

II. Hinduism

If I were asked under what sky the human mind...has most deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions to some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant—I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human a life...again I should point to India.

Max Müller

On July 16, 1945, in the deep privacy of a New Mexico desert, an event occurred that may prove to be the most important single happening of the twentieth century. A chain reaction of scientific discoveries that began at the University of Chicago and centered at “Site Y” at Los Alamos was culminated. The first atomic bomb was, as we say, a success.

No one had been more instrumental in this achievement than Robert Oppenheimer, director of the Los Alamos project. An observer who was watching him closely that morning has given us the following account: “He grew tenser as the last seconds ticked off. He scarcely breathed. He held on to a post to steady himself.... When the announcer shouted ‘Now!’ and there came this tremendous burst of light, followed...by the deep-growling roar of the explosion, his face relaxed in an expression of tremendous relief.” This much from the outside. But what flashed through Oppenheimer’s own mind during those moments, he

recalled later, were two lines from the *Bhagavad-Gita* in which the speaker is God:

*I am become death, the shatterer of worlds;
Waiting that hour that ripens to their doom.*

This incident provides a profound symbol for this chapter’s opening, and Mahatma Gandhi’s life can join it in setting the stage for the faith we are about to explore. In an age in which violence and peace faced each other more fatefully than ever before, Gandhi’s name became, in the middle of our century, the counterpoise to those of Stalin and Hitler. The achievement for which the world credited this man (who weighed less than a hundred pounds and whose worldly possessions when he died were worth less than two dollars) was the British withdrawal from India in peace, but what is less known is that among his own people he lowered a barrier more formidable than that of race in America. He renamed India’s untouchables *harijan*, “God’s people,” and raised them to human stature. And in doing so he provided the nonviolent strategy as well as the inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s comparable civil rights movement in the United States.

Gandhi’s own inspiration and strategy carries us directly into this chapter’s subject, for he wrote in his *Autobiography*: “Such power as I possess for working in the political field has derived from my experiments in the spiritual field.” In that spiritual field, he went on to say, “truth is the sovereign principle, and the *Bhagavad-Gita* is the book *par excellence* for the knowledge of Truth.”

What People Want

If we were to take Hinduism as a whole—its vast literature, its complicated rituals, its sprawling folkways, its opulent art—and compress it into a single affirmation, we would find it saying: You can have what you want.

This sounds promising, but it throws the problem back in our laps. For what *do* we want? It is easy to give a simple answer—not easy to give a good one. India has lived with this question for ages and has her answer waiting. People, she says, want four things.

They begin by wanting pleasure. This is natural. We are all born with built-in pleasure-pain reactors. If we ignored these, leaving our hands on hot stoves or stepping out of second-story windows, we would soon die. What could be more obvious, then, than to follow the promptings of pleasure and entrust our lives to it?

Having heard—for it is commonly alleged—that India is ascetic, other-worldly, and life-denying, we might expect her attitude toward hedonists to be scolding, but it is not. To be sure, India has not made pleasure her highest good, but this is different from condemning enjoyment. To the person who wants pleasure, India says in effect: Go after it—there is nothing wrong with it; it is one of the four legitimate ends of life. The world is awash with beauty and heavy with sensual delights. Moreover, there are worlds above this one where pleasures increase by powers of a million at each rung, and these worlds, too, we shall experience in due course. Like everything else, hedonism requires good sense. Not every impulse can be followed with impunity. Small immediate goals must be sacrificed for long-range gains, and impulses that would injure others must be curbed to avoid

antagonisms and remorse. Only the stupid will lie, steal, or cheat for immediate profit, or succumb to addictions. But as long as the basic rules of morality are obeyed, you are free to seek all the pleasure you want. Far from condemning pleasure, Hindu texts house pointers on how to enlarge its scope. To simple people who seek pleasure almost exclusively, Hinduism presents itself as little more than a regimen for ensuring health and prosperity; while at the other end of the spectrum, for sophisticates, it elaborates a sensual aesthetic that shocks in its explicitness. If pleasure is what you want, do not suppress the desire. Seek it intelligently.

This India says, and waits. It waits for the time—it will come to everyone, though not to everyone in one's present life—when one realizes that pleasure is not all that one wants. The reason everyone eventually comes to this discovery is not because pleasure is wicked, but because it is too trivial to satisfy one's total nature. Pleasure is essentially private, and the self is too small an object for perpetual enthusiasm. Søren Kierkegaard tried for a while what he called the aesthetic life, which made enjoyment its guiding principle, only to experience its radical failure, which he described in *Sickness Unto Death*. "In the bottomless ocean of pleasure," he wrote in his *Journal*, "I have sounded in vain for a spot to cast anchor. I have felt the almost irresistible power with which one pleasure drags another after it, the kind of adulterated enthusiasm which it is capable of producing, the boredom, the torment which follow." Even playboys—a type seldom credited with profundity—have been known to conclude, as one did recently, that "The glamour of yesterday I have come to see as tinsel." Sooner or later everyone wants to experience more than a kaleidoscope of momentary pleasures, however delectable.

When this time comes the individual's interests usually shift to the second major goal of life, which is worldly success with its three prongs of wealth, fame, and power. This too is a worthy goal, to be neither scorned nor condemned. Moreover, its satisfactions last longer, for (unlike pleasure) success is a social achievement, and as such it involves the lives of others. For this reason it commands a scope and importance that pleasure cannot boast.

This point does not have to be argued for a contemporary Western audience. The Anglo-American temperament is not voluptuous. Visitors from abroad do not find English-speaking peoples enjoying life a great deal, or much bent on doing so—they are too busy. Being enamored not of sensualism but of success, what takes arguing in the West is not that achievement's rewards exceed those of the senses but that success too has its limitations—that “What is he worth?” does not come down to “How much has he got?”

India acknowledges that drives for power, position, and possessions run deep. Nor should they be disparaged per se. A modicum of worldly success is indispensable for supporting a household and discharging civic duties responsibly. Beyond this minimum, worldly achievements confer dignity and self-respect. In the end, however, these rewards too have their term. For they all harbor limitations that we can detail:

1. Wealth, fame, and power are exclusive, hence competitive, hence precarious. Unlike mental and spiritual values, they do not multiply when shared; they cannot be distributed without diminishing one's own portion. If I own a dollar, that dollar is not yours; while I am sitting on a chair, you cannot occupy it.

Similarly with fame and power. The idea of a nation in which everyone is famous is a contradiction in terms; and if power were distributed equally, no one would be powerful in the sense in which we customarily use the word. From the competitiveness of these goods to their precariousness is a short step. As other people want them too, who knows when success will change hands?

2. The drive for success is insatiable. A qualification is needed here, for people do get enough money, fame, and power. It is when they make these things their chief ambition that their lusts cannot be satisfied. For these are not the things people really want, and people can never get enough of what they do not really want. In Hindu idiom, “To try to extinguish the drive for riches with money is like trying to quench a fire by pouring butter over it.”

The West, too, knows this point. “Poverty consists, not in the decrease of one's possessions, but in the increase of one's greed,” wrote Plato, and Gregory Nazianzen, a theologian, concurs: “Could you from all the world all wealth procure, more would remain, whose lack would leave you poor.” “Success is a goal without a satiation point,” a psychologist has recently written, and sociologists who studied a midwestern town found “both business men and working men running for dear life in the business of making the money they earn keep pace with the even more rapid growth of their subjective wants.” It was from India that the West appropriated the parable of the donkey driver who kept his beast moving by dangling before it a carrot attached to a stick that was fixed to its own harness.

3. The third problem with worldly success is identical with that of hedonism. It too centers meaning in the self, which proves to be too small for perpetual enthusiasm. Neither fortune nor station can obscure the realization that one lacks so much else. In the end everyone wants more from life than a country home, a sports car, and posh vacations.

4. The final reason why worldly success cannot satisfy us completely is that its achievements are ephemeral. Wealth, fame, and power do not survive bodily death—"You can't take it with you," as we routinely say. And since we cannot, this keeps these things from satisfying us wholly, for we are creatures who can envision eternity and must instinctively rue by contrast the brief purchase on time that worldly success commands.

Before proceeding to the other two things that Hinduism sees people wanting, it will be well to summarize the ones considered thus far. Hindus locate pleasure and success on the Path of Desire. They use this phrase because the personal desires of the individual have thus far been foremost in charting life's course. Other goals lie ahead, but this does not mean that we should berate these preliminaries. Nothing is gained by repressing desires wholesale or pretending that we do not have them. As long as pleasure and success is what we think we want, we should seek them, remembering only the provisos of prudence and fair play.

The guiding principle is not to turn from desire until desire turns from you, for Hinduism regards the objects of the Path of Desire as if they were toys. If we ask ourselves whether there is anything wrong with toys, our answer must be: On the contrary, the thought of children without them is sad. Even sadder,

however, is the prospect of adults who fail to develop interests more significant than dolls and trains. By the same token, individuals whose development is not arrested will move through delighting in success and the senses to the point where their attractions have been largely outgrown.

But what greater attractions does life afford? Two, say the Hindus. In contrast with the Path of Desire, they constitute the Path of Renunciation.

The word renunciation has a negative ring, and India's frequent use of it has been one of the factors in earning for it the reputation of being a life-denying spoilsport. But renunciation has two faces. It can stem from disillusionment and despair, the feeling that it's not worthwhile to extend oneself; but equally it can signal the suspicion that life holds more than one is now experiencing. Here we find the back-to-nature people—who renounce affluence to gain freedom from social rounds and the glut of things—but this is only the beginning. If renunciation always entails the sacrifice of a trivial now for a more promising yet-to-be, religious renunciation is like that of athletes who resist indulgences that could deflect them from their all-consuming goal. Exact opposite of disillusionment, renunciation in this second mode is evidence that the life force is strongly at work.

We must never forget that Hinduism's Path of Renunciation comes after the Path of Desire. If people could be satisfied by following their impulses, the thought of renunciation would never arise. Nor does it occur only to those who have failed on the former path—the disappointed lover who enters a monastery or nunnery to compensate. We can agree with the disparagers that for such people renunciation is a salvaging act—the attempt

to make the best of personal defeat. What forces us to listen attentively to Hinduism's hypothesis is the testimony of those who stride the Path of Desire famously and still find themselves wishing for more than it offers. These people—not the ones who renounce but the ones who see nothing to renounce for—are the world's real pessimists. For to live, people must believe in that for the sake of which they live. As long as they sense no futility in pleasure and success, they can believe that those are worth living for. But if, as Tolstoy points out in his *Confessions*, they can no longer believe in the finite, they will believe in the infinite or they will die.

Let us be clear. Hinduism does not say that everyone in his or her present life will find the Path of Desire wanting. For against a vast time scale, Hinduism draws a distinction the West too is familiar with—that between chronological and psychological age. Two people, both forty-six, are the same age chronologically, but psychologically one may be still a child and the other an adult. The Hindus extend this distinction to cover multiple life spans, a point we shall take up explicitly when we come to the idea of reincarnation. As a consequence we shall find men and women who play the game of desire with all the zest of nine-year-old cops and robbers; though they know little else, they will die with the sense of having lived to the full and enter their verdict that life is good. But equally, there will be others who play this game as ably, yet find its laurels paltry. Why the difference? The enthusiasts, say the Hindus, are caught in the flush of novelty, whereas the others, having played the game over and over again, seek other worlds to conquer.

We can describe the typical experience of this second type. The world's visible rewards still attract them strongly. They throw

themselves into enjoyment, enlarging their holdings and advancing their status. But neither the pursuit nor the attainment brings true happiness. Some of the things they want they fail to get, and this makes them miserable. Some they get and hold onto for a while, only to have them suddenly snatched away, and again they are miserable. Some they both get and keep, only to find that (like the Christmases of many adolescents) they do not bring the joy that was expected. Many experiences that thrilled on first encounter pall on the hundredth. Throughout, each attainment seems to fan the flames of new desire; none satisfies fully; and all, it becomes evident, perish with time. Eventually, there comes over them the suspicion that they are caught on a treadmill, having to run faster and faster for rewards that mean less and less.

When that suspicion dawns and they find themselves crying, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!" it may occur to them that the problem stems from the smallness of the self they have been scrambling to serve. What if the focus of their concern were shifted? Might not becoming a part of a larger, more significant whole relieve life of its triviality?

That question announces the birth of religion. For though in some watered-down sense there may be a religion of self-worship, true religion begins with the quest for meaning and value beyond self-centeredness. It renounces the ego's claims to finality.

But what is this renunciation for? The question brings us to the two signposts on the Path of Renunciation. The first of these reads "the community," as the obvious candidate for something greater than ourselves. In supporting at once our own life and the

lives of others, the community has an importance no single life can command. Let us, then, transfer our allegiance to it, giving its claims priority over our own.

This transfer marks the first great step in religion. It produces the religion of duty, after pleasure and success the third great aim of life in the Hindu outlook. Its power over the mature is tremendous. Myriads have transformed the will-to-get into the will-to-give, the will-to-win into the will-to-serve. Not to triumph but to do their best—to acquit themselves responsibly, whatever the task at hand—has become their prime objective.

Hinduism abounds in directives to people who would put their shoulders to the social wheel. It details duties appropriate to age, temperament, and social status. These will be examined in subsequent sections. Here we need only repeat what was said in connection with pleasure and success: Duty, too, yields notable rewards, only to leave the human spirit unfilled. Its rewards require maturity to be appreciated, but given maturity, they are substantial. Faithful performance of duty brings respect and gratitude from one's peers. More important, however, is the self-respect that comes from doing one's part. But in the end even these rewards prove insufficient. For even when time turns community into history, history, standing alone, is finite and hence ultimately tragic. It is tragic not only because it must end—eventually history, too, will die—but in its refusal to be perfected. Hope and history are always light-years apart. The final human good must lie elsewhere.

What People Really Want

“There comes a time,” Aldous Huxley wrote, “when one asks even of Shakespeare, even of Beethoven, is this all?”

It is difficult to think of a sentence that identifies Hinduism's attitude toward the world more precisely. The world's offerings are not bad. By and large they are good. Some of them are good enough to command our enthusiasm for many lifetimes. Eventually, however, every human being comes to realize with Simone Weil that “there is no true good here below, that everything that appears to be good in this world is finite, limited, wears out, and once worn out, leaves necessity exposed in all its nakedness.” When this point is reached, one finds oneself asking even of the best this world can offer, “Is this all?”

This is the moment Hinduism has been waiting for. As long as people are content with the prospect of pleasure, success, or service, the Hindu sage will not be likely to disturb them beyond offering some suggestions as to how to proceed more effectively. The critical point in life comes when these things lose their original charm and one finds oneself wishing that life had something more to offer. Whether life does or does not hold more is probably the question that divides people more sharply than any other.

The Hindu answer to the question is unequivocal. Life holds other possibilities. To see what these are we must return to the question of what people want. Thus far, Hinduism would say, we have been answering this question too superficially. Pleasure, success, and duty are never humanity's ultimate goals. At best they are means that we assume will take us in the direction of what we really want. What we really want are things that lie at a deeper level.

First, we want being. Everyone wants to be rather than not be; normally, no one wants to die. A World War II correspondent once described the atmosphere of a room containing thirty-five men who had been assigned to a bombing mission from which, on average, only one-fourth returned. What he felt in those men, the correspondent noted, was not so much fear as “a profound reluctance to give up the future.” Their sentiment holds for us all, the Hindus would say. None of us take happily to the thought of a future in which we shall have no part.

Second, we want to know. Whether it be scientists probing the secrets of nature, a typical family watching the nightly news, or neighbors catching up on local gossip, we are insatiably curious. Experiments have shown that even monkeys will work longer and harder to discover what is on the other side of a trapdoor than they will for either food or sex.

The third thing people seek is joy, a feeling tone that is the opposite of frustration, futility, and boredom.

These are what people really want. To which we should add, if we are to complete the Hindu answer, that they want these things infinitely. A distinctive feature of human nature is its capacity to think of something that has no limits: the infinite. This capacity affects all human life, as de Chirico’s painting “Nostalgia of the Infinite” poignantly suggests. Mention any good, and we can imagine more of it—and, so imagining, want that more. Medical science has doubled life expectancy, but has living twice as long made people readier to die? To state the full truth, then, we must say that what people would really like to have is infinite being, infinite knowledge, and infinite bliss. They might have to settle for less, but this is what they really want. To gather the wants

into a single word, what people really want is liberation (*moksha*)—release from the finitude that restricts us from the limitless being, consciousness, and bliss our hearts desire.

Pleasure, success, responsible discharge of duty, and liberation—we have completed the circuit of what people think they want and what they want in actuality. This takes us back to the staggering conclusion with which our survey of Hinduism began. What people most want, that they can have. Infinite being, infinite awareness, and infinite bliss are within their reach. Even so, the most startling statement yet awaits. Not only are these goods within peoples’ reach, says Hinduism. People already possess them.

For what is a human being? A body? Certainly, but anything else? A personality that includes mind, memories, and propensities that have derived from a unique trajectory of life-experiences? This, too, but anything more? Some say no, but Hinduism disagrees. Underlying the human self and animating it is a reservoir of being that never dies, is never exhausted, and is unrestricted in consciousness and bliss. This infinite center of every life, this hidden self or *Atman*, is no less than *Brahman*, the Godhead. Body, personality, and *Atman-Brahman*—a human self is not completely accounted for until all three are noted.

But if this is true and we really are infinite in our being, why is this not apparent? Why do we not act accordingly? “I don’t feel particularly unlimited today,” one may be prompted to observe. “And my neighbor—I haven’t noticed his behavior to be exactly Godlike.” How can the Hindu hypothesis withstand the evidence of the morning newspaper?

The answer, say the Hindus, lies in the depth at which the Eternal is buried under the almost impenetrable mass of distractions, false assumptions, and self-regarding instincts that comprise our surface selves. A lamp can be covered with dust and dirt to the point of obscuring its light completely. The problem life poses for the human self is to cleanse the dross of its being to the point where its infinite center can shine forth in full display.

The Beyond Within

“The aim of life,” Justice Holmes used to say, “is to get as far as possible from imperfection.” Hinduism says its purpose is to pass beyond imperfection altogether.

If we were to set out to compile a catalogue of the specific imperfections that hedge our lives, it would have no end. We lack strength and imagination to effect our dreams; we grow tired, fall ill, and are foolish. We fail and become discouraged; we grow old and die. Lists of this sort could be extended indefinitely, but there is no need, for all specific limitations reduce to three basic variants. We are limited in joy, knowledge, and being, the three things people really want.

Is it possible to pass beyond the strictures that separate us from these things? Is it feasible to seek to rise to a quality of life that, because less circumscribed, would be life indeed?

To begin with the strictures on our joy, these fall into three subgroups: physical pain, frustration that arises from the thwarting of desire, and boredom with life in general.

Physical pain is the least troublesome of the three. As pain’s intensity is partly due to the fear that accompanies it, the

conquest of fear can reduce pain concomitantly. Pain can also be accepted when it has a purpose, as a patient welcomes the return of life and feeling, even painful feeling, to a frozen arm. Again, pain can be overridden by an urgent purpose, as in a football game. In extreme cases of useless pain, it may be possible to anesthetize it through drugs or control of the senses. Ramakrishna, the greatest Hindu saint of the nineteenth century, died of cancer of the throat. A doctor who was examining him in the last stages of the disease probed his degenerating tissue and Ramakrishna flinched in pain. “Wait a minute,” he said; then, “Go ahead,” after which the doctor could probe without resistance. The patient had focused his attention to the point where nerve impulses could barely gain access. One way or another it seems possible to rise to a point where physical pain ceases to be a major problem.

More serious is the psychological pain that arises from the thwarting of specific desires. We want to win a tournament, but we lose. We want to profit, but the deal falls through. A promotion goes to our competitor. We would like to have been invited, but are snubbed. Life is so filled with disappointments that we are likely to assume that they are built into the human condition. On examination, however, there proves to be something disappointments share in common. Each thwarts an expectation of the individual ego. If the ego were to have no expectations, there would be nothing to disappoint.

If this sounds like ending an ailment by killing the patient, the same point can be stated positively. What if the interests of the self were expanded to the point of approximating a God’s-eye view of humanity? Seeing all things under the aspect of eternity would make one objective toward oneself, accepting failure as on a par with success in the stupendous human drama of yes and no,

positive and negative, push and pull. Personal failure would be as small a cause for concern as playing the role of loser in a summer theater performance. How could one feel disappointed at one's own defeat if one experienced the victor's joy as also one's own; how could being passed over for a promotion touch one if one's competitor's success were enjoyed vicariously? Instead of crying "impossible," we should perhaps content ourselves with noting how different this would feel from life as it is usually lived, for reports of the greatest spiritual geniuses suggest that they rose to something like this perspective. "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me"—are we to suppose that Jesus was posturing when he uttered those words? We are told that Sri Ramakrishna once

howled with pain when he saw two boatmen quarrelling angrily. He came to identify himself with the sorrows of the whole world, however impure and murderous they might be, until his heart was scored with scars. But he knew that he must love God in all sorts and conditions of men, however antagonistic and hostile, and in all forms of thought controlling their existence and often setting them at variance to one another.

Detachment from the finite self or attachment to the whole of things—we can state the phenomenon either positively or negatively. When it occurs, life is lifted above the possibility of frustration and above ennui—the third threat to joy—as well, for the cosmic drama is too spectacular to permit boredom in the face of such vivid identification.

The second great limitation of human life is ignorance. The Hindus claim that this, too, is removable. The Upanishads speak

of a "knowing of That the knowledge of which brings knowledge of everything." It is not likely that "everything" here implies literal omniscience. More probably, it refers to an insight that lays bare the point of everything. Given that summarizing insight, to ask for details would be as irrelevant as asking the number of atoms in a great painting. When the point is grasped, who cares about details?

But is transcendent knowledge even in this more restricted sense possible? Clearly, mystics think that it is. Academic psychology has not followed them all the way, but it is convinced that there is far more to the mind than appears on its surface. Psychologists liken the mind to an iceberg, most of which is invisible. What does the mind's vast, submerged ballast contain? Some think it contains every memory and experience that has come its way, nothing being forgotten by the deep mind that never sleeps. Others, like Carl Jung, think it includes racial memories that summarize the experience of the entire human species. Psychoanalysis aims a few pinpoints of light at this mental darkness. Who is to say how far the darkness can be dispelled?

As for life's third limitation, its restricted being, to profitably consider this we have first to ask how the boundary of the self is to be defined. Not, certainly, by the amount of physical space our bodies occupy, the amount of water we displace in the bathtub. It makes more sense to gauge our being by the size of our spirits, the range of reality with which they identify. A man who identifies with his family, finding his joys in theirs, would have that much reality; a woman who could identify with humankind would be that much greater. By this criterion people who could identify with being as a whole would be unlimited. Yet this

seems hardly right, for they would still die. The object of their concerns would continue, but they themselves would be gone.

We need, therefore, to approach this question of being not only spatially, so to speak, but also in terms of time. Our everyday experience provides a wedge for doing so. Strictly speaking, every moment of our lives is a dying; the I of that moment dies, never to be reborn. Yet despite the fact that in this sense my life consists of nothing but funerals, I do not conceive of myself as dying each moment, for I do not equate myself with my individual moments. I endure through them—experiencing them, without being identical with any of them in its singularity. Hinduism carries this notion a step further. It posits an extensive self that lives successive lives in the way a single life lives successive moments.

A child's heart is broken by misfortunes we consider trivial. It identifies completely with each incident, being unable to see it against the backdrop of a whole, variable lifetime. A lot of living is required before the child can withdraw its self-identification from the individual moment and approach, thereby, adulthood. Compared with children we are mature, but compared with saints we are children. No more capable of seeing our total selves in perspective than a three-year-old who has dropped its ice cream cone, our attention is fixated on our present life span. If we could mature completely we would see that lifespan in a larger setting, one that is, actually, unending.

This is the basic point in the Hindu estimate of the human condition. We have seen that psychology has accustomed us to the fact that there is more to ourselves than we suspect. Like the eighteenth century European view of the earth, our minds have

their own darkest Africas, their unmapped Borneos, their Amazonian basins. Their bulk continues to await exploration. Hinduism sees the mind's hidden continents as stretching to infinity. Infinite in being, infinite in awareness, there is nothing beyond them that remains unknown. Infinite in joy, too, for there is nothing alien to them to mar their beatitude.

Hindu literature is studded with metaphors and parables that are designed to awaken us to the realms of gold that are hidden in the depths of our being. We are like kings who, falling victim to amnesia, wander our kingdoms in tatters not knowing who we really are. Or like a lion cub who, having become separated from its mother, is raised by sheep and takes to grazing and bleating on the assumption that it is a sheep as well. We are like a lover who, in his dream, searches the wide world in despair for his beloved, oblivious of the fact that she is lying at his side throughout.

What the realization of our total being is like can no more be described than can a sunset to one born blind; it must be experienced. The biographies of those who have made the discovery provide us with clues, however. These people are wiser; they have more strength and joy. They seem freer, not in the sense that they go around breaking the laws of nature (though the power to do exceptional things is often ascribed to them) but in the sense that they seem not to find the natural order confining. They seem serene, even radiant. Natural peacemakers, their love flows outward, alike to all. Contact with them strengthens and purifies.

Four Paths to the Goal

All of us dwell on the brink of the infinite ocean of life's creative power. We carry it within us: supreme strength, the fullness of wisdom, unquenchable joy. It is never thwarted and cannot be destroyed. But it is hidden deep, which is what makes life a problem. The infinite is down in the darkest, profoundest vault of our being, in the forgotten well-house, the deep cistern. What if we could bring it to light and draw from it unceasingly?

This question became India's obsession. Her people sought religious truth not simply to increase their store of general information; they sought it as a chart to guide them to higher states of being. Religious people were ones who were seeking to transform their natures, reshape them to a superhuman pattern through which the infinite could shine with fewer obstructions. One feels the urgency of the quest in a metaphor the Hindu texts present in many guises. Just as a man carrying on his head a load of wood that has caught fire would go rushing to a pond to quench the flames, even so will the seeker of truth, scorched by the fires of life—birth, death, self-deluding futility—go rushing to a teacher wise to the ways of the things that matter most.

Hinduism's specific directions for actualizing the human potential come under the heading of *yoga*. The word once conjured images of shaggy men in loincloths, twisting their bodies into human pretzels while brandishing occult powers. Now that the West has appropriated the term, however, we are more likely to think of lithe women exercising to retain their trim suppleness. Neither image is totally divorced from the real article, but they relate only to its bodily aspects. The word *yoga* derives from the same root as does the English word yoke, and yoke carries a double connotation: to unite (yoke together), and

to place under disciplined training (to bring under the yoke, or “take my yoke upon you”). Both connotations are present in the Sanskrit word. Defined generally, then, *yoga* is a method of training designed to lead to integration or union. But integration of what?

Some people are chiefly interested in their bodies. Needless to say, they have their Indian counterparts—people who make their bodies the prime objects of their concern and endeavor. For such people India, through centuries of experimentation, has devised the most fantastic school of physical culture the world has ever seen.⁴ Not that she has been more interested in the body than the West; her interest has simply taken a different turn. Whereas the West has sought strength and beauty, India has been interested in precision and control, ideally complete control over the body's every function. How many of her incredible claims in this area can be scientifically corroborated remains to be seen.⁵ It is enough here to note that her extensive instructions on the subject comprise an authentic *yoga*, *hatha yoga*. Originally it was practiced as preliminary to spiritual *yoga*, but it has largely lost this connection so it need not concern us here. The judgment of the Hindu sages on this matter can be ours as well. Incredible things can be done with the body if you are willing to give your life to the project, but these things have little to do with enlightenment. If their cultivation stems from a desire to show off, they can actually impede spiritual growth.

The *yogas* that do concern us are those designed to unite the human spirit with the God who lies concealed in its deepest recesses. “Since all the Indian spiritual [as distinct from bodily] exercises are devoted seriously to this practical aim—not to a merely fanciful contemplation or discussion of lofty and

profound ideas—they may well be regarded as representing one of the most realistic, matter-of-fact, practical-minded systems of thought and training ever set up by the human mind. How to come to Brahman [God in Sanskrit] and remain in touch with Brahman; how to become identified with Brahman, living out of it; how to become divine while still on earth—transformed, reborn adamant while on the earthly plane; that is the quest that has inspired and deified the human spirit in India throughout the ages.”

The spiritual trails that Hindus have blazed toward this goal are four. At first this may seem surprising. If there is one goal, should there not be one path to it? This might be the case if we were all starting from the same point, though even then different modes of transport—walking, driving, flying—might counsel alternate routes. As it is, people approach the goal from different directions, so there must be multiple trails to the common destination.

Where one starts from depends on the kind of person one is. The point has not been lost on Western spiritual directors. One of the most noted of these, Father Surin, for example, criticized “directors who get a plan into their heads which they apply to all the souls who come to them, trying to bring them into line with it like one who should wish all to wear the same clothes.” St. John of the Cross called attention to the same danger when he wrote in *The Living Flame* that the aim of spiritual directors should “not be to guide souls by a way suitable to themselves, but to ascertain the way by which God Himself is pointing them.” What is distinctive in Hinduism is the amount of attention it has devoted to identifying basic spiritual personality types and the disciplines that are most likely to work for each. The result is a

recognition, pervading the entire religion, that there are multiple paths to God, each calling for its distinctive mode of travel.

The number of the basic spiritual personality types, by Hindu count, is four. (Carl Jung built his typology on the Indian model, while modifying it in certain respects.) Some people are primarily reflective. Others are basically emotional. Still others are essentially active. Finally, some are experimentally inclined. For each of these personality types Hinduism prescribes a distinct *yoga* that is designed to capitalize on the type’s distinctive strength. The types are not sealed in watertight compartments, for every human being possesses all four talents to some degree, just as most hands of cards contain all four suits. But it makes sense to lead with the suit that is strongest.

All four paths begin with moral preliminaries. As the aim of the *yogas* is to render the surface self transparent to its underlying divinity, it must first be cleansed of its gross impurities. Religion is always more than morality, but if it lacks a moral base it will not stand. Selfish acts coagulate the finite self instead of dissolving it; ill-will perturbs the flow of consciousness. The first step of every *yoga*, therefore, involves the cultivation of such habits as non-injury, truthfulness, non-stealing, self-control, cleanliness, contentment, self-discipline, and a compelling desire to reach the goal.

Keeping these common preliminaries in mind, we are ready for the *yogas*’ distinctive instructions.

[The Way to God through Knowledge](#)

Jnana yoga, intended for spiritual aspirants who have a strong reflective bent, is the path to oneness with the Godhead through

knowledge. Such knowledge—the Greeks’ *gnosis* and *sophia*—has nothing to do with factual information; it is not encyclopedic. It is, rather, an intuitive discernment that transforms, turning the knower eventually into that which she knows. (“She” is appropriate here because in the principal Western source-languages—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—the words for knowledge in this mode are usually feminine in gender.) Thinking is important for such people. They live in their heads a lot because ideas have for them an almost palpable vitality; they dance and sing for them. And if such thinkers are parodied as philosophers who walk around with their heads in the clouds, it is because they sense Plato’s Sun shining above those clouds. Thoughts have consequences for such people; their minds animate their lives. Not many people are convinced by Socrates’ claim that “to know the good is to do it,” but in his own case he may have been reporting a straightforward fact.

For people thus given to knowing, Hinduism proposes a series of demonstrations that are designed to convince the thinker that she possesses more than her finite self. The rationale is straightforward. Once the *jnana yogi* grasps this point, her sense of self will shift to a deeper level.

The key to the project is discrimination, the power to distinguish between the surface self that crowds the foreground of attention and the larger self that is out of sight. Cultivating this power proceeds through three stages, the first of which is learning. Through listening to sages and scriptures and treatises on the order of Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, the aspirant is introduced to the prospect that her essential being is Being itself.

The second step is thinking. By prolonged, intensive reflection, that which the first step introduced as a hypothesis must assume life. The *Atman* (God within) must change from concept to realization. A number of lines of reflection are proposed for this project. For example, the disciple may be advised to examine our everyday language and ponder its implications. The word “my” always implies a distinction between the possessor and what is possessed; when I speak of my book or my jacket, I do not suppose that I am those things. But I also speak of my body, my mind, or my personality, giving evidence thereby that in some sense I consider myself as distinct from them as well. What is this “I” that possesses my body and mind, but is not their equivalent?

Again, science tells me that there is nothing in my body that was there seven years ago, and my mind and my personality have undergone comparable changes. Yet, throughout their manifold revisions, I have remained in some way the same person, the person who believed now this, now that; who once was young and is now old. What is this something in my makeup, more constant than body or mind, that has endured the changes? Seriously pondered, this question can disentangle one’s Self from one’s lesser identifications.

Our word “personality” comes from the Latin *persona*, which originally referred to the mask an actor donned as he stepped onto the stage to play his role, the mask through (*per*) which he sounded (*sonare*) his part. The mask registered the role, while behind it the actor remained hidden and anonymous, aloof from the emotions he enacted. This, say the Hindus, is perfect; for roles are precisely what our personalities are, the ones into which we have been cast for the moment in this greatest of all tragi-

comedies, the drama of life itself in which we are simultaneously coauthors and actors. As a good actress gives her best to her part, we too should play ours to the hilt. Where we go wrong is in mistaking our presently assigned part for what we truly are. We fall under the spell of our lines, unable to remember previous roles we have played and blind to the prospect of future ones. The task of the *yogi* is to correct this false identification. Turning her awareness inward, she must pierce the innumerable layers of her personality until, having cut through them all, she reaches the anonymous, joyfully unconcerned actress who stands beneath.

The distinction between self and Self can be assisted by another image. A man is playing chess. The board represents his world. There are pieces to be moved, bishops to be won and lost, an objective to be gained. The game can be won or lost, but not the player himself. If he has worked hard, he has improved his game and indeed his faculties; this happens in defeat fully as much as in victory. As the contestant is related to his total person, so is the finite self of any particular lifetime related to its underlying *Atman*.

Metaphors continue. One of the most beautiful is found in the Upanishads, as also (by interesting coincidence) in Plato. There is a rider who sits serene and motionless in his chariot. Having delegated responsibility for the journey to his charioteer, he is free to sit back and give full attention to the passing landscape. In this image resides a metaphor for life. The body is the chariot. The road over which it travels are the sense objects. The horses that pull the chariot over the road are the senses themselves. The mind that controls the senses when they are disciplined is represented by the reins. The decisional faculty of the mind is the

driver, and the master of the chariot, who is in full authority but need never lift a finger, is the Omniscient Self.

If the *yogi* is able and diligent, such reflections will eventually induce a lively sense of the infinite Self that underlies one's transient, finite self. The two will become increasingly distinct in one's mind, separating like water and oil where formerly they mixed like water and milk. One is then ready for the third step on the path of knowledge, which consists in shifting her self-identification to her abiding part. The direct way for her to do this is to think of herself as Spirit, not only during periods of meditation that are reserved for this purpose, but also as much as possible while performing her daily tasks. This latter exercise, though, is not easy. She needs to drive a wedge between her skin-encapsulated ego and her *Atman*, and an aid in doing so is to think of the former in the third person. Instead of "I am walking down the street," she thinks, "There goes Sybil walking down Fifth Avenue," and tries to reinforce the assertion by visualizing herself from a distance. Neither agent nor patient, her approach to what happens is, "I am the Witness." She watches her unsubstantial history with as much detachment as she lets her hair blow in the wind. Just as a lamp that lights a room is unconcerned with what goes on within it, even so the *yogi* watches what transpires in his house of protoplasm, the texts tell us. "Even the sun, with all its warmth, is marvelously detached" was found scribbled somewhere on a prison wall. Life's events are simply allowed to proceed. Seated in the dentist's chair, Sybil notes, "Poor Sybil. It will soon be over." But she must play fair and adopt the same posture when fortune visits her and she would like nothing better than bask in the praise she is receiving.

Thinking of oneself in the third person does two things simultaneously. It drives a wedge between one's self-identification and one's surface self, and at the same time forces this self-identification to a deeper level until at last, through a knowledge identical with being, one becomes in full what one always was at heart. "That thou art, other than Whom there is no other seer, hearer, thinker, or agent."

[The Way to God through Love](#)

The *yoga* of knowledge is said to be the shortest path to divine realization. It is also the steepest. Requiring as it does a rare combination of rationality and spirituality, it is for a select few.

By and large, life is powered less by reason than by emotion; and of the many emotions that crowd the human heart, the strongest is love. Even hate can be interpreted as a rebound from the thwarting of this impulse. Moreover, people tend to become like that which they love, with its name written on their brows. The aim of *bhakti yoga* is to direct toward God the love that lies at the base of every heart. "As the waters of the Ganges flow incessantly toward the ocean," says God in the *Bhagavata Purana*, "so do the minds of the *bhakta* move constantly toward Me, the Supreme Person residing in every heart, immediately they hear about My qualities."

In contrast to the way of knowledge, *bhakti yoga* has countless followers, being, indeed, the most popular of the four. Though it originated in antiquity, one of its best-known proponents was a sixteenth-century mystical poet named Tulsidas. During his early married life he was inordinately fond of his wife, to the point that he could not abide her absence even for a day. One day she went to visit her parents. Before the day was half over, Tulsidas turned

up at her side, whereupon his wife exclaimed, "How passionately attached to me you are! If only you could shift your attachment to God, you would reach him in no time." "So I would," thought Tulsidas. He tried it, and it worked.

All the basic principles of *bhakti yoga* are richly exemplified in Christianity. Indeed, from the Hindu point of view, Christianity is one great brilliantly lit *bhakti* highway toward God, other paths being not neglected, but less clearly marked. On this path God is conceived differently than in *jnana*. In *jnana yoga* the guiding image was of an infinite sea of being underlying the waves of our finite selves. This sea typified the all-pervading Self, which is as much within us as without, and with which we should seek to identify. Thus envisioned, God is impersonal, or rather transpersonal, for personality, being something definite, seems to be finite whereas the *jnanic* Godhead is infinite. To the *bhakti*, for whom feelings are more real than thoughts, God appears different on each of these counts.

First, as healthy love is out-going, the *bhakta* will reject all suggestions that the God one loves is oneself, even one's deepest Self, and insist on God's otherness. As a Hindu devotional classic puts the point, "I want to taste sugar; I don't want to be sugar."

Can water quaff itself?

Can trees taste of the fruit they bear?

He who worships God must stand distinct from Him,

So only shall he know the joyful love of God;

For if he say that God and he are one,

That joy, that love, shall vanish instantly away.

Pray no more for utter oneness with God:

Where were the beauty if jewel and setting were one?

The heat and the shade are two,

*If not, where were the comfort of shade?
 Mother and child are two,
 If not, where were the love?
 When after being sundered, they meet,
 What joy do they feel, the mother and child!
 Where were joy, if the two were one?
 Pray, then, no more for utter oneness with God.*

Second, being persuaded of God's otherness, the *bhakta's* goal, too, will differ from the *jnani's*. The *bhakta* will strive not to identify with God, but to adore God with every element of his or her being. The words of Bede Frost, though written in another tradition, are directly applicable to this side of Hinduism: "The union is no Pantheist absorption of the man in the one, but is essentially personal in character. More, since it is preeminently a union of love, the kind of knowledge which is required is that of friendship in the very highest sense of the word."² Finally, in such a context God's personality, far from being a limitation, is indispensable. Philosophers may be able to love pure being, infinite beyond all attributes, but they are exceptions. The normal object of human love is a person who possesses attributes.

All we have to do in this *yoga* is to love God dearly—not just claim such love, but love God in fact; love God only (other things being loved in relation to God); and love God for no ulterior reason (not even from the desire for liberation, or to be loved in return) but for love's sake alone. Insofar as we succeed in this we know joy, for no experience can compare with that of being fully and authentically in love. Moreover, every strengthening of our affections toward God will weaken the world's grip. Saints may, indeed will, love the world more than do the profane; but they will love it in a very different way, seeing in it the reflected glory of the God they adore.

How is such love to be engendered? Obviously, the task will not be easy. The things of this world clamor for our affection so incessantly that it may be marveled that a Being who can neither be seen nor heard can ever become their rival.

Enter Hinduism's myths, her magnificent symbols, her several hundred images of God, her rituals that keep turning night and day like never-ending prayer wheels. Valued as ends in themselves these could, of course, usurp God's place, but this is not their intent. They are matchmakers whose vocation is to introduce the human heart to what they represent but themselves are not. It is obtuse to confuse Hinduism's images with idolatry, and their multiplicity with polytheism. They are runways from which the sense-laden human spirit can rise for its "flight of the alone to the Alone." Even village priests will frequently open their temple ceremonies with the following beloved invocation:

*O Lord, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations:
 Thou art everywhere, but I worship you here;
 Thou art without form, but I worship you in these forms;
 Thou needest no praise, yet I offer you these prayers and salutations.
 Lord, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations.*

A symbol such as a multi-armed image, graphically portraying God's astounding versatility and superhuman might, can epitomize an entire theology. Myths plumb depths that the intellect can see only obliquely. Parables and legends present ideals in ways that make hearers long to embody them—vivid support for Irwin Edman's contention that "it is a myth, not a mandate, a fable, not a logic by which people are moved." The

value of these things lies in their power to recall our minds from the world's distractions to the thought of God and God's love. In singing God's praises, in praying to God with wholehearted devotion, in meditating on God's majesty and glory, in reading about God in the scriptures, in regarding the entire universe as God's handiwork, we move our affections steadily in God's direction. "Those who meditate on Me and worship Me without any attachment to anything else," says Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, "those I soon lift from the ocean of death."

Three features of the *bhakta's* approach deserve mention: *japam*, ringing the changes on love, and the worship of one's chosen ideal.

Japam is the practice of repeating God's name. It finds a Christian parallel in one of the classics of Russian spirituality, *The Way of a Pilgrim*. This is the story of an unnamed peasant whose first concern is to fulfill the biblical injunction to "pray without ceasing." Seeking for someone who can explain how it is possible to do this, he wanders through Russia and Siberia with a knapsack of dried bread for food and the charity of locals for shelter, consulting many authorities, only to be disappointed until at last he meets an old man who teaches him "a constant, uninterrupted calling upon the divine Name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart, during every occupation, at all times, in all places, even during sleep." The pilgrim's teacher trains him until he can repeat the name of Jesus more than 12,000 times a day without strain. This frequent service of the lips imperceptibly becomes a genuine appeal of the heart. The prayer becomes a constant, warming presence within him that brings a bubbling joy. "Keep the name of the Lord spinning in the midst of all your activities" is a Hindu statement of the same point.

Washing or weaving, planting or shopping, imperceptibly but indelibly these verbal droplets of aspiration soak down into the subconscious, loading it with the divine.

Ringling the changes on love puts to religious use the fact that love assumes different nuances according to the relationship involved. The love of the parent for the child carries overtones of protectiveness, whereas a child's love includes dependence. The love of friends is different from the conjugal love of woman and man. Different still is the love of a devoted servant for its master. Hinduism holds that all of these modes have their place in strengthening the love of God and encourages *bhaktas* to make use of them all. In practice Christianity does the same. Most frequently it envisions God as benevolent protector, symbolized as lord or parent, but other modes are not absent. "What a Friend we have in Jesus" is a familiar Christian hymn, and "my Master and my Friend" figures prominently in another Christian favorite. God figures as spouse in the Song of Songs and in Christian mystical writings where the marriage of the soul to Christ is a standing metaphor. The attitude of regarding God as one's child sounds somewhat foreign to Western ears, yet much of the magic of Christmas derives from this being the one time in the year when God enters the heart as a child, eliciting thereby the tenderness of the parental instinct.

We come finally to the worship of God in the form of one's chosen ideal. The Hindus have represented God in innumerable forms. This, they say, is appropriate. Each is but a symbol that points to something beyond; and as none exhausts God's actual nature, the entire array is needed to complete the picture of God's aspects and manifestations. But though the representations point equally to God, it is advisable for each devotee to form a lifelong

attachment to one of them. Only so can its meaning deepen and its full power become accessible. The representation selected will be one's *ishta*, or adopted form of the divine. The *bhakta* need not shun other forms, but this one will never be displaced and will always enjoy a special place in its disciple's heart. The ideal form for most people will be one of God's incarnations, for God can be loved most readily in human form because our hearts are already attuned to loving people. Many Hindus acknowledge Christ as a God-man, while believing that there have been others, such as Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha. Whenever the stability of the world is seriously threatened, God descends to redress the imbalance.

*When goodness grows weak,
When evil increases,
I make myself a body.
In every age I come back
To deliver the holy,
To destroy the sin of the sinner,
To establish the righteous. (Bhagavad-Gita, IV:7–8)*

[The Way to God through Work](#)

The third path toward God, intended for persons of active bent, is *karma yoga*, the path to God through work.

An examination of the anatomy and physiology of human bodies discloses an interesting fact. All organs of digestion and respiration serve to feed the blood with nutritive materials. The circulatory apparatus delivers this nourishing blood throughout the body, maintaining bones, joints, and muscles. Bones provide a framework without which the muscles could not operate, while joints supply the flexibility needed for movement. The brain

envisions the movements that are to be made, and the spinal nervous system executes them. The vegetative nervous system, helped by the endocrine system, maintains the harmony of the viscera on which the motor muscles depend. In short, the entire body, except for the reproductive apparatus, converges on action. "The human machine," a physician writes, "seems indeed to be made for action."

Work is the staple of human life. The point is not simply that all but a few people must work to survive. Ultimately, the drive to work is psychological rather than economic. Forced to be idle, most people become irritable; forced to retire, they decline. Included here are compulsive housekeepers as well as great scientists, such as Mme. Curie. To such people Hinduism says, You don't have to retire to a cloister to realize God. You can find God in the world of everyday affairs as readily as anywhere. Throw yourself into your work with everything you have; only do so wisely, in a way that will bring the highest rewards, not just trivia. Learn the secret of work by which every movement can carry you Godward even while other things are being accomplished, like a wristwatch that winds itself as other duties are performed.

How this is to be done depends on the other components in the worker's nature. By choosing the path of work, the *karma yogi* has already shown an inclination toward activity, but there remains the question of whether the supporting disposition is predominantly affective or reflective. The answer to that question determines whether the *yogi* approaches work intellectually or in the spirit of love. In the language of the four *yogas*, *karma yoga* can be practiced in either mode: *jnana* (knowledge), or *bhakti* (devoted service).

As we have seen, the point of life is to transcend the smallness of the finite self. This can be done either by identifying oneself with the transpersonal Absolute that resides at the core of one's being, or by shifting one's interest and affection to a personal God who is experienced as distinct from oneself. The first is the way of *jnana*, the second of *bhakti*. Work can be a vehicle for self-transcendence in either approach, for according to Hindu doctrine every action performed upon the external world reacts on the doer. If I chop down a tree that blocks my view, each stroke of the ax unsettles the tree; but it leaves its mark on me as well, driving deeper into my being my determination to have my way in the world. Everything I do for my private wellbeing adds another layer to my ego, and in thickening it insulates me more from God. Conversely, every act done without thought for myself diminishes my self-centeredness until finally no barrier remains to separate me from the Divine.

The best way for the emotionally inclined to render work selfless is to bring their ardent and affectionate natures into play and work for God's sake instead of their own. "He who performs actions without attachment, resigning them to God, is untainted by their effects as the lotus leaf by water." Such a one is as active as before, but works for a different reason, out of dedication. Acts are no longer undertaken for their personal rewards. Not only are they now performed as service to God; they are regarded as prompted by God's will and enacted by God's energy as channeled through the devotee. "Thou art the Doer, I the instrument." Performed in this spirit, actions lighten the ego instead of encumbering it. Each task becomes a sacred ritual, lovingly fulfilled as a living sacrifice to God's glory. "Whatsoever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever austerity you practice, O

Son of Kunti, do this as an offering to Me. Thus shall you be free from the bondages of actions that bear good and evil results," says the *Bhagavad-Gita*. "They have no desire for the fruits of their actions," echoes the *Bhagavata Purana*. "These persons would not accept even the state of union with Me; they would always prefer My service."

A young woman, newly married and in love, works not for herself alone. As she works the thought of her beloved is in the back of her mind, giving meaning and purpose to her labors. So too with a devoted servant. He claims nothing for himself. Regardless of personal cost he does his duty for his master's satisfaction. Just so is God's will the joy and satisfaction of the devotee. Surrendering to the Lord of all, he remains untouched by life's vicissitudes. Such people are not broken by discouragements, for winning is not what motivates them; they want only to be on the right side. They know that if history changes it will not be human beings that change it but its Author—when human hearts are ready. Historical figures lose their center when they become anxious over the outcome of their actions. "Do without attachment the work you have to do. Surrendering all action to Me, freeing yourself from longing and selfishness, fight—unperturbed by grief" (*Bhagavad-Gita*).

Once all claims on work have been renounced, including whether it will succeed in its intent, the *karma yogi*'s actions no longer swell the ego. They leave on the mind no mark that could vector its subsequent responses. In this way the *yogi* works out the accumulated impressions of previous deeds without acquiring new ones. Whatever one thinks of this *karmic* way of putting the matter, the psychological truth involved is readily apparent. A person who is completely at the disposal of others barely exists.

The Spanish ask wryly: “Would you like to become invisible? Have no thought of yourself for two years and no one will notice you.”

Work as a path toward God takes a different turn for people whose dispositions are more reflective than emotional. For these too the key is work done unselfishly, but they approach the project differently. Philosophers tend to find the idea of Infinite Being at the center of one’s self more meaningful than the thought of a divine Creator who watches over the world with love. It follows, therefore, that their approach to work should be adapted to the way they see things.

The way that leads to enlightenment is work performed in detachment from the empirical self. Specifically, it consists in drawing a line between the finite self that acts, on the one hand, and on the other the eternal Self that observes the action. People usually approach work in terms of its consequences for their empirical selves—the pay or acclaim it will bring. This inflates the ego. It thickens its insulation and thereby its isolation.

The alternative is work performed detachedly, almost in dissociation from the empirical self. Identifying with the Eternal, the worker works; but as the deeds are being performed by the empirical self, the True Self has nothing to do with them. “The knower of Truth, being centered in the Self should think, ‘I do nothing at all.’ While seeing, breathing, speaking, letting go, holding, opening and closing the eyes, he observes only senses moving among sense objects.”

As the *yogi*’s identification shifts from her finite to her infinite Self, she will become increasingly indifferent to the

consequences that flow from her finite actions. More and more she will recognize the truth of the *Gita*’s dictum: “To work you have the right, but not to the fruits thereof.” Duty for duty’s sake becomes her watchword.

*He who does the task
Dictated by duty,
Caring nothing
For the fruit of the action,
He is a yogi. (Bhagavad-Gita, VI:I)*

Hence the story of the *yogi* who, as he sat meditating on the banks of the Ganges, saw a scorpion fall into the water. He scooped it out, only to have it bite him. Presently, the scorpion fell into the river again. Once more the *yogi* rescued it, only again to be bitten. The sequence repeated itself twice more, whereupon a bystander asked the *yogi*, “Why do you keep rescuing that scorpion when its only gratitude is to bite you?” The *yogi* replied: “It is the nature of scorpions to bite. It is the nature of *yogis* to help others when they can.”

Karma yogis will try to do each thing as it comes as if it were the only thing to be done and, having done it, turn to the next duty in similar spirit. Concentrating fully and calmly on each duty as it presents itself, they will resist impatience, excitement, and the vain attempt to do or think of half a dozen things at once. Into the various tasks that fall their lot they will put all the strokes they can, for to do otherwise would be to yield to laziness, which is another form of selfishness. Once they have done this, however, they will dissociate themselves from the act and let the chips fall where they may.

One to me is loss or gain,

*One to me is fame or shame,
One to me is pleasure, pain. (Bhagavad-Gita, XII)*

Mature individuals do not resent correction, for they identify more with their long-range selves that profit from correction than with the momentary self that is being advised. Similarly, the *yogi* accepts loss, pain, and shame with equanimity, knowing that these too are teachers. To the degree that *yogis* repose in the Eternal, they experience calm in the midst of intense activity. Like the center of a rapidly spinning wheel, they seem still—emotionally still—even when they are intensely busy. It is like the stillness of absolute motion.

Though the conceptual frameworks within which philosophical and affectionate natures practice *karma yoga* are different, it is not difficult to perceive their common pursuit. Both are engaged in a radical reducing diet, designed to starve the finite ego by depriving it of the consequences of action on which it feeds. Neither gives the slightest purchase to that native egoism that the world considers healthy self-regard. The *bhakta* seeks “self-naughting” by giving heart and will to the Eternal Companion and finding them enriched a thousandfold thereby. The *jnani* is equally intent on shrinking the ego, being convinced that to the degree that the venture succeeds there will come into view a nucleus of selfhood that differs radically from its surface mask, “a sublime inhabitant and onlooker, transcending the spheres of the former conscious-unconscious system, aloofly unconcerned with the tendencies that formerly supported the individual biography. This anonymous ‘diamond being’ is not at all what we were cherishing as our character and cultivating as our faculties, inclinations, virtues, and ideals; for it transcends every horizon of unclarified consciousness. It was enwrapped within the sheaths of the body and personality; yet the dark, turbid, thick [layers of

the surface self] could not disclose its image. Only the translucent essence of [a self in which all private wants have been dispersed] permits it to become visible—as through a glass, or in a quiet pond. And then, the moment it is recognized, its manifestation bestows an immediate knowledge that this is our true identity. The life-monad is remembered and greeted, even though it is distinct from everything in this phenomenal composite of body and psyche, which, under the delusion caused by our usual ignorance and indiscriminating consciousness we had crudely mistaken for the real and lasting essence of our being.”

[The Way to God through Psychophysical Exercises](#)

Because of the dazzling heights to which it leads, *raja yoga* has been known in India as “the royal (*raj*) road to reintegration.” Designed for people who are of scientific bent, it is the way to God through psychophysical experiments.

The West has honored empiricism in the laboratory but has often distrusted it in spiritual matters, on grounds that it deifies personal experience by making it the final test of truth. India has not had such misgivings. Arguing that affairs of the spirit can be approached as empirically as can outer nature, she encourages people who possess the requisite inclination and willpower to seek God in laboratory fashion. The approach calls for a strong suspicion that our true selves are more than we now realize and a passion to plumb their full extent. For those who possess these qualifications, *raja yoga* outlines a series of steps that are to be followed as rigorously as the steps in a physics experiment. If these do not produce the expected consequences, the hypothesis has been disproved, at least for this experimenter. The claim,

however, is that the experiences that unfold will confirm the hypothesis in question.

Unlike most experiments in the natural sciences, those of *raja yoga* are on one's self, not external nature. Even where science does turn to self-experiment—as in medicine, where ethics prescribes that dangerous experiments may be performed only on oneself—the Indic emphasis is different. The *yogi* experiments not on his body (though we shall find the body definitely involved) but on his mind. The experiments take the form of practicing prescribed mental exercises and observing their subjective effects.

No dogmas need be accepted, but experiments require hypotheses they are designed to confirm or negate. The hypothesis that underlies *raja yoga* is the Hindu doctrine of the human self; and though it has been described several times already, it needs to be restated as the background against which the steps of *raja yoga* proceed.

The theory postulates that the human self is a layered entity. We need not go into the detailed Hindu analyses of these layers; the accounts are technical, and future science may show them to be more metaphorical than literally accurate. For our purposes it is enough to summarize the hypothesis by reducing the principal layers to four. First and most obviously, we have bodies. Next comes the conscious layer of our minds. Underlying these two is a third region, the realm of the individual subconscious. This has been built up through our individual histories. Most of our past experiences have been lost to our conscious memory, but those experiences continue to shape our lives in ways that contemporary psychoanalysis tries to understand. With these

three parts of the self, the West is in full agreement. What is distinctive in the Hindu hypothesis is its postulation of a fourth component. Underlying the other three, less perceived by the conscious mind than even its private subconscious (though related to it fully as much), stands Being Itself, infinite, unthwarted, eternal. "I am smaller than the minutest atom, likewise greater than the greatest. I am the whole, the diversified-multicolored-lovely-strange universe. I am the Ancient One. I am Man, the Lord. I am the Being-of-Gold. I am the very state of divine beatitude."

Hinduism agrees with psychoanalysis that if only we could dredge up portions of our individual unconscious—the third layer of our being—we would experience a remarkable expansion of our powers, a vivid freshening of life. But if we could uncover something forgotten not only by ourselves but by humanity as a whole, something that provides clues not simply to our individual personalities and quirks but to all life and all existence, what then? Would this not be momentous?

The call, clearly, is to retreat from the world's inconsequential panorama to the deep-lying causal zones of the psyche where the real problems and answers lie. Beyond this, however, *raja yoga's* response cannot be described, quite, as an answer to any articulated call. Rather, it is a determined refusal to allow the pitter-patter of daily existence to distract from the unknown demands of some waiting urgency within: a kind of total strike against the terms of routine, prosaic existence. The successful *yogi* succeeds in carrying life's problem to this plane of new magnitude and there resolving it. The insights of such people will pertain not so much to passing personal and social predicaments as to the unquenchable source by which all peoples and societies

are renewed, for their inspiration will be drawn from direct contact with this primary spring. In body they will remain individuals. In spirit each will have become unspecific, universal, perfected.

The purpose of *raja yoga* is to demonstrate the validity of this fourfold estimate of the human self by leading the inquirer to direct personal experience of “the beyond that is within.” Its method is willed introversion, one of the classic implements of creative genius in any line of endeavor, here carried to its logical term. Its intent is to drive the psychic energy of the self to its deepest part to activate the lost continent of the true self. Risks are of course involved; if the venture is bungled, at best considerable time will have been lost, and at worst consciousness can disintegrate into psychosis. Rightly done, however, under a director who knows the terrain, the *yogi* will be able to integrate the insights and experiences that come into view and will emerge with heightened self-knowledge and greater self-control.

With the hypothesis *raja yoga* proposes to test before us, we are prepared to indicate the eight steps of the experiment itself.

1 and 2. The first two concern the moral preliminaries with which all four *yogas* begin. Anyone who sits down to this task of self-discovery discovers that distractions lie in wait. Two of the most obvious are bodily cravings and mental inquietude. Just as concentration is about to begin in earnest, the *yogi* may experience an urge for a cigarette or drink of water. Or resentments, envies, and pangs of conscience obtrude. The first two steps of *raja yoga* seek to clear the field of such static and to lock the door against further intrusions. The first involves the practice of five abstentions: from injury, lying, stealing,

sensuality, and greed. The second involves the practice of five observances: cleanliness, contentment, self-control, studiousness, and contemplation of the divine. Together they constitute the five finger exercises of the human spirit in anticipation of more intricate studies to come. Chinese and Japanese officers who used to practice variations of *raja yoga* in Buddhist monasteries with no religious interest whatsoever—simply to increase their mental clarity and vitality—discovered that even in their case a certain amount of moral comportment was a necessary condition for success.

3. *Raja yoga* works with the body even while being ultimately concerned with the mind. More precisely, it works through the body to the mind. Beyond general health, its chief object here is to keep the body from distracting the mind while it concentrates. This is no small object, for an untrained body cannot go for long without itching or fidgeting. Each sensation is a bid for attention that distracts from the project at hand. The object of this third step is to exclude such distractions—to get Brother Ass, as Saint Francis called his body, properly tethered and out of the way. What is attempted is a bodily state midway between discomfort, which rouses and disturbs, and at the opposite pole a relaxation so complete that it sinks into drowsiness. The Hindu discoveries for achieving this balance are called *asanas*, a word usually translated “postures” but which carries connotations of balance and ease. The physical and psychological benefits of at least some of these postures are now widely recognized. That the Hindu texts describe eighty-four postures indicates extensive experimentation in the area, but only about five are considered important for meditation.

Of these, the one that has proved most important is the world-renowned lotus position in which the *yogi* sits—ideally on a tiger skin, symbolizing energy, overlaid with a deerskin, symbolizing calm—with legs crossed in such a way that each foot rests sole up on its opposing thigh. The spine, with allowance for its natural curvature, is erect. Hands are placed, palms up, in the lap, one atop the other with thumbs touching lightly. The eyes may be closed or allowed to gaze unfocused on the ground or floor. People who undertake this position after their bodies have reached maturity find it painful, for it imposes strains on the tendons which require months of conditioning to be accommodated. When the position has been mastered, however, it is surprisingly comfortable and seems to place the mind in a state that conduces to meditation. Given that standing induces fatigue, chairs invite slumping, and reclining encourages sleep, there may be no other position in which the body can remain for as long a stretch both still and alert.

4. *Yogic* postures protect the meditator from disruptions from the body in its static aspects, but there remain bodily activities, such as breathing. The *yogi* must breathe, but untrained breathing can shatter the mind's repose. Newcomers to meditation are surprised by the extent to which unbridled breathing can intrude upon the task. Bronchial irritations and congestions trigger coughs and clearings of the throat. Each time the breath sinks too low, a deep sigh erupts to shatter the spell. Nor are such obvious irregularities the sole offenders; through concentrated silence, a "normal" breath can rip like a crosscut, sending the hush shivering, flying. The purpose of *raja yoga's* fourth step is to prevent such disruptions through the mastery of respiration. The exercises prescribed toward this end are numerous and varied. Some, like learning to breathe in through one nostril and out

through the other, sound bizarre, but studies suggest that they may help to balance the brain's two hemispheres. On the whole the exercises work toward slowing the breath, evening it, and reducing the amount of air required. A typical exercise calls for breathing so gently across goose down touching the nostrils that an observer cannot tell if air is moving in or out. Breath suspension is particularly important, for the body is most still when it is not breathing. When, for example, the *yogi* is doing a cycle of sixteen counts inhaling, sixty-four holding, and thirty-two exhaling, there is a stretch during which animation is reduced to the point that the mind seems disembodied. These are cherished moments for the task at hand. "The light of a lamp," says the *Bhagavad-Gita*, "does not flicker in a windless place."

5. Composed, body at ease, its breathing regular, the *yogi* sits absorbed in contemplation. Suddenly, a door creaks, a sliver of moonlight shimmers on the ground ahead, a mosquito whines, and he is back in the world.

*Restless the mind is,
So strongly shaken
In the grip of the senses.
Truly I think
The wind is no wilder. (Bhagavad-Gita, VI:34)*

The senses turn outward. As bridges to the physical world they are invaluable, but the *yogi* is seeking something else. On the track of more interesting prey—the interior universe in which (according to reports) is to be found the final secret of life's mystery—the *yogi* wants no sense bombardments. Fascinating in its own way, the outer world has nothing to contribute to the present task. For the *yogi* is tracking the underpinning of life's facade. Behind its physical front, where we experience the play

of life and death, the *yogi* seeks a deeper life that knows no death. Is there, beneath our surface accounting of objects and things, a dimension of awareness that is different not just in degree but in kind? The *yogi* is testing a hypothesis: that the deepest truth is opened only to those who turn their attention inward, and in this experiment the physical senses can be nothing but busybodies. “The senses turn outward,” observe the Upanishads. “People, therefore, look toward what is outside and see not the inward being. Rare are the wise who shut their eyes to outward things and behold the glory of the Atman within.” Five hundred years later the *Bhagavad-Gita* repeats that refrain:

*Only that yogi
Whose joy is inward,
Inward his peace,
And his vision inward
Shall come to Brahman
And know Nirvana.*

It is against the background of three millennia of this postulate that Mahatma Gandhi proposed to our extroverted century: “Turn the spotlight inward.”

The final, transitional step in the process of effecting this turn from the external to the internal world is to close the doors of perception, for only so can the clatter of the world’s boiler factory be effectively shut out. That this can be done, and without bodily mutilation, is a common experience. A man calls his wife to remind her that they should leave for a social engagement. Five minutes later she insists that she did not hear him; he insists that she must have heard him, for he was in the adjoining room and spoke distinctly. Who is right? It is a matter of definition. If hearing means that sound waves of sufficient

amplitude beat on healthy eardrums, she heard; if it means that they were noticed, she did not. There is nothing esoteric about such occurrences; their explanation is simply concentration—the woman was at her computer and deeply engrossed. Similarly, there is no catch in this fifth step in *raja yoga*. It seeks to carry the *yogi* beyond the point the wife had reached, first, by turning concentration from a chance occurrence into a power that is controlled; and second, by raising the talent to a point where drumbeats in the same room can escape notice. The technique, though, is identical. Concentration on one thing excludes other things.

6. At last the *yogi* is alone with his mind. The five steps enumerated thus far all point to this eventuality; one by one the intrusions of cravings, a troubled conscience, body, breath, and the senses have been stopped. But the battle is not yet won; at close quarters it is just beginning. For the mind’s fiercest antagonist is itself. Alone with itself it still shows not the slightest inclination to settle down or obey. Memories, anticipations, daydreams, chains of reverie held together by the flimsiest, most unexpected links imaginable close in from all sides, causing the mind to ripple like a lake beneath a breeze, alive with ever-changing, self-shattering reflections. Left to itself the mind never stays still, smooth as a mirror, crystal clear, reflecting the Sun of all life in perfect replica. For such a condition to prevail, it is not enough that entering rivulets be dammed; this the five preceding steps effectively accomplished. There remain lake-bottom springs to be stopped and fantasies to be curbed. Obviously, much remains to be done.

Or switch the metaphor to one less serene. The motions of the average mind, say the Hindus, are about as orderly as those of a

crazed monkey cavorting about its cage. Nay, more; like the prancings of a drunk, crazed monkey. Even so we have not conveyed its restlessness; the mind is like a drunken, crazed monkey that has St. Vitus' Dance. To do justice to our theme, however, we must go a final step. The mind is like a drunken crazed monkey with St. Vitus' Dance who has just been stung by a wasp.

Few who have seriously tried to meditate will find this metaphor extreme. The trouble with the advice to "leave your mind alone" is the unimpressive spectacle that remains. I tell my hand to rise and it obeys. I tell my mind to be still and it mocks my command. How long can the average mind think about one thing—one thing only, without slipping first into thinking about *thinking* about that thing and taking off from there on a senseless chain of irrelevancies? About three and a half seconds, psychologists tell us. Like a ping-pong ball, the mind will alight where its owner directs it, but only to take off immediately on a jittery flight of staccato bounces that are completely out of hand.

What if the mind could be turned from a ping-pong ball into a lump of dough, which when thrown sticks to a wall until deliberately removed? Would not its power increase if it could be thus held in focus? Would not its strength be compounded, like the strength of a light bulb when ringed by reflectors? A normal mind can be held to a reasonable extent by the world's objects. A psychotic mind cannot; it slips at once into uncontrollable fantasy. What if a third condition of mind could be developed, as much above the normal mind as the psychotic mind is below it, a condition in which the mind could be induced to focus protractedly on an object to fathom it deeply? This is the aim of concentration, the sixth step of *raja yoga*. An elephant's trunk

that sways to and fro as the elephant walks and reaches out for objects on either side will settle down if it is given an iron ball to hold. The purpose of concentration is comparable: to teach the restless mind to hold unswervingly to the object it is directed to. "When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not—that, say the wise, is the highest state."

The method proposed for reaching this state is not exotic, only arduous. One begins by relaxing the mind to allow thoughts that need release to exorcize themselves from the subconscious. Then one selects something to concentrate on—the glowing tip of a joss stick, the tip of one's nose, an imaged sea of infinite light, the object does not much matter—and practices keeping the mind on the object until success increases.

7. The last two steps are stages in which this process of concentration progressively deepens. In the preceding step the mind was brought to the point where it would flow steadily toward its object, but it did not lose consciousness of itself as an object distinct from the one it was focusing on. In this seventh step, in which concentration deepens into meditation, the union between the two is tightened to the point where separateness vanishes: "The subject and the object are completely merged so that the self-consciousness of the individual subject has disappeared altogether." In this moment the duality of knower and known is resolved into a perfect unity. In the words of Schelling, "the perceiving self merges in the self-perceived. At that moment we annihilate time and the duration of time; we are no longer in time, but time, or rather eternity itself, is in us."

8. There remains the final, climactic state for which the Sanskrit word *samadhi* should be retained. Etymologically *sam* parallels

the Greek prefix *syn*, as in synthesis, synopsis, and syndrome. It means “together with.” *Adhi* in Sanskrit is usually translated Lord, paralleling the Hebrew word for Lord in the Old Testament, *Adon* or *Adonai*. *Samadhi*, then, names the state in which the human mind is completely absorbed in God. In the seventh step—that of meditation—concentration had deepened to the point where the self dropped out of sight entirely, all attention being riveted on the object being known. The distinctive feature of *samadhi* is that all of the object’s forms fall away. For forms are limiting boundaries; to be one form others must be excluded, and what is to be known in *raja yoga*’s final stage is without limits. The mind continues to think—if that is the right word—but of no thing. This does not mean that it is thinking of nothing, that it is a total blank. It has perfected the paradox of seeing the invisible. It is filled with that which is “separated from all qualities, neither this nor that, without form, without a name.”

We have come a long way from Lord Kelvin’s assertion that he could not imagine anything of which he could not construct a mechanical model. By that mode in which the knower is united with what is known, the knower has been brought to the knowledge of total being and, for a spell, been dissolved into it. That which the experiment was designed to test has been determined. The *yogi* has attained to the insight “That, verily, That thou art.”

We have presented the four *yogas* as alternatives but, to conclude with a point that was made at the start, Hinduism does not consider them as exclusive of one another. No individual is solely reflective, emotional, active, or experimental, and different life situations call for different resources to be brought into play. Most people will, on the whole, find travel on one road more

satisfactory than on others and will consequently tend to keep close to it; but Hinduism encourages people to test all four and combine them as best suits their needs. The major division is between *jnana* and *bhakti*, the reflective and the emotional types. We have seen that work can be adapted to either of these modes, and some meditation is valuable in any case. The normal pattern, therefore, will be for individuals to cast their religion in either a philosophical or a devotional mold, adapt their work to the one that is chosen, and meditate to whatever extent is practicable. We read in the *Bhagavad-Gita* that some “realize the *Atman* through contemplation. Some realize the *Atman* philosophically. Others realize it by following the yoga of right action. Others worship God as their teachers have taught them. If these faithfully practice what they have learned, they will pass beyond death’s power.”

The Stages of Life

People are different. Few observations could be more banal, yet serious attention to it is one of Hinduism’s distinctive features. The preceding sections traced its insistence that differences in human nature call for a variety of paths toward life’s fulfillment. We have now to note the same insistence pressed from another quarter. Not only do individuals differ from one another; each individual moves through different stages, each of which calls for its own appropriate conduct. As each day passes from morning through noon and afternoon into evening, so every life likewise passes through four phases, each possessing distinct aptitudes that dictate distinct modes of response. If we ask, therefore, how should we live? Hinduism answers, that depends not only on what kind of person you are but also on the stage of life you are in.

The first stage India marked off as that of the student. Traditionally, this stage began after the rite of initiation, between the ages of eight and twelve. It lasted for twelve years, during which the student typically lived in the home of the teacher, rendering service for instruction received. Life's prime responsibility at this stage was to learn, to offer a receptive mind to all that the teacher, standing, as it were, on the pinnacle of the past, could transmit. Soon enough responsibilities would announce themselves copiously; for this gloriously suspended moment the student's only obligation was to store up against the time when much would be demanded. What was to be learned included factual information, but more; for India—dreamy, impractical India—has had little interest in knowledge for knowledge's sake. The successful student was not to emerge a walking encyclopedia, a reference library wired for sound. Habits were to be cultivated, character acquired. The entire training was more like an apprenticeship in which information became incarnated in skill. The liberally educated student was to emerge as equipped to turn out a good and effective life as a potter's apprentice to turn out a well-wrought urn.

The second stage, beginning with marriage, was that of the householder. Here during life's noonday, with physical powers at their zenith, interests and energies naturally turn outward. There are three fronts on which they can play with satisfaction: family, vocation, and the community to which one belongs. Normally, attention will be divided between the three. This is the time for satisfying the first three human wants: pleasure, through marriage and family primarily; success, through vocation; and duty, through civic participation.

Hinduism smiles on the happy fulfillment of these wants but does not try to prime them when they begin to ebb. That attachment to them should eventually decline is altogether appropriate, for it would be unnatural for life to end while action and desire are at their zenith. It is not ordained that it do so. If we follow the seasons as they come, we shall notice a time when sex and the delights of the senses (pleasure) as well as achievement in the game of life (success) no longer yield novel and surprising turns; when even the responsible discharge of a human vocation (duty) begins to pall, having grown repetitious and stale. When this season arrives it is time for the individual to move on to the third stage in life's sequence.

Some never do. Their spectacle is not a pretty one, for pursuits appropriate in their day become grotesque when unduly prolonged. A playboy of twenty-five may have considerable appeal, but spare us the playboys of fifty. How hard they work at their pose, how little they receive in return. It is similar with people who cannot bring themselves to relinquish key positions when a younger generation with more energy and new ideas should be stepping into them.

Still, such people cannot be censured; for seeing no other frontier to life, they have no option but to hang on to what they know. The question they pose is, bluntly, "Is old age worthwhile?" With medical science increasing life expectancy dramatically, more and more people are having to face that question. Poets have always given their nod to autumn leaves and the sunset years, but their phrases sound suspect. If we rest our case with poetry, "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be" carries not half the conviction of "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.... Tomorrow we'll be dying."

Whether life has a future beyond middle age depends in the end not on poetry but on fact, on what the values of life really are. If they are supremely those of body and sense, we may as well resign ourselves to the fact that life after youth must be downhill. If worldly achievement and the exercise of power is best, middle age, the stage of the householder, will be life's apex. But if vision and self-understanding carry rewards equal to or surpassing these others, old age has its own opportunities, and we can come to happiness at the time when the rivers of our lives flow gently.

Whether or not the later years do hold such rewards depends on the scene that is disclosed when the curtain of ignorance lifts. If reality is a monotonous and depressing wasteland and self no more than subtle cybernetics, the rewards of vision and self-knowledge cannot possibly rival the ecstasies of sense or the satisfactions of social achievement. We have seen, however, that in Hinduism they are held to be more. "Leave all and follow Him! Enjoy his inexpressible riches," say the Upanishads. No joy can approximate the beatific vision, and the Self to be discovered is great beyond all report. It follows that succeeding the stages of student and householder, Hinduism will mark with confidence a third stage into which life should move.

This is the stage of retirement. Any time after the arrival of a first grandchild, the individual may take advantage of the license of age and withdraw from the social obligations that were thus far shouldered with a will. For twenty to thirty years society has exacted its dues; now relief is in order, lest life conclude before it has been understood. Thus far society has required the individual to specialize; there has been little time to read, to think, to ponder life's meaning without interruption. This is not resented; the game has carried its own satisfactions. But must the human spirit

be indentured to society forever? The time has come to begin one's true adult education, to discover who one is and what life is about. What is the secret of the "I" with which one has been on such intimate terms all these years, yet which remains a stranger, full of inexplicable quirks, baffling surds, and irrational impulses? Why are we born to work and struggle, each with a portion of happiness and sorrow, only to die too soon? Generation after generation swells briefly like a wave, then breaks on the shore, subsiding into the anonymous fellowship of death. To find meaning in the mystery of existence is life's final and fascinating challenge.

Traditionally, those who responded fully to this lure of spiritual adventure were known as forest dwellers, for—husband and wife together if she wished to go, husband alone if she did not—they would take their leave of family, the comforts and constraints of home, and plunge into the forest solitudes to launch their program of self-discovery. At last their responsibilities were to themselves alone. "Business, family, secular life, like the beauties and hopes of youth and the successes of maturity, have now been left behind; eternity alone remains. And so it is to that—not to the tasks and worries of this life, already gone, which came and passed like a dream—that the mind is turned." Retirement looks beyond the stars, not to the village streets. It is the time for working out a philosophy, and then working that philosophy into a way of life; a time for transcending the senses to find, and dwell with, the reality that underlies this natural world.

Beyond retirement, the final stage wherein the goal is actually reached is the state of the *sannyasin*, defined by the *Bhagavad-Gita* as "one who neither hates nor loves anything."

The pilgrim is now free to return to the world for, the intent of the forest discipline achieved, time and place have lost their hold. Where in all the world can one be totally free if not everywhere? The Hindus liken the *sannyasin* to a wild goose or swan, “which has no fixed home but wanders, migrating with the rain-clouds north to the Himalayas and back south again, at home on every lake or sheet of water, as also in the infinite, unbounded reaches of the sky.” The marketplace has now become as hospitable as the forests. But though the *sannyasin* is back, he is back as a different person. Having discovered that complete release from every limitation is synonymous with absolute anonymity, the *sannyasin* has learned the art of keeping the finite self dispersed lest it eclipse the infinite.

Far from wanting to “be somebody,” the *sannyasin*’s wish is the opposite: to remain a complete nonentity on the surface in order to be joined to all at root. How could one possibly wish to make oneself up again as an individual, restore the posturings and costumes of a limiting self-identity, the persona that conceals the purity and radiance of the intrinsic self? The outward life that fits this total freedom best is that of a homeless mendicant. Others will seek to be economically independent in their old age; the *sannyasin* proposes to cut free of economics altogether. With no fixed place on earth, no obligations, no goal, no belongings, the expectations of body are nothing. Social pretensions likewise have no soil from which to sprout and interfere. No pride remains in someone who, begging bowl in hand, finds himself at the back door of someone who was once his servant and would not have it otherwise.

The *sannyasin* saints of Jainism, an offshoot of Hinduism, went about “clothed in space,” stark naked. Buddhism, another

offshoot, dressed its counterparts in ochre, the color worn by criminals ejected from society and condemned to death. Good to have all status whisked away at a stroke, for all social identities prevent identification with the imperishable totality of existence. “Taking no thought of the future and looking with indifference upon the present,” read the Hindu texts, the *sannyasin* “lives identified with the eternal Self and beholds nothing else.” “He no more cares whether his body falls or remains, than does a cow what becomes of the garland that someone has hung around her neck; for the faculties of his mind are now at rest in the Holy Power, the essence of bliss.”

The unwise life is one long struggle with death the intruder—an uneven contest in which age is obsessively delayed through artifice and the denial of time’s erosions. When the fever of desire slackens, the unwise seek to refuel it with more potent aphrodisiacs. When they are forced to let go, it is grudgingly and with self-pity, for they cannot see the inevitable as natural, and good as well. They have no comprehension of Tagore’s insight that truth comes as conqueror only to those who have lost the art of receiving it as friend.

[The Stations of Life](#)

People are different—we are back a third time to this cardinal Hindu tenet. We have traced its import for the different paths people should follow toward God, and the different patterns of life appropriate at various stages in the human career. We come now to its implications for the station the individual should occupy in the social order.

This brings us to the Hindu concept of caste. On no other score is Hinduism better known or more roundly denounced by the

outside world. Caste contains both point and perversion. Everything in the discussion of this subject depends on our ability to distinguish between the two.

How caste arose is one of the confused topics of history. Central, certainly, was the fact that during the second millennium B.C. a host of Aryans possessing a different language, culture, and physiognomy (tall, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, straight-haired) migrated into India. The clash of differences that followed burgeoned the caste system, if it did not actually create it. The extent to which ethnic differences, color, trade guilds harboring professional secrets, sanitation restrictions between groups with different immunity systems, and magico-religious taboos concerning pollution and purification contributed to the pattern that emerged may never be fully unraveled. In any event the outcome was a society that was divided into four groups: seers, administrators, producers, and followers.

Let us record at once the perversions that entered in time, however they originated. To begin with, a fifth group—of outcastes or untouchables—appeared. Even in speaking of this category there are mitigating points to be remembered. In dealing with her lowest social group, India did not sink to slavery as have most civilizations; outcastes who in their fourth stage of life renounced the world for God were regarded as outside social classifications and were revered, even by the highest caste, the *brahmins*; from Buddha through Dayananda to Gandhi, many religious reformers sought to remove untouchability from the caste system; and contemporary India's constitution outlaws the institution. Still, the outcaste's lot through

India's history has been a wretched one and must be regarded as the basic perversion the caste system succumbed to. A second deterioration lay in the proliferation of castes into subcastes, of which there are today over three thousand. Third, proscriptions against intermarriage and interdining came to complicate social intercourse enormously. Fourth, privileges entered the system, with higher castes benefiting at the expense of the lower. Finally, caste became hereditary. One remained in the caste into which one was born.

With these heavy counts against it, it may come as a surprise to find that there are contemporary Indians, thoroughly familiar with Western alternatives, who defend caste—not, to be sure, in its entirety, especially what it has become, but in its basic format. What lasting values could such a system possibly contain?

What is called for here is recognition that with respect to the ways they can best contribute to society and develop their own potentialities, people fall into four groups. (1) The first group India called *brahmins* or seers. Reflective, with a passion to understand and a keen intuitive grasp of the values that matter most in human life, these are civilization's intellectual and spiritual leaders. Into their province fall the functions our more specialized society has distributed among philosophers, artists, religious leaders, and teachers; things of the mind and spirit are their raw materials. (2) The second group, the *kshatriyas*, are born administrators, with a genius for orchestrating people and projects in ways that makes the most of available human talents. (3) Others find their vocation as producers; they are artisans and farmers, skillful in creating the material things on which life depends. These are the *vaishyas*. (4) Finally, *shudras*, can be characterized as followers or servants. Unskilled laborers would

be another name for them. These are people who, if they had to carve out a career for themselves, commit themselves to long periods of training, or go into business for themselves, would founder. Their attention spans are relatively short, which makes them unwilling to sacrifice a great deal in the way of present gains for the sake of future rewards. Under supervision, however, they are capable of hard work and devoted service. Such people are better off, and actually happier, working for others than being on their own. We, with our democratic and egalitarian sentiments, do not like to admit that there are such people, to which the orthodox Hindu replies: What you would *like* is not the point. The question is what people actually are.

Few contemporary Hindus defend the lengths to which India eventually went in keeping the castes distinct. Her proscriptions regulating intermarriage, interdining, and other forms of social contact made her, in her first prime minister's wry assessment, "the least tolerant nation in social forms while the most tolerant in the realm of ideas." Yet even here a certain point lies behind the accursed proliferations. That proscriptions against different castes drinking from the same source were especially firm suggests that differences in immunity to diseases may have played a part. The presiding reasons, however, were broader than this. Unless unequals are separated in some fashion, the weak must compete against the strong across the board and will stand no chance of winning anywhere. Between castes there was no equality, but within each caste the individual's rights were safer than if he or she had been forced to fend alone in the world at large. Each caste was self-governing, and in trouble one could be sure of being tried by one's peers. Within each caste there was equality, opportunity, and social insurance.

Inequalities between the castes themselves aimed for due compensation for services rendered. The well-being of society requires that some people assume, at the cost of considerable self-sacrifice, responsibilities far beyond average. While most young people will plunge early into marriage and employment, some must postpone those satisfactions for as much as a decade to prepare themselves for demanding vocations. The wage earner who checks out at five o'clock is through for the day; the employer must take home the ever-present insecurities of the entrepreneur, and often homework as well. The question is partly whether employers would be willing to shoulder their responsibilities without added compensation, but also whether it would be just to ask them to do so. India never confused democracy with egalitarianism. Justice was defined as a state in which privileges were proportionate to responsibilities. In salary and social power, therefore, the second caste, the administrators, rightly stood supreme; in honor and psychological power, the *brahmins*. But only (according to the ideal) because their responsibilities were proportionately greater. In precise reverse of the European doctrine that the king could do no wrong, the orthodox Hindu view came very near to holding that the shudras, the lowest caste, could do no wrong, its members being regarded as children from whom not much should be expected. Classical legal doctrine stipulated that for the same offense "the punishment of the Vaishya [producer] should be twice as heavy as that of the shudra, that of the *kshatriya* [administrator] twice as heavy again, and that of the *brahmin* twice or even four times as heavy again." In India the lowest caste was exempt from many of the forms of probity and self-denial that the upper castes were held to. Its widows might remarry, and proscription against meat and alcohol were less exacting.

Stated in modern idiom, the ideal of caste emerges something like this: At the bottom of the social scale is a class of routineers—domestics, factory workers, and hired hands—who can put up with an unvaried round of duties but who, their self-discipline being marginal, must punch time clocks if they are to get in a day's work, and who are little inclined to forego present gratification for the sake of long-term gains. Above them is a class of technicians. Artisans in preindustrial societies, in an industrial age they are the people who understand machines, repair them, and keep them running. Next comes the managerial class. In its political wing it includes party officials and elected representatives; in its military branch, officers and chiefs-of-staff; in its industrial arm, entrepreneurs, managers, board members, and chief executive officers.

If, however, society is to be not only complex but good, if it is to be wise and inspired as well as efficient, there must be above the administrators—in esteem but not in pay, for one of the defining marks of this class must lie in its indifference to wealth and power—a fourth class, which in our specialized society would include religious leaders, teachers, writers, and artists. Such people are rightly called seers in the literal sense of this word, for they are the eyes of the community. As the head (administrators) rests on the body (laborers and technicians), so the eyes are placed at the top of the head. Members of this class must possess enough willpower to counter the egoism and seductions that distort perception. They command respect because others recognize both their own incapacity for such restraint and the truth of what the seer tells them. It is as if the seer sees clearly what other types only suspect. But such vision is fragile; it yields sound discernments only when carefully protected. Needing leisure for unhurried reflection, the seer must be protected from

overinvolvement in the day-to-day exigencies that clutter and cloud the mind, as a navigator must be free from serving in the galley or stoking in the hold in order to track the stars to keep the ship on course. Above all, this final caste must be protected from temporal power. India considered Plato's dream of the philosopher king unrealistic, and it is true that when *brahmins* assumed social power, they became corrupt. For temporal power subjects its wielder to pressures and temptations that to some extent refract judgment and distort it. The role of the seer is not to crack down but to counsel, not to drive but to guide. Like a compass needle, guarded that it may point, the *brahmin* is to ascertain, then indicate, the true north of life's meaning and purpose, charting the way to civilization's advance.

Caste, when it has decayed, is as offensive as any other corrupting corpse. Whatever its character at the start, it came in time to neglect Plato's insight that "a golden parent may have a silver son, or a silver parent a golden son, and then there must be a change of rank; the son of the rich must descend, and the child of the artisan rise, in the social scale; for an oracle says 'that the state will come to an end if governed by a man of brass or iron.'" As one of the most thoughtful recent advocates of the basic idea of caste has written, "we may expect that the coming development will differ chiefly in permitting intermarriage and choice or change of occupation under certain conditions, though still recognizing the general desirability of marriage within the group and of following one's parents' calling." Insofar as caste has come to mean rigidity, exclusiveness, and undeserved privilege, Hindus today are working to clear the corruption from their polity. But there remain many who believe that to the problem no country has yet solved, the problem of how society

ought to be ordered to insure the maximum of fair play and creativity, the basic theses of caste continue to warrant attention.

Up to this point we have approached Hinduism in terms of its practical import. Beginning with its analysis of what people want, we have traced its suggestions concerning the ways these wants might be met and the responses appropriate to various stages and stations of human life. The remaining sections of this chapter shift the focus from practice to theory, indicating the principal philosophical concepts that rib the Hindu religion.

“Thou Before Whom All Words Recoil”

The first principle of Japanese *ikebana* flower arrangement is to learn what to leave out. This is also the first principle to be learned in speaking of God, the Hindus insist. People are forever trying to lay hold of Reality with words, only in the end to find mystery rebuking their speech and their syllables swallowed by silence. The problem is not that our minds are not bright enough. The problem lies deeper. Minds, taken in their ordinary, surface sense, are the wrong kind of instrument for the undertaking. The effect, as a result, is like trying to ladle the ocean with a net, or lasso the wind with a rope. The awe-inspiring prayer of Shankara, the Thomas Aquinas of Hinduism, begins with the invocation, “Oh Thou, before whom all words recoil.”

The human mind has evolved to facilitate survival in the natural world. It is adapted to deal with finite objects. God, on the contrary, is infinite and of a completely different order of being from what our minds can grasp. To expect our minds to corner the infinite is like asking a dog to understand Einstein’s equation with its nose. This analogy becomes misleading if, pressed in a different direction, it suggests that we can never know the

Abysmal God. The *yogas*, we have seen, are roads to precisely such realization. But the knowledge to which they lead transcends the knowledge of the rational mind; it rises to the deep yet dazzling darkness of the mystical consciousness. The only literally accurate description of the Unsearchable of which the ordinary mind is capable is *neti...neti*, not this...not this. If you traverse the length and breadth of the universe saying of everything you can see and conceive, “not this...not this,” what remains will be God.

And yet words and concepts cannot be avoided. Being the only equipment at our mind’s disposal, any conscious progress toward God must be made with their aid. Though concepts can never carry the mind to its destination, they can point in the right direction.

We may begin simply with a name to hang our thoughts on. The name the Hindus give to the supreme reality is *Brahman*, which has a dual etymology, deriving as it does from both *br*, to breathe, and *brih*, to be great. The chief attributes to be linked with the name are *sat*, *chit*, and *ananda*; God is being, awareness, and bliss. Utter reality, utter consciousness, and utterly beyond all possibility of frustration—this is the basic Hindu view of God. Even these words cannot claim to describe God literally, however, for the meanings they carry for us are radically unlike the senses in which they apply to God. What pure being would be like, being infinite with absolutely nothing excluded, of this we have scarcely an inkling. Similarly with awareness and joy. In Spinoza’s formulation God’s nature resembles our words about as much as the dog star resembles a dog. The most that can be said for these words is that they are pointers; our minds do better to move in their direction than in

the opposite. God lies on the further side of being as we understand it, not nothingness; beyond minds as we know them, not mindless clay; beyond ecstasy, not agony.

This is as far as some minds need go in their vision of God: infinite being, infinite consciousness, infinite bliss—all else is at best commentary, at worst retraction. There are sages who can live in this austere, conceptually thin atmosphere of the spirit and find it invigorating; they can understand with Shankara that “the sun shines even without objects to shine upon.” Most people, however, cannot be gripped by such high-order abstractions. That C. S. Lewis is among their number is proof that their minds are not inferior, only different. Professor Lewis tells us that while he was a child his parents kept admonishing him not to think of God in terms of any form, for these could only limit his infinity. He tried his best to heed their instructions, but the closest he could come to the idea of a formless God was an infinite sea of grey tapioca.

This anecdote, the Hindus would say, points up perfectly the circumstance of the man or woman whose mind must bite into something concrete and representational if it is to find life-sustaining meaning. Most people find it impossible to conceive, much less be motivated by, anything that is removed very far from direct experience. Hinduism advises such people not to try to think of God as the supreme instance of abstractions like being or consciousness, and instead to think of God as the archetype of the noblest reality they encounter in the natural world. This means thinking of God as the supreme person (*Ishvara* or *Bhagavan*), for people are nature’s noblest crown. Our discussion of *bhakti yoga*, the path to God through love and devotion, has already introduced us to God conceived in this way. This, in

Pascal’s Western idiom, is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the God of the philosophers. It is God as parent, lovingly merciful, omniscient, almighty, our eternal contemporary, the companion who understands.

God so conceived is called *Saguna Brahman*, or God-with-attributes as distinct from the philosophers’ more abstract *Nirguna Brahman*, or God-without-attributes. *Nirguna Brahman* is the ocean without a ripple; *Saguna Brahman* the same ocean alive with swells and waves. In the language of theology, the distinction is between personal and transpersonal conceptions of God. Hinduism has included superb champions of each view, notably Shankara for the transpersonal and Ramanuja for the personal; but the conclusion that does most justice to Hinduism as a whole and has its own explicit champions like Sri Ramakrishna is that both are equally correct. At first blush this may look like a glaring violation of the law of the excluded middle. God may be either personal or not, we are likely to insist, but not both. But is this so? What the disjunction forgets, India argues, is the distance our rational minds are from God in the first place. Intrinsically, God may not be capable of being two contradictory things—we say may not because logic itself may melt in the full blaze of the divine incandescence. But concepts of God contain so much alloy to begin with that two contradictory ones may be true, each from a different angle, as both wave and particles may be equally accurate heuristic devices for describing the nature of light. On the whole India has been content to encourage the devotee to conceive of *Brahman* as either personal or transpersonal, depending on which carries the most exalted meaning for the mind in question.

God's relation to the world likewise varies according to the symbolism that is embraced. Conceived in personal terms, God will stand in relation to the world as an artist to his or her handiwork. God will be Creator (Brahma), Preserver (Vishnu), and Destroyer (Shiva), who in the end resolves all finite forms back into the primordial nature from which they sprang. On the other hand, conceived transpersonally, God stands above the struggle, aloof from the finite in every respect. "As the sun does not tremble, although its image trembles when you shake the cup filled with water in which the sun's light is reflected; thus the Lord also is not affected by pain, although pain be felt by that part of him which is called the individual soul." The world will still be God-dependent. It will have emerged in some unfathomable way from the divine plenitude and be sustained by its power. "He shining, the sun, the moon and the stars shine after Him; by His light all is lighted. He is the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Speech of the speech, the Life of life, the Eye of the eye." But God will not have intentionally willed the world, nor be affected by its inherent ambiguity, imperfections, and finitude.

The personalist will see little religious availability in this idea of a God who is so far removed from our predicaments as to be unaware of our very existence. Is it not religion's death to despoil the human heart of its final treasure, the diamond of God's love? The answer is that God serves an entirely different function for the transpersonalist, one that is equally religious, but different all the same. If one is struggling against a current it is comforting to have a master swimmer by one's side. It is equally important that there be a shore, solid and serene, that lies beyond the struggle as the terminus of all one's splashings. The transpersonalist has

become so possessed by the goal as to forget all else, even the encouragement of supporting companions.

Coming of Age in the Universe

With God in pivotal position in the Hindu scheme, we can return to human beings to draw together systematically the Hindu concept of their nature and destiny.

Individual souls, or *jivas*, enter the world mysteriously; by God's power we may be sure, but how or for what reason we are unable fully to explain. Like bubbles that form on the bottom of a boiling teakettle, they make their way through the water (universe) until they break free into the limitless atmosphere of illumination (liberation). They begin as the souls of the simplest forms of life, but they do not vanish with the death of their original bodies. In the Hindu view spirit no more depends on the body it inhabits than body depends on the clothes it wears or the house it lives in. When we outgrow a suit or find our house too cramped, we exchange these for roomier ones that offer our bodies freer play. Souls do the same.

Worn-out garments

Are shed by the body:

Worn-out bodies

Are shed by the dweller. (Bhagavad-Gita, II:22)

This process by which an individual *jiva* passes through a sequence of bodies is known as reincarnation or transmigration of the soul—in Sanskrit *samsara*, a word that signifies endless passage through cycles of life, death, and rebirth. On the subhuman level the passage is through a series of increasingly complex bodies until at last a human one is attained. Up to this point the soul's growth is virtually automatic. It is as if the soul

were growing as steadily and normally as a plant and receiving at each successive embodiment a body that, being more complex, provides the needed largess for its new capabilities.

With the soul's graduation into a human body, this automatic, escalator-like mode of ascent comes to an end. Its entry into this exalted habitation is evidence that the soul has reached self-consciousness, and with this estate come freedom, responsibility, and effort.

The mechanism that ties these new acquisitions together is the law of *karma*. The literal meaning of *karma* (as we encountered it in *karma yoga*) is work, but as a doctrine it means, roughly, the moral law of cause and effect. Science has alerted the West to the importance of causal relationships in the physical world. Every physical event, we are inclined to believe, has its cause, and every cause will have its determinate effects. India extends this concept of causation to include moral and spiritual life as well. To some extent the West has as well. "As a man sows, so shall he reap"; or again, "Sow a thought and reap an act, sow an act and reap a habit, sow a habit and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny"—these are ways the West has put the point. The difference is that India tightens up and extends its concept of moral law to see it as absolute; it brooks no exceptions. The present condition of each interior life—how happy it is, how confused or serene, how much it sees—is an exact product of what it has wanted and done in the past. Equally, its present thoughts and decisions are determining its future experiences. Each act that is directed upon the world has its equal and opposite reaction on oneself. Each thought and deed delivers an unseen chisel blow that sculpts one's destiny.

This idea of *karma* and the completely moral universe it implies carries two important psychological corollaries. First, it commits the Hindu who understands it to complete personal responsibility. Each individual is wholly responsible for his or her present condition and will have exactly the future he or she is now creating. Most people are not willing to admit this. They prefer, as the psychologists say, to project—to locate the source of their difficulties outside themselves. They want excuses, someone to blame so that they may be exonerated. This, say the Hindus, is immature. Everybody gets exactly what is deserved—we have made our beds and must lie in them. Conversely, the idea of a moral universe closes the door on chance or accident. Most people have little idea how much they secretly bank on luck—hard luck to justify past failures, good luck to bring future successes. How many people drift through life simply waiting for the breaks, for that moment when a lucky lottery number brings riches and a dizzying spell of fame. If you approach life this way, says Hinduism, you misjudge your position pathetically. Breaks have nothing to do with protracted levels of happiness, nor do they happen by chance. We live in a world in which there is no chance or accident. Those words are simply covers for ignorance.

Because *karma* implies a lawful world, it has often been interpreted as fatalism. However often Hindus may have succumbed to this interpretation, it is untrue to the doctrine itself. *Karma* decrees that every decision must have its determinate consequences, but the decisions themselves are, in the last analysis, freely arrived at. To approach the matter from the other direction, the consequences of one's past decisions condition one's present lot, as a card player finds himself dealt a particular hand while remaining free to play that hand in a variety of ways. This means that the career of a soul as it threads its course

through innumerable human bodies is guided by its choices, which are controlled by what the soul wants and wills at each stage of the journey.

What its wants are, and the order in which they appear, can be summarized quickly here, for previous sections have considered them at length. When it first enters a human body, a *jiva* (soul) wants nothing more than to taste widely of the sense delights its new physical equipment makes possible. With repetition, however, even the most ecstatic of these falls prey to habituation and grows monotonous, whereupon the *jiva* turns to social conquests to escape boredom. These conquests—the various modes of wealth, fame, and power—can hold the individual's interest for a considerable time. The stakes are high and their attainment richly gratifying. Eventually, however, this entire program of personal ambition is seen for what it is: a game—a fabulous, exciting, history-making game, but a game all the same.

As long as it holds one's interest, it satisfies. But when novelty wears off, when a winner has acknowledged with the same bow and pretty little speech the accolades that have come so many times before, he or she begins to yearn for something new and more deeply satisfying. Duty, the total dedication of one's life to one's community, can fill the need for a while, but the ironies and anomalies of history make this object too a revolving door. Lean on it and it gives, but in time one discovers that it is going round and round. After social dedication the only good that can satisfy is one that is infinite and eternal, whose realization can turn all experience, even the experience of time and apparent defeat, into splendor, as storm clouds drifting through a valley look different

viewed from a peak that is bathed in sunshine. The bubble is approaching the water's surface and is demanding final release.

The soul's progress through these ascending strata of human wants does not take the form of a straight line with an acute upward angle. It fumbles and zigzags its way toward what it really needs. In the long run, however, the trend of attachments will be upward—everyone finally gets the point. By “upward” here is meant a gradual relaxation of attachment to physical objects and stimuli, accompanied by a progressive release from self-interest. We can almost visualize the action of *karma* as it delivers the consequences of what the soul reaches out for. It is as if each desire that aims at the ego's gratification adds a grain of concrete to the wall that surrounds the individual self and insulates it from the infinite sea of being that surrounds it; while, conversely, each compassionate or disinterested act dislodges a grain from the confining dike. Detachment cannot be overtly assessed, however; it has no public index. The fact that someone withdraws to a monastery is no proof of triumph over self and craving, for these may continue to abound in the imaginations of the heart. Conversely, an executive may be heavily involved in worldly responsibilities; but if he or she manages them detachedly—living in the world as a mudfish lives in the mud, without the mud's sticking to it—the world becomes a ladder to ascend.

Never during its pilgrimage is the human spirit completely adrift and alone. From start to finish its nucleus is the *Atman*, the God within, exerting pressure to “out” like a jack-in-the-box. Underlying its whirlpool of transient feelings, emotions, and delusions is the self-luminous, abiding point of the transpersonal God. Though it is buried too deep in the soul to be normally

noticed, it is the sole ground of human existence and awareness. As the sun lights the world even when cloud-covered, “the Immutable is never seen but is the Witness; It is never heard but is the Hearer; it is never thought, but is the Thinker; is never known, but is the Knower. There is no other witness but This, no other knower but This.” But God is not only the empowering agent in the soul’s every action. In the end it is God’s radiating warmth that melts the soul’s icecap, turning it into a pure capacity for God.

What happens then? Some say the individual soul passes into complete identification with God and loses every trace of its former separateness. Others, wishing to taste sugar, not be sugar, cherish the hope that some slight differentiation between the soul and God will still remain—a thin line upon the ocean that provides nevertheless a remnant of personal identity that some consider indispensable for the beatific vision.

Christopher Isherwood has written a story based on an Indian fable that summarizes the soul’s coming of age in the universe. An old man seated on a lawn with a group of children around him tells them of the magic Kalpataru tree that fulfills all wishes. “If you speak to it and tell it a wish; or if you lie down under it and think, or even dream, a wish, then that wish will be granted.” The old man proceeds to tell them that he once obtained such a tree and planted it in his garden. “In fact,” he tells them, “that is a Kalpataru over there”.

With that the children rush to the tree and begin to shower it with requests. Most of these turn out to be unwise, ending in either indigestion or tears. But the Kalpataru grants them indiscriminately. It has no interest in giving advice.

Years pass, and the Kalpataru is forgotten. The children have now grown into men and women and are trying to fulfill new wishes that they have found. At first they want their wishes to be fulfilled instantly, but later they search for wishes that can be fulfilled only with ever-increasing difficulty.

The point of the story is that the universe is one gigantic Wishing Tree, with branches that reach into every heart. The cosmic process decrees that sometime or other, in this life or another, each of these wishes will be granted—together, of course, with consequences. There was one child from the original group, however, so the story concludes, who did not spend his years skipping from desire to desire, from one gratification to another. For from the first he had understood the real nature of the Wishing Tree. “For him, the Kalpataru was not the pretty magic tree of his uncle’s story—it did not exist to grant the foolish wishes of children—it was unspeakably terrible and grand. It was his father and his mother. Its roots held the world together, and its branches reached beyond the stars. Before the beginning it had been—and would be, always.”

The World—Welcome and Farewell

A ground plan of the world as conceived by Hinduism would look something like this: There would be innumerable galaxies comparable to our own, each centering in an earth from which people wend their ways to God. Ringing each earth would be a number of finer worlds above and coarser ones below, to which souls repair between incarnations according to their just desserts.

“Just as the spider pours forth its thread from itself and takes it back again, even so the universe grows from the Imperishable.” Periodically the thread is withdrawn; the cosmos

collapses into a Night of Brahma, and all phenomenal being is returned to a state of pure potentiality. Thus, like a gigantic accordion, the world swells out and is drawn back in. This oscillation is built into the scheme of things; the universe had no beginning and will have no end. The time frame of Indian cosmology boggles the imagination and may have something to do with the proverbial oriental indifference to haste. The Himalayas, it is said, are made of solid granite. Once every thousand years a bird flies over them with a silk scarf in its beak, brushing their peaks with its scarf. When by this process the Himalayas have been worn away, one day of a cosmic cycle will have elapsed.

When we turn from our world's position in space and time to its moral character, the first point has already been established in the preceding section. It is a just world in which everyone gets what is deserved and creates his or her own future.

The second thing to be said is that it is a middle world. This is so, not only in the sense that it hangs midway between heavens above and hells below. It is also middle in the sense of being middling, a world in which good and evil, pleasure and pain, knowledge and ignorance, interweave in about equal proportions. And this is the way things will remain. All talk of social progress, of cleaning up the world, of creating the kingdom of heaven on earth—in short, all dreams of utopia—are not just doomed to disappointment; they misjudge the world's purpose, which is not to rival paradise but to provide a training ground for the human spirit. The world is the soul's gymnasium, its school and training field. What we do is important; but ultimately, it is important for the discipline it offers our individual character. We delude ourselves if we expect it to change the world

fundamentally. Our work in the world is like bowling in an uphill alley; it can build muscles, but we should not think that our rolls will permanently deposit the balls at the alley's other end. They all roll back eventually, to confront our children if we ourselves have passed on. The world can develop character and prepare people to look beyond it—for these it is admirably suited. But it cannot be perfected. "Said Jesus, blessed be his name, this world is a bridge: pass over, but build no house upon it." It is true to Indian thought that this apocryphal saying, attributed to the poet Kabir, should have originated on her soil.

If we ask about the world's metaphysical status, we shall have to continue the distinction we have watched divide Hinduism on every major issue thus far; namely, the one between the dual and the non-dual points of view. On the conduct of life this distinction divides *jnana yoga* from *bhakti yoga*; on the doctrine of God it divides the personal from the transpersonal view; on the issue of salvation it divides those who anticipate merging with God from those who aspire to God's company in the beatific vision. In cosmology an extension of the same line divides those who regard the world as being from the highest perspective unreal from those who believe it to be real in every sense.

All Hindu religious thought denies that the world of nature is self-existent. It is grounded in God, and if this divine base were removed it would instantly collapse into nothingness. For the dualist the natural world is as real as God is, while of course being infinitely less exalted. God, individual souls, and nature are distinct kinds of beings, none of which can be reduced to the others. Non-dualists, on the other hand, distinguish three modes of consciousness under which the world can appear. The first is hallucination, as when we see pink elephants, or when a straight

stick appears bent under water. Such appearances are corrected by further perceptions, including those of other people. Second, there is the world as it normally appears to the human senses. Finally, there is the world as it appears to *yogis* who have risen to a state of superconsciousness. Strictly speaking, this is no world at all, for here every trait that characterizes the world as normally perceived—its multiplicity and materiality—vanishes. There is but one reality, like a brimming ocean, boundless as the sky, indivisible, absolute. It is like a vast sheet of water, shoreless and calm.

The non-dualist claims that this third perspective is the most accurate of the three. By comparison, the world that normally appears to us is *maya*. The word is often translated “illusion,” but this is misleading. For one thing it suggests that the world need not be taken seriously. This the Hindus deny, pointing out that as long as it appears real and demanding to us we must accept it as such. Moreover, *maya* does have a qualified, provisional reality. Were we asked if dreams are real, our answer would have to be qualified. They are real in the sense that we have them, but they are not real inasmuch as what they depict need not exist objectively. Strictly speaking, a dream is a psychological construct, a mental fabrication. The Hindus have something like this in mind when they speak of *maya*. The world appears as the mind in its normal condition perceives it; but we are not justified in thinking that reality as it is in itself is as it is thus seen. A young child seeing its first movie will mistake the moving pictures for actual objects, unaware that the lion growling from the screen is projected from a booth at the rear of the theater. It is the same with us; the world we see is conditioned, and in that sense projected, by our perceptual mechanisms. To change the metaphor, our sense receptors register only a narrow band of

electromagnetic frequencies. With the help of microscopes and other amplifiers, we can detect some additional wavelengths, but superconsciousness must be cultivated to know reality itself. In that state our receptors would cease to refract, like a prism, the pure light of being into a spectrum of multiplicity. Reality would be known as it actually is: one, infinite, unalloyed.

Maya comes from the same root as magic. In saying the world is *maya*, non-dual Hinduism is saying that there is something tricky about it. The trick lies in the way the world’s materiality and multiplicity pass themselves off as being independently real—real apart from the stance from which we see them—whereas in fact reality is undifferentiated *Brahman* throughout, even as a rope lying in the dust remains a rope while being mistaken for a snake. *Maya* is also seductive in the attractiveness in which it presents the world, trapping us within it and leaving us with no desire to journey on.

But again we must ask, if the world is only provisionally real, will it be taken seriously? Will not responsibility flag? Hinduism thinks not. In a sketch of the ideal society comparable to Plato’s *Republic*, the *Tripura Rahasya* portrays a prince who achieves this outlook on the world and is freed thereby from “the knots of the heart” and “the identification of the flesh with the Self.” The consequences depicted are far from asocial. Thus liberated, the prince performs his royal duties efficiently but dispassionately, “like an actor on the stage.” Following his teachings and example, his subjects attain a comparable freedom and are no longer motivated by their passions, though they still possess them. Worldly affairs continue, but the citizens are relieved of old resentments and are less buffeted by fears and desires. “In their everyday life, laughing, rejoicing, wearied or angered, they

behaved like men intoxicated and indifferent to their own affairs.” Wherefore the sages that visited there called it “the City of Resplendent Wisdom.”

If we ask why Reality, which is in fact one and perfect, is seen by us as many and marred; why the soul, which is really united with God throughout, sees itself for a while as sundered; why the rope appears to be a snake—if we ask these questions we are up against the question that has no answer, any more than the comparable Christian question of why God created the world has an answer. The best we can say is that the world is *lila*, God’s play. Children playing hide and seek assume various roles that have no validity outside the game. They place themselves in jeopardy and in conditions from which they must escape. Why do they do so when in a twinkling they could free themselves by simply stepping out of the game? The only answer is that the game is its own point and reward. It is fun in itself, a spontaneous overflow of creative, imaginative energy. So too in some mysterious way must it be with the world. Like a child playing alone, God is the Cosmic Dancer, whose routine is all creatures and all worlds. From the tireless stream of God’s energy the cosmos flows in endless, graceful reenactment.

Those who have seen images of the goddess Kali dancing on a prostrate body while holding in her hands a sword and a severed head; those who have heard that there are more Hindu temples dedicated to Shiva (whose haunt is the crematorium and is God in his aspect of destroyer) than there are temples to God in the form of creator and preserver combined—those who know these things will not jump quickly to the conclusion that the Hindu worldview is gentle. What they overlook is that what Kali and Shiva destroy is the finite in order to make way for the infinite.

*Because Thou lovest the Burning-ground,
I have made a Burning-ground of my heart—
That Thou, Dark One, hunter of the Burning-ground,
Mayest dance Thy eternal dance. (Bengali hymn)*

Seen in perspective, the world is ultimately benign. It has no permanent hell and threatens no eternal damnation. It may be loved without fear; its winds, its ever-changing skies, its plains and woodlands, even the poisonous splendor of the lascivious orchid—all may be loved provided that they are not dallied over indefinitely. For all is *maya*, *lila*, the spell-binding dance of the cosmic magician, beyond which lies the boundless good, which all will achieve in the end. It is no accident that the only art form India failed to produce was tragedy.

In sum: To the question, “What kind of world do we have?” Hinduism answers:

1. A multiple world that includes innumerable galaxies horizontally, innumerable tiers vertically, and innumerable cycles temporally.
2. A moral world in which the law of *karma* is never suspended.
3. A middling world that will never replace paradise as the spirit’s destination.
4. A world that is *maya*, deceptively tricky in passing off its multiplicity, materiality, and dualities as ultimate when they are actually provisional.
5. A training ground on which people can develop their highest capacities.
6. A world that is *lila*, the play of the Divine in its Cosmic Dance—untiring, unending, resistless, yet ultimately beneficent, with a grace born of infinite vitality.

Many Paths to the Same Summit

That Hinduism has shared her land for centuries with Jains, Buddhists, Parsees, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians may help explain a final idea that comes out more clearly through her than through the other great religions; namely, her conviction that the various major religions are alternate paths to the same goal. To claim salvation as the monopoly of any one religion is like claiming that God can be found in this room but not the next, in this attire but not another. Normally, people will follow the path that rises from the plains of their own civilization; those who circle the mountain, trying to bring others around to their paths, are not climbing. In practice India's sects have often been fanatically intolerant, but in principle most have been open. Early on, the Vedas announced Hinduism's classic contention that the various religions are but different languages through which God speaks to the human heart. "Truth is one; sages call it by different names."

It is possible to climb life's mountain from any side, but when the top is reached the trails converge. At base, in the foothills of theology, ritual, and organizational structure, the religions are distinct. Differences in culture, history, geography, and collective temperament all make for diverse starting points. Far from being deplorable, this is good; it adds richness to the totality of the human venture. Is life not more interesting for the varied contributions of Confucianists, Taoists, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and Christians? "How artistic," writes a contemporary Hindu, "that there should be room for such variety—how rich the texture is, and how much more interesting than if the Almighty had decreed one antiseptically safe, exclusive, orthodox way.

Although he is Unity, God finds, it seems, his recreation in variety!" But beyond these differences, the same goal beckons.

For evidence of this, one of Hinduism's nineteenth-century saints sought God successively through the practices of a number of the world's great religions. In turn he sought God through the person of Christ, the imageless, God-directed teachings of the Koran, and a variety of Hindu God-embodiments. In each instance the result was the same: The same God (he reported) was revealed, now incarnate in Christ, now speaking through the Prophet Muhammad, now in the guise of Vishnu the Preserver or Shiva the Completer. Out of these experiences came a set of teachings on the essential unity of the great religions that comprise Hinduism's finest voice on this topic. As tone is as important as idea here, we shall come closer to the Hindu position if we relinquish the remainder of this section to Ramakrishna's words instead of trying the paraphrase them.

God has made different religions to suit different aspirations, times, and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself. Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with whole-hearted devotion. One may eat a cake with icing either straight or sidewise. It will taste sweet either way.

As one and the same material, water, is called by different names by different peoples, one calling it water, another eau, a third aqua, and another pani, so the one Everlasting-Intelligent-Bliss is invoked by some as God, by some as Allah, by some as Jehovah, and by others as Brahman.

As one can ascend to the top of a house by means of a ladder or a bamboo or a staircase or a rope, so diverse are the ways

and means to approach God, and every religion in the world shows one of these ways.

Bow down and worship where others kneel, for where so many have been paying the tribute of adoration the kind Lord must manifest himself, for he is all mercy.

The Saviour is the messenger of God. He is like the viceroy of a mighty monarch. As when there is some disturbance in a far-off province, the king sends his viceroy to quell it, so wherever there is a decline of religion in any part of the world, God sends his Saviour there. It is one and the same Saviour that, having plunged into the ocean of life, rises up in one place and is known as Krishna, and diving down again rises in another place and is known as Christ.

Everyone should follow one's own religion. A Christian should follow Christianity, a Muslim should follow Islam, and so on. For the Hindus the ancient path, the path of the Aryan sages, is the best.

People partition off their lands by means of boundaries, but no one can partition off the all-embracing sky overhead. The indivisible sky surrounds all and includes all. So people in ignorance say, "My religion is the only one, my religion is the best." But when a heart is illumined by true knowledge, it knows that above all these wars of sects and sectarians presides the one indivisible, eternal, all-knowing bliss.

As a mother, in nursing her sick children, gives rice and curry to one, and sago arrowroot to another, and bread and butter to a third, so the Lord has laid out different paths for different people suitable for their natures.

There was a man who worshipped Shiva but hated all other deities. One day Shiva appeared to him and said, "I shall

never be pleased with you so long as you hate the other gods." But the man was inexorable. After a few days Shiva again appeared to him and said, "I shall never be pleased with you so long as you hate." The man kept silent. After a few days Shiva again appeared to him. This time one side of his body was that of Shiva, and the other side that of Vishnu. The man was half pleased and half displeased. He laid his offerings on the side representing Shiva, and did not offer anything to the side representing Vishnu. Then Shiva said, "Your bigotry is unconquerable. I, by assuming this dual aspect, tried to convince you that all gods and goddesses are but various aspects of the one Absolute Brahman.

[Appendix on Sikhism](#)

Hindus are inclined to regard Sikhs (literally disciples) as somewhat wayward members of their own extended family, but Sikhs reject this reading. They see their faith as having issued from an original divine revelation that inaugurated a new religion.

The revelation was imparted to Guru Nanak, *guru* being popularly explained as a dispeller of ignorance or darkness (*gu*) and bringer of enlightenment (*ru*). Nanak, pious and reflective from his birth in 1469, around the year 1500 mysteriously disappeared while bathing in a river. On reappearing three days later he said: "Since there is neither Hindu nor Muslim, whose path shall I follow? I will follow God's path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim, and the path I follow is God's." His authority for those assertions, he went on to explain, derived from the fact that in his three-day absence he had been taken to God's court, where he was given a cup of nectar (*amrit*, from which Amritsar, Sikhism's holy city, is named) and was told:

This is the cup of the adoration of God's name. Drink it. I am with you. I bless you and raise you up. Whoever remembers you will enjoy my favor. Go, rejoice in my name and teach others to do so also. Let this be your calling.

That Nanak began by distinguishing his path from both Hinduism and Islam underscores the fact that Sikhism arose in a Hindu culture—Nanak was born into the *kshatriya* caste—that was under Muslim domination. Sikhism's homeland is the Punjab, "the land of the five rivers" in northwest India, where Muslim invaders were in firm control. Nanak valued his Hindu heritage while also recognizing the nobility of Islam. Here were two religions, each in itself inspired, but which in collision were exciting hatred and slaughter.

If the two sides had agreed to negotiate their differences, they could hardly have reached a more reasonable theological compromise than the tenets of Sikhism afford. In keeping with Hinduism's *sanatana dharma* (Eternal Truth), the revelation that was imparted to Nanak affirms the ultimacy of a supreme and formless God who is beyond human conceiving. In keeping with the Islamic revelation, however, it rejects the notion of *avatars* (divine incarnations), caste distinctions, images as aids to worship, and the sanctity of the Vedas. Having departed from Hinduism in these respects, however, the Sikh revelation leans back toward it in endorsing, as against Islam, the doctrine of reincarnation.

This relatively even division between Hindu and Muslim doctrines has led outsiders to suspect that in his deep, intuitive mind, if not consciously, Nanak worked out a faith he hoped might resolve the conflict religion had produced in his region. As

for the Sikhs themselves, they acknowledge the conciliatory nature of their faith, but ascribe its origins to God. Only in a secondary sense was Guru Nanak a *guru*. The only True *Guru* is God. Others qualify as *gurus* in proportion as God speaks through them.

The official Sikh *gurus* are ten in number and, beginning with Guru Nanak, the Sikh community took shape through their ministrations. The tenth in this lineage, Guru Gobind Singh, announced that he was the last of this line; following his death the Sacred Text that had taken shape would replace human *gurus* as the head of the Sikh community. Known as the Guru Granth Sahib, or Collection of Sacred Wisdom, this scripture has ever since been revered by the Sikhs as their living *Guru*; it lives in the sense that the will and words of God are alive within it. For the most part it consists of poems and hymns that came to six of the *Gurus* as they meditated on God in the deep stillness of their hearts and emerged to sing joyfully God's praises.

Sikhism has been under heavy assault during much of its history. At a time when the faith was particularly hard pressed, the Tenth *Guru* called for those who were prepared to commit their lives unreservedly to the faith to step forward. To the "beloved five" who responded he gave a special initiation, thereby instituting the *Khalsa*, or Pure Order, which continues to this day. Open to men and women alike who are willing to fulfill its regulations, it requires that those who enter it abstain from alcohol, meat, and tobacco, and that they wear "the five Ks," so-called because in Punjabi all begin with the letter "k." The five are uncut hair, a comb, a sword or dagger, a steel bracelet, and undershorts. Originally, all five of these had protective as well as symbolic sides. Together with the comb, uncut hair (typically gathered in a

turban) shielded the skull while tying in with the *yogic* belief that uncut hair conserves vitality and draws it upward; the comb for its part symbolized cleanliness and good order. The steel bracelet provided a small shield, while at the same time “shackling” its wearer to God as a reminder that hands should always be in God’s service. Undershorts, which replaced the Indian *dhoti*, meant that one was always dressed for action. The dagger, now largely symbolic, was originally needed for self-defense.

At the same time that he instituted the *Khalsa*, Guru Gobind Singh extended his name Singh (literally lion, and by extension stalwart and lionhearted) to all Sikh men, and to women he gave the name Kaur, or princess. The names remain in force for Sikhs, right down to today.

These matters concern religious forms. Centrally, Sikhs seek salvation through union with God by realizing, through love, the Person of God, who dwells in the depths of their own being. Union with God is the ultimate goal. Apart from God life has no meaning; it is separation from God that causes human suffering. In the words of Nanak, “What terrible separation it is to be separated from God and what blissful union to be united with God!”

World renunciation does not figure in this faith. The Sikhs have no tradition of renunciation, asceticism, celibacy, or mendicancy. They are householders who support their families with their earnings and donate one-tenth of their income to charity.

Today there are some 13 million Sikhs in the world, most of them in India. Their headquarters are in the famed Golden Temple, which is located in Amritsar.

[Suggestions for Further Reading](#)

Before turning to books, let me note that my half-hour videotape (with Elda Hartley), titled “India and the Infinite: The Soul of a People,” places the ideas of this chapter in their audio-visual context. It can be purchased or rented from Hartley Film Foundation, Cat Rock Road, Cos Cob, CT 06807.

David Kinsley’s *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982) provides a clear overview of Hinduism. It grounds it in its geographical setting, outlines its historical development, and calls attention to the tremendous variety this religion includes.

Heinrich Zimmer’s *The Philosophies of India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969) and Swami Prabhavananda’s *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1980) develop at greater length the philosophical and religious dimension of Hinduism that my chapter focuses on.

Diana Eck’s *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1985) provides a graphic sense of Hindu devotion.

The Hindu scriptures are of enormous scope, but two portions are of universal import. The *Bhagavad-Gita* now belongs to the world, and Barbara Stoler Miller’s translation (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) is eminently serviceable. The Upanishads require more interpretation, and Swami Nikhilananda’s four-volume translation of the principal ones, with running commentary (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1975–79), can be recommended. For a one-volume edition of the

Upanishads, without commentary but with a helpful introduction, see the translation by Juan Mascaro (New York: Penguin Books, 1965).

On Sikhism *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* by W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1986), and the chapter on “The Faith of the Sikhs” in John Koller’s *The Indian Way* (New York: Macmillan, 1982) are recommended.

Huston Smith

From *The World’s Religions*

