

## Unit 9a: Hindu Texts--Societal Implications

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

### Be aware of the following

- Liberation as the underlying goal of Hindu social thought
- Three paths leading to liberation
- Four classes (varnas) making up the Hindu social structure
- Four stages and goals of Hindu life
  - Flexible nature of Hindu religious life

### Identify

- moksha, margas, yogas
- gyana yoga
- varnashramadharma
- karma yoga
- varna, dharma, ashrama
- Brahmins
- ksatriyas
- vaisyas
- sudras
- jati, artha, kama
  - Krishna, Kali

### Realize

- Common ethical core underlying all Hindu thought
- Class within a class structure of Hindu society
- Hindu liberation path of popular devotional worship
- Hindu gods Krishna and Kali
- Place of images in Hindu devotional life

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*"'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'-- because thy neighbor is thyself; God is in both thee and thy neighbor, and both are in God. He who acts in this spirit need not fear that his acts will bind him to further existence."*

--Franklin Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gita, p. 165.

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The close alliance of Hindu thought and practice (belief and ethics) makes it difficult to neatly categorize aspects of its ethical system. This section focuses on the margas or paths taken to liberation; aspects of the varnashramadharma (vahn-AHSH-rah-muh-DAHR-muh) system as a model for society; and the Bhakti (BUK tee) path.

### The Hindu Social Vision

Underlying the whole Hindu social system is the focus upon liberation (moksha.) The question "How can we seek liberation and still focus on the welfare of society?" becomes primary.



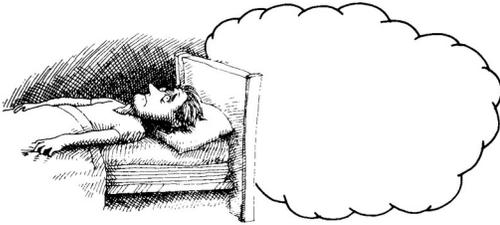
Three paths (margas), the yogas ('YOH-guhs,' disciplines, techniques, 'yokes') of knowledge, action and devotion, mark the ways to liberation. Each path, like spokes on a wheel, is considered on an equal par with the others.

Ethics becomes a matter of following the disciplines or duties involved in your chosen path, a "living up to the system."

Underlying each path is a common ethical core which advocates self-control, non-violence, truthfulness, self-discipline, cleanliness and contentment. Hindus practice all three of these paths, just in differing degrees.

Only when you talk to a person do you find out what degree of each he or she practices.

**1. Gyana yoga** (jnana/gnana/yana) This path of knowledge is a difficult way, reserved for a select few. It requires a rare combination of rationality and spirituality.



Based upon the Upanishads, it focuses upon interior knowledge and meditation.

## 2. Karma yoga

The path of Karma yoga, that of works or deeds, is the practice of many Hindus. Varnashramadharma describes the karma yoga model. Dharma (DAHR muh--social and religious duty) depends on which varna (VAHRN-ah--social class) one is born into and what ashrama (AHSH ruh-muh--stage of life [student, householder, forest dweller, homeless wanderer]) one is in.

**a. Varnas** (VAHRN ahs) Four classes (varnas) make up this model for the social structure.

(1) **Brahmins** (BRAH mihns) are the guardians of spiritual values, the religious teachers and priests. A required twelve years of study acquaints practitioners with the ritual and practice of this class.

(2) **Ksatriyas** (KSHAT ree ahs)--rulers and warriors--oversee the land or kingdom. Eight years of study are necessary for members.

(3) **Vaiśyas** (VIS yahs), the merchants, control cash, agricultural produce and livestock. Vaiśyas require four years of study.

(4) **Sudras** (SOO drahs) are serfs accorded service positions, being members of the lowest class.



Within the varna structure, every work, movement and exercise in living out the duties of the class one was born into becomes an exercise moving toward enlightenment.

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In reality, rather than the varna (class) system, jati (or class within a class) becomes the decisive factor in societal relations. Hundreds to thousands of these classes within the four major varnas divide society.

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Rigid adherence to prohibitions and privileges within the jati structure is the present-day norm. With contentment, patience and whole-hearted concentration, one focuses on his or her duties.

**b. Ashrama** Hindu response to the question "When should I do what?" lies in contentedly practicing the ashrama ('AHSH-ruh-muh,' four stages--student, householder, forest dweller, homeless wanderer) of life.

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The ideal for a student is to follow a dedicated regimen of ascetic and scholarly practice under the tutorship of a guru.

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Householdership becomes a key stage in the whole system. Responsibilities to family, vocation and community occupy most of one's attention. Then, at age sixty, a householder may escape to the forest. In this guilt-free, hermit stage of retirement, one seeks self-understanding and spiritual vision. The last stage, that of renunciation (being a homeless wanderer), describes one who neither hates nor loves

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anything, someone who lives as identified with the eternal self.

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**c. The Four Goals** The doctrine of the four goals of life answers the questions "What should I do? What are legitimate things to follow?" In a sense, these goals serve in conjunction with the stages of life described above.

(1) **Artha** (ahr-tah) Earning wealth, and economic/political activity, defines artha the first goal.

(2) **Kama** (KAH-muh), the second goal, describes pursuit of sensual pleasures, especially those of romantic ecstasy. Cultivating aesthetic and sensual appetites becomes the objective.

(3) **Dharma** The third goal, dharma, the leading of a moral life, accentuates duty and willingness to serve.

(4) **Moksha** The last aim, that of seeking liberation (moksha), matches the practice found in one who reaches the final stage in life, that of renunciation. It is a release from the constrictions of this life.



### 3. Bhakti yoga

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Popular devotional worship is centered in the bhakti path. Bhakti does not seek an escapist, theistic retreat. Rather, it seeks implementation of universal virtues, and maintains a classless, egalitarian outlook.

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Poet saints, while insisting on god's otherness, yet seek to adore him with every element of their being. Love, friendship, despair, and joy--emotional expressions of devotion--describe the feelings focused on god.

Devotion, as offered to the gods Krishna (KRISH nah) and Kali (KAH lee), presents a strong, vigorous, all-consuming passion for the holy.

**a. Krishna**, with his symbolic flute, portrays the relationship of the worshiper with god as a riotous, festive, rollicking affair, filled with abandon, frenzy, and intoxicated delight. The universe and self are filled with bliss.

**b. Kali**--eerie, awesome, terrifying, wild, frantic and out of control--epitomizes the undomesticated, fearful aspects of the divine. Though appearing dangerous and frightening, Kali possesses an irresistible, attractive dimension. She may be "tamed" by simple, childlike devotion.

### c. Images

Images move worshipers in the direction of god. Called visual "theologies" and "scriptures," images remind us that India is a "seeing" culture. The beautiful and sensuous, distressing and baffling combine to both confront and delight practitioners.

The primary element involved in the worship experience is faith. In concentration on the image, the worshiper becomes aware of the oneness of his/her atman with the universal brahmin. At the point of emancipation, that oneness overflows into the image. Put another way, a worshiper concentrates, extinguishing his/her ego. One's own realization is

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the focal point. Once recognizing the oneness of atman with brahmin, that awareness overflows to the image.

Hinduism is a democratic, process oriented religion. In choosing a god or many gods adherents are free to choose their own representatives of the Divine. Worshipers can call up a given god at a given time, without disbelieving in other gods.



## Vocabulary List: Hindu Texts--Societal Implications

**Atman** (AHT-muhn) The individual soul or life-force, eternal, indestructible...of the nature of pure being, consciousness and bliss...the essential nature of one's self.

**Artha** (ahr-tah) Earning wealth, and economic/political activity, defines this first goal of Hindu social life.

**Ashrama** (AHSH-ruh-muh) Hindu response to the question "When should I do what?" Contentedly following the ashrama (four stages--student, householder, forest dweller, homeless wanderer) of life is the way to liberation.

**Bhakti yoga** (BUHK-tee) Popular devotional worship. Poet saints, while insisting on god's otherness, yet seek to adore him with every element of their being. Love, friendship, despair, and joy--emotional expressions of devotion--describe the feelings focused on god.

**Brahmins** (BRAH mihns) The guardians of spiritual values, the religious teachers and priests. A required twelve years of study acquaints practitioners with the ritual and practice of this class.

**Dharma** (DHAR mah) The leading of a moral life, accentuating duty and a willingness to serve, describes dharma, the third goal of Hindu social life.

**Gyana yoga** (jnana/gnana/yana) The path of knowledge reserved for a select few. It requires a rare combination of rationality and spirituality. Gyana yoga focuses upon interior knowledge and meditation.

**Jati** The class within a class. Jati becomes the decisive factor in Hindu societal relations. Hundreds to thousands of these classes within the four major varnas divide society.

**Kali** (KAHL lee) Goddess who is eerie, awesome, terrifying, wild, frantic and out of control. She epitomizes the undomesticated, fearful aspects of the divine.

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**Kama** (KAH-muh), The pursuit of sensual pleasures, especially those of romantic ecstasy, describes the second goal of Hindu social life. Cultivating aesthetic and sensual appetites becomes the objective.

**Karma yoga** The liberation path of works or deeds, which is the practice of many Hindus

**Krishna** (KRISH nah) God who, with his symbolic flute, portrays the relationship of the worshiper with the holy as a riotous, festive, rollicking affair, filled with abandon, frenzy, and intoxicated delight. The universe and self are filled with bliss.

**Ksatriyas** (KSHAT ree ahs) Rulers and warriors who oversee the land or kingdom. Eight years of study are necessary for members.

**Moksha** The seeking of liberation, a release from the constrictions of this life

**Sudras** (SOO drahs) Serfs accorded service positions, being members of the lowest class

**Vaisyas** (VIS yahs) Individuals who are merchants, control cash, agricultural produce and livestock. Vaisyas require four years of study.

**Varna** (VAHRN-ah) Social class

**Varnashramadharma** (vahrn-AHSH-rah-muh-DHAR-muh) The path to liberation which describes the karma yoga model

## Review Quiz: Hindu Texts--Societal Implications

**Part 1--True/False** Place the correct letter (T or F) in the blank provided.



1. \_\_\_\_\_ In Hinduism, some paths towards liberation are viewed as \_\_\_\_\_ more important than others.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ A devout Hindu practices only one liberation path at a time.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Jati describes the many classes within a class (varna) within Hindu practice.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The terrifying goddess Kali is never tamed.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The primary element involved in the Hindu worship experience is having images present to aid concentration.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Hinduism is a democratic, process-oriented religion.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The god Krishna presents a worshipper with a sober, austere picture of the holy.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ The pursuit of romantic ecstasy (kama) can be a legitimate goal, depending on one's stage in life.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Bhakti (devotional worship) is an escapist, outside of this life experience.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Within the varna (class) system, only spiritual works--meditation, worship, and piety--have significance in attaining enlightenment.



**Part 2--Multiple Choice** Place the letter of the most correct answer in the blank provided.

1. \_\_\_\_ The three yogas (disciplines, "yokes") to attain liberation are the paths of
  - a. meditation, sacrifice and giving.
  - b. knowledge, action and devotion.
  - c. reading, writing and arithmetic.
  
2. \_\_\_\_ A common ethical core advocating self-control, non-violence, truthfulness and cleanliness
  - a. underlies each path leading to enlightenment.
  - b. is important in the path of knowledge (gyana yoga.)
  - c. is of minor importance in Hindu ethical thought.
  
3. \_\_\_\_ The path of knowledge (gyana yoga) is
  - a. reserved only for a select few.
  - b. the easiest of all liberation paths.
  - c. based upon bhakti.
  
4. \_\_\_\_ Karma yoga, the path of works or deeds, involves practice in
  - a. devotion to the goddess Kali.
  - b. social and religious duties, social class, and stages of life.
  - c. learning the doctrines of the Upanishads.
  
5. \_\_\_\_ Of these three classes, which one requires the most study?
  - a. Sudras
  - b. Brahmins
  - c. Ksatriyas

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6. \_\_\_\_\_ In present day Hindu society, what form does the class system (varna) take?
- Four major classes solely
  - Hundreds to thousands of jati or classes within a class
  - Class is meaningless--liberation comes to all
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The four stages (ashrama) of life in karma yoga are
- ascetic monk, mountain guru, desert hermit and temple priest.
  - student, householder, forest dweller and homeless wanderer.
  - eenie, meenie, mynie, and moe.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Of the four stages (ashrama) of life, which one is a key to the whole Hindu system?
- student
  - householder
  - homeless wanderer
9. \_\_\_\_\_ The four goals of Hindu life seek to answer what questions?
- "What should I do? What are legitimate aims to follow?"
  - "Who should rule Calcutta? Should India ban all rickshaws from the streets?"
  - "Should I worship Kali or Krishna? What forest should I go live in?"
10. \_\_\_\_\_ What God portrays the worshipper with the holy as riotous, festive, and filled with intoxicating delight?
- Kali
  - Krishna
  - Ganesha



**Part 3--Matching** Place the letter of the correct response in the blank provided.

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|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1. _____ Dharma                      | A. Hindu response to the question "When should I do what?" Contentedly following the ashrama (four stages--student, householder, dweller, homeless) is the way to liberation. |
| 2. _____ Ksatriyas                   | B. The leading of a moral life, accentuates duty and willingness to serve, the third goal of Hindu social life.   |
| forest wanderer) of life liberation. | C. The path of knowledge reserved for a select few. It requires a rare combination of rationality and spirituality. Focuses upon interior knowledge and meditation.           |
| 3. _____ Jati                        | D. The class within a class...the decisive factor in Hindu relations. Hundreds to thousands of these classes within the four major society.                                   |
| 4. _____ Ashrama                     | E. The liberation path of works or deeds, which is the practice of many Hindus  |
| 5. _____ Yogas                       | F. Rulers and warriors who oversee the land or kingdom. Eight years of study are necessary for members.   |
| 6. _____ Varna                       |   |
| 7. _____ Karma yoga                  |   |
| 8. _____ Moksha                      |   |
| 9. _____ Gyana yoga                  |   |
| 10. _____ Sudras                     |   |

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G. The seeking of liberation, a release  
from the constrictions of this life

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class

H. Serfs accorded service positions,  
being members of the lowest

I. Social class

J. The disciplines, techniques leading  
to liberation

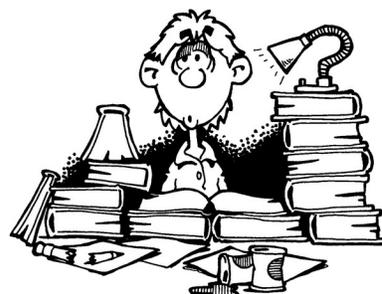


"Let off some steam."

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## Sources Used in Hindu Texts-- Societal Implications



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(Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972).

Ryerson, Charles, A., Class Notes , HR 345, Hinduism, Princeton  
Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, Spring 1996.

Sampson, Kenneth L., World Religions: A Resource for U.S. Army  
Chaplains and Chaplain Assistants, Thesis project, Masters  
of Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New  
Jersey, submitted to Dr. Charles Ryerson 6 May 1996.



## Resources for Further Study

Eck, Diana, Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India, (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Publications, 1985).

With pictures and narrative, this work discusses the visual nature of Indian religion.

Embree, Ainslie, The Hindu Tradition--Readings in Oriental Thought, (NY: Random House, 1972).

Compilation of readings from basic Hindu texts. Author's introductions are especially helpful.

Hopkins, Thomas, The Hindu Religious Tradition, (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971).

Compact, often technical, but instructive and thorough work.

Jhabvala, Ruth Praver, Heat and Dust, (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

Novel, set in 1920s India, of an English colonial wife and minor Indian prince. Captures the heat, dust, squalor, romance, sensual and spiritual dimensions of India.

Kinsley, David, The Sword and the Flute, (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1977).

Engrossing work describing Kali and Krishna--Indian manifestations of God.

Murthy, U.R. Anantha, Samskara--A Rite for a Dead Man, (trans. by A.K. Ramanujan, NY: Oxford Press, 1989).

Indian religious novel, taking place in south India, concerning a decaying brahmin colony.

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Narajan, R.K., The Guide, (NY: Penguin, 1988).

What a Delight! Few works of fiction engage the reader in the life of India better than The Guide.



"People come into this world with varying degrees of talent, but few achieve much without a great deal of diligent effort."  
(General Gordon R. Sullivan)

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