

Hinduism: Powerful Gymnastics of the Mind

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While living in Madison, WI, I experienced part of a Hindu Wedding ceremony held at our First Unitarian Society Meeting House. The wedding, relative to traditional Hindu practice, was rather short. It lasted only a day. Although short lived, it was magnificent, a feast for the eyes, ears, nose, taste buds and hands. The touch and sight of brightly colored silken cloths. The smells and tastes of myriad spiced foods. Celebratory music. Softly flowing incense. The joyous interchange of people's voices. It was a banquet for the soul.

One time Unitarian Henry David Thoreau, whose enthusiasm for Hinduism was sparked by the former Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson, stated "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny."

Hinduism. The word derives from the Persian, literally meaning the people and culture of the Indus Region. The basic beginnings of Hinduism are said to come from two primary sources which date back somewhere amidst the 3rd and 2nd millennium B.C.E. The first source is the Indus Valley Civilization, of which excavations point to a finely developed approach to life and the divine. The second source comes from the Aryan people whose oral tradition of hymns brought a broad base of religious thought. The collection of hymns is known as the Vedas. And they were eventually written down to create the sacred Vedic literature texts. (The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions, Abingdon Press, 1981, pg 305-307)

Thoreau said of the Vedas:

What extracts from the Vedas I have read fall on me like the light of a higher and purer luminary, which describes a loftier course through purer stratum. It rises on me like the full moon after the stars have come out, wading through some far stratum in the sky.

As to the Vedas, they are considered to reveal divine and ultimate truth to humans. Much of the Vedic texts address awareness and the need for proper relationship with the gods as they reveal the divine. Also, during this time of the Vedic formation, central concepts developed regarding the human condition. One of these concepts, Karma-Samsara, became a main theme in the formulation (either through acceptance or rejection) of the four major religions of India: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism:

Briefly stated, concepts of rebirth-redeath and Karma-Samsara are themes that teach that individual souls exist from beginningless time, passing on from one form of existence to another in a continuous rebirth-redeath. The conditions or circumstances for each new form of existence are determined by the merit or demerit of the actions (karma) that have taken place in previous existence. (The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions, Abingdon Press, 1981, pg 308)

The frustration of living within this samsaric way of existence, this human and cosmic condition, led to the development of a growing philosophical, theological and meditative strain of religious thought which began around the 8th century BCE. The Upanishads, which were created from approximately 500 B.C.E to 200A.D., is the literature associated with this developing religious thought. Again, (and this is a bit oversimplified) while the Vedas are considered to be of divine origin and offer revealed truths, the goal of the Upanishads is said to shine light upon these truths.

For example, the following thought comes from the Chandogya Upanishad:

You could have golden treasure buried beneath your feet, and walk over it again and again, yet never realize it is there. Just so, all beings live every moment in the city of the Divine, but never find the Divine because it is hidden by the veil of illusion. (UU Hymnal #613)

Over the years, I have observed that the Upanishads are of particular attraction to Unitarian Universalists, in part, I would offer, due to their wise blend of philosophical, theological and spiritual insights and guidance.

Also the Upanishads seem very aware that the nature of Brahman (that consciousness and power which upholds all existence) is mysterious and difficult to know. While Brahman may be found in objects and phenomenon, it is NOT objects and phenomenon. It is transcendent, "Thus it is that all particular aspects of existence must be considered as referring back to a single source, the One that lies underneath, within, and beyond all existence, namely Brahman." (Ibid, pg 309)

Now some of you may be aware of another term in Hindu religious thought, Atman. Atman is the self. Commonly referred to as the "intrinsic human self", not the ego, the personality. But that essence of ourselves, which is whole and complete within us, that which we can access through meditation. Some refer to Atman as the divine aspect within. Some Westerners might refer to it as the soul.

For those of you familiar with the Unitarian Minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson, this concept may sound very similar to Emerson's concept of the divine spark within every human being. This should not be surprising because Emerson was very influenced by the Hindu writings, the Vedas and Upanishads. This past Wednesday afternoon, I was upstairs sitting in the sunlit ministers' office talking to Cherry Merritt Darriau about this service, and she mentioned Emerson's phrase regarding Hindu writings as "powerful gymnastics of the mind." Of Hindu texts he said, "It was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us."

Atman. The divine essence within. Think about how freeing it is to know that within each of us resides the divine spark within, a depth of soul whole and complete, from which we can live our lives. And, in terms of our ethical way of living, to know that within every other person resides the same.

Beyond that which we dislike about others or like about them, resides a divine spark, an essence, the Atman. It gives a new depth of meaning to our Unitarian Universalist principle, which is to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Now, just to provide a little more mental gymnastic exercise for your mind, let me point out that while the Upanishads do on occasion refer to Atman as the inmost essence of each person, and Brahman as the ultimate essence of the universe, there is an ultimate non-dualistic understanding. Ultimately, and this is a key in Hindu religious thought, “Atman equals Brahman. Brahman equals Atman. ‘That art thou.’ (tat tvam asi)” Ibid. 309)

So what does all this mean to us on this summer Sunday morning? First, I do believe we Unitarian Universalists turn to the wisdom of the world’s religions to inspire us in our ethical and spiritual lives. Secondly, I believe that any insights we gain about another culture’s religious thought bring with them a deeper understanding of humanity. Our diversity. In our differences and similarities. And our world calls to us to heed this kind of understanding. This understanding, which allows for compassion. An open heart to others and ourselves.

Someone who embodies this deep understanding and compassionate way-of-being regarding world religions, I believe, is World Religion’s Scholar, Huston Smith. Author of this book, “The World’s Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions”, Professor Smith spoke from our UUCB pulpit in 1995 and 2004. His visits to our congregation, through the significant efforts of Rev. Barbara Carlson

and others, provide memories I shall always cherish. Barbara and I were recently speaking about what insights we remember from Huston Smith's visits.

She recollects his remark that "we in the west have predominantly manifested an *outward* expression of the mind and spirit genius, for example, our technological advances (for better or for worse) demonstrate this to the world, while the east has dwelled more in the interior expressions of the mind and spirit genius." Her remark reminded of a brief comment that Huston Smith made regarding his visits to India, "In their religious language and thought," he expressed, "they have descriptions for over one hundred various levels of consciousness." It certainly gives one pause as to what experiences of reality and humanity we in the west are missing out on.

As I mentioned earlier in this worship service, I want to emphasize that Hinduism affirms the notion of pluralism. It offers that there is tremendous diversity of divine appeal to different psychological configurations in the human condition. So, like Unitarian Universalism, there is a sense of each person discovering what "What works for you" in terms of one's spiritual path.

A prime example of various paths regarding one's spiritual journey is reflected in Yoga. First, let me lay bare some things about yoga (Yoga Baring!); first, Yoga itself is a science of various "methods of training which lead to integration and union of the infinite human potential." The common use of the term Yoga mistakenly refers to a set of unusual body postures known as Asanas. These Asanas are simply aspects of certain yoga methods.

Yoga, itself, actually predates formal Hinduism. Remember earlier when I mentioned there were two early sources of Hinduism 3rd and 2nd Millenium BCE, one being the Indus Valley Civilization, of which excavations point to a finely

developed approach to life and the divine. In one of those civilizations, the Harappan civilization 3000 BCE, little Yogic meditating statues have been found.

As Hinduism came into being, so did the ongoing development of Yoga. Cherry Merritt Darriau says this about Yoga:

Yoga means “union” from “yuj” (sanskrit for “yoke”) All techniques of this vast science have one purpose: TO UNITE THE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ASPECTS OF OUR LIVES. The Yogis have gained an understanding of the incredible complexity of the human body/mind. Through disciplined senses, a one pointed mind, a sharpened intellect and refined intuition, they have experienced the fuller capacity of the brain and powers of the mind and consciousness, which lie dormant in the human being

To unite the external and internal aspects of living. To join in union with the divine. Union of self and non-self. The uniting of Atman and Brahman.

Huston Smith points out that Hinduism consists of four paths of Yoga for attaining union with God. Each path is suited to a different religious personality type, “Some people are primarily reflective. Others are emotional. Still others are active and energetic. Finally, some like to experiment.” (Smith, Huston, “The World Religions” pg 26).

The four paths are, Union with the Divine Through Knowledge, Union with the Divine Through Love, Union with the Divine Through Work, and Union with the Divine Through Psychophysical Exercises. (Smith, pgs 25 through 38)

Union with the Divine Through Knowledge, known as Jnana Yoga, is for those people who are naturally reflective. The key to Jnana Yoga is discernment. Through listening to sages and sacred texts one learns that one’s essential self is Being itself. Prolonged intensive thinking and reflection are engaged to know the enduring self beyond the transient self of ego and thought. Eventually, through

ongoing practice, one can learn to live within the enduring self as opposed to the persona self. The Upanishads state it as such, “That thou art, other than Whom there is no other seer, hearer, thinker, or agent. Again, this Yoga is known as Jnana Yoga. Union with the Divine Through Knowledge.

Union with the Divine through Love, known as Bhakti Yoga, is the yoga of love and devotion. This Yoga envisions God as other and distinct from one’s self. The love one feels flows outward to the divine, to God. This Yoga is different from Jnana Yoga. As a Hindu devotional classic describes the difference, The follower of Bhakti Yoga wants to taste the sugar, not be the sugar. The love for God is a deep discipline. One is to keep the name of God present in all of one’s activities. “As the water of the Ganges flow incessantly toward the ocean,” says God in the Bhagavad Purana, “so do the minds of the bhakta move constantly toward Me, the Supreme person residing in every heart, when they hear about My qualities.” Union with the Divine through Love. Bhakti Yoga. (Ibid)

Union with the Divine through Work, is Karma Yoga. In this Yoga, people learn how to work in a way that carries them towards God. Primarily this is done by detaching from work for personal gains. One approaches work thoughtfully and in loving service. The Bhagavad Gita states, “He who performs actions without attachment, resigning them to God, is untainted by their effects like the lotus leaf by water.” The ego is lightened in this way of working. One becomes the instrument and God the doer. Karma Yoga. Union with the Divine through Work.

Union with Divine through Mind/Body Exercise and Experiment is Raja Yoga. Raja Yoga utilizes meditation, and slowly through awareness and exercise of body and breath, one is led to a deepening of concentration. Through layers of the conscious mind, the subconscious mind, the raja yogi is led to Being itself. The mind, however, is not easy to quiet. It is compared to a drunken, crazed monkey bantering about in its cage. The Raja Yogi must practice diligently.

“When all the senses are stilled,” says the Katha Upanishads, “when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not—that, say the wise, is the highest state.” Union with Divine through Mind/Body Exercise. Raja Yoga.

Finally, in concluding these simple, bare facts about the basic four paths of Yoga, it should be emphasized that these paths are not exclusive of one another. People will practice various types of Yoga, however, most people will tend to be drawn to one particular path more than others.

Allow me to conclude this reflection with an article from the mid 1980s by Debu and Catherine Majumdar; the article is entitled, “Hindu Couple Finds Common Thread with UUs in US” and it begins with a quote from Rev. Dr. Forrest Church that “each of us, as Unitarian Universalists, is charged to seek truth and meaning wherever it can be found. When you join a Unitarian Universalist church you commit yourself to a moral and spiritual purpose to be faithful to the inherent responsibilities of religious freedom. You commit to discard whatever beliefs you discover to be false and accept whatever beliefs you are convinced are true.”

It is an ongoing search. (the Majumdar’s point out) “For both Hindu and UU life is a perpetual evolution in knowledge. The evolution is moral, ethical, aesthetic, humanistic, as well as individualistic. The spirit of questioning, cross-examining and debating has been harbored in Hindu souls for thousands of years. The UUs perpetuate the same adventurous spirit toward religion.”

Allow me to close with the following invocation is from the Upanishads: May Brahman bestow upon us (teacher and the disciple) both the fruit of knowledge! May we both obtain the energy to acquire knowledge! May we both study to reveal the truth! May we cherish no ill feelings toward one another! Om Shanti. Om Shanti. Om Shanti.

So may it be. Amen. Shalom