

## 8. Gods of India

To a certain extent, one must be a little circumspect when discussing the religion of others because no one knows that religion like its faithful. On the other hand, that “knowing” is generally limited among the faithful to knowing their personal ‘feel’ of their religion because they universally have little or no understanding of its history or its deep philosophical foundation. As mentioned on page 176, Dr. Mark W. Muesse has said, “Most religious people throughout the world, even today, consider ritual much more important than doctrine and belief.” Folks are usually too busy with the business of living to study philosophy, which is of little benefit anyway. What’s more, individual believers are usually knowledgeable about only their own understanding of their faith, which varies from individual to individual. With its numerous divisions, Hinduism is probably the best example of the limitations of individual believer’s knowledge of the total system of their faith. So a commentator is sure to find disagreement regardless of what he or she might say.

Hinduism doesn’t recognize reason as exclusively the mode of scientific inquiry and faith as the mode of religious expression. It encompasses both reason and faith. Hindus consider their religion to be “a religion of the body, the mind, and the spirit. Hinduism is not just a religion but a body of spiritual knowledge that assists mankind to progress spiritually and evolve themselves into higher planes.” It’s perhaps, less a religion than a way of life. It’s not simply a collection of rituals that are performed on certain days or at certain times of the day.

The focus of Hinduism is on the individual. Other than festivals, it has no scheduled communal worship. It does not seek converts, but accepts anyone who wishes to follow any of their paths. It strongly believes that individuals should be free to follow whatever path will lead them to the ‘One’.

As a way of life, the positive role models that older generations provide to their children is probably, at least partly, responsible for Hinduism’s remarkable success. According to tradition, the deeper secrets of Hinduism can be revealed only by a personal guru to his most qualified disciples based on their spiritual progress.

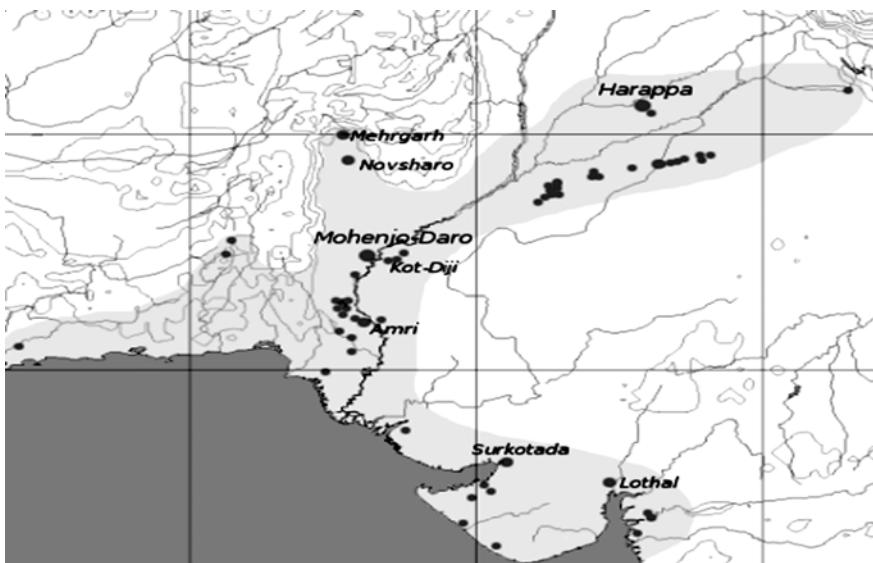
Rather than a single monolithic religion, Hinduism is generally considered to be a collection of numerous separate traditions that share a few fundamental beliefs under the umbrella term “Hinduism”. Of course, this is

not unique to Hinduism; the numerous Christian denominations, from Catholicism to fundamentalists, and the various Judaic movements, from Orthodox to Reform, are also somewhat divergent. The divergence in Islam, however, is more a struggle for power than a disagreement over ideology. Like the ancient religions, the history of modern faiths is a story of splintering.

The Hindu religion is famous for its plethora of gods, which are worshiped as separate entities but which most of the faithful consider to simply be different aspects of the one god Brahman. [The god is spelled with an 'a' ('man') whereas the caste is spelled with an 'i' ('min'), although not all writers follow this spelling protocol, leading to some confusion.] "One God manifests as many. He is the sum total of all things in the universe." "He is both manifested and unmanifested, Being and Non-Being, Existence (*sat*) and non-existence (*asat*)."<sup>1</sup> In this way, Hinduism deflects the modern stigma of polytheism. However, the faithful might not always sustain the connection between the various gods and the supreme deity, the 'One', Brahman, in everyday ritual.

Outsiders might think Hinduism to be a collection of numerous contradictions, but the faithful consider these apparent contradictions as merely different manifestations of the same principle: a unifying oneness of all existence that's called "the unchanging reality amidst and beyond the world". An example of such an apparent contradiction is that, on the one hand, Brahman is said to be unknowable, but on the other hand, enlightenment is said to be the state of knowing Brahman. Hinduism is rife with such paradoxical beliefs. For example, Book 10, Hymn 72, Verse 4 of the *Rig Veda* (alternate spellings are *Rig-Veda*, *Rg Veda*, or *Rigveda*; 'veda' means 'knowledge'), the oldest holy book of Hinduism, says, "Daksa was born of Aditi, and Aditi was Daksa's Child." For the faithful, the paradox that Aditi was Daksa's child and Daksa was Aditi's child is resolved by the belief that the Universe is only one thing and all the separate things are merely manifestations of the 'one'.

Like most religions that have ever captured the hearts of people, Hinduism seeks a relationship with the Creator that guarantees the worshiper eternal life. One philosophical tradition identifies three stages in a man's life in his quest for this eternal life: the first stage is childhood, during which one learns; the second stage is adulthood, during which one marries and raises children; the third stage is a search for religious fulfillment (enlightenment) after the children have grown, during which a man might leave his wife and wander as an ascetic and mendicant. The wife is left to live with her oldest son or perhaps joins a sort of convent with other abandoned wives. Thus, Hinduism is male-dominated and narcissistic in the sense that it focuses on the individual sometimes at the expense of the family. Of course, in all religions, individuals focus on themselves by necessity; one can only affect oneself, although one might pray for others in the hope of affecting them. But in the end, a person's good works or bad works are recorded only on his or her own slate. We are all alone. The crucifixion of



### Extent of the Indus Valley Culture

The Indus Valley Culture extended along the Indus River and the Arabian Sea. At its peak around 2600 BCE, it comprised almost 1000 municipalities that were all very similar and exhibited quite an advanced infrastructure. By 1000 BCE, the Indus Valley people were moving southeast into the vast subcontinent. This migration was perhaps driven by repeated flooding of the Indus River and the drying of the Ghaggar-Hakra river system.

Christ is probably the only instance in the history of religion in which an individual's action was for the benefit of someone other than himself—the only purely altruistic act.

Hinduism is possibly the oldest and most unique of all modern religions. It is prone to splintering into different traditions both because it has no central authority to maintain cohesion and because one of the fundamental beliefs common to all its traditions is that there is no single way to gain everlasting life; many paths are possible. So it's a very tolerant religion, both of other faiths and of other traditions within Hinduism, which provides fertile ground for the growth of diverse traditions. This tolerance is one of the factors that tie the different traditions together under the umbrella of "Hinduism".

Modern Hinduism grew out of the beliefs and practices of a culture that existed along the Indus River primarily in what is now Pakistan around 3000 BCE. This civilization was first discovered in 1856 by British railroad construction engineers looking for ballast for their roadbed. Locals told them of ancient cities nearby, and investigation turned up a couple of walled cities made of sun-cured and fire-cured brick, which the engineers appropriated to ballast 96 miles of track.

Archaeological digs in the area, begun in 1921, have revealed a heretofore unknown civilization of over a thousand towns and cities that extended along the Indus River and the coast of the Arabian Sea. The oldest known



### Some Symbols of Indus Valley Script

Some of the nearly 600 symbols found in the messages of the Indus Valley people. None of the 4000 or so messages has ever been deciphered.

village is Mehgarh, a neolithic farming community that existed around 6000 BCE and that's located 125 miles west of the Indus valley. By 3300 BCE, contemporary with early Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, the Indus Valley culture was advancing toward its zenith, which began around 2600 BCE. At its height of development, cities laid out in east-west-north-south grid patterns, extensive public water supplies, and a sewage system of covered drains—all of which were not only highly systematic at each location but were also extraordinarily consistent throughout the civilization of 1000 towns—suggest one of the most advanced cultures of its time and, perhaps, a unified kingdom. There's also ample evidence that they engaged in extensive trade with Mesopotamian civilizations.

Unfortunately, the exact identity of the Indus Valley culture's people who created early Hinduism remains speculative because they left no written record describing themselves. They left as many as 4,000 written messages that are composed of various symbols, such as a spoked wheel. Altogether, between 400 and 600 symbols have been identified among the 4,000 written messages. The messages have been found on tools, small tablets, copper plates, and pottery but are most commonly found on flat, rectangular stamp seals, which are carved stones used to impress their inscription into soft clay. Some of these seals have been found in Mesopotamia. The messages are all brief. The average message is only five symbols long, and the longest inscription contains only 26 symbols. Short messages like that are hard to decipher unless their context is known, and no one knows the context of the Indus scripts. It's even unclear whether or not the messages are a written language or merely marks signifying ownership similar to cattle brands. A written language is a set of symbols that a group of people recognize as representing, and corresponding to, the sounds of a spoken language as opposed to symbols that simply identify a specific thing or person, a mark representing a name for example. No one knows what language was spoken in the area; it could have been either an Indo-European language such as Sanskrit, or a Dravidian dialect like that spoken in the area today. The Indus script's several hundred characters is in a no-man's land between an alphabet-type script, which would use far fewer characters, and a Chinese-style ideographic script, which would need far more. Thus, although the civilization is no longer lost to history, it remains lost to our understanding.

Although nothing is undeniably known about the people who created early Hinduism, it's generally believed that they were a mixture of a native population (sometimes associated with the modern Dravidians of south-eastern India) and a group, often called the Aryans, who came into the Punjab from some unknown place around 3000 BCE to 2500 BCE. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the English word 'Aryan' is borrowed from the Sanskrit word 'arya', which means 'Noble'. This is possibly the source of the historic belief that the Indus Valley Culture of 2500 BCE was stratified into a lower class composed of the native people and an upper class composed of the Aryan newcomers. There are several hypotheses describing the influx of Aryans, but none have sufficient evidence to warrant the dignity of a theory.

One hypothesis is that the Aryans were a nomadic people from somewhere near the Caucasus Mountains or present-day Iran who invaded the Punjab, conquering the inhabitants by force over a short period of time and bringing the seeds of the *Rig Veda* with them. These nomadic Aryans had domesticated the horse, which they brought into India with them. A second hypothesis is that the Aryans were an agricultural people from somewhere near the Caucasus Mountains or present-day Iran who emigrated into the Punjab over the course of several centuries, bringing the horse and the seeds of the *Rig Veda* with them. A third hypothesis is that the Aryans had come to the Punjab eons ago and were already an established part of the culture when the *Rig Veda* was composed; they were, in a sense, always there.

By 2000 BCE, the Indus Valley culture began to decline, and by around 1700 BCE, many cities were abandoned. According to classical interpretations of Indian history, this decline was because the native Indus Valley people were overrun (through either invasion or immigration) by the Aryans, which contradicts the hypothesis that the Aryans arrived between 3000 and 2500 BCE and a stable society ensued. Others believe that the occasional extensive flooding that the Indus River inflicted on them finally wore out the Indus Valley people. Excavations have revealed that some cities were inundated (or demolished) and rebuilt a half dozen times over the course of several hundred years. Alternatively, the Ghaggar-Hakra river system, which these days is an intermittent system that depends on the monsoons and that flows parallel to the Indus but east of it, may have disappeared entirely, leaving many cities dry. Satellite photographs have shown that the Ghaggar-Hakra was indeed a large river that has dried up several times. Whatever the cause of the demise of the Indus Valley culture, the people left no tales, either oral or written, of their struggles against either man or nature.

Modern Hinduism began as one of the polytheistic nature religions that was so common among the primitive beliefs of people that were making the first, faltering attempts to come to terms with a supernatural force in the Universe. Among the numerous gods of early Hinduism are *Agni*, the god of fire (more specifically, the fire used in sacrifices) and the first word

## RV 3.62.10 in Sanskrit

This is Mandela (book) 3, Prayer 62, Verse 10 of the *Rig Veda* and part of the sacred Gayatri Mantra. There are many translations, but all essentially say, "We meditate on God; may he enlighten our minds."

तत्सवितुर्वरेन्यं  
भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि  
धीयो यो नः प्रचोदयात्

(*Agnim*) of the Hinduism's most ancient holy book, the *Rig Veda*; *Indra*, king of the gods; *Rudra*, god of storms; and *Varuna*, god of the water and the keeper of the cosmic order as a god of law. There were numerous other 'minor' gods such as the *Asvins*, the twins who represented sunrise and sunset. The gods of Vedic Hinduism, like those of other primitive religions, ate, drank, fought, bore children, and exhibited other human behavior. Like all other nature religions, sacrifice to the gods was an important part of early Hinduism, and the early holy texts were largely devoted to procedures of ritual sacrifice. They contain little or no instruction on how to lead a moral life.

The Vedas, date from around 1,700 BCE (around the time when many cities of the Indus Valley Culture were abandoned), and some verses from the *Rig Veda* are still recited as prayers at religious functions and other occasions. For example, Verse 10, Prayer 62, Mandela (book) 3 of the *Rig Veda* (RV 3.62.10) is still recited as part of the Gayatri Mantra. The English translation of the verse, like those in all the Vedas, varies from translator to translator: "May we attain that excellent glory of Savitar the God: So May he stimulate our prayers." (Ralph T. H. Griffith); "We meditate on the worshipable [sic] power and glory of Him who has created the Universe, and who directs our understanding." (Sivanath Sastri); "We meditate on the glory of that Being who has produced this Universe; may He enlighten our minds." (Swami Vivekananda; Swami is the title of a Hindu ascetic or religious teacher); "We meditate on the effulgent glory of the divine Light; may he inspire our understanding." (S. Radhakrishnan). There is no universally accepted English translation of the Vedas. Because of the Vedas' antiquity and their continued use, albeit limited, in contemporary worship, Hinduism is often called the world's oldest religion.

However, the late Roderick Ninian Smart (late Professor of Theology, University of Birmingham; former visiting lecturer at Yale University; former Professor in the Comparative Study of Religions at the University of California, Santa Barbara) has written, "Hinduism could be seen to be much more recent, though with various ancient roots: in a sense it was formed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century [sic] and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century." The nineteenth and twentieth century Hinduism to which Smart alludes is called Neo-Hinduism by most other scholars. Smart's view of the antiquity of Hinduism's roots stems from extensive clarifications and explanations of the Vedas that, through the centuries, have so altered their meaning that modern Hinduism has little in common with the beliefs and practices of four eons ago. That train of clarification and explanation is the primary link between the Vedas and modern Hinduism.

One of the common beliefs that tie together the various traditions of Hinduism is that the Vedas are not perfect; the unnamed and unknowable spirit who inserted them into the minds of ancient sages transmitted them perfectly, but humans, even the ancient sages, are incapable of receiving them perfectly. Therefore, the texts are being constantly clarified and explained. These clarifications and explanations have woven an intricate pattern of thought that is more like a Gordian Knot than a logical progression of ideas.

The ancient people in the Indus valley composed the four Vedas, which are the oldest body of literature that's still regarded as holy writings: *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. Consequently these people are known simply as the Vedic peoples. The Vedas were all composed centuries before they were written down; they were handed down orally for hundreds of years. It is claimed that this oral transmission was very accurate because a rigid chanting technique was used. The *Rig Veda* was the first one composed.

A detailed study of the language (philology) of the *Rig Veda* indicates that it was composed over the time period of 1700 to 1100 BCE. The *Rig Veda* was followed chronologically, as best we know, by the *Yajur Veda*, which is estimated to have been composed between 1,400 and 1000 BCE; the *Sama Veda*, the earliest parts of which are believed to date from 1000 BCE; and finally the *Atharva Veda*. There is no universal agreement on these dates because the Hindus had no tradition of recording history in the manner of the Greek Herodotus. These four texts were later termed the *samhitas* to differentiate them from subsequent texts that became recognized as integral parts of the Vedas.

Indus Valley Hinduism and its Vedas, like other ancient primitive nature religions, was very heavily oriented toward sacrifices in order to gain support of the gods. The *Rig Veda* is a compilation of prayers to the various deities that were recited during these sacrifices, and the *Yajur Veda* is a collection of rudimentary instructions on how to conduct these sacrifices. The *Sama Veda* is a collection of hymns that are more musical in nature. They were chanted by a specialist during important rituals. It has been said that "The *Rig Veda* is the word, and the *Sama Veda* is the song or the meaning." The *Atharva Veda* is a collection of spells intended to ward off ill fortune such as sickness and disease, snake bites, bad dreams, and evil spirits or to secure good fortune such as success, happiness, and prosperity. It has been of little use in solemn ritual.

The Vedas are the core of what Hinduism calls *sruti*, or *shruti*, from a Sanskrit word that means 'What Is Heard'. *Sruti* are texts that are considered to be scripture of divine origin. Brahmanas (ritual treatises), the Aranyakas (Forest Books), and the Upanishads (philosophical elaborations on the Vedas) are also considered to be *sruti*. The source of the Vedas is traditionally credited to the god (*deva*) of creation as some sort of divine sound that was unintelligible to mortals. This divine sound was inserted directly into the minds of holy men called Rishis, who had achieved perfect

oneness with all that is and who were thus able to receive it and translate it into a language that humans could understand. This is, perhaps, the most complex transmission of divine texts of all modern religions.

The *Rig Veda* is composed of 10 books, known as Mandalas, each of which contain several hymns, or prayers, dedicated to the various deities. Some of them follow the traditional format of a prayer as described on page 180: God is great; give me something; God is great (optional). Others are simple hymns of praise such as a hymn to the god *Agni* in Mandala (book) one, hymn number 67, as translated into rather poetic English by Ralph T.H. Griffith:

1. Victorious in the wood, Friend among men, ever he claims obedience as a King. Gracious like peace, blessing like mental power, Priest was he, offering-bearer, full of thought.
2. He, bearing in his hand all manly might, crouched in the cavern, struck the Gods with fear. Men filled with understanding find him there, when they have sting prayers formed within their heart.
3. He, like the Unborn, holds the broad earth up; and with effective utterance fixed the sky. O *Agni*, guard the spots which cattle love: thou, life of all, hast gone from lair to lair.
4. Whoso hath known him dwelling in his lair, and hath approached the stream of holy Law—they who release him, paying sacred rites—truly to such doth he announce great wealth.
5. He who grows mightily in herbs, within each fruitful mother and each babe she bears, wise, life of all men, in the waters' home—for him have sages built as 'twere a seat.

Like our hunter-gatherer ancestors who gathered around the fire and asked the gods for a good hunt, the Vedic people also asked the gods for favors such as protection from enemies or for wealth as in the first hymn of the first Mandala (Ralph T. H. Griffith):

1. I Laud *Agni*, the chosen Priest, God, minister of sacrifice, the hotar, lavishest of wealth.
2. Worthy is *Agni* to be praised by living as by ancient seers. He shall bring hitherward the Gods.
3. Through *Agni* man obtaineth wealth, yea, plenty waxing day by day, most rich in heroes, glorious.
4. *Agni*, the perfect sacrifice which thou encompassest about verily goeth to the Gods.
5. May *Agni*, sapient-minded Priest, truthful, most gloriously great, the God, come hither with the Gods.
6. Whatever blessing, *Agni*, thou wilt grant unto thy worshipper, that, Angiras, is indeed thy truth.
7. To thee, dispeller of the night, O *Agni*, day by day with prayer bringing thee reverence, we come
8. Ruler of sacrifices, guard of Law eternal, radiant One, increasing in thine own abode.

9. Be to us easy of approach, even as a father to his son: *Agni*, be with us for our weal.

As in many other primitive nature religions, the Vedic people sought favor of the gods by sacrifice rituals that involved consigning material to a ritual fire, which the Vedic people considered to be the god *Agni*. In Vedic times, every household kept a sacrificial fire constantly burning just as Rome kept the holy fire in the Temple of Vesta constantly burning. The Romans considered it a dire portent for the city if the fire in the Temple of Vesta were to go out. Similarly, the Hindus considered it sacrilege if a householder allowed his sacred fire to go out; it meant *Agni* had left the building.

The *Rig Veda* sanctioned the four-part division (four castes, or varnas) of society in two verses of Prayer 90 in Book 10:

11. When they divided Purusa how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet?
12. The Brahman [sic: Brahmin? priests, scholars] was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya [the noble and warrior class] made. His thighs became the Vaisya [merchants, cattleherders, farmers, artisans], from his feet the Sudra [laborers] was produced.

These two lines are the only mention of caste in the Vedas, so the social divisions, though present, were probably not significant in Vedic India, nor is there mention of either rank or discrimination between castes. Rank and discrimination were social developments unsupported by the *Rig Veda*. Around 400 CE, Fa-Hien, a Buddhist pilgrim from China, wrote of seeing that "Throughout the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor eat onions or garlic. The only exception is that of the Chandalas ['the lowest and most despised caste of India' wrote James Legge, translator of Fa-Hein's journal]. That is the name for those who are (held to be) wicked men, and live apart from others. When they enter the gate of a city or a marketplace, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known, so that men know and avoid them, and do not come into contact with them." This was likely when what might be called the fifth caste, the untouchables, originated.

Caste consciousness still continues in India and is a topic of considerable debate among Hindu scholars and activists. Some advocate the end of social injustice by completely abolishing social divisions while others attempt to redefine the ancient divisions in a way that is relevant to modern society.

Hymns from the Vedas were recited, chanted, or sung by a priest during sacrifice rituals. In the earliest worship of the Vedic people, these sacrifice rituals were simple observances, but over time they gradually became very complex. From the time of the composition of the earliest *Rig Veda* hymns around 1,700 BCE to the appearance of the first hymns of the *Yajur Veda*, sacrifice rituals involved a priest, or *hotr*, reciting hymns from the *Rig Veda*, as he consigned the sacrificial material to the fire on behalf of the

sacrificer. This sacrificial material was literally 'food for the gods' such as clarified butter called 'ghee', milk, grains, cakes, and 'soma', which was an intoxicating beverage of the gods. The identity of soma is a mystery and, thus, a topic of lively debate. The *hotr* contemplated upon and identified with the particular deity to which the ritual was addressed.

As the *Yajur Veda* was composed, priests increased the complexity (and cost) of sacrifice rituals because the *hotr* added an assistant, the *adhvaryu*. In our age of complexity and specialization, we must often rely on the advice of specialists, from priests to auto mechanics, who have a vested interest in that advice. Book 3, Part 1, Verse 10 of the *Yajur Veda* says, "The *adhvaryu* is the first of the priests to start work". The *Yajur Veda* is seven books, each having several parts, that contain prayers specific to sacrifice rituals as well as descriptions, absent from the *Rig Veda*, of the parts the sacrificer, *hotr*, and *adhvaryu* played in the ritual. It contains verses, some of which are refrains of some of those in the *Rig Veda*, and part of the duties of the *adhvaryu* was to chant these verses while making his own sacrifices to the gods. The *Yajur Veda* also contains detailed instructions, also absent from the *Rig Veda*, on how the sacrificial fire hearths were to be constructed. In addition to his own chants and sacrificial offerings, the *adhvaryu* was in charge of the physical details of the ritual such as measuring the ground, building the altar, and so forth.

After the *Sama Veda* was composed, another priest, the *udgatar*, was added to the complexity and cost of rituals. The *udgatar* chanted hymns drawn from the *Sama Veda* that were set to melodies (*saman*). Vedic fire sacrifice rituals still live on in the modern purification ritual of Havan and its Sacred Fire Ceremony sometimes observed during Hindu weddings, although Havan and the Sacred Fire are much simpler than Vedic sacrifices.

Early in the *Yajur Veda*'s composition it was separated into two versions: the Krishna, or Black, *Yajur Veda* and the Sukla, or White, *Yajur Veda*. In the Preface to his translation of the White *Yajur Veda*, Ralph T.H. Griffith speculates that this separation is "... owing to a schism among its earliest teachers and their followers". This was, perhaps, the first splintering of Hinduism into its various schools (*shakha*). The two versions are substantially the same, but the Black has its further clarifications, or *Brahmanas* and *Aranyakas*, embedded in the text whereas the White's *Brahmana*, the *Satapatha Brahmana*, is attached as an appendix. There are also minor variations in the texts, such as pronunciation marks, that are evident only when the verses are chanted.

As the ancient, primitive, nature religion of the Vedas, with its emphasis on sacrifice, became inadequate over the centuries to satisfy newer, more philosophical ideas, the Hindus chose to expand upon the Vedas rather than discard them and begin all over, and the *Brahmanas* were the first of these modifications. The *Brahmanas* are a collection of texts that clarify and expand upon the four Vedas and are part of the Hindu sacred scripture. Most people believe them to be integral parts of the Vedas such that reference to the Vedas includes the *Brahmanas*; the original Vedic mandalas then became known as the *samhitas*. This viewpoint considers the Vedas to

be a spiritual essence that transcends the mandalas themselves. Others consider the Brahmanas to be adjunct texts that have also been divinely revealed.

The Brahmanas contain instructions, more detailed than in the *Yajur Veda*, on the proper performance of the various ritual sacrifices and explain the symbolic importance of sacred words and ritual actions. The instructions are very detailed (such as how the sacred fire is kindled, where the participants stand or sit, the sequence of actions, exact pronunciation and precise pitch of the hymns) because only through proper performance were the sacrifices considered to be effective. A single error in the performance would render the sacrifice worthless and require the entire ritual to be repeated until its performance was perfect. Ultimately, a Brahmin priest who was more expert on the rituals than the other three priests was added to the cast. This Brahmin was generally silent during the procedures but would observe the ritual and 'heal' it when a mistake occurred by reciting specific mantras and sacrificing ghee. Thus, in its fullest flower, Vedic ritual involved four priests: *hotr*, *adhvaryu*, *udgatar*, and Brahmin. Moreover, each priest had three assistants.

Several schools of interpretation (*shakhas*) have risen from the four Vedas, and each has its own Brahmana. The various schools and their Brahmanas don't completely agree with one another, so Hindu revealed scripture has several versions that sometimes conflict with one another, which has been part of the cause for splintering of Hinduism. As the centuries passed, the Brahmanas have been revised numerous times, but few of the early revisions are extant.

The Aranyakas are a collection of texts that, like the Brahmanas, clarify and expand upon the four Vedas and are part of the Hindu sacred *sruti* scripture. Some disagreement exists over what constitutes a Brahmana and what constitutes an Aranyaka because there is only a subtle difference in the type of content between the two texts. Subtle differences in texts are always the stuff of bickering among experts and adherents. The Brahmanas tend to discuss the proper performance of rituals whereas the Aranyakas tend to focus a little more on their meaning. However, they both also include a modicum of philosophical musings, fewer in the Brahmanas than in the Aranyakas. The extent of these musings is partly the source for the debates on what constitutes a Brahmana or an Aranyaka.

As mentioned previously, the Aranyakas are called 'forest books' because they are associated with forests; they are considered so intellectually dangerous they should be studied only by ascetic seers in the forest. Some were composed by ascetic seers who had retired to the forests as part of their contemplation of the divine in preparation for their death. Like the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas are considered by some to be part of the Vedas, and reference to the 'Vedas' includes the Aranyakas as well as the Brahmanas. Others believe both the Brahmanas and Aranyakas to be completely separate from each other and from their respective Vedas.

Regardless of these debates, the Brahmanas and Aranyakas began the transition between early, primitive Hinduism focused on sacrifice and the

modern form focused on the believer's spiritual development. This transition was essentially completed by the Upanishads, which are often considered to be *Vedanta* (the end of the Vedas). Most explanations in the Aranyakas of sacrifice rituals, and their hymns are rather fanciful and cryptic. For example, verses four through six of the Second Khanda (book) of the First Adhyaya (section) of the First Aranyaka (division) in the *Aitareya Aranyaka*, which belongs to the Aitareya school (*shakha*) of the *Rig Veda*, as translated by Max Muller, say:

4. There are four metrical feet (in the Trishtubh verses of this hymn). Verily, cattle have four feet, therefore they serve for the gaining of cattle.
5. There are three metrical feet (in the Virag verses of this hymn). Verily, three are these threefold worlds. Therefore they serve for the conquest of the worlds.
6. These (the Trishtubh and Virag verses of the hymn) form two meters, which form a support (pratishihhi). Verily, man is supported by two (feet), cattle by four feet. Therefore this hymn places the sacrificer who stands on two feet among cattle which stand on four.

The Third khanda of the First Adhyaya in the *Aitareya Aranyaka's* Second Aranyaka, as translated by Max Muller, says:

1. Next follows the origin of seed. The seed of Pragapati are the devas (gods). The seed of the devas is rain. The seed of rain are herbs. The seed of herbs is food. The seed of food is seed. The seed of seed are creatures. The seed of creatures is the heart. The seed of the heart is the mind. The seed of the mind is speech (Veda). The seed of speech is action (sacrifice). The action done (in a former state) is this man, the abode of Brahman.
2. He (man) consists of food (ira), and because he consists of food (iramaya), he consists of gold (hiranmaya). He who knows this becomes golden in the other world, and is seen as golden (as the sun) for the benefit of all beings.

Swami Krishnananda has interpreted the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads in this way: "I have also mentioned that the Veda has an aspect, namely, the ritual aspect, the aspect of sacrifice, performance of religious ceremony by the application of the Mantras of the Samhitas [Vedic hymns], as expounded in the section known as the Brahmanas. The Aranyakas go to the contemplated side of the Brahmanas, and tell us that a sacrifice need not necessarily be outward; it can also be inward; and the inward is as powerful as the outward. It can even be more powerful than the outward. The ritual that is performed by the mind, say the Aranyakas, is more puissant in the production of effect than the ritual that is outwardly performed through the sacred fire, or in the holy altar. The entire range of the Aranyakas is filled with this meaning, that mental action is a greater action than outward action. Its capacity is greater than external activity. Thought is more potent than word and deed. This principle is carried to its logical limit in the Upanishads.

### The Holy Syllable *Om*, or *Aum*

*Om*, shown here in Devanagari script, is often thought to be the unofficial symbol of Hinduism. Its sound is considered to be the holy sound that brought the divine consciousness into being at the instant of creation. It is uttered before and after prayers or reading the Vedas.



The Upanishads carry philosophical Hinduism much further than the Brahmanas and Aranyakas and are also considered to be divinely revealed *sruti* texts. Like the Brahmanas and Aranyakas, they are considered to be beyond the proper concern of all casts but the Brahmins. They are often considered to be part of the Vedas rather than adjunct texts. The focus of Vedic ritual, even as modified by the Brahmanas and Aranyakas, was to gain wealth (as measured by cattle) and sons. By the time the Upanishads were composed, this focus had greatly faded but was still occasionally evident in the *Chandogya Upanishad*. The *Chandogya Upanishad* was one of the first composed, some say as early as 800 BCE but more likely as much as three centuries later. It comprises eight sections (*Prapathakas*), each containing several chapters (*Khanda*s). The second verse of the Twenty-third *Khanda* in the Fifth *Prapathaka*, as translated by Max Muller, says, "If *Udana* is satisfied, *Vayu* (air) is satisfied, if *Vayu* is satisfied, ether is satisfied, if ether is satisfied, whatever is under *Vayu* and under the ether is satisfied. And through their satisfaction he (the sacrificer or eater) himself is satisfied with offspring, cattle, health, brightness, and Vedic splendor."

As time passed, the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads increasingly de-emphasized the role of sacrifice and the Vedic gods, although both sacrifice and the Vedic gods were still evident in the early Upanishads. *Indra* and *Rudra* were never completely abandoned. For example, Verse 6 of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Second *Adhyaya*, First *Brahmama* clings to the Vedic gods *Indra* and the *Maruts*, as translated by Max Muller: "Gargya said: 'The person that is in the wind (and in the breath), that I adore as Brahman.' Agatasatrū said to him: 'No, no! Do not speak to me on this. I adore him as *Indra Vaikuntha*, as the unconquerable army (of the *Maruts*).' Whoso adores him thus, becomes victorious, unconquerable, conquering his enemies."

The *Chandogya Upanishad* was perhaps the first to introduce the importance of meditation in worship. One of the important concepts introduced in the First *Prapathaka*'s (section's) First *Khanda* (chapter) of this Upanishad is the holy syllable *Om*, or *Aum*, as an object and facilitator of meditation. Perhaps even more significant, the seventh verse of the *Chandogya Upanishad*'s Fifth *Prapathaka*, Tenth *Khanda* introduces the concept of the transmigration of the soul, or rebirth after death (*samsara*), and hints that it depends on the person's conduct, although the term '*karma*' was not used. The verse says, "Those whose conduct has been good, will quickly attain some good birth, the birth of a Brahmana [sic; Brahmin?], or

a Kshatriya, or a Vaisya. But those whose conduct has been evil, will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog, or a hog, or a Kandala." The third verse of the Third Prapathaka's Fourteenth Khanda is one the first descriptions of *atman* (the soul, or the personal spiritual self) although the term '*atman*' had not yet been introduced into Hinduism: "He is my self within the heart, smaller than a corn of rice, smaller than a corn of barley, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller than a canary seed or the kernel of a canary seed. He also is my self within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven, greater than all these worlds." Meditation, *Om*, *atman*, and reincarnation are all central tenants of modern Hinduism.

The *Mundaka Upanishad* is another that marks the transition from the sacrifice centered worship of the Vedas to the spiritual worship of modern Hinduism. The First Khanda, First Mundaka of the *Mundaka Upanishad*, as translated by Max Muller, says:

3. Saunaka, the great householder, approached Angiras respectfully and asked: "Sir, what is that through which, if it is known, everything else becomes known?"
4. He said to him: "Two kinds of knowledge must be known, this is what all who know Brahman tell us, the higher and the lower knowledge.
5. "The lower knowledge is the *Rig-veda*, *Yagur-veda*, *Sama-veda*, *Atharva-veda*, Siksha (phonetics), Kalpa (ceremonial), Vyakarana (grammar), Nirukta (etymology), Khandas (meter), Gytisha (astronomy); but the higher knowledge is that by which the Indestructible (Brahman) is apprehended."

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which some say is the earliest Upanishad, also illustrates the transition from Vedic Hinduism to the modern form. This Upanishad is divided into a number of Brahmanas that, like true Brahmanas, explain the meaning of Vedic sacrifices, but to a deeper philosophical and metaphysical extent, thus introducing the more complex thought characteristic of the modern religion. For example, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's* First Brahmana explains the Vedic horse sacrifice in terms of "...a symbolic placement of the parts of the individual [the horse] in the cosmic quarters, with the spiritual intention of an undivided meditation, where the subject commingles with the object."

Perhaps the Upanishads' de-emphasis of sacrifice to gain wealth and sons was a response to the inability of the poorer people to afford the four priests (and their assistants) required for the sacrifices and, thus, to ever gain that which they desired. Vedic religion might have always been solely the faith of the Aryans (the overlords) alone. Thus, the sages of the Upanishads sought to bring the religion of the Vedas to the general population just as, a few short centuries later, Paul would seek to remove Jesus Christ from the ranks of Judaic prophets and make Him the savior of the entire world. Knowing that the poor would never be able to obtain their desires through their sacrifices, the sages of the Upanishads began to remove desire from Hinduism and replace it with renunciation. This was the same answer that Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) proposed to end the

suffering of unrealized desire. Buddhism appeared around the same time as the Upanishads, and the question of which influenced the other is unresolved and probably never will be. Perhaps they both sprang independently as the solution to the unmet desires of the masses.

Regardless of histories' unanswered questions, the Upanishads were a great step in the migration of the Veda's primitive, shallow nature religion to deeply philosophical modern Hinduism. They marked the end of the *samhitas* of the Vedic Mandalas as the universally considered primary theological doctrine and were the last of primary, revealed scripture. Although the *samhitas* continue to be revered as holy, their influence has become increasingly overshadowed, though never completely eliminated, by the more philosophical viewpoints of later sages. The last 'important' Upanishad was most likely composed in the neighborhood of 400 BCE to 300 BCE, although texts that are regarded by some as Upanishads were composed during the current era. As indicated previously, the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads became inextricably intertwined with the original four Vedas such that references to 'the Vedas' often implies reference to the attached Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads as well.

Around the time the last 'important' Upanishad was composed, written Sanskrit was introduced into India, and all the holy books were recorded. Numerous Hindu sages also began to elaborate on the principles of meditation, *atman*, and reincarnation as well as the holy syllable, *Om*, that were introduced in the Upanishads and to refute the interpretations of rival schools of thought. Sanskrit has been called "elastic" (although 'imprecise' might be a better description), allowing considerable room for interpretation and, hence, disputation.

Texts written after the Upanishads are considered secondary literature called *smriti* (what is remembered). Among this secondary literature that appeared at this time were several Sutras, which are collections of aphorisms that are so succinct as to be nearly meaningless without extensive explanations. For example, Sutras 1.1 through 1.4 of the *Brahma Sutras*' first chapter (Samanvaya Adhyaya), as translated by Swami Sivananda (with the Swami's clarifications deleted) say:

- 1.1 Now the inquiry into Brahman is taken up.
- 1.2 Brahman is the cause from which proceeded the origin of this world.
- 1.3 The scriptures being the means of right knowledge.
- 1.4 Brahman is the main purport of all texts.

The Sutras were among the texts that accelerated the shift in some schools of belief from ritual toward knowledge (*jnana*) as the best means of escaping rebirth and attaining everlasting life. To reiterate, Hinduism is a collection of a wide variety of beliefs; there is no heresy in Hinduism as long as schools of belief seek everlasting life and are tolerant of one another.

The *Bhagavad Gita* was among the first written works to appear in the post-Upanishad period, perhaps as early as 500 BCE. Some consider it scripture, although others consider it to be among the secondary texts (*smriti*). It's part of a much longer epic, the *Mahabharata*, that describes the fratricidal war for the throne between the Pandavas and the Kurus, two

branches of a great family. The *Gita* is philosophy in the guise of a historical narrative. The setting of the narrative is a battle during the war. The scene is a moment prior to the start of hostilities when a Pandava prince, Arjuna, commands his driver to drive their chariot along a path between opposing armies that he may view the array of contending forces. As he passes between them, he is overcome with sadness at the prospect of having to kill many of his relatives, friends, and teachers among the Kurus and considers abandoning the fight. The *Gita* is a dialog between Arjuna and his driver, who is the God Krishna in disguise, over Arjuna's moral dilemma.

The *Gita* is essentially an exposition on *dharma*, which is the collection of personal imperatives that each person faces. These imperatives include duty, righteousness, ideal conduct, moral principles, and truth. One should act in accordance with these imperatives, and failure to do so contributes to upsetting the delicate balance of the Universe and destroying its harmony. It is of prime importance, however, that one not be emotionally invested in the outcome of acting in accordance with one's *dharma*; one should take neither pleasure nor displeasure in it. In Chapter 2, Verse 48 of the *Gita*, Krishna says, "Do your duty to the best of your ability, O Arjuna, with your mind attached to the Lord, abandoning attachment to the results, and remaining calm in both success and failure." Thus, Krishna tells Arjuna that he must fight and kill Kurus in accordance with the warrior code, and feel no sadness in doing so; it is his duty according to his *dharma*. Krishna continues on to explain all the aspects of *dharma*: action, knowledge, and worship.

The *Gita* also introduced loving devotion (*bhakti*) as an alternative to knowledge as a means of escaping rebirth and gaining everlasting life. Because it could be practiced by anyone at any time and any place, loving devotion became more instrumental than knowledge in changing Hinduism from a religion of the elite to a faith of the common people. During the early centuries of the current era, a Bhakti Movement developed, and *bhakti* grew to be considered the best way to escape rebirth.

By 500 BCE, the importance of the Vedic gods such as *Indra*, *Agni*, *Varuna*, the *Maruts*, and *Ushas* (dawn) was in sharp decline (although *Indra*, *Agni*, and *Rudra* were never abandoned) as the transition from a sacrifice-oriented, nature religion to a spiritual faith continued. Numerous gurus wrote commentaries on the Vedas (which we should recall include the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads) and the Sutras and attracted followers, splintering Hinduism into six orthodox schools of philosophical thought (*darsanas*): Nyaya, Sankhya, Vaisheshika, Purvamimasma, Yoga, and Vedanta. A tidal wave of philosophy swept across India at the same time it was engulfing Greece. The everyday person is uninterested in philosophy, and for good reason. It doesn't put food on the table or pay the rent, and in its fullest expression, it's also boring. Unfortunately, for good or ill, philosophy has a profound effect on our lives; among its children is the U.S. Constitution.

These six schools are not religious denominations. They're philosophies of religion and are different from the various Vedic schools (*shakhas*) men-

tioned earlier such as the *Bashkala Shakha*. *Shakhas* were theological schools that specialized in learning certain Vedic texts. These six schools of philosophical thought (*darsanas*) are called orthodox because they all recognize the authority of the Vedas. Their intent was to philosophically establish the nature of the Supreme Being (Brahman), the relationship between Brahman and mortal life, what constitutes release from rebirth, and how to achieve this release. Subsequent religious denominations, such as the worship of *Vishnu* (Vaishnavism) or *Shiva* (Shaivism), adopted ideas from one or more of these six schools as the fundamental principles behind their religious practice.

When the sages formulated the hypothesis that we are all destined to be reborn in another body after we die (the process of *samsara*) according to the *karma* (spiritual assessment) we accumulate, it became obvious that there must be some way to escape the cycle. This liberation from *samsara* is called *moksha*. Although people must be continuously reborn until they accumulate enough good *karma* to escape the cycle, no one is ever damned in Hinduism. There is no Hell to which a person is relegated for eternity. One is forever given the opportunity to redeem oneself, which is a strong lure for Hinduism. In the final centuries before the current era, some Hindu philosophers thought knowledge to be the best way to gain liberation from endless rebirth. However, the issue of what constitutes liberation, whether it be union with God or simply being in God's presence, has never been resolved, and different philosophical schools have different positions that were subsequently adopted by the various modern Hindu denominations.

The thrust for knowledge as the best way to liberation gave birth to the Nyaya philosophical school, or Nyaya *darsana*. Because knowledge had become the leading contender for escape from rebirth, Nyaya focused on the best ways to obtain knowledge such as through our five senses or, like all other religions, the verbal testimony of reliable people. Their philosophical arguments led them to examining methods of reasoning to gain knowledge and to win debates with other schools. Nyaya attempted to prove the existence of a creator God through reason by observing that the Universe has the characteristics of an artifact, and artifacts are always created. However, the Nyaya school, in general, didn't emphasize questions that are the focus of most religions such as the nature of God and the ultimate fate of humankind. Thus, it was more pure philosophy rather than philosophy of religion. Other *darsanas* often used Nyaya methods of argument in debates.

Nyaya was a school that focused primarily on abstract concepts such as the best way to discover truth (with a brief nod to God), whereas the Vaisheshika school focused on the physical Universe and ignored God in its original primary text, the *Vaisheshika Sutra*. The Vaisheshika school was concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of existence (metaphysical questions) and identifying the correct path to salvation, or liberation (*moksha*), which differs markedly from the Nyaya concern with how to identify truth. Although Vaisheshika recognizes the authority of the Vedas, it separates itself from the five other *darsanas* by not accepting testimony

of reliable witnesses as a source of truth and accepting only perception and inference. By accepting the authority of the Vedas but rejecting the testimony of reliable witnesses, the Vaisheshika school is one of the seeming contradictions of Hinduism.

The school is noted for its introduction of atomism into Hindu thought. Like the Greek Democritus, the Vaisheshikas postulated that the physical Universe is composed of irreducible particles (atoms) that are too tiny to be seen and that these atoms combine to form composites, which we call molecules. Atoms are indestructible and eternal whereas composites are transient, impermanent, and subject to destruction. Atoms and composites combine to form the four substances (earth, fire, air, and water) from which all matter in the Universe is made. This is the same hypothesis of matter's constituents that the Greek philosopher Empedocles postulated around 450 BCE. Because these two hypotheses stand out as so different from other Hindu thought of the time, we must conjecture that Kanada, the Vaisheshika school's founder, probably got them from the Greeks.

As is typical for someone who stands on the shoulders of giants, Kanada expanded the atomic hypotheses by adding time (*kala*), space (*dik*), souls (*atman*), and mind (*manas*) to earth, fire, air, and water in the inventory of reality's primary constituents. Souls, are innumerable, and each is an independent, all pervading, eternal spiritual substance that is only temporarily housed in a physical body.

Kanada opined a complex structure of reality that included, besides substances, five categories of constituents, such as action. Bondage to the continuous cycle of death and rebirth is a result of ignorance of this complex structure of atoms, composites, substances, and categories, leading to actions that attach good *karma* and bad *karma* to the soul. Liberation is achieved by eliminating all *karma*, both good and bad (*karma*, according to the Vaisheshika school, influences only *samsara*, not *moksha*), through understanding this complex structure and, thus, ceasing all actions and the associated accumulation of all *karma*. The *Vaisheshika Sutra* never describes the soul when it becomes liberated, nor does it mention God. During the Current Era, the Vaisheshika and Nyaya schools slowly merged, and the Vaisheshika adopted Nyaya's god in the form of a Supreme Soul, which it called *Isvara*. The school declined significantly after the fifteenth century.

The Sage Kapila is traditionally credited as founding the Sankhya philosophical school around the turn of the first millennium give or take a couple of centuries. Once again, we are bedeviled by the lack of a Hindu tradition of recording history. Like the other five philosophical schools, Sankhya identifies the criteria by which it determines truth (which is a question that's fundamental to all religions and to philosophy in general): *pratyaksa* (perception), *anumana* (inference), and *sabda*, which is testimony of reliable sources (i.e., the Vedas).

The Sankhya school considered the Universe to consist of two realities: consciousness (*purusa*, which are individual and innumerable) and matter (*prakriti*). A living being (*jiva*) is an occurrence in which consciousness is

bonded in some way to matter. This bond causes awareness of the Universe (*buddhi*) and awareness of one's self, or Ego as defined by Freud, (*ahankara*) to emerge. All living beings are made of different combinations of more than twenty components such as space, air, fire, water, earth, organs of the five senses, and structures that permit activity like speaking and movement. All living beings also have three qualities, or innate tendencies (*gunas*): *sattva*, which is good, compassionate, positive, and constructive; *rajas*, which is active, chaotic, passionate, impulsive, and potentially good or bad; and *tamas*, which is dark, ignorant, destructive, lethargic, and negative. The interactions among these qualities causes all living beings to spiritually evolve (not in a Darwin sense; the concepts of species and their evolution from one to another won't come for another two millennia). This school is unique by espousing spiritual evolution without the assistance of God. In fact, some Sankhya proponents explicitly argued against the existence of God, Whom they called Ishvara rather than Brahman.

Awareness of one's self is closely related to awareness of one's physical form, which is matter (*prakriti*). One slips into the bondage of the continuous cycle of death and rebirth when one is unable to distinguish the difference between the conscious *purusa* and the unconscious *prakriti*. In other words, one is too immersed in the physical acts of living such that spiritual development is hindered. One obtains release from *samsara* (*moksha*) through knowledge of the difference between *purusa* and *prakriti* and focusing on *purusa*. Some forms, or sub-schools, of Samkhyan believe that this knowledge is obtained by meditation and other yoga-type practices.

The Yoga school was systematized in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Almost nothing is known about the date of Patanjali's life, which was some time between the fourth century BCE and the sixth century CE. Once again, we are bedeviled by the lack of a Hindu history-recording tradition. Like Sankhya, the Yoga school doesn't attempt to explicitly derive its authority from the Vedas, but it differs from Sankhya in its emphasis on practical means to gain liberation.

The word 'yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root 'yuj', 'to yoke' or 'to join'. In its broadest use, it can mean addition in arithmetic; the conjunction of stars and planets in astronomy; the compounding of herbs and other substances in medicine; and the joining of letters and words in grammar. In Mimamsa philosophy, it indicates the force of a sentence, whereas in Nyaya logic, it signifies the power of the parts taken together. In general use it also means 'discipline'.

Like Sankhya, the Yoga *darsana* declares the Universe to be composed of both a physical part, or nature, and a spiritual part, which is somewhat akin to computer hardware and software. Also like Sankhya, Yoga describes nature as composed of three qualities (*gunas*), although Yoga uses different terms. Opposed to Sankhya, on the other hand, Yoga pictures the soul to be more active in the effort to gain liberation. *Yoga Sutra* I.2 identifies disturbances in the mind as the prime impediments to liberation, and the thrust of yoga is to quiet these disturbances. To do this, the Yoga system

prescribes several moral and practical measures such as *yama*, which includes sexual restraint and abstaining from evil-doing, from harming others (*ahimsa*), from telling falsehoods (*asatya*), from acquisitiveness (*asteya*), and from greed/envy (*aparigraha*). Other practical measures are yoga meditation practices and *niyamas*, which include cultivating purity (*saucha*), contentment (*santos*), and austerities (*tapas*).

The steadfast observance of these practices negates past *karma*, leading to the yogi's ultimate state of liberation, which is separation from nature and from other souls therein and union of the individual self (*atman*) with the Universal Self (Brahman).

In classical yoga, after the yogi has undergone a long initial period of training under a guru, he sheds material distractions and psychic hindrances such as memories, desires, fears, yearnings, and the residue of dreams and impressions; all with the goal of liberation. The defining characteristic of the Yoga school is its meditation technique, which includes certain postures and control of thoughts and breathing. This technique has become very popular and wide spread for itself alone apart from its Hindu philosophical trappings.

The Purvamimamsa school appeared in the final centuries before the current era when the priestly rituals of Vedic sacrifice were being marginalized. 'Mimamsa' literally means 'reflection' or 'critical investigation', and the school examined the semantics of the Vedas and Brahmanas in great detail to find the rules for proper religious practice. Their critical investigations were instrumental to the creation of philology (the study of historical documents) and the philosophy of language by establishing rigorous maxims and principles for such critical examinations. "Hindu Law accepts without any reservation the maxims and principles formulated by the Mimamsa." These principles for critical examination of ancient documents strongly influenced philological practices in the West.

The school considers proper practice as outlined in the Vedas and Brahmanas (though not necessarily sacrifice) to be more important than belief, a point of view that later philosophers came to regard as useless or even as unholy. The school has several subschools, each devoted to its particular interpretation of the Vedas, and that are similar to, but distinct from, the earlier *shakhas*. The *shakhas* were interested in simply learning the hymns whereas the Purvamimamsa was more interested in interpreting the hymns and their Brahmanas. All these sub-schools have several beliefs in common: the Vedas are eternal, without author (self-revealed), and infallible. They consider the Upanishads and other spiritualityrelated texts as subsidiary. They consider *dharma* to be following the prescriptions of Vedic rituals and their Brahmana commentaries relating the correct performance of such rituals. Like the early Sankhya school, they neither affirm nor deny the existence of any God as the creator and destroyer of the Universe nor see any reason to suppose that the Universe ever had any beginning in time, or that any God created it. It has been eternally as it is now. At one time, Purvamimamsa was an important school; however, it's all but nonexistent now.



### Hindu *Trimurti*

The Hindu *trimurti* of Brahma (left), Vishnu (center), and Shiva (right). The *trimurti* is sometimes incorrectly likened to the Christian Trinity, but they are similar only in the sense that they both represent three aspects of one God.. Brahma is often shown with four faces, signifying that he is god of the four directions and sees everything. The gods are often shown with multiple arms, signifying that they can do everything simultaneously. Shiva is often shown with a trident.

The Vedanta school is sometimes called Uttaramimamsa. One could speculate that, perhaps, it rode in on the tail of the once popular Purvamimamsa school. As the popularity of Purvamimamsa waned, that of Uttaramimamsa grew until it's now the most prominent school of Hindu philosophy. Around 200 BCE, a sage named Badarayana began systematizing Vedanta into one coherent philosophy in the *Vedanta Sutra*, or *Brahma Sutra*. The cryptic aphorisms of the *Vedanta Sutras* are open to a variety of interpretations, resulting in the formation of numerous Vedanta sub-schools, each interpreting the texts in its own way and producing its own commentaries claiming to be more faithful to the truth within the original texts than the others. Directly opposing Purvamimamsa, all Vedanta sub-schools deny the importance of ritual, embracing instead an individual's spiritual growth through meditation and knowledge.

Vedanta espouses the notions of an individual soul (*atman*) and its continuous cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*). This cycle is identified, though unnamed, in Verse 22 of the *Bhagavad Gita*'s second Chapter: "Just as a person puts on new garments after discarding the old ones, similarly Atma acquires new bodies after casting away the old bodies." The concept of *samsara*, but not the term itself, and its dependence on one's deeds, was probably introduced in Verse 2 of *Kaushitaki Upanishad*'s First Adhyaya: "And Kitra said: '... And according to his deeds and according to his knowledge he is born again here as a worm, or as an insect, or as a fish, or as a bird, or as a lion, or as a boar, or as a serpent, or as a tiger, or as a man, or as something else in different places.'" This rebirth might be as a higher or lower life according to one's net *karma*, which is the balance between good and bad. *Karma* is the spiritual assessment of the soul determined by totaling

one's good *karma* (good works or good conduct) and bad *karma* (bad works or bad conduct). The goal of life is *moksha*, which is escape from the continuous cycle of death and rebirth; in other words, the *atman* escapes from *samsara*.

Some Vedanta schools believe *moksha* to be a final death in which a person joins Brahman, the Supreme Reality, in eternal bliss whereas others believe it to simply be an Earthly release in which a person overcomes ignorance and finds truth and reality, claiming that death and beyond is unknown and unknowable.

Brahman can only be described as absolute existence, consciousness, bliss, both formless and with form, impersonal and personal, immanent (indwelling, inherent) and transcendent (beyond the universe or material existence). Some Vedanta sub-schools believe that Brahman is the only reality and that the Universe is composed simply of different manifestations of Brahman and is, therefore, an illusion. Other sub-schools believe that the Universe is real, that the *atman* is eternal and separate from Brahman, and that *moksha* is the ultimate joining with Brahman in eternal bliss. Other subschools believe that the Universe is real, that the *atman* is a part of Brahman but separate just as the arms and legs are part of the body but separate, and *moksha* is the ultimate elimination of this separateness and a joining with Brahman in eternal bliss. Vedanta is now the dominant religious philosophy of Hinduism.

As Hindu religious philosophy developed during the current era, the seers began to extend the cycles of days and years to cycles of time itself that are under the control of the ultimate reality, or absolute existence: Brahman. The Universe was hypothesized to repeatedly be created, exist, then dissolved. The Maya of Central America also believed the Universe is periodically destroyed and reformed, but the Mayan time scale was considerably shorter than that of the Hindus. At the beginning of a cycle, Brahman 'births' from himself three gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva. Hindus assigned these gods to control the Universe during the three phases of time: creation, maintenance, and dissolution (or destruction). Brahma is responsible for creation, Vishnu for maintenance, and Siva for destruction, although all three are properly considered simply different manifestations of the absolute existence: Brahman.

This Hindu view time is considered by some to be responsible for the absence of a Hindu history-recording tradition. Historically, Hindus likely didn't consider it important to record events of a world they believed was temporary and, perhaps, illusory. Moreover, they believed events themselves are insignificant. Brahman is only thing of importance. Religion can have a debilitating influence on the development of secular civilization.

This Hindu concept of time is based on the hypothesis that after a specific Brahma lifetime, Shiva performs a dance that destroys the Universe, and Brahma dies as does, perhaps, Vishnu and Shiva, although the death of Vishnu and Shiva are unclear. All Hindu sects have variations on this theme. Brahman then begins a new cycle by 'birthing' Brahma, Vishnu,

and Shiva again. Whether these are the previous deities revived or new ones is unclear, although the Hindu belief that souls are eternal favors the former. Brahma's lifetime is hypothesized to be 100 'Brahma years'. Each Brahma year is composed of 360 'Brahma days' that have both a 'day' and a 'night' of equal length. This is, perhaps, the most egregious example of dimensioning god in human terms such as days and years. Altogether, the lifetime of Brahma is 311 trillion Earth years. At the end of Brahma's lifetime, Shiva performs the ultimate dance of death, the Universe dissolves, and Brahman initiates a new cycle, perhaps after a period of rest. One alternate view is that Brahman's consciousness has no divisions of time. There is only one continuous, indivisible and indistinguishable state of existence. Time is regarded as an aspect of *prakriti*, or Nature.

During the current era, religious traditions developed around Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, although growth slowed somewhat during the Muslim occupation between 1000 CE and 1760 CE. The denomination centered around Brahma is surprisingly small considering his position as the creator god. The denomination centered around Vishnu (Vaishnavism) is the largest and most complex (Hinduism altogether is extremely complex.), and that centered around Shiva (Shaivism) is in between the two in size and influence. Another denomination, Shaktism, focuses worship on Shakti, or Devi, which is the Hindu Divine Mother, as the absolute, ultimate Godhead and is especially popular in Bengal and Assam. All these denominations except Shaktism generally ignore all gods but their own, and all draw upon the fundamental principles of all Hinduism—*dharma*, *karma*, *atman* and their relationship to Brahman, *samsara*, and *moksha*—that were elaborated by the six philosophical schools briefly discussed just previously.

Although it's seldom stated explicitly, most modern Hindu commentary is written by followers of either Vishnu or Shiva and centers around the beliefs associated with that particular god. For example, a commentary might discuss the ten incarnations of Vishnu, which is a part of the belief system only of Vishnu's followers; Shiva's believers don't necessarily accept that scenario. Thus, nearly all commentary is one-sided. Shiva's disciples are more attracted to asceticism than adherents of other Hindu denominations and often perform self-purification rituals in which they strive to attain a spiritual unity with Shiva.

Vaishnavism followers worship Vishnu as a personal god and the Supreme Lord. Vaishnavism finds its guidance in the Vedanta school of philosophy with the various sects following the various Vedantic sub-schools. Vaishnavas strongly believe that avatars (appearances, or manifestations, of the Supreme Being in human form) of Vishnu have appeared at various times to help humanity through a crisis. Rama, Krishna, and Buddha are among the avatars, and the last, Kalki (the harbinger of the age's end time), is expected to appear at the end of the current Hindu age. Some sects identify twenty-five avatars, but most identify only ten. Vaishnavism adherents are generally nonascetic, monastic, devoted to meditative practice and ecstatic chanting, and are deeply devotional (*bhakti*). Most sects

believe that Vishnu is actually Brahman in a different guise. There are hundreds of slight, almost trivial, variations in the beliefs among Vaishnava sects: the number of avatars and their importance; the nature of the relationship between God and humankind; how the law of *karma* is applied; the nature of *moksha* and how to gain it; and many, many other points of difference.

One prominent sect, Gaudiya Vaishnavism (commonly called Hare Krishna), believes that Krishna is not merely an avatar of Vishnu, but is himself the supreme Godhead that others view to be Vishnu or Brahman. This is based primarily on verse 1.3.28 of the *Bhagavata Purana* and other scriptures. So much has been written in the past 3000 years by numerous Hindu commentators that believers of anything can inevitably find support in appropriately interpreted passages somewhere in the vast corpus. For example, the *Vishnu Purana* (fourth century) presents a Vaisnava viewpoint different from all others in which Vishnu awakens, becomes the creator god Brahma to create the universe, sustains it, and then destroys it in the guise of the Vedic god Rudra, which some equate to Shiva.

Shaivism, the Hindu denomination that's second only to Vaishnavism in popularity, reveres the God Shiva as the Supreme Being. Like Vaishnavism, it's guided by the Vedanta school of philosophy with the various sects following the various Vedantic sub-schools. Shaivas believe that Shiva is the creator, preserver, and destroyer of all that is, co-opting the roles of Brahma and Vishnu that others believe independent. Like Vaishnavism, worship of Shiva is represented by an almost infinite variety of beliefs and practices. Shaivism is widespread throughout India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia and, like Vaishnavism, has many distinct regional variations in both philosophy and practice. Most sects don't believe avatars of Shiva have appeared as is so important to Vaishnavism, but a few do.

Saivists are more attracted to asceticism than adherents of other Hindu denominations, and may be seen wandering with ashen faces and performing self purification rituals. The most common symbol of Shiva is the linga, a phallic column that represents both Shiva's chastity and his potency in all aspects of existence. Some scholars have the opinion that Shiva developed from the Vedic god Rudra.

As previously mentioned, Shaktism is a denomination of Hinduism that worships Shakti, or Devi, which is the Hindu Divine Mother, as the absolute, ultimate Godhead. It is one of the primary schools of devotional Hinduism behind Vaishnavism and Shaivism in popularity. Shaktism is similar to a host of primitive divine-mother religions. Shaktism regards Devi as the Supreme Brahman itself, and all other forms of divinity, such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, are considered to be merely her diverse manifestations. In this sense, Shaktism is an echo of Vaishnavism and Shaivism.

Worship (called *puja*) of Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, or any other god is not performed specifically at any particular place. Neither is it performed specifically on particular days of the week or times of the day. It can be indi-

vidual reflection or group ceremonies. It is often done in the home but can also be done in temples or at outdoor shrines. Usually Hindus worship in the home, but sometimes also visit the temple later in the day. This reliance on individual worship leaves Hinduism vulnerable to uneven worship among its followers; no system is better than its people. Of course, all religions depend on the individual initiative of their members to attend services although they all use some level of mental coercion.

As has been true of all religion from the time it was first formulated eons ago, Hindus usually worship to achieve some specific end. Worship in any religion seldom has been pure adoration of God. For Hindus the most important end is making a spiritual connection with the divine being in order to integrate their body, mind, and spirit and evolve into a higher self worthy of escaping continuous rebirth. Thus, like all worship that has ever been performed by anyone anywhere, Hindu worship is self-serving. Of course, that's only natural and an expression of the instinct for self-preservation in all life forms.

That spiritual connection with the divine being is often facilitated through an object (*murti*): an element of nature such as a tree, a sculpture, a vessel, a painting, or a print that expresses a divine spirit (*murti*). This image or other symbol of the god serves as a means of gaining access to the divine and is not considered to be the deity itself; rather, it is believed to be filled with the deity's cosmic energy. For the devout Hindu, the object's artistic merit is important (after all, a deity deserves the best one can offer), but is secondary to its spiritual content. Some sects decry the use of such objects, claiming that they are idol worship.

Every Hindu home has a sacred space set apart for honoring and worshiping the gods rather like the Roman lararium mentioned in Chapter 7. Although a particularly devout Hindu may visit a temple every day, others go there only to request a favor of the deity, on festival days, or to celebrate auspicious occasions such as a wedding or birth. Temple worship requires a priest, but in the home the contact between devotee and deity is direct. Although children often grow up following family beliefs, they are encouraged as young adults to make their own choices of which gods or goddesses to follow. Thus, household shrines might contain images of several deities.

*Puja* is usually performed by at least one member of the household every day, and the paraphernalia used includes an incense burner and a tray with flowers, fruits, and food. It is said that the ritual is patterned after the ceremonies with which Vedic people welcomed guests. Probably only the wealthy Vedic people such as the Aryans (overlords) had the time and resources for such frivolities. In a criticism of *puja*, the Mimamsa philosopher Sabara wrote that the act of worship bore no relationship to the case of guests. *Puja* begins by welcoming the god to the ceremony and offering him or her a seat, and it ends with thanking the deity for attending and bidding him or her adieu. In between are number of steps such as lighting incense, waving a lighted lamp in front of the deity (*aarti*), and circumambulating around it, which is also often done at temple worship. The total

number of steps in *puja* might be only a few for household worship to over sixty for elaborate temple *puja* performed by a priest.

The steps of *puja* are accompanied by prayers. Hinduism was founded on prayer; the Vedas are essentially books of prayers to the gods. Most Hindu prayers are chanted verses from the Vedas or were written by ancient sages, and some are contained in a prayer book. How the prayers are uttered (the pronunciation of the words and their cadence) is considered to be vital to the Deity's acceptance of the prayer. The performance is as important in modern Hindu prayers as it was for Vedic sacrifices 3000 years ago.

Temples have an image, usually a linga in temples devoted to Shiva or a sculpture in other temples, that represents the temple's patron god. The image is not considered to be the god itself but rather an Earthly form in which the deity's cosmic essence resides rather like our spiritual soul dwells inside our corporeal bodies. Hindus believe that if proper care is not taken of a temple's images, the deity will abandon the temple. Hence priests live in the temple and take care of the gods' needs. The deity is awakened in the morning, washed, anointed with oils, garlanded with flowers, and offered food and drink. By offering the god food and drink, Hindus maintain a strongly anthropomorphic view of the deity. Priests perform *puja* at sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight. Worshipers remove their shoes before entering a Hindu temple in order to pay appropriate respect to the deity within.

Several religions such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism have sprung up in India that could be considered offshoots of Hinduism because they share the fundamental concepts of *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksha*, but they differ in the details. Although the differences between these religions and Hinduism are less than those among the various traditions of Hinduism itself, they often consider themselves to not be part of Hinduism, and so shall we.

The oldest of these different religions is Jainism, which, if one were to speak simplistically, could be considered to be extreme Hinduism. The roots of Jainism, like those of Hinduism, lie in Vedic times. Jains believe that the Universe is eternal; it's neither created nor destroyed. Thus, there are no gods to aid us, although a perfect universal presence (i.e., a god) exists. Jains are strict vegetarians, ascetic, truthful, and chaste (celibacy preferred). The census of Jains is confounded by the tendency for some Jains to consider themselves to be Hindus.

Buddhism was elaborated by Siddhartha Gautama sometime between the fourth and sixth century before the current era. It's sometimes called a "non-theistic religion" although others consider that term an oxymoron because religion is, by definition, theistic; if it's not theistic, it's simply philosophy. Buddhism employs the same concepts of *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksha* as Hinduism, but differs markedly in the details. As described earlier, Buddhism is a system for dealing with suffering.

Sikhism appeared in the fifteenth century Punjab. Sikhs consider spiritual life and secular life to be intertwined. They believe leading an active,

creative, and practical life of truthfulness, fidelity, self-control, and purity to be preferable to a purely contemplative one. Thus, Sikhism can be simplistically considered to be practical Hinduism. Liberation from rebirth is considered to be merging with the 'Timeless One'.

This thumbnail sketch doesn't remotely do justice to Hinduism; volumes have been written on its beliefs and practices. Hinduism is the most philosophical of all religions; Hindu philosophers believed it is possible to know the unknowable simply through logic. In their quest to know the unknowable, they created the most complex and diverse religion ever devised. In its diversity lies its great tolerance of other ways to find God. The often recondite philosophies of the six philosophical schools are the basis for Hindu worship.

Hinduism is not simply a set of rituals that believers engage in a few days of the week or even a few times a day. It's a way of life, a mind-set that believers practice constantly. This mind-set is facilitated by their ever-present awareness of their *dharma* (i.e., their duty to family, caste, and god). In general, Hindus are rather diligent in the practice of their faith, which provides younger generations with excellent role models.

Hinduism began as a primitive nature religion that was so common among those creating the first, faltering attempts to find the spirit world and its inhabitant(s). Unfortunately, it has never been able to completely escape its primitive roots. Like most religions, it's focused on males with application to females derived primarily from their association with males. The phases of life, student, householder, ascetic, and renunciant (in some traditions), are oriented toward males. For example, it's often written that, after fulfilling his duties as a householder, a man will leave his wife and family and become an ascetic in the forest, but it's seldom, if ever, written that a wife will do the same unless with her husband.

Hindus hypothesize that a living being (*jiva*) has a physical part and a spiritual part (*atman*). The spiritual part is the true and everlasting self. The physical part is unimportant and inevitably dies, but the spiritual part is immortal. The *atman* is considered to be either a part of the Great Spirit (Brahman), which is defined to be the ultimate reality, or is a separate entity that Brahman created at the same time he created himself.

As the *atman* goes through life, it accumulates a net worth (*karma*), which is sort of balance sheet on a goodness scale according to whether it performs good works or bad works. Good works and devout worship (*bhakti*) can offset bad works. The *atman*'s *karma* is permanently attached to it, and the *atman* suffers repeated death and rebirth (*samsara*) in different bodies, even as plants, as long as its *karma*, which follows it, is bad. When the *atman* finally accumulates enough good *karma* through good works and devoted worship (*bhakti*), it can escape *samsara*. This escape is called *moksha*. The description of what this escape is like varies among the denominations and sects.

Most Hindus believe that the Universe undergoes an infinite series of creations and destructions similar to the cycle of birth and death among

humans. Similarities between gods and humans is pervasive in Hinduism. The ultimate God, Brahman, creates lesser deities, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva for each new creation. Brahma creates the Universe, Vishnu preserves it, and Shiva destroys it. These three deities, along with the mother goddess Shakti, are the primary entities worshiped. Each denomination considers its own god to be the only one and all other to be simply different manifestations of their one. Thus, Hinduism is not strictly polytheistic.