Hinduism

Hinduism had its origins in the religious beliefs of the Aryan peoples who settled in India after 1500 B.C. Evidence about the religious beliefs of the Aryan peoples comes from the Vedas, collections of hymns and religious ceremonies that were passed down orally through the centuries by Aryan priests and then eventually written down.

Early Hindus believed in the existence of a single force in the universe, a form of ultimate reality or God, called Brahman. It was the duty of the individual self—called the atman—to seek to know this ultimate reality. By doing so, the self would merge with Brahman after death.

By the sixth century B.C., the idea of reincarnation had appeared in Hinduism. Reincarnation is the belief that the individual soul is reborn in a different form after death. As one of the Vedas says, “Worn-out garments are shed by the body/Worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller [the soul].” After a number of existences in the earthly world, the soul reaches its final goal in a union with Brahman. According to Hinduism, all living beings seek to achieve this goal.

Important to this process is the idea of karma, the force generated by a person’s actions that determines how the person will be reborn in the next life. According to this idea, what people do in their current lives determines what they will be in their next lives. In the same way, a person’s current status is not simply an accident. It is a result of the person’s actions in a past existence.

The concept of karma is ruled by the dharma, or the divine law. The law requires all people to do their duty. However, people’s duties vary, depending on their status in society. More is expected of those high on the social scale, such as the Brahmans, than of the lower castes.

The system of reincarnation provided a religious basis for the rigid class divisions in Indian society. It justified the privileges of those on the higher end of the scale. After all, they would not have these privileges if they were not deserving. At the same time, the concept of reincarnation gave hope to those lower on the ladder of life. The poor, for example, could hope that if they behaved properly in this life, they would improve their condition in the next.

How does one achieve oneness with God? Hindus developed the practice of yoga, a method of training designed to lead to such union. (In fact, yoga means “union.”) The final goal of yoga was to leave behind the cycle of earthly life and achieve union with Brahman, seen as a kind of dreamless sleep. As one Hindu writing states, “When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, that, say the wise, is the highest state.”

Most ordinary Indians, however, could not easily relate to this ideal and needed a more concrete form of heavenly salvation. It was probably for this reason that the Hindu religion came to have a number of human-like gods and goddesses.

There are hundreds of deities in the Hindu religion, including three chief ones: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva (SIH•vuh) the Destroyer. Many Hindus regard the multitude of gods as simply different expressions of the one ultimate reality, Brahman. However, the various gods and goddesses give ordinary Indians a way to express their religious feelings. Through devotion at a Hindu temple, they seek not only salvation but also a means of gaining the ordinary things they need in life.

Today, Hinduism is still the religion of the vast majority of the Indian people.

Comparing

How do karma, dharma, and yoga relate to reincarnation?
The Sanchi stupa, third century B.C.
Originally the stupa housed a relic of the Buddha. This stupa has become the greatest Buddhist monument in India. Describe how the decorative architecture reflects the monument’s importance to Buddhism.

Buddhism

In the sixth century B.C., a new doctrine, called Buddhism, appeared in northern India and soon became a rival of Hinduism. The founder of Buddhism was Siddhartha Gautama (sih • DAHR • tuh• GOW• tuh•muh), known as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One.”

The Story of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama came from a small kingdom in the foothills of the Himalaya (in what is today southern Nepal). Born around 563 B.C., he was the son of a ruling family. The young and very handsome Siddhartha was raised in the lap of luxury and lived a sheltered life. At the age of 16, he married a neighboring princess and began to raise a family.

Siddhartha appeared to have everything: wealth, a good appearance, a model wife, a child, and a throne that he would someday inherit. In his late twenties, however, Siddhartha became aware of the pain of illness, the sorrow of death, and the effects of old age on ordinary people. He exclaimed, “Would that sickness, age, and death might be forever bound!” He decided to spend his life seeking the cure for human suffering. He gave up his royal clothes, shaved his head, abandoned his family, and set off to find the true meaning of life.

At first he followed the example of the ascetics, people who practiced self-denial to achieve an understanding of ultimate reality. The abuse of his physical body, however, only led to a close brush with death from not eating. He abandoned asceticism and turned instead to an intense period of meditation. (In Hinduism, this was a way to find oneness with God.) One evening, while sitting in meditation under a tree, Siddhartha reached enlightenment as to the meaning of life. He spent the rest of his life preaching what he had discovered. His teachings became the basic principles of Buddhism.

The Basic Principles of Buddhism Siddhartha denied the reality of the material world. The physical surroundings of humans, he believed, were simply illusions. The pain, poverty, and sorrow that afflict human beings are caused by their attachment to things of this world. Once people let go of their worldly cares, pain and sorrow can be forgotten. Then comes bodhi, or wisdom. (The word bodhi is the root of the word Buddhism and of Siddhartha’s usual name—Gautama Buddha.) Achieving wisdom is a key step to achieving nirvana, or ultimate reality—the end of the self and a reunion with the Great World Soul.

Siddhartha preached this message in a sermon to his followers in the Deer Park at Sarnath (outside India’s holy city of Banaras). It is a simple message based on the Four Noble Truths:

1. Ordinary life is full of suffering.
2. This suffering is caused by our desire to satisfy ourselves.
3. The way to end suffering is to end desire for selfish goals and to see others as extensions of ourselves.
4. The way to end desire is to follow the Middle Path.

This Middle Path is also known as the Eightfold Path, because it consists of eight steps:
1. Right view We need to know the Four Noble Truths.
2. Right intention We need to decide what we really want.
3. Right speech We must seek to speak truth and to speak well of others.
4. Right action The Buddha gave five precepts: “Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not be unchaste. Do not take drugs or drink alcohol.”
5. Right livelihood We must do work that uplifts our being.
6. Right effort The Buddha said, “Those who follow the Way might well follow the example of an ox that arches through the deep mud carrying a heavy load. He is tired, but his steady, forward-looking gaze will not relax until he comes out of the mud.”
7. Right mindfulness We must keep our minds in control of our senses: “All we are is the result of what we have thought.”
8. Right concentration We must meditate to see the world in a new way.

Siddhartha accepted the idea of reincarnation, but he rejected the Hindu division of human beings into rigidly defined castes based on previous reincarnations. He taught instead that all human beings could reach nirvana as a result of their behavior in this life. This made Buddhism appealing to the downtrodden peoples at the lower end of the social scale.

Buddhism also differed from Hinduism in its simplicity. Siddhartha rejected the multitude of gods that had become identified with Hinduism. He forbade his followers to worship either his person or his image after his death. For that reason, many Buddhists see Buddhism as a philosophy rather than as a religion.

Siddhartha Gautama died in 480 B.C. at the age of 80 in what is today Nepal. After his death, his followers traveled throughout India, spreading his message. Temples sprang up throughout the countryside. Buddhist monasteries were also established to promote his teaching and provide housing and training for monks dedicated to the simple life and the pursuit of wisdom.

Reading Check
Contrasting How does Buddhism differ from Hinduism?