

Unit One

Who Am I? Who Are We?

Lesson 7

Looking East: Hinduism and Buddhism

heart to heart

“If the faith of a mustard seed...”

Here I Am, Lord, page 39



A Backward Glance

1. The five “pillars” of the Islamic faith are a confession of faith, almsgiving, prayer, pilgrimage, and
 - a. holy war or “jihad”
 - b. fasting
 - c. simple living
 - d. reading the Koran
2. The most important role of the Muslim “imam” is
 - a. judge
 - b. matchmaker
 - c. teacher
 - d. pilgrimage leader
3. The word “Islam” means
 - a. prophet
 - b. angel
 - c. priest
 - d. submission
4. Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims
 - a. are the priestly groups of Islam
 - b. form the two major branches of Islam
 - c. are the gatekeepers at Mecca
 - d. were Mohammed’s first followers
5. An important characteristic of a mosque is
 - a. women are not allowed in
 - b. images of God are not permitted
 - c. worshippers must dress in white
 - d. the roof is transparent to allow in the sun

Scenic Overlook

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) was considered the “father of the Indian nation” as he championed Indian independence from British occupation via civil disobedience. Gandhi’s spiritual leadership had an enormous influence. He lived simply, dressing in traditional Indian dress. His vegetarianism and fasting reflected his respect for life. He was later referred to as “Mahatma” which means “great soul” in Sanskrit.



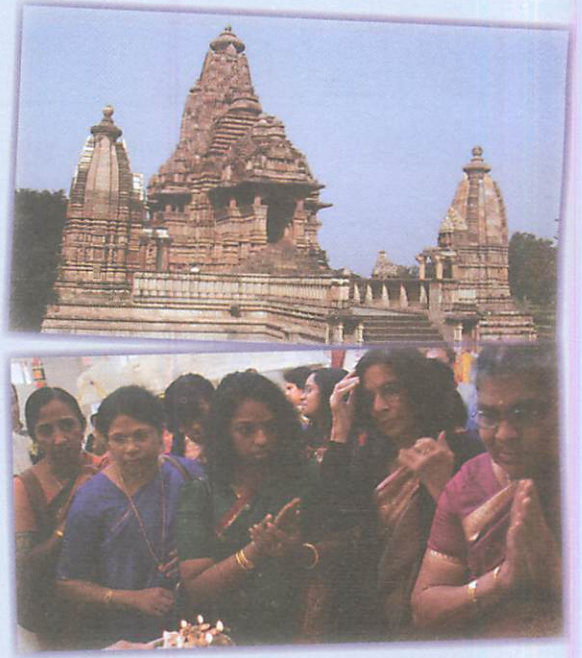
The Many Faces of God: Hinduism

A Long Time in the Making

After Christianity and Islam, Hinduism is the third largest religion. The majority of believers live in India, but many Indians have emigrated to other countries and you may have Hindu classmates or a Hindu temple in your neighborhood.

Hinduism is actually a collection of many ancient religious beliefs and philosophical schools. There is no single prophet, leader, creed or sacred text.

The name “Hindu” derives from the word “Sindhu,” the traditional name for the Indus River. This complex fabric of beliefs developed from the merging of two main groups – the people of the Indus Valley in India, a culture that flourished 5,000 years ago in what is today Pakistan and northwestern India; and the Aryans of Persia, who invaded the Indus Valley civilization 4,000 years ago.

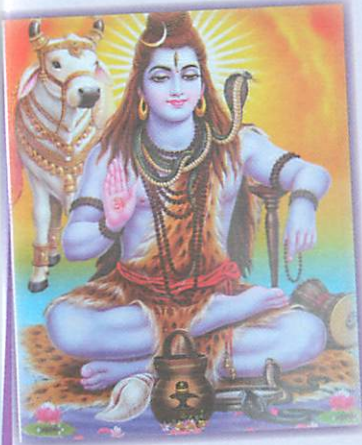


Many Gods Out of One

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion that lists hundreds, perhaps thousands of gods, but at its heart is the one true God - Brahman. There are three major Hindu sects, each based on a different idea of the divine, each devoted to a different god – Shiva, Vishnu or Shakti. They are loosely bound together by a single belief: that many different and individual paths may lead to the one ultimate goal of Hinduism, *moksha*, which is the release from the cycles of reincarnation, or attachment to the material world.

Shiva

Shiva is depicted as 4-armed, with contradictory powers - a god of storms, animals, healing, yogic self-control, sexuality. One of his sons is the elephant-headed Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, who is invoked at the beginning of every undertaking. His wife is Parvati.



Vishnu

Vishnu is a powerful but kind god, most commonly depicted as a handsome young man dressed in royal robes. His wife is Lakshmi. There are ten incarnations of Vishnu, called avatars. The 7th was the prince Rama, a powerful king who ruled for thousands of years and the subject of the famous epic poem “*The Ramayana*.” The 8th is Krishna, one of Hinduism’s most widely-worshiped gods. The 9th was the Buddha (more on him later). And the 10th is expected to come at the end of time, riding a white horse and holding a flaming sword.



Shakti

Shakti is a goddess, a composite of positive and negative traits, reflecting life and death, creation and destruction, vigor and rest. One of her forms is Kali, depicted with a string of human skulls around her neck.

Early religious laws supported a *caste* system which divided Hindu society into four basic occupations, but this system has loosened in more modern times.

Highlights

Basic Belief: Brahman is the one true god, the World Soul, the Ultimate Reality of which the many gods are part. Everyone's *individual* soul (atman) seeks union with the Universal Soul. All our actions, good and bad, will later have an affect in this life or another life. The consequence of our actions is called our "karma."

Holy Day: There is no specific holy day; every day is devoted to some sort of worship.

Holy Days: Dashera - a ten-day festival in the autumn in which Rama's victorious battle against the demon king Ravana is reenacted. **Diwali** - a festival in October or November that recalls Rama's return to his kingdom after fourteen years' exile. Because people would decorate their homes with lights it is called the "festival of lights."
Holi - a harvest festival celebrating the victory of truth over falsehood.

Holy Book: There is no one sacred text for Hindus. There are two main broad categories of Hindu scripture: *shruti*, "that which is heard" (considered more ancient and of a divine origin), and "smriti" - "that which is remembered." The *Vedas* are the most ancient of the shruti texts and are the primary scriptures for the Hindus. Veda means knowledge, revealed by the creator-god Brahman to inspired sages and these were then transmitted through an oral tradition. The *Rig Veda* is the oldest. They were compiled gradually, over the centuries and contain hymns, chants, and praises to the gods. The *Upanishads* were written around 700-500 B.C. and are the most recent of shruti scriptures. These are the writings of spiritual masters or gurus.

Well known "smriti" texts include the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* - two epics you may even study in college if you study world literature. The *Mahabharata* is probably the longest epic poem in history (90,000 stanzas)!

Worship: Each day Hindus worship the divine - performing "puja" - in a sacred corner of their home where offerings are made of flowers or food before a picture or statue of the god. But at the temple, the center of their religious and cultural affairs, more extensive rituals are held. People also visit their temples - dedicated to specific gods or goddesses - to worship individually.

Membership Rites: No membership rites per se, but rites of passage from childhood to youth to middle and then old age are marked by specific rituals performed at home by the head of the household.

Community Governance: Brahmins or priests.

Symbols: The sacred syllable or "om," which comes from the ancient Sanskrit language. The sound is believed to start from deep within the body and end at the lips which is a symbol of the movement of prayer from within. The sound is chanted at the beginning and end of Hindu prayers - something like a hypnotic and mesmerizing "amen." The cow is considered a sacred animal, representing all that is good about the earth and creation.

Pious Practices Pilgrimages to sacred rivers such as the Ganges are often made in the spring. People bathe and wash.



Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama



Like Christianity, Buddhism was born from the teachings of one person. This was Prince Siddhartha from northern India – what is now Nepal. His family name was Gautama and was known at first as Gautama the Buddha. The word “Buddha” means “enlightened one.” Interestingly, while Buddhism developed out of Hindu culture, it is no longer a religion of India. It is the 4th largest religion after Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.



Born around 566 BC, Siddhartha lived the lush life of a royal but became disenchanted with his protected palace life. He married but eventually left palace life at the age of 29 to seek a better way. He studied Hinduism, but did not like the caste system and had already rejected the animal sacrifices of the Brahmin priests as well as their authority. He tried a severe ascetic life but this too proved unhelpful. Finally, he sat under a bodhi tree and decided not to move until he would achieve a better understanding of things. And he did, experiencing an enlightenment that allowed him to see the true way. Glowing with wisdom and slowly referred to as the Buddha, he espoused a right path open to anyone and not subject to the interpretation of the priests. He died at the age of 80 urging his followers to go forth and preach his doctrines. The conversion of the Indian King Asoka (3rd c. B.C.) added greatly to the spread of Buddhism, with monasteries, traveling shelters and hospitals built by his missionaries.

What Do Buddhists believe?

The Buddha developed 4 basic truths and an 8-fold path that he called a “raft” that takes one to the ‘other shore,’ to “nirvana,” the ultimate goal. Nirvana is the total loss of ego, the uniting with the universe.

The Four Basic Truths

1. ***Life is suffering.***
The very nature of human existence is painful. Because of the cyclical nature of death and rebirth, death does not bring an end to suffering.
2. ***Suffering has a cause: craving for and attachment to material pleasures.*** Suffering is the result of our selfish craving and clinging. This in turn reflects our ignorance of reality.



Verse Master

“Be still and know that I am God.”

Psalm 46:10





As you can see, there is a great emphasis on mind and attitude. Buddhists believe in *karma* (the consequence of our actions), but their emphasis is more on the mental attitudes and thoughts that lead to actions.

Two Buddhist Paths

There are two major branches of Buddhism: *Mahayana* and *Theravada*.

Mahayanas are primarily in Tibet, China, Mongolia Korea, and Japan. This group is more worshipful towards the Buddha, holding him to be almost divine. There is also an emphasis on the many lesser enlightened ones or saints and on helping others to enlightenment. Tantric Buddhism is an off-shoot of the Mahayana school.

Believers in the *Theravada* school are found in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. "Theravada" literally means "the way of the elders." It focuses more on monastic life and one's own personal enlightenment.

3. *Craving and attachment can be overcome.*

When one completely transcends selfish craving, one enters the state of nirvana, and suffering ends. Those who achieve nirvana but wish to help others achieve it renounce nirvana as a goal, thereby becoming saints ("bodhisattvas").

4. *The path away from craving and attachment is an Eightfold Path:*

- Right understanding (understanding the four noble truths)
- Right thinking (caring for other people and all life)
- Right speech (truthfulness, compassion)
- Right conduct (helping others)
- Right livelihood (earning a living that doesn't harm others; anti-war)
- Right effort (improving one's mind and soul)
- Right alertness (always aware of others)
- Right concentration (focusing on awakening the mind)



Scenic Overlook

Two giant 6th-century statues of Buddha carved into the rock face in the Hazarajat region of Afghanistan were destroyed with dynamite in 2001 by the archly conservative Taliban who thought them to be idolatrous.



Highlights

Basic Belief: Buddhism is a spiritually focused way of life, which believes that in detaching ourselves from the material world, we can live as enlightened, free, and successful people.

Holy Day: There is no specific holy day.

Holy Days: *Vaishakha Festival* honors Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death with a procession bearing the images of Buddha and saints, music, and two nights of burning lamps; *Ullambana* a ceremony for the souls of the dead (especially popular in Japan and China); *Pirit* a blessing ritual to sanctify a new home, give strength and health to the sick, or ward off evil.

Holy Book: There are many different "canons" of sacred Buddhist writings, i.e. the *Tipitaka* of the Theravada tradition. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a well known collection of funeral prayers.

Worship: Sunday afternoon "vandana" or devotional prayers that consist of praise of Buddha and commitment to the 8-fold path; includes a sermon by the chief monk.

Membership Rites: None

Community Governance: There is no such thing as a parish or temple as a site for cultural and community gathering, but temples exist in communities of monks and for individual devotion.

Symbols **The Image of Buddha** The Buddha is depicted in many ways, but most often seated with his hands in his lap in meditation or with a hand raised in a gesture of blessing.

The lotus is an important symbol in Buddhism. Its roots are under water, in the mud and the flower is above, a beautiful symbol of the corruption of the world even as the Buddha maintains his purity.

Zen is short for "zazen"- a type of meditation developed by a 13th century Japanese Buddhist who believed words were secondary to seeking enlightenment and espoused quiet meditation and a peaceful mind. Zen Buddhism emphasizes harmony and unity and has influenced such diverse things as gardens, tea ceremonies, and the discipline of samurai warriors.

Samsara is the cycle of birth death and rebirth, the movement from one lifetime to another. By reaching "nirvana," one can be released from this eternal cycle.



Remember

Buddhism was founded by Prince Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BC and is primarily about a harmonious and spiritually centered way of life.