

will be true in the future. And whatever else exists beyond the three divisions of time, that also is indeed Om. What is the essence of Om? It is the eternal vibration of awareness.

The idea that Brahman, Ultimate Reality, is eternal and is the same as the Self implies that the Self is eternal. As the *Katha Upanishad* puts it,

The Self, whose symbol is Om, is the omniscient Lord. He is not born. He does not die. He is neither cause nor effect. The Ancient One is unborn, imperishable, eternal: though the body be destroyed, he is not killed.

This teaching is linked to two more new ideas in the *Upanishads* – **reincarnation** and **karma** – and it has deep implications for human life and happiness. Since the Self cannot be destroyed, what we call death is only the destruction of the body, which is a mere vehicle of the real Self. The Self survives, to be reborn in another body. What kind of body that is depends on its previous life. If the person lived a good life, then the Self will be reborn as a higher kind of human being. If the person lived a bad life, then the Self will be reborn into a lower state, as a person of lower social standing or perhaps even as an animal. All this happens automatically because of karma – as we saw in Chapter 2, the law of cause and effect that constitutes the natural justice of the universe. Good actions lead to good consequences and bad actions lead to bad consequences.

So, then, what constitutes good actions or a good life? And what happens when people manage to achieve it? Does the cycle of rebirths go on forever? The *Upanishads* teach that the ultimate goal of life is actually to escape or “be released from” **samsara**, the cycle of rebirths. This release from rebirth is called **moksha**, and the way to achieve it is to recognize the illusory nature of the material world and realize that one’s true nature is indeed Brahman. To recognize one’s true self (**Atman**) and its identity with Brahman, each person must become free of attachment to material things.

Classical Hinduism (3rd century BCE–7th century CE)

The profound wisdom expressed in the *Upanishads* has remained central to Hindu thought. However, on the level of practice, people were more concerned with how to deal with the struggles of daily life, while still moving toward correct awareness and detachment from the material world. And so examples of exemplary lives became widely popular. These examples are provided in the texts of the classical age of what we now call Hinduism. These texts reflect both ancient Vedic teachings about the gods and *Upanishadic* philosophy.

The major texts of this period were two great epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, some stories about the gods called the **Puranas**, and moral and legal codes called the Laws of Manu.

THE RAMAYANA The first of the great epics was the *Ramayana*, about King Rama and his wife Sita. Ravana, the evil ten-headed king of Lanka, abducted Sita and tried to force her to





FIGURE 7.3 Arjuna and Krishna. © Frédéric Soltan/Corbis.

marry him. But Rama, with the help of Hanuman, a monkey descended from gods, rescued her with his monkey army. Rama ruled as an ideal king, with Sita as his ideal wife. This story became so popular that temples to Rama and Sita were built across India, and eventually Rama was said to be an incarnation of the great god Vishnu.

THE MAHABHARATA The second great Hindu epic is the Mahabharata. With 74,000 verses, it is the longest poem in the world. The story has been sung and danced and acted thousands of times. In the late 1980s, Indian television broadcast 94 episodes of the story, which drew huge audiences. When the series was shown on BBC television in the U.K., it drew 5,000,000 viewers, an audience unheard of for a program shown in the afternoon.

The Mahabharata revolves around a great (*maha*) struggle between two sets of cousins who were descended from King Bharata. The story favors the Pandava family, whom the other family, the Kauravas, try to cheat out of their share of the kingdom. The conflict leads to a war in which the Pandava warrior **Arjuna** is guided by his charioteer, Krishna, who is the god Vishnu in human form.

Before the fighting starts, Arjuna asks Krishna whether he should take part in a war that will slaughter many of his own relatives. Krishna answers that it is a duty to fight for what is right when there is no non-violent alternative, and that when one's motivation is altruistic (pure) rather than selfish the violence will not result in negative karma. So the negative effects of the violence will not attach themselves to his soul, dooming him to further rounds of reincarnation. The word for doing "what is right" and "one's duty" is thus the same: **dharma**. Arjuna and Krishna's discussion takes up 18 chapters of the Mahabharata. These

18 chapters are called the **Bhagavad Gita**. Combining an engaging story with philosophy and moral teaching, it is among the most beloved of Hindu scriptures.

As Krishna and Arjuna get into their conversation about the war, many other topics come up, such as the nature of the Self and the nature of the gods. Krishna reaffirms the eternity and indestructibility of the Self, and adds another new idea. He says that the Ultimate Reality underlying everything is a personal god who loves human beings and becomes human himself to help them. Krishna, an avatar (manifestation) of Vishnu, says

I am the universal father,
mother, granter of all, grandfather,
object of knowledge, purifier,
holy syllable om, threefold sacred lore.

I am the way, sustainer, lord,
witness, shelter, refuge, friend,
source, dissolution, stability,
treasure, and unchanging seed....

When devoted men sacrifice
to other deities with faith,
they sacrifice to me, Arjuna,
however aberrant the rites....

The leaf or flower or fruit or water
that he offers with devotion,
I take from the man of self-restraint
in response to his devotion.

Whatever you do – what you take,
what you offer, what you give,
what penances you perform –
do as an offering to me, Arjuna....

Keep me in your mind and devotion,
sacrifice to me; bow to me,
discipline your self toward me,
and you will reach me! (9:17–28)

In the Upanishads, as we saw, the Ultimate Reality is Brahman, which is not a person. However, in the Bhagavad Gita, Ultimate Reality is a person – the god Krishna – and not only is Krishna a person, but he appears to help Arjuna in his time of need. By implication, Krishna cares about all human beings and is willing to help them. Therefore, the Bhagavad Gita provides a new way to understand reality. Rather than focusing on Brahman, an esoteric metaphysical principle, the Gita focuses on a personal, loving god who befriends human beings and even becomes one himself. This idea of a loving God becoming human to help people is similar to the Christian teaching that God became a man in Jesus to redeem





Hatha Yoga

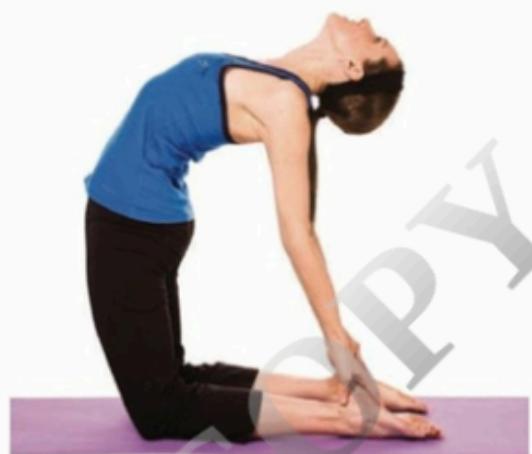


FIGURE 7.4 Woman bending backwards – hatha yoga.
Mehmet Dilsiz/Shutterstock Images.

Today in Western societies, when most people hear the word *yoga*, they think of **hatha yoga**, a discipline that combines bodily movements and postures with conscious breathing. This system was developed by Hindu yogis, holy men, as a way to prepare the body for long periods of meditation. It is part of *jnana yoga*, the yoga of knowledge, which fosters the realization that the *Atman*, the true Self, is identical with *Brahman*, Ultimate Reality. Hindus and non-Hindus who practice hatha yoga find that it has other benefits too, such as relaxation, reduction of stress, increased strength and flexibility, and better blood circulation.

In this passage from the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, translated by Max Müller (see Chapter 3), the physical discipline of hatha yoga is linked with meditation:

Holding his body steady with the head, neck and torso erect,
And causing the senses with the mind to enter the heart,
A wise man with the Brahma-boat will cross over
All the fear-bringing streams.
Compressing his breathings here in the body, and having his movements checked,
One should breathe through his nostrils with diminished breath.
Like that chariot yoked with vicious horses,
His mind the wise man should restrain undistractedly....
When the nature of the self, as with a lamp,
A practicer of Yoga beholds here the nature of Brahma, Unborn, steadfast, from
every nature free –
By knowing God one is released from all fetters.



FIGURE 7.5 Statue of Sarasvati outside music college in Puttaparthi. Tim Gainey/Alamy.

the world, but according to the Hindu epics God manifests himself in many forms (has many avatars).

In classical Hinduism, as in Christianity, too, God not only loves human beings but wants devotion and love from them in return. This love of and devotion toward God is called **bhakti**, and it is one of three **margas** – “paths” or “ways of life” – described in the Bhagavad Gita. Each marga is also described as a **yoga**, a religious discipline. The way of devotion, bhakti yoga, gets the most attention in the Bhagavad Gita, and it became the most popular tradition in India, as it still is. When people surrender themselves to God in love, they drop their ordinary selfishness and live better lives. Indeed, the Bhagavad Gita says that such full loving devotion will make up for any bad karma. “Letting go all dharma, take refuge in me alone,” Krishna says. “I shall deliver you from all sins; do not grieve.” (18:66)



PART II USING THE TOOLS: SURVEYING WORLD RELIGIONS

The second marga or way of life is **jnana yoga**, the way of knowledge. This consists largely of meditation and study of the scriptures. Like bhakti yoga, jnana yoga can counterbalance a person's bad karma. Just as fire turns wood to ashes, Krishna says, so the fire of knowledge destroys bad karma.

The third marga, **karma yoga**, is the way of action. It is based on not just any action, but unselfish action. One is acting not to gain a reward but simply to carry out one's dharma, one's duty. Different people have different dharmas based on their social status and their karma.

THE PURANAS The Puranas are stories about the gods, dating from 300 BCE–1000 CE, when Hinduism was spreading across India and incorporating the gods of many peoples. In the Puranas some of the older gods of the Vedas, such as Indra and Varuna, are ignored. Other older deities are given new roles. The goddess Sarasvati, for example, becomes the patron of learning and the arts.

Three deities that were unimportant in the Vedas become central in the Puranas, and in classical Hinduism – the gods Vishnu and Shiva, and the goddess **Devi**.

Vishnu is a god who works for righteousness. When dharma declines, he manifests himself to help the human race get back on track. One of the Puranas describes two dozen avatars of Vishnu, but ten is a more standard number. The most famous is Krishna, the charioteer of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. Another is Rama in the Mahabaharta. The **Buddha**, founder of a tradition that split off from Hinduism, is a third avatar of Vishnu. In the future, Hindus say, Vishnu will appear again as **Kalki**, a Messiah-like figure who will destroy evil and restore moral order.

Most Hindus today, as we said, follow the path of devotion to a god, and many are devoted to Vishnu. They are called **Vaishnavas**.

The second major god in the Puranas and in classical Hinduism is Shiva, a god quite different from Vishnu. He has pairs of opposed features; he is creator and destroyer, he is helpful and threatening. There are three main images of Shiva. The first is as creative power. Here Shiva is represented by a **lingam**, a shaft that some scholars describe as an erect penis symbolizing the creative power of sex, set in a **yoni**, a term meaning the origin of life and represented as a vagina. Other scholars interpret the lingam as representing a sort of mini-temple.

Another image of Shiva is as Lord of the Dance. It is by dancing that Shiva creates the universe and later, when it is beyond repair, destroys it.

The third way Shiva is represented is as a wandering **ascetic** – someone who has renounced worldly possessions and pleasures – similar to today's **sadhus**, wandering holy men.

Hindus who are devoted mainly to Shiva are called **Shaivites** or **Shaivas**. Worshippers (or "devotees") of Shiva and worshippers of Vishnu can be distinguished by the designs painted on their foreheads.

Shaivites paint horizontal bands across their foreheads for ritual purposes, while Vaishnavites paint vertical lines on theirs.

Along with worship of Vishnu and Shiva, the other most popular form of devotion is to the Goddess, whose most universal name is Devi. While there are several names and





FIGURE 7.6 Shiva as Lord of the Dance.
© Paul Prescott/iStockphoto.



FIGURE 7.7 Shaivite with marks on forehead. Stuart Forster/Alamy.

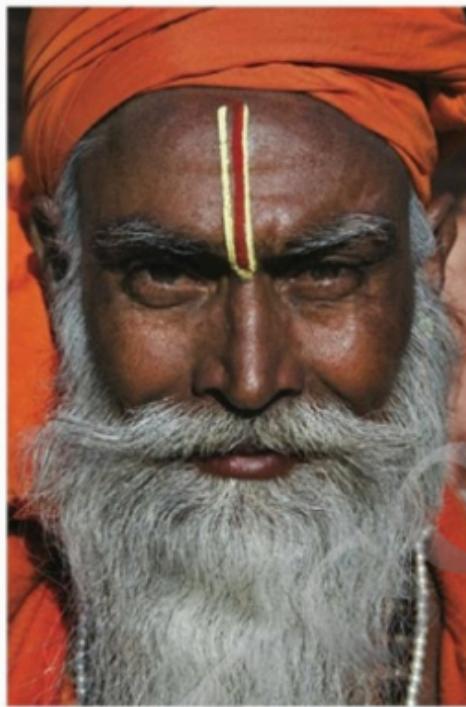


FIGURE 7.8 Vaishnavite with marks on forehead. © imagebroker.net/SuperStock.

descriptions of goddesses in the Puranas, for many Hindus they are all forms of one great Goddess. Some of the Puranas describe her as the wife of Shiva and as his **Shakti**, his power. Other texts treat her as the supreme divinity who created the universe, the ultimate mother. When she is portrayed as loving toward humans, the Goddess may be called **Parvati**. When she is seen as the destroyer of evil, she may be called **Kali**, a frightening figure who wears a necklace of human skulls. As a fighter, she is called **Durga**.

THE LAWS OF MANU By 200 CE a set of legal and moral codes had been created that formalized traditional Indian social practices into sets of four: the Four Varnas (social classes), the Four Ends of Man, and the Four Stages of Life.

As we have seen, at the top of the Four Varnas are the brahmins, the elite priestly class who perform rituals and study the scriptures. Second are the kshatriyas, the warrior ruling class. Third are the vaishyas, merchants who also do farming and cowherding. The kshatriyas and the vaishyas may study the Vedas but not teach about them. The fourth varna is the shudras, the peasants. Unlike those above them, they are not allowed to study the Vedas or to build up wealth.

The varnas are not the same as the **castes** of Indian society, although the two systems are related. The varnas are scripturally validated; in fact, as we saw in Chapter 2, the Rig Veda describes how they were created through the sacrifice of the cosmic man, Purusha. From his



FIGURE 7.9 Dalits, Untouchables, at an anti-government rally, 2006. Raveendran/AFP/Getty Images.

mouth came the brahmins, from his arms came the kshatriyas, from his thighs came the vaishyas, and from his feet came the shudras. The castes are called *jati*, and they are not religiously sanctioned. They reflect an individual's identification with a particular extended family and community, locale, and livelihood. Like the varnas, one is born into the jati, and mixing with those of other jati is traditionally prohibited. But unlike the varnas, the jati are receding into history as India modernizes, industrializes, and urbanizes. The caste system has actually been outlawed in modern India, although remnants of it survive.

Below all of these varnas and jati are *dalits*, the Untouchables. They are outside the caste system, outcastes. They must do the jobs that are too defiling for others to do, such as handling corpses, hauling garbage, and cleaning toilets. Most live in poverty. They are considered to be in a permanent state of impurity, so other Hindus are not supposed to touch them or eat with them. They must even drink from separate wells. Mahatma Gandhi, the great leader of modern India, called them *harijans*, children of God, and worked to eliminate the caste system which held them at the bottom of society. He made friends with Untouchables and ate with them. Nonetheless, the dalits – some 20% of the population – are still the poorest people in India.

The Laws of Manu thus authorize a strict social hierarchy. It is divided not only by social class but also by gender. Even women from the upper classes are considered servants of men. According to Manu, girls and women should not act on their own. “Nothing must be done independently by a girl, by a young woman, or by an old woman, even in her own house. As a girl, a female must submit to her father, as a young woman, to her husband, and when her



PART II USING THE TOOLS: SURVEYING WORLD RELIGIONS

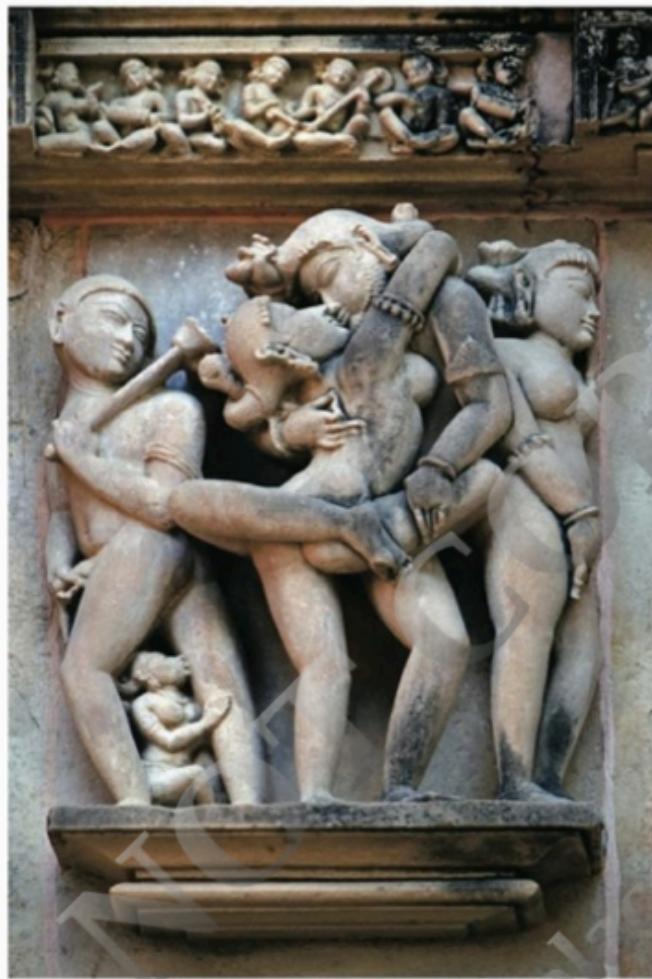


FIGURE 7.10 Carvings on the outside of Khajuraho temple.
© Prisma/SuperStock.

lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent." (*Manu* 5.137–148) Another rule is that wives owe their husbands total devotion. "Though he lacks virtue, and is unfaithful to his wife, and has not good qualities, a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife." (*Manu* 5.154)

The Laws of Manu also describe the Four Ends of Man. These are the four main goals people pursue. The first is **kama** – pleasure. The second is **artha** – wealth, success, and power. Third is **dharma** – righteousness or duty. And the fourth is **moksha** – liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. These four goals are not ranked; the Laws of Manu simply describe how different people follow different goals.

In Indian tradition, the pursuit of pleasure is not discouraged. One of the scriptures is the **Kama Sutra**, about kama, pleasure, and it gives advice about increasing sexual pleasure. Some Hindu temples, too, have statues of figures in various sexual positions – see Figure 7.10.