



THE ILLUSTRATED WORLD'S RELIGIONS







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## CHAPTER II

### HINDUISM

*"If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions to some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant — I should point to India.*

*And if I were to ask myself from what literature we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human a life, again I should point to India."*

Max Muller (19th century orientalist)



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*A stylized rendering of hrim, the bija or seed syllable for the Divine Mother.*

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## WHAT PEOPLE WANT

**T**HE QUESTION FOR THIS CHAPTER is how India (through its presiding religion, Hinduism) proposes to make life more perfect, comprehensive, universal, and truly human. It begins by asking what people want, and it is through this question that we will enter this first religion.

Hindus hold that people want four things. They begin by wanting pleasure. This is natural; we are born with built-in pleasure-pain reactors. If we ignore these, leaving our hands on hot stoves or stepping out of second-storey windows, we soon die. What could be more appropriate than to follow the promptings of pleasure and entrust our lives to it?

Having heard that India is ascetic, other-worldly, and life-negating, we might expect her attitude toward hedonists to be scolding, but it is not. To be sure, she has not made pleasure her highest good, but this is different from condemning enjoyment. To the person who wants pleasure, India says in effect: go after it. There is nothing wrong with it; it is one of the four legitimate ends of life. The world is awash with beauty and heavy with sensual delights. Moreover, there are worlds above this one where pleasures increase by a factor of a million at each rung, and these worlds, too, we shall experience in due course. Like everything else, hedonism requires good sense. Small immediate goals must be sacrificed for long range gains, and impulses that would injure others must be curbed to avoid antagonisms and remorse. Only the stupid will lie, steal, cheat, or succumb to addictions. But as long as the basic rules of morality are observed, you are free to seek all the pleasure you want. To simple persons who seek little else, Hinduism presents itself primarily as a regimen for insuring health and prosperity;

while at the other end of the spectrum, for sophisticates, it elaborates a sensual aesthetic that shocks in its explicitness. If pleasure is what you want, do not suppress the desire. Seek it intelligently.

This India says, and waits. It waits for the time – it will come to everyone, though not to everyone in this lifetime – when one realizes that one wants more than pleasure. The reason everyone eventually comes to this discovery is because pleasure is too trivial to satisfy us. Pleasure is essentially private, and the self is too small an object for perpetual enthusiasm. Sooner or later everyone wants more from life than pleasant sensations. When this discovery arrives, interest usually shifts to the second major goal of life, namely worldly success in the form of wealth, fame, and power. This goal too should not be repressed or condemned. Its satisfactions are more substantial than pleasure, for they are social. Their scope is larger for involving other people.

This does not have to be argued for a contemporary Western audience. Anglo-Americans are not sybarites. They do not give themselves over to pleasure – they are too busy, too driven. What takes arguing in the West is not that pleasure has limitations, but that social achievements are likewise limited – that “*what am I worth?*” isn’t synonymous with “*how much have I got?*”

India grants, not only that success is a requisite for supporting a household and discharging one’s civic responsibilities, but that its achievements confer dignity and self-respect. In the end, however, these rewards too harbor limitations we can enumerate.

1. Wealth, fame, and power are exclusive, hence competitive, hence precarious. Unlike mental and spiritual treasures, they cannot be dispensed without diminishing one’s own portion. If I own a dollar, that dollar





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is not yours; to be in the limelight presupposes an audience in the darkened hall. Similarly with fame and power. From the competitiveness of these goods to their precariousness is a short step, for as other people want them too, who knows when fortune will change hands?

2. The drive for success is insatiable. A qualification is needed, for many people *are* content with their income, visibility, and authority. It is people who place these things first in their lives who cannot be satisfied, and for a discernible reason. These are not the things people really want, and you can never get enough of what you do not really want. To try to extinguish greed with money is like trying to quench fire by pouring

butter over it. The parable of the driver who kept his donkey plodding by attaching a carrot to its harness comes from India.

3. The third problem with worldly success is one it shares with hedonism. Success, too, centers meaning in one's finite self which proves to be too small for enduring interest. Neither the size of one's fortune nor the height of one's station can conceal the smallness of their possessor.

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*Above: Shiva with his consort Uma. To the person who wants pleasure, Hinduism instructs not to suppress the desire but to seek it intelligently.*

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4. The final reason why worldly success cannot satisfy us is that its rewards are ephemeral. "You can't take it with you," we say; and because we can't, its glitter fades. For we are creatures who can envision eternity, and must rue by contrast brief dividends.

Before proceeding to the other two things that Hinduism sees people wanting, it will be well to summarize the ones that have been mentioned. Hindus locate pleasure and success on the Path of Desire. They use this phrase because natural desires have thus far dictated life's course. To understand that satisfying these desires still leaves us unfulfilled is not to condemn them; this has already been said. Desires should not be turned from until they turn from us, for Hinduism regards the objects on the Path of Desire as if they were toys. There is nothing wrong with toys. Quite the contrary; the thought of children without toys is sad. Even sadder, though, is the prospect of adults who remain fixated at their level.

But what more satisfying interests are there? Two, say the Hindus. Before naming them we can note that together they constitute the Path of Renunciation.

The word renunciation has a negative ring, and India's frequent use of it has earned her the reputation of being a life-denying

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*An 11th-century stone icon from western India showing an infant Jain saint in his mother's arms.*

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spoilsport. But everything turns on what is renounced. In waiving away the desert tray, an athlete in training renounces a momentary pleasure for a more significant goal. When a man of the world praised an Indian ascetic for his powers of renunciation, the yogi responded: *"Your renunciation is far greater than mine, for I have renounced the finite for the Infinite whereas you are renouncing the Infinite for the finite."* If people could be satisfied by following their impulses, the thought of renunciation would never arise.

Let us be clear. Hinduism does not say that everyone in his present life will find the Path of Desire wanting; for against a vast time scale, Hinduism draws a distinction between chronological and psychological age. Two persons, both forty-six, are the same age chronologically, but psychologically one may be immature and the other not. Hindus extend this distinction to cover multiple life spans, as we shall see when we come to their doctrine of reincarnation. As a consequence, we shall find men and women who play the game of desire with all the zest of nine-year-old cops and robbers; though they know little else, they will die with the sense of having had a good life. Others, though, will be just as good at this game but find its laurels paltry. Why the difference? The enthusiasts are caught up in the flush of novelty, whereas the others, having played the game many times, seek other worlds to conquer.

These other worlds lie beyond self-centeredness, for the emptiness that remains after one rakes in what one wants for oneself derives from the smallness and insignificance of the integumented self.

This suggests that identification with something larger might relieve the sense of triviality. That thought announces the birth of religion, for all true religion begins with the quest for meaning and value beyond oneself. It renounces the ego's claims to finality.

In stepping out of self-centeredness, what do we step into? Hinduism has planted two markers which together constitute the Path of Renunciation.

The first reads, "Community." In supporting at once our own life and the lives of others, the community has an importance no individual life can command. Let us, then, transfer our allegiance to it, giving its claims priority over our own.

This transfer marks the first significant step in religion. It produces the religion of duty – after pleasure and success the third great aim of life in the Hindu outlook. Its attraction for the mature is major. Myriads have transformed the will to get into the will to give, the will to win into the will to serve. Not to triumph but to acquit themselves responsibly in the task at hand, has become their watchword.

Hinduism abounds in directives to persons who would put their shoulders to the collective wheel. It details duties appropriate to age, temperament, and social status; they will be examined in subsequent sections. Here we need only repeat what was said in connection with pleasure and success: duty, too, yields notable rewards, only to leave the human spirit unfilled. Its rewards require maturity to be appreciated, but given maturity, they are substantial. Faithful performance of duty brings respect and gratitude from one's peers. More important, however, is the self-respect that comes from doing one's share. In the end, though, even these rewards prove insufficient.

For even when time converts communities into history, history, standing alone, is finite and hence ultimately tragic. It is tragic not only because it must end – *"this too must pass away"* – but in its refusal to be perfected. Hope and history are always light years apart. The final good must lie elsewhere.





## WHAT PEOPLE REALLY WANT

*"There comes a time when one asks, even of Shakespeare,  
even of Beethoven, is this all?"*

Aldous Huxley

**I**T IS DIFFICULT TO THINK of a sentence that identifies Hinduism's attitude toward the world more precisely. The world's offerings are substantial enough to satisfy us for many lifetimes, but eventually everyone realizes with Simone Weil that *"there is no true good here below, that everything that appears to be good in this world is finite, limited, wears out, and once worn out, leaves necessity exposed in all its nakedness."*

If what "wears out" – finite things – can't satisfy us completely, what can? Only its alternative, the infinite. Infinity, though, is a highly abstract notion. To link it to human satisfactions we need to connect it to the wants we have been discussing.

Pleasure, success, and duty are not what we really want, the Hindus say; what we really want is to be, to know, and to be happy. No one wants to die, to be in the dark about things, or to be miserable. Pleasure, success, and duty are only approximations of what we really want; they are apertures through which our true wants come through to us. Come through provisionally, though, we must add; for as windows they can admit only so much being, knowledge, and happiness, and what we really want is those things in infinite degree. The Hindus call this fourth, final and true want for which we are programmed liberation (*moksha*) – liberation from everything that distances us from infinite being, infinite awareness, and infinite bliss.

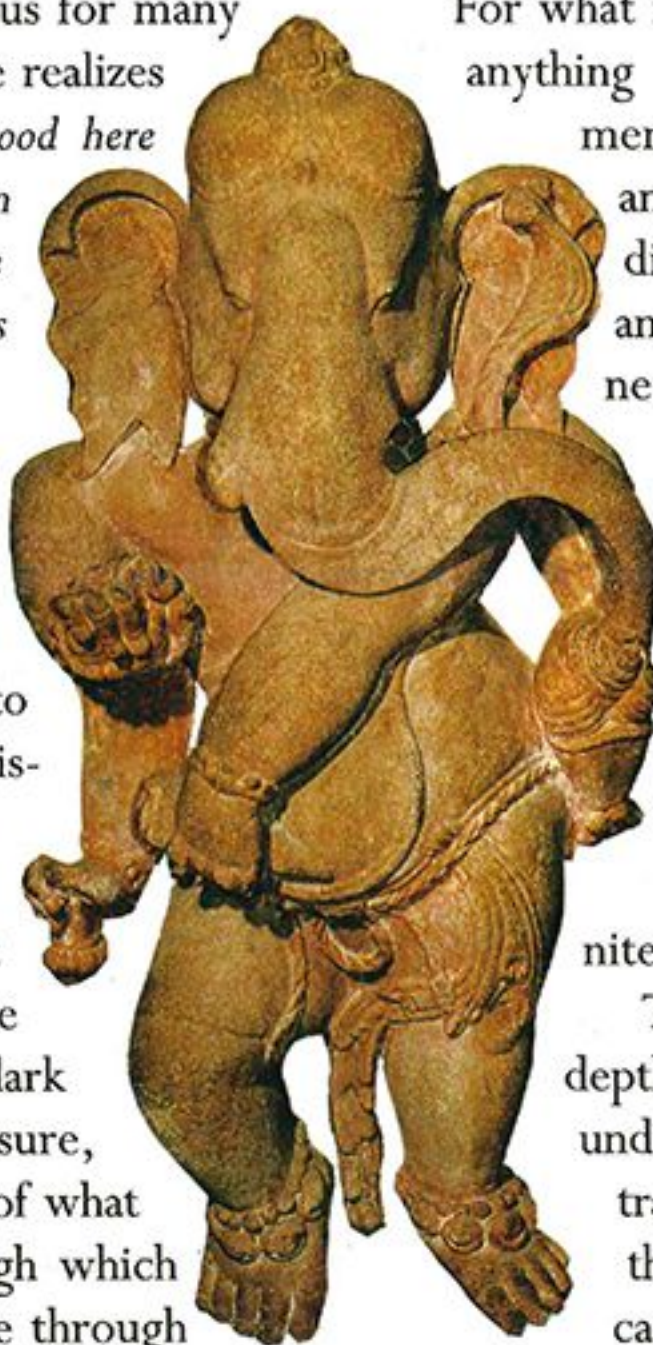
This brings us to the most startling claim of Hindu

anthropology. That which we most truly want, we can have. As if that were not enough, though, the anthropology adds: you already have it.

For what is a human being? A body? Certainly, but anything else? A personality that includes mind, memories, and propensities? This, too, but anything more? Some say no, but Hinduism disagrees. Underlying the human self, and animating it, is a reservoir of being that never dies, is never exhausted, and is unrestricted in consciousness and bliss. This infinite center of every life, this hidden self or *Atman*, is no less than *Brahman*, the Godhead. Body, personality, and *Atman-Brahman* – a human self, is not completely accounted for until all three are entered.

But if this is true and we really are infinite in our being, why is this not apparent?

The answer, say the Hindus, lies in the depth at which the Eternal is buried within us, under an almost impenetrable mass of distractions, delusions, and self-serving instincts that comprise our surface selves. A chimney can be covered with dust, dirt, and mud to the point where no light pierces it at all. The human project is to clean one's "chimney" to allow the light within to radiate in full display.



Above: *Ganesh*, one of the most beloved Hindu deities. Right: *"Cosmogogenesis"* Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, 18th century. The evolution of the universe from dense matter, symbolized here by elephants, into the ethereal spheres of the cosmos.









## THE BEYOND WITHIN



**T**HE AIM OF LIFE," Justice Holmes said, "*is to get as far as possible from imperfection.*" Hinduism holds that it is possible to transcend imperfections completely, and it reduces them to three: ones that limit the joy, knowledge, and being that we basically want. To begin with the strictures on joy, these fall into three sub-groups: physical pain, thwarted desire, and ennui – an

emptiness that breeds apathy, and depression. The sense of life's vanity. About physical pain we can be brief, for it derives from our bodies which we shall eventually out-grow – the spiritual character of the Hindu self is growing pronounced.

Psychological disappointments, for their part, occur when our egos don't get what they want, so they will decline as egos stop insisting. As for emptiness, it will





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abate as interests turn outward, for the cosmic drama is too stupendous to pall when our egos don't eclipse it.

Life's second limitation is ignorance. The Hindus claim that this, too, is removable. The *Upanishads* speak of a "knowing of That the knowledge of which brings knowledge of everything." It is not likely that "everything" here refers here to factual knowledge. More probably, it refers to an insight that lays bare the meaning of things at large.

As for restricted being, life's third limitation, this needs to be approached by asking how the self is to be defined. Not, certainly, by the physical space we occupy – the amount of water we displace in the bathtub. It makes more sense to gauge our being by the size of our spirits, the range of reality that engages us. By this criterion, people who could identify with being as a whole would be unlimited, yet this seems hardly right, for they would still die. The object of their concerns would continue, but they themselves would have vanished. We need, therefore, to approach this question of being not only spatially, so to speak, but also in terms of time. Strictly speaking, every moment of our lives is a dying; the I of that moment dies, never to be reborn. Yet despite the fact that in this sense my life consists of nothing but funerals, I do not think of *myself* as dying with each moment, for I do not equate myself with those moments. I thread them as if they were beads on my string, experiencing them without considering myself identical with them. Hinduism carries this notion to its

logical limit. It posits a self that threads successive lives in the way a single life threads successive moments.

This is the basic point in the Hindu estimate of human nature. Depth psychology has accustomed us to the notion that there is more to our minds than we con-

sciously realize. Hinduism extends this notion and considers the mind to be infinite. Infinite in being, our minds are infinite in awareness as well, for there is nothing beyond them that remains to be known.

And they are infinite in joy, for there is nothing alien to them to thwart their beatitude.

Hindu literature is studded with metaphors that are designed to awaken us to the realms of gold that are hidden in the depths of our being. We are like kings who, falling victim to amnesia, wander our kingdoms in tatters not knowing who we really are. Or like a lion cub which, having been separated from its mother, is raised by sheep and

takes to grazing and bleating like them. We are like a lover who, in his dream, searches the wide world in despair for his beloved, oblivious of the fact that she is lying at his side throughout.



*In Kathmandu, Hindu temples and Buddhist stupas appear side by side. Opposite: Vasundhara Temple next to Swayambhunath. Above: Hindu shrine in front of Bauddhanath.*





## FOUR PATHS TO THE GOAL

**A**LL OF US DWELL on the brink of the infinite ocean of life's creative power. We carry it within us: supreme strength, the fullness of wisdom, and unquenchable joy; but it is deeply hidden. What if we could bring it to light and draw from it unceasingly?

Hinduism's discoveries for actualizing the human potential come under the heading of *yoga*, a word that derives from the same root as the English word 'yoke' and carries connotations of uniting (yoking together), and placing under discipline (as in "take my yoke upon you"). Yoga is a method of training designed to lead to integration or union. It includes physical exercises, but its ultimate goal is union with God. The spiritual trails that Hindus have blazed toward this goal are four. At first this may seem surprising; if there is one goal, should there not be one path to it? This might be the case if we all started from the same point; but in actuality people approach the goal from different angles, so multiple paths are needed. Different starting points here really refers to different types of people. All the religions in this book recognize different spiritual personality types, but Hinduism is exceptional in the attention it has given the matter; it identifies the principal types, and delineates the programs that are suited to each.

The result is a recognition, pervading the entire religion, that there are multiple paths to God, each calling for its distinctive mode of approach.

Since the paths that Hinduism charts are four, the types they are intended for are likewise four. Some people are primarily reflective. Others are emotional. Still others are active and energetic. Finally, some like to experiment.

For each of these personality types, Hinduism prescribes a distinct yoga that is designed to capitalize on the type's strong suit. The types are not separated into watertight compartments. Every human being

possesses some talent in all four directions in the way most hands of cards include all four suits. But one normally leads with one's strongest suit.

All four paths begin with moral preliminaries. As the aim of the yogas is to discern the self's deep-lying divinity, the scum on its surface must be removed. Selfishness muddies the water, ill-will skews objectivity.

The first step of every yoga, therefore, involves the dismantling of bad habits and the acquisition of good ones, such as non-injury, truthfulness, non-stealing, self-control, cleanliness, contentment, self-discipline, and a compelling desire to reach the goal. Keeping these common preliminaries in mind, we proceed to the yogas' distinctive directives.



Above: God is depicted in this image with "a thousand heads and a thousand hands." Opposite: Jain *Tirthankara*, or great teacher, in the Vimala Sha Temple, Mount Abu, India.