

Hinduism's Views on the Body

Shareeram. A Sanskrit word for body. Hinduism comprises a hefty assortment of literature, discussing topics such as ritual prescriptions, moral guidance and devotional wisdom. The ceaseless literature and philosophical deliberation within Hinduism may lead one to think about how Hinduism views the physical body.

To investigate that topic, it is easier to compartmentalize Hinduism into its three major *margas* (paths towards liberation). They are the *karma*, *jnana* and *bhakti margas*, corresponding simplistically to ritual prescription, knowledge attainment and devotional action.

This paper will look at the manner in which Hinduism observes the human body through the lens of the distinct *margas*. This will be completed by integrating primary source material. The research will indicate that the diverse *margas* have their unlike yet occasionally overlapping understandings of the human body. The analysis of the research will also comprise the Divine and “its bodies” in relation to human bodies.

First and foremost, the *Rig Veda* is a manuscript dealing with ritual instructions, specifically prayers to be chanted, while performing a *yajna* (sacrificial fire). Therefore, we classify this literature with the *karma marga*. Overall, the *Rig Veda* portrays the body as a means to oblige a life-long purpose (caste). It offers compelling evidence to indicate that human and divine bodies are different in their capabilities.

To illustrate, on page six of chapter one of Deepak Sarma's *Hinduism A Reader*, the message of a *Rig Vedic* mantra, the *Purusha Suktha* (Creation Hymn), is expounded as follows, “The entire universe as well as the social system of the Vedas – namely, the four-fold varna, class system.... – is born from this cosmic sacrifice.”

Subsequently, a quote from verse twelve of this hymn will attempt to illustrate a point. “His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born”, the mantra proclaims.

Consequently, the initial quote conveys that people and therefore their bodies are born within a caste, with cosmic origin, whose *dharma*, or duty, they must maintain. Irrespective of caste, the body is obligated to do some physical work in order to uphold their duty. This permits one to conclude that the body characterizes a productive or purposeful existence for the sake of sustaining obligation.

Furthermore, the hymn quote specifies location, on the Divine, from which the castes originate. There is much significance in the placement. “Higher” castes emanate from upper parts of the Divine’s body whereas “lower” castes originate from lower regions of the Divine’s body, such as the feet. Typically in Hindu culture, the feet of a person are the dirtiest parts of them. This is why feet are cleaned before entering temples and stepping on another person or facing your feet towards them is considered disrespectful. Therefore, this example indicates that bodies are regarded as encompassing dirtier and cleaner parts.

Interestingly, the Divine’s body is capable of emanating other beings on the basis of caste. Obviously, human bodies are not capable of such a feat. This *karma marga*-based literature shows that there is a stark difference between the abilities of the Divine’s body and the transient one of our own.

In contrast, let’s view the body from the outlook of the *jnana marga*. The literature being utilized is *Meditations* by Swami Muktananda. This composition perceives the body as both illusory and simplistic. Funnily enough, comparisons of human bodies and the Divine’s are

contradictory. Initially, Swami Muktananda deems the Divine (and therefore any of its infinite possible bodies) is equivalent to the human self and that physical nature is irrelevant. He contradicts himself when offering an example related to physical location capabilities.

Swami Muktananda says on page sixteen and seventeen of his book, “Truly speaking, a human being is divine. It is only our wrong understanding which keeps us small. We think of ourselves as the body. We think that we are a certain physical structure, with hands, feet, legs, and eyes... But none of these things is what we are.”

He gives the conclusion to the esoteric statement above when saying on page forty-five, “As you become immersed in this light [the light of the inner Divine], you will know, “I am God. I am Brahman.”

Hence, here Swami observes the body as being transitory and illusory. Humans are deluding themselves by compartmentalizing objects, like limbs, when instead God surrounds us and we are one with Him. Swami Muktananda understands all as being God and therefore the body is dismissed as inconsequential after that fact has been relayed.

Furthermore, the Swami says on the forty-third and forty-fourth pages, “The first [“body” that our spirit is encased in] is the physical body, in which we experience the waking state. This is the state in which we identify ourselves as the body. When we are in the waking state, if the body is experiencing pain or pleasure, we say, “I am experiencing pain,” or “I am experiencing pleasure.”

Here, he is illustrating how precisely simplistic our response mechanisms are. We have fleeting sensations that are impairing our aptitude to go deeper into our soul. After this quote, he

explains how one can go deeper and how rudimentary physical reactions are incompatible with profounder stages of meditation.

In spite of previous quotes, Swami Muktananda imparts an example refuting his previous notion of the Divine and humans as unable to be discerned. He says on the twenty-eighth page, “For example, if you are in New York, you are real in New York; but since you are not in Los Angeles, you are not real there. But God, being sat, is not bound by place or time, nor is He restricted to one particular object.”

There are two imperative arguments to heed. Firstly, the elucidation that our bodies are unable to be in two places simultaneously demonstrates that we are restricted in our capabilities. These boundaries are confirmed by the example of the Divine who is “unrestricted”. Consequently, the second issue/point: how can the human body be the Divine? It seems incongruous. Our bodies are limited in their physical capability but the Divine is not. How can we be equivalent? This is an unresolved issue, sadly.

At last, let’s deliberate the assessment of the human body from the perspective of the *bhakti marga*. The literature used for this viewpoint is Mirabai’s poetic works from the book *Songs of the Saints of India*. Mirabai, who is a great devotee of *Sri Krishna*, sees the human body as existing in a definite state, as being influenced by the Divine and as being dissimilar from the Divine.

The following excerpt from a Mirabai poem on page one-hundred-and-fourty-eight declares, “He stands, he sits, he lies down, he wanders; / he doesn’t stand nor sit nor lie down nor wander- / any thought that he is any of these states / he eludes”

With the above quote in mind, Mirabai commences by describing verbs associated with human body movements and then contradicts them. The purpose is to conclude that there is no state of being that you can ascribe to the Divine. The first two lines are states that human bodies can occupy but, for example, they cannot sit and not sit concurrently.

Moving on, the concluding excerpt from Mirabai comes on page one-hundred-thirty-six. “Murali [Krishna] sounds on the banks of the Jumna, / Murali snatches away my mind; / My senses cut loose from their moorings- / Dark waters, dark garments, dark Lord. / I listen close to the sounds of Murali / And my body withers away”, she articulates.

In this passage, Mirabai alludes to how the Divine manipulates the human body and its senses to produce any intended consequence. Mirabai is evidently swayed and also in an alternative realm of cognizance. The notion that her “body withers away” from the sensations of the Divine confirms she is subject to the influences of a greater power. This higher authority has “dark garments” and is “dark”, both of which are meant to contrast her own garments and skin complexion. For her the human body appears more like a vehicle through which we can direct our devotion by contemplating on the Divine.

In conclusion, this paper established the discrete perspectives of the human body from the perception of the three chief *margas* of Hinduism. To accomplish this end, primary source material was employed. The author anticipates this paper to help the reader’s pathway towards enhanced interpretation of the Hindu faith.

Bibliography

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