



Sanatana Dharma

The Eternal Way of Life
(Hinduism)

Brahman, Atman and Maya

The Hindu Way of Comprehending
Reality and Life

Brahman, Atman and Maya

- ◆ These three terms are essential in understanding the Hindu view of reality.
 - ❖ *Brahman* — that which gives rise to *maya*
 - ❖ *Atman* — what each *maya* truly is
 - ❖ *Maya* — appearances of *Brahman* (all the phenomena in the cosmos)

Early Vedic Deities

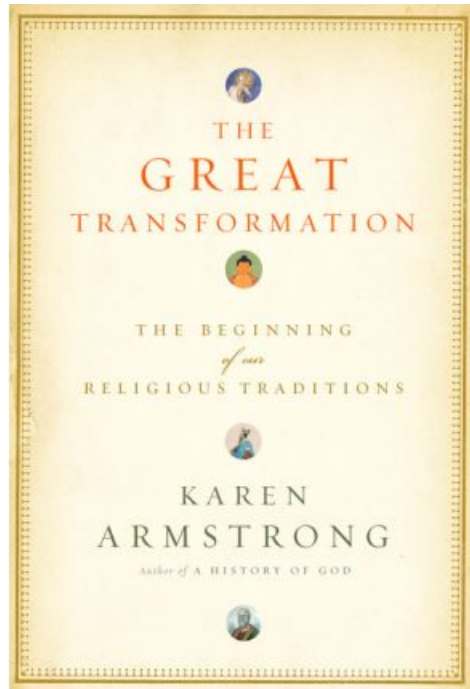
- ◆ The Aryan people worship many deities through sacrificial rituals:
 - ❖ Agni — the god of fire
 - ❖ Indra — the god of thunder, a warrior god
 - ❖ Varuna — the god of cosmic order (*rita*)
 - ❖ Surya — the sun god
 - ❖ Ushas — the goddess of dawn
 - ❖ Rudra — the storm god
 - ❖ Yama — the first mortal to die and become the ruler of the afterworld

The Meaning of Sacrificial Rituals

- ◆ Why worship deities?
- ◆ During the period of Upanishads, Hindus began to search for the deeper meaning of sacrificial rituals.
- ◆ Hindus came to realize that presenting offerings to deities and asking favors in return are self-serving.
- ◆ The focus gradually shifted to the offerings (the sacrificed).
- ◆ The sacrificed symbolizes forgoing one's well-being for the sake of the well-being of others. This understanding became the foundation of Hindu spirituality.

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In the old rites, the patron had passed the burden of death on to others. By accepting his invitation to the sacrificial banquet, the guests had to take responsibility for the death of the animal victim. In the new rite, the sacrificer made himself accountable for the death of the beast. He took death into his own being instead of projecting it onto others, and thus became one with the sacrificial offering. Dying a symbolic death in the new rites, he would offer himself to the gods and — like the animal — he would experience immortality: “Becoming himself the sacrifice,” one ritualist explained, “the sacrificer frees himself from death.”



Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, p. 80.

From Deities to *Brahman*

- ◆ Around the late Vedic period and the early Upanishadic period, as Hindus searched for the deeper meaning of sacrificial rituals, the focus gradually shifted from the Vedic deities to the unified reality and order — *Brahman*.

Brahman — that which is

- ◆ The root of the term “Brahman” is *brih*, which means “to grow.”
- ◆ *Brahman* is that from which everything grows.
- ◆ *Brahman* — Being, the ground of being, the divine, God
- ◆ *Brahman* appears as phenomena (*maya*) in the universe.

Two Levels of Knowing *Brahman*

- ◆ According to Hindu philosopher Adi Shankara, there are two levels of truth about *Brahman*:
 - ❖ the lower level — the formed *Brahman*
 - ❖ the higher level — the formless *Brahman*

The Formed *Brahman*

◆ The Formed *Brahman*

- ❖ *saguna Brahman* (the *Brahman* with attributes)
- ❖ the creative power of the universe
- ❖ the foundation of being — the foundation of the phenomenal world
- ❖ personified as deity
- ❖ the object of worship

The Formless *Brahman*

◆ The Formless *Brahman*

- ❖ *nirguna Brahman* (the *Brahman* without attributes)
- ❖ cannot be described in words
- ❖ *neti, neti* (not this, not this)
- ❖ free from all limiting conditions
- ❖ above good and evil

Maya — the World of Phenomena

- ◆ *Maya* — that which appears for a while and then disappears
- ◆ *Maya* is the phenomena that constitute the world as we perceive and know it.
- ◆ Everything we perceive is just an appearance or a manifestation of *Brahman*.
- ◆ The cosmos, being the appearance of *Brahman*, goes through endless cycles of birth (appearing) and death (disappearing).

Manifestations of *Brahman*

- ◆ an analogy:

Beautiful phenomena are manifestations of beauty.
Beauty is what each beautiful phenomenon really is.



Creation is not the making of a separate thing, but an emanation of Himself. God creates, constantly sustains the form of His creations and absorbs them back into Himself.”

Atman — the True Self

- ◆ “Atman” is just a term used to designate what a *maya* truly is.
- ◆ “my Atman” = “my true self” = “what I truly am”
- ◆ Just like every phenomenon in the universe, a person is a manifestation of *Brahman*.



We are inwardly already one with God.”

- ◆ “I am *Brahman*” means “*Brahman* is what I truly am.”
- ◆ Realizing that I am *Brahman*, I need to live and act as *Brahman*, namely, I need to be godly.

That art Thou

- ◆ *Brahman* is what each phenomenon truly is.
- ◆ Each person is really *Brahman*.
- ◆ This is the most important teaching from the *Upanishads*.



The *Brahman-Atman* Diagram illustrates that we are one but appear as many.

Atman ≠ Individual Souls

- ◆ In western religions, it is commonly believed that each of us has an individual and different soul.
- ◆ Some textbooks use “soul” as the translation of “Atman”. But this can be misleading and cause misunderstanding.
- ◆ The phrase “my Atman” should be read as meaning “what I truly am.”
- ◆ Since *Brahman* is what each one of us truly is, my *Atman* is *Brahman* and your *Atman* is also *Brahman*.

Soul and souls

- ◆ *Brahman* is the Soul (or Self) of *maya*. It is “the Life of life.”
- ◆ A person is a manifestation (appearance) of *Brahman*. The particular way a *maya* appears is its *jiva* (soul or self).
- ◆ When *Brahman* appears in a certain way, a person is born. When *Brahman* ceases to appear in that way, the person passes away. As such, a life cycle is completed.

Hindu Spirituality

- ◆ We are manifestations of *Brahman*.
- ◆ This means that at the deepest level, we are *Brahman*, and not individuals. This provides a ground for universal love in Hinduism.
- ◆ Your pain and sorrow is my pain and sorrow; your joy and happiness is my joy and happiness.