

THE CREATION, DEATH, AND REBIRTH OF THE UNIVERSE

The world is created, destroyed, and re-created in an eternally repetitive cycle. It continuously moves from one Maha Yuga (great age) to the next, with each lasting for 4,320,000 years. Each Maha Yuga consists of a series of four shorter yugas, or ages, each of which is morally worse and of shorter duration than the age that preceded it.

The beginning of each Maha Yuga is the Krita Yuga, the age of virtue and moral perfection—a bright, golden age on earth. The great god Vishnu, in his form of Brahma, the grandfather and creator of the world, is the presiding god, and dharma (ideal, righteous behavior or moral duty) walks steadily and securely upon all four feet. The Krita Yuga lasts for 1,728,000 years. During this period, human beings need no shelters, whether they live in the mountains or by the sea. Gift-giving trees provide them with an abundant supply of food, clothing, and decorative objects. Everyone is born good and lives a happy, contented, unselfish, and beautiful life. People are devoted to meditation, the highest virtue, and spend their lives being loyal to dharma. They work for the pleasure of it, rather than from necessity. Sorrow does not exist.

The second age in each Maha Yuga is the Treta Yuga. *Treta* means three and refers to the fact that dharma now walks less steadily, on three of its four feet. Virtue and moral perfection still exist, but they have declined by one-fourth. The duration of the age has similarly declined by one-fourth. Vishnu, lord of heavenly light and the preserver of life on earth, is the ruling god. People are now devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, which they consider the highest virtue.

In the Treta Yuga the gift-giving trees supply food and clothing to everyone in abundance until greedy people try to make them their private property. Then the special trees disappear, and life on earth becomes difficult for the first time. Heavy rainfall creates rivers, and the mixture of earth and water makes the soil fertile for the growth of many new kinds of trees. Although the new trees bear fruit and are useful to human beings, they are ordinary trees rather than gift-giving trees. Therefore, people must work hard to acquire food and clothing. Because of the rain and severe changes in the weather, they also need to construct houses for shelter.

In the Treta Yuga people are more passionate and greedy. They are no longer happy with what they have. Dissatisfaction, resentment, and anger replace satisfaction, peace, and contentment in their hearts. They covet their neighbors' possessions. The strong take land from the weak in order to possess more food and greater wealth. Many men take the wives of others.

The third age in each Maha Yuga is called the Dvapara Yuga. *Dva* means two, and eternal dharma now totters unsteadily on two of its four feet, creating a precarious and shifting balance between good and evil. Virtue and moral perfection still exist, but they have declined to one-half what they were in the Krita Yuga. Correspondingly, the duration of this age is half that of the Krita Yuga. Vishnu, the preserver of life on earth, is still the ruling god, and people devote themselves to sacrifice, which they consider the highest virtue.

In the Dvapara Yuga, disease, misfortune, suffering, and death are part of everyone's existence; people have become more passionate and greedy, and war is commonplace. Religious doctrines are developed in an attempt to guide human behavior toward dharma, but the gradual process of moral deterioration continues.

The fourth age in each Maha Yuga is the Kali Yuga. This is the dark age, as *Kali* means quarrel and war. Dharma drags along on only one of its four feet, and virtue barely exists. This age is one-fourth the length of the golden Krita Yuga. The great god Vishnu is the ruling god, in his form of Shiva-Rudra, the destroyer of life on earth.

In the Kali Yuga people achieve noble rank in society based on the amount of money and property they own rather than their moral virtue. The quality of virtue is measured only in terms of material wealth. Sexual passion alone binds husband and wife together in marriage. People become successful in life through a succession of lies, and their only source of enjoyment is sex. They live with continuous fear of hunger, disease, and death.

In the Kali Yuga only the poor are honest, and the only remaining virtue is charity. To escape the oppression of greedy kings, a few people retreat to isolated mountain valleys. They clothe themselves with rough-hewn garments made from the leaves and bark of trees, and they live by gathering wild fruits and edible roots. Harsh weather and

primitive living conditions make them prey to devastating illnesses. One who lives to the age of twenty-three is considered very old.

VISHNU AS SHIVA-RUDRA, DESTROYER OF LIFE ON EARTH

At the end of one thousand Maha Yugas, which is one day of the life of the world, the great god Vishnu will take on the form of Shiva-Rudra and will destroy all life on earth. He will usher in one night in the life of the world, a period lasting as long as the day. First he will enter the sun's rays and intensify them for one hundred years, causing great heat to evaporate all water on the face of the earth. All three worlds—heaven, earth, and the Underworld—will burn up from this intense heat. The great drought and scorching fire will create a wasteland. Famine will stalk the universe, and by the time the one-hundred-year period ends, no living creature will remain.

When the fires have consumed all life on the three worlds, Shiva-Rudra, the destructive form of Vishnu, will exhale dreadful storm clouds. Accompanied by terrifying thunder and lightning, these clouds will move across the face of the earth, blocking the sun and covering the world in darkness. Day and night, for one hundred years, a deluge of rain will pour forth until everything in the world has been buried beneath the deep waters of a devastating flood. Besides the desolate sea, only the great god Vishnu will continue to exist, for the fire and flood will have destroyed all of the other gods along with the rest of all life.

Just as the great flood begins to bury all life, a large golden egg will appear. This egg will contain the seeds of all forms of life that existed in the world before the flood. As the world drowns, the egg will float safely upon the waters of the boundless ocean.

When the ocean completely covers all three worlds, Vishnu will exhale a drying wind. For one hundred years this wind will blow across the world, scattering the storm clouds. For the remainder of the one thousand Maha Yugas, that night in the life of the world, Vishnu will sleep and the world will lie asleep also.

VISHNU AS BRAHMA. CREATOR OF LIFE ON EARTH

At the end of the long night of one thousand Maha Yugas, Vishnu will awaken. A marvelous lotus flower will emerge from his navel, and Vishnu will emerge from the lotus flower in his creative form of Brahma, creator of life on earth. The lotus will become the foundation of the three worlds. Once he has emerged from the blossom, Brahma will

rest upon it. Realizing that the flood has killed all life, Brahma will break open the egg to begin the process of rebirth. Thus, as the god Brahma, Vishnu will usher in the next day in the life of the world, a new period of one thousand Maha Yugas.

The image of all three worlds, complete with gods, demons, and human beings, exists within Brahma. First Brahma the creator will bring forth water, fire, air, wind, sky, and earth, with mountains and trees upon the earth. Then he will create the forms of time, as a way of organizing the universe.

Soon thereafter, Brahma will concentrate upon creating gods, demons, and human beings. First he will bring forth the demons from his buttocks. He will then cast off his body, creating the darkness we call night, which belongs to the enemies of the gods. Taking a second body, Brahma will bring forth the gods from his face. He will cast off this body as well, creating the lightness we call day, which belongs to the gods. From successive bodies, Brahma's powers of concentration will bring forth human beings and Rakshasas, snakes, and birds. Then Brahma will bring forth goats from his mouth, sheep from his chest, cows from his stomach, antelope, buffalo, camels, donkeys, elephants, and other animals from his arms and legs, horses from his feet, and plant life from the hair on his body.

Thus the great god Vishnu exists eternally in his three forms. First he is Brahma, the grandfather and creator of the world. Then he is Vishnu, the preserver of life on earth. As Vishnu, he protects human beings with dharma, a code of civilized behavior, and often defends them from their greatest enemies by descending to earth and being born as a human being in order to help them. Finally he is Shiva-Rudra, the destroyer of life on earth.