

THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE HINDU COSMOLOGICAL VISION: An introductory Glossary

1. The nature of Existence: *Brahman* and *Samsara*

<i>Brahman, Bhagwan, Paramatama, Sat, Sach</i> and many other terms	The unqualified source of all existence
<i>Nirguna</i> – without qualities: <i>Saguna</i> – with qualities:	the central characteristic of unmanifest Brahman. the central characteristic of the existent world
<i>Om Shabad</i>	the sound through which the unmanifest manifests itself divine song, music, verse
<i>Prakriti Purusha</i>	spirit the form within which <i>prakriti</i> manifests itself
<i>Atma</i> – spirit <i>Samsara</i> – existence, the Cosmos <i>Shakti</i> – power	the life-source at the heart of every existent being. the endless cycle of becoming, i.e. the manifest Universe the energy which articulates and hence provides the underlying dynamic for the endless cycle of <i>samsara</i>

2. The Three *Gunas*

<i>Rajas</i>	The principle of creation, of growth, and of becoming
<i>Sattva</i>	The principle of stabilisation, of order, and of holding things together.
<i>Tamas</i>	The principle of re-creation, and hence of the destruction which inevitably leads to rebirth.

3. Relationships between the Major Deities in the Hindu Trinity

Male format	Female format	Guna	Area of Influence
Brahma	Saraswati	<i>Rajas</i>	Intellectual creativity
Vishnu (and many <i>avtars</i>)	Lakshmi	<i>Sattva</i>	Royal power, wealth
Shiva	Devi, Durga, Parvati etc	<i>Tamas</i>	Life and death Spiritual awareness

4. The structure of the existent world

<i>Dharma</i>	<i>Law, order and morality:</i> the rules and structures which underpin the operation of all aspects of the existent and therefore intrinsically <i>samsaric</i> , universe.
<i>Maya</i>	<i>Illusion:</i> the mistaken assumption that the existent world of <i>samsara</i> is fixed and static, rather than transitory and therefore necessarily impermanent.
<i>Juni</i>	<i>Birth-category or species:</i> the <i>samsaric</i> slot occupied by an <i>atma</i> in the course of any given incarnation; whilst there are an infinite number of <i>atmas</i> in the Universe, they are a total of 84 <i>lakh</i> (8,400,000) <i>juni</i> between which these <i>atmas</i> continuously circulate.

<i>Swadharna</i>	<i>Own-dharma</i> : the specific set of moral duties which the occupant of any given <i>juni</i> is expected to fulfil, given its particular location in the cosmic order.
<i>Karma</i>	<i>The Fruits of Action</i> : the process by which each <i>atma</i> is allocated to a specific <i>juni</i> at each rebirth. Good <i>karma</i> , acquired by conformity to one's pre-ordained <i>swadharna</i> , leads to birth in a superior <i>juni</i> ; bad <i>karma</i> , the outcome of a failure to conform, has the opposite effect. Since <i>karma</i> has a cumulative effect, both good and bad <i>karma</i> will still impact on a being's experiences many existences beyond the one in which they were incurred. However <i>karmic</i> theory is much more frequently invoked to explain unexpected misfortune in the here and now than as means of gaining a superior future rebirth.

5. Basic Forms Of Non-Transcendental Worship

5.1. *Worship without an image as a focus: the fire sacrifice*

<i>Hawan</i> (Sanskrit <i>yajna</i>)	Ritual whose centrepiece is an offering of ghee to a sacrificial fire.
<i>Purohit</i>	Priestly officiant, invariably a Brahmin, who oversees the performance of <i>hawan</i> .
<i>Jajman</i> (Skt. <i>yajamana</i>)	"He who causes sacrifices to be performed", the sponsor of the sacrifice who, in company with his wife, makes the offering to the fire.
<i>Samskara</i>	Rite of passage (especially at birth, marriage and death) at which <i>hawan</i> is performed.

5.2. *Worship with an image as a focus: Puja*

<i>Murti</i>	An image, or perhaps better still the icon, of a deity
<i>Mandir</i>	Any place which houses an image (or more usually images) of deities
<i>Puja</i>	Any ritual at which offerings are made to the image of a deity.
<i>Pujari</i>	Priestly officiant – often but by no means always a Brahmin – who supervises the presentation of offerings to a deity.
<i>Prasadam</i>	Offerings which have been made to – and “consumed by” – the deity before being returned for consumption by subsequent devotees.
<i>Darshan</i>	“Sight” – the making of eye-contact between a manifestation of the divine and a devotee
<i>Bhakti</i>	Comprehensive devotion to a manifestation of the divine, such that – at the extreme – lover and beloved combine in ecstatic union
<i>Bhajan</i>	A collective gathering where devotees participate in – and aim to get carried away by – songs of praise focussed on a particular deity.

6. Moksha: the quest for transcendence

Moksha, Mukhti ‘Liberation’ – or in other words condition achieved when an individual being's *atma* is comprehensively reunited with the universal *Paramatma*, so bringing its further participation in the endless cycle of *samsara* to an end.

However the Hindu tradition sustains a range of different visions of exactly what the condition of *moksha* entails, depending – amongst other things – on one's understanding of the status of the existent world vis-à-vis its Source. On this score two positions are of particular significance.

- a) the strictly non-dualist, and highly intellectual *advaitin* perspective, which holds that only Brahman is real, and that *samsara* is comprehensively illusory. Within this scheme *moksha* is understood to entail the wholesale extinction of one's personal *atma* in the qualityless essence from which existence sprang.
- b) the much more popular qualified non-dualist *vishistadvaitin* (or *tantric*) perspective, which holds that the manifest and unmanifest dimensions of the cosmic Whole are intrinsically complementary to one another. Hence whilst those without insight may be beguiled into mistaken understanding of the significance of *samsara*, and so caught up in its *maya*, spiritual adepts seek to pierce the veil of *maya* in an effort to gain an ever-deeper awareness of the necessary complementarity of Brahman and *samsara*, of *Paramatma* and *atma*, and of *prakriti* and *purusha*.

A range of techniques have been developed as means of realising *moksha* in this sense. These fall into two main categories:

i) The path of Yoga:

Yoga The exercise of discipline – and hence systematic control – over both one's body and mind

Yogi, Sadhu, Sannyassi or Bairagi A person who uses yogic discipline wholly to detach him- (and much more rarely) herself from the everyday social order in pursuit of *moksha*.

Samadhi The point – in both time and space – where a being has achieved *moksha*.

Jiwan-mukhti The condition of 'realisation whilst still inhabiting one's body' experienced by those who have achieved *moksha*

Tapas Extreme forms of austerity associated with intense yogic discipline

Siddhi Occult power over cosmic processes achieved as a result of practising yogic austerities, and possessed in abundance by those enjoying *Jiwan-mukhti*

ii) The path of *bhakti*

In contrast to the *yogi*, whose path requires him to step right outside the social order in pursuit of his objective, those who follow the path of *bhakti* seek to achieve to eliminate the distinction between their personal selves and the Ultimate by devotional, and hence non-renunciatory, means.

To this end those who follow this path build on vision of the manifest and its unmanifest Essence as gendered partners, and hence as divine lovers, and hence seek to think their way into being such a passionately committed devotee that all distinctions between themselves and the object of their devotion (i.e. the Lord) disappear – so enabling them to experience *moksha*.

Most followers of this path focus their attention on a *murti*, a concrete manifestation of the Divine essence. However in contrast to this strategy of *saguna bhakti*, where the Ultimate is understood in a with-qualities format, the path of *nirguna bhakti* has long been popular in northern India.

In a final twist in the whole procedure *viraha bhakti* – the *bhakti* of pain-in-separation – also enjoys immense popularity. Here whilst the devotee draws intense inspiration in having occasionally pierced the veil of *maya* to experience union with the Beloved, he (or she) is nevertheless faced with the intense but exquisite pain of *viraha* which arises from their everyday experience of *samsaric* life in which they are necessarily separated from the object of their devotions.

7. The homology of microcosm and macrocosm

One of the most central assumptions of the Hindu tradition is that the macrocosm, the entire Universe, and all its component systems and sub-systems (including the human body as the microcosm) are structured in the same way, and operate according to the same principles. If what is true at one level is therefore equally true of every other, it follows that an awareness of those homologies provides a particularly effective means of gaining a transcendental awareness that we are everything and everything is us. Hence the central objective of most forms of Hindu practice is to participate – in varying ways and with varying degrees of insight – in a realisation of that Truth.

Hence the idea of a *tirath* – a place where many different systems can be experienced as congruent with one another, thus providing a “crossing point” between the manifest Universe and its unmanifest Essence – is of particular importance in the Hindu tradition. *Tiraths* are invariably pilgrimage centres, and one of the most important of these is Kashi, the holy city of Benares on the banks of the River Ganges. All the ideas and practices discussed in this course can be observed there. To explore the details try reading Jonathan Parry *Death in Benares* and/or Diana Eck *Benares: City of Light*

But despite its importance, Kashi is ultimately only one *tirath* amongst many; and since one’s own personal microcosm has, by definition, a structure which is wholly congruent with the Universal macrocosm, it follows that pilgrimages to a physical *tirath* – and hence external ritual and religious practices of all kinds – are ultimately a diversion. The closest and most illuminating *tirath* of all lies at the heart of every microcosmic being, and most especially ourselves.

So it is that from a Hindu perspective the *maya* which is an inescapable consequence of our participation in *samsara* simultaneously veils and substantiates the most crucial truth of all: that *atman and Brahman are one and the same*. Hence the Sanskrit aphorism *tat tvam assi*, ‘that art thou’ highlights of the core understandings of the Hindu philosophical tradition.

However there is no single position which can in any way be identified as ‘orthodox’. Given the complex character of the Hindu cosmological vision, the immense variety of different ways in which its implications can be read, and the on-going development of new readings, interpretations and understandings of its gnostic consequences, no single form of ‘Hinduism’ can be – or ever could be – identified as unambiguously correct. Hence whilst all Hindus may operate within the context of a shared cosmological vision, as it manifests itself in practice the Hindu tradition is – and always has been – profoundly polymorphous.

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