

# The Rise of Hinduism

Dharma. Karma. Reincarnation.

Brahma. Shiva. Vishnu.

Not many things have endured without interruption or major transformation for over 5,000 years. Hindu traditions such as these are great exceptions. Arguably, Hinduism is the oldest religion on Earth.

To understand how Hinduism has withstood the tests of time, it is important to know the principles upon which it is grounded. And to understand the principles, it is necessary to know their historical foundations.

Archaeologists have determined that highly developed civilizations flourished throughout the Indus Valley between 4000 and 1500 B.C.E. But for still unknown reasons, the valley's inhabitants appear to have moved out rather suddenly. They resettled among new neighbors in northwestern India and encountered a group of people from central Asia who brought with them warrior ethics and a religion called Vedism.

Within the ruins of the ancient Indus Valley civilization, archaeologists have discovered many artifacts of modern Hinduism that were not found in any Vedic civilizations. These include statues and amulets of gods and goddesses, huge temple tanks for bathing, and sculptures of people in yoga postures.

Based on this evidence, it seems that when the people from central Asia settled in India, their Vedic beliefs were mingled with the beliefs of indigenous Indians. Thus, it is likely that the Indus Valley tradition and Vedic gods and beliefs combined to form the foundations of Hinduism.

## One Faith, Many Paths

Hinduism stands apart from all other religions for several reasons. It has no single founder, no single book of theological law and truth, no central religious organization, and no definition of absolute beginning and end.

Hinduism is a code of life — a collection of attitudes, personal experiences, and spiritual practices. It is, in essence, defined by behaviors rather than beliefs.

According to Hindu philosophy, there is one divine reality, and all religions are simply various interpretations of it. Because of this, Hinduism allows and even encourages individuals to choose a religious path that best suits their social, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs.

One Hindu devotee might worship well-known gods such as Vishnu and Shiva in a large, public temple, whereas another might worship less common deities in a private shrine within his or her own home. Yet they would both be considered good Hindus, provided that they honored each other's choices.

This tolerance makes Hinduism difficult to understand and define, but it does explain why so many gods, goddesses, and rituals are described in the numerous Hindu scriptures.

## The Vedas and the Upanishads

Despite the fact that Hindus characteristically believe and do different things, several concepts and traditions bind them together. Many of these beliefs were compiled in a set of scriptures written around 1300 B.C.E. known as the Vedas. It is believed that the Vedas are the eternal truths that were heard, then written down by holy seers.

According to the Vedas, time and life are cyclical. After death, one's soul leaves the body and is reborn, or reincarnated, into a new form.

The constant cycle of birth and rebirth is known as *samsara* and the measurement by which the quality of new birth is determined is known as karma. Karma, the accumulated result of one's actions in various lives, can be good or bad. Righteous and moral conduct, known as dharma, is the road to good karma.

Examples of traditional good conduct included marrying within one's caste, revering upper castes, doing good deeds, and abstaining from meat, particularly that of cows.

The writings known as the Upanishads appeared six to eight hundred years after the Vedas and focus mostly on how to escape the cycle of rebirth. The Upanishads explain how to leave Samsara through a release and ultimate enlightenment known as *moksha*. The appearance of the Upanishads marked the beginning of a period known as the Vedantic Age.

### **The End of the Vedas?**

Literally, "Vedantic" means "end of the Vedas." But the Vedic beliefs never really disappeared. Gods of the Vedic tradition became less commonly worshipped, but the Vedic philosophies recorded in the books were surely not forgotten. The principles of karma and dharma were too popular (especially among members of the lower castes) to fade away.

Scholars continue to debate over the beginning of Hinduism, but most agree that during the Vedantic Age (between 800 and 400 B.C.E.) there was a shift to the widespread worship of the gods Vishnu and Shiva. They also agree that this shift coincided with the emergence of new religions in India that sought enlightenment, such as Buddhism and Jainism.

In the years to come, Hinduism became divided into many sects. But true to the foundations of Hinduism, the new sects' beliefs and practices were accepted. Because of such tolerance, Hinduism thrives today, millennia after it began.

### **Questions:**

- 1. How do archaeologists believe the foundations of Hinduism were formed?**
- 2. Explain the faith and tolerance of the Hindu faith. What sets it apart from other religions?**
- 3. In the ancient civilization in the Indus Valley, why do you think this religion of tolerance was created? What does it say about the culture of the region?**

# The Birth and Spread of Buddhism

What is humanity's place within the universe?

For millennia, people around the world have asked this question. In 6th-century South Asia, this question stirred up a small revolution.

The answers provided by traditional Hindu teachings and practices made Indian philosophers and religious sages increasingly upset. Many members of the Vaishya class spoke against the injustices of the Hindu caste system and the overwhelming power of the priestly class, known as the Brahmins.

Many Brahmin priests were considered corrupt because they performed animal sacrifices and practiced other Vedic rituals. Resentment of such rituals and continued anger about unbalanced social power prompted the development of new intellectual teachings and philosophies. These new ideas maintained that some aspects of Hindu tradition and ritual had merit. They never directly challenged Vedic gods or beliefs.

But Siddhartha Gautama did.

## **Buddha: Spiritual Revelation**

Siddhartha was born about 563 B.C.E. in the foothills of the Himalayas. A prince, he lived a sheltered life amid luxury, wealth, and comfort. But at age 29, Siddhartha fled from his palace and discovered something new.

For the first time, he saw poverty, misery, and illness. At home, he soon felt discontented with his materialistic life and the conditions that surrounded him. In response to the emotions triggered by his experience outside the palace, he gave away all his belongings and searched for enlightenment through the abandonment of basic needs.

Siddhartha began his quest with a period of starvation. According to legend, he grew so thin during this time that he could feel his hands if he placed one on the small of his back and the other on his stomach. These methods of self-denial eventually led him to a revelation.

Siddhartha discovered that he needed to find another way — something in between his rich and impoverished lifestyles. He resolved to follow the Middle Path.

Siddhartha sought enlightenment through concentration. He sat under a pipal tree, practiced intense meditation, and fought off all worldly temptations. After 40 days, he reached the ultimate goal — nirvana.

He came to understand his previous lives and finally gained release from the cycle of suffering. When he attained Enlightenment he became known by the title of Buddha, or "Awakened One."

The Buddha set out to share his experience and to teach others to follow the Middle Path. He traveled throughout northeastern India for several decades, spreading his philosophy to anyone who was interested, regardless of gender or caste. Even Brahmins and members of the nobility were converted.

The Buddha died in 483 B.C.E., after 45 years of traveling and teaching. Upon his death, the Buddha passed into a state of nirvana, the ultimate release from suffering in which the self no longer exists and salvation is achieved. Included in his last breaths were four words of inspiration: "Strive on with awareness." And his followers did.

## **Buddhism: Spiritual Revolution**

Small communities of monks and nuns, known as *bhikkhus*, sprung up along the roads that Buddha traveled. Devoted to his teachings, they dressed in yellow robes and wandered the countryside to meditate quietly. For almost 200 years, these humble disciples were overshadowed by the dominant Hindu believers. But the rise of a great empire changed all that.

In the 3rd century B.C.E., several ambitious leaders built the expansive Mauryan empire and fought many bloody battles to extend its boundaries of control. One king, named Ashoka, was so troubled by the effects of the conquests on humanity that he converted to Buddhism. Adopting a code of nonviolence, he renounced all warfare and incorporated principles of Buddhism in his ruling practices.

Ashoka promoted Buddhist expansion by sending monks to surrounding territories to share the teachings of the Buddha. A wave of conversion began, and Buddhism spread not only through India, but also internationally. Ceylon, Burma, Nepal, Tibet, central Asia, China, and Japan are just some of the regions where the Middle Path was widely accepted.

With the great spread of Buddhism, its traditional practices and philosophies became redefined and regionally distinct. Only a small minority practiced the earliest forms of Buddhism, and Buddhist influence as a whole began to fade within India. Some scholars believe that many Buddhist practices were simply absorbed into the tolerant Hindu faith.

Today there are approximately 350 million Buddhists in the world.

### **Questions:**

- 1. Who was Buddha? How did he develop his new religion?**
- 2. Explain nirvana.**
- 3. Explain the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism.**
- 4. How did the teachings of Buddha soon spread throughout the Mauryan Empire? Explain the relationship between government and religion in the empire.**