"HINDUISM"
The Religious Dimension of Indian Culture

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THE FOUNDATIONS OF HINDUISM:  THE AGE OF THE VEDAS  (ca. 1500 - 500 BCE)

Hindu tradition traces its origins to the coming of "the Aryans," an Indo-European people who gained power over the indigenous peoples of India and replaced the "Indus Valley Civilization" (ca. 1500 BCE). Their religion focussed on sacrifices to a variety of gods and goddesses, conducted by priests (brahmans). These beliefs and practices are seen in sacred texts called the Vedas. The Rig Veda (the oldest) is the source of most of our knowledge of the religion of Vedic India. It consists of hymns to the gods, composed by unknown "seers" (rishis). The hymns exemplify the practice of henotheism. The other three Vedas (the Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda) contain other materials pertaining to Vedic sacrifices and other religious matters. All four Vedas were transmitted orally from generation to generation. In later Hinduism, the Vedas are generally considered the highest of all scriptures, even by those whose beliefs and practices may be very different.

NEW RELIGIOUS IDEAS:  THE UPANISHADS and VEDANTA

Around the 7th-5th centuries BCE, brahmans who meditated upon the meaning of the Vedic rituals developed new ideas about life and the universe, possibly influenced by the ideas of others (e.g., laypeople, Jains, non-Aryans). Those new ideas are seen for the first time in texts called the Upanishads:

1. Humans (and all other sentient beings) are trapped in samsara — an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, which is powered by the law of karma — the automatic moral law by which all actions bring appropriate consequences.

2. Beyond samsara there is an abiding reality called Brahman, which the Upanishads describe as the true reality of all things, including us. (Tat tvam asi: "That thou art"). Thus, our true self (Atman) is Brahman, and when we gain true experiential awareness of that fact, we achieve moksha, "liberation" from samsara.

3. These ideas form the basis of Vedanta, which evolved into one of the six orthodox Hindu systems of thought (darshanas). Later Vedanta was refined by the philosopher Shankara (fl. 800 CE), whose thought was called Advaita or "monistic" Vedanta. Shankara said that the world of appearances is the result of maya (Brahman's creative power) and is not ultimately "real" (in the sense that Brahman is). Shankara's ideas were later disputed by thinkers like Ramanuja and Madhva.

Other new perspectives emerged in the age of the Upanishads among non-brahmans; two of them developed into the non-Hindu religions of Jainism and Buddhism.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA:  A COMpendium OF HINDUISM
The most popular of all Hindu sacred writings. It incorporates elements from all the paths to liberation (outlined below).

**THE HINDU PATHS TO LIBERATION**

1. "The Path of Knowledge or Insight" (jñāna):

   A term used to characterize Vedanta and certain other Indian traditions, including the Hindu darshanas of Samkhya and Yoga, and Buddhism as well. All of these systems teach that we attain liberation (moksha) by gaining experiential awareness of true reality (as distinguished from the world of appearances). Samkhya, for instance, says that purusha ("souls" or "spirits") have become enmeshed in prakriti (matter/mind), and need to be freed by liberating insight (or, by Yoga, as suggested in the Bhagavad Gita).

2. "The Path of Duty" (dharma):

   The idea that liberation comes from fulfilling one's dharma — one's social and moral duty (as outlined in The Code of Manu). Hindu dharma is usually understood in terms of one's social category (varna: elaborated in the "caste system"). The four basic varnas are: (1) priests (brahmans), (2) warriors and rulers (kshatriyas), (3) tradesmen (vaishyas), and (4) laborers (shudras).

3. "The Path of Devotion" (bhakti):

   The idea that fulfillment and liberation come from immersion in selfless love for one's deity. The most important Hindu deities are the gods Shiva, Vishnu, and Krishna, though there are many others, male and female.

   In some medieval Hindu texts, Shiva and Vishnu are linked with a much less important god, Brahma (not to be confused with the impersonal Brahman of Vedanta). But the god Brahma was seldom worshipped among the Indian people, and the concept of a Trimurti ("triad") of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva never became a central element of Hinduism (as many Western textbooks falsely suggest). Vishnu and Shiva have vast followings in India even today, and to their worshippers, each of them is, in effect, "God" (not merely one of a triad of gods).

**HINDU MOVEMENTS IN THE WEST**

1. The Vedanta Society: Founded by Ramakrishna in mid-19th century; brought to the West by Swami Vivekananda late in the century. It is ultimately based upon the Vedanta teachings of (1) the Upanishads and (2) the thought of Shankara, but it also uses the Bhagavad Gita as a focus for cultivating spirituality and insight. It teaches the essential unity of all religions.

2. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (commonly, though improperly, called "the Hare Krishnas"): Teaches the universal lordship of Krishna; emphasizes devotion to Krishna and study
of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The movement is uncommonly sectarian. Its formal name derives from the name of its 16th-century founder, Caitanya.

3. **Siddha Yoga**: Teaches liberation through *bhakti* and awareness of one's true reality as *Shiva*; currently led by a woman, Gurumayi.