

hinduism

INTRODUCTION:

Originally, the word **Hindu** simply meant "Indian": it was a term invented by foreign traders to describe the civilization and peoples of the sub-continent. This civilization originated more than 4000 years ago, long before the first historical events recorded in the Old Testament. Today, it represents one of the oldest continuous traditions in the world. (Only the culture of China is comparably ancient.)

The beliefs and traditions that have guided India's peoples for so many centuries are known as the Hindu religion, or Hinduism. There is no central messiah or prophet in this religion; rather, the wisdom of many different sages and saints is represented.

Over the ages, hundreds of sects have grown up within the Hindu religion, and the contrasts among them are greater than those which divide Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism. Yet there are certain beliefs and values that most Hindus share, and these give consistency to all of the various sects and forms of worship.

Hindus agreed upon a philosophy rather than upon a doctrine. Although they built magnificent temples, they developed no church. Their priesthood was hereditary and could be achieved only through reincarnation. Of the few beliefs shared by all Hindus, respect for priests is among the foremost. Since priests are closer to *nirvana* [the emancipation from ignorance and the extinction of all attachments] than others, Indians generally think it important to protect and support them with charity. All priests are drawn from the Brahman caste, although not all Brahmans are priests.

Another belief shared by Hindus is veneration of life, especially the cow, which is thought to embody fertility. Although rivers, trees, and other forms of life are regarded as sacred, too, the cow is the holiest form. Indians have forbidden its killing from the period of Classical Hinduism onward, and perhaps before that.

Early Hindus were united in other philosophical respects. The **transmigration** of the soul represented one essential element of their faith. In the backward or forward movement of the soul there was an underlying cause: moral responsibility [*dharmā*]. It was *dharmā* [which may also be translated as law, religion, virtue, morality, or custom] which obliged each member of society to maintain the role that he was given at birth. On the individual level, *dharmā* required the pursuit of Nirvana in ways which were defined by the priests.

The doctrine of **reincarnation**, of which transmigration is a part, provided a vital link between the religion of Brahmanism and the social order in which it was practiced. The religion claimed a divine mandate to separate people by color. At the same time, it suggested to members of the toiling lower castes that they might become reincarnated at a higher level in another life. To win advancement in the next life, it was said, the individual must fulfill his moral obligations in the present one. Thus the doctrine of reincarnation persuaded members of the lower castes to be dutiful. The ultimate joy of final union with *Brahman* was a dim and distant, but realizable goal. While this union might be achieved through correct actions, the nature of action was limited by each caste.

1. THE HINDU CONCEPT OF GOD:

Alberuni, an Arab philosopher who visited India in the 11th century, was one of the few foreign visitors who could find an underlying unity in the Hindu religion. All Hindus, he discovered, believe in a supreme being, an immortal spirit who created the universe and still exists within it. Alberuni described the Hindu belief in God as follows:

The Hindus believe with regard to God that he is one, eternal, without beginning and end, acting by free-will, almighty, all-wise, living, giving life, ruling, preserving; one who in his sovereignty is unique, beyond all likeness and unlikeness, and that he does not resemble anything nor does anything resemble him.

From this description, it is apparent that the Hindu concept of God is quite similar to that of the Judeo-Christian tradition and of Islam. But at this point a difference arises. These "Western" religions teach that there are essential differences between God and man and between man and other living things. But in the Hindu religion, there are no such divisions. Rather, Hindus believe that everything in the world was created from the same divine spirit.

An ancient Indian myth explains the origin of the universe and tells how the unity of all living things came about. According to this myth, the universe at first contained only one being, called the Self, or **Brahman**. This divine being suddenly experienced a feeling of great loneliness and so poured forth all of the variety of life on earth in one burst of creation.

The message of this story is quite different from that of the biblical version of creation. In the biblical story (Genesis 1), it is related that God created each part of the world on a separate day and then gave humankind dominion over the earth and everything on it (fish, fowl, and cattle, etc.). But in the Hindu version, creation is

described as a spontaneous explosion, or act of division. Thus, in the Hindu view, everything in the world—man, animal, plant, and mineral—is equally a manifestation of Brahman. The divine essence, or soul, in each living thing is known as *atman*.

2. DHARMA:

The Indian system rested on dharma. *Dharma* upheld the universe and was the basis of what we identify as the ecological cycle of nature. Each person and thing has attributes or unique properties. Birds fly, fish live in water, apple trees produce apples, fire burns. A “good fire” is one that burns well. It makes no sense to criticize a fire if it burns homes instead of wood. Rain falls on “the just and the unjust.” If rain stopped to worry about what was underneath, the universe would fall apart. In fact, the whole Indian universe rested on *dharma*. Birds didn’t swim, apple trees shouldn’t grow foxes, *Sudras* should work for *Brahmins*. Dharma upheld the entire universe.

No matter what happened, *Brahmins* taught, a person must perform his or her *dharma*, whatever it might be. If he was born the eldest child, he must be a “good” son, elder brother, and later a good husband and father. If he was born a *Brahmin*, he must be diligent about the rituals. If she was born a *Sudra*, she must serve others responsibly. A person was to perform the job appropriate to his or her *varna* [caste] and not try to become something else.

A large part of a person’s dharma was determined at birth. When a person was born, his gender, family, personal qualities and abilities were set. One was an elder brother or a younger sister or an only child and a member of a certain *varna*. Some aspects of *dharma* changed with a person’s age. A young boy was to be a good son, but as he matured, his roles changed and he took on the *dharma* of a husband, father, and elder in the community. A dutiful daughter became a good wife, a loving mother and a just mother-in-law.

3. KARMA:

The earliest thinkers of India believed that everything in the universe reveals the spirit of Brahman. This spirit is the essence of every creature on earth: it can never be dissolved or destroyed, but continues to live even after death. When an individual dies, therefore, the individual spirit, or *atman*, does not disappear but enters another form, or body. (In this process there is no division between the human and animal worlds. A person might be reborn in either human or animal shape.) Following from this concept of rebirth, we can see that there is literally “nothing new under the sun.” To the Hindu, the world has been continually reborn in different forms, but its essence has never changed.

Although the spiritual quality of each individual is immortal, it may be corrupted by *karma*, or the measure of one’s actions. Good *karma* stayed with a person for lifetimes and so did bad *karma*. A person who lives in a selfish way or fails to obey the rules of morality is said to have “bad *karma*.” This means that the person will be reborn in a lower state in the next life. But almost any type of action involves *karma*; it is nearly impossible to avoid. This is one reason why a yogi tries to avoid any contact with the world.

Karma helped explain the seeming unfairness of life, why some died young or were born deformed, why the good man suffered and the scoundrel appeared to prosper. “It’s his *karma*!”

*In dark forests, amidst his foes in war,
In flood or raging flame;
In ocean depths or on precarious peaks;
Slumbering or courting dread danger
With reckless abandon;
Merits earned in former lives
Afford a man protection.*

Although a person may hope and expect to be reborn into a higher state in the next life, rebirth is not considered a positive thing. One of the constant themes of Indian philosophy is that all earthly existence involves suffering. The ultimate goal is to free the spirit from the cycle of rebirth and bondage to the physical world. The discipline of yoga provides one path to this goal. If a person comes close to a state of enlightenment either through yoga or by living righteously, this “goodness” or “greatness of soul” will be apparent in the next life.

4. AHIMSA:

The idea that there is a bond among all living things follows from the Hindi concept of God and from the doctrine of *karma*. For many centuries, the cow has been the special symbol of animal life in Hindu communities. Through their respect and veneration for the cow, Hindus express the bond that they share with all members of the animal kingdom. Mahatma Gandhi described the respect for this animal as “the one concrete belief common to all

Hindus" and went on to explain its importance as a symbol:

Cow-protection to me is one of the most wonderful phenomena in human evolution. It takes the human being beyond his species. The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man, through the cow, is enjoined [urged] to realize his identity with all that lives. ... Cow-protection is the gift of Hinduism to the world. And Hinduism will live so long as there are Hindus to protect the cow. (Young India, 6 October 1921.)

5. YOGA:

The word **yoga** comes from the same root as the verb to yoke, or "bind together." It expresses the highest goal of the Hindu religion: to realize, or become conscious of, the link between humans and God and all living things. A person who pursues this goal is called a **yogi**.

Through the techniques and discipline of yoga, an individual learns to suppress the needs and wants that normally occupy the mind. (These impulses are considered undesirable, for they have the effect of clouding over the soul.) After overcoming all such distractions—a process that usually takes many years of effort—the yogi is able to achieve a higher state of consciousness or awareness. At this stage, the individual **atman**, or soul, recognizes its unity with Brahman. The ego, or personality, is dissolved, and the soul becomes one with all of creation—"like a raindrop merging into the ocean." This dissolution is called **moksha**, or release. It represents a type of salvation that is unknown in the religions of the West. Rather than developing the personality to meet certain spiritual goals, the worshiper instead tries to dissolve all sense of individuality.

6. THE PRACTICE OF YOGA:

There is evidence that the art of yoga may have been known in India prior to 1500 B.C. The first known manual on the subject was written by a yogi named Patanjali, who may have lived about 200 B.C.

In preparation for his meditations, Patanjali says, the yogi must first purify both mind and body by withdrawing from the world. This detachment from material things and from human company is essential, for any type of pleasure (or desire fulfillment) only causes more desires to arise. (In any case, Patanjali notes, pleasure is always followed by pain or disappointment. For this reason, those who pursue pleasure are in a state of ignorance.)

To prepare for supreme efforts of concentration, the yogi assumes a position that is uncomfortable at first but provides greater stability over a long period of time. The familiar cross-legged position is one that is recommended. Now the yogi must stop the flow of thoughts and associations that normally crowd the mind. To help this process along, the yogi begins to breathe in a rhythmic fashion and eventually enters a trance-like state. At this point, he begins the process of contemplation. Often, he will concentrate his thoughts on a single object, such as a stone. After a period of meditation, the yogi begins to "know" this object in an entirely new way; that is, he obtains a special insight into it.

The special insights that a yogi achieves during his meditations are believed to be the source of magical powers. Thus, by meditating on the quality of "lightness," for example, it is said that a yogi can make himself as light as wool and float through the air. There have also been reports of yogis who can shrink themselves to the size of an atom or extend their minds far enough to explore the moon. A yogi who has achieved such powers is known as a **siddha**. But to Patanjali, the magical powers of the **siddha** were not the true goal of yoga, only a side effect.

7. THE CONCEPT OF MAYA:

The Sanskrit word **maya** refers to the entire material world and everything in it—whether living or inanimate—that has shape or form. Many Indian philosophers have considered **maya** to be a trick or illusion because it disguises the underlying reality of Brahman. (In fact, the word **maya** means "magic.") Others, however, have had a more positive view of **maya**. In their view, the great variety of forms and shapes in the material world can help people to appreciate the infinite power and variety of Brahman.

8. THE FOUR STAGES OF LIFE:

The ideal life of a good Hindu is divided into four stages; two stages in the first half of life and two stages in the second half. Each stage has an appropriate goal or goals. The first two stages are the student and the householder. The second two stages are going to the forest and the wandering holy man.

During the first stage [the **student stage**], a person studies, preferably with a teacher, called a **guru**, to whom he should be completely devoted. He serves the guru and does exactly as his guru says. The student is to be selfless and put aside any thoughts of pleasure except the desire to please the teacher. Dharma is the only

appropriate goal during the student stage in life.

When a person has finished studying, he or she enters the second stage of life [the **householder stage**]. *Dharma*, **artha** [survival, the striving to obtain wealth and influence, money and power], and **kama** [pleasure and enjoyment of all the senses, including good food, joyful games, excitement, and passion] are the appropriate goals for this stage. Under Hinduism, wealth and power are legitimate goals for one's personal life. A person is never to violate the rules of dharma, but within those rules, there is plenty of room to try to get rich and famous. Parents select a bride or groom, and the person is married. The young man goes to work usually at the same occupation as his father. Young girls are usually married to boys who have the same occupation as their fathers. During the householder stage of life, people perform their dharma for the good of the community. The man must be a good husband and father and follow the rules of his community. The young woman is a good wife and mother. They can also seek artha and kama for their own satisfaction. As long as they do not violate dharma, the joys of love and the thrills of success are legitimate goals for the householder.

The second half of life is devoted entirely to **moksha** [oneness with the ultimate]. The third stage is called "**going to the forest.**" When a householder's daughters are safely married and his sons are ready to take on the family responsibilities, the householder can turn his back on worldly concerns and drop out of society. During this period one meditates and studies in an effort to experience the true nature of life and the Oneness of all reality.

If a person experiences *moksha*, that person enters the final stage of life: **the wandering holy man**. He spreads ashes on his body to symbolize that his ego and personality are dead. He wanders around or sits and meditates; his presence assures others that *moksha* is possible.

The four stages of life represent the Hindu ideal. Perhaps few actually lived according to this ideal. Many died before they had completed the second stage; many more never wanted to leave the householder stage. No matter. There was always another life, or another thousand lives in which to seek *moksha*. Hindus did not have to choose between material goals and spiritual ones. They just followed the goals appropriate to particular times and places. No one had to rush toward *moksha* or feel guilty if he was not hankering after it. As the wise sage Ramakrishna said centuries ago:

This world is like a stage, where men perform many parts under various disguises. They do not like to take off the mask unless they have played for some time. Let them play for a while, and they will leave off the mask of their own accord.

9. THE HINDU PANTHEON {group} OF GODS:

Though Hindus believe in one all-encompassing God, they worship this divine spirit in many different forms. There are innumerable gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, and most Hindus worship one or more of them. Each of these deities is considered to have some—but by no means all—of the infinite qualities of Brahman.

A. **Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu:**

The most prominent gods in the Hindu pantheon are Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu. They are often referred to as the Hindu triad. **Brahma**, the first god of the triad, is venerated for his role in the original creation of the world. However, he is not often worshiped as a "personal" god: most Hindus choose either Shiva or Vishnu as their main god of worship.

Shiva, the great creator-destroyer, is believed to keep the universe in balance with his cosmic dance. His consort {spouse}, Parvati-Kali, similarly has two aspects: as Parvati, she is worshiped as the Great Mother, but as Kali (or Durga), her destructiveness and fury are more evident. Shiva and Kali are among the most ancient of Indian gods.

Vishnu, a more kindly deity, is worshiped as the preserver of the universe. His consort, Lakshmi, is also associated with love and mercy. At times when evil threatens to overwhelm the world, Vishnu appears as an **avatar**, or incarnation, and sets things aright. According to one tradition, Vishnu has had nine different avatars, with a tenth still to come. One of the most popular of these is the god Krishna, who is noted for his sense of humor and playful personality.

B. **Other Popular Gods:**

Not all Hindu gods and goddesses are depicted in human form; many of them have animal forms and qualities. The kindly, elephant-headed **Ganesha** is one of the most popular of these. He is worshiped as a bringer of good fortune and remover of obstacles. The monkey god **Hanuman** also has many shrines dedicated to him.



Brahma



Vishnu

Shiva



Ganesha



Hanuman

Source: *India: Its Culture and People*. Anne Ferguson Jensen. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1991, pp. 21-30.