dreams—and to derive meaning from them. He also agreed that these expressions were authoritative only for the person who made them. This point applied in particular to any desire to express one's experience in terms of rules of behavior. No one had the authority to force his or her morality on anyone else. In this sense, Jung's sense of the moral expression of the undivided self came closer to Hölderlin's than to James'. In other words, the purpose of religious experiences was not to lead to conformity with any moral law. Instead, it was to provide an ongoing integration of all the contents of the psyche, with no need for consistency over time.

On religious change: Again agreeing with the Romantics, Jung felt that although all religions were valid, some were more evolved than others and had to be evaluated under the framework of historicism to see where that particular religion fell in the organic development of the human psyche. In this way, one could gauge how appropriate its lessons were for curing spiritual illness as that illness takes new forms in modern times. And because the human psyche is constantly evolving, religious change is not only a fact, it is also a duty. This, for Jung, meant that the development of dream-analysis in psychotherapy as a replacement for traditional religion was not only a fact of modern life, but also a necessary and healthy development in human evolution.

To justify this view, he closed *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* with these words, Romantic both in their message and in their organic symbolism:

“The living spirit grows and even outgrows its earlier forms of expression; it freely chooses the men in whom it lives and who proclaim it. This living spirit is eternally renewed and pursues its goal in manifold and inconceivable ways throughout the history of mankind. Measured against it, the names and forms which men have given it mean little enough; they are only the changing leaves and blossoms on the stem of the eternal tree.”²³

Jung obviously believed that the living spirit had chosen him to proclaim his message as a compensatory action against the rampant materialism of the modern world. For him, the fact that dream analysis—the search for the meaning of dreams—cured the psychic illnesses of his patients was proof that psychic reality could not be reduced to material laws. After all, “meaning” has no meaning in a strictly materialistic system. “Meaning” makes sense only in a system that allows for the teleology of purposes and aims. Thus the focus on symbolism was, for him, the central means for re-enchanting the world so that life itself could regain meaning and authenticity.

In proclaiming this modernized version of the Romantic view of spiritual illness and the spiritual cure, Jung saw himself as advancing beyond both Christianity and Buddhism. Buddhism, in his eyes, ranked with Christianity as one of the two greatest traditional “systems of healing for psychic illness.” And he expressed high regard for the symbolic world of the Buddhists, especially in the Tibetan tradition, and for Buddhist systems of mental training as possible means for inducing mind states receptive to the unconscious. In this way he accorded much more respect to Buddhism than had Freud, who regarded all quests for religious experience as reversions to an infantile state. Thus, wherever Jung’s influence spread—both among trained Jungian analysts and among therapists of a more eclectic humanistic bent—he opened the door for Buddhism to enter into the world of Western psychotherapy.

Nevertheless, the door was open only on certain conditions. Jung criticized Westerners who wanted to adopt Buddhism as their religion, comparing them to Western paupers trying to dress up in Oriental robes. In his eyes, Buddhist symbolism and practices were to be adopted strictly in line with his view of how to best foster the becoming of the soul. The result was that his Romantic organic view of the universe prevented him from imagining the possibility that the Dhamma might be right in seeing even the healthiest form of becoming as a disease, and that it might offer a spiritual cure—suitable for all times and places—that transcended becoming entirely.

Maslow



Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) was one of the pioneers of humanistic psychology in America. Writing at a time when Freud and the behaviorists dominated the psychotherapeutic field, Maslow championed what he called a Third Force in psychotherapy, devoted to the principle that a therapist should not be content simply with curing his or her patients' blatant neuroses and psychoses, but should also work toward their full psychological health. Among his fellows in this movement he counted Jung, Horney, Rogers, and a host of others.

One of Maslow's primary contributions to this approach to psychotherapy was the concept of *self-actualization*: the principle that human beings are born with certain potentials that they need to actualize to the full in order to achieve genuine happiness. For Maslow, this observation carried an imperative: "What man can be, he must be." In other words, the *fact* that biology has endowed people with certain potentials carried a *value*: Society should be ordered so that those potentials can be actualized.

In the course of articulating what those potentials are and how they can best be actualized, Maslow drew heavily from James, Jung, and Otto. In doing so, he adopted many of the Romantic assumptions about religion that their writings contain. He also adopted a number of Romantic assumptions from Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, a book we will discuss in the last section of this chapter. In addition, he was familiar with the writings of the New England Transcendentalists. And as we noted above, he was living at a time where he felt that serious scientists had come to regard the universe as an organic, unified whole, evolving with meaning and purpose. In other words, he felt that science had returned, in principle at least, to the universe inhabited by the Romantics.

As a result, just as Jung had incorporated more Romanticism into his writings than he had acquired from either James or Otto, Maslow

incorporated more Romanticism than he had acquired from any of the three. The fact that Maslow's Third Force has now come to dominate American psychotherapy has meant that these Romantic assumptions continue to thrive in American culture, where they have played a direct role in shaping Buddhist Romanticism.

Maslow's most accessible book on the topic of religion is *Religion, Values, and Peak Experiences*, which he published in 1964 and then revised in 1970, shortly before his death. The book centers on the issue of how to derive an objective set of spiritual values that can underlie an educational system in a modern democratic, pluralistic society. He did not define the term *spiritual value*, but he did provide a list of questions that spiritual values should answer: "What is the good life? What is the good man? The good woman? What is the good society and what is my relation to it? What are my obligations to society? What is best for my children? What is justice? Truth? Virtue? What is my relation to nature, to death, to aging, to pain, to illness? How can I live a zestful, enjoyable, meaningful life? What is my responsibility to my brothers? Who are my brothers? What shall I be loyal to? What must I be ready to die for?"²⁴

Maslow noted that modern society had reached an impasse on these questions, an impasse he traced to the fact that religion and science, narrowly defined, had carved out mutually exclusive areas of concern. Science, in a quest for objectivity, had declared itself value-free, and in fact had dismissed questions of value as not worth answering. Religion had retreated from science and so offered no intellectually respectable, objective source for its answers to these questions. All it could offer were unverifiable supernatural claims.

Maslow's proposed solution to this problem was to offer an expanded vision of science based on his assumption—taken from his organic view of the universe—that human potentials carry an inherent, objective imperative to be actualized. But just as science would have to be reconfigured to adopt this assumption, so would religion. Following Jung, Maslow felt that the progress of society required religion to relinquish its authority in the field of values and hand it over to psychotherapy, just as in earlier centuries it had relinquished its authority in cosmology to the physical sciences.

“Just as each science was once a part of the body of organized religion but then broke away to become independent, so also it can be said that the same thing may now be happening to the problems of values, ethics, spirituality, morals. They are being taken away from the exclusive jurisdiction of the institutionalized churches and are becoming the “property,” so to speak, of a new type of humanistic scientist... This relation between religion and science could be stated in such a dichotomous, competitive way, but I think I can show that it need not be, and that the person who is deeply religious—in a particular sense that I shall discuss—must rather feel strengthened and encouraged by the prospect that his value questions may be more firmly answered than ever before.”²⁵

To convince the religions of the world to relinquish their authority in the area of values, Maslow followed a two-pronged approach. First, he stated as a scientifically proven fact the basic premise of historicism: that all truths were subject to time and place, and that the social sciences had disproven all religious claims to eternal truth.

“One recurring problem for all organized, revealed religions during the last century has been the flat contradiction between their claim to final, total, unchangeable, eternal and absolute truth and the cultural, historical, and economic flux and relativism affirmed by the developing social sciences and by the philosophers of science. Any philosophy or religious system which has no place for flux and for relativism is untenable (because it is untrue to the facts).” (*parentheses in the original*)²⁶

The second prong of Maslow’s approach was to argue that psychotherapy had a more objective understanding of the common essence of all religions, along with their common values, and so was better qualified than they to take charge in the area of determining and teaching values. Following James, Maslow stated as a fact the bald assumption that all religions are derived from a single religious experience, common to all great religious figures, which was then integrated into the life of the individual who had undergone the

experience. To divorce James' categories of *conversion* and *sanctification* from any particular tradition, Maslow renamed them after the shape they would assume if graphed over time: *peak-experiences* and *plateau-experiences*. Peak-experiences are short-lived feelings of oneness, rapture, ecstasy, and integration. Plateau-experiences exhibit a more stable sense of integration, knowledge, and heightened being, and last much longer. Peak-experiences could not be lived in, but plateau-experiences could.

We have already noted the paradoxical role of this essentially Romantic claim that all religions come from the same experience, variously described: On the one hand, it can be used as license for each person to interpret the religious experience in any way he or she saw fit; on the other, it can be imposed as a means for judging invalid any religious view that doesn't agree with the Romantic explanation of where that view came from. Maslow, at least for the purpose of deriving an objective set of values, adopted the second tack.

"To the extent that all mystical or peak-experiences are the same in their essence and have always been the same, all religions are the same in their essence and always have been the same. They should, therefore, come to agree in principle on teaching that which is common to all of them, i.e., whatever it is that peak-experiences teach in common (whatever is different about these illuminations can fairly be taken to be localisms both in time and space, and are, therefore, peripheral, expendable, not essential)."
(parentheses in the original)²⁷

Maslow then argued that peak-experiences should be regarded not as supernatural in any sense, but as totally natural and biological in origin. Previous generations of mystics had missed this fact because of the limitations of their culture:

"Small wonder it is then that the mystic, trying to describe his experience, can do it only in a local, culture-bound, ignorance-bound, language-bound way, confusing his description of the experience with whatever explanation of it and phrasing of it is most readily available to him in his time and in his place."²⁸

In contrast, Maslow argued that the naturalistic, biological explanation of these experiences available in *his* time and place was not limited in this way. As proof, he cited interviews in which—defining peak-experiences as any feeling of heightened rapture, ecstasy, or illumination—he had asked a variety of educated people whether they had ever had such experiences. At first he seemed to find two sorts of people—*peakers* and *non-peakers*—but then he realized that the non-peakers actually had had such experiences but, for various psychological, philosophical, or other undetermined reasons, had dismissed them as unimportant. Thus he concluded that non-peakers were really *weak peakers*: Everyone has had such experiences, and in many cases those experiences carried no supernatural meaning for those who had them. Thus supernatural interpretations of such experiences were expendable.

Furthermore, he maintained that because peak-experiences carried a heightened sense of being and consciousness, they could function as a source of objective values offering guidance in how to foster heightened self-actualization throughout society. Based on his interviews and on his readings about peak-experiences in the past—mainly in James, Otto, and Huxley—he came to the following conclusions about the core values that could be derived from such experiences.

To begin with, people can be taught how to have them. Like the Romantics, Maslow noted that this meant, basically, developing an attitude of open receptivity toward them, which could be triggered in a number of ways: through hearing or reading about examples of peak-experiences, through the controlled use of psychedelic drugs, or through healthy sexual love. Maslow focused special attention on this last trigger, devoting an entire appendix of his book to ways in which one should view one's sexual partner—both as an actual human being and as an idealized archetype of Man or Woman—so that the sexual act could be a union of the sacred and profane. In this way, he revived an element of Romantic religion that James and Jung had ignored: the role of Eros in bringing about heightened consciousness. This element would play a large role in Buddhist Romanticism.

As for the lessons learned during a peak-experience, Maslow drew up a long list of perception shifts that the experience induces, which

included these Romantic perceptions about human beings and their place in the universe: The universe is an integrated, organic, unified whole. Dichotomies, polarities, and conflicts are resolved, both within and without. One's life has meaning and purpose as an integral part of the whole. In fact, every object is seen in its own Being as sacred. The universe is good in its purpose, and one becomes reconciled even to the place of evil in the larger scope of things. One's emotional response is one of wonder, acceptance, and humility, and yet one also feels pride in having a creative role to play in contributing to the whole. Consciousness becomes unitive—a term that Maslow apparently picked up from Huxley. In Maslow's definition, the special mark of unitive consciousness is what Novalis would have termed authenticity: It glimpses a sense of the sacred in and through the profane particulars of the world.

Maslow, like James, noted that these perceptual shifts were extremely convincing for the person experiencing them, but that the experience offered no objective proof of their truth. Nevertheless, Maslow did venture to say that these experiences proved that the view of the universe as an organic, unified whole is conducive for self-actualization, and so should be regarded as a “species-relative absolute,” i.e., a truth with pragmatic value that has to be assumed for the healthy functioning of every member of the human species.

As for the personal values and traits resulting from peak-experiences—and that, through effort and training, can be developed into plateau-experiences—Maslow formulated a list that omitted a few items, such as asceticism, from James' similar list, but otherwise considerably expanded on it: truth, goodness, an appreciation of the beauty, perfection, and richness of the world; wholeness, dichotomy-transcendence, aliveness, uniqueness, a sense of the necessity of the way things are, justice, order, simplicity, effortlessness, playfulness, and self-sufficiency.

Maslow argued that the objectivity of these values is proven by the fact that they are conducive to survival—in a good society. In a bad society, some of them can lead to a premature death. Thus, he argued, social sciences should study further what a good society is and how it can be brought about so that human beings can be free to develop these

values and traits to their full potential without infringing on the full development of those same traits in others. In this way, Maslow's religious program, like the religious *Bildung* recommended by the Romantics, had a political/social dimension, aimed at freedom as the Romantics defined it: the freedom to express one's inherent nature. This was another aspect of Romantic religion that he revived and added to what he had learned from James and Jung.

It's easy to understand why the religions of the world did not all accept Maslow's argument that psychology had now superseded them as an authority on human values. Three reasons in particular stand out:

- One, not all religions would have agreed to limit questions of values to the ones on his list.
- Two, they would have recognized that his equation between flux and relativism is a false one: The fact that cultures and societies undergo flux does not mean that all truths are culturally relative. The fact that change happens does not mean that it always happens in a healthy, appropriate way.
- Three, it is hard to see that the religions of the world would have agreed that all peak-experiences are essentially the same, and in particular that the ecstasy of good sex was no different from the religious experiences that had inspired their founders. From the Buddhist point of view, this last assumption is a fatal weakness in Maslow's theory.

Then there are the two major methodological weaknesses in his analysis of the core peak-experience.

- First, it's easy to see that Maslow's method for conducting interviews about peak experiences skewed the results of those interviews in the direction he wanted them to go. By defining such experiences as *any* sense of rapture, ecstasy, or illumination, he ensured that the interviews would lead to the conclusion that not all peak experiences were supernatural in meaning, and that supernatural interpretations were for that reason irrelevant. Because this conclusion was implicit in the way he framed his questions, the answers he got were no proof that his conclusion was true.

- Second, even though Maslow used James as a source, he chose to ignore many of the accounts in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that

did not fit into his paradigm of the core peak-experience. For example, there was the account of Théodore Jouffroy (1796–1842), the French philosopher whose conversion experience had told him that the world, far from being sacred, was meaningless, and that he was thus free to create his own meaning for his life. There were also the many Catholic saints—such as Margaret Mary Alacoque, Saint Theresa, and Saint Louis of Gonzaga—whose peak-experiences, according to James, had turned them into lower-functioning rather than higher-functioning individuals. Maslow dismissed these experiences as pathological, which indicates that he was not actually deriving his system of values from the universal phenomenon of peak-experiences. Instead, he was judging peak-experiences from another set of values about health and pathology, which seem to be Romantic/Transcendentalist in origin, and then cherry-picking the evidence to give those values the appearance of objectivity.

This tendency is most blatant in Maslow's treatment of one of the perception-shifts that he attributed to the core peak-experience—an acceptance of the necessary role played by evil in the world—and the corresponding value, dichotomy-transcendence, that he derived from it. It's hard to see how either of these features could provide a motivation for doing good—after all, if evil is necessary, how is it bad?—or any answer to the questions of what a good life or a good person should be.

And of course, from the perspective of the Dhamma, it's obvious that Maslow's imperatives of self-actualization are at best nothing more than imperatives for improved levels of becoming: how to become a more fully developed human being within the world, but leaving no possibility for going beyond a human identity in a human world. By dismissing any religious experiences that deviate from what he defines as a core peak-experience, he closed off the possibility that an awakening like the Buddha's could have anything of unique and higher value to offer the world.

Nevertheless, in spite of these weaknesses in his theory, Maslow's attitudes about religions, values, and peak-experiences were not only adopted by many therapists in the field of humanistic psychology, but also—through those therapists—made their way into the thought of

modern Dhamma teachers, providing the underlying structure for a large portion of Buddhist Romanticism.

HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

As we noted in Chapter Four, the early Romantics were among the first European thinkers to call for a new way of studying religion in the university: what Schelling called a “supra-confessional” approach. Instead of simply teaching Christian theology, they argued, professors should approach the study of the world’s religions with an eye to the way in which all religions played a role in the unfolding drama of the evolution of the cosmos.

The three early Romantics who wrote most extensively about this proposed line of study—Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Schlegel—agreed that religion had to evolve in line with the progressive evolution of the cosmos, but they approached this idea from different angles. Each of these angles ended up influencing the ways the study of the history of religions developed in Europe and America in the succeeding decades.

Schelling was convinced that religious ideas, over time, had to evolve in objectively better ways as part of the general evolution of divine consciousness—from unity, through diversity, to unity containing diversity. For him, this conviction was an objective truth. He was also convinced that human beings, in helping religion to evolve, had no choice in the matter. They were simply acting in line with the laws of organic change that drove the entire cosmos. Thus any effort to understand the evolution of religion had to find its place in a larger philosophy of history—like Schelling’s—that tried to explain the laws of the evolution of the universe as a whole.

In contrast, Schlegel—in line with his high regard for a sense of irony—thought that the idea of progressive change in religion was simply a useful myth to foster the progress of freedom in society. His concern was less with the general shape of religious change and more with the aesthetics of religion as a human art form, expressed in individual myths that pointed to the reality of infinity but could not describe it objectively. He also believed that the creativity expressed in these myths was an expression of divine freedom in action. Like Herder, his interest

lay more in developing an “infinite sphere of taste” than in judging particular myths as to their “objective” value. And, like Herder, he called for a greater interest in philology—the study of languages and other critical tools to determine the meaning and authenticity of ancient texts—so that these myths and their evolution could be better understood. In particular, he called for a greater interest in Sanskrit, so that the myths of India—in his eyes, the source of all religious mythology—could be appreciated in a way that would advance the evolution of European civilization across the board.

As for Schleiermacher, his interest centered in the primary experience of the infinite within each individual, and so he believed that religious texts should be studied with regard to how they tried to express that experience, given the talents of the author and his or her situation in time and place. Like Schlegel, Schleiermacher promoted the study of texts so as to understand the author’s original meaning—but less for the sake of aesthetic appreciation than as a way to intuit the experience that inspired the text. In fact, as we have noted, Schleiermacher’s writings on this topic are considered the founding documents of modern hermeneutics, or the science of interpretation. And as we saw in the discussion of Jung, Schleiermacher’s ideas eventually influenced Rudolph Otto and, through Otto, shaped the discipline called the phenomenology of religion: the attempt to understand the religious experience from the inside.

Thus the early Romantics bequeathed three approaches to the academic study of what came to be called history of religions, comparative religion, and comparative mythology: grand history, philology, and phenomenology.

It’s easy to see why these approaches eventually split apart, for they assign meaning to religious beliefs in different ways. In grand history, religious texts and experiences have meaning only with an eye to where the cosmos as a whole is going; in philology, meaning is centered in the texts themselves; whereas in phenomenology, meaning is centered in what the reader intuits about the experience that must have inspired the text. For the Romantics, though, these various approaches were tied together by their common assumption that the cosmos was animated by a single divine force, so that wherever one looked for meaning—in the

original experience of infinity, its expression as myth, or its role in the larger evolution of consciousness in the universe—that meaning must always be the same.

For a while, these approaches continued to work together, as can be seen in one of the first studies of comparative mythology inspired by the early Romantics. In 1810–1812, Friedrich Creuzer published *Symbolic and Mythology of Ancient Peoples*, citing Schelling as his prime intellectual influence. In this work, Creuzer advanced a dual thesis: that the Eleusinian mysteries contained the true religious doctrine of the ancient Greeks, and that the origins of this “symbolic”—i.e., both the body of symbols and the beliefs organized around them—lay in India. “When dealing with almost all major myths,” he wrote, “... we must, so to speak, first orient ourselves toward the Orient.”²⁹ Although Creuzer explicitly expressed his intellectual debt to Schelling in writing this book, Schlegel’s influence can also be seen in Creuzer’s choice of subject matter, his philological emphasis, and his understanding of the role of India in the history of world religions.

However, the peaceful co-existence of grand history, philology, and religious phenomenology quickly came to an end, even before the belief in an ever-present and ever-active divine force in the universe was rejected. Ironically, the first battle was fought in the 1820’s in German university circles among scholars who had played a role in the early Romantic movement. At the center of the battle was the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who had been a bit-player in the early Romantic movement but then went on to become the most influential German philosopher of the 19th century.

Hegel

Hegel (1770–1831) had roomed with Hölderlin and Schelling while at seminary, and had danced with them around their “tree of liberty” on first hearing the news that the German efforts to stifle the French Revolution had failed. Later he gained minor jobs with Hölderlin’s and Schelling’s help. He repaid his debt to Schelling in 1801 by publishing a book on the differences between Schelling’s philosophy and Fichte’s, arguing that Schelling’s was by far the better of the two.



In 1807, however—after the early Romantics had gone their separate ways—he published his first major independent work on philosophy, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, in which he tried to distance himself from Schelling and the other early Romantics. The general outline of his philosophy—the universe as an infinite, organic unity, developing by dialectical means from unity, through diversity, and on to an ultimate unity that contains diversity—came from Schelling. So did Hegel’s understanding of philosophy in

the context of that worldview: that philosophy could not deal only in static, abstract principles, but had to show how the cosmos—both in material reality and the evolution of human consciousness—had actually developed by dialectic means. Schelling was not happy to see his ideas appropriated by his former roommate, because Hegel, in his preface to the *Phenomenology*, had grossly misrepresented Schelling’s positions, perhaps to disguise his debt to Schelling. Nevertheless, Hegel made many additions to what he had taken from Schelling, enough to make his philosophy his own.

Hegel’s most basic contributions to Schelling’s outline lay in his treatment of the dialectic means by which consciousness and the cosmos evolve. In Schelling’s dialectic, the assertion of a thesis contains an implicit contradiction, which is its antithesis. In other words, the antithesis does not arise *in opposition* to the thesis. It actually arises *from within* the thesis itself. The conflict between the two is then resolved only by reaching a higher synthesis, which embraces both. This synthesis, however, then becomes a new thesis, which contains a new antithesis, and so on. For our purposes, we can highlight two major additions that Hegel made to Schelling’s explanation of this process.

- The first was his explanation of what was actually happening in the move from thesis to antithesis to synthesis: In resolving the conflict between thesis and antithesis, Hegel said, the act of arriving at a synthesis had to discover and articulate a larger truth that was implicit

in the social process of asking for and providing reasons for the thesis—an underlying truth that the thesis had ignored. This explanation carried three main implications.

One: All knowledge, to count as knowledge, had to be articulate. Thus what we have been calling “phenomenology” throughout this book—one’s sense of one’s consciousness as something singular, composed of sense data that are directly experienced from within, prior to being put into words—doesn’t really count as knowledge.

Two: Just as the synthesis moves knowledge *forward* by expanding the range of articulate understanding of the activities of the mind, it also moves *backward* in the sense that it reveals what was already implicitly there prior to the assertion of the thesis. (As we will see in the next section, this aspect of Hegel’s dialectic came to inform the growth of perennial philosophy in a way that Hegel would neither have anticipated nor welcomed.) This is how the diversity of articulate knowledge moves back to unity but without the ignorance of primal unity. This is what “unity in diversity” means.

Three: Because human philosophizing lies at the forefront of all conscious activity, it is not an idle pastime. Nor does it simply attempt to grasp what is going on in the world. Instead, it actually directs the evolution of the world through its efforts to articulate a full and coherent synthesis embracing all of the assumptions underlying the activity of Mind: the larger, universal consciousness of which all individual consciousnesses are a part. Evolution then reaches completion as this synthesis becomes manifest in physical reality. This is why, for Hegel, every statement of a philosophical position had to show how that position had actually played a role in world history. This in turn is why his philosophical works devote so much space to Grand History: showing how the philosophical, political, and social history of the world could be explained in terms of the dialectic of human thought. In Buddhist terms, this History was a celebration of Becoming writ large.

- Hegel’s second main addition to Schelling’s dialectic lay in his understanding of where the dialectic was headed. As we noted in Chapter Four, Schelling had argued that all events and organisms in the universe had to be understood in terms of where they fit within the dynamic evolution of the universe toward a goal, but then he denied that

a final goal would ever be reached. This meant that his philosophy, judged on its own terms, couldn't explain anything: If things can be understood only in relation to the goal to which they lead, but that goal itself can't be understood, then nothing can be understood.

Hegel proposed to remedy this defect by defining the goal of the universe. He gave it two different definitions in two different works, but the definitions are connected. In the *Phenomenology*, he defined the goal of the universe as “absolute knowledge,” i.e., the realization on the part of Mind—both in its personal sense as individual human minds and its cosmic sense as God—that all of the universe is nothing but its own constructs, and that beyond itself and its constructs there is nothing to know. This knowledge is absolute in that it is not an object of a knowing subject. Instead—within this knowledge—the subject, the object, and the knowing are all One. This unity would contain no inner conflict, and so there was nowhere further for the cosmos to develop. This point was to resurface in perennial philosophy as well.

In *The Philosophy of Right*, however, Hegel defined the goal of history as “full consciousness of the idea of freedom.” Here he attempted to combine Kant and Spinoza by defining freedom both as adherence to the universal laws of reason, and as the freedom to follow one's own nature. To make this combination work, though, Hegel had to deviate from Kant in arguing that when a mind sees itself as separate from other minds and from universal Mind, its feelings are bound to conflict with universal laws of reason, which means that it becomes divided within itself, feeling constrained by those laws. But when it realizes that it is in no way separate from Mind, its feelings and reason can harmonize. It can act morally with no inner conflict or sense of alienation.

This is why absolute knowing and full consciousness of the idea of freedom are simply two different ways of stating a single goal: the fully articulated Oneness of everything. In this way Hegel supplied further arguments for the Romantic ideas—which would eventually become Buddhist Romantic ideas—that the universe was One, and that morality could be achieved effortlessly by learning to see oneself as part of that universal Oneness.

Not only did Hegel define the goal of the universe, he also announced that it had already been reached. On the one hand, Mind arrived at

absolute knowledge when Hegel finished *The Phenomenology of Mind*—which means that he viewed his book both as a *description* of the purpose of the universe and as a *performance piece*: an example of how Mind drives evolution to a purpose, and the actual means by which that purpose was finally attained. On the other hand, Hegel argued in *The Philosophy of Right* that the idea of freedom had been fully realized in the modern Prussian state. On this latter count, though, his students later fell into two major camps over the question of whether he was speaking of the political realities of the 1820's or of his idea of where Prussia would have to develop given that *he* had realized the true idea of freedom.

As might be expected, these principles in Hegel's discussion of the dialectic thrust of history shaped his understanding of the role of religion in history. But events in his academic career shaped it as well. After the completion of his second major opus, the *Science of Logic* (1812–1816), Hegel in 1818 was offered a position on the philosophy faculty of the recently founded University of Berlin. Schleiermacher was already on the faculty there—as we noted in Chapter One, he had been involved with the university since its founding in 1810—and although he was a member of the theology faculty, he lectured on philosophy as well.

Because, in Hegel's view, the evolution of the cosmos depended on the ability to articulate the relationship of Mind and its creations, he felt that Schleiermacher's view of religion as an inarticulate feeling for the infinite was a giant step backward. Thus, in 1821, he began to lecture on the history of religion with the express purpose of refuting Schleiermacher's views, and he continued to lecture on the topic three more times, in 1824, 1827, and 1831. Not only did he offer rational arguments against Schleiermacher's ideas on religion, he heaped ridicule on them as well. For instance, he remarked that Schleiermacher's description of faith as a feeling of dependence on and submission to the infinite could not tell the difference between faith and a dog's happiness at getting a bone from its master.³⁰

The overall effect of this attack was to emphasize the vast difference between their approaches, and to push Schleiermacher and his theories out of the realm of philosophical discourse for many decades afterward. Only in academic theology was Schleiermacher considered an authority;

and only in the last decades of the 19th century, when professors such as William James began to question Hegel's theories, did Schleiermacher's theories on the nature of religious experience receive serious attention in the disciplines of philosophy and psychology.

However, in addition to exposing the divide between phenomenology and Grand History, Hegel's lectures also exposed a similar divide between Grand History and philology as approaches in the study of world religion. Exposing the first divide was intentional on his part; exposing the second divide was more inadvertent.

He had already established the major outlines of his theory of the evolution of religion in world history in the *Phenomenology*; in his lectures on the history of religion, he simply worked out the details of this outline. He presented the evolution of religion as a story of growing understanding of the relationship between the *finite* and the *infinite*. This much of the theory is Romantic in origin, as was Hegel's assertion that this understanding was evolving not only in human minds but, at the same time, in the mind of God: The history of religion showed not only the evolution of human understanding in the area of religion; it also showed the evolution of God's.

In line with Hegel's theories about the goal of the universe, this understanding grew dialectically toward a full and articulate consciousness of freedom together with the Oneness of all reality. The initial thesis in the dialectic from which this consciousness grew was represented by what Hegel called "nature religion." In nature religion there is a vague sense of a universal force behind the finite events of nature, but with no logical understanding of the relationship between the two, and thus no possibility of freedom for the individual. In this category, Hegel gathered primitive religions together with Chinese, Indian, and Persian religions, culminating in Egyptian religion. As an aside, he also threw Kant's religious beliefs into this category as a way of dismissing them.

The antithesis growing out of nature religion was "the elevation of spirit over nature," which covered Greek, Jewish, and Roman religion. Greek religion elevated spirit over nature in an *aesthetic* way, showing humanity—through stories of the gods—how to imagine what it must be like to be free. Jewish religion showed this in a *sublime* way, by depicting

God as a single, transcendent power. In Roman religion, however, the conflict between external compulsion and the subjective desire for freedom created an “unhappy consciousness,” which, having posited a God apart from itself, felt alienated both from God and within itself. This conflict was resolved with Christianity, in which, according to Hegel, God becomes a human being and then dies in order to show all human beings that they no longer have to look for divinity outside themselves, but should learn to see it within themselves. At the same time, Hegel felt, Christ’s message was that all human beings should realize that, being an integral part of the divine, they are free to act in line with that divinity, and that they were under no compulsion to obey any outside authority.

This, of course, was a very imaginative interpretation of world religions, and of Christianity in particular. Hegel himself realized that his interpretation of Christ’s message was novel, but he defended it on grounds that also took Schleiermacher as their target: Philosophy, instead of being a degenerate, second-hand result of the religious experience, he said, actually took the content of religious revelation and gave it logical form, making it both understandable and real by showing its dialectical necessity and reconciling the conflicts that the first thought of religion engendered—thus completing the work that religion left unfinished. In Hegel’s words:

“Insofar as thinking begins to posit an antithesis to the concrete and places itself in opposition to the concrete, the process of thinking consists in carrying through this opposition until it arrives at reconciliation.

“This reconciliation is philosophy. Philosophy is to this extent theology. It presents the reconciliation of God with himself and with nature, showing that nature, otherness, is implicitly divine, and that the raising of itself to reconciliation is on the one hand what finite spirit implicitly is, while on the other hand it arrives at this reconciliation, or brings it forth, in world history. This reconciliation is the peace of God, which does not “surpass all reason,” but is rather the peace that *through* reason is first known and thought and is recognized as what is true.”³¹

Here again, Hegel felt that his own philosophy of religion was not only descriptive. It was also performative, a momentous event in world history in that it made the Oneness of all reality explicit in the real world.

At the same time, by presenting the history of religion as a history of the evolving relationship of the divine with its creation, Hegel was the first to realize Schelling's Romantic dream of a universal history showing the drama of what Schelling had called the World Soul at work in the world: Grand History in the grandest sense. One can only wonder what Schelling thought, though, on seeing Hegel assume a starring role in the dream. But from our perspective, even if we don't take sides in the feud between Schelling and Hegel, we can easily see that Hegel's history told more about Hegel than it did about the religions of the world.

This is evident from many idiosyncratic features in his version of history, but two in particular stand out. First, Islam is allowed no role in world history, and Hegel mentions it briefly only in passing. Given his general theory that religions evolve over time through dialectic necessity, the fact that Islam developed after Christianity would lead one to assume that it would have to be an advance on Christianity, but Hegel dismissed it as pure irrationality. His unwillingness to discuss Islam in detail can perhaps be explained by a passage toward the end of the *Science of Logic*. There he stated that although the dynamic of the dialectic was *necessary*, it exerted no *compulsion* on nature. In other words, the progress of the world had to follow the dialectic pattern, but individuals were free to move the world forward in line with that pattern or not. If they chose not to, they could either stagnate or regress. This would explain not only Islam, but also, in Hegel's opinion, such retrograde theories about religion as Schleiermacher's and Kant's.

However, given that the ultimate outcome of religious progress is full consciousness that God and the universe have been One all along, it would be strange for God's left brain not to know what his right brain had been doing. How could part of God regress when another part had already made progress?

A second idiosyncratic feature of Hegel's history is the role it gives to Indian religion. Even his sympathetic commentators have noted that his treatment of Buddhism and Hinduism is blatantly one-sided and negative, a severe distortion of what these religions actually practiced

and taught. These commentators have excused this aspect of Hegel's history by claiming that Hegel had no good sources to work with, but that was not actually the case.

It is true that Hegel's initial views about Indian religion were based on limited sources. For instance, Herder, in 1792, had rendered into German some passages in the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gīta from earlier English translations. In these renderings, he had emphasized, with considerable poetic license, the monistic and vitalistic elements that he intuited in the texts and that corresponded with his own views about the cosmos. But even Herder had objected to some of the doctrines he found in those texts—in particular, the teachings on karma and rebirth—seeing them as undermining morality. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel had followed Herder in dismissing Indian religion as “a realm of pantheism, passivity, selflessness, and amorality.”

Similarly with Buddhism: 18th century scholars had depicted Buddhism as a form of nihilism, and so Hegel in his religion lectures summarized its teaching as, “It is from nothing that all comes, and to nothing that all returns.” Further, “Man must make himself into nothingness”; and “holiness consists only to the extent to which man in this annihilation, in this silence, unites with God, with nothingness, with the absolute.”³² This interpretation fit neatly with Hegel's assertion in the *Science of Logic* that the initial conception of Being is undifferentiated, and thus is actually a concept of nothingness. Interpreting Buddhism as nihilism allowed him to cite it as an example of this primitive stage in his story of the dialectic of human thought.

As more Buddhist and Hindu texts were translated into German in the succeeding years, Hegel moderated some of his views on Indian religions, but he continued to assert that even though Indian religions had formed a concept of the infinite and proposed an identity of the finite with the infinite, they had no clear, concrete conception of how the infinite could be fully realized on the level of the finite. As for Buddhism, he continued to present it as a form of nihilism even though newer research showed clearly that it wasn't.

We might excuse Hegel's intransigence on these points by assuming that he simply wasn't keeping up with the scholarly literature in these

areas, but in at least one case we know that this wasn't so. The case involves August Schlegel, Friedrich's brother, one of Hegel's acquaintances from his earlier days at Jena.

August had been appointed professor of literature at the University of Bonn in 1818. In 1823, he published—together with Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the founders of the University of Berlin—a full, annotated translation of the Bhagavad Gita. In it, he noted that when the Gita was read in full, it did not support Herder's facile interpretations of Indian religion and instead presented a more complex view of the relation between God—Viṣṇu—and the cosmos.

In 1827, Hegel himself wrote a review of the book. Then, four years later, he neglected to mention in his 1831 lectures the fact that this text, predating the Christian Bible, mentions a divine being who had become fully human in the person of Krishna, who taught that his incarnation had a universal plan with implications for all of humanity. Instead, Hegel continued to insist that Indian religion had created no necessary connection between beings and their underlying Being. Thus Indian religion was nothing but the “Religion of Abstract Unity,” a pantheism in which “substance [is] not grasped as wisdom but solely as power. It is something devoid of concept; the determinate element, purpose, is not contained in it.... It is merely the reeling, inwardly purposeless, empty power.”³³ Hegel should have known that this was a gross mischaracterization of what the Gita taught, but he held to it in order to continue maintaining that only Christianity provided a meaningful incarnation of the divine. In other words, he fudged the facts to fit his theories.

From his review of Schlegel's book, it's clear that Hegel would have justified his treatment of Indian religion by claiming that his understanding of the dialectic had enabled him to get below the surface of the text to see its underlying message. Thus, in his eyes, just because the facts did not fit with his theory, that did not prove his theory wrong. It simply showed that the facts were insignificant or provided a false cover for a deeper reality.

This was how Hegel's theories were able to survive and exert influence on later generations. But this incident did show that two of the Romantic bequests to the study of world religions—philology and Grand

History—were beginning to work at cross-purposes. Philology tried to get at what a text was saying on its own terms in its immediate historical environment; Grand History tried to assign meaning to the texts in terms that the author of the text would not have recognized. Add to this Hegel's treatment of Schleiermacher's phenomenological approach, and we can see that even by the 1820's, the threefold Romantic bequest to religious studies was already beginning to fall apart. As philologists continued their work in the 19th and 20th centuries, the split among these three approaches continued to widen.

Romanticism in Modern Scholarship

Fast-forward to the present. The two world wars have put an end to any serious academic effort to present the history of world religions as a grand narrative of progress. The rise of the social sciences has brought the techniques of anthropology and sociology to bear on the history of religious change. And the assumption that a divine will is at work in personal religious experiences, in the composing of religious texts, or in the direction of religious change has, at least in the academy, fallen by the wayside. Nevertheless, the modern academic study of religion has created a climate that has fostered and justified the growth of Buddhist Romanticism.

To begin with, all three aspects of the Romantic approach to the study of religion are still being practiced: Philologists still study texts. Phenomenologists still follow Schleiermacher in trying to get at the structure of religious consciousness. As for Grand Theorists, Hegel's descendents in the field no longer look for grand narratives, but they do look for underlying power dynamics in religious texts (counting all kinds of behavior as "texts"), dynamics that subvert the surface meaning of the texts and that the authors they are studying would deny are there. And although each of these approaches has provided interesting insights, when they are applied to the study of Buddhism, none of them are capable of answering the most important question that the Dhamma provokes: Does the practice of the Dhamma really lead to the end of suffering and stress?

For this reason, historians of religion have directed their focus away from the Dhamma and turned it toward Buddhism as a social movement in history. In other words, they focus on issues that skirt the basic question. They analyze what texts say about the ending of suffering or related issues. They observe what people who claim to be inspired by these texts have done or are doing. They trace the changes in texts and behavior over the centuries.

Furthermore—given the message from the psychology of religion, that no religious experience carries any truth-value for those who haven't had the experience—texts are studied not for their truth-value but as myths. In the case of Buddhism, this means stories or myths about the end of suffering or anything that can claim relation to that topic. Behavior is judged, not by its success in putting an end to suffering, but by how it relates to developments in society and culture. The question of whether a development in the tradition was made by someone who actually put an end to suffering or by someone who hadn't, is never allowed into the discussion. With the discussion limited to what makes sense in light of historical circumstances, the conclusion is that this sense and these circumstances explain everything worthy of interest.

Inevitably, the field itself becomes a major topic of discussion, as historians argue over what "Buddhism" means and how far the term extends. To define the field, historians of religion have to ask and answer questions like these: (1) What kind of text or behavior deserves to fall under the term, "Buddhism," and at what point is the relationship so tenuous to other Buddhist texts and behavior that it falls out of range? (2) Within that range, what kinds of text or behavior deserve to be studied?

Because the historical method cannot judge whether there really is a path to the end of suffering, historians cannot use that as an anchor point against which to judge these things. In fact, some scholars have made their reputation by saying that the Buddha didn't teach the four noble truths at all. Thus the default answer to question (1) becomes: Anything done by anyone claiming to be Buddhist—or inspired, positively or negatively, by Buddhist teachings—counts as Buddhism, regardless of whether it has anything to do with the end of suffering.

Given that changes are more interesting to discuss than efforts to maintain teachings and practices unchanged, the default answer to question (2) is: Any trends or changes in those teachings that are adopted by enough people or survive long enough deserve to be studied. The emphasis on change reinforces the Romantic assumption that changes are actually the life of religion. The question then becomes, how many people and how long a survival count as “enough” to deserve study? In this way, Buddhism is no longer about the Dhamma, or the end of suffering. It’s about patterns of religious change: the way in which people adapt the tradition—successfully or unsuccessfully—to meet their perceived needs at their particular point in space and time, with emphasis placed on the most popular adaptations.

To cite a typical example: Richard Seager, in *Buddhism in America*, writes,

“Writing as a historian rather than a partisan in current debates, I am most interested in the long-term challenges involved in building viable forms of Buddhism, whether among converts or immigrants. Observing the current vitality of the American Buddhist landscape, I often wonder how it will change, even within the next thirty years or so, as some forms continue to thrive and others fall by the wayside.... The definition of American Buddhism will be determined by those forms that survive the winnowing process that can be expected during the early decades of the twenty-first century.”³⁴

“It is possible to talk about many developments in contemporary American Buddhism, but impossible to assess which of these ‘has legs’ and will pass the tests of time required to become a living Buddhist tradition in the United States.”³⁵

Notice that the discussion here is not about the Dhamma as something to be discovered, as the Buddha claimed. It’s about Buddhism as something to be built. And the question is not one of whether these developments in Buddhism will keep alive the path to the end of suffering. It’s simply whether they are viable—“viable” meaning, not keeping the Dhamma alive, but simply being able to survive as forms

of behavior, with the implicit assumption that whatever survives must be better than what doesn't.

The result is that people learning about Buddhism from the academy—and that's where many Westerners are first exposed to Buddhism—learn it from a distinctly Romantic point of view. Just as the Romantics studied religious texts as myths, to be appreciated as responses to the particulars of their historical context but with no necessary truth outside of that context, that is how students are exposed to Buddhist texts. Just as Romantics such as Schlegel and Schleiermacher argued that no one was in a position to pass judgment on the religious experience or beliefs of another person, that is the perspective from which students are exposed to the behavior of Buddhists over the centuries.

So it should come as no surprise that students who learn about Buddhism in this way and then become attracted to practicing it bring a Romantic view of the tradition into their practice. And it's no surprise that they would use Romantic principles for doing so. This is true not only of Buddhist teachers, but also of Buddhist scholars studying these teachers. Here are two examples from the recent literature:

David McMahan, writing in *The Making of Modern Buddhism*, legitimates the creation of modern Buddhism in a very Romantic way. First he frames the issue in terms of Buddhism, rather than Dhamma, dismissing the early texts teaching the end of suffering as "myths." Then he paints a picture of the Buddhist tradition as a search for viability: the ability to survive. There is no question of the motives animating the people who change the tradition, or the standards by which a viable change is to be judged. The people in each generation are to be trusted to know what their needs are and how they can use the tradition to meet those needs. The fact that they use the tradition to answer questions that the tradition explicitly refrained from asking is, again, assumed to be a good thing:

"The hybridity of Buddhist modernism, its protean nature, its discarding of much that is traditional, and its often radical reworking of doctrine and practice naturally invite questions of authenticity, legitimacy, and definition. What is a Buddhist? What is the boundary between Buddhism and non-Buddhism? At what

point is Buddhism so thoroughly modernized, westernized, detraditionalized, and adapted that it simply no longer can be considered Buddhism?

“We can surely dispense with the myth of the pure original to which every adaptation must conform. If ‘true Buddhism’ is only one that is unalloyed by novel cultural elements, no forms of Buddhism existing today qualify. ... Every extant form of Buddhism has been shaped and reconfigured by the great diversity of cultural and historical circumstances it has inhabited in its long and varied existence. Buddhist traditions—indeed all traditions—have constantly re-created themselves in response to unique historical and cultural conditions, amalgamating elements of new cultures, jettisoning those no longer viable in a new context, and asking questions that previous incarnations of Buddhism could not possibly have asked.”³⁶

Ann Gleig, in an article describing the celebration of Eros in American Buddhism—“From Theravāda to Tantra: The Making of an American Tantric Buddhism?”—echoes many of McMahan’s assertions and concludes:

“In the absence of a pure Buddhism with which to compare and measure contemporary developments against, how are we to respond to these questions of authenticity and legitimation? ... [T]o ask if any of the various forms of Buddhist modernism are legitimate is to ask whether there are communities of practice that have been convinced of their legitimacy.”³⁷

As these quotations indicate, the Buddha’s comment that the True Dhamma disappears when counterfeit Dhamma is created has been borne out in the modern academy. There is no True Dhamma in the academy at all. There is just Buddhism, and as far as the academy is concerned, Buddhism is a tradition whose story is all about being adaptable over time and finding enough followers to accept the adaptations. Small wonder, as we will see in the next chapter, that exponents of Buddhist Romanticism use these Romantic arguments

from the academy to lend academic authority to the changes they are making in the Dhamma.

PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY



While thinkers in the fields of the psychology of religion and the history of religion have—at least professionally—abandoned the idea that religions teach metaphysical truths, that idea has survived in the field named after a book that Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) published in 1944–45: *The Perennial Philosophy*. The basic premise of the perennial philosophy is that there is a core of truths recognized by the greatest spiritual masters in all the great world religions. As Huxley expressed it, that core has three dimensions, all based on the principle of monism:

Metaphysically, there is a divine Ground that forms the single substance underlying and identical with phenomena; psychologically, one's individual soul is not really individual, in that it is identical with that divine Ground; and ethically, the purpose of life is to arrive at a unitive experience of this already-existing unity, in which the knower and the known are one.

The truth claim of this premise is based on the principle of corroboration: that because all great spiritual teachers agree on this premise, it must be true. We will examine the validity of this truth claim below, but first we need to examine its history, to see how Romantic religion came to shape Huxley's thinking, both on the issue of what constitutes a great religion, and on the issue of what all great religions teach. To the extent that Huxley's writing influenced Western Buddhist teachers—and the influence is extensive—this history will help us see how the Romanticism implicit in the perennial philosophy has played a role in shaping Buddhist Romanticism today.

As it turns out, two currents of Romantic thought converged in Huxley's religious philosophy. As a Westerner, he picked up some Romantic influences directly from his education and culture. As a pupil of Indian religious teachers, he received corroborating influences indirectly via the Western education received in India by the teachers in his lineage. Because the second current is unusual and somewhat unexpected—much like the introduction of American pizza to Italy—we will focus our primary attention on it. As we do so, we will see how Asian religions in general were changed by Western ideas before they were exported to the West, and how some of the changes went deeper than mere repackaging. They also altered the content.

One of the main influences in the Westernization of Asian religions in Asia came from Hegel. As we saw in the last section, he taught that every culture and race has contributed its own peculiar strengths to the religious progress of the world. And in his eyes, of course, the pinnacle of progress had been achieved in Protestant Christianity. When this theory was brought by European colonial powers to the countries in Asia where they established schools, some of their students adopted Hegel's basic script of the march of religious progress but rewrote the parts, so that their own religions, rather than Christianity, played the starring role. Reformed Zen in Japan was one example; Neo-Hinduism in India was another.

Neo-Hinduism is the name currently given to a religious movement in 19th century India—centered in Calcutta and, with the passage of time, conducted primarily by Indians trained in British schools—to reform the Indian religious tradition from one of multiple separate religions into a single religion that would be in a better position to ward off the influx of foreign religions on Indian soil.

The basic premise of the movement was that the varieties of religious experiences and practices in India hid an underlying unity: All gods and goddesses were expressions of a single God, *Brahmā*, who was also the one substance permeating the individual soul and all of creation; the *Upaniṣads* and *Bhagavad Gīta* were the primary texts underlying all Indian religious beliefs; and the differences among the various sects were simply adaptations of the one true message, adaptations designed

to appeal to the needs of people at different stages of development on the common path leading to union with Brahmā.

This was a radical recasting of the Indian religious tradition. To begin with, the Upaniṣads had long been treated as secret texts, revealed only to brahman initiates. Thus they could not be the common source of all Indian religious beliefs. Similarly, union with Brahmā was a goal traditionally reserved only for brahmins and denied to other castes, so it could not be the universal Indian religious goal. Nevertheless, by dint of education and propaganda, the leaders of the Neo-Hindu movement were able to convince both their British colonizers and many of their fellow Indians that this was the actual religious tradition that India had inherited from its past.

The figure most commonly recognized as the founder of the movement was Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), who founded the Brahmo Samaj, a society devoted to the dissemination of Upaniṣadic and Vedantic teachings, in 1828. As far as can be ascertained, he was the person who had earlier coined the term, “Hinduism,” in 1814. In other words, “Hinduism” was a Neo-Hindu construct. Some scholars, however, debate whether Neo-Hinduism had roots going back further than the arrival of the English in India, and there is good evidence that Neo-Hinduism had its roots at least in the 18th century, as a reaction not to the Europeans, but to the challenge presented by Islam.

To begin with, there is the fact that some of the earliest Europeans to learn Sanskrit from brahmanical teachers in Calcutta—Charles Wilkins and Henry Thomas Colebrooke—were led, prior to Roy’s work, straight to the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gīta as most representative of Indian religious beliefs. Traditionally, as foreigners outside the caste system, they would have been denied access to the Upaniṣads. However, the willingness of their teachers to show them these texts would not be unusual if we assume that Sanskrit pundits, in their earlier confrontation with Islam, had focused on the same texts. In dealing with a monotheism of the Book, such as Islam, it would be strategic to claim that Indian religions, too, had a Book, and the Bhagavad Gīta would be a likely candidate for that Book, inasmuch as it taught monotheism, too.

As for the Upaniṣads—especially as interpreted by Advaita Vedanta, which focused on their monism—they would have been useful in

opening dialogue with the monistic branch of Islam, Sufism. In fact, the first translation of the Upaniṣads into a non-Indian language—Persian—was completed in 1657 at the request of a crown prince in the Moghul dynasty who had Sufi leanings. These facts help to explain why Roy's first book on the Upaniṣads, *Gift to the Monotheists* (1803–04), was written in Persian and aimed at a Sufi audience.

So when the Sanskrit pundits encountered Christianity—another monotheism with a Book—they adopted the same strategy. Wilkins was introduced to the monotheism in the Bhagavad Gīta, and Colebrooke to the monism of the Aitareya Upaniṣad. This means that when Roy completed a translation of the Kena Upaniṣad into English in 1816, he was simply following an earlier precedent.

However, as the 19th century progressed and the British took control of India, Indian students trained in British schools realized that there was more to European spirituality than just Christianity. There was European philosophy as well. Although many of the philosophers taught in British schools—such as John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer—were agnostic, others, such as Spinoza, Emerson, and Hegel, were not only monotheists, but monists to boot. The simple fact that their views were in harmony with Advaita Vedanta held out the possibility of a meaningful dialogue between cultures. And the vitalism taught by Emerson and Hegel offered a new twist on monism that was eventually absorbed into Neo-Hinduism.

The example of Swami Vivekananda (Narendranath Datta, 1863–1902) offers a case in point. Trained in British schools, he was exposed at an early age to a wide range of European philosophers, among them Spencer, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. He was especially drawn to those whose philosophies focused on progress and change, apparently because they explained the progress of the British and how India might start making progress of its own. Spencer and Hegel were the two philosophers with the most lasting influence in shaping Vivekananda's vitalism, although they taught him different lessons on how the principle of vitalism could be used to move India forward.

From Spencer—the famous proponent of the ideology now known as social Darwinism (even though he formulated it before Darwin published his findings on evolution)—the young Narendranath learned



the social principle of the survival of the fittest: Social organizations are like organisms that must compete with other organizations in order to survive, with the victory going to those whose strengths enable them best to thrive in the competitive environment. Later in his career—under his ordained name, Vivekananda—he used this theory to explain why Buddhism had failed to survive in India and, in its downfall, after sapping the strength of the Indian race by getting too many people to join its celibate order, had brought India to ruin as well. At the same time, he also used Spencerian principles to advance a program for the strengthening of the Indian race so that it

could throw off its European oppressors.

From Hegel, Narendranath had learned that social progress is led by the evolution of Mind, and that this evolution follows the dialectical pattern of moving forward by digging back into the most ancient assumptions underlying earlier thought. Thus the way to lead India forward—so that it would develop, in his words, “muscles of steel and nerves of iron”—was to return to the deepest principles underlying Indian religion, which he came to believe lay in Advaita Vedanta. Narendranath also learned from Hegel the idea that the history of the religions of the world is a vast drama in which all cultures and religions play a distinctive part, culminating in a unitive knowledge of the One Mind or One Soul at work both within and without. Given that the Upaniṣads were older than Christianity, and that Vedanta taught monism in much more definitive terms, it is easy to see how, as Vivekananda, he could put Hegel’s principles together in such a way that Vedanta, rather than Christianity, was to be the religion of the future. This explains why he went on lecture tours not only throughout India, but also twice into the West before his early death at age 39.

In the West, he encountered resistance from conservative Christians but he also found a select, receptive audience whose attitudes had been shaped by the Romantics. By extolling India as the source of spiritual inspiration, by claiming that vitalistic monism was the most advanced spiritual teaching, and by portraying the religions of the world as part of a common quest to realize the monistic vision, the Romantics and their transmitters had paved the way for Vivekananda's teachings to take root in the West.

In teaching Vedanta both in India and the West, Vivekananda formulated the principle that was to provide the underpinning for Huxley's perennial philosophy: that when comparing different religious traditions, the differences are of no account; only the similarities matter. Thus he was able to brush over the many differences not only among Indian religions, but also the religions of the world. In this, he followed the Romantic program that attributed differences among religions to the accidents of personality and culture, whereas the core religious experience for all was the same: union with the infinite. The main point of difference was that, for the Romantics, the infinite was totally immanent; whereas for Vivekananda, it was both immanent and transcendent. This point was to resurface in Huxley's perennial philosophy, too.

One of Vivekananda's disciples, Swami Prabhavananda, was placed in charge of the Vedanta Society of Los Angeles. He, in turn, was Huxley's teacher. When Huxley later came to compose *The Perennial Philosophy*, he adopted from his teachers the principle that the one force permeating and underlying the cosmos was both immanent and transcendent. On this point, he was more Vedantic than Romantic. And he differed both from Vivekananda and Romantics like Schelling in abandoning the idea of the inevitable spiritual progress of the human race—after all, he was writing during World War II, which severely challenged the idea that humanity was moving ever upward. Otherwise, though, *The Perennial Philosophy* expresses a wider range of Romantic principles than Huxley had learned from his Vedantic teachers.

To begin with, there is the underlying assumption about what religion is and the questions it is meant to address. Like both the Vedantics and the Romantics, Huxley presents religion as a question of

relationship between the individual and the divine, in which the main questions addressed are, “What is my True Self? What is its relationship to the cosmos? And what is its relationship to the divine Ground underlying both?” These questions, according to Huxley, belong to the field of “autology,” or the “science of the eternal Self.” And the answer —“the most emphatically insisted upon by all exponents of the Perennial Philosophy”—is that this Self is “in the depth of particular, individualized selves, and identical with, or at least akin to, the divine Ground.”³⁸

“Based upon the direct experience of those who have fulfilled the necessary conditions of such knowledge, this teaching is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula, *tat tvam asi* (‘That art thou’); the Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being is to discover the fact for himself, to find out Who he really is....

“Only the transcendent, the completely other, can be immanent without being modified by the becoming of that in which it dwells. The Perennial Philosophy teaches that it is desirable and indeed necessary to know the spiritual Ground of things, not only within the soul, but also outside in the world and, beyond world and soul, in its transcendent otherness.”³⁹

Huxley then quotes approvingly a passage from William Law, an 18th century mystic, to the effect that this Ground, both within and without, is infinite.

“This depth is the unity, the eternity—I had almost said the infinity—of the soul; for it is so infinite that nothing can satisfy it or give it rest but the infinity of God.”⁴⁰

Although Huxley presents this Ground—God in his various names—as both transcendent and immanent, he gives something of a Romantic twist to the idea of God’s immanence. In a peculiar passage, explaining the existence of evil in a universe that is the expression of a single divine power, Huxley falls back on an organic model to explain the relationship

of all creation to God: We are all individual organs within a much larger organism permeated with God. From this analogy, Huxley argues a position similar to Hölderlin's: that the universe, being infinite, ultimately lies beyond good and evil, and that peace can be found only by adopting this universal view. After pointing out that many individuals—i.e., other organs in the universal organism—behave selfishly, Huxley states:

“In such circumstances it would be extraordinary if the innocent and righteous did not suffer—just as it would be extraordinary if the innocent kidneys and the righteous heart were not to suffer for the sins of a licorous palate and overloaded stomach, sins, we may add, imposed upon those organs by the will of the gluttonous individual to whom they belong.... The righteous man can escape suffering only by accepting it and passing beyond it; and he can accomplish this only by being converted from righteousness to total selflessness and God-centredness.”⁴¹

In making this point, however, Huxley doesn't seem to realize that he has portrayed God as a glutton and a lush. Thus the passage has the double effect of adding confusion to the problem it attempts to solve, at the same time undermining much of the rest of his book.

This unfortunate passage aside, there are other features of Romantic religion that Huxley transmits in a fairly unaltered manner.

For example, his definition of the basic spiritual problem is that people suffer from their sense of having a separate self. This sense of separation causes suffering both because it produces feelings of isolation and also because it leads to the notion of a separate free will. Like Schelling and Hegel, Huxley regards the idea of individual will and its freedom to choose as the “root of all sin,” for such a will can have only one purpose: “to get and hold for oneself.” And, like them, he derives this low evaluation of individual freedom from his vision of a monistic, organic universe. In such a universe, the idea that one part of the organism would have a will of its own would be detrimental to the survival of the whole organism, and then, of course, to the survival of the individual part.

The solution to the problem of the “separative self” is a direct, unitive consciousness of the divine substance, in which the knower, the knowledge, and the known are one. This experience is the same for all who have it, meaning that differences among religious teachings are merely a matter of personality and culture. Thus the differing names by which it is known—God, Suchness, Allah, the Tao, the World Soul—are to be taken as synonyms for the one Ground. And he assumes that this Ground has a will, just as the Romantic World Soul operates with a purpose. It functions not only as that which is known in the religious experience but also as the inspiration within the knower to open up to its preexisting unity with the Ground.

Huxley notes that many people can have this unitive experience spontaneously—he cites Wordsworth and Byron as examples—but he makes a distinction between what James would have called experiences of conversion and sanctification. If the conversion does not lead to sanctification, or further cultivation of this consciousness, it is little more than an invitation declined—and, as in the cases of Wordsworth and Byron, has little lasting effect.

“At the best such sudden accessions of ‘cosmic consciousness’... are merely unusual invitations to further personal effort in the direction of the inner height as well as the external fullness of knowledge. In a great many cases the invitation is not accepted; the gift is prized for the ecstatic pleasure it brings; its coming is remembered nostalgically and, if the recipient happens to be a poet, written about with eloquence.”⁴²

To be truly fruitful, the unitive experience has to be cultivated by a process that Huxley calls *mortification*. By this he means not so much mortification of the flesh as mortification of the individual will: adopting an attitude that he variously describes as docility, obedience, submission, receptivity, and acceptance. The only positive exercise of individual freedom is to willingly abandon it:

“Deliverance... is achieved by obedience and docility to the eternal Nature of Things. We have been given free will, in order

that we may will our self-will out of existence and so come to live continuously in a 'state of grace.' All our actions must be directed, in the last analysis, to making ourselves passive in relation to the activity and the being of divine Reality. We are, as it were, Aeolian harps, endowed with the power either to expose themselves to the wind of the spirit or to shut themselves away from it."⁴³

Like the Romantics, Huxley compares the cultivation of this receptive attitude to the state of mind that a true artist must cultivate before creating art of genuine value, although he recognizes that spiritual cultivation is a much more rigorous process. He also warns that heroic efforts to purify oneself in the course of this cultivation are counter-productive. Only through the negation of self-will and the ego can one open to the grace offered by the Ground:

"But stoical austerity is merely the exaltation of the more creditable side of the ego at the expense of the less creditable. Holiness, on the contrary, is the total denial of the separative self, in its creditable no less than its discreditable aspects, and the abandonment of the will to God."⁴⁴

Also Romantic is Huxley's comment that one of the results of the unitive experience is that nature is seen as sacred. Strangely, given that he was a novelist, he devotes no space in *The Perennial Philosophy* to the idea that unitive experience automatically issues in a desire to express it aesthetically. In this, he departs from the Romantics and is more in line with the Vedantic tradition. But he is thoroughly Romantic in his insistence that, because the Ground lies beyond common notions of good and evil, the experience of the Ground finds its moral expression not through rules, but through an attitude of love that makes rules unnecessary. To bolster this point, he quotes, out of context, a passage from Augustine (who had counseled not simply to love, but to love God):

"From all this it follows that charity is the root and substance of morality... All this has been summed up in Augustine's formula: 'Love, and do what you like.'⁴⁵

Huxley does add, however, that this sense of love is not incompatible with the idea of divine commandments. In fact—in a passage that may have been Maslow’s inspiration for *Religion, Values, and Peak Experiences*—Huxley states that unitive consciousness is the source of all moral values.

“We see then that, for the Perennial Philosophy, good is the separate self’s conformity to, and finally annihilation in, the divine Ground which gives it being; evil, the intensification of separateness, the refusal to know that the Ground exists. This doctrine is, of course, perfectly compatible with the formulation of ethical principles as a series of negative and positive divine commandments, or even in terms of social utility. The crimes which are everywhere forbidden proceed from states of mind which are everywhere condemned as wrong; and these wrong states of mind are, as a matter of empirical fact, absolutely incompatible with that unitive knowledge of the divine Ground, which, according to the Perennial Philosophy, is the supreme good.”⁴⁶

Huxley does not directly address the question of whether mortification is a process that arrives at its goal, or is one that must be constantly pursued throughout life, but he does seem to endorse the latter position by quoting Augustine, this time more accurately:

“If thou shouldst say, ‘It is enough, I have reached perfection,’ all is lost. For it is the function of perfection to make one know one’s imperfection.”⁴⁷

Unlike the Romantics, Huxley does not recommend erotic love as a means of mortification, nor does he assume that religions have progressed or are destined to progress over time. As for one’s duty to make one’s religion evolve, Huxley has little to say on the topic except that world peace will be impossible unless all religions evolve to the point where they accept the perennial philosophy as their common core.

As we noted above, the truth claim of the perennial philosophy is based on the principle of corroboration: the claim that these teachings

are common to all the world's great spiritual traditions, stretching back to prehistoric times. There are two good reasons, though, for rejecting this claim.

The first is that, even if it were true that all religious traditions, in their highest expression, hold to these teachings, it would not be a sound basis for a truth claim. The traditions, for all we know, could all be wrong. Human beings, throughout history, have agreed on many things that have since been proven false.

The second reason for questioning Huxley's claim is the sheer fact that these teachings are not common to all religions. Theravāda—what Vivekananda called the Southern School of Buddhism, and Huxley called Hīnayāna—is a major case in point. Whereas the perennial philosophy teaches religion as an answer to questions about the relationship between self and cosmos, Theravāda puts those questions aside. The perennial philosophers teach a true Self; Theravāda, not-self. The perennial philosophy teaches union with God as the highest goal; Theravāda calls union with Brahmā a goal inferior to unbinding (MN 83; [MN 97](#)). And whereas the perennial philosophy teaches that the Ground of Being has a will, and that its grace is necessary to attain the highest goal, Theravāda teaches that unbinding is totally without a will—being unfabricated, it does not fabricate any intentions at all—and that it is reached, not through grace, but through one's own efforts.

These differences presented problems both for Vivekananda and for Huxley, and they tried to overcome them by using a variety of tactics.

Vivekananda visited Sri Lanka to gain the support of the Buddhist monks there in creating a unified Hinduism that would contain Buddhism in its fold, but he was understandably rebuffed. For the remainder of his life, he had very little good to say about the Buddhist Saṅgha.

When it came to the topic of the Buddha, though, Vivekananda adopted three strategies in his addresses to American audiences to dispense with the areas where Buddhist teachings contradicted those of Advaita Vedanta:

1) In “Buddha's Message to the World” (1900), he portrayed the Buddha as a well-meaning reformer who had taught not-self and no-God as a way of undoing the selfish exploitation that characterized the caste

system of his time. However, in spite of the Buddha's good intentions, his teachings were so out of step with the reality of God and Soul that they disappeared in India—and deservedly so. In this presentation of the Buddha, Vivekananda took pains to express admiration for the Buddha as a man, but not as a philosopher.

2) In “Buddhism, the Fulfillment of Hinduism” (1893), Vivekananda insisted that the Buddha was misunderstood by his followers, and that his teachings were really meant to be in line with the Vedanta—which Vivekananda, like many Indians of his time, believed to have predated the Buddha. For example, when the Buddha taught not-self, Vivekananda claimed, he was denying the existence not of the True Self, but of the false separate self. The implication of this claim, of course, is the Buddha's discourses are not to be taken at face value when they say that the idea of a universal self is completely foolish (§21). Like Hegel, Vivekananda was convinced that his beliefs gave him insight into intentions that lay below the surface and subverted the meaning of the surface.

3) In “The Vedanta Philosophy” (1896), Vivekananda claimed that the true essence of the Buddha's teachings was to be found in the Mahāyāna—what he called the Northern School—and that the Southern School could simply be dismissed.

Huxley, in dealing with the problem of the Buddha, fleshed out all three strategies and used them to support one another. This is clearest in his treatment of the teaching on not-self.

In one instance, Huxley adopts the first strategy, treating the not-self teaching—in its interpretation as a no-self teaching—as simply inadequate to answer the questions that would animate a metaphysician, in particular, those around the question of an intelligent design to the cosmos:

“Hume and the Buddhists give a sufficiently realistic description of selfness in action but they fail to explain how or why the bundles ever became bundles. Did their constituent atoms of experience come together of their own accord? And, if so, why, or by what means, and within what kind of a non-spatial universe? To give a plausible answer to these questions in terms of *anatta* is so

difficult that we are forced to abandon the doctrine in favour of the notion that, behind the flux and within the bundles, there exists some kind of permanent soul by which experience is organized and which in turn makes use of that organized experience to become a particular and unique personality.”⁴⁸

Here Huxley is adopting the Romantic view of causality, in which complex interacting systems can be explained only in terms of an organic, purposeful will.

In another passage, Huxley starts with strategy number 2, following Vivekananda’s example: The not-self teaching was intended to deny, not the universal Self, but only the personal self. Therefore it is actually in line with the perennial philosophy.

“Let it suffice to point out that, when he insisted that human beings are by nature ‘non-Atman,’ the Buddha was evidently speaking about the personal self and not the universal Self.... What... Gautama denies is the substantial nature and eternal persistence of the individual psyche.... About the existence of the Atman that is Brahman, as about most other metaphysical matters, the Buddha declines to speak, on the grounds that such discussions do not tend to edification or spiritual progress among the members of a monastic order, such as he had founded.”⁴⁹

As we have noted, this misrepresents the Buddha. Not only did he say that the idea of a universal Self is a foolish doctrine (§21); he also explicitly applied the teaching on not-self to all possible ideas of self, including a self that is infinite (§18).

Huxley then goes on to combine strategy number 3 with strategy number 1, asserting—without supporting his assertion—that the sort of metaphysical questions the Buddha deliberately put aside actually need to be asked and answered, and that the Mahāyāna, in answering those questions, made Buddhism truly great. In other words, Huxley is defining “great religion” as any religion that articulates the perennial philosophy—which turns the truth claim of perennial philosophy into a tautology: I.e., the perennial philosophy is true because all great

religions teach it, but a religion can be called great only when it teaches the perennial philosophy.

At the same time, Huxley—like Māluṅkyaputta (§5)—is criticizing the Buddha for not answering the sort questions that Māluṅkyaputta wanted answered, but that the Buddha saw as obstacles in the path to the end of suffering.

“But though it has its dangers, though it may become the most absorbing, because the most serious and noblest, of distractions, metaphysical thinking is unavoidable and finally necessary. Even the Hinayanists found this, and the later Mahayanists were to develop, in connection with the practice of their religion, a splendid and imposing system of cosmological, ethical and psychological thought. This system was based upon the postulates of a strict idealism and professed to dispense with the idea of God. But moral and spiritual experience was too strong for philosophical theory, and under the inspiration of direct experience, the writers of the Mahayana sutras found themselves using all their ingenuity to explain why the Tathagata and the Bodhisattas display an infinite charity towards beings that do not really exist. At the same time they stretched the framework of subjective idealism so as to make room for Universal Mind; qualified the idea of soullessness with the doctrine that, if purified, the individual mind can identify itself with the Universal Mind or Buddha-womb; and, while maintaining godlessness, asserted that this realizable Universal Mind is the inner consciousness of the eternal Buddha and that the Buddha-mind is associated with ‘a great compassionate heart’ which desires the liberation of every sentient being and bestows divine grace on all who make a serious effort to achieve man’s final end. In a word, despite their inauspicious vocabulary, the best of the Mahayana sutras contain an authentic formulation of the Perennial Philosophy—a formulation which in some respects... is more complete than any other.”⁵⁰

Huxley also uses strategies number 2 and 3 to explain that the Buddha really believed in God as the ultimate Ground, but that his

rhetorical style obscured this point until the Mahayanists realized that this assumption was a necessary part of his teaching:

“The Buddha declined to make any statement in regard to the ultimate divine Reality. All he would talk about was Nirvana, which is the name of the experience that comes to the totally selfless and one-pointed. To this same experience others have given the name of union with Brahman, with Al Haqq, with the immanent and transcendent Godhead. Maintaining, in this matter, the attitude of a strict operationalist, the Buddha would speak only of the spiritual experience, not of the metaphysical entity presumed by the theologians of other religions, as also of later Buddhism, to be the object and (since in contemplation the knower, the known and the knowledge are all one) at the same time the subject and substance of that experience.”⁵¹

This, of course, ignores the Buddha’s repeated emphasis that unbinding was not identical with the brahmanical goal of union with Brahmā, that the latter goal was inferior because it was still stuck in becoming, and so did not lead to the end of suffering. Although Huxley treats union with Brahmā as an eternal state lying beyond the flux of becoming, the Buddha saw that any sense of identity—even with an infinite being—actually lies within the flux of becoming because it is based on subtle craving.

The fact that Huxley is rewriting the Dhamma in a way that offers no release from becoming is reflected in his use of strategy number 2 to rewrite the noble eightfold path. In his account, the first seven factors are meant to impose a regimen of mortification—which, by his definition, is not a matter of self-cleansing or self-mastery through the mature cultivation of one’s freedom of choice. Instead, it is a matter of opening oneself up to divine grace. As for why the Buddha neglected to mention the need for grace, he wrote:

“Of the means which are employed by the divine Ground for helping human beings to reach their goal, the Buddha of the Pali scriptures (a teacher whose dislike of ‘footless questions’ is no less

intense than that of the severest experimental physicist of the twentieth century) declines to speak.”⁵²

In other words, in Huxley’s eyes, the Buddha gave an incomplete picture of the path because his rhetorical style got in the way.

To make the noble eightfold path lead not to the end of becoming, but to a refined level of becoming in which one attained union with the Ground of the universe, Huxley redefined the factors of the path. A look at his version of two of the factors will show how he managed this. First, right view—or in his terms, right belief:

“Complete deliverance is conditional on the following: first, Right Belief in the all too obvious truth that the cause of pain and evil is craving for separative, ego-centred existence, with its corollary that there can be no deliverance from evil, whether personal or collective, except by getting rid of such craving and the obsession of ‘I,’ ‘me,’ ‘mine.’”⁵³

In terms of the Dhamma, Huxley has redefined “complete deliverance” to mean release only from a separative self-identity, and not from all forms of self-identity, separative or unitive. In practical terms, this is shown by his definition of the last factor of the path:

“...eighth, Right Contemplation, the unitive knowledge of the Ground.”⁵⁴

Here Huxley presents, as the goal of the practice, a revived version of a step that the Buddha included as part of the path to the goal. From the point of view of the Dhamma, only when one drops any perception of “Ground” and any identification with unitive knowledge—which, by nature, is fabricated—can one attain final release.

From this discussion of Huxley’s treatment of Buddhism, two points are clear:

1) To make Buddhism fit in with the perennial philosophy, he had to extensively rewrite it, at the same time criticizing the Buddha: The Buddha was unwise not to address metaphysical questions about the

nature of the world and the self; his doctrines on not-self and nirvāṇa were incomplete, leading to a confusion that was cleared up only in the Mahāyāna. Whether Huxley was correct in making these criticisms, the fact that he had to revise the Buddha's teaching so radically to make it fit into the perennial philosophy shows that the truth claim of that philosophy—that it is true because all great traditions agree with it—is bogus.

2) From the point of view of the Dhamma, Huxley's revised Buddhism is inferior to the original Dhamma in that it can lead not to the total cessation of becoming, but only to a refined level of becoming. Thus it cannot lead to total freedom from suffering and stress. And by asserting that differences among religious traditions don't really matter, Huxley has obscured an important principle: that differences in belief *do* matter when they lead to differences in behavior. From this principle follows the Buddha's teaching on how truth claims made by different teachings can be tested: not by agreement among views, but by the results that come when teachings are put into practice. In this way, too, Huxley has promoted an inferior version of the Dhamma, denying any possible way for religious truth claims to be tested through action.

Despite Huxley's rough treatment of Buddhism, *The Perennial Philosophy* has had an enormous influence on the development of Buddhist Romanticism: both directly, on those who read the book, and indirectly, through the book's influence on Maslow.

Part of this influence can be explained by the fact that the book opened the minds of many Westerners to the idea that religions of the East, such as Buddhism, have something valuable to offer, and that the preference of one religion over another could be simply a matter of personal taste—as long as that religion was interpreted in a monistic way. People already favorably disposed to monism—through Emerson and other transmitters of Romantic religion—found this condition easy to accept. Those with a positive relationship to the Judeo-Christian tradition felt that they could adopt Buddhist teachings and practices without conflict; those with a negative relationship to that tradition felt that they could find spiritual nurture in Buddhism, free from the faith demands of the synagogue or the church. In this way, the idea of a

perennial philosophy eased the way of many Westerners into Buddhist thought and practice.

But even though *The Perennial Philosophy* helped open the way for Buddhism to be accepted in the West, it did so at a price. Because it misrepresented the Buddha's teachings, it brought many people to Buddhism on false pretenses. To the extent that Huxley's rewriting of the Dhamma contained many elements of Romantic religion, it led them to believe that the Dhamma and Romantic religion were the same thing. This is one of the reasons why the development of Buddhist Romanticism has been so invisible, even to those responsible for it.

At the same time, because *The Perennial Philosophy* claimed that the choice of a tradition was merely a matter of taste and personal attraction, it downplayed the extent to which the choice of a practice really does make a difference in action. In this way, it has led many Westerners to believe that the act of mixing and matching the Dhamma with other teachings carries no practical consequences, and is instead simply a matter of aesthetics and taste. This in turn has led many Western Buddhist teachers to believe that their primary duty as teachers is not to remain faithful to the tradition, but to make themselves and their teachings attractive through an appeal to ecumenism. This is why teacher biographies often list non-Buddhist teachings from which the teachers take inspiration, and why Rumi, for example, is so often quoted in Buddhist writings and talks.

Finally, the truth claims of the perennial philosophy—even though they don't stand up to scrutiny—have justified many Western Buddhist teachers in their belief that if a tenet of the perennial philosophy doesn't exist in the Dhamma, they are doing the Dhamma a favor by adding it to the mix. Because many such tenets are actually derived from Romantic religion, this is one more way in which *The Perennial Philosophy* has promoted the obscuration of the Dhamma and the rise of Buddhist Romanticism in its place.

THE CUMULATIVE TRANSMISSION

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, very few people still read the early Romantics. However, the transmitters of Romantic religion

surveyed in this chapter—especially Emerson, James, Jung, Maslow, and Huxley—are still widely read for inspiration. At the same time, they have exerted an influence on the fields of literature, the psychology of religion, the history of religion, and the discourse of perennial philosophy—fields that to a greater or lesser extent are accorded respect in our culture. This is why the ideas of Romantic religion have not only survived into the present day, but have done so with a measure of authority.

And when we look at the premises of Romantic religion that these authorities have transmitted, we find that almost all the defining features of Romantic religion have survived intact, beginning with the Romantic view on the prime question raised by religion—the relationship between the individual and the cosmos—and the answer to that question: that the individual is an organic part of the larger organism of the cosmos. Also intact are the Romantic ideas about there being one religious experience, along with the nature of that experience; the psychological illness that that experience heals; the way that experience is to be cultivated; the results of that experience; the status of religious texts as expressions of feelings; and the duty of individuals to help their religions evolve.

The various Romantic positions on the relationship among inner oneness, freedom, and duty in an organic universe have also been transmitted intact. Emerson followed Schlegel in asserting the duty to be free to express one's intuitions without being confined by society's rules, and to follow those intuitions as they change over time; Jung, like Hölderlin, asserted the duty to allow one's aesthetic intuitions to govern one's search for the peace of inner integration; Hegel and Huxley followed Schelling in asserting one's duty to abandon one's individual will in favor of the universal will.

Transmitters of Romantic religion have also transmitted the paradox at the heart of Romantic religion: On the one hand, it asserts the individual's complete freedom to create his or her own religion, a religion that no one else is in a position to judge. Emerson is the prime exponent of this side of the paradox. On the other hand, Romantic religion proposes an objective standard for judging religious views, stating that individuals are free to create their own religions only

because they are an organic part of a monistic, vitalistic cosmos. This view of the cosmos, in their eyes, is the most advanced—and thus objectively the best—worldview that a religion can teach. Maslow and Huxley are the prime exponents of this second side of the paradox.

In fact, among the 20th century thinkers we have considered, only one principle of Romantic religion cannot be explicitly found: the idea that the immanent organic unity of the universe is *infinite*. Huxley comes close, but his infinity is ultimately transcendent, in that part of it lies beyond time and space. This gap in the transmission of Romantic religion, however, is not a major one. The infinitude of the universe, for the Romantics, meant ultimately that its purpose could not be fathomed, an idea that remains common in our culture for other reasons. So for all practical purposes, the tradition of Romantic religion is still intact. And although Buddhist Romanticism follows the 20th century transmitters of Romantic religion in dropping “infinite” from its description of universal organic unity, it follows the Romantics in seeing the ultimate purpose of that unity as lying beyond the powers of the human mind to fathom.

Some of the transmitters of Romantic religion have introduced a few innovations in the tradition. Emerson and James, for instance, have redefined authenticity in moral, rather than aesthetic terms, although Emerson’s approach to morality meant that this concept retained its sense of being authentic to oneself—in all one’s inconsistencies—and not to any consistent principles of reason.

Also, different transmitters have added their own variations to the already varied Romantic ideas of what inner integration means. As we noted in Chapter Four, the early Romantics regarded inner integration as a matter of reestablishing unity to heal two inner splits: between the body and mind on the one hand, and between reason and feeling on the other. As the transmitters of Romantic religion brought these ideas into the present, some of them—such as Jung and Maslow—were more explicit than others in discussing the unity of body and mind. All, however, offered their own ideas of what unity within the mind might be and how it might be found. For Emerson, it meant staying true to one’s intuitions, wherever they might lead; for James, it meant developing a coherent will, giving order to one’s overall aims in life. For Jung, inner

unity meant opening a dialogue among the ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. For Maslow, inner unity was an affair of unitive consciousness, which he defined in terms reminiscent of Novalis: the ability to see the ordinary affairs of the world as sacred. Huxley also defined inner unity as unitive consciousness, but for him this concept meant a mode of knowing in which knower and known are one. In other words, inner unity meant seeing one's unity with the world outside.

What this means is that the Romantic idea of inner oneness has come to carry a wide variety of meanings—so wide that it's possible to say *inner oneness* to, say, ten people and for them to hear ten different positive things. This fuzziness in the concept has lived on in Buddhist Romanticism.

Yet the process of transmission has brought about still another change in Romantic religion that has had an even more important effect on Buddhist Romanticism. That is the change effected by James and Jung. Both of these thinkers showed that even though Romantic thought originally depended on a particular view of the physical universe, many Romantic principles about the psychological value of religion could survive even when the dominant paradigm in the physical sciences changed. To allow for this survival, both men had to reinterpret them, not as principles built into the fabric of the cosmos, but as principles useful from a phenomenological point of view: solving the problems of consciousness as felt from within.

However, neither James nor Jung, despite their broadmindedness, tested alternative principles for achieving psychological health, such as those offered by the Dhamma, most likely because they were not aware that these alternatives might exist. They simply picked up the principles that—both from the limited perspective of their personal religious experience and in the limited range of the Western philosophical and religious tradition—seemed most useful for their purposes. The limits of their personal experience can be seen in that, although they extolled a sense of Oneness as a religious goal, neither of them attained that Oneness to the point where they could assess its worthiness as a goal. The limits of the material they were working with can be seen most clearly in their understanding of what religious experiences might be

possible, and what kind of freedom or health could be derived from those experiences. The idea of an absolute freedom, attained once and for all, lay beyond their conception of what a human mind could do. They didn't realize that the varieties of actual religious experience were actually more various than the *Varieties* would suggest.

The overall effect of their work was that Romantic psychological principles took on a life of their own. Cut loose from their original metaphysical moorings, they became embedded as axioms in the field of psychology, but without having their assumptions carefully scrutinized or adequately tested against the wider range of religious experiences in non-Western cultures. This has allowed many people to adopt the principles of Romantic religion without being aware of their deeper implications, of the assumptions that underlie them, or of their history in the Romantic movement. And because Romantic religion regards religion not as a body of truths and skills to be tested, but as an evolving expressive art, the extent to which people *are* aware that they are changing the Dhamma as they fit it into a Western mold, they justify what they are doing as Good.

These are some of the reasons why Buddhist Romanticism has been developed by people who are largely ignorant of the Romantics and of the assumptions on which Romantic views are based. To free the Dhamma from Romantic distortions, this ignorance has to be addressed. The first, threefold step—identifying the principles of Romantic religion, their sources in our cultural history, and their transmission to the present—has now been completed. The remaining step, which we will take in the next chapter, is also threefold:

- 1) to identify the ways in which Romantic religion has found expression in Buddhist Romanticism;
- 2) to understand some of the factors in modern culture that incline people to find those expressions attractive; and
- 3) to compare those expressions with the actual Dhamma so as to assess the practical consequences of choosing Buddhist Romanticism over the Dhamma.

Only when these three topics have been covered will people in search of a path to the end of suffering be able to make an informed choice,

clear on the fact that the choice does matter, and that much can be lost by choosing the less effective alternative.

Buddhist Romanticism

Buddhist Romanticism is a result of a very natural human tendency: When presented with something foreign and new, people tend to see it in terms with which they already are familiar. Often they are totally unaware that they are doing this. If emotionally attached to their familiar way of viewing things, they will persist in holding to it even when shown that they are seeing only their own myths and projections, rather than what is actually there.

In most areas of life, this tendency is rightly regarded as a form of blindness, something to be overcome. However, in the transmission of the Dhamma to the West, even when people *are* aware that they are reshaping the Dhamma as they study and teach it, the Romantic principle that religion is an art form—creating myths in an ever-changing dialogue with ever-changing human needs—inclines them to regard this tendency as not only natural but also good. In extreme cases, they believe that there really is nothing “actually there.” In their eyes, the Dhamma itself is a body of myths, and they are doing it a favor by providing it with new myths in step with the times. There is very little recognition that something crucial and true is being lost.

Granted, there are some points on which Romantic religion and the Dhamma agree. Both see religion as a means for curing a spiritual disease; both regard the mind as having an active, interactive role in the world, shaping the world as it is being shaped by the world; both focus on the phenomenology of experience—consciousness as it is directly sensed, from within, as a primary source of knowledge; and both reject a deterministic or mechanical view of causality in favor of a more interactive one. But these points of similarity disguise deeper differences that can be recognized only when the larger structural differences separating the Dhamma from Romantic religion are made clear.

Those differences, in turn, will be acknowledged only when people can see that the Romantic viewpoint is actually getting in the way of their well-being, preventing them from gaining the most from their encounter with the Dhamma.

Thus the purpose of this chapter is threefold. The first purpose is to demonstrate that what is often taught and accepted as Buddhism in the West is actually Romantic religion dressed up in Buddhist garb. In other words, the basic structure of modern Buddhism is actually Romantic, with Buddhist elements reshaped so as to fit into the confines of that structure. This is why, as we noted in the Introduction, this tendency is best referred to as Buddhist Romanticism, rather than Romantic Buddhism.

The second purpose is to gain some distance from these Romantic assumptions by understanding why they hold attractions—and seeing that their attractions are dangerous, fostering an attitude of heedlessness that the Dhamma cites as the primary reason for making harmful and unskillful choices in life.

The third purpose is to expand on this last point, showing the practical implications of forcing the Dhamma into a Romantic mold. A main tenet of Buddhist Romanticism is one that can be traced back to Hölderlin: that your choice of a religious path is purely a matter of taste, and that whatever makes you feel good, peaceful, or whole at any given moment is perfectly valid. Ultimately, it doesn't really matter what you believe, as all beliefs are equally inadequate expressions of a feeling of Oneness. All that matters is learning how to use those beliefs to achieve their common goal, a temporary but personally very real impression of the Oneness of all Being.

From the perspective of the Dhamma, though, beliefs are not just feelings. They are a form of action. Actions have consequences both within and without, and it's important to be clear that your choices do make a difference, particularly when you realize that the Dhamma does not aim at a feeling of Oneness, and regards Oneness as only a step to a higher goal: total freedom. To genuinely benefit from your powers of choice and from the possibility of this higher goal, you owe it to yourself to understand the practical implications of holding to different systems of belief.

Because its purpose is threefold, the main body of this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section documents the existence of Romantic views in the talks and writings of modern teachers. At the same time, it shows how these views derive from the question and answer that provide the basic structure for Romantic spirituality—and thus the structure for Buddhist Romanticism. The second section discusses some of the possible reasons why Buddhist Romanticism holds an appeal for the modern world, and why that appeal is something to regard with distrust. The third section then contrasts the principles of Buddhist Romanticism with the Dhamma, pointing out some of the ways in which the choice of one over the other leads to radically different results.

The body of the chapter is then followed by a closing section that attempts to draw some conclusions from the preceding three.

VOICES OF BUDDHIST ROMANTICISM

Buddhist Romanticism is so pervasive in the modern understanding of the Dhamma that it is best approached, not as the work of specific individuals, but as a cultural syndrome: a general pattern of behavior in which modern Dhamma teachers and their audiences both share responsibility for influencing one another—the teachers, by how they try to explain and persuade; the audiences, by what they're inclined to accept or reject.

Thus, this section quotes passages from modern Dhamma books, articles, interviews, and talks to illustrate the various features of Romantic religion contained in modern Dhamma, but without identifying the authors of the passages by name. I do this as a way of following the example set by the Buddha: When discussing the teachings of his contemporaries to non-monastic audiences, he would quote their teachings but without naming the teachers ([DN 1](#); [MN 60](#); [MN 102](#)), the purpose being to focus attention not on the person but on the teaching. In that way he could discuss the reasoning behind the teaching, and the consequences of following the teaching, all the while focused on showing how these points were true regardless of who espoused the teaching.

In the same way, I want to focus attention, not on individuals who may advocate Buddhist Romantic ideas, but on the cultural syndrome they express, along with the practical consequences of following that syndrome. It's more important to know *what* Buddhist Romanticism is than to know *who* has been espousing it or to enter into fruitless debates about how Romantic a particular Buddhist teacher has to be in order to deserve the label, "Buddhist Romantic." By focusing directly on the syndrome, you can then learn to recognize it wherever it appears in the future.

Some of the teachers quoted here are lay; others, monastic. Some make an effort to shape their Romantic ideas into a coherent worldview; others don't. Some—and, ironically, these are among the most consistently Romantic in their own thought—misunderstand Romanticism to be nothing but anti-scientific emotionalism or egotism, and so have explicitly denounced it. But the tendency to Romanticize the Dhamma is present, at least to some extent, in them all.

We will follow the twenty points defining Romantic religion listed at the end of Chapter Four. However, because many of the passages quoted here cover several points at once, those points will be discussed together. Some of the points have been rephrased to reflect the fact, noted in the preceding chapter, that Buddhist Romanticism has followed such thinkers as James, Jung, and Maslow in dropping the idea of *infinity* from its view of the universe. Otherwise, only Point 18 in the original list is not explicitly present in the Theravāda version of Buddhist Romanticism, although it is strongly explicit in the Mahāyāna one. Still—as we will see—it is sometimes implicit in Theravāda Romanticism too.

These are the principles by which Buddhist Romanticism can be recognized:

The first three principles go together, as they describe both the basic question that the Dhamma is said to answer, and the answer it is said to provide.

1) The object of religion is not the end of suffering, but the relationship of humanity with the universe.

- 2) *The universe is a vast organic unity.*
- 3) *Each human being is both an individual organism and a part of the vast organic unity of the universe.*

“[W]ith the spiritual path, what we are aiming at is to penetrate the question of what we are.”

“According to the world’s great spiritual traditions and perennial philosophy, both East and West, the critical question that each of us must ask ourselves is ‘Who am I?’ Our response is of vital importance to our happiness and well-being. How at ease we feel in our body, mind, and in the world, as well as how we behave toward others and the environment all revolve around how we come to view ourselves in the larger scheme of things....

“Instead of asking ‘Who am I?’ the question could become ‘Who are *we*?’ Our inquiry then becomes a community koan, a joint millennial project, and we all immediately become great saints—called Bodhisattvas in Buddhism—helping each other evolve.”

“The goal [of Dhamma practice] is integration, through love and acceptance, openness and receptivity, leading to a unified wholeness of experience without the artificial boundaries of separate selfhood.”

This vision of our place in the universe is presented not only as a religious ideal but also as a scientific fact.

“Ironically, the dividing intellect—in its incarnation as modern science—is showing us our oneness with all things. The physicists have found evidence that we are subatomically joined at the hip to absolutely everything else in creation... The evolutionary scientists tell us a story of our emergence from a long lineage of beings in what seems like a miraculous process of bubbling, twitching, struggling life, recreating itself as it interactively adjusts to the ever-changing conditions of earth ecology... [I]f we could somehow integrate our knowledge of interconnection and let it infuse our lives—that would mark a revolution in both consciousness and

behavior. If we could experience our existence as part of the wondrous processes of biological and cosmic evolution, our lives would gain new meaning and joy.”

“What happens for us then is what every major religion has sought to offer—a shift in identification, a shift from the isolated ‘I’ to a new, vaster sense of what we are. This is understandable not only as a spiritual experience, but also, in scientific terms, as an evolutionary development. As living forms evolve on this planet, we move not only in the direction of diversification, but toward integration as well. Indeed, these two movements complement and enhance each other.... If we are all bodhisattvas, it is because that thrust to connect, that capacity to integrate with and through each other, is our true nature.”

In giving prime importance to questions of the relationship between self and world, Buddhist Romanticism takes basic Buddhist teachings—even those, such as dependent co-arising, that are meant to cut through questions of self-identity and becoming—and interprets them as if they were an answer to the question, “What is my self? What is my identity in relationship to the world?” And the answer becomes: Our identity is fluid and totally imbedded with the rest of the world; it finds its meaning as part of the evolution of all life.

Life as a whole, in this case, takes on the role of Schelling’s World Soul and Emerson’s Over-Soul. Its evolution is seen as purposeful. Individuals, as expressions of life, can find meaning in helping that purpose be achieved harmoniously.

“The Dharma vision of a co-arising world, alive with consciousness, is a powerful inspiration for the healing of the Earth.... It shows us our profound imbeddedness in the web of life.... I have been deeply inspired by the Buddha’s teaching of dependent co-arising. It fills me with a strong sense of connection and mutual responsibility with all beings.”

“The aim of all great spiritual traditions is to offer us relief from the dramas of self and history, to remind us that we are part of much grander projects than these. In that sense, I suggest that

experiencing ourselves as part of biological evolution can be understood as a complete spiritual path. The fantastic story of evolving life and consciousness contains as many miracles as any bible and as much majesty as any pantheon of divinities. The drama of earthlife's creative expression and the puzzle of where it might be leading can fill us with enough suspense and wonder to last at least a lifetime. And the idea that we are part of its unfolding can offer us meaning and purpose."

Some teachers echo Emerson's image of the universal ocean of life as a symbol of the answer to life's prime spiritual question.

"It is the goal of spiritual life to open to the reality that exists beyond our small sense of self. Through the gate of oneness we awaken to the ocean within us, we come to know in yet another way that the seas we swim in are not separate from all that lives. When our identity expands to include everything, we find a peace with the dance of the world. It is all ours, and our heart is full and empty, large enough to embrace it all."

* * *

The next two principles treat the nature of the basic spiritual illness that Buddhist Romanticism proposes to treat in light of its answer to the spiritual question, and the meditative experience that helps to cure that illness.

4) Human beings suffer when their sense of inner and outer unity is lost—when they feel divided within themselves and separated from the universe.

5) Despite its many expressions, the religious experience is the same for all: an intuition of Oneness that creates a feeling of unity with the universe and a feeling of unity within.

Buddhist Romantics often follow the early Romantics by citing a deep connection between finding inner unity and outer unity: Inner unity can be achieved by reconnecting with the outside world; outer unity, by reconnecting inside.

“Because my sense of self is an impermanent psychosocial construct, with no reality of its own, it is always insecure, haunted by *dukkha* [suffering] as long as I feel separate from the world I inhabit.”

“We create prisons, projections, self-limitations. Meditation teaches us to let them go and recognize our true nature: completeness, integration, and connectedness. In touch with our wholeness, there is no such thing as a stranger, not in ourselves or in others.”

Given that the universe, in the Romantic view, is already a Oneness, Buddhist Romantics need to explain how we lost that sense of Oneness to begin with. Thus, in their view, the ignorance causing suffering is not—as in the Buddha’s definition—an ignorance of the four noble truths. Instead, it is an ignorance of original Oneness.

“Through the power of ignorance in the mind, we restrict and narrow our sense of who we are as we go from a nondual awareness of the wholeness of the universe through the progressive levels of separation. First we separate the mind/body from the environment and limit ourselves through identifying with the organism. There is then a further narrowing in which we identify with the ego-mind.... Finally the mind itself becomes fragmented into those aspects we identify with because they are acceptable in light of our self-image, and those we repress because they are not.... The path of dharma is to heal these divisions.”

“We feel alienation, separation, lack of wholeness; we feel incomplete because if there is ‘I,’ then there is ‘you’ and we are apart, there is distinction and there is separation. If we see through this and we dissolve the belief in an absolute individual existence, then the sense of separation naturally dissolves because it has no basis. There is a recognition of wholeness.”

Buddhist Romantic writings on the issue of Oneness are often unspecific enough to lend themselves to any of the interpretations of this concept that the West has inherited from Romantic religion—or

from other sources. However, the first passage above is an example of a common tendency when these writings get specific: to define Oneness in terms derived from Jung, as unity of body and mind, and unity between the ego and its shadow.

In other cases, inner Oneness is described in terms more reminiscent of Huxley: a non-dual consciousness in which the distinction between subject and object dissolves.

“This insight leads us to a contemplation of apparent subject and object—how the tension between the two generates the world of things and its experiencer, and more importantly how, when that duality is seen through, the heart’s liberation is the result.... This abandonment of subject/object dualities is largely contingent upon the correct apprehension of the perceptual process, and thus the breaking down of the apparent inside/outside dichotomy of the observer and the observed.”

Buddhist Romanticism holds that discovery of a pre-existing Oneness reveals our true identity—sometimes equated with the Mahāyāna concept of Buddha nature—and that this discovery is an experience and understanding at which all religious traditions aim.

“Beneath our struggles and beyond any desire to develop self, we can discover our Buddha nature, an inherent fearlessness and connectedness, integrity, and belonging. Like groundwater these essential qualities are our true nature, manifesting whenever we are able to let go of our limited sense of ourselves, our unworthiness, our deficiency, and our longing. The experience of our true self is luminous, sacred, and transforming. The peace and perfection of our true nature is one of the great mystical reflections of consciousness described beautifully in a hundred traditions, by Zen and Taoism, by Native Americans and Western mystics, and by many others.”

* * *

6) This feeling of unity is healing but totally immanent. In other words, (a) it is temporary and (b) it does not give direct experience of any

transcendent, unconditioned dimension outside of space and time.

7) Any freedom offered by the religious experience—the highest freedom possible in an organic universe—thus does not transcend the laws of organic causation. It is conditioned and limited by forces within and without the individual.

8) Because the religious experience can give only a temporary feeling of unity, religious life is one of pursuing repeated religious experiences in hopes of gaining an improved feeling for that unity, but never fully achieving it.

“In the maturity of spiritual life, we move from the wisdom of transcendence to the wisdom of immanence.”

“Enlightenment does exist. It is possible to awaken. Unbounded freedom and joy, oneness with the Divine, awakening into a state of timeless grace—these experiences are more common than you know, and not far away. There is one further truth, however: They don’t last.”

“The raw material of dharma practice is ourself and our world, which are to be understood and transformed according to the vision and values of the dharma itself. This is not a process of self- or world-transcendence, but one of self- and world-*creation*.”

“Awakening is called the highest pleasure (*paramam sukham*), but the word is hardly adequate to express this paramount condition of ultimate well-being. It is not freedom *from* the conditions in which we find ourselves (no eternal bliss in this tradition) but it is freedom *within* them. Even though there is physical pain, we are capable of joy; even though there is mental sorrow, we are able to be well; and even though we are part of an impermanent, self-less flow of phenomena, we are nevertheless able to feel whole, complete, and deeply healthy.”

“The Buddha’s Third Noble Truth, and his most significant biological insight, is that... as humans we are able to see into our primal reactivity and in the process learn how to overcome some of it....

Most of us will never get there, never arrive at a steady state of ‘happiness ever after’ or ‘perfect wisdom.’ Nature’s odds are against it. Humans seem to be novices at self-realization. And while mindfulness meditation may be an evolutionary sport, like evolution itself the game is never finished. One reason is that if we are indeed evolving, then we will always need remedial training in self-awareness.”

In maintaining the immanence of the Buddhist goal, some authors note that the Pāli Canon contains passages—such as §§46–50—clearly indicating that the goal is transcendent, and that these passages contradict what they are saying. One common way of dealing with this problem is to dismiss such passages as “rogue,” “later additions” to the Canon composed by “neurotic monks.” Another is to translate the passages in such a way as to mitigate their transcendent implications.

The immanence of the goal, according to Buddhist Romanticism, is nothing to be regretted. In fact, it is to be celebrated as an expression of the infinite creativity of life. This is one of the reasons that Buddhist Romantic writings, as in one of the examples under Point 3 above, often compare the spiritual life to a dance. Just as the novel provided the early Romantics with an example of a free-form genre, modern dance has provided a similar example for Buddhist Romanticism.

“We can find peace and freedom in the face of the mystery of life. In awakening to this harmony, we discover a treasure hidden in each difficulty. Hidden in the inevitable impermanence and loss of life, its very instability, is the enormous power of creativity. In the process of change, there arises an abundance of new forms, new births, new possibilities, new expressions of art, music, and life-forms by the millions. It is only because everything is changing that such bountiful and boundless creativity exists.”

“Our mission is not to escape from the world... but to fall in love with our world. We are made for that, because we co-arise with her—in a dance where we discover ourselves and lose ourselves over and over.”

The idea that no human being can awaken to a transcendent dimension is sometimes inferred from the fact that the Buddha himself, even after his awakening, kept encountering Māra, the embodiment of temptation. In line with some modern psychological theories, Māra is understood here not as an actual non-human being but as a symbol of the defilements still lurking in the Buddha's heart.

“Unless we are prepared to regard the devil as a ghostly apparition who sits down and has conversations with Buddha, we cannot but understand him as a metaphoric way of describing Buddha's own inner life. Although Buddha is said to have ‘conquered the forces of Mara’ on achieving awakening, that did not prevent Mara from harassing him until shortly before his death forty years later. Mara's tireless efforts to undermine Buddha by accusing him of insincerity, self-deception, idleness, arrogance and aloofness are ways of describing the doubts within Buddha's own mind.”

“No matter what version [of the Buddha's awakening] we read, Mara does not go away. There is no state of enlightened retirement, no experience of awakening that places us outside the truth of change.... All spiritual life exists in an alternation of gain and loss, pleasure and pain.”

In other cases, the immanent view of awakening is simply asserted as superior to the transcendent, which—the argument goes—is dualistic and tends to foster indifference to the world at a time when the world is in urgent need of our love and attention.

“Buddhism also dualizes insofar as this world of samsara is distinguished from nirvana.... the contrast between the two worlds inevitably involves some devaluation of the lower one: so we are told that this realm of samsara is a place of suffering, craving, and delusion... the ultimate goal is individual salvation, which involves transcending this lower world by doing what is necessary to qualify for the higher one...

“Buddhists don’t aim at heaven: we want to awaken. But for us, too, salvation is individual: yes, I hope you will become enlightened also, but ultimately my highest well-being—my enlightenment—is distinct from yours. Or so we have been taught....

“Needless to say, that is not an adequate response [to the eco-crisis].”

“Notions have arisen, and even been ascribed to the Buddha... that suffering is a spiritual mistake... These errors have perpetuated the popular stereotype of Buddhism as a world-denying religion, offering escape from this realm of suffering into some abstract, disembodied heaven....

“The gate of the Dharma does not close behind us to secure us in a cloistered existence aloof from the turbulence and suffering of samsara, so much as it leads us out into a life of risk for the sake of all beings.”

* * *

9) Although the religious experience is not transcendent, it does carry with it an ability to see the commonplace events of the immanent world as sublime and miraculous. In fact, this ability is a sign of the authenticity of one’s sense of unity with the larger whole.

“To know ourselves as emerging from earthlife doesn’t in any way deny our divinity: it only seems to deny our *exclusive* divinity. The sacred is alive not just in us, but everywhere.”

“In relinquishing the obsession of being an isolated self, Buddha opens himself fearlessly and calmly to the tumult of the sublime.”

“Fear of being unspiritual puts up walls, isolates our heart from living, divides the world so that part of it is seen as not holy. These interior boundaries must be dissolved. There is an underlying unity to all things. All are part of a sacred whole in which we exist and in the deepest way they are completely trustworthy.”

* * *

10) (a) People have an innate desire and aptitude for the religious experience, and can induce it by cultivating an attitude of open receptivity to the universe.

“Openness leads to intimacy with all things.”

“When the mind is allowed to rest in that sense of complete clarity and choicelessness, we find that it is beyond dualism—no longer making preferences or being biased towards this over that. It is resting at the point of equipoise, where this and that and black and white and where you and I all meet; the space where all dualities arise from and where they dissolve.”

“This unity, this integration, comes from deeply accepting darkness and light, and therefore being able to be in both simultaneously. We must make a shift from one worldview to another, moving from trying to control the uncontrollable and instead learn how to connect, to open, to love no matter what is happening.”

“Just as a waiter attends to the needs of those at the table he serves, so one waits with unknowing astonishment at the quixotic play of life. In subordinating his own wants to those of the customer, a waiter abandons any expectation of what he may be next called to do. Constantly alert and ready to respond, the oddest request does not faze him. He neither ignores those he serves nor appears at the wrong time. He is invisible but always there when needed. Likewise, in asking ‘What is this thing?’ one does not strain ahead of oneself in anticipation of a result. One waits at ease for a response one cannot foresee and that might never come. The most one can ‘do’ is remain optimally receptive and alert.”

“As we open to what is actually happening in any given moment, whatever it is or might be, rather than running away from it, we become increasingly aware of our lives as one small part of a vast fabric made of an evanescent, fleeting, shimmering pattern of turnings. Letting go of the futile battle to control, we can find

ourselves rewoven into the pattern of wholeness, into the immensity of life, always happening, always here, whether we're aware of it or not."

This attitude of acceptance is said to be developed through mindfulness practice, which—contrary to the Buddha's definition of mindfulness as a function of active memory—is here defined as bare attention: an open, receptive, pre-verbal awareness of all things as they impinge on the senses.

"Mindfulness is best described as 'a noninterfering, non-reactive awareness.' It is *pure knowing*, without any of the projections of our ego or personality added to the knowing."

"Mindfulness is presence of mind, attentiveness or awareness. Yet the kind of awareness involved in mindfulness differs profoundly from the kind of awareness at work in our usual mode of consciousness.... The mind is deliberately kept at the level of bare attention, a detached observation of what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. In the practice of right mindfulness the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event. All judgements and interpretations have to be suspended, or if they occur, just registered and dropped. The task is simply to note whatever comes up just as it is occurring, riding the changes of events in the way a surfer rides the waves on the sea."

* * *

10) (b) Because religion is a matter of taste, there is no one path for developing this attitude of receptivity. The most that any teacher can offer are his or her own opinions on the matter, in the event that they will resonate with other people. In fact, the refusal to follow any prescribed path is a sign of authenticity in Emerson's sense of the word.

"No one can define for us exactly what our path should be."

"To opt for a comforting, even a discomfoting, explanation of what brought us here or what awaits us after death severely limits

that very rare sense of mystery with which religion is essentially concerned.... [I]f my actions in the world are to stem from an authentic encounter with what is most vital and mysterious in life, then they surely need to be unclouded by either dogma or prevarication....

“As far as anyone knows, we are alone in an inconceivably vast cosmos that has no interest at all in our fate. Even if other worlds like this exist elsewhere in the cosmos, they would not be mere repetitions of the awesomely complex configuration of biological, cultural and psychological conditions that are generating this world now. The path that has led you here and beckons you into an unknown future has likewise never appeared in exactly this way before and will not do so again. You are free to go straight ahead, turn right or turn left. Nothing is stopping you.”

* * *

11) One of the many ways to cultivate a receptivity to all things is through erotic love.

“The separation of the spiritual from the sensual, of the sacred from the relational and of the enlightened from the erotic no longer seems desirable. Certainly seeing how impossible the division has proven for the countless spiritual teachers of every tradition who have stumbled over their own longings has been instructive. In addition, having a family and a relationship has made it abundantly clear to me that they require the same dedication, passion and vision that a spiritual life demands. Now that spiritual life is in the hands of householders rather than monastics, the demands of desire are front and center, not hidden from view.”

“Buddhist texts are filled with stories about the impurities of the body, just like those you would find in the Catholic Church. And so there is a lot of confusion, because the body isn’t seen as a vehicle for sacredness, but more as something to transcend. In the lay community, we are not taught how to make it a deliberate part of our practice, guided into making sexual activity a wise part of

our life. But the body could be, and it's time for it. Sexuality can open us beyond ourselves, to grace, ecstasy, communion, oneness, and natural samadhi. Let us teach sexuality as a domain of practice and health instead of a realm of pathology or anti-spirituality."

* * *

12) Another way to cultivate a receptivity to all things is to develop a tolerance of all religious expressions, viewing them aesthetically, as finite expressions of a feeling for the larger whole, without giving authority to any of them. In other words, one should read them as Schlegel recommended reading a novel: empathetically, but at the same time maintaining a sense of distance so as not to be confined by their point of view.

"The experience of wholeness will express itself in many ways. The spiritual journey does not present us with a pat formula for each of us to follow. We cannot be Mother Theresa or Gandhi or the Buddha. We have to be ourselves. We have to discover and connect with our own unique expression of the truth. To do that, we must learn to listen to and trust ourselves, to find our path of heart."

"Religion and philosophy have their value, but in the end all we can do is open to mystery."

* * *

13) In fact, the greatest religious texts, if granted too much authority, are actually harmful to genuine spiritual progress.

"The images we have been taught about perfection can be destructive to us. Instead of clinging to an inflated, superhuman view of perfection, we learn to allow ourselves the space of kindness."

* * *

14) Because the mind is an organic part of the creatively expressive whole, it, too, is creatively expressive, so its natural response to a feeling of

the larger whole is to want to express it.

15) However, because the mind is finite, any attempt to describe the experience of the larger whole is limited by one's finite mode of thought, and also by one's temperament and culture. Thus, religious statements and texts are not descriptive of reality, but simply an expression of the effect of that reality on a particular person's individual nature. As expressions of feelings, religious statements do not need to be clear or consistent. They should be read as poetry and myths pointing to the inexpressible whole and speaking primarily to the feelings.

16) Because religious teachings are expressive only of one individual's feelings, they have no authority over any other person's expression of his or her feelings.

“[A]ll the teachings of books, maps, and beliefs have little to do with wisdom or compassion. At best they are a signpost, a finger pointing at the moon, or the leftover dialogue from a time when someone received some true spiritual nourishment... We must discover within ourselves our own way to become conscious, to live a life of the spirit.”

“Even the most creative, world-transforming individuals cannot stand on their own shoulders. They too remain dependent upon their cultural context, whether intellectual or spiritual—which is precisely what Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence and causal interdependence implies. The Buddha also expressed his new, liberating insight in the only way he could, using the religious categories that his culture could understand. Inevitably, then, his way of expressing the dharma was a blend of the truly new... and the conventional religious thought of his time. Although the new transcends the conventional... the new cannot immediately and completely escape the conventional wisdom it surpasses.”

“It's never a matter of trying to figure it all out, rather we pick up these phrases and chew them over, taste them, digest them and let them energize us by virtue of their own nature.”

“Even these ostensibly literal maps may be better read as if they were a kind of poem, rich in possible meanings.”

* * *

17) Although a religious feeling may inspire a desire to formulate rules of behavior, those rules carry no authority, and are actually unnecessary. When one sees all of humanity as holy and one—and oneself as an organic part of that holy Oneness—there is no need for rules to govern one’s interactions with the rest of society. One’s behavior toward all naturally becomes loving and compassionate.

Buddhist Romantic explanations of morality can follow either of the patterns set by the Romantics: that morality derives from one’s sense of being part of a larger whole, or from the inspirations welling up from within one’s own awareness.

“Without the rigidity of concepts, the world becomes transparent and illuminated, as though lit from within. With this understanding, the interconnectedness of all that lives becomes very clear. We see that nothing is stagnant and nothing is fully separate, that who we are, what we are, is intimately woven into the nature of life itself. Out of this sense of connection, love and compassion arise.”

“Note that virtue is *not* required for the greening of the self or the emergence of the ecological self. The shift in identification at this point in our history is required precisely *because* moral exhortation doesn’t work, and because sermons seldom hinder us from following our self-interest as we conceive it.

“The obvious choice, then, is to extend our notions of self-interest. For example, it would not occur to me to plead with you, ‘Oh, don’t saw off your leg. That would be an act of violence.’ It wouldn’t occur to me because your leg is part of your body. Well, so are the trees in the Amazon rain basin. They are our external lungs. And we are beginning to realize that the world is our body.”

“The Buddha said that if we are deeply established in awareness, the precepts are not necessary.”

* * *

18) When one has a genuine appreciation for the organic unity of the universe, one sees how that unity transcends all ideas of right and wrong.

As noted above, this is the one principle of Romantic religion that is never explicitly professed in the Theravāda version of Buddhist Romanticism, although it is explicit in the Mahāyāna version. Still, it occasionally appears implicitly in Theravāda Romanticism, in assertions of the need to embrace all aspects of life. This is a point to which we will return in the last section of this chapter.

* * *

19) Although all religious expressions are valid, some are more evolved than others. They must be viewed under the framework of historicism, to understand where a particular religious teaching falls in the organic development of humanity and the universe as a whole.

20) Religious change is thus not only a fact. It is also a duty.

When these last two points are taken together with Point 16, we can see that Buddhist Romanticism carries within it the fundamental paradox at the heart of Romantic religion: No one can judge another person’s expression of the Dhamma, but some expressions are better than others. The best expressions are those that agree with the Romantic understanding of what religion is, how it comes about, and how it functions in the universe.

Sometimes modern changes in Buddhism are justified by the fact that people have already been changing Buddhism over the generations. Both sorts of changes, ancient and modern, are justified in vitalistic terms: sometimes explicitly—one teacher has described the Dhamma as an “inexpressible living force”—and other times implicitly, when Buddhism is described as the agent adapting itself, like an amoeba, to new environments.

“The great strength of Buddhism throughout its history is that it has succeeded many times in reinventing itself according to the needs of its new host culture. What is happening today in the West is no different.”

Given this organic view of the Buddhist tradition, it's not surprising that the need to fashion a new Buddhism—or for Buddhism to refashion itself—is sometimes expressed as a Darwinian necessity.

“Looking at Buddhism as part of the spiritual heritage of humanity, I see it as subject to similar evolutionary pressures as other types of contemplative spirituality have felt.... As I now look at our situation, I distinguish three major domains in which human life participates. One I call the transcendent domain, which is the sphere of aspiration for classical contemplative spirituality. The second is the social domain, which includes our interpersonal relations as well as our political, social, and economic institutions. And the third is the natural domain, which includes our physical bodies, other sentient beings, and the natural environment. From my present perspective, a spirituality that privileges the transcendent and devalues the social and natural domains, or sees them at best as stepping stones to realization, is inadequate to our current needs. Such an orientation has led to a sharp division of duties that puts our future at risk.... This division also opens the doors of influence over our communal institutions to religious dogmatists and fundamentalists.

“As I see it, our collective future requires that we fashion an integral type of spirituality that can bridge the three domains of human life.”

In other cases, the Darwinian need for Buddhism to change is bolstered by an appeal to the Buddha's own teachings on change:

“Since all schools of Buddhism also arise from conditions, they share the very nature of the conditioned things they tirelessly describe as transient, imperfect, and empty. This is true even of the original Indian form of the dharma at the time of Gautama

himself. To say that Buddhism is empty is to recognize how it is nothing but an emergent property of unique and unrepeatable situations. Such an insight into the nature of things is entirely in keeping with the central Buddhist understanding of the inescapable contingency of existence (*pratitya-samutpada* [*paṭicca samuppāda*]).... This core insight into contingency emphasized how everything emerges from a shimmering matrix of changing conditions and is destined to change into something else.... In this way the non-essential vision of the dharma converges seamlessly with a historical and Darwinian evolutionary understanding of life.”

“This strongly held view [that Buddhism should not change] seems a bit odd in a religion that also teaches that resistance to all-pervasive change is a root cause of misery.”

Some of the strongest statements of the need to change Buddhism come from teachers who, following the example of the more politically involved Transcendentalists, give high priority to social action in their understanding of the spiritual life.

“In each historical period, the Dharma finds new means to unfold its potential in ways precisely linked to that era’s distinctive conditions. Our own era provides the appropriate stage for the transcendent truth of the Dharma to bend back upon the world and engage human suffering at multiple levels, not in mere contemplation but in effective, relief-granting action.”

“We must be open to a variety of responses toward social change that come from no particular ‘authority’ but are grounded in the radical creativity that comes when concepts fall away.”

Romantic changes to the Dhamma can take many forms. In some cases, they involve borrowing from other Buddhist religions, on the grounds that later forms of Buddhism were more developed than the earlier forms: hence the Mahāyāna teachings on Buddha nature and the bodhisattva path presented in otherwise Theravāda contexts. In other cases, these changes involve drawing on non-Buddhist religious

traditions, as when Rumi's ruminations on God are cited for their insight into the Dhamma. And in still other cases, the changes are drawn from non-religious traditions of all sorts.

Whatever the changes being proposed for Buddhism in the modern world, Buddhist Romantics present them as nothing to fear because they are rooted in forces in the human heart that they describe, echoing Emerson, as trustworthy to the end.

“There is an underlying unity to all things, and a wise heart knows this as it knows the in-and-out of the breath. They are all part of a sacred whole in which we exist, and in the deepest way they are completely trustworthy. We need not fear the energies of this world or any other.”

* * *

The passages quoted here have been drawn from the talks and writings of thirteen modern Dhamma teachers, but they could be multiplied many times over from the writings both of these teachers and of many others. As anyone who has read modern Dhamma books or listened to modern Dhamma talks could attest, the principles expressed in these passages are by no means atypical. They are the common coin of modern Buddhist discourse—so common that most Westerners accept them as Dhamma as a matter of faith, and are surprised to hear that they differ from the Buddha's Dhamma in almost every respect.

In fact, some people are even offended to hear this—not because they feel betrayed by those who teach Buddhist Romanticism, but because they would rather continue to hold to Buddhist Romantic ideals. To get past that sense of being offended, it's important to understand the false attractions that those ideals continue to hold.

THE APPEAL OF BUDDHIST ROMANTICISM

As many Western converts to the Dhamma will readily admit, it's because of ideals such as wholeness within, Oneness without, and the universality of the religious experience that they left their earlier religious upbringing and started practicing Buddhism to begin with.

And it's easy to see why those ideals made such a conversion possible: To believe that all religions come from the same experience, and that differences in the expression of that experience are immaterial, makes it possible to ignore the exclusionary faith demands made by the monotheistic religions that dominate the West. Only when you feel safe to ignore those demands will you feel free to look elsewhere for alternative religious teachings that provide more nourishment for—and feel less oppressive to—the heart.

However, it's one thing to hold to views to free yourself from an oppressive system of beliefs. It's another to continue holding to them after having broken free. The common desire to continue holding to Buddhist Romantic ideas even after learning that they are not Buddhist suggests that there are other reasons why such ideas have an appeal in the modern world.

As we have seen, one of the prime reasons is that a strong current in Western thought over the past two centuries has come to view all religious activity in these terms. When Westerners come to Buddhism, they usually approach it through the doors of psychology, history of religions, or perennial philosophy, all of which are dominated by Romantic ways of thinking.

However, ideas do not survive simply because they have a long past. There also have to be factors in contemporary culture and society to help keep them alive.

A wide range of factors—philosophical, emotional, economic, and political—may be relevant here, but four aspects of modern culture in particular seem to have contributed to the creation and continued survival of Buddhist Romanticism.

The first is that modern society is more destructive of a sense of inner wholeness and outer connectedness than anything even the Romantics knew. Economically and politically, we are more and more dependent on wider and wider circles of other people, yet most of those dependencies are kept hidden from view. Our food and clothing come from the store, but how they got there, or who is responsible for ensuring a continual supply, we don't know. When investigative reporters track down the web of connections from field to final product in our hands, the bare facts read like an exposé. Fashionable

sweatshirts, for example, come from Uzbekistani cotton woven in Iran, sewn in South Korea, and stored in Kentucky: an unstable web of interdependencies that involve not a little suffering, both for the exploited producers and for those pushed out of the production web by cheaper labor. Our monetary supply, which keeps these interdependencies flowing, has been converted into electronic signals manipulated by international financiers of unknown allegiances and constantly open to cyber attack.

Whether or not we know these details, we intuitively sense the fragmentation and uncertainty inherent in such an unstable system. The result is that many of us feel a need for a sense of wholeness. For those who benefit from the hidden dependencies of modern life, a corollary need is a sense of reassurance that interconnectedness is reliable and benign—or, if not yet benign, that feasible reforms can make it that way. Such people want to hear that they can safely place their trust in the principle of interconnectedness without fear that it will turn on them or let them down. When Buddhist Romanticism affirms the Oneness of the universe and the benevolence of interconnectedness, it tells these people what they want to hear.

A second aspect of modern culture conducive to the popularity of Buddhist Romanticism is the overload of information poured into our eyes and ears every day. Never before have people been subjected to such a relentless barrage of data from strangers. The sheer amount of data challenges the mind's ability to absorb it; the fact that it is coming from strangers leaves, at least on a sub-conscious level, a lingering doubt as to where to place our trust. Especially when we learn that much of the news twenty or thirty years ago was little more than propaganda, we instinctively suspect that the news of today will ultimately be revealed to be a fabric of lies as well.

Given that our ideas are shaped by the data we absorb, we begin to distrust even the thoughts going through our own minds. So we find it reassuring to be told that at least we can trust our feelings, that we can safely leave logical inconsistencies as mysteries, and that whatever religious beliefs speak to our feelings must be safe and true.

A third aspect of modern culture conducive to the survival of Buddhist Romanticism is that we are subject not only to a flood of data,

but also to a flood of competing value systems: some promoted by religious and cultural traditions, some by academia, some by the commercial media. Exposed to all these conflicting values simultaneously, we find it impossible not to see ourselves judged as lacking in terms of one system of values or another. No matter where we look at ourselves, we see something that someone can condemn as substandard or wrong. So we feel comforted when told that the highest value system is embodied in a non-judging mind, open and receptive to all things, and that the judgments of others show only how narrow-minded they are.

A fourth aspect of modern culture conducive to the survival of Buddhist Romanticism is that people's work lives, social lives, and search for entertainment, especially when conducted over the Internet, have come to consume so much of their mental energy and their time. Spiritual needs get squeezed into the few cracks of the day left vacant by other demands. Within those cracks, few people have the time to test differing religious teachings for their truth and effectiveness. Thus it's reassuring to be told that the differences among religions don't matter, that all paths lead to the same destination. This means that people can choose whichever path or mixture of paths they like—in the language of the Romantics, this would be termed an *aesthetic* choice—with no need to fear that their choices could possibly be a mistake or lead to harm.

Buddhist Romanticism, in speaking to these aspects of modern culture, provides solace to people suffering from the demands and uncertainties of modern life. But its solution in all four areas is to teach an attitude of heedlessness, regardless of whether it speaks in soothing terms of acceptance or in more rousing ways of the challenges of authenticity and the need for social engagement.

- To begin with, on the deepest level, Buddhist Romanticism teaches people to define their spiritual needs in ways that actually block the path to a transcendent happiness. By fostering an immanent rather than transcendent solution to suffering, Buddhist Romanticism encourages people to stay within the web of interdependencies that are causing them to suffer: to accept the vagaries of an interdependent, interconnected world and to define their desire for well-being totally within those vagaries. It's as if Buddhist Romanticism finds people

feeling anxious and unsafe because they are trying to sleep in the middle of the road, and so sells them pillows and blankets, at the same time deriding any desire to get out of the road as selfish, deluded, or sick.

On a more immediate level, Buddhist Romanticism, by celebrating our interconnected world, suggests that the Dhamma as a whole is blind to the suffering and instabilities inherent in that world. In doing so, it alienates those for whom the current system is obviously *not* benign, convincing them that the Dhamma is out of touch with reality. As a result, Buddhist Romanticism turns them away from the Dhamma, denying them the benefits that the Dhamma could otherwise offer.

- At the same time, by encouraging trust in one's feelings, Buddhist Romanticism leaves people open to subliminal influences from those who would like to manipulate those feelings. As the Buddha pointed out, feelings are just as fabricated as thoughts, and any knowledge of the tactics of advertising should be enough to confirm his observation that our feelings are not really ours. They can often act against our better interests.

- As for a non-judging mind, the Buddha taught that the path to true happiness begins with the ability to judge one's own actions fairly ([MN 61](#)), which also means learning how to judge the actions of others as to whether they are wise examples to follow ([MN 95](#)). The solution to the problem of conflicting value systems lies, not in abandoning one's powers of judgment, but in learning how to use them adeptly through self-examination. When there are no standards for what should and shouldn't be done, people are left unprotected ([§8](#))—from their own unskillful mind states, and from the unskillful influences of others.

- Finally, by portraying the choice of a religious path as nothing more than a personal preference, Buddhist Romanticism blinds people to the fact that if they choose it over the Dhamma, their choice will carry consequences.

So as a service to those of us sleeping in the road, we need to look more carefully at what the consequences of that choice can be.

BUDDHIST ROMANTICISM VS. THE DHAMMA

The consequences of choosing Buddhist Romanticism over the Dhamma can best be appreciated by examining the practical implications of each of the principles of Buddhist Romanticism, point by point, and comparing them with the practical consequences of adopting the Dhamma instead. Because all the defining points of Buddhist Romanticism grow from Points 1 through 3, we will see that the practical implications of these first three points will keep echoing throughout the remaining ones.

* * *

• *First, Points 1 through 3: the basic religious issue.*

To define the basic issue of the spiritual life in terms of a relationship requires that you first define who the members of the relationship are. Once you define a person in relationship to a world—in Buddhist terms, this is a state of becoming—you are placing limitations on what that person can know or do ([§20](#)). This is especially true if you define people as organic parts of a larger, organic whole. As organisms subject to organic laws, they would not be able to know anything totally separate from those laws. As integral parts of a larger whole, they would have to subsume their felt needs to the larger purposes of the whole, and could not escape the whole without being annihilated.

All three of these points would force them to view as unrealistic, and even evil, their desire to find an end to suffering. They would be blocked from reaching unbinding, which is a dimension outside of the range of organic laws. Instead, they would have to accept their sufferings as necessary parts of the larger purpose of the organic whole, for otherwise they would risk going out of existence.

So to advance the notion that all beings are parts of a universal organic unity runs totally counter to the aims of the Dhamma.

One of the largest ironies of Buddhist Romanticism is that the teaching of dependent co-arising is often cited as proof that the Buddha shared the Romantic view that all things are part of the single interconnected whole that is the universe. This is ironic for two reasons.

The first is that dependent co-arising does not describe the status of the self within the universe; instead, it stands outside both “self” and “universe”—and thus outside of becoming—explaining becoming in terms of a framework that doesn’t derive from becoming at all. Its perspective is phenomenological, meaning that it describes processes as they are immediately experienced. From that perspective, it shows how ignorance gives rise to concepts of “self” and “universe,” how those concepts lead to suffering, and how suffering ends when ignorance of those processes is brought to an end. To reframe this teaching, limiting it to a description of what occurs *in* the universe or *in* the self, prevents it from leading *beyond* the universe and *beyond* the self.

The second reason why it’s ironic for Buddhist Romanticism to present dependent co-arising as a description of the Oneness of all things is that the Buddha explicitly cited dependent co-arising as a teaching that avoided the question of whether things are One or not (§25). In other words, his rejection of the teaching of the Oneness of the universe was so radical that he refused to get involved in the issue at all.

There are two possible reasons why the Buddha did not want to describe the universe as One. The first is that although he affirmed that concentration practice can lead to states of non-dual consciousness in which all experience is viewed as One, he noted that such states are fabricated (§24) and thus fall short of the goal. Only when a meditator learns to view all objects of awareness as something separate (§23) can he or she regard them with the detachment needed to overcome any clinging to them—an issue that we will discuss in more detail below, under Point 5. To regard the universe as One closes the door to this sense of separateness needed to reach to freedom.

The second possible reason for not wanting to describe the universe as One can easily be surmised from what we have repeatedly seen of the Romantic problems concerning the issue of freedom. There is no convincing way to explain how a part of a larger Oneness can exercise freedom of choice. At most, such a part can be allowed by other parts to follow its inner drives, but it cannot choose what those drives are. Otherwise, it would be like a stomach suddenly deciding that it wanted to switch jobs with the liver or to strike out on its own: The organism would die.

At the same time, given that all parts of an organic system act in constant reciprocity, there's no way that any part of a larger whole can lay independent claim to its drives as truly its own. When a stomach starts secreting digestive juices, the signal comes from somewhere else. So if freedom means only the ability to follow one's inner nature or drives, the fact that one's drives are not really one's own denies any independent freedom of choice.

For the purpose of Dhamma practice, this difficulty is fatal. To be able to choose skillful over unskillful actions, you first have to be free to choose your actions. Otherwise, the whole notion of a path of practice is meaningless.

So the basic question posed by Buddhist Romanticism and the answer it provides to that question impose, all in all, at least four severe limitations on the possibility of a path to the end of suffering.

The first limitation is that, by identifying a conditioned experience of Oneness as the goal of spiritual practice, Buddhist Romanticism encourages people to satisfy themselves with experiences falling far short of an unconditioned end to suffering and stress.

The second limitation is that, by defining individuals as organic parts of an organic whole, Buddhist Romanticism—implicitly or explicitly—defines their purpose in life: They are here to serve the purposes of the whole. When this is the case, that larger purpose overrides every person's desire to put an end to his or her own suffering. People are here to further the goal of the earthlife, and should bear their sufferings with equanimity and joy, happy in the knowledge that they are advancing the goal of earthlife, whatever it is. Thus the Buddhist Romantic answer to the value question implicit in the four noble truths—Is the end of suffering a worthwhile goal?—is clearly a No.

The third limitation is that by defining the primary spiritual issue in terms of becoming—a self in relationship to a world—Buddhist Romanticism closes the door to any notion of a dimension beyond becoming. And because every state of becoming involves suffering, this closes off the possibility that suffering can be totally brought to an end. Thus the Buddhist Romantic answer to the question that set the Buddha-to-be on his quest—Is it possible to find a happiness free from aging, illness, and death?—is another clear No.

The fourth limitation is an even more basic restriction on the possibility of freedom, one that applies even if you don't aim at ultimate release in this lifetime. In a world where you are an integral part of a larger whole, freedom of choice even in simple matters is impossible. Not only is the idea of a path of practice meaningless; so is the act of teaching any path—or anything—at all. If people have no choice in what they do, why bother to teach them? And why should they bother to listen to what other people say? Thus the Buddhist Romantic answer to one of the Buddha's even more basic questions—Does the idea of a path of practice make sense?—contradicts itself. On the one hand, Buddhist Romantics teach meditation as a path of practice; on the other, their underlying assumption that the universe is One denies the freedom of choice needed for there to be the possibility of following a path.

The early Romantics, even though they couldn't provide a satisfactory answer to the question of how freedom can be reconciled with a universal, interdependent Oneness, did at least grapple with the issue. Buddhist Romantics, however, never give it serious attention. At most, some of them assert the possibility of freedom and describe how malleable the causal connections in dependent co-arising can be—portraying them, for instance, as a jeweled net or shimmering matrix—but rarely pursue the issue further than that. If these images are examined carefully, though, they prove wanting in two ways.

The first is simply a matter of consistency: If all factors in the web are easily manipulated, then you yourself are easily manipulated. If you are nothing but a cipher in a shimmering matrix, what means do you have to exert a freely chosen force on any other part of the shimmer?

* * *

- The second way in which these images are wanting is less a matter of internal consistency and more a matter of truth, directly related to *Point 4, the basic cause of suffering and its solution*.

The Romantic idea that we suffer because we feel separate from the world, and that suffering stops during moments when we have overcome that sense of separation is, from the point of view of the Dhamma, only a partial—and very poor—understanding of suffering and its end. Even if we could constantly maintain a sense of Oneness

with the causal connections that constitute the world, would that really end suffering? Is the world really a shimmering net of jewels, content simply to reflect one another and needing nothing else for their sustenance?

As the Buddha pointed out, we live in a world where the basic interaction is one of feeding off one another, emotionally and physically. Inter-being is inter-eating. If we're jewels, we're jewels with teeth—and those teeth are diamond-tipped, strong enough to shred other jewels to pieces. This is what it means to be a being, someone who has taken on becoming in a world where other beings have also become and have their sights on the same sources of food.

The Buddhist Romantic equation of suffering with a sense of a discrete, separate self is sometimes justified by the idea that such a sense of separateness is by its nature unstable. This, however, assumes that a connected sense of self—or a sense of oneself as a process-being, rather than a discrete being—would be any more stable. As the Dhamma repeatedly states, *every* sense of self is a fabrication, and all fabrications are unstable (§19, §22). They always need to feed. Even process-beings need to feed to keep the process going. And there is no single mouth in the interconnected universe that, when fed, would send the nourishment to all parts of the universal organism. Each process feels its own hunger and needs to feed itself from a limited range of food. So the switch from a discrete, separate sense of self to an all-embracing process-self would not solve the problem of suffering.

The image of the world that drove the Buddha to practice was one of fish competing for the water in a diminishing pool (§27). And as he famously said, even if it rained gold coins, that wouldn't be enough to satisfy our sensual desires (§29). Only if we train the mind to a dimension where there is no felt hunger and no need to feed will we ever reach a genuine happiness. The need to feed cannot be ended simply by seeing ourselves as jewels reflecting a shimmering light. We have to uproot the source of our hunger by overcoming the need to be a being. If we choose to stay immersed in a web of conditions driven by hunger, we close ourselves to any possibility that suffering can be brought to an end.

• *Point 5, the nature of the religious experience:* As noted in Chapter Five, Schleiermacher's belief that there was a single religious experience, identical for all human beings, grew from his own monotheistic, Pietist background, in which only one religious experience—a feeling of God's presence—was possible. When translated into Romantic terms, in which the ultimate truth about reality was the infinite unity of the cosmos, this meant that the only possible religious experience was a feeling of that unity. And as we saw in Chapter Six, even as the West gained more knowledge about non-monotheistic religious traditions, the transmitters of Romantic religion never seriously challenged this part of Schleiermacher's thesis. In some cases they questioned whether such an experience *proved* one's unity with the cosmos, but in no case did they question whether this feeling of unity was the only possible experience that qualified as religious. And Buddhist Romanticism tends not to question this, either.

The Buddha's map of spiritual experiences, however, differs from Schleiermacher's in two important respects: one, in mapping out a wide variety of experiences that could be mistaken for the ultimate spiritual goal; and two, in asserting that the ultimate goal is not a feeling—not even a feeling of Oneness—but a direct experience of a dimension beyond feelings and beyond the senses (§§46–47; §54). At the same time, the Buddha offers many practical tests to ascertain whether an experience in meditation qualifies as the ultimate goal or not.

The Buddha does acknowledge that the Oneness of awareness achieved in right concentration is a central part of the path to the deathless, but it is not the goal (§23; §58). Because it is fabricated, it—like all the other factors of the path—has to be dropped when it has done its work. Otherwise, the opening to the deathless will never appear.

At the same time, the Buddha never encourages us to believe that the feeling or perception of Oneness felt in concentration should be taken as a sign that experience is really One. Quite the contrary: A meditator who wants to end ignorance and give rise to clear knowing has to view all objects of the mind as something separate (§24). This point applies to all the objects that Buddhist Romanticism advocates seeing as parts of a pre-existing unity: self and cosmos, mind and body, feelings and

thoughts. To view these things as parts of a Oneness of which you are also a part makes it impossible to gain any distance from them. Without that sense of distance, you can't clearly see and overcome your attachment for them.

For instance, to see the body as One with the mind makes it impossible to see how attachment to the body is a major source of suffering. To see your feelings as One with your reason makes it impossible to see their drawbacks or to catch the mind in the act of clinging to them. To see the self as One with the world—an interpretation that can easily be applied to the experience of concentration on very refined, infinite levels—is, in the Buddha's estimation, one of the most foolish self-doctrines of all.

There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, because "self" carries the implication of "things belonging to self," it claims identity with things that could not possibly belong to the self. If you think you are One with your neighbor's tree, try cutting it down and see if it's really yours (§21). On the other hand, if the concept of self is stretched to include the cosmos, you won't look for the way "self" as a mental action forms around desires on a moment-to-moment basis. If you don't examine your sense of self on this level, you won't be able to work free of it (§22).

So there are important practical consequences for adopting the Buddhist Romantic position on these points over the Buddha's. If you believe that there is only one religious experience, then when you have an impressive unifying experience, you will not apply the Buddha's tests to it. If you are satisfied with a feeling of Oneness, you will not look further to see whether that feeling—like all other feelings—is fabricated or not. In this way, you risk settling for much less than second best.

* * *

• *Points 6 and 7, the immanence of the religious goal and the limited freedom it can bring:* The idea that the religious experience leads only to an immanent dimension, and not to a transcendent one, is drawn from the Romantic definition, under Points 2 and 3, of what a human being is: an integral, organic part of a cosmos with no transcendent dimension. As part of such a cosmos, there is no way that you could

experience anything transcending the cosmos. Even in a mechanistic model of the cosmos, the same limitations prevail. When Buddhist Romanticism accepts either of these worldviews, it is forced to accept those limitations as well.

This approach is the reverse of the Buddha's. Instead of starting with a definition of what a human being is, and then deducing from that what a human being can know, he worked the other way around: exploring first what a human being can know through experience, and then—in light of how the best possible experience was attained—drawing conclusions about how to answer the question of what a human being is. His conclusion was that holding to any definition of what a human being is would ultimately stand in the way of that experience, which is why he developed his teachings on not-self, while at the same time refusing to answer whether or not the self exists (§§15–16).

In this sense, the Buddha's approach is somewhat like the approach that James and Jung followed at a time when the mechanistic model of the universe was ascendant: Instead of starting with the laws of the cosmos “out there” as a primary reality and trying to fit oneself, as a secondary reality, into the context of those laws, they proposed starting with consciousness as it is experienced from within as primary reality, and regarding the cosmos out there as secondary. Only then, they stated, could the problems and illnesses of consciousness be healed.

The difference in the Buddha's case is that he went considerably further than either James or Jung in discovering what true health for the psyche could be: a dimension totally free from the constraints of space and time. From that discovery, he was able to evaluate theories of causality and the universe, and to reject any that would not allow for the experience he had attained.

This, as we have noted, is called the phenomenological approach. And the Buddha aimed his attention directly at the most pressing phenomenological problem: the problem of suffering and how to end it. My suffering is something that only I can feel. Yours is something that only you can feel. I cause my suffering through my own unskillfulness, and can put an end to it by developing skillfulness in all my actions. The same principle applies to you. In other words, the problem is felt from within, caused from within, and can be cured only from within. And as

long as we claim our identity as part of an unstable web of connections, we will never be able to effect a cure.

This means that if we insist on choosing to hold to a worldview in which there is no escape from a web of interconnections, we leave ourselves subject to continued suffering without end.

As for the Buddhist Romantic arguments that an immanent view of awakening is superior to a transcendent view, these boil down to two assertions. The first is that an immanent goal is nondualistic, whereas a transcendent goal is dualistic. This argument carries force only if “dual” is inherently inferior to “nondual.” But the problem of suffering is inherently dual, both in the distinction between suffering and its end, and in the teaching that there are causes and effects. Either you suffer or you don’t. You create the causes that lead to suffering, or you follow a path of action that leads to suffering’s end. If you decide that suffering is not a problem, you are free to continue creating the causes of suffering as you like. But if you want to stop suffering, then you are committed to taking on these two dualities and seeing that here, at least, dualism opens up opportunities that nondualism closes off.

The second assertion is that a transcendent goal automatically entails indifference to the world being transcended, and that this contributes to the ecological crisis facing the Earth. The idea that there is a transcendent dimension, we are told, makes people treat this worldly dimension as worthless. Therefore we need a vision of awakening in which we all awaken together with the purpose of staying here.

This argument gains some of its force from the reduced version of the path that has come to stand for Buddhist practice in the West: going to retreat centers and closing yourself off from the outside world. But when we look at the entire path of practice as outlined by the Buddha, it’s hard to see where the path to unbinding encourages indifference to the Earth or contributes to the pollution and abuse of the environment. No one ever gained awakening by being stingy and materialistic. No one ever fracked for oil or raped the environment from a desire for unbinding. As the Buddha said, as long as one has not achieved full awakening, one incurs a debt with every meal one takes—a teaching that hardly encourages carelessness.

Most Buddhists know that they will not gain full awakening in this lifetime, which means that they face the prospect of returning to the Earth that they have shaped during this lifetime through their actions. This belief in karma and rebirth, in fact, is one of Buddhism's most potent arguments for the stewardship of the planet. And yet Buddhist Romanticism—like Herder and the early Romantics before them—have rejected belief in karma and rebirth, and have offered only a vague generality on interconnectedness and evolution in its place. But these vague notions of responsibility toward others whom we will never see don't have half the emotional impact of a worldview in which we will be forced to return to clean up any messes we ourselves have made.

And the path actually fosters habits designed not to leave messes. To begin with, it teaches contentment with few material things, a quality that helps to slow the exploitation of the Earth's resources. When people are content with only what they really need, they leave a small footprint behind.

Similarly, the path entails celibacy, which is certainly not responsible for the over-population of the earth. And, unlike bodhisattvas, who are committed to returning to the feeding chain of the Earth again and again, arahants remove themselves from the chain entirely, at the same time inspiring others to do likewise, so that that many mouths and that many fish will be removed from the dwindling pool.

So it's hard to see that holding to unbinding as a transcendent goal encourages trashing the Earth. It's actually an act of kindness—toward oneself, toward those who follow one's example, and all forms of life who choose to remain behind. To choose an immanent goal over unbinding—and to urge others to keep returning to the pool—is actually an irresponsible and heartless act.

* * *

• *Point 8, that the goal is never reached once and for all:* As the Buddha made clear, it is not the case that once awakening happens all problems in life will end. The fully awakened person still experiences pleasure and pain, and must still deal with the difficulties presented by other people. The Buddha himself had to deal for 45 years with the misbehavior of the monks and nuns in the Saṅghas he established.

Nevertheless, he also repeatedly emphasized that none of these difficulties could make inroads on his mind, and that the same held true for all those who are fully awakened ([MN 137](#)). And, unlike people who have yet to abandon becoming, once the fully awakened person passes away, there will be no more experience of the pleasures and pains of the six senses. In the meantime, their experience of unbinding consists of the total eradication of passion, aversion, and delusion ([§52](#)).

Some Buddhist Romantics, however, challenge the Buddha on this point, noting that even after his awakening, he kept encountering Māra. Because the modern mechanistic worldview has room neither for non-human spirits nor for the thoughts in one person's mind to appear in the mind of another, the argument interprets Māra, not as an actual non-human being, but as a symbol of the defilements still in the Buddha's subconscious that he did not recognize as such. The repeated encounters, in this view, were simply signs that the Buddha still had work to do in dealing with his own delusions all life long.

But there are two inconsistencies here. The first is that in making this assertion these Buddhist Romantics are repudiating their own Romantic interpretation of Buddhist causality. Elsewhere, they themselves have described the world as a mystery, a shimmering matrix in which there exist no discrete boundaries between individuals. In such a world, there could easily be a being like Māra whose thoughts might permeate into the Buddha's consciousness. Why these teachers have chosen to defend the limited Romantic view of the religious goal by repudiating the Romantic worldview of a mysterious interconnected Oneness is hard to say, but the inconsistency undermines their case.

The second inconsistency comes from the mechanistic worldview such teachers adopt to make their case. In such a worldview, there is no room for consciousness as anything but a by-product of physical processes, which means that suffering, too, would be simply the result of physical processes. If it could possibly be ended in such a world, it would have to be by means of physical processes. Meditation, as a phenomenological, non-physical process, couldn't possibly have an effect. So it would be inconsistent for a person holding such a worldview to engage in meditation practice, and even more inconsistent to teach Dhamma or meditation lessons to others.

So again, the inconsistencies involved in making this argument undermine the position of the person making it.

However this argument is made, the practical consequences of insisting that the goal can never be fully reached are similar to those under Point 5: If you accept that awakening still leaves greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind, you will tend to overestimate a meditative experience that seems impressive but still leaves seeds of these defilements in its wake. This will stand in the way of making any further progress on the path.

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• *Point 9, on seeing the sacred in the mundane:* The ability to see all things as luminous is recognized in the Canon as a state of mental mastery—but it is still fabricated ([§23](#)). This means that it's not a sign of a transcendent attainment.

As for the sense that all things are sacred—what we have termed the microcosmic sublime—this can lead easily to attachment. The Buddha himself pointed out that seeing all things as good can create suffering similar to the sort that comes from seeing all things as bad ([MN 74](#)). And if skillful and unskillful intentions are regarded as equally sacred, what motivation is there to abandon the unskillful ones? So the sense that all things are sacred leaves people defenseless against their own unskillful intentions and is actually an obstacle on the path.

As for the macrocosmic sublime: One of the passages quoted under Point 10 above makes the assertion that religion is mainly concerned with mystery, and expresses the preference that life and its purpose be left mysterious, and that life's great questions remain unanswered.

This differs sharply from the Buddha's sense of overwhelming dismay prior to his awakening. The word with which he described it, *saṁvega*, actually means “terror,” and fits well with Kant's use of the word *sublime*. For the Buddha, this terror came from a specific view of the world—the fish in the pool—and demanded an answer: the end of suffering. To leave that answer as a mystery is to close the path to an escape.

So here again, the practical consequences of choosing one view of the sublime over another are sharp in their difference. Buddhist

Romanticism wants the large questions to remain unanswered; the Dhamma, that they be resolved.

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• *Point 10 (a), on attaining the spiritual goal through an attitude of mindfulness, defined as an open receptivity and acceptance:* The Buddha notes that the causes of suffering come in two forms: those that end when you simply watch them with equanimity, and those that end only when you exert yourself actively to get rid of them ([§38](#)). To adopt an attitude of acceptance for everything you experience allows you to end only causes of the first sort. Causes of the second sort will continue to fester, preventing true freedom.

At the same time, if all experience is simply to be accepted, and all experience is One, what does that say about the problem of evil? As we noted in our discussions of Emerson, Maslow, and Huxley, if evil is supposed to be accepted as a necessary part of the Oneness of all things, and the universe as a whole is indifferent to good and evil, there is no incentive to make the effort to avoid evil and do good. To teach such an attitude would, in the Buddha's eyes, leave people bewildered and unprotected from their own unskillful urges ([§8](#)). There would be no basis for what he identified as a categorical truth: that unskillful behavior is to be avoided, and skillful behavior developed ([AN 2:18](#)). This means that an attitude of total acceptance is diametrically opposed to Dhamma practice.

As for mindfulness, the Buddha *never* defines it as an open, receptive, pre-verbal state. In fact, his standard definition for the faculty of mindfulness is the ability to remember and keep things in mind for a long time ([§35](#)). Thus, in the practice of right mindfulness, one is keeping one of four frames of reference in mind—body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities—remembering to stay with these things in and of themselves, alert to the present moment in terms of these frames of reference, at the same time remembering the instructions connected with each frame in how to be ardent in abandoning unskillful factors that arise and to develop skillful factors in their place.

Some of the Canon's more vivid analogies for the practice of mindfulness emphasize this element of ardency, suggesting anything

but an open, receptive, non-judging state: a person with his head on fire; a man walking between a beauty queen and a crowd, carrying on his head a bowl filled to the brim with oil, and a man following behind him with a raised sword, ready to cut off his head if even a drop of oil gets spilled (§§36–37).

There's a tendency, even among serious scholars, to mine the Canon for passages presenting a more spacious, receptive picture of mindfulness. But this tendency, in addition to ignoring the basic definition of mindfulness, denies the essential unity among the factors of the path. In some cases, this denial is explicit: To make their case, some scholars actually define right mindfulness on the one hand, and right effort and right concentration on the other, as two mutually exclusive forms of practice. This suggests that the tendency to define mindfulness as an open, receptive, non-judging state comes from a source other than the Canon. It's possible to find Asian roots for this tendency, in the schools of meditation that define mindfulness as bare awareness or mere noting. But the way the West has morphed these definitions in the direction of acceptance and affirmation has less to do with Asian traditions, and more to do with the Romantic tendency to exalt an open receptivity as the source for spiritual inspiration.

And the practical consequences are clear: To limit oneself to a practice of open acceptance leaves one defenseless against the causes of suffering that will go away only through concerted effort.

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• *Point 10 (b), on their being many different paths to the goal:* This idea, as we noted above, came from the Pietist assumption, later adopted by the Romantics, that there is only one possible goal. Based on this assumption, both the Pietists and the Romantics believed that the only kindly way to regard paths other than one's own was to endorse them as equally valid alternative routes to one and the same place.

However, if—as the Dhamma maintains—there are many possible goals, then the differences among the paths actually can make a difference in what is attained. So the kindly approach is not simply to endorse all paths. It's to figure out which path leads to which goal.

The Buddha states clearly that there is only one path to unbinding ([§60](#)). Trying to find awakening in ways apart from the noble eightfold path is like trying to squeeze oil from gravel, or to get milk from a cow by twisting its horn ([§59](#)). The Canon compares the Buddha's knowledge of the way to awakening to that of an expert gatekeeper who knows, after encircling the walls of a city, that there's only one way into the city: the gate he guards ([§57](#)).

Even for a person on the one path to unbinding, the Buddha cites many possible experiences, such as the levels of concentration, that might be—and have been—mistaken for unbinding ([DN 1](#)). Thus he provides a series of tests for judging whether a meditative experience counts as the endpoint, as a station along the way, or as a side path leading in the wrong direction.

One of the tests for determining whether one has reached the first level of awakening is if, on reflection, one realizes that no one outside the Buddha's teaching teaches the true, accurate, way to the goal ([§56](#)). Although individual people may have to focus on issues particular to their temperament ([SN 35:204](#)), the basic outline of the path is the same for all.

From this point of view, the Buddhist Romantic position that each person can choose his or her own path—secure in the knowledge that whatever their choice, they will get to the same goal—deprives people of the incentive to stick with the true path when it inevitably gets difficult. This, for the purposes of freedom, is a severe obstacle.

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- This obstacle is especially blatant with regard to *Point 11, the assertion that erotic love can form a path to awakening*. The Buddha began his teaching career with the observation that the path he taught avoided two extremes: indulgence in sensual pleasures under the sway of sensuality—in other words, the passion for one's sensual resolves—and indulgence in self-torment. Both extremes, he said, are ignoble. Both create a great deal of suffering—if you don't believe that sex can cause suffering, spend some time in divorce court—and neither leads to the goal.

And he didn't deprecate sensuality out of an arbitrary personal dislike for it. He recognized that the mind could attain strong concentration when focused on sensual desire, but he realized that, for the purpose of the path, that would be wrong concentration. *Right* concentration would require that he drop that desire ([§58](#); [§14](#)). After all, awakening requires comprehending becoming, and a person can comprehend sensual becoming only when he or she has been able to step out of the desire around which it forms ([MN 14](#)). As the Buddha later admitted, when he first realized that right concentration required pulling away from sensuality, his mind didn't leap up at the prospect. But he was honest enough with himself to admit that it was true. So, by focusing on the drawbacks of sensuality, he was able to get the mind into right concentration and from there attain awakening ([AN 9:41](#)).

An unwillingness to see the drawbacks of sensuality is a form of dishonesty that prevents one from examining some of the crudest forms of becoming that the mind creates. At the same time, it prevents one from imagining the desirability—or even the possibility—of a mind free from the suffering that these forms of becoming entail ([MN 125](#)). This lack of imagination places severe limitations on one's sensitivity to stress, and one's ability to gain a happiness totally free from stress.

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• *Point 12: on tolerating all religious traditions as equally valid expressions of a sense of universal Oneness.* The Romantic attitude toward tolerance is directly related to the basic paradox that we have frequently noted in Romantic religion: the position that, on the one hand, no one can pass judgment on another person's expression of Oneness; but, on the other hand, that those expressions are valid only when recognizing the Romantic view that they are imperfect expressions of Oneness, along with the corollary view that some expressions express this principle better than others. Translated into the issue of tolerance, this means that your beliefs will all be tolerated only as long as they recognize the Romantic principles of what religion is and the world in which it functions.

This straitjacket is somewhat looser than the narrow range of tolerance offered by many other religious traditions, but it's a

straitjacket nonetheless. This is especially clear from the point of view of the Dhamma, for two reasons. One, the Dhamma is not an attempt to express universal Oneness and doesn't see a return to that Oneness as its goal. It aims instead at something beyond the universe: total unbinding. Two, it recognizes that there are right and wrong paths to unbinding. To claim that a wrong path can actually get the same result is a disservice to others—and to oneself—just as it's perverse to teach other people to get milk from a cow by twisting its horn (§59).

These two reasons are directly related to the third and fourth noble truths: that there is an unfabricated dimension constituting the end of suffering, and that there are right and wrong paths for getting to that dimension. To force the Dhamma to abandon these two truths in order to earn Romantic tolerance is exacting too high a price. It impoverishes all those who, if the Dhamma did bow to these conditions, would be deprived of the benefits of learning these truths.

Some people fear that notions of right and wrong practices lead inevitably to strife—look at all the futile wars fought over religious beliefs—so it's kinder to let people take whatever path they want. This is the attitude that led to Pietism in the first place, and as we have seen, this Pietist attitude has survived in Romantic religion. But some differences of opinion on religious matters are more likely to lead to strife than others. If, for instance, you believe that there is only one god, and view all other gods as evil and false, you are likely to feel threatened by the existence of other people who believe in gods other than your own. This attitude can easily lead—as it has led—to recurrent violence.

If, however, you believe in a path of action that leads to true happiness—that, say, you can get milk from a cow by pulling on its udder—you will pity other people who try to milk the cow by twisting its horn. You may feel inspired to point out their error, but if they insist on twisting the horn, you leave them alone. Nevertheless, you can still do your best to convince others aside from them that a cow is more effectively milked by pulling on its udder. And you're right to do so. Where there's no clear sense of right and wrong, a lot of people will needlessly go without milk.

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• *Points 13 through 16*: These principles in the Buddhist Romantic program boil down to two: (a) *that all religious texts are expressive of the author's feeling for universal Oneness* and (b) *that no text carries special authority because no finite being—trapped in his or her point in time and culture—can fully comprehend or express that Oneness*. Thus, all texts should be read aesthetically, for poetic inspiration, but without granting them any authority. In fact, because of the limitations of language in expressing universal Oneness, one harms one's own experience of it by giving authority to anyone else's expression of it.

However, from the perspective of the Dhamma, the premise on which these ideas are based is false. The Buddha's teachings are not expressions of his feelings for universal Oneness. They are precise instructions on what to do to attain ultimate happiness. This is why his basic image for his teaching was a path: something to be followed to reach a goal.

a) Granted, the Canon contains a few passages where the Buddha and his awakened disciples speak poetically and expressively of their attainments, but those passages are rare. Far more common are the descriptive and proscriptive passages: *maps to the path*, in which the Buddha tells explicitly how to get to awakening; and *encouragement to follow the maps*, in which he tries to get people to see why awakening is worth pursuing. As he said in a famous simile, the knowledge gained in his awakening was like the leaves in the forest; the knowledge he taught, like the leaves in his hand ([SN 56:31](#)). And he chose those particular leaves because they served a purpose, helping others develop the skills needed for release.

This point is supported by the imagery and analogies employed throughout the Canon. Although some of the more poetic passages draw images from nature, they are greatly outnumbered by analogies drawn from manual skills—cooking, farming, archery, carpentry—making the point that Dhamma practice is a skill that can be understood and mastered in ways similar to more ordinary skills.

The poetic approach to the Canon overlooks the care with which the Buddha tried to make his instructions specific and clear. As he once commented ([§66](#)), there are two types of assemblies: those trained in bombast, and those trained in cross-questioning. In the former, the

students are taught “literary works—the works of poets, artful in sound, artful in expression, the work of outsiders” and are not encouraged to pin down what the meaning of those beautiful words might be. In the latter—and here the Buddha was describing his own method of teaching—the students are taught the Dhamma and “when they have mastered that Dhamma, they cross-question one another about it and dissect it: ‘How is this? What is the meaning of this?’ They make open what isn’t open, make plain what isn’t plain, dispel doubt on its various doubtful points.”

He taught people in this way so that they could clearly understand what they were supposed to do. To treat such teachings as poetry encourages a hazier notion of the Dhamma, and deprives the “supposed to do” of much of its force. Passages that challenge the reader’s habits and views can more easily be dismissed—and important lessons are lost.

At the same time, treating the Buddha’s words as poetry encourages a certain looseness in quoting and translating them. Many Buddhist Romantic writers exhibit this looseness—as in the above quote citing the Buddha to the effect that precepts are not necessary for a person established in awareness, something he never said. In treating the Buddha’s words loosely, these writers harm both the Buddha, by slandering him, and the reader, by denying him or her the chance to benefit from the Buddha’s precise experience in the path and skill in pointing out how to practice it.

b) Because the Buddha was teaching a particular path of action, the Romantic reasons for refusing to grant him authority do not apply. It’s true that no one person can have the last word on universal Oneness, but it is possible for one person to have developed full expertise in a skill—and in some cases, to develop an expertise on which no one else can improve.

Seeing the Buddha’s teachings in this light enables us to understand the nature of his authority as presented in the Pāli suttas. He speaks, not with the authority of a creator, but with the authority of an expert. Only in the disciplinary rules in the Vinaya does he assume the added authority of a lawgiver. In the suttas, he calls himself a doctor; a trainer; an admirable, experienced friend who has mastered a specific skill:

putting an end to suffering. He provides explicit recommendations on how to act, speak, and think to bring about that result; instructions on how to develop qualities of mind that allow you to assess your actions accurately; and questions to ask yourself in measuring your progress along the way.

As for the possible harm that might come from giving the Buddha authority in these areas, Buddhist Romantics who describe the dangers of following a particular Buddhist teaching usually deal in caricatures. For instance, one teacher warns of the dangers of wanting to follow a path that leads to a transcendent, once-and-for-all goal as follows:

“The linear path holds up an idealistic vision of the perfected human, a Buddha or saint or sage. In this vision, all greed, anger, fear, judgment, delusion, personal ego, and desire are uprooted forever, completely eliminated. What is left is an absolutely unwavering, radiant, pure human being who never experiences any difficulties, an illuminated sage who follows only the Tao or God’s will and never his or her own.”

Although this may be a possible vision of the linear path, it’s not the path taught in the Canon. The Buddha certainly passed judgment on people and taught clear criteria for what are and are not valid grounds for judgment ([AN 7:64](#); [AN 4:192](#); [MN 110](#)). He experienced difficulties in setting up the monastic Saṅgha. But that does not invalidate the fact that his greed, aversion, and delusion were gone.

As [MN 22](#) states, there are dangers in grasping the Dhamma wrongly. In the context of that sutta, the Buddha is referring to people who grasp the Dhamma for the sake of argument; at present we might point out the dangers in grasping the teachings neurotically. But there are even greater dangers in misrepresenting the teachings, dragging them down to our own level rather than using them to lift ourselves up. As the Buddha said, people who claim that he said what he didn’t say, or didn’t say what he did, are slandering him ([§68](#)). In doing so, they blind themselves—and others—to the Dhamma.

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• *Point 17, on the sources of moral behavior.* The Romantic rejection of moral precepts, like its rejection of religious authority in general, is based on a false premise: that ideas of right and wrong express only the feelings of the person who sets them forth.

The Buddha established a moral code of five precepts because he had discovered, from experience, that it gave necessary guidance in leading a harmless life: harmless both to oneself and to others ([AN 4:99](#)). And the range of this guidance doesn't end with awakening. Even though awakened people no longer define themselves in terms of the precepts, their behavior still falls in line with them ([MN 78](#)). And, conversely, if a person claims to be awakened but his or her behavior doesn't fall in line with the precepts, the claim can be rejected as false ([AN 3:87](#)).

Viewed from the perspective of the Buddha's standards, the Buddhist Romantic assertion that feelings of love and compassion on the one hand, and Oneness on the other, can give a person adequate guidance to skillful behavior doesn't hold up to experience.

An attitude of love and compassion—on its own, and uninformed about how actions work out over time—is not enough to prevent actions with harmful consequences. Good intentions are not always skillful intentions. So the precepts act as reminders of what skillful kamma actually is, and they express their message in a concise form, easy to remember when most needed, i.e., when events are urgent and confusing, and give rise to conflicting emotions or conflicting ideas about what a skillful action might be.

Similarly, an attitude of Oneness—that other people are One with you—is hard to maintain when those other people are trying to kill you and your loved ones, or steal what you need to survive. And yet it's precisely in situations like those that you need something clear to hold onto so that you know what, in the long run, is skillful to do, and you have the strength of character to do it.

But the precepts do more than simply counsel against unskillful behavior. They are also aids in developing concentration and discernment. If you follow them carefully, you avoid actions that will lead to regret—or, from regret, to denial. A mind wounded by regret will have a hard time settling into concentration. If it has covered that regret

with the scar tissue of denial, it will have a hard time looking carefully at its inner actions. Discernment won't have a chance to arise.

Moreover, if you hold carefully to the precepts, you will find that they conflict with many of your cherished habits and notions. This gives you the opportunity to come face to face with attachments lying behind those habits and notions, which you might otherwise hide from yourself. If you tend to dismiss the precepts as simply the feelings of one person at one particular point in time—the Buddha in ancient India—which need to be modified for today, you will easily make exceptions for your notions and habits. That will deprive you of the “mirror of Dhamma” that the precepts can ideally provide.

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- This principle holds true, not only for your personal notions and habits, but also for those you have picked up from your culture. If you can't see the Dhamma as transcending culture, you won't be willing to listen to the Dhamma when it challenges the horizons within which your culture has taught you to think and feel. Given that these horizons can be invisible to the people they surround, and yet can effectively block out any premises that don't fall in line with them, you may not even hear the challenges the Dhamma presents.

This is the practical drawback of *Point 19, on seeing the Buddha's Dhamma simply as a product of his historical circumstances*.

The whole purpose of the Dhamma is a direct challenge to this principle. The release provided by unbinding—what the Buddha called the essence or heartwood (*sāra*) of the Dhamma (§39)—stands outside of space and time (§§45–49). The Buddha's discovery of this timeless perspective was what enabled him to judge which aspects of his culture were conducive to the path leading to the essence, and which ones were not. The simple fact that he claimed an experience of the transcendent doesn't prove that it's true, but the Romantic counterclaim—that there is no transcendent dimension—has never been proven, either. But as we have previously noted, the Buddha's claim offers the possibility of freedom—both freedom of choice on a moment-to-moment level, and the ultimate freedom of unbinding—whereas the Romantic claim offers no possibility of genuine freedom, period. So to choose the Romantic

claim over the Dhamma's closes off the possibility of any path of practice at all.

It's obvious that the Buddha's language and metaphors were culturally conditioned, but it's hard to identify any of his basic teachings as limited in that way. To say nothing of his teaching on unbinding, even his explanations of suffering and the path to its end deal in universal terms. As for the range of his knowledge, he claimed an awareness of the past that far outstrips ours ([DN 29](#); [DN 1](#)), and he'd often cite direct knowledge of a vast expanse of past, present, and future when describing, for instance, how physical, verbal, and mental actions are to be purified ([MN 61](#)) and how the highest emptiness can be attained ([MN 121](#)). This is why even the Dhamma of the path is said to be timeless, and why the first level of awakening verifies that this is so.

At the same time, when people speak of essential Buddhist teachings that are limited by the cultural conventions of the Buddha's time, they're usually misinformed as to what those conventions were.

For instance, with the doctrine of kamma: Even though the Buddha used the word *kamma* like his contemporaries, his conception of what kamma was and how it worked differed radically from theirs ([§8](#); [MN 60](#); [MN 101](#)).

The same holds with the teaching on rebirth: Questions of whether rebirth actually happened, and the extent to which it was related to kamma, were hotly debated in his time ([DN 2](#); [DN 23](#)). So it's hard to say that, in teaching the effect of kamma on rebirth, he was simply following unthinkingly the narrow beliefs of his culture. In fact, his teachings on this issue tackled the issue of rebirth in a novel and practical way: focusing not on *what* is or isn't reborn, but on *how* rebirth happens based on habits of the mind, and how those habits can be retrained to give freedom from continued suffering.

His teachings on kamma and rebirth give universal answers to a universal question: "What factors should I take into account to decide if a particular action is worth the effort?" We can't be agnostic on this issue, treating it as a question not worth answering, because we answer it willy-nilly with every action we take, as we decide which potential results of the action should enter into the calculation of whether it's worth doing, and which potential results to ignore.

What's striking about the Western attitude toward kamma and rebirth is that so many Westerners have resisted these teachings from the start. Herder found them repellent, as did Hegel, although neither of them understood the wide range of Indian positions on these topics, or the fact that the Buddha's position differed radically from anything else in the Indian tradition. Yet even though much new evidence on these topics has surfaced over the years, showing how the Buddha's position was uniquely suited to the purpose of putting an end to suffering, Buddhist Romanticism remains stuck in the old Western attitude: It treats his teachings on kamma and rebirth simply as cultural holdovers that would be better dropped from the tradition because the idea of individual kamma clashes with the principle of the Oneness of all being, and the teaching on rebirth with the principle of total receptivity to the present moment. As a result, the Buddha's actual teachings on these topics are not allowed to hold up a mirror to Western/Romantic suppositions. Nor are they given a chance to show the way around the obstacles that those suppositions place on the path.

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- Instead, Buddhist Romanticism teaches that modern Buddhists are actually doing the Dhamma a favor by changing it to suit the needs and suppositions of modern culture, in line with *Point 20: the duty to alter one's religious tradition in line with the times*.

Here it's important to remember the Romantic assumption underlying this principle: that the universe is an organism with a purpose, and that its purpose is becoming more fully realized with the passage of time. Thus evolutions in society are good, and religions should evolve in order to keep up with them. This assumption receives strong reinforcement in a culture such as ours where technological progress leads people to believe that the culture as a whole is evolving far beyond anything the world has ever known.

But there is very little to support this assumption. In fact, the Pāli suttas present the opposite picture: that human life is getting worse as a sphere for Dhamma practice, and will continue to deteriorate until the Dhamma disappears entirely. And it's easy to cite features of modern life that confirm this picture. To begin with, Dhamma practice is a skill,

requiring the attitudes and mental abilities developed by manual skills—such as patience, respect, humility, and resilience—and yet we are a society whose manual skills are fast eroding away. Thus the mental virtues nurtured by manual skills have atrophied. At the same time, the social hierarchy required by skills—in which students apprentice themselves to a master—has mostly disappeared, so we’ve unlearned the attitudes needed to live in hierarchy in a healthy and productive manner.

We like to think that we’re shaping the Dhamma with our highest cultural ideals, but some of our lower ways are actually dominating the shape of Western Dhamma: The sense of neurotic entitlement produced by the culture of consumerism is a case in point, as are the hype of the mass media and the demands of the mass-market for a Dhamma that sells.

So just because Buddhism has been changed in the past doesn’t mean that those changes were good, or that they should be taken as an example or justification for new changes now. Here, again, the organic notion of change has created confusion. All too often Buddhism is presented as an organism that wisely adapts itself to its new environments. But Buddhism is not a plant or an animal. It doesn’t have a will, and it doesn’t adapt; people adapt Buddhism to their various ends. In some cases, those ends are admirable. Some novel elements—in terms of language and imagery—have helped bring people in new times and places into contact with the essence of the Dhamma. And in many cases, often overlooked in histories that focus on innovation, many attempts at adaptation have aimed, not at creating something new, but at recovering something that had been lost.

Yet because the adapters of the past were not always wise, there’s no guarantee that all adaptations are skillful. Just because other people have made changes in the Dhamma doesn’t automatically justify the changes we want to make. Think, for instance, of how some Mahāyāna traditions dropped the Vinaya’s procedures for dealing with teacher-student sexual abuse: Was this the Dhamma wisely adapting itself to their needs?

The Buddha foresaw that people would introduce what he called “a counterfeit of the true Dhamma”—and when that happened, he said,

the true Dhamma would disappear ([§69](#)). In a separate passage, he compared the process to what happens when a wooden drum develops a crack, into which a peg is inserted, and then another crack, into which another peg is inserted, and so on until nothing is left of the original drum-body. All that remains is a mass of pegs, which cannot come near to producing the sound of the original drum ([§71](#)).

As noted above, some scholars have found the Pāli Canon's warnings about the decay of the Dhamma ironic, citing what they claim to be a Buddhist principle: that resistance to change is a root cause of suffering. But the Buddha didn't embrace change, didn't encourage change for the sake of change, and certainly didn't define resistance to change as the cause of suffering. Suffering is caused by *identifying* with change or with things that change. Many are the suttas describing the perils of "going along with the flow" in terms of a river that can carry an unsuspecting person to whirlpools, monsters, and demons ([Iti 109](#)). And a pervasive theme in the Canon is that true happiness is found only when one crosses over the river to the changelessness of the other side ([Sn 5](#)).

As for trusting the impulses of the mind to produce wise changes, this too is a notion based on the organic Romantic view of the universe: that our inner drives are all expressions of a reliably good source leading to a good end. But try a thought experiment and take the above passage—that "we must be open to a variety of responses toward social change that come from no particular 'authority' but are grounded in the radical creativity that comes when concepts fall away"—and imagine how it would sound in different contexts. Coming from a socially concerned Buddhist activist, it might not seem disconcerting. But from a rebel leader teaching child-soldiers in a civil-war torn country, or a greedy financier contemplating new financial instruments, it would be a cause for alarm.

The Buddha's teachings on the mind's active interaction with the world are in agreement with the Romantic principle that the mind has an interactive, reciprocal relationship with the universe. But he would have differed with the Romantic estimation that this activity—whether from within the mind or from the universe outside—is divinely rooted and inspired. To trust this activity unquestioningly would be, in his eyes, an act of heedlessness. In his analysis of dependent co-arising, mental

fabrication—the mind’s active approach to experience—comes from ignorance ([§25](#); [SN 12:2](#)). This ignorance has no overall purpose, and in particular does not work instinctively for the good of all. As we noted in Chapter Four, the simple fact that the mind is in an interactive relationship with its environment is no proof that both are parts of a larger, benevolent, teleological whole.

In fact, from the point of view of the Dhamma, the interactive, reciprocal nature of fabrication is the reason why causal relations are unstable, and why any happiness built on fabrication is unreliable and entails inherent suffering. The only way to end suffering is not to celebrate fabrication, but to master it strategically so as to end it; and this requires an attitude, not of trust, but of heedful vigilance ([DN 16](#)). Heedfulness must extend both to one’s attitude toward one’s intuitions and to the ways with which one interprets the Dhamma.

The choice between the Dhamma and Buddhist Romanticism ultimately comes down to which kind of freedom you want. The Dhamma offers freedom from suffering through freedom from becoming; Buddhist Romanticism—in line with the Romantic view of religion as an artwork—offers you the freedom to redesign the Dhamma in line with your preferences to produce more inclusive states of becoming. Given that the Romantic universe allows for nothing beyond becoming, it closes the door to freedom in the ultimate sense. And as we have noted, the fact that, in a Romantic universe, you have no control over your preferences, it can’t even offer freedom in the more everyday sense of freedom of choice. Although the Romantic worldview promotes the idea that expressions of preferences ultimately have no consequences, the Dhamma *starts* with the principle that actions have consequences now and into the future ([MN 61](#)). The difference in perspective couldn’t be more stark.

If we are serious about our engagement with the Dhamma, we have to think not only of the benefits we can gain from the Dhamma, but also of what sort of Dhamma we leave for future generations. The Buddha never demanded that people believe his teachings, but he did ask that people represent them fairly and give them a fair test. But if we insist on making changes to the Dhamma, the people who come after us won’t know what to test, or what a fair test might be. To whatever extent the true Dhamma

has come down to us, has all been through the efforts of the men and women of many generations who practiced in line with it, benefited from it, and went out of their way to preserve it.

Those people were motivated to preserve the Dhamma because they had followed, not the duty to change it, but the duties with regard to the four noble truths. They comprehended suffering, abandoned its cause, realized its cessation, all by developing the path. In other words, instead of imposing duties on the Dhamma, they accepted the duties the Dhamma taught them. Having tasted the release that comes from following these duties, they fully appreciated the value of the Dhamma and wanted to keep it alive and intact for those who would come after. To disrupt their efforts in that direction, out of a desire to be creative or expressive, is an act of ingratitude toward those who went before us, and of callousness toward those who will come after.

When the Buddha described how counterfeit Dhamma would make the true Dhamma disappear, he compared the process to what happens to genuine money when counterfeit money gets circulated: As long as there is only genuine money, people don't doubt its authenticity. They can simply put it to use. But when there is both genuine and counterfeit money, doubts will arise as to what is genuine, and so all money becomes dubious. People have to be wary of what they're using, and have to devise more and more sophisticated tests to determine what's genuine.

We already live in an era where counterfeit Dhamma has become common. As a result, it's very easy to doubt that there is, or ever was, such a thing as genuine Dhamma. This means that the Buddha's forecast has already come true. True Dhamma—as something undeniably True or Dhamma—has already disappeared. This places a burden of responsibility on everyone who wants to find an end to suffering: We have to be very careful about our reasons for choosing one version of Dhamma over another, and to test our own honesty again and again. Otherwise, if we simply trust the impulses of our hearts and of those who offer us an appealing Dhamma, we become suckers for counterfeit. And if we become counterfeiters ourselves, we're making things that much harder for succeeding generations.

THE IRONIES OF BUDDHIST ROMANTICISM

The radical differences between Buddhist Romanticism and the Dhamma can best be summarized by restating Buddhist Romantic principles in the framework of the four noble truths: what might be called the four Romantic truths.

- 1) Suffering is a feeling of separation: within oneself, between oneself and other people, and between oneself and the universe at large.
- 2) This feeling of separation is caused by the mistaken notion that one is a separate entity with a separate identity.
- 3) Suffering never totally ends, but relief from suffering can be occasionally glimpsed in a feeling of Oneness that temporarily overcomes that sense of separate identity.
- 4) There is no one right path for glimpsing a sense of Oneness, but all effective paths consist of cultivating an attitude of enlarging one's perspective to embrace all of life, to transcend ideas of right and wrong, and to maintain an attitude of open receptivity to all experience.

Compare these four Romantic truths with the four noble truths:

- 1) Suffering is clinging to—feeding on—the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness.
- 2) This clinging is caused by the craving that leads to becoming: craving for sensual passions, craving for becoming, and craving for the destruction of becoming.
- 3) This craving can be ended once and for all through dispassion for it.
- 4) This dispassion can be induced only by following the path of right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The four noble truths entail four duties—comprehending stress, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path—whereas the four Romantic truths entail only one: fostering an open receptivity to universal Oneness, accepting joys and sorrows as all part of the sacredness of life.

As we saw with Schlegel and Emerson, this universal point of view carries with it an attitude of irony. In fact, a viewpoint that embraces opposites *demand*s an attitude of irony, because every time it expresses a truth it has to acknowledge the limitations of those expressions. This attitude thus embodies a stance on the part of the author—above the truths he or she is expressing—and also a style, indicating that the truth, while heartfelt, should not be taken as fully serious. Thus a genuine Romantic would prefer to put quotation marks around the word *truth* in the Romantic truths—or to call them *myths*—to suggest the universal point of view that could embrace their opposites as well.

We often associate Romanticism with a flowery, emotional style—and traces of that style certainly can be found among Romantic writers, whether early or Buddhist—but among the various styles adopted by Romantics, irony is most faithful to the content of the Romantic worldview. In fact, irony is where Romantic content and style merge. This is particularly true for an artist who aspires to embody freedom in the process of creating a work of art, because an attitude of irony liberates the artist from two kinds of tyranny: the tyranny of traditional rules about what a work of art should be, and the tyranny of being defined by one's own previous artistic creations.

In addition to expressing a universal perspective, the ironic style and stance also expresses the Romantic sense of the universe as organism, constantly evolving. It allows the artist to be faithful to his or her feeling of the organic forces at play within and without at a particular point in time, but without being committed to consistency over time. This is one of the reasons that, although Oneness and freedom were the two main principles that the Romantics embraced, they never managed to resolve the inconsistency between them—or to acknowledge that they had failed in trying.

Like the early Romantics, Buddhist Romantics express their appreciation of irony both in the style and content of their teachings. Irony in style is hard to demonstrate in short quotations; but irony as a conscious stance is often explicitly extolled:

“As one matures in spiritual life, one becomes more comfortable with paradox, more appreciative of life's ambiguities,

its many levels and inherent conflicts. One develops a sense of life's irony, metaphor, and humor and a capacity to embrace the whole, with its beauty and outrageousness, in the graciousness of the heart.... When we embrace life's opposites, we hold our own birth and death, our own joy and suffering, as inseparable. We honor the sacred in both emptiness and form."

Applied to the Buddhist tradition, irony would mean maintaining that there are many paths to the goal, and that freedom is to be found, not by following any particular Buddhist path, but by standing above the confines of any path and exercising one's freedom in being able to move lightly and easily among many.

In some cases, this attitude of irony is justified from within the Buddhist tradition itself by pointing to instances where the Buddha warned about attachment to views.

"[F]lexibility understands that there is not just one way of practice or one fine spiritual tradition, but there are many ways. It understands that spiritual life is not about adopting any one particular philosophy or set of beliefs or teachings, that it is not a cause for taking a stand in opposition to someone else or something else. It is an easiness of heart that understands that all of the spiritual vehicles are rafts to cross the stream to freedom. In his earliest dialogue, the Buddha cautioned against confusing the raft with the shore and against adopting any rigid opinion or view. He went on, 'How could anything in this world bring conflict to a wise person who has not adopted any view?'... The flexibility of heart brings a humor to spiritual practice. It allows us to see that there are a hundred thousand skillful means of awakening, that there are times for formal and systematic ways and times for spur-of-the-moment and unusual and outrageous ones."

However, in making this argument, this passage—like many others with a similar point—misrepresents what the Buddha actually said. He drew a clear line between the role of views when one is still on the path and their role after one has reached the goal. As he stated in an early poem, the goal cannot be defined in terms of views—or of learning or

precepts—but it cannot be attained *except* through views, learning, and precepts ([Sn 4:9](#)). There may be some leeway in how a person practices in line with this fact—the Wings to Awakening, for instance, contain seven different descriptions of how the factors of the path interact—but paths of practice are clearly divided into right and wrong, because wrong paths, like an attempt to get edible oil by grinding gravel, simply don't work.

While you're on the path, you have to hold to it. This is part of the message of the simile of the raft. It's not about confusing the path with the goal. The simile's main message is about not needing to hold to the path after you have achieved the goal. But it also implies that as long as you are still at the stage of crossing the river, you need to hold firmly to the raft. Otherwise, the river will sweep you away ([MN 22](#)).

This point is underlined by the simile that accompanies the simile of the raft in [MN 22](#): the simile of the snake. Suppose that you want something from a snake, such as venom to make an antidote. If you grasp the snake wrongly, by catching its tail, it'll bite you. If you grasp it rightly, by pinning its neck down with a forked stick, the snake won't be able to bite you no matter how much it writhes and coils around your arm. You'll be able to get the venom needed for the antidote. However, if you try to play it safe by not grasping the snake at all, you won't get the antidote you need.

Similarly, if you hold to the Dhamma simply to argue with others, you'll harm yourself. If you hold onto it to practice it sincerely, you'll gain the results you want. If you don't hold onto it at all, the results simply won't come.

As we noted above in our discussion of Point 18, it's rare for Theravāda Buddhist Romantics explicitly to promote the idea that the universe is beyond dualities of right and wrong in moral matters. However, when they adopt an ironic attitude toward views, they ignore the fact that to assert no right or wrong in terms of views is to assert implicitly no right or wrong in terms of actions and morality. After all, views are a type of action, they lead to further actions, and those actions have consequences. As long as suffering is a problem resulting from unskillful actions, and the end of suffering is a possible goal resulting from skillful actions, there have to be right and wrong ways of viewing

the problem and understanding which actions are skillful and which ones are not.

The Buddha was not an argumentative person, but even he would go out of his way to confront those who taught views that were absolutely detrimental to Dhamma practice—in particular, those who taught that action bore no results. He would also seek out and argue with those who held to opinions that inadvertently denied the power of action in the present, such as philosophers who attributed everything to a creator God, who taught that all things were without cause, or who taught that all experience was predetermined by what was done in the past ([§8](#); [MN 101](#)). Because these views undercut any notion of an effective path of practice, the Buddha had to show clearly that they were wrong.

So the Dhamma does not embrace opposites. If it embraces anything, it embraces the observation that some practices are right for the sake of leading to the end of suffering, and other practices are wrong. As long as you're on the path, you embrace the path. When the goal is reached, you let go of everything. But if you're still alive and teaching others, you show them compassion by making sure that they understand what is right and wrong so that they can attain the freedom of the transcendent as well.

This point highlights a greater irony in the difference between Buddhist Romanticism and the Dhamma. By adopting a universal point of view—that of an expressive artist, trying to transcend finite dualities—Buddhist Romantics seem to be coming from a higher perspective from which they can use the historical method to criticize the Dhamma for being narrow: time-bound, culture-bound, and out-of-date. And yet, in the final analysis, they can promise only a very compromised notion of freedom: glimpses of Oneness that can never go beyond the confines of becoming.

As for the Dhamma, even though it seems to be taking a narrower point of view—that of a craftsman trying to master what is right and wrong in a craft, and passing that craft along to others—it ultimately leads to a higher goal: transcendent freedom beyond the dimensions of space and time.

The contrast between these two approaches can be appreciated most graphically by considering the story with which the author of the above passage on flexibility illustrates his message. He tells of a high school

basketball coach hired to coach a group of specially handicapped children. Realizing after his first session that the children would never be able to play basketball with any recognizable rules—they had trouble even lining up and facing in the same direction—he went with the flow and threw out his coaching plans in favor of a more free-form approach. Instead of focusing on winning, he fostered an atmosphere that allowed the children to express their creativity and have a good time. The scorekeeper pushed the score button whenever he felt like it—in one game, they racked up more than a million points—the game could be interrupted by music and dance at any point, and at the end of each game everyone was rewarded with hotdogs.

The story is humorous in a gentle, heartwarming way, but the humor distracts attention from the question of whether this was the most helpful approach the coach could have taken in training the children. And the warmth distracts attention from the chilling message the story is being forced to convey: that spiritual life is not about playing well or mastering a skill, and that in the final account, winning or losing at the path doesn't matter. All that matters is expressing yourself and enjoying yourself in the process.

If suffering weren't a real problem, this attitude would be perfectly helpful, as it places no unnecessary demands on anyone. But suffering itself places demands on the heart, and the demands have a squeeze. If you're sensitive to that squeeze, you want, not an artist who teaches you how to express yourself while embracing the squeeze, but a craftsman who can train you in the skills needed to put an end to that squeeze once and for all. In this context, compassion doesn't mean throwing out the rules and awarding prizes to everyone. It means giving clear instructions as to what works and what doesn't—treating people, not as children wanting entertainment, but as adults.

The Buddha didn't speak as a creative artist expressing himself by inventing the Dhamma. He spoke as an expert craftsman who had discovered a path to a freedom totally uncreated and who passed that path on to many others who, in turn, have continued passing it on for millennia. The craft of the path is based on the assumption that we are free to make choices, and that our choices can make a difference. As the Buddha saw when he first contemplated his life, there is no proof that

these assumptions are true—or that our actions can lead to the deathless—until you’ve put them to the test. There are no guarantees prior to at least some level of commitment. But as he also saw, the possibility that actions might make a difference meant that the only honorable way to live was to take the risk of taking on the commitment, and to devote his life to finding out how far human action can go.

There is no honor in assuming that actions don’t count and that a transcendent happiness is impossible. As long as we’re choosing a path to follow, why not make the honorable choice?

Unromantic Dhamma

THE DISCOVERY OF THE DHAMMA

§ 1. “It’s just as if a man, traveling along a wilderness track, were to see an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by people of former times. He would follow it. Following it, he would see an ancient city, an ancient capital inhabited by people of former times, complete with parks, groves, & ponds, walled, delightful. He would go to address the king or the king’s minister, saying, ‘Sire, you should know that while traveling along a wilderness track I saw an ancient path.... I followed it.... I saw an ancient city, an ancient capital... complete with parks, groves, & ponds, walled, delightful. Sire, rebuild that city!’ The king or king’s minister would rebuild the city, so that at a later date the city would become powerful, rich, & well-populated, fully grown & prosperous.

“In the same way I saw an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times. And what is that ancient path, that ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times? Just this noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. That is the ancient path, the ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times. I followed that path. Following it, I came to direct knowledge of aging-& death, direct knowledge of the origination of aging-& death, direct knowledge of the cessation of aging-& death, direct knowledge of the path leading to the cessation of aging-& death. I followed that path. Following it, I came to direct knowledge of birth... becoming... clinging... craving... feeling... contact... the six sense media... name-& form... consciousness, direct knowledge of the origination of consciousness, direct knowledge of the cessation of consciousness,

direct knowledge of the path leading to the cessation of consciousness. I followed that path.

“Following it, I came to direct knowledge of fabrications, direct knowledge of the origination of fabrications, direct knowledge of the cessation of fabrications, direct knowledge of the path leading to the cessation of fabrications. Knowing that directly, I have revealed it to monks, nuns, male lay followers & female lay followers, so that this holy life has become powerful, rich, detailed, well-populated, wide-spread, proclaimed among devas & human beings.” — [SN 12:65](#)

THE PROBLEM OF *DUKKHA*

§ 2. “Both formerly & now, it is only stress that I teach, and the cessation of stress.” — [SN 22:86](#)

§ 3. “Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration....

“‘This noble truth of stress is to be comprehended’ ... ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned’ ... ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress is to be realized’ ... ‘This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress is to be developed.’” — [SN 56:11](#)

SKILL IN QUESTIONS

§ 4. “There are these four ways of answering questions. Which four? There are questions that should be answered categorically [straightforwardly yes, no, this, that]. There are questions that should be answered with an analytical answer [defining or redefining the terms]. There are questions that should be answered with a counter-question. There are questions that should be put aside. These are the four ways of answering questions.” — [AN 4:42](#)

§ 5. “So, Mālun̄kyaputta, remember what is undisclosed by me as undisclosed, and what is disclosed by me as disclosed. And what is undisclosed by me? ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ is undisclosed by me. ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ is undisclosed by me. ‘The cosmos is finite’ ... ‘The cosmos is infinite’ ... ‘The soul & the body are the same’ ... ‘The soul is one thing and the body another’ ... ‘After death a Tathāgata exists’ ... ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist’ ... ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist’ ... ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,’ is undisclosed by me.

“And why are they undisclosed by me? Because they are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding. That’s why they are undisclosed by me.

“And what is disclosed by me? ‘This is stress,’ is disclosed by me. ‘This is the origination of stress,’ is disclosed by me. ‘This is the cessation of stress,’ is disclosed by me. ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,’ is disclosed by me. And why are they disclosed by me? Because they are connected with the goal, are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding. That’s why they are disclosed by me.” — [MN 63](#)

§ 6. “And what have I taught and declared to be categorical teachings? (The statement that) ‘This is stress’ I have taught and declared to be a categorical teaching. ‘This is the origination of stress’ ... ‘This is the cessation of stress’ ... ‘This is the path of practice leading to the

cessation of stress' I have taught and declared to be a categorical teaching. And why have I taught and declared these teachings to be categorical? Because they are connected with the goal, connected with the Dhamma, and fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding. That's why I have taught and declared them to be categorical." — [DN 9](#)

§ 7. Anāthapiṇḍika the householder said to the wanderers, "As for the venerable one who says, '*The cosmos is eternal*. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless. This is the sort of view I have,' his view arises from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. Now this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. This venerable one thus adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress." [Similarly for the other positions mentioned in §5.]

When this had been said, the wanderers said to Anāthapiṇḍika the householder, "We have each & every one expounded to you in line with our own positions. Now tell us what views you have."

"Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. This is the sort of view I have."

"So, householder, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. You thus adhere to that very stress, submit yourself to that very stress."

"Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. Having seen this well with right discernment as it has come to be, I also discern the higher escape from it as it has come to be."

When this was said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, their heads down, brooding, at a loss for

words. Anāthapiṇḍika the householder, perceiving that the wanderers were silent, abashed... at a loss for words, got up & went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he told the Blessed One the entirety of his conversation with the wanderers.

[The Blessed One said:] “Well done, householder. Well done. That is how you should periodically & righteously refute those foolish men.” Then he instructed, urged, roused, and encouraged Anāthapiṇḍika the householder with a talk on Dhamma. When Anāthapiṇḍika the householder had been instructed, urged, roused and encouraged by the Blessed One with a talk on Dhamma, he got up from his seat and, having bowed down to the Blessed One, left, keeping the Blessed One on his right side. Not long afterward, the Blessed One addressed the monks: “Monks, even a monk who has long penetrated the Dhamma in this Dhamma & Vinaya would do well, periodically & righteously, to refute the wanderers of other persuasions in just the way Anāthapiṇḍika the householder has done.” — [AN 10:93](#)

KAMMA & FURTHER BECOMING

§ 8. “Monks, there are these three sectarian guilds that—when cross-examined, pressed for reasons, & rebuked by wise people—even though they may explain otherwise, remain stuck in (a doctrine of) inaction. Which three?

“There are contemplatives & brahmans who hold this teaching, hold this view: ‘Whatever a person experiences—pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful—is all caused by what was done in the past.’ There are contemplatives & brahmans who hold this teaching, hold this view: ‘Whatever a person experiences—pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful—is all caused by a supreme being’s act of creation.’ There are contemplatives & brahmans who hold this teaching, hold this view: ‘Whatever a person experiences—pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful—is all without cause & without condition.’

“Having approached the contemplatives & brahmans who hold that... ‘Whatever a person experiences... is all caused by what was done in the past,’ I said to them: ‘Is it true that you hold that... whatever a person

experiences... is all caused by what was done in the past?’ Thus asked by me, they admitted, ‘Yes.’ Then I said to them, ‘Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings because of what was done in the past. A person is a thief... unchaste... a liar... a divisive speaker... a harsh speaker... an idle chatterer... greedy... malicious... a holder of wrong views because of what was done in the past.’ When one falls back on what was done in the past as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort (at the thought), ‘This should be done. This shouldn’t be done.’ When one can’t pin down as a truth or reality what should & shouldn’t be done, one dwells bewildered & unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative. This was my first righteous refutation of those contemplatives & brahmans who hold to such teachings, such views.

[The Buddha then uses the same arguments to refute those who hold that whatever a person experiences is all caused by a supreme being’s act of creation and those who hold that whatever a person experiences is all without cause, without condition.]

“These are the three sectarian guilds that—when cross-examined, pressed for reasons, & rebuked by wise people—even though they may explain otherwise, remain stuck in inaction.” — [AN 3:62](#)

§ 9. Then Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, bowed down to him and sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, “Lord, this word, ‘becoming, becoming’—to what extent is there becoming?”

“Ānanda, if there were no kamma ripening in the sensuality-property, would sensuality-becoming be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture. The consciousness of living beings hindered by ignorance & fettered by craving is established in/tuned to a lower property. Thus there is the production of renewed becoming in the future.

“If there were no kamma ripening in the form-property, would form-becoming be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture. The consciousness of living beings hindered by ignorance & fettered by craving is established in/tuned to a middling property. Thus there is the production of renewed becoming in the future.

“If there were no kamma ripening in the formless-property, would formless-becoming be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture. The consciousness of living beings hindered by ignorance & fettered by craving is established in/tuned to a refined property. Thus there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. This is how there is becoming.” — [AN 3:77](#)

§ 10. “I designate the rebirth of one who has sustenance [or: clinging (*upādāna*)], Vaccha, and not of one without sustenance. Just as a fire burns with sustenance and not without sustenance, even so I designate the rebirth of one who has sustenance and not of one without sustenance.”

“But, Master Gotama, at the moment a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, what do you designate as its sustenance then?”

“Vaccha, when a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, I designate it as wind-sustained, for the wind is its sustenance at that time.”

“And at the moment when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, what do you designate as its sustenance then?”

“Vaccha, when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, I designate it as craving-sustained, for craving is its sustenance at that time.” — [SN 44:9](#)

DESIRE

§ 11. “All phenomena are rooted in desire. ...

“All phenomena have release as their heartwood.

“All phenomena gain footing in the deathless.

“All phenomena have unbinding as their final end.” — [AN 10:58](#)

§ 12. I have heard that on one occasion Ven. Ānanda was staying in Kosambī, at Ghosita’s Park. Then Uṇṇābha the brahman went to Ven. Ānanda and on arrival exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to Ven. Ānanda: “Master Ānanda, what is the aim of this holy life lived under Gotama the contemplative?”

“Brahman, the holy life is lived under the Blessed One with the aim of abandoning desire.”

“Is there a path, is there a practice, for the abandoning of that desire?”

“Yes, there is....”

“What is the path, the practice, for the abandoning of that desire?”

“Brahman, there is the case where a monk develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on desire & the fabrications of exertion. He develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on persistence... concentration founded on intent... concentration founded on discrimination & the fabrications of exertion. This, brahman, is the path, this is the practice for the abandoning of that desire.”

“If that’s so, Master Ānanda, then it’s an endless path, and not one with an end, for it’s impossible that one could abandon desire by means of desire.”

“In that case, brahman, let me question you on this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think? Didn’t you first have desire, thinking, ‘I’ll go to the park,’ and then when you reached the park, wasn’t that particular desire allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

[Similarly with persistence, intent, & discrimination.]

“So it is with an arahant whose effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, totally destroyed the fetter of becoming, and who is released through right gnosis. Whatever desire he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular desire is allayed.

Whatever persistence he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular persistence is allayed. Whatever intent he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular intent is allayed. Whatever discrimination he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular discrimination is allayed. So what do you think, brahman? Is this an endless path, or one with an end?”

“You’re right, Master Ānanda. This is a path with an end, and not an endless one.” — [SN 51:15](#)

§ 13. Then Ven. Ānanda went to the nun and, on arrival, sat down on a seat made ready. As he was sitting there, he said to the nun: “This body, sister, comes into being through food. And yet it is by relying on food that food is to be abandoned.

“This body comes into being through craving. And yet it is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned.

“This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.

“This body comes into being through sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse is to be abandoned. With regard to sexual intercourse, the Buddha declares the cutting off of the bridge.” — [AN 4:159](#)

§ 14. Ven. Ānanda: “It wasn’t the case, brahman, that the Blessed One praised mental absorption [*jhāna*] of every sort, nor did he criticize mental absorption of every sort. And what sort of mental absorption did he not praise? There is the case where a certain person dwells with his awareness overcome by sensual passion, seized with sensual passion. He does not discern the escape, as it has come to be, from sensual passion once it has arisen. Making that sensual passion the focal point, he absorbs himself with it, besorbs, resorbs, & supersorbs himself with it.

“He dwells with his awareness overcome by ill will... sloth & drowsiness...

restlessness & anxiety...

“He dwells with his awareness overcome by uncertainty, seized with uncertainty. He does not discern the escape, as it has come to be, from

uncertainty once it has arisen. Making that uncertainty the focal point, he absorbs himself with it, besorbs, resorbs, & supersorbs himself with it. This is the sort of mental absorption that the Blessed One did not praise.

“And what sort of mental absorption did he praise? There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—enters & remains in the first jhāna... the second jhāna... the third jhāna... the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is the sort of mental absorption that the Blessed One praised.” — [*MN 108*](#)

QUESTIONS OF SELF & NOT-SELF

§ 15. Then Vacchagotta the wanderer went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he asked the Blessed One: “Now then, Master Gotama, is there a self?”

When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.

“Then is there no self?”

A second time, the Blessed One was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left.

Then, not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, “Why, lord, did the Blessed One not answer when asked a question by Vacchagotta the wanderer?”

“Ānanda, if I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self—were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those contemplatives & brahmins who are exponents of eternalism [the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul]. If I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self—were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those contemplatives & brahmins who are exponents of annihilationism [the view that death is the annihilation of consciousness]. If I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self—were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?”

“No, lord.”

“And if I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self—were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: ‘Does the self I used to have now not exist?’” — [*SN 44:10*](#)

§ 16. “And what are the effluents [*āsava*] to be abandoned by seeing? There is the case where an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for people of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—doesn’t discern what ideas are fit for attention or what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn’t attend to ideas fit for attention and attends (instead) to ideas unfit for attention....

“This is how he attends inappropriately: ‘Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?’ Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the immediate present: ‘Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?’

“As he attends inappropriately in this way, one of six kinds of view arises in him: The view ‘*I have a self*’ arises in him as true & established, or the view ‘*I have no self*’ ... or the view ‘*It is precisely by means of self that I perceive self*’ ... or the view ‘*It is precisely by means of self that I perceive not-self*’ ... or the view ‘*It is precisely by means of not-self that I perceive self*’ arises in him as true & established, or else he has a view like this: ‘*This very self of mine—the knower that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & bad actions—is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity.*’ This is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, & death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering & stress.

“The well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for men of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma—discerns what ideas are fit for attention and what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn’t attend to ideas unfit for attention and attends (instead) to ideas fit for attention....

“He attends appropriately, *‘This is stress’ ... ‘This is the origination of stress’ ... ‘This is the cessation of stress’ ... ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of stress.’* As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: self-identification view, doubt, and grasping at habits & practices. These are called the effluents to be abandoned by seeing.” — [*MN 2*](#)

§ 17. The Blessed One said: “And which craving is the ensnarer that has flowed along, spread out, and caught hold, with which this world is smothered & enveloped like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes & reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, & bad destinations? These 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal and 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is external.

“And which are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal? There being ‘I am,’ there comes to be ‘I am here,’ there comes to be ‘I am like this’ ... ‘I am otherwise’ ... ‘I am bad’ ... ‘I am good’ ... ‘I might be’ ... ‘I might be here’ ... ‘I might be like this’ ... ‘I might be otherwise’ ... ‘May I be’ ... ‘May I be here’ ... ‘May I be like this’ ... ‘May I be otherwise’ ... ‘I will be’ ... ‘I will be here’ ... ‘I will be like this’ ... ‘I will be otherwise.’ These are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal.

“And which are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is external? There being ‘I am because of this [or: by means of this],’ there comes to be ‘I am here because of this,’ there comes to be ‘I am like this because of this’ ... ‘I am otherwise because of this’ ... ‘I am bad because of this’ ... ‘I am good because of this’ ... ‘I might be because of this’ ... ‘I might be here because of this’ ... ‘I might be like this because of this’ ... ‘I might be otherwise because of this’ ... ‘May I be because of this’ ... ‘May I be here because of this’ ... ‘May I be like this because of this’ ... ‘May I be

otherwise because of this' ... 'I will be because of this' ... 'I will be here because of this' ... 'I will be like this because of this' ... 'I will be otherwise because of this.' These are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is external.

"Thus there are 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal and 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is external. These are called the 36 craving-verbalizations. Thus, with 36 craving-verbalizations of this sort in the past, 36 in the future, and 36 in the present, there are 108 craving-verbalizations.

"This, monks, is craving the ensnarer that has flowed along, spread out, and caught hold, with which this world is smothered & enveloped like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes & reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, & bad destinations." — [AN 4:199](#)

§ 18. "To what extent, Ānanda, does one delineate when delineating a self? Either delineating a self possessed of form & finite, one delineates that 'My self is possessed of form & finite.' Or, delineating a self possessed of form & infinite, one delineates that 'My self is possessed of form & infinite.' Or, delineating a self formless & finite, one delineates that 'My self is formless & finite.' Or, delineating a self formless & infinite, one delineates that 'My self is formless & infinite.'

"Now, the one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as possessed of form & finite, either delineates it as possessed of form & finite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become possessed of form & finite [i.e., in the future/after death/when falling asleep], or the thought occurs to him that 'Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.' This being the case, it is proper to say that a fixed view of a self possessed of form & finite obsesses him.

"The one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as possessed of form & infinite, either delineates it as possessed of form & infinite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become possessed of form & infinite [in the future/after death/when falling asleep], or the thought occurs to him that 'Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.' This being the case, it is proper to say that a fixed view of a self possessed of form & infinite obsesses him.

“The one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as formless & finite, either delineates it as formless & finite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become formless & finite [in the future/after death/when falling asleep], or the thought occurs to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that a fixed view of a self formless & finite obsesses him.

“The one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as formless & infinite, either delineates it as formless & infinite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become formless & infinite [in the future/after death/when falling asleep], or the thought occurs to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that a fixed view of a self formless & infinite obsesses him.” — [*DN15*](#)

§ 19. Ven. Sāriputta said, “Now, householder, how is one afflicted in body & afflicted in mind?

“There is the case where an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for men of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He is seized with the idea that ‘I am form’ or ‘Form is mine.’ As he is seized with these ideas, his form changes & alters, and he falls into sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair over its change & alteration.

“He assumes feeling to be the self, or the self as possessing feeling, or feeling as in the self, or the self as in feeling....

“He assumes perception to be the self, or the self as possessing perception, or perception as in the self, or the self as in perception....

“He assumes fabrications to be the self, or the self as possessing fabrications, or fabrications as in the self, or the self as in fabrications....

“He assumes consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. He is seized with the idea that ‘I am consciousness’ or ‘Consciousness is mine.’ As he is seized with these ideas, his

consciousness changes & alters, and he falls into sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair over its change & alteration.

“This, householder, is how one is afflicted in body and afflicted in mind.

“And how is one afflicted in body but unafflicted in mind? There is the case where a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for men of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma—does not assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He is not seized with the idea that ‘I am form’ or ‘Form is mine.’ As he is not seized with these ideas, his form changes & alters, but he does not fall into sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, or despair over its change & alteration.

“He does not assume feeling to be the self....

“He does not assume perception to be the self....

“He does not assume fabrications to be the self....

“He does not assume consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. He is not seized with the idea that ‘I am consciousness’ or ‘Consciousness is mine.’ As he is not seized with these ideas, his consciousness changes & alters, but he does not fall into sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, or despair over its change & alteration.

“This, householder, is how one is afflicted in body but unafflicted in mind.” — [SN 22:1](#)

§ 20. “If one stays obsessed with form, monk, that’s what one is measured [or: limited] by. Whatever one is measured by, that’s how one is classified.

“If one stays obsessed with feeling....

“If one stays obsessed with perception....

“If one stays obsessed with fabrications....

“If one stays obsessed with consciousness, that’s what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that’s how one is classified.

“But if one doesn’t stay obsessed with form, monk, that’s not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn’t measured by, that’s not how one is classified.

“If one doesn’t stay obsessed with feeling....

“If one doesn’t stay obsessed with perception....

“If one doesn’t stay obsessed with fabrications....

“If one doesn’t stay obsessed with consciousness, that’s not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn’t measured by, that’s not how one is classified.” — [SN 22:36](#)

SEPARATENESS & ONENESS

§ 21. “Monks, where there is a self, would there be (the thought,) ‘belonging to my self’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Or, monks, where there is what belongs to self, would there be (the thought,) ‘my self’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Monks, where a self or what belongs to self are not pinned down as a truth or reality, then the view-position—‘This self is the same as the cosmos. This I will be after death, constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change. I will stay just like that for an eternity’—Isn’t it utterly & completely a fool’s teaching?”

“What else could it be, lord? It’s utterly & completely a fool’s teaching.” — [MN 22](#)

§ 22. “One may have a view such as this: ‘This self is the same as the cosmos. This I will be after death, constant, lasting, eternal, not subject to change.’ This eternalist view is a fabrication. What is the cause, what is the origination, what is the birth, what is the coming-into-existence of that fabrication? To an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person, touched by the feeling born of contact with ignorance, craving arises. That fabrication is born of that. And that fabrication is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. That craving... That feeling... That contact... That ignorance is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. It is by

knowing & seeing in this way that one without delay puts an end to effluents.” — [SN 22:81](#)

§ 23. “There are these ten totality-dimensions. Which ten? One perceives the earth-totality above, below, all-around: non-dual [*advayaṃ*], immeasurable. One perceives the water-totality... the fire-totality... the wind-totality... the blue-totality... the yellow-totality... the red-totality... the white-totality... the space-totality... the consciousness-totality above, below, all-around: non-dual, immeasurable. These are the ten totality-dimensions. Now, of these ten totality-dimensions, this is supreme: when one perceives the consciousness-totality above, below, all-around: non-dual, immeasurable. And there are beings who are percipient in this way. Yet even in the beings who are percipient in this way there is still aberration, there is change. Seeing this, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with that. Being disenchanted with that, he becomes dispassionate toward what is supreme, and even more so toward what is inferior.” — [AN 10:29](#)

§ 24. [A certain monk:] “But how does a monk know, how does a monk see, so that ignorance is abandoned and clear knowing arises?”

[The Buddha:] “There is the case, monk, where a monk has heard, ‘All dhammas are unworthy of attachment.’ Having heard that all dhammas are unworthy of attachment, he directly knows every dhamma. Directly knowing every dhamma, he comprehends every dhamma. Comprehending every dhamma, he sees all themes [all objects] as something separate.

“He sees the eye as something separate. He sees forms as something separate. He sees eye-consciousness as something separate. He sees eye-contact as something separate. And whatever arises in dependence on eye-contact—experienced either as pleasure, as pain, or as neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that too he sees as something separate.

[Similarly with the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, & the intellect.]

“This is how a monk knows, this is how a monk sees, so that ignorance is abandoned and clear knowing arises.” — [SN 35:80](#)

§ 25. Then a brahman cosmologist went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of

friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, “Now, then, Master Gotama, does everything exist?”

“‘Everything exists’ is the senior form of cosmology, brahman.”

“Then, Master Gotama, does everything not exist?”

“‘Everything does not exist’ is the second form of cosmology, brahman.”

“Then is everything a Oneness?”

“‘Everything is a Oneness’ is the third form of cosmology, brahman.”

“Then is everything a multiplicity?”

“‘Everything is a multiplicity’ is the fourth form of cosmology, brahman. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle:

From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.

From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.

From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.

From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.

From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance.

From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.

From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.

From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

“Now from the remainderless fading & cessation of that very ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications. From the cessation of fabrications comes the cessation of consciousness. From the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-&-form. From the cessation of name-&-form comes the cessation of the six sense media. From the cessation of the six sense media comes the cessation of contact. From the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling.

From the cessation of feeling comes the cessation of craving. From the cessation of craving comes the cessation of clinging/sustenance. From the cessation of clinging/sustenance comes the cessation of becoming. From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. From the cessation of birth, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering.” — [SN 12:48](#)

FEEDING

§ 26. “What is one? All beings subsist on nutriment.” — [Khp 4](#)

§ 27. Seeing people floundering
like fish in small puddles,
competing with one another—
 as I saw this,
 fear came into me.
The world was entirely
 without substance.
All the directions
 were knocked out of line.
Wanting a haven for myself,
I saw nothing that wasn’t laid claim to.
Seeing nothing in the end
but competition,
I felt discontent.

 And then I saw
an arrow here,
 so very hard to see,
 embedded in the heart.
Overcome by this arrow
you run in all directions.
But simply on pulling it out
 you don’t run,
 you don’t sink. — [Sn 4:15](#)

§ 28. I see them,

in the world, floundering around,
people immersed in craving
for states of becoming.
Base people moan in the mouth of death,
their craving, for states of becoming & not-,
unallayed.

See them,
floundering in their sense of *mine*,
like fish in the puddles
of a dried-up stream—
and, seeing this,
live with no *mine*,
not forming attachment
for states of becoming. — [Sn 4:2](#)

§ 29. Not even if it rained gold coins
would we have our fill
of sensual pleasures.

‘Stressful,
they give little enjoyment’—
knowing this, the wise one
finds no delight
even in heavenly sensual pleasures.
He is

one who delights
in the ending of craving,
a disciple of the Rightly
Self-Awakened One. — [Dhp 186–187](#)

§ 30. Ven. Sāriputta [speaking to the Buddha]: “One sees with right discernment, lord, that ‘this has come into being.’ Seeing with right discernment that ‘this has come into being,’ one practices for disenchantment with, for dispassion toward, for the cessation of what has come into being. One sees with right discernment that ‘it has come into being from this nutriment.’ Seeing with right discernment that ‘it has come into being from this nutriment,’ one practices for disenchantment with, for dispassion toward, for the cessation of the

nutriment by which it has come into being. One sees with right discernment that ‘from the cessation of this nutriment, what has come into being is subject to cessation.’ Seeing with right discernment that ‘from the cessation of this nutriment, what has come into being is subject to cessation,’ one practices for disenchantment with, for dispassion toward, for the cessation of what is subject to cessation. This is how one is a learner.

“And how, lord, is one a person who has fathomed the Dhamma?

“One sees with right discernment, lord, that ‘this has come into being.’ Seeing with right discernment that ‘this has come into being,’ one is—through disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, through lack of clinging/sustenance—released from what has come into being. One sees with right discernment that ‘it has come into being from this nutriment.’ Seeing with right discernment that ‘it has come into being from this nutriment,’ one is—through disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, through lack of clinging/sustenance—released from the nutriment by which it has come into being. One sees with right discernment that ‘from the cessation of this nutriment, what has come into being is subject to cessation.’ Seeing with right discernment that ‘from the cessation of this nutriment, what has come into being is subject to cessation,’ one is—through disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, through lack of clinging/sustenance—released from what is subject to cessation. This is how one is a person who has fathomed the Dhamma.” — [SN 12:31](#)

HEEDFULNESS VS. INNATE GOODNESS

§ 31. “I don’t envision a single thing that is as quick to reverse itself as the mind—so much so that there is no satisfactory simile for how quick to reverse itself it is.” — [AN 1:49](#)

§ 32. “Monks, have you ever seen a moving-picture show [an ancient show similar to a shadow-puppet show]?”

“Yes, lord.”

“That moving-picture show was created by the mind. And this mind is even more variegated than a moving-picture show. Thus one should

reflect on one's mind with every moment: 'For a long time has this mind been defiled by passion, aversion, & delusion.' From the defilement of the mind are beings defiled. From the purification of the mind are beings purified.

"Monks, I can imagine no one group of beings more variegated than that of common animals. Common animals are created by mind [i.e., each animal's body is the result of that animal's kamma]. And the mind is even more variegated than common animals. Thus one should reflect on one's mind with every moment: 'For a long time has this mind been defiled by passion, aversion, & delusion.' From the defilement of the mind are beings defiled. From the purification of the mind are beings purified." — [SN 22:100](#)

§ 33. "Just as the footprints of all legged animals are encompassed by the footprint of the elephant, and the elephant's footprint is reckoned the foremost among them in terms of size; in the same way, all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness, converge in heedfulness, and heedfulness is reckoned the foremost among them." — [AN 10:15](#)

§ 34. Then Pañcakaṅga the carpenter went to Uggāhamāna the wanderer and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Uggāhamāna said to him, "I describe an individual endowed with four qualities as being consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments. Which four? There is the case where he does no evil action with his body, speaks no evil speech, resolves on no evil resolve, and maintains himself with no evil means of livelihood. An individual endowed with these four qualities I describe as being consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments."

Then Pañcakaṅga neither delighted in Uggāhamāna's words nor did he scorn them. Expressing neither delight nor scorn, he got up from his seat and left, thinking, "I will learn the meaning of this statement in the Blessed One's presence."

Then he went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, after bowing down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he told the Blessed One

the entire conversation he had had with Uggāhamāna the wanderer.

When this was said, the Blessed One said to Pañcakaṅga: “In that case, carpenter, then according to Uggāhamāna’s words a stupid baby boy, lying on its back, is consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments. For even the thought ‘body’ doesn’t occur to a stupid baby boy lying on its back, so from where would it do any evil action with its body, aside from a little kicking? Even the thought ‘speech’ doesn’t occur to it, so from where would it speak any evil speech, aside from a little crying? Even the thought ‘resolve’ doesn’t occur to it, so from where would it resolve on any evil resolve, aside from a little bad temper? Even the thought ‘livelihood’ doesn’t occur to it, so from where would it maintain itself with any evil means of livelihood, aside from its mother’s milk? So, according to Uggāhamāna’s words, a stupid baby boy, lying on its back is consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments.” — [MN 78](#)

MINDFULNESS & ARDENCY

§ 35. “And what is the faculty of mindfulness? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, is endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. He remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This is called the faculty of mindfulness.” — [SN 48:10](#)

§ 36. “Just as when a person whose turban or head was on fire would put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, earnestness, mindfulness, & alertness to put out the fire on his turban or head; in the same way, the monk should put forth extra desire... mindfulness, &

alertness for the abandoning of those evil, unskillful mental qualities.”
— [AN 10:51](#)

§ 37. “Suppose, monks, that a large crowd of people comes thronging together, saying, ‘The beauty queen! The beauty queen!’ And suppose that the beauty queen is highly accomplished at singing & dancing, so that an even greater crowd comes thronging, saying, ‘The beauty queen is singing! The beauty queen is dancing!’ Then a man comes along, desiring life and shrinking from death, desiring pleasure and abhorring pain. They say to him, ‘Now look here, mister. You must take this bowl filled to the brim with oil and carry it on your head in between the great crowd and the beauty queen. A man with a raised sword will follow right behind you, and wherever you spill even a drop of oil, right there will he cut off your head.’ Now what do you think, monks? Will that man, not paying attention to the bowl of oil, let himself get distracted outside?”

“No, lord.”

“I have given you this parable to convey a meaning. The meaning is this: The bowl filled to the brim with oil stands for mindfulness immersed in the body.” — [SN 47:20](#)

§ 38. “And how is striving fruitful, how is exertion fruitful? There is the case where a monk, when not loaded down, does not load himself down with pain, nor does he reject pleasure that accords with the Dhamma, although he is not fixated on that pleasure. He discerns that ‘When I exert a [physical, verbal, or mental] fabrication against this cause of stress, then from the fabrication of exertion there is dispassion. When I look on with equanimity at that cause of stress, then from the development of equanimity there is dispassion.’ So he exerts a fabrication against the cause of stress for which dispassion comes from the fabrication of exertion, and develops equanimity with regard to the cause of stress for which dispassion comes from the development of equanimity. Thus the stress coming from the cause of stress where there is dispassion from the fabrication of exertion is exhausted, and the stress coming from the cause of stress where there is dispassion from the development of equanimity is exhausted.” — [MN 101](#)

THE ESSENCE OF THE DHAMMA

§ 39. “Monks, this holy life doesn’t have as its reward gain, offerings, & fame, doesn’t have as its reward consummation of virtue, doesn’t have as its reward consummation of concentration, doesn’t have as its reward knowledge & vision, but the unprovoked awareness-release: That is the purpose of this holy life, that is its heartwood [or: essence (*sāra*)], that its final end.” — [MN 29](#).

§ 40. Those who regard
non-essence as essence
and see essence as non-,
don’t get to the essence,
ranging about in wrong resolves.

But those who know
essence as essence,
and non-essence as non-,
get to the essence,
ranging about in right resolves. — [Dhp 11-12](#)

§ 41. “Just as the ocean has a single taste—that of salt—in the same way, this Dhamma & Vinaya has a single taste: that of release.” — [Ud 5:5](#).

§ 42. Gone to the beyond of becoming,
you let go of in front,
let go of behind,
let go of between.

With a heart everywhere released,
you don’t come again to birth
& aging. — [Dhp 348](#)

§ 43. *Sister Subhā:*

I—unimpassioned, unblemished,
with a mind everywhere released ...
Knowing the unattractiveness
of fabricated things,
my heart adheres nowhere at all. — [Thig 14](#).

§ 44. Ven. Revata’s last words:

Attain consummation
through heedfulness:

That is my message.

So then, I’m about to
unbind.

I’m released

everywhere. — [*Thag 14:1*](#)

§ 45. Ven. Sāriputta: “The statement, ‘With the remainderless fading & cessation of the six contact-media [the six senses and their objects], is it the case that there is anything else?’ objectifies the non-objectified. The statement, ‘... is it the case that there is not anything else... is it the case that there both is & is not anything else... is it the case that there neither is nor is not anything else?’ objectifies the non-objectified. However far the six contact-media go, that is how far objectification goes. However far objectification goes, that is how far the six contact media go. With the remainderless fading & cessation of the six contact-media, there comes to be the cessation of objectification, the stilling of objectification.” — [*AN 4:173*](#)

§ 46. [The Buddha to Baka Brahmā:] “‘Having directly known earth as earth, and having directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the earthness of earth, I wasn’t earth, I wasn’t in earth, I wasn’t coming from earth, I wasn’t “Earth is mine.” I didn’t affirm earth. Thus I am not your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be inferior? I am actually superior to you.

“‘Having directly known liquid as liquid... fire as fire... wind as wind... beings as beings... devas as devas... Pajāpati as Pajāpati... Brahmā as Brahmā... the radiant as radiant... the beautiful black as the beautiful black... the sky-fruit as the sky-fruit... the conqueror as the conqueror [these are high levels of Brahmās] ...

“‘Having directly known the all [the six senses, their objects, and whatever arises in dependence on their contact—see [*SN 35:23*](#)] as the all, and having directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the allness of the all, I wasn’t the all, I wasn’t in the

all, I wasn't coming forth from the all, I wasn't "The all is mine." I didn't affirm the all. Thus I am not your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be inferior? I am actually superior to you.'

"If, good sir, you have directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the allness of the all, may it not turn out to be actually vain & void for you.'

"Consciousness without surface,
endless, radiant all around,

has not been experienced through the earthness of earth... the liquidity of liquid... the fieriness of fire... the windiness of wind... the allness of the all.'" — [MN 49](#)

§ 47. "Therefore, monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye [vision] ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades. That dimension should be experienced where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades. That dimension should be experienced where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades. That dimension should be experienced where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades. That dimension should be experienced where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea fades. That dimension should be experienced." — [SN 35:117](#)

§ 48. "There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress." — [Ud 8:1](#)

§ 49. "There is, monks, an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated. If there were not that unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, there would not be the case that escape from the born—

become—made—fabricated would be discerned. But precisely because there is an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, escape from the born—become—made—fabricated is discerned.” — [Ud 8:3](#).

§ 50. “Among whatever dhammas there may be, fabricated or unfabricated, dispassion—the subduing of intoxication, the elimination of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the breaking of the round, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, the realization of unbinding—is considered supreme. Those who have confidence in the dhamma of dispassion have confidence in what is supreme; and for those with confidence in the supreme, supreme is the result.

“Among whatever fabricated qualities there may be, the noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—is considered supreme. Those who have confidence in the dhamma of the noble path have confidence in what is supreme; and for those with confidence in the supreme, supreme is the result.” — [Iti 90](#)

§ 51. “Now these three are unfabricated characteristics of what is unfabricated. Which three? No arising is discernible, no passing away is discernible, no alteration while staying is discernible.” — [AN 3:48](#)

§ 52. “Monks, there are these two forms of the unbinding property. Which two? The unbinding property with fuel remaining, & the unbinding property with no fuel remaining.

“And what is the unbinding property with fuel remaining? There is the case where a monk is an arahant whose effluents have ended, who has reached fulfillment, finished the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, destroyed the fetter of becoming, and is released through right gnosis. His five sense faculties still remain and, owing to their being intact, he experiences the pleasing & the displeasing, and is sensitive to pleasure & pain. His ending of passion, aversion, & delusion is termed the unbinding property with fuel remaining.

“And what is the unbinding property with no fuel remaining? There is the case where a monk is an arahant whose effluents have ended, who has reached fulfillment, finished the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, destroyed the fetter of becoming, and is released

through right gnosis. For him, all that is sensed, being unrelished, will grow cold right here. This is termed the unbinding property with no fuel remaining.”

These two
 proclaimed
 by the one with vision,
unbinding properties
 the one independent,
 the one who is Such:
one property, here in this life,
with fuel remaining
 from the destruction of [craving],
 the guide to becoming,
and that with no fuel remaining,
 after this life,
in which all becoming
totally ceases. — *Iti 44*

§ 53. “If the thought should occur to you that, when defiling mental qualities are abandoned and bright mental qualities have grown, and one enters & remains in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for oneself in the here & now, one’s abiding is stressful/painful, you should not see it in that way. When defiling mental qualities are abandoned and bright mental qualities have grown, and one enters & remains in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for oneself in the here & now, there is joy, rapture, calm, mindfulness, alertness, & a pleasant abiding.” — [DN 9](#)

§ 54. “Now it’s possible, Ānanda, that some wanderers of other persuasions might say, ‘Gotama the contemplative speaks of the cessation of perception & feeling and yet describes it as pleasure. What is this? How can this be?’ When they say that, they are to be told, ‘It’s not the case, friends, that the Blessed One describes only pleasant feeling as included under pleasure. Wherever pleasure is found, in whatever terms, the Blessed One describes it as pleasure.’” — [MN 59](#)

THE ONLY PATH

§ 55. “And further, the disciple of the noble ones considers thus: ‘Is there, outside of this (Dhamma & Vinaya), any other contemplative or brahman endowed with the sort of view with which I am endowed?’

“He discerns that, ‘There is no other contemplative or brahman outside (the Dhamma & Vinaya) endowed with the sort of view with which I am endowed.’ This is the third knowledge attained by him that is noble, transcendent, not held in common with run-of-the-mill people.” — [MN 48](#)

§ 56. “And further, the monk who is a learner [one who has reached at least stream-entry but is not yet an arahant] reflects, ‘Is there outside of this (Dhamma & Vinaya) any contemplative or brahman who teaches the true, genuine, & accurate Dhamma like the Blessed One?’ And he discerns, ‘No, there is no contemplative or brahman outside of this who teaches the true, genuine, & accurate Dhamma like the Blessed One.’ This too is a manner of reckoning whereby a monk who is a learner, standing at the level of a learner, can discern that ‘I am a learner.’” — [SN 48:53](#)

§ 57. Ven. Ānanda: “Suppose that there were a royal frontier city with strong ramparts, strong walls & arches, and a single gate. In it would be a wise, competent, & intelligent gatekeeper to keep out those he didn’t know and to let in those he did. Walking along the path encircling the city, he wouldn’t see a crack or an opening in the walls big enough for even a cat to slip through. Although he wouldn’t know that ‘So-and-so many creatures enter or leave the city,’ he would know this: ‘Whatever large creatures enter or leave the city all enter or leave it through this gate.’

“In the same way, the Tathāgata doesn’t endeavor to have all the cosmos or half of it or a third of it led (to release) by means of (his Dhamma). But he does know this: ‘All those who have been led, are being led, or will be led (to release) from the cosmos have done so, are doing so, or will do so after having abandoned the five hindrances—those defilements of awareness that weaken discernment—having well-established their minds in the four establishing of mindfulness, and

having developed, as they have come to be, the seven factors for awakening.” — [AN 10:95](#).

§ 58. “Now what, monks, is the noble eightfold path? Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

“And what, monks, is right view? Knowledge with regard to [or: in terms of] stress, knowledge with regard to the origination of stress, knowledge with regard to the cessation of stress, knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This, monks, is called right view.

“And what, monks, is right resolve? Resolve for renunciation, resolve for non-ill will, resolve for harmlessness: This, monks, is called right resolve.

“And what, monks, is right speech? Abstaining from lying, abstaining from divisive speech, abstaining from harsh speech, abstaining from idle chatter: This, monks, is called right speech.

“And what, monks, is right action? Abstaining from taking life, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from illicit sex: This, monks, is called right action.

“And what, monks, is right livelihood? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps his life going with right livelihood. This, monks, is called right livelihood.

“And what, monks, is right effort? There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This, monks, is called right effort.

“And what, monks, is right mindfulness? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself...

mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This, monks, is called right mindfulness.

“And what, monks, is right concentration? There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’ With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This, monks, is called right concentration.” — [*DN 22*](#)

§ 59. “Suppose a man in need of milk, looking for milk, wandering in search of milk, would twist the horn of a newly-calved cow. If he were to twist the horn of a newly-calved cow even when having made a wish (for results)... having made no wish... both having made a wish and having made no wish... neither having made a wish nor having made no wish, he would be incapable of obtaining results. Why is that? Because it is an inappropriate way of obtaining results.

“In the same way, any contemplatives or brahmans endowed with wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, & wrong concentration: If they follow the holy life even when having made a wish (for results)... having made no wish... both having made a wish and having made no wish... neither having made a wish nor having made no wish, they are incapable of obtaining results. Why is that? Because it is an inappropriate way of obtaining results....

“Suppose a man in need of milk, looking for milk, wandering in search of milk, would pull the teat of a newly-calved cow. If he were to pull the teat of a newly-calved cow even when having made a wish (for

results)... having made no wish... both having made a wish and having made no wish... neither having made a wish nor having made no wish, he would be capable of obtaining results. Why is that? Because it is an appropriate way of obtaining results.

“In the same way, any contemplatives or brahmans endowed with right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, & right concentration: If they follow the holy life even when having made a wish (for results)... having made no wish... both having made a wish and having made no wish... neither having made a wish nor having made no wish, they are capable of obtaining results. Why is that? Because it is an appropriate way of obtaining results.” — [*MN 126*](#)

§ 60. Then Subhadda the wanderer went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, “Master Gotama, these contemplatives & brahmans, each with his group, each with his community, each the teacher of his group, an honored leader, well-regarded by people at large —i.e., Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambalin, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Sañjaya Velatṭhaputta, & the Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta: Do they all have direct knowledge as they themselves claim, or do they all not have direct knowledge, or do some of them have direct knowledge and some of them not?”

“Enough, Subhadda. Put this question aside: ‘Do they all have direct knowledge as they themselves claim, or do they all not have direct knowledge, or do some of them have direct knowledge and some of them not?’ I will teach you the Dhamma, Subhadda. Listen, and pay close attention. I will speak.”

“As you say, lord,” Subhadda responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said, “In any Dhamma & Vinaya where the noble eightfold path is not ascertained, no contemplative of the first... second... third... fourth order [stream-winner, once-returner, non-returner, or arahant] is ascertained. But in any doctrine & discipline where the noble eightfold path *is* ascertained, contemplatives of the first... second... third... fourth order *are* ascertained. The noble eightfold

path is ascertained in this Dhamma & Vinaya, and right here there are contemplatives of the first... second... third... fourth order. Other teachings are empty of knowledgeable contemplatives. And if the monks dwell rightly, this world will not be empty of arahants.

At age twenty-nine I went forth, Subhadda,
seeking what might be skillful,
and since my going forth, Subhadda,
more than fifty years have passed.

Outside of the realm
of methodical Dhamma,
there is no contemplative.

“There is no contemplative of the second order; there is no contemplative of the third order; there is no contemplative of the fourth order. Other teachings are empty of knowledgeable contemplatives. And if the monks dwell rightly, this world will not be empty of arahants.” —

[*DN 16*](#)

RIGHT VIEW

§ 61. As they were sitting there, the Kālāmas of Kesaputta said to the Blessed One, “Lord, there are some contemplatives & brahmans who come to Kesaputta. They expound & glorify their own doctrines, but as for the doctrines of others, they deprecate them, disparage them, show contempt for them, & pull them to pieces. And then other contemplatives & brahmans come to Kesaputta. They expound & glorify their own doctrines, but as for the doctrines of others, they deprecate them, disparage them, show contempt for them, & pull them to pieces. They leave us absolutely uncertain & in doubt: Which of these venerable contemplatives & brahmans are speaking the truth, and which ones are lying?”

“Of course you’re uncertain, Kālāmas. Of course you’re in doubt. When there are reasons for doubt, uncertainty is born. So in this case, Kālāmas, don’t go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, “This contemplative

is our teacher.’ When you know for yourselves that, ‘These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the observant; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering’—then you should abandon them.

“What do you think, Kālāmas? When greed arises in a person, does it arise for welfare or for harm?”

“For harm, lord.”

“And this greedy person, overcome by greed, his mind possessed by greed, kills living beings, takes what is not given, goes after another person’s wife, tells lies, and induces others to do likewise, all of which is for long-term harm & suffering.”

“Yes, lord.”

[Similarly with aversion & delusion.]

“So what do you think, Kālāmas: Are these qualities skillful or unskillful?”

“Unskillful, lord.”

“Blameworthy or blameless?”

“Blameworthy, lord.”

“Criticized by the observant or praised by the observant?”

“Criticized by the observant, lord.”

“When adopted & carried out, do they lead to harm & to suffering, or not?”

“When adopted & carried out, they lead to harm & to suffering. That is how it appears to us.”

“... When you know for yourselves that, ‘These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the observant; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness’—then you should enter & remain in them.

“What do you think, Kālāmas? When lack of greed arises in a person, does it arise for welfare or for harm?”

“For welfare, lord.”

“And this ungreedy person, not overcome by greed, his mind not possessed by greed, doesn’t kill living beings, take what is not given, go

after another person's wife, tell lies, or induce others to do likewise, all of which is for long-term welfare & happiness."

"Yes, lord."

[Similarly with lack of aversion & lack of delusion.]

"So what do you think, Kālāmas: Are these qualities skillful or unskillful?"

"Skillful, lord."

"Blameworthy or blameless?"

"Blameless, lord."

"Criticized by the observant or praised by the observant?"

"Praised by the observant, lord."

"When adopted & carried out, do they lead to welfare & to happiness, or not?"

"When adopted & carried out, they lead to welfare & to happiness. That is how it appears to us." — [AN 3:66](#)

§ 62. "There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings. There are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves." — [MN 117](#)

§ 63. Then Ven. Kaccāna Gotta approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "Lord, 'Right view, right view,' it is said. To what extent is there right view?"

"By & large, Kaccāna, this world is supported by [takes as its object] a polarity, that of existence & non-existence. But when one sees the origination of the world as it has come to be with right discernment, 'non-existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the world as it has come to be with right discernment, 'existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one.

“By & large, Kaccāna, this world is in bondage to attachments, clingings/sustenances, & biases. But one such as this does not get involved with or cling to these attachments, clingings, fixations of awareness, biases, or obsessions; nor is he resolved on ‘my self.’ He has no uncertainty or doubt that mere stress, when arising, is arising; stress, when passing away, is passing away. In this, his knowledge is independent of others. It’s to this extent, Kaccāna, that there is right view.” — [SN 12:15](#)

THE SURVIVAL OF THE TRUE DHAMMA

§ 64. “Having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path.

“And how does a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, develop & pursue the noble eightfold path? There is the case where a monk develops right view dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. He develops right resolve... right speech... right action... right livelihood... right effort... right mindfulness... right concentration dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. This is how a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, develops & pursues the noble eightfold path.

“And through this line of reasoning one may know how having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life: It is in dependence on me as an admirable friend that beings subject to birth have gained release from birth, that beings subject to aging have gained release from aging, that beings subject to death have gained release from death, that beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair have gained release from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. It is through this line of reasoning that one may know how having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life.” — [SN 45:2](#)

§ 65. “Monks, when a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, it is to be expected that he will be virtuous, will dwell restrained in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha, consummate in his behavior & sphere of activity, and will train himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults.

“When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, it is to be expected that he will get to hear at will, easily & without difficulty, talk that is truly sobering and conducive to the opening of awareness, i.e., talk on modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, arousing persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, release, and the knowledge & vision of release.

“When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, it is to be expected that he will keep his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful qualities and for taking on skillful qualities—steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful qualities.

“When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, it is to be expected that he will be discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress.” — [AN9:1](#)

§ 66. “Monks, there are these two assemblies. Which two? The assembly trained in bombast and not in cross-questioning, and the assembly trained in cross-questioning and not in bombast.

“And which is the assembly trained in bombast and not in cross-questioning?

“There is the case where in any assembly when the discourses of the Tathāgata—deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness—are recited, the monks don’t listen, don’t lend ear, don’t set their hearts on knowing them, don’t regard them as worth grasping or mastering. But when discourses that are literary works—the works of poets, elegant in sound, elegant in rhetoric, the work of outsiders, words of disciples—are recited, they listen, they lend ear, they set their hearts on knowing them, they regard them as worth grasping & mastering. Yet when they have mastered that Dhamma, they don’t cross-question one another about it, don’t dissect: ‘How is this? What is the meaning of

this?’ They don’t make open what isn’t open, don’t make plain what isn’t plain, don’t dispel doubt on its various doubtful points. This is called an assembly trained in bombast, not in cross-questioning.

“And which is the assembly trained in cross-questioning and not in bombast?

“There is the case where in any assembly when discourses that are literary works—the works of poets, elegant in sound, elegant in rhetoric, the work of outsiders, words of disciples—are recited, the monks don’t listen, don’t lend ear, don’t set their hearts on knowing them; don’t regard them as worth grasping or mastering. But when the discourses of the Tathāgata—deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness—are recited, they listen, they lend ear, they set their hearts on knowing them, they regard them as worth grasping & mastering. And when they have mastered that Dhamma, they cross-question one another about it and dissect it: ‘How is this? What is the meaning of this?’ They make open what isn’t open, make plain what isn’t plain, dispel doubt on its various doubtful points. This is called an assembly trained in cross-questioning and not in bombast.” — [AN 2:46](#)

§ 67. There the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Monks, I will teach you four great standards. Listen and pay careful attention.”

“As you say, lord,” the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said, “There is the case where a monk says this: ‘Face-to-face with the Blessed One have I heard this, face-to-face have I received this: This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s instruction.’ His statement is neither to be approved nor scorned. Without approval or scorn, take careful note of his words and make them stand against the suttas and tally them against the Vinaya. If, on making them stand against the suttas and tallying them against the Vinaya, you find that they don’t stand with the suttas or tally with the Vinaya, you may conclude: ‘This is not the word of the Blessed One; this monk has misunderstood it’—and you should reject it. But if, on making them stand against the suttas and tallying them against the Vinaya, you find that they stand with the suttas and tally with the Vinaya, you may conclude: ‘This is the word of the Blessed One; this monk has understood it rightly.’”

[Similarly with a monk who claims to have learned Dhamma & Vinaya from well-known leading elders, from learned elders who know the texts, or from a single elder who has learned the texts.]

“Monks, remember these four great standards.” — [DN 16](#)

§ 68. “Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata. Which two? He who explains what was not said or spoken by the Tathāgata as said or spoken by the Tathāgata. And he who explains what was said or spoken by the Tathāgata as not said or spoken by the Tathāgata. These are the two who slander the Tathāgata.” — [AN 2:23](#)

§ 69. “There is no disappearance of the true Dhamma as long as a counterfeit of the true Dhamma has not arisen in the world, but there is the disappearance of the true Dhamma when a counterfeit of the true Dhamma has arisen in the world. Just as there is no disappearance of gold as long as a counterfeit of gold has not arisen in the world, but there is the disappearance of gold when a counterfeit of gold has arisen in the world, in the same way there is no disappearance of the true Dhamma as long as a counterfeit of the true Dhamma has not arisen in the world, but there is the disappearance of the true Dhamma when a counterfeit of the true Dhamma has arisen in the world.

“It’s not the earth property that makes the true Dhamma disappear. It’s not the water property... the fire property... the wind property that makes the true Dhamma disappear. It’s worthless people who arise right here [within the Saṅgha] who make the true Dhamma disappear. The true Dhamma doesn’t disappear the way a ship sinks all at once.

“These five downward-leading qualities tend to the confusion and disappearance of the true Dhamma. Which five? There is the case where the monks, nuns, male lay followers, & female lay followers live without respect, without deference, for the Teacher. They live without respect, without deference, for the Dhamma... for the Saṅgha... for the training... for concentration. These are the five downward-leading qualities that tend to the confusion and disappearance of the true Dhamma.

“But these five qualities tend to the stability, the non-confusion, the non-disappearance of the true Dhamma. Which five? There is the case where the monks, nuns, male lay followers, & female lay followers live with respect, with deference, for the Teacher. They live with respect, with

deference, for the Dhamma... for the Saṅgha... for the training... for concentration. These are the five qualities that tend to the stability, the non-confusion, the non-disappearance of the true Dhamma.” — [SN 16:13](#)

§ 70. “And as long as the monks—with reference to the view that is noble, leading outward, that lead those who act in accordance with them to the right ending of suffering & stress—dwell with their view in tune with those of their companions in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs, the monks’ growth can be expected, not their decline.” — [DN 16](#)

§ 71. “Monks, there once was a time when the Dasārahas had a large drum called ‘Summoner.’ Whenever Summoner was split, the Dasārahas inserted another peg in it, until the time came when Summoner’s original wooden body had disappeared and only a conglomeration of pegs remained. [The Commentary notes that the drum originally could be heard for twelve leagues, but in its final condition couldn’t be heard even from behind a curtain.]

“In the same way, in the course of the future there will be monks who won’t listen when discourses that are words of the Tathāgata—deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness—are being recited. They won’t lend ear, won’t set their hearts on knowing them, won’t regard these teachings as worth grasping or mastering. But they will listen when discourses that are literary works—the works of poets, elegant in sound, elegant in rhetoric, the work of outsiders, words of disciples—are recited. They will lend ear and set their hearts on knowing them. They will regard these teachings as worth grasping & mastering.

“In this way the disappearance of the discourses that are words of the Tathāgata—deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness—will come about.

“Thus you should train yourselves: ‘We will listen when discourses that are words of the Tathāgata—deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness—are being recited. We will lend ear, will set our hearts on knowing them, will regard these

teachings as worth grasping & mastering.’ That’s how you should train yourselves.” — [SN 20:7](#)

§ 72. “And further, there will be in the course of the future monks undeveloped in body [according to [MN 36](#), this means that pleasant feelings can invade the mind and give rise to passion], undeveloped in virtue, undeveloped in mind [i.e., painful feelings can invade the mind and give rise to sorrow], and undeveloped in discernment. They—being undeveloped in body... virtue.... mind... discernment—will not listen when discourses that are words of the Tathāgata—deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness—are being recited. They won’t lend ear, won’t set their hearts on knowing them, won’t regard these teachings as worth grasping or mastering. But they will listen when discourses that are literary works—the works of poets, artful in sound, artful in rhetoric, the work of outsiders, words of disciples—are recited. They will lend ear and set their hearts on knowing them. They will regard these teachings as worth grasping & mastering. Thus from corrupt Dhamma comes corrupt Vinaya; from corrupt Vinaya, corrupt Dhamma.

“This, monks, is the fourth future danger, unarisen at present, that will arise in the future. Be alert to it and, being alert, work to get rid of it.” — [AN 5:79](#)

§ 73. Then the Blessed One said to Ven. Ānanda, “Ānanda, the twin sal trees are in full bloom, even though it’s not the flowering season. They shower, strew, & sprinkle on the Tathāgata’s body in homage to him. Heavenly coral-tree blossoms are falling from the sky.... Heavenly sandalwood powder is falling from the sky.... Heavenly music is playing in the sky.... Heavenly songs are sung in the sky, in homage to the Tathāgata. But it is not to this extent that a Tathāgata is worshipped, honored, respected, venerated, or paid homage to. Rather, the monk, nun, male lay follower, or female lay follower who keeps practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, who keeps practicing masterfully, who lives in accordance with the Dhamma: That is the person who worships, honors, respects, venerates, & pays homage to the Tathāgata with the highest homage. So you should train yourselves: ‘We will keep practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, we

will keep practicing masterfully, we will live in accordance with the Dhamma.’ That’s how you should train yourselves.” — [DN 16](#)

§ 74. “For a monk practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, what accords with the Dhamma is this: that he keep cultivating disenchantment with regard to form, that he keep cultivating disenchantment with regard to feeling, that he keep cultivating disenchantment with regard to perception, that he keep cultivating disenchantment with regard to fabrications, that he keep cultivating disenchantment with regard to consciousness.

“As he keeps cultivating disenchantment with regard to form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, he comprehends form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness. As he comprehends form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, he is totally released from form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness. He is totally released from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. He is totally released, I tell you, from suffering & stress.” — [SN 22:39](#)

Glossary

Arahant: A “worthy one” or “pure one;” a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus is not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

Āsava: Effluent; fermentation. Four qualities—sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance—that “flow out” of the mind and create the flood (*ogha*) of the round of death & rebirth.

Bhava: Becoming. A sense of identity within a particular world of experience. The three levels of becoming are on the level of sensuality, form, and formlessness.

Bodhisatta: “A being (striving) for Awakening;” the term used to describe the Buddha before he actually became Buddha, from his first aspiration to Buddhahood until the time of his full Awakening. Sanskrit form: *Bodhisattva*.

Brahman: In common usage, a brahman is a member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth. In a specifically Buddhist usage, “brahman” can also mean an arahant, conveying the point that excellence is based, not on birth or race, but on the qualities attained in the mind.

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the heavenly realms of form or formlessness.

Deva (devatā): Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial or heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) *nibbāna* (although there are passages describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Dukkha: Stress; suffering.

Gotama: The Buddha's clan name.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. This term is derived from the verb *jhāyati*, which means to burn with a steady, still flame.

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *Karma*.

Khandha: Aggregate; physical and mental phenomena as they are directly experienced; the raw material for a sense of self: *rūpa*—physical form; *vedanā*—feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain; *saññā*—perception, mental label; *saṅkhāra*—fabrication, thought construct; and *viññāṇa*—sensory consciousness, the act of taking note of sense data and ideas as they occur. Sanskrit form: *Skandha*.

Māra: The personification of temptation and all forces, within and without, that create obstacles to release from *saṃsāra*.

Nibbāna: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. “Total nibbāna” in some contexts denotes the experience of awakening; in others, the final passing away of an arahant. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa*.

Papañca: Objectification—thinking that derives from the perception, “I am the thinker,” and lead to conflict.

Paṭicca-samuppāda: Dependent co-arising; dependent origination. A map showing the way ignorance and craving interact with the aggregates (*khandha*) and sense media (*āyatana*) to bring about stress and suffering. As the interactions are complex, there are several different versions of paṭicca samuppāda given in the suttas. In the most common one, the map starts with ignorance. In another common one, the map starts with the mutual dependence between name (mental activities—*nāma*) and form (physical

data(*rūpa*) on the one hand, and sensory consciousness on the other.

Pāli: The language of the oldest extant Canon of the Buddha's teachings.

Pāṭimokkha: Basic code of monastic discipline, composed of 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns.

Samādhi: Concentration.

Samśāra: Transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, with their attendant death and rebirth.

Samvega: A sense of dismay over the meaninglessness and futility of life as it is ordinarily lived, combined with a strong sense of urgency in looking for a way out.

Saṅgha: On the conventional (*sammati*) level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal (*ariya*) level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry.

Saṅkhāra: Fabrication (literally, “putting together”). The forces that fabricate experiences and the experiences that result. Sanskrit form: *Samskāra*.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sūtra*.

Tādin: “Such,” an adjective to describe one who has attained the goal. It indicates that the person's state is indefinable but not subject to change or influences of any sort.

Tathāgata: Literally, “one who has become authentic (*tatha-āgata*) or is truly gone (*tathā-gata*)”: an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In Buddhism, it usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his arahant disciples.

Upādāna: The act of clinging to something to take sustenance from it. The activities that, when clung to, constitute suffering are the

five *khandhas*. The clinging itself takes four forms: to sensuality, to habits & practices, to views, and to theories about the self.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text.

Abbreviations

<i>AN</i>	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>Iti</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
<i>Khp</i>	<i>Khuddakapāṭha</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
<i>Thag</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
<i>Thig</i>	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udāna</i>

References to DN, Iti, and MN are to discourse (*sutta*). Those to Dhp are to verse. References to other texts are to section (*saṃyutta*, *nipāta*, or *vagga*) and discourse. Numbering for AN and SN follows the Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon.

All translations from these texts are by the author, and are based on the Royal Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, 1982).

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