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HINDUISM



What Is Hinduism?

- If you live in North America, you share the continent with about 1.1 million Hindus. If you live in a large city, chances are it has a Hindu community with its own temple and traditions. But most of the world's Hindus live in southern Asia, especially India, the land where Hinduism began (see map). All told, there are about 900 million Hindus. That makes it the world's third largest religion (after Christianity and Islam).
- Hinduism has no one founder such as Christ or Mohammed or Buddha, no central authority like a pope or ayatollah, no single Scripture like the Torah or Koran or the Bible, no defining creed or statement of faith like the Apostles' Creed.



ONE OF SOME 780 MILLION HINDUS WHO LIVE IN INDIA, THIS WOMAN WEARS THE RED DOT OR TALIK AS A SIGN OF HER DEVOTION.

- The word "Hindu" was created by early travelers to the Indian subcontinent to describe the people who lived near the Indus River. The sacred writers of this religion speak of themselves as followers of the sacred law or *dharma* (DAHR-muh) and call their religion the *Sanatan dharma*,

which means "the eternal religion."

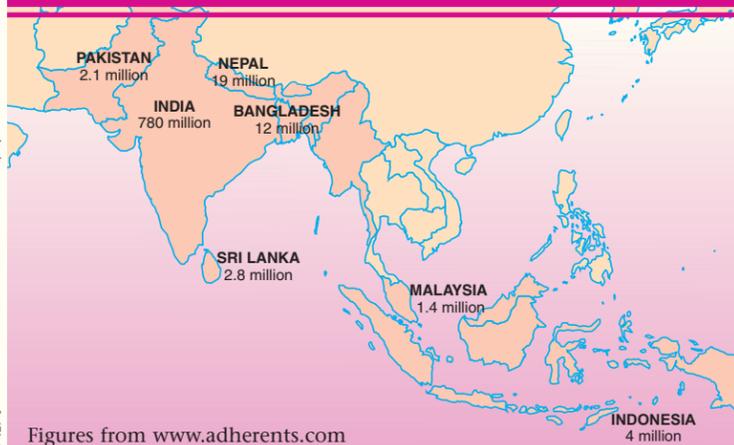
- Hinduism is one of the oldest continuing religions in the world today. Its history reaches back to 3000 B.C., a thousand years before the call of Abraham, to the mixing of the people of the Indus Valley with tribes of Aryans who arrived from the west. Together they created a religion that emphasizes **the oneness of a universal truth that is present everywhere and binds all things that live together.** They created a rich oral tradition of hymns called *Vedas* (VAY-des), which were written down in Sanskrit thousands of years later. By 600 B.C. informal spiritual schools led by teachers, or gurus, were common; their teachings were recorded in the *Upanishads* (oo-PAH-nih-shahd).
- By 300 B.C. Hinduism took a different turn with the rise of personal worship or devotion to a particular god or goddess in the Hindu array of deities. This new interest in individual gods and goddesses led to the sacred writings called the *Ramayana* (ra-MA-yeh-neh) and *Mahabharata* (ma-BA-reh-teh), which are epic poems about gods coming to earth to defeat evil. Law codes that set out the proper social order for Hindu culture were also established.

- In 1200 A.D. the Muslims arrived in India, followed by Christian Europeans in 1700. Hinduism changed little from interacting with these other faiths and remained the dominant religion of India.
- Hinduism has survived for so long partly because it has changed as it met new ideas and challenges. It has welcomed new ways of expressing devotion, and it allows all followers of *dharma* to find their own way to the oneness of the universe.

Hindu Glossary

- atman:** The soul or essence within people that's identical to the essence of the universal power, the source of everything.
- Brahman:** (BRA-men) The one eternal being of Hinduism. Also known as the One, the ultimate reality, the world soul. The self-existing power which is the source of everything.
- karma:** The effects of our actions in this life and in previous lives. All actions have effects, good and bad. A person's actions determine his or her future in this life and in the lives to come.
- moksha:** (MOK-sha) Liberation, release, salvation, enlightenment. Final freedom from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The soul achieving moksha does not have to be reborn, but rejoins Brahman for eternal bliss.
- samsara:** (sem-SA-reh) The Hindu wheel of life. The cycle of a soul's birth and rebirth through different lifetimes in different bodies. The transmigration of souls or reincarnation.
- yoga:** A discipline of the mind and body through which one obtains union with Brahman.

THE SPREAD OF HINDUISM



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Salt and Water

"What is Brahman?" a son once asked his father.

The father told the boy to bring him a bowl of water and the family's container of salt. The boy ran to get the items and returned to his father with them. "Put the salt into the water and come back tomorrow," the father said.

The next morning, the boy was up early looking for his father to learn the answer to his question. "Take out the salt," the father commanded his son.

"I can't. It's disappeared," he answered.

"Taste the water from the top of the bowl," he instructed. The boy did so. It was salty.

"Taste the water from the middle of the bowl," he was told.

The boy did so. It too was salty.

"Taste the water from the bottom of the bowl."

The boy did so. It was as salty as the rest of the water had been.

"Brahman is like the salt in the water. It is invisible, but everywhere."

More About Brahman

- Brahman is the absolute and ultimate reality that exists beyond the appearance of our everyday lives.
- Brahman has no form and is everywhere: in people, plants, and animals.
- Brahman is a universal being but is not a person; rather, it is the source of all existence.
- The Brahman that exists in each human being is called *atman*. The essence of one's self, or soul, is the same eternal spirit that lives in each living thing and is the life force of the universe. The essence of each living being is the same as the essence of the universe.



The Wheel of Life

Hindus believe that just as the world follows a cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction, the human soul is caught in a never-ending wheel of life. Birth, death, and rebirth are the eternal motion of the *atman*. When a baby is born, it is inhabited by the *atman* or preexisting soul. Whether this new life will be a step up or down depends on the karma the soul had attached to itself in its previous cycle.

Karma depends on the actions we take in life for good or evil. Good karma will result in rebirth into a better physical existence in the next life; bad karma will result in the opposite. So what we do determines the condition of our next life. This idea of birth and rebirth is often called reincarnation, but the more correct term is “the transmigration of the soul.”

This endless cycle of *samsara* is not a pleasurable merry-go-round. The *atman* in each of us yearns to leave physical existence behind and become one with the *Brahman*. This release or *moksha* is the ultimate goal of every Hindu. Never to be born again, but to achieve total oneness with the *Brahman* in an eternal state of perfect knowledge and total peace is the ultimate goal of humanity.

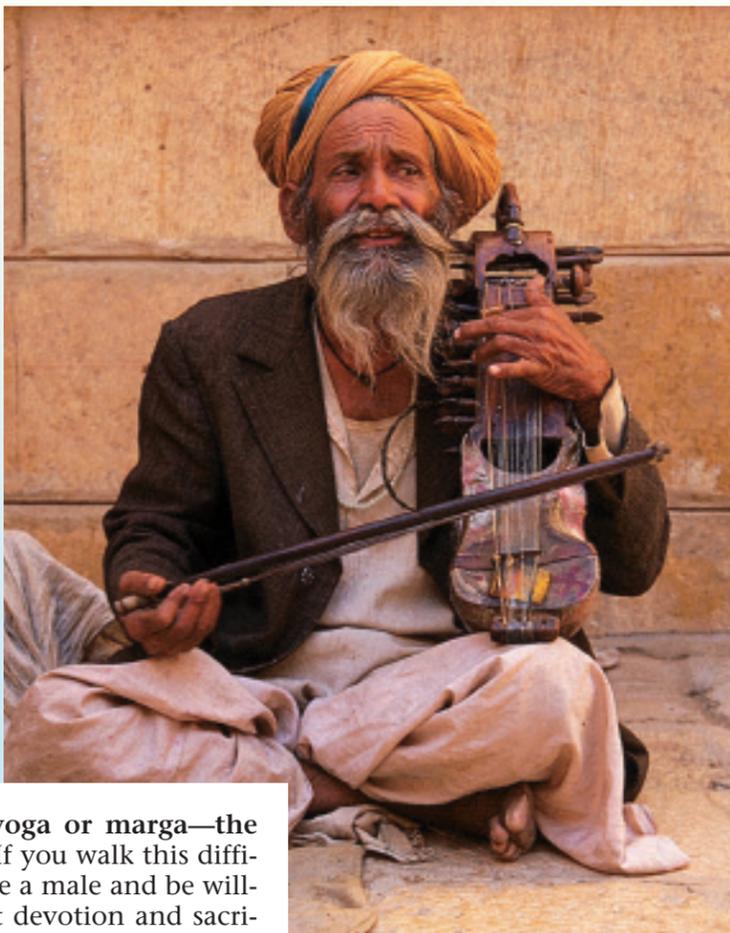
What keeps us from achieving *moksha*? *Maya*. To attain *moksha* requires knowing that our life is illusion—the only truly real thing is *Brahman*. *Maya* prevents people from seeing this knowledge—they see only the illusion and not

BIRTH, DEATH, AND REBIRTH ARE THE ETERNAL MOTION OF THE ATMAN. THIS ENDLESS CYCLE IS CALLED SAMSARA AND IS SYMBOLIZED BY THIS GIANT WHEEL. THE ATMAN YEARNS TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF SAMSARA.

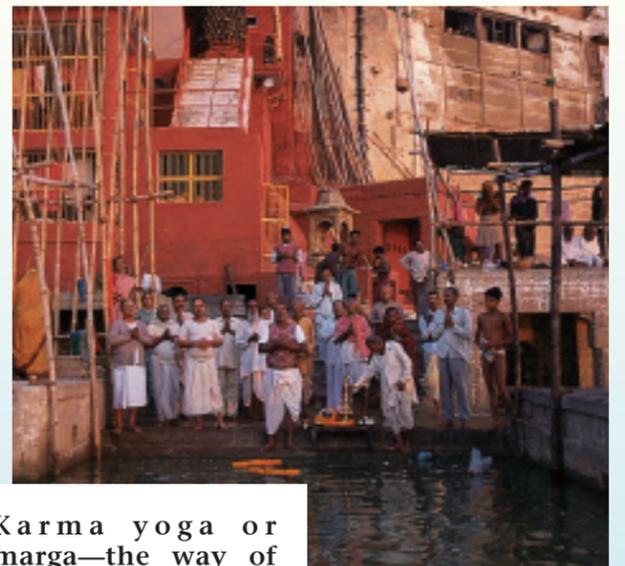
the reality. *Moksha* cannot be obtained by dedicating yourself to gaining something in this world but only by experiencing union with *Brahman*.

Three Paths to Moksha

In the *Bhagavad Gita* (BHUG-eh-ved GEE-ta), one of the most famous and popular sections of the Hindu religious writings, Krishna explains to the hero, Arjuna, the six pathways to *moksha*. Three of them, the most popular, are described below. Hindus are free to choose the one that best suits them.



A HOLY MAN DENIES ALL PHYSICAL COMFORTS AND NEEDS TO BEG FOR FOOD.



A SUNRISE CEREMONY ALONG THE GANGES RIVER.

2 Karma yoga or marga—the way of action: If you choose this path, you will spend your life serving others, working for the good of society. You will also take care to properly worship the gods, usually at a temple. You may even go on a pilgrimage to holy places like the Ganges River.

1 Jnana (je-NA-neh) yoga or marga—the way of knowledge: If you walk this difficult path you must be a male and be willing to live a life of great devotion and sacrifice. Your path will have four steps. You begin as a student and you learn the scripture and other rituals of worship. Then you marry and have children, but you also must help the poor. At this point you may choose to continue on this path or take another. If you go on, you take the “forest dweller” step, which requires you (usually at retirement) to leave your family and property behind, find a guru to instruct you in further knowledge, and live in the forest. When you are ready, you take the final step and assume the life of a holy man. As such, you deny yourself all physical comforts, beg for your food, and spend your days and nights meditating, reflecting, and reading the sacred scriptures, until you begin to participate in *moksha*. When you die, you enter fully into the oneness of *Brahman*.



A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION FOR LORD KRISHNA.

A Ladder for Society

Tied to the idea of *samsara* is the caste system in Hinduism. Every Hindu is born into one of four groups, as explained in Hindu scriptures. These form the basis of Hindu society. Within this system, Hindus support each other by performing the duties of their caste. If one does not do his or her duty (*dharma*) perfectly, it harms all of society and the entire universe suffers. How well or poorly one performs one's duties has direct bearing on one's karma.



A SHOPKEEPER IS CONSIDERED A VAISHYA IN THE CASTE SYSTEM.

Your previous karma determines into which caste you will be reborn. The castes are ranked on a purity scale and the goal is to get to the top rung of the ladder. It is possible to create such bad karma in your present lifetime that the gods punish you by having you reborn as an animal.

Brahmins are at the top of the ladder. The purest group, Brahmins are priests who perform temple rituals and teach the sacred scriptures.

Brahmins are vegetarians so that they never inadvertently kill another life.

Satriyas (Sha-TREE-yas), the next purest group, are the warriors and rulers: soldiers, police, government officials, and the hereditary ruling families. They may study the scriptures, participate fully in religious activities, and carry weapons.

Vaishyas (VISH-ee-as) are the farmers, shopkeepers, skilled craftspeople, and teachers. They too may study the scriptures and participate in some (but not all) religious activities. They may not carry weapons.

Shudras (SHOO-drehs), at the bottom of the ladder, are manual laborers such as potters and carpenters. They may not study the scriptures or participate in sacred rituals but may follow a simplified form of domestic worship.

Untouchables are not even allowed near the ladder. They are the unfortunate ones who do the "dirty work" of society: garbage collectors, cremation workers, street sweepers, and others. Members of other castes avoid touching them, lest they become polluted themselves. The rights to full citizenship for this caste in the nation of India was the result of some of the democratic reform work of Gandhi in the 1950s.

How important would caste be to you if you were a Hindu? If you lived in rural India, it would determine most of your life. Your caste would dictate your level of education, your job, even your choice of spouse (you could not marry above your caste). Elsewhere in the world, caste is more flexible. But for all Hindus, how well you perform the duties of your caste determine who and where you'll be in your next life.

HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY

How are Hinduism and Christianity alike? Different? Here are some questions to discuss in your group meetings and to think about on your own:

- How is the Hindu idea of "eternal life" (reincarnation) different from our understanding?
- How is the Christian idea of sin like the Hindu concept of *maqa*?
- How do Hindu and Christian ideas of incarnation differ?
- What difference does it make to you to have a faith that's centered on the one, unique person of Jesus Christ rather than on many gods/goddesses?
- What can Christians learn about worship from Hindus?
- Which Hindu *marga* or yoga do you find most appealing? Which *marga* echoes Christianity the closest?
- Is yoga a good activity for everyone, including Christians, or should we avoid it because of its association with another religion?

For other comparisons, check your copy of the chart "World Religions at a Glance."

We Don't Worship Cows!

I am an Indian Hindu living in the state of Oregon. There are only 11,000 Indians in this state. I am the only one in my school district. . . . My nearest Indian neighbor lives 45 minutes away.

While I was attending public school, a lot of kids asked me questions about Hinduism. Some of these queries—like "Why do you worship cows?"—are easier to answer than others. Especially challenging are the sarcastically nettling questions like: "You want a bite of beef?" or "Are you going to sacrifice me to your Goddess?" Usually, I am able to keep a level head. When I get asked the tough questions, I find myself thanking God for the chance to answer, but also praying that my responses are suitable. . . .

I have been attending regular classes at the Chinmaya Mission Balavihar since I was five years old. There I have been fortunate to learn of the deep mysticism of Hinduism, and also about Indian culture. The spiritual titan Swami Vivekananda said: "Unity is

knowledge, diversity is ignorance. This knowledge is your birthright. . . ." Inspired by this and a saying often repeated at the Chinmaya Mission, "Knowledge is power," I find myself deeply rooted and firm in my beliefs. I am not one to be swayed.

Thanks to this training and the wisdom of my mother, I have been able to intelligently deflect many insults and answer many antagonistic questions at school.

When I am asked about cows, I calmly reply: "First of all, we don't worship cows. We respect them. India is a land where farming is a common job, and cows play a big part in the lives of many Indians. They help us in many ways . . . (Then, of course, I would go on to explain this). And besides, what does it matter if I don't eat cow? Do you eat snakes? Or dogs? No? Dogs are quite a delicacy in Korea, you know."

. . . Growing up Hindu in America was a bit unnerving at first. This was simply because many of the people that I met did not know anything about Hinduism. And

people generally fear what they do not understand.

Being Hindu is something that I have always been proud of. I was raised that way. I feel sad when I see another Hindu kid laughing along with the jokes that are made about us and our culture.

When we put up barriers between people on the basis of religion or race, we are allowing ourselves to become ignoble bigots. If a fellow student ridicules my religion, I do not have to turn around and ridicule his.

Any advice I might have is directed toward other Hindu youth like myself growing up in America. It is this: "Don't get disheartened by the ridiculous questions and insulting comments. Be proud of the religion that you belong to. Be an exemplary Hindu. If you can do that, you will have achieved something that you can truly be proud of."

BY GAUTAM RAMA VARMA PATHIAL. GAUTAM, 15, LIVES WITH HIS PARENTS IN NEWBERG, OREGON, WHERE HE ATTENDS PRIVATE SCHOOL AND ASPIRES TO BE A LAWYER. ARTICLE USED BY PERMISSION FROM HINDUISM TODAY, WWW.HINDUISMTODAY.COM.

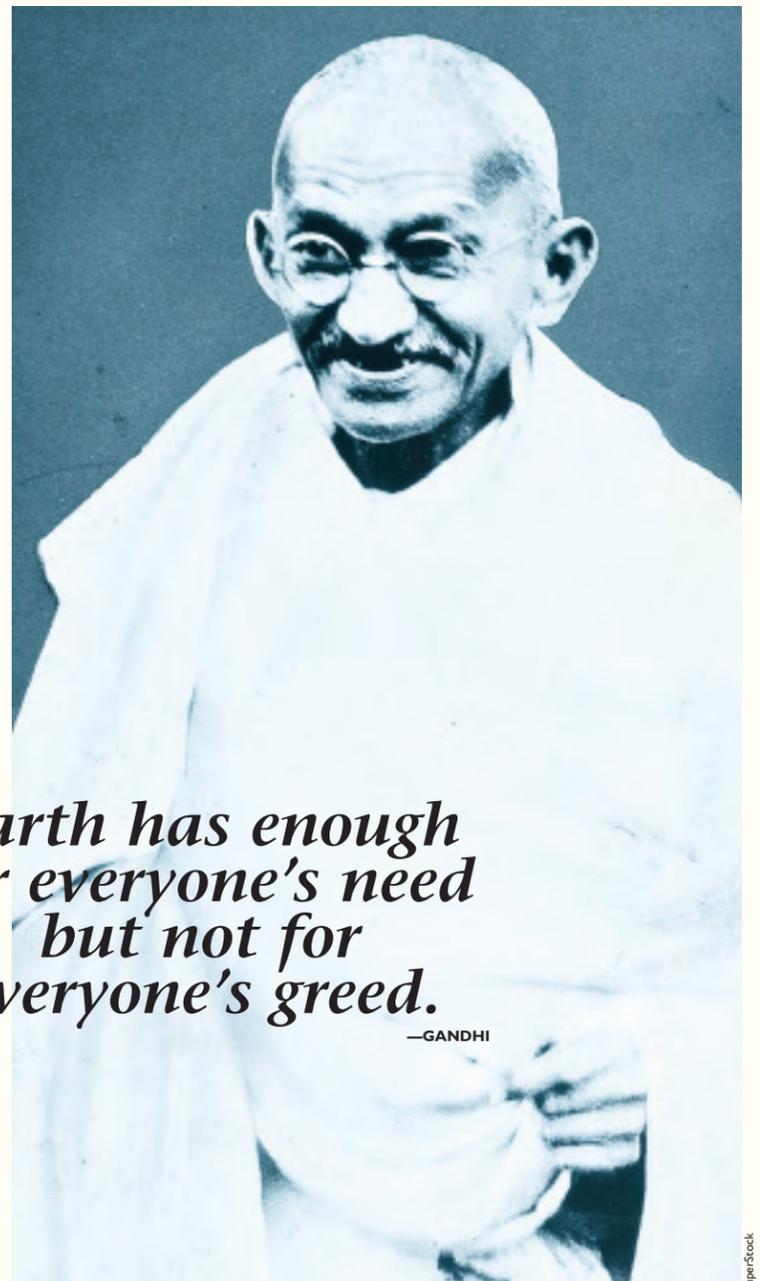
Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

Mahatma Gandhi (meh-HAT-meh GAN-dee) is revered by Indians as a great champion for political rights, by Hindus as a charismatic holy man, and by the entire world as an inspirational leader for the rights of the powerless, wherever they may be.

Originally a lawyer in the Indian community in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India in 1941 to help lead India's struggle for independence from the British. He insisted that nonviolence was the only acceptable way of protest. He also spoke for the rights of the poor and powerless; in fact, he saw the full rights of citizenship given to the "untouchable" caste of Hindu society.

India gained independence in 1947, but just a year later Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic. His example has inspired a legacy of others who work for change through nonviolent protest. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., used Gandhi's methods in the United States civil rights movement in the 1960s.

When approached by followers who wanted to imitate him, Gandhi referred them to this piece of advice called the Gandhi Talisman: "Recall the face of the poorest and most helpless person whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him; will he be able to gain anything from it? Will it restore him to control over his life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* (self-rule) for the hungry and also spiritually starved millions of our countrymen? Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away."



Earth has enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed.

—GANDHI

One God or Many?

How many gods and goddesses does Hinduism have? One Hindu would tell you there is only one—Brahman; another might name twenty or so that she knows of, and add that there are many more she doesn't—too many to count! Who's right?

Both are. Hindus believe that while there is only one eternal being, there are thousands of gods. While there is only one formless god, people need a god or goddess they can feel close to, picture, worship, and claim as their own. Each one of these gods or goddesses is only one face of the supreme Brahman.

Three main gods are responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the world: Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. The world revolves through this cycle of beginnings and endings in a continuous repeating pattern.

When Vishnu needs to appear on earth to preserve the world from danger or evil, he takes on the form of a human or animal. This is called an *incarnation* or *avatar*. Vishnu has acted in ten such avatars. (The tenth, Kalki, will appear at the end of the present time riding a white horse and holding a flaming sword.) Two of these avatars, Rama and Krishna, are also honored as gods. The most recent avatar was Buddha.

The Gods of Hinduism

BRAHMA (not Brahman) First member of the trimurti; the god who makes the creation of new ages possible. Brahma, the creator, has four faces so he can look in all directions at once. His four arms point to the four points of the compass. Each arm holds a different object: a string of beads symbolizing time, a pot of water for the source of life, a tool used in sacrifice for the world, and a book (Brahma is the god of knowledge and thought). He sits on a swan, a symbol of wisdom.

VISHNU Second member of the trimurti. A powerful but kind god, Vishnu preserves, protects, and defends the world. His four hands enable him to be everywhere in the world; each holds a symbol of his divinity. He carries a lotus for the beautiful world; a conch shell, which when blown sounds like the *Om*; a club for power over time; and a wheel symbolizing the wheel of life. He stands on the lotus as a guardian of the world and usually wears a crown, symbolizing his kingship.

SHIVA Final member of the trimurti. Though a destroyer, he is also a liberator, since in destroying an evil world he makes it possible for a new, pure world to be created. As Lord of the Dance, Shiva creates the energy that flows through the world, making day and night, the changing seasons, birth and death. He stands on the head of the dwarf Ignorance and is surrounded by a circle of flames representing time, which has no beginning and no end. His upper right hand holds the drum on which he beats out the rhythm of his dance, and his upper left hand holds the flame of his power. A third eye in the middle of his forehead looks inward and symbolizes wisdom.

PARVATI The beautiful wife of Shiva; one of the most worshiped goddesses in Hinduism. Usually gentle, she can also take the form of *Durga*, a warrior goddess, or *Kali*, an ugly goddess who destroys evil through war, strife, and disease.

GANESHA Son of Shiva and Parvati. This elephant-headed god specializes in removing obstacles, so he is often worshiped by Hindus who are beginning a new job, moving to a new home, starting a long journey, or undertaking another new endeavor. His large ears help him hear the prayers of his worshipers. His potbelly shows he is prosperous and successful. Some Hindus also begin their time of worship by praying to Ganesha.

KRISHNA The most popular of the gods. A young, handsome man, he is usually pictured as blue and playing a flute. He is known as a loving god who accepts all gifts, no matter how small, if they are given in love. In North America, members of the Hare Krishna society devote their worship to Krishna. They wear Hindu dress, celebrate Krishna worship in public places like airports and parks, and practice strict vegetarianism. *Hare* means "God who forgives your wrongdoings."



BRAHMA



VISHNU



SHIVA



PARVATI



GANESHA



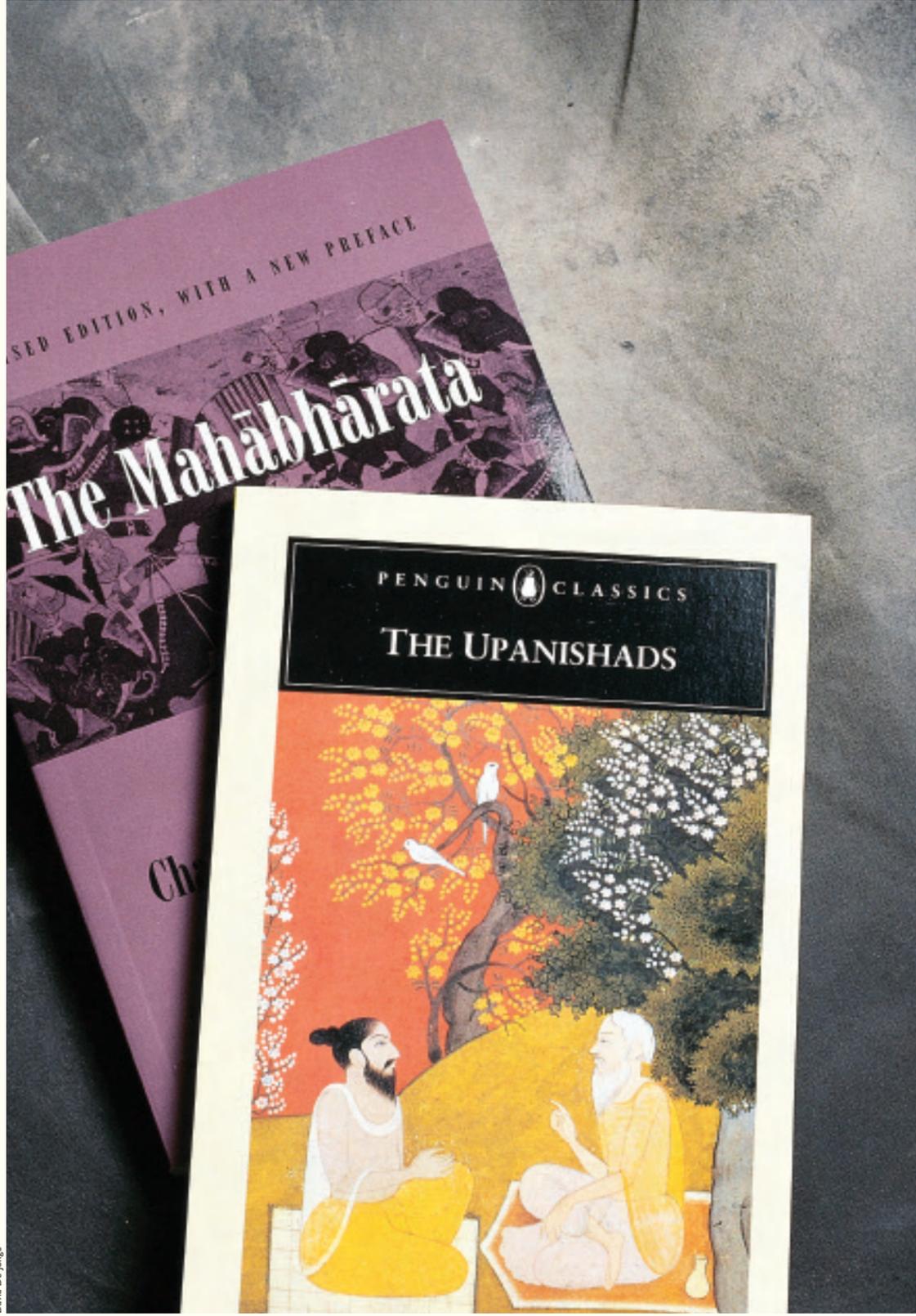
KRISHNA

Art by Tim Foley

The Sacred Writings

Hinduism recognizes six different scriptures or sacred texts:

- **Vedas:** (VAY-des) Collections of hymns used in the earliest years of Hindu worship. They were handed down orally for hundreds of years before being set down in Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language.
- **Upanishads:** (oo-PAH-nih-shahd) Collections of teachings that grew out of sessions held by teachers and their students. Dating from 600 B.C., they contain the essential teachings about Brahman.
- **Mahabharata:** (ma-BA-reh-teh) An epic poem of 90,000 stanzas (probably the longest poem in the world!) about the civil war between two ruling families of India. The god Vishnu appears as Krishna to help solve the conflict. One of the most famous sections in the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita* or “Song of the Lord,” which recounts the dialogue between Krishna and the hero Arjuna. Krishna explains the various ways to find moksha and gives instruction in the yogas.



- **Ramayana:** (ra-MA-yeh-neh) Another long poem, this one about the incarnation of Vishnu as Lord Rama. Rama escapes from banishment and, with the help of the monkey god Hanuman and his army of monkeys, rescues his wife, Sita, from the demon king Ravana, who has taken her to a fortress in Sri Lanka; he returns home to be a wise and just king.
- **Puranas:** (pu-RAH-nes) A collection of ancient stories and myths that were compiled over hundreds of years. Many of the stories are about Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.
- **Dharmashastras:** (darh-MUH-SHAS-truhz) A group of law books that provide detailed discussion of correct Hindu society. The caste system, the proper purposes of life, and the stages of life are all explained.

MANY OF THE SACRED WRITINGS WERE HANDED DOWN ORALLY FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS BEFORE BEING WRITTEN. TODAY, MOST OF THESE WRITINGS CAN BE FOUND IN PAPERBACKS AT LOCAL BOOKSTORES.

FROM THE SACRED WRITINGS

The Creation of the World

1. In the beginning this world was Soul alone in the form of a person. Looking around, he saw nothing else than himself. . . .
2. He was afraid. Therefore one who is alone is afraid. . . .
3. Verily, he had no delight. Therefore one alone has no delight. He desired a second. He was, indeed, as large as a woman and a man closely embraced. He caused that self to fall into two pieces. Therefrom arose a husband and a wife. . . . He copulated with her. Therefrom human beings were produced.
4. And she then bethought herself: “How now does he copulate with me after he has produced me just from himself? Come, let me hide myself.” She became a cow. He became a bull. With her he did indeed copulate. Then cattle were born. She became a mare, he a stallion. . . . Thence were born solid-hoofed animals. She became a she-goat, he a he-goat; she a ewe, he a ram. With her he did verily copulate. Therefrom were born goats and sheep. Thus, indeed, he created all, whatever pairs there are, even down to the ants.
5. He knew: “I, indeed, am this creation, for I emitted it all from myself.” Thence arose creation. Verily, he who has this knowledge comes to be in that creation of his.

—BRIHADARANYAKJA UPANISHAD

As leaving aside worn-out garments
a man takes other, new ones,
so leaving aside worn-out bodies
to other, new ones goes the embodied soul.

—BHAGAVAD GITA

From delusion lead me to Truth.
From darkness lead me to Light.
From death lead me to immortality.

—BRIHADARANYAKJA UPANISHAD

असतो मा सद्गमय ।
तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।
मृत्योर्मांसमृतं गमय ॥

THIS VERY IMPORTANT HINDU TEXT IS WRITTEN IN SANSKRIT, AN ANCIENT LANGUAGE OF INDIA AND THE LANGUAGE OF HINDUISM'S SACRED WRITINGS. SANSKRIT IS READ FROM LEFT TO RIGHT.



Hindus at Worship

Worship at the temple, worship in the home, pilgrimages, and festivals are all important in the life of the devout Hindu. Faithful and pure devotion will be well rewarded with good karma and sanctifies all of life.

Temple Worship

A Hindu temple is a holy place where the gods and humanity can meet, a “crossing” where members of any caste can be with the divine reality. The largest temples are devoted to the major gods like Shiva, but most villages will have a smaller temple to a local deity. Hindu communities in

North America often build their own temples. The temples are open all day for people to bow down before the deity in the shrine room, give their offerings, pray, and sing. Only the Brahmin priests may “wake up” the deity, bathe it, dress it, feed it, and put it to sleep.

Home Worship

Daily worship, *puja*, is an important ritual. Puja consists of three steps: seeing the deity; offering flowers, fruits, and cooked food; and retrieving the blessed food and eating it. This ritual is carried out in front of a family shrine devoted to the family god or goddess.



PILGRIMAGE TO BATHING FAIR ALONG THE GANGES RIVER.

The puja ritual begins by asking the deity to be present. When the presence is felt, the worshipers welcome it by symbolically bathing it and offering it gifts. Worship is

designed for seeing—not just the worshiper seeing the god, but the god seeing the worshiper. This is why Hindu images have such huge eyes. Puja involves all the senses: worshipers see the lamps, touch the ritual objects, hear the bells and the sacred sounds, smell the incense, and taste the food.

Pilgrimages

Devout Hindus travel to holy places, which radiate sacredness to the pilgrims who worship there. There are so many sites for pilgrimages in India that by visiting each in a circular route, a pilgrim could walk around the whole land of India! All the major rivers in India are worshiped as goddesses because they bring water and life to an arid land. In fact, the most important place for pilgrims to visit is the river Ganges, whose waters they believe can wash away a person’s bad karma. Most devout Hindus try to wash in the river at least once in their lifetime.

Festivals

Hindus celebrate several major festivals and many smaller ones tied to a local custom or event. Most of these commemorate or celebrate a story from Hindu mythology. Food, drama, dance, music, and puja are all part of the celebrations. Hindu festivals follow a lunar rather than numerical calendar, so festivals aren’t always celebrated on exactly the same days each year.



THE LARGEST HINDU TEMPLE IN NORTH AMERICA SITS IN A FIELD OF MARIGOLDS 10 MILES SOUTHWEST OF AUSTIN, TEXAS. IT WAS BUILT ON WHAT WAS ONCE A CATTLE RANCH.

DAILY WORSHIP (PUJA) IS IMPORTANT FOR HINDUS. THEY WORSHIP IN THEIR HOMES AT SHRINES LIKE THE ONE SHOWN HERE.

A Hindu Teen at Worship

I am the eldest daughter in my family. My father is a pediatrician who came to this country twenty years ago to study for his medical degree. There was a need for doctors here so he decided to stay rather than go back to India. He was not yet married, so after graduation he returned to India for several months and married my mother, who is also a Brahmin. Their families selected them for each other, for it is important that they be from the same caste. My father leads my family in the way of devotion or Bhakti. He has chosen Krishna to honor as a messenger from god. We also honor Ganesha, Shiva’s son, for my father has had to make many long trips.

We live in a suburb of our city in a brand-new house. We have set aside one of the bedrooms to be our shrine. My father must leave for work at 7:30 and I must catch my bus at 7:15, so every morning at 6:30 our family gathers at our shrine to worship together for thirty minutes. Before we enter the room, we must have showered, put on clean clothes, and not yet eaten breakfast. We remove our shoes before entering the room. This is to show respect to Krishna and to show that we have left worldly distractions behind.

The shrine is set against the wall. It is on a table about five feet high and four feet wide. A light on the ceiling shines on it so it is always in light. My

mother has prepared the altar for us before we get there. She has laid down a clean red cloth over the table. Red is the color of deity or holiness. The figures of Krishna and Ganesha have been freshly washed and oiled, and mother has placed garlands around their necks. In front of them my mother has placed new sticks of incense, a candle, fresh flowers, and a food offering of fruit and rice. A handbell rests at the edge of the altar. Each of these offerings is matched to one of our senses so that our worship involves all of our being: we smell the incense, see the candle, touch the flowers, taste the food, and hear the bell.

My father begins our worship by lighting the candle and

incense and ringing the bell. We all sit in our favorite yoga position and chant the *Om* together while we focus our minds on the *atman* within us, rid our minds of distracting thoughts, and meditate on the goodness of Krishna. My father ends our time of worship by reciting some verses from the *Gita*, which he learned as a boy. He has to translate them into English for us because we don’t know Sanskrit.

We leave the room to get ready for school and work. The incense and candle are left burning. We will eat the fruit and rice for breakfast.

Yoga, Anyone?

Mention “yoga” and most people think of a set of exercises designed to help increase control of the mind and the body. In Hinduism, however, yoga is intended to build up one’s spiritual power in order to attain moksha (union with the Brahman).

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna describes the perfect disciple of yoga:

The person who aims at that supreme condition of perfect yoking with God must first of all be moderate in all things, in food, in sleep, in vigilance, in action, in exercise and recreation. Then let him, in seeking God by deep meditation, abandon his possessions and his hopes, betake himself to some secluded spot, fix his heart and thoughts on God alone. . . . then let him sit firm and erect, his body, head and back straight and immovable, his eyes directed toward a single spot, not looking around, devoid of passion, free from anxious thought, his heart restrained, deep in meditation. . . . He whose senses are well controlled attains to sacred knowledge. . . . Quietness in mind is the state of the Supreme. He who, intent on meditation, joins his soul with the Supreme, is like a flame that flickers not when sheltered from the wind.



A series of postures are used for training the body to practice yoga. The most important one is the lotus position (seated with legs crossed onto the thighs) because it is the most conducive to a peaceful mental state (see diagrams). Other postures include the cobra (lying flat on the floor, stomach-side down, with head and shoulders raised) and the star (standing bent at the waist so the forehead touches the knees).

Breathing exercises are also used to promote special rhythms and control breathing. A person practicing yoga might also use a yantra as a visual aid and a mantra as a verbal aid (see definitions elsewhere on this page).

Yoga has become very popular in North America as a tool for relaxation and stress-reduction. Yoga classes can be found at health centers, sports clubs, heart rehab units, and pain clinics. Supporters of yoga claim it brings better health, improved powers of thinking, peace of mind, and longer life.

Do-It-Yourself Yoga

Here are two basic yoga positions for meditation. Begin with the half-lotus, practicing it until you’re comfortable. Then, if you’re game, you *may* want to try the full lotus position.

Half Lotus



Sit on floor, as shown.



Right foot against upper left thigh.



Left foot in fold of right leg. Hands on knees or in lap with palms up.

Full Lotus



Left foot high on right leg. Left knee touching floor.



Right foot on left thigh.



Knees on floor, bottoms of feet up. Hands on knees or in lap with palms up.

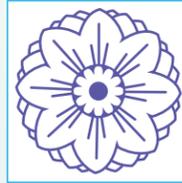
AIDS TO HOLINESS



Om

This is the sacred Sanskrit syllable “Om” or “Aum.” It’s often spoken at the beginning of prayers and worship, as well as in mantras, as a vocal expression of Brahman or oneness.

The symbol is found everywhere in Hindu society: posted on the walls of homes, painted on the dashboards of cars, and worn as jewelry.



Lotus

A symbol of the beauty of Hinduism and the beauty of the universe. Just as the lotus grows from the dark bottom of the pond to float on the surface and opens its beautiful blossom to the light of the sun, so

the world rises out of the unknown mystery to the light of true light and consciousness. This design of the lotus blossom is used as the central figure in many *yantras*, meditation pictures.



Yantra

A picture used as a kind of visual aid to meditation, designed to turn one’s attention inward. Notice the circles that suggest the wheel of life and the lotus petals.



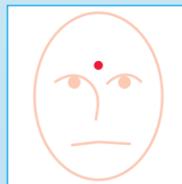
Mantra

A verbal aid to meditation, a mantra is a syllable or words that one repeats over and over, with the effect of increasing one’s spiritual level. The Om (spoken as “Aum”) is often used as a mantra. Gurus often give their students a special mantra of their own.



Thou Art That

The Sanskrit *Tat Tvam asi* (TAT TVAM Asee)—thou art that—is a symbol of the central theme of Hinduism and a saying repeated multiple times in the Upanishads. You (the individual soul) are that (the universal essence).



Red Dot

Traditionally, all Brahmins wore the red dot or *talik* as a mark of their caste. The dot is placed at the meeting point between the two eyes, where the third spiritual eye is said to be. The dots are painted on with a paste made from a

herbal powder. Red is the sacred color in Hinduism. Today, the *talik* is used as a sign of devotion for all castes and can be worn for worship.

Sacred Cows

Cows have a special place in Hinduism. Cows roam the Indian countryside freely: tying up traffic, eating food in marketplaces, and bothering tourists. They may not be killed and the beef is never eaten. Why? Partly because all life is sacred (the reason many Hindus are vegetarians) and because the cow is simply so valuable to the Indian economy. For many families, survival depends on owning a healthy cow.

The Four Yugas

The Hindu year has twelve lunar months. Each year is counted by the gods as only a day in a god’s year. There are 360 Hindu years in a god’s year, and 12,000 gods’ years make up a cycle of four ages or *yugas*: *Kryta*, *Treta*, *Dvapara*, and *Kali*. In the *Kryta* yuga the world was at its best and people were happy. In each of the following *yugas*, life got progressively worse. According to this calendar, we live in the fourth yuga of the cycle, the worst one. Hindus believe that this yuga will end in violence, chaos, and destruction. *Kalki*, the tenth avatar of Vishnu, will appear at this time to begin a new, perfect age.

Gurus and Swamis

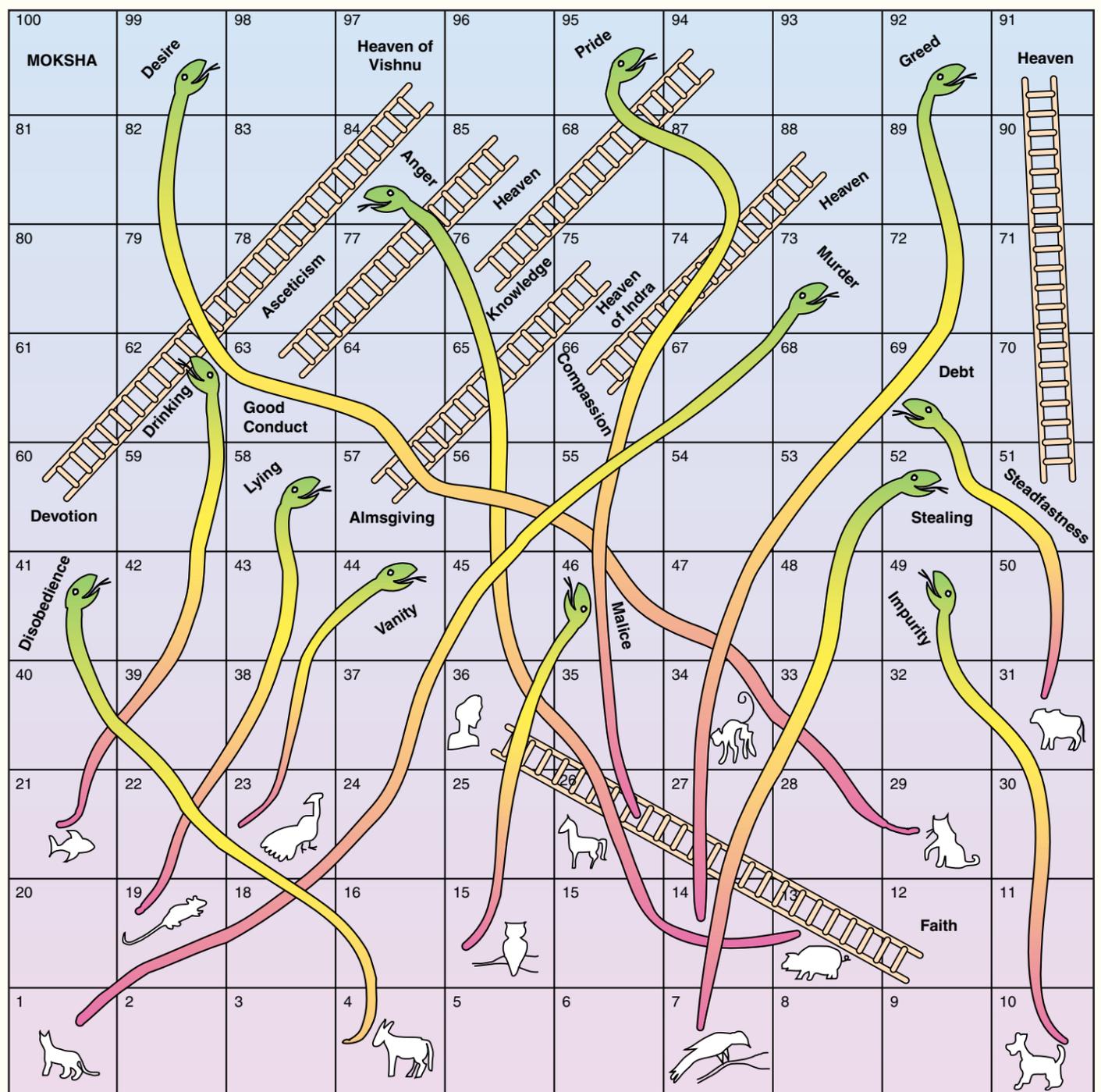
A *guru* is a religious teacher or guide. A genuine guru is known by the quality of his teaching and the nature of his life. A guru can show you the way, but you must travel it alone. A *swami* is a title of respect like “sir.” A student may choose to address a guru with this title if the student feels the teacher deserves it. If truly deserved, it will be adopted by all the students and used from that point on. (Try it out on your guru!)

Snakes and Ladders

This game is fun and also teaches the Hindu belief in a series of reincarnations or transmigrations that lead to the ultimate goal of *moksha* (deliverance from rebirth). According to this belief, a person is reborn higher in the social system if he or she has lived a good life, or lower if he or she has lived an evil life. The rebirth can even be to an animal level, if the law of karma reflects an evil life.

Begin by having players put their markers at space 36 (humanity's estate). Each player tosses the die and moves ahead accordingly. If a marker lands on a snake's head, it must be moved down to the square at the snake's tail. If it stops at the bottom of a ladder, it may advance to the square at the top of the ladder. The object of the game is to see who can reach moksha first.

—FROM *WORLD RELIGIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM* BY DOROTHY ARNETT DIXON, © 1975, TWENTY-THIRD PSALM PUBLICATIONS, MYSTIC, CT 06355.



Cook's Corner

Like to cook? Like to eat? Here are some recipes that you may want to cook up (or persuade someone else to) as you learn about Hinduism.

Easy Curry

serves 3-4

Brown in small amount of fat

1/4-1/2 pound (.11-.22 kg) chicken or other meat (raw or cooked), finely cut

Add **2 1/2 cups (.60 L) water**

Chop and add in order according to cooking time needed

2 medium carrots

2 stalks celery

1 green pepper

1/2 medium onion

Add **1 teaspoon (5 mL) salt**
1/8 teaspoon (1.6 mL) pepper

1 tablespoon (15 mL) curry powder

Blend together **1 cup (.24 L) tomato sauce**

1/3 cup (.08 L) milk
2 tablespoons (30 mL) cornstarch

Simmer 45 minutes or until vegetables are tender and sauce is thick and glossy. Stir frequently.

Serve over rice, noodles, or biscuits.

—MARIE J. GRANTZ, NORTH NEWTON, KS. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF HERALD PRESS, SCOTSDALE, PA 15683 AND WATERLOO, ONT. N2L 6H7 FROM *MORE-WITH-LESS COOKBOOK* BY DORIS JANZEN LONGACRE.

Indian Flat Bread (India)

Chapati (chah-PAH-tee)

serves 10

Chapatis are made in varying sizes and thicknesses in South Asia and East Africa. Pieces of chapati are used instead of utensils to scoop up curry dishes.

Combine

2 cups (500 mL) whole wheat flour

1 teaspoon (5 mL) margarine, melted

pinch of salt

Gradually add **1/2 cup (125 mL) or more lukewarm water**

Knead until dough is soft. Cover with damp cloth and let rest 1 hour. Divide dough into ten pieces. On floured surface, roll each piece into 4-inch (10 cm) circle, 1/4-inch (3/4 cm) thick. Heat heavy ungreased frying pan. Cook each chapati until it starts to bubble on bottom, turn, fry other side, and remove. Stack in a tea towel to keep warm.

Options:

- Substitute white flour for half the whole wheat flour
- After turning chapati, rub with a few drops margarine or oil. When second side is finished, turn over again and cook briefly on first side. Rub oil on second side and fry briefly.

—CYNTHIA PEACOCK, CALCUTTA, INDIA. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF HERALD PRESS, SCOTSDALE, PA 15683 AND WATERLOO, ONT. N2L 6H7 FROM *EXTENDING THE TABLE: A WORLD COMMUNITY COOKBOOK* BY JOETTA HANDRICH SCHLABACH.

Banana Yogurt Salad (India)

Kela Raita (KAT-lah RIE-tah)

serves 3-4

A simple, cool side dish to serve with hot curry meals. A healthy hot-weather snack or pleasant light meal.

Slice **2 bananas**
Sprinkle with **2 teaspoons (10 mL) lemon juice**

Toss with **2/3 cup (150 mL) yogurt**

Top with **2 teaspoons (10 mL) shredded coconut (optional)**

Option:

- To sweeten, add a bit of sugar

—SARA LARSON WIEGNER, AKRON, PA. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF HERALD PRESS, SCOTSDALE, PA 15683 AND WATERLOO, ONT. N2L 6H7 FROM *EXTENDING THE TABLE: A WORLD COMMUNITY COOKBOOK* BY JOETTA HANDRICH SCHLABACH.

Hindustani Tea (Chai)

serves 7-8

Heat together in a 3-4 qt. saucepan
6 cups (1.4 L) water
7 teaspoons (35 mL) loose tea

Boil 10 minutes. Add **6 cups (1.4 L) milk**

Heat to near boiling. Add to taste

10-15 teaspoons (50-75 mL) sugar

Tastes best when prepared 2 or more hours in advance and set aside. Reheat during meal and serve with fresh fruit for dessert.

—JOHN NYCE, GOSHEN, IN. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF HERALD PRESS, SCOTSDALE, PA 15683 AND WATERLOO, ONT. N2L 6H7 FROM *MORE-WITH-LESS COOKBOOK* BY DORIS JANZEN LONGACRE.

FACTS IN A FLASH

Where and When It Began: India; 3000 B.C.

Founder Figure: no one founder

Major Deities: Brahman is the one eternal being of Hinduism, the source of everything. However, there are thousands of gods, including the trimurti of Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer.

Places of Worship: shrines in homes or in temples

Sacred Places: numerous sites in India but especially the Ganges River

Holy Books: Hinduism recognizes six different sacred writings, among which the Upanishads contain the essential teachings about Brahman.

Major Festivals: Hinduism has numerous local festivals that vary from place to place; its main universal festivals are Holi, which celebrate the grain harvest, and Divali, a tribute to the Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and success.

Where Practiced: India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia. About 1.1 million Hindus live in North America.

Online: www.Hinduismtoday.com; www.beliefnet.com; www.about.com; www.adherents.com