

Integrating Hindu Elements into Unitarian Universalism

Hinduism is the world's oldest continuous religious tradition, easily more than 5000 years old. 83% of India's more than 1 billion people are Hindus, and several million more Hindus are spread throughout the world; so, it is the third largest religious tradition after Christianity and Islam. India and the United States are the most religiously diverse countries in the world. India has the 3rd largest Muslim population in the world, about 12% of its population. India has most of the world's Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, several million Buddhists, several million Christians, and a residual Jewish population. Some of the Jews and Christians trace their Indian heritage from Biblical times. The United States has the largest Jewish population of any country in the world, and now has as many Muslims as Jews. There are four million American Buddhists, half of them people without Buddhist ancestry, and more than a million Hindus in the United States.

I am not going to try to do justice to 5000 years of religious history with a single sermon. However, my intent today is to share with you some of the major aspects of the Hindu tradition which I feel can and should be integrated into our Unitarian Universalist tradition.

First, let's talk about gods and goddesses. Hinduism has an incredible array of divine images, from icons of natural forces to the most sophisticated and arcane human interests. Hinduism has countless images of the divine, but they essentially realize at a philosophical level that all of images reflect a single Creation. Most Hindus are Shaivites or Vashnavites, followers of the destroyer-creator God, Shiva, or the evolutionary-preserver God, Vishnu. There is a Creator God, Brahma, but like most high gods, he feels too far away and is rarely worshipped on a personal level. Here is the only common image of Brahma, in the Trimurthi, or three faces of God: Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva, the Destroyer. Each God has a usual steed upon which he rides. Here is an image of Shiva in yak bone riding his tiger. Shiva is the dynamic energy of the world; so, one of his most ancient representations is as a lingam or penis. Lingams were found that are more than 5000 years old, and almost every village temple still has them today. I am a follower of Vishnu, because I am most interested in the preserving, evolutionary forces in Creation. Vishnu reincarnates himself when the world becomes too chaotic. At first his incarnations were animals, then mixed animal-human figures, then purely human: Krishna with his flute, Ram, the noble warrior, and then the Buddha, and some Vaishnavites count Jesus and even Gandhi as incarnations Vishnu. The Hindus have always felt that the foundational power of life was female; so, each god has his goddess, and the goddess has the essential shakti, or power. Ram and Sita, for instance.

Behind all of these images of God is the divine, the Brahman-atman. This concept is at best explicated in the *Upanishads*. Essentially, Brahman is the transcendent dimension, the divine outside ourselves, and atman is the immanent, the divine within ourselves. This is the locus of Hindu interest: how can human beings connect that essential divine within themselves, the atman, with the transcendent, the Brahman.

Both Unitarian Universalism and Hinduism believe that every human being is worthy of reverence. We recognize the transcendent, as God, world, or cosmos, but we concentrate upon the immanent, upon the God within, the unique and irreplaceable part of each of us that deserves

to be the focus of our living, the portions of each of us that are worthy of reverence, that make us children of God.

Second, let's talk about karma and reincarnation. Hindus believe that the world is in its total scope, a just world. Karma argues that what you do comes back to you. If you do good, it eventually helps you and the world. If you do evil, it eventually hurts you and the world. Since, justice is transparently not always accomplished in the short run, like most human beings, the Hindus have figured out a way to explain how justice is done in the long run. Reincarnation is the idea that after death, you work your way up or down the evolutionary spiral through your deeds in this life.

Both Unitarian Universalists and Hindus believe that life makes sense, that in the long term and the total scope of things, justice is done, love dominates hate, knowledge is superior to ignorance, and peace is stronger than violence. We are also wise and worldly enough to recognize that this does not always happen in the short run, or even in every life time, or culture's history. Although many Unitarian Universalists probably do not literally believe in karma and even fewer in reincarnation, the sense that good begets good and that evil begets evil, and the attraction of the sense that some people are older souls than others, makes the Hindu doctrines of karma and reincarnation of significant interest to Unitarian Universalists.

Third, an even more relevant concept for Unitarian Universalists is the central Hindu concept of dharma. Dharma is usually translated as duty, but I believe a better English concept is vocation, not in the sense of a job only but in the sense of one's life purpose. The Hindus believe that fulfilling your unique life purpose is your essential responsibility. Living up to your dharma is the first order of business in human living. The primary scriptural text to understand the doctrine of dharma is the Bhagavad Gita, which is the short section of the *Mahabharata* that is a dialogue between the Pandava Brother and Master Archer Arjun and the god Krishna. Here are two central ideas from the Bhagavad Gita: it is better to your own duty imperfectly than to do another person's duty well, and to action alone has thou a right not ever to its fruits. In order words, it is your job to take care of your own responsibilities, and completing our responsibilities need to be their own reward.

The Hindu's emphasis upon dharma is perhaps the most centrally relevant Hindu concept to our Unitarian Universalist beliefs. We constantly emphasize individual and cultural responsibility and the need for people to find every viable way to become responsible for not only their own behavior, but also for our impact and opportunities upon the world at large. How do Hindus practice responsibility?

Fourth, let me tell you about the four tradition stages of life in Hinduism. But, first, let me contrast it with the dominant image in the Western world. In the West, life is generally perceived as a single mountain. You are not quite a full person as a child or adolescent or even young adult. At some point in middle age, you become a VP of something, and you have 2.2 children, a spouse, and considerable wealth and power. Then, you try desperately to cling to as much of this as possible until death. The traditional Hindu model has 4 mountains. Each is equally important, but the goals and responsibilities are quite distinct: in the first, you are student, you are under the wing of your family and your teachers, and they are responsible for you; in the second, you are a

householder, lust, power, and ambition, are appropriate because you are now responsible for others; in the third stage, what I call the grandparent stage, you are supposed be getting over lust, power, and ambition. You are not trying to look like a young person. You are trying to nurture others and share your knowledge with them without trying to dominate them. In the fourth stage, you have turned more to spiritual and ultimate matters, you are preparing to die with dignity.

Fifth, in Hinduism, each human being has a yoga. They find the spiritual practices that work for them. Hinduism is acutely aware that people have different personalities. As there are countless images of the divine, so there are countless paths to the divine, both are inevitably shaped by our unique personalities, contexts, and circumstances. Several of the dominant yogas are: hatha yoga: physical, jhana yoga: mind, karma: actions, bhakti: devotion, worship, ecstasy, and raja: psycho-philosophical exercises. Of course many people mix different yogas to make their own.

In summary, the Hindus believe that our essential task as human beings is to realize that the divine, in a unique way, is inside of us [the atman], and to fulfill that divine destiny through living our human responsibilities [are dharma]. To do so adequately, we need to do an adequate job with the context and circumstances in which we are placed [our karma]. We need to pay attention to living up to the different stages of life, and we need to find our unique paths [our yoga] through the pitfalls and opportunities of life. Unitarian Universalists can learn much by integrating these Hindu concepts more thoroughly into our faith and practice.