

"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 (*brahmins*). 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, *brahmins* 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-*brahmins*; 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" (*jñ_ana*):

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 (*brahmins*), (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.