

Hinduism: Ancient, Timeless and Inspiring – the Rev. Suzelle Lynch,  
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Hinduism is an ancient religion, whose roots are deeply planted in India. Hinduism is a contemporary religion – vital and lively, with more than 800 million adherents worldwide. Can you imagine? Eight hundred million. That’s something like one out of every six people on the planet. Yet for many of us, Hinduism is a great mystery.

But our lack of knowledge about Hinduism is not without good reason. Immigration laws before 1965 severely restricted the number of people who could immigrate to the United States from India and other Asian countries, and thus, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there weren’t many Hindus in this country. But since that time, the Hindu population of the U.S. has grown to more than a million – about five for every Unitarian Universalist! (*Statistics from Adherents.com and Beliefnet.com*)

That in itself would be reason enough for our gathering today, for we know that learning about the faiths of our neighbors is key to appreciating the diversity in our world. But for many of us, there’s another reason, too. It’s like the first line of our children’s recessional hymn, “down the ages we have trod many paths in search of God...” We seek to understand more about Hinduism because we know, deep in our hearts, a restless longing for meaning, a desire for spiritual or religious knowledge and practices that can strengthen and sustain our lives’ paths.

And Hinduism is full of beauty and strength, though it can be difficult for the American imagination to grasp, especially if we’re used to the dominant Christian modality of monotheism, scripture, and church-on-Sunday. For in Hinduism, diverse ways of worshiping hundreds of deities are relished, and home-based worship as well as offerings made in the temple are usual. It is a faith that can be serious and intellect-based, but is, for the average person at least, more often joyful and devotional. Thus I’d like to do three things today: give you a brief overview of some of the concepts of Hinduism, tell you what I know about how it helped change the direction of Unitarianism, and make a suggestion about religious pluralism. And, thanks to our wonderful music director, Ruben and

our choir and other musicians, after this sermon is over, we'll have an opportunity to listen to and learn some traditional Hindu devotional music.

But first, Hinduism! It is the oldest of the world's religions, with beginnings before recorded time. As it has evolved and changed over the millennia it also has served to generate Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and a number of other religious traditions which emerged from Hinduism and grew into their own multifaceted and separate faiths.

Hinduism is a mystical religion. As such, it focuses on the personal experience of inner truth – or enlightenment. This is different from the way of prophetic religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity or Islam, which emphasize a God who is transcendent -- separate from human beings and the rest of creation – and reveals his or her wisdom by means of prophets.

Contemporary Hindu thinker and former president of India Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan says that Eastern religious traditions like Hinduism emphasize intuitive rather than rationalist thinking, focus on mystery instead of creeds, seek the divine within one's consciousness rather than engaging in theological discussion, and cultivate individual meditative calm and self control instead of promoting community service and human development.

Hinduism does have scripture in the form of the Vedas, the world's most ancient sacred texts, which are revered by all Hindus. Other major scriptures include the Upanishads, a collection of spiritual dialogues, and the Bhagavad Gita, a classic tale that serves as a devotional guide.

The supreme god in Hinduism is called Brahman, the power underlying the whole of existence, the source of being, the one ultimate reality – as we heard in our meditation from the Bhagavad Gita.

But Brahman has many aspects, and is worshipped in many different forms. One way to think about this is to know the three main tasks Hindus ascribe to God: creation of the universe, preservation,

and the dissolution that becomes recreation. Hindus associate these three tasks with three deities, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Lord Brahma is the creator, and represents the eternal creative; Lord Vishnu maintains the universe and represents the eternal principle of preservation, and Lord Shiva represents the principle of dissolution or destruction, which leads to recreation.

But it's important to understand that Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are not three separate gods, but simply different aspects of the same supreme power. It's kind of like the way a person might be called a teacher, a parent, or a spouse based upon the role they are playing or the tasks they are performing at the moment.

And actually, it's even more beautifully complex than that, for each of these three major god figures can be worshiped in a number of other different forms or by other names. Shiva, the destroyer, also is worshiped via his female partners or consorts Kali and Parvati. Vishnu, the preserver, can be worshiped via his consort Lakshmi, whose image appears on the cover of our order of service, but also via his ten incarnations who take the forms of animals, humans, and half-animal, half-human beings. The three most important are Krishna, Narasimha, and Rama, whose image we'll see up on our big screen later. But the Buddha also is considered an incarnation of Vishnu. And each of these different gods and goddesses are invoked for different reasons. For example, Saraswati, the consort of Brahma, represents learning and knowledge – and so if you were a student, or wanted to learn something, you might pray to her.

And actually, there's even more to this dazzling array of gods – for according to the Hindu scriptures, underlying each 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 (with a capital S) is called Atman, but it, too is an aspect of Brahman, the supreme God.

Hindus understand the universe as proceeding through endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution. They believe in karma, the law of cause and effect, and in reincarnation and the cycle of samsara, in which a human soul evolves through lifetimes into spiritual knowledge and liberation from the body – a state of being

called moksha. They view all life as sacred, and practice ahimsa, or not-harming. And finally, Hindus believe that no one religion teaches the only right way, but that all genuine religious paths should be respected, for they all are a part of the Ultimate Reality that is God.

The Bhagavad Gita outlines four major paths by which Hindus might attain the spiritual goal of life. These paths are called yogas (also margas). Now, some of us practice yoga as a particular kind of physical and spiritual exercise, but another meaning of the word is to harness or yoke. Yoga essentially means connecting or yoking a person to the Divine. Thus spiritual practice in Hinduism is not only the path toward divine union, toward enlightenment, but also is a way to know that god is beside us, pulling with us, as though we were a team of oxen pulling a heavy load.

I'd like to tell you a little about each of the four major yogas, but I also want to remind you that in practice, they translate into countless variations, each one suited to a particular person. Some folks try them all or combine several.

The first yoga, Jnana yoga, is the way of knowledge. This is the process of attaining an intuitive or mystical understanding of reality that leads to an inner vision of absolute truth. It's gained by meditation on the wisdom of the scriptures and traditions of Hinduism.

Jnana yoga is said to be the quickest path to enlightenment, but it is also the most difficult. And clearly it is too intellectually rigorous to work for everyone. And so certain Hindu theologians (Ramanuja and Madhva), building on the way that epic and mythical literature presented the deities as figures of great beauty and honor, developed ways of understanding and talking about them that could help ordinary people find a more personal, even intimate relationship with the divine. Bhakti yoga, the path of devotion, came into being. The Bhakti path involves surrendering one's life to the love and grace of a chosen deity, making selfless service and emotional attachment to the deity the core of one's existence. It is the spiritual path followed by most Hindus today. (I'm told that many Hindus think of Christianity as a very bhakti way of religion.)

Karma yoga, the way of work or action, originated during the Vedic period of Hinduism, a time when ritual was viewed as a way to control the powers of nature. Proper ceremony – taking the right action -- helped regulate the cosmos. Over time, of course, the definition of karma changed. The Bhagavad Gita tells us that action performed purely out of a sense of one's duty or dharma, with no emotional attachment or thought of selfish gain is the path to spiritual fulfillment. (This is the path associated with Mahatma Gandhi.)

Raja yoga involves disciplines of meditation and complex psychophysical exercises and is said to be a spiritual path particularly suited to folks with a scientific temperament.

So what about Hindu worship?

Worship can take place at home, but even in the temple, when people are together, Hindus worship as individuals, not communally. Each is involved in his or her own personal practice -- repeating mantras and the names of his or her favorite gods and goddesses. Water, fruit, flowers and incense are offered. And the worship is a joyful affair; those waiting to make their offerings are not solemn and silent, but often noisy and jubilant. Worship is viewed as something both the gods and the worshippers ought to enjoy – a kind of sacred play (and we'll have an opportunity to experience something like this later, with our kirtan-raga-mantra special music).

Now remember, of course, that the purpose of worship, the purpose of the yogas, and the purpose of all those Hindu gods is to help humans achieve enlightenment by working through their karma.

In Hinduism, the law of Karma governs all life experiences. Karma, in its simplest form, means the logical outcome of what has gone before. It's the law of cause and effect applied to the moral sphere of life. Each person's overall karma is the outcome of his or her own past merits and demerits, sort of like the old saying, "As you sow, so shall you reap," but it's more complicated than that. Hindu psychology holds that every action we carry out, every experience we have, every thought we think leaves a trace in our minds. The stronger the emotion associated, the deeper the mark. The marks build deep unconscious patterns, called vasanas, which limit our freedom and keep us from knowing the true divine Self within us.

Our karma, embodied in these vasanas, isn't something imposed on us from outside – we gather and shape it ourselves by the choices we make. Karma isn't determinism, though. Hindus believe in free will just as strongly as Unitarian Universalists do, and that it is our choice whether or not to work on our vasanas.

Hinduism holds that it may take many lifetimes to work out our karma. Our soul reincarnates, passing through many bodies, many lifetimes as we work. But when all our karma is cleared, we achieve moksha, enlightenment, union with God, and we are liberated from the body. The soul then continues to evolve free from human suffering. Hindus believe that every soul will eventually achieve moksha.

So how did Hinduism inform and forever change our Unitarian Universalist faith? Well, as you can see, some of its ideas, such as the affirmation that there are many different valid religious paths, that people must live their religious beliefs, that all souls will achieve enlightenment, and that all life is interconnected and sacred, sound familiar to us. When I was in seminary and first studied Hinduism, I found particular resonance with my own beliefs in what I understood of the concept of Brahman and Atman – for I believe that god is something like the ground of all being and that there is a spark of that same being, that same Divinity, within me. Brahman and Atman felt right, familiar, just exactly what I already believed.

Studying the Transcendentalist movement within Unitarianism, I realized why that is. Many of you, I know, are familiar with Transcendentalism as a 19<sup>th</sup> century literary movement led by such greats as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Margaret Fuller, a brilliant writer and scholar was one of the few women involved.

All of them were Unitarians, indeed Transcendentalism arose, in many ways, as a sort of individualistic reform movement within a Unitarianism that was trying to set its boundaries, and particularly, trying to hang on to the traditional, personal, parent-like God of its heritage.

But Emerson had already shed this father-God, in part due to his study of -- you guessed it -- Hinduism. According to Harvard professor of religion Diana Eck, (who wrote about Emerson in her book *"A New Religious America"*, Harper-SanFrancisco, 2001) Emerson had been introduced to the scriptures and understandings of Hinduism by his amazing aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, when he was a rather young man. As early as the 1820s, Emerson wrote about India in his journals. And in the 1830s he and his friends obtained copies of the Bhagavad Gita. Henry David Thoreau took his copy with him to Walden Pond, and in the essay, "Walden" he writes: "In the morning, I bathed my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geet.. in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial."

Emerson's religious imagination was fired by the Hindu belief that the purpose of religious practice was, as he put it "to restore the bond linking the soul ...to the Eternal" (Eck). In his essay, "The Over-Soul," he writes:

"We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle; the subject and the object are one," Emerson says. "We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul."

As Diana Eck explains: "Unitarians were increasingly drawn to India's religious ideas: its insistence on the oneness of the divine, the presence of the sacred in all existence, and Hinduism's capacity to point to the transcendent unity of diverse paths and ways." Yes – as we sang earlier in Jim Scott's song, our Unitarian ancestors found themselves engaged by the intuitive rightness of the beautiful idea of "the oneness of everything." And in 1893, the Unitarians sponsored Hindu sage Swami Vivekenanda to speak at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago – one of the first such appearances of a Hindu holy man in America – so that these ideas might be more widely shared.

Emerson and Thoreau's writings had an impact, but their novel approach did not catch on immediately within the broader fold of Unitarianism of their time, indeed, it was seen for many years as a threat to the Christian basis of our faith tradition. But with knowledge comes change, and as the generations after Emerson read and studied and learned and opened their eyes and their hearts, Unitarianism did change – stretching to accommodate those who could no longer call themselves Christian, those who were increasingly interested in early twentieth-century humanism, and so on, until we reach today, and our proud understanding that we live our faith within a context of religious pluralism.

And that brings me around to my suggestion about religious pluralism. Hinduism tells us that there are millions of ways to approach the Divine, multiple roads to enlightenment, many right paths of religion. Paths centered on mind, heart, body, and on daily living – each to be practiced by an individual with great care and attention. As Unitarian Universalists entrusted with finding our own right paths, there is much here that we might find appealing. But we also know that if we adopt practices from other faiths that are cut off from their particular religious and cultural contexts, the wisdom of the world's religious traditions will never reach us.

And so, let us go forth this day with renewed knowledge and wonder, with reverence, respect and greater caring for our Hindu neighbors and friends.

Amen.

#### References:

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and other Internet sites as noted.