

Hinduism

A Comprehensive Overview

Notes by Huston Smith



- Hinduism has one overarching affirmation: “You can have what you want.”
- The question, then naturally arises... what do humans want?
 - Hinduism realizes that men and women have wants and desires
 - it treats these wants and desires as toys - that they are better to play with and then to move on than to never have had them and become fixated
 - Hinduism allows man to have *what he thinks that he wants*, trusting that he will move on
 - on the question, then, of what mankind wants, Hinduism says that they are fourfold:

The Four Paths of Life

Path of Desire (thing one and thing two)

1) Pleasure (hedonism)

- the first two wants of man are considered to rest under the path of desire
- hedonism is the search for pleasure in all things, to have fun in life
- Hinduism says that if you desire enjoyment and see that as the ultimate goal, then pursue it to the fullest
- this pursuit is limited only in the sense that you must be fair in your pursuit and use good and moral judgment
- ultimately, this pursuit fails... not because pleasure is an evil thing, but because pleasure... focuses on the self (*small self, i.e., personality*)
- man realizes that the self is too narrow and unfulfilling for a life goal

2) Success

- Man's second want, then moves from pleasure to success
 - success has three facets: wealth, fame and power
 - man evolves to seeing that success is useful and requisite in a number of areas such as household, family, and civic duties
 - also, more than pleasure, success brings a sense of dignity and self respect
 - Ultimately, though, the pursuit and desire for success fails, too, for four basic reasons:
 - success cannot be shared with others without loss the self
 - greed can never be satisfied, always wants more success
 - desire for success is centered in the self, and like pleasure, becomes too small a goal as you find that "man cannot live on bread alone."
 - Desire for success is a goal bounded by the world... "you can't take it with you."
- Hinduism hopes, but does not assume, that the pursuit of the Path Of Desire will fail
- some people will die fully satisfied with one of the goals of the path of desire and still in pursuit of it
- some will die having fully achieved the path of desire, but having been left wanting something more, something else not quite tangible
- difference between these two types is the difference between chronological age and psychological age
- The path of renunciation is what arises after the pursuits of pleasure and success have been rejected by man
- with this rejection comes a breakthrough where world ends and religion begins
- wonders if the self is inadequate, then will a larger whole satisfy?
 - Hinduism asserts that true religion does not have a self-god, but a value and god that goes beyond the selfish pursuits of the ego
 - man then asks, if you must renounce the self, then why? And for what?
 - This line of questioning leads to the path of renunciation

Path of Renunciation (thing three and thing four)

3) Duty

- man's third want is a need for duty
- with duty, man, at one time, supports his own life and the life of the community
- Hinduism says that mans need for religion and need for the support of others gives rise to a sense of duty
- contrary to the paths of desire and its rewards, the rewards from a life of duty require maturity to appreciate
- among its rewards are the praise of peers and heightened self respect
- ultimately, however, duty, too fails as an ultimate pursuit

- man finds the human community to be finite and tragic
- community and worldly life must end, and are, therefore, ultimately imperfect
- in the pursuit of duty, man is still left asking, "is this all?"
- Hinduism, again, hopes that man will emerge from the pursuit of duty and ask, "is this all?"
- Here, man comes to the conclusion that everything seems shallow and ephemeral in the face of death. What, then, is the point?
- You must return to the question of what man truly wants, Hinduism says:
 - man finds pleasure, success, and duty are too superficial
 - man definitely wants being (as opposed to death)
 - man also wants to be aware (the need for answers)
 - man wants to have joy (happiness as opposed to futility)
 - man wants all of the above in infinite quantity

4) Liberation (in Hinduism, called mukti)

- Hinduism says that infinite being, awareness and joy are all within man's reach
- Hinduism asserts that man has a limitless force of the self within him called Atman
- Atman, within man, is equal to the limitless force of the universe, called Brahman, which is the god-head
- Hinduism says that man's potential is buried beneath the distractions of the world, false idea and the ego impulse
- man's problem, therefore, and the Hinduism's aim, is "to cleanse the dross of [man's] being to the point where its center [atman] will be fully manifest."
- Hinduism explains how man is already liberated, if only he could allow himself to see things correctly.
- In order "To see things correctly," they explain the way in which man has infinite ability beyond his perceived limitations

Limitations

- Hinduism insists that we must eradicate them
- in definition, it says that there are three basic types of limits

1) Limits to joy

- in proof of limits to joy, Hinduism cites the pain in life, and prescribes cures for them
- we have physical pain
 - accept pain as a means to an end, as purposeful
 - you can turn off pain anesthetically or mentally
- we have psychological pain, such as disappointments
 - realize that these are linked to the personal ego
 - expand interest of the self to a "god-level"

- become completely objective to see your part in whole
 - we are bored
 - by expanding the scope of comprehension, and seeing the universe objectively, boredom becomes impossible
- 2) Limits to Knowledge
- we are ignorant
 - gain “transcendent knowledge”... where you grasp the universal and essential point
 - realize that details, “worldly knowledge,” is immaterial
- 3) Limits to being
- we have death, which ends being, to confront
 - we are limited on our view of the self
 - must expand definition of the self to identify with being rather than simply with family or success or duty, but the entire state of being, but this does not eradicate death
 - expand the self in time, a self that endures experience by refusing to identify with specific instances, but that flows through them... a self not living experiences, but observing them

The Goal

- the goal, therefore, of Hinduism, is to achieve liberation, to be limitless
- liberation is a freedom from the plagues that beset human experience, we must transcend the human
- Liberation includes:
 - how to locate and stay in touch with Brahman
 - how to become identified with Brahman
 - how to become divine while on earth
 - realize that to do so is in the absence of ego, it is redefining “I”
- Hinduism says, though, that the limitless is covered, or hidden to normal human perception
- to uncover Brahman, to actualize fullest potential, the Hindu studies yoga...
 - yoga means both “to unite” and “to place under a discipline”
 - yoga, therefore, is a method of training designed to lead to integration
 - yoga attempts to unite man’s spirit with god

Paths to the Goal

- Hinduism acknowledges four basic types of people...
 - reflective
 - emotional
 - active
 - empirical (experimental)
- Hindus recognize that each of these four basic personality types acts and thinks differently

- they, therefore, recognize that each type must travel a different path that leads to the same goal, so each of four paths begins from different place and works towards converging on an identical liberation
- each path has some similar basic precepts...
 - non-injury
 - truthfulness
 - non-stealing
 - self control
 - cleanliness
 - contentment
 - self discipline
 - a desire to reach the same goal

1) Path through knowledge

- considered the shortest and most elite path
- called jnana yoga... jnana means knowledge
- intended for the reflective, for those with a strong intellectual penchant
- pursues a series of three meditations the thinker is convinced that there is more in this world than the self (ego)... path from the self to the SELF
 - 1) hearing...
 - listening to the sages and the scripture
 - familiarize the thinker with the idea that, at the center of his being, lies the “fountain of being, itself.”
 - This fount of being is the Atman, or SELF
 - 2) thinking...
 - reflection leads from a mere idea of the existence of an atman to making the atman an actual fact
 - corrects man’s faulty identification with “personality” (dying each second through experience) to one as an actor behind the role (observer)
 - leads to ability to distinguish between self and SELF
 - 3) identifying...
 - shift self-identification from passing to eternal
 - identify with the eternal spirit
 - “I am the Witness”

2) Path through Love

- considered the most popular path
- called bhakti yoga... bhakti means devotion
- Hinduism assumes that, for the most part, life is guided by emotion
 - love is considered to be the most predominant of these emotions
- Hinduism operates on the idea that people become like that thing which they love
- bhakti yoga attempts to channel all love to god
- there are major differences between bhakti yoga and jnana...

- jnana identifies god within the self, bhakti does not identify god with the self
- bhakti says that since love goes outward, then god is an "other," outside of the self
- bhakti's goal is not to identify with god (or goddess), but to love him (or her)
- since god is an other and we must love him, then god has a personality, and is not merely an intellectual construct
- love is developed through Hindu myths, symbols (images of god), and rituals.
 - they are responsible for introducing man to what they represent, but are not, in themselves, idolic
 - they illustrate depths which man's intellect can only guess at
 - they are intended to recall the mind from the world to the thought of god
 - each shows a single aspect of a greater whole, thus Hinduism is neither, not polytheistic



Example: The Goddess Tulasi Devi Representing Incomparable Beauty, Devotion, and Charm

- of the many, bhakti has three interesting aspects of the approach to love...
 - 1) japam - the constant repetition of the name of god, it attempts to keep god in the midst of all daily activities
 - 2) striving to love god on all levels...
 - protected towards the protector- god is lord and master
 - friend to a friend - god is a beloved confidant
 - parent to a child - devoted to love/protect god as a child
 - lover to a beloved - god or goddess as a marriage partner
 - 3) focusing on a chosen ideal

- Hinduism says to pay heed to all manifestations of god, as they all represent one god, but proper focus demands that you choose one manifestation and focus on it
- the human manifestation of god is the most popular
- Hindu sees Christ as a god-man, one who had reached the goal, but they see others on the same level: Rama, Krishna, Buddha

3) Path through Works

- called karma yoga... karma means action
- this practice is based on the fact that the body is designed for action
- this action is psychologically, not economically, motivated... need to be in motion
- therefore, Hinduism asserts that god can be found through pure, wise, and devoted work
- this work can either be pursued through a devotional (bhakti karma) or an intellectual (jnana karma) path
 - 1) bhakti karma...
 - shifts interest to a personal god
 - assumes that every act done without thought of self diminishes self-centeredness
 - work is done for god's sake: service to god, prompted by his will; done for him; done by his energy
 - mantra... "thou art the doer, I am the instrument"
 - since the instrument is not responsible, but only the doer, then liberation is attained because the instrument is not effected by anything
 - 2) jnana karma...
 - draws line between the instrument self and the doer SELF
 - by shifting identification to the SELF, he cares not about consequences to the self or rewards for it
 - duty here is done for duty's sake; total focus on one duty at a time
 - accept correction, pain, loss, shame, success and praise as irrelevant
- though bhakti and jnana yoga approaches differ, each seeks to eradicate the self by dissociation of consequence (positive or negative)

4) The Path through Psychological Exercises

- called raja yoga
- designed for scientific people and based on psychological experiment
- requires that the devotee suspect that the self is more vast than we know and that he wish to experience the full reach of the self
- raja yoga asks that you undertake a series of "experiments"
- these experiments are done on the self, working through the body to go through the mind to access the spirit
- Hinduism says that man has four layers:
 - 1) body

- 2) conscious
- 3) subconscious
- 4) Being
- raja asks that you retreat from the world to the real problems of psyche
- the experiment progresses through four layers by way of eight steps:
 - 1) five abstentions: injury, lying, stealing, sensuality, and greed
 - 2) five observances: cleanliness, contentment, self-control, studiousness, contemplation of the divine
 - 3) shut out the sensation of the body: produced through asanas which are postures designed to cut out the intrusion of the muscular system
 - 4) controlled breathing
 - 5) shutting off senses at will: turn mind inward
 - 6) concentration: focus held on one thing, mind control
 - 7) meditation: from concentration on one thing, meditation brings to the point where observed and observer become one
 - 8) samadhi... from sam (together with) adhi (the lord). This is the point where all form falls away from the object, the mind thinks of no thing, but of everything, of being itself, and the mind is absorbed in god

5) Union of the ways...

“The major division is between jnana and bhakti, the reflective and the emotional types in people. Work, as we have seen, can be adapted to either mode, and some meditation is valuable in either case. The normal pattern, therefore, will be for the individual to cast his religion in either a philosophical or a devotional mold, adapt his work to the mold he chooses, and meditate to the extent that he can make time for it.”

The Four Stages of Life

- Hinduism admits that not only are people different, but life itself evolves
- they insist that life has four stages, each of which calls for a distinct behavior pattern

1) student

- this is the period of the right of initiation
- begins between the ages of eight and twelve and lasts twelve years
- the sole responsibility of this stage is to learn
- emphasis is not on knowledge or book learning, but on habit and character

2) householder

- begins with the advent of marriage
- this stage is filled by three fronts for satisfaction which parallel the wants of man
 - 1) family... (pleasure)
 - 2) vocation... (success)
 - 3) community... (duty)

3) retirement

- begins after the first grandchild is born
- beginning of the adult education
- again, this is not knowledge centered, but, through seclusion, the attempt to ponder “I,” philosophy, and the SELF

4) sannyasin

- the final stage of life
- defined as one who neither loves nor hates anything
- a state of non-entity on the surface to become and to be the SELF
- man is independent of consequence and economy and identified with the SELF

The Stations of Life

- the Hindu idea that there are differences in types of people gave rise to an idea of caste

- originally, the Hindu concept said that society could be broken into four castes:

1) seers

- the Brahmins, the enlightened
- highest in honor and psychological power
- intellectual and spiritual leader of the community
- occupationally, they were the philosophers, artists, teachers, and religious leaders

2) Administrators

- these were the highest in salary and social power
- these honors were earned through heightened responsibility
- their job was to organize and promote the affairs of man

3) producers

- these were the producers
- they made all of life's necessary materials
- occupationally the farmers, craftsmen, and artisans

4) followers

- these were the unskilled laborers
- they were those who could not train or study for themselves
- they were completely non-responsible, but cared for completely

- harmless and formed for good at its inception; it was a system that organized and protected peoples. Rights and privileges were earned and caste determination was from the individual

- India did not confuse democracy with egalitarianism; privilege came from responsibility

- since its inception, many perversions have corrupted the system

- fifth class was added: the outcastes; considered to be the super-social of the fourth stage of life and as above all castes
- subcastes were created hierarchically within castes
- proscriptions arose against intermarriage and interdating
- privileges arose where the high profited over the low
- castes became hereditary rather than learned

- idea of heredity ruined and defiled the caste system

Hinduism Theory

- position on words

- god is acknowledged as being, essentially, beyond the mind
- words are human constructs and tools of the mind
- god is, therefore, essentially indescribable
- though words are inadequate and insufficient, they can point towards truth
- this does not mean that the mind cannot grasp god, but that, ultimately, man will have to transcend the rational mind

- position on god

- Brahman (from brih- to be great) is the hindu word for the supreme reality
- Brahman is considered to be the union of the three true desires of man in liberation
 - ananda (bliss)
 - chit (awareness)
 - sat (being)
- the thinking, the philosophic say that god is ultimate bliss, ultimate awareness, and ultimate being in one
 - the ultimate god is Nirguna Brahman (god without attributes)
 - god is ultimately considered to be impersonal
 - the world depends upon him and came from him, but he is removed
 - god is a goal to achieve in the SELF, despite the traps of the self
- the feeling and emotional say god is Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver) and Shiva (destroyer)
 - the ultimate god is Saguna Brahma (god with attributes)
 - god is personal
 - god cares for man; he is the artist, the world his painting
 - god is the epitome of man, man in perfection



A Depiction of the Gods: Lords Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva

- both these two takes on god are true depending on the viewpoint, just as light can be seen as a wave or as a particle

The Path of Life

- deals with the soul of man and a holistic view of progression through life
- delves into man's essential nature and destiny
- jiva is the word for the individual soul
 - the jiva (soul) enters the world through mystery
 - enters the world first as a simple life form and, eventually, through sufficient reincarnations, automatically graduates to human
 - with the human form comes freedom of choice of behavior, responsibility for your choices, and effort in succeeding to higher levels
 - progress of jiva from this point depends on karma and sought liberation
 - karma is the moral law of cause and effect
 - actions in the past define the current state
 - actions in the present define the future state
 - karma commits man to complete personal responsibility
 - karma eradicates luck, chance, and accident
 - does not indicate fatalism: though decisions have inescapable consequence, each decision is freely made
 - the jiva make their way through life and the universe
 - ultimately, the jiva will evolve into liberation
- the career of a soul (jiva) is determined by its choices
 - choices are influenced by the desire prevalent to the "age" of the jiva
 - just as humans have different stages in their live and different desires at each stage, so does the jiva in its incarnation cycle:
 - jiva new to human form... seeks pleasure
 - jiva somewhat experienced... seeks success
 - jiva beyond path of desire... seeks duty
 - jiva very experienced... seeks liberation, the eternal, the SELF
 - Atman, the SELF, is always at the center of the jiva
 - eventually, the jiva attains the atman and finds Brahman

The World

- in terms of physical layout
 - there are numerous galaxies, like ours, with an earth where people work towards god
 - around each earth are superior worlds above and inferior worlds below
 - between incarnations, jivas go to the inferior or superior worlds based on karma
- in terms of temporal layout
 - the cosmos is in an eternal cycle of expansion and compression
 - when the cosmos collapses, the phenomenal being returns to potential
 - cycles of being continually occur
- in terms of philosophical layout
 - the earth is a moral world where choices generate deserved consequence
 - the earth is a middle world where the spectrum of good and bad lies eternally
 - utopia on earth is impossible and is contrary to the idea of the earth as a workroom towards man's liberation
 - world challenges develops character in people

- in terms of metaphysical layout

Karma	Bhakti	Jnana
way of life (choices)	love	intellect
doctrine of god	dual (Other)	merge with god
salvation	companion of god	non dual (SELF)
nature of the world	natural world is real	natural world is illusion

- in terms of cosmological layout

- both see world as grounded in god
- the bhakti (dualists) say that god is real, but less exalted. The world, the soul and god are each valid and non-reducible to the other
- the jnana (non-dualists) say that world appears differently according to three different modes of consciousness:
 - 1) hallucination- not confirmed by repeat experience or experience of other - a onetime deal
 - 2) normal sense - repeated, everyday experience proves this
 - 3) world through yoga- state of superconscious where the world becomes illusion (maya)... appearance based on psychological construct; this is considered to be the truest

Opinions on other religions

- Hindu say that various religions are equal paths to the same god
- they assert that it is normal for a man to take the path most common to his own culture
- they insist that, though religions vary in form at their beginnings, they converge to a common goal

Vocabulary

Agni	god of fire
Atman	the Self
ananda	bliss
asanas	postures, as in yoga
bhakti	heart, love
bhava chakra	the wheel of rebirth
Brahma	the creator
Brahman	God as absolute and total reality
chit	awareness
hatha yoga	yoga based on mastery of the body
Indra	God of power, light and victory
dharma	the universal laws, the way things are
japam	the practice of repeating the name of God constantly

jiva	the soul
jnana	intellect
ishta devata	chosen ideal... a chosen path towards moksha
karma	literally: work, the law of consequence and responsibility
nirguna	without attributes
nirvana	the state of existence on Brahman's level
maya	magic, illusion
moksha	the liberation from the world, enlightenment
raja	royalty
Rudra	god of the storm
saguna	with attributes
samadhi	a yogic state of union with God
samsara	reincarnation, the life and rebirth cycle
sannyasin	one who neither hates nor loves anything, the liberated individual
sat	being
trimurti	the trinity: Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva (creator, preserver, destroyer)
Varuna	the preserver of order
yoga	yoke, discipline

