

# Textbook

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## 1 Perspectives on the Religious Path

**The Sacred** “is the focal point of religion, the ground of ultimate vitality, value, and meaning. The various modes of experiencing the sacred and the responses to this experience is what makes up the religious traditions of the world.

### 1.1 Studying Religious Experience

Some scholars approach the study of religion using scientific methodology to develop theories that explain religious activities like any other human activity. Others believe that scholars should just describe the phenomenon of religion as it actually exists and as it is interpreted by its practitioners.

### 1.2 Some Dimensions of Religion

The word religion comes from the latin *religio* which means bond or link.

Key dimensions of religion:

- human involvement in the realm of the sacred
- expressed in thought, action, and social forms
- a total system of symbols with deep meaning
- path of ultimate transformation

#### 1.2.1 Human Involvement in Realm of Sacred

This suggests a relationship between two levels of experience, that of the limited human level and that of the sacred level. Basic to human experience is a deep sense of the *numinous* (a word stemming from latin for holy/sacred). The numinous has an unlimited, primordial, overpowering quality which leads to us to say that the sacred is ultimate, the basis of everything else, and nothing can supersede or encompass it. The human reaction to experiencing the sacred is called *mysterium tremendum* which means terrifying mystery because it evokes awe in us. Since the sacred is the source of ultimate value, the deepest need of human life is to have a relationship with it.

#### 1.2.2 Expression in Thought, Action, and Social Forms

**Religious Tradition** It is suggested that there are three modes of religious expression that combined make up religious tradition.

- theoretical: thinking or speaking
- practical: doing or acting
- social: fellowship or community

**Theoretical Mode** sets forth a way of thinking about the most important issues of life. You can talk about it through narrative (story or myth) or doctrine (theoretical statements)

**Practical Mode** is the expression that has to do with religions visible and performed side.

**Social Forms** is religion as it is experienced by the group. The community is what carries religious tradition forward.

### 1.2.3 Total System of Symbols

Religion guides and gives meaning by presenting a whole view of the world through the use of **symbols**. If we imagine all that a human knows as a circle of the symbols important to them, then all the symbols will have a central vision which is colored by their religion. The symbols closest to the center are the **primary symbols** which are essential to those of that religious path. Towards the outside of the circle are the **secondary symbols** which change easily with new experiences. Religious tradition is not static. When we consider a symbol we must view it in its total context as the same symbol may have many meanings.

### 1.2.4 Path of Ultimate Transformation

Religion is a way of life, a path of transformation to ultimate meaning. Basically we recognize our fractured relationship with the sacred and use religion to make our way back to it.

## 1.3 Basic Human Concerns and Religious Responses

We explore religious responses through three areas of questions:

- Sacred Story
- Worlds of Meaning
- Ritual Practices and the Good life

### 1.3.1 Sacred Story and Historical Context

Individuals tend to connect their own story with the sacred story of their religion. Frequently the story of the founding or the revealing of the religious path is important as it frequently ties divine authority to one's religious identity.

**Myths** are stories that form the central focus by which people express their religious identity. There is always one *master story* more important than the other.

Our understanding of religious tradition comes from it being passed down between generations, which gives it a dynamic quality as each generation puts their own spin on it.

### 1.3.2 Worlds of Meaning

Often the power encountered in the world gets personified as gods or spirits resulting in *polytheism*. In most of these religions there is a supreme god (a creator or one who wield absolute authority) that delegates power to other gods. If there is only one god it's called *monotheism*. Some religions are **nondualism** which means that there is no difference between the two realities (real, and sacred). **Monism** is the view that all reality is one unified divine reality. Within monism there might be gods but they are facets of the one sacred reality.

Many religions try to deal with the big questions through **cosmogonic stories** about the creation and maintenance of the world. Frequently the world is created as the result of a divine being's actions and it is humanity's role to assist this being in their work. Through this we start to get the concept of an *ideal human existence*. By having this ideal to work towards humans can evaluate their actions and make changes to move toward it.

Many religions have a path that leads you to a transformation away from the "badness" of the world and towards a more perfect life. A religious path presents methods of interaction with the realm of the sacred so that this sacred power can transform your life. Some religions emphasize that humans cannot transform themselves alone and must rely on outside forces to help them and others emphasize the exact opposite. One of the distinctive characteristics of a religion

is its particular vision of the interaction between human practice and sacred gift usually through the modes of religious expression. The path to follow usually involves distancing yourself from badness and moving toward goodness.

The path to transformation is a means and an end. You want to reach the ideal state but you also are experiencing the sacred just by being on the path.

### 1.3.3 Ritual Practices and the Good Life

Most cultures allocate **sacred time** in which you practice ritual. It is thought that humans could not tolerate the meaningless chaos that would evolve from a life without special or “strong” times to provide centers of meaning. This is often called “re-creation” because we are recreating our connection with the sacred. It is at these times that we feel we are contemporaries with the spirits and heroes of our myths. Rituals also reorient our life back in line with the sacred path. They also connect the sacred to average life to remind us that it's always there.

There needs to be an emptying out called **kenosis** of the power of life. This allows renewal to take place. This is followed by a filling up called **plerosis** where the renewing power of the sacred can be felt. Often there is an in-between state called **liminal** where you return to a sort of prebirth existence.

Rituals are often repeating on patterns of varying length but they can also occur at important life cycle changes and only happen once (usually on an individual basis).

Most religions also have rituals to bring about healing and wholeness to a person. This often entails the creation of sacred time in which the individual can tap the powers of the sacred to heal. Frequently the community helps.

Religion is most often expressed through art because interaction with the sacred is based on perception (aka *aesthesis*). Art can point beyond itself to the sacred dimension and this act of symbolizing the sacred also works to share it somehow. Sometimes art is there to represent the sacred and other times it just presents it (presenting the sacred allows you to experience it while representing it is more informative). Art can evoke experience of the sacred much better than rational and logical attempts because it is so much more expressive. Often times religious architecture tries to embody *axis mundi* which is the center of the world when planning their orientation. Sometimes art can be too evocative and be considered idolatry (worship of an idol) which is not ok in some religions. Religious art of the east emphasizes intuitional, meditative, aesthetic experience while religious art of the west emphasizes word, intelligence, and logic.

Most religious societies gain their structure from their master story. This can result in religious leaders whose power is derived from their office or religious leaders that derive power from their own charisma.

Almost all of our understanding of religion is from a male-centric point of view. Very rarely are there predominant females in myths or in places of power, and if there were little is known about them.

Many religions have a sacred place usually established in their master story as the center of the world. A sacred land provides a feeling of rootedness which is why it is so very important to most religions.

All religions have a *sacred history* usually outlining what their gods did and such. It is in these texts that the good life is usually defined. The ethical life is how we should be and usually based on the religious vision of creation and human nature. This is usually decreed by some higher being outside oneself that we then internalize and make part of our life. Ethical life centers around controlling your desires and transforming them into something good to best serve your community. Many religions view their ethics as the truth and thus feel a responsibility to spread it to others so that they may live the good life as well.

## 1.4 Key Terms

**Aesthetic** concerning beauty or artistic perception, important for religious expression.

**Cosmogenic Myth** sacred story that tells of the creation or founding of the world and of basic human realities.

**Ethics** thought and study about moral decisions on the basis of traditions of right and wrong.

**Healing Rituals** religious rituals devoted to promoting health, often complementary to modern medical practices.

**Kenosis** “emptying out”; in ritual, the movement of separation or doing away with the old state

**liminal** in ritual, the state between separation and restoration

**Monism** view that all reality is one unified divine reality

**Monotheism** belief in one almighty god, separate from the world

**Myth** story about sacred beings in the beginning time, telling how existence came to be as it is and providing the pattern for authentic life

**Nondualism** view that ultimate reality and the phenomenal world are not different

**Path of Transformation** practice in a religious tradition that changes one from the wrong state to the right state

**Plerosis** “filling up”; fulfillment or restoration movement of ritual

**Polytheism** belief that many divine powers share in the world’s operation

**Religious Traditions** sacred stories and basic ideas and practices that religious communities hand over from generation to generation; that which is handed over (Latin traditio) is thought to maintain a recognizable unity even while changing over time

**Rites of Passage** rituals connected with the critical changes or passages in a person’s life

**Rituals** activities of many kinds that connect people with sacred realities

**Sacred Space** space that is made special by connection with the sacred, providing orientation for a people

**Sacred Story** master story of a religion, providing identity for the adherents

**Sacred Time** special time of ritual and festival, when mythic events are made present once more

**The Sacred** “what is experienced as ultimate reality that is the ground of ultimate value and meaning

**Symbols** words, pictures, ideas, rituals, and so on that evoke deep meanings by connecting with sacred reality

**Transformation** the act of reaching the ideal state

**Understanding** “standing under” another’s way of thought and life, comprehending it by reference to one’s own experience

**Worship** respectful ritual activity in special times, directed toward sacred beings or realities of ultimate value

## 2 Hindu Sacred Story and Historical Context

The word hindu stems from the persian word meaning indian. The only people of india that wouldn't be classified as hindus are those that do not respect the Vedic scriptures and social class structure they describe.

### 2.1 Foundations of the Hindu Tradition

Hinduism does not have a specific founder. This faith places little emphasis on historical events or people, most things happen in a transcendental time frame. The vedic scriptures are considered timeless and eternal. The events described in their epics are said to have happened hundreds of thousands of years ago during various mythic ages. They do not attempt to fit their religious events and people into human time frames, giving them a eternal religious truth.

#### 2.1.1 The Formative Period

The hindu story probably started with the Aryans in the indus valley, as their sacred text was the Vedas. The aryaans migrated to india around 2000 BCE and absorbed some of the indigenous peoples religions into the formative hinduism they practiced. The civilization of the indus valley was very advanced (enough to rival the egyptians) with its own writing system and advanced agricultural techniques. It had two major cities, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa were major centers for religion and government. There was a uniformity of culture throughout this civilization (all cities were laid out with the same plan) which implies it was controlled by powerful rulers.

The IVC (indus valley civilization) had a great reverence for water, each house had a bathroom and the major city centers had large water tanks for ritual bathing. The concept of water purification is also prevalent in hinduism. The region also greatly worships fertility and cycles (as an agriculturally based people this makes sense) which may have influenced the concept of samsara in hinduism. They also worshiped the male fertility power with many phallic symbols. Most interesting of all is a recurring figure of what appears to be a man doing yoga. It has been suggested that this figure grew into Shiva, a great yogi that is often symbolized in a lingam (a phallic symbol). The IVC started declining around 1900 BCE due to geological changes (extreme dryness).

After the IVC died out the Aryans moved into the area. The aryaans were pastoralists and splintered into tribes with chieftans. They had a three caste society (priests, warriors, and herders, sound familiar). They domesticated horses and invented the chariot and were quite good at metal working. The aryaans didn't have a writing system for a long time, so the Vedas were ritual hymns and shared through word of mouth, supposedly it was heard by the poet-prophets of old. This is how hinduism was formed. The four Smritis were collections of the original hymns, also called the Vedas.

The **rig-veda** is the oldest and most important collection. The **sama-veda** contains the verses to be sung to music during the sacrifice. The **yajur veda** had formulas to be spoken by the priest who performed the physical component of the ritual. the **atharva veda** contained incantations for priests to use during various other events (childbirth, illness, etc), kind of like spells.

The worship of the gods centered around sacrifice, petition, and praise. They resided in three realms, sky, atmosphere, and earth. The sanskrit word for god *deva* means shining. The gods were the powers that create life and growth in the many things around us (wind, fire, speech, consciousness, etc). There are many gods so we'll look at the four most commonly mentioned in the rig-veda.

**Varuna** is the god of the vault of the sky. He guards the cosmic order (called *rita*). He does this by watching humans and punishing their wrongdoings with disease (he catches them with his noose) so you must petition him to remove these effects.

**Indra** is the god of the atmosphere (storm, lightning, thunder, and so on). He is a boisterous god that like to drink and lead people into battle (think of Thor). He is famous for defeating the demon *vritra* who had shut up the waters and the sun.

**Agni** is the god of fire, he resides in the third realm (earth). He is most important as the god of the sacrificial fire, he accepts the sacrificial offerings and transports them to the realm of the gods. This makes him the priest of the gods.

**Soma** god of soma, an intoxicating drink, also resides on earth. This drink is often offered to the gods as a sacrifice. He represents exstacy and the power of those that have experience the divine.

The aryaans believed that life centered around the *atman* or breath/should of a person. This lived on after death and by means of a funeral fire sacrifice could be transported to the heavenly realm (depended on their deeds in life). Most devotion to the gods came in the form of fire sacrifice. It would be done daily by the head of the house and in more complex ceremonies by the priests. It was believed that the gods would come and sit with you to enjoy the sacrifice and listen to your petitions. It was believed that these sacrifices were necessary to help sustain the gods so that they could continue their work on earth.

Hinduism entered a speculative period around 1000 BCE which resulted in the **Bramanas** and the **Upanishads**. The sages start to think that some power prior to the gods is the origin of everything and they start looking for the sacred center. They try to describe it and even personify it has a giant man called *purusha*. It is when Purusha is sacrificed that the universe comes into existence. This means that when a priest is enacting a sacrifice he is mimicing the primordeial sacrifice. Purusha also becomes the classes.

- mouth - priest class
- arms - warrior class
- thighs - merchant class
- feet - servant class

This is the first time the hindu caste system is mentioned in the vedas. This means that the caste system is of cosmic order. It also marks a transition where the priest class is now at the top where the warrior class used to be.

This period also showed an increase in the importance placed on knowledge. It is not just the sacrifice that is important but the inner knowledge that powers the blessing.

There isnt a clear break between the brahmanas and the upanishads. These combined with the vedic hymns are collectively known as the vedas. The brahmanas outlined new rituals that had exploded in complexity. The upanishads looked more into the inner truth of reality and the cause of human problems. Upanishad may come from the notion of teachers passing down knowledge (upa = near, ni = down, sad = sit).

This is the point at which “repeated death” is introduced. This is the concept of a death that ends all future lives. This is something to be feared but it grows into the concept of samsara and our need to escape it. The upanishad concludes that samsara is the cause of human suffering. The suffering you go through is caused by the karma attached to your atma from a previous life.

The upanishads continue to speculate on the one source of all and eventuall name it **Brahman** which is prior to all that is know, including samsara. From this they derive that knowledge of brahman could bring you liberation from samsara, called **moksha**. This meant that it is through inner knowledge that you can reach the divine and not external sacrifice.

The vedic hymns, brahmanas, and upanishads are collectively called the **shruti**, that which was “heard” by the sages, and form the basis of hindu belief.

### 2.1.2 The Many Faces of Hindu Tradition

Many powerful nations had started to form in the area and these gave rise to challenging faiths to Hinduism. Two such movements were Jainism and Buddhism, both of which strongly opposed the sacrifices used in hinduism. Jainists focused on asceticism (self control) and buddhists emphasized discipline and knowledge. In the midst of all this unrest, Alexander the Great invaded in 400 BCE and the Maryuna family created a dynasty in northern india that expanded greatly. This dynasty was not very loyal to the vedic faith and frequently converted to buddhism. Eventually unity was refound around 500 CE.

During this period of great upheaval many different religious traditions were formed. They tended to focus in a number of directions, later denoted *margas* (paths). This period was known as the epic period due to all these changes. Many new writings were composed and they are referred to as the **smriti** or what was remembered. They include the yogas sutras (yoga sutras of patanjali), the dharmasutras (the law-code of marnu), and the epics(ramayana and mahabharata).

**Yoga** A common concept in vedic ritual is the withdrawal from society and practicing ascecitism as you should have the utmost control of yourself. The image given is that the body is the chariot and the soul is the charioteer. Yoga takes withdrawal one step farther and aims to withdraw even from mental activity. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali outline

an eight-step method for discipline and control which is sometimes called royal yoga. This writing is often considered scripture.

**Dharma** Dharma is another name for the cosmic order (the thing guarded by Varuna) and many sages spent much time trying to outline what that is. In the Dharma Sutras they attempt to picture an idealized society. This often lead to tension with the pursuit of moksha that required withdrawing from society, but this is considered just a facet of the hindu faith. The Law of Manu is considered the laws of the cosmic order as passed down by Manu, the originator of man. It outlines the rights and responsibilities of the four classes (also called varnas) in hindu society. This was probably an attempt to order society after a time of great chaos and upheaval but came to be very influential and still practiced today.

**Ramayana** These epics outline the ideals of hindu values in a perfect history. It does not reflect actual events though. The Ramayana is the story of Vishnu and his fights with demonic forces. The hero of the story is **Rama** and prince that was born as an **avatara** (incarnation) of Vishnu. The villain is Ravana the demon king of the island Lanka. Rama fights a great war with the demon to save his wife Sita with the help of some monkey people lead by their chief Hanuman. During this time he sets a model for the ideal ruler. He accepts 14 years of exile instead of questioning his father's rash decision and even exiles his beloved wife because his subjects question her chastity and it was causing unrest. Rama is still considered a great hero and has a festival Ramlila every autumn.

**Mahabharata** The Mahabharata outlines the conflict between two clans in northern India. The heroes are the five Pandava brothers who have a conflict with their cousins about who will rule. It is a long and rambling tale, but the most famous part is the Bhagavad-Gita (song of the beloved one) in which one brother, Arjuna is overcome with grief when he sees that his enemies contain many good people. He says that he would rather die than inflict such pain. His charioteer is Krishna (an avatara of Vishnu) and he explains that he must do his duty as a warrior. He explains that although he will be killing their bodies, their atman will continue much like shedding clothes. He also explains that action done without desire (for reward) is higher than not acting. So you can seek liberation by taking selfless action which helps ease the tension between seeking moksha through withdrawal and the need to maintain society. Krishna also explains that liberation can be achieved through **bhakti** (the love of the gods), he says that the highest path is selfless action and wisdom through loving and surrendering to the gods. In this way the Gita summarizes the three paths to liberation.

## 2.2 Continuing Transformation in the Hindu Story

Unlike many other religions, hinduism doesn't have a clear end to its scripture, it can continue to evolve limitlessly.

### 2.2.1 Shaping the Sacred Ways: Puranas and Tantras

An explosion of bhakti resulted in many devotional cults to various gods. The new line of kings united northern India and gave strong worship to Vishnu. A series of stories called the **Puranas** were published about the various gods and devotion to them. Many stories focus on Vishnu, his wife Lakshmi, and his avatara Krishna.

A great revival of Vishnu bhakti swept through India as led by *Chaitanya*. It introduced parades and singing and dancing as shows of devotion. He also synthesized Krishna worship and built many temples. These practices are still carried on today even in North America through the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (aka Hare Krishna).

Shiva is the god of dualities so his stories have a different tone. He is creation and destruction, male and female, so on. Shiva is a great yogi so many of his followers were ascetics and yogis. Worship of him became very prevalent in southern India. The largest group was called the *Shaiva Siddhanta* and they had their own sacred texts equal to the Vedas called the *Agamas*. Another group called the *Virashaiva* protested the caste system and refused to go through the initiation ceremony. They also were called the *Lingayats* because they wore the lingam (Shiva's symbols).

In conjunction with the growing worship of Shiva, a group started worshipping his wife Shakti. Since Shiva embodies all dualities it was believed that Shakti was his power personified. Sometimes she was called Parvati or Uma. Shakti herself is also worshiped as a separate goddess through her three avatars Durga, Kali, and Devi. The relationship between these three is muddled, but Kali and Durga are vicious and destructive. Durga is famous for saving the world from a demon. Devi is worshiped as the divine mother. Kali is said to have emerged from when Durga became furious while fighting demons. She's scary as shit DO NOT CROSS KALI. Weirdly enough there are many people who worship Kali, the destructive mother, specifically.

**Tantrism** This is the pursuit of moksha through elaborate rituals including yoga and the worship of the great Goddess. It focused on uniting the dualities, specifically that of Shiva (intelligence) and Shakti (creativity). The right handed path involved matras, mandalas, and yoga to activate Shakti to unite it with Shiva. The left handed path was only for advanced practitioners, it involved a special ritual called circle-worship, and using forbidden elements. The forbidden elements (called the M's since all their names in sanskrit start with M) are wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and sexual intercourse. This is often frowned upon by traditional hindus.

### 2.2.2 Rethinking the Vedic Truth: Philosophical Systems

Many people spent a lot of time and thought on the philosophical underpinnings of the Hindu tradition. Through this extensive questioning 6 schools or darshanas (meaning view points) evolved.

- Samkhya
- Yoga
- Nyaya
- Vaisheshika
- Mimamsa
- Vedanta

**Nyaya** (school of logic) used logic as a means to reach liberation.

**Vaisheshika** (atomistic school) used cosmology as a means to reach liberation.

**Mimamsa** focused on the eternality of the vedas and thus how important vedic rituals are to dharma.

**Samkhya-Yoga** focused highly on the 8 stage path taught by Patanjali. This was combined with the samkhya's map of the cosmos and the causes of bondage. It talks about the duality of pure matter (a person's body and mind) and pure spirit (the transcendent consciousness). Bondage stems from the mind mistaking itself for the pure spirit and we must pull these apart to reach moksha.

**Vedanta** focused on the teachings of the Upanishads concerning Brahman. They focus on the union of atman and brahman and the correct knowledge (jnana). **Shankara** was a famous thinker in this school that wrote many very influential commentaries on the upanishads and the bhagavad-gita. He focused on the fact that brahman does not have a duality and thus is identical to the atman. He believes that our problem is that we view the world as changing and the way to liberation is through meditation to break this illusion.

**Advaita** believed in the nondualist vedantic view, founded by Shankara. There are no permanent individual selves and no samsara, these are all illusions. This implied that devotion to a god will not bring liberation because even the gods are just an illusion. There are different levels of truth and for those at a lower level, devotion to a god can lead you to spiritual understanding.

**Vishishtadvaita** founded by **Ramanuja** believed that withing reality there is a distinction between the self and god.

### 2.2.3 Muslim Presence and Impact on India

A great expansion of Islam spread throughout southern asia. By the thirteenth century muslim was dominant in northern india. Many clashes occurred between the two very different religions resulting many temples being replaced by mosques and heavy religious restrictions. The two religions heavily influenced each other and their ideas.



## 2.3 The Modern Era: Renaissance and Response to the West

When England arrived in India a bunch of stuff changed, they introduced Christianity and English and many other European things.

### 2.3.1 Reform Movement and Thinkers

Western ideas brought to India led to people questioning the caste system. A man named *Ram Mohan* spoke out against abuses in the Hindu system (polytheism, neglect of women's education, and burning a widow alive at her husband's cremation). He founded the *Brahmo Samaj* to advocate a rationalistic religion without the Hindu rituals and customs. This society later broke away from the Vedas by arguing that reason and conscience are the authority of religion. This group still advocated for ethical reform until it collapsed due to internal arguing.

The *Arya Samaj* was founded by Swami Dayanada Sarasvati also wanting to restore Hindu purity. He rejected the Puranas and all the popular gods of Hindu as well as the caste system. In his book he argued that Hindus should only rely on the original Vedas and all other religions had perverted this truth, it should be the source of all science as well. Anyone can study the Vedas and women should have more rights. In its work for social reform the Arya Samaj was very similar to the Brahmo Samaj, but they strongly rejected Western influence.

**Ramakrishna Paramahansa** he was a temple priest for Kali, but he worshiped many other gods. He practiced worship through a trance-like state. Weirdly enough he also followed Western disciplines from Christianity to Islam. He used these experiences to expand Hindu to incorporate any tradition of worship. This was based on his belief that the ultimate reality could be experienced by any one of any religion. His disciple Swami Vivekananda traveled the world spreading Hindu.

### 2.3.2 Independence and New Visions: Gandhi and Aurobindo

Gandhi was the leader of the independence movement in India to get away from Britain and remove Muslim influence. He was heavily influenced by the Bhagavad-Gita and the sermon of the mount and he used these to develop the philosophy of *satyagraha* (holding the truth) which is an act of nonviolent resistance that awakens guilt in your opponent. He lived an ascetic life with his wife and his spinning wheel which became the symbol of his movement.

Aurobindo was a contemporary of Gandhi that retreated from the world to practice tantric yoga and rewrite his books that described that spiritual reality can be found through the practice of an all-encompassing discipline of yoga.

## 2.4 Hindu Worlds of Meaning

### 2.4.1 The Ultimate Real: Brahman

Hindus often refer to two levels of truth when referring to Brahman. There is the 'formed' Brahman which is personified for worship and the 'unformed' Brahman which is more a force of nature. The Brahman without attributes (unformed) is called *nirguna* and is often described by saying what it is not, this is the highest truth. The Brahman with attributes is called *saguna* and is the creative power of the universe. Usually this is for experiencing Brahman in a personal sense called *isvara*. When you become enlightened you gain knowledge that the physical world is an illusion, called *maya* superimposed on the one reality, Brahman. It is through closer inspection that we can come to know this.

The above concept of two levels of truth is called *dualism* and its main proponent is *Shankara*.

### 2.4.2 God as Supreme Sacred Reality

Many philosophers argued the opposite of Shankara and said that the personal experience of Brahman (*saguna*) is the highest truth. This movement was led by *Ramanuja*. He was a dualist that was very devoted to Vishnu. He argued that *saguna* Brahman was like your soul's soul. God is the ultimate reality and so worshipping him is the highest truth.

The Bhagavad-Gita presents Vishnu as the highest god and in essence Brahman. He is the creator and preserver of the world and his wife Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and abundance. When the world is threatened by demons he embodies one of his avatars to go fight (as seen in the Ramayana epic). The Vaishnavites worship him.

Many worship Shiva as the ultimate reality as they feel that the duality of his nature better represents the ultimate reality. A story in the puranas shows brahman and vishnu arguing and a large pole separating them from which the sacred om emerges. It is revealed that this pillar is shivas lingum and they worship him. He represents all dualities, yoga, and divine dancing. His lingum is the axis of the universe. He is worshiped by the shaivites.

Some people worship Shakti (shiva's wife) as supreme. She has many different forms and is usually associated with shiva. Durga is often worshiped for her power in fighting demons and protecting the world. A demon was set to attack the world and he was impervious to everything except a woman so the gods pooled all their power and formed durga, thus she is the embodiment of the strength of all the male gods. Her fury becomes Kali. She can also use her power to nourish the world. Some hindus believe there is a unified goddess Devi (Goddess) or Mahadevi (great goddess). Shakti (power) is applied to her because it is the creative force.

## 2.5 Existence in the World: Dharma and Samsara

### 2.5.1 The World and Human Nature in Hindu Thought

The penultimate truth of the world is that *the world is here, it is real, it functions by the eternal Dharma, the gods work to keep it going, and humans have the duty to contribute to its welfare.*

Dharma is the main source of truth when you are trying to understand how you should live. It is the eternal order of things so this makes sense, The word Dharma means to "sustain" or "support" and in hindu it kinda means the essential foundation. Originally it was similar to the vedic word rita which was the universal harmony of everything.

**Creation Stories** The original version of creation is that the world was formed from the sacrifice of Purusha. A story in the upanishads has the first man get so lonely he falls into two people and they breed and shapechange to create all life. A similar story has the primordial one desire to become many and in the heat of this evolve into the entirety of creation. The last creation story tells of Vishnu who is Brahman unified (he has spirit, matter, and time united in him). He decides to play and creates the whole universe through uniting those three things and creates a vast egg resting on the cosmic waters. He enters this egg as Brahman and creates the three worlds (earth, sky, atmosphere) and populates them. Finally he becomes the preserver of the world. When the world becomes exhausted he kills it and takes a nap until it is time to create a new one.

**Time** The last of those stories fits the concept of cycles that is prevalent in the hindu belief. It has time broken up into smaller cycles, *yugas*, set within larger cycles, *kalpas* which denote times between the world creation and destruction. Each kalpa is 1000 mahayugas which are 4 320 000 years. Each mahayuga has four lesser yugas which degenerate until a renewal happens in the new mahayuga. Each kalpa is one day of brahman and the resting time between kalpas is one night. They believe that Brahman will live for 100 years of 360 days. Then the process reverses itself until there is just vishnu ... until he decides to play again.

**Humans Selves** Hindus believe that there is a *real* self and an *empirical* self. The empirical self is made of the elements (earth, water, light, wind, and ether) and includes the subtle body made of vital breaths, the organs of action, and the organs of knowledge. The real self is the atman

### 2.5.2 Samsara and the Problem of Existence

Hindus view the cycle of rebirth as bad, but they still view the value of happiness in life.

This section is just a rehash of samsara, karma, and moksha.

## 2.6 Three Paths to Transformation and Liberation

### 2.6.1 The Path of Knowledge

Also known as **jnana-marga**

The end goal is to understand that you are brahman and thus earn release from samsara. You must know this in more than your mind since your subtle self is still tied to samsara. It is because we don't know this we view our material self as the main concern and thus are trapped by worldly desires. If we understood that we are brahman we would have no worldly desires because we are all. Knowing this breaks all desires and thus all karma and thus achieves moksha.

This path requires education and spiritual perfection so only the elite can really follow it. The first step is to become a **sannyasin**, a renouncer, as someone who renounces worldly possessions (including ties to other humans). Some people cannot fully renounce everything so they take partial steps. Yoga involves moral restraints and withdrawing the senses inward. Meditation is the most common activity in the path of knowledge. This is usually the process of withdrawing your consciousness inward, away from reality, to allow yourself to experience brahman. OM or AUM is often used in meditation. A stands for the waking state with consciousness turned outward, U stands for the dreaming state with consciousness turned inward, M stands for the deep-sleep state which is the blissful unified consciousness, and the silence between is the end goal of experiencing brahman.

### 2.6.2 Path of Action

Also known as **karma-marga**

The path of knowledge is the only real way to achieve moksha, but only a few can start on that path. When we act out of desire it generates hot karma which negatively effects our rebirth. Action done without desire creates cool karma and positively effects our rebirth. After enough good karma has been accumulated you will be reborn as someone with enough spiritual purity to follow the path of knowledge. One way to act without desire is to fulfill your dharma.

### 2.6.3 Path of Devotion

Also known as **bhakti-marga**

Not everyone can follow the path of knowledge and our own desires may get in the way of us following the path of action so a third path is needed. This is spiritual purity through love of the gods. Many believe that specific gods are actually brahman and by devoting yourself to them so fully as to forget all worldly desires (self-surrender) they can help you achieve liberation (it works the same way as the path of knowledge in that you become one with brahman through love). Frequently groups of people were banned from reading the vedas and following the path of knowledge, but anyone can follow the path of devotion.

**Vishnu** Worshipers of Vishnu (vaishnavites) can feel him throughout all of creation and its continued existence or through his avatars. A common theme in stories of Vishnu (in particular Krishna) is the lovable nature of god as he is reborn amongst humans. God invites us with port and pay to share in the divine self-delight. Krishna frequently goes to earth and falls in love with women leading some to believe that the highest form of loving a god is to be their lover and surrender to them in ecstasy.

**Shiva** Worshipers of Shiva (shaivites) are all about experiencing him in the duality of the world. He is very wild and destructive. He also embodies the tension between erotic powers and ascetic powers, he is both the great ascetic but also wildly attracted to parvati. In one story he destroys **Kama** the god of desire and uses his desire for parvati to bring him back as all life needs kama for fertility. His worshipers often practice yoga and are ascetics, they feel great guilt for being separated from him. Usually they experience him through his immense holiness.

**Shakti** Worshipers of Shakti use many different names for her but all are worshipping the great goddess. They believe that she represents the energy active at the heart of the world. Some tantric practitioners even worship Kali and confront her head on as the source of fear which must be overcome, others view her as a mother that they must cling to like children. It is through her cruelty that Kali taught her children to abandon worldly desires.

## 3 Hindu Ritual and the Good Life

### 3.1 Rituals and Sacred Times of Hinduism

#### 3.1.1 Vedic Rituals and Puja

Hinduism centers on spiritual purity where interaction with the sacred powers is essential but obstacles in human life can limit it. Many bodily functions are considered polluting (for instance menstrating) so the morning devotions should happen after a purifying bath.

**Vedic Rituals and Sacrifice** The most common ritual is the sacrifice of food and drink to a sacred fire which then takes the sacrifice to the gods. This can be done simply in the home (for instance to the house's sacred fire) or in large scale events that brahmins lead. Frequently in times of disaster people will turn to brahmins to try to get the grace of the gods back through ritual. The most important verse is the *Gayatri* which is the first words of veda and said to hold the whole power of the vedas. When this is recited in the morning and at night it destroys the effect of bad deeds, drives away darkness, and harmonizes your mind.

**Puja: Celebrating the Powerful Presence of God** Vedic rituals are usually limited in who can practice them (women and the slave class were banned) but the act of worshipping a god, called **puja** is not. These are usually rituals performed in the presence of the divine image at a temple or domestic shrine. The image is usually created by sacred craftsmen who build it according to special iconography and then a ritual is used to call down the presence of the god. The large icons at temples are usually very carefully tended to as they treat it like a visiting dignitary. Puja at a temple begins with purification, calling the god, and greet them with respect. The god is honored with **kirtana** which is devotional worship (could be in the form of singing, music, dancing, offerings, marking your self, or any number of other acts). The worshiper then holds their hands over a sacred fire and touches their forehead. The aim is to see the god, called **darshana**, and thus know them better. The gods have food prepared for them and some of it is given to worshipers and it is called **prasad**. The worshipers eat this food and thus accept the blessing of the god.

#### Ascetic and Meditational Practices: Yoga

Sacrificial fire has always been very important in hindu tradition and meditation frequently looks to internalize the heat and power from sacrifice. Many forms of meditation are spoken of as yoga. Most spiritual practices are called a yoga. There are many different variations and practices from the well known western version to sitting in a circle of fire. All of these stem from the classic eight-stage system from Patanjali's yogasutras. He aims to find discriminative knowledge to tell the difference between the physical/mental reality (prakriti) and the true nature (purusha).

##### Ethical values

- moral self restraints(yama) - getting you life in moral order through nonviolence, truthfulness, not stealing, sensual restraint, and not being greedy (don't be an asshole)
- moral commitments(niyama) - laying the moral foundation of purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-education, and dedication to god

##### Physical Practices

- Postures(asana) - involving steadiness, endurance, equilibrium, relaxation, and meditation on the infinite
- regulation of vital energy through breath(pranayama) - controlling the energy of the mind-body system by breath exercises
- withdrawal of senses(pratyahara) - eliminating mental distraction from the sense-organs so that all powers of consciousness can be focused inward on the source of being

##### Cultivation of consciousness

- concentration(dharana) - one pointed mental concentration
- meditation(dhyana) - sustained attention to the object
- meditative trance(samadhi) - the culminating experience in which the object of meditation vanishes and the mind wells to encompass a limitless reality

## Ceremonies, Festivals, and Pilgrimages

**Daily Rituals** Many small ceremonies happen on a daily basis for the devout. They rise before the sun to meditate, bathe, and offer puja before breakfast. This sequence may be performed again before sunset for brahmans. Some very orthodox houses give five sacrifices daily (study the vedas, food to the gods, water to the ancestors, food to the brahmans and students, and food to all beings). The kitchen is a sacred place as the ceremony of serving food is one most hindus have time to follow. The food is often encircled with water and mantras are chanted which turn the food into prasad.

**Festival Calendar** Villiage wide ceromonies are a bigger deal but the typical villiage will have over 40 yearly occasions. A famous one at the end of the rainy season is Durga Puja celebrating durgas triumph over the demon mahisha. This festival lasts 10 days. Divali is another festival where they light shit tons of lamps. Lakshmi is the main patron and symbols of prosperity are all over the place. The most popular festival is Holi where people burn a bunch of stuff under a full moon. It usually devolves into a rave where everyone gets high and parties.

**Sacred Geography** Pilgrimages start with rituals of separation (shaving the head, special clothes, and leaving your house). The actual journey is a liminal state where the ordinary structures of social life are removed. Caste is ignored and people sing. When they get to the site they gain sacred power through rituals and receiving darshana. Once thats all done they return home to rejoin society. Some of these locations are visited at specific times (ex Kumbha Mela is held every 12 years), others are very remote (ex Mt. Kailasa in the himalayas is the home of Shiva and Parvati). Some cities are sacred (ex Banaras the city of light, another home for shiva and parvati).

## Ritualizing the Passages of Life

Hindus have a series of **samskaras** to ritualize an individual's life events.

Before birth the husband does the ritual parting of the hair in which we parts his wife's hair and applies a red mark to ward off demonds.

Ten days after birth is the naming ceremony.

At 3 years there is the first hair cut which leaves only a small tuft that some high-caste hindus never cut.

**Upanayana** is the initiation ceremony performed when a male is 8-12. This is when the boy in introduced to his vedic guru that will teach him. He drapes a sacred thread over the boy's shoulder that will mark him as twice-born for the rest of his life. He is then taught the gayatri which he recites daily thereafter and he is shown how to perform the ritual fire sacrifice. He has now died in the world of childhood and been reborn as an adult so he can now study the vedas.

There are some puberty rights for girls (not recognized by orthodox brahman tradition). These tend to be localized and not really standard.

Marriage is a very important time. The law of manu implies that this is the female equivalent of upanayana, serving her husband is similar to studying the vedas and doing household chores is similar to the ritual sacrifice. Parents arrange the pairing and do some premarriage ceromonies. The day of the wedding is chosen by an astrologist. On the day of the families gather at the bride's house where a priest performs sacrifice and mantras. The groom says some stuff, the bride steps on a grinding stone to symbolize firmness and their clothes are knotted together. They take seven steps around a fire and the groom says some more stuff. Finally the husband puts a mark on her forehead and they go outside to look at the northern star.

The last samskara happens at death. The body is washed and clothed before the family carries it to the cremation grounds led by the eldest son. The eldest son then lights the funeral pyre and says a prayer to agni. The mourners say prayers to help the soul reunite with its ancestors leaving behind sin and avoiding yamas dogs. After the cremation the mourners leave without turning around and take a purifying bath before returning home. Three days later the bones are gathered and brought to some place with sacred water. For the 10 days after death many sacrifices of food and water are done to build the next body (the 10 days symbolize the 10 lunar months of pregnancy).

For those born of high spiritual purity there is another ceremony to become and **samnyasin** in which they renounce the world. They give away everything they own and shave their heads. They then perform the household rituals for the last time and a guru may cut the sacred string releasing them from caste.

## Healing and Medicinal Practices: Ayurveda

**Aryurveda** is a holistic system of medicine. It has seen a recent surge in popularity and the government of india has a department to promote it. There are as many practitioners of aryuveda as there are western medicine. Everything in the world has its particular characteristics through the interaction of three universal qualities called *gunas*.

- Sattva - white/bright bringing clarity of perception
- Rajas - red bringing passion, emotion, senses, and movement
- Tamas - dark brings heaviness, inertia and confusion

Each person's body is made of five elements:

- Space - permits the flow of intelligence between cells
- Air - vital force that governs all sensory stimuli and mortor responses
- Fire - regulates body temperature and is responsible for digestion and absorbtion of food
- Water - the body fluids, carrying energy from one cell to another
- Earth - present in all solid structures and tissues

The actual functioning of the body is goverened by three energies *doshas*:

- Vata(space and air) - energy of movement, is dry, light, cold, active, astringent
- Pitta(fire and water) - energy of digestion, is hot, sharp, light, sour, oily, and bitter
- Kapha(earth) - energy that forms the body's structures, is heavy, slow, cool, dense, static, sweet, and salty

Having perfect balance of the 5 elements and 3 energies is healthy and sickness stems from imbalance.

## Hindus and Sacred Art

The hindus believe that the sacred is everywhere so all of your senses are involved in knowing the sacred. Due to this art of all forms is by default sacred. there are many poems in various dialects from various times about the gods. A famous one is about the love between Krishna and Radha, called *Gitagovinda*. Chaitanya is famous for introducing singing as a form of worship so there are also many songs. Statues and religious carvings are also very common. The mere act of creating one of these is a yoga or devotional act. The artist must see into the divine to make the image (called *murti*) so that others might take darshana from it.

The iconography used in this art is on page 82 of the textbook. I dont feel like writing it out.

Drama is another sacred art. Frequently ceremonies wil invovle reenacting various stories and myths. These dramas usually contain mostly dancing. By watching the play (called *lila*) the audience can experience *rasa*, the flavour of the sacred presence on earth.

Architecture is also very important as temples are the homes of the gods and fix the center of the world. Temples are modeled after squares to reflect divine perfection. The temple will have a holy center called *garbha* (womb) which houses the divine image form with power radiates. This is thought of as the atman of the temple and the rest of it around the garbha is like the mortal body. Some temples have towers representing the mountain one must ascend and others have deep underground areas representing the navel of the cosmos from which the gods send their power.

## Society and Wholesome Life

### Structure of Hindu Society

Modern hindus still follow the caste system very closely. Caste discrimination is outlawed but it still has its hold over many people. The caste system is actually two systems meshed together:

- varna - color
- jati - birth

There are a couple varna classes and thousands of jati classes. The castes are originally outlined in the vedas and draw their origin from the cosmic order Dharma. The five varnas are:

- Brahmins - study and teach the vedas, oversee ceremonies
- Kshatriya - protect the people and run the government
- Vaishya - provide for the economic needs of the community
- Shudra - serve the upper three casts, not twice born, cannot study the vedas
- Untouchables - have no caste, do very polluting duties, have to avoid other classes to not pollute them, not twice born, cannot study the vedas

Jati are usually divided by three restrictions on its members:

- endogamy (who they can marry)
- commensality (who they can eat with)
- occupational exclusivity (who they can live with)

Almost always jati can only marry within their own jati. Similarly they tend to only eat and live with members of their group. Jati are very concerned with maintaining their ritual purity so they frequently avoid interactions with other classes. Villages are laid out to maintain this and when they do have to meet seating is arranged to prevent this.

## Living According to Dharma

Dharma more focuses on your day to day duties as it assumes that certain things are known to be evil (killing, stealing, etc) and others are known to be good (respecting your parents, helping others, etc).

**Four Stages of Life** There are four stages of life, called *ashramas*, and what your dharma is varies based on what stage of life you are in. Traditionally Shudras, Untouchables, and women do not go through the stages of life. Women kinda go through the stages of life vicariously through their husbands.

The four stages are:

- student
  - study the vedas
  - respect of teacher
  - develop self control
  - learn to contribute to society
- householder
  - women are obliged to serve their husband (this obedience lead to child brides and widow suicides, called *satu*)
  - men are obliged to protect and honor their wife
- forest-dweller
  - starts when your son transitions to being a householder (has his own son)
  - basically retirement to focus on spirituality
- renouncer(samnyasin)
  -

**Four Aims of Life** Hindus summed up the good life in four aims (called *purusharthas*):

- material prosperity (artha)
- pleasure (kama)
- liberation (moksha)

- dharma

Different aims are more important at different stages in life.

**Leadership** Brahmins are very important leaders in the community. Even though some castes can never hear or see vedic rituals they still reap the benefits. Some men and women that are very learned in spirituality and thus called *gurus*. These people do nothing for society, but they provide a role model to aim for in the quest for moksha. There are many women in religious leadership roles, frequently as gurus.