

HINDUISM

Hinduism—Foundational Texts and Teachings,

Lecture 3

Hinduism is considered by some scholars to be the oldest living major religion in the world. By some estimates, there are nearly a billion Hindus, making it the world's third largest religion after Christianity and Islam. While most Hindus are found in South Asia, Hindus can also be found in many other parts of the world, such as England, Canada, and the United States.

A Brief History of Hinduism

- It is hard to find a statement of belief that would be agreed on by all Hindus. There is no centralized authority to enforce orthodoxy, no universally accepted creed.
- The very word "Hindu" itself did not originate with Indians trying to describe shared religious beliefs; rather, it was used, in various forms, by outsiders (such as Persians, Greeks, and Arabs) to refer to the people who lived in an area beyond the Indus River.
- At the same time, there is universality to Hinduism. Anybody who finds Hindu teachings compelling, engages in study of the Hindu tradition, practices the rituals, and so forth, can become a Hindu.
- The two great traditions that served as the foundations for Hinduism were the Indus River Valley Civilization and the Vedic tradition.
- The Indus River Valley Civilization flourished around 4,500 years ago. A number of important features of later Hinduism—the importance of goddesses, the centrality of bathing and the use of water in rituals, many of the animals prominently featured, and the significance of yoga and meditation—may have their origins with the Indus River Valley Civilization.

Notes

The Four Social Classes and the Vedic Period

The people known as Aryans migrated into India from the north around 2000 B.C.E. The Aryans brought with them (1) their scriptures, known as the Vedas, and the language in which they were written, a form of Sanskrit; (2) a pantheon of gods; (3) rituals officiated by priests, called brahmins; and (4) a social class system.

The period that saw the rise and flourishing of Aryan culture and the primacy of their texts and rituals is known as the Vedic period (1500–500 B.C.E.). This was the foundation out of which Hinduism arose.

The Four Social Classes

Aryan society was divided into four social classes. The top two consisted of Brahmins (priests) and Kshatriyas (the warriors and rulers). The third social class is the Vaishyas (the merchants, traders, and farmers), and the fourth and lowest class is the Shudras (servants).

These four classes are known as Varnas, and they form the basis of what will later become the Hindu caste system. The top three varnas are known as "twice-born." Traditionally, only those twice-born can have access to the Vedic texts; the shudras were denied this.



The four-headed image of Brahma represents the fourfold nature of many Hindu beliefs, including the four varnas, or social classes.

Notes

- “Veda” is a word that means “knowledge” or “wisdom.” In fact, it is worth pointing out that Sanskrit belongs to the vast Indo-European language family, which also contains English. This means that there will be many connections between Sanskrit and English words.
- The Vedas are some of the oldest existing texts in an Indo-European language. Although the earliest parts of the Vedas date back to approximately 1500 B.C.E., it is unlikely that these texts were written down until around 1,000 years later. The texts were orally, and accurately, transmitted for centuries.
- The Vedas are divided into four sections that contain different types of texts. The oldest is the Rig Veda, which contains 1,028 hymns dedicated to a variety of deities. The final portion of the Vedas is the Upanishads, texts that are highly philosophical and speculative.
- In the Vedic hymns, we see an emphasis on rituals performed for the gods in the hopes of gaining benefits in this world, for this life. There is not a significant otherworldly aspect to the early Vedic hymns.
- Of the many gods in the Vedas, there are three that are most important—Agni, Soma, and Indra. Agni is fire, a central component of Vedic ritual. Soma is a consciousness-expanding beverage made from a plant or mushroom that was consumed during rituals. Indra is a warrior god and a king who defeated the serpent demon and released the waters (making the land fertile).
- Two final Vedic themes are worth mentioning. The first is that there is a cosmic order that must be upheld. The second theme involves Vedic accounts of the creation of the world. According to the Rig Veda, the world began with the sacrifice of a cosmic primordial being named Purusha. The entire universe is seen as a single vast organism.

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Within this vision is an account of the origins of the social hierarchy. Thus, the Vedas give a divine origin to the four social classes, the varnas.

- As mentioned, the Vedic texts were used in a ritual context. They were often spectacles that involved the construction of a great altar. The rituals, which were officiated by Brahmin priests, were largely replaced over time with the temple and home rituals known as pujas.

The Influence of the Upanishads

- Around the 6th century B.C.E., an increasing number of religious seekers were leaving the Vedic fold and striking out on new paths. The part of the Vedas that had the greatest impact on Indian philosophy, and in fact were to later influence philosophical movements in the West as well, are the Upanishads.
- Whereas the early Vedic hymns focus on maximizing welfare in this life, the Upanishads believe attachment to the things of this world produces suffering. Along with this attitude was a particular belief about life and death: as long as people are bound by attachment to this world, they will continue to be reborn indefinitely. The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is known as samsara. A belief in rebirth would be widespread in India from this period onward.
- For the Indian traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, rebirth is bad news. If life is characterized by suffering, by aging, sickness and death, then who would want to go through the whole thing over and over again? The ultimate goal, then, is to achieve the liberation that would free you from the cycle.
- A crucial question that will be addressed in all of the Indian traditions is what gets reborn. In the Upanishads and in much of later Hinduism, there is the notion of an eternal, unchanging soul called Atman. While the material parts of the body return to earth on death, the soul is reborn repeatedly until liberation.

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The Concept of Karma

- For Hinduism, the concept that explains the mechanics of the rebirth process is karma. The word "karma" means "action," and it refers to the inexorable law of cause and effect: Who we are today is the product of our previous actions, and our current actions will shape who we are in the future.
- The soul is reborn in accordance with its karma, but you have freedom to choose what to do with these circumstances and thus shape your future karma.
- The Upanishads tell us that if we understood our true identity as Atman, we would be liberated from suffering. One way to describe the nature of Atman is pure consciousness. It is pure subjectivity, awareness itself. The Upanishads teach that this is your true identity, and that this is changeless, deathless, eternal.
- We now see one of the most fundamental tensions within Hinduism: the importance of preserving cosmic and social order by finding one's place within it and the quest to find liberation from the world through renunciation, asceticism, and nonattachment. Some of the most powerful ideas in Hinduism have come from attempts to reconcile this tension.

The Four Ends/Goals of Humanity

- There are two systems within Hinduism that allow a place for seemingly conflicting ideals and goals. The first is the Four Ends/Goals of Humanity.
- The first goal is the vitally important concept of dharma, which connotes duty or obligation. The second end is the realm of material gain, wealth, and power—*artha*. The third end is pleasure, *kama*. Hinduism preserves a place for the realm of pleasures of all kinds—sexual, of course, but also many areas of aesthetic pleasure—music, poetry, art, dance, and food. Finally, there is the fourth goal of moksha, liberation from the samsaric cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

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In its most expansive sense, dharma connotes right conduct and has elements of law and morality. While there are many factors that go into establishing one's dharma, two are of greatest importance: one's social class/varna, and the stage of life that one is in, one's ashrama.

- The caste hierarchy is also connected with notions of purity and pollution. The most polluting jobs—dealing with dead bodies, cleaning streets and bathrooms, handling garbage, et cetera—are relegated to those who are considered outside of the caste system (outcasts) commonly known as untouchables, Dalits, or the oppressed.

- While the modern Indian constitution formally outlawed untouchability, it still exists in many ways. Dalits are often prevented from worshipping in certain temples or drawing water from certain wells.

The Key Life Stages

- While much of one's dharma is determined by caste, another key element is the stage of life that one is in. The tradition recognizes that people will aim for different goals during different parts of their life.

- The first stage is that of the student. The next stage is the householder stage. This is the time of life to get married (through a properly arranged marriage, a practice still found throughout much of India today), raise children, get a job, and earn money.

- The next stage, that of the forest dweller, hermit, or—more familiar to us—the “retiree,” generally occurs when a person has grandchildren and is ready to withdraw from the life of working. The fourth and final phase is that of the renunciate, the most committed of whom live out their remaining days as celibate beggars focusing on following spiritual pursuits.

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- In the West, the latter part of life is supposed to be a time to enjoy the wealth that one has accumulated, to live a comfortable life, to focus on one's children and grandchildren. In the traditional Hindu system, the emphasis is on withdrawal, on giving up possessions and ties to the world and, ultimately, to family.
- Rather than approach life as a series of either/or choices, Hinduism finds a way for both/and. It has a generally inclusive and pluralistic approach in much of its religious orientation.

Suggested Reading

Doniger, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*.
 Embree, Hay, and De Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*.
 Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*.
 Hawley and Narayanan, *The Life of Hinduism*.
 Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective*.
 Matlins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*.
 Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*.
 Sharma, *Our Religions*.
 Smith, *The World's Religions*.
 Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.
 Vatsyayana and Kakar, *Kamasutra*.

Questions to Consider

1. Hinduism sees the four goals of humanity as dharma (duty), *artha* (wealth and power), kama (pleasure), and moksha (liberation). How do these compare with your own ideas of the goals of life? Are these goals compatible with each other, or are some mutually exclusive?

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Lecture 3: Hinduism—Foundational Texts and Teachings

2. How do the traditional stages of life in Hinduism—student, householder, forest dweller or hermit, and renunciate—compare with your ideas of the stages of life?
3. If you do not currently believe in rebirth, how would such a belief change the way you live your life? Do you believe in some form of karma?

Notes

Hindu Gods and Devotional Practices

Lecture 4

To the non-Hindu, the Hindu gods can appear quite strange and overwhelming. First, there are so many of them. Second, they can appear in manifestations that range from childlike to loving to bloodthirsty. At times, contradictory elements will be embodied in a single deity. But reflecting on divinity through the lens of Hindu gods can lead even the non-Hindu to new insights about the nature of divinity.

The Hindu Representation of Gods

- Hindus do not shy away from representing gods; Hindu temples and homes almost always feature paintings and statues of gods. This is an obvious difference between Hinduism and, say, Judaism and Islam, which prohibit making any images of God.
- Given that in both Hinduism and Islam (the two largest religions of India) people are tremendously devoted to God, why are there such radically different opinions about representing God?
- There is the response of Judaism and Islam: Given that God is infinite, do not even try to represent God. If you do, you will end up worshipping the representation, becoming idolaters, in the process circumscribing and limiting God, who is in fact limitless.
- Hinduism approaches this differently: Since divine reality is infinite, never stop representing it; never think you have it all in one image. The answer is not the avoidance of representation but endless multiplicity.
- In Hinduism, there is an emphasis placed on the visual. Hindus believe that it is important to see and be seen by the deity. This is known as darshan, the experience of visual connection between the worshipper and the deity.

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Most Jews, Christians, and Muslims think of God as a separate being. There is another approach that we encounter in the Upanishads. Previously we learned about the Atman, or soul, our true Self. There is another important term: "Brahman." This is the word that Hindus use to refer to ultimate reality.

Brahman is often described using three Sanskrit words: *sat cit ananda*. *Sat* means "being." *Cit* means "consciousness." *Ananda* means "bliss." So Brahman is being-consciousness-bliss.

- So now we know that we each have a soul (Atman) and we know about ultimate reality (Brahman). The Chandogya Upanishad reveals "that art thou"—*tat tvam asi*. Your soul, your Atman, is identical with ultimate reality, Brahman. When we recognize our identity with the ultimate reality, we achieve liberation.
- So there is oneness underlying all multiplicity, and we need to see all other beings as manifestations of the divine. When you greet someone in India, it is customary to put your hands together and say, "Namaste." This has been interpreted as something like, "The divine in me bows to the divine in you."
- Many Hindus focus their worship on one deity. You can often tell what god a Hindu worships by a special marking on the forehead, known as a tilak. A tilak is usually made with a substance like sandalwood paste, kunkum powder, clay, or even ashes.
- In most cases, while Hindus will see the god they worship as supreme, they do not see other gods as false. For many Hindus, all of the gods are seen as manifestations of the one Brahman. This is why Hinduism can be seen as polytheistic from one angle, but monistic—emphasizing the oneness of all being—from another.
- Some Hindus worship many deities, for they see different deities performing different functions and representing different characteristics of God.

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The Representative Gods—Vishnu (and Avatars), Shiva, and Devi

- The best way to approach the deities is to talk about three categories, representing the gods who are most widely worshipped in India and whose images are most often seen in temples and homes—Vishnu and his avatars (especially Krishna and Rama); Shiva in his many forms; and Devi, the goddess, in her many forms.
- Vishnu is seen as the all-pervading Lord of the Universe and protector of humanity. Many Vishnu worshippers wear a tilak on their foreheads that consists of two vertical lines joined at the bottom to make a U or V shape. It is said that this shape represents Vishnu's footprint.
- Vishnu is usually portrayed with blue skin, which is said to represent vastness. He has four arms, which indicate power. His four arms hold a conch shell, a discus, a mace, and a lotus flower. The conch is said to represent Vishnu's creative power and is associated with the divine sound of the cosmos (and which is often blown in religious ritual), and the lotus flower represents purity and liberation.
- Many Hindu deities are depicted in male-female pairs. The female power is called Shakti, and it is necessary to activate the spiritual power that resides in the male. The goddesses depicted with the male gods are often called consorts. Vishnu's consort is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.
- One of the most important features of Vishnu is that he manifests himself in avatars to help humans when we are in need. There are 10 great avatars associated with Vishnu. Two avatars are most important and are widely worshipped throughout India: Krishna and Rama.
- Krishna has been called the best loved of all Hindu gods. He takes many forms, and in virtually all he is depicted with dark blue skin and long black hair. He is sometimes depicted as a small child enjoying his favorite treat, butter. The mischievous young Krishna is sometimes known as the butter thief.

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As he grows, he becomes known as a protector of his people. One of the most common portrayals of Krishna shows him as a cowherd (Krishna Gopala), a handsome young man playing the flute and often flirting with the young girls around him.

- If Krishna is the divine in the form of child or lover, Vishnu's avatar of Rama is an exemplar of the courageous warrior honoring his dharma—doing his sacred duty no matter the consequences. Rama is the hero of the epic *Ramayana*.
- There are a number of Hindu festivals associated with Rama. The two most popular celebrations are of his victory over Ravana and Diwali, the festival of lights.
- Shiva is a god who embodies opposites. Like Krishna, he is represented in many ways, but in Shiva's case, these take forms that seem contradictory.
- Let us begin with Shiva as the Lord of Yoga. His trident is a weapon against evil and ignorance. Shiva's third eye, if turned inward, gains wisdom and insight; if turned outward, it can be the eye of destruction, destroying greed, ego, and lust.
- Devotees of Shiva wear a distinctive tilak (forehead-marking) composed of three horizontal lines. Shiva is associated with death and dissolution, and frequents cremation grounds. He is associated with the city of Varanasi, the most sacred Indian city to Hindus. The Ganges River flows through Varanasi, and it is the aspiration of many devout Hindus to have their ashes scattered in the Ganges.
- Another common depiction of Shiva shows him with his family—his wife Parvati and his two sons. One of these sons is Ganesha, the very popular elephant-headed deity.
- Ganesha is known as the remover of obstacles and the guardian of entryways. Praying to him is said to bring good luck and success.

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so many people worship him before embarking on a trip or a new venture.

- One of the best-known, most visually compelling images of Shiva is as Shiva Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance. He dances in a circle of flames, one foot on the ground and one off, showing that he is both within and transcending the world.
- The final representation of Shiva we will discuss is the lingam. A lingam is an object shaped like a pillar that represents Shiva's power. Many linga are set inside a yoni, which is shaped like a vulva.
- In Hinduism, there is a sense that female divine power, Shakti, is the active force of the cosmos; without it, the male deities would be powerless. The goddess can take many forms in Hinduism, from gentle and loving to playful and passionate to fierce and terrifying.
- Two of the most important goddesses are Durga and Kali. Durga is portrayed with numerous arms, many holding weapons, riding a lion and ready for battle. Kali is usually portrayed as dark with a long red tongue, blood dripping from her mouth, and wearing a necklace of skulls. She is considered a great protector.
- It is difficult for many Westerners to understand the appeal of the terrifying deities in Hinduism. Keep in mind that if God is behind



Ganesha, a popular Hindu deity, is the god of beginnings and new ventures.

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all phenomena, then the fearful aspects of existence—earthquakes, hurricanes, death—are parts of divine creation. Hindus, through these gods, face these realities directly.

The Worship of Deities

There are many ways to worship deities. Some of the most simple involve repetitively chanting the name of the deity or a short mantra associated with the deity, often accompanied by the movement of mala beads, a South Asian “rosary.”

- Sound also plays an important role in worship. We can see from the importance of chanting within the tradition. One sound is more important than all others: the sacred Sanskrit syllable “Om.”
- The rituals that take place in Hindu temples and homes are called pujas, and a large part of these rituals can be seen as a hospitality ritual, in which the devotee acts as a host to welcome the deity.
- If you visit a Hindu temple, in the main prayer room, you will remove your shoes. You will either stand or sit on the floor to observe rituals. The worshipper can receive a tilak to represent the blessing received at the puja.
- Keep in mind that many, though not all, Hindus are vegetarian. This is in part due to the Hindu concept of ahimsa, or nonviolence. Almost all Hindus refuse to eat beef, as the cow is considered worthy of reverence and its killing is legally forbidden in most of India.
- There are frequent festivals in India. Diwali is the autumn harvest festival of lights. Holi is a spring festival with connections to the color and fertility of the season and also to the stories of the gods and themes of love, sex, and play.
- India also features many major pilgrimages, including the largest gathering on earth: the Kumbha Mela. This pilgrimage occurs at three-year intervals along sacred rivers, such as the Ganges.

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- The path of devotion to the gods is vitally important to many Hindus. At the same time, there are other paths to liberation, from meditative introspection to selfless action to transformative knowledge.

Suggested Reading

- Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*.
- Eck, *Darsán*.
- Embree, Hay, and De Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*.
- Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*.
- Hawley and Narayanan, *The Life of Hinduism*.
- Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective*.
- , *The Sword and the Flute*.
- Matlins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*.
- Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*.
- Sharma, *Our Religions*.
- Smith, *The World's Religions*.
- Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of representing God in pictures or icons? How important are sensory experiences—sounds, smells, sights—in the worship of the divine?
2. How is it possible for such a diverse pantheon of Hindu gods to represent a single ultimate reality, Brahman?
3. Which of the Hindu gods would you choose to worship to connect you most closely with the divine?

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Gita to Gandhi—Yogas and Modern Hinduism

Lecture 5

The conversation between the warrior-prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna became one of the most important scriptures in the Hindu tradition—the Bhagavad Gita. The text has had a powerful impact on Indian thinkers and activists for centuries, and it was one of the books most valued by Mahatma Gandhi as well as Western thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Aldous Huxley.

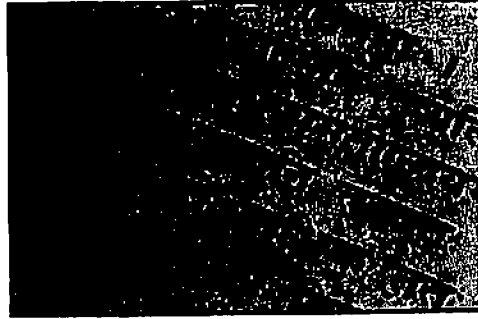
The Bhagavad Gita

- As Arjuna hesitates to fight, Krishna tells Arjuna that he must act in accordance with and only for the sake of his dharma. The message to the reader: Attachment to results brings desire, suffering, frustration, and anger. Rather, the disciplined person acts with commitment to duty.
- Krishna advises us that rather than being attached to the fruits of the action, the person performs the action as a sacrifice, offering up the action to the Lord.
- The climactic moment of the Gita occurs when Arjuna is given the opportunity to see Krishna in his entirety rather than through a single form—although he cannot do this with his own eyes (as our human eyes are too limited). He is given the divine eye, which makes it possible for a human being to see God directly.
- The text proceeds to describe the innumerable manifestations of Krishna, which completely overwhelm Arjuna. Arjuna wants to return to the familiar form. However, he—and we readers—know that this form serves as a focal point for our worship and a symbol that gestures beyond itself to the infinite.

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Paths to Liberation—Yogas

- The Gita presents a range of paths to liberation—yogas. “Yoga” means to tie together, or as many people interpret it, to unite. This is why many define yoga as “union.”
- While there are many forms of yoga, four are featured most prominently in the Gita. The first is Karma Yoga, the yoga of action. The second form is Bhakti Yoga, the yoga of devotion. The third is Jnana Yoga, the yoga of knowledge. And the fourth is Raja Yoga, or “royal yoga,” the yoga of meditation.
- The physical practice of yoga that features poses and breathwork is not a focus of the Gita. That discipline, Hatha Yoga, developed later.
- The Gita focuses a great deal on Karma Yoga; it rejects the idea of renunciation as giving up action, as that would undermine dharma and the social and cosmic orders. One acts but renounces the results of action.
- Gandhi believed that the central teaching of the Gita is selfless action. He wrote, “I was not built for academic writings. Action is my domain. What I understand, according to my lights, to be my duty ... I do. All my action is actuated by the spirit of service.”
- To the Gita’s synthesis of action and renunciation is added yet another element: devotion. The renouncing of the fruits of action to the deity brings action, renunciation, and devotion together. The element of devotion to the gods, bhakti, becomes one of the primary features of Hindu religion.



The Bhagavad Gita, written in ancient Sanskrit, has been one of the most influential texts of Hinduism from ancient times through today.

Notes

Chapter 10: Yoga and Modern Hinduism

- In Jnana Yoga, the yoga of knowledge, it is important to point out that knowledge here is transformative knowledge, a "knowing" of the deepest, liberating truths.
- The school of Indian philosophy that has had the greatest impact on modern Indian and Western thought is Vedanta. This system of philosophy examines the nature of the soul and ultimate reality.
- Another school that has been profoundly influential is Advaita Vedanta, or "nondualistic Vedanta." In this school, all of reality is one, and there is an identity between the individual soul, Atman, and ultimate reality, Brahman.
- Raja Yoga is the yoga of meditation, the contemplative path that leads the seeker through a series of practices that result in the direct experience of one's soul. The essence of this path is summed up as "yogas citta vritti nirodha." This means, "Yoga is the cessation of mental fluctuations" or "mental activity."
- A very important theme is contained in this passage: the importance of stilling the mind through a contemplative practice. In quieting the mind, we can come to see our true identity, in this case the soul.
- Patanjali set up a system known as Ashtanga Yoga, which means eight-limbed yoga. The eight limbs are: (1) moral principles; (2) observances (including external and internal bodily purification); (3) posture; (4) breath control; (5) withdrawal of senses; (6) concentration; (7) meditation; and finally, (8) samadhi, or pure contemplation/absorption. This is the state of resting completely in the spirit, with the total quieting of mental fluctuations.
- In the eight-limbed system of Patanjali, the third limb was posture. But the yoga sutra only says that posture of yoga should be steady and easy. The notion here is that the body must be in a stable, relaxed state to practice the limbs of breath control and meditation.

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- Centuries later, a form of yoga that focuses on postures and breath developed, which we know today as Hatha Yoga. The word "Hatha" means "effort," so Hatha Yoga requires the application of energy and will.
- Although the system dates back far earlier, the most famous early text of the tradition is the 15th-century *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. The text emphasizes that the poses, known as asanas, are not to be done for their own sake. Rather, they are to help one prepare to engage in Raja Yoga, the meditative path to liberation.
- Over time, systems of Hatha Yoga developed. Different poses had different effects: calming or energizing the body, helping with digestion, or healing illness. Yoga practice provides the benefits of strength, flexibility, and balance.
- The practice of yoga is connected with a particular understanding of anatomy. In the Indian system of anatomy, we have a subtle body of energy flow, in which our life force, or prana, flows along channels. These channels intersect at certain places in the body to create powerful centers, called chakras (circles/wheels). There is a chakra at the base of the spine, the genitals, the solar plexus, the heart, the throat and between the eyes.
- The chakra between the eyes corresponds with the "third eye," a source of a higher consciousness or wisdom. This chakra is sometimes called *bindu* (point or dot), as is the spiritual or ornamental cosmetic dot that is applied there.
- Finally, there is a chakra at the crown of the head that is the site of higher consciousness and the attainment of union, which can be seen as the connection of female energy (shakti) with male energy (shiva), and the union of the human and divine. In kundalini yoga one learns to cultivate the energy at the base of the spine so that it moves up the chakras, awakening each as it uncoils (one feels heat and energy traveling up the body).

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Those who commit themselves to the pursuit of liberation often seek out a guru, a spiritual teacher and guide. Communities of disciples often practice together in an ashram, a compound of devotees under the leadership of a guru.

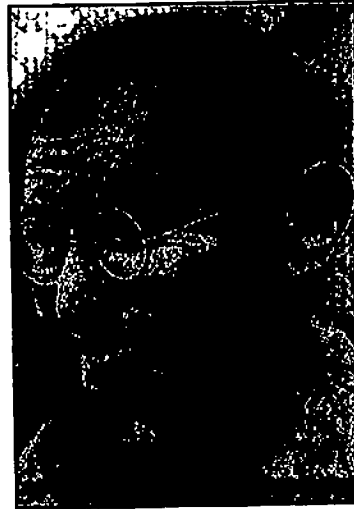
Hinduism and Recent Historical Change

While Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religious traditions, it has been undergoing continuous transformation from the time of its origins. Some dramatic changes have occurred by encounters with Enlightenment Western thought. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, developments within Hinduism took the shape of what became known as the Hindu Renaissance.

- Members of the reform movement emphasized reason and rejected elements of Hinduism they considered unethical, superstitious, or backward, such as icon worship, child marriage, caste and untouchability, and sati (widow burning).

Some of the changes in modern Hinduism happened as a result of British control of India, which ended with Indian independence in 1947. Many Indians, like Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, wanted India to have a secular government that would not favor any religion.

- Some Indian nationalists emphasized Hindu solidarity, often with an anti-Muslim undercurrent. A member of this group assassinated



Mahatma Gandhi, although a deeply spiritual man, favored a secular government for the newly independent India.

Mahatma Gandhi - Yoga and Modern Hinduism

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Gandhi because he ~~felt~~ that Gandhi was too accommodating toward Muslims.

- This form of Hindu nationalism, some of which takes very strident, militant forms, is still alive in India today. However, it is important to remember that throughout most of India, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others live peacefully side by side. Members of one religious tradition go to the temples and sacred sites of the other traditions. Hindus, for example, will often go to Sufi Islam shrines to receive blessings and pay homage.

Hinduism in South Asia and the West

- There is not a large community of converts to Hinduism in the West. Most Hindus are immigrants from India (or other parts of South Asia) and their children. In the West, Hindu parents must make a greater effort to maintain a connection with the community. Sunday schools and summer camps that teach Hinduism to children are increasingly common.
- While Hindu temples are very important, much of Hindu worship is based in the home. The homes of most observant Hindus have shrines to the deity or deities they worship. Pujas are performed every day, often by the oldest woman in the house. These pujas involve chanting mantras and offering flowers, food, incense, and light (*arati*) to the god.
- In India, people go to temples whenever they are moved to do so or on festival days. In America, many Hindu temples have adopted the weekly ritual schedule, with many temples offering Sunday worship given by knowledgeable members of the community, not by priests.
- The large Hindu temples in America feature virtually all of the most prominent deities, as they must serve Hindus from a range of backgrounds. The temple is not only a place for worship, but it is also a place for the community to come together.

Notes

One religious movement arose from Hindu foundations and took on new forms in the West: the Hare Krishnas. This devotional movement centers on the practice of chanting as follows: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare. Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

The movement was founded by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada who, in 1965 at the age of 70, arrived in New York and attracted many followers. Among them was the Beatle George Harrison. In Harrison's song, "My Sweet Lord," you will hear the Hare Krishna chant in the background. After his death, Harrison's ashes were scattered in the Ganges.

- The stream of Hinduism has undergone continuous change. If you attend a yoga class or talk about your karma, Hinduism has already had an impact on you. Hinduism is now truly a world religion.

Suggested Reading

Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*.

Embree, Hay, and De Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*.

Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*.

Gandhi, Mahatma. *The Essential Gandhi*.

———, *Gandhi, an Autobiography*.

Gelberg, *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna*.

Hawley and Narayanan, *The Life of Hinduism*.

Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*.

Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective*.

Matlins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*.

Miller, *The Bhagavad-Gita*.

Patañjali and Stoler Miller, *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom*.

Schiffman, *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness*.

Sharma, *Our Religions*.

Smith, *The World's Religions*.

Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of the idea that there are different practices leading to liberation for people with different dispositions? Are you more drawn to practices based on action, contemplation, knowledge, or devotion? In what ways can these be combined?
2. Have you ever practiced Hatha Yoga? What was your experience of it? In what ways might a practice involving physical movements be considered a spiritual practice?
3. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says, "Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action. Be impartial to failure and success." What do you think of that idea? Is it an attainable goal? A desirable one?

Notes: