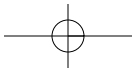
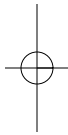
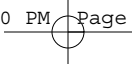


CHAPTER II

# The Wheel of Becoming





The relationship between the Buddha's philosophy and Hinduism is complex. When the traditional mythology of the Vedas was examined and developed in the Upanishads, Indian philosophy became focused upon the nature of Brahman (God as "first cause"). And more important, Hindu thinkers attempted to articulate the relationship between Brahman and each individual person's soul or self—in Sanskrit, "atman." Are we, as individual persons, related to the Godhead in some way?



The symbol for "Om," the Hindu mantra representing the imperishable sound of the universe

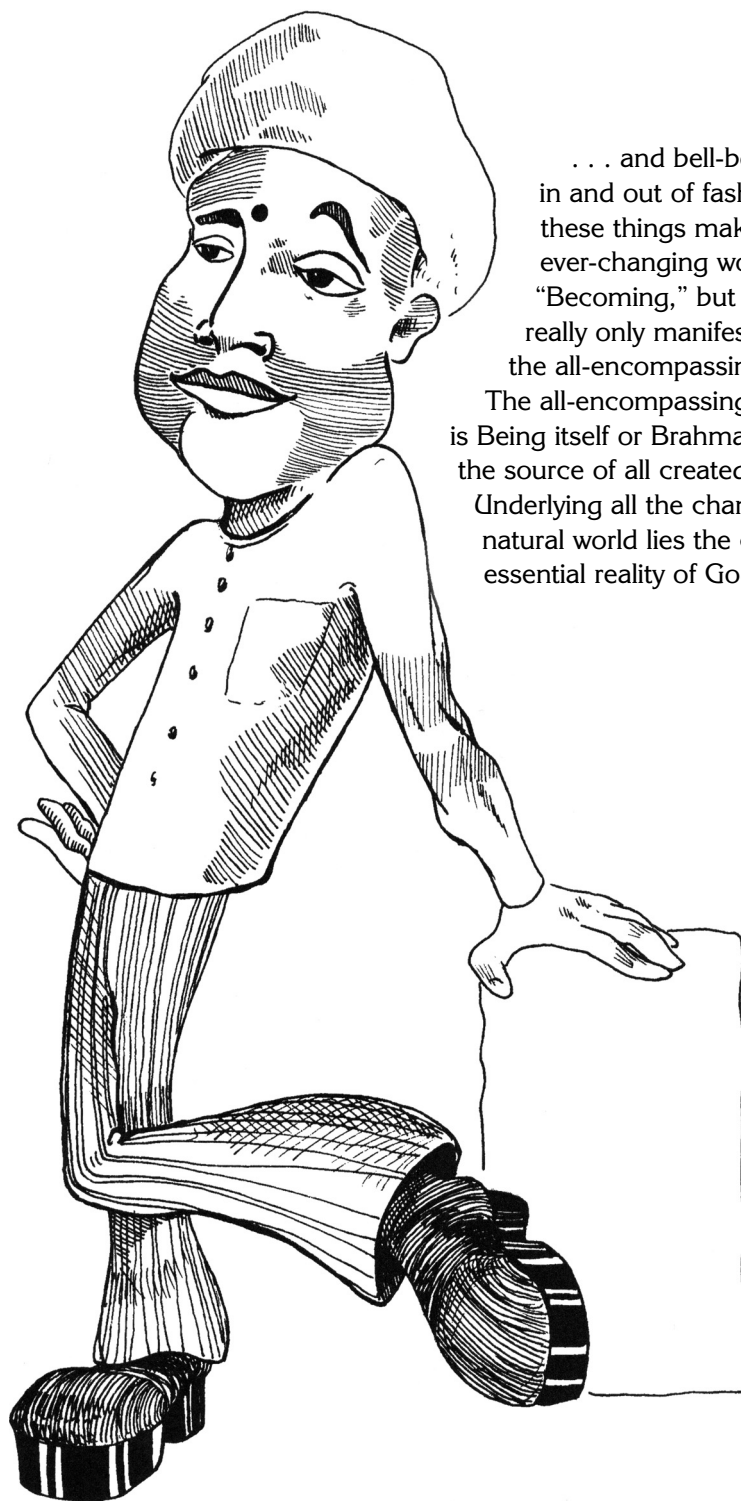
Unlike the Judeo-Christian God, Brahman  
has no anthropomorphic personality.





God, in the Upanishads, is the creative originating principle for the entire cosmos. All of nature is in a relentless state of flux or becoming. Animals grow old and perish, seasons come and go, political empires pass away, solar systems arise and collapse . . .

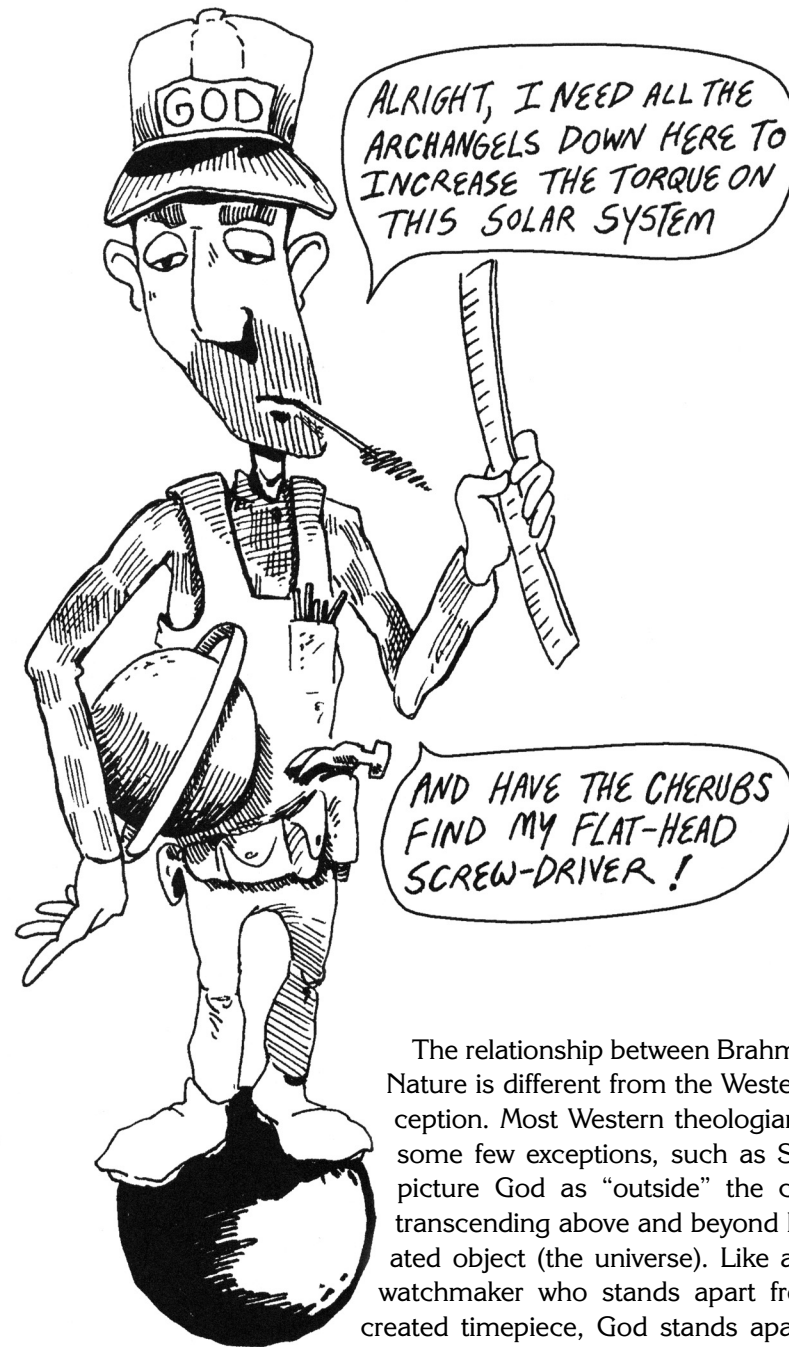




... and bell-bottoms go in and out of fashion. All these things make up the ever-changing world of "Becoming," but these are really only manifestations of the all-encompassing reality.

The all-encompassing foundation is Being itself or Brahman, which is the source of all created things.

Underlying all the changes of the natural world lies the changeless essential reality of God.



The relationship between Brahman and Nature is different from the Western conception. Most Western theologians (with some few exceptions, such as Spinoza) picture God as “outside” the cosmos, transcending above and beyond His created object (the universe). Like a skilled watchmaker who stands apart from her created timepiece, God stands apart from the created cosmos. In the West, God might occasionally step into the mundane realm to wind His clock—perhaps making a statue or two weep miraculously—but generally speaking, the Deity is unsullied by the material world.

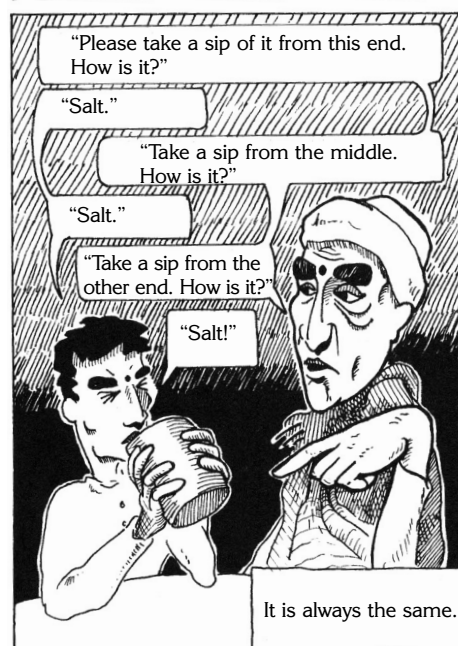
In the Hindu tradition, however, God is not only the antecedent and transcendent world-maker, Brahman is also the world itself. The natural world around us that we encounter on a daily basis is not simply God's created artifact—it is Brahman itself. The natural world is just a manifestation of God and the two cannot really be separated.



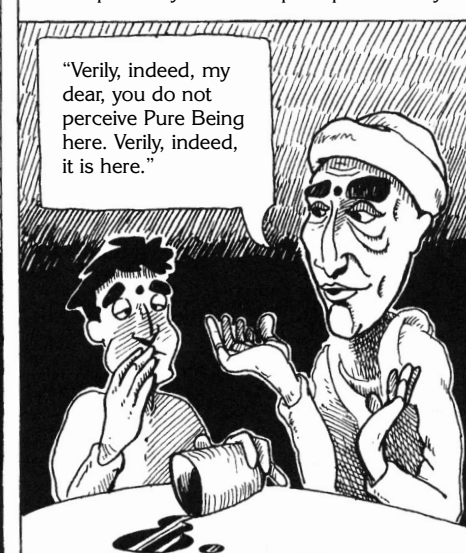
In the Chandogya Upanishad (chapter 6), the novice Svetaketu asks his sage father, Aruni, how God can be present everywhere and yet go undetected by the senses. Aruni demonstrates with an analogy.



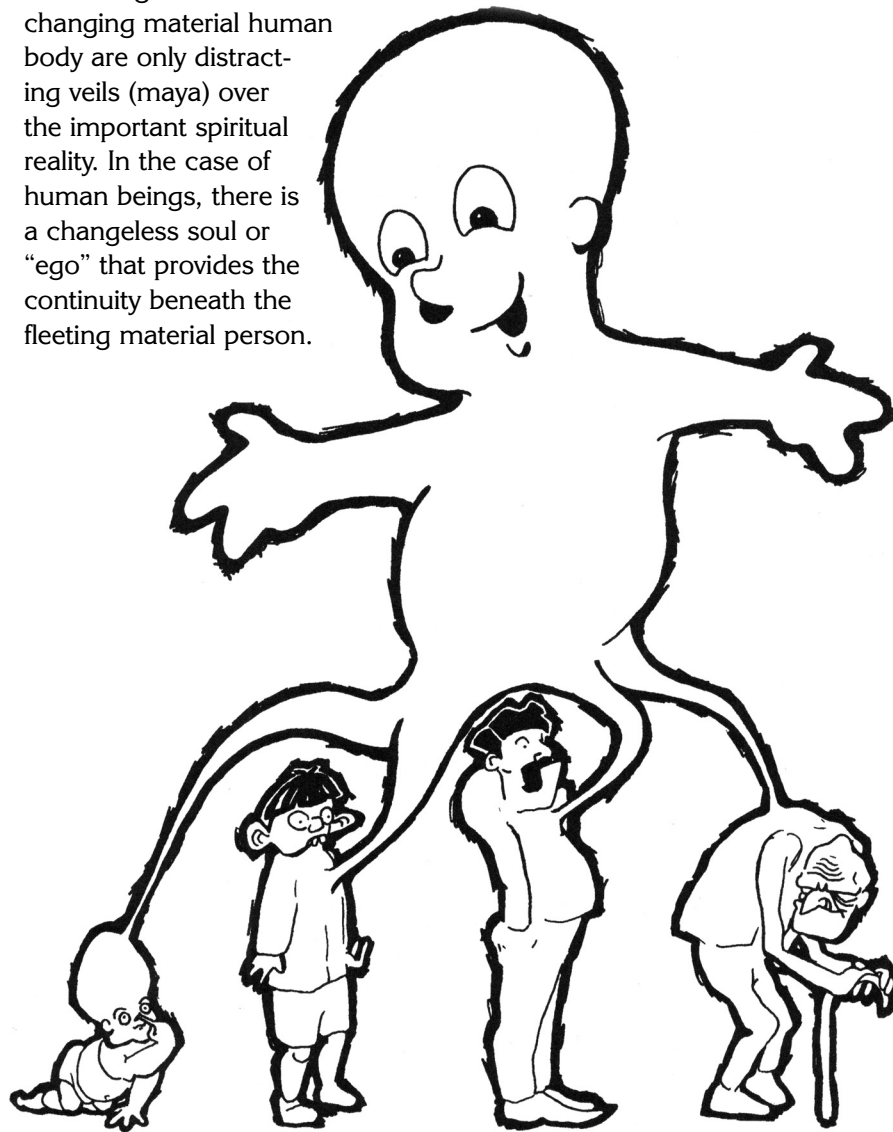
He looked for the salt but could not find it because it had completely dissolved.



Like the salt that infuses all of the water but remains unseen, so too Brahman is the omnipresent yet invisible principle of reality.

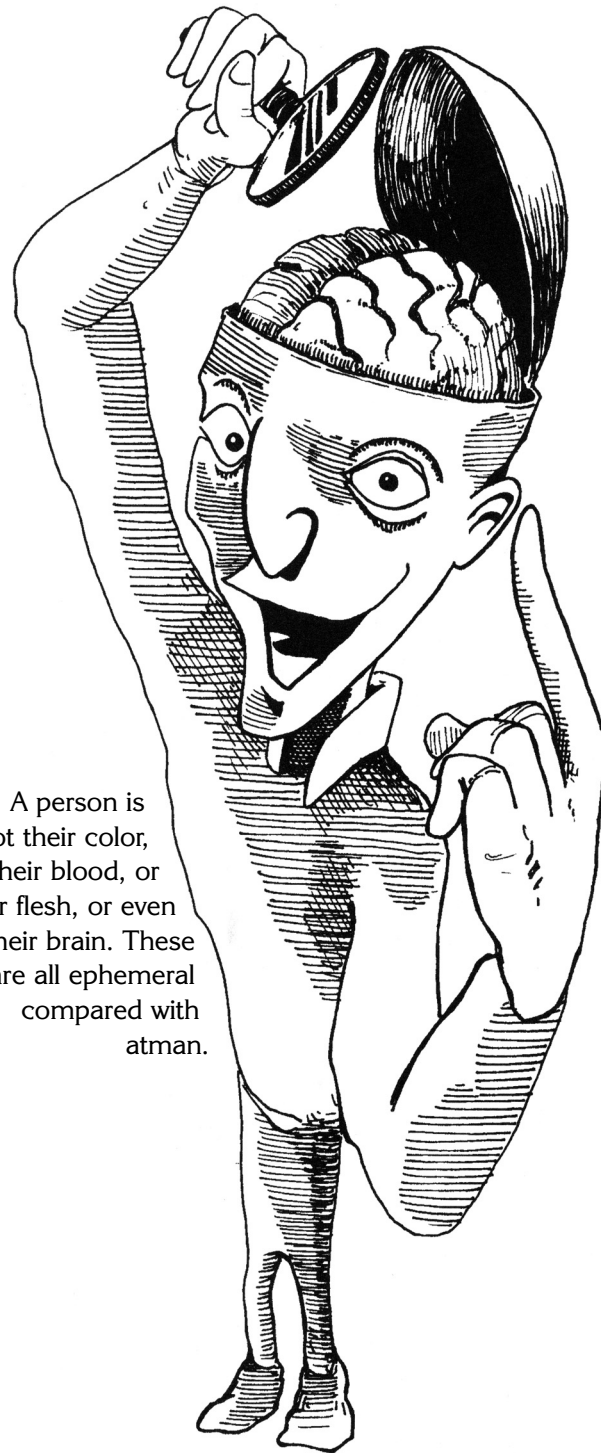


More important for understanding the Buddha's philosophical revolution is the related Hindu concept of atman or "soul." Just as there is this permanent essential reality underlying Nature called Being or Brahman, there is also an unchanging permanent dimension of human beings—namely, atman. The principal lesson of the Upanishads is that both the fluctuating cosmos and the ever-changing material human body are only distracting veils (maya) over the important spiritual reality. In the case of human beings, there is a changeless soul or "ego" that provides the continuity beneath the fleeting material person.



Atman, though unseen and unheard, is the “ruling” part of the individual creature. It is this subtle essence—this immutable core self—that makes up the true self. And in a famous phrase from the Upanishads, the sage Aruni repeatedly explains the atman to Svetaketu and proclaims “That art thou” (tat tvam asi).





A person is  
not their color,  
or their blood, or  
their flesh, or even  
their brain. These  
are all ephemeral  
compared with  
atman.





In other words, according to Hindu philosophy, one shouldn't get hung up on the trivial trials and tribulations of one's daily life, for all of it will pass. But the core self will always remain through this life and the next and the next.



It is the self or ego that migrates from one body and lifetime to another. Karma is both produced (kartr) and received (bhoktr) throughout different life spans by this eternal self—it is the “agent” and “patient” of karma. Much like the Western concept of an afterlife, there is something psychologically soothing about the idea that one’s essential self will live beyond this lifetime.

The last, and perhaps most difficult, part of Hindu philosophy for us to understand is the relationship between Brahman and atman. Brahman is God and atman is the individual self, but in a deeper sense they are both the same thing.



Most properly speaking, there is only one permanent reality and that is God, but the individual selves are manifestations or expressions of God temporarily separated from itself. There is an ideal unity of the soul of the human (atman) and the soul of the universe (Brahman). Individual selves are related to God like sparks to a fire . . .

. . . or water droplets to the sea—they are not qualitatively different and yet they are temporarily estranged from each other.





The transcendent unmanifested Brahman does not need to achieve liberation from ignorance, because it is already completely perfected and free. But the eternally Divine God seeks to express itself through many conscious selves because in this way it is able to rise above ignorance. As the cosmic play unfolds, human egos continue to conquer the challenges of living and realize self-knowledge. With this conquering of ignorance, we are reunited with the Universal Consciousness and this saga is one of the infinite expressions that flow from Brahman.



The aim of the  
Cosmic Dance  
is to celebrate itself.

Having explored the basic metaphysics of Hindu philosophy, we can better understand both the similarities with and the radical differences from Buddha's teachings. The most shocking break from previous thinking is the Buddha's rejection of the concept of "self."



One of the central, and least understood, concepts of the Buddha's philosophy is the doctrine of "no-self" (anatman). The Hindu philosophy correctly pointed out the impermanent nature of the human body, the fallibility of the senses, and the fleeting character of daily consciousness. But despite all this flux and alteration, an inner agent, atman, persisted. The Buddha embraced this theory of the impermanence of all things but pushed the theory further than the Upanishads and claimed that this supposedly permanent self, atman, was itself a fiction. Just as the Upanishad philosophers reprimanded people for thinking that the changing material world was reality, the Buddha now reprimanded the Upanishad philosophers for thinking that the self was reality.





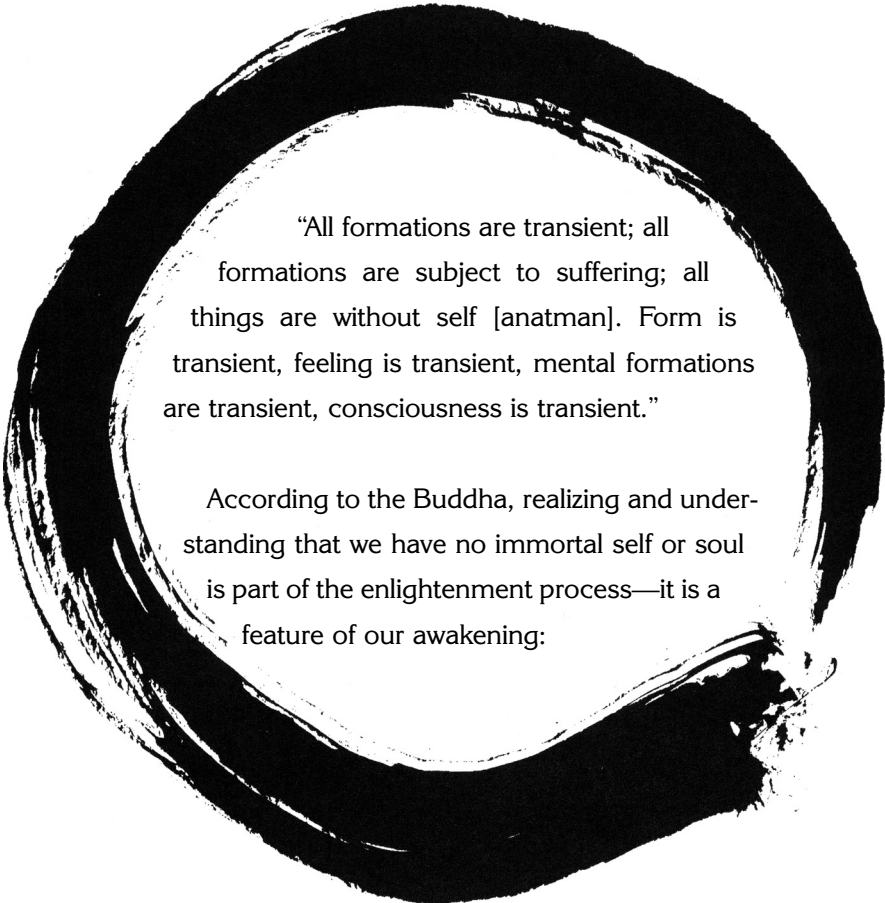
To argue that there is no immortal self is to pull a very comforting rug out from under religious thinking. The idea that some part of us lives on and on is pleasing and satisfies our craving for immortality. According to the Buddha, however, satisfying cravings is not the path to truth.



Not only is there no evidence for an immortal self, but to believe in its existence, according to the Buddha, will lead to an immoral life. It leads to evil because such a belief is ultimately ego-centered and selfish, and human beings will be unable to free themselves if they are seeking rewards in their future lives.



In the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha states:



“All formations are transient; all formations are subject to suffering; all things are without self [anatman]. Form is transient, feeling is transient, mental formations are transient, consciousness is transient.”

According to the Buddha, realizing and understanding that we have no immortal self or soul is part of the enlightenment process—it is a feature of our awakening: