

## Hinduism

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"In religion, all other countries are paupers... India is the only millionaire."  
-- Mark Twain

"How can you sort out all these [Hindu] patterns-- family, regional, historical--and come to a simple understanding of the whole? The answer quite simply is: you cannot. No one can, or has, or perhaps ever will."  
-- Thomas Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, p. 2.

You can "study [Hinduism] for years with the best of teachers, and when you raise your head, nothing that they told you quite fits."  
-- E. M. Forster (as quoted in Diana Eck, *Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*, p. 11).

## Introductory Principles

Six underlying themes describe the Hindu world view.

1. **Diversity.** Within Hinduism, there are different paths to emancipation, many schools of thought, and an assortment of classes and sub-classes within society at large. This vast collection of peoples, ideas and practices all make up the Hindu worldview.

2. **Time.** Within Hindu spirituality, time is cyclical and of unimaginable duration. One **kalpa** (KAL-pah) or cycle of time from creation to dissolution (day of Brahma), lasts 4.3 million years. These cycles continue on for the life of Brahma (100 years of 360 Brahma days and nights). The process then, with variations, repeats itself.

Time, in this sense, ultimately diminishes history to insignificance. Individual biographies become simple, brief scenes in an endless drama of lives. An individual's present life may even be one lived a countless number of times in the past. We live currently in a **Kali Yuga** (KAH-lee YOO-gah) age, wherein a steady decline takes place. Time is running down. "Every day, in every way," we do not get "better and better." Our children will not necessarily have a better life than the one we enjoy. Rather, we are all involved in the downward spiral of time.

3. **Tension.** Rather than discard old ideas and practices, Hinduism, over its long history, has tended to put the new alongside the old, discounting neither. This "additive" logic creates a framework for tensions, contradictions and seeming ambiguities. An aesthetic/ascetic, sensual/Spartan, indulgent/austere, mystical/logical tension surfaces throughout the entire tradition. **A love of extremes, and the tendency to press everything to its ultimate limit, promotes a tension-filled perspective.**

4. **Tolerance.** An enduring strength of Hinduism is its ability to implement a hospitable predisposition which accepts approaches which differ. **Hinduism embraces diversity, seeing it as a tool to unite, rather than divide, a people.** A genuine sense of acceptance stems from the tradition's ability to admit variety and debate into the core of its religious culture.

5. **Monism.** Hindu thought is monistic. That is, it sees reality as consisting of only one basic substance, principle or reality. Whereas dualistic world views see society in good/evil, self/other, I/world, terms, Hindu thought identifies a single notion which ties all reality together. One single principle or ground of existence operates within the universe.

The **Upanishadic** narrative between Aruni and his newly educated son Shvetaketu points to this sense of universal oneness. Aruni asks his son to put salt in a cup of water and

leave it overnight. The next day, after discussing the salt's dissolving in the water--its being present but unseen--Aruni says to his son:

"Verily, my dear, you do not [see] Being in this world; but it is, indeed, here only: That which is the subtle essence--this whole world has that essence for its Self. That is the Real. That is the Self. That art Thou, Shvetaketu." (Chandogya, VI in *The Hindu Tradition* by Ainslie Embree, p. 61.)

6. **Religious Integration.** The Hindu world view knows no sacred/secular dichotomy. There is no area of belief or custom alien to religious influence. Thus, one's social life, politics, and homemaking activities receive distinct spiritual attention along with worship, prayer and private devotion. The world, as grounded in God, is a just world. Individuals get what they deserve. This life becomes the soul's gymnasium, school and training field. All of living becomes an extension of the spiritual dimension.

## Beliefs

"If one can summarize in a phrase the general intention of Indian spirituality it is to gain release (**Moksha**) from the bondage of **Karma** and **Samsara**, to break the bonds of finite limitations and participate in the infinite ground of reality which is imperishable."

-- David Kinsley, *Sword and the Flute*, p. 143.

"If I really know--then that truth destroys me. I am one with the essence of being. The goal is to truly 'Be,' to slam the ego. 'Be all that you are'...not 'Be all that you can be.'"

-- Dr. Charles Ryerson, Princeton Seminary

Within Hinduism, practice takes precedence over belief. The line separating belief and ethic becomes an indistinct one. While realizing the preference for right action over right thinking, there are nonetheless certain basic concepts which describe Hindu belief, its transcendent Upanishadic vision or world and life view.

The following five key terms--**samsara, karma, moksha, dharma** and **bhakti**--describe this Hindu world view. These five concepts become essential in discussing many of the religions of the East (Buddhism and folk religions).

**Samsara** (sahm-SAH-ruh). This term, expressing concepts of "flow" and "run-around," describes humankind's sense of despair at the passing nature of events within this life. In this world of rebirth, what is achieved in the course of one's life can easily become lost. This sense of loss happens not once but endlessly. The more one becomes conscious, the more one feels the frustrations and limitations of life.

A passage from the seventeenth century describes the sense of ultimate pain and helplessness explained by samsara. Describing the soul like an empty stomach, never at rest, with no set home, dancing like rice in a frying pan, the Tukaram states,

"I have been harassed by the world. I have dwelt in my mother's womb and I must enter the gate of the womb eight million times. I was born a needy beggar and my life is passed under a stranger's power. I am bound fast in the meshes of my past and its fated influence continues with me..."

("The Burden of the Past," Tukaram, as quoted in Embree, *The Hindu Tradition*, p. 252).

**Karma** (KAHR-muh). As defined in the HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, karma encompasses:

"deed, action, ritual, result... Any mental, verbal, or physical action or intention...The results or consequences of actions or intentions." (p. 622)

Karma, the moral law of cause and effect, sees nothing as happening by chance or accident. Individuals have personal responsibility. Each thought and deed carries a destiny producing effect. Transmigration sees the birth of the "soul" in successive life forms. Karma directly ties into this series of rebirths. Writes Hindu scholar Arvind Sharma,

"[O]ne is not just accidentally born into a family belonging to a vocational group, one is reborn into it as a result of that universal accounting system called karma." (*Our Religions*, p. 25.)

The cause of samsaric frustration and sense of "dis-ease" is not just acts or deeds themselves but the desire, will, and sense of resolve behind those actions. At the base of this desire is what we often call the ego which always seeks expansion--either in power over things or in acquisition of things/sensuous appetites.

**Moksha.** Though Hindu thought most often describes moksha in terms of what it is not, the terms "liberation," "full being," "consciousness," "bliss" gives some sense of its meaning. From what is humankind to be liberated? The egocentric desire described under samsara above. **To transcend, transform, destroy, and kill the ego is the aim.**

The search for salvation can take place along two planes. On one level, this search... "is related to an attempt to improve one's karma, the fruit of one's actions, in order to improve one's future existence." On another and higher level, salvation is understood as the finding of a mode of existence that is beyond the changing flux of time and circumstance. This concept was directly linked to the ancient message of the Upanishads [very old Hindu Scriptures] that:

"there is an identity between [humankind's] spirit and the universal spirit, and that salvation consisted in an intuitive realization of this truth. To come to this state of knowledge is to realize [humankind's] true nature."

(Ainslie Embree, *The Hindu Tradition*, p. 120.)

**Atman** (AHT-muhn), the "individual soul or life-force, eternal, indestructible...of the nature of pure being, consciousness, and bliss" is the essential nature of one's self. (HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, p. 88.) The ultimate or absolute reality of the universe, **brahman**, (BRAH-muhn) is like atman but expanded to a universal, cosmic dimension.

The term [b]rahman (with a small 'b') is not to be confused with Brahman, (members of the highest of Hinduism's four classes), or Brahma (the creator deity of classical Hinduism. Realization that **atman = brahman = moksha** is not so much an existential quest as an intuitive awareness, an instinctive knowledge, understanding that in knowing All, one becomes All. Again, the dialogue between Aruni and his "learned, pompous" son Shvetaketu is instructive. Aruni tells his son to bring him a fig. After examining the fine seeds, Shvetaketu is to break one. Inside is nothing but a "subtle essence not seen," but from which the great fig develops.

"Believe me, my dear, that which is the subtle essence--this whole world has that essence for its Self; that is the Real; that is the Self; that subtle essence art thou, Shvetaketu..."

(Chandogya, as quoted in Embree, *The Hindu Tradition*, p. 64.)

The "subtle essence," the Self (brahman), "that thou art" Aruni told Shvetaketu. Emancipation (moksha...liberation) thus becomes a process of coming to an awareness of this identity of atman with brahman. Few realize moksha as a continual state. Most only capture a glimpse of it here and there.

Various paths or disciplines are available to realize moksha. Each path depends on one's temperament, disposition and position within or outside the class structure. The intent of these paths is to take an ordinary person on his/her own terms, and gear salvation to his/her unique makeup. Of these paths (**margas**) and disciplines (**yogas**), three receive great attention--those of knowledge (**gyana**), duty (**dharma**), and devotion (**bhakti**).

**Dharma** (DAHR-muh). What people ought to do--their established duty--becomes the sustaining, underlying goal and guide for ordinary people. Dharma also focuses on the model of how society should be organized.

**Bhakti.** The path of devotion, loyalty and love, is bhakti. It embodies the essential traits of heartfelt worship. Intense emotion, being "mad" after God, devotion which is intimate, passionate, intense and topsy-turvy characterizes the revolutionary encounters with the sacred. The *Bhagavad Gita* describes this sense of devotion.

"Of all men of discipline, moreover, With inner soul gone to Me Whoso reveres Me with faith, Him I hold the most disciplined."

-- VI:47 (translated by Edgerton, p. 37.)

If a person is as he or she feels, and if a person feels united with God, that person, in some sense, is united with God. Bhakti promotes such feeling and offers a practical salvation path. It serves as a safety valve for Hindu worshipers, a spiritual quest alternative for those caught up in routines of dharmic duty or ascetic, knowledge demanding paths to the Holy.

## Selected Hindu Scriptures

**Vedas** (VAY-duhs). These early Sanskrit texts were primarily hymns composed between 1200 - 900 B.C. They are seen as a verbal form of ultimate reality. The Brahmin group embodies and interprets this reality.

**Upanishads** (oo-PAH-ni-shuhdz). Interpretations of the Vedas, beginning with an emphasis on proper performance of sacrificial ritual and ending with mystical identities of the individual soul (atman) with the universal spirit (brahmin) are the focus of the Upanishads.

**Great Epics** 300 B.C. - A.D. 300. The **Mahabharata** (mah hah BAH rah tah) is a grand narrative of stories involving warriors and kings. The **Bhagavad Gita** (BUH guh vuhd GEE tah), describing poetic dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna, is included in this extensive narrative. The **Ramayana** (rah mah YAH nuh), the second great Hindu epic, describes the rule of **Rama** or God's kingdom on earth.

**Vacanas**. These texts describe poems of personal devotion to a god-- essential in following the bhakti path.

Concerning the overall nature and importance of the Hindu scriptures, two concepts are helpful.

1. Texts ratify what is already being experienced.
  2. As described by theologian Harold Coward, "it is the vibrating, spoken word that has power, that is heard and remembered and transforms human consciousness."
- For most Hindus, "once the direct experience of the Divine Word is realized, the manifested forms (the words and sentences of the Veda) are no longer needed. The Vedic words and sentences function only as the 'ladder' to raise one to the direct, intuitive experience of the complete Divine Word." (Howard Coward, Hindu-Christian Dialogue, pp. 232, 236.)

## Vocabulary

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**Brahma** The creator deity of classical Hinduism

**Brahman** Members of the highest of Hinduism's four classes

**brahman, (BRAH-muhn)** The ultimate or absolute reality of the universe, is like atman but expanded to a universal, cosmic dimension.

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**Kali Yuga (KAH-lee YOO-gah)** Age in which we presently live, wherein a steady decline takes place. Time is running down. "Every day, in every way," we do not get "better and better." Our children will not necessarily have a better life than the one we enjoy. Rather, we are all involved in the downward spiral of time.

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**Transmigration** More precise term than reincarnation. It sees the birth of the soul in successive life forms. Karma directly ties into this series of rebirths.

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## Sources Used

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