

The Hindu Way: Works, Knowledge, Devotion; Transmigration, Caste, Passages

Hinduism is a religion which offers many beliefs and practices to all comers. Already Hindu beliefs in a diversity of gods, goddesses, and spirits have been presented. Also, various scriptural traditions have been shown to support this variety of beliefs. Hinduism is inclusive in that it provides for its followers a multiplicity of ways to attain its goals.

A primary belief of Hinduism is the law of Karma and the transmigration of the soul. There are two words for soul. Brahman is the world soul, and Atman is the individual soul. One goal within Hinduism is for the individual soul to unite with the world soul. Until this unity occurs, the individual soul is born time after time. This birth cycle is called the transmigration of the soul (Samsara). The law of Karma is the balancing of good and bad actions within the individual soul. As the soul attains good Karma, the chances become better to break the birth cycles and to forever unite with the world soul. However, if the soul has more bad than good Karma, then the soul faces more births, and unification with the world soul is prolonged. The ultimate goal of Hinduism is to attain freedom (Moksha), at which the Karma or good works is perfect, the birth cycle is concluded, and the individual soul and world soul becomes one.

How does one attain good works? Hinduism offers three classic ways or margas. These are the way of activity (karma marga), the way of knowledge (jnana marga), and the way of devotion (bhakti marga). One may choose one or several of these ways in hope of breaking the birth cycle and experiencing ultimate freedom.

The Way of Activity

The way of activity or works emphasizes offerings and sacrifices to gods, goddesses, and spirits in ceremonies both in temples and in homes. Hindu deities dwell on the earth and take their abodes in images and earthly forms. The temple is the place of the deity. Often temples are built by the wealthy to gain merit for themselves. In the temple there is the image of the deity. Priests called Brahmin perform the various rituals of purification and worship at the temple. The priests awaken the deity, bathe the deity, and offer food, flowers, and incense. They also commune with the deity through chanting sacred literature.

Near the temple there may be a theological school and a floral shop. Hindus bring flowers and food to the temple to offer to the temple deity, and they rely on the priests to properly care for the deity. They do not go to the temple to hear a sermon. There are no preachers, no pulpits, and no seats. They desire strength, economic success, healthy families, and the power to overcome bad omens. The temple is a place of stored power which may be set loose through the deity by Brahman. Through good works or Karma, Hindus yearn to build up enough merit to overcome all life's obstacles. Hindus may also practice good works at home. Both personal and family worship may occur at home or at a small family shrine. If worship occurs in the home, a particular space is set aside with an altar to a special deity of the family. The image of the deity is placed in a box. Each day the deity is awakened by a bell, bathed, fed, incensed, and communed with through readings and chants. At a family shrine there may from time to time be priests and singers to aid in the worship of the deity. The way of works is a popular form of Hinduism practiced by millions. It is a matter of daily duty. Performing worship (puja) to a deity helps the worshiper build up good Karma. This is the way to attain freedom.

The Way of Knowledge

Another way to freedom is the way of knowledge, or jnana marga. The way of knowledge offers the Hindu the secret to life and the end of life. It gives one knowledge and insight into the essence and meaning of all things. This way first was taught in the Upanishad scriptures. Later, it was detailed in the Laws of Manu. The chief belief is that a single essence, the world soul, is the basis for all things. The world soul is beyond conceptualization; however, it can be experienced through a mystical relationship. The mystical experience of the individual soul with the world soul is facilitated by the practice of Yoga meditation. At the moment of oneness there is freedom or salvation.

The attainment of this kind of knowledge is difficult. The Laws of Manu outlined the four stages of life (asramas) through which one must pass to accomplish the knowledge way. They are the stages of student, householder, forest dweller, and ascetic. In the student stage the youth studies the Veda scriptures, including the Upanishad tradition. The Guru teaches the youth the truths of Hinduism and the passages of life to reach the truth. The householder is the second stage of life. It is the duty of the man to wed a woman, raise a family, provide for all the sustenance of the family as well as the needy.

The third stage, that of forest dweller, is not a duty but a choice if the

Hindu desires to continue the way of knowledge. He charges his sons to care for his wife, gives his property to his family, performs the fire sacrifice for the final time, and leaves home for the forests. He finds a Guru for his spiritual guide, becomes his disciple, and takes up the ascetic and meditative style of life, far away from family, friends, and worldly disturbances.

The fourth stage is the ascetic form, when the Hindu has learned the knowledge and the meditative techniques from the Guru and is ready to practice the art of Yoga on his own. Some of the ascetic practices are self-mortification. He may lay on beds of thorns. He may stare into the blazing sun until his sight disappears. He may stand on one foot for many hours. Self-torture is a way to put the body in its place so one can develop the concentration of the mind.

This concentration is what Yoga accomplishes. Yoga is the discipline in the way of knowledge that leads one to have the ultimate experience of freedom and the end of the transmigration cycle. However, certain virtues have to be a part of one's character and behavior before one can achieve this final meditative stage. Truthfulness, honesty, harmlessness, purity, and continence are among the virtues.

Yoga provides the Hindu with the method to reach freedom. The Yoga posture with head erect and spine straight and breath control enable the Hindu to attain supreme concentration. Through gazing upon certain sacred symbols and reciting certain sacred sounds, the Hindu approaches mystical union with the absolute, the world soul. This union brings him to a state of samadhi, a feeling of lightness, exemption from the laws of gravity, and peacefulness. Now he can be called a holy man, a Sannyasin. A lifetime of learning, discipline, and meditation are necessary to become a Sannyasin. The way of knowledge is an exclusive path to liberation.

The Way of Devotion

The third classic path is the way of devotion (bhakti). This way offers the Hindu a deity who is personal and who gives grace to overcome bad Karma. The Hindu relies on the deity through faith and devotion. It is interesting to note the differences in the three classic ways. The way of works is easily available to everyone. A home or a temple can house the deity. However, in spite of all the sacrifices and offerings to various deities, the Hindu is never certain of the outcome of break-

ing the transmigration and Karma cycles. The second path, the way of knowledge, is quite demanding and exclusive. Only a few can decide to leave family, home, and work to enter the forests. It is a price too costly for most Hindus.

The way of devotion is appealing to tens of millions of Hindus. In fact, it is the most popular religious belief and practice in Hinduism. The deities to whom Hindus give devotion and expect to receive grace include Vishnu and Shiva. Vishnu is a god of incarnations. Rama and Krishna are incarnations (avatara) of Vishnu. Also, Shakti, the female goddess, is prominent, especially as the divine mother. Shakti has presence in the goddess wives of Rama and Krishna. The most popular deity in the polytheism of Hinduism is Krishna. When a Hindu gives love and devotion to Krishna, as to other prominent deities, Krishna then makes liberation possible. There is no need to sacrifice countless offerings to numerous deities. It is not necessary to spend one's life deep in the forests. Devotion and grace work hand in hand to provide good Karma, break the transmigration of soul, and enable the Hindu to attain liberation.