

330 MILLION GODS – OR NONE

Two Traditions from India



"I imagine serenity's pretty much the same, one season to the next?"

FIGURE 7.1 © Donald Reilly 1997/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com.

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*Lead me from the unreal to the Real.
Lead me from darkness unto Light.*

BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD



Overview

As we turn from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the Indian traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, we find some major differences.

- Indian traditions were started and developed by human beings, without divine intervention.
 - Their scriptures record the wisdom of brilliant human beings who were able to perceive the nature of reality, rather than the word of a god transmitted through messengers.
 - As a result, there are more and less traditional approaches to Hinduism and Buddhism, but there is no orthodoxy.
- Indian traditions are primarily concerned with understanding and living in accordance with the laws of the universe, rather than obeying the laws of a god and achieving salvation.
 - Evil results from incorrect understanding of the nature of reality, rather than displeasing God.
 - Justice is built into the universe itself, rather than imposed by God.
 - Good actions naturally lead to benefits and bad actions lead to harm.
 - The principle of natural justice of the universe is called karma.

Hinduism and Buddhism

Hinduism

History and Teachings of Hinduism
Hinduism Today
Rituals

Buddhism

History and Teachings of Buddhism
Buddhism Today
Rituals

Conclusion: Religious Studies and Indian Traditions



- Indian traditions do not take ordinary experience at face value, but see it as **maya**, illusory.
 - Ordinary experience is often compared to dreaming, and a major goal in Hinduism and Buddhism is enlightenment, waking up to the true nature of reality.
 - This correct understanding, or “waking up,” is true happiness.
- The ways to achieve correct understanding are many.
 - One’s spiritual path may involve devotion to a god, but it need not.
 - There are many gods in Eastern traditions. Some people believe in one ultimate God; some believe in many gods; some believe in no gods.
 - Indian traditions generally do not think of the gods and goddesses as ruling the universe by giving people commands.
 - Supernatural beings are more like patron saints in Christianity, sources of aid and comfort.
- Hindus and Buddhists both believe in reincarnation, and believe that karma works itself out through many lifetimes rather than just one.
 - Individuals are born over and over again, into lifetime after lifetime, until they escape the cycle of rebirth by “waking up.”
 - Gods and teachers may guide people in their efforts, but they do not “redeem” or “save” them. Ultimately, people’s karma is their own.

Despite these differences, scholars see some similarities between Indian traditions and Western monotheisms. However, the application of some Religious Studies categories and methods have been rejected by some members of Indian traditions.

Hinduism and Buddhism

As we said in Chapter 1, “Hinduism” is not the name of one tradition, but a term used to lump together hundreds of traditions that originated in India. Buddhism is somewhat more unified, but from an early stage it had diverse traditions too. There is a huge range of acceptable beliefs in both Hinduism and Buddhism – including idealism (minds and ideas are the only reality), materialism (only material things are real), monotheism, polytheism, pantheism (all things are divine), and atheism. While there have been sectarian clashes over power, caused by specific historic developments, India has generally been known for its religious pluralism.

Indian traditions share a number of commonalities – among them, their ideas about time. In the West, time is thought of as linear, like the flight of an arrow. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and goes in one direction only. Time began when God created the world. Time “moves” from past to future, with each event occurring just once. And at some determinate moment in the future, God will bring time and the world to an end. Each person is born physically into earthly life just once, lives for a period of time ranging from minutes to decades, and dies just once, to then be judged.



In the Indian worldview, by contrast, time is cyclic, like the seasons of the year, only with much larger cycles. Western scientists estimate that the universe is 14.5 billion years old. But in Indian thought, the universe has been created and destroyed countless times, with each cycle of creation and destruction lasting much longer than 14.5 billion years. The cycles of creation and destruction are counted as the days and nights of a creator god, **Brahma**. He is a minor god, not to be confused with **Brahman**, Ultimate Reality. A Brahma day is 4,320 million earthly years; a year of Brahma's time equals 3,110,400 million years. And Brahma lives for 100 years. So the whole cycle of Brahma's lifetime is 311,040,000 million years – 311 trillion years. At the end of the cycle, the universe is inhaled into the body of the gods **Vishnu** or **Shiva**, and it stays there until another Brahma develops to start the whole process over again. In Indian thought, in other words, the universe and time had no determinate beginning and have no foreseeable end.

Each of us, too, had no beginning. We have been reborn – “reincarnated” – countless times, not just as human beings, but perhaps also as animals. And we shall probably be reborn countless times in the future, until we develop sufficient awareness to escape the cycle of rebirth. This notion of reincarnation is another major difference between Western traditions and those that came out of India. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, life after death happens just once and is something to look forward to (assuming one has lived according to the divine commands). Many Christians and Muslims see living in heaven as the ultimate goal of human life. However, in Hinduism and Buddhism being reincarnated is thought of negatively because it means that you have not reached the goal of human life. Your next life might be as a lowly peasant, for example, or even as an animal, because you acted badly in this life. For Hindus and Buddhists, the goal of life is to *not* be reborn, but rather to escape reincarnation.

Hinduism

The word “Hinduism” is fairly new, and rather imprecise. It covers hundreds of millions of people with amazingly diverse beliefs, moral systems, and rituals. Some “Hindus” are monotheists, some are polytheists, and some are atheists. Some are vegetarian pacifists who refuse to harm any living thing; others fight wars and practice animal sacrifice. It is better to think of Hinduism as a family of traditions rather than as a single religion.

Before the British took over India in the 1700s, few people in India identified themselves as “Hindus.” Today, there are large sections of the population who do identify themselves as Hindus, but some Indians resent the term. The word is derived from “Sindhu,” an ancient Sanskrit word for the Indus River. When Muslims entered India, they called the people living east of the Indus River “Hindu.” Then when the British made India into a colony, they used the word as a convenient label for all the Indians who were not Muslims (or members of the few minority religions in India, such as Jews and Christians).

India today has over a thousand languages written in twenty-four different scripts. Its rituals show a similar diversity. Even when people celebrate a festival under one name at one time, they may have different practices and reasons for performing them. **Navaratri**, for example, is the festival of Nine Nights. In southeastern India, it is mostly



FIGURE 7.2 Men conduct ritual for Durga, who is worshipped during Navaratri. Louise-Batalla Duran/Alamy.

a festival for women, who create colorful scenes with dolls representing deities such as Lakshmi and **Sarasvati**. In northwestern India during Navaratri, people light a sacred lamp and do a dance with sticks, like the dance the god **Krishna** did with cowherd girls. For Navaratri in the north Indian town of Ramnagar, young boys reenact events from the **Ramayana**, the epic story about Rama, an avatar (“manifestation”) of the god Vishnu. For some Indians, the last two days of Navaratri are for honoring machines: they put garlands of flowers on cars and buses, and bless their computers with special powders.

Amid all this diversity, as we said, Indians have a long tradition of tolerance. There are many paths, they say. What determines whether a particular path is acceptable is not that it conforms with a set of beliefs or doctrines, but that it is effective in helping people live in



PART II USING THE TOOLS: SURVEYING WORLD RELIGIONS

accordance with the laws of the universe. If your path works for you and mine works for me, then everything is as it should be.

History and Teachings of Hinduism

Unlike Western religions, the family of traditions called Hinduism has no single founder or datable beginning. It developed amid a wave of migrations from Central Asia into India, which brought new influences to one of the oldest civilizations in the world.

Indus Valley Civilization (3000–1500 BCE)

In Pakistan and northwest India, archaeologists have found remnants of a culture that started about five thousand years ago. It stretched across much of Northwestern India (now Pakistan) and had several cities. Some were highly developed and carefully planned, such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Each of these cities was laid out on a grid and had an artificial hill with large buildings on top, which may have been religious or political centers. Mohenjo-daro had a pool on the hill, 17 meters by 7 meters by 3 meters deep, that may have been for ritual bathing. The larger houses in these cities had sewers, plumbing, and even bathrooms on the second floor. Scholars have not yet deciphered their language and do not know for sure what their culture may have been like, but archaeologists have found female figurines and carved stone phalluses (representations of penises) that may have been connected with fertility rituals.

The Aryans and the Vedas (1500–600 BCE)

Between 2000 and 1500 BCE, warrior tribes in central Asia began migrating, some into Europe, and some south and east to settle near Iran. Of the second group, some then moved southeast into what is now Pakistan, and northwest India. They conquered the local peoples, intermarried with them, and ruled over them. They called themselves **Aryans** – “Noble Ones” – and their language was ancient Sanskrit. That language is still used in India today, but for formal purposes only – in rituals, debate, and writing.

The Aryans appear to have had the three social classes common to ancient civilizations (see Chapter 5) – priests, warriors, and peasants. Predictably as well, their rituals included sacrifice to gods. The sacrifices “fed” the gods, so that the gods would make people healthy and prosperous. They offered their gods animals, milk, **ghee** (clarified butter), and honey. Many rituals also involved the making, offering, and drinking of **soma**, a beverage brewed from herbs with stimulant (or perhaps hallucinogenic) effects and considered sacred. The use of stimulants and hallucinogens is another feature common to a number of ancient traditions, although their precise nature and the purpose of their use are difficult to determine from the little evidence found to date.

Over time, the rituals became more complex and the priests, called **brahmins**, insisted that they had to be performed exactly correctly. Some rituals lasted several days and required over a dozen priests. So the brahmins became technical specialists in the proper performance of ritual. Indeed, being the custodians of the sacrifices gave the brahmins great authority, since correct performance of the sacrifices was considered essential to maintaining *rita*, the order of the universe.



Soma

Hallucinogen or Entheogen?

Soma is mentioned in ancient Indian texts as an energizing drink. It is also mentioned in Zoroastrian scripture (see Chapter 9), where it is called hoama. In the related ancient languages of India and Persia, the terms mean the same thing: something “pressed out” or expressed from the stalks of a plant.

In both the Indian and Persian traditions, soma/hoama is described as a plant and juice from a plant, as well as a god. In Indian texts, the juice is consumed by gods and by human beings, whom it makes feel like gods – perhaps a reference to what we today call a “religious experience.”

The nature of the experience induced by consuming soma is difficult to determine. Some texts make it sound as if it produced visions or hallucinations: “We have drunk Soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the gods discovered.” (Rig Veda 9.48.3) In other texts it is described as having curative powers, and as something consumed before battle to give enhanced strength or endurance.

It is probable that the effect of soma varied with the strength of the product being used and the metabolism of the person using it, leading to a range of descriptions from mild stimulant to hallucinogen.

Today many scholars identify the source of soma as ephedra, a shrub that grows in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Central and South Asia. It is used as a stimulant and decongestant throughout these regions, where it is sometimes called medicinal and sometimes inspirational. Until it was banned by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2004, ephedra was used in energy drinks marketed largely to college students, dieters, and athletes.

However, the use of drugs to facilitate spiritual experiences is not uncommon in the world’s religions. In fact, it is so common that scholars have coined a word for it: **entheogen** – meaning, literally, something that generates “god within.” Entheogens are described as psychoactive substances – substances that produce changes in consciousness, perception or awareness, cognition or thinking, mood, or behavior – that people interpret as metaphysical, spiritual, or even supernatural. Evidence of the use of peyote (a cactus that produces mescaline) for both medicinal and spiritual purposes by Native Americans has been documented from as early as the 4th century BCE. (It is still legal for a particular group who call themselves Native American Religion, although peyote is a controlled substance for others in the U.S. and Canada.) Ancient Greek and Mesopotamian myths refer to flowers – perhaps poppies – being consumed, as well as wine, and perhaps mushrooms – all of which can produce states of altered consciousness and are therefore potential entheogens. Quests for plants that give eternal youth or immortality, common in ancient stories, may have been variants on this theme, reflecting awareness that some substances at least make people feel immortal. Perhaps the tree that Adam and Eve were not supposed to eat from was an entheogen. Some scholars even argue about whether Jesus’ healing miracles could be attributed to the use of psychoactive drugs.

For conducting and understanding the rituals, the brahmins used four kinds of composition dating from between 1500 and 600 BCE. Together they are called the Vedas, from the Sanskrit root *vid*, meaning “to know.” (*Vid* is the source of our words “video,” “vision,” “wit,” and “wise.”) The Rig Veda consists of hymns to the gods; the Yajur and Sama Vedas are ritual formulas, and the Atharva Veda is mainly practical information regarding healing and other important tasks. The Vedas are traditionally ascribed to ancient “seers,” called **rishis**, who “heard” or “perceived” them. That is, the knowledge they convey is not thought to be “revealed” in the way that Western scriptures are. Instead, the Rishis had extraordinary abilities to understand Reality, to “see” it as it truly is, and to convey that information in language.

The oldest of the four Vedas – the Rig – contains 1,028 hymns to various gods. **Indra**, the god of war and weather, is the most frequently praised, but there seems to be no hierarchy among the gods. **Agni**, the god of fire, is the second most often praised. Many of the deities are described in diverse ways. Soma is sometimes identified as the moon, for example, and sometimes as a sacred hallucinogenic beverage. The goddess Sarasvati is worshipped sometimes as a river and sometimes as the one who inspires people with noble thoughts. In later centuries, she would be the goddess of learning and the arts. **Aditi** is identified with light or the mind, and in some passages is called mother of the gods. Scholars see this diversity as evidence of the ancient origins of the tradition as well as of the multiple groups contributing to its development. Just as we saw with the Hebrew Bible (Chapter 6), not only do ancient traditions change over time, but different groups often have different names for a particular god, and varying ideas about that god’s characteristics and “job description.”

The four Vedas continue to be the most sacred scriptures in Hinduism. The highest praise you can give to a text is to call it the “the Fifth Veda.” The brahmins say, in fact, that the vedas were not created but are eternal, not because they are of divine origin, as is said of the Bible and the Qur'an, but because the wisdom they convey is so profound and accurate a reflection of Reality.

However, the Vedas are not the only source of wisdom in the traditions that came to be called Hinduism. The Vedas were memorized and passed on orally by the brahmins for centuries. When the use of writing developed, the Vedas were written down, perhaps by 100 BCE. Around the same time, other forms of wisdom were developing – in particular, the Upanishads.

The Mystical Worldview of the Upanishads

The Upanishads are a series of treatises that are among the most influential in Hindu literature. Although Upanishads continued to be produced for perhaps a millennium and scholars are unsure of exactly how many there are (somewhere between 100 and 300), we know that the earliest was composed around 600 BCE, a time of intellectual and cultural questioning in India and elsewhere. In Greece, Western philosophy was beginning to develop. The period also produced Siddhartha Gautama, who began life in the Vedic tradition but then launched Buddhism. As we shall see, people like Gautama were unhappy with the emphasis on sacrifice in India and with the great power wielded by the brahmins.

The Upanishads do not reject the Vedas, but provide a radical new interpretation of them. That new interpretation not only downplays sacrifice and the gods, but presents significant teachings about the nature of the self, of knowledge, and of reality itself.

Presented in the form of conversations, many of the Upanishads focus on the search for a deeper truth than that reflected in the rituals of the brahmins. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter says, “Lead me from the unreal to the Real. Lead me from darkness unto Light.”

At the core of the Upanishads is the idea that there is a profound unity to all existence, despite the apparent diversity we experience in our daily lives. The person seeking truth in the Mundaka Upanishad asks “What is it that, when it is known, everything else becomes known?” The Chandogya Upanishad tells of a brahmin father whose son came home from studying the Vedas in a forest school, proud of what he had learned. The father tells the boy that he must look beyond conventional religious knowledge. While it looks as if there are many things in the world, he says, there is really only one reality, one Existence or Being. And all things in the universe are this one ultimate Being. In the beginning, this one Being had the thought, “Let me grow forth.” And so it projected the universe out of itself. Having projected everything out of itself, it is the stuff of which all things are made.

The essence of all things is the same, then; just as all rivers flow into one sea, so all the apparently separate things in our experience are really one. The name of this Ultimate Reality is Brahman. It is utterly simple and without beginning or end. It is what everything exists in, but itself it is uncreated and changeless.

You are the fire,
You are the sun,
You are the air,
You are the moon,
You are the starry skies.
You are Brahman Supreme:
You are the waters – you,
The creator of all....
You are the dark butterfly,
You are the green parrot with red eyes,
You are the thundercloud, the seasons, the seas.
Without beginning are you,
Beyond time,
Beyond space.

(Shvetashvatara Upanishad IV-2-4)

The claim that everything is one is amazing enough but, as the dialogue above between father and son continues, the father adds something more astounding. He says, “That is you.” This claim – in Sanskrit, *tat tvam asi* (from the Chandyoga Upanishad VI-8-7) – is considered one of the grand pronouncements of what will be called Vedanta (“the end of the Vedas”), the most important philosophical tradition in Hinduism. The idea follows naturally from the idea that all is one. If all is one, then there is no difference between the subject of experience and the object of experience. The Ultimate Reality Brahman is identical with Atman, consciousness, the self.



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Mysticism and Monism

The idea that everything is ultimately one is not unique to India. Known as **monism** to scholars, this idea is found in religious traditions around the world, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is part of a worldview called **mysticism**. This worldview stems from experiences in which the ordinary distinctions between things fade away, and what is left is a powerful sense that All is One. Usually we think that there are many things spread out in space and in time. We commonly think that the mind is different from the body, and that the person who experiences something is different from what she experiences. But in mystical experience, time and space and the difference between subject and object disappear.

There are many ways to induce this experience of the oneness of everything. Meditation, along with special breathing techniques and other physical disciplines are sometimes used. Rhythmic chanting and music are some of the oldest techniques. Many mystics seem to take up music because it helps them get into a mood in which the ordinary boundaries between things dissolve.

Of course, it is perfectly possible to interpret the special experience of the oneness of all existence as the illusion, and the vast diversity of everyday experience as the reality. However, as William James pointed out (see Chapter 4), mystics typically experience cosmic unity with such intensity that it seems more real than ordinary experience. They feel they have experienced Truth.

The most common method for experiencing the oneness of Atman and Brahman, and realizing that consciousness is Ultimate Reality, is meditation. By quieting the noise that usually surrounds us, and emptying the mind of thoughts about this or that thing, it is possible to achieve a state of undisturbed consciousness in which we feel at one with Ultimate Reality. In Upanishadic terms, it is possible to experience the oneness of Atman and Brahman.

To express the oneness of the universe, Indians use the sound **Om**, *a-u-m*, in meditation and prayer. Om is said at the beginning and end of Hindu prayers. It is the most sacred sound in all Hindu traditions, and is written in temples, on doors and walls, and even on trucks. It is not considered a name as such, nor is it definable. Its verbal meaning is “to express loudly [in sound],” with the connotation that such expression is in praise. As we have seen with other terms for the Infinite, the term is best understood as reference to a reality that can be experienced, but not captured in language. The Mandukya Upanishad explains the unity of everything using this term:

Om is eternal Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. This entire universe, including our body, mind and senses, is its manifestation, extension and expansion. Past, present and future all are nothing but Om. This was true in the past, it is true in the present and