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CHAPTER ONE

ETERNITY AND TIME

1.

The Parade of Ants

INDRA slew the dragon, a giant titan that had been couching on the mountains in the limbless shape of a cloud serpent, holding the waters of heaven captive in its belly. The god flung his thunderbolt into the midst of the ungainly coils; the monster shattered like a stack of withered rushes. The waters burst free and streamed in ribbons across the land, to circulate once more through the body of the world.

This flood is the flood of life and belongs to all. It is the sap of field and forest, the blood coursing in the veins. The monster had appropriated the common benefit, massing his ambitious, selfish hulk between heaven and earth, but now was slain. The juices again were pouring. The titans were retreating to the underworlds; the gods were returning to the summit of the central mountain of the earth, there to reign from on high.

During the period of the supremacy of the dragon, the majestic mansions of the lofty city of the gods had cracked and crumbled. The first act of Indra was to rebuild them. All the divinities of the heavens were acclaiming him their savior. Greatly elated in his triumph and in the knowledge of his strength, he summoned Vishvakarman, the god of arts and crafts, and commanded him to erect such a palace as should befit the unequaled splendor of the king of the gods.

The miraculous genius, Vishvakarman, succeeded in constructing in a single year a shining residence, marvelous with palaces

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and gardens, lakes and towers. But as the work progressed, the demands of Indra became even more exacting and his unfolding visions vaster. He required additional terraces and pavilions, more ponds, groves, and pleasure grounds. Whenever Indra arrived to appraise the work, he developed vision beyond vision of marvels remaining to be contrived. Presently the divine craftsman, brought to despair, decided to seek succor from above. He would turn to the demiurgic creator, Brahmā, the pristine embodiment of the Universal Spirit, who abides far above the troubled Olympian sphere of ambition, strife, and glory.

When Vishvakarman secretly resorted to the higher throne and presented his case, Brahmā comforted the petitioner. "You will soon be relieved of your burden," he said. "Go home in peace." Then, while Vishvakarman was hurrying down again to the city of Indra, Brahmā himself ascended to a still higher sphere. He came before Vishnu, the Supreme Being, of whom he himself, the Creator, was but an agent. In beatific silence Vishnu gave ear, and by a mere nod of the head let it be known that the request of Vishvakarman would be fulfilled.

Early next morning a brahmin boy, carrying the staff of a pilgrim, made his appearance at the gate of Indra, bidding the porter announce his visit to the king. The gate-man hurried to the master, and the master hastened to the entrance to welcome in person the auspicious guest. The boy was slender, some ten years old, radiant with the luster of wisdom. Indra discovered him amidst a cluster of enraptured, staring children. The boy greeted the host with a gentle glance of his dark and brilliant eyes. The king bowed to the holy child and the boy cheerfully gave his blessing. The two retired to the hall of Indra, where the god ceremoniously proffered welcome to his guest with oblations of honey, milk, and fruits, then said: "O Venerable Boy, tell me of the purpose of your coming."

The beautiful child replied with a voice that was as deep and soft as the slow thundering of auspicious rain clouds. "O King of

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Gods, I have heard of the mighty palace you are building, and have come to refer to you the questions in my mind. How many years will it require to complete this rich and extensive residence? What further feats of engineering will Vishvakarman be expected to accomplish? O Highest of the Gods,"—the boy's luminous features moved with a gentle, scarcely perceptible smile—"no Indra before you has ever succeeded in completing such a palace as yours is to be."

Full of the wine of triumph, the king of the gods was entertained by this mere boy's pretension to a knowledge of Indras earlier than himself. With a fatherly smile he put the question: "Tell me, Child! Are they then so very many, the Indras and Vishvakarmans whom you have seen—or at least, whom you have heard of?"

The wonderful guest calmly nodded. "Yes, indeed, many have I seen." The voice was as warm and sweet as milk fresh from the cow, but the words sent a slow chill through Indra's veins. "My dear child," the boy continued, "I knew your father, Kashyapa, the Old Tortoise Man, lord and progenitor of all the creatures of the earth. And I knew your grandfather, Marīchi, Beam of Celestial Light, who was the son of Brahmā. Marīchi was begotten of the god Brahmā's pure spirit; his only wealth and glory were his sanctity and devotion. Also, I know Brahmā, brought forth by Vishnu from the lotus calix growing from Vishnu's navel. And Vishnu himself—the Supreme Being, supporting Brahmā in his creative endeavor—him too I know.

"O King of Gods, I have known the dreadful dissolution of the universe. I have seen all perish, again and again, at the end of every cycle. At that terrible time, every single atom dissolves into the primal, pure waters of eternity, whence originally all arose. Everything then goes back into the fathomless, wild infinity of the ocean, which is covered with utter darkness and is empty of every sign of animate being. Ah, who will count the universes that have passed away, or the creations that have risen

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afresh, again and again, from the formless abyss of the vast waters? Who will number the passing ages of the world, as they follow each other endlessly? And who will search through the wide infinities of space to count the universes side by side, each containing its Brahmā, its Vishnu, and its Shiva? Who will count the Indras in them all—those Indras side by side, who reign at once in all the innumerable worlds; those others who passed away before them; or even the Indras who succeed each other in any given line, ascending to godly kingship, one by one, and, one by one, passing away? King of Gods, there are among your servants certain who maintain that it may be possible to number the grains of sand on earth and the drops of rain that fall from the sky, but no one will ever number all those Indras. This is what the Knowers know.

"The life and kingship of an Indra endure seventy-one eons, and when twenty-eight Indras have expired, one Day and Night of Brahmā has elapsed. But the existence of one Brahmā, measured in such Brahmā Days and Nights, is only one hundred and eight years. Brahmā follows Brahmā; one sinks, the next arises; the endless series cannot be told. There is no end to the number of those Brahmās—to say nothing of Indras.

"But the universes side by side at any given moment, each harboring a Brahmā and an Indra: who will estimate the number of these? Beyond the farthest vision, crowding outer space, the universes come and go, an innumerable host. Like delicate boats they float on the fathomless, pure waters that form the body of Vishnu. Out of every hair-pore of that body a universe bubbles and breaks. Will you presume to count them? Will you number the gods in all those worlds—the worlds present and the worlds past?"

A procession of ants had made its appearance in the hall during the discourse of the boy. In military array, in a column four yards wide, the tribe paraded across the floor. The boy noted them, paused, and stared, then suddenly laughed with an aston-

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ishing peal, but immediately subsided into a profoundly indrawn and thoughtful silence.

"Why do you laugh?" stammered Indra. "Who are you, mysterious being, under this deceiving guise of a boy?" The proud king's throat and lips had gone dry, and his voice continually broke. "Who are you, Ocean of Virtues, enshrouded in deluding mist?"

The magnificent boy resumed: "I laughed because of the ants. The reason is not to be told. Do not ask me to disclose it. The seed of woe and the fruit of wisdom are enclosed within this secret. It is the secret that smites with an ax the tree of worldly vanity, hews away its roots, and scatters its crown. This secret is a lamp to those groping in ignorance. This secret lies buried in the wisdom of the ages, and is rarely revealed even to saints. This secret is the living air of those ascetics who renounce and transcend mortal existence; but worldlings, deluded by desire and pride, it destroys."

The boy smiled and sank into silence. Indra regarded him, unable to move. "O Son of a Brahmin," the king pleaded presently, with a new and visible humility, "I do not know who you are. You would seem to be Wisdom Incarnate. Reveal to me this secret of the ages, this light that dispels the dark."

Thus requested to teach, the boy opened to the god the hidden wisdom. "I saw the ants, O Indra, filing in long parade. Each was once an Indra. Like you, each by virtue of pious deeds once ascended to the rank of a king of gods. But now, through many rebirths, each has become again an ant. This army is an army of former Indras.

"Piety and high deeds elevate the inhabitants of the world to the glorious realm of the celestial mansions, or to the higher domains of Brahmā and Shiva and to the highest sphere of Vishnu; but wicked acts sink them into the worlds beneath, into pits of pain and sorrow, involving reincarnation among birds and vermin, or out of the wombs of pigs and animals of the wild,

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or among trees, or among insects. It is by deeds that one merits happiness or anguish, and becomes a master or a serf. It is by deeds that one attains to the rank of a king or brahmin, or of some god, or of an Indra or a Brahmā. And through deeds again, one contracts disease, acquires beauty and deformity, or is reborn in the condition of a monster.

"This is the whole substance of the secret. This wisdom is the ferry to beatitude across the ocean of hell.

"Life in the cycle of the countless rebirths is like a vision in a dream. The gods on high, the mute trees and the stones, are alike apparitions in this phantasy. But Death administers the law of time. Ordained by time, Death is the master of all. Perishable as bubbles are the good and the evil of the beings of the dream. In unending cycles the good and evil alternate. Hence, the wise are attached to neither, neither the evil nor the good. The wise are not attached to anything at all."

The boy concluded the appalling lesson and quietly regarded his host. The king of gods, for all his celestial splendor, had been reduced in his own regard to insignificance. Meanwhile, another amazing apparition had entered the hall.

The newcomer had the appearance of a kind of hermit. His head was piled with matted hair; he wore a black deerskin around his loins; on his forehead was painted a white mark; his head was shaded by a paltry parasol of grass; and a quaint, circular cluster of hair grew on his chest: it was intact at the circumference, but from the center many of the hairs, it seemed, had disappeared. This saintly figure strode directly to Indra and the boy, squatted between them on the floor, and there remained, motionless as a rock. The kingly Indra, somewhat recovering his hostly role, bowed and paid obeisance, offering sour milk with honey and other refreshments; then he inquired, falteringly but reverently, after the welfare of the stern guest, and bade him welcome. Whereupon the boy addressed the holy man, asking the very questions Indra himself would have proposed.

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"Whence do you come, O Holy Man? What is your name and what brings you to this place? Where is your present home, and what is the meaning of this grass parasol? What is the portent of that circular hair-tuft on your chest: why is it dense at the circumference but at the center almost bare? Be kind enough, O Holy Man, to answer, in brief, these questions. I am anxious to understand."

Patiently the old saint smiled, and slowly began his reply. "I am a brahmin. Hairy is my name. And I have come here to behold Indra. Since I know that I am short-lived, I have decided to possess no home, to build no house, and neither to marry nor to seek a livelihood. I exist by begging alms. To shield myself from sun and rain I carry over my head this parasol of grass.

"As to the circle of hair on my chest, it is a source of grief to the children of the world. Nevertheless, it teaches wisdom. With the fall of an Indra, one hair drops. That is why, in the center all the hairs have gone. When the other half of the period allotted to the present Brahmā will have expired, I myself shall die. O Brahmin Boy, it follows that I am somewhat short of days; what, therefore, is the use of a wife and a son, or of a house?

"Each flicker of the eyelids of the great Vishnu registers the passing of a Brahmā. Everything below that sphere of Brahmā is as insubstantial as a cloud taking shape and again dissolving. That is why I devote myself exclusively to meditating on the incomparable lotus-feet of highest Vishnu. Faith in Vishnu is more than the bliss of redemption; for every joy, even the heavenly, is as fragile as a dream, and only interferes with the one-pointedness of our faith in Him Supreme.

"Shiva, the peace-bestowing, the highest spiritual guide, taught me this wonderful wisdom. I do not crave to experience the various blissful forms of redemption: to share the highest god's supernal mansions and enjoy his eternal presence, or to be like him in body and apparel, or to become a part of his august substance, or even to be absorbed wholly in his ineffable essence."

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Abruptly, the holy man ceased and immediately vanished. It had been the god Shiva himself; he had now returned to his supramundane abode. Simultaneously, the brahmin boy, who had been Vishnu, disappeared as well. The king was alone, baffled and amazed.

The king, Indra, pondered; and the events seemed to him to have been a dream. But he no longer felt any desire to magnify his heavenly splendor or to go on with the construction of his palace. He summoned Vishvakarman. Graciously greeting the craftsman with honeyed words, he heaped on him jewels and precious gifts, then with a sumptuous celebration sent him home.

The king, Indra, now desired redemption. He had acquired wisdom, and wished only to be free. He entrusted the pomp and burden of his office to his son, and prepared to retire to the hermit life of the wilderness. Whereupon his beautiful and passionate queen, Shachi, was overcome with grief.

Weeping, in sorrow and utter despair, Shachi resorted to Indra's ingenious house-priest and spiritual advisor, the Lord of Magic Wisdom, Brihaspati. Bowing at his feet, she implored him to divert her husband's mind from its stern resolve. The resourceful counselor of the gods, who by his spells and devices had helped the heavenly powers wrest the government of the universe from the hands of their titan rivals, listened thoughtfully to the complaint of the voluptuous, disconsolate goddess, and knowingly nodded assent. With a wizard's smile, he took her hand and conducted her to the presence of her spouse. In the role, then, of spiritual teacher, he discoursed sagely on the virtues of the spiritual life, but on the virtues also, of the secular. He gave to each its due. Very skillfully he developed his theme. The royal pupil was persuaded to relent in his extreme resolve. The queen was restored to radiant joy.

This Lord of Magic Wisdom, Brihaspati, once had composed a treatise on government, in order to teach Indra how to rule the world. He now issued a second work, a treatise on the polity

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and stratagems of married love. Demonstrating the sweet art of wooing ever anew, and of enchaining the beloved with enduring bonds, this priceless book established on sound foundations the married life of the reunited pair.

Thus concludes the marvelous story of how the king of gods was humiliated in his boundless pride, cured of an excessive ambition, and through wisdom, both spiritual and secular, brought to a knowledge of his proper role in the wheeling play of unending life.*

2.

The Wheel of Rebirth

INDIA's treasure of myths and symbols is immense. In the teeming texts and multitudinous architectural monuments eloquent details so abound that, though scholars since the end of the eighteenth century have been editing, translating, and interpreting, it is by no means an infrequent experience to come across tales hitherto unnoticed or unknown, images undeciphered, expressive features not yet understood, esthetic and philosophical values uninterpreted. From the second millennium B.C., the Indian traditions have been handed on in unbroken continuity. Since the transmission has been mainly oral, there is left to us only an imperfect record of the long and rich development: certain periods, long and fruitful, are barely documented; much has been irretrievably lost. Nevertheless, though tens of thousands of pages remain in manuscript still waiting to be edited, the great works already published in printed Western and Indian editions are so many that no individual may hope to cover them in a lifetime.

This inheritance is both prodigious and fragmentary, and yet

* *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa,* Kṛiṣṇa-janma Khaṇḍa, 47. 50-161.

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homogeneous to such a degree that it is possible to present the main features in a simple, consistent outline. We shall be able to review in the present volume, and in some measure to fathom, the major areas and problems, the dominant symbols and most significant features of the abundant world of Hindu myth. Questions of methodology and interpretation, which will inevitably arise as the exotic forms unfold their amazing secrets, we shall deal with as they come. They cannot be coped with at the outset; for we are not yet familiar with the personages, the style, the sequences of events, the basic conceptions and scales of value of this tradition so utterly different from our own. It would not do to seek to constrain the Oriental conceptions into the delimiting frames familiar to the West. Their profound strangeness must be permitted to expose to us the unconscious limitations of our own approach to the enigmas of existence and of man.

The wonderful story of the Parade of Ants opens before us an unfamiliar spectacle of space and throbs with an alien pulse of time. Notions of space and time are commonly taken for granted within the pale of a given tradition and civilization. Their validity is seldom discussed or questioned, even by people who sharply disagree on social, political, and moral issues. They appear to be inevitable, colorless and unimportant; for we move through and are carried on by them, as the fish by water. We are contained within and caught by them, unaware of their specific character, because our knowledge does not reach beyond them. Hence, the time and space conceptions of India will at first seem to us of the West unsound and bizarre. The fundamentals of the Western view are so close to our eyes that they escape our criticism. They are of the texture of our experience and reactions. We are prone, therefore, to take them for granted as fundamental to human experience in general, and as constituting an integral part of reality.

The astounding story of the re-education of the proud and successful Indra plays with visions of cosmic cycles—eons fol-

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lowing each other in the endlessness of time, eons contemporaneous in the infinitudes of space—such as could hardly be said to enter into the sociological and psychological thinking of the West. In "timeless" India these extensive diastoles give the life-rhythm of all thought. The wheel of birth and death, the round of emanation, fruition, dissolution, and re-emanation, is a commonplace of popular speech as well as a fundamental theme of philosophy, myth and symbol, religion, politics and art. It is understood as applying not only to the life of the individual, but to the history of society and the course of the cosmos. Every moment of existence is measured and judged against the backdrop of this pleroma.

According to the mythologies of Hinduism, each world cycle is subdivided into four yugas or world ages. These are comparable to the four ages of the Greco-Roman tradition, and, like the latter, decline in moral excellence as the round proceeds. The Classical ages took their names from the metals, Gold, Silver, Brass, and Iron, the Hindu from the four throws of the Indian dice game, Krita, Tretā, Dvāpara, and Kali. In both cases the appellations suggest the relative virtues of the periods, as they succeed each other in a slow, irreversible procession.

Kṛita is the perfect participle of the verb *kṛi*, to do; it means, literally, "done, made, accomplished, perfect." This is the dice-throw that wins the jackpot, the total gain. According to the Indian conception, the idea of total, or totality, is associated with the number four. "Four square" signifies "totality." Anything complete and self-contained is conceived as possessing all of its four "quarters" (*pāda*). It is established firmly on its "four legs" (*catuḥ-pāda*). Thus, Krita Yuga, the first of the ages, is the perfect, or "four-quartered," yuga. Dharma, the moral order of the world (which is in virtual existence before the beginning, but then becomes manifest in the spheres, energies, and beings of the world), is during this period firm on its four legs, like a sacred cow; one hundred percent, or four quarters, effective as an all-

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pervading structural element in the organism of the universe. During this yuga men and women are born virtuous. They devote their lives to the fulfillment of the duties and tasks divinely ordained by Dharma.* The brahmins are established in saintliness. Kings and feudal chiefs act according to the ideals of truly royal conduct. The peasants and townsfolk are devoted to husbandry and the crafts. The lower, servile classes abide lawfully in submission. People even of the lowest extraction observe the holy order of life.

As the life-process of the world-organism gains momentum, however, order loses ground. Holy Dharma vanishes quarter by quarter, while its converse gains the field. Tretā Yuga is therefore named after the dice-cast of the three. Tretā is the triad or triplet; three of the quarters. Etymologically, the word is related to the Latin *trēs,* Greek *treîs,* English *three.* During Tretā Yuga, the universal body, as well as the body of human society, is sustained by only three fourths of its total virtue. The modes of life proper to the four castes have begun to lapse into decay. Duties are no longer the spontaneous laws of human action, but have to be learned.

Dvāpara Yuga is the age of the dangerous balance between imperfection and perfection, darkness and light. Its name is derived from *dvi, dvā, dvau,* meaning "two" (compare the Latin *duo,* French *deux,* English *deuce,* Greek *dúo,* Russian *dva*). This is the dice-cast of the duad. During Dvāpara Yuga, only two of the four quarters of Dharma are still effective in the manifest world; the others have been irrecoverably lost. The cow of ethical order, instead of firmly standing on four legs, or resting safely

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* [Dharma: *Lex aeterna,* ideal or absolute Justice or Righteousness, Greek δικαιοσύνη as in Plato and Luke 12.31; the proportionate part of this Justice, which pertains to an individual, is his 'own-justice' (*sva-dharma*), the vocation, social function, or duty as determined for him by his own nature.—AKC.]

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has kindly supplied a number of explanatory notes to supplement the material left by Dr. Zimmer. These are introduced in square brackets, and initialled AKC.

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on three, now balances on two. Destroyed is the ideal, semidivine status of society. Lost is the knowledge of the revealed hierarchy of values. No longer does the perfection of the spiritual order energize human and universal life. All human beings, brahmins and kings as well as tradespeople and servants, blinded by passion and eager for earthly possessions, grow mean and acquisitive and averse to the fulfilment of such sacred duties as require self-denial. True saintliness, to be achieved only through devotional observances, vows, fasting and ascetic practices, becomes extinct.

Finally, Kali Yuga, the dark age, miserably subsists on twenty-five percent of the full strength of Dharma. Egoistic, devouring, blind and reckless elements now are triumphant and rule the day. *Kali* means the worst of anything; also, "strife, quarrel, dissension, war, battle" (being related to *kal-aha,* "strife, quarrel"). In the dice-play, kali is the losing throw. During the Kali Yuga, man and his world are at their very worst. The moral and social degradation is characterized in a passage of the Vishnu Purāna:* "When society reaches a stage, where property confers rank, wealth becomes the only source of virtue, passion the sole bond of union between husband and wife, falsehood the source of success in life, sex the only means of enjoyment, and when outer trappings are confused with inner religion . . ."—then we are in the Kali Yuga, the world of today. This age, in the present cycle, is computed as having begun, Friday, February 18, 3102 B.C.

Deficiency of Dharma accounts for the short duration of the Kali Yuga, which is, namely, 432,000 years. The preceding Tretā Yuga, strong with double the amount of moral substance, is described as surviving twice as long, 864,000. Correspondingly, Dvāpara Yuga, provided with three of the four quarters of Dharma, endures the length of three Kali units, 1,296,000 years; and Krita Yuga, the period of Dharma "four square,"

* A classic source of Hindu mythology and tradition, dating from the first millennium of our era. Translated by H. H. Wilson, London, 1840. The above text is a condensation of a long descriptive passage in Book IV, Chapter 24.

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1,728,000. The grand total is thus 4,320,000 years, ten times the duration of one Kali Yuga. This complete cycle is called Mahā-Yuga, "The Great Yuga."

One thousand mahāyugas—4,320,000,000 years of human reckoning—constitute a single day of Brahmā, a single kalpa. In terms of the reckoning of the gods (who are below Brahmā, but above men) this period comprises twelve thousand heavenly years. Such a day begins with creation or evolution (*sṛiṣṭi*), the emanation of a universe out of divine, transcendent, unmanifested Substance, and terminates with dissolution and re-absorption (*pralaya*), mergence back into the Absolute. The world spheres together with all the beings contained in them disappear at the end of the day of Brahmā, and during the ensuing night persist only as the latent germ of a necessity for re-manifestation. The night of Brahmā is as long as the day.

Every kalpa is subdivided also into fourteen manvantaras, or Manu-intervals,* each comprising seventy-one and a fraction mahāyugas and terminating with a deluge.† The intervals are named from Manu, the Hindu counterpart of Noah, the hero who escapes the flood. The present period is called the Interval of Manu Vaivasvata, "Manu the Son of the Radiating One," "Manu the Son of the Sun God Vivasvant." ‡ This is the seventh

* In Sanskrit, *u* before a vowel becomes *v;* therefore *manu-antara* ("Manu-interval") becomes *manvantara.*

† $71 \times 14 = 994$, leaving 6 mahāyugas to be accounted for. The adjustment is effected as follows. The first of the fourteen manvantaras is regarded as preceded by a dawn the length of one krita yuga (i.e., 0.4 mahāyuga), and every manvantara as followed by a twilight of equal length. $0.4 \times 15 = 6$. $994 + 6 = 1000$ mahāyugas, or one kalpa. This complicated calculation seems to have been introduced in order to co-ordinate two originally separate systems, the one based on a chronology of wheeling mahāyugas, the other on a tradition of periodic universal floods.

‡ Each manvantara is named from its special manifestation of the flood hero. Vaivasvata Manu, the progenitor of the present race of mankind, was rescued from the deluge by the fish incarnation of Vishnu. His father was the Sun God Vivasvant.

Vivasvant is a Vedic name of the Sun God. In the Zoroastrian tradition of Persia the same name occurs as a patronymic of the first mortal, Yima, who in Sanskrit is called Yama. The flood hero and the first mortal are finally two versions of the same primordial being.

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manvantara of the present day of Brahmā, seven more being due to pass before the day comes to its close. And this present day is termed Varāha Kalpa, "The Kalpa of the Boar"; for it is during this day that Vishnu becomes incarnated in the figure of a boar. This is the first day of the fifty-first year in the lifetime of "our" Brahmā. It will end—after seven deluges more—at the next dissolution.

The progress and decline of every kalpa is marked by mythological events that recur similarly, again and again, in magnificent, slowly and relentlessly rotating cycles. The victories of the gods, by which they become established in authority over their respective spheres of the universe; the interludes of defeat, downfall, and devastation, when they are overcome by the titans or antigods—who are their stepbrothers, ever alert to overthrow them; the avatārs * or incarnations of Vishnu, the Supreme Being, when he assumes an animal or human form, in order to appear in the world as its savior and deliver the gods: these marvels, singular and breath-taking though they must seem when they come to pass, are but unchanging links in an ever-revolving chain. They are typical moments in an unvariable process, and this process is the continuous history of the world organism. They constitute the standard schedule of a day of Brahmā.

At the dawn of each kalpa, Brahmā re-emerges from a lotus that has stemmed and blossomed out of the navel of Vishnu. During the first Manu-interval of the present Varāha Kalpa, Vishnu descended as a boar to rescue the freshly created Earth from the bottom of the sea, whither she had been ravished by a demon of the abyss. In the fourth interval or manvantara, he rescued a great elephant king from a sea monster. In the sixth occurred the cosmic event known as the Churning of the Milky Ocean: the gods and titans, contending for world dominion, concluded a temporary truce, in order to extract the Elixir of

* *Avatāra,* "descent," from the root *tṛī,* "to pass across or over, to sail across," plus the prefix *ava-,* "down."

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Immortality from the Universal Sea. During the present mahāyuga of the seventh manvantara the events described in the two great Indian epics are considered to have occurred. Those recounted in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are assigned to the Tretā Age of the present cycle, those in the *Mahābhārata* to the Dvāpara.

It should be observed that the traditional texts allude only very seldom to the fact that the mythological events which they are describing and extolling take place again and again, recurring every four billion three hundred and twenty million years, i.e., once every kalpa. That is because, from the viewpoint of the short-lived human individual such a prodigious circumstance may be temporarily disregarded. But it cannot be totally and finally dismissed; for the short-lived individual, in the round of his transmigrations, remains involved, somehow, somewhere, under one mask or another, throughout the whole course of the protracted span. In one of the Purānic * accounts of the deeds of Vishnu in his Boar Incarnation or Avatār, occurs a casual reference to the cyclic recurrence of the great moments of myth. The Boar, carrying on his arm the goddess Earth whom he is in the act of rescuing from the depths of the sea, passingly remarks to her:

"Every time I carry you this way . . ."

For the Western mind, which believes in single, epoch-making, historical events (such as, for instance, the coming of Christ, or the emergence of certain decisive sets of ideals, or the long development of invention during the course of man's mastery of nature) this casual comment of the ageless god has a gently minimizing, annihilating effect. It vetoes conceptions of value that

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* The Purānas are sacred books of mythological and epic lore supposed to have been compiled by the legendary sage and poet Vyāsa. There are eighteen Purānas (*purāṇa*, "ancient, legendary") and associated with each a number of Secondary Purānas (*upapurāṇā*). Among the latter are reckoned the great epics, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*.

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are intrinsic to our estimation of man, his life, his destiny and task.

From the human standpoint the lifetime of a Brahmā seems to be very lengthy; nevertheless it is limited. It endures for only one hundred Brahmā years of Brahmā days and nights, and concludes with a great, or universal, dissolution. Then vanish not only the visible spheres of the three worlds (earth, heaven and the space between), but all spheres of being whatsoever, even those of the highest worlds. All become resolved into the divine, primeval Substance. A state of total re-absorption then prevails for another Brahmā century, after which the entire cycle of 311,040,000,000,000 human years begins anew.

3.

The Wisdom of Life

It is easy for us to forget that our strictly linear, evolutionary idea of time (apparently substantiated by geology, paleontology, and the history of civilization) is something peculiar to modern man. Even the Greeks of the day of Plato and Aristotle, who were much nearer than the Hindus to our ways of thought and feeling and to our actual tradition, did not share it. Indeed, Saint Augustine seems to have been the first to conceive of this modern idea of time. His conception established itself only gradually in opposition to the notion formerly current.

The Augustinian Society has published a paper by Erich Frank,* in which it is pointed out that both Aristotle and Plato believed that every art and science had many times developed to its apogee and then perished. "These philosophers," writes

* E. Frank, *Saint Augustine and Greek Thought* (The Augustinian Society, Cambridge, Mass., 1942, obtainable from The Harvard Cooperative Society), see pp. 9-10.

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Frank, "believed that even their own ideas were only the rediscovery of thoughts which had been known to the philosophers of previous periods." This belief corresponds precisely to the Indian tradition of a perennial philosophy, an ageless wisdom revealed and re-revealed, restored, lost, and again restored through the cycles of the ages. "Human life," Frank declares, "to Augustine was not merely a process of nature. It was a unique, unrepeatable phenomenon; it had an individual history in which everything that happened was new and had never been before. Such a conception of history was unknown to the Greek philosophers. The Greeks had great historians who investigated and described the history of their times; but . . . the history of the universe they considered as a natural process in which everything recurred in periodical circles, so that nothing really new ever happened." This is precisely the idea of time underlying Hindu mythology and life. The history of the universe in its periodic passage from evolution to dissolution is conceived as a biological process of gradual and relentless deterioration, disintegration, and decay. Only after everything has run its course into total annihilation and been then re-incubated in the boundlessness of the timeless cosmic night, does the universe reappear in perfection, pristine, beautiful, and reborn. Whereupon, immediately, with the first tick of time, the irreversible process begins anew. The perfection of life, the human capacity to apprehend and assimilate ideals of highest saintliness and selfless purity—in other words the divine quality or energy of Dharma—is in a continuous decline. And during the process the strangest histories take place; yet nothing that has not, in the endless wheelings of the eons, happened many, many times before.

This vast time-consciousness, transcending the brief span of the individual, even the racial biography, is the time-consciousness of Nature herself. Nature knows, not centuries, but ages—geological, astronomical ages—and stands, furthermore, beyond them. Swarming egos are her children, but the species is her con-

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cern; and world ages are her shortest span for the various species that she puts forth and permits, finally, to die (like the dinosaurs, the mammoths, and the giant birds). India—as Life brooding on itself—thinks of the problem of time in periods comparable to those of our astronomy, geology, and paleontology. India thinks of time and of herself, that is to say, in biological terms, terms of the species, not of the ephemeral ego. The latter *becomes* old: the former *is* old, and therewith eternally young.

We of the West on the other hand, regard world history as a biography of mankind, and in particular of Occidental Man, whom we estimate to be the most consequential member of the family. Biography is that form of seeing and representing which concentrates on the unique, the induplicable, in any portion of existence, and then brings out the sense-and-direction-giving traits. We think of egos, individuals, lives, not of Life. Our will is not to culminate in our human institutions the universal play of nature, but to evaluate, to set ourselves against the play, with an egocentric tenacity. As yet our physical and biological sciences —which, of course, are comparatively young—have not affected the general tenor of our traditional humanism. So little, indeed, are we aware of their possible philosophical implications (aside from the lesson of "progress" which we like to derive from their account of evolution) that when we encounter something of their kind in the mythological eons of the Hindus, we are left, emotionally, absolutely cold. We are unable, we are not prepared, to fill the monstrous yugas with life significance. Our conception of the long geological ages that preceded the human habitation of the planet and are promised to succeed it, and our astronomical figures for the description of outer space and the passages of the stars, may in some measure have prepared us to conceive of the mathematical reaches of the vision; but we can scarcely feel their pertinence to a practical philosophy of human life.

It was consequently a great experience for me, when, while reading one of the Purānas, I chanced upon the brilliant, anony-

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mous myth recounted at the opening of the present chapter. Suddenly the empty sheaves of numbers were filled with the dynamism of life. They became alive with philosophical value and symbolic significance. So vivid was the statement, so powerful the impact, that the story did not have to be dissected for its meaning. The lesson was plain to see.

The two great gods, Vishnu and Shiva, instruct the human hearers of the myth by teaching Indra, king of the Olympians. The Wonderful Boy, solving riddles and pouring out wisdom from his childish lips, is an archetypal figure, common to fairy tales of all ages and many traditions. He is an aspect of the Boy Hero, who solves the riddle of the Sphinx and rids the world of monsters. Likewise an archetypal figure is the Old Wise Man, beyond ambitions and the illusions of ego, treasuring and imparting the wisdom that sets free, shattering the bondage of possessions, the bondage of suffering and desire.

But the wisdom taught in this myth would have been incomplete had the last word been that of the infinity of space and time. The vision of the countless universes bubbling into existence side by side, and the lesson of the unending series of Indras and Brahmās, would have annihilated every value of individual existence. Between this boundless, breath-taking vision and the opposite problem of the limited role of the short-lived individual, this myth effected the re-establishment of a balance. Brihaspati, the high priest and spiritual guide of the gods, who is Hindu wisdom incarnate, teaches Indra (i.e., ourself, the individual confused) how to grant to each sphere its due. We are taught to recognize the divine, the impersonal sphere of eternity, revolving ever and agelessly through time. But we are also taught to esteem the transient sphere of the duties and pleasures of individual existence, which is as real and as vital to the living man, as a dream to the sleeping soul.

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