In the centuries before the Common Era, ancient Indian religious culture exploded into life with speculative fervor and a new counter-culture based on the belief that existence in the world is bondage. The Maha-bharata’s “Book of Liberation” is the invaluable only record of this early post-Upanishadic period, and is unrivaled in scope by any other work of Hindu philosophy.

The Maha-bharata is a unique series that, through original text and English translation, gives an international readership access to the beauty and variety of classical Sanskrit literature.

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Here is a new Clay Sanskrit Library translation of the first part of “The Book of Liberation,” Volume Three (of five) of “Peace,” Book Twelve of the Maha-bharata.

“The Book of Liberation” is the most enigmatic philosophical text from ancient India. Presented as the teachings of Bhishma as he lays dying on the battlefield, after the epic war between the Pandavas and Kauravas, “Liberation” was composed by unknown authors in the last few centuries BCE, during the exciting early period of world-renunciation.

In this age, peripatetic sages meditated under trees, holy men practiced austerities in forest groves, and wandering sophists debated in the towns and cities. There may have been no time before or since of such freedom of thought and expression. The freedom enjoyed by these ancient thinkers was not an end in itself. This is above all an animated work, the record of philosophers seeking liberation (moksha) from a world they believed unsatisfactory. The speculation herein is but a means to an end, for its authors believed they could attain freedom from the world by knowing the truth.
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THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN BHRIGU AND BHARAD·VAJA
YUDHIŚTRIKA UVĀCA:

182.1 KUTAṀ ŚRŚṬAM IDAṀ VIŚVAM JAGAT STHĀVARAJAṀGAMAM?
   pralaye ca kam abhyeti? tan me brūhi, pitā|maha.
   sa|sāgaraḥ, sa|gaganaḥ, sa|śailaḥ, sa|balāhakaḥ,
   sa|bhūmiḥ, s'|āgni|pavano loko ’yaṃ kena nirmitaḥ?
   katham śrśṭaṁ bhūtāṇi?
   katham varṇa|vibhaktayaḥ?
   ūṣau|āṣaucaṁ katham teṣaṁ?
   dharm'|ādharma|vidhiḥ katham?
   kīdṛśo jīvatāṁ jīvaḥ? kva vā gacchanti ye mṛtāḥ?
   asmāl lokād amuṇ lokaṁ, sarvaṃ saṃsatu no bhavān.

BHĪṢMA UVĀCA:

182.5 atr’ āpy udāharant’ īmaṁ itihāsaṁ purātanaṁ:
   Bhṛguṁ” ābhithaṁ śastraṁ Bharadvājya ṃṛcchate.
   Kailasa|śikhare ṅṛṣṭva dipyāmānaṁ mah”|āujasam
   Bhṛguṁ maha”|ṛṣim āśīnaṁ Bharadvājo ’nvapṛcchata
   «sa|sāgaraḥ, sa|gaganaḥ, sa|śailaḥ, sa|balāhakaḥ,
   sa|bhūmiḥ, s'|āgni|pavano loko ’yaṃ kena nirmitaḥ?
   katham śrśṭaṁ bhūtāṇi?
   katham varṇa|vibhaktayaḥ?
   ūṣau|āṣaucaṁ katham teṣaṁ?
   dharm'|ādharma|vidhiḥ katham?
   kīdṛśo jīvatāṁ jīvaḥ? kva vā gacchanti ye mṛtāḥ?
   para|lokaṁ imaṁ c’ āpi, sarvaṁ saṃsituṁ arhasi.”

92
Yudhiṣṭhira said:

What is the source of the universe, this world of animate and inanimate things? And to what does it return during a period of cosmic dissolution? Please tell me this, grandfather. Who fashioned this world of oceans, sky, mountains, clouds, earth, fire and wind?

How were the different creatures created, and how were they divided into different classes? How did they become pure and impure? How did the order of right and wrong come about?

What is the nature of the soul that abides within living beings? And where do the dead go? Please explain all this to me, from this world to the world beyond.

Bhishma said:

On this subject people relate an ancient tradition: the instruction imparted to the enquiring Bharad-vaja by Bhrigu.*

The great seer Bhrigu was seated on the peak of Mount Kailāsa, glowing with great energy. Upon seeing him, Bharad-vaja asked these questions: “Who fashioned this world of oceans, sky, mountains, clouds, earth, fire and wind?

How were the different creatures created, and how were they divided into different classes? How did they become pure and impure? How did the order of right and wrong come about?

What is the nature of the soul that abides within living beings, and what happens to people when they die? Please tell me everything about this world and the world beyond.”
evaṁ sa bhagavān pṛṣṭo Bharadvājena saṁśayam,
brahma’ṛṣir Brahma|saṁkāśaḥ sarvaṁ tasmai tato ’bravīt.

BHṚGUR uvāca:

«mānasā» nāma yaḥ pūrvo viśruto vai maha”|ṛṣibhiḥ
anādi|nidhano devas, tath” ā|bhedyo ’jara|maraḥ.
«avyakta» iti vikhyātaḥ, sāśvato ’th ā|kṣayo ’vyayaḥ.
yataḥ sṛṣṭāni bhūtāni, jāyante ca mriyanti ca.

so ’sṛjat prathamaḥ devo «mahāntaṁ» nāma nāmataḥ.
mahān sasraj’ āhaṁ|kāraṁ; sa c’ āpi bhagavān atha.
«ākāśam» iti vikhyātaṁ sarva|bhūta|dharāḥ prabhuḥ;
ākāśad abhavad vāri, salilād agni|mārutau,
agni|māruta|sāmyogat tataḥ samabhavan mahī.

tatas tejo|mayaṁ divyaṁ padmaṁ sṛṣṭāṁ svayaṁ|bhuvā.
tasmāt padmāt samabhavad Brahmā vedā|maya nirhīḥ.
«ahaṁ|kāra» iti khyaṭaḥ, sarva|bhūt’|ātma|bhūtal|kṛt.
Brahmā vai sa mahā|tejā, ya ete paṇca dhātavaḥ.

śailās tasy’ āsthi|saṁjñās tu, medo māṁsaṁ ca medini,
samudrās tasya rudhiram, ākāśam udaram tathā.
pavanaś c’ āiva niḥśvāsas, tejo ’gnir, nimmagāḥ sīrāḥ.
agni|somau tu candr’|ārkau nayane tasya viśrute.
 nabhaś c’ ōrdhvaṁ śīras tasya, kṣitiḥ pādau; bhujau diśaḥ.
Thus questioned on these perplexing matters by Bharadvaja, the blessed Bhrigu, a Brahminic seer who looked just like the god Brahma himself, explained everything to him.

BHRIGU said:

The great seers used the expression “pure consciousness” to eulogize the ancient deity, which is indivisible, without beginning or end, and beyond decrepitude and death. It is eternal, unfailing and immutable, and also called the “unmanifest.” All creatures which are born and then die are its creation.

In the beginning this deity emitted a substance called “the absolute,” and this ejaculated the utterance “I!”; this utterance was the blessed Lord.* The Lord, upholder of the world, created that which is called “space”; water came into being from space. Fire and wind came into being from the water, and the contact between them produced the earth.

After the creation of the five elements, brahman, the self-existent absolute created a divine lotus of lustrous light. From that lotus emerged the lord Brahma; the Vedas are his substance, and he is the source of everything. He is both the soul of all beings and their creator, and is known by the name “the utterance I!”* Brahma is brilliantly lustrous, and comprises the five elements.

The mountains are said to be his bones, the earth is his bone marrow and flesh, the oceans are his blood and space is his belly. The wind is his breath, fire is his energy and the rivers are his veins. The sun and moon, agni and soma, are said, in eulogies, to be his eyes. The sky above is his head, the earth below is his feet; the directions are his arms. Even the
dur|vijñeyo hy a|cinty’|ātmā siddhair api, na saṃśayah.

182.20  
sa eva bhagavān Viṣṇur, «an|anta» iti viśrutaḥ.

sarva|bhūt’|ātma|bhūta|stho, dur|vijñeyo ’|kṝ’|ātmabhiḥ.

ahaṃ|kārasya yaḥ sraṣṭā sarva|bhūta|bhavāya vai,

yataḥ samabhavad viśvaṃ—prṣṭo ’hamḥ yad iha tvayā.

BHARADVĀJA uvāca:
gaganasya, diśāṃ c’ āiva, bhū|talasy’, ānilasya vā
kāny atra parimāṇāni? saṃśayaṃ chinddhi tatvataḥ.

BHṚGUR uvāca:
an|antam etad ākāśaṃ, siddha|daivata|sevitam,
ramyaṃ, nān”|āśray’|ākīrṇaṃ, yasy’ ānto n’ ādhigamyate.
ūrdhvam gater adhastāt tu candr’|ādityau na drśyataḥ,
tatra devaḥ svayaṃ|diptā bhāsvar’|ābh”|āgni|varcasah.

182.25  
te c’ āpy antaṃ na paśyanti nabhasaḥ prathit’|āujasaḥ
durgamatvād anantatvād: iti me viddhi, mānada.
upariṣṭ’|opariṣṭāt tu pajvaladbhiḥ svayaṃ|prabhailḥ
niruddham etad ākāśam a|prameyaṃ surair api.

prṣṭhivy|ante samudrās tu, samudr’|ante tamaḥ smṛtam.
tamaso ’nte jalaṃ prāhur, jalasy’ ānte ’gnir eva ca.
Rasātal’|ante salilaṃ, jal’|ante pannag’|ādhipaḥ.
tad|ante punar ākāśam, ākāś’|ante punar jalam.
Siddhas find it hard to perceive him, undoubtedly, because his essence is unthinkable.

He is the blessed lord Vishnu, who is eulogized as “the limitless.” Incomplete men cannot perceive him, the one who abides within as the soul of all beings.

He is the one you asked me about—the source of the universe, the one who ejaculated the utterance “I!” in order to bring all creatures into existence.

**BHARAD-VAJA said:**

What is the extent of the sky, the cardinal directions, the earth and the wind? Please dispel my doubts, in accordance with the true nature of things.

**BHRIGU said:**

This space here is infinite, a realm of pleasure frequented by Siddhas and gods. It contains dominions of all kinds, but no end to it is found. The self-lustrous gods, resplendent and as brilliant as fire, are to be found where the sun and moon cannot be seen, being beyond their range.

Although the gods have power in abundance, even they cannot perceive an end to the sky. This is because it is infinite and impassable: understand that this is my opinion, courteous one. This region of space cannot be measured by the blazing, self-luminous gods, since it comes to an end beyond them.

It is held that there are oceans at the end of the earth, and darkness after that. Beyond the darkness there is more water, so they say, after which there is the fire of the Rasátala hell. Beyond this hell there is water, and after that the Lord
evam antaṃ Bhagavataḥ, pramāṇaṃ salilasya ca, 
agni|māruta|toyebhyo, durljñeyam daivatair api. 

agni|māruta|toyānāṃ varṇāḥ kṣiti|talasya ca 
ākāśād avagṛhyante; bhidyante tattva|darśanāt. 

paṭhanti c’ āiva munayaḥ sāstreṣu vividheṣu ca, 
Trailokya|sāgare c’ āiva pramāṇaṃ vihitaṃ yathā. 
a|ḍṛṣṭaya tv a|gamyaya kaḥ pramāṇam udāharet?
siddhānāṃ devatānāṃ ca yadā parimitā gatiḥ, 
tadā gauṇam an|antasya nām’ «ân|ant’ » āti viśrutam 
nāmadhey’|ānurūpasya mānasasya mah”|ātmanaḥ. 

yadā tu divyaṃ yad rūpaṃ 
hrasate vardhate punah, 
ko ’nyas tad vedituṃ śakyo? 
 yo ’pi syāt tad|vidho ’paraḥ. 

Brahmā dharma|mayaḥ pūrvaḥ prajā|patir an|uttamaḥ. 

Bharadvāja uvāca:
puṣkarād yadi saṃbhūto, jyeṣṭhaṃ bhavati puṣkaram. 
Brahmāṇaṃ pūrvaljaṃ c’ āha bhavān; saṃdeha eva me.
of serpent demons has his lair. Then there is more space, after which there is water once again.

And so even the gods cannot fathom the limit of the Blessed One, and the extent of water, fire and wind.

The nature of fire, wind, water and the ground is different from that of space; they are distinguished from each other when a person sees the truth.

The silent sages pronounce the extent of the world in various treatises, just as it has been laid down in the “Ocean of the triple world.” But who can declare the extent of that which cannot be seen or traversed? Since the movement of even the Siddhas and gods is circumscribed, the term “infinite,” which is pronounced of the infinite, macrocosmic “pure consciousness” which fits this description, is but a figurative designation.

When the divine form of brahman contracts and expands over and over again, who else is able to know him? Such a person would have to be of a similar nature. It is for this reason that the all-knowing Lord emerged from a lotus in an embodied form. This is the personal god Brahma, the ancient, incomparable Lord of creatures whose substance is the religious order.

BHARAD·VAJA said:

If Brahma was born from a lotus, then the lotus must be older than him. I am confused, because you say that Brahma was born first.
BHṚGUR uvāca:

mānasasy’ ēha yā mūrtir brahmatvāṃ samupāgatā, 
tasy’ āsana|vidhān’|ārthaṃ prthivī padmaṃ ucyate. 
karṇikā tasya padmasya Merur gaganam ucehairah. 
tasya madhye sthito lokān sṛjate jagataḥ prabhuḥ.

BHARADVĀJA uvāca:

PRAJĀ|VISARGAM vividhāṃ kathāṃ sa sṛjate prabhuḥ 
Merū|madhye sthito Brahmā? tad brūhi, dvija|sattama.

BHṚGUR uvāca:

prajā|visargam vividhāṃ mānas’u mano manas’ āṣijat. 
samraksan’|ārthaṃ bhūtānāṃ sṛṣṭaṃ prathamato jalam, 
yat prāṇaḥ sarvā|bhūtānāṃ, vardhante yena ca prajāḥ, 
parityaktāś ca naśyanti—ten’ ēdaṃ sarvam āvṛtam. 
prthivī, parvata, meghā, mūrtimantaś ca ye pare, 
sarvāṃ tad vāruṇaṃ jñeyam, āpas tastambhire yataḥ.

BHARADVĀJA uvāca:

kathāṃ salilaṃ utpannaṃ? kathāṃ c’ āiv’ āgni|māruta? 
kathāṃ ca medinī sṛṣṭ”? ēty atra me saṃśayo mahān.

BHṚGUR uvāca:

brahma|kalpe pūrā, brahman, brahma’|ṛṣīṇāṃ samāgame 
loka|saṃbhava|saṃdehaḥ samutpanno mah”|ātmanām. 
te ’tisṭhān dhyānam ālambya, maunam āsthāya niścalāḥ, 
tyakt’|āhārāḥ, pavana|pā, divyaṃ varṣa|sataṃ dvijāḥ.
BHRIGU said:
The material form of pure consciousness is endowed with its divine essence, whereas the earth is called a lotus because it provides a seat for Brahma. The pericarp of that lotus towers up into the sky as Mount Meru. Abiding at its center, the Lord of the world creates all the worlds.

BHRAD-VAJA said:
How did the lord Brahma bring about the numerous emanations of different creatures while abiding at the center of Mount Meru? Tell me that, exalted brahmin.

BHRIGU said:
Pure consciousness created all the different creatures through mind. First of all, in order to protect living beings it created water, because water is the breath of all beings and that through which creatures flourish. Water envelops the entire world—which without it everything would be destroyed. The earth, mountains, clouds and anything of a corporeal nature should be understood as forms of water, for it was the waters themselves that became solid.

BHRAD-VAJA said:
How did water come into being? And what about fire and wind? How was the earth created? I am very confused about this.

BHRIGU said:
Long ago, brahmin, in the Brahma aeon, a doubt about the origin of the world arose during a council of holy Brahminic seers. These brahmins remained in meditation for a hundred celestial years, during which they practiced silence...
teṣāṃ dharma|mayī vāṇī sarveṣāṃ śrotram āgamat,
divyā Sarasvatī tatra saṃabhūva nabhas|talāt.

purā stimitam ākāśam an|antam, a|cal’|ōpamam,
naṣṭa|candr’|ārka|pavanam; prasuptam iva saṃbhau.

tataḥ salīlam utpannaṃ, tamas’ īv’ āparaṃ tamaḥ.
tasmāc ca salīl’|ōtpīḍād udatiṣṭhata mårutaḥ.

yathā bhājanam a|cchidraṃ niḥ|śabdam iva lakṣyate;
tac c’ āmbhasā pūryamāṇaṃ sa|śabdaṃ kurute ’nilaḥ.
tathā salīla|saṃruddhe nabhaso ’nte nir|antare bhītv” ārṇava|talaṃ vāyuḥ samutpatati ghoṣavān,
sa eṣa carate vāyur arṇav’|ōtpīḍa|saṃbhavaḥ:
ākāśa|sthānam āsādyā praśāntīṃ n’ ādhigacchati.

tasmin vāyv|ambu|saṃgharṣe dīpta|tejā mahā|balaḥ
prādur abhūd ārdha|śikhāḥ, kṛtvā nis|timiram nabhaḥ.

agniḥ pavana|saṃyuktaḥ khaṃ samākṣipate jalam.
so ’gnir māruta|saṃyogād ghanatvam upapadyate.
tasy’ ākāśe† nipatitaḥ snehas tiṣṭhati yo ’paraḥ,
sa saṃghātavam āpanno bhūmitvam anugacchati.

rasānāṃ, sarvalgandhānāṃ, snehānāṃ prāṇināṃ tathā bhūmir yonir iha jñeyā; yasyāṃ sarvaṃ prasūyate.
and were motionless, shunning all food and drinking the wind. And then they heard the sound of religious order, as the celestial Sarásvati river burst forth from the roof of space.

Before that the infinity of space had been calm, and seemingly motionless, for it was devoid of sun, moon and wind; it was as if it had been sunk in a deep sleep. But then water sprang forth, like another great darkness within the gloom. The pressure within it produced wind.

It is just like a pot that, if it is not cleft, is seen to be virtually noiseless. But when it is filled with water the air in it makes a noise. So it was when the interior of space, which really has no interior, was immersed in water: wind pierced the surface of this foaming mass of water and rose up in a thunder. That wind, produced by the pressure within the water, is the same wind that still blows here: when it escaped into space, it could not be stilled.

In the friction between wind and water a powerful, radiant flame arose. With its crest rising up this fire lit up space, and when it came into contact with the wind it forced space and water together, but because of its contact with wind, some of the fire congealed. This viscous part of fire stood apart descended within space. In the process it was compressed, and so it turned into earth.

This earth should be known as the source of all tastes, smells, fluids and sentient beings; everything is generated within it.
Alexander Wynne is Lecturer in Buddhist Studies at Mahidol University, Bangkok.

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In the centuries before the Common Era, ancient Indian religious culture exploded into life with speculative fervor and a new counter-culture based on the belief that existence in the world is bondage. The Maha-bharata’s “Book of Liberation” is the invaluable only record of this early post-Upanishadic period, and is unrivaled in scope by any other work of Hindu philosophy.