

The Religious Context

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, the three great religions that developed in the subcontinent, share certain basic beliefs: that time is cyclical, and the universe is created and destroyed in endless cycles; that the world is transitory and the appearance of permanence is illusion (*maya*); that all living beings are born and reborn in different lives and bodies (*samsara*); and that one's good and bad deeds (*karma*) accumulate from life to life and determine the form in which one is reborn. The goal is to accumulate enough good deeds to finally be released from cycles of birth and rebirth by attaining nirvana (extinction or quiescence) in Buddhism, or *moksha* (release or liberation) in Hinduism.

Over the centuries, as these religions have evolved, they have incorporated a variety of physical disciplines and esoteric and magical practices such as yoga, meditation, trance, breath control, and the repetition of mantras (words of power). An essential feature of all three religions is a holistic view of life: all forms of life—gods, demons, humans, animals, and vegetation—are integrally connected.

Although Buddhists and Jains believe in *maya*, *samsara*, *karma*, and eventual release (as Hindus do), they reject caste, Hindu gods, sacrifices, and the power of the priestly caste (Brahmins). The founders of Buddhism and Jainism both lived in the sixth century B.C. and were born in the warrior, or *kshatriya*, caste.

Early Religious Practices in India

An ancient form of religious practice was the worship of spirits believed to dwell in trees, rivers, and rocks. Many Indians still hold such beliefs. One form these beliefs took is the worship of yakshas and yakshis, male and female deities associated with the fertility of the earth. Serpent kings called *nagarajas* and their consorts, *naginis*, as well as *makaras*, fabulous crocodilelike creatures, are all associated with the cult of life-giving waters. These early deities were incorporated into the major Indian religions as minor gods.

image 1

Only fragmentary information can be pieced together about the religion of the Indus Valley civilization. Horned animals (image 1), trees, many female figurines (probably mother goddesses), and phallic sculptures suggest that the people practiced some kind of fertility worship. Depictions of figures in yogic postures suggest that meditation was used. These images relate to those of later Indian religions, and some may be prototypes of later Indian deities.

Some time after the collapse of the Indus civilization, Aryans migrated down to the subcontinent from Central Asian steppes, bringing with them beliefs in gods, predominantly male, who personified forces and nature and were worshipped in elaborate sacrifices performed by Brahmins, the priestly class. The Aryans composed religious texts beginning with the *Rig Veda*, *Soma Veda*, and *Athar Veda* (ca. 1500–1200 B.C.), which contained hymns to the gods and descriptions of the customs, behavior, and traditions of Aryan life. The Upanishads, composed later (700–500 B.C.), contain profound

philosophical speculations about the “One who lies behind.” This “One,” called Brahman, is eternal, formless, all encompassing, and the origin and essence of all things.

Hinduism

There is no single founder or doctrine of Hinduism. It has evolved over the centuries, incorporating previous doctrines and deities, for instance, maintaining reverence for the ancient Vedic texts and adopting some of the Vedic deities but in new guises, and responding to non-Vedic religious movements such as Buddhism and Jainism. Hinduism as we know it seems to have coalesced at the beginning of the first millennium A.D.

Initially, Hinduism was centered around three male gods: Brahma, creator of the cosmos; Vishnu, preserver and protector of the universe; and Shiva, destroyer of the universe so that from the formless void it may be created again. Brahma has never had a large number of worshippers. Shiva, Vishnu, and the Great Goddess Devi (Mahadevi) in their myriad forms are the most widely worshipped Hindu gods. They are described in the Puranas, a group of texts formulated between A.D. 200 and 800.

image 22 Shiva is worshipped as the ascetic god, remote when in meditation but also at times wild, passionate, and loving. As Lord of the Dance (image 22), he both destroys and creates the universe. His cosmic dance visualizes the cycles of creation and destruction in human lives, in the history of nations, and in the universe. Shiva is also manifest in a phallic emblem called a linga (image 17), and it is in this form that he is most often portrayed in the inner sanctum of his temples. Worshippers of Shiva believe that he is the supreme god who contains and controls all creation.

image 16, 20 Vishnu (image 16 and 20) preserves and maintains order in the universe. Whenever destructive forces, usually symbolized by demons, threaten to overwhelm the world, Vishnu descends in the form of an avatar to restore moral order. His concern for human political and social activities expresses the gentle and just-minded side of the One. It is believed that in our present universe, Vishnu has already appeared in nine incarnations, taking such animal forms as a fish and a tortoise and various human forms such as Krishna, Rama, and the Buddha. It is believed he will appear once more in the future. As Rama (image 38), he symbolizes the importance of loyalty and obedience. As Krishna, he is the divine lover (image 30) as well as a slayer of demons (image 15). Krishna’s consort, Radha, and his female devotees, in their passionate longing for him, symbolize the soul’s desire to be one with God (image 29).

One of the most striking characteristics of Hinduism is the importance of goddesses. As Hinduism developed, Vedic goddesses came to the fore. Lakshmi and Sarasvati, for instance, became the consorts of Vishnu. Other goddesses, who may have been worshipped independently outside of the Vedic tradition, gradually appeared as powerful deities on their own, most prominently, Devi, who represents the essence of female power.

In the seventh century, Hinduism and Buddhism were influenced by Tantra, a new religious movement that employed esoteric knowledge to speed the

image 18

image 24

image 19

believer toward spiritual liberation. The Hindu pantheon of gods expanded to include *shaktis*, female counterparts to male gods and personified as their consorts. Shakti is female energy, which activates the powers of the male gods and emanates from the goddess Devi. Many other goddesses represent aspects of Devi's powers, for instance, Parvati, the beautiful, loving, and obedient consort of Shiva (image 18), and Durga (image 24), Chamunda (image 19), and Kali, whose actions and moods indicate anger, ferocity, and the horrific. This range of emotions symbolizes their multiple purposes and the variety of forms female energy and power can assume.

From its beginnings, Hinduism has possessed a remarkable ability to assimilate rather than reject new ideas. It has developed complex overlays of beliefs, cults, gods, and forms of worship. Hindus recognize no single founder or prophet. There is no single holy book similar to the Bible or Qur'an; the religion is not supervised and interpreted by a hierarchy of priests, and its great texts were not inscribed but handed down as an oral tradition. Hindu worship is based on a one-to-one relationship between devotee and god rather than being congregational. This practice intensified beginning in the seventh century with the popularity of *bhakti*, passionate personal devotion to an individual god or goddess. Over the centuries, a number of important poets and musician-saints emerged from the *bhakti* tradition whose works, such as the *Gita Govinda*, became classics of Indian culture.

Indian people have treasured, in particular, two great epics: the *Ramayana* (2nd century B.C.) and the famous epic poem, the *Mahabharata* (500–400 B.C.), both of which may be based on actual historical events. The *Ramayana* has been, and still is, a rich source for art.

Today the great majority of Indian people are Hindus. Although Hindus may select one deity for personal worship among the great gods and goddesses and the countless regional and local gods, all of these deities can be understood as representing the many aspects of the One.

Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama, who later became the Buddha, was born in North India in the sixth century B.C. According to legend, Siddhartha was the son of a king of the Shakya clan (hence the name Buddha Shakyamuni, by which he is often referred). At his birth, a soothsayer predicted he would become either a great military ruler or a great spiritual leader. To prevent the latter from happening, Siddhartha's father kept him within the palace, providing him with luxuries and pleasures so that he would remain unaware of the harshness and suffering in the world.

One day, already a young man, Siddhartha managed to escape from the palace. For the first time he saw an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and an ascetic holy man. He was stunned and deeply affected by their suffering. Realizing that pleasures are transitory and cannot prevent suffering, he put aside all his jewelry and fine clothing. Leaving his wife and son at the palace, he embarked on a journey to seek the meaning of life and the ways in which humans can attain peace (image 5).

image 5

At first Siddhartha turned inward in his quest for knowledge. He went into the forest to seek the advice of holy men and to meditate. In Siddhartha's time, yoga was already an ancient way to seek inner knowledge and understanding of universal truths. He became an ascetic and attempted extreme forms of renunciation, nearly starving himself to death. Having recognized that extreme deprivation was not the way, he once again took food. He sat meditating beneath a bodhi tree, overnight according to some accounts and days and days according to others. The evil demon Mara, realizing that Siddhartha was close to enlightenment, tempted him with his beautiful daughters and threatened him with a powerful army. But Siddhartha touched the ground with his right hand, calling the Earth to witness his resolve to achieve enlightenment and thereby vanquishing Mara. When Siddhartha arose, he had become the Buddha, which means the Enlightened One (or the Awakened One). He realized that the causes of human suffering lay in the attachment to physical desires of all kinds, and as long as this was so, the karma-laden souls of living creatures were destined to suffer endless rebirths. Only with the complete elimination of worldly attachments could one reach release into a state of eternal selfless bliss, called nirvana, the Sanskrit word for "extinguishment."

Buddhism was a philosophical and ethical system with the Buddha as its greatly revered founder. The Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching his ascetic doctrine, gaining an ever-growing group of followers. He taught that nirvana could only be achieved through first realizing the Four Noble Truths: that all life is suffering; that suffering is caused by desires; that to eliminate suffering, one must eliminate desires; and that this can be done by following the Eightfold Path, which includes right thoughts, right intentions, right deeds, and the right concentration in meditation. Nirvana can only be attained through the extinguishment of one's ego by following the Eightfold Path.

Buddhism attracted many people for whom caste and the Brahmins' exclusive control over worship were problematic. Even before the Buddha's death, many of his followers had become monks and nuns and were settling into monasteries provided by wealthy laity as merit-producing gifts. Gradually the monks spread his teachings across northern India in peaceful conversions. The main focus of worship became stupas, hemispherical mounds containing relics of the Buddha or other transcendent beings and often decorated with scenes from the *Jatakas* (folk tales about the past lives of the Buddha). The faithful also made pilgrimages to important places in the Buddha's life, including his birthplace, the bodhi tree at Bodhi Gaya where he reached enlightenment, and the Deer Park at Sarnath where he preached his first sermon. As the centuries passed, pilgrims throughout Asia came to visit these sacred sites. There they learned about the Buddha's life and his teachings.

The earliest form of Buddhism is called the Theravada (Way of the Elders). It adheres strictly to the Buddha's teaching and to his austere life of meditation and detachment. Theravada Buddhists believed that very few would reach

nirvana. Initially, in this system, the Buddha was represented in art only by symbols, but in the first century A.D., under the Kushan rulers, the Buddha began to be depicted in human form. At about this time, a new form of Buddhism emerged called the Mahayana (the Great Way), which held that the Buddha was more than a great spiritual teacher but also a savior god. It was believed that he had appeared in perfect human form to relieve suffering with the message that, by performing good deeds and maintaining sincere faith, everyone could reach nirvana through means less strict and arduous than in Theravada (which Mahayana Buddhists called the Hinayana, or Lesser Way).

A whole pantheon of Mahayana Buddhist deities began to appear to aide the devotee—Buddhas of the past, bodhisattvas such as Maitreya (Buddha of the Future), and Vajrapani (“thunderbolt bearer”), who had evolved from the chief Vedic god Indra. Most appealing and approachable of all is the gentle Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of infinite compassion, who can be called upon to help people in all kinds of trouble. A bodhisattva is a being who has reached the moment of spiritual transcendence but foregoes nirvana in order to guide all beings in their quest to attain enlightenment. The Mahayana faith became the more popular form of Buddhism and was carried by merchants and monks across Central Asia along the trade routes to China, and from there to Korea and Japan.

Another form of Buddhism, called Esoteric and also known as Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism, grew out of Mahayana Buddhism beginning in the late sixth or early seventh century. Esoteric Buddhists accepted the tenets of the Mahayana but also used forms of meditation subtly directed by master teachers (gurus) involving magical words, symbols, and practices to speed the devotee toward enlightenment. They believed that those who practiced compassion and meditation with unwavering effort and acquired the wisdom to become detached from human passions could achieve in one lifetime a state of perfect bliss or “clear light,” their term for ultimate realization and release. Their practices paralleled concurrent developments in Hinduism.

image 12

Many new deities appeared in the Esoteric Buddhist pantheon who, in their poses, gestures, and expressions, visualize philosophical ideas (image 12). For instance, male and female deities shown in embrace express the union of wisdom and compassion. Wrathful deities symbolize protection, and their violent and horrific appearance helps devotees to overcome the passions that hinder salvation. Also central to Esoteric thinking were the five celestial Buddhas (the four directions and the zenith), who represent both the energy of the universe and the potential for wisdom within the psychological make-up of the individual (image 8, 10, and 43).

image 8, 10, 43

By the twelfth century, Buddhism was concentrated mainly in northeastern India, where the Buddha lived and preached. Its near extinction seems to have been caused by Muslim invaders who destroyed the Buddhist monastic universities. Teachers and monks fled to Nepal, Tibet, and Burma. Today only a small percentage of India’s population is Buddhist.

Buddhism and Hinduism in Southeast Asia

Hinduism and Theravada, Mahayana, and Esoteric Buddhism had spread throughout Southeast Asia by the seventh century, and important monuments and sculptures of both faiths survive from that period onward. Throughout the region, ancient indigenous animistic and pantheistic beliefs survived and complemented the tenets and practices of the Indic faiths.

Theravada Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka at an early date and is still the dominant religion there. It was also carried along sea routes to Thailand and Burma (Myanmar). It is the form of Buddhism still practiced in those countries today, as well as in Cambodia and Laos. In neighboring Vietnam, the population is largely Mahayana, perhaps due to the proximity to China, where the Buddhism that still exists is largely Mahayana. In Indonesia, Hinduism and Esoteric Buddhism, which had coexisted peacefully for centuries, were gradually displaced by the spread of Islam through not only Indonesia but also Malaysia in the fifteenth century. Indonesia now has the largest Muslim population in the world. Bali, however, remains largely Hindu.

Jainism

Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, and Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, both lived in the sixth century B.C., and both were princes who left their fathers' kingdoms for the life of an ascetic. They shared the belief in karma and samsara, and sought release (moksha) through meditation and control of one's desires. Unlike Buddhism, however, Jainism never spread beyond India. Today there are some two million Jains in western India, where Mahavira taught.

As a prince, Mahavira's name was Vardhamana. The ideal Aryan prince was a *vira*, meaning "brave warrior." Vardhamana also wished to be known as a brave warrior, not in a battle against human foes but in his battle against his own desires. So he took the name Mahavira (*maha* = great). A person who has absolute control over his senses and has become a great teacher is known as a *jina* or tirthankara. Mahavira's followers believed that he was the last of twenty-four tirthankaras (image 27).

image 27

Mahavira led an austere life, teaching, meditating, begging for food, and denying his body any comforts. When his clothes fell into tatters, he went without them, "sky-clad" for the rest of his life. Jain monks disagreed about how far their austerities should go. One group held that, like Mahavira, they should teach "sky-clad," or naked. Those opposed wore white robes. Most present-day Jain monks are "white-clad."

Mahavira taught his followers to detach themselves from worldly desires and also from their own viewpoints. He suggested that it is often easier to give up material possessions than it is to part with one's opinions. According to Mahavira, a person can see only a very small part of the truth, and what one believes to be true depends on many factors like social status, education, and context. An ancient Jain parable interpreted by a nineteenth-century poet clarifies this point.

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind)
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the Elephant
And happened to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side
At once began to bawl:
“Bless me! But the elephant
Is very like a wall.”*

*The second, feeling of the tusk
Cried, “Ho! What have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp!
To me ’tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear.”*

*The third approached the animal,
And happened to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he;
“the Elephant
Is very like a snake.”*

*The fourth reached out his eager hand
And felt about the knee.
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he;
“’Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree.”*

*The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan.”*

*The sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope
Than seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the elephant
Is very like a rope.”*

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong.*

—John Godfrey Saxe (American, 1816–1887)

Mahavira taught that to avoid accumulating bad karma, one should not harm any living things. This is the doctrine *ahimsa*, the most important concept in Jain teaching. Because of their reverence for all life, Jain monks preached against brahminical animal sacrifices and introduced strict vegetarianism. Since a human soul can be reborn as an animal or insect, and since all forms of life have souls, even the smallest creature should not be harmed. To prevent this, devout Jains wear face masks when they are outside to avoid inhaling insects, and gently sweep the path in front of them before taking a step. Jains avoid farming because their ploughs might injure burrowing animals. The Jain emphasis on nonviolence influenced both Buddhism and Hinduism and established a tradition which many prominent Indians such as Gandhi have followed.

Islam

The faith of Islam arrived in India gradually from western Asia beginning as early as the seventh century A.D. Islam, an Arabic word meaning “submission to God,” was founded by the Prophet Muhammad (ca. A.D. 570–632) after God (Allah) had appeared to him as the archangel Gabriel in the desert outside of Mecca. In those times, South Arabia was a crossroads of inter-regional trade and a place where the traditional beliefs of idol worshippers who gathered around the Ka’ba, the sacred center of Mecca, clashed with the religious ideas and practices of Christianity and Zoroastrianism, an ancient Iranian religion.

“Recite in the name of the Lord,” commanded Allah as he gave to Muhammad the final and complete instructions about the relationships between humankind and God. These relationships had been only partially revealed to the Old Testament prophets and to the New Testament prophet Jesus. Muhammad immediately began to teach God’s divine message, converting many in Mecca. He experienced a temporary setback, however, when he and the newly faithful were driven from Mecca by local merchants who feared his preaching against idol worship would divert the lucrative trade routes elsewhere. This forced migration in 622, called the Hijra in Arabic, marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar, the years of which are referred to as A.H. (Anno Hijra).

By the end of his life, Muhammad and the faithful had returned triumphantly to Mecca, cleansed the Ka’ba of idols, and declared it sacred to Allah. Within a century of his death, Muhammad’s followers had spread Islam through the Middle East to the borders of India and westward across Africa to Spain.

Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion. Although Muslims revere Muhammad as God’s greatest prophet, they worship only one god, Allah, who controls the fate of all beings. Allah’s words which he ordered Muhammad to recite were written down after the Prophet’s death in the Qur’an, the Muslim holy book. *Qur’an* means “recitation” in Arabic. Because God spoke in Arabic, the Qur’an must be written and read in Arabic. As a consequence, within Islamic cultures Arabic calligraphy (the art of writing beautifully) has traditionally been deemed the highest form of art. Described in the Qur’an are the five obligations of all Muslims, often called the Five Pillars of Islam: the profession of faith (“There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God”); prayer five times a

day at dawn, noon, afternoon, evening, and night; the giving of alms; fasting from sunrise to sundown during the month of Ramadan; and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if physically possible.

Nearly a quarter of the world's population is Muslim. The nation with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia. Although Muslims come from diverse cultures and speak many different languages, they are united by their faith and, historically, by a busy network of East-West trade. At the same time, there was and continues to be diverse political, cultural, and artistic expressions in regions of the Islamic world that were not part of the Arabic-speaking heartland of Islam and where there existed strong pre-Islamic indigenous traditions.