

Ganga Flows West

The Essentials of Modern Hinduism

Shukavak N. Dasa

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The Origins

The Nature of Religion

Hinduism is perhaps the oldest living religion. In fact, the origins of Hinduism can be traced back to at least 2500 BCE and today there are close to a billion followers. It behooves us, therefore, to ask, “What is Hinduism”? and then to understand how this ancient tradition has managed to survive and even thrive in modern times. Before we do this, however, there is an even more basic question to ask, namely, what is the nature of religion itself? The most common answers go something like: Religion is the belief in God, the soul and an afterlife; religion is a set of rules to regulate how people should act in the world; religion is a series of rituals and symbols that address the psychology of human beings; or religion is a way of life. While all such answers are surely true, they unfortunately limit our ability to understand the true nature of religion and what it means to be religious. Ultimately, such views even impede spiritual growth. Let me explain.

Most people view religion as one thing: A set of beliefs, rituals and behaviors that form a world-view. But instead of viewing religion as one set of things, I prefer to break religion into two constituent parts, namely, faith and a cumulative religious tradition. The first arises from the perception that life is a wondrous mystery, and the second is what results from this perception.

From the earliest times up to the present, human beings from all cultures have looked out at the world and felt deep amazement, a kind of wonder. From the flash of lightning in the sky and the crash of thunder that follows, from the eclipses of the sun and the moon that have caused primitive peoples to run and flee, to the exquisite views of DNA strands that regulate biological life and the amazing images of distant galaxies seen through a space telescope, human beings have constantly been confronted with the wonder and mystery of the world around them. Moreover, this wonder and mystery also confronts us from the negative aspects of life. We call it horror. Death and destruction are a great source of horror. The devastation caused by a powerful earthquake is a great horror to see. Anyone who has ever witnessed death, with the gradual fading of consciousness and the profound silence and coldness that follows, also knows this horror. These horrors indeed have a great impact on human consciousness. Perhaps the most universal response of the human heart toward this wondrous mystery and even the horror of physical reality, has been, and continues to be, a questioning into the nature of reality. Who are we? What is this world? Why is there suffering, and so forth? Implicit within such questioning comes a faith that there can be answers to such questions. This faith takes many forms, one of which is religious faith. In other words, the origins of religious faith lay within the experience of life itself; and so long as there continues to be life, with all its beauty and mystery, and even horror, there will always be faith. Even modern science, which has solved the mystery of lightning, thunder and eclipses, has shown even greater beauties and mysteries that continue to inspire the heart of mankind.

Faith, translated into physical reality, results in an almost infinite variety of religious expressions: architecture, music, dance, dietary laws, dress codes and even belief systems. Religious architecture, for example—churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples—can be looked upon as the projection or translation of faith into physical form. Each of these buildings have their particular architectural styles and they all arise from the collective faith of their worshippers. Similarly, in the realm of religious art, there are unlimited religious expressions beginning from the ancient rock paintings of early man in the caves of France and Spain or the outstanding Islamic designs found in the mosques of Saudi Arabia, or the ancient Greek and Roman sculpture found in the ruins of Athens and Rome. Music and dance are also expressions of religious faith. The requiems of Bach and Mozart, or the Indian dance styles of Kathak and Bharata Natyam are examples of faith projected into the world of music and dance. Even dietary laws, codes of conduct, and forms of dress are projections of this faith. The Jewish and Islamic laws of kosher and halal, the Hindu restrictions against meat and alcohol, or even the use of psychogenic drugs found in many indigenous tribes of North America and Australia are examples of faith translated in terms of dietary laws.

Projections of religious faith similarly includes many intangible manifestations. In the intellectual realm, religious beliefs: God as Father, God as Mother, the belief in a soul, an afterlife or in reincarnation, are also manifestations of religious faith. In terms of social organization, the Indian caste system or the Christian or Buddhist's systems of monastic organization are examples of faith translated into the realm of social organization. Taken together, each of these categories of religious expression—architecture, music, dance, dress, dietary laws, belief and social systems—form the cumulative religious traditions of the world, which we commonly call Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and so forth. Consequently, we can speak of Christian faith, Hindu faith, Islamic faith, etc. I use the word “cumulative” because these expressions of religious faith build up or “accumulate” over time. The older a religious tradition, the deeper its layers of accumulated tradition. In common terms, I sometimes think of the cumulative religious traditions as the “stuff” of religion.

Not only does religious faith inspire the religious traditions of the world, faith is also nurtured by these same traditions. Anyone who has ever sat in a cathedral like Chartres or Notre Dame in France or the massive Balaji temple in south India knows the powerful effect of architecture on the human heart. If you have visited the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican and contemplated Michelangelo's hand of God reaching out to the hand of man on the ceiling that towers above, you may also know the powerful effect of religious art on human faith. Religious faith and religious traditions go hand and hand, and for this reason they seem inseparable, but at the same time, being able to distinguish between the “stuff” of religion and religious faith itself empowers a person and promotes spiritual growth. Failing to distinguish between the two, leads to the mistake of confusing the stuff of religion with the essence of religion. It leads to attachment to the externals of religion instead of to the inner mystical and mysterious origins of religion. Unfortunately, the world is always full of people who miss the essence of religion in the name of being religious and who fight and argue over all aspects of the cumulative religious traditions. Consequently, they impede their own spiritual growth and the growth of those around them. Therefore, as you read this small work that describes the cumulative religious tradition called Hinduism, be aware of the deep and mysterious yearning of religious faith that underlies this tradition and inspires it.

Hinduism and The Indus Valley Civilization

The dating of ancient Hinduism has always been, and will likely continue to be, a difficult issue. Prior to 1923 the only means of dating the origins of Hinduism was through textual evidence found in the [Shruti Vedas](#). The early Aryans left no cities or other major architectural remains, therefore, textual evidence alone could push early Hinduism back to only about 1500 BCE. In 1923 a great civilization along the banks of the Indus River was unearthed, and the possibility to push the origins of Hinduism back many millennia arose. Now a great controversy rages regarding the origins of this civilization and its relationship to Hinduism. There are indications that Indus Valley culture has roots far back into neolithic times (7000 BCE), but current evidence places the active phase of this culture between 3300–1700 BCE, with its high points between 2600–1900 BCE. If a link can be made between this culture and Hinduism it could push the date of Hinduism back many more millennia than current textual evidence allows.

The center of Indus Valley culture was along the Indus River basin and its tributaries, which places most of it in present day Pakistan, but ruins of this culture have also appeared as far west as northern Afghanistan along the Oxus river and east into present day Gujarat, and even into Haryana State in central India. This covers an area the size of Western Europe and so far over a thousand cities and settlements have been located! The Indus Valley people left behind an extensive set of cities and towns, the most notable of which are Harappa, Mohenjo Daro and Lothal, and through these sites it is clear that they were well organized with planned streets, elaborate bathes, covered sewage systems, water and drainage to individual homes, and even large port facilities. As in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, grain appears to be the basis of the economy. This is evidenced by the extensive storage structures found in most cities and towns and in particular at the port city of Lothal. In fact, the Indus Valley Civilization is the largest of the four ancient world civilizations that includes Egypt, Mesopotamia and China. Unfortunately, it is the least known because its script has yet to be deciphered. Indeed, there are over 400 distinct symbols found on thousands of pieces of pottery, seals, amulets and other artifacts, but no “Rosetta Stone,” or means of deciphering the script has yet been found, and without this it is likely that the origins of this civilization will remain obscure. This, of course, is the crux of the problem in trying to relate this civilization to ancient Hinduism.

At present there are three main theories to explain the origins of the Indus Valley Civilization and how it relates to Hinduism. The first is that it is an Aryan civilization and the script is an early form of Sanskrit. The second is that the culture is proto-Dravidian and therefore a part of the indigenous culture of the Indian sub-continent and, finally, that it has no relation to either Aryan or Dravidian culture and consequently no relationship to Hinduism. There are problems with all three of these hypothesizes.

Signs of ancient remains first appeared in the Indus Valley during the 1800s when Europeans began to move through the area in numbers. In fact, bricks from this ancient civilization were unknowingly used by the British when they built the first railroads in the 1860s, but it was not until the 1920s when John Marshall, director of the Archaeological Survey of India, started an excavation at Harappa that it became apparent just how ancient and extensive this lost civilization was. Along with finds from other archaeologists, who were excavating at Mohenjo Daro, Marshall believed that they had found evidence for a new civilization that was older than any they had known before. It was originally thought that the civilization was early Aryan and the script was a form of the Brahmi script and therefore proto-Sanskrit. The Aryan theory, however, soon became rejected because the Indus culture showed no signs of the chariot, the horse, iron, ritual fire use, or other hall marks of Aryan culture described in the Vedas. Consequently, speculations grew that the script was some form of Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, or even old Slavic. In recent years, with the desire to show that Aryan culture was indigenous to the Indian sub-continent and not the result of migration, the theory that the Indus Valley Civilization was Aryan has again been raised by different groups trying to establish this view.

The second theory, which is currently popular, is the proto-Dravidian theory that developed during the late 1960s and 1970s by Russian and Finnish teams of researchers. They tried to show that the symbols can be derived from the Dravidian language group. Generally this language group is found in south India, but there are pockets of it scattered throughout India, particularly in northern Pakistan, which gave credence to this theory. If, indeed, the Indus culture is Dravidian in some form, it pushes the dating for the Dravidian side of Hindu culture back considerably. However, major challenges have been presented against the script being Dravidian and therefore the proto-Dravidian theory is far from confirmed.

One of the strongest pieces of evidence that is used to show either an Aryan or Dravidian link to modern Hinduism are some of the images on the Indus seals. The image of the bull, the mother goddess image and the so called proto-shiva seal are all used as proof of a Hindu connection. Unfortunately, none of these images show conclusive proof of a Hindu connection. Both the symbols of the bull and the mother goddess are common throughout the ancient world. The so-called proto-shiva shows a cross legged person sitting amongst animals, but even this has been challenged. At the present time, this is still a hot area of discussion and no matter what the various groups try to show, without a clear deciphering of the Indus Valley script there is still not enough evidence to link the Indus Valley Civilization to Hinduism or even to conclusively show that it is not apart of ancient Hinduism.

The third theory, which has been brought forth in recent years by a team of American researchers, challenges both the Aryan and Dravidian origins of the Indus symbols, and argues that the symbols are not evidence of written language and therefore there is no justifiable connection to either Dravidian or Aryan cultures. They argue that the Indus Valley

Civilization was non literate and completely separate from both the Dravidian or Aryan worlds. All three theories, of course, have their proponents and opponents with interesting arguments, but the conclusion is unfortunately that we still do not know what the origins of the Indus Valley civilization were or what its connection to ancient Hinduism was.

Models of Religion

Imagine a great tree. There is a large root at the base and a huge trunk that rises up from this central root to spread out into a network of main branches and then into a mass of successively smaller branches. Every part of the tree grows out of this one central root. Now imagine a river. A river is formed when a series of rivulets converge to form streams that in turn converge to form increasingly larger streams that eventually join to form a main waterway.

Hinduism can be imagined to be a large river system. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and many other religions can be imaged to be great trees. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam rise up from a single source, a Buddha, a Christ, a Muhammad and then grow out from a few main branches that in turn spread out into many smaller branches. In Christianity there are three main branches that grow off the main trunk of Christ: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. Each of these main branches in turn split off into many smaller branches. In the case of Protestantism, there is the Lutheran branch, the Anglican branch, the Baptist branch, and so on. Similarly, for Buddhism there are the main branches of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. For Islam there are the Sunni and Shiia main branches of Islam. The tree model of religion is the way the majority of people think of religion.

Hinduism as a River

Hinduism, on the other hand, has no single source and does not, therefore, follow the tree model of religion. To think of Hinduism in the same way that one thinks of Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, is a mistake. Hinduism has no single Buddha-like, Christ-like or Muhamand-like founder, who forms the starting point or root. Instead, there are many streams, separate religious traditions, which combine to make a much larger multi-layered and complex conglomeration of traditions. In general there are four major streams that converge and flow together forming what today we call Hinduism: the Shaiva stream, the Shakta stream, the Vaishnava stream and a huge number of folk streams. We often hear that there are 3,333,000 Gods in Hinduism and to the Western mind this seems absurd. Spend just a few hours walking in the streets of any Indian city, town or village and one will meet a dizzying array of Gods and Goddess in street-side temples and shrines. Yet all of these divinities arise from one of these four basic streams. Most Westerners can hardly imagine the complexity of divine manifestations that appear in India. So one might ask how can such a complex mixture of traditions exist with so many Gods and Goddesses without a unifying root. The answer is simple: there is indeed a unifying root, but instead of it being an historical personality, a Buddha, a Christ or a Muhammad, it is a unifying idea. The oldest of

Hindu texts, the [Rig Veda](#), gives us the key to understanding the complexity of religious streams that comprise the river of Hinduism:

ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti (RV 1.164.46)

This short and simple verse is profound in its implications. In just five words the vast and seemingly complex world of Hinduism is described. *Ekam* means “one.” *Sat*, for lack of a better English word, is “[God](#).” *Viprah* means “the learned.” *Bahudha* means “many” and *vadanti* means “they say.” Thus, “The wise speak of God as One and Many.”

The Hindu Way of Seeing

The Hindu way of seeing reality simultaneously ranges from plurality to oneness, from polytheism to monotheism. When a Hindu enters a temple and sees a dozen different Deities that person sees both diversity and oneness. The plurality of divinities are simply different “faces” or manifestations of the One. Another word that is used in Sanskrit to describe this oneness is *purnam*, which means complete or full. Thus God by very definition is complete and full; God is all things. This is the oneness, and yet this oneness manifests in an unlimited number of “expressions,” “faces” or “personalities.” These are the Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism. The forms of Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva, Ganesha or of the Goddesses Lakshmi, Sarasvati and Durga are simply multiple faces of the One. This is how most Hindus see the world.

There is a wonderful dialogue in the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* that illustrates this point. There, a student asks a renowned teacher, how many Gods there are and the answer comes back, “My dear son, there are but 3,306 Gods.” At first the student is happy to hear this answer, but then he wonders why 3,306 and so he returns to his teacher and again asks, “How many Gods there are. This time he is told there are but three Gods! Being satisfied he goes away only to wonder why just three, so he returns and asks again, “How many Gods are there? This time he is told there are two Gods. Again he wonders, why just two Gods? This time he is told there are one and a half Gods! One and a half Gods, he questions? And so he finally asks and is told, “My dear son, there is but one God. Ask no more!” This sublime conversation illustrates the Hindu way of seeing the universe, simultaneous diversity and oneness.

Even when a Hindu enters a church, the form of Christ is simply another manifestation of the One. Similarly, in a synagogue or mosque a Hindu simply sees other manifestations of the One reflected through different cultural perspectives to form the many. Consequently, the almost unlimited religious streams making up Hinduism are unified under the simple idea: *ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*. The Vaishnava worship of Krishna, the Shaiva worship of Shiva and the Shakta worship of Durga are unified through the power of this simple verse.

The Origins of Hinduism

In terms of its religious development there are now two basic theories that attempt to explain how Hinduism first developed within India, and they both draw on the famous [*ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti verse*](#) for their effectiveness. One suggests that at some time towards the end of the [Indus Valley Civilization](#) (circa 1700 BCE) a group of nomadic people called the Aryans moved into northern India from the steppes of central Europe or even Asia Minor. This is called the “Indo-Aryan Migration Theory” and it was first posited after the relationship between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin was discovered along with other archeological evidence that emerged in the late 18th century. According to this view, these Aryans mixed with the indigenous Dravidian and other peoples of the Indian sub-continent, and in time the Aryan religious stream combined with the indigenous streams and became what today we call Hinduism. The other theory suggests that Hinduism emerged out of India itself. This is the “Out of India Theory” and it says that Aryan culture is a development from the Indus valley civilization and not one introduced by outside invaders or migrants. It says that the religious development of Hinduism has been wholly indigenous. It also suggests that the linguistic similarities between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin are the result of Aryan migrations in the opposite direction, out of India and into Europe. Aryan tribes from within India spread throughout Europe bringing their culture, language and religion. Passages from the *Mahabharata* and other Hindu texts are quoted in support of this theory. Whether the Aryans came from outside the subcontinent or whether Aryan culture developed within India, matters little for our purposes here. Hinduism should be regarded as a development of at least 3,000 years of Aryan culture working within the Indian subcontinent according to the rule of *ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*. The unifying force of this sublime verse is what has created the Hinduism of today. The Term Hinduism We have mentioned the [Indus Valley Civilization](#), which seems to have existed over a vast period of time between 7000 BCE and 1700 BCE, and although the debate still rages over the nature of this great culture, whether it was Dravidian, Aryan or other, the Indus River has had a great effect on defining modern Hinduism. The Sanskrit name for this river is “Sindhu” and with the coming of Arabic speakers to India around 1000 CE the term “hindu” first appeared. Arabic speakers pronounced “sindhu” as “hindu” and used the word to refer to those living on the other side of the Indus River. Consequently, the term was originally a geographical reference that included many peoples. As late as the 16th century the term even referred to Muslims living within India because they too lived beyond the Indus. By the end of the 18th century, however, the British were using the term to refer to the people of India who were not Christian, Muslim, Sikh or Jain. The “ism” was added early in the 19th century. Later the word was appropriated by “Hindus” themselves as part of their national and religious identity; and so today the term has evolved as the name for the religion of the Vedas. The more correct Sanskrit term for this religion is, *sanatana-dharma*, “the eternal way,” but since the term “hinduism” has emerged, we will use this word.

Who is a Hindu?

As we have noted, there is a problem in defining Hinduism in the same way that we do Christianity, Islam or Buddhism. In this sense it is hard to call Hinduism a religion at all. Hinduism has no founder or even a fixed belief system. Hinduism has no corporate hierarchy. There is no church or governing institution that says all Hindus believe this or that, or that all Hindus should act in a certain way. For this reason, Hinduism has tended to remain a religion of individual experience rather than institutional doctrine. It is true that most Hindus revere the Vedas, but not all do to the same extent. Many, perhaps most, consider the Vedas as divine revelation, but others consider the Vedas as mere human inspiration and yet such persons are still within the Hindu fold. Some Hindus are highly theistic, believing in a personal God, but others are not. It is true that most Hindus accept the ideas of reincarnation, karma and liberation, but so do Jains and Buddhists, therefore it is difficult to precisely define what Hinduism is. I have even seen Christian Brahmins in Kerala performing Jesus *puja*! They consider themselves Christian, but other Hindus considered them a separate sect of Hinduism. At a recent meeting, one educated Hindu gentlemen declared that Christians are even Hindus, only they just don't know it! We could say that Hinduism is an ethnic religion of the people of India, but the largest Hindu temple in the world, a Vishnu temple, is not even within India. It is in Cambodia! And here in the West it is common to see Westerners coming to Hindu temples for [*puja*](#). These Westerners generally consider themselves Hindu. In fact, there are many Western groups building major Hindu temples throughout the world. So even this attempt at a definition does not work. Perhaps the first prime minister of modern India, Jawaharlal Nehru, best captured the essence of the problem when he said that Hinduism is "all things to all men." Certainly I would not go this far in defining Hinduism, but the Prime Minister's comment does express the difficulty in defining this ancient tradition.

Regardless of how we define Hinduism, there is one glaring truth that is emerging. Hinduism is now expanding into the world to an extent that it has never done before, and in so doing, it is changing in fundamental ways. Our next section about religion and language will explain the root cause of these changes, but for now, not only is Hinduism under the pressure of modernity as all religions are, even more importantly, it is under pressure from the monotheisms of the world to conform to a more standard religious model—that religion is something you believe. Consequently, Hinduism is becoming a religion of belief, similar to Christianity. But Hinduism has never been a religion of belief. Hindus are under increasing pressure to have a common set of beliefs and practices: acceptance of the Vedas as divine revelation, acceptance of reincarnation, karma, and the divine nature of Krishna and Rama, and even to have standard prayers, songs and dietary practices. We now even see prominent Hindu groups publishing Hindu "catechisms" and other publications outlining what Hindus believe. And such books are well-received by Hindu parents who are struggling to teach their children the beliefs of Hinduism before they go off to college and are

confronted with aggressive Christian or even secular humanist's attempts at conversion. In spite of these recent developments, I am still hesitant to provide a definition of Hinduism, other than to say that it is simply a union of multi-religious streams. And so, if you think of yourself as a Hindu, and you can accept the idea behind the *Rig Veda* verse, "[Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti](#)," you are a Hindu.

The Importance of Sanskrit to Hinduism

Hinduism and Sanskrit are inseparably related. The roots of Hinduism can be traced to the dawn of Vedic civilization. From its inception, Vedic thought has been expressed through the medium of the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit, therefore, forms the basis for much of Hindu civilization.

As language changes, so religion changes. In the case of Hinduism, Sanskrit stood for millennia as the carrier of Vedic thought before its dominance gradually gave way to the vernacular languages that eventually became the modern day languages of India: Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Telugu, Kannada, and so on. Although the foundations of Hinduism are largely built on the vocabulary of Sanskrit, these modern languages are now the primary carriers of Hindu thought within India. While the shift from Sanskrit to these regional languages forced a change in the meaning of words, and therefore a change in how subsequent generations interpreted the religion, the shift was at least within the context of languages that were directly related to Sanskrit and within an intellectual and social context that was largely Hindu. In other words, the change was slow and organic.

In the last century a new phenomenon has been occurring. Hinduism has begun to emerge in the West, and as Hinduism expands into the West, the emerging forms of this ancient tradition are naturally being reflected through the medium of Western languages, the most prominent of which is English. But as we have pointed out, the meanings of words are not easily moved from one language to the next and the more distant two languages are separated by geography, latitude and climate, and so forth, the more the meanings of words shift and ultimately the more the world view shifts. While this is a natural thing, it does mean that the emerging Hindu religious culture in the West is changing radically from its Sanskritic and even vernacular language roots. The differences between the Indian regional languages and Sanskrit are minuscule when compared to the differences between a Western language such as English and Sanskrit.

The "Christianization" of Hinduism

With this problem in mind, the difficulty in bringing Hinduism to the West and having a language such as English serve as the prime carrier of the tradition, is that it becomes all too easy to import foreign concepts of religion into the tradition. Especially Christian and Jewish, and to a certain extent even Islamic, concepts are built into words like God, soul, heaven, hell and sin. So if one translates *brahman* as God, *atman* as soul, *papa* as sin, *dharma* as

religion, one imperceptibly changes Hinduism. This is because the Sanskrit word *brahman* is not the same as the English word, God, *atman* is not equivalent to soul, *papa* is not sin, and *dharma* is much more than religion. The only true way to understand these terms is through Sanskrit, which means reading and understanding the sacred texts of Hinduism in the original language, Sanskrit. But if no one is reading these texts and if no one is teaching what these terms actually mean, it becomes inevitable that the Hinduism developing in the West is going to be reflected through the lens of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, which ultimately means that the theological uniqueness of Hinduism is going to be changed or even lost. And few people will even know!

I do not suggest that this means the end of Hinduism. In fact, I see positive signs when Hindu youth come to temples for [darsana](#) and prayer and increasingly ask for Hindu weddings and other [pujas](#). But it does suggest that the new Hinduism that is developing in the West is evolving in a way that is divorced from not only its Sanskrit roots, but even from its vernacular roots, in the same way that Christianity in the West developed separate from its original language base.

It is therefore important that Hindu institutions in the West, such as temples, teach Sanskrit. Ideally Hindu youth should learn at least a little Sanskrit. This will connect the next generation to its foundations and give a basic understanding of the roots of Hindu culture. Centers of Sanskrit and Hindu scholarship should be established at major universities. Wealthy Hindu patrons should endow chairs of Hindu studies at established universities. Jewish and Christian communities have been doing this for generations. We do not expect the majority of Hindus to become Sanskrit scholars or anything near that, but at least the facility should be available to those who wish it. A culture of Sanskritic learning must be created.

In addition certain key words of Hindu theology should be identified and a glossary of Sanskrit religious words should be created. Words such as *brahman*, *dharma*, *papa*, and *atman* should remain un-translated and become part of the common spoken language when we speak of Hindu matters. In this way, at least an essential vocabulary that contains the subtleties of Hinduism can remain somewhat intact. I therefore include, as a part of this site, a glossary of Sanskrit religious words along with an explanation of their meanings that I suggest should be learned and remain un-translated by students of Hinduism. These are terms taken primarily from the *Bhagavad-gita* and the major *Upanishads* and they are used throughout this site. If measures such as these are undertaken then there can be a healthy growth of Hinduism in the West.

Vedas: the Sacred Writings of Hinduism

What are the sacred writings of Hinduism? This question begs a more basic question, namely, what are sacred writings? In other words, before we can discuss the sacred writings

of Hinduism, we should first come to an understanding of scripture. When we use the terms “sacred writings” or “scripture,” this implies written texts. As we have noted earlier, written texts are a part of a [cumulative religious tradition](#), the “stuff” of religion. In many cases, and particularly in the case of India, the original sacred texts were not texts at all; they were oral transmissions passed down from teacher to student through memorization. But even these transmissions are part of a cumulative religious tradition, and though it was considered profane to put these sacred dialogues into writing, today, virtually all sacred writings of all major religions are in the form of written documents, scripture. Given this fact, one could argue that what scripture actually is are voice sounds and words on paper, or more likely today, digital code and marks on a computer screen. In this sense, scripture is not different from any common dialogue or piece of writing. But we know there is a world of difference between scripture and a common newspaper or a novel. Scripture is sacred. Newspapers and common novels are secular. It is therefore, the quality of “sacredness” that creates the difference between scripture and an ordinary piece of writing.

What is the source of such sacredness? Is it something within the voice of the teacher or the text itself that creates sacredness? The answer to this question is the same as what lays at the heart of religion; namely, [faith](#). It is the faith of the reader that gives sacredness to the written text. A person reads a common newspaper with a certain mental state; he interacts with the newspaper in a certain way; the same reader, when he reads a religious text, also enters a certain mental state, but in this case he perceives the religious text as sacred. When reading the religious document his mental state is one of “scripturalizing.” Through his faith, he scripturalizes the religious document. Another reader, without the element of religious faith, reads the same religious document simply as a literary or an historical document and so may not perceive the scriptural aspect of the text. What is scripture, therefore, is determined by the mental state of the reader; and when enough readers agree that a certain document deserves the stature of sacredness, the document attains the collective status of “sacred writing,” scripture. This is how scripture is created. One may also argue that it is the word of God or even of saints that create sacredness, but we know that one person’s God may be another person’s demi-god or even a demon, and that one person’s saint can also be another person’s terrorist. It always comes down to individual and collective faith. All aspects of a cumulative religious tradition are predicated upon faith.

The Shruti Vedas

There is good evidence that the ancient Indian, Zoroastrian, Greek, Roman, and pre-Christian European religions all share a common Aryan heritage. They are of the same religious type, even though they have been processed differently. The great contribution of these Aryans in India was primarily their language, Sanskrit, and their sacred writings, the early Vedas. The word *veda* comes from the Sanskrit root *vid*, “to know.” So the Vedas are literally what was known by the ancient Aryans, in other words, their sacred knowledge. As we have noted, the reference to writings is not strictly correct because the early Aryan traditions in India were oral. The sacred traditions of early Hinduism inform us that their

seers, known as *risis*, “heard” the Vedas. By “heard” we mean that a kernel of these Vedas appeared in the hearts of these seers, who then elaborated upon this kernel to produce the oral tradition of the Vedas. The early Vedic tradition is consequently called *shruti*, “what is heard.” This *shruti* tradition was also known as an *apaurusheya* tradition. *Purusha* means man, *paurusheya* means composed by man and *apaurusheya* means not composed by man, i.e., made by God. Today, this *shruti* tradition appears as the four Vedas: *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*. These four Vedas comprise what is often called the Shruti Vedas. These four Vedas were then each divided into four divisions known as branches:

Samhitas,

Brahmanas,

Aranyakas and

Upanishads

The *Samhitas* are hymns praising various Vedic Deities. These Deities, for the most part, do not include the common Deities of modern Hinduism: Krishna, Rama, Shiva and Hanuman for example. Instead, the primary Deities of the Shruti Vedas are Agni, Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Soma, the Rudras, the Vasus, and a whole host of Deities that are barely known in modern Hinduism. The Deities of the Shruti Vedas are primarily “nature” Gods and these *Samhita* hymns were used to call upon these Deities for rain, food and other necessities of life. These hymns formed the substance of the rituals used to propitiate these Deities. The *Brahmanas* are works detailing these rituals. They may be compared to the Book of Leviticus in the Bible. They are technical books describing the details of the Agni Hotra or fire and other rituals. They elaborately describe the articles to be used in these ceremonies as well as the cosmic significance of these rituals to the universe.

The *Brahmanas* are the beginnings of Hindu theological reflections. The next branch of the Vedas are the *Aranyakas*. *Aranya* means forest and *aranya* means “in the forest.” These forest works continue the theological speculations of early Hinduism, but they go beyond the rituals and start to develop the theology of the early Aryans that eventually takes mature form in the *Upanishads* which, today, are the most well known part of the Shruti Vedas. The *Upanishads* are the premier theological discussions of early Hinduism and they appear mainly in the form of dialogues between students and teachers asking such question as, What is soul? What is God? What is the nature of reality? What is death? and so forth. The number of *Upanishads* varies with the highest number being over a hundred. Today, the most popular number of *Upanishads* are between 10 and 13. The famous teacher, Shankara commented on 10 *Upanishads*. Later Madhva and others followed his example. These works are well worth reading for they are some of the most profound theological discussions of humankind.

Interestingly, these four Shruti Vedas appear in a version of the Sanskrit language that is considerably different than the Sanskrit of modern Hinduism. This early Sanskrit is generally called Vedic Sanskrit as opposed to the more common classical Sanskrit of modern Hinduism. In addition to these four Vedas, there are a set of works collectively called the *Vedangas*, supplementary works. In order to read and perform the rituals of the Shruti Vedas, one needed a knowledge of grammar, meter, pronunciation, astronomy/astrology, and so forth. These are the *Vedangas*, which are traditionally six in number. For the most part these four Vedas, along with all their divisions and the *Vedangas*, comprise the Shruti Vedas.

The Smriti Vedas

Hinduism views time in great cyclic periods known as *yugas*. There are four such *yugas* and today we live in the time period known as Kali Yuga. This is the period of spiritual darkness, ignorance and destruction. At the beginning of this Kali Yuga, it is described how the great sage, Vyasa, looked into the future and saw mankind in a fallen condition with decreased mental abilities and a shortened life span; and so, to mitigate the suffering of mankind, he codified and put the Shruti Veda into writing. He also saw the need for a simplified form of the Shruti Vedas that could be understood by the fallen people of Kali Yuga, so he created what is sometimes called the “fifth Veda.” This fifth Veda is a catch-all term that refers to all subsequent developments after the four original Vedas. This new phase of the tradition is called the Smriti Vedas and it is described as a *paarusheya*, man-made tradition.

Literally, *smriti* means “remembered,” but a better way to think of this later Vedic tradition is in terms of what has been made by man and written down from the outset. Thus the Smriti Vedas are the Vedas for Kali Yuga and they include the two epics poems, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and the numerous *Puranas* that, all together, form the basis of modern Hinduism. The compiler of this fifth Veda is known to be Veda Vyasa, but the word *vyasa* simply means compiler and debate continues whether there is one Vyasa or many *vyasas*. Popular tradition informs us that there was only one Vyasa.

The *Mahabharata* is the history of ancient India from the beginning of Kali Yuga and the famous *Bhagavad Gita* (The Song of God) appears within this great epic. The other major epic of ancient India is the *Ramayana* composed by the sage Valmiki. The *Ramayana* is said to predate the *Mahabharata*, but it is also included within the compass of the Smriti Vedas. The *Ramayana* is the story of Rama and Hanuman, two of the most popular Divinities of modern Hinduism.

As far as the *Puranas* are concerned, they are collections of ancient stories. The word *purana* means old and so they are compilations of old stories about gods, sages, and kings, along with the genealogies of famous royal families. The *Puranas* include stories of creation, destruction, and stories taken from different *yugas* and even different parts of creation such as the various heavens and hells. Tradition mentions eighteen *Puranas*, the most common of which are: the *Bhagavata*, the *Vishnu*, the *Shiva*, the *Skanda* and the *Garuda Puranas*. There is even a set of smaller *Puranas* known as *upapuranas* that are

also eighteen in number. Most people, however, do not know all these works. In general, the two epics and the *Puranas* comprise the bulk of modern-day Hinduism. Of all these books, theologically the *Bhagavad Gita* is the most prominent book within the Smriti tradition. If the *Upanishads* are the most prominent works of the Shruti tradition, it is safe to say that modern Hinduism is mainly based on the works of the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Mahabharata* is well known, but it is so vast, over ten times the size of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined, and therefore so overwhelming, that it is almost unreadable. Many people are even afraid to keep a *Mahabharata* in their homes since it describes the story of a devastating war that almost ended humanity. People do not want war in their homes.

There are also many other works that are not written in Sanskrit, but which also play a major role in modern Hinduism. The most common of these works is the “Hindi *Ramayana*” known as the *Ramcharit Manas*, by Tulsī Das. It is a devotional reworking of the original Sanskrit *Ramayana* composed in Hindi about 500 years ago. The famous *Hanuman Chalisa*, forty verses in praise of Hanuman, is taken from this Hindi *Ramayana* and is still commonly recited today. Another set of books that are not in Sanskrit, but which also inspire the lives of millions of Hindus today in South India are the works of the twelve Alwars. This is the *Divya Prabhanda*, which is a collection of beautiful devotional and theological prayers written in Tamil. These are ancient works and they are also considered to be “Vedic.” In addition, there are many secular works also included within the general category of being Vedic. These are works on medicine, *Ayur Veda*; law, the *Dharma Shastra*; architecture, *Vastu Shastra*; political science, *Artha Shastra*; morality, *Niti Shastra*; and of course, love and pleasure, the *Kama Shastra*. So all of these, the Shruti and Smriti Vedas, comprise the *shastra* or sacred writings of Hinduism.

The Religious Order: Sampradaya

Hinduism, like most religions, has many religious groupings. The Sanskrit word for this is *sampradaya*, which comes from the verbal root “*da*” meaning to “give.”

A *sampradaya* therefore is something that is “given” or passed down from generation to generation. Hence, the idea of a religious tradition, a religious denomination or a religious sect. Each of these groupings fall within the idea of a *sampradaya*.

In general terms Hinduism breaks down into four broad groupings determined by which Deity is the major object of worship. There are Shaivas who focus on Shiva, Vaishnavas who revere Vishnu, Shaaktas who focus on a female form of Divinity, and many folk traditions. The expression “folk traditions” is a catchall phrase to mean the huge number of local traditions that pervade every part of Hinduism and which commonly intermix with the Shaiva, Vaishnava and Shaakta traditions. Each of these major groupings can be called a *sampradaya*, but even more so, within each of these major groupings there are many sub-groupings that can also be called *sampradayas*. Amongst the Shaivas, for example, there are

Kashmiri Shaivas and Siddhanta Shaivas. Amongst the Vaishnavas there are Shri Vaishnavas, Madhva Vaishnavas, and Gaudiya Vaishnava, and many others. In this way, we can speak of each major grouping as a *sampradaya* as well as each sub-grouping as a *sampradaya*. If we compared this to Christianity, it would be somewhat similar to saying, Christianity is divided into three major groupings, Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants and within each of these major groupings are many sub-groups. Amongst Protestants, for example, there are Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Quakers, and so on. All of these major groupings and sub-groupings are the “*sampradayas*” of Christianity.

The Hindu idea of *sampradaya* is the closest thing to the idea of a religion in the traditional sense. Elsewhere we spoke of different [models of religion](#), namely the tree and the river models. Hinduism we described as a river model and distinct from most other religions that follow a tree model of religion. The idea of the *sampradaya* is like a tree. Most of the *sampradayas* of Hinduism start from a source, a major philosopher or guru. [Ramanuja](#) is the founder of the Shri *sampradaya* of Vaishnavas, [Madhva](#) is the founder of Madhva Vaishnavas and so forth. Similarly [Shankara](#) is the founder of a major *sampradaya* of Hinduism called Advaita Vedanta. In this way Hinduism contains many religions within its scope.

Philosophy

Spiritual Qualification and Ownership: Adhikara

There is an important Sanskrit term that will help us better understand Hinduism, or any other religion. It is *adhikara*, which literally means “authority and ownership.” A person in an advanced chemistry class, for example, who has taken previous chemistry courses has the *adhikara* to be in the advanced class. That person is qualified to be in the advanced class. Someone who has not taken chemistry before has no *adhikara* to be in a graduate class. We could translate *adhikara* as “qualification,” which is implied, but more than qualification, the term suggests ownership. This means, in the case of chemistry for example, that the person at the advanced level has the right to interpret, apply and teach chemistry. He is an “owner” of that body of knowledge and consequently has a right to that knowledge. A person in an elementary class of chemistry has no *adhikara* for the body of advanced chemical knowledge. Such a person has no right to teach and apply the knowledge of chemistry. The kinds of information and experiments a beginner will receive will therefore be different from the activities of the advanced graduate. Their *adhikaras* are different and therefore their activities and rights are different. This is what is meant by the word *adhikara*.

From a Hindu perspective, life is a great evolution taking place over many lifetimes, even through many species of life! We can say the world is a school and each lifetime is a classroom. Some of us are in elementary grades, others are in middle grades, and some are in advanced grades. And like students of chemistry, every person has a particular *adhikara* over a certain level of spiritual development. Students in elementary grades see the world in a certain way and must be taught in a certain way. Students at an advanced level need to be approached in an appropriate way to suit their positions. The different *adhikaras* have different perceptions and spiritual rights. The idea of *adhikara* and spiritual evolution becomes a powerful tool in understanding spirituality, especially for religious teachers and priests. A temple priest in particular must deal with all varieties of *adhikara*, from the most advanced to the most elementary, and so having an understanding of *adhikara* will greatly help that priest minister to the needs of the congregation.

Here is a simple example. There is a common *puja* that temple priests perform called the [Satya Narayana Puja](#), which includes a story (*katha*) that is read after the completion of certain religious rituals. In essence the story teaches that if one is pious and religious he will be rewarded with material rewards in this life and then will achieve *moksha* at the end of life. And if one is not pious he will lose everything in this world and go to hell. I am simplifying things somewhat, but that is the gist of the story. I recently performed this *puja* and *katha* and afterwards was approached by a Western born Hindu girl of about

16 years of age. She was upset and confused why God would be so vindictive and cruel. To her the story seemed juvenile and God seemed out of character. To answer her concerns, I explained that all religions have stories that teach reward and punishment for pious or impious actions. I call this carrot and stick philosophy and I explained how a parent might promise a reward for good grades at school or threaten punishment for poor grades. "But this is how parents may treat a 6 or 7 year old child!" she replied. "Yes, exactly," I stated. "So the story of Satya Narayana is for children?" I would not say children, but for people of a certain stage of spiritual advancement. I explained the concept of *adhikara* and how there are different stories and religious approaches for the various levels of religious *adhikaras*. Perhaps this young girl was not the intended audience for the Satya Narayana Katha and therefore she was reacting to the story from a different level of *adhikara*.

What is Dharma?

Dharma is one of the most important themes within Hinduism. One often sees dharma translated as religion, duty, or even righteousness, but in fact, there is no single direct translation for dharma. Religion, duty and righteousness are not wrong; they are simply included within the idea of dharma. The word "*dharma*" comes from the Sanskrit root *dhri*, meaning to "uphold" or to "sustain." From this perspective, the best way to think of dharma is to say, "that which upholds or sustains the positive order of things: the nation, the community, the family and ultimately even the universe." At a social level, every individual has a particular dharma according to their place in life. Children have a dharma, parents have a dharma, teachers have a dharma, the police have a dharma and even the head of a nation has a dharma. One of the dharmas of a child, for example, is to obey parents and to study. Parents have a dharma to protect and look after children: to make sure they are educated, fed, housed and trained. It is sometimes written on the sides of police cars: To Serve and to Protect. This is a statement of dharma for police. A head of state has a dharma to protect the country and to provide a secure environment for its citizens. If everyone performs their dharma: children obey parents, parents look after children, citizens uphold the laws of the land, the police enforce the law, a head of state protects the nation, then the family, the community and the nation are "upheld" and there can be prosperity. This is dharma, and it all follows from the idea of *dhri*, to uphold.

The opposite of dharma is "*a-dharma*." What this means is obvious. If children fail to obey parents, if parents do not train and discipline children, if the police misuse their power and fail to protect, if the head of state fails to act in the interest of the nation, then *adharma* exists, and when there is too much *adharma*, there will be a break down of the family, society or the nation. The nation, the community, the family and even individuals cannot prosper when too much *adharma* reigns. There is a saying, "Protect dharma and dharma will protect you."

Individuals have different dharmas at different times in their lives. A child has a certain dharma that we mentioned above, but the same person as an adult has different dharmas to focus upon. And still later in life, there are other dharmas that need to be stressed. When one is married, one should not live according to the dharma of a child. If an adult adopts the dharma of a child this is *adharmas*. A child cannot follow the dharma of the police. If an ordinary citizen tries to follow the dharma of the a head of state it results in *adharmas*.

The ancient Hindu social system was called [Varnashrama Dharma](#) and the [great epics of India](#), the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are built on this system of dharma. In the *Ramayana*, the hero Rama exhibits the ideal execution of the dharma as a son and king. Sita, his wife, illustrates the dharma of the ideal woman and wife. Hanuman, the divine monkey, exhibits the dharma of a devoted servant in the way he serves Rama. The evil Ravana, the villain, is the very personification of *adharmas* as he kidnaps Sita and tries to usurp Rama's kingdom. In the end *adharmas* destroys Ravana. In the *Mahabharata*, a great war takes place as dharma and *adharmas* collide in a cosmic struggle over good and evil. In the end, good triumphs over evil. Dharma always rules over *adharmas*. This is the way of the universe.

The word dharma is also used in a different way within Hindu philosophy that can also be understood from the root *dhri*. Every constituent of matter: liquids, metals, gases, fire, and so on have different dharmas. For example, the dharma of water is liquidity and wetness. The dharma of ice is solidity and coldness. The dharma of fire is heat and light. In other words, whatever it is that makes water, water or ice, ice, or fire, fire; what "upholds" the state of being water-ness, ice-ness, or fire-ness, etc., is dharma. These ideas occupies an important part of Hindu philosophy and even though they are subtle, I think the reader can see how even this use of dharma comes from the root *dhri* Indeed, the idea of dharma is paramount within both Hindu religion and philosoph

Yoga and the Yogi

Today one hears of yoga everywhere. People go to yoga classes for exercise and weight reduction; people do yoga meditation to reduce stress and to help sleep at night; one even hears of a yoga diet. In his classical treatise on yoga, Patanjali, an ancient yoga master, defines yoga as, "stilling the movements of the mind" (*citta-vritti-nirodha*). So what does exercise, weight loss, diet, relaxation and improved sleep have to do with "stilling the movements the mind"? Indeed, there is a lot of confusion regarding what is actually meant by yoga.

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning "to join." The English word "yoke," as in, "to yoke a team of bulls," is also derived from this same Sanskrit root. The word yoga is used throughout the [Bhagavad Gita](#) in the sense of "joining," or integrating oneself with ultimate reality, call this "joining the soul with God" if you wish. So the

question arises, what are the means of joining? These “means” are the different paths or forms of yoga. Throughout Hindu literature there are dozens of different forms of yoga often described as *raja yoga*, *hatha yoga*, *ashtanga yoga*, *sankhya yoga*, *pranayama yoga* and even *japa yoga*, but reduce it all down, and there are four basic forms of yoga that become the building blocks for all these other forms of yoga. These four basic forms of yoga are *karma*, *bhakti*, *jnana* and *dhyana* yogas. A person who practices one or any combination of these yogas is a *yogi*. Let us explain each of these four basic yogas.

Karma Yoga

In Sanskrit the word [karma](#) simply means action. What a person does, both involuntarily and voluntarily, is karma: breathing is karma, the heart beating is karma, eating is karma, working is karma, and so on. In other words, ordinary action is karma. Karma yoga, however, is a different kind of action. It is action that brings one closer to a spiritual reality. It is spiritual action. If you recall the meaning “joining” for yoga, then literally any action that joins one to a spiritual purpose is karma yoga. In practice, however, karma yoga usually refers to working with a spiritual purpose. It is not necessarily a different kind of action, but an action performed with a different kind of attitude: seeing one’s self connected to a higher, or spiritual, purpose is karma yoga. For example, one may act as a policeman, upholding the laws of the state. This is ordinary karma, but if one adds a spiritual dimension, viewing oneself as working for God, for example, or perhaps donating a percentage of one’s wages to a spiritual purpose, such action ceases to be ordinary karma and becomes karma yoga, and a person who acts in this way is a Karma Yogi. As far as most people are concerned, the vast majority of us live as working members of society, and so the most common form of yoga is karma yoga, ordinary people performing so called ordinary works, but with a spiritual vision. There are a lot of striving karma yogis in this world and they get little recognition. Yet a *yogi*, including a *karma yogi*, in the estimation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, is a most exalted person.

Bhakti Yoga

The word “*bhakti*” means love and devotion. *Bhakti yoga* is the cultivation of love and devotion. A devotee who brings fruits and flowers, and who bows and prays before a sacred image of Krishna, for example, is practicing *bhakti yoga*. A Christian who dedicates one’s self to Christ and tries to cultivate love towards Jesus is also performing *bhakti yoga*, devotional joining. In fact, most of the devotional actions performed in temples, churches, synagogues and mosques fall under the category of *bhakti yoga*. Most what one usually thinks of as being religious falls under the purview of *bhakti yoga*. A pious Hindu, Christian, or Muslim is a *bhakti yogi*.

Jnana Yoga

In Sanskrit the word “*jnana*,” written and pronounced as *gnan* in most north Indian languages, means knowledge. Ordinary, so called secular knowledge, is *jnana*, but *jnana yoga* is the cultivation of knowledge with a spiritual purpose. This is generally thought to be scriptural knowledge. For example, learning Sanskrit and studying the [Upanishads](#) and other

Vedic literatures would be *jnana yoga*. Applied to the Jewish tradition, to give some breath to the idea, the study of the Torah or Mishnah would also be *jnana yoga*. But *jnana yoga* can also include more than just scriptural knowledge. The study of the cosmos, mankind's attempt to reach into outer space with space telescopes or robotic satellites, if done with a spiritual perspective, could also be an act of *jnana yoga*. A scientist, who studies the computer screen of an electron microscope and peers down into the detailed complexity of life and who feels a sense of awe and reverence for the miracle of life and the details of physical reality, and who can sense a spiritual foundation laying behind the mystery of life, is similarly practicing *jnana yoga*. It all depends on attitude. Such persons are *jnana yogis*.

Dhyana Yoga

The word *dhyana* means meditation; it is derived from the Sanskrit root *dhyai*, "to think of." *Dhyana yoga* is the meditation and contemplation of things spiritual. This, of course, is typified by the classical image of the meditating *yogi*, and in many ways, this is how most people think of yoga in general. A *yogi* with a large beard completes such the image! There is a popular form of *dhyana yoga* called *kundalini yoga* that many people in the West know as yoga. In fact Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, wherein he defines yoga as, "the stilling of the movements of the mind," falls under the category of *dhyana yoga*. Stopping the movements of the mind is the key to meditation. The yoga exercise classes that people attend in the modern world for weight control or stress reduction are also a part of the *dhyana yoga* process and it is called *hatha yoga*. In order to achieve the meditative state, the body and mind need to be strong, healthy and controllable. The means to achieve this end is *ishatha yoga*. Breath control is also conducive to mental control and meditation, and is similarly part of *dhyana yoga*. Breath control is often called *pranayama yoga*. The so called *raja yoga*, the royal yoga, is just a particular combination or packaging of *hatha yoga*, *pranayama yoga*, *kundalini yoga*, *jnana yoga* and *dhyana yoga*. Even the *ashtanga yoga* that I mentioned earlier is just another form of yoga packaging. *Ashta* means eight and *anga* means parts, so *ashtanga yoga* is an eight step process of yoga that is grounded in *dhyana yoga*. I even saw an advertisement for *Vikrama Yoga* recently. *Vikrama* means strength and courage. I let the reader consider what kind of yoga mix this might be. I have no idea, but you can be certain that it is just a modern packaging of yoga.

Fasting: Upavasana

Think of fasting as a "holiday" for the senses, a chance for the body to cool down from the constant bombardment of sensual simulation and a chance for it to slow down and catch its breath. Fasting is a kind of austerity (*tapas*), and like all austerities involves the voluntary stopping of contact between the senses and their sense objects. This may seem like an unusual way to think of fasting, but the fact is our body is composed of many sense organs (more than just five according to Hinduism) that each has a corresponding sense object. The

ear, for example, interacts with sound, the eye with light, the tongue with taste, and even the stomach, which is considered a sense organ, with food, and so on. When contact between the sense organs and their objects occurs there is sensual stimulation which then sends an impulse to the brain which interprets the impulse as pleasure or pain, hot or cold, hard or soft, etc. In this way, our senses are sending a steady stream of sensual data to our brains. By voluntarily avoiding contact between the senses and their sense objects we are stopping, or at least decreasing, the amount of input to our brains. *Tapas* is the process of limiting sensual stimulation to our brains and giving our brains a period of rest. This is why fasting is a kind of holiday for, not just the senses, the whole digestive system and the total body. In the modern world we are confronted with an unending stream of sensual stimulation coming from all sources and so a certain amount of austerity is a good thing because it allows our over-heated systems to “cool down” and rest. It recommend that when one fasts one should take a real holiday away from the world and not try to go on with life as usual. Take the day off and rest if you are going to fast. Try not speaking for the day as well. The effects of not speaking will really astound you!

There are all varieties of fasting. Some fasting avoids all foods and even water. Then there is water only fasting or juice only fasting. Some fasting is partial, which could mean no heavy foods like meat, beans or grains. Then there are half day fasts or fasting that just avoids salt. If you understand the concept of fasting as described above you can decide what degree of fasting suits your situation. Hindu scripture suggest certain days of the week, month or even year for fasting. In particular many Hindus fast twice a month on the [ekadashi](#), the 11th day of the waning and waxing moon. The [Nava Ratri](#)s are also a good time for fasting. Some people fast every Monday. There is no end to the variation, but in general it is good to take a holiday every once in a while.

Voluntary Service: Seva

The word *seva* comes from the Sanskrit root, *sev*, meaning to “attend” or “to go towards.” *Seva* is generally understood to be “service” and mostly is used in the context of religious service as in the case of a person doing Deity *seva* by bringing fruits and flower and bowing down before a form of God in a temple. This is actually a form of [bhakti-yoga](#). Another way to look at *seva* is simply as volunteer service, and in the case of a temple, for example, this could mean polishing copper or silverware, cleaning, or the offering of professional services such as bookkeeping or architectural skills. *Seva* can also be used in reference to philanthropic work such as volunteering to work for civic organizations or hospitals, and so on. Another form of *seva* is [guru](#) *seva* or service to one’s teacher.

Hindu Caste: Varnashrama Dharma

The Cosmic Body and the System of Varnas

There is a famous verse from the [Rig Veda](#) entitled Purusha Sukta, which describes how this physical world emanates from the cosmic body of God, or according to another interpretation, how the physical world *is* the body of God. This hymn describes, for example, how the moon arises from the mind of God, how the sun becomes the eye of God, how the mountains are His bones, and the trees and grasses are His hair, and so on. It also describes the human social body as an emanation from this same cosmic body. According to this hymn human society is divided into four social grouping called *varnas*. The word “*varna*” literally means “color” or “hue.” These four “colors” of men, therefore, represent universal psychological types of mankind. The divine head of this cosmic body becomes the priestly (*brahmana*) class, the arms of this body become the warrior (*kshatriya*) class, the stomach, or sometimes the thighs, become the agricultural or merchant (*vaishya*) segments of society, and finally, the feet of this cosmic form become the worker (*shudra*) segments of society. In this way, human society is directly related to the cosmic body of the universe. Maintaining the social order is maintaining the cosmic order. This is an act of [dharma](#).

Ashramas

In addition, to these four *varnas*, the later [Smriti Vedas](#) add yet another layer to this system, namely four stages of life called *ashramas*. As the *varnas* divide the social body, the *ashramas* divide the life of an individual. Assuming the life of a human being is 100 years, each stage is afforded 25 years. The first quarter is called the student phase (*brahmacharya*). During this time of life the individual goes to the home of the guru ([guru-kula](#), the ancient Sanskrit word for school) and lives a life of celibacy serving the teacher and learning what needs to be learned for later years. After graduation the student adopts the next stage of life, the householder (*grihastha*) stage and takes on worldly responsibilities, which include wife, family and career. By age fifty it is recommended that the householder turn his mind back to the ways of spiritual life as in younger days and so moves into the retirement (*vanaprastha*) stage of life. In this stage he passes household responsibilities over to his children, leaves home and enters the forest (*vana*) to be away from the world. Husband and wife perhaps travel on pilgrimages. The *vanaprastha* stage is the gradual winding down of material affairs in preparation for the final stage, complete renunciation or *sannyasa*. In this final stage of *sannyasa* a man will send his wife back to his family, symbolically perform his own funeral rites and spends his remaining days as a monk seeking final release (*moksha*) from the world. This is the ideal.

Together these two systems of *varnas* and *ashramas* are known as *Varnashrama Dharma*, the ancient social system that was meant to assure spiritual and material prosperity for both society and the individual. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which is part of the later Smriti Veda, speaks of the *varnas* as being created by God according to an individual’s qualities and actions and not according to birth. There are many verses that describe qualities and responsibility of each *varna*. In other words, an individual’s *varna* was to be determined by his psychological disposition and his activities in life. For example, an individual who was naturally peaceful,

gentle, studious, clean and non-violent had the potential to become a member of the *brahmana* class. Someone with the qualities of bravery, resourcefulness and leadership had the potential to be a warrior or *kshatriya*. A person with a natural inclination to do business would be considered a member of the *vaishya* community, and finally a person without qualities of these three “higher” *varnas* would be placed as a member of the laboring class and could work for the three higher *varnas*. In this way, the system of *varnas* placed individuals in positions that best suited their psychological makeup, and the system of *ashramas* maintained the spiritual focus of society. This at least was the theory. Reality, however, was quite different.

The Caste System

The traditional Hindu caste system, although taking its inspiration from the system of *Varnashrama Dharma*, is based solely on birth and not qualities or action as mention in the *Gita*. The son of a priest became a priest regardless of his qualities or activities; the son of a warrior became a warrior regardless of his bravery or leadership qualities. The son of a merchant became a merchant regardless of his business abilities. In fact, temple priests of a certain sect formed their own subdivision within this system; priests who did funerals formed another subdivision. There were even *brahmanas* who were cooks and caterers who formed their own subgroup. Similarly, *kshatriyas* of different grades distinguished themselves from other *kshatriyas*; within the business community gold merchants, for example, distinguished themselves from grain sellers, land owners distinguished themselves from other members of the *vaishya* community, and in this way, the Hindu caste system divided society into a complex array of subgroups (*samajas* and *jats*) according to job divisions and birth rights. This was analogous to guilds of ancient Europe.

It is beyond the scope of this primer to examine the Hindu caste system in more detail other than to ask: How is modern Hinduism in the West related to this ancient system of castes or even *varnas* and *ashramas*. The answer is simple: modern Hinduism is not dependent on either of these ancient systems. There is no theological or philosophical imperative that demands that modern hinduism conform to these ancient systems. In fact, much of what naturally results from these hierarchical systems would be illegal in a modern democracy. There are special rights and privileges that are awarded to the different *varnas* that could not be permitted in a modern democracy. I do, however, see how a general understanding of the system of *varnas* and *ashramas* can serve as a guide for child development and personal spiritual growth. Understanding the psychology of a child, for example, can help guide a child into an occupation that suits his or her personal psychology. In other words, the *varna* model applied to child psychological development can be beneficial. Forcing the son of a doctor to become a doctor when the child may be better suited to perform another occupation, just for the sake of money or family status, has been a prescription for rebellion and unhappiness. We see this often within our Hindu communities. Similarly, applying aspects of the *ashrama* system with its emphasis on spiritual growth can also have its beneficial results.

There are, however, some areas where the ancient caste system still operates within modern Hinduism. One is in the area of marriage, another is in the area of work, and the other is in the area of temple priests. Hindu parents who are traditionally *brahmanas*, for example, prefer to see their children marry other *brahmanas*. There are even *brahamana* social groups (*samajas*), that is to say organization of traditional *brahamanas* in the west that seek to promote and maintain *brahamana* values and maintain data bases of prospective marriage partners. In a similar manner, there are merchant groups amongst traditional *vaishya* families that seek to promote marriage and business relations within the same traditional castes. Particularly within the Indian business community, they will also share business opportunities and employment within their own group to the exclusion of outsiders, including Hindus from other parts of India. And finally, a Hindu temple will generally only hire a traditional caste priest to serve as a temple priest. Hindu congregations generally will only accept a traditional caste priest. They will not accept even one of their own members, who may be extremely devoted, to serve even as an assistant on the altars if they are not from traditional caste *brahamana* families.

Action: Karma, Punya and Papa

Karma is a frequently heard word that has entered many Western languages including English. The word karma comes from the Sanskrit root *kri* meaning “to do.” Karma is action, plain and simple, whether involuntary or voluntary. The beating of the heart, the breathing of the lungs, eating, walking, working, playing; all of these actions are karma. One also hears of good karma and bad karma, which simply refers to actions that lead to positive results or negative results. In Sanskrit, the word for result is “*phala*,” which means “fruit.” So the fruit of an action can be positive, negative or mixed. Perform the action of robbing a bank and the fruit may be jail. Perform the action of opening a school and the result will be education. Where Hinduism adds an extra dimension to this understanding of karma is that the results of any given karma may not only bear “fruit” in this life, but may also bear fruit in a future lifetime. Similarly, actions performed in a former lifetime may be bearing results in this lifetime. Rob a bank in this lifetime, and you may not get caught and punished in this lifetime, but in some future lifetime you will pay for the crime in some fashion. You may appear to be an innocent person put into jail in the present lifetime, but in fact you are simply paying for a crime committed in a previous lifetime. If a person has an unexpected win-fall of good fortune in this lifetime it could be the result of some good karma having been performed in a past lifetime.

Punya and Papa

Actions that bear positive results and elevate a person are called *punya*. Actions that lead to a negative fruit and degrade a person are called *papa*. Imagine that every person has a spiritual “ledger” showing accrued *punya* credits and *papa* liabilities. A person who wins a lottery must have had a lot of *punya* accumulated due to many past positive actions. A

person murdered must be experiencing the accumulated effects of past *papa*. In Hinduism people will often consciously attempt to buildup their *punya* assets and decrease their *papa* load by performing good actions, avoiding negative actions and even by performing atoning actions to wipe out negative *papas*. Scripture tells how fasting or giving charity on special days are particularly good for raising *punya* levels. Attending temple and receiving [prasada](#) or performing certain [yaqnas](#) and other rituals are said to even erase the effects of negative actions, *papas*. One's position in life, the family one is born into, one's economic position, one's health and strength, and even what country one is born into and who one marries are considered to be the result of *punya* and *papa*. A person is born into a family of privilege and class as a result of great *punya*. A person is born into a hellish condition of war and disease as a result of *papa*. There are said to be heavenly and hellish realms "above and below" this earth that beings are born into as a result of high and low levels of *punya* and *papa*. The expression "seventh heaven," for example, comes from a Hindu idea of heaven. Above this earth there are many levels of heaven and similarly, below this earth there are many levels of hell. The "seventh heaven" is the highest realm, but a heaven and a hell are never permanent. One may go to a heaven as a result of great *punya*, but once that *punya* is exhausted through enjoyment, one will move to lower levels of existence. Similarly, one may fall to a hell as a result of great *papa*, but once that *papa* is "burned off" through suffering one will begin to raise again to higher levels of existence. Earthly regions are considered middle ground where there is both happiness and suffering and because most actions are neither all good or all bad, the results are mixed. Therefore, our lives are mixed in terms of happiness and suffering.

Liberation: Moksha/Nirvana

In Hinduism the present life is considered to be the result of many lifetimes of past desires, actions and the results of those actions. The results of these previous actions are unfolding at every moment. Some actions are mature and bearing fruit at the present moment, other actions are laying as "seed" waiting to mature at a future time. All that we have done in the past creates who we are in the present and all that we do in the present is creating who we will be in the future. In this way, there is great cycle of desire, action and reaction that drives the wheel of life, and as a result, all beings are forced to remain within this world in order to experience the fruit of their desires and actions. Desire and action are said to be the source of reincarnation. Beings continue to "rotate" through endless lifetimes in this physical world. Sometimes in heaven (nice places), sometimes in the middle regions (medium places) and sometimes in hellish realms. This rotation through endless lifetimes is the process of reincarnation called *samsara* in Sanskrit. The ultimate goal of life in Hinduism is to break this cycle of reincarnation, to escape *samsara*. Breaking this cycle is done through the process of [yoga](#), and freedom or liberation from the cycle of rebirth is called *moksha*.

A slightly different version of *moksha* is *nirvana*. Literally the word *nirvana* means “extinguishing” and in this case it means extinguishing one’s material existence. Sometimes one’s desire which leads to action and reaction is compared to a flame. “The blazing fire of material life,” is an expression often heard. Extinguish or “put out” one’s material existence and one has achieved liberation. This is *nirvana*. The word *nirvana* is more used in Buddhism than it is in Hinduism.

Hindu Astrology

One of the unique characteristics of Hinduism is that it never throws anything away. There is simply no one to do it! Hinduism has no central authority and so there is no one body that “edits” the tradition. Consequently, astrology is still a vibrant part of the tradition. In the West, with the onset of modern science, astrology became separated from both the mainstream sciences (astronomy) and the religious tradition. Descartes was an astrologer and so were Copernicus and Galileo. Today you can not find a department of Astrology in any university in the West. This has tended to be the case in other religions as well, but not so in Hinduism. In fact, I have met many Western educated and highly placed Hindus who still hold a deep faith in astrology and regularly visit astrologers for advice on important issues. Astrology is still an important requirement for a Hindu priest. Not a day goes by without members coming to a priest for information on [muhurta](#), birth names, and other kinds of astrological advice. [Nava Graha puja](#) is one of the most popular [pujas](#) performed by a Hindu priest. Therefore, it is worth while to have a general understanding of Hindu astrology.

Western and Hindu Astrology

Hindu astrology, also called Vedic astrology, is not the same as Western astrology. In the West most people know their astrological sign and they may even check their horoscope in the newspapers, if only for “entertainment purposes.” But if you think you are an Aries, a Taurus or a Gemini in Western astrology, this is not the case with Hindu astrology. Western astrology is tropical and Hindu astrology is sidereal. Western astrology is based on the orientation of the Earth to the sun, whereas Hindu astrology is based on the actual position of the stars relative to the earth. Understanding this difference is technical and not a matter that needs to be explained here, suffice to say, that the starting point of Western astrology is not the same as the starting point of Hindu astrology. This does not mean that one form is better than the other, it just means they are different and so you cannot compare one with the other. If you are an Aries in Western astrology, in Hindu astrology you may not be the same.

The Workings of Astrology

Astrology works at two levels, one practical and the other symbolic. We already see how various celestial bodies exert unseen forces on terrestrial life and thereby influence the way we act. The best and most obvious example is the influence of the sun and moon on the

tides. This is the effect of gravity. Science also shows that a planet, even as far a way as Jupiter, has a considerable gravitational influence, not only on the earth, but throughout the whole solar system. We can also see how the solar wind and storms affect the weather, satellite communications and electrical power grids on earth. Similarly, science shows the existence of unseen cosmic rays and minute particles that constantly bombard the earth from great distances, which even have an effect on genetic mutation. The effect of gravity, solar winds and storms, and particle bombardment indeed determines the way we act on our planet, so if these forces can affect terrestrial life, why not the other planets? Just because Western science has not measured the influence of Mars and Venus and Saturn on the lives of human beings does not mean that such influences are not there. Cosmic particle bombardment was only recently measured, and had someone suggested such bombardments 50 years ago it would have been dismissed as foolish by the same science that now informs us about it. Yet virtually all ancient cultures have noted the influence of the sun and the moon and the planets on the affairs of terrestrial life. They tell us that these bodies exert subtle influences on life that in turn affects the way we think and act. Modern science has just not understood and measured these influences yet. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to accept the working of astrology. This is a practical way to understand how astrology works.

Hinduism, however, speaks of the workings of astrology in an even more subtle way, through the power of symbols. There is a famous hymn from the [Rig Veda](#) called the *Purusha Sukta*, (RV 10.90) which describes the relationship between this universe and God. The sun corresponds to the eye of God, the moon to His mind, space to His navel, the wind to His breathing, the mountains to His bones, and so forth. In fact this universe is the living body of God and all beings are existing within this universal body. Even ourselves, the living beings, are emanations from this God, and along with this physical universe we are parts who have emanated from the whole. This idea of the parts and the whole is especially mentioned in the [Upanishads](#) as a deeply mystical relationship. The *Ishopanishad* refers to this relationship when it describes the Whole as complete (*purnam*) and from this Whole so many other whole units emanate and yet the Whole remains complete. This is something like if you have a pie and you take a slice away from the whole, the pie does not get smaller. It remains the same, and even though we may take many slices away, the whole pie still remains. But the matter is even more paradoxical, contained within the individual pie slices is the whole pie. The parts contain the whole! A way to think of how this is possible is through an understanding of DNA. Within in a single hair strand, a tiny part of the whole, can be found all the information to make the whole person. The part contains the whole. Another example is a holographic projection. Each photon of light, which is just a part of the whole projection, contains within itself an image of the original whole projection. This relationship between the whole and its parts is viewed as a deep and mysterious relationship, and one that has had profound effects on Hindu culture, not only

philosophically and theologically, but also practically in terms of astrology and even [Hindu architecture](#).

Once you start thinking that the whole is embedded within every part of this creation you can start seeing a relationship between the outer world and the inner world, between the microcosm and the macrocosm. This means that by measuring the outer world, one can grasp an understanding of the inner world. But even more importantly, by influencing the outer world one can influence the inner world. Thus we have the foundations of Hindu astrology. Astrology is a measurement of the outer world that allows an understanding of the inner world. The astrological chart is a snapshot, not only of the universe at a certain time and place, but also a snapshot of the inner life of an individual at a certain time and place. In other words, the planets we see in the heavens above have a corresponding set of “planets” within. There is a Mars above us and a Mars within us. Read the meaning of the Mars on the outside and you get an understanding of the Mars within. Align yourself to the Jupiter without and you align yourself to the Jupiter within.

Later Vedic works like the [Puranas](#) expand on these ideas to describe how this gross physical world is an expansion from subtle energy. From our thoughts and desires, manifests our physical existence and from our physical actions our future thoughts and desires are derived. This is, of course, is the idea of karma and how our destiny is shaped by past and future actions. Thus our desires and actions become tied to both universes, the one on the outside and the one on the inside.

The Horoscope

The word “horoscope” actually has a Sanskrit basis. “*Hora*” is a “moment of time” similar to [muhurtha](#), and “scope” comes from the Greek “*skopos*” meaning to target, and so a horoscope is literally a targeted moment of time. This is what I call a snapshot of time. By focusing on a particular moment in time through the “coordinates” of birth time, birth date and birth place, the horoscope isolates a particular part of the whole that corresponds to a particular individual, and by reading that moment in time, one is able to “read” the individual. This is the basis of astrology. There are two other commonly heard words used by Hindi speakers to refer to the horoscope. They are *kundali* and *janma patri*. A *kundali* is a circle and *janma patri* is the “birth page.” The horoscope is a circular diagram and so the word *kundali* is used. It is common to have a person’s horoscope prepared immediately upon birth, hence the birth page. As we noted a horoscope is nothing more than a snapshot of time, which also means that it is a snapshot of the sky. More specifically, it is a symbolic representation of the sky at a particular moment in time. Usually this is the time of one’s birth, but not necessarily so. A horoscope can be prepared for any occasion, the construction of a building, the time of a marriage, the signing of a contract, and so on.

The Zodiac

Under the section, The Making of the Hindu Calendar, we mentioned the [solar ecliptic](#). The sun’s path across the sky from east to west and extending about 10 degrees above and

below this ecliptic is known as the band of the zodiac. This 360 degree band is divided into twelve 30 degree segments known as the signs of the zodiac, *rashis* in Sanskrit. The first sign is Aries, which is then followed by Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, and so on. Both Western and Hindu astrology use these signs of the zodiac in the same order. In Hindu astrology, not only is this system of zodiac signs used, but there is also another way of dividing the zodiac and this is the [nakshatras](#) system, which divides the zodiac into twenty-seven $13 \frac{1}{3}$ degree segments called nakshatras. This adds another level of interpretation to Hindu astrology that is not found in Western astrology. We will not be discussing this *Nakshatras* system of interpretation as it goes into more details than necessary here.

When an astrological chart is prepared, Hindu astrology first calculates the astronomical position of nine celestial influences (see [Nava Graha](#)) and then places them on a symbolic diagram called a horoscope. In addition to these nine influences, the sign that is rising above the eastern horizon for the time of the event is also calculated and shown on the horoscope. This is called the ascending sign of the zodiac or the lagna in Sanskrit. This ascending sign then becomes the starting point or first house of interpretation for the chart.

Northern Chart

There are different ways of expressing this “snapshot” of the sky. The most common North Indian method uses a set of diamond shaped boxes to show the various signs of the zodiac and it is read in a counter clockwise direction. The typical South Indian method uses a system of rectangular boxes that is read in a clockwise direction. There is also a Bengali style that is read in a counterclockwise direction. See the illustrations. All these methods do the same thing, namely symbolically show the various celestial influences at a particular moment in time and place, and in their respective signs of the zodiac.

So far as preparing a chart is concerned, the endeavor is simply astronomy, a description or snapshot of the sky. The astrology comes in when we attempt to derive meaning from celestial bodies and their positions in the zodiac. What does it mean to have Mars in Aries or the moon in Leo. What does it mean when Saturn is with Mars in Aries? What does it mean when Jupiter is five zodiac signs after the moon? What does it mean when the sun and Saturn are 180 degrees apart? The answers to these questions constitutes astrology.

Astrology, which involves the analysis of a intricate system of planetary and other relationships and their subsequent interpretations, cannot be adequately described in this short discussion. It is possible, however, to provide a basic understanding of how an astrologer approaches his craft, which can be useful if a person ever goes to to an astrologer to have a horoscope prepared and read.

In Hindu astrology the nine celestial influences that are used for interpretation are: the sun, the moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, and the north and south lunar nodes (Rahu and Ketu). There are other influences that are sometimes examined, but they are not

important for our purposes. In addition to these 9 celestial influences, an astrologer will also examine the signs of the zodiac where these celestial influences are located, the houses in which they are residing, and certain key relationships between these components. In addition, an astrologer will also calculate the planetary periods (*dashas*) that are used to determine when events are likely to occur in a particular chart. Each of the celestial bodies, plus the signs of the zodiac and the houses carry symbolic meanings that are used to make an astrological interpretation. Here is a brief description of the symbolic meaning of the celestial bodies, the astrological the signs and the houses of interpretation, which will be useful in understanding how an astrologer makes a reading.

The Nine Celestial Influences

The sun is the soul, the heart, the father, authority, heat, power and ambition.

The moon is the mind, mother, water, coolness, emotions, memory and common sense.

Mars is courage, bravery, sports, competition, maleness, passion, action, war, cuts and burns.

Mercury is intelligence, learning, teaching, speech, expression, communication and writing.

Jupiter is fortune, expansion, wealth, children, religion, philosophy and wisdom.

Venus is marriage, love, romance, luxuries, prosperity, femininity, artistic expression, grace, and beauty.

Saturn is slowness, struggle, discipline, dryness, labor, asceticism, accidents, and chronic disease.

Rahu is material desire, dullness, ignorance, laziness, sleep and addictions and ancestral karma.

Ketu is asceticism, spirituality, psychic ability, ghosts, eccentricity and occultism.

The Signs of the Zodiac

Aries is the first sign of the zodiac and is ruled by Mars and so has many of the qualities of this planet. Aries is action, impulse, independence, force, self-expression and competition.

Taurus is the next sign and is ruled by Venus. Taurus is the earth, feelings, stability, conservation, relationships and partnerships.

Gemini is ruled by Mercury. Gemini is energy, nervousness, restlessness, intellect, language, artistic ability, and communications.

Cancer is ruled by the moon, which is mind and the mother. Cancer is openness, friendship, sympathy, care, nurturing, emotions, family and the home.

Leo is ruled by the sun and therefore stands for heat, order, harmony, and central control. Leo is ambition, power will, pride, show and drama.

Virgo is ruled by Mercury. Virgo stands for intellect, command of language, nervousness and sensitivity. Virgo is also detail and precision.

Libra is ruled by Venus. Libra is leadership, power, command of ideas and idealism. Libra is reform, revolution, prophets, and even fanaticism.

Scorpio is ruled by Mars. Scorpio is secretive, sensual, sexual and eccentric. Scorpio is both physical and mental, and so stands for martial force as well as psychic force.

Sagittarius is ruled by Jupiter and stands for grace, beneficence, completion and harmony. Sagittarius is expansion, morality, justice, philosophy and religion.

Capricorn is ruled by Saturn and therefore signifies hard work, perseverance, tenacity and accomplishment. Capricorn is also power, order and organization.

Aquarius is also ruled by Saturn and tends to exhibit the dark side of Saturn. Aquarius is deviation, occultism, eccentricity, but also includes sacrifice, humanitarianism, ingenuity and faith.

Pisces is ruled by Jupiter. Pisces stands for emotion, expansion, intuition, liberation and imagination. Pisces is also dependence and conservatism.

The Houses

There are 12 houses of interpretation. The first house is always determined by the place of the rising sign, the second house follows after that, and so on. Each of the houses have the following symbolic importance:

The first house is the house of life purpose and physical existence. It indicates the self, the ego, character, appearance, the head and general well being.

The second house is money, wealth, self expression, knowledge, speech, family and imagination.

The third house shows courage, bravery, efforts, adventures, brothers and sisters, enthusiasm and motivations.

The fourth house shows mother, the heart, land, buildings, comforts, vehicles, happiness and ancestral property.

The fifth house is children, intelligence, learning, destiny, government, investment, romance, and charity.

The sixth house shows health, illness, enemies, litigation, obstacles, subordinates and employees.

The seventh house is the spouse, married life, relationships, partners, and foreign residence.

The eighth house is longevity, death, wills and inheritance, legacy, taxes, occult matters, secrets and sex.

The Ninth house is father, fortune, solutions, religion, philosophy, faith, worship, wisdom and long journeys.

The ten house shows career, fame, worldly power, professional activities, honors, and life purpose.

The eleventh house shows gains, wealth, opportunities, major goals and desires,

The twelfth house is expenditure, loss, insanity, imprisonment, final salvation, the state after death, secret sexual pleasures, and life in remote places.

Planetary periods

Hindu astrologers have observed that life has certain "moods" or "phases," which are governed by the nine celestial influences. In Sanskrit these planetary periods are called periods (*dashas*). Every life has a sun period, a moon period, a Mars period, a Jupiter period,

and so on. These periods last for different time lengths. A sun period always lasts for six years, a moon period for ten years, a Mars period for seven years, a Venus period for twenty years, etc., so that the total number of years for all the planetary periods is 120 years. Why the length of each planetary period varies and how these planetary periods are determined is a technical matter that goes beyond the scope of this discussion, suffice to say that each chart will have these different planetary periods. The value in knowing the planetary periods is to understand when, for example, the influence of the sun will be strongest in the person's life and therefore to know when sun related influences are most likely to occur. The same for the moon and Mars, and all the other planets. This helps in prediction. You might compare the idea of planetary periods to music. For a certain time a song may be in the key of C, then the song changes to the key of D minor, and then to another key. During the "C period" the music will have a certain sound and mood, but when it changes to D minor the music exhibits a different sound and mood. In this way a life will go through its different planetary periods and during each period will have a certain tone and mood, so to speak. Planetary periods are also divided into smaller sub-periods and then even into sub-sub-periods. This gives the astrologer even more ability to make predictions. The matter of planetary periods is complex, but at least to know in a general way about these periods will help a person understand how an astrologer reads a chart.

Interpretation

How astrologers derive meaning from these symbols is logical and easy to understand. What would it mean, for example, if Mars, the planet of conflict and war, was in the fourth house of home along with the moon, the planet of mother and mind? This would suggest troubles with mother, troubles in the home and disturbances of the mind. Instead of Mars what would it mean if Jupiter was in the fourth house along with the moon? This would suggest prosperity in the home, happiness with mother, and peace in the mind. What would it mean if Saturn and Mars, the planets of struggle and conflict, were together in the 10th house of career? This would suggest conflict, delay, and struggles, yet the drive to success in one's career. And what if Mars was in the seventh house of marriage? This would suggest war and conflict within the marriage and perhaps even divorce. And what if the moon or Jupiter, positive influences, were in the seventh house instead of Mars. This would be good for marriage and suggests happiness and children. These examples are simple and straight forward, but life is more complicated than this. What would it mean, therefore, if the moon and Jupiter were in the seventh house of marriage along with Saturn or Mars? In this case we have good influences mixed with evil influences. Would this mean some good and some bad effects? But how much good and how much evil? And when would the good occur and when would the evil occur? Would the marriage even survive? Would a second marriage also have these mixed effects? Now the matter becomes complicated and only the careful and experienced analysis of a trained astrologer can sort these influences out and make an informed opinion about the marriage. Astrologers have many mathematical systems to measure the strengths of these influences and to determine the times in life when these influences, both positive and negative, will be in force. Even though more detail on this topic

goes beyond the scope of this discussion, the reader, at least, has an idea of how an astrologer approaches his craft. There is a lot of learning that goes into a sound astrological interpretation.

Gems and Pujas

Once a chart has been analyzed and a reading given, it is common to find both negative and positive influences within a chart. Even a “good” planet may bestow negative results and a “bad” planet can bestow positive results under the right conditions, and so a client may want a way to diminish these negative effects or even increase the positive influences. In Hinduism there are many ways that this can be done, but the two most common ways are through the wearing of gems or the performance of *puja*. The idea behind the wearing of gems is as follows. Every planetary influence has both a positive and negative side. The moon, for example, is generally a positive influence, but it also has a negative side, dark emotions and insanity. Mars is generally not a positive influence. It is war and conflict, but it is also courage and strength—good qualities. So even Mars has a positive side. In general, planets that are strongly positioned in a chart bestow their positive side and planets that are weakly positioned bestow their negative side. Each planet is also associated with a certain gem stone (and even a metal and a color, etc.) Jupiter is yellow sapphire, the Moon is white pearl, Mercury is green emerald, Mars is red coral, and so forth. By wearing the gem of a particular planet one increases the power of that planet and thereby brings out the positive qualities of that planet. If the moon is weak in a chart, one could increase the power of the moon by wearing a pearl. A yellow sapphire would increase the strength of Jupiter; an emerald would increase the effect of mercury; a diamond would do the same for venus, etc. The gem would also be put on at a time when the influence of the respective planet is highest. For example, a pearl, for the moon, would first be put on during a Monday, the moon’s day. A diamond would be put on for Venus on Friday. In this way, you can often get a good indication of a person’s astrological condition by noticing the kinds of rings they wear. People will often wear multiple rings for various astrological reasons.

The idea behind an astrological *puja* is as follows. If it is determined that Mars is an enemy in a particular chart, in other words, Mars exerts a negative influence, then a *puja* for Mars could be performed. During the *puja*, symbolically Mars is invited and treated as a guest and shown all respect and honor by being bathed, fed and given gifts, etc. In other words, one way to neutralize an enemy is to make him your friend. The idea behind *apuja* is to invite your enemy over for a “visit” and make him your friend by honoring him food and gifts and thereby decreasing his negative influence over you. The appropriate gem, a red coral in the case of Mars, may also be put on during the Mars *puja*. And of course, the *puja* would be performed on a Tuesday, Mars’s day. These kinds of astrological pujas are called [Nava Graha](#) pujas and they are commonly performed within Hinduism. By far the most commonly performed astrological *pujas* are for Saturn, Mars and Rahu, the three most “cruel” of celestial influences.

The Uses of Astrology

Hindu astrology is a vast subject and in these short pages I have tried to explain in simple terms the basic workings of astrology, how an astrologer makes an interpretation and some of the techniques that astrologers use to affect positive change. In the hands of an experienced astrologer, astrology can be a powerful tool for good. It can give insights into one's character, into one's strengths and weaknesses, and into the subtle forces around us, but like any tool it must be used with discretion and caution, and it has limitations. An immature astrologer can cause havoc in the minds of parents by telling them of a child's future diseases, divorce and even premature death. On the other hand, an astrologer can see hidden talents and encourage parents to cultivate these strengths within their child. An astrological chart can be used to understand the basic psychology of a couple and thereby help a troubled relationship. It can give a partner insight and strategies in dealing with a difficult relationship. But astrology can also lead to dependency, and to a situation where a person avoids taking responsibility for one's life. So like most things in life it has positive and negative aspects. It is to the credit of Hinduism that it has managed to keep within its fold an ancient discipline such as astrology. As the world continues to develop and move ahead it is good that there are traditions like Hinduism that preserve and even keep thriving one of the oldest of all human pursuits.

Non Harming: Ahimsa

There is a chilling reflection on the nature of life in the *Bhagavata Purana*: "Those who are devoid of hands are prey for those with hands; those devoid of legs are prey for those with legs. The weak are the life of the strong, for the rule holds: one living being is food for another." Against this back drop of harsh reality, there is the principle of *ahimsa*, which Hinduism upholds as one of its highest ideals. The word *ahimsa* is derived from the Sanskrit root *hims*, meaning to strike. *Himsa* is injury or harm. *A-himsa* is the opposite of this, non harming or nonviolence.

Ahimsa manifests in various ways. Mahatma Gandhi used *ahimsa* as a powerful weapon against the British to drive them out of India and to achieve independence. Even Martin Luther King junior, after a trip to India, adopted nonviolence as the hallmark of his civil rights movement in America. *Ahimsa* is the basis for the vegetarianism within Hinduism and many Hindus even though they may not be vegetarian will not enter a temple or perform *puja* wearing leather. The principle of *ahimsa* can directly be derived from the concept of the modes of matter ([three gunas](#)) It arises from the mode of goodness, (*sattva guna*). *Ahimsa* is also tied into the principle to [karma](#). Treat the universe in a less harmful way and the universe will treat you accordingly. Many followers of *ahimsa* apply the principle of non harming well beyond just being vegetarian or not wearing leather, but also to not even thinking or speaking in a harmful manner. The Jain religion, which is a sister

tradition to Hinduism, in particular, has made *ahimsa* the very cornerstone of its faith. Mahavira is the founder of Jainism and one of the greatest teachers of *ahimsa*.

It is interesting to note that in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna evokes the principle of *ahimsa* to avoid fighting a terrible war that he knew would destroy the world as he knew it, and yet, Krishna, as God, wanted Arjuna to rise above *ahimsa* and extolled him to adopt an even higher principle, yoga, and fight the war as a *yogi*. In the end Arjuna accepted Krishna's position and fought a devastating war where, according to the *Mahabharata*, millions of people were killed. Mahatma Gandhi, on the other hand, regularly studied the *Gita* and held it in highest esteem. The relationship between *ahimsa* and the *Bhagavad Gita* is a fascinating study in contradiction and has been a great problem for Hinduism from the earliest of times.

God in Hinduism

As surprising as it may seem, Hinduism has no one word "God" as English does. Instead, it has many words that each describe a certain understanding of God. This is something like in many Eskimo (Inuit) languages there is no one word for snow, instead there are many words, each describing snow in its various varieties, wet, dry, iced, melting, slushy, and so many other forms that people who do not live with snow cannot even begin to imagine. In a similar way, Sanskrit is the language of theology and so there are many many words for God.

There is a famous verse from the [*Bhagavat Purana*](#), (1.2.11) a popular devotional text, that gives a good understanding of how "God" is generally understood in Hindu terms. The text begins by saying that God is beyond human understanding, No words or human conceptions can even begin to touch God, none the less, humans have three basic and limited ways in which they try to conceive of God. These three ways are *asbrahman*, *paramatma* and *bhagavan*. *Brahman* is God as raw energy, as force. It is an impersonal understanding of Divinity. *Paramatma* is God as indwelling spirit, a kind of generic presence that exists within all things. *Bhagavan* is God in personal terms, as Krishna, Rama, Shiva, Lakshmi, Durga and the myriad of other Gods and Goddess. In this way, as impersonal force, as indwelling spirit and as transcendent personality, human beings conceive of the Divine. According to the *Bhagavat Purana* such understandings are universal categories of divine "seeing" and we suggest that they are expressed in one form or another within all religions.

Here are a few basic "God terms" that are commonly used within Hinduism:

Om—God as Divine Sound

Bhagavan—God as Supreme Personality,

Isha—God as Supreme Lord

Purusha—God as Supreme Man
Brahman—God as impersonal force or energy
Sat—Supreme Permanence
Cit—Supreme Consciousness
Ananda—Supreme Bliss
Satya—Supreme Truth
Mahesha—the Great Lord
Tat—That
Tattva—Absolute Truth

Eka—the One

Indeed Sanskrit has hundreds of such words to describe God. These are at least some of the more common ones that the average person may hear.

Divinity as one Desires

There is one more concept of Divinity that is worthy of note. This is the concept of *ishta devata*, or one’s personal way of perceiving Divinity. *Ishta* means “desired” and *devata* means “divinity,” and so *ishta devata* can be roughly translated as, “Divinity as one desires.” If you recall the term [adhikara](#) which meant that each person is at a unique place in spiritual evolution and therefore has “rights” to a certain level of spiritual awareness, in a similar way, God, being limitless, can be approached in an infinite number of ways according to the *adhikara* of the individual. Each individual has the right, therefore, to conceive of and worship God according to his or her unique position and psychology. How this plays-out in practice is most interesting. Some people, for example, will want to worship God in a very personal and direct way and so they will focus on the worship of a specific personal form of God; perhaps as Rama or Krishna. Even within this personal approach of worship some people will want to worship only Krishna in one of His childhood forms, as baby Krishna (Gopala) or as the young Butter Thief (Makhan Chora). There is a huge number of devotional texts devoted to Krishna as the Butter Thief. Others may prefer to see their personal God as Shiva, Ganesha or in female form as Devi. Others, however, may consider the worship of a personal God to be limiting and prefer to approach Divinity in more abstract terms, as *Brahman* or *paramatma*, for example. Consequently, there is room for huge differences between individuals according to the principle of *ishta devata*, and from a Hindu perspective of Divinity there is no contradiction.

What is a Guru?

The idea of a guru is a misunderstood concept within Hinduism. Literally, a guru is a teacher. The word *guru* means “heavy” or “deep,” thus a guru is a person “heavy” or “deep” in knowledge. In this sense a school-teacher is a guru, a coach or athletic instructor is a guru, a fine-arts or even a dance teacher is a guru. One’s parents are also gurus. In the religious

field, where the word is most commonly used, a guru is a Hindu religious teacher. So a priest or any person learned in Hindu lore may be a guru. The main purpose of the guru is to teach. In the popular mind there are many stereotyped images of what a guru looks like or how he acts. Usually long hair, beards, flowing robes and lots of bowing followers come to mind, but if we keep the idea of a teacher in mind we will not be confused.

Sometimes we hear of different kinds of religious gurus. There is an initiating guru (*diksha guru*), an instructing guru (*shiksha guru*), and even the “guru within” (*chaitya guru*). An initiating guru is a person who formally accepts a student into a religious order or [sampradaya](#). This kind of guru gives a mantra and other articles of initiation in a ceremony called [diksha](#). The instructing guru is the teacher who actually trains the student. Sometimes the instructing guru and the initiating guru are the same person. The guru within is said to be the “wee” voice of God within the heart that tells a person how to act, and so on. Conscience might be the best word to describe this type of guru. In fact, it is considered that God is the original guru and all other forms of guru represent this one original guru. The expression “eternal guru” (*sat guru*) is often used to indicate God as the original guru.

Within Hinduism a guru is given great respect, even to the point of offering worship (*guru puja*). One full-moon each year (during July/August) is even called the *Guru Purnima* and is dedicated to the worship of guru. To have a guru who acts as the master is an essential part of spiritual growth and so to feel respect for and to want to honor one’s guru is natural and healthy. However, there is a tendency within Hinduism for the development of guru “cults” where the worship of guru supersedes the worship of God. This generally takes place when the original idea of guru as teacher becomes diminished and is replaced by the idea of guru as “blesser.” To be blessed by a guru is considered the greatest thing, but people forget that the real blessing of a guru comes in the form of study, discipline, and hard work that leads to knowledge and wisdom and not just with the touch of a hand. The idea of guru as blesser is a debasement of the true role of a guru.

Hindu Architecture: Vaastu Shastra

We often hear devout Hindus say, “Hinduism is more than just a religion; It is a way of life.” While members of other religions also like to say the same thing—few devoted people want to think that their religion is not a way of life—there is actually some justification for the Hindu statement. We can say this because Hindu culture has never fully separated its so-called “secular side” from its religious side, something that has taken place in many other religions as a result of the secularizing influence of modernity. We have noted this fact in reference to astrology. Hinduism still includes, not only religion, but also astronomy, astrology, grammar, mathematics, law, medicine, politics, diplomacy, war, love, architecture and many other branches of knowledge. In this way, Hinduism is holistic. It is not just about theology.

Vaastu Shastra

It is popular in many Western countries to hear about the ancient Chinese system of Feng Shui, which attempts to align the energies of the physical world with the life of man. The branch of Hindu learning that includes these ideas is called Vaastu Shastra, Hindu Architecture. In Sanskrit the word “*vaastu*” means a building or structure and so the expression “*vaastu shastra*” is the science of structure. Like Vedic astrology, *vaastu* is a vast and highly developed branch of learning and in this installment I can describe only the most basic principles of this subject. There are, of course, whole books devoted to this wonderful subject and an interested reader is encouraged to study these books, especially if one is planning to build or buy a home, commercial building or land for construction.

Hindu Architecture addresses two kinds of buildings: religious structures—temples and shrines—and non-religious structures, civic buildings, business complexes and residential homes. In Hindu culture, not only is the home and family all important, but so is the actual building where the family lives. Consequently, how a physical building is designed and constructed is a matter of deep concern. Hindu traditions tell us that there are forces, some subtle and others not so subtle, some positive and some negative, around us at all times, and like the Chinese system of Feng Shui, it is in man’s interest to arrange his life to take advantage of these positive forces and avoid the effects of the negative forces. It has been observed that through the proper orientation of a building and other techniques, the positive forces can be focused in a way that will lead to an increase in wealth, happiness, and harmony for the residents of such a building. Conversely, the wrong orientation of a structure and other architectural failures can cause unhappiness, disease and troubles for the inhabitants. The same can be said for other buildings including temples, business and civic structures.

In our discussion on astrology, we pointed out some of the essential principles of Hindu theology that affect not only astrology, but many other subjects of learning, including Hindu architecture. The first is the idea that the world is a manifestation of the body of God or, more precisely, the world is the body of God. A sacred structure such as a temple is designed to be not just the home of God, but the actual body of God. The building is sacred because it is the Deity directly. The second principle concerns the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm. A tiny structure like a temple or a home, compared to the large universe, is constructed as a miniature version, a microcosm, of the greater universe, the macrocosm. And finally, the third principle teaches that the part always contains within itself the whole. Design a building by aligning the universe on the inside with the universe on the outside, knowing that the whole is within, and you control the forces of the universe within that building.

Hindu architecture always begins by laying the cosmic body of God (*purusha*) over every building site (*mandala*). This is call the Mandala Purusha. The accompanying diagram illustrates this and shows how this cosmic body is positioned in relation to the site. Notice

that the head of “God” lays in the northeast corner. The basis behind this orientation is the principle of maximization of light that is described by the metaphor: the sun equals light, which equals knowledge, which equals consciousness and ultimately spiritual enlightenment. The east is the source of light and of all the points along this eastern axis the north-east point is the most important because it is the point of maximization of light. On June 21st of every year the sun rises in the north-east and this is the day when daylight is longest and darkness is shortest. There is maximization of light at this point and so the north-east corner is called God’s corner (*isha-kona*). The cosmic head, which is a symbol for enlightenment, is placed in the northeast. It is perhaps a little crude to mention, but notice where the cosmic anus is located. Ancient Hindu culture includes everything! This is the position reserved for the negative forces of the universe, personified as demons. The south-west corner, which is the exact opposite of the north-east corner is not considered an auspicious place and so when arranging a home one should avoid placing the meditation, kitchen, or financial areas in this place.

In addition to the sun, there are, of course, many other powerful forces that affect the life of man, and so these forces have also been considered in Hindu architecture and given their respective places. One of the most common features of Hinduism is its tendency to personify all things and so these forces are personified as Gods and given their proper “seats” in the various directions of Hindu architecture according to how they are positioned in the macrocosm, the greater universe. See the accompanying diagram that illustrates the sitting places of these powerful forces. Agni, the god of fire, sits in the south-east corner and so this is the ideal direction for a kitchen. Kuvera, the god of wealth sits in the north, so this is the best place for keeping financial matters. In this way, knowing the places of these forces, the next illustration shows the basic arrangement of how any building should be designed to create an alignment with the forces of the universe. This is the basis of Hindu architecture. Beyond this there are, of course, a large number of details. Below I provide just a few details found in Vaastu Shastra along with my explanations (in italics) to help the reader get an idea of how the system of *vaastu* works. Exactly how a building is designed will vary greatly according to the site and the needs of the family in the case of a house for example. There is a lot of flexibility built into this system of architecture.

*No garbage should be dumped in the north-east corner of the site or the building. *The reason for this is obvious: the northeast corner is God’s corner.*

*Lawns and gardens with small plants should be grown in the northern and eastern side. Large trees should only be planted in the south and western sides, never in the east and north-eastern sides. *The east is the source of spiritual power and so this energy should never be blocked or obstructed. Blocking the southern direction blocks death. In addition, planting tree in the south and west provides cooling shade against the hottest positions of the sun.*

*Beds should be placed so that when one sleeps the head is directed towards the south, east, or west, but never towards the north. *A person’s body is a tiny magnet with a north*

and south pole. One's head is the north pole. The universe is also a magnet (a very big magnet!) with a north and south pole. Polaris, the north star, is the north pole of the universe. Place two magnetic poles together and there is a repulsion. So to sleep with one's head in the directions of the universe's head is the same as placing two north poles together. There is repulsion. Therefore sleep will be better when the head is placed towards the south or another direction other than north.

**Main doors should open to the east, north or west, but never to the south.*

The east is the source of divine light and therefore this is the preferred placement for the main door of a house. The south is the direction of the God of death and so a main doorway should not open to death.

**The site should be higher in the west than in the east. By sloping slightly to the east the site is open to the east, the source of divine light. In addition, a slope provides for water drainage.*

**The staircase should be located in the south, west or south-west corner. The stair or elevator area is not considered useful living space so these things are relegated to less important areas of the building.*

**A Kitchen should be located in the south-east corner, but may also be in the north-west corner. In either case the cooking area should allow facing east while cooking. The south-east the the place given to the fire divinity, Agni. A kitchen involves fire, so the placement is obvious. The cooking fire is a miniature sun and therefore light, so facing the cooking fire and facing east while cooking is facing light.*

**A Kitchen should never be in the south-west because it will endanger the health of residents. Notice that the south-west is the the place of the cosmic anus, so placing the kitchen in this location is not favorable for health. Instead the south-west is the proper place for toilets, garbage and storage of things like tools.*

**The site should be square or rectangular. Sites with triangles, round shapes, with five corners or more, or having odd shapes should be avoided. Symmetry is the basis of Hindu aesthetics, Odd shapes "confuse" or otherwise obstruct the flow of energy and create an imbalance of energy. A shape such as a triangle does away with one whole flank of energy.*

**The treasury should never be located in the west or south-west. The deity of wealth resides in the north and so the financial part of a house should be in this position. As we have noted, the south-west is the place of negative energy, so one should avoid subjecting wealth to negative energy.*

**The meditation area ideally should be in the north-east, but should never be in the south-west. The north-east is God's corner and the south-west is for less positive things. The placement for meditation is obvious.*

Finally, here is a sample home design that conforms to the principle of Vaastu Shastra. I provide this just to give a simple idea on how a building can be designed. There can be many many such designs.

What I have described in this short discussion on Vaastu Shastra is only a basic outline of what is a detailed and complicated subject. In spite of this, I have provided the essence of the subject matter as far as residential homes are concerned. There can be endless designs and there are many ways to adjust the designs and even design methods and *pujas* that can be performed to settle or neutralize problems and defects in the site and even in existing homes.

What is Vedanta?

Vedanta is a form of Hindu theology based on the combined interpretations of three sacred sources:

1. Upanishads
2. Bhagavad-gita
3. and Vedanta-sutra In spite of what common opinion says, there is no such a thing as the Vedanta theology. Instead there are widely divergent interpretations of Vedanta, all of which may be called Vedanta theologies. There are, however, three distinct classical interpretations of Vedanta based on the writings of:

1. Shankara Acharya 788-820 CE
2. Ramanuja Acharya 1017-1137 AD
3. and Madhva Acharya 1238-1317 AD

Of these three, Shankara is the most well known and so his particular interpretation of Vedanta is commonly understood to be the only Vedanta. This is not true and the other two theologians, although not as well known, are no less important in the history of Hindu theology and therefore should be appreciated. I would also add that these three great teachers should be placed on par with Aristotle, Socrates and Plato.

Each of these classical interpretations of Vedanta theology has been named according to their type of interpretation. Respectively they are:

1. Advaita Vedanta (Shankara)
2. Vishishtha Advaita Vedanta (Ramanuja)
3. Dvaita Vedanta (Madhva)

You will notice that the names of these theologies all center around the word 'dvaita' which means 'duality.' Therefore, starting from the most recent theologian, Madhva Acharya, his interpretation of Vedanta is called Dvaita. He is often depicted with two fingers held up suggesting duality. According to this interpretation he asserts that the nature of reality is

dual, meaning that this universe is comprised of two distinct principles, namely, God and everything else. By contrast, Shankara Acharya, the most ancient theologian of the three, has an interpretation called Advaita, non-duality, which asserts that nature of reality is not dual, but oneness. Shankara's depiction often shows him holding only one finger up. According to Shankara there is only one ultimate 'thing' in existence, namely God. Shankara's interpretation creates an obvious problem—that if everything is ultimately God, then why do we not know this? I certainly do not feel like I am God, nor does the table in front of me seem to be God and my dog is certainly not God! Shankara's answer to this question is simple. Everything is God, but the reason you do not perceive this fact is because your 'seeing' ability is obscured by illusion (maya) due to ignorance. Remove this illusion through knowledge and you will perceive that all things are God, hence Advaita. Shankara and Madhva have diametrically opposed interpretations of Vedanta.

Ramanuja's interpretation lies between these two interpretations. According to Ramanuja the nature of reality is ultimately non-duality (advaita), but with a qualification (vishishtha). Thus his interpretation of Vedanta is called Vishishtha Advaita (qualified non-duality). The nature of the qualification is significant. Ramanuja asserts that three distinct 'things' exist in this world, namely, God, soul and matter and yet one does not exist without the other. As a unity they are one (advaita) and yet because they are distinct in their essence, this unity is qualified (vishishtha). In a certain way we might say that Ramanuja's interpretation of Vedanta is something like saying that reality is both dual and non-dual at the same time. Indeed, Ramanuja's theology has created many derivative interpretations by later theologians who have tried to capture his idea in their own words. For example there is dvaita-advaita (dual and non-dual), shudha-advaita (purified non-duality) and even achintya-bheda-abheda (inconceivable difference and non-difference!

The followers of Shankara's school commonly assert that these are not different interpretations of the Upanishads, the Gita and Vedanta Sutras, but simply different levels of the same Vedanta theology, the highest being the advaita interpretation. Ramanuja and Madhva, of course, would reject this understanding and say that Shankara's interpretation is outright wrong. The topic of Vedanta is a vast subject matter that I have barely touched upon, but if the reader wishes to pursue the matter this short explanation will serve as a basis for further study.

Time in Hinduism

Time In Hinduism: The Yuga

Hinduism perceives time to flow in great cycles called *yugas*. There are four *yugas* and depending upon the *yuga* the duration varies. The four *yugas* along with their duration in earthly years are:

Satya Yuga 1,728,000

Treta Yuga 1,296,000

Dvapara Yuga 864,000

Kali Yuga 432,000

Total 4,320,000 One *yuga* cycle.

I say earthly years because Hindu scripture gives the years as divine years—time according to the calculation of the Gods. Notice that the basic number is 432,000, the age of Kali *yuga*, and so *dvapara* is twice that number, *treta* is 3 times that number and *satya* is four times that number. One rotation of these four *yugas* is called a *yuga* cycle which is a total of 4,320,000 years. A thousand *yuga* cycles is called a *kalpa* and therefore a *kalpa* is 4,320,000,000 years. Time moves on in these great cycles, *yuga* after *yuga*, *kalpa* after *kalpa*, eternally.

To give an example how such huge numbers are used, consider the lifetime of Brahma, the four headed creator God. Brahma's life span is calculated according to *yuga* time. One *kalpa* is said to be the 12 hours of Brahma's day, so his 24 hour day is two *kalpas* in length. That means 24 hours of Brahma's time is 8,640,000,000 earthly years! His year is 365 days long and he lives for a 100 years. I leave it to my readers to do the math. My calculator does not have enough places to calculate the vast lifetime of Brahma. I am amazed by size of the numbers that the early Hindu thinkers were dealing with.

Now consider the story of one hairy sage. This is a story taken from one of the [Puranas](#). A hairy sage once showed up in the court of King Indra and when asked where he lived the sage replied that since life was so short he had decided not to marry and so did not to have a home. Indra then asked him why he had such a strange bald spot on his chest where hair

was obviously falling out. The sage replied that each time a Brahma died he lost one hair from his chest and this why he has becoming bald. The sage further asserted that once he had lost all of this hair from the death of so many Brahma's he too would die. And you can be sure he was a very hairy sage! Add to this the idea that within Hinduism there is not just one universe, but endless numbers of universes all with their own Brahmas that come and go like moths rushing into a fire and you get a sense of time within Hinduism. These anecdotes give us an understanding of the massive time frames in which the Hindu mind has conceived of time. Compare this with the Biblical story of Genesis where God created the world in seven days and you see the different conceptions of time between the two cultures.

It is said that we are now living within the Kali *yuga*, which started about 5000 years ago. Each of these yugas is said to have a certain quality of life. Kali *yuga* is the worst of times because it is the time of quarrel and deceit. The level of morality and spirituality is greatly decreased and the maximum span of life one can expect is only 100 years. In the previous yuga, Dvapara Yuga, life is said to have been much better. The lifetime of a human being during the Dvapara Yuga could be as much as 1000 years. Life was more vibrant and spirituality was greatly increased. It is described how a human being stood as much as 12 feet tall and how the trees and animals are much larger as well. The Tretayuga was an even better time with the maximum life span as much 10,000 years. Spirituality is even higher, and finally, in the best of times, the Satya *Yuga* the life of a human being could be up to 100,000 years! The [Mahabharata](#) and the Puranas are full of stories from the various yugas describing scenes of people living for huge periods of time. The great sage Vishwamitra, for example, meditated in water for 60,000 years before his meditation was broken by the beautiful Menaka. Their union brought about the famous Shakuntala, the heroin of many famous stories and plays in Sanskrit. Similarly, in many of the [Puranas](#), ten avatars of Vishnu are said to repeatedly appear throughout the *yuga* cycles. Rama always appears during the Treta *Yuga*, Krishna appears at the end of Dvapara, and Kalki, the final avatara comes at the end of Kali *Yuga* to destroy all things and prepare the way for the next Satya *Yuga*. There are, therefore, many appearances of Rama, Krishna, and the other avataras. This is all takes place within the great cycles of *yugatime*.

The Hindu Calendar: Panchanga

The name for the Hindu calendar is a *panchanga*. Along with other information, a *panchanga* especially records the movements of the sun and the moon. Traditionally no religious festival, family event, or even a civic affair is performed without first consulting a *panchanga* to know the favorable movements of these celestial bodies.

In Sanskrit the word "*panchanga*" is made of two parts: *pancha* and *anga*. *Pancha* means five and *anga* means a part. The *panchanga* is, therefore, something made of five parts. As a calendar, these five parts are the lunar day (*tithi*), day of the week (*vara*), lunar mansion (*naksatra*), luni-solar day (*yoga*) and half lunar day (*karana*). A full explanation of the Hindu

calendar is detailed and technical and not necessary for the general reader, but a summary understanding of at least the first three of these parts is worthwhile. For a more detailed explanation, see [the Hindu Almanac](#).

Measuring the Sky

In order to understand the Hindu calendar it will be helpful to first know how astronomers measure the sky. Just as a road map uses miles or kilometers to show distance between cities, so a celestial sky map uses degrees to show distance between celestial objects. Keeping in mind that there are 360 degrees in a circle, it is easy to measure approximate degrees in the sky. Just raise your hand to the sky, and at arm's length, use your hand to measure the degrees in the sky. See the accompanying illustration that shows how the hand can be used to measure degrees in the sky. At arm's length, for example, the width of the end of the little finger is about one degree across. Check to see that the full moon is half a little finger in width and therefore can be estimated to be about a half a degree wide. This system is reasonably accurate for men, women and children, since people with smaller hands tend to have shorter arms. Astronomers have used this hand technique for thousands of years to make approximate measurements of the sky. To see how this system can be used to measure a common constellation see the illustration of the big dipper (*sapta-rishi*) and the North Star (*dhruva*) to measure the degrees of separation between each star.

Lunar Day (Tithi)

The first element of the Hindu *panchanga* is the lunar day known as *tithi*. This is perhaps the single most important element of the *panchanga* because it is the building block for the lunar month. Just as the sun rises everyday in the east and sets in the west and we call the time between one sunrise and the next a "day," so the moon also rises in the east and sets everyday in the west and the time between one moonrise and the next is called a "lunar day." The Sanskrit word for this lunar day is *tithi*. There are 30 such lunar days in a lunar month and they are sequentially numbered starting from the new moon as well as the full moon. See the diagram that shows the lunar month along with the phases of the moon. Thus, in the moon's waxing phase, the first lunar day is called new moon (*amavasya*), the next lunar day is called the first *tithi*, next lunar day is called the second *tithi*, the next is called the third *tithi*, and so forth until the fourteenth lunar day. The day after the 14th is called full moon (*purnima*). From this point the numbering sequence starts over again. The day after the full moon is the first *tithi*, the next day is the second *tithi*, and so on. The important difference being that the second set of *tithis* belong to the waning phase of the moon while the first set belongs to the waxing phase. Afterwards the cycle repeats itself. In this way thirty *tithis* make up a lunar month, which is known as a *masa*. Some parts of India begin the month from the full moon whereas other parts begin the month from the new moon. Today, the lunar calendar is still in use throughout the Hindu world for religious purposes.

From an astrological perspective the various *tithis* are considered either auspicious or inauspicious for different events. In general *tithis* on the waxing or bright side of the lunar month (*shukla-paksha*) are considered conducive to growth, increase and prosperity and would be selected for such occasions as weddings, moving into new homes or starting businesses. Most religious festivals are held at these times and names of the festivals are even named after these *tithis*. The moon's waning or dark side (*krishna-paksha*) is considered favorable for ancestor worship, and in general Hindu festivals are not held during this dark side of the lunar month, but there are important exceptions. See [Hindu festivals: Utsavas](#)

The Day of the Week (Vara)

The second element of the Hindu panchanga is the day, *vara*. In Sanskrit the days of the week are clearly named after seven of the nine major astrological influences used in Hindu astrology (see [Nava Graha](#)):

Sunday, the sun, (*ravi-vara*)

Monday, the moon, (*soma-vara*)

Tuesday, Mars, (*mangala-vara*)

Wednesday, Mercury, (*budha-vara*)

Thursday, Jupiter, (*guru-vara*)

Friday, Venus (*shukra-vara*)

Saturday, Saturn, (*shani-vara*)

You can still see these astrological influences in the English names, Sunday, Monday and Saturday for the sun, the moon and Saturn respectively. If you examine the French and Spanish words for the days of the week you will see an even greater connection.

Astrologically these days are named after these celestial bodies because the influence of that celestial body is said to be prominent on that day. For example, Tuesday, being ruled by Mars, the planet of war, would be a good date to state a battle, but not a good day to get married or move into a new home! Monday (moon-day) would a better day for a marriage.

Lunar Mansion (Nakshatra)

The third element of the Hindu calendar is lunar mansion or *nakshatra*. The best way to understand *nakshatra* is to observe the moon some evening. Notice the moon's position in relation to the background of stars. The next evening, at the same time and in the same location, again observe the moon's position in relation to the background of stars. You will see that it has moved considerably towards the east. Use the raised hand technique to estimate how many degrees the moon has moved. The moon will appear to have moved about 15 degrees. In fact, the moon has moved 13 degrees and 20 minutes. The region of the sky that has been displaced by the moon's eastward movement in one day is called a lunar mansion. In Sanskrit this is known as a *nakshatra*. There are 27 such lunar mansions in the 360 degrees the moon travels in one lunar month ($13.3 \times 27 = \sim 360$). In the Hindu calendar each of these lunar mansions is named after a star or group of stars in each region

of the sky. It becomes a little confusing, but this is why a *nakshatra* is also called a “star.” See the sample illustration of the region of the sky known as Cancer and Leo to view a segment of the sky that includes five *nakshatras*: *uttara phalguni*, *purva phalguni*, *magha*, *ashlesha*, and *pushyami*.

The *nakshatra* is important in Hindu culture. At birth a person’s horoscope is traditionally made, and one of the most important items to be known is the *nakshatra*. Many elements of a person’s character are thought to be determined by the *nakshatra*. (The moon stands for the mind in Hindu astrology.) In many regions of India a person’s name is based on the *nakshatra*. The first syllable of the name may be derived from the *nakshatra*. Thus a person’s existence is tied into the movement of the heavens. At the time of a *puja* or religious ceremony a priest may ask for the *nakshatra*, or “star” of the person performing the religious service so that it can be recited in the opening statement of the *puja* called a *sankalpa*. At the time of marriage, considerations of the *naksatras* for the both the bride and groom may be compared to check for psychological compatibility.

The 27 *nakshatras* are grouped into *nakshatra* “types.” Certain *nakshatras*, for example, are considered “fixed” and therefore are good for activities than require stability. Moving into a new home would best done on the day of a fixed *nakshatra*. Some *nakshatras* are considered movable and therefore would be good for starting a voyage or buying a new car. Other *nakshatras* are considered cruel and dreadful and would be good for starting a war or litigation against an enemy. In this way, people will often seriously consult a *panchanga* in order to find the best timing for the type of activity they are considering.

Luni-solar Day and Half Lunar Day

The final two elements of the Hindu calendar are highly technical and not generally used by lay Hindus and so I will only give them passing mention. They are important to astronomers and astrologers. They are called Luni-solar Day (*yoga*) and Half Lunar Day (*Karana*) and they both have to do with the relationship between the sun and the moon.

In addition to these five parts of the traditional Hindu calendar one other component should be noted, the month (*masa*).

Month (*Masa*)

The Hindu year contains twelve lunar months named after the *nakshatra* in which the moon is full:

Chaitra (March – April)

Vaishakha (April – May)

Jyaishtha (May – June)

Ashadha (June – July)

Shravana (July – August)

Bhadrapada (August – September)

Asvina (September – October)
Karttika (October – November)
Margasirsha (November – December)
Pausha (December – January)
Magha (January – February)
Phalguna (February – March)

Different parts of India start the year during different months. In general the year begins either in the spring time month of Caitra or in the autumnal month of Karttika.

Choosing the Moment: Muhurta

Most people know the feeling of trying to accomplish something, yet nothing seems to work. You make telephone calls, but no one answers; you search for a parking space, but none can be found; no store stocks what you are looking for. You cannot find a taxi. Obstacles are everywhere. And then there are times when everything just works. One is successfully able to return all phone calls; the right people are available. There is always a parking space available. Every store has in stock what you are looking for and the bus is on time. And then there are mixed periods; some things work and other things do not work. Only half of what needs to be done can be accomplished. This is the nature of time. It has ebbs and flows, positive and negative “moods.” Recognizing the shifting nature of time, Hinduism has been particular about choosing the proper moment to begin an important activity. This can be compared to catching a wave to surf. Catch the right wave in the right place and it will carry you along seemingly without effort. Therefore, choosing the right moment is especially important for occasions such as marriage, moving into a new home, starting a construction project, taking a new job or even having a child. A family that is not otherwise religious may still have a concern for choosing the right moment for their son’s or daughter’s wedding.

In Sanskrit the word for a moment is “*muhurta*.” Specifically, a *muhurta* is a period of 48 minutes, and there are 30 such *muhurtas* in a day. These moments are sometimes compared to flowing water with ups and downs and ins and outs, and so there are certain moments when the flow of time is favorable and when the flow of time is unfavorable. It is, therefore, important to choose the right moment to begin a new project as this will affect the outcome of that endeavor. In fact, not only do each of the thirty 48 minute segments of time have their different moods, some auspicious and others inauspicious, different days of the week (*varas*), different lunar mansions (*nakshatras*), different lunar days (*tithis*), different phases of the moon (*pakshas*), the direction of the sun (*ayana*) and even whether it is night time or day time are all considered favorable or unfavorable for different endeavors. Therefore, when choosing a favorable time for any given event all these factors have to be considered. This is what is meant by ‘choosing the moment’ (*muhurta*) and it is the job of an expert priest or astrologer to select the proper time for the proper activity.

Rahu Kalam and Choghadia

Keeping track of the *muhurtas* is a little difficult and so there are numerous systems that attempt to simplify the process. There are two common methods. One takes into consideration the time of Rahu, known as Rahu Kalam and the other is called Choghadia. Amongst the South Indian community one will often hear about Rahu Kalam as being a particularly bad time of the day. What Rahu Kalam actually is are two consecutive 48 minute *muhurtas* that occur each day, which are considered particularly negative. On Saturday this time is between 9:00 AM and 10:30 AM; on Sundays it is between 4:30 PM and 6:00 PM, on Mondays it is between 7:30 AM and 9:00 AM, (based on a 6 AM sunrise time) and so on. In this way, each day of the week has two consecutive *muhurtas* (96 minutes) of “negative” time and one should not begin an important endeavor during this time of the day. Amongst the Gujarati community there a similar system called Choghadia that divides a day into a repeating system of seven favorable and unfavorable periods lasting each about an hour and a half. The Gujarati system is somewhat different from the 48 minute *muhurta* system, but it attempts to do the same thing, namely, find the best moment to start important activities.

Moving into a Home

Choosing a proper *muhurta* is often a complicated process, but I want to provide a simple example in order to give the reader an idea of how this is done. Keep in mind the metaphor: the sun equals light, which equals knowledge, which equals consciousness, and so on. Maximization of light is the idea. In the case of moving into a new home, it is always best to enter during the daytime instead of the night time. The morning is best because there is more light remaining in the day. It is also best to move during the sun’s northern course and during the waxing (light increasing) phase of the lunar month for the same reasons. Tuesday and Saturday are governed by Mars and Saturn respectively. Mars is the planet of war, and Saturn is the planet of hardship and so Tuesdays and Saturdays should be avoided. As far as lunar mansions (*nakshatras*) are concerned, certain ones are conducive for endeavors that demand stability. Others are conducive for movable situations such as travel, others for artistic endeavors, others for war and destruction, other are “general purpose,” and so forth. Obviously, the last thing one wants when moving into a new home is instability or war, so choosing a fixed lunar mansion is ideal or at least one should choose a *nakshatra* that is general purpose. One must also examine the lunar days (*tithis*). The different lunar days have their “moods” and influences. The new moon, for example, is generally not favorable for moving into a home. For other reasons the 8th and the 14th lunar days may also not be favorable for entering the home for the first time. Similarly, each of the 48 minute *muhurtas* have their “moods” and influences that may be positive or negative for moving into a home. Especially one should avoid the times of Rahu Kalam as we have noted.

In this way each of these factors must be considered when selecting a good time to move into a new home. However, there are often many other non time related factors that need to be considered. For example, a family may not be able to afford to wait 5 or 6 months for the sun to change from a southern course to a northern course before moving into a new home. Building codes, construction inspections and loan requirements may also affect the times when a family can move. In this way many practical matters must be taken into consideration when choosing the moment. Taken together these matters can become highly technical. Indeed they often conflict with each other and so it may not be possible for the general reader to fully understand the technique of *muhurta*, but at least the reader now has a general understanding of what is involved in choosing the right moment. With some variation, a similar process must be considered when choosing a time for marriage or when opening a new business or for some other important endeavor. This is *muhurta*, choosing the proper moment.

An interesting thing about Rahu Kalam is that many people think that these are fixed periods that occur at the same time every day, but in fact they shift according to daylight savings time and the rise times of the sun at different times of the year. The fixed Rahu Kalam times that many people assume to be correct are always based on standard time and a 6 AM rise time for the sun, and so these set times must always be adjusted to account for daylight savings and the sun's local rise time. It is common that if you make these adjustments when determining a *muhurta* of a wedding, for example, people will object thinking that they must follow the set times for Rahu Kalam and not the adjusted time.

The Making of the Hindu Calendar

Hinduism is a religious tradition that is still intimately connected to the movements of the celestial bodies, particularly the sun and the moon, and the planets. Unfortunately, most people live in large cities that obscure the night's sky with buildings, light pollution and smog, so people hardly look to the sky anymore. Consequently, people know little about the movements of the celestial bodies which affects so much of modern Hinduism. Let us examine some of these important wheels in the sky.

The Motion of the Sun

Most people know that the sun rises every morning in the east and sets every evening in the west, but what they do not know is that the sun also has a north/south movement along the horizon. Our urban lifestyle makes it almost impossible to see the horizon, so all we can see is the sun moving over our heads from east to west. On June 21, the first day of summer and the longest day of the year, the sun rises, not directly in the east, but in the northeast. Then six months later on December 21, the first day of winter and the shortest day of the year, the sun will rise in the southeast. This may not sound like a big difference, but if one actually looks along the horizon from the north-east to the south-east you will see that it is a distance of 60 degrees, one sixth of a circle. This means that between the longest day of the

year and the shortest day of the year the sun has been rising each day a little more towards the south. The sun has been moving in a southerly course along the horizon. In Sanskrit this is called the sun's southern course (*dakshinayana*). Then, from December 21 until June 21, the sun will be moving in the reverse direction, north along the horizon. This is called the sun's northern course (*uttarayana*). During the northern course the days are getting successively longer (light is increasing) and during southern course the days are getting shorter (light is decreasing). Actually, when the sun reaches its most northerly point on June 21st and when the sun reaches its most southerly point on December 21, there is about a three week "hanging" or "turning around" period when the sun appears to move very little. Thus the first day of the northern course (*uttarayana*) is not considered December 22, instead January 14th is the day, and the first day of the southern course (*dakshinayana*) is not June 22, but July 17th. This north/south movement of the sun is important in Hinduism since all things are considered better if they are performed in light. It is considered more auspicious to move into a house, install a sacred image, start a business, or even to die during the northern course of the sun than during the southern course. Remember the metaphor: the sun equals light, which equal knowledge, which equals consciousness. It is also recommended that temples, homes and businesses open to the east. In [Vaastu Shastra](#) the northeast direction is even called God's corner (*isha-kona*). It is the best direction because it represents the maximization of light.

The Motion of the Moon and the Planets

Just as the sun moves across the sky in a daily east to west movement, so the moon and the planets also rise everyday in the east and set in the west following the path of the sun. This path of the sun across the sky is called the solar ecliptic. Imagine a huge circle across the sky that the sun follows. Everyday the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, but this is only 180 degrees of this great circle. Below us, in the dark, the sun is continuing to move to complete a 360 degree circle around the earth and then to rise in the east the following morning. This solar ecliptic is the apparent path of the sun. I say apparent because the sun does not actually move around the earth; it only appears to move around the earth from our geocentric perspective.

In a similar way, the moon and all the planets also move in an east-west motion across the sky following close to this solar ecliptic. The moon and the planets are never more than 5 degrees to either side of the path of the sun, and so everyday they rise and set like the sun. You will never find Mars or Jupiter near the north star or near the southern horizon. All the planets follow close along the path of the sun. But there is one main difference between the sun and the rest of the planets including the moon: they all do not rise and set at the same time as the sun. In fact, the moon and the planets each rise and set at different times. The moon, for example, may rise in the east at 10 AM, or 10 PM, or 3 PM or 3 AM depending on its phase. Similarly, Mars, Jupiter or Saturn will rise and set at all different times depending on their positions in their particular path around the sun. So unless one pays attention to the moon and planets, it is hard to notice who is rising and who is setting at any given time,

especially during the day when one cannot see the moon or planets. In this way, above our head, there are huge circles moving in the heavens like a gigantic clock. The sun is moving in one great circle, the moon is moving in its circle, and Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and all the other planets are moving in their circles above us at all times.

The Zodiac

Each of these separate circles closely follow the solar ecliptic to collectively create a narrow “band” across the sky that we call the zodiac. Divide this band into 12 equal parts of 30 degrees each and we have the 12 signs of the zodiac (called *rashis* in Sanskrit): Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, and so on.

As a side issue, it is interesting to note that as Hindus we walk around a deity in a clockwise direction and offer incense or a lamp in a similar clockwise direction. This is a symbolic gesture that follows the apparent motion of the sun across the sky as if to always follow the path of light. Similarly, the doorways to temples, homes and businesses ideally open to the east. This is also a symbolic gesture to maximize light. (see [Vaastu Shastra](#))

The Phases of the Moon

Hinduism, from its earliest times, has been aware of the movements of these celestial bodies and has paid special attention to how they affect life on earth. For this reason Hindu astronomy and astrology have played, and continue to play, an important role in Hindu culture. In particular, the moon is most important in terms of the Hindu calendar. Unlike the western calendar, which is based upon the movements of the sun, the Hindu calendar is based on the moon’s cycle, so if one understands the basic movements of the moon and how the Hindu calendar is organized, one can understand a lot about Hindu culture.

Let us assume that a lunar month is comprised of 30 days, (The actual length varies considerably, but averages out to a little less than 29 and a half days.) and let us imagine that this cycle is divided into two equal halves of 15 days each. These are called *pakshas*. Literally, the word *paksha* means a wing. (A bird is called *pakshi*, one possessing wings.) We can translate *paksha* as “side” instead of wing. One half of the moon’s cycle is when it is increasing in brightness, from new moon to full moon, which is the waxing phase of the moon’s cycle. In Sanskrit this is called the *shukla-paksha*, the bright side of the lunar month. The second half of the moon’s cycle is from full moon back to new moon, which is the waning phase or the period of decreasing brightness. In Sanskrit this is the *krishna-paksha* or the dark side of the month. Day by day, as the moon moves from its initial new moon position until it reaches full moon, and then again, down to new moon, we call each of these “days,” a lunar day or *tithi* in Sanskrit. In Hinduism lunar days are important and they are distinguished from solar days which are called *varas* in Sanskrit. In the common western calendar, when we speak of the days we mean solar days, but in Hinduism it is important to distinguish between a solar day and a lunar day. A lunar day is shorter than a solar day and starts at a different time. One of the greatest challenges in modern Hinduism

is aligning lunar dates with solar dates and these two differences alone create a lot of problems.

You might expect the counting of these lunar days goes from one to thirty, but it does not. Instead, the counting of the lunar days goes from one to fourteen, then the full moon, and then again from one to fourteen and the new moon. See the diagram to understand the phases of the lunar month. Thus there is a first lunar day of the waxing moon and a first lunar day of the waning moon, a second lunar day in the waxing phase and a second lunar day of the waning phase, and so on. This numbering system is important because in many cases the festival days in Hinduism are named after these lunar days. One full cycle, from new moon to full moon and then down from full moon to new moon again, is called a lunar month (*masa*) and like the solar months there are twelve lunar months that are named after the place in the sky where the moon becomes full.

The Lunar Months

From one perspective the movements of the moon makes a good calendar because the moon can easily be tracked as it moves across the sky and because one can readily see the moon's phases. However, there is a major problem with using a lunar calendar over a solar calendar. Just as the sun falls out of the sync with the rest of the stars a tiny amount everyday so that every four years an extra day must be added, so the moon also falls out of the sync with the rest of the stars. The moon, however, falls out of sync much more and so needs to be corrected a lot more. In fact, the addition of an extra month every 2 and a half years is necessary! The lunar year of twelve months consists of 354 solar days. However, a solar year consists of 365 days. There is, therefore, a difference of 11 days between the lunar year and the solar year. Due to this difference alone, the two calendars move rapidly out of synchronization and in about two and a half years a difference of 29 days is accumulated between the two calendars. Hence, every two and half years an additional month or thirteenth month must be added to the lunar calendar to bring it back into synchronization with the solar calendar. This additional month is called *adhika masa*, extra month. Some Hindu communities call this additional month, God's month (*purushottama masa*) and hold special festivals during this time.

Ceremonies

Hindu Festivals: Utsavas

During the Hindu year, as in all religions, there are many religious days and nights that celebrate a particular Deity or religious event. These times are called festival days, *utsavas*. You may also hear the term *mahotsava* meaning “big festival.” Some festivals are considered major and others minor. In general, these days or nights are dedicated as the “birthday” of a particular Deity or the “victory” day when the Deity was triumphant over a particular evil force or demon. In most cases these festivals are named after the lunar days of the Hindu calendar. In general festivals are celebrated during the bright or waxing side of the [lunar month](#) (*shukla paksha*). Festivals that deal with ancestors generally take place during the dark or waning phase of the lunar month (*krishna paksha*). From the different regions of India there are a seemingly unlimited number of festivals, but here I will only describe the major ones that may be celebrated in any Hindu temple outside of India. The festival days are listed in the order they are celebrated along with a brief description.

Makara Sankranti

After all the discussion about the Hindu calendar being a [lunar calendar](#), *makara sankranti* is one of the few major festivals that does not follow the lunar calendar. Instead it is celebrated according to the solar calendar and therefore always falls on the same day in the western calendar, January 14th. Most other Hindu festivals follow the lunar calendar and therefore will vary by approximately three weeks from year to year against the solar calendar. Makara Sankranti is the celebration of the sun beginning its path on the [northern course](#) (*uttarayana*). It is therefore the celebration of the return of light into the world according to the metaphor: the sun equals light, which equals knowledge, and so on. In this regard it is important to note that July 17, which is the beginning of the sun moving on its southern course, is never celebrated or even known. No one celebrates the return of darkness. In different parts of India, Makara Sankranti is celebrated in various ways. It is kite flying day in Gujarat. It is a “rice” harvest festival called Thai Pungalin in parts of south India. In the Punjab it is another agricultural festival called Lodi. It is common to see worshippers bringing sweets made with sesame seeds as offering to the Deities in a temple on this day.

Maha Shiva Ratri

Literally, the “Great Night of Shiva” is celebrated every year on the 13th or sometimes the 14th lunar night ([thithi](#)) in the waning or dark fortnight (*krishna paksha*) of the month of Maagh. This corresponds to late January early February on the solar calendar. There are many stories to explain the source of this important festival, but in essence it is a night set

aside for worship and remembrance of Shiva. During this night there are elaborate *pujas* and *abhishekas* (bathing ceremonies) to the [Shiva Linga](#) that include offerings of special (Bilva) leaves. It is a day of fasting and a night of *bhajans* and prayer.

Holi

Also known as the Festival of Colors, Holi traditionally takes place over two days in late February or early March on the full moon day of the month of Phalgun. Holi is a popular spring festival observed particularly in North India that includes a bonfire and the throwing of colored powders. On the first day there is a bonfire which represents the burning the demoness known as Holika. It is the triumph of good over evil. On the second day colored powders, red, blue, yellow, green, white, are exchanged between the participants along with hugs and smiles. In the west the two days are usually merged into one afternoon or evening. It is a joyous festival as you can see from the photo.

Ugadi

Ugadi falls on the first day of the bright half of the month of Chaitra and it marks the beginning of the new year for much of south India including the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The word *ugadi* is derived from the Sanskrit “*yuga-adi*” which means, “beginning of the *yuga*.” Here *yuga* means the beginning of the year. In Maharashtra the day is called Gudi Padwa. In general Ugadi is celebrated more as a cultural event and less as a religious event.

Hanuman Jayanti

Hanuman Jayanti is a festival to celebrate the birth of Hanuman the famous “monkey” Deity worshipped throughout India. Hanuman Jayanti is celebrated during the month of Chaitra (March/April) to venerate Hanuman who was an ardent devotee of Rama. Hanuman is the embodiment of strength, energy and resourcefulness. He is able to assume any form at will, wield rocks, move mountains, jump through the air, and even hides in clouds. In folk tradition he is a deity with magical powers who has the ability to conquer evil spirits. During Hanuman Jayanti devotees visit temples and apply markings (*tika*) of reddish powder (sindhur) to their foreheads. This is considered to be good luck. According to the legend, while Sita, the wife of Rama, was applying sindhur to her head, Hanuman asked her why and she replied that this would ensure a long life for her husband. Hanuman then smeared his entire body with sindhur to ensure Rama’s immortality. For this reason you often see Hanuman covered in a particular orange kind of powder. Religious programs are organized in most Hindu temples and on this day Hanuman Jayanti is often celebrated with the recitation of the [Hanuman Chalisa](#), forty verses praising Hanuman taken from the Rama Charit Manas. This *chalisa* may be recited 108 times taking many hours.

Guru Purnima

The day of full moon in the month of Aashadh in the Hindu Calendar is traditionally celebrated as Guru Purnima by many Hindus. On this day devotees offer worship (*puja*) to their guru. According to tradition this was the day when Vyasadeva, author of the

Mahabharata and the Puranas, (See Vedas...) was born. All religious teachers (gurus) are revered on this day by remembering their life and teachings.

Vara Lakshmi

Vara Lakshmi *puja* is a special time when married ladies worship Lakshmi Devi, the consort of Vishnu and the embodiment of beauty, prosperity and wealth. The Vara Lakshmi *puja* is performed during the month of Shraavan (corresponding to August – September) on the Friday immediately following the full moon day (*puṇnima*). This festival is primarily followed within the south Indian community and is performed by married ladies to ensure wealth, good progeny, good health, and long life for their husbands.

Janmasthanami

Krishna Janmashtami, also known as Gokulashtami, Shri Krishna Jayanti, or sometimes just Janmasthanami is a festival celebrating the appearance of Lord Krishna, the eighth incarnation (*avatara*) of Vishnu. Literally *janma* means birth and *asthanami* means eighth.

Krishna Janmashtami is observed on the eighth lunar day of the dark half of (*krishna paksha*) the month of Shraavan when the [rohini nakshatra](#) is rising. There is often confusion regarding the right day to celebrate Janmasthanami because both calendar requirements do not always coincide perfectly and because calendars may be prepared for different parts of the world. Consequently, it is common to find different temples celebrating the festival a day apart.

The festival falls in the months of August/September of the western calendar. Janmasthanami is always celebrated with *puja* and a bathing ceremony for baby Krishna and it usually lasts until midnight, the time when Krishna appeared on earth. At midnight a special *aarti* takes place and sweets are thrown from the altar as a [prasada](#).

Ganesh Chaturthi

Ganesh Chaturthi is the festival day when Ganesha, the son of Shiva and Parvati, first appeared for all his devotees. The day is also known as Vinayaka Chaturthi and it is observed in the month of Bhadrapada starting on the fourth lunar day (*chaturthi*) of the waxing moon. This always comes between late August and early September. Traditionally the festival lasts for 10 days, but in most Hindu temples in the West, the festival is generally celebrated for just one day. Ganesha is widely worshipped as the supreme Deity of wisdom, prosperity and good fortune. Most Hindus will begin any *puja* or important event with the invocation of Ganesha.

Shraaddha/Pitri Paksha

Shraaddha is a Sanskrit word which literally means “based on faith.” A *shraaddha* therefore is a ritual based on faith. Of course, all rituals are *shraaddhas* in the widest sense of the

term, but specifically a *shraaddha* denotes a ritual performed to pay homage to one's deceased ancestors (*pitri*), and especially to one's deceased parents during the dark fortnight (*krishna paksha*) of the month of Bhadrapada (September/October). For this reason the dark fortnight of this month is also called the *Pitri Paksha*.

Performing a *shraaddha* is a way of expressing one's gratitude and thanks to parents and ancestors. The *shraaddha* period lasts for two weeks and includes every lunar day (*tithi*) as well as a new and full moon. In other words, it covers all the possible lunar times when a person could pass away. This means if an ancestor had passed away on the 4th lunar day of any month, whether waxing or waning, that person's *shraaddha* could be observed on the 4th lunar day of the *pitri paksha* period. If the person passed away on the 8th lunar day of any month, his *shraaddha* would be observed on the 8th lunar day of the *pitri paksha* period, and so on. The rituals used to observe a *shraaddha* will involve the pouring of water, a sacred fire (*havan*) and the feeding of priests and other honored guests in one's home.

Nava Ratri

Nava means "nine" and "ratri" means "night," so the Nava Ratri is a festival held for nine nights. There are two Nava Ratri cycles in each year, one in the spring and one in the fall. The spring Nava Ratri occur during the first nine lunar nights of the bright fortnight of the month of Chaitra. This corresponds to March-April on the Western calendar. The fall Nava Ratri occur during the first nine lunar nights of the bright fortnight of the month of Aashvini. This corresponds to September/October on the Western calendar. The fall Nava Ratri are more popular, but both Nava Ratri are a time of fasting, purification and spiritual renewal. Traditionally, the Nava Ratri are an auspicious time for starting new ventures such as moving into a new home or starting a business.

The fall time Nava Ratri especially focus on the worship of Devi in all her forms. Here is a nice interpretation of the fall season Nava Ratri.

The nine nights are divided into three sets of three nights each to adore three different aspects of the Goddess. On the first three nights the Goddess Durga is invoked as a spiritual force to destroy all impurities, vices and defects. On the second set of three nights the Goddess Lakshmi is adored as the giver of spiritual wealth. The final set of three nights is spent in worship of the Goddess Sarasvati, who is the embodiment of wisdom. In order to have full success in life, believers seek the blessings of all three aspects of the Goddess, who first destroys impurities from the heart, then endows the worshipper with spiritual powers, and finally gives the maturity of wisdom to know how to employ these great powers. Hence the nine nights of worship. Most common of all is the traditional Ras Garba dances that are performed during these Nava Ratri. This dance is traditionally a Gujarati custom, but it is quickly becoming the main focus of the Nava Ratri celebrations in the West.

Durgashtami

“Durga” refers to the Goddess Durga and “asthami” means 8th. Thus Durgashtami is the worship of the Goddess Durga Devi on the 8th lunar day during both the spring time and fall time Nava Ratri. Naturally, Durgashtami is always celebrated on the 8th day of the 9 night Nava Ratri festival. Commonly a special *havan* or fire worship ceremony is performed on that day. This is the day when Durgadevi killed the great buffalo demon, Mahishasura.

Vijaya Dashami

Also known as Dussehra, Vijaya Dashami is the celebration of Rama’s victory over the demon Ravana. The story of Rama’s killing of Ravana is found in the [Ramayana](#). *Vijaya* means victory and *dashami* means tenth and so Vijaya Dashami is the victory on the 10th lunar day. If the Nava Ratri are a time of purification and the attainment of spiritual powers and wisdom, the Vijaya Dashami celebration, which follows the day after the last Nava Ratri in the fall is the culmination of that time of purification with the final conquering of evil symbolized by Rama’s killing of Ravana. Commonly an effigy of Ravana is burnt when a flaming arrow is shot into Ravana’s heart by a devotee dressed up like Rama.

Diwali

In Sanskrit Diwali is written as *dipavali*, “*dipa*” is a lamp and “*avali*” means a row. So *dipavali* is literally a row of lamps. Today in many Western countries Diwali has become famous as The Festival of Lights. Similar to Christmas in terms of lights, Hindus will string lights around their houses and temples. Diwali is always celebrated on the new moon night at the end of the month of Aashwini. There are numerous interpretations regarding the origins of this famous festival, but the one I prefer connects to the Nava Ratri and Vijaya Dashami festivals. After killing Ravan on the 10th lunar day (Vijaya Dashami), Rama returns to Ayodhya, his capital, on the following new moon (*amavashya*) night. Diwali comes exactly twenty days after Vijaya Dashami. Since there is no moon on that day, the residents of Ayodhya are said to have illuminated the city by placing lamps on their homes and other building eager for Rama’s return. Hence the name Diwali. Other interpretations have to do with Krishna defeating the demon Narakasura, or in honor of the day Bali went to rule the nether-world according to the order of Vishnu. In all cases Diwali is the celebration of good conquering evil and the bringing of light back into the world. On the day of Diwali, many devotees wear new clothes, share sweets and snacks, and light firecrackers. Some North Indian business communities start their financial year on Diwali and so open their new business books on this day.

Annakuta

Annakuta generally takes place the day following Diwali. “*Anna*” means food and *kuta* means a “mound,” so literally Annakuta is a “mound of food.” The festival is celebrated in temples as members bring food offerings that are added to a growing number of dishes used to decorate an altar. Sometimes the festival is connected to another festival called Govardhana Puja, which celebrates the day Shri Krishna lifted the mountain known as Govardhana. In

this case the great “mound of food” becomes Govardhana mountain. Usually the festival includes a Krishna *puja*, *bhajan*s, a telling of the story of Krishan lifting Govardhan mountain and *arati*.

Lakshmi /Chopra Puja

Lakshmi puja is celebrated as part of the Diwali festival and is similar to Vara Lakshmi puja except that it is celebrated by all devotees and not just married ladies. Lakshmi Devi is the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, and so it is common for devotees to perform Lakshmi puja with gold or silver coins, jewelry, or a small sacred image of Lakshmi as the Goddess Lakshmi herself. Milk, yogurt, honey, ghee, sugar (*panchamrita*) and other liquids are liberally poured over the coins, jewelry or *murti* in an elaborate bathing ceremony of Lakshmi Devi. There is a related *puja* that is performed by business people at this time called Chopra Puja. Chopra refers to “business books,” and so during this season business people bring their check-books or even laptop computers to a priest to have Lakshmi Devi worshipped over their business books.

Sometimes we think of the time of the year from Janmashami until Diwali as *puja* season because many important festivals that include Ganesha Chaturthi, Shraaddha, the Nava Ratri, Vijaya Dashami, and Lakshmi puja cluster between these months.

Ekadashi

“Eka” means one and “dasha” means ten, therefore, *eka + dasha*= eleven. Eleven refers to the 11th [lunar day](#) of both the waxing and waning lunar month. Thus there are two *ekadashis* each month. Generally these days are observed as fasting days and they are observed by the most pious twice a month throughout the year as a day of prayer and meditation. Each of the *ekadashis* has a separate name. The two most common *ekadashis* are the *vaikuntha ekadashi* (celebrated in December/January) which is a famous Balaji festival, and the *nirjala ekadashi*. *Nirjala* means “without water” and so this *ekadashi* is ideally followed by total fasting including not even the taking of water. It is said that if one can follow just one *ekadashi* in the year this should be the one. Other pious Hindus may also fast on Mondays in honor of Shivaji or on Tuesdays in honor of Hanumanji.

Kalyanam

This is a particular type of *puja* that is most popular within the South Indian community. It is a divine wedding ceremony that is performed primarily on festival days. The word *kalyana* literally means “the beautiful” and what can be more beautiful than a divine wedding; hence the meaning of the term. Some examples of this ceremony include Rama Kalyanam, the wedding of Sita and Rama especially performed on the festival day of Rama Navami, another is the Shiva Kalyana the wedding of Shiva and his wives performed on Shiva Ratri and the Balaji Kalyana, the wedding of Balaji and his wives performed on important Balaji dates such as *Vaikuntha ekadashi*. Usually during the performance of a Kalyanam ceremony, two or more families get together and play the role of the bride’s and groom’s parents. A *mandapa*, the place where weddings are performed, is decorated and many of

the mantras that are ordinarily recited in wedding are chanted. It is a enjoyable and exciting ceremony.

A Ladies' Vow: Karwa Chauth

Karwa Chauth is a "ladies" festival that is especially popular within many of the communities from north India, particularly the Punjabi community. It is a vow to fast undertaken by married ladies, who offer prayers to the Goddess Gauri seeking the welfare, prosperity, and longevity of their husbands and families. The word, "karwa" refers to an earthen pot with a spout, which is seen as a domestic symbol for peace and prosperity. The word "chauth," means 4th and it refers to the fourth lunar day after the new moon in the month of Karttika (October-November) when the vow is followed.

On the day of the vow, married ladies will rise early, before the sun, bathe, perform some puja and recite a sankalpa (a special prayer that describes the vow they are about to follow) and then take a simple "pre-fasting" meal. For the rest of the day they will abstain from food including even water. In the later afternoon, a few hours before moonrise, they will dress in their best outfits and jewelry, which may include their wedding outfits, and then get together at a temple or someone's home for a collective puja. Typically the ladies will sit in a circle and perform a Gauri puja accompanied by a traditional story that describes the origins and benefits of following this fast. During the puja each lady holds a tray that is passed around the circle at different times making a total of seven rounds. These seven rounds match the seven circles that a bride and groom take around the sacred fire during their wedding ceremony. Once the puja is completed the ladies will go outside and wait for the moon to rise. They do not break their fast until they have seen the moon. Interestingly, they never look directly at the moon, but only through a screen like a sieve or at a reflection of the moon in water. After seeing the moon each lady will return home, bow to her husband for a blessing and then eat a simple vegetarian meal.

Installing a Sacred Image Murti Sthapana/Prana Pratishta

Within Hinduism there are special ceremonies where [sacred images](#) are formally installed in temples. These installation ceremonies are generally given two names: *Murti Sthapana* and *Prana Pratishta*. The word *murti* means sacred image and "*sthapana*" means "placing," and so the *murti sthapana* ceremony is the "placing of the sacred image." The other term, *Prana Pratishta* is a little less common, but still prevalent. "*Prana*" means "breath" and "*pratishta*" means "establishing," and so the *Prana Pratishta* ceremony is literally "establishing the breath" within the sacred image. In other words, it is bringing the sacred image to life. Instead of repeating both terms, I will just use the term *Murti Sthapana* to mean both. The *Murti Sthapana* ceremony is fairly common in the West at the present time because there is a renaissance of Hinduism taking place as many new temples

are being established. In another generation or so such ceremonies will likely become less common. In temples the ceremonies are generally elaborate and may last for many days and include many priests. Such ceremonies include immersing the sacred image in water, rice, and flowers; bathing the sacred image in milk, yogurt, clarified butter (ghee) and other sacred substances, and performing many [havans](#) and [pujas](#). Generally, a *Murti Sthapana* ceremony is not performed in private homes, or if it is, the ceremony is much simpler.

There are two ways to understand the *Murti Sthapana* ceremony. The first is as a contract. An agreement is established between the Deity and a temple congregation: the Deity agrees to “descend” into the sacred image, and the congregation agrees to care for the Deity in the form of service, [seva](#). The ceremony is literally the bringing and awakening of the Deity within the stone or metal image. The other view is more theological. By definition God is all-pervading and omni-present and so the idea of establishing the breath of the Deity within an image is impossible, God is already there! The purpose of the ceremony is not to establish the Deity within the image, but to awaken the mind of the participants, through the power of ritual, to the presence of divinity within the sacred image. At the beginning of the ceremony people see only stone or metal, but at the end they see God! The real installation takes place not in the stone or metal image, but in the minds of the participants. This is the power of ritual. The culmination of such a ceremony is when the “eyes” of the image are actually opened. In some instances, a sculptor will chip away at the eyes of the image and “open” them up. More commonly, a chief guest will be invited to remove a covering from the eyes of the image with a golden coin or similar object. The first thing the newly infused Deity will see is an image of Him or Herself as a mirror is held before the newly “awakened” image.

Ways of Worship: Puja and Archana

A *puja* is a religious ceremony performed in temples or in homes that involves worship through the use of a sacred image. At its most basic level of understanding, *puja* is a symbolic means of communication, a way to reach out to higher powers. There are many ways that we can reach out to divinity: through prayer, meditation, acts of charity, and so forth, but one of the most important and common means is through ritual. In fact, ritual is the foundation of worship and all religions employ rituals as a means to contact the Divine. The Christian Eucharist, the Jewish Seder (passover meal), the Islamic practice of bowing towards Mecca, the Buddhist use of the prayer-wheel and, of course, the Hindu *puja* are all important uses of ritual that allow a worshipper to communicate with higher powers. The word *puja* derives from the Sanskrit root *puj*, to honor or respect.

A *puja* can be short or long, lasting minutes or days, simple or elaborate, involving just the worshipper or many priests and guests, but in every case *puja* involves the invocation of a Deity as “a guest” in the home, temple or heart of the performer. A *puja* usually employs

some kind of sacred image or photo, which serves as a focal point wherein the “spirit” of the Deity is invited to reside for the duration of the ceremony. The sacred image or photo serves as a kind of “receptacle” to house the spirit of the Deity. The image is usually made of metal, wood or, now a days even plastic, but it could even be just a sketch of a Deity drawn on the ground in sand or earth. One can think of the sacred image as an icon that becomes “switch on” or “surcharged” with the spirit of the Deity during the time of *puja*. Sometimes, instead of using a specific sacred image or photo, just a coconut with leaves in a copper pot is used as a “generic” receptacle. Any God or Goddess can then be invited into this receptacle for the ritual. *Puja* can be viewed as either the Deity coming down to man and appearing in a form comprehensible to human beings, or man creating a symbolic form of the Deity that is then used to reach out towards the Deity. In other words, *puja* can be either a descending process or an ascending process. This is a matter of theology and faith.

Once a particular Deity was been evoked, *puja* is simply the receiving and adoration of that God or Goddess as a guest. The Deity is then worshiped in a logical and loving manner as one would treat a human guest. A formal *puja* usually involves 16 separate offerings made to the Deity, but could also involve as many as 27 items of worship or as few as just a couple of items. These items include welcoming and seating of the Deity; washing the feet, hands and mouth; bathing, dressing, ornamentation of the Deity; feeding and worship with incense, lamps and prayers and finally, sending back or releasing the Deity from the receptacle. In its more simple form, *puja* may only include incense and a lamp. The process is totally malleable and can easily be adjusted to suit the conditions of the worshipper.

Pujas are performed both in temples (*mandirs*) and in private homes. In temples, they are usually associated with the daily worship of the temple’s sacred images and are performed only by priests. They are also performed on special festival days or upon request of individuals by temple priests. In homes, *pujas* are performed for special occasions such as anniversaries, graduations, the birth of children, memorial days, or simply for general prosperity and peace within the family. In this case, the family members themselves perform the *puja* under the guidance of a priest. Commonly performed *pujas* include Ganesha, Satya Narayana, Durga, and Lakshmi *pujas*. In fact, a *puja* can be performed for any God or Goddess or even a combination of Deities. Perhaps the most important part of a *puja* is the final blessing by the priest and the distribution of [prasada](#) at the end. The purpose of a *puja* is to evoke the presence of a Deity and then to receive the blessing of that Deity. One of the jobs of the priest is to give these blessings. *Prasada* is the blessed food that has been offered to the Deity during the *puja*. This food is then offered to all those who have attended the *puja*. *Prasada* is the blessing of the Deity.

Hinduism is full of many sacred rituals and colorful ceremonies. These include weddings, the naming of children, hair cutting ceremonies and funerals. Collectively, these ceremonies are called [samskaras](#), rites of passage. *Pujas* always form the basis of Hindu *samskaras* and during the course of a marriage, for example, many small *pujas* will be performed. There

may be a dozen *pujas* contained within the one large marriage ceremony and these *pujas* involve the invocation of various Gods and Goddess to bless the couple and even the worship of ancestors, *pitri-puja*, to give blessings to the couple.

Archana

Akin to *puja* is *archana*. Technically, *archana* and *puja* are the same thing and the words could be interchanged, however, in practice *puja* generally refers to a more formal “sit down” ceremony, while *archana* is a ceremony performed by a temple priest on a “walk-in basis.” Typically, a devotee will come to a temple with a basket of fruits and flowers and perhaps a coconut and the priest will offer these items to the Deity on the altar along with a lamp and prayers. The devotee will then receive the food offerings back as a *prasada* or blessings from the Deity. This is *archana*.

The Fire Ritual: Havan/Homa

A *havan* or *homa* is similar to a [puja](#) in the sense that both are common modes of Hindu worship and both are symbolic forms of communication. The words *havan* and *homa* each derive from the Sanskrit root *hu*, meaning to offer, to present and to eat. Generally, the word *havan* is heard in North India and *homa* is used in South India, but in either case, the meanings are identical. I will use the word *havan*, but I could just as easily use the word *homa*.

A *havan* is a religious ceremony performed in temples and in homes that involves worship through the use of a sacred fire. The use of fire as a means of

worship is the most ancient of all rites, going back to the earliest Vedic times. This fire ritual is described in elaborate detail in the [Brahmanas](#). From the earliest of Vedic times and even to present day, fire (Agni) was viewed as the chief of the Gods. In fact, the first verse of the *Rig Veda* is addressed to Agni, the fire God. “I praise Agni, the chosen Priest, God, minister of sacrifice... .”

In ancient times the fire sacrifice was an elaborate ceremony that could involve the sacrifice of horses, cows and goats, as well as gold, gems and other precious items into the fire. Today, a *havan* is a simplified ritual that rarely involves animal sacrifice or the placing of precious items into the fire. Instead, rice or a kind of popery is commonly substituted for these items, but still the basic meaning of the ritual remains. This may sound odd or glib, but an easy way to think of the *havan* is as a symbolic “postal system.” The fire container is the postbox, fire is the postman, the items placed into the fire are the message and [mantra](#) is the means of address. Generally, wood and clarified butter (*ghee*) are used as the fuel. The fire container, which may be brick or metal, is called a *kunda*, and when made of brick it is built to specific dimensions and shapes according to the purposes of the ceremony. For home use, generally a small metal *havan kunda* is used instead of a brick one because of its

ease of setup and portability. In a formal situation, a brick *kunda* will be used. *Kundas* have different shapes: square, rectangular, round and triangular, but in most cases the square *kunda* is used.

A *havan* ceremony involves a priest and a host(s) and guests sitting before the *kunda* while mantras are recited and various items such as ghee, rice, herbs, foodstuffs, and other items are placed into the fire. Through the mantras, fire, is asked to take the prayers and consumed offerings (hence the meaning of *hu* "to eat") to the intended Divinity. For example, if one wanted to perform a *havan* for increased health, one could direct the offerings to the sun Deity, Surya. If one wanted rain, one might direct their prayers and offerings to the rain Deity, Indra. If one wanted to increase luck and general prosperity one could direct Agni to take the offerings to Ganesha and Lakshmi, two Divinities in charge of luck and fortune. In this way, during a *havan* many Deities may be propitiated with a specific focus on just one or two, depending on the purpose.

[Puja](#) and *havan* can also be combined. In fact, this is most common. For example, a ceremony could begin with *puja* to a sacred image of Ganesha and then a *puja* using a copper pot, coconut and leaves to Varuna and then go on to include a *havan* directed towards Vishnu, Shiva and Durga Devi. In common speech the complete ceremony would be called a *puja*, but in fact there are many *pujas* and many *havans* all combined into one.

Sacred Bathing: Abhishekam

An *abhisheka* is a religious bathing ceremony. The word *abhisheka* means a sprinkling. It is derived from the root *sic*, to wet, and with the prefix *abhi*, "around," *abhisheka* is literally, "wetting around." An *abhisheka* is the bathing part of a [puja](#) that usually is done with sacred water. In *puja*, a Deity is called, seated, greeted, bathed, dressed, fed and praised. The bathing of the Deity is the *abhisheka* part of the *puja*. In some cases, the main focus of the *puja* is the bathing ceremony itself. This is especially the case with the worship of the [Shiva Linga](#) or the famous South Indian form of Vishnu known as [Balaji](#). During an elaborate bathing ceremony a Deity is bathed not only in water, but also with milk, yogurt, butter milk, honey, clarified butter, sugar, and all kinds of fruit juices. After this bathing, the sacred image is dressed, ornamented, fed and praised with hymns accompanied with bells, drums and other instruments.

Initiation: Diksha

Diksha is a ceremony of initiation and the entering of a religious order ([sampradaya](#)). How *diksha* is performed varies with the religious order, but in general it involves a initiating guru giving a mantra to a student and having the student agree to follow a certain religious practice and perhaps even accept a certain set of beliefs. In some religious

orders *diksha* even involves the branding and the giving of a new name to the student. A religious order that focuses on Vishnu, for example, may brand a student with the symbols of Vishnu on the upper arms of the student. Hinduism does not have any formal ceremony of conversion, but if we wanted to find some ceremony that comes closest to a conversion ceremony, the *diksha* ceremony is the one. For a detailed example of how *diksha* is performed in a Vaishnava *sampradaya*, see the article [Pancha Samskara, The Process of Initiation](#).

The Satya Narayana Puja

There is a popular puja called the Satya Narayana Katha that is performed regularly by many Hindu families. This puja is generally performed in the home, but may also be done in a temple. The Satya Narayan puja can be performed on any day. It is not a puja confined to any festivities, but (full moon days or sankranti are considered to be most auspicious day for this puja. Performing this puja in the evening is considered more appropriate, however, one can do it in the morning as well.

On the day of the puja, the devotees should fast and after bathing the puja can begin. This puja is conducted to ensure abundance in one's life. Many people carry out this puja immediately after or along with an auspicious occasion like a marriage or moving into a new house or any other success in life. In most cases the host will invite many family members and friends. The puja has two parts, the puja proper and the reading of the story (katha) after the puja. The word Satya means truth and Narayana is a form of Vishnu and so the expression means "Narayana the Lord of Truth." In other words, the puja is a Vishnu puja with a particular story attached. The story says purports to be from the S

Sacred Images

Do Hindus Worship Idols?

The answer to this question is most certainly yes! Hindus do worship idols, but so do Christians, Jews and even Muslims. In fact, it is impossible to conceive of God without some form of idol, for idol worship is the way of religion. Let me explain.

In Hinduism there are many words to describe the nature of God, and we will refer to them as the need arises, but in this regard, the most relevant word is *acintya*, which means “inconceivable,” “beyond thought.” The true nature of God is, therefore, beyond the ability of human beings to understand, yet we have a need to reach out in our mind and try to conceive of God, so we create an image of God in our minds. This mental image of God is an idol. Most people, including Hindus, think of an idol solely as a graven or carved image and, while this is true, an idol is a carved image, it is also a form that begins in the mind. It is a mental form. Consequently, mental forms are also idols.

The Image of Father

With this in mind, perhaps the most common mental images that human beings use to conceive of God is as a Father, a King or a Mother. The idea of a father, a king or a mother is, therefore, a mental idol, a tool we use, to conceive of what is actually inconceivable, beyond thought. Convert that mental idol into a wooden or stone image and you have created a graven idol. From a Hindu perspective there is little difference between a mental idol and physical idol. One is just an extension of the other. And so, if you conceive of God as the supreme Father, or as the King of kings, or the divine Mother, you have created an idol, a material image with which to approach God. Human beings have no choice other than to approach God through these idols, even though all idols are simply crude and limited approximations of what God is in reality. Of all religions Hinduism seems the most adept at converting mental idols into physical form as graven idols, or what we prefer to call, sacred images. In fact, we generally teach our students not to use the word idol at all because it gives the wrong impression amongst many non Hindus. Indeed, Hindu temples are full of such sacred images of God and Hindus have special ways to install and interact with these images in their temples and homes, and in most cases these images are viewed, not as material images, but as spiritual forms. This is the result of seeing through faith.

Which Image?

Another Sanskrit word that describes the nature of God and which comes into play in regard to idols is *sarva-gata*, which means literally “gone everywhere.” In other words, *sarva-gata* refers to the all pervading nature of God. God is in all things and in all places. In fact, you are sitting or standing on God right now, which means, technically speaking, you could

worship the floor or chair or anything as an idol of God. This, however, is generally not done. Instead, Hindus worship specific images that are described in [scripture](#) (*shastra*). The technical name for these sacred images of God is *arcya-vigraha*. *Arcya* means ‘worship-able’ and *vigraha* means “form” and so *arcya-vigraha* is the “form to be worshipped.” We can also say that God agrees to appear in these special forms that can be understood by human beings in order to allow Himself to be worshipped. A more common term that is used instead of *arcya-vigraha* is *murti*. It simply means divine form. These sacred images that you find in Hindu temples and homes are installed according to specific rituals also described in scripture (See [Prana Pratishtha](#)). How Hindus perceive of these images varies according to [adhikara](#), but one simple way is to see these sacred images as “mail boxes.” Devotees come to a temple bringing fruits and flowers and all their prayers and hopes and stand before the sacred image and “post” their offerings and prayers through the sacred image. The worshippers are not bowing down to stone, they are not worshipping a statue; they are approaching these sacred images as the means to get to the God behind the image. In a similar way, a Christian may kneel before a crucifix of Jesus and pray. The worshipper is not worshipping the wooden cross, but instead he is approaching his object of devotion, Jesus, through the manifestation of the crucifix. This is a form of idol worship from a Hindu perspective. Even a Muslim, who will never worship any form, cannot help but have some abstract mental image or concept of God. This too is an idol of God, albeit an abstract mental idol. It can not be helped. This is what I mean when I say there is no way to conceive of and worship God except through some form of idol worship.

Language as an Idol

Closely related to these ideas of idol worship is the use of human language to express our understanding of God. The very words *acintya* or *sarva-gata*, are human attempts to touch God using language. But even language is a product of this world and therefore is limited to the boundaries of physical reality. Language, even though it is a crude instrument used to express what is beyond thought is still the best instrument we have. So when we speak about God as our Father, our King, our Lord or our Mother, these words are also idols of God. But, again, how can we speak of the divine without these idols of language? Idols of the divine cannot be avoided.

Nine Planets: Nava Grahas?

Hinduism and astrology are still intimately connected. In the past it was common that astrology and religion were related, even within Christianity, but over time astrology became separated and even rejected from many religious cultures, including Judaism and Christianity. In the case of Hinduism, however, this never happened, and to this day astrology has remained a vibrant part of the religion. Even now, most educated Hindus will seek astrological advice at some point in their lives. One of the key components of astrology are the *Nava Grahas*. Most Hindus think of the *Nava Grahas* as the nine planets. The

word *nava* does mean nine, but *graha* does not directly mean planet. Instead, *graha*, comes from the Sanskrit root *grih* which means “to seize” or “to take hold of.” Literally, these nine “planets” are nine “seizers,” so if we can be seized or taken hold of, we can be influenced. The *Nava Grahas* are, therefore, the nine influences over our lives. In the early days of Hinduism, the tradition speaks of the enlightened seers, [rishis](#), who looked out across physical reality and saw that life was “influenced” by different forces, and of all the forces that influenced life, nine were the most influential, and so they were called the *nava grahas*, “the nine influences.” These nine influences are: the sun, the moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Rahu and Ketu. This is the Hindu order and it follows the days of the week in most Indian and even many European languages. Sunday, for example, is governed by the sun, hence the name Sunday. Monday is governed by the moon, (add an extra “o” and you get moon-day); Tuesday by Mars (Martes in Spanish); Wednesday by Mercury (Miércoles); Thursday by Jupiter (Jueves, Jovian for Jupiter); Friday by Venus, (Viernes), and Saturday, of course, is governed by Saturn. In addition, to these seven points of influence, there are two others called Rahu and Ketu that are a little more difficult to understand.

Rahu and Ketu

It is a common mistake to think that the nine planets (now eight) that we used to hear about in Western astronomy are the same as the *Nava Grahas* of Hinduism. There is no Uranus, Neptune or Pluto in ancient Hinduism. (They were added later.) In spite of this, even in Hindu temples, one sees the two Hindu *grahas*, Rahu and Ketu often misunderstood as Pluto or Neptune. In Hindu mythology, Rahu and Ketu are described as two parts of a great demon who swallow up the sun and moon. These *grahas* are described as invisible or shadowy planets because they cannot be observed like the other *grahas*, but in fact, they are mathematical points of calculation. Imagine the path of the sun across the sky as a great wheel in the heavens. This path is called the solar ecliptic. Now imagine a similar path of the moon as it makes its monthly journey across the sky. Where the moon’s path crosses the sun’s path at the top of the circle is called the point of Rahu, and 180 degrees to the south, where these two lines again intersect is called Ketu. In modern astronomy these points are called the north and south lunar nodes. Hindu astrology considers these points to exert influence over life and so they are considered two important points of influence. They are, consequently, part of the *Nava Grahas*. Neither the sun, the moon, Rahu or Ketu are planets, nor does the word *graha* mean planet in the same sense that we understand the world planet today, and so this is why it is incorrect to call the *Nava Grahas* nine “planets.” In Hindu mythology Rahu and Ketu chase the sun and the moon across the heavens, and from time to time, swallow them up and cause a solar or a lunar eclipse. In fact, Rahu and Ketu do play a role in eclipses because it is only when the sun and the moon align at the points of Rahu and Ketu, the north and south lunar nodes, that an eclipse can take place.

The Danger from Solar and Lunar Eclipses

There is a common Hindu belief that it is inauspicious and dangerous to look at an eclipse or even to be outside in the light of an eclipse. Temples close, homes lock their doors and

shade their windows, people are told not to eat, and it is thought to be an especially dangerous time for pregnant women. After the eclipse temples and homes are washed and *pujas* are performed to purify the atmosphere. As noted above, during an eclipse, Rahu or Ketu “swallow” up the sun or the moon, and because their influences are highly negative, their mixture with the sun’s or the moon’s light creates highly toxic rays of light that reach the earth. It is said that these rays contaminate wherever they strike and cause all kinds of havoc, including even miscarriages and deformities in pregnant females. This is the reason that eclipses are considered inauspicious and why people should not eat or travel in the open during an eclipse.

Nava Graha Murtis Installed in Temples

It is common to see the Nava Grahas installed as [murtis](#) in Hindu temples and people will perform [pujas](#) to these *grahas* in order to propitiate these influences. It is often the case that a Hindu will consult an astrologer and be told that one of the *grahas* is exerting a negative influence over his life and that he should perform a *puja* in order to diminish the negative influence. Occasionally, even the reverse is true, someone may be told that a particular *graha* is exerting a positive influence and so the person may perform a *puja* to increase the positive influence. There is a popular *puja* called “Graha Shanti” to make peace with the *grahas* (*shanti* means peace) that is often performed before weddings and other important times. You can think of a Nava Graha *puja* as paying the cosmic “utility bill.” Indeed, the *Nava Grahas* still play an important role in Hinduism.

From an astrological perspective here is how these nine *grahas* are understood in Hindu astrology. The sun represents the soul, the heart, the father, authority, heat, power and ambition. The moon is the mind, mother, water, coolness, emotions, memory and common sense. Mars is courage, bravery, sports, competition, maleness, passion, action, war, cuts and burns. Mercury is intelligence, learning, teaching, speech, expression, communication and writing. Jupiter is fortune, expansion, wealth, children, religion, philosophy and wisdom. Venus is marriage, love, romance, luxuries, prosperity, femininity, artistic expression, grace, and beauty. Saturn is slowness, struggle, discipline, dryness, labor, asceticism, accidents, and chronic disease. Rahu is material desire, dullness, ignorance, laziness, sleep and addictions and ancestral karma. Ketu is asceticism, spirituality, psychic ability, ghosts, eccentricity and occultism. For more details see the section entitled, Hindu Astrology.

The Sacred Image: Shri Murti

Most Hindu temples will have sacred images of Gods and Goddesses. In Sanskrit these sacred images are called [murtis](#), which literally means, “forms or shapes.” In general, Hindus worship through the help of these *murtis* whether in temples or in private homes. In temples two kinds of sacred images can be found: *chala murtis* and *achala murtis*. The word “*chala*” means “movable” and “*achala*” means “immovable.” The *achalamurti* is the sacred image, usually made of stone, that is permanently installed in the temple. Such images are

generally between three and five feet in height and are cemented into place. The *chala murti*, on the other hand, is a small sacred image that can easily be moved by priests. *Chalamurtis* are generally made of metal and are between one and two feet in size and they can usually be seen on an altar standing in front of or to the side of the *achala murti*. Another more common name used to describe the movable or *chala murti* is Utsava Murti. “Utsava” means festival, so the Utsava Murti is the “festival *murti*” so called because it can be easily moved around for festival purposes that include processions, [bathing ceremonies](#) and other [sacred marriage ceremonies](#) (see *kalyana*).

Special Murtis: Balaji, Jagannatha and Shri Nathji

Throughout India there are a huge number of ancient holy sites and many of these sites have famous temples dedicated to a specific Deity. A few of these temples have opened “franchise” temples in the West and other parts of the world, that is to say, replica versions of the original sacred image found in India have been installed in new Western temples. Two such sacred images that you will see most commonly are Balaji, Jagannatha Swami and Shri Nathji.

Balaji

A hundred kilometers north of Chennai (Madras) in the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India is the famous Balaji temple at a place called Tirumala. This region is famous for its seven hills called the Venkata Hills and so the full name of the Balaji *murti* is Venkateshwara, the Lord of the Venkata hills. The town at the base of these hills is called Tirupati which is the more common name on the maps of this region. You visit Balaji by first coming to Tirupati and then walking or driving up the Venkata hills to Tirumala.

The Balaji *murti* is worshipped as a form of Vishnu and the Sri Vaishnavas, who are the predominate [sampradaya](#) of Vaishnavas in this area, say that Balaji is the Kali Yuga *avatara*, the specific form of Vishnu who incarnates on earth during the current age. In the *Bhagavad Gita* it is said that in different ages, God incarnates on earth to establish true religious teachings and to give protections to His devotees and to destroy the sinful. Balaji is said to be the current *avatara* for this age. Another name for Balaji is *Srinivasa* which literally means the abode of Lakshmi. Lakshmi is the consort or wife of Balaji and for many Sri Vaishnavas, Lakshmi holds particular importance. The main feature for Balaji, for which he is most famous, is his sacred bath, [abhisheka](#). All most every major city in America now has a Balaji temple or image in their region and every Saturday morning you can attend one of these sacred bathing ceremonies. During these ceremonies Balaji is liberally bathed in milk, butter milk, honey, sugar-water, fruit juices and other substances. It is a wonderful sight to see.

Jagannatha Swami

South of Calcutta in the state of Orrisa on India's east coast is the famous Jagannatha Temple at the city of Puri. Here there is an ancient temple dedicated to three famous Deities, Jagannatha, Subhadra and Baladeva. The Gaudiya (Bengal) Vaishnavas of this area worship these sacred images as forms of Krishna, His sister Subhadra and His brother Balarama. Other devotees see these forms in a slightly different way as Vishnu, Durga and Shiva. Regardless, these three *murtis* can now be seen throughout the world in Hare Krishna temples. Jagannatha (Krishna) is most important to Gaudiya Vaishnavas and so when the Hare Krishna movement established itself in the West, Jagannatha came with them. Today there is an annual festival called Ratha Yatra that is celebrated in major cities around the world. The Ratha Yatra is sometimes called the Festivals of Chariots because during the festival these three sacred images are placed in chariots and pulled by devotees through the street in a parade accompanied by singing and chants of Krishna's names. The original Ratha Yatra festival is held annually in Puri during the month of June when literally millions of people attend.

Shiva Lingam

Most Gods and Goddesses within Hinduism are worshipped through the use of a sacred image, known as a *murti*. Every Deity has their particular image or icon that is used in puja. It is therefore common in temples to see a sacred image of Shiva along with His consort Parvati. But there is another sacred image of Shiva that is even more common than Shiva and Parvati seated beside each other and this is the Shiva Lingam. The Shiva Lingam is an aniconic form of Shiva because it has no specific features that could be recognized as Shiva if one did not already know what the form was. A Shalagram Shila, which is a black fossil stone used in the worship of Vishnu, is a similar aniconic form.

The antiquity of the Shiva Lingam is uncertain. There are some who claim that certain remains found within the Indus Valley Civilization are Shiva Lingams. This claim, however, is disputed and is far from being universally accepted. In addition, there is no mention in the Rig Veda or any of the other Shruti Vedic texts of the Shiva Lingam. There are, however, many references to the Shiva Lingam throughout the later Smriti Vedas and so it is uncertain at what point the Shiva Lingam became popular within Hinduism. But popular it is! Virtually all temples and Hindu homes have a Shiva Lingam.

In many cases a Shiva Lingam is a one piece image usually made of stone, but a true Shiva Lingam is comprised of two parts: the actual Lingam itself, which has a cylindrical shape, and a stand or peetham, which supports the Lingam. In the case of a one piece image the Lingam and the stand are together. There are two basic interpretations of what the Shiva Lingam actually is. The first is that God, being ultimately formless, is represented by a formless image, the Lingam. One meaning of the word "lingam" is "sign" and therefore the Lingam is

a “sign” of the formless nature of God. The second interpretation is that the Lingam is a symbolic phallus and that the stand which holds the Lingam is the female organ, and therefore the Lingam sitting within its stand is a symbolism for cosmic union and creation. Naturally, this latter interpretation is offensive to many worshippers, but given the imagery of ancient Hinduism with its elaborate sexual depictions found on many temple towers (*gopurams*) in South India, the phallic interpretation of the Shiva Lingam is not out of the question, especially given that another meaning of the word lingam is “male organ.”

The most common use of the Shiva Lingam is for sacred bathing (*abhisheka*) and so the worship of a Shiva Lingam always includes an *abhisheka* usually of milk and water, but commonly with other liquids, including yogurt, honey and clarified butter as well.

Practice

Mantras

Simply stated, a mantra is a religious utterance composed in Sanskrit verse and taken from the some part of the Vedas. In other words, a mantra is a piece of Vedic poetry. The verses of the Vedas, including both the Shruti Vedas as well as the Smriti Vedas, are mostly written in verse and therefore are considered mantras. The reason the Vedas are primarily composed in verse as opposed to prose is because they were originally meant to be memorized, not written down, and verse is much easier to memorize than prose.

A mantra is also an utterance composed in a special way to effect a certain result. For example, there can be a specific mantra addressed to a certain Deity, which when chanted properly, is thought to evoke the presence and powers of that Deity. The Gayatri mantra is one such example. The Hare Krishna mantra is another example. In these cases the mantras are often chanted over and over again in a process called japa. The repetition of mantras is called mantra-japa and a devotee many take a vow to repeat a certain mantra many times a day. Often during initiation (diksha) a teacher (guru) will give a special mantra to a disciple and ask him to chant it a certain number of times a day on a set of beads called a japa-mala, similar to a rosary.

A mantra can also be used as part of a spell or charm. There are portions of the Vedas that contain such mantras meant to achieve various purposes. Mantras also have a use in meditation to help achieve a certain state of consciousness. One derivation for the word mantra is man+tra. Man means the mind (from manas) and tra means “to cross,” so a mantra is an utterance that ‘crosses the mind.’ In meditation the mind is “crossed over” or silenced. Hence the meaning of the term mantra.

Sacred Songs: Bhajana/Kirtana

Bhajana and *Kirtana* both mean “to praise” and “to glorify” a Deity through song, music and dance. Hindus from different parts of India will use one term over the other, in much the same way that [havan](#) and [homa](#) are interchanged by devotees from different regions of India. *Kirtana* comes from the Sanskrit root *kirt*, “to call out” and *bhajana* comes from *bhaj*, “to practice.” Apart from praising a Deity through song and music, *bhajana* can also have the added meaning of “spiritual practice.” A devotee, for example, may have a

personal *bhajana* that he or she practices on a daily basis that may include [puja](#), [japa](#), study, meditation, prayer, and so on.

Used in the sense of praise and glorification, *bhajana* and *kirtana* involve a group of devotees coming together in a temple, hall or home, with musical instruments to sing the glories of a Deity or, more usually, many Deities. *Bhajana* and *Kirtana* are often preceded by a short *puja* for sanctification and to evoke the Deities who are the object of veneration. At the conclusion of *bhajana* and *kirtana*, [prasada](#), in the form of offered food, is always distributed. Without this *prasada* the program is not complete.

Kirtana also has a variation called *sankirtana* which is the public praise and glorification of a Deity. *Sankirtana* parties, groups of devotees, go into the public areas of a city and walk down the streets or sit in the parks singing and chanting the names and a Deity. The Hare Krishna movement is famous for the performance of *sankirtana* in many Western cities. In India *sankirtana* is commonly performed by many other groups of devotees as well.

The Meaning of Sounds

The Reciting of OM, Chanting Shanti, Blowing a Conch and Ringing Bells

Why do we blow a conch?

In the Bhagavad-gita it is described that at the beginning of the great battle Lord Krishna blew this divine conch and then was followed by the others, Yuddhisthira, Bheema, Arjuna, and so on. The sound of the conch is the sound of victory and success. We blow a conch at the beginning of aratis and other programs as an auspicious sound to invite victory and success. I particularly like to blow a conch at the end of a wedding as the newly married couple walk down the aisle.

Why do we ring bells in a temple?

It is common to ring bells in temples during puja and arati. A priest, for example, will ring a bell as he performs puja. This is to signal people that a puja is taking place and they should pay attention. Bells are rung during arati for similar reasons and to create a pleasing musical effect on the mind. Sometimes a bell is positioned at the entrance to a temple so that devotees can ring the bell as they enter the temple. The temple is the house of God and so it is only polite to make a sound before one enters. Don't we always knock before entering someone's home? Besides, ringing bells is fun.

Why do we say Shaanti at the end of havans?

The word shanti means peace and it is recited not just at the end of havans but also at other times during most pujas. There is a well known Vedic prayer called Shanti Patha that asks for peace throughout creation that is commonly recited at the end of havans. Here is a translation:

May we find peace in the sky above us and in the highest reaches of heaven. May we find peace on land and in the waters. May all herbs and the food that sustains us bring us physical and spiritual peace. May we find peace in every region of this divine creation. Let us seek ultimate peace in that Supreme God. Let peace reign throughout the world!

Why do we chant Om?

At its most basic level the word “om” is a solemn affirmation and respectful assent somewhat on par with Amen in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Om is uttered at the beginning and end of sacred prayers. The word first appears in the Upanishads as a mystical sound and the object of deep meditation. There are, of course, many works written on the significance and meaning of this sound. Most commonly it is divided into three parts a, u, m, and meaning is been given to each part. In the Mandukya Upanishad the letter “a” represents waking consciousness, the letter “u” represents dream consciousness, and the letter “m” represents the consciousness of deep sleep, and finally the whole word is said to represent a 4th state of consciousness which is unknowable, unspeakable and “into which the whole world passes.” Another interpretation equates “a” with Vishnu, “u” with Shiva and “m” with Brahma. Yet another interpretation equates Om with the Greek, “logos,” “the word”, found at the beginning of St John’s gospel. I suggest that the syllable Om should not be analyzed or interpreted at all. It just is. But if you must interpret it, take it as the sound of God.

Gayatri Mantra

There is a famous prayer in Sanskrit that first appears in the *Rig Veda* (iii /62/10) called the *gayatri* [mantra](#) that almost every Hindu knows. In roman letters it is as follows:

*Om bhur bhuvah svah
tat-savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah pracodayat*

Literally hundreds of books and thousands of web pages are currently dedicated to explaining the esoteric meaning of this mantra, so I will not repeat that discussion. Instead I will provide a basic grammatical explanation of this most famous mantra and if you are new to Hinduism and want to know at least one prayer, this is the prayer you should learn.

Gayatri is actually the name for a Sanskrit poetical meter that contains three lines of eight syllables each. There are, therefore, many *gayatri* mantras, but this particular one is the oldest and most well known of all *gayatri* mantras. In Hinduism all Gods and Goddesses have a *gayatri* mantra associated with them. There is a *gayatri* for Ganesha, one for Shiva, one for Durga, one for Vishnu, one for Lakshmi, and so on. Most people are unaware of this fact and when Hindus talk about the *gayatri* mantra they mean **thee** *gayatri* mantra shown above, which is addressed to Savitri, the sun. The first line: *om bhur bhuvah svah* that you

see above is not actually part of a *gayatri* mantra. It is a special utterance called *vyahriti* that has been added to the beginning of this famous *gayatri*. This *vyahriti* is important in and of itself and we will discuss it after we have explained the basic *gayatri* mantra. The three lines of this *gayatri* mantra are:

1. *tat-savitur varenyam.*
2. *bhargo devasya dhimahi, and*
3. *dhiyo yo nah pracodayat*

Here is a word-for-word breakdown of the *gayatri* mantra that most Hindus know.

tat—that (God)
savitur—of the sun
varenyam—the best
bhargo (bhargas)—light, illumination
devasya—divine
dhimahi—let us meditate (a verb)
dhiyo (dhiyah)—thought(s)
yo (yah)—which
nah—of us, our
pracodayat—May it push, inspire (a verb)

The deity associated with this *gayatri* mantra, as we mentioned, is the sun, *savitri*. (The second word of this mantra.) The more common name for the sun is *surya*. Generally “*surya*” is the name for the sun while it is above the horizon and *savitri* is the sun as it is rising and setting, just below the horizon. There is a great metaphor in Hinduism that when understood explains a lot about the Hindu way of seeing the universe. The metaphor is: “the sun equals light, which equals knowledge, which equals consciousness.” This metaphor applies not only to the *gayatri* mantra, but also to the design of temples and homes, and to details such as why we circumambulate from left to right and offer incense and lamps in a clockwise direction.

The most important word in the *gayatri* mantra is the word, “*tat*,” which is a neuter pronoun meaning “that.” It is a reference to “that One,” God. According to the metaphor mentioned above, the sun, which is the source of illumination, heat, food and so many other things in our life, can naturally be seen as the “representative” or symbol of God in this world. There are two verbs in the *gayatri* mantra, *dhimahi* and *pracodayat*. *Dhimahi* means, “let us meditate.” So, “let us meditate on the light (*bhargo*) of the sun which represents God.” This is the basic meaning of the first part of the *gayatri* mantra.

The second part is also straight forward. The verb *pracodayat* literally means, “it should push,” but in more poetic language we can translate it as “let it inspire.” *Dhiyah* is

“thoughts,” so *dhiyo yo nah prachodayat* means, “may our thoughts be inspired” So the most literal meaning of the *gayatri* mantra is, “Let us meditate on the light of the sun which represents God, and may our thoughts be inspired by that divine light.”

As with most things Hindu, the *gayatri* mantra is also personified as the Goddess, Gayatri Devi. She is the wife of Brahma and is pictured with five heads sitting on a lotus. She is the embodiment of the supreme [brahman](#). You will also see other depictions of Gayatri Devi that vary somewhat.

The *gayatri* mantra is traditionally whispered into the ear of a young boy in a ceremony called The Thread Giving Ceremony (*upanayana*), which is one of the [rites of passage](#) followed by many Hindus. In addition, the *gayatri* mantra is repeated during daily prayers performed by many Hindus three times a day, while facing the sun: at sunrise, at noon and at sun set. It is also common to recite the *gayatri* as part of a [havan](#), or to recite it in a collective way in temples or homes.

Hindu Samskaras

A *samskara* is a rite of passage, and virtually every world culture has such ceremonies. Rites of passage are ceremonies that mark important events in the life of an individual. A Baptism, a wedding, a Bar Mitzvah, a Confirmation, and a funeral are all examples of rites of passage. Such important events generally include pre birth ceremonies, birth ceremonies, life ceremonies, death ceremonies and even after life ceremonies. In Sanskrit the word *samskara* literally means, “making perfect” or “refining,” and so a *samskara* is a ceremony of refinement, which is to say, refining or raising an individual beyond his or her mere physical existence and marking a higher spiritual existence. *Samskaras* bind an individual into his or her social group.

In Hinduism, as with most religious cultures, *samskaras* are sacred ceremonies performed with the help of a priest and in the presence of family and friends. Traditionally there are twelve *samskara*, but some later traditions raise this number to sixteen. In practice, however, there are only about eight *samskaras* that are regularly performed. This number varies from family to family and from region to region. The most common ceremonies are a pre-birth ceremony (*Simantoyannayanam*), the name giving ceremony (*Nama Karana*), a first grains ceremony (*Anna Prashanna*), the first hair cutting (*Mundan*), starting school (*Vidyarambhana*), the thread giving ceremony (*Upanayana*), marriage (*Vivaha*) and the funeral (*Antyesthi*). As I briefly describe these ceremonies, be aware that there is a lot regional variation, and how a ceremony may be performed in one community may vary a lot from how it is performed in another community.

Baby Shower (Simantoyannayanam)

Simantoyannayanam is a ceremony performed either in the fourth, sixth or eighth month of a woman's pregnancy. It is done for the protection and health of the mother and the unborn child. Today we might compare this ceremony to a baby shower. Literary, it means "parting of the hair." A priest is invited, mantras are chanted, and a fire ceremony (*havan*) is performed as the husband parts the hair of his wife and places vermilion in the parting of her hair. Family members and friends come bearing gifts for the mother and the coming new born. After the ceremony a meal is served.

The Name Giving (Nama Karana) *Nama Karana* is the name giving ceremony performed after the birth of a child. Traditionally the name is not supposed to be given until the 11th day after the birth, but because Western hospitals demand a name on a birth certificate within hours of a birth, a name has to be given without the actual ceremony. In many cases immediately after a birth a family member will contact an astrologer or priest so that a horoscope can be prepared and a name determined according to the deals of the astrological chart. In this way a name is determined and legally given, but the religious samskara is not performed until much later.

First Solid Food (Anna Prashanna)

The next ceremony is the anna prashanam or the ceremony of "feeding the grains." This is the child's first solid food generally performed in sixth month. A child is brought to a temple, or a priest is invited to the family's home, and along with mantras and a sacred fire, food (usually a sweet rice preparation) is offered to God through the fire and "made" into prasada. The prasada is then fed to the child. In other words, the child's first solid food is prasada, spiritual food.

First Hair Cutting (Mundan)

After the first grain's ceremony, the Mundan or first hair cutting is the next samskara that may be performed. Different families perform this ceremony at different ages, but the ideal time is when the soft spot in the skull of the child vanishes, usually around 14 months. As in all samskaras, family, friends and a priest get together in the home or in a temple. Mantras are recited, a sacred fire is evoked and the priest with the help of the father or maternal uncle cut small locks of hair from four sides of the child's head. After this ritual cutting, the child is taken to a barber that comes just for this occasion and the child's hair is completely shaved. There is a belief that the first hair from the time of birth is impure and so shaving it off is a purification, but more importantly, the real point of the samskara is that it is a sacrifice. The parents of the child sacrifice the beauty of their child by shaving their child's head, and in exchange they ask God for long life and prosperity for their child.

Starting School (Vidyarambhana)

The next samskara is called Vidyarambhana or beginning education. Vidya is knowledge and arambhana is commencing. This is usually performed around the ages of four or five years. The ceremony generally involves some mantras of sanctification and the worship of

Sarasvati Devi, the Goddess of learning. Then, either on a chalk board or “scratched out” in a bed of plain rice, the child’s hand is guided in writing his first letters A, B, C... or whatever the local script maybe. Sometimes the name of an important family Deity, such as Rama is the first word written by the child.

Thread Ceremony (Upanayana)

The next *samskara* is called Upanayana. This is the equivalent of a Christian Confirmation or Jewish Bar Mitzvah. It is a coming of age ceremony and in Hinduism it is usually performed for adolescence boys. Today the ceremony is generally performed only within the traditional brahmin families. This is unfortunate because it is an important ceremony and virtually all boys could benefit from such a ritual. Traditionally the ceremony was performed by the three upper varnas and not just brahmins. The ceremony is sometimes called a “thread ceremony” because one of its important features is the investiture of a “sacred thread” that is placed over the shoulder of the boy. The thread is used in certain prayer rituals (called sandhya vandana) that are performed on a daily basis after the ceremony. The word upanayana comes from the sanskrit root “ni” which means “to lead” and so the upanayana is the “leading or coming closer,” which means the boy is becoming a man and taking on adult responsibilities and is also coming closer to the spiritual side of life to guru and ultimately to God. After the ceremony the boy is considered a dvija or twice born. He has completed his second birth. One’s physical birth from mother is the first birth. The upanayana is the spiritual or second birth that comes from father or guru. During the Upanayana ceremony the boy has his head shaved, is given a sacred bath, takes vows of study and celibacy and is given the ancient gayatri mantra which includes the investiture of the sacred thread. The mantra is whispered into the hear of the boy while ladies hold a cloth over the father, guru and boy for privacy. For more information see The Sacred Thread Ceremony.

Marriage (Vivaha)

Moving along in a chronological way the next import *samskara* is marriage. This is called Vivaha. As in virtually all cultures the marriage ceremony involves a bride and groom coming together in the presence of family and friends and then taking an oath of dedication to each other. In Sanskrit the word vivaha comes from the root vah which means to carry. The oath of dedication that the bride and groom take to each other is a contract that “carries” them along for the remainder of their lives. Most Hindu weddings involve an exchange of garlands between the bride and groom (jaya mala), a bestowal of the bride by her father to the groom (kanya dhanam), the lighting of a sacred fire (havan), circumambulation of the fire (parikramanam), and the taking of seven vows (sapta padi). In general southern marriages have the addition of a sacred necklace given to the bride by the groom (mangala sutra), and northern weddings have the addition of a sacred mark of vermilion applied by the groom to the bride in the parting of her hair (sindhura). There are, of course, huge variations between weddings, and many other aspects that we have not mentioned, especially in India where a

ceremony can last many hours. In the West the average wedding lasts about an hour. For more detailed information see The Hindu Wedding.

Funeral (*Antyesthi*)

The final *samskara* is the *antiesthi* or the last rites. In the West, Hindu funerals are performed very differently than in India where there is a whole caste of specialized priests that only deal with death. Out of necessity, in the West temple priests perform funeral services in conjunction with the local system for handling the dead. In orthodox culture it is considered impure for temple priests to deal with death.

Upon the death of an individual the family will call a funeral home to prepare the body as well as a priest to perform the last rites. In India a funeral is generally performed before the sun goes down on the day of passing, but in the West the funeral may not be performed for many days while permits are obtained and family members are given time to assemble. During the funeral family members and friends come to a funeral home or chapel. Last rites are never performed in a temple. A priest recites mantras, some final rituals are performed that may include a havan, eulogies are said and family and friends are given the opportunity to offer their last respects with flower petals. Afterwards the body is taken to a crematorium where the body is committed to the fire. From the time of death and for about two weeks the family is in an official state of mourning. They are not supposed to come to a temple or perform puja during this period. Every evening at this time prayers may be recited in the home and at the end of this period of mourning a special havan is performed by a priest for the release of the soul. Finally a meal is served to family members and friends and gifts are given to the priest(s). Weeks or months later the ashes may be taken to India to be disposed into a sacred river or, locally if it is possible, ashes may be put into the ocean. The funeral process can be an elaborate affair and one that varies greatly from community to community. For detailed information see Hindu Funeral Rites and Ancestor Worship.

These are the major *samskaras* that are still practiced today. The ones that have not been mentioned include the conception ritual (*Garbhadhana*), a ceremony to create a son (*Pum-savana*), the birth ceremony (*Jata Karman*), the first trip out after birth (*Nishkramana*), returning home after graduation, and even a first *saris* tying ceremony for girls entering puberty.

Spiritual Practice: Sadhana

In Hinduism one's personal spiritual practice is called *sadhana*. The word *sadhana* indicates the instrument or means by which a goal is accomplished. In general there is no one *sadhana* or spiritual practice that applies to all. Hinduism recognizes that every individual has a unique position in life (*adhikara*) and therefore there is no one way for all. In this way there are many forms of God and one individual may be attracted to one form, while another individual may be attracted to another form of God. Similarly there are many

different forms of yoga and a form of yoga that may be suited to one individual may not be suited to another individual, so in a similar manner, one's spiritual practice or *sadhana* is unique to the individual depending on the goal they wish to achieve. So spiritual practice varies greatly from individual to individual. Examples of spiritual practice may include such things as, prayer, meditation, going on pilgrimage, giving charity, fasting, bathing, chanting of mantras, study of scripture, or even one's daily work. They can all be a means to achieve a spiritual end. Sometimes the word *bhajana* is used to mean one's internal spiritual practice.

Chanting: Japa

Japa is the repetition of sounds and words. This is partly the same thing as chanting except that chanting can also be a certain way of singing or reciting prayers and mantras that may not involve repetition of words. Mantras can be chanted with a certain intonation of voice. *Japa*, on the other hand, is specifically the repetition of sounds and words. The best example is the repetition or chanting of the names of God as in the famous *Hare Krishna mantra* "hare krishna, hare krishna, krishna krishna, hare hare; hare rama, hare rama, rama rama, hare hare. This is a mantra that is commonly recited over and over again as *japa*. Usually some means of counting is employed such as a set of beads like a rosary set. Such beads are called a *japa mala* and a devotee may follow a vow to recite this mantra or some other mantra a specific number of times a day as part of his or her personal spiritual practice, *sadhana*. You may often hear the expression *mantra-yoga* or *japa-yoga* to mean that one is using the recitation of mantras as one's main spiritual practice. A set of Hindu chanting beads generally contains 108 beads. Such beads may be made of sandalwood, crystal or in the case of Shaivas *rudraksha* seeds or in the case of Vaishnavas tulasi beads.

Sacred Objects

Sacred Objects: Trees, Lotuses, Cows

Why are certain trees and plants as sacred?

In Hinduism all of life is sacred and one of the highest qualities to aspire to is non-harming, [ahimsa](#), but it is true that certain trees and plants, as well as certain animals and certain rivers or even mountains are viewed as especially sacred. The [tulasi plant](#) is especially regarded as sacred amongst Vaishnavas. Within the Shaiva community *bael* leaves are particularly sacred. Trees like the fig or the bodhi tree are generally sacred to all Hindus. Similarly, rivers like the Ganga (Ganges) are sacred to all Hindus, but in different part of India the local rivers are sacred to a particular region. In the south, for example, the Godavari and Kaveri are most sacred. In the north these rivers may not be known. Mountains such as the Himalayas are sacred to all Hindus, but again in different regions local mountains or hills may have particular significance although they may be unknown outside of that region. The Venkata hills north of Chennai (Madras) are sacred to Vaishnavas who visit the famous temple to Balaji that sits atop this great set of hills. Outside of this region these hills are unknown. And of course along with every sacred object, there is a sacred story explaining the divine origins of that object.

Here is a simple anecdote that further illustrates what is meant by the sacred in Hinduism: [Puja](#) is always to be performed with sacred waters, particularly Ganges water, the water most sacred in India. However, it is not always possible to get Ganges water in America, my part of the world. In order to solve this problem there is a special sacred waters “calling” mantra that can be repeated at the beginning of the *puja* to convert ordinary tap water into sacred waters. This mantra lists many of the sacred rivers of India, but I have rewritten the mantra to include the Colorado River as well as the rivers of India. For me, in my part of the world, the Colorado River is my sacred river. In fact America is my sacred land. Where I live is my sacred home. Hinduism views the whole world as sacred. Seeing the sacred is a state of mind.

Why do we consider the lotus special?

The lotus has huge symbolic importance within Hinduism. We see that many Gods and Goddesses stand on the lotus. The best example is the Goddess of Wealth, Lakshmi Devi. See the illustration. Even more, however, we often hear of lotus feet, lotus eyes, lotus hearts, lotus seats, and so on. The best explanation for the symbolism of the lotus comes from the Sanskrit word for the lotus, *panka-ja*. “*Panka*” means mud and *ja* means “born.” The literally meaning is “born from the mud,” and yet if you have ever seen a lotus it is the most amazing flower! The closest flower that I can think of that approximates the lotus is the water lilly, but a real lotus far outshines the water lilly. The idea is that even though the

lotus has its roots in the mud of the pond from which it grows, it is ever unsullied as it floats on the water above the pond, and any drop of water that touches the lotus immediately slides off. The lotus is ever pure and aloof from the world. It is in the world, but not of the world. This is the symbolism of the lotus. So when the Goddess Lakshmi stands on a lotus, the meaning is that she understands the problems of the world, but she is not sullied by this world. She is absolutely pure. Similarly, a guru's feet are often said to be lotus feet indicating his purity and detachment from the world. If someone is said to have lotus eyes it means that their eyes and eye brows have the shape of the lotus petal. This is a great compliment!

Who do we show respect to cows?

Cows like other sacred animals mentioned in the previous answer are sacred because all life is sacred in Hinduism. However, the added factor regarding cows is that in ancient times and even now in much of rural India, cows form the economic basis of an agrarian society. The cow gives milk, butter and oil for cooking. The bull plows the land for grains. The cow and the bull provided fertilizer to refresh the land. Dried cow dung was used as fuel for cooking and heating. The cow and the bull provided many of the necessities of life. In addition many modern Hindu commentators speak of cow's milk as having special nutrients that make it ideal for spiritual life. The cow is considered one of the seven "mothers" in Hinduism and the bull is the emblem of *dharma*. There are many references to the four legs of the bull as the four pillars that support *dharma*: cleanliness, austerity, truthfulness, non-harming, and so of all animals, the cow and the bull have taken on the greatest significance within Hinduism.

What is the meaning of a Swastika?

How the Word is Derived

In Sanskrit, the proper spelling of the word swastika is *svastika*. Sanskrit has no 'w'. Literally, the word *svastika* is a statement of affirmation, "It is!" "Life is good!" "There is value" "There is meaning!" *Svastika* is a term that affirms the positive values of life. The word is made of *su* + *as*. "As" is the root of the copular verb "to be" of which the third person singular is, "asti," "it is." *Su* is a prefix used in Sanskrit to intensify meaning in a positive way, thus *su+asti* means literally, "it really is!" When combined, the 'u' changes into a 'v' thus giving the form *svasti*. The ending 'ka' makes this verbal form into a noun. This is the linguistic morphology of the word, *svastika*.

A Negative Symbol

Today, the Swastika is primarily known as a symbol of racism, persecution and anti semitism, which, primarily, arises from the ideology of the German Nazi party and World War II. I remember performing a wedding between a Hindu girl and a Jewish boy. Right at the beginning of the ceremony, when it is traditional to hold a decorative cloth between the boy and girl, the Hindu mother proudly presented a special cloth with a huge red Swastika in

the middle that she wanted me to hold between the couple. Half the audience was Jewish! Another time, I performed a ground-breaking ceremony for a Hindu family, who was going to build a new home in an exclusive gated community. The man had me draw a large red Swastika on the ground where the house would be built. Later, as we were walking around the perimeter of the property, someone came walking a dog and saw the red Swastika. In terror, this person called the police thinking that a neo-Nazi cult was moving into his neighborhood. On many occasions, I have had to explain to confused fire and building inspectors why there are Swastikas in our Hindu temples. As a priest, I regularly bless people using the expression, *svasti svasti svasti!* and even inscribe swastikas on the heads of newly shaved babies for their health and prosperity!

Its History

In fact, the Swastika is an ancient solar symbol that has been used by many cultures going back at least 3000 years. It has been found used by the Celts in northern Europe and by the Greeks as early as 1000 BCE. In India the symbol has been used since Vedic times. It is most commonly seen as an ancient Aryan symbol. Nazi Germany did not invent the symbol, but only borrowed it in order to show the “Aryan” roots of their new German state. Today, unfortunately, the Swastika is most commonly known for the destruction of life rather than its affirmation.

A Nazi Swastika

Its Use in India

In India, the Swastika is used in two forms, one with the arms moving to the right, the right-handed Swastika, and the other with the arms moving to the left, the so-called “left-handed” occult Swastika. It is commonly thought that the Nazis used the left-handed Swastika and that this is the difference between the Hindu’s use of the Swastika and the Nazi’s use of it. But this is not the case. In fact, the Nazis used the same right-handed Swastika that is used in modern Hinduism, but gave it a 45 degree turn. This gives it the appearance of being left-handed, even though it is not. Regardless, in India many groups have used the left-handed Swastika. One common example amongst Hindu groups is the Theosophical Society, which used it on their logo. The left-handed Swastika is also associated with esoteric tantric practices. Jains and Buddhists often use the left handed Swastika as well. Today the right-handed Swastika is mainly used in Hindu temples, homes and sacred ceremonies as a symbol or affirmation of good luck, health and prosperity. A “yes” to life!

The Offerings of Food and Lamps (aarati)

Why do we do aarati?

A better question is, what is aarati? The word aarati is not Sanskrit, so we know nothing about the derivation of the word. Aarati, however, is simply the offering of articles of worship to a Deity, the primary object being a lamp. An aarati can be performed formally in a temple at a scheduled time with a priest, or informally in a person's home after a puja such as a Satya Narayana katha (see...). A priest can offer the aarati or devotees themselves can do it. An aarati tali is a tray that people hold that contains the flame that is offered during aarati. Each Deity has its own aarati song that is sung during the offering of the lamp. See the illustration.

Why do we offer food to the Lord before eating it?

Anything offered to God during puja or worship falls under the category of bhoga. The word bhoga means enjoyment and pleasure. In other words, while worshipping we offer enjoyable, pleasing things, to the Deity, such as fragrant incense and flowers, nice cloth, jewels, fresh milk, delicious foods, and so on. All of these things are different forms of bhoga, enjoyment. Once these things have been offered they cease to be bhoga, but instead become prasada. The word prasada means mercy, grace, and blessings. So once an article of bhoga has been offered to God it becomes prasada, a form of blessings or mercy. So we might say that during worship we offer enjoyment to God and receive blessing in return. Receiving blessings is a good thing! And so we offer food to God before we eat so that our eating is not just ordinary eating but "spiritualized" eating. And as they say, we are what we eat!

Why do we offer lamps to God? (Aarati)

Virtually every puja includes the offering of a flame to a Deity. This is aarati. This lamp is usually made with a ghee wick or a camphor (kapoor) flame. There are two basic reasons why a lighted lamp is offered. The first is purely practical. In ancient times the lamp provided illumination to see the Deity since electrical lights were not available. The lamp would be offered to the feet of the Deity, then slowly moved up to illuminate the knees, the waist and the chest, to finally illuminate the face. This would allow meditation on each part of the Deity starting from the feet.

The second reason is purely symbolic and goes back to our metaphor: the sun equals light, which equals knowledge, which equals consciousness, which equals liberation (see page...). Think of the flame as a kind of bhoga (see...) which then becomes a prasada after being offered to the Deity. The flame is then presented to the worshippers who sweep their hands across the lamp in a gesture that suggests "scooping up" the light and bathing their eyes, face and head with the blessings of knowledge, etc. In an interesting side note, when a ghee wick is prepared usually two wicks are twisted together. The two wicks combined make a larger flame and one that symbolically represents the soul and God (atma and the paramatma), combined.

Rituals, Lamps, Holy Ash

Pradakshina, Kalasha, Coconuts and Prayer Rooms

Why do we light lamps during puja?

During puja lamps are lighted and usually placed on each side of the main worship area. The purpose is both practical and symbolic. In a time before electrical lights were available, the lamps provided illumination, but today the purpose is mainly symbolic. In some cases five separate flames are lighted on each side of the puja area. Fire is one of the five basic elements of matter (the others being earth, water, air and space (pancha-maha-bhuta see...)) and so the five flames represent these five elements of matter.

Why do we apply the holy ash?

Many forms of [tilakam](#) are applied with holy ash (vibhuti) especially amongst the Shaiva schools of theology. Holy ash is also a form of [prasada](#) and so applying sacred ash is an act of purification and submission. Some people also say that holy ash also contains antiseptic qualities.

Why do we do pradakshina?

Pradakshina means circumambulation or moving around in a circle. In a temple devotees may perform circumambulation around a Deity or even around the whole temple. One may also circumambulate a sacred object such as a tulasi plant (see...) or even a cow. Circumambulation, like touching the feet, is an act of submission, reverence and devotion. The devotee is putting the object of veneration in the center of his or her life. In general circumambulation is always in a clockwise direction. This is in accordance to our much mentioned metaphor: the sun equals light, which equals knowledge, which equals, consciousness, which equals liberation. The source of light, the sun appears to move in a clockwise direction across the sky from east to west and so circumambulation follows the way of light, left to right. Sometime an act of circumambulation is not done by walking, but also by laying on the path fully outright and then getting up, laying out again and moving one body length, and then repeating the process one body length at a time all the way around the object of veneration. I have seen this done around temples and even around whole towns such as the holy city of Vrindavan in India. Such an act of circumambulation is over 30 kms in length! In a less extreme form, it is common for devotees to circumambulate a temple by walking around a certain number of times, sometimes as many as 108 times. 108 is a sacred number.

Why do we worship with a kalasha?

A kalasha is a metal pot of a certain shape usually made of copper. The kalasha is most commonly used to hold a coconut and leaves during puja. See the illustration. This combination of copper pot, coconut and leaves becomes a symbolic receptacle for the placement of a Deity. The coconut is the head, the leaves are arms and legs, and the pot is

the body. The kalasha is also used during bathing ceremonies (see abhishekha..) to hold various liquids used in bathing a Deity.

Why do we use coconuts?

Coconuts are a really fun fruit. They are full of all kinds of layers and therefore full of great symbolic meaning. In puja we use a coconut as a head for a Deity, we sometimes use them to represent the the universe and worship them as the world. We also interpret them as a heart with an ego (hard on the outside and soft and sweet on the inside), and then they are great to break when inaugurating new cars and entering new homes and businesses. They are like breaking a bottle of champagne. The fruit on the inside is not only good to eat it is also good to burn when it is dried for havans. We love coconuts.

Why do we have a prayer room?

Most Hindu homes will include a prayer room where a small shrine is kept that holds the family Deities and other sacred objects. In the simplest case, this prayer room may be placed in a small closet, cabinet or even shelf. In a more elaborate case, a separate room may be dedicated for the shrine. Ideally this room would be in the northeast area of the home, which is isha-kona (God's corner) according to [vaastu-shastra](#). The prayer room is generally maintained by the ladies of the family and in the morning they will light a lamp and incense and offer prayers to the Deities in the shrine. At different times of the day food may be offered on this altar. As to why Hindu homes have a prayer room, I think it is obvious. Prayer and worship are not something only reserved for a certain day of the week in a temple. Instead prayer and worship are part of the daily practice of a Hindu family.

Feet in Hinduism

Why no shoes in a Temple

As we mentioned, feet hold a powerful symbolism with Hindu culture. You take off your shoes when you enter a temple. When sitting you never point your feet towards people, especially seniors, and you never spread your feet before an altar or towards fellow worshippers. We can say the feet of people are considered low. In fact one of the greatest insults you can make is to throw shoes at someone. And yet the feet of God and seniors are special. God's feet and even a guru's feet are often called "lotus feet" and in some temples even a small set of shoes belonging to the Deity ([shathari](#)) is touched to the head of worshippers. We even drink the feet bathing water of God as a [prasada](#) and sprinkle the bathing water of a [guru](#)'s feet on our heads. No shoes in Temples

The basis for feet symbolism goes back to the Vedic conception of the universe as the body of God. Just like a body has high and low parts so this universe has high and low, pure and impure places. Up is high, down is low. Feet touch the ground, which is low, and so when you enter a temple you leave your low part at the door. We take off our impure part, our feet, symbolized by leaving our shoes at the door as we enter sacred space. You might say we leave our materialistic side at the door when we enter spiritual space.

Why do we not touch papers, books and people with the feet?

Along with this question one might also add ask: Why do we not blow out a flame with our breath? The answer to both these questions has to do with one of the most fundamental features of Hinduism, namely personification. Hinduism personifies virtually every aspect of life. The wind is not just air blowing from high pressure to low pressure. It is a God, Vayudeva. The sun is not just a great nuclear reaction in space. It is the sun God, Suryadeva. Similarly, the rain is a God, the moon is a God, all the planets are Gods and every other aspect of reality is subject to personification. Therefore, all things of learning: papers, books, musical instruments, pens, typewriters and even computers can be seen as an aspects of the Goddess of learning, Sarasvati. And we since already know the symbolism of [feet](#) in Hindu culture, it is obvious why we do not touch our feet to these items. Similarly, we do not blow a flame with our breath because it would be impolite. The flame *is* Agni, the fire God, and to blow in his face is impolite! To the Western mind this may seem difficult to understand, but there is great power in personification. Personification gives one the ability to communicate with the God and therefore perhaps control or at least get favors from the Deity. Personification is the basis of *puja*.

Namaste and Bowing as Signs of Respect

“Namaste” is made of two words, *namas* and *te*. *Namas* comes from the verbal root *nam* which means to bow and so *namas* is a bow or salutation. “*Te*” means, to you. And so *namaste* literally means, bowing to you. There is a variation of this in the form “*namaskara*.” The Sanskrit word “*kara*” means, doing. So *namaskara* literally means, doing salutations. Many Hindus say that when they do *namaste* they are bowing to the soul (*atma*) and God (*paramatma*) within and not to the body without. By contrast shaking hands is a gesture of respect to the body, whereas in Hinduism bowing to the soul within is considered more important. Hence, *namaste* is made with two hands held together at the heart where the soul is said to reside.

Why do we bow before parents and elders?

Bowing to parents, elders, or for that matter, all seniors including teachers and saintly people, is an important matter within Hinduism. Children are taught to bow to elders from an early age. Bowing is a sign of submission and a way to show respect. In addition, the act suggests the hierarchical nature of Hindu society where juniors submit to seniors. But there is still more involved. Bowing is not just bowing one’s head. To bow generally means

touching the feet of seniors, and feet hold a powerful symbolism within Hindu culture. From a child's perspective, parents, teachers and elders are considered "gods" therefore bowing to the feet of seniors is the way showing the highest respect.

Why do Hindus wear marks on the forehead?

In Sanskrit the name for these marks is *tilaka*, which literally means, "ornament." In Hindi the word is shortened to *tika*. There are three basic uses for *tilaka* marks. Two are most common: the mark (*bindu*) worn by ladies as part of their makeup, and the red "dot" that is applied during *puja*. A third use has to do with religious designation and is worn primarily by priests and other religious people.

In *kulalini-yoga* certain places on the body are known as *chakras* or places of "psychic openings." One of the most important of these places is the space between the eyes just above the eyebrows. This is sometimes called the place of the third eye. Commonly ladies will mark this place with makeup or a stick-on *bindu* (in Hindi it is called a *bhindi*). Similarly, during *puja* a priest will apply a dot of red powder (called *kukumam*) at this same location to both man and ladies. I sometimes think of applying the red *tilaka* during *puja* as "logging the person in" to the *puja*. I explain the *tilaka* mark by saying: God has given us two eyes by which we see the physical world, now this *tilaka* is a symbolic third eye by which we can see spiritual reality.

The *tilaka* marks worn by priests and other religious people has a completely different purpose. Essentially the lines of *tilaka* are sectarian marks that indicate which school of Hindu theology (*sampradaya*) the person is coming from. They are identification marks. There are three categories indicating the three basic grouping within Hinduism. Horizontal lines for followers of Shiva (Shaivas see...), vertical lines for followers of Vishnu (Vaishnavas see...) and straight on marks for followers of Devi (Shaaktas). Within each of these categories of devotees there are many variations, black lines, red lines, yellow lines, curved lines, rounded lines, and so on. Each of these configurations indicate the particular school of theology within each group, and there are many many designation even within a single group. See the illustrations that show a few of the main designations.

These kind of *tilaka* are applied not just on the forehead as in the case of the *bindu* or *tilaka* during *puja*, but are applied to many different locations on the body above the waist. Usually there are 12 locations, but this can vary according to the *sampradaya*. You might think of this as marking the body as a temple of God. Each time a *tilaka* is applied a mantra or name of God is recited. In this way the body is sanctified. This affects not only the wearer of these marks, but also observers. "Oh this man is a Shaiva priest, I see his *tilaka*. I am in the presence of a priest."

Divine Blessings: Prasada

There is a general understanding that the food offered to a Deity during [puja](#) or [archana](#) is called *prasada*. This is incorrect. *Prasada* is what comes back to the worshipper after offering something to the Deity. In fact, *prasada* is not necessarily food at all. The word *prasada* means “mercy” or “blessings.” The counterpart of *prasada* is *bhoga*, and again most people commonly misunderstand this word thinking that *bhoga* is food. In fact, the word *bhoga* means enjoyment, and so anything enjoyable is a *bhoga*. In the *Kama Shastra*, Hindu books on sensual enjoyment, love and sex are called *bhoga*, enjoyment. In ordinary language, food is called *bhoga* because it is enjoyable! During *puja* the devotee offers *bhoga*, enjoyable things, to the Deity and receives *prasada*, mercy, back. *Bhoga*, therefore, is anything pleasing including, fresh fruits and flowers, fragrant incense, lamps of ghee and camphor, beautiful cloth, devotional prayers and tasty food, and the *prasada* is what is returned back to the devotee as mercy or blessings. The scent of the offered incense or flowers is a *prasada*. The light of the lamps that is “touched” by the hands and then “bathed” over the eyes and head is a *prasada*. The sound of the devotional prayers are a *prasada* and, of course, the offered food coming back is a *prasada*. Indeed, the whole point of a *puja*, *archana*, *yajna* or [havan](#) is the creation of *prasada*, blessings to the devotees. *Puja*, therefore, is an exchange of love between the devotee and the Deity. The devotee offers various *bhogas* to the Deity, which, in effect, convey the love of the devotee to the Deity, and the Deity reciprocates by sending His or Her love back to the devotee in the form of blessings, *prasada*.

A Sacred Plant: Tulasi

The *tulasi* plant is a small perennial shrub in the mint family that is native to India and which is venerated by Hindus in general and Vaishnavas in particular. The botanical name is *ocimum tenuiflorum* or sometimes, *ocimum sanctum*, the sacred Basil. In Hindi and other north Indian languages the name is written just a *tulsi*.

There are three varieties of *tulasi* plants used by Hindus. There is a dark variety called *syama* or *krishna tulasi*, a white variety called *rama tulasi*, and an extremely hardy variety sometimes called Fujian or Thai *tulasi*. Strict Vaishnavas do not accept this latter *tulasias* true *tulasi* although this variety is the most common of all since it is easiest to grow. This Thai *tulasi* is distinguished from the two former varieties because it is much larger. The *syama* or *krishna tulasi* is the smallest variety and is the most difficult to grow.

No Hindu home is considered complete without a *tulasi* plant. Mostly, the *tulasi* is grown directly in the ground, but sometimes it is grown in a special container that allows places for lamps. See the illustration to the left. Vaishnavas worship *tulasi* as the Goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu and so during *puja*, *tulasi* leaves are offered to the feet of Vishnu. Lakshmi

is the wife of Vishnu and so the offering of *tulasi* leaves is the offering of love. *Tulasi* leaves are also dipped in sandal paste and “stuck” to the feet of Vishnu during *puja*.

Vaishnavas carve the wood of the *tulasi* plant and use it for chanting beads ([japa mala](#)). It is also common to see small *tulasi* beads worn in strands around the neck. During the month of Kartika (October-November) a ceremony called *tulasi vivaha* is commonly celebrated, This is a wedding ceremony where *tulasi* is “married” to Vishnu or Krishna. Sometimes Vishnu comes in the form of a sacred stone (*shalagram shila*), so it is interesting to see a marriage between a plant and a stone! You can imagine how strange this seemed to the British when they saw such a ritual in temples without a clear explanation of what was going on.

The *tulasi* plant is fully decorated with a wedding sari, jewelry, and sometimes even a face made of silver or hardened wheat dough. It is a fun ceremony to watch as the “parents” of both the bride and groom proudly carry their son and daughter through the paces of the marriage ceremony.

The *tulasi* plant also has many medicinal properties. Extracts from *tulasi* are used in traditional Ayurvedic medicines for common colds, headaches, stomach problems and even heart problems. Preparations of *tulasi* are often made into a tea or a powder or even just eaten as fresh leaves along with ghee, clarified butter.

God’s Feet: Shathari

The *shathari* is an altar implement used primarily in South Indian style “Balaji” temples. There is a famous temple in South India, just north of Chennai (Madras), that is dedicated to a particular form of Vishnu known as Shri Venkateshwara or [Balaji](#) for short. Modeled after this original Balaji temple, many cities in the West now have a Balaji Temple. Ordinarily most Hindus never see the *shathari* unless they visit this original Balaji temple in South India, but now that Balaji temples have proliferated around the world, the *shathari* is rather common and so needs some explanation.

At first look most people think that the *shathari* is some kind of a silver helmet that priests touch to the head of devotees, but in fact the helmet is a stand (*peetham*) for a small pair of shoes that are permanently mounted to the top. See the illustration. The shoes are a symbol for the feet of God and so to be touched by the *shathari* is to have the feet of God placed on one’s head. This is a blessing.

The word *shathari* is made of two smaller words, “*shatha*” and “*ari*.” *Shatha* means “corruption,” “deceit” and “ego;” *ari* means “enemy.” So the *shathari* is literally the “enemy of deceit or ego,” which means is that the feet of God are the enemy of bad things. In other words, the blessing of God destroy all bad things in the heart of the devotee. Ordinarily devotees will come for the divine seeing ([darshana](#)) of Balaji and in turn the priest will touch the *shathari* to the head of the devotee as a blessing.

Religious Marks: Tilaka/Tika

Going hand in hand with religious denomination ([sampradaya](#)) are the religious marks worn by the devotees of the various schools of Hindu theology. These marks are called *tilaka*, or in Hindi and many other regional languages, *tika*. The *tilaka* is a religious mark worn mainly on the forehead and is made primarily of sandal paste, clay, or ash. The word *tilaka* is literally a “freckle” or “spot” and it is considered highly auspicious to wear these marks. In general, there are three broad categories of *tilaka* marks, those worn by Vaishnavas, those worn by Shaivas and general marks. *Tilaka* marks are made with white, red, yellow or black colors. Vaishnava marks run vertically on the body and Shaiva marks run horizontally. The Vaishnava *tilaka* is the most extensive. A trained observer can tell exactly which school of theology a devotee is coming from by the color and shape of these *tilaka* marks. It is fun to visit a traditional holy place of pilgrimage during festival season to watch the holy men and try to read their *tilaka* and determine which *sampradaya* they are representing.

Shaiva Marks

In general Shaiva *tilaka* is made of ash coming from burned wood, cow dung or incense. The tradition of ash goes back to stories that tell how Shiva would smear his body with ash taken from cremation sites, and so today, Shaivas mark their bodies with holy ash. In general, amongst Shaivas, the wearing of *tilaka* is not as extensive or as rigid as it is in the Vaishnava schools. Here are the most common Shaiva patterns. See the illustrations.

Vaishnava Marks

By far the Vaishnava *tilaka* is the most extensive. Each school of theology, including all the sub-sects, have their own configurations. See the illustrations. In the modern world the wearing of *tilaka* was two functions, general religious identification and personal sanctification. Nowadays, the need to distinguish sectarian differences is no longer relevant. Amongst the Vaishnavas there was a time when it was considered “sinful” to wear Shaiva *tilaka* or to even see it. In the past the different schools of theology aggressively debated with each other over the correctness of doctrine and so, like a sports team today, the *tilaka* was used to identify which school the debater was representing. At one time Madhva Vaishnavas were antagonistic toward Advaita Vedanta Shaivas. Shaiva kings hunted down and even persecuted Shri Vaishnavas. Shaivas would not enter Vaishnava temples and Vaishnavas would not go near Shaiva shrines. But today such sectarian differences hardly exist, and so we see both Shaiva and Vaishnava shrines within the same temple. The function of *tilaka* has changed greatly. In the West only priests generally wear *tilaka* and consequently the main function of *tilaka* is to distinguish a priest from the lay community. This function is similar to how a male Christian priest may wear a collar to distinguish himself from his congregation.

The other function of *tilaka* is for personal sanctification. *Tilakais* generally applied to the body in twelve places (the number varies) after bathing. These places include the forehead,

the throat, the heart, the stomach, two shoulders, arms, and so on. Each time a mark is applied, the name of a particular Deity is recited. This touching, marking, and evocation has the effect of personal sanctification. A priest is dedicating his body as a temple of God by applying *tilaka*.

General Tilaka

Apart from the formal *tilaka* worn by priests, during a *puja* generally a simple form of *tilaka* will be applied to all lay members. This is the application of the so-called “dot” or red mark that is applied during *puja* or when attending temple. We often explain this by saying that God has given us two eyes for seeing the physical world, the red *dottika* is a symbolic third eye or soul’s eye for seeing spiritual reality. During *puja* someone will often go around amongst the participants and give them *tika*. This function is akin to “logging in” to the *puja*, in other words, marking oneself as a faithful participant in the *puja*.

Sacred Designs: the Yantra

The general meaning of the word *yantra* is “a machine,” and so in this sense a washing machine, a television or even a computer is a *yantra*. In a religious context a *yantra* is a symbolic diagram that represents a Deity and is used primarily for *puja* and meditation. Yantras are generally inscribed onto thin copper or silver plates that shows a geometric shape, often some numbers and even the inscription of a Deity. Virtually every Deity will have *yantra*. Thus it common to find Narayana *yantras*, Lakshmi or Shri *yantras*, Nava Graha *yantras*, Durga *yantras*, and so on. A *yantra* can be used in much the same way as a *murti* or sacred image is worshipped during *puja*. *Yantras* have other uses as well. They are often placed underneath a sacred image when it is newly installed onto a temple altar. A Shri *yantras*, (the *yantra* for the Goddess of wealth and prosperity) or a Ganesha *yantra* (for good luck) is often kept near one’s check book or business books. Yantras are often used in astrology. If one needed to boost the influence of a certain astrological influence, the *yantra* for that influence may be worshipped and kept on a family or personal altar. *Yantras* are sometimes placed above doorways to near entrance ways to homes and other buildings. See the illustrations of some typical *yantras*.

Miscellanea

Hinduism and Science

The relationship between Hinduism and science is not easy to describe. Since Hinduism has no centralized ecclesiastical authority, (no “church”) it is impossible to get an official position on science or any other issue. In the case of Christianity, however, one can get the official Roman Catholic position on science, and similarly one can get official Lutheran or Baptist positions on evolution, on capital punishment, abortion, birth control, and so on, but this is not the case with Hinduism. Individual Hindu groups ([sampradayas](#)) may have official positions determined by a [guru](#), but in general, there are no large organizations that speak for major segments of the tradition. Consequently, we can only address the relationship between Hinduism and science in the most general of terms.

What we can say, is that Hinduism, like Christianity, Judaism and Islam is a metaphysical system. Science, on the other hand, is non metaphysical and so accepts no divine or “outside the system” source. In this way, Hinduism stands along side the major theologies of the world in its relation to science. That Hinduism has a polytheistic side, unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam, matters little when it comes to the issue of science. The key point is that Hinduism is a metaphysical tradition, whereas science is not.

In many ways the relationship between science and religion can be determined by how the members of a particular religion view [scripture](#). And as might be expected, within Hinduism, there are conservative Hindu views, modern liberal views and everything in between. Conservative Hindus accept the Vedas as the direct revelation of God and therefore inerrant. Whatever is stated in the Vedas, even if it is contrary to reason, sense perception and modern science, must be accepted. This is religious fundamentalism. On the other hand, there are

Hindus who admit the Vedas contain much that is spiritual, yet they also think the Vedas are not infallible and so those parts of the Vedas that contradict reason or science can be rejected. This is religious liberalism, and it involves a high degree of rationalism and secularization. And finally there are Hindus, the mass majority of whom, accept the Vedas contain divine revelation, but think such revelation is not free of errors because the Vedas have been written and interpreted by human beings who are flawed and conditioned by their place history. Consequently, those parts of the Vedas that seem out of step with reason and proven science are not to be rejected, but must be reinterpreted in a way that conforms to reason and, ultimately, science. All three of these approaches fall within the realm of what, in theology, is called hermeneutics or the interpretation of sacred writings. Indeed, all religions have adherents who subscribe to one of these basic modes of scriptural interpretation and therefore their views towards science follows one of these three general modes.

Here is an example of how an important Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, might regard modern science. There is a chapter of the *Gita* entitled, *Saankhya Yoga*. The word “*sankhya*” means “counting,” “enumeration,” or “analysis.” In the *Gita* there is a simple form of “analysis” that classifies matter into eight constituent elements: earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intelligence and ego. This is essentially a periodic table and an excellent example of early science or what used to be called natural philosophy. Even before the *Gita*, Hindu thinkers had taken this theme of “counting” and developed it into one of the six traditional philosophies of ancient India called *Saankhya*. From the perspective of *Bhagavad Gita*, it is fair to say that modern science is simply a highly detailed analysis of matter and so, in this sense, there is no conflict between the *Gita* and science. Modern science is simply more of what ancient Hindu thinkers had been doing for millennia, but where the *Gita* would disagree with modern science is that modern science does not go far enough in its analysis of reality. Vedic “science” is not simply about the mere analysis of matter, but it also includes the analysis soul and God. In other words, it includes metaphysical reality as well as physical reality. The *sankhya* of the *Gita*, therefore includes an analysis of physical reality as well as a spiritual reality. At present, modern science only accepts physical reality as its domain of study, but the call from the *Gita* is that ordinary science should also explore the metaphysical dimensions of life and so become a complete form of *sankhya*. But an objection can be made that science does not need to include such metaphysical issues as the soul and God because philosophy and theology already do this. I think the answer from the *Gita* would be that physical reality and spiritual reality are ultimately inseparable, and therefore, any study of one that omits the presence of the other will create a false or incomplete body of knowledge. Therefore even such non physical sciences as psychology, biology, or the medical sciences must include at least the premise that at the heart of reality there is a spiritual foundation, and even though we may not be equipped to see it at this point, it is there nonetheless and must be accounted for.

This simple example illustrates how, from a Hindu perspective, religion and science are related, but of course, most modern scientists, at present, would be hard pressed to include metaphysics within their scientific perspective and methodology. From a Hindu perspective, modern science is a legitimate, but incomplete, step towards knowing and understanding reality. From a modern scientific perspective, Hinduism goes too far in its assumption of what constitutes the foundations of reality and the means of knowing this reality. The relationship between Hinduism and science is, therefore, mixed. On the one hand, the basic approach of science can be accepted, but when it comes to the acceptance of metaphysical elements of reality the *Gita* and the Vedas embrace these principles as essential to the pursuit of truth. Current science cannot.

Consequently it is fair to say that the Hindu view of science is not that it is wrong, but that it only offers a limited view of reality. Until science is able to open itself to the exploration of metaphysical reality, it will remain incapable of understanding the full nature of reality. In general, the middle and liberal sides of Hinduism are favorable and open to science. The

conservative sides of Hinduism, however, will remain closed to science. Interestingly, I see the gradual acceptance of a metaphysical view of reality by modern science an increasing possibility as more work is done in “cutting edge” areas of research like quantum mechanics, particle and string theories, cosmology and other areas that seems to point to answers that go beyond the common mechanistic view of the universe. It will be exciting to watch and see where these new theories lead.

There is another relationship between science and religion that is current, but which, in my opinion, is a wrong attempt to link Hinduism and modern science. This is the attempt to read into the *Rig Veda* and other Hindu religious texts allegorical renderings that contain so called secret or vague references to modern ideas such as particle theory or quantum mechanics. I have seen interpretations by modern Hindus that attempt to show how modern particle theory was known at the time of the *Rig Veda*, and how this knowledge was secretly inserted into the text of the Vedas. I have seen attempts by modern Hindus to rationalize and reinterpret Puranic cosmology, which holds a geocentric view of the universe and describes the sun as closer to the earth than the moon, to name just a few differences, in terms of modern astronomy. As we have mentioned, from a Hindu perspective, there is no problem in exploring the possible religious implications of quantum mechanics, string theory or any other modern scientific theory that may open the way for modern science to explore a metaphysical view of the universe, but to read such theories back into the pages of the Vedas in order to justify faith or with so called Hindu nationalistic (Hindu-tva) motivations is not science at all. I caution my readers to be aware of such extreme reinterpretations of sacred writing.

A Note about Western Perceptions of India

Hindu Diversity

Whole books have been and could still be written on the topic of Western perceptions of India, but here are just a few things that regularly come up in my dealings in the West between Hinduism and the Westerners. First, Westerners tend to look upon India as if it was just one thing. They fail to see the huge diversity that exists within India. India is more diverse than Europe. The differences between Bengal, for example, and Gujarat, two Indian states, one in the east and the other in the west, are more diverse than between Germany and England. The Germans and the English at least share a similar writing system. Bengalis and Gujaratis have different alphabets. Similarly, the differences between North India and South India are even greater. The ways of worship, the ways of food, the ways of a marriage are vastly different between the North and the South. Westerners should be aware of the huge diversity within India and Hindu culture in general.

The West is Materialistic/India is Spiritual

The second misperception is that India is spiritual and the West is materialistic, but this is simply not true. There is a great hunger within India and within Indians in the West for modernization and for all the material goods of a modern world. Hinduism has no problem adapting to modern technology or dealing with modern science and using these things for all the pleasures of life. In fact Hindu culture has a great tradition of so-called secular advancement. There is nothing exclusively spiritual about Indian culture. Indian culture is a mixture of spirituality and materialism. On the other hand, there is nothing inherently materialistic about the West. The roots of Western culture are profoundly spiritual. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three pillars of Western culture, have grappled with the deepest spiritual questions and what we have today in the West with all its so-called materialism is a culture that is still grounded in deep spirituality. My point is this, both Hinduism and the Western traditions are neither exclusively one or the other. They both are ancient traditions that attempt to express the aspirations, hopes and dreams of humanity with all its spirituality and its material ambitions. There are indeed differences between the two traditions, but for a Westerner to think that the West is materialistic and India is spiritual is a great mistake.

Exotic Hinduism

And finally, when Westerners come to Hinduism they tend to be attracted to the more mystical and exotic sides of the tradition. Meditation and kundalini yoga come to mind, but your average Indian Hindu practices a kind of Hinduism that is more like what the average Christian practices. Most Hindus are just “normal” people who work during the week and come to a temple to pray on the weekends. Exotic mediation and raising serpent powers through chakras is far from their minds. Most of what is practiced as Hinduism in the West by Indians is more like the religion of the average Christian than the exotic forms of Hinduism that many Westerners seek. Sensing this hunger for exocitic forms of Hinduism there are many Indian “gurus” who come to the West in order to “cash in” on the lucrative Western market for exotic spirituality. Westerners should be aware that there is a lot of cheating going on in the guru market.

Divine Sages: Rishis

In common usage, a rishi is a word that simply means an inspired poet or sage or a holy person in general. In more specific usage the rishis are semi divine beings distinct from gods (*devas*), demons (*asuras*) and men who “heard” the Vedic hymns and passed them on down to mankind. In fact each *sukta* or hymn of the Veda is associated with the name of one of these rishis. The rishi are the patriarchs and progenitors of mankind. In the ancient texts 10 original rishis are mentioned who then become the source for the Hindu gotra lineages. Seven of these ancient and divine “seers” have been immortalized in the heavens. The Sapta

Rishis, the seven sages, is the Hindu name for the Big Dipper (Ursa Major) in Hindu astronomy. Each star of the Big Dipper is named after one of these rishis.

Hindu Education: Guru Kula and Bal Vihar

The ancient system of Hindu education was called Guru Kula, which literally means “the family or home of the teacher.” In the days before government mandated schools in India, children would attend the home of a local brahmana teacher for education. In the tradition social system called Varnashrama Dharma the brahmanas would play the role of teachers and the children of the other classes would go to these brahmanas for schooling. Sometimes these schools would be associated with a local temple or ashrama and the the curriculum would involved a mixture of religious and practical education. Today the system of Guru Kula has been replaced by modern schools systems and the only Guru Kulas that still exist function as private religious schools connected to a religious organization.

Today Hindu religious education is mainly provided in small groups called Bal Vihars. A Bal Vihar is the Hindu equivalent of a Christian Sunday School. In other words, it is religious education provided by a Hindu Temple or some one organization or even by a group of parents on a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basis. Sometimes other names are employed such as Bal Vikas instead of Bal Vihar for the same thing.