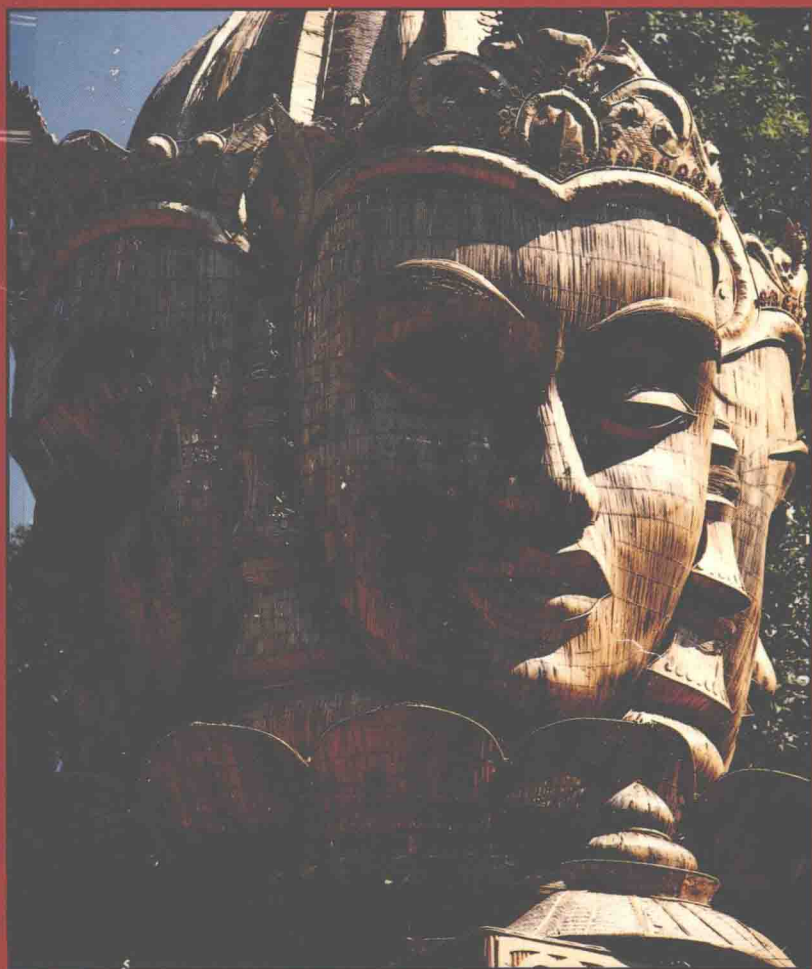


Religions of India



Hinduism, Yoga, Buddhism

Thomas Berry

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Foreword

The relevance of this book is enhanced rather than diminished by the years since its original publication. The human situation has become even more critical. We are moving from a period of industrial plundering of the planet into a more intimate way of relating to the planet. We can no longer violate the integrity of Earth without becoming a destructive force for both the surrounding world and for ourselves.

Too frequently we have based our spiritualities simply on divine-human relations and inter-human relations while neglecting any concern for the role that the natural world has in this process. What strikes us immediately is the extent to which the experience of the divine is inseparable in India from the experience of the natural forms that surround us throughout the universe. Absolute transcendence requires total immanence. We read in the Upanishads that the divine is the numinous presence within every visible form. Especially in the Epic tale of Rama and Sita narrated in the *Ramayana* and celebrated throughout the Asian world we find this human intimacy with the flowering plants and with every living form, all of which become a protective and

healing presence to the two exiles in their long journey through the fields and woodlands of this vast subcontinent.

As with the divine so with the human mode of being. We also have an intimate presence within the natural world, a presence that began in paleolithic times and continued on through the neolithic and into the classical civilizations, until recent centuries when we in the western world began to see the natural world simply as mechanism, devoid of any vital principle or spirit presence enabling the natural world to establish a communion relationship with ourselves. Because of this spiritual degrading of the natural world we began our physical plundering of the Earth until now every living creature on the earth is experiencing a degraded mode of existence. Most of all the human is experiencing a devastation that we seem not to understand or be able to remedy.

As we seek to heal this situation we turn to earlier spiritual traditions to guide us in restoring our sense of the sacred as a pervasive presence manifested in the dawn and sunset, in the wind and rain and thunder and lightning, in the dark forests and the snow-covered mountains, in the flow of the river, the soaring of the eagle, in the song of the mockingbird, and in the evening chorus of the cicada. In all these manifestations of the world about us we spontaneously bow our heads in a gesture of reverence for the presence of the sacred, for the deep mysteries of existence, for the fearsome as well as the fascinating qualities of the surrounding universe.

Strangely in this late twentieth century even when we witness all these astounding manifestations of the world of the sacred, they make very little impression on us. Our cultural fixations do not permit us to see what is simply there before us. Thus there is a need for traditions not afflicted with our pathology to assure us that it is quite proper to let the spontaneities within our own souls respond to the resplendent universe in which we live. The strange mental fixations that close off our deepest spontaneities need the examples of the poets and artists and spiritual personalities of other times and places to once again awaken us to the realities there before us.

Such is the role that India can fulfill in these times. Influences from India have been present throughout the spiritual traditions of the western world ever since the closing decades of the 18th century when our modern discoveries of India, the Sanskrit and vernacular languages and literatures and spiritual traditions took place. Since then our association with India and its religions has passed through a scholarly period of acquaintanceship, into the period of spiritual practitioners, to our present understanding of the intimate spiritual mode of the physical universe as this is revealed to us in this closing decade of

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the twentieth century when the dominant issue confronting us is how to establish a mutually-enhancing mode of human presence to the Earth.

In India we find a unique sensitivity to the pathos not simply of the human but of the entire natural world rooted deep within the religious experiences that have given its inner shape to the soul of India. One of the most profound doctrines of India is the doctrine of Ahimsa (non-injury) a term that can be understood as a negative way of expressing a positive all-embracing love or affection for every being in the universe. This teaching of Ahimsa is prior to the coming of the Aryan peoples and the Sanskrit tradition. It belongs to the primordial orientations not only of the conscious life of India but even to the unconscious depths of the Indian psyche.

These deeper spontaneities within the soul of India have been a transforming element throughout the intellectual, emotional, moral, religious, and aesthetic teachings handed down in India from earliest times. An all-pervading reverence for life was especially prominent in the teachings of the Buddha who had a profound experience of the sorrow of things and a corresponding sympathy whereby he sought to alleviate the pain not simply of the human but of all beings. This unwillingness to consider the suffering of humans apart from the suffering of the natural world led Buddha, in one of the stories of his prior existences, to throw himself over a cliff to give himself as food for a mother tiger and her cubs who were at the time starving to death. This rings quite authentic in the traditions of India, although it would generally be totally unacceptable to western religious or moral or humanist thinking. So too there is the example of Shanti Deva who offered to take upon himself the sufferings of all beings. He considered it more appropriate that he himself should suffer the pain of every other being rather than that other beings should suffer.

While in this book we are presenting our interpretation of India mainly through its spiritual and religious literature, a verification of what is suggested here can be found throughout the artistic and literary productions of the tradition. The intimate rapport of India's peoples with the natural world can be seen from its early period of sculptured columns in the time of Asoka in the 3rd century BC. Again it is seen in the Buddha images, in the Hindu temples of South India, in the Murals of Ajanta. In all of these presentations we find an immense delight in all forms of earthly existence. The universe entire seems to come to itself in an integral moment of self-fulfillment.

We see this especially in the remarkable sculpture at Mamallapuram on the eastern shores of the Indian sub-continent portraying the Descent of the Ganges. Here all of nature is depicted in a reverent presence to the divine river

coming down from heaven upon earth. All the animals as well as the humans and the devas bow in a hushed silence in gratitude for this wondrous gift. Such intimate presence of the divine throughout is expressed in the miniature paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries, especially in the tenderness of the Rajput paintings of this period. Rarely do we see such intimacy with the natural world. This is a sublime folk art where play and delight and sensuous joy in existence all resonate together.

We in the western world are not without our artists and poets and mystics who express their sense of intimacy with the natural world. But somehow we have not been able to carry over our emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual perceptions into the habits of daily living. The demands for materials to build our industrial civilization have overwhelmed us. Somehow we have become frightened by the rigors of life, by the violence often experienced in nature, experiences that have caused us to withdraw into our cities, to build barriers between ourselves and the surrounding world. We have shaped for ourselves a mechanistic wonderworld that we seem determined to build even when we are obviously reducing the entire planet to a condition of waste and ruin.

In a kind of mental fixation we have become autistic in relation to the natural world. We have closed it out as an unacceptable world. We impose our mechanistic systems on our surroundings until we have attained an abiding beatitude beyond all contact with the natural life communities to which we belong and without which we cannot survive. The world about us has become a collection of objects to be exploited for comfort and commercial gain rather than a universe of subjects to be communed with. It is this communion with the natural world that is so infinitely important in any form of survival, economic or aesthetic or spiritual.

We need to hear the voices of the natural world, the voices of the mountains and rivers, the voices of the ocean and the sky and the wind and all natural phenomena. The traditions of India can assist in teaching us this, if only we will first enter into its deepest experience of the divine as expressed in its great spiritual heritage. This experience first articulated in the Vedic hymns and the mystical teachings of the Upanishads, was later expressed even more intimately in the Hindu devotional hymns to the deities Vishnu and Shiva and the great diversity of regional names under which these deities were worshiped. It is also communicated to us through the Buddhist sensitivity to the pain of the universe, a pain akin to that expressed in the Aeneid of Virgil where he speaks of the *lachrymae rerum*, the "tears of things."

It is precisely this pathos of temporal existence that leads to an ever-deepening delight in existence. Because of its transience, existence becomes

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infinitely precious. For time bears eternity within itself. That these are dimensions of each other is entirely clear to the spiritual traditions of India. Yet only now are we in the West becoming aware of these two modes of each single reality. The fragility of things needs the presence of the absolute while the absolute can reveal itself only in the fragile formations of time.

The final term of all existence is "Celebration." This is the origin, purpose, and destiny of every form of being. Indeed we can say that the universe throughout its vast extent in space and its long sequence of transformations in time is a single, multiform celebratory event. Humans already in the paleolithic period had discovered that the proper role of the human was to integrate human activity with the activity of the universe, to participate in the Grand Liturgy of the seasonal transformations. Such is India a single vast multiform celebration in itself. Such is the literature of India from the Vedic hymns through the mystical literature of the Upanishads, the great devotional writers, and especially the great Mahayana Buddhist Sutras the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra, and the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana Sutra. The culmination of joy finds special expression in The Great Surprise when the promise of Nirvana in the earlier Buddhist scriptures is fulfilled in becoming a Buddha Being. The universe entire finds a new level of exaltation. In this manner India offers a comprehensive way of human fulfillment within the ultimate liturgy of the universe itself.

*Under the Great Red Oak
at Riverdale
Spring 1992*

Introduction to the First Edition

The Spiritual Aspect of Asian Civilizations

This study is concerned with the spiritual formation of man in the Asian world. This spiritual formation has provided the Asian peoples with a bond of communion between the divine and the human worlds; it has established the ideals of perfection toward which human life is directed; it has enabled Asian peoples to manage the human condition in a creative manner; it has inspired the arts and sciences that have characterized the Asian civilizations up to modern times. These spiritual traditions of Asia are so highly developed that they frequently attain a level that corresponds more with the higher mystical traditions of the West than with its ordinary levels of religious and moral life.

Some traditions, such as Hinduism, are principally concerned with the response of man to divine reality and to the final consummation of human life within this divine reality. Others, such as Buddhism, are less attracted to religion in its ordinary manifestations; rather, they are immediately concerned with forming a spiritual life that will enable men to master the human condition and eventually attain total release from the sorrowful

aspect of life. But whatever the point of emphasis, these sacred traditions have been the supreme dynamic forces in structuring the civilizations of Asia. They are all keenly aware of a transphenomenal dimension of reality, whether this be the Brahman of the Hindu, the Nirvana of the Buddhist, the Kaivalya experience of the Yogin, or the Tao of the Chinese.

Man is most truly himself when he shares in this higher dimension of reality. There is a surprising variety in these experiences. Yet all attain a higher fulfillment of man's being; they give to human life divine significance. If the sorrows of life are not perfectly healed in this experience, they are at least given depth of meaning. A constructive process is set in motion to remove the limitations of man's earthly condition, to give man a transformed existence in a higher order of reality. Differences and similarities in these traditions are both significant, yet the differences are especially striking and need to be studied with some care. The variety in his spiritual formation is among the most fascinating aspects of man's historical development. The differences of cultural expression that distinguish the various peoples of earth come largely from these differences in their experience of the divine order of reality and their efforts to elevate human life to a greater participation in this higher order.

Rituals, beliefs, and ways of perfection became more and more complex as these traditions developed through the centuries. At first the ritual development was of primary importance. Ritual on a grand scale provided the basic structure within which human life attained its greatest significance. Man's ritual life included everything from sacrifices and prayers offered to the divine, to the customs governing marriages, to the manner in which people greeted each other on the street. Through ritual a profound intercommunion was established between all three realms of reality: the divine, the natural, and the human. Human life was seen as a single compact order in which the spiritual and the secular were inseparably associated with each other. Ritual was the main instrument through which man found his place within the larger human community and within the cosmic order beyond.

Along with this ritual development came development of the higher thought traditions. Great systems of belief were evolved concerning divine reality and the relation between the divine and the earthly realms. Narratives set forth the manner in which things came into existence at the beginning. Explanations were given of the inner nature of things, their significance, and their proper function in the universe. Hinduism was deeply concerned with the inner life of the divine, its ineffability, its creative power,

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its omnipresence. Other traditions, such as Confucianism, were intellectually oriented toward a comprehension of man and his place in the cosmic order and his proper perfection as a human being. Yet both these traditions remained within a basic religious context throughout their formative periods. Neither in Asia nor elsewhere has man in the traditional societies attained any deep comprehension of the world of time except in relation to some higher reality that is both above and present in the world of constantly changing phenomena. Only in relation to the higher reality do things of this lower realm have reality, value, or truth.

The intellectual situation in both India and China differs from that of Plato, who saw the realities of time as reflections of the ideal realities that transcend time and space and have eternal and absolute existence. In Hindu India there is a more absolute division and a closer identity. The higher and lower orders are linked by a mysterious power, that of Maya. Only the absolute order is truly real; the phenomenal order is manifestation. Yet there is here a coincidence of opposites. The phenomenal and the absolute are totally different, yet totally identical. In the final analysis, however, the lower is derived from the higher, is contained in the higher, and is directed toward a transformation in the higher. In China, the mysterious Tao is beyond the phenomenal order yet present in it and manifested through it. Here also there is a coincidence of opposites, although in this case the phenomenal as such is much more real than in India. A doctrine of archetypes is indicated but not fully developed.

While the ritual and intellectual developments of Asia are of primary importance in any study of the Asian religions, the present work is focused not so much upon these aspects of the Asian traditions as upon their spiritual meaning—the way in which these peoples subjectively experienced the divine, the ways through which they sought salvation from the human condition, the ideals of human perfection toward which they directed their efforts. The ritual forms of worship were not the main points of emphasis in the later stages of the Asian traditions. Attention was focused upon a better comprehension of man himself, on how to manage life so that man would attain to the most perfect expression of himself. This quest for a life discipline was even more universal in Asia than was the creation of ritual expressions of worship. From their inception, some of the higher traditions of Asia were more directly concerned with the salvation of man than with the worship of God. They were religious only to the extent that the final goal of this spiritual effort was release from the phenomenal world into the world of the infinite. The Yoga tradition, one of the most unique

and most influential forms of Asian spirituality, had in itself a minimum of religious content. Yet through its association with other Indian traditions, especially Buddhism, its spiritual influence was felt throughout the entire Far-Asian world.

Although the spiritual disciplines must be distinguished from the ritual and intellectual aspects of the religious life of Asia, it should be noted that they were intimately related to man's intellectual understanding of the divine and to the manner in which ritual communion with the divine takes place. If ritual was the earliest way in which form and structure were given to the spiritual life of these peoples, the spiritual disciplines, as a distinct aspect of man's life, led more directly to the fulfillment of human existence. This spiritual development brought to fulfillment the salvation to which all else was subordinated. It contained the quintessence of religion as this was expressed in daily life.

As these societies developed, the importance of human spiritual formation loomed more significant. Ritual itself was ineffective if any failure in the human personality was associated with it. If ritual served for a time as the principal spiritual guide of man, this inner spiritual development gave vital content to the ritual. While these two were mutually implicated, the spiritual transformation of man remained the primary concern. This was religion in its highest expression. This inner human transformation was the true ritual, the true sacrifice, the true response to divine presence, the true perfection of man, his way of attaining his final destiny, his only way of achieving his true, his real self.

Moreover, the main intellectual developments were centered on establishing a way of spiritual perfection by which final release from the human condition was obtained. The main function of Vedantic philosophy was the curing of man's illusions about the external world in order to lead man toward spiritual release into the Supreme Reality. Thus the intellectual life itself must be viewed less as a rational process than as a way of salvation. One of the most important reasons for the high development of the spiritual traditions of Asia is that the Asian peoples saw with extraordinary clarity that man in his original state was only the crude material of his real self. Man was an unfinished being who must give higher form and substance to his own existence. The very purpose of the higher Asian cultures was to develop a setting in which the real man could be formed, a setting that would bring man into conscious accord with the larger realms of the divine and natural worlds with which he is intimately associated and upon which his perfection depends.

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Intense preoccupation of Asian peoples with the spiritual formation of the human personality led them to insights that have great significance for the religious and spiritual life of all mankind. The Buddhist tradition has much to offer precisely because it is a spiritual discipline more than a ritual tradition. Confucianism, also, is of universal value because of its teaching concerning the formation of the human personality in the full range of its faculties. The ritual aspect of these and the other Asian traditions is almost totally incommunicable. The intellectual insights and the efforts toward a higher spiritual development of man—these are the things that come through to other societies across the expanse of space and time. These spiritual traditions are important not only because they enrich man's understanding of how to achieve a status of perfection; they also indicate how man has dealt with the sorrows, tensions, frustrations, and limitations to which he is subject both from the external world about him and from the inner constitution of his own being.

The similarity of the human condition throughout the ages is one of the forces that brings together all the spiritual traditions of mankind and enables them to communicate with one another on the most profound level, even in present times. Modern man has become increasingly conscious of the agonies inherent in the human condition. Intellectual and mechanical progress have not cured man of the inner limitations to which he is subject. Indeed, we are more highly sensitized to the human condition than the peoples who have preceded us. Other peoples, knowing that they could do little to alter the human condition externally, built up a spiritual capacity to sustain themselves as they worked toward final triumph over this condition. Modern man seeks to remove the painful elements of the human condition by the control he exercises over the natural world and over the inner functioning of his own physical and psychic organism. But in neither case has modern man eliminated the personal agonies or the larger terrors inherent in his historical situation. In many ways he has only aggravated his life tension while lowering his spiritual capacity to absorb the afflictions inseparable from his existence as man.

It is within this salvation context that the higher thought traditions arose in Asia. Philosophy, there, is an effort to understand and deal with both the transphenomenal and the infraphenomenal, both divine splendor and human sorrow. Such monumental challenges call for a response from the depth of a man's being rather than from the top of his mind. In a special manner, however, philosophy arose from within the urgencies of human life itself, from the agonies associated with the human condition,

from the effort to establish an intellectual-spiritual response that would comprehend and then control this situation. Philosophy in Asia did not arise from curiosity concerning the nature of things, as Aristotle suggested, it was the expression of a spirituality rather than the expression of an abstract intellectual insight. Until recently, we in the modern West were inclined to give spirituality a place in the lower emotional life of man rather than in his higher intellectual life. Thus it is still difficult to place the thought traditions of Asia within Western philosophical and theological categories. While this effort at philosophical understanding has not been entirely satisfactory, it is beginning to achieve some impressive results. The designation of Asian writings either as philosophy or as theology cannot be completely dismissed, for they contain many philosophical and theological discussions such as we have in the West. Yet there is a wider spiritual context which is quite different from the rational context of most modern Western philosophy.

The Asian works fit best in a category that is neither philosophy nor theology. They belong in the realm of spirituality, the realm in which much of St. Augustine's work was done, the realm of Dionysius, of Bonaventure, Eckhart, John of the Cross, and more recently of Nietzsche and to some extent Heidegger. This is true particularly of the Indian traditions, which are directly concerned with the higher spiritual development of man, not with intellectual enlightenment within the rational order. In fact, they are principally transrational or even antirational. They intend to make man truly man by carrying him beyond himself to a participation in divine existence, for only there is man fully what he should be, only there are the sorrows of life totally healed, only there is the full vision of truth.

Thus the classical writings of Asia are spiritual treatises that have for their purpose the guiding of man along the path of salvation. This is found in the Hindu *Upanishads*, but especially in the greatest of India's spiritual classics, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The Buddhist scriptures, especially the *Dhammapada* (*Way of Perfection*), offer spiritual guidance rather than philosophical insight. In China this is especially clear in the *Book of History*, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Book of Ritual*, as well as in the writings of Confucius and Mencius. In all these works the entire civilizational structure is seen as a way of spiritual perfection. The *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu and the writings of Chuang Tzu are primarily spiritual classics. Thus, these Asian classics should be considered not only as ritual guides and as specu-

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lative doctrines, but even more as outlines of a way of salvation. This is true even of such highly developed scholastic writings as those of Shankara and Ramanuja, the greatest Hindu theologians, and of Chu Hsi, who created the most impressive and most influential synthesis of Confucian thought. They instruct man in the manner in which he should respond to the higher order of reality that governs the world, how he should manage the afflictions of human life, how he should attain his higher perfection as a man, how he comes finally to a divine transformation.

This preoccupation with the spiritual cannot be considered as strange in that the more significant Western philosophers were themselves spiritual writers rather than rational thinkers, just as were many of the philosophers of later times. In its more lively moments, philosophy, even in the West, is primarily a spiritual quest for salvation. The pre-Socratic philosophers such as Pythagoras and Parmenides present spiritual vision rather than rational philosophy. Greek philosophy of the later period is less rational in its finer examples than is generally thought. This can be seen especially in Plato, whose philosophy is clearly a way of salvation, a spiritual discipline. That this is also true of Plotinus can be seen from the mystical content of his thought and from his vision of the One. Yet, certainly, Western philosophy has inquired into the nature of things more than did the Asian writers generally. Since the medieval acceptance of Aristotelianism there was in the West a growing tendency toward rational, logical thought as the ideal of man's intellectual life. The historical trend in India, however, moved in the opposite direction; there was a progressive attraction toward a saving spiritual vision.

Asian education, too, must be seen as primarily spiritual initiation. In all traditional civilizations the bearer of wisdom was the spiritual personality in the society. This is true of the Brahman class of India, of the scholar class of China, of the Buddhist monks throughout Asia. The intellectual leaders of India and China were primarily spiritual guides who carried the learning of these societies and provided its proper explanation. These spiritual guides were the teachers of the young, whose education was a training for spiritual perfection, and not the inculcation of facts or a preparation for some mundane occupation. This too was done, but it was not primary. It was not the basic educational process. Education was primarily an initiation into the expansive realms of the spiritual; thus it had a sacred character. This is true even of Chinese education, which emphasized the humanities but always with profound spiritual implications.

THE SEVERAL TRADITIONS

There is no one, universal Asian religious or spiritual tradition. Neither is there any ideal norm of Asian spirituality, just as there is no ideal flower or ideal tree. There is simply the variety, at times an interrelation and derivation within the variety. Within the Asian traditions it is difficult to designate each of them as spiritual traditions in the same sense of the word. This is a serious problem in any study that includes the multiplicity of traditions within the same frame of reference. Indeed, at first sight there seems to be more contradiction than agreement within Asia. At times the Asian traditions differ more among themselves than the individual traditions differ from the basic traditions of the West.

The first step in a study of Oriental religions must be to accept the diversity of man's spiritual traditions as historical fact. This comes hard for us in the West; we are extremely sensitive to differences in man's spiritual life. Because we have difficulty in accepting this differentiation we lack the interest needed to understand it. A common attitude is that it should not be, or, if it is, that it should be eliminated as soon as possible. Antagonism to spiritual diversity is so great that the spiritual traditions of Asia have often been considered a catastrophe for them and a danger for us. This attitude does no credit to intelligent persons, much less Christians. In reality these traditions are the glory of these peoples, a support for our own traditions, and a treasure for all mankind. Once this is realized we can begin a sound approach to these traditions.

In an effort to understand, caution must be taken not to listen first to what Western writers have said about these traditions, but to listen first to their own expressions of their thoughts and ideals, which are found in their sacred writings, in their genuine traditions, and in their present religious thinking. These sacred scriptures, traditional writings and present teachings are all available and wonderfully instructive. They are neither mysterious nor seductive. The earlier sacred writings, especially, are inspiring documents that for centuries have guided Asian peoples along the path of virtue and the avoidance of vice, illumined them concerning the final realities of human existence, instructed them concerning the ineffable nature of that supreme reality upon which the visible world depends, explained to them the sorrows of life, and given them hope for salvation from this sorrow through divine aid and human effort.

In recent years the most fundamental of these spiritual writings have