

# The Quest for Fullness

## Human Problem as Suffering

Although the description of the human problem as *duḥkha* (suffering) is prominently associated with the Buddhist tradition, this description is not unique. The characterization of the unliberated human condition as one of *duḥkha* is not unusual in the Hindu tradition. It is also an assumption of the Hindu tradition that the condition of *duḥkha* is undesirable, even unnatural, and can be overcome. One well-known Hindu prayer used often to conclude temple and home worship expresses the desirability and hope for freedom from suffering for all beings.

*Sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ / Sarve santu nirāmayāḥ*  
*Sarve bhadraṇi paśyantū / Mā kaścit duḥkha bhāgbhavet*

*May all be happy. May all be free from disease.*  
*May all know that which is good. May no one suffer.<sup>1</sup>*

In the famous Chāndogya Upaniṣad (Chapter 7) dialogue between the student, Nārada, and his teacher, Sanatkumāra, Nārada approached his teacher with the confession that he is in a condition of suffering (*śoka*) and requests a teaching that will take him beyond his suffering (*śokasya pāram tārayatu*).

The liberated state is represented consistently as one of freedom from *duḥkha*. Bhagavadgītā (6:23) characterizes the purpose and end of the religious life as “disassociation from association with sorrow.”<sup>2</sup> The heaviest of sorrows, according to Bhagavadgītā (6:22), does not overwhelm the liberated person (*duḥkhena guruṇāpi*

*vicālyate*). The liberated is strikingly described as resting happily (*sukham*) in the body, having gained a happiness that does not decay (*sukham akṣayam aśnute*).<sup>3</sup> This is a joy grasped by the intellect and not born of contact between the senses and their objects. It is an unending joy that has its source in the recognition of the infinite (*brahman*).<sup>4</sup> Knowledge of one's identity with the limitless *brahman* constitutes liberation (*mokṣa*), and the Upaniṣads repeatedly use the word *ānandam* (bliss) to describe the nature of *brahman*.<sup>5</sup> The teacher Yājñavalkya in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (4.3.32) speaks of *brahman* as supreme bliss and of all beings as living on a particle of this bliss. According to Nārada, in Chāndogya Upaniṣad (7.1.3), the infinite alone is bliss; there is no bliss in the finite. It is clear therefore that the Hindu tradition understands suffering to be characteristic of the unliberated human condition. It is overcome in knowing *brahman* as one's self (*ātmā*). The state of liberation is the very opposite of suffering (*duḥkha*) and is spoken of as one of unending joy (*ānandam*).

### The Universal Desire for Happiness

This desire to attain happiness and to avoid suffering is universal and intrinsic to human beings. The Dalai Lama describes it as having no boundaries and as needing no justification because it is "validated by the simple fact that we naturally and correctly want this . . ."<sup>6</sup> Although the specific objects of desire may vary at different moments in the life of a single individual, the desire to be happy is constant. Similarly, there may be national or cultural variations regarding desirable objects and methods employed for attaining happiness. What is common in the various stages of a single life, across generations, cultures, and nationalities, is the urge to gain happiness (*sukha*) and to avoid suffering (*duḥkha*).

Swami Dayananda Saraswati, a contemporary teacher of the Advaita Vedānta tradition, distinguishes between cultivated and uncultivated desires and characterizes the desire for happiness as uncultivated or embedded in human nature.

Thus, we find that in addition to the basic urge to survive, there seems to be another basic urge that manifests in

the mind. It can be expressed by saying, "I want to be full, complete, adequate, fulfilled, happy, self-possessed," and so on. However one says it, it means the same thing. Unlike all cultivated desires for a specific end that one picks up in time, this one seems to come along with birth. No one has to be told that being full, happy, etc. is desirable.<sup>7</sup>

This uncultivated desire for fullness is the source of all transitory and culturally determined desires. The fact of it being intrinsic to human nature means also that it cannot, like transitory and cultivated desires, be given up. It will simply find expression in another form or guise. *Duḥkha*, in the Hindu tradition, is the expression of the frustration that arises from what the Dalai Lama speaks of as a natural and universal desire to be happy and our failure to fulfill this desire in a satisfactory and lasting manner. It is the consequence of not resolving the fundamental human want.

### Suffering as Mortality Anxiety

*Duḥkha* expresses itself existentially in a number of discernible ways. One of the ways that finds repeated mention in Hindu sacred texts is anxiety over the fact of human mortality. Anxiety over mortality is a fear that is unique to a self-conscious being able to reflect on the fact of finitude. No other animal, as far as we know, is endowed with the critical self-awareness that enables contemplation of the event of death before it occurs or that allows it to ponder the meaning of life in the face of its finitude. Anxiety about death was, for cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, the fundamental human problem. The human predicament, in his words, is "that man wants to persevere as does any animal or primitive organism; he is driven by the same craving to consume, to convert energy, and to enjoy continued existence. But man is cursed with a burden no animal has to bear: he is conscious that his own end is inevitable, that his stomach will die."<sup>8</sup> The tragedy of our existence is our finitude, our fear of death and our "deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation."<sup>9</sup> Drawing on the work of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, Becker

identifies the underlying human anxiety as one that results from a consciousness of our animal limits. We are self-conscious animals.

What does it mean to be a *self-conscious* animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible to disagree with Becker's characterization of anxiety about death as constituting the human predicament by arguing for the priority of the desire to be happy and the fact that happiness seems to be thwarted by the reality of mortality. In other words, the threat of nonexistence adversely affects our ability to be happy. Death threatens to end and separate us from all that we associate with happiness.

Anxiety about death is at the heart of the question of Naciketas to his teacher Yama in Kaṭha Upaniṣad (1.1.20). Naciketas speaks of the doubt and uncertainty existing among human beings about existence or nonexistence after death and pleads for instruction about the truth of death. "Tell us," he asks, "of that thing about which people entertain doubt in the context of the next world and whose knowledge leads to a great result" (1.1.29).<sup>11</sup> Maitreyī, in the Bṛhadāraṅkaya Upaniṣad 2.4.1, turns down the offer of ample wealth in favor of an instruction for the attainment of immortality. "If indeed," Maitreyī asks her teacher and husband, Yājñavalkya, "this whole earth full of wealth be mine, shall I be immortal through that . . . What shall I do with that which will not make me immortal? Tell me, sir, of that alone which you know (to be the only means of immortality)."<sup>12</sup> Accumulating wealth does not resolve human anxiety about death and leaves us, as Naciketas observes in Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.1.27, unsatisfied.

The Bhagavadgītā 13:8 speaks of death (*mṛtyu*) as suffering in a list that includes birth, death, aging, and disease. The text invites the student to see repeatedly the defect (*doṣa*) of suffering (*duḥkha*) present in all four conditions and describes such seeing or understanding as constituting wisdom. This verse requires careful exegesis because it may be read as suggesting that existence itself

is suffering and that freedom from suffering necessitates freedom from existence itself. Such an interpretation, however, is questionable in a tradition like Advaita, which affirms the possibility and primacy of liberation in life (*jīvanmukti*) and not at the end of existence in the world. Liberation does not free us from existence in the world or from aging, illness, and physical death. It promises to free from the mental and emotional suffering that these conditions may occasion. As we will see more clearly later, the Advaita tradition understands ignorance (*avidyā*) to be the root of human suffering and not birth itself. *Duḥkha* is properly understood to be a characteristic of the unliberated life and not of life itself. The Hindu emphasis in the analysis of suffering is on our emotional and psychological reactions to phenomena such as aging, illness, and death and not on identifying these with suffering. We should read the reference to birth as suffering in this verse and other similar ones as typical of the pairing that we find in Hindu texts. Death presupposes birth, and birth inevitably ends in death. Freedom from death implies freedom from birth. Bhagavadgītā 2:27 stated this insight earlier: “For that which is born, death is certain, and for that which is dead, birth is certain.”<sup>13</sup>

### Suffering and the Transient Nature of Experiences

Another significant expression of *duḥkha* may be found in the transient quality of all pleasurable experiences. This is a particularly poignant manifestation of *duḥkha* because the search for pleasurable experiences is one of our primary modes of fulfilling the natural desire to be happy. Yet each experience of pleasure grants a transient satisfaction and fails us in our search for fullness and adequacy of self. The Bhagavadgītā (5:22) cautions, “Because those enjoyments that are born of contact (between the sense organs and desirable objects) are the sources of pain alone (*duḥkhayonaya*), and have a beginning and an end, Arjuna, the wise person does not revel in them.”<sup>14</sup> Although more extensive in meaning and calling attention to the impermanence, flux, and change that characterize all reality, the Buddhist teaching on *anicca* (Sanskrit: *anitya*) certainly includes the fleeting nature of all pleasures. In the second noble truth, the Buddha associates *duḥkha* with “union with the

unpleasing and separation from the pleasing." Naciketas observes in Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.1.27 that all pleasures are ephemeral, and unrestrained indulgence wears down the senses and leaves us dissatisfied.

Krishna's teaching in the Bhagavadgītā about the transient nature of pleasure follows logically from his statement that experiences with a beginning inevitably come to an end. As a subjective experience, pleasure is associated with our own classifications of objects and persons as desirable, undesirable, or neutral and the consequent development of likes (*rāga*) and dislikes (*dveṣa*) that condition our responses. In the gain of that which we regard as desirable and which conforms to our likes, we experience pleasure. The opposite occurs in the case of the undesirable object or person. Likes and dislikes are constantly shifting, objects and persons change, and, as Naciketas observed, the instruments of enjoyment decline and wane. Pleasures turn out to be capricious, leaving us wanting and incomplete. Understanding the fickle nature of pleasures leads to the state of informed detachment, quite different from a self-denial that is based on fear or the rejection of pleasures. It is described in Bhagavadgītā 2:64 as a state of freedom and tranquility that results from not coating objects in the world with subjective values based on likes (*rāga*) and dislikes (*dveṣa*) and thinking that such values are intrinsic to these objects. "One whose mind is controlled, moving in the world of objects, with sense organs that are under his or her control, free from likes and dislikes, attains tranquility."<sup>15</sup>

### Suffering as the Experience of Inadequacy

Anxieties about the hovering presence of death and the fleeting nature of pleasure are well-recognized forms of *duḥkha*. Less tangible, but no less real, is what Becker refers to as the "ache of cosmic specialness."<sup>16</sup> Describing it also as "the struggle for self-esteem" and for "limitless self-extension," Becker notes its presence from earliest childhood and its reflection of the basic human condition. "[I]t is not that that children are vicious, selfish or domineering. It is that they so openly express man's tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value; he must

stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else."<sup>17</sup>

It is a yearning to stand out, to be "an object of primary value," the "one in creation." It is at heart a desire for meaning, a need to believe that what we do is "truly heroic, timeless, and supremely meaningful." We may argue that what Becker characterizes as the struggle for self-esteem or as the desire to enjoy primary value reveals a fundamental experience of self-lack, self-insufficiency, or inadequacy. It is the nagging consciousness of oneself as an incomplete being and the inner turmoil this generates. Positively, the feeling of insecurity manifests in a continuous seeking for security through the pursuit of different ends.

There are encounters in the Upaniṣads that exemplify the anxieties about death and the transiency of pleasure.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the one that most eloquently describes the experience of *duḥkha* as the absence of meaning involves Nārada in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (Chapter 7). Nārada wanted instruction from his teacher Sanatkumāra, but the teacher requested that he first describe the various intellectual disciplines that he had studied and mastered. Nārada provided an exhaustive list that included sacred texts, grammar, ritual, mathematics, logic, ethics, war, science, astronomy, and the arts! At the end of it all, Nārada confessed, "Here I am sir, a man full of sorrow. Please, sir, take me across to the other side of sorrow."<sup>19</sup> Nārada's sorrow, in Becker's terms, was the "failure to find a meaning for his life, some kind of larger scheme into which he fits. . . . It is the expression of the will to live, the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has lived, has emerged on it, and has worked, suffered and died."<sup>20</sup>

### Inadequacy and the Multiplication of Desires

The urge to overcome the gnawing sense of self-inadequacy and to achieve fullness of being finds expression in multifarious desires. Among the prominent of these are the desires for wealth, fame, and power. The insatiable quest for wealth, beyond the decent satisfaction of one's needs, is explicable by the fact that wealth acquisition

is a culturally acceptable way of seeking to add self-value and to overcome the sense of lack in oneself. Material acquisitions enable us to entertain thoughts of fullness of self and, in Becker's terms, "cosmic specialness." The same is true of our modern preoccupation with the gain of fame. The gain of fame, however momentary, is one of the widely accepted aspirations of contemporary culture. Modern technologies of communicating and receiving information offer new possibilities for pursuing this goal. Anonymity seems to be equated today with insignificance and lack of self-worth. The pursuit of wealth, already mentioned, often has fame as its objective, based on the assumption that persons of wealth are admired and that most of us aspire to become like them. The thought of being admired by others allows the wealthy or famous person to own him- or herself as a being of value. Wealth or fame itself does not confer adequacy or add tangibly to one's significance. Because these are culturally approved and valued pursuits, their gain enables a human being to entertain a thought of self-worth and to overcome, however temporarily, a sense of insignificance and to become acceptable to oneself. It is, in other words, the thought that matters. *Brhadārāṅkaya Upaniṣad* 2.4.5 states this truth beautifully in its famous dictum "All things become dear for one's own sake (*ātmanastu kāmāya sarvam priyam bhavati*)."<sup>1</sup> Fame is sought for the purpose of self-acceptance. One confers value upon oneself indirectly through the approval of others.

What has been said of wealth and fame may also be said of the thirst for power. When it is not sought or used for the purpose of alleviating suffering, it becomes what Becker understands as another element in the cultural hero system to make us believe that we have ultimate worth. The *Bhagavadgītā* 16:13–15 describes well the attitude of searching for security of self through wealth, fame, and power and the thought process involved.

Today, this is gained by me. I will gain this (also) which is pleasing to the mind. This (much) wealth I have; this wealth also I will have later.

This enemy is destroyed by me and I will destroy others also; I am the ruler; I am the enjoyer; I am successful, powerful, and happy.



Those who are totally deluded due to lack of discrimination say, "I have wealth. I was born in a very good family. Who else is equal to me? I will perform rituals. I will give. I will enjoy."<sup>21</sup>

What the Bhagavadgītā offers us here is a composite picture of the thought process of one who searches to overcome his sense of limitation by the acquisition of wealth, fame, and power and who is driven by the need to stand out from everyone else ("Who else is equal to me?"). It is the search for self-importance that is pursued by favorably comparing oneself to others who are regarded as inadequate. "And it is only by contrasting and comparing himself to *like* organisms, to his fellow men, that he can judge if he has some extra claim to importance. Obviously, it is not very convincing about one's ultimate worth to be better than a lobster, or even a fox; but to outshine 'that fellow sitting over there, the one with the black eyes'—now that is something that carries the conviction of ultimacy."<sup>22</sup>

### The Persistence of Inadequacy

The tragic nature of the quest for self-acceptance and self-value through pursuits such as pleasure, wealth, fame, and power, as attested in the experiences of human beings across cultures and times, is that such gains consistently fail to satisfy and leave us wanting. There are many reasons for this. First, the problem of inadequacy is a notional one centered on oneself. It does not arise because of any gain or any loss and is not resolved, therefore, as a consequence of any gain or loss such as wealth, fame, or power. One is in search of self-adequacy and not in any of these as ends in themselves. Because the problem of self-inadequacy is not caused by the loss of wealth, fame, or power, the addition of these cannot be the solution. Huston Smith made this argument in different words when he wrote, "While it is not true to say that men cannot get enough money, fame and power, it is true to say that men cannot get enough of these things when they want them greedily, when they make them the supreme forces of their lives.

*These are not the things men really want, and man can never get enough of what he does not really want.*"<sup>23</sup> Our intrinsic existential problem of inner lack will not be resolved by the addition of anything extrinsic to the self.

Second, as noted by Becker, we strive for self-value by comparing and contrasting ourselves with others. What this implies, of course, is that any value attributed to oneself through gains such as wealth, fame, and power is dependent on others enjoying less or on the unequal distribution of these goods. When these things are sought for one's fullness of being, one can never have enough because the value of what one gains is always relative to others' accomplishments. One lives in perpetual anxiety of losing self-value because of the gains of another. We become participants in a race without a finish and without any hope of fullness and enter into a relationship of psychic competition with others. The consequence is the ubiquitousness of envy, described by Becker as "the signal of danger that the organism sends to itself when a shadow is being cast over it, when it is threatened with being diminished."<sup>24</sup> Although the transient worth of these gains is certainly connected with their relative character, it also is the outcome of the wider truth of change that affects everything finite. All gains originating in time are subject to time and hence change and uncertainty.

The fundamental human predicament, as understood in Advaita, is that of a self-conscious being experiencing a profound sense of inner lack and insignificance and discovering that culturally approved gains such as pleasure, wealth, fame, and power do not resolve this emptiness. Wanting persists in spite of all gains. Every finite gain provides a momentary satisfaction, fleetingly removing our sense of want but leaving it to return with nagging insistence. Want is the ever-active incubator and source of multifarious desires. Some of these desires are focused on gaining ends not already possessed (*pravṛtti*), and others take the form of striving to eliminate what one perceives to be the sources of unhappiness (*nivṛtti*). Both kinds of desires and the appropriate actions for their achievement do not liberate from persisting want. Not recognizing this predicament and hoping that the next desire will lead to lasting freedom from want, we become victims of greed, an insatiable condition of always wanting more. Swami Dayananda summarizes the human predicament succinctly:

Any gain from change also always involves a loss. When one gains something, there may be an initial release from a sense of inadequacy, but one then finds that the original problem still remains. By gaining or disposing of one thing or another, the problem of inadequacy is not solved. Adequacy, freedom from being incomplete, is the end I seek behind all my forced pursuit of security, *artha*; but no gain or disposal accomplishes that end.<sup>25</sup>

If we understand *duḥkha* (suffering) to fundamentally be this condition of want and dissatisfaction with ourselves, then we should think of greed as a symptom rather than a cause of the problem.<sup>26</sup> Greed, whatever its object, is a response to the condition of inadequacy and not its cause. This is a very important point to which we return at various points in our discussion. Without a resolution to the problem of lack, the source of desires, greed goes untreated. Greed is acknowledged in the Hindu tradition as a cause of actions that inflict pain on others (Bhagavadgītā 3:36–37) and on oneself (Bhagavadgītā 16:21). It is often paired with anger (*krodha*) as a source of suffering. It is, however, symptomatic and not fundamental.

### Overcoming the Problem of Inadequacy: The Limits of Action

Understanding this fundamental human predicament is an important first step toward its eventual resolution. Such understanding is the consequence of mature reflection on the nature of one's search and on the limits of various gains to overcome our need for adequacy. Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.2.12) describes well this process of examining and reflecting on one's experiences. "Having analyzed the worldly experiences achieved through effort, a mature person gains dispassion, discerns that the uncreated (limitlessness) cannot be produced by action."<sup>27</sup>

What the thoughtful person understands is that all finite gains accomplished by action do not lead to freedom from the state of want. Freedom from want does not seem to be a product that follows from actions performed. These may at best produce

a temporary release from want, but the condition of wanting soon reappears.

Conviction about the limits of finite gains to dispel the suffering of inadequacy leads to an attitude of dispassion or detachment (*nirvedam*). It is an appreciation of the fact that while finite actions can generate results necessary for satisfying legitimate human needs, it is illusory to think that these will overcome entirely our deep-rooted sense of want. Śaṅkara, in his commentary on the Brahma-sūtra 1.1.4, identifies four possibilities for action. Through actions, we can create an effect (like a pot from clay), modify or transform an existing effect (milk into yogurt), reach somewhere (like traveling from one destination to another), or cleanse and purify something (like removing dust from a mirror). Such limited actions are useful for accomplishing specific finite ends but do not seem to overcome inadequacy. It is important also to note that any adequacy that is the effect of a finite action will itself be finite and transient. A created fullness, the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad text suggests, will be a limited one. The attitude of detachment spoken of in this verse should not be construed as implying an attitude of fear or disgust toward the finite. It is a mature understanding of the limits of the finite to solve the fundamental human problem. The Bhagavadgītā 2:59 cautions that it is only such wisdom and not the suppression of sense activity that liberates from unhealthy attachment and greed toward finite gains. An active life, infused with healthy detachment, is superior, according to Bhagavadgītā (3:6–7), to an inactive one in which one still harbors misconceptions about sense objects and finite gains. “The one who, controlling the organs of action, sits with the mind remembering those sense objects is deluded and is called a person of false conduct. Whereas, Arjuna! the one who, controlling the sense organs with the mind, remaining unattached, takes to the *yoga* of action with organs of actions, is far superior.”<sup>28</sup>

Understanding the human problem is a necessary step toward any search for its resolution. Suffering (*duḥkha*) properly describes this problem, even though its expressions are many and include the anxiety over mortality that Becker emphasizes, the transience of pleasure, the wish for significance, and the persistence of inadequacy. The sense of insignificance and inadequacy is centered on oneself and on notions that one has about oneself and

is not overcome by extrinsic gains such as wealth, fame, power, or pleasure. We feverishly, and often recklessly, pursue finite ends hoping through these to overcome self-lack and to attain the fullness of being that we truly want. Citing the work of Kierkegaard, Becker addresses the fact of our non-awareness of our motives in action. "We seek stress, we push our own limits, but we do it with our *screen against despair* and not with despair itself. We do it with the stock market, with sports cars, with atomic missiles, with the success ladder in the corporation or the competition in the university."<sup>29</sup>

It is significant that Naciketas, in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.1.26, in his encounter with Death, also rejects all the rewards offered, such as wealth, power, long life, social status, and sense-pleasure. Naciketas turns down the offerings of Death with the observation that these are finite and leave human beings wanting and discontented. Naciketas sees through the "screen of despair" described by Becker. "Ephemeral are these, and they waste away the vigor of all the organs that a man has. All life, without exception, is short indeed. Let the vehicles be yours alone; let the dances and songs be yours."<sup>30</sup>

In Becker, awakening to the predicament of our illusory quest for significance leads to despair. There is not much to be offered when we confront the reality of an existence that seems meaningless. Becker articulates this rhetorically.

When you get a person to emerge into life, away from his dependencies, his automatic safety in the cloak of someone's power, what joy can you promise him with the burden of his aloneness? When you get a person to look at the sun as it bakes down on the daily carnage taking place on the earth, the ridiculous accidents, the utter fragility of life, the powerlessness of those he thought most powerful—what comfort can you give him from a psychotherapeutic point of view?<sup>31</sup>

Although few contemporary thinkers have articulated and described the human problem as powerfully as Becker, his solution does not take us out of the realm of the illusory. Becker's solution to existential despair is the release of one's creative powers

in work. Through work, "he satisfies nature which asks that he live and act objectively as a vital animal plunging into the world; but he also satisfies his own distinctive human nature because he plunges in on his own *symbolic* terms and not as a reflex of the world as a given to mere physical sense experience. He takes in the world, makes a total problem out of it, and then gives out a fashioned, human answer to that problem."<sup>32</sup> Although this "humanly created meaning" is also illusory, it is a necessary illusion, argues Becker, because it provides the heroic justification and meaning for life.

### Despair as Opportunity

Despair is also a painful reality in the Advaita tradition. Vedāntasāra (1.30) describes the student as "scorched with the fire of the endless round of birth and death" and as going to a teacher as a person "with his head on fire rushes to a lake."<sup>33</sup> In similar language, Vivekacudamani (36) characterizes him as afflicted by an "unquenchable fire," "shaken violently," and "terrified." This sorrow of despair is also a moment of opportunity. The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.2.12) text cited above advises the despairing human being in the following words: "To know That, he should go, with twigs in his hand, to a teacher who is learned in the scriptures and who is steadfast in the knowledge of himself." The same text also advises the teacher on her response to the student. "To that student who has approached properly, who has a resolved mind, who has mastery over mind, that wise person should teach that *brahman* by which one knows the imperishable, the limitless truth as it is."

We had earlier highlighted Becker's identification of the human longing for "limitless self-extension," "cosmic significance," the urge "to be the *one* in creation." The Advaita tradition, following the Upaniṣads, names and identifies this desire as the intrinsic desire for *brahman* (the infinite), where alone there is freedom from suffering (*duḥkha*). The infinite is, according to the Advaita tradition, what human beings really want, as opposed to the unending finite ends that we pursue. The coincidence of terminology between Becker and the Upaniṣads is, to say the least, fasci-

nating. Chāndogya Upaniṣad (7.23.1) speaks of the ultimate object of human longing in these famous words. “That which is infinite, is alone happiness. There is no happiness in anything finite. The infinite alone is happiness. But one must desire to understand the infinite.”<sup>34</sup>

Later in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (8.7.1), students go to their teacher, Prajāpati, after hearing that it is the knowledge of the infinite alone that culminates in the fulfillment of all desires. Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (2.4.5) is even more specific and offers a list of objects of desire that are sought not for their own sake but in pursuit of the infinite. These include husbands, wives, children, wealth, other worlds, and deities. The teacher advises that after understanding that the infinite is the object of human search, we should hear about, reflect on, and contemplate its nature.

Identifying the one end of human longing to be the infinite (*brahman*) is important for several reasons. We gain clarity about the human predicament that helps to end the frenzy of greed that is fueled by the illusion that gains of wealth, fame, or power will confer self-adequacy. It leads, as we have noted earlier, to a state of healthy detachment that is a consequence of understanding the possibilities and limits of finite gains. As important, the understanding of the human problem to be the quest for the infinite helps us also to think about the appropriate methods that may be employed for gaining this end.

### The Uncreated Infinite

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.2.12), cited earlier, mentions that the fruit of reflection on the nature of action is the understanding that the infinite, literally the uncreated, is not the created effect of an action. All actions, physical and mental, originate in time and can only be performed for a limited duration. The effects of any such actions will necessarily be finite and subject to change and loss. It is a contradiction to understand or to think it possible to bring the infinite into existence through finite actions. “A limited being,” writes Swami Dayananda, “through limited action gains a limited result. A series of limited results do not add up to limitlessness. A limited being plus a limited result, plus limited results, endlessly,

still equals a limited being. By a process of becoming, the inadequate and limited being will never become limitless. Any changes one brings about, within or without, will not change the limited into the limitless."<sup>35</sup> We also are reminded here of the admonition in the Buddhist tradition that Nirvana should not be thought of an effect of anything. Walpola Rahula argues this point forcefully.

Nirvana is not the result of anything. If it would be a result, then it would be an effect produced by a cause. It would be *samkhata* "produced" and "conditioned." Nirvana is neither cause nor effect. It is beyond cause and effect. Truth is not a result nor an effect. It is not produced like a mystic, spiritual, mental state, such as *dhyana* or *Samadhi*. TRUTH IS. NIRVANA IS.<sup>36</sup>

This claim about the nature of action, it must be emphasized, includes, from the Advaita perspective, actions that may be regarded as religious in character. The Advaita tradition accepts the possibility of the existence of worlds of pleasure (*svargaloka*) or worlds of pain (*narakaloka*) attained after death. These are attained through the performance of virtuous action (*punya*) or, in the case of unhappy worlds, non-ethical ones (*pāpa*). Because the attainment of these worlds is the consequence of finite actions, commended or proscribed, the gain is impermanent (*anityā*), and there is always return to the world of birth and death (*samsāra*). If heavenly worlds are impermanent, so also are hellish ones.

Our failure to attain fullness of self, according to the Advaita tradition, is the consequence of not discerning the true object of our search and our employment of inappropriate methods. The creation of finite effects through the employment of finite means is referred to in Advaita as the method of *aprāptasya prāpti* or the gain of that which not yet gained. The proper method for such an end is action (*karma*). The quest for fullness through the acquisition of wealth, fame, power, or pleasure, or by the performance of good works (*punya*), religious or ethical, is illustrative of this method and, Advaita claims, does not lead to a resolution of the human problem. The desire for fullness cannot be ignored and is not satisfied by finite gains.



### The Human Problem as Ignorance (Avidyā)

Advaita does not stop with an identification of the human problem and skepticism about its resolution. The gain of that which is not yet gained is not the only model for the human problem and its solution. Advaita understands the Upaniṣads to propose the model of gaining that which is already gained (*prāptasya prāpti*). The issue, according to Advaita, is that we do not interrogate the problem of inadequacy itself. In other words, we assume inadequacy and then go about seeking a resolution through finite gains. The gain of that which is already gained seems paradoxical, but it is quite clear that this is exactly what Advaita proposes. The infinite (*brahman*), the object of human seeking, constitutes the nature of the seeking self. It is a fundamental error to think otherwise and to search for the infinite as though it is an object separate and different from oneself. The reality and availability of the infinite is at the heart of Advaita's resolution to the human problem, and is not unlike the often-quoted teaching and assurance of the Buddha that echoes so well the nature of the infinite in the Upaniṣads.

Monks, there is the unborn, unoriginated, unmade, and unconditioned. Were there not the unborn, unoriginated, unmade and unconditioned, there will be no escape for the born, originated, made, and conditioned. Since there is the unborn, unoriginated, unmade, unconditioned, there is escape for the born, originated, made, conditioned . . . this indeed is the end of suffering.<sup>37</sup>

Although paradoxical, the method of gaining the gained is common in human experience. The story of the tenth person has become a classic parable in Advaita as an illustration of this method. It tells of ten disciples who were on their way to a pilgrimage site when they came upon a swollen river. In the absence of a boatman, they decided to swim across. On reaching the opposite shore, the student-leader took a count to ensure that everyone was safe. To her dismay, one was missing. Every member did likewise, but ended with the same conclusion that the tenth person was lost. A passerby, attracted by their lamentations, inquired about

their problem. After listening patiently, he assured them that the tenth person was not lost and requested that the leader do another count. When she stopped at nine, the passerby said with a smile, "You are the tenth person!" Everyone immediately understood the nature of the error and rejoiced in the "gain" of their fellow disciple.

The model of gaining that which is already gained obtains when the problem is one of ignorance, and its resolution is through knowledge. In the case of the parable above, the loss of the tenth person was entirely notional. The tenth person was always present and available. In fact, the tenth person could not be any closer because the seeker of the tenth person was the tenth person, and there was no spatial or temporal separation between the seeker and the sought. What needed to be interrogated, as done by the passerby, was the very assumption that the tenth person was lost. In a similar way, contends Advaita, although the problem of self-inadequacy and want is a common human one, we need to turn the searchlight of inquiry on it and examine its validity. It should not be an unexamined assumption about oneself that then becomes the primary motivation behind what Buddhism speaks of as *tanha* (craving or thirst).

The Advaita resolution of the human predicament is the teaching that, like the tenth person searching for herself, one is the full and adequate being that one wishes to become. The problem is ignorance of the truth of oneself, and this is dispelled by knowledge. If liberation (*mokṣa*) from the human problem is accomplished through knowledge, and if this knowledge is to be regarded as valid, then knowledge must have a source regarded as valid. It is to the question of liberating knowledge and its source that we turn next.