

Exploring India's Hinduism and Buddhism

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*Every religious man should
study other religions in order
to understand his own religion
Paul Carus*

Introduction

The Indian religious heritage is incredibly rich, diverse and ancient. The peoples themselves have long histories, with some of the pre-Aryan aboriginals dating back to the Stone Age (Noss 81). What evolved into Hinduism and then later branched off into other distinct religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism has left a rich legacy today. It is a legacy that is not only religious, but also deeply cultural. The followers of Hinduism and Buddhism today comprise twenty percent (Hinduism: fourteen percent; Buddhism: six percent) of the world's population, having the third (900 million) and fifth (376 million) most adherents, respectively (adherents.com). Brief overviews, followed by a more detailed examination of similarities and differences, will help to clarify Hinduism and Buddhism.

Hinduism

Hinduism is surpassed only by Christianity and Islam in having the most number of adherents today. Hinduism has a very ancient tradition, and it is not possible to pinpoint an exact year when it began. Archeological evidence can be traced back to at least the third millennium B.C.E. for a culture living in the northern regions¹ of the Indian subcontinent. The deities of the people in those regions were typically personifications of nature, and were hierarchically described. Their religious system was formed from a broad array of beliefs and practices. In fact, Hinduism is actually a family of religions, and its practices are widely varied. Etymologically,

¹ It is commonly believed to have developed primarily in the Indus River Basin, with concentrations in the towns of Mohenjo Daro and Harappā (Prebish 2).

the word Hinduism refers to the Indian people, and references their diversity of beliefs. They appreciate the variety of beliefs making up the aggregate of Hinduism and believe that what is important is that individuals believe in something greater than what we can fathom, and that belief may or may not include the worship of a single supreme deity. For the Hindus that do believe, however, deity becomes manifest in many different forms. The three major Hindu deities are Brahmā, Shiva, and Vishnu. There are perhaps thousands of additional Hindu gods, each representing a different quality or characteristic.

The various gods are mentioned in ancient Hindu texts. One of those, a four-part compilation known as the Vedas are the scriptural texts that form the basis of Hinduism. The oldest Veda, the Rig-Veda, dates back to at least 1500 B.C.E. The other three Vedas are Sāma, Yajur, and Atharva. In the Vedic tradition, the Vedas themselves are not considered human compositions, but were rather received by shamans known as rishis. The Vedas weren't actually written down until about the fifteenth century C.E., so their passing down by word of mouth for over three millennium is phenomenal indeed.

The Upaniṣads, originally 14 in number, and dating from at least 800 B.C.E., were commentaries associated with the four Vedas. They comprise a string of philosophical sayings and insights into the nature of reality, and are the basis for the later Vedānta philosophy. They suggest that our ultimate destiny depends on finding out the truth about the world and ourselves. Not satisfied with the aphoristic wisdom of these sources, and interested in establishing a comprehensive world view, Hindu thinkers developed a number of philosophical systems or views (Klostermaier 230). Seen as a collective, these systems or views help illustrate the diversity of Hindu beliefs.

Six orthodox² views of the Vedas and Upanishads form the basis of the Hindu philosophy (Renard 89). Sāṃkhya is associated with discrimination and reason, and it describes all of reality. Its purpose is to understand reality and its 25 categories of spirit and matter. It is believed that by fully understanding spirit and matter, true knowledge is achieved. As it developed, Sāṃkhya, which was idealistic in nature, became paired with the more practical Yóga system, and it was in the latter that a 26th category of reality was included—God. In the Yóga system, God, like the other 25 categories of reality, is a focus of meditation.

The third view forming the foundation of the Hindu philosophy is that of Mīmāṃsā. Its belief is that liberation can not be gained by knowledge alone, and it has an elaborate system for interpreting the Vedas. Mīmāṃsā's oldest form is referred to as Pūrvā Mīmāṃsā, and it has been traditionally paired with a later form known as Uttarā Mīmāṃsā. The focus of Pūrvā Mīmāṃsā is on ritual and worldly duties, whereas the focus of Uttarā Mīmāṃsā is on theoretical matters such as perception and causation (Jones and Ryan 289).

A fifth view of Hindu philosophy, Nyāya, is based on logic. It has sixteen logic-based categories that help correct erroneous thinking. Similar to Nyāya is Vaiśeṣika, which has six analytical categories with which to overcome difficulties in knowledge dealing with the dichotomy of spirit and matter. Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika have been interpreted and combined into a single philosophical system.

Hinduism is both a way of living and a structured social and religious system. Most Hindus don't think of religious truth in dogmatic terms, because the very act of using words to describe something stops short of being able to truly grasp its essence. Truth transcends all verbal definitions (Zaehner 3). The core of Hinduism doesn't depend on belief in deity, or on whether there is one deity or many. Instead of God, the concept of dhárma is at the center of

² "Orthodox" in this sense means that in these systems the Vedas have been accepted as the ultimate authority.

belief for Hindus. It can be a difficult concept to fully understand but essentially comprises the essence of law and religion, both of which are based on the subtle natural law that governs all existence (i.e., both human and non-human existence). Dhárma has many different subtle meanings in different circumstances, but at the heart of dhárma is the sense of existing in a manner that is appropriate (Bowker 68). And part of acting appropriately is to humbly accept one's status in life.

There are four distinct periods of development of Hinduism (Zaehner 6-9). The first period was one of polytheism, with the Rig-Veda being its main literary document. The second period was one represented by pantheistic monism, in which All are centered as One. From the pantheistic view, Brahmā (the creator god) reveals itself through the various subordinate divinities. In this phase, emphasis was placed on mokṣa, which is the freeing of the soul from time, space, and the limitations of matter.

The third period showed development within Hinduism of decided monotheistic trends. This is also the phase where the caste system became set as a social and cultural structure. The caste system³ was built upon the idea of the hierarchical system of deities from the prior period.

In the fourth period there is a trend toward denial of individualism and more focus on the spiritual component of human life (viz., the soul). The soul is attached to the body, and the aim of self-realization is to break free of the confines of the body to realize the true self within. "In reality, it is the soul who desires, such as 'I shall look,' 'I shall hear,' and these desires are fulfilled through the crude external senses" (Rosen 173). But the soul also has a transcendental life beyond the physical body in relationship with the divine.

"The soul has three manifestations which correspond to three sheaths of consciousness

³ In descending order of caste status, the four classes are Brahmins (priests, scholars), Kṣatriyas (warrior-nobles, government workers), Vaiśyas (merchants, artisans, traders and producers), and Śúdras (workers and servants). Outside of these groups are the Dalits (outcasts or untouchables) (Noss 101).

explained in Vedic literature: the physical body, the mind, and the true self within the physical body” (Rosen 173). It was during this fourth and current period that Mahātmā Gandhi pointed out the unjustness of the caste system.

Rosen pointed out the three basic ideas that clarify Hinduism (169). They are the concept of identity (i.e., there is a soul that is distinct from the body), the teaching of kárma—that every thought, word and action has an ethical consequence, and belief in the transmigration of souls (a.k.a., reincarnation). All Hindu practice is set against the backdrop of these three basic ideas, and these three ideas are fundamental truths learned from the scriptures and traditions that form the basis of Hinduism.

Each of these three ideas operates in conjunction with the other two. The idea of the soul is better understood as the essence of the individual that goes through the various rebirths of reincarnation until the bondage of human suffering is broken. The idea of kárma is ingrained with the concept of the function of the soul, and there are numerous ways to understand kárma. “The Eastern law of kárma might be defined in various Western ways: scientifically as action and reaction, epistemologically as cause and effect, biblically and botanically as sowing and reaping, and even economically as supply and demand” (Braunstein 89). The idea of reincarnation operates with consideration of both the soul and kárma, and takes care of those whose thoughts and actions weren’t reconciled through the consequences of karma in the current life.

Buddhism

The Hindu way of life had already been in existence for many centuries when Gautama Siddhārtha, the historical Buddha, was born. Buddhism arose in India in a climate that was active with philosophical and religious speculation. A dominant tradition was concerned with how to

overcome the continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Many serious individuals tried to realize the ideal of ascetic dualism—achieving a high mental state through mastery of the body. Many teachers, ascetics and philosophical thinkers appeared who claimed to be able to show the way to enlightenment. Two individuals stood out above the rest and left religious legacies that are still practiced today. One of them, Vardhamana (c. 599-c. 527 B.C.E.) was the founder of Jainism. The other individual was Gautama Siddhārtha (c. 563-483 B.C.E.), the son of King Śuddhodana and Queen Māyā of the Śākya tribe of the Gautama clan. Both Jains and Buddhists criticized the traditional Hindu views of the understanding of God, along with the existing sacrificial system. They also rejected the idea that the Vedas were the ultimate authority.

Buddha overcame the dualism of previous philosophies (i.e., those that described humans in terms of a separation of matter and spirit). He followed in the tradition of the Sāṃkhya philosophy wherein misery and evil were overcome by the seeking of salvation through detachment and enlightenment. Buddha denounced various religious superstitions, including those involving blood sacrifices, which he considered to be cruel and absolutely unnecessary (Carus 23). Buddha's idea of enlightenment was that it could be acquired while occupying a middle ground between self indulgence and extreme asceticism. He saw enlightenment as a lively activity, and a process of contemplative and purifying thought. Like ascetics before him, he had fasted, but felt that during such periods of denial the mind as well as the body was deprived. He had been so disciplined as a novice that it was reported that he ate only a single grain of rice at meal times, but eventually realized that denying the body served no practicable purpose (Corlett and Moore 103).

Buddha saw the issue of man's problems as a moral problem. Our problems were rooted in the selfishness of focusing on our desires. He believed that if desire itself was banished, then

humans would proceed along a righteous path in life. Until his own enlightenment, Buddha knew that he had spent much of his life pursuing that which would inevitably pass away. He eventually realized that he could not continue to rely on fleeting activities and desires for his happiness (Corlett and Moore 80). Once he had awakened through enlightenment in his own life with the wisdom to abandon the selfish interests of his formerly princely life, he was content to enjoy the inner peaceful life of non-attachment (i.e., non-attachment to both material things and to delusional ideas).

The essence of Buddha's teachings can be summed up in two principles: the Four Noble Truths⁴ and the Noble Eightfold Path⁵. The four noble truths deal with doctrine, the focus being on *understanding*. The eightfold path deals with discipline and its focus is on *practice*. These two main principles lock together to become a mix of both *doctrine* and *path*.

Comparisons of Hinduism and Buddhism

Differences can often be readily apparent, while similarities are often hidden. An examination of both follows (with non-comprehensive lists) that helps to illuminate both similarities and differences between Hinduism and Buddhism (V).

Similarities

1. Both originated and evolved on the Indian subcontinent.
2. Both emphasize the illusory nature of the world and the role of kárma in the cycle of births and deaths.
3. Both acknowledge the role of desire in human suffering. Buddha believed that removing desire would result in the ending of suffering. Some Hindu beliefs maintain that actions motivated by desire (i.e., with the end result in mind) cause suffering, and doing actions without focusing on the end result will help to ease suffering.
4. Both emphasize compassion and non-violence towards all living beings.
5. Both believe in the existence of higher and lower worlds of existence.

⁴ The Four Noble Truths are (1) The Noble Truth of Suffering, (2) The Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering, (3) The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and (4) The Noble Truth of the Path (Noss 179).

⁵ The elements of the Noble Eightfold Path are (1) right understanding, (2) right aspiration, (3) right speech, (4) right conduct, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right concentration.

6. Both believe in the existence of deities on different planes.
7. Both believe in the value of certain spiritual practices including deep concentration and meditation.
8. Both believe that a renunciation of worldly life (with its many sufferings) is a precondition to enter the spiritual life.
9. Both have their own versions of rituals and practices that aid in the attainment of inner peace.

Differences

1. Hinduism was not founded by any particular individual. Buddhism was founded by the Buddha (Siddhārtha Gautama).
2. Hindus believe in the efficacy and supremacy of the Vedas. Buddhists don't follow the Vedas or any other Hindu scripture.
3. Buddhists don't profess a belief in a supreme God, nor of individual souls. Hindus believe in the individual soul (Ātman) and also in a supreme being (Brāhman).
4. Hindus accept Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu. Buddhists do not believe that any of the Hindu gods are equivalent or superior to the Buddha.
5. Buddhists consider ending human suffering as their chief aim in life. The Hindus consider that there are four chief aims in life: dhārma (religious duty), artha (material possessions and the power associated with them), kāma (passions and pleasures), and mokṣa (salvation, release and liberation).
6. Hindus believe in the four stages of life (student, householder, forest dweller, ascetic), and believe that it is only when one becomes as a forest dweller (i.e., withdrawing from society to begin a process of inner reflection) that one is open to the spiritual path. In Buddhism, anyone can join at any time in their life depending on their desire for a spiritual life.
7. Buddhists organize themselves into a monastic order. Hindus have no official and consistent ordering system; it is a religion of the individual.
8. Buddhists believe in the concept of Bodhisattvas (viz., that some are destined to become enlightened). Hindus don't believe in it.

Two Fundamental Differences

There are two major characteristics of Buddhism that distinguish it from Hinduism (Pagewise). First, the religion of Buddhism does not agree with the Hindu conception of the eternal self (i.e., Ātman), and secondly, Buddhism does not agree with the Hindu idea of eternity in nature (i.e., Brāhman).

Buddha discounted the notion of an independent self because he believed that we are all a part of a larger whole. He held that the view that each individual was separate and autonomous

was the cause of all of the suffering of mankind. Thinking that we are all a part of a whole will make us think in terms of the whole, and, that being the case, no one would want to do harm to another because doing so would mean harming oneself. This is the essence of Buddha's concept of no-self. Every single thing and every single process arises in dependence upon countless other things and processes. Even our own thoughts don't just originate in our minds on their own; they arise in our minds because of our previous thoughts and actions. This concept is not unlike the unified field theory of physics where it is hypothesized that nothing exists on its own, and wherein everything is connectedly dependent. It is like a complex web of things and processes reflecting other things and processes. Likewise, every human and every other animate and inanimate object are not independently recognized as a *self*. Each supposedly independent self is dependent upon and a part of much more, and is "lacking in self-existence" (Houston and Novak 62). What appears to be an independent *self*, then, is actually part of the comprehensive *Self*.

If there is no independent self, it must be wondered what happens after one reaches enlightenment. Buddha's belief was that there is no "after enlightenment." He believed that enlightenment lies beyond any idea of time. Any temporal notions we have about enlightenment come from our limited dualistic understanding. Enlightenment is non-temporal. Anything we can describe (e.g., ecstasy, bliss, epiphany) is temporal and will not last. Enlightenment is different in that there is no "individual you" to experience enlightenment in the first place. "If there is some particular thing you can name, pick up, single out, or point to, it's not enlightenment; it's ordinary. It's not true liberation or freedom of mind" (Hagen 245). Enlightenment is not just a state of mind or a place to be; it simply *is*.

On the point of Buddhism's second major distinction from Hinduism, Buddha believed that there was no fixed eternity since everything everywhere was always in flux and changing.

Things may appear to be non-changing (e.g., stones), but their rate of change is simply much slower than a flower that changes more rapidly through time. And since everything is always changing, including our own thoughts and bodies, there is no way for us to know if there is a singular and supreme God.

Some say that since Buddhism professes no God, then it cannot be a religion. Others say that since Buddhism is obviously a religion, religion therefore does not require God (Smith and Novak 53). Buddha believed that if there is a God, it is beyond our comprehension. Not professing a supreme being is quite different from the atheistic belief that there is no supreme being. Buddha merely chose to focus on what we *can* know and do, and taught that humans *can* become awakened and free themselves from misery through enlightenment.

Summary

The very fact that there are numerous sects and variations within both Hinduism and Buddhism show that there are many ways to find religious expression. Even the Hindus that are atheists at least hold a religious world view, albeit not one that includes a single supreme being. Gautama Siddhārtha was raised as a Hindu, but was discouraged by what he felt were limitations of or dogma within Hinduism. He forged a different path and those that followed him and the preaching of his Dhárma (i.e., his doctrine) for the 45 years of his ministry eventually identified his way as a different religion, not just as a sect of Hinduism. Buddhism and Jainism grew naturally from the roots of Hinduism like Christianity and Islam grew from the roots of Judaism. What seems to be of value to the followers of a particular religious tradition is that they have found a religious *way* in life that is rewarding, and many believe in a doctrine of salvation that is beyond our commonplace experiences. Perhaps the greatest value of religion is that it helps the individual become a better member of humankind, and, on a larger scale, that individual

becomes a better element of the collective whole of existence.

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