

Hindu Practice

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Historical Context of Early Asceticism*Johannes Bronkhorst*

Ascetics have impressed foreign visitors to India from an early time onward. The Greek Megasthenes, who spent time in eastern India around the year 300 BCE, described ascetics that remained motionless for a whole day in one single position. More than a thousand years later, Arab travellers marvelled at men in India who remained motionless for years on end (Mackintosh-Smith 2014: 57). After almost another millennium, in the seventeenth century CE, the Frenchman François Bernier saw ascetics who remained standing seven days and nights, without sitting or lying down, leaning against ropes while asleep. Today Indian ascetics still impress foreigners, but the latter no longer have to leave their arm-chairs and can observe the sādhus, yogis, or fakirs on their television or computer screens.

This chapter will briefly present what we know about asceticism in early India. It will present the evidence schematically, because this is the only way in which an understanding of complicated historical processes can be conveyed.

Hindu asceticism has two main sources. These two sources are connected with the two cultures that existed side by side in northern India during the early period: (1) the culture of Greater Magadha (see Bronkhorst 2007) and (2) Brahmanical culture. Most of the ascetic practices and ideas we find described in surviving Hindu literature draw upon both of these sources, presenting a mixture of their features. It is clear, however, that the two types of asceticism once existed independently of each other, and that the two have to some extent succeeded in surviving on their own. For expository purposes, it will be useful to present Hindu asceticism in its main developments in three sections: 1. Asceticism in Greater Magadha; 2. Brahmanical Asceticism; and 3. The Meeting of the Two Traditions. After a section on the special powers attributed to ascetics in India (4), this chapter will conclude with section 5: Asceticism and Human Nature.

1. Asceticism in Greater Magadha

Greater Magadha is the name here used to designate a region in the eastern parts of the Ganges valley that included, at the time when Buddhism and Jainism came

into being, the kingdom called Magadha. A precise geographical delimitation of this region is hard to give, but it coincides by and large with the region where both the Buddha (the founder of Buddhism) and the Jina (the most recent sacred teacher of Jainism) preached. Indeed, the ideological background of asceticism in Greater Magadha is primarily known from the surviving texts of Buddhism and Jainism, even though there are also other sources.

The main feature of this ideological background is the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. This belief, as we will see, was initially not part of Brahmanical culture, and is all by itself responsible for a number of characteristics of asceticism in this part of the sub-continent.

The belief in rebirth and karmic retribution in its most common form holds that all deeds one performs will have consequences in this or a next existence. Those who held this belief were convinced that by simply acting in this world, rebirth in this or another world, whether as human beings or as something else, was unavoidable. This prospect may not have seemed disagreeable to all, whether in ancient India or in the modern world—some people nowadays lay out large sums of money in the hope of a next life through cryonics—but those who turned to asceticism or related methods did so in principle to avoid such a fate. In other words, all forms of asceticism we know about that originated in Greater Magadha were based on the wish to escape from the cycle of rebirth and karmic retribution.

Those who sought an escape from the cycle of rebirth and karmic retribution came up with four responses in particular: (i) inactivity asceticism; (ii) fatalism; (iii) insight into the true nature of the self; and (iv) a modified understanding of karmic retribution. These will now be discussed in order.

1.1. Inactivity Asceticism

If rebirth is the result of deeds carried out in earlier existences, the way to end rebirth passes through the suppression of all deeds. Suppressing all activity was the way in which numerous seekers after freedom from rebirth attempted to attain their goal. Best known among them are the Jainas, but they were not the only ones: this method also gained prominence in Hindu texts, showing that others than only Jainas followed this path. Since Jainism has left us a canon of scriptures that allow us to gain a deeper understanding of this particular path, we will concentrate on this movement.

Non-activity to avoid the results of activity seems straightforward. Deeper reflection shows that it is not. One can—and certain Jaina ascetics did—stop all activity and remain motionless (standing, sitting, or lying), trying to suppress all thought and even holding one's breath until death ensues, but this does not

guarantee that one will not be reborn: earlier activities will have left their traces and these will lead to retribution in a next life. Even the most severe form of inactivity asceticism is pointless if there is no way to get rid of the traces of earlier deeds.

Jainism had an answer to this dilemma. Inactivity asceticism is a painful affair. Fighting exhaustion while standing in the blazing sun, hungry and thirsty, without being able to scratch when bitten by insects, or to ward off offensive creatures, is an excruciating experience. It is useful, however, according to the Jaina scriptures. The very suffering one goes through as a result of suppressing all activity destroys the traces of earlier deeds. If one inflicts upon oneself this kind of suffering for long enough, and at the right time (i.e. after the right preliminary exercises), one may reach the point where all earlier traces are destroyed. Death at that moment, in a motionless position, the mind brought to a complete standstill and breath interrupted, frees the person from rebirth.

1.2. Fatalism

Total immobilization, as shown above, is by itself not good enough to guarantee freedom from rebirth. Jainism presented an additional mechanism in the form of the suffering that necessarily accompanies seriously performed inactivity asceticism: this suffering would destroy the traces of all those deeds that had been accomplished before the ascetic abstained from further activity.

Not all were convinced. The adherents of one movement in particular, the Ājīvikas, did not think that traces of earlier deeds could be gotten rid of in this manner, or indeed in any other manner. Future rebirths were therefore inevitable, whatever one did (or abstained from doing) in the present life. However, the Ājīvikas did not give up hope altogether. All living beings, they maintained, have to pass through a long, but finite, cycle of rebirths. The duration of the total cycle is more than astronomical—about two and a half million times the duration of the universe as calculated in modern cosmology—but will come to an end, at a different moment for each living being.

How will those behave who have come to the end of their cycle? Ājīvikism appears to have held that those individuals will live ascetic lives, not unlike Jaina ascetics. But whereas Jaina ascetics practised asceticism *in order to* gain liberation, Ājīvika ascetics did so *because* they were near liberation.

Unfortunately, Ājīvikism has not survived until today; nor has it left us any scriptures. All the information we can obtain about it has to be culled from references to it in other texts. Since Ājīvikism was close to Jainism, the Jaina canon is an important source of information. Some of this information is confirmed in references to this movement in the early Buddhist canon. Epigraphy tells us that

Ājīvikism survived into the second millennium of the Common Era in South India, after which it disappeared altogether.

1.3. Insight into the True Nature of the Self

Inactivity asceticism might be described as the manifestation of an unwillingness to identify with body and mind. Ascetics systematically ignore pain and other bodily or mental signals. The question could and did arise what remains if one does not identify with body and mind. Is there anything that can be considered one's self, different from those two? Certain seekers thought there is. They believed that each person has a core, her *self*, which is different from both body and mind, and therefore unrelated to all bodily and mental activity. In fact, the real self is intrinsically inactive.

The belief in a totally inactive self could go hand in hand with the inactivity asceticism and fatalism described above, and there are indications in the texts that it did. However, certain seekers put relatively more emphasis on the nature of the self at the expense of ascetic fervour. After all, if the core of one's being never acts, it is not subject to karmic retribution. In order to escape from the cycle of rebirths, it is sufficient to identify with this core of one's being, one's true self, and no longer therefore with one's body and mind.

Insight into the true nature of the self becomes in this way a *sine qua non* for liberation from karmic retribution. It is responsible for some of the philosophical developments that came to accompany—or replace—ascetic religious practice. All the schools of classical Brahmanical philosophy have one thing in common: they all propose a vision of the world in which one or more inactive selves occupy a central position. This is true of Sāṃkhya, the philosophy with close links to Yoga, but also of the school of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, and of course of Vedānta in its various manifestations.

For our present purposes, the Sāṃkhya school of philosophy is of most interest. As stated above, one of its central elements is a completely inactive self. Nothing much can be said about it apart from the fact that it is conscious: this consciousness is, of course, totally motionless, a bit like the flame of a candle where there is no wind. All that is active belongs to the realm of Original Nature (*prakṛti*), fundamentally different from the self. Its activity covers mental activity as much as physical activity. This activity is due to the fact that it has three differently orientated constituents (called *guṇas*): Goodness (*sattva*), Vigour (*rajas*), and Darkness (*tamas*). Mental activity is the result of the interaction of Original Nature (which is active but not conscious) and the self (which is conscious but not active). A predominance of *sattva* allows the self to 'shine through', thus facilitating the identification with this inactive centre of the personality.

Ascetic practice should therefore aim at bringing about a predominance of *sattva*. We will see below that another interpretation of this same scheme of mental functioning is possible, too.

1.4. A Modified Understanding of Karmic Retribution

Buddhism falls into a category of its own because it rejects the belief that all activity leads to karmic retribution and, by implication, that only through inactivity can one be freed from rebirth. It is, moreover, emphatic in its rejection of the belief that insight into the true nature of the self is a condition for liberation.

If deeds do not lead to rebirth and karmic retribution, what does? The Buddhist answer is: the desires and intentions that inspire us to act. Deeds that may have been inadvertently carried out are not by themselves causes of rebirth and karmic retribution. As a result, rather than suppressing deeds and destroying the traces of deeds, the Buddhist path aimed at the destruction of the roots of desire. This can neither be done through inactivity asceticism nor through an insight into the true nature of the self. The Buddhist method was—and could not but be—a psychological method that aimed at a radical and lasting modification of the structure of the mind. This change could only be produced in a state of mind different from ordinary consciousness. Certain forms of meditation were thought to produce that particular state of mind.

The Buddhist path was clearly less straightforward and more complicated than the other paths considered so far. It involved a different notion of the mechanism of karmic retribution, and psychological practices that were far removed from everyday experience. It could therefore easily give rise to misunderstandings. This is what happened. The result is that already the early Buddhist canon contains numerous contradictory indications as to the right path to follow. Analysis shows that features from the inactivity ideology slipped in, without replacing the authentic bits. Fortunately, it is possible for modern research to separate the wheat from the chaff, since the inactivity ideology is easily recognizable in the added ascetic and mental practices.

In chronological terms, we know that the different forms of asceticism that were a response to the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution, and that have been described in outline above, existed at the time of the Buddha and the Jina, the founders of Buddhism and Jainism respectively. Recent research puts the death of the Buddha in or soon after the year 400 BCE; Mahāvīra (the most recent Jina) appears to have been a contemporary of the Buddha who died some years before him. It is possible that before Mahāvīra there had been an earlier preacher of (a variant of) Jainism, Pārśva. If so, asceticism inspired by rebirth and karmic retribution existed already before the fifth century BCE. Unfortunately, no more precise date can be given.

2. Brahmanical Asceticism

The centre of Brahmanical culture lay west of Greater Magadha. Brahmins were primarily sacrificial priests, specialized in the sacrificial culture that finds expression in the corpus of texts called the Veda. This sacrificial culture implied various restrictions that, in the end, led certain Brahmins to the cultivation of an ascetic lifestyle. Restrictions demanded of the Vedic sacrificer included fasting, sexual abstinence, limitations of speech, restricted movements, and more. Sacrificial consecration (*dīkṣā*) frequently imposed these restrictions on the sacrificer.

Certain Brahmins extended these sacrificial restrictions beyond the sacrifice itself and beyond the time span reserved for its regular execution. In other words, certain Brahmins decided to live a consecrated life for the remainder of their days. They often used the same word, *dīkṣā*, 'consecration', in this context. Another principal feature of Brahmanical asceticism was the central place that the sacrificial fire plays in it. This is not surprising. Fire played a fundamental role in Vedic culture in general. A Brahmin kindled his own sacrificial fire after finishing his religious studies. He maintained it until his death, upon which his bodily remains were to be burned in this fire.

Brahmanical ascetics went further. They would abandon almost all they possessed, except of course the sacrificial fire, and withdraw to the forest, separating all links with ordinary society. In the forest, they would make regular ritual offerings to the fire, and survive by what the forest would provide, primarily roots and fruits.

Beside the sacrificial fire, a further concern of the Brahmanical ascetic was purity. This explains his refusal to enter into any form of contact with society. In practice, this meant that the Brahmanical ascetic would not accept anything, including food and, more precisely, agricultural products. The question can be asked whether human beings can find enough fruits and roots in the forest to survive while at the same time dedicating much time to looking after the sacrificial fire. The answer to this question is only to a limited extent relevant at present. The consecrated life of the Brahmanical ascetic was and remained an ideal that certain people no doubt tried to approximate, and that exerted a determining influence on much of subsequent Brahmanical literature.

Close study of the Vedic sacrifice has shown that its victim is a substitute for the sacrificer. This allowed Sylvain Lévi to state, already in 1898 (p. 133), that 'the only authentic sacrifice would be suicide' ('Le seul sacrifice authentique serait le suicide'). Heesterman (1993: 173, with a reference to Heesterman 1987) observed: 'self-sacrifice is an all-but-ubiquitous theme in the ritual brāhmaṇa texts, the victim as well as other offerings being regularly equated with the sacrificer'. Biardeau (Biardeau and Malamoud 1976: 38) added that 'the cremation [of the body of the deceased sacrificer] is itself conceived of as a sacrifice in which the sacrificer has become the victim'. In other words, the sacrificer is or can be the victim in his

own sacrifice, with the proviso that most often he is replaced by a substitute; he is himself sacrificed in his fire after his physical death. There are reasons to think that certain Brahmanical ascetics were not willing to wait that long. They ended their lives by voluntarily entering into the fire.

Dating Vedic religion is a perilous undertaking; dating the beginnings of Brahmanical asceticism even more so. However, we have good reasons to believe that Alexander of Macedonia ('Alexander the Great') met Brahmanical ascetics in Taxila in 325 BCE, i.e. only fifty or seventy-five years after the death of the Buddha, well before Buddhism and Jainism had penetrated into those far western regions. One of these Brahmanical ascetics (Calanus/Greek: Kalanos) accompanied Alexander to Persia, where he ended his life by voluntarily entering the fire. We may conclude that Brahmanical asceticism existed at that time. It must therefore date back at least that far. It can therefore be claimed with confidence that Brahmanical asceticism and the different forms of asceticism characteristic of Greater Magadha coexisted—though in different parts of the Indian sub-continent—in and presumably already before the year 400 BCE.

3. The Meeting of the Two Traditions

Alexander's conquests in the north-western parts of the Indian sub-continent profoundly affected the political situation. The strongly brahmanized regions that he had conquered did not remain in Greek hands for long and soon became part of the Maurya Empire. The capital of this empire was Pāṭaliputra, the capital of Magadha and therefore right at the centre of Greater Magadha. The brahmanized regions of north-western India were now governed by rulers who had no sympathy for Brahmins or their sacrificial culture, and whose natural sympathies lay with the religions of Greater Magadha, primarily Jainism, Ājīvikism, and Buddhism.

Brahmanism survived this difficult period, but not without undergoing profound changes. These changes came both from within and from without.

3.1. Changes from Within

The Maurya Empire deprived the Brahmins of their natural sponsors, rulers who financed the sacrifices that Brahmins carried out for them. Brahmanism, as a result, turned inward, with an increased emphasis on household rites and private piety. Brahmanical asceticism had existed before the Maurya Empire (think of the ascetics Alexander met), but could not but gain in appeal during this period, precisely because the element of private religious motivation plays an important role in it. It is, however, possible that it downplayed some of its more extreme aspects, most notably the custom of ending one's life by entering voluntarily into the fire.

Traces of the earlier situation survive, as in the following passages:

After having addressed his relatives, he makes the fires rise up in himself. 'For the fire is a comrade, an observer of joy and pain', thus it is said. With the verse: 'This is thy due place of birth, etc.' he shall set fire to himself in the three sacrificial fires. (*Mānava Śrautasūtra* 8.25)

And:

Having made the sacrificial priests place all the sacrificial utensils on the limbs of the sacrificer (i.e., of his own), he should place (his five breaths, viz.) *prāṇa*, *apāna*, *vyāna*, *udāna* and *samāna*, that are in (the five sacrificial fires, viz.) *āhavanīya*, *gārhapatya*, *anvāhāryapacana*, *sabhya* and *āvasathya*, all [five of them], in all [of the five sacrificial fires]. (*Kaṭhaśruti*, ed. Schrader (1912: 311.7–321.3))

Both these passages suggest at first that the person concerned ends his life in his fire(s), but both then continue as if he is still alive and ready to proceed to a next phase of ascetic life. This makes most sense if we assume that the editors used earlier passages (in which the person really dies) but give them a 'symbolic' interpretation, so that he now stays alive.

One law book—the *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (29.4)—states in so many words that one reaches the world of Brahma by entering the fire. There is even a sacrifice—the so-called *Śunaskarṇa* (= 'dog-eared') sacrifice—in which the sacrificer dies and his body is burnt in the fire; according to at least one source, the sacrificer brings this about by entering the fire.¹

3.2. Changes from Without

Brahmanism could not avoid coming into contact with the altogether different ideology of Greater Magadha. If it had tried to stay aloof from outside influence in earlier days, which seems likely, this was no longer possible once its adherents had become part of the Maurya Empire, whose rulers felt close to that ideology. We can only guess what this interaction may have looked like on the ground, but its effects on Brahmanical asceticism are more than clear.

The belief in rebirth and karmic retribution was unknown to the Vedic tradition. No Vedic texts are acquainted with it, with the exception of some passages in Upaniṣads. These passages are associated with the names of Uddālaka and Yājñavalkya, and occur in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya*, and *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣads*. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* point out that this knowledge

¹ For details, see Bronkhorst 2016: 417–22 (Appendix II).

had thus far been unknown to Brahmins. As the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (5.3.7) puts it: ‘before you this knowledge has never reached Brahmins. In all the worlds, therefore, government belonged exclusively to royalty’ (tr. Olivelle 1992). The importance of this admission is not always fully appreciated by modern scholars. Brahmins, normally the guardians of important and esoteric knowledge, are here stated not to have known a crucially important fact. These are probably the only Vedic passages that make such an admission. They state in so many words that rebirth and karmic retribution were borrowed notions in the Brahmanical tradition. The texts do not say from whom they borrowed this notion, but it will be clear that they borrowed it from the culture of Greater Magadha.

Not all Brahmins accepted rebirth and karmic retribution at the time of those Upaniṣads. It took another thousand years before this belief became part and parcel of Brahmanism in most of its forms. The most orthodox Brahmins—the Mīmāṃsakas, who occupied themselves with Vedic interpretation—did not do so until the middle of the first millennium CE. The Cārvākas, who were at one point close to the Mīmāṃsakas, refused to accept rebirth and karmic retribution until the end of the first millennium, after which they disappeared from sight. But clearly this belief gained enormously in importance in Brahmanism already during the centuries preceding the Common Era, and affected the way people thought about asceticism.

This is clear from the fact that certain Brahmanical texts—primarily the Dharmasūtras, which may date from the last centuries preceding the Common Era—present young Brahmins and others who are twice-born with four options as to how they wish to spend their lives. In the theoretical scheme presented by these texts, a young man first spends time with a teacher. At the end of this period, he can (i) decide to remain a religious student for the rest of his life; (ii) marry and create a family; (iii) become a Brahmanical ascetic (*vānaprastha*, ‘forest-dweller’) and withdraw to the forest with his wife and fire; or, finally, he can (iv) become a renouncer who abandons all including his wife and fire, and survives furthermore by begging. The terms used for the renouncer are primarily *parivrāj* or *parivrājaka*, which means ‘wandering mendicant’; later on another term came to be used, *saṃnyāsīn*, which literally means ‘renouncer’.

A look at the way of life of the forest-dweller shows that it corresponds to the lifestyle of the Brahmanical ascetic described above. It is not surprising that this is one of the options open to the religious Brahmin (and, at least in theory, to other twice-born men, i.e. Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas). More surprising is the fourth option, that of the renouncer, for it has no inherent connection with Brahmanical tradition. It has all the more connection with the ascetic lifestyles that had been common in Greater Magadha.

The Dharmasūtras, then, reserve a place for a form of asceticism that has no inherent link with the Brahmanical tradition: they allow a young (male) Brahmin to enter a life of religious mendicancy in which all connections with Vedic ritual

have been broken. Many experienced this as embarrassing, and it is easy to understand why.

The importance of progeny in the Brahmanical tradition can hardly be overestimated. A person's wellbeing after death depends on ritual performances carried out by his son. Indeed, the texts sometimes speak of the three debts with which a Brahmin is born. It finds its classical expression in a Vedic text, the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (6.3.10.5):

A Brahmin, at his very birth, is born with a triple debt—of studentship to the seers, of sacrifice to the gods, of offspring to the fathers. He is, indeed, free from debt, who has a son, is a sacrificer, and who has lived as a student. (tr. Olivelle 1992: 47)

The idea of voluntarily renouncing parenthood is, as a result, almost unimaginable in traditional Brahmanism. And yet, those who opt for a life of religious mendicancy do precisely that.

In view of the above it is perhaps not surprising that Brahmanical texts looked for ways of taming an intruder that could no longer be expelled. External forms of asceticism had entered Brahmanism from Greater Magadha and were there to stay. Strict sexual abstinence was part of them, and this implied that any youngster who opted for this path before and instead of marriage would be without offspring. (The same applies, of course, to the young man who decides to remain a religious student for the rest of his life.) For traditional Brahmanism this was hard to accept. The simplest way to avoid this outcome would be to move these forms of asceticism to a later phase of life, well after the production of offspring.

This is indeed what happened. The relatively early Dharmasūtras had offered four options to the young man at the end of his period of study. More recent texts on Dharma turn these four options into a sequence of four stages. The first stage is now the period of study. After this the young man is expected to marry and found a family. This second period is followed by one in which he withdraws into the forest with wife and sacrificial fire. Only at the very end does he abandon all so as to become a religious mendicant in search of enlightenment. These are the four *āśramas* that become a standard ingredient of classical Hinduism.

The transition from the third *āśrama*, that of the forest-dweller, to the fourth *āśrama*, that of the religious mendicant, remained somewhat problematic for Brahmanical thinkers: no inner logic appears to connect these two altogether different forms of asceticism. This puzzlement finds expression in certain Brahmanical texts. An example is provided by the two passages we studied earlier: one from the *Mānava Śrautasūtra*, another from the *Kaṭhaśruti*. These two passages reinterpret self-destruction in the sacrificial fire as a transition to a next phase of ascetic life. This next phase of ascetic life lies beyond ordinary life, and follows indeed on the symbolical death of the person concerned. Henceforth he no longer belongs to the realm of ordinary human beings, and is 'dead to the world'. His

bodily remains will not even be incinerated (as happens in the case of everyone else), for his incineration has already taken place, though symbolically, when he entered this phase of life.

We noticed above that Brahmanism felt threatened by the forms of asceticism that had entered it from the region to its east. The invention of the four sequential *āśramas* was a way to deal with this threat. It was not the only one. Another one became at least as popular and found its primary expression in the *Bhagavadgītā*, a text that became extremely influential and remains so today.

Recall that insight into the true inactive nature of the self was one of the responses to the doctrine of rebirth and karmic retribution. It found expression in the Sāṃkhya philosophy (though not only there). In Sāṃkhya the inactive self is strictly differentiated from Original Nature, which is active on account of its three constituent *guṇas*. In classical Sāṃkhya, Original Nature is compared to a dancer (female: the word *prakṛti* is feminine) who performs before the self (the Sanskrit word for self is *puruṣa*, which also means ‘man’). The dancer performs as long as the man shows an interest, but stops dancing when the man no longer pays attention. In classical Sāṃkhya, therefore, insight into the true nature of the self went hand in hand with calming the activity of Original Nature.

The *Bhagavadgītā* interprets the situation differently. If a person realizes that he is not involved in ‘his’ actions, that Original Nature works on its own, driven by the three *guṇas* without the involvement of the self, that person will no longer be attached to the fruits of his actions. But mind and body will continue to act. Mind and body, the *Bhagavadgītā* proclaims, will act in accordance with the position in society in which one is born. Since one’s position in society is determined by the caste-class system that is supposed to prevail in Brahmanical societies, the person who knows his true self will abide by the rules imposed by Brahmanism. Far from leaving society to search for liberation, such a person will become a pillar of traditional Brahmanical society, free from the desire to change his position in life. On several occasions (3.35 and 18.45–8) the *Bhagavadgītā* emphasizes that it is better to perform one’s own duty imperfectly than someone else’s well.

This reinterpretation of an originally ascetic philosophy became a potent weapon in the hands of Brahmanism and its vision of society. Doubters now learned that the highest goal (liberation, or union with God) is best reached not by leaving the world and becoming wandering mendicants, but by following in all details the rules of Brahmanical society. These rules are weightier than any moral considerations. This is clear from the way in which the *Bhagavadgītā* presents its message. The warrior Arjuna has moral qualms about the battle that is about to start and in which he is to play a central role. God, in the form of Kṛṣṇa, tells him to forget these moral qualms and to carry out his duty as a warrior without asking these questions and, of course, without getting attached to the fruits of his actions.

Brahmanism did not succeed in banishing asceticism, as suggested in the *Bhagavadgītā*, or indeed in preventing young people from taking up the ascetic

life, as the sequence of life stages (*āśrama*) would expect them to do. Ascetics remained and remain a prominent feature of the religious landscape we often call Hinduism, and there can be no doubt that respect for ascetics was and is as important for many ordinary Hindus as respect for Brahmins. It is not surprising that the two were and are engaged in an implicit competition.

4. Asceticism and Power

Ascetics in India have, as far as we can see, always been associated with special powers.² To the extent that they occupied themselves with mental exercises of various sorts, it is not surprising that extraordinary mental powers were attributed to them, or that they claimed such mental powers for themselves. But also non-mental powers came to be attributed to advanced ascetics, even in Buddhism and Jainism where mental development held the centre of attention.

Information about the special powers of ascetics in early India usually comes from narrative literature. This is once again not surprising, since stories are our most important source of information about popular beliefs of the time. Members of the general public who were in awe of this or that ascetic were inclined to believe that the ascetic concerned was in the possession of extraordinary powers. This observation may have been valid quite independently of the particular current to which the admired and/or feared ascetic may have belonged. He may have looked upon himself as a follower of the Buddha or of the Jina, or he may have been a Brahmin who dedicated himself to Brahmanical asceticism; he may also have been an ascetic without a link to any of these currents.

This general picture has to be adjusted in light of the following. From among the currents we have studied in the preceding pages, one—and to the best of our knowledge only one—made a concerted effort to spread the idea that its ascetics were particularly powerful, so much so that fear and reverence towards them was an absolute necessity. This one current was, of course, Brahmanism. The strong Brahmanical preoccupation with language, and with the special powers it attributed to certain verbal expressions, primarily *mantras*, explains the central role of curses among the means by which Brahmins were believed to exert their power. The belief in the extraordinary powers attributed to Brahmins stood them in good stead. Indeed, it was perhaps the most important instrument enabling Brahmanism to succeed in spreading far and wide from an initially limited geographical area, and to gain the respect and awe that characterized them in the following centuries. This belief primarily spread through the intermediary of

² On the supernatural perceptions and powers of Indian ascetics, see Franco 2009; White 2009; Jacobsen 2012; Olson 2015. On the role that stories of Brahmanical power played in the spread of Brahmanism, see Bronkhorst 2016: § IIB and III.5.

narrative. Brahmanical narrative—and for the early period we may first of all think of the Sanskrit epics, i.e. the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*—is brim-full of extremely powerful Brahmins, all of them ascetics, whose powers far exceed those of the worldly rulers they meet, and of everyone else. No one can read the narrative portions of these epics without realizing that the heroic valour of the warriors in these stories fades in comparison with the ascetic powers that those Brahmins have at their disposal. By emphasizing the power of those Brahmins, and by illustrating this with examples that leave no room for doubt, the epics could become an important instrument for the accomplishment of the Brahmanical project of gaining pre-eminence in society.

In this situation, it was only to be expected that rival currents—such as Buddhism and Jainism—felt they had to compete, with the result that ever more extraordinary powers came to be attributed to their ascetic saints, too. Stories about powerful ascetics of all colours henceforth adorned the Indian religious landscape.

5. Asceticism and Human Nature

So far this chapter has dealt with the historical context of early asceticism in India. To some extent this historical context explains why certain individuals in early India engaged in asceticism at all. Among the motivating factors we found the wish to escape from rebirth and karmic retribution, and the goal of reaching perfect Brahmanical purity. There were no doubt other motivating factors, such as the desire to escape from society or, paradoxically, the wish to conform to societal pressures once ascetic traditions had been institutionalized. The hope of obtaining the supernatural powers that were attributed to ascetics may also have inspired some to pursue an ascetic way of life. As so often, historical processes are far too complicated to be fully caught in simplifying schemes. And yet, such schemes do sometimes enable us to see the forest for the trees. They most certainly do so in this case.

However, ascetic practices are no child's play. No amount of historical information can sufficiently explain that people were willing to take such extreme steps, which sometimes resulted in death, presumably in response to beliefs they held.

It has to be remembered that asceticism was (and is) not an exclusively Indian phenomenon. Ascetic practices are known from other cultures, some of which had no known historical connections with India. In each of these alternative ascetic traditions there are no doubt belief systems in which these practices find their place. But the occurrence of similar ascetic practices in different theoretical contexts obliges us to conclude that belief systems can only provide a partial explanation (if at all). Another part of the explanation has to be based on the fact that ascetics in different cultures have one thing in common: they are all human

beings. It appears that human beings, simply by being human, have what it takes to ensure that some of them, in certain cultural contexts, will engage in activities of the kind we call ascetic.

This is not the place to elaborate these observations. Note, however, that a recurring theme in asceticism in different cultures is the disinclination to identify with one's body and mind, and the tendency to remain aloof even when faced with extreme conditions. This can be accompanied by a belief that the inner self is fundamentally different from body and mind, as we saw was true for certain Indian ascetics. However, ascetic practices are not always accompanied by this particular belief. This suggests that specific beliefs (such as, for example, the doctrine of karma in India) may in the end not be the cause of ascetic practices, but perhaps rather the other way round: their effect (see Bronkhorst 2001 and 2017).

The other motivating factor behind ascetic practices considered above, viz. the Vedic sacrificial tradition, is similarly in need of further explanation in more generally human terms. For sacrifices, too, occur in altogether different cultures. The willingness to inflict harm upon oneself, and in certain cases to kill oneself, fits into a more general understanding that looks upon the sacrifice as a ritual manner to solemnize a hierarchical relationship. The sacrificer ritually subordinates himself to the entity—usually a divinity, sometimes another human being—to whom the sacrifice is made. Instances of the opposite, in which the sacrifice gives ritual expression to the hierarchical superiority of the sacrificer over others, also exist (Bronkhorst 2012b). This understanding of the sacrifice makes sense of the situation in India and elsewhere. We have seen that the Vedic sacrifice inspired some people (think of Calanus, mentioned above) to violently put an end to their own life.

All this makes sense of a form of asceticism that occurred in early India but that does not derive from the two traditions, singly or jointly, specified above. In fact, this kind of asceticism is close to the margins of what is commonly called asceticism, and has structural similarities with the Vedic sacrifice, or rather with sacrifice in general. It manifests itself in Buddhism and elsewhere.

Earlier in this chapter we had occasion to draw attention to the connection between the Vedic sacrifice and (Vedic) asceticism. The kind of Buddhist asceticism now to be discussed has structural similarities with sacrifice, without there being reason to suppose that it is historically linked with the Vedic sacrifice.

An oft-recurring theme in Indian Buddhist literature—especially in the so-called *Jātakas*, but also in the *Lotus Sūtra* (Plank 2014: 181–6)—is giving away all one's possessions, including one's body or parts of it. Numerous stories told about the former lives of the Buddha depict him as involved in such activities. We find here, for example, King Śibi who cut off parts of his body to feed a bird of prey, or Prince Viśvāntara, who gave away all his possessions including his wife and children. But this theme was more than a mere literary motif. The Chinese pilgrim Yijing, who visited India around the year 700 CE, reports that there were

Buddhists in India who burned their own bodies as an act of religious fervour. The habit of self-mutilation became particularly popular in China, where it occurred on a large scale in conjunction with the worship of Buddhist relics or stūpas (Bronkhorst 2012a).

Self-mutilation, and self-decapitation in particular, are also known from Hinduism. Hero stones in Andhra commemorate such cases of suicide, and devices were created to permit devotees to decapitate themselves without outside help. These suicidal practices have no known link to the Vedic tradition, whereas in some cases a historical link with Buddhism seems plausible (Sudyka 2014).

We saw that, in theory, the victim in a Vedic sacrifice is to be identified with the sacrificer; in other words, 'the only authentic sacrifice would be suicide' (see section 2 above). The self-destructive behaviour of certain Buddhists falls in this same category, all the more since these Buddhists, by offering themselves, or parts of themselves, to the Buddha, hierarchically subordinate themselves to the Buddha in the way in which the Vedic sacrificer subordinates himself to the gods. The same can be said about the self-decapitations of Hinduism. Certain scholars think therefore that this kind of behaviour arose in Buddhism under the influence of the Vedic sacrifice.

This theory is hard to maintain. Buddhism was critical of the Vedic sacrifice and did not try to imitate it in any way. What is more, few Vedic sacrificers literally harmed themselves; the idea that Buddhists would outperform them in this respect is highly unlikely, to say the least. And, finally, self-mutilation in Buddhism developed on a large scale in China rather than in India, and therefore far from any possible influence of the Vedic sacrifice.

We must conclude that this particular form of Buddhist ascetic behaviour, and by extension the tradition of self-decapitation in Hinduism, arose neither out of the traditions of asceticism outlined above, nor out of the Vedic sacrifice. They must rather be looked upon as new and independent developments, based on the same human predisposition that also gave rise to sacrifice, both in India and elsewhere.

Self-destruction and self-mutilation in India as an expression of religious respect and subordination occurred both in Buddhism and Hinduism, as we have seen. In Buddhism, it primarily occurred during the early period, and was there largely confined to literature. To the examples discussed above we must add the infamous custom of *suttee*, in which a widow follows her dead husband on the funeral pyre. Once again, there is no reason whatsoever to think that *suttee* was influenced by Buddhism or by the Vedic sacrifice, or vice versa.

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