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Grade Level: College Junior

Whence Arose the World?

Look upon the world as a bubble;

look on it as a mirage.

Whoever looks thus upon the world

is not seen by the sovereign of death.

Come, look at this world resembling a painted royal chariot.

The foolish are immersed in it,

but the wise are not attached to it.

-Dhammapada, Sect. 13, "The World"

Where did the world come from? This is an essential question of life, one of the first we ask our parents as a child along with "Why is the sky blue?" and "Where do babies come from?". Most major religions, with the exception of Buddhism, posit a creator God, as in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". Hinduism nominally ascribes the creation of the world to Brahma, the creator god; however, his powers themselves emanate from and reside in Vishnu, as the Brahma Samhita tells us. So can we establish a fundamental origin of the universe, apart from the circular reasoning of the creation stories taught to us?

Shakyamuni Buddha explained the world's presence as a product of maya, illusion; according to him, it would be folly to attempt to perceive the world as linearly formed, existing, and eventually being destroyed. Just as we know now that the passage of time is relative to other forces and not an independent characteristic in itself, Buddha taught that the universe is a product of Prakriti (nature) transforming itself continuously to evolve from simple primordial life to more complex organisms, then eventually destroying itself and reforming another universe in place of the former one. All these events occur spontaneously over countless millions of years, such that this present universe would be only one page in the chapter of the universe's evolution. But having established the futility of tracking down the age of this earth, Buddha declined to pursue this issue further, deeming it more critical to deliver sentient beings from suffering, bondage and attachment to this world. When a prospective disciple, Malunkyaputta, demanded that the Buddha define the nature of the cosmos and its' origins, he received the following reply:

When there is the view, 'The cosmos is eternal,' and when there is the view, 'The cosmos is not eternal,' there is still the birth, there is the aging, there is the death, there is the sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, & distress....It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions, kinsmen & relatives would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a priest, a merchant, or a worker.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know the given name & clan name of the man who wounded me...until I know his home village, town, or city...until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was that of a common arrow, a curved arrow, a barbed, a calf-toothed, or an oleander arrow.' The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him. (Cula-Malunkyo vada Sutta)

Unlike Buddhism's unequivocal teaching on the universe's creation, the answer varies between the shad darshanas, or six major schools, of Hindu philosophy. The Nyaya school takes the Vedas, or Shruti, as being of divine origin. The scriptures state Brahman is the creator, cause and destroyer of the world. Since Nyayikas take shruti to be the literal word of God, it only logically follows for them that, as per the scriptures, God exists and that He created the world. The Vaisheshika school also follows this argument closely. The Sankhya and Yoga school parallel each other in their belief that spirit (prakriti) and consciousness (purusha) interact to produce and maintain the world. Brahman is Purusha, and all sentient beings are each individual purushas; however, each individual purusha is ignorant of its' true identity as the infinite Purusha of Brahman. This ignorance is cultivated by Prakriti, which evolves into the world, first to bind purusha to itself, then later facilitating its' liberation from the lila (illusory play) of Prakriti that engenders the world. Thus according to Sankhya and Yoga, the world was initiated by the purusha's non-discrimination between itself and prakriti, and propagated by Prakriti's evolution to continue Purusha's bondage. This cycle goes on endlessly: some purushas evolve and liberate themselves from Prakriti's bondage, but others remain enchanted by her charm:

The whole development of Prakriti, it is said, takes place only when Purusha is looking on the dancer, that is, on Prakriti, in all her disguises. If he does not look, she does not dance for him, and as soon as he turns his eyes entirely away from her, she altogether ceases to try to please him. She may please others who

may be still looking at her, and so far it may be said that she is never annihilated, because there will always be new Purushas to be enchanted and enchained by her, but at last to be set free by her. (Müller 80-81)

Despite the pedagogical difference between the different philosophical schools in describing the world's origins, all have one central point in accord: Samsara is an endless cycle. Like a river that sweeps one away in moha (delusion), one's desires require one to be continually reborn in order to fulfill them: "He who forms desires in his mind, is born again through his desires here and there. But to him whose desires are fulfilled and who is conscious of the true Self (within himself) all desires vanish, even here on earth" (Mund Upanisad 3:2:2). Since those desires are continuously generated, this cycle of death and rebirth is eternally perpetuated. The allure created by attachment is great: Fulfillment of any one desire automatically generates another host of desires in the unenlightened person. Hence, the world is created and maintained by ignorance of individual souls, or jiva-atmas, and their subsequent pursuit of all the objects, beings, and experiences that lie within it, as opposed to striving for liberation from it.

From the standpoint of the great sages and saints, the illusory nature of the world is the fundamental flaw in posing the question "Where did the world originate from?". The prominent Vedantin Adi Shankara taught, "*Brahma satyam jagan mithya jivo brahmaiva na aparah*" (Brahman is alone real; this world is unreal; and the Jiva- the individual soul-is not different from Brahman). The metaphor of the rope and the snake makes this teaching more lucid. A person traveling late at night notices a dense coil on the roadside in the shadowy undergrowth. Taking it to be a snake, he shys away from it in fear. However, upon coming closer to the shadowy coil, he will find it lifeless and inert, merely a coiled rope. Till his discovery of the rope's true nature, he fully attributed to it the qualities of a snake and treated it as such. But after being apprised of the rope's qualities *per se*, he is fully able to discard his previous misapprehension. Likewise, while human beings remain in the world, they are not able to discern what is apart from it; much of what we comprehend to be reality is really the dream of maya. Thus, to understand the origin of the world, we would first have to transcend it.

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