

I've recently come to see Hinduism as having a great deal in common with Unitarian Universalism. Hinduism is a religion that seems accessible to virtually anyone; those who approach religion from primarily an intellectual perspective and need religious concepts to make rational sense and also for those whose relationship with religion is based exclusively on faith.

Unitarian Universalism has the ability to follow in the footsteps of Hinduism as a unifying force across many dimensions of differences. Both are founded on macro-level conceptions, philosophies if you will, leaving the details or particular beliefs and interpretations to the individual. As such, both are more than a religion, as we tend to think of religions, they represent a way of viewing the world, a way of being in the world, a way of living.

Hinduism has its roots in prehistory, going back to perhaps 4-5000 BCE. It's arguably the oldest religion in the world. In fact, Hinduism existed before it had a name. When westerners invaded the province, Sindh, in the Indus Valley they called the people Hindus, and their religion Hinduism.

Hinduism is largely based on revelations, codified in the Vedas, ancient scriptures of sacred knowledge. These scriptures were passed down from generation to generation over millennia, in the oral tradition, with painstaking attention to detail.

While the Vedas document sacred knowledge, Hinduism is not a text-based religion as the bible is for Christianity. The origin of the Vedas' can not be dated nor attributed to any author or to a particular source. The Vedas represent uncontroverted theological knowledge, which portrays revelation that has been heard (sruti), knowledge that has been remembered (smrti), and logical theological proof (pramana).

The two other foundational elements of Hinduism are the belief in the four divisions of society (castes) and the four stages of life. The four stages of life are seen within the context of karma and a hierarchical notion of life. The underlying concept is that one lives ones life with an eye toward ultimate release from the cycle of life, reincarnation, in order to attain liberation, moksa. The four stages are: student, householder, forest-dweller, and wandering monk or ascetic.

Hinduism has a vast and deep grounding in philosophy. Indian philosophy is focused on finding the truth, what they call reality. It seeks to find the reality of the universe and the reality of being human. There are seven characteristic attitudes or tendencies generally attributed to Indian philosophy. 1) First and foremost, there's a concentration on the spiritual nature of thought and its lived application. It sees human beings as fundamentally spiritual and focuses on the spiritual destiny of humanity in relation a universe which is also seen as spiritual.

2) There is an overarching belief in the intimate relationship of philosophy and life. Philosophy is not seen as a mere intellectual exercise. Theory and practice, doctrine and life, the truth, must be lived. 3) The ability to grasp the realities of self and the universe is founded in one's inner spirit. There is an introspective attitude and an introspective approach to reality and to ultimate truth.

4) This introspective approach is fundamentally idealistic. Indian philosophy believes reality is ultimately one and ultimately spiritual 5) While reason and intellectual knowledge is valued, its not seen as sufficient to arrive at ultimate truth. Intuition is seen as the only way to know truth; one must embody it, become one with it.

6) Virtually all Indian philosophy accepts the authority of ancient revelation, sruti. 7) Religion and philosophy, knowledge and behavior, intuition and reason, God and man, are all brought into harmony in Indian philosophy.

Hinduism, built on Indian philosophy, has an incredible ability to combine often diverse conceptions into a coherent, meaningful whole. I suspect that its this ability to harmonize, to combine divergent views into a coherent whole that has enabled Hinduism to last some 6000 years. I'm convinced we have much to learn from Indian philosophy and from Hinduism.

We in the west, our religions, have a strong tendency towards dualism; either or, good or bad, write or wrong, your truth or mine, my God or yours, God does or does not exist. In our culture, we tend to stop learning, stop growing once we think we have arrived at an answer. Our minds close and in a real sense, our eyes close, when we've arrived at an answer. We grab onto "our" truth and fight to the death to defend it.

This tendency is significantly mitigated by the harmonizing approach of Indian thought. Indian philosophy has devised what's known as jnana-marga, the path of knowledge. It's a hierarchical system of learning, of knowing, that allows for multiple starting points. This system is identified in the Upanishads, one of Hindu's many sacred texts, as a four-step process of discovery or levels of knowledge.

The first stage is the state of being awake. One is aware of rational thought and sense perceptions. One's awareness is of time and space and the earthly plane. The second and third stages provide experiences that allow one to enter the fourth. This fourth stage is where I want to center the rest of remarks today. Whether this fourth stage is "true" or not, "real" or not, I'm convinced, just the idea of it, the concept, opens up a whole new panacea for us.

The fourth stage is called turiya, where duality does not exist. Here one does not gain the knowledge of something, but an awareness of "no-thing". This is a place beyond words, because words represent concepts, which are a form of division. This notion is very similar to what is said to be attainable through yoga, and to the Buddhist notion of "emptiness". Both yoga and Buddhism grew out of Hinduism.

Here, the self is conscious of self, self knows the self as all, referred to in the Upanishads as pure knowledge, bliss. We're told it is not possible to have some of this knowledge; either one has it fully or one does not have it at all. However, this knowledge may only be dimly perceived at first before becoming overwhelmingly clear.

This knowledge is not easily obtained. It's more akin to a deep level of experience, than what the western mind would call knowledge. The Upanishads tell us the ultimate attainment of self is Atman (the "absolute", the ultimate or God within). At the point we're able to recognize self as undifferentiated, self is able to recognize itself as Brahman, the absolute, the One. This state of awareness is not available to the rational mind, so revered by the western world. It is not about learning more, or the acquisition of some outward knowledge but an *awareness* of actual reality, the removal of so many layers of non-reality.

Such learning requires physical and spiritual discipline acquired over a long period of time. One is taught a process of discernment whereby one becomes increasingly competent at recognizing the reality of self. It's a process of continually honing perception, through a process called *neti, neti*, meaning not this, not this. One peels away the many layers of what is not, in order to discover what is.

One of the main purposes of the Upanishads is to synthesize rituals (songs, ceremonies, formulas), cosmic knowledge (both gods and celestial sphere), and the human person (body, personality, life). As stated earlier, there is an assumption in Indian philosophy that all is connected, even though things may be seen or thought of as separate and distinct. The authors of the Upanishads sought to identify and reveal these interconnections.

The primary concern of the Upanishads is to reveal knowledge of man's connection to the cosmos. It is argued that the term Upanishads means connection or equivalence, and that the term implies hierarchically arranged connections. The quest is to discover the reality that stands at the summit of this hierarchically interconnected universe. The central "secret" of the Upanishads is that the self, atman, *is* Brahman (the absolute).

Atman can mean self, person, body or the concept of mine or myself. It can also be the inner self that causes the eye to see, the ear to hear, the part of self that is one with the Whole. This is the self that is reborn or liberated from the cycle of rebirth, the end state of reincarnation.

The root of the word Brahman means to grow, to become great. The term is used in many ways with different meanings. It is the caste of teachers and priest, Brahmans, the highest order of the caste system. It also means sacred utterance, the sound equivalent of some transcendent reality. Om is not a concept, but the Supreme Being in the form of sound. Brahman is the term used in the Upanishads to designate ultimate reality, the prana, life breath of the universe and all within it.

Whether or not one is attracted to the tenets or belief systems contained in Hinduism, one must pay homage to a religion that continues to hold great sway for so many, after some six thousand years. One of the primary characteristics that has allowed Hinduism to flourish is its ability to conceive of and define, apparent divergent viewpoints, as but a part of an overarching whole. Diane Eck may capture this idea best when she writes, “In part, the unity of India...is in its cultural genius for embracing diversity, so that diversity unites, rather than divides”, differing ways of seeing the truth, it “...takes the form of an ongoing dialogue, in which the views of others are explained so that one can counter them with one’s own view...any ‘point of view’ implicitly assumes that another point of view is possible.”

There are two key messages I want to leave with you this morning. One is the possibility that we can find the “absolute”, the “ultimate” within our selves, because we do truly contain the all; we are not merely just a part of it. The other key point is that it is truly possible to embrace differences and diversity in such a way that it unites, rather than divides. It is possible to include, to incorporate, another point of view in such a fashion as to enlarge us, rather than highlight our separateness.

I want desperately for us not to argue over “right” terminology, to not require that the other use the “correct” word because it pleases us. I want us not to fear speaking our truth for fear that it may offend someone else. Let us each, be willing to extend the necessary energy to embrace, rather than use that same energy to reject. That is what will make inherent worth and dignity real, and the interconnected web of life come alive. Thank you for listening.

Hinduism and the Indian philosophy on which it is built is deep, vast and inclusive. It has a rich heritage that has much to teach us.

Amen