

## EARLY CIVILIZATION

### The Inner Circle of Humanity

The belief that a body of ancient esoteric wisdom is secretly being guarded and transmitted by an 'Inner Circle' of highly evolved human beings can be traced through the course of history. "From time immemorial certain men and women appear to have developed their consciousness far beyond the 'normal' level or state which the rest of humanity has taken for granted as the totality of 'life'."

Tradition asserts that for thousands of years there has been an "Inner Circle of Humanity" capable of thinking in terms of millennia and possessing knowledge and powers of a high order. Its members intervene from time to time in human affairs. They do this, not as leaders or teachers of mankind, but unobtrusively by introducing certain ideas and techniques . . . This inner circle, it is claimed, concentrates its activities in those areas and at those times when the situation is critical for mankind. (1)

In discussing the structure of the Inner Circle with his students, Gurdjieff divided humanity into groups of progressively more spiritually developed human beings, which he represented graphically as concentric circles emanating from a core. The outer circle represents ordinary humans, described as the region of the 'confusion of tongues' or lack of understanding. The inner three (exoteric, mesoteric, esoteric) constitute three levels of spiritually developed human beings. There are four gates on the circumference of the exoteric circle through which those from the outer, undeveloped circle could pass to enter the inner circles. The four gates correspond to the three traditional ways: the *fakir* (body), the *monk* (feelings), the *yogi* (mind) and the *fourth way* (balanced development).

Most people are completely unaware of the innermost (esoteric) circle, and only a few suspect the existence of the mesoteric and exoteric circles. "The outer circle of humanity to which we belong is like the leaves on trees that change every year. In spite of this they consider themselves the centre of life, not understanding that the tree has a trunk and roots, and that besides leaves it bears flowers and fruit. The esoteric circle is, as it were, humanity *within* humanity, the immortal soul of humanity."

It is clear that esotericism implies and requires the existence of higher human beings, an esoteric community, a guiding inner circle of humanity who produce, direct and sustain the education of the race. The inner teaching requires inner teachers. With them it is organically connected. For such knowledge depends on *being*, higher being, for its very existence. It is thus *being* knowledge. It originates with, and is sustained by, beings of a certain nature, who project it downward through a descending sequence of other beings until it reaches the recipient level of ordinary humanity. This is Jacob's Ladder. From the inner community comes

the inner help by which we can ascend it. The way is indeed a *living way*. And cannot be otherwise . . . Though most people are unable to accept the possible existence and activity of a higher kind of human being on the planet, unknown on the whole to ordinary mankind, there are nevertheless hints throughout history of such a presence. In all the great cultures one can discern indications of a deeper humanity, hidden like leaves within the humanity we imagine we know. The very concepts of Masters, Initiates and Adepts are evidence of this. (2)

The three inner circles of developed humanity are responsible for the creation of esoteric schools and the transmission of higher influences into the world. Gurdjieff described how these higher influences are distinct from ordinary influences on human life:

The first kind are influences created *in life itself* or by life itself. Influences of race, nation, country, climate, family, education, society, profession, manners and customs, wealth, poverty, current ideas, and so on. The second kind are influences created *outside this life*, influences of the inner circle, or esoteric influences – influences, that is, created under different laws, although also on the earth. These influences differ from the former, first of all in being *conscious* in their origin. This means that they have been created consciously by conscious men for a definite purpose. Influences of this kind are usually embodied in the form of religious systems and teachings, philosophical doctrines, works of art, and so on. (3)

## Esoteric Knowledge and Schools

According to esoteric tradition, a body of ancient knowledge of human spiritual development has existed since time immemorial, and has been transmitted through a chain of succession from initiate to initiate. The guardians and custodians of these ancient secret teachings hold that there are eternal universal truths that are the foundation of all religious and spiritual traditions. This trans-dimensional knowledge has been described as the “inner kernel or essence of spirituality,” “the science of human evolution and transformation” and the “river of knowledge from beyond the stars.”

Esoteric knowledge can be regarded as two kinds. Firstly, there is the higher or inner cosmic knowledge possessed by those beings who have reached the deepest level of consciousness possible to mankind. These people are the inner or esoteric Circle of Humanity. They will obviously possess knowledge of the inner nature and destiny of the Universe related to, and necessary for, their special role in it, and which is an attribute of their level of being. It will be knowledge of the Design and the Direction of the Universe, its Purpose, and the path to that Purpose. It will connect glow-worm and galaxy, man and angel . . . Such must be the subtle quality of knowledge possessed by beings of this order. They will be aware of the invisible Web, and in touch with its essential texture. Secondly, there is the esoteric know-

ledge pertaining to the ways and schools deliberately created by this Conscious Circle, to enable those ordinary human beings who truly seek it to have access to the superior levels of being and consciousness. This is the knowledge of the manner of human development, the art of transformation itself. (4)

Gurdjieff taught that this body of wisdom or 'Great knowledge' has been continuous and present throughout history, but has been frequently reformulated so as to be suit-able for each time, each place and each community:

Great knowledge, which has existed from the most ancient times, has never been lost, and knowledge is always the same. Only the form in which this knowledge was expressed and transmitted changed, depending on the place and the epoch . . . The form in which the Great knowledge is expressed is barely comprehensible to subsequent generations and is mostly taken literally. In this way the inner content becomes lost for most people. In the history of mankind we see two parallel and independent lines of civilization: the esoteric and the exoteric. Invariably one of these overpowers the other and develops while the other fades. A period of esoteric civilization comes when there are favorable external conditions, political and otherwise. Then Knowledge, clothed in the form of a Teaching corresponding to the conditions of time and place, becomes widely spread. (5)

The source of this timeless esoteric tradition of mystical knowledge is mysterious and unknown. It is said to have ancient prehistoric roots originating from the most remote antiquity. Some of the historical manifestations of this ancient stream of transcendental wisdom have been provisionally identified by scholars and esotericists:

- Indigenous shamanic traditions
- Egyptian and Chaldean masters (Hermes and Zoroaster)
- Hindu Vedas and Upanishads
- Old Testament prophets (Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Noah, Elias and John the Baptist)
- Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah
- Greek philosophers (Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Socrates, Plato, Hippocrates, Aristotle)
- Taoism (Lao-Tzu, Chuang Tzu)
- Gautama Buddha and his School
- Jesus Christ, Essenes, Gnostics
- Mohammed the Prophet, Sufi saints (Attar, Saadi, Rumi, ibn el-Arabi, Al-Ghazali)
- Medieval alchemists (Jabir, Avicenna, Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Raymond Lully)
- Christian mystics (St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila)
- Western Mystery schools, The Illuminati, Masonic and Rosicrucian teachings

The means by which esoteric knowledge is transmitted are complex and multi-faceted. Historical examples include the Mysteries (ancient Egypt and Greece), philosophical schools (Plato and Socrates), and certain traditional religious teachings. Other means include myths, legends, teaching stories, literature, rituals and ceremonies. Various forms of sacred art have also been employed, as well as dance, music, poetry, sculpture, drama and architecture.

In most cases, the vehicles that transmit higher knowledge are the consciously designed products of esoteric schools. These schools convey spiritual knowledge and teachings according to a precise plan "to a very limited number of people simultaneously through the observance of a whole series of definite conditions, without which knowledge cannot be transmitted *correctly*."

Rodney Collin, a student of P.D. Ouspensky, studied the history of esoteric schools and identified some of their salient characteristics (6):

- The primary purpose of these schools is the regeneration of individual human beings through increased consciousness and purification of being. The secondary purpose is to spread objective understanding of cosmological laws and human spiritual possibilities throughout humanity.
- Esoteric schools may be hidden or openly visible according to the conditions of 'time, place and people.' Accordingly, "at most favorable times, though the inner school will still be hidden and concentrated, its preparatory schools and its external work or effect may reach large proportions of a population and even fundamentally affect the course of visible history."
- The inner workings of these schools are largely invisible to ordinary humanity and cannot be readily ascertained by ordinary means of investigation: "What true schools are like, how they are organized, what are their rules and methods, how suitable pupils or raw materials are drawn out of the general run of life, we do not know. Evidently one of their chief requirements is secrecy and anonymity."
- Schools may engage in some external expression of their work such as construction of temples or churches, the writing of spiritual literature or poetry, the composition of sacred music, and even scientific research.
- Schools may transmit their knowledge in encoded ways through enciphered language or the symbolism of special sculptures, monuments or buildings.
- The activities of schools follow a pattern in harmony with cosmic planetary cycles. When these influences are favorable, the work of inner regeneration and outer expression in the world proceed more productively.

- Esoteric schools often disseminate their knowledge to the outside world through certain individuals who are sympathetic to and influenced by a school's inner circle, but who are outsiders to the school, like some professional scientists or writers.
- When the work of an esoteric school is finished, traces of its existence may remain. An imitation or counterfeit school may then form around the vestiges of a formerly vibrant school: "What appears to some people as the sum total of the human heritage of philosophy, metaphysics and magical practices can also be viewed as the wreckage or misinterpretation (through selective choice) of formulations previously operated by coherent Schools."

In *The Masters of Wisdom*, John G. Bennett suggests that around 12000 - 10000 B.C., a period of great environmental change, a number of esoteric schools were established throughout the world. "The task of the true initiates was to provide mankind with adequate language to express abstract ideas, to lay the foundation of the belief in a communication with the spiritual world, and to lead ordinary men and women to think independently." Bennett provisionally identified five such 'centres' of initiation and spiritual activity (7):

1. The original source of esoteric teaching seems to have been geographically centered in Northeast Africa, especially Egypt and Abyssinia (Ethiopia). It developed an advanced methodology to unlock the creative and magical powers of the human mind. This centre was the creator of the Semitic tradition and reflected "a remarkable unity of vision that combined the concept of One Creator God (monotheism), the autocratic and theocratic state (based on a divine ruler), and a sacred language."
2. A centre of initiation situated in the Near and Middle East had its roots in the fertility cults of remote antiquity. "These traditions bear witness to a time when the Great Mother was the fount of life and the originator of the domestic arts, especially of agriculture and husbandry. The Masters of Wisdom of this region were concerned with teaching mankind the practical arts. Copper and iron, weaving and pottery, the wheel and the plough all originated in the region."
3. A third centre was located in Central Asia and the Far East. "The form of society was nomadic, where guidance came through the magicians and shamans who were inspired. The subtle polysynthetic languages created were capable of conveying the sense of an unseen spiritual presence and the timeless pattern of situations." The teachings which emanated from this center were focused on the Great Spirit or *Tao* – the all-pervading spiritual principle of the universe. It led to the great achievements of Chinese art and science and the development of techniques of inner transformation later identified with Yoga, Tantra and Sufism.
4. A Hyperborean culture originating in northern Siberia and areas within the Arctic circle (in a period when the climate was much milder) produced the Indo-European languages

and was the origin of the Aryan traditions and Vedic hymns. "The culture was based on a sense of the uncertainty of existence and the idea of the need for man to co-operate with creative intelligence to maintain his life and to progress." One of the greatest achievements of this school of wisdom was the creation of languages such as Sanskrit, whose structure "corresponds to the pattern of the universe."

5. Bennett also mentions a centre of initiation located in the South American Andes, but provides little detail. He does, however, observe that "the remarkable similarities of the monuments, symbols and beliefs of Mexico and the Andean cultures to those of Egypt have led many to believe that the extraordinary feat of navigating the Atlantic was first achieved six or seven thousand years ago."

## The Agricultural Revolution

During the vast stretches of human evolution, the daily existence of human beings as hunter-gatherers in different regions of the planet was very similar and virtually unchanged since the dawn of time:

We know that humanity was fairly homogeneous throughout the Stone Age. Even 10,000 years ago, people lived pretty much the same way, whether they were in Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia, or the Americas. They lived very close to nature, hunting wildlife and gathering wild plants, using stone tools and stone, wood and bone weapons. They had learned the art of making and controlling fire and they had very accurate and detailed knowledge about the habits of animals, the lay of the land, nature's cycles, and how to distinguish between edible and poisonous plants. This knowledge and their way of life had been painstakingly acquired over millions of years of experience . . . Nature bestowed her bounty upon those early humans and they learned to live within that natural framework. It is very easy to understand how our remote ancestors lived; life changed very little and very slowly. Early man adapted and stuck with what worked. It was a simple but demanding way of life that was passed on from generation to generation by example and oral tradition. (8)

Following the last Ice Age, 12,000 years ago, communities in various parts of the world embraced a new way of life, giving up their nomadic existence. Instead, they settled down and began cultivating certain crops and domesticating several animal species, taking the first steps toward early civilization. There was a revolutionary change in diet from wild meats and fresh greens, nuts and fruits to domesticated animal meat and grains. Throughout the world human beings began experimenting with new food forms and their processed products:

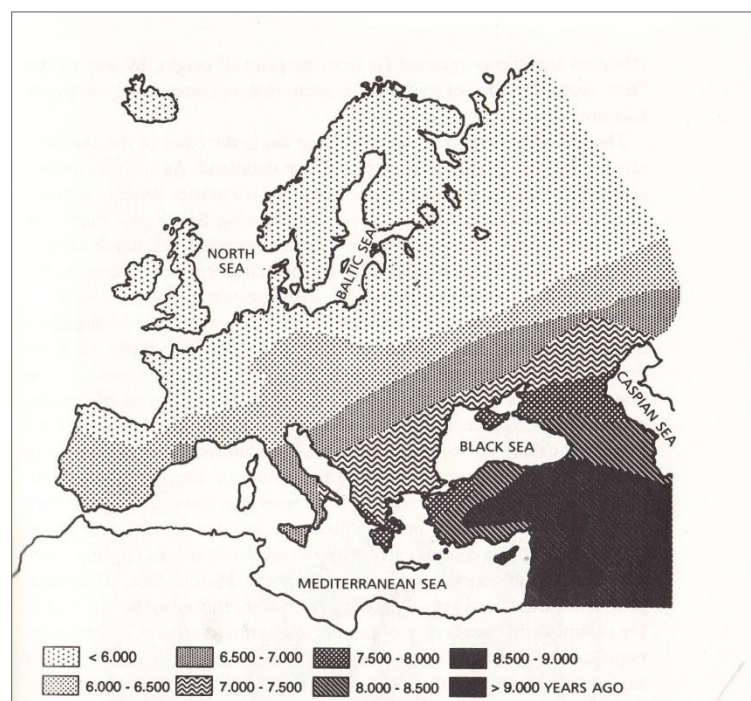
- According to the Old Testament the Israelites made leavened and unleavened bread and wine from grapes.
- The Sumerians also produced secondary products from grains, including bread and beer.

- Around 8600 B.C., near Jericho in the Jordan valley, the inhabitants harvested a wild grass called wheat, which when crossed with other grasses eventually led to bread wheat.
- Botanical and archaeological evidence indicate that forms of primitive agriculture were practised in lands as far apart as Lake Titicaca in Peru and the highlands of Thailand.
- Eventually the agricultural revolution spread throughout the globe: in Africa and China millet was cultivated; in America beans and maize; in New Guinea sugar cane and in Indochina rice.

Early agriculture and the domestication of animals initially occurred in three distinct regions where there were fertile conditions and the ready availability of plants and animals. In the Middle East in Israel and the Euphrates valley, local wild cereals such as wheat and barley were cultivated and harvested. Agriculture also developed about 7000 B.C. in both northern and southern China where millet and rice were farmed. And in Mexico and South America pumpkins, beans and maize were cultivated.

Eventually agricultural practices reached many different geographical regions of the globe: "From the Middle East, agriculture spread in every possible direction, not just toward Europe and northern Africa but also northward into the Steppes and eastward into Iran, Pakistan, and then India. Neolithic farmers proved able geneticists by domesticating many plants and selecting new varieties." The expansion of agriculture from the Middle East to Europe proceeded in stages. "This gradual process eventually took in every corner of the continent, sometimes relatively rapid, as along the Mediterranean coast and the rivers of central Europe, and sometimes more slowly."

Figure 1. The spread of agriculture in Europe based on radiocarbon dating



The shift from hunter-gatherer to an agriculture-based form of living directed to the production of food marked an evolutionary leap in human development. Agriculture and the cultivation of cereals allowed greater control of both the quantity and the quality of the yield, as well as greater predictability of food stuffs.

Humans had previously lived on what they found in the wild. Over millions of years, their hunting ability and understanding of the environment had developed to an extraordinary degree, allowing them to amply explore the opportunities offered by their surroundings. The evidence left by our ancestors of fifteen to twenty thousand years ago in Europe suggests that they had a high standard of living. These people hunted, fished, and gathered enough plants, fruit, and roots to support small communities and survive well; even today their art, ornamental objects, and tooling skills inspire our admiration. Some ten thousand years ago, however, these people started to produce their own food by cultivating plants and rearing animals, generally the ones already eaten in the wild. This led to an enormous increase in the potential numbers of people the earth could support. In the four to five hundred generations since then, the world's population has increased over a thousand-fold, from a mere few million to today's six billion, a figure set to grow further still. (9)

The implications of the agricultural revolution were far-reaching, and transformed the way in which human beings interacted with the world. "Since farming began, cultural evolution has gradually transformed *Homo sapiens* from a species that evolved in response to the natural environment into one that is literally 'making' the world in which it lives."

At the time of the Agricultural Revolution, the stable world of hunter-gatherers began to change quickly. Fifteen thousand years in the past (less than a thousand generations) the entire human population consisted of perhaps 5 million souls, surviving by hunting and gathering. Then, about ten thousand years ago, rather than search out food in the wild, people began to domesticate both plants and animals. Farming created an especially favorable environment for both rapid population growth and the rich elaboration of culture. Births could be spaced more closely when people settled down to farm. As a result birth rates began to creep upward. It took a few thousand years for food production to become efficient enough for one farming family to provide reliable sustenance for more than itself. Surplus production by farmers freed part of the population from the several-million-year-old imperative for each family or clan to supply its own food. This opened the way to specialization of activities, cities, and civilization. (10)

During this great transitional period, there were many other advances in a wide variety of human activities:

- Invention of the wheel
- Smelting of copper and creation of alloys
- New, more efficient modes of transportation
- Invention of the compass, sail and outrigger canoe



- Employing tokens as currency
- Development of advanced language
- Development of writing

Many anthropologists have commented on the high level of knowledge and skill required to successfully grow food under a variety of environmental conditions. There is no evidence that hunter-gatherers had any experience with plant breeding or animal domestication. Yet, by the time of the appearance of the Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations, wild grains had been hybridized, a process that requires a high degree of knowledge about, and experience with, plants. Some have hypothesized that this ability was not due to chance experimentation, but was the result of an 'intervention' or 'transmission' from some pre-existing source of higher knowledge.

Plato wrote in his *Laws* (Book 3) that world agriculture originated in highland regions across the globe following some great flood catastrophe that destroyed lowland settlements. Charles Darwin was struck by the fact that domesticated plants were found only in circumscribed areas of the planet: "We do not owe a single useful plant to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa or lower South America – countries abounding to an unparalleled degree with endemic species." Some writers have noted that these areas are all far removed from the supposed mid-Atlantic site of legendary Atlantis and its colonies. Perhaps survivors of the destruction of Atlantis, who had attained advanced botanical knowledge, passed this on as a bequest to the peoples of the lands to the east and west of their homeland, thereby assuring that this knowledge would not be lost.

## The Megaliths

Mysterious configurations of stones, of many sizes and shapes, aligned in recognizable patterns related to terrestrial energies and celestial cycles appear throughout the world. Their origins date back to prehistoric times, and their designers and builders are utterly unknown:

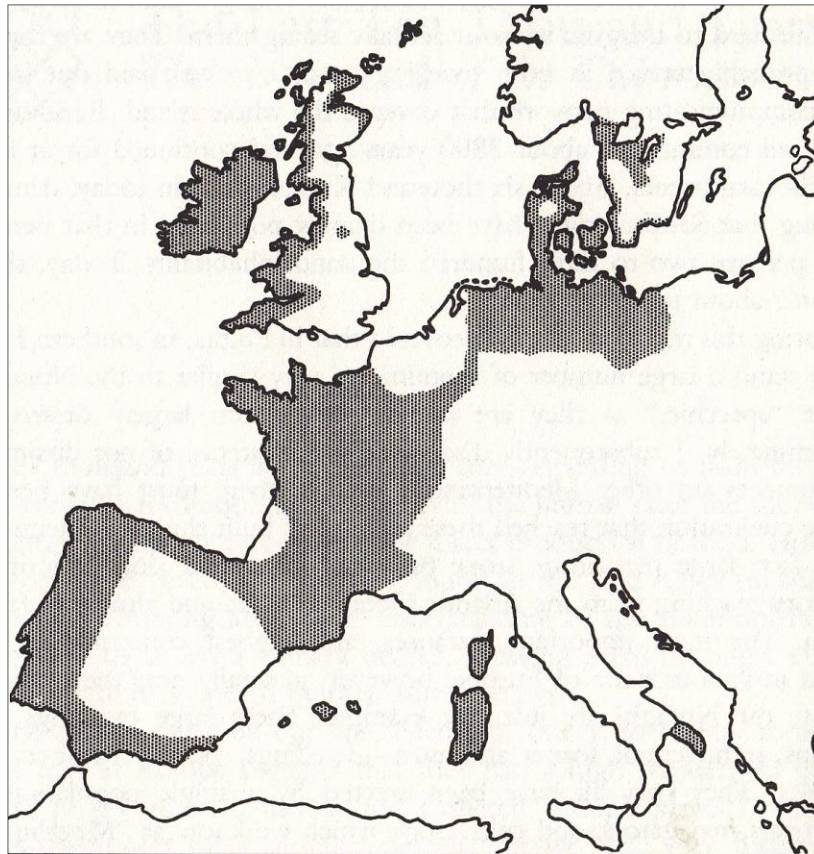
Megalithic structures – that is to say, prehistoric monuments built with stones of enormous size – exist in many parts of the world. The most famous, if not the greatest number, are found in the British Isles and in Brittany in the north-west corner of France. They are of many different kinds – dolmens, chambered tombs, menhirs or great stones standing alone, stone rings of various sizes and shapes (circles, flattened circles, ellipses, and egg-shaped rings), and straight avenues of standing stones arranged like grids in multiple rows. Of all the megalithic structures by far the best known and the best preserved is the circular 'temple' of Stonehenge on Salisbury plain. From the point of view of sheer size and complexity of structure perhaps the most important of the megalithic sites is the great stone ring of Avebury in England. (11)

The ingenuity and technical skill of those who built megalithic structures is impressive. Immense stone blocks, some weighing one hundred tons or more, were cut and tooled with great precision and then transported large distances to sacred sites.

Although megalithic buildings, monuments, statues and standing stones can be found in many parts of the world, they are especially prevalent in Europe:

Large prehistoric stone buildings are found along a strip of territory stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to India and almost as far as Japan. The most important instances, and the highest concentration, are found in various parts of Europe, however, generally near the coast. These large buildings had architectural forms and uses – dwellings, burial chambers, or temples. They may all have been erected by a single population of colonizers, navigators and cultivators, which we know as “Megalithic,” for want of a better term. This population may well have originated in France, Britain or Spain, since that is where the oldest monuments have been found. (12)

*Figure 2.* Distribution of megalithic sites in Europe



There is compelling archaeological evidence that many of the stone constructions of ancient cultures around the world were designed and utilized as astronomical observatories:

At Stonehenge in England and Carnac in France, in Egypt and Yucatan, across the whole face of the earth are found mysterious ruins of ancient monuments, monuments with astronomical significance. The relics of other times are as accessible as the American Midwest and as remote as the jungles of Guatemala. Some of them were built according to celestial alignments, others were actually precision astronomical observatories. All are wordless but emphatic evidence of our ancestors' energetic pursuit of the sky and stars. Careful observation of the celestial rhythms was compellingly important to early peoples, and their expertise, in some respects, was not equalled in Europe until three thousand years later. (13)

The English astronomer Sir Norman Lockyer was the first to suggest that Stonehenge might be an "astronomical calculator" marking the positions of the sun and moon, the phases of the moon, the solar solstices and equinoxes, and predicting solar and lunar eclipses.

In the 1960s British astronomer Gerald Hawkins (author of *Stonehenge Decoded*) confirmed Lockyer's thesis by using computer simulations to prove that the design of Stonehenge was predicated on precise astronomical alignments. Further research also established that other sites in Great Britain had a similar astronomical purpose. For instance, the standing stones of Callanish, Scotland are arranged in a pattern such that the north-south axis points directly at the Pole Star.

In *The View Over Atlantis*, scholar John Michell describes a sophisticated 'earth science' involving the precise terrestrial and celestial alignments of ancient monuments along long 'ley lines,' based on an advanced science of numbers and sacred geometry, and impressive pre-historic engineering. He proposed that there was a vast system of "ancient earthworks and stone monuments built for an unknown purpose, and that their shared features suggest that they might be part of a worldwide system that served the elemental science of the archaic civilization of Atlantis."

Modern research has revealed that the stone monuments of prehistoric antiquity are not the work of primitive barbarians, but are instead the scientific instruments of an advanced universal civilization. The legendary continent of Atlantis was the source of this unified system of knowledge, whose relics still survive throughout the world – the dragon paths of China, Irish fairy paths, straight tracks in Europe and beyond, and the 'ley' system of aligned monuments which include Stonehenge and the Great Pyramid . . . We all live within the ruins of an ancient structure whose vast size has hitherto rendered it invisible. The entire surface of the earth is marked with the traces of a gigantic work of prehistoric engineering, the remains of a once universal system of natural magic, involving the use of polar magnetism together with another positive force related to solar energy. (14)

## The Flowering of Civilization

The agricultural revolution dramatically changed the life of human beings around the globe and prepared the way for the advent of civilization, with larger and more organized settlements of people in villages, towns and cities. There was a cross-fertilization of cultures, languages and ideas that enriched human life and opened new avenues of enterprise, trade and learning:

The earth enjoyed its best climate in a hundred thousand years during the period from 8000 to 5500 B.C. The only area where conditions deteriorated was the Far North, which was cut off from the benefits of the Gulf Stream . . . The population of the earth grew rapidly. In the first Adamic age, the entire human race scarcely exceeded two million; it grew to ten times this number by the sixth millennium before Christ. There now began the first migrations directed by the Masters. The Aryans moved southward and entered the plains of Turkestan, where they met with the Great Spirit people. These latter prospered greatly as their nomadic habits enabled them to take advantage of the increased food supplies. They went south to India, east into China, and crossed by the land bridge into America. The Creator God people occupied Egypt and some groups reached Mesopotamia. The groups that migrated brought with them their tradition, their language, and their way of life. The epoch was the most peaceful and happiest since the creation of Adam. No weapons have been found in any of the settlements that existed between 8000 and 5500 B.C. It may well be that this was the golden age referred to in so many traditions. (15)

However, near the end of this long cultural development powerful environmental changes forced large-scale migrations of people, leading to conflict between competing cultural groups and a degradation of higher human values. One of the most important consequences of these planetary disturbances was the creation of "hidden centers of wisdom" to preserve esoteric teachings for future generations:

About six thousand years ago, great changes of climate occurred all over the world. There were also great natural disasters. The great Siberian meteorite struck the earth with the violence of a thousand atom bombs. The earth entered a period of windstorms and drought. Trillions of square miles of rich prairies turned to desert: the Sahara, the Arabian, the Kara-Kum, and the Gobi. The inhabitants were forced to migrate and the struggle for land began. The first wars of invasion changed the entire human situation . . . It was at this time that the Masters of Wisdom set themselves to establish hidden sanctuaries where their teachings could be preserved for the future. This was the beginning of the "great work." It was inevitable and foreseen long before that as men learned to use their creative powers to dominate over others, there would arise divisions of castes and nations and there would have to be a visible exoteric authority to maintain the integrity of society. The Masters could not occupy such positions nor were men ready to look for advice. By the end of

the epoch the climatic conditions again changed. One result of the drought had been to dry the great valleys of the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, and the Yellow River in China, making them habitable. (16)

During this long span of time, religious expression underwent a series of transformations as more complex forms of worship emerged. "Early religions had evolved from the rites that hunter-gatherers had invented as they attempted to 'control' the impersonal ecosystems that ruled their lives. In those days human beings feared not only death, loneliness, hunger, and violent storms, as we do, but also wild beasts, ghosts, witches, and the spirits of slain enemies and game animals, as well as many other inanimate and animate features of the natural world."

The invention of monotheism by an Egyptian pharaoh Ikhnaton and its establishment among the Jews, was a major step in distancing people from nature. Gradually gods were invented who could better hear and answer the pleadings of fearful people than could the spirits of the dead, but these were very humanlike gods, superpeople like the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, who were assigned human emotions and frailties. In Mesopotamia, however, the gods were stripped of many of their human qualities and granted near-omnipotence. They were identified with the planets – too far removed from mere mortals to be pressured by magical rites. People were not expected to understand the motives or actions of the gods; one simply submitted to them . . . For a while the Egyptians retained polytheism, but amplified an element that traces to prehistory and is still seen in religions today: belief in an afterlife. Indeed, as the pyramids attest, that belief was an obsession for the Egyptians. However, later, Ikhnaton conceived of the sun as a single non-anthropomorphic god with a personal relationship to the pharaoh. The priests of the old religion are thought, however, to have brought about a return to polytheism, and the idea of a single god only re-emerged with the Jews. The Jews went further than Ikhnaton and invented a god that offered them a personal covenant to be the bearers of his religion. They imagined a god with no connection to physical things but rather one who had created all things. Their god had an ethical character and a concern for individual moral behavior. (17)

For most of recorded human history spiritual initiation was offered only to selected men and women who came in contact with the 'Inner Circle of Humanity.' But now, in many regions of the world, inspired prophets, messengers and saints began to preach a new doctrine of limitless human inner development. "New voices were heard throughout the inhabited world proclaiming the significance and even the sanctity of the human individual. The message took many external forms; but the inner content was unmistakably one and the same."

The "new way" was to be open to all men and women, and it could only be known by revelation. The new message was to be openly proclaimed, and it came almost simultaneously in all parts of the world. The Masters of Wisdom can see far ahead and they can look back far into the past. They were aware that a great experiment was going to be made: no less than an attempt to enable mankind, at the comple-

tion of the half-cycle that started ten thousand years before their time, to acquire the characteristic that would complete human evolution. This would allow the second half of the great cycle to be devoted to bringing about the unity of man and nature. Since love is the characteristic needed for this, it was necessary to make mankind aware that universal love is beyond creativity and that man must learn to love with the same impartial, unselfish love that Great Nature has for him. (18)

For many thousands of years the centre of civilization was in Mesopotamia in the rich lands of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where new advances in harnessing the power of nature were made. One of the most significant contributions was the creation of a sophisticated system of irrigation canals to distribute water from the rivers to the adjoining farmlands.

The very first known examples of writing, incised on small clay tablets, occurred in the region around 3500 B.C. The invention of writing laid the foundation for many of the advances in commerce, early technology, the sciences and even mathematics:

Writing (both words and numbers) was obviously a precondition for the advance of civilization. Without it, records of transactions and inventories could not be kept, land could not be surveyed, banking (and credit) could not have progressed past the most primitive stages, and well-organized economic systems could hardly have developed. Such systems generated incentives for invention, division of labor, and economies of scale. Without these organized systems the technologies that created the modern world would never have been developed. Another crucial invention was Arabic (more accurately Hindu-Arabic) numerals, which came into use in India around 300 BC . . . Science is completely dependent upon quantification – the ability to express complex relationships in a form much more compact than any other language. Arabic numerals provided a basis for that capacity. (19)

Perhaps the most significant spiritual teacher to emerge from Mesopotamia was Zoroaster (or Zarathustra), who is believed to have lived from 628 to 551 B.C. At that time the common person lived by various laws, commandments and prohibitions under the domination and control of secular rulers and their priests. Zoroaster was the first great teacher to proclaim the right of every person to participate in the 'Great Work' and create their own immortal soul. In a sense he was a visionary: "The notion of service was given a new importance. The men and women who have been purified and transformed ensure the progress of the world and prepare the coming millennium."

Another centre of spiritual activity during these times was located in Greece. The origin of the Greek Mysteries has been traced to the Egyptian Mystery Schools. The three primary Greek Mysteries, representing successive stages of spiritual initiation, were the Eleusinian, Orphic and Dionysian Mysteries. The Eleusinian Mysteries are replete with complex symbolism and archetypal gods and goddesses:

The Eleusinian Mysteries are commonly believed by scholars to have commenced only about 1400 B.C., although this appears highly open to question. They were separated into the Greater and Lesser Mysteries, the latter being celebrated every year in the spring and the former in the autumn. Women and children were admitted to the Lesser Mysteries, which were clearly oriented toward a spiritually-focused understanding of the cycles of Nature generally and the awakening of the "soul-sense." The rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries revolved around the legend of the abduction of the goddess Persephone (the daughter of Demeter) by Hades – brother of Zeus and king of the Underworld. The underlying theme involved principles of alternating cycles of birth and death (i.e. regeneration). These graphically introduced the individual to the idea of the soul's conditional immortality, amid the immense hardships involved in reincarnation and the round of human existence. (20)

The Orphic Mysteries provided the next higher stage of initiatory progression. The esoteric meaning of the rite relates to the cycle of personal spiritual evolution. The final part of the Greek Mysteries involved the Dionysian rite, which "related directly to the cycles of experience of the 'Divine Spark' itself – the highest aspect of the inner man."

One of the most important and influential esoteric schools in Greece was founded by the great sage Pythagoras, who was born between 600 and 590 B.C. In his early years he studied with Phoenician priests and Greek philosophers before being initiated into the Egyptian Mysteries of Isis and Osiris. He eventually travelled to Babylon where he studied the Chaldean Mysteries and was initiated by Zoroaster, at which time he "learned all the wisdom of the Magi." He also went to India for further studies and, it is said, worked with Jewish rabbis and learned the secret tradition of Moses.

In his school, disciples had to pass through three degrees of initiation, culminating in "full illumination." The philosophy of Pythagoras encompassed a deep understanding of spiritual laws and principles:

- Students learned mathematics, geometry, music and astronomy – disciplines which were considered the foundation of the mystical sciences.
- Pythagoras understood the magical healing powers of certain plants and explored the therapeutic value of sound and music.
- He taught that knowledge was best achieved by observation. "When the mind could observe the invisible manifesting itself through the visible, it was in alignment with the spirit of all things."
- Pythagoras advocated a strict lifestyle of restraint. He preached moderation in all things and ate a special vegetarian diet that he considered the "diet of Hercules."

- He instructed his followers that both man and the universe were made in the image of God and the understanding of one predicates the knowledge of the other. "The laws, elements and powers of the universe are exemplified in the human constitution. The body is a temple of God and man must begin his spiritual journey by looking within himself."
- To Pythagoras, God was the Monad, the One that is everything. He taught that God is the Supreme Mind and permeates the universe. "God is the Cause, the Intelligence, and Wisdom within all things. The body of God is light and His substance is Truth."

The teachings of Pythagoras had a profound influence on the schools of some of the greatest Greek philosophers – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. His influence also extended to many Eastern and Western "esoteric societies," including the Freemasons and Rosicrucians. And, many of the principles of sacred music, geometry and architecture originated with Pythagoras.

During the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., centres of spiritual transformation also emerged in India and China. They exerted a far-reaching effect on the peoples of these countries and their legacy extends to this day.

The *Vedas* are the oldest Indian scriptures, dating from between 1500 and 1000 B.C. The word "Veda" means wisdom, knowledge or vision. Written in Sanskrit, they consist of hymns, recitations and incantations. Vedic texts were largely transmitted orally from generation to generation, although there were some written manuscripts. They are considered to be among the most sacred texts of India and are sometimes referred to as the "language of the gods." Some of the verses are chanted as mantras or prayers. Their teachings encompass all aspects of life, espousing social, domestic, legal and religious customs which support a truly spiritual life.

The *Upanishads* are a collection of important Hindu spiritual texts believed by scholars to have been composed around 800 - 400 B.C. They are one of the main sources of knowledge for the school of Vedanta, and were described by Sri Aurobindo as "the supreme work of the Indian mind." They examine the nature of Ultimate Reality and describe individual spiritual liberation from the bondage of the ego through the non-dual union of *Brahma* (World Creator) and *Atman* (World Soul). "The *Upanishads* are summits of thoughts on mankind and the universe, designed to push human ideas to their very limit and beyond. They give us both spiritual vision and philosophical argument, and it is by a strictly personal effort that one can reach the truth."

The last great sacred text of India is the *Bhagavad Gita*, believed by scholars to have been composed between 500 and 400 B.C. It is a 700-verse scripture that is a part of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* and takes the form of a dialogue between prince Arjuna and his teacher Lord Krishna. Also known as 'The Song of God,' it is a treasure of India's ancient wisdom. It reveals that our true nature or Self is masked by *Maya*, which creates the illusion of separateness and duality. The attainment of self-realization entails a letting go of our egoistic clinging to condi-



tioned beliefs, thoughts and feelings and turning towards a way of living guided by our Higher Self.

Another highly influential tradition of spiritual development born during this period is the *Yoga Sûtras* of Patanjali. The *Sûtras* are the foundation of Raja Yoga (the 'Royal Path') and build on the earlier Indian philosophy of Samkhya. They were characterized by Swami Vivekananda as "the supreme contemplative path to self-realization."

The Indian tradition of yoga, first codified in the *Yoga Sûtras* of Patanjali in perhaps the third or fourth century CE, constitutes one of the world's earliest and most influential traditions of spiritual practice. It is a tradition that, by the time of Patanjali, already had an extensive prehistory and one that was to have, after Patanjali, an extraordinarily rich and diverse future. As a tradition yoga has been far from monolithic. It has embraced a variety of practices and orientations, borrowing from and influencing a vast array of Indic religious traditions down through the centuries. (21)

Perhaps India's greatest contribution to the spiritual heritage of humanity was the teachings of the Buddha:

The Buddha, whose personal name was Siddhârtha, and family name Gautama, lived in North India in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The young prince lived in his palace with every luxury at his command. But all of a sudden, confronted with the reality of life and the suffering of mankind, he decided to find the solution – the way out of this universal suffering . . . One evening, seated under a tree (since then known as the Bodhi-tree, 'the Tree of Wisdom') near Gaya, at the age of 35, Gautama attained Enlightenment, after which he was known as the Buddha, 'The Enlightened One.' After his Enlightenment, Gautama the Buddha delivered his first sermon to a group of five ascetics in the Deer Park near Benares. From that day, for 45 years, he taught all classes of men and women – kings and peasants, Brahmins and outcasts, bankers and beggars, holy men and robbers – without making the slightest distinction between them. He recognized no differences of caste or social groupings, and the Way he preached was open to all men and women who were ready to understand and to follow it. (22)

Buddhism was later to spread throughout the world, first to neighbouring countries and communities and eventually to every continent of the globe. The Buddha's last message to his followers, it is said, was: "Work out your own salvation with diligence."

During the same period in China two pre-eminent spiritual teachers emerged with different, yet complementary, approaches to inner development and expression. The legendary Lao Tzu (ca. 604 - 510 B.C.) taught the pure doctrine of *Tao*, the ultimate spiritual principle, which is the source of all that is. Confucius (551 - 479 B.C.) emphasized social responsibility and actions emanating from "goodness" as the stamp of spiritual maturity. "Whereas Confucius counseled

his people to labor untiringly for the welfare and dignity of man in society, Lao Tzu on the other hand cautioned them against excessive interference. The urge to change what by nature is already good only increases the sum-total of human unhappiness. The man who can maintain a just balance between them is on the road to social and spiritual integration." According to Taoist legend, the two are said to have met in 517 B.C., when the Old Master (Lao Tzu), then 86 years of age, gazed upon the young teacher and burst into uncontrollable laughter. For many millennia to come their teachings would deeply impact Chinese culture:

Both Confucianism and Taoism complement each other, however incompatible they seem at first sight to be. The former places a man in his proper relation to his fellow-men, the latter in proper relation to nature. A third philosophy, Buddhism, though introduced from India, deals with the problem of human suffering and with man's ultimate destiny. These three inheritances – the first adjusting man to his fellow-men, the second to nature, and the third to the Absolute – have moulded the thinking not only of the Chinese people but of all Eastern Asia. There is truth, then, in the common saying that every Chinese wears a Confucian cap, a Taoist robe, and Buddhist sandals. (23)

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