

# ESSENTIALS OF HINDUISM

by

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*Transcription*

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## Lesson 4: Devotional Movement

Our next lecture begins by kind of completing this discussion of popular Hinduism. In the full lectures, we actually have quite a bit of time to discuss Hindu philosophy and the philosophical branch of Hinduism. We also spend time on the popular side. We try to give through this a good feel for both the philosophical and popular Hinduism.

I want to at least allude to four of the key sayings present in the bhakti movement, or the devotional movement, because at this point we have only discussed the iconography of gods and goddesses. We talked about people reading the great epics and learning the epical stories that are found in India. I mentioned the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the part of Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita.

Actually, there are other kinds of important things that have made the bhakti movement so particular and interesting, especially from a Christian perspective; because one of the things we know, when you really look at Hindu philosophy, is that God seems so removed, so distant from human experience and human reflection. After all, if you are really stuck with this Nirguna/Saguna distinction – God with qualities, God without qualities - and the highest expression is God without qualities, then you can say nothing definitively about God. This leaves a gray, empty chasm in the lives of Hindus who desire desperately a personal relationship with God. This is all met in a certain way by the popular bhakti movements in India.

### PERSONAL ASPECTS OF WORSHIP

Let me just review for you briefly. Again, the full lecture will cover this in more detail. The four key things found in the bhakti movement: The first theme is the great emphasis on the personal and popular aspects of worship over the impersonal and kind of anthological emphasis that you find in the philosophical writings. What happens in the bhakti movement, the devotional movement, is that they go back and re-read the Upanishads; and they reject the distinction between Nirguna and Saguna Brahmin. They revisit the whole Upanishads, assuming that God is personal and God is distinct from his creation. They tend to be much more against the superiority of the Brahmins. You have emphasis on the eminence of God rather than just the transcendence of God. The result is that they re-read the Upanishads from the perspective of their own traditions. These are mostly Dalits and Sudras, people that are on the lower end of the social spectrum. Then they have produced, in addition to the main epical stories of India and the Vedic texts of the Upanishads, their own literature known as the Puranic literature. The word “purana” just means old or ancient literature. In this literature, you find again, a reinforcement of the first theme of the personal and popular, over the anthological and personal. There is a deep expression of sorrow over sin that you have not found in much of the later material in Hinduism. You find this complete surrender to God, desire to be in union with God.

## DEVOTION OVER KNOWLEDGE

The second major theme present in bhaktism is the whole relative position of devotion over knowledge, or even ritual or caste. In India, you will find in general there is a lot of discussion throughout Indian history over the relationship of devotion, to works, to knowledge. You remember when we looked at the overall scheme of Hinduism, we saw that Hinduism involves three major branches, or three major ways in which people become liberated from the wheel of samsara: the way of knowledge, the way of works and the way of devotion. In the Indian writings, obviously these different groups, in all different ways, will insist that their way or path is the ultimate answer to the problem of human suffering.

For example, if you talk to somebody in the philosophical camp, in the way of knowledge, jnana marga, and you ask them about the role of devotion or the role of works, they would say devotion or works are important, but they are only good in so far as related to proper knowledge. Knowledge trumps out devotion and works. On the other hand, if you talk to someone in the devotional movement, in the bhakti movement, they will say that knowledge is good and works are good, but they must both lead to proper devotion and worship.

Because of the different perspective – in the works path, marga, people say everything must lead to proper action - you can see how these three themes of knowledge, works or actions, and devotion are constantly in tension with each other within Hinduism. Whenever a group, such as in this case the bhakti movement, wants to emphasize the role of devotion; then not only will they have their own re-reading of the Upanishads and all of that; but they will also produce their own literature. We saw this with Puranic literature, this old literature, where they have some of their own emphases, and this is also coming out in a whole other range of devotional literature that has emerged out of the bhakti movement.

Take for example, the devotion to Krishna. Krishna is one of the most widely worshiped gods in terms of personal devotion of any god in India. You have the Bhagavad-gita, which is the classic text of the Mahabharata, but it has been removed in the case of the followers of Krishna, they removed Bhagavad-gita from the larger Mahabharata context and they will read the Bhagavad-gita by itself. This is how you mostly encounter Bhagavad-gita in the western world.

You will see they have written supplements to the Mahabharata, such as the Harivamsha which refers to that collection of stories about Krishna, where he plays childish pranks, etc. In the Gita Govinda, the famous 12th century Sanskrit lyrical poem they use the love of Radha and Krishna to develop all kinds of examples of devotion to God, and the whole relationship of a man and a woman is compared to the relationship to God and humanity. It is quite a remarkable bit of literature if you take time to look at it. But the main point is that all of this literature emphasizes the role of devotion over knowledge or caste.

## ECSTATIC RESPONSE

The third major theme in the bhakti movement after this personal, popular over anthological and personal, and also the role of devotion over knowledge; thirdly there is this ecstatic response to the personal deity. The chronicle literature and the other writings of the bhakti movement emphasize very much the role of ecstatic response to God. People work themselves into a frenzy and they believe they will actually enter into a personal relationship and a mystical union. They believe that you not only have this ecstatic response in the presence of God, but they believe that you can enter into a mystical union with Krishna or with another personal deity. You have again, more Puranic writings including one called the bhagavata purana, which gives the adventures of Krishna and his devotion to the gopis and all of this, that show you how these gopis, especially Radha, are engaged in ecstatic response to Krishna.

## SIMPLICITY

The fourth and final theme in the bhakti movement is the term, "simplicity." The bhakti movement is something that is very simple to follow. It does not involve a lot of complicated theology. It is simply a matter of showing your devotion or adoration to God in practical ways. This is normally done through taking coconuts or milk and bringing them into the presence of the deity. It is done in a very simple way. They believe in the concept of "mana." Mana means receiving power through touching or coming into contact with a deity via the icon. Just simply a matter of going into the temple and touching the icon or the idol, is considered to be very, very powerful and helpful. This is an act known as "puja". In the full lectures, we actually go into a whole lecture on puja and what actually happens, what it means, etc. Essentially this involves coming and performing the act of worship in the presence of the idol or icon. It usually involves putting water or rice or flowers or coconuts in the presence of a God and usually you will bring food which you sacrifice in the presence of the deity. That food is set aside just for the deity, it is called "prasad." Many Hindus will then take prasad and take it to their friends to eat and share with. This is where we have, as we find in the Bible, the "food sacrificed to idols" motif, which is still very much alive and well in India. Those are some of the key elements of the bhakti movement, key themes, which I believe will be helpful in understanding how practical Hinduism actually works.

Another part of modern Hinduism which is important to understand talks a lot about the presence of deities and iconography and kind of the practical worship within Indian society of their various gods and goddesses. We should also mention a couple of other aspects that have gripped the popular imagination all through Indian history, especially in the last two hundred years is the rise of gurus. A guru is a spiritual teacher of India that believes that by gathering a following of people together, they can impart some knowledge to help people to achieve enlightenment. These gurus are very famous. Some of them are people who have already died, but continue to be followed very devotedly by their devotees. Krishna is an example of this. There are many others that have come up in modern day India that are very, very popular and very important. I think that once you get into India, you will find that these are very, very widely held.

There is one named Yogananda who came to Boston himself in 1920 to speak at the International Congress of Religious Liberals. He began to spread the knowledge of Hinduism to the West and he gathered a great following of westerners to Hinduism.

Another very popular guru in India today is one named Sai Baba. It is a very popular Hindu guru who claims to have divine healing powers. He has a huge following in India and around the world. I will never forget being in Dehradun one time and I walked into a clothing store and there was a man there selling clothes. He was wearing around his neck a picture of Sai Baba, one of those small medallions. I asked him, "Why do you have Sai Baba around your neck?" He said, "Because he is God." I said, "How do you know that Sai Baba is God?" He said, "Because I met him in Bangalore and I am convinced that he has great healing powers." He had become a devotee of Sai Baba. Other famous gurus are around India and it is something you should be aware of. We spend more time discussing this also in the full lectures.

Another important aspect of modern day Hinduism, kind of on the ground, is not only found in the popular gods and goddesses located in the various temples and various places of worship in India; but also the way popular Hinduism has wed itself to major festivals in Indian life. The Indian calendar is marked by a number of major festivals which bring everyone together and reinforce the images and the stories, the metaphors and the epics in India.

I want to mention a few of these very important festivals. If you see this happening in India, you will know what we are talking about. One is "Lohri." This is a festival which symbolizes the casting out of evil and invoking blessings for the New Year, so this is the beginning of the year. You will find people throwing popcorn and peanuts and sometimes candles into the fire. This becomes something they will identify that they do in Lohri, just the way people here shoot off fireworks or sing Auld Lang Syne or something like that.

The second major holiday that occurs in the springtime, February and March our time, is "Holi." Holi celebrates the death of winter and the return of spring. In north India, this is associated with Krishna, who in particularly one of their stories, even as an infant killed a demon who once served the king of winter. It is considered to be again, a great way to reinforce the death of winter. Across India it is often identified with new birth and therefore sexual love. Spring has come back; winter is over and so it involves celebrating the reminder of rebirth. Again, practically in India you will find that people will get plastic squirt guns and they will spray each other with colored liquid. You will see someone with a blue face or paint type stuff all over their clothing. This is called, "the exchange of colors." Again, this reflects the death of winter and coming of the spring colors, new life, etc. You will see kids running around the street, squirting each other with these colored liquids.

Another holiday you should know about, the third one, is the Nag Panchami. This occurs usually in July or August. It celebrates snakes. The word "naga" means "snake." It is extremely strong in the villages. You will find snake handlers everywhere. You will

find people wearing snakes on their necks like Shiva does. You will see people pouring milk into holes in the ground, they believe the snake will come and drink the milk. You cannot miss it if you are there during the naga festival.

Another one in August or September is called "Janmashtami." It celebrates Krishna's birthday. You will find that, especially the Krishnavites will fast all day long, all of the way until midnight and they will put on plays celebrating Krishna's birth. They will tell stories about Krishna's life. You will see people with big pots of milk and curd and butter, all of that. Krishna, again, is part of the epic. It is a very, very popular festival in India.

Another one is Ganesh Chaturthi. Ganesh Chaturthi is the celebration of Ganesh's life, the name of the epic. The name of the festival implies it happens at the end of summer, usually particularly in west and south India. They will sell thousands of images of the lovable Ganesh; the people love and carry around. You will see thousands of clay idols of Ganesh appearing in the market place, with the elephant head and all of that. You will see Ganesh being celebrated during the end of the summer.

In the fall, September and October you will find what is called "Durga Puja" which is the goddess worship. They will re-enact "Durga's" triumph over evil. They actually will build huge effigies of Ravana, the famous demon king. They will light it and burn it all the way to the ground; mass effigies, sometimes 20 or 30 feet high. It is quite a remarkable part of this festival.

Another well-known festival is known as "Diwali," Diwali is known as the festival of lights. It occurs in November or the end of the monsoon season. It celebrates the return of Rama after his exile. You will find this also associated with Lakshmi goddess of wealth, as well as Kali. Generally, at this particular time is when people will get married. There will be hundreds of weddings that take place during the Diwali period. At the festival of lights people will light lamps in their homes. People will normally clean out their houses during Diwali. It is a tradition to get a fresh start in your home. There are various things you will see identified with Diwali.

There is the Maha Shivaratri which is the great Shiva austerity. This is a day of fasting and a night of keeping vigil to earn the merit of Shiva. This is followed by a great festival of eating and celebration. You will see pilgrims traveling to dip in the Ganges. You will see Shiva lingams sold everywhere in the shops; and that takes place at the Maha Shivaratri.

Every 12 years there is a "Kumbh Mela" which is a great festival where they will go and dip in the Ganges River. There are certain points on the river that are important. They actually will rotate every three years; so even though any one of the major sites is only every 12 years, there will be one site available every three years to go on pilgrimage to the Ganges River. These are very auspicious times. They believe that by dipping in the river you can achieve moksha, or salvation. You will see great masses of pilgrims

traveling along the roads, often carrying small buckets to bring water back from the Ganges River, or colorful poles over their shoulders, on their way to festival. These are very regular sights in India. I teach in a school in north India, which is very, very close to a major pilgrimages site known as "Haridwar." It is not unusual at all to see hundreds and thousands of pilgrims traveling down the road to these pilgrimage sites.

This concludes the major overview of Hinduism. We have not actually talked in these summary lectures about a lot of specifics about Hindu philosophy. You will find in the main, full lectures, a full lecture on the philosophy and theology of the famous Hindu philosopher, Shankara as well as the Hindu philosopher Ramanuja. These are two of the most famous Hindu philosophers in the history of India. Shankara and Ramanuja correspond to Plato and Aristotle in the western tradition. They are that famous, that well known and their philosophy is quite profound. If you would like to learn more about Shankara and Ramanuja, then you should listen to the full lectures that are on Shankara and Ramanuja in the main course.