

Hindu Paths to the Infinite

We Unitarians are famous for claiming that we started some spiritual development or another – one you will hear often is the important role we play in inter faith work – getting together in dialogue with people from other religions in order to understand one another better. It is true. We Unitarians played our part in the founding of the World Congress of Faiths, the IARF the Int Ass for Religious Freedom, the World Parliament of Religions – to mention some of the key ones.

But if anyone ever claims that Unitarians are at the forefront of this inter faith movement you can now tell them that Hinduism got there a few thousand years earlier. That story of the camel / elephant we heard earlier on is of Hindu origin and it is one of many teaching stories that carry the same message. There are many ways to god and human beings can only know their own small version of the much greater truth. Last week I talked of the image of one great underground river that has many wells dipping down into it, the image of many lanterns yet one light.

Another great Hindu story told by Ramakrishna but from an earlier source is that of the great mountain which at its summit has truth, the ultimate goal. And there are many different paths up that mountain – steep paths, rocky paths, circuitous paths, gentle meandering paths, paths with handrails. Some people spend their lives going around the base of the mountain telling other people which way to go. They are wasting their time for they cannot know which is the right path for anyone other than themselves. Only the individual can know for his or her self.

These paths up the mountain represent the world's many spiritual and religious traditions. They are all heading upwards, up the mountain to the summit of ultimate truth, all religious paths share the same goal. We must find the route that suits our lives and times and temperaments and start to climb. That journey towards the ultimate is the journey of a life time and we are all on that journey whether we recognise it or not.

So Hinduism, a religious path that reaches back thousands of years, carried a message of religious acceptance from a very early time, which is not to say that it has not been embroiled in conflicts just like any other religion at times in its history. And its history is itself fascinating. It is a rich and complex religion of the Indian subcontinent that has itself given birth to other religions of Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism. Only the other day I heard a Buddhist lama describing Buddhism, somewhat tongue in cheek, as Hinduism for export! And Hinduism itself only really gained its identifying name in the 1800s when the British forces were trying to make sense of India's religious multiplicities. Hinduism is so varied in its manifestations yet at its core it has key teachings. And it is a few of these key teachings that I am considering today.

Hinduism has a great pantheon of gods and goddesses, often seen in colourful pictures or statues. Certain villages or regions or families will have their favourite divinity which they will worship. To outsiders this may seem like the worship of idols when statues are brought gifts or like polytheism where many gods are worshipped. But Hinduism is a complex system of thought and contains contradictions. All these gods and goddesses, all these images are recognised as manifestations of the one divinity, the ultimate Brahman, the godhead which is without form or substance and which encompasses all that is.

Putting such beliefs simply:

- Everything in existence is an expression of god
- The proper aim of everyone's life is to come close, realise or merge with god
- Worldly delights are a temptation that divert humanity from pursuing or coming near to god.

Each human being has an individual personal self – the jiva – but this is not our true identity. Through spiritual practice we can realize our true identity as the Atman or the higher self. Through further spiritual exploration we can come to enlightened realization that Atman is Brahman – that our higher self is God, that our consciousness is an expression of the consciousness of the universe.

Its interesting to note how many of these spiritual ideas are now part of everyday awareness in the west, spread by a few key figures who brought Hinduism across the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with a resurgence of interest in the 1950s and 60s. Writers such as Aldous Huxley, musicians like the Beatles – were strongly influenced by Hindu teachings. As was Carl Jung in his creation of a system of personality types.

Hinduism is remarkable for its recognition that whilst merging with god is the ultimate aim in life people are different and will benefit from following different paths that suit their personalities. Here are the different spiritual personality types as identified in Hinduism: I wonder which you are?

Some people are primarily reflective
Some people are basically emotional
Others are essentially active
Finally some are experimentally inclined.

We do not just have one and only one type but there is usually one that particularly describes our core self (repeat them)

There is a great book on World Religions by Huston Smith which I know a number of people here have copies of and I have used his words in describing those four spiritual personality types.

I also have to thank Huston Smith for his excellent description of yogas – Hinduism’s set of instructions for ways to actualize fully our human potential – the paths we might take in order to merge with the divine.

Smith writes that “the word yoga once conjured images of shaggy bearded men in loin cloths, twisting their bodies into human pretzels whilst brandishing occult powers. Now that the West has appropriated the term however we are more likely to think of lithe women exercising to retain their trim suppleness. Neither image is totally divorced from the real article but they relate only to its bodily aspects.” They may be termed hatha yoga and as such are part of all other yogic paths.

The word yoga has a double meaning of to yoke together, to join, unite and to place under disciplined training. Yoga is a system of training designed to lead to integration or union with Brahman with the divine, elements of which are hidden within the deepest recesses of each and every living thing. The four yogas:

The first way to god is through knowledge – *jnana yoga*. This is the path of philosophical understanding, meditation, and the study of wisdom. Through this path seekers understand that the world is an illusion, that they have no personal identity and that in truth god is all that exists.

The second way to god is through love – known as *bhakta yoga*. This is the path of the heart that emphasises worship, prayer and surrender to god. Bhaktas lose themselves in ecstatic devotion to the divine, so losing their individual identity and becoming one with the Beloved, with Brahman, with all that is.

The third path to God is through work – *karma yoga*. This is the path for active people who can find God in the world of everyday activities. Karma yoga is for those who can go beyond the mundane task to that which lies eternally within it. There is the story of the yogi who sat meditating on the banks of the Ganges and saw a scorpion fall into the water. He scooped that scorpion out of the water only to have it bite him and then stumble straight back into the water again. Several times more the yogi rescued that scorpion only to have it bite him and then fall back into the river again. Eventually a bystander could stand watching this sequence no more and asked the yogi “why do you keep rescuing that scorpion when its only gratitude is to bite you?” “Well,” the yogi replied, “it is the nature of scorpions to bite. It is the nature of yogis to help others when they can.” Those taking the path of karma yoga will do each thing that needs to be done, but do it without attachment, thus through their tasks seeking oneness with all that is.

The fourth path to god is *raja yoga*, known in India as the royal road to re-integration. This is the path for those of a scientific frame of mind who may seek God through psychophysical experiments. The disciplines of Raja Yoga consist of eight steps: inner restraint, cultivating good habits, posture, the art of controlling the breath, withdrawal of the senses, fixing the mind on a chosen object, and intense mental concentration leading to the final stage of Samadhi – oneness with all that is.

For most of us there will not be one single path that we must take towards enlightenment. Choosing such a single path requires a single minded focus on spiritual growth that does not fit with most of our 21st century western lives. But I do believe that Hinduism has much to teach us Unitarians – not just about how to value other faiths but perhaps more importantly how to value our own faith and our own spiritual development. And its message is clear – the spiritual path does require some effort and discipline if we are truly to benefit from it. And perhaps that’s what brings us all here on Sunday mornings! Amen.

Benediction:

“Seek to do brave and lovely things that are left undone by the majority of people.
Give gifts of love and peace to all those you meet.” Paramahansa Yogananda