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### The Basic Beliefs of Hinduism and Buddhism

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THE BASIC BELIEFS OF HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

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Dr. Vester Wolber  
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## THE BASIC BELIEFS OF HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

In the world today there are approximately three billion people, who belong to 11 major religions. Nearly all belong to the religion and denomination into which they were born, and accept it naturally, and are loyal to it as they are loyal to their nationality.

Religion so exists for many men. "They have been born into a culture, and it is unthinkable that religion can be anything but part of their being."<sup>1</sup>

As far as can be determined, religion has existed in every society. The more we learn about the days of man on earth, the more evidence there is that all societies have one thing in common--some form of religion.

Men everywhere have established codes of behavior which differ from one another in practice, though they are often similar in theory. Commandments were formulated to keep the believers in harmony with, and dedicated to, their basic concepts of life's purpose.

The basic beliefs of two great religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, will be briefly examined in this paper.

### Hinduism

Hinduism is the national form of religion in India. It began sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C. The term Hinduism was

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<sup>1</sup>Harold Watts, The Modern Reader's Guide to Religions (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1964), p. 37.

first used under the foreign domination of the Mohammedans to mean unconverted native Indians. Only in recent literature have the Indians themselves begun to designate their religious affiliation as Hinduism. "In the course of 800 years the present Hindu system has spread from a small region in Northern India to an area comprising over 200 million people."<sup>2</sup>

### The Hindu "Bible"--The Vedas

Hinduism, like most other religions, has a holy book, the Vedas. It is a collection of hymns, prayers, and formulae. There are four collections of Vedas. The most important of these is the Rig Veda, which would occupy a book of about 600 pages. It contains hymns addressed to the various gods, yet their names are hardly mentioned. The gods of the Vedas are functional and hero gods similar to those of Homer.

The following is an excerpt taken from the Vedas:

#### Expiation for the Irregular Appearance of the First Pair of Teeth

These two teeth, the tigers, that have broken forth eager  
to devour father and mother, do thou, O Brahmanaspati  
Jatavedas render auspicious!

Do ye eat rice; eat barley; and eat, too, beans, as well  
as seasamum! That, O teeth, is the share deposited  
for your enrichment. Do not injure your father and  
mother!

Since ye have been invoked, O teeth, be ye in unison kind  
and propitious! Elsewhere, O teeth, shall pass away the  
fierce qualities of your body! Do not injure father  
and mother!

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<sup>2</sup>Max Weber, The Religion of India (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958), p. 4.

The major constituent parts of the Vedas were originally orally transmitted. After their transcription by different schools of Brahmans, they continued in accordance with ancient correct practice to be withheld as the Bible is withheld from the laity in the Catholic Church. The leaders were able to impart knowledge of only certain sections of the Vedas and that only to laymen of the highest castes.

### Caste

Caste, the ritual, rights and duties it gives and imposes and the position of the Brahmans is the fundamental institution of Hinduism--without caste there is no Hindu. Caste is essentially hereditary. It is perhaps impossible to determine the rank order of the castes. It is contested and subject to change.

Traditionally, however, at the top of this hierarchy are found the three free classes--the Brahmans, who exercise spiritual power, the Kshatriyas, who wield secular power, and the Vashiyas, who represent the economic aspect. These three classes comprise the twice-born who obtain a second birth. Apart from these three are the Sudras, somewhat like serfs, who nevertheless maintain certain rights. All these classes are diversified by their privileges.

The Brahmans are the priests and philosophers dedicated to the study of the sacred books, and they are supported by the State or other castes. They are vegetarians and wear the sacred thread that is a symbol of their status. All other castes must do honor to them and even the royal or ruling family must show them the greatest respect. Originally, their activities consisted of sacrifice and instruction. They accepted only gifts--not pay. The giving for the use of the services was a ritualistic duty. Sacrifice without gifts brought evil enchantment.

Kshatriyas were kings, subkings and in the lowest stratum, village notables with special economic privilege. Their function was to protect the population politically and militarily. They were liable for damage done to their subjects. The ancient Kshatriyas rivaled the Brahmans in education.

"The present castes recognized as having more or less undisputed Kshatriya rank are quite mixed in character and bear the traces of historical change which Hinduism has undergone."<sup>3</sup> Today Kshatriyas engage in all manner of governmental and legal activities and professions. They have prescribed religious duties to perform. They represent the upper middle class of Indian society.

The Vaishya caste ministers to the material needs of their fellow countrymen. They are merchants, farmers and industrialists. "While below the other twice-born castes, they are above the rest of the population in distinction and privileges."<sup>4</sup>

The duty of the Sudras is to serve the rest of the people as workmen, artisans, farm laborers, servants, and gardeners. They are not permitted to study the Vedas and are excluded from many religious duties or participation in rituals.

The caste system has become divided and subdivided until there are many castes. There are a group who do not belong to any caste. These people are known as "untouchables" because contact with them is supposed to pollute and degrade any caste member. It is believed that these people were the offspring of forbidden marriages or children of illicit unions.

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<sup>3</sup>John Noss, Man's Religions (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 207.

<sup>4</sup>Weber, op. cit., p. 86.

Among the Hindu castes, not only is inter-marriage between castes absolutely shunned but marriage between a girl of higher caste and a lower caste man is considered an offense against the status of the girl's family. However, to have a wife of lower caste is not considered an offense.

The caste system has been held responsible for social stagnation--excessive nonviolence and certain deplorable customs as the burning of widows in past time and child marriage which is still sometimes practiced.

Today, the Hindu caste order is profoundly shaken. Many norms throughout the country have practically lost their force. "For the time being, however, the caste structure stands quite firmly."<sup>5</sup>

### Hindu Worship

No temples or idols existed in ancient time, but there was a body of paid priests. Eventually the cult of the idol developed. To fashion the idol of a god, to install it in the sanctuary, to treat it as "animated," and to anoint it all became major rites.

Worship is performed three times a day and is accompanied by offerings. Morning worship for the Hindu is performed sitting facing east. Water is sipped and sprinkled around the body, the breath is controlled, and the deity is invoked by touching the limbs in different spots.

Most houses have a room or corner for worship where there is an image or symbol of the deity. There are often brightly coloured pictures which illustrate some episode in the myths of the gods. The stone or image is anointed while texts are recited and then the worshipper sits in front in meditation.

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<sup>5</sup>Geoffrey Parrinder, The Faiths of Mankind (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1965), p. 279.

Worship is performed again at midday and once more in the evening in a shortened form. The sacred stone receives offerings again and at night is undressed and put to sleep.

Prayer consists of the silent recitation of sacred formulae, which are repeated indefinitely. Other elements of personal worship are study of the scriptures and meditation, which are strengthened by Yoga exercises. These Yoga exercises are a physical discipline necessary to gain complete concentration for the effort to identify with the Absolute. "The Yoga system is fundamentally a system of body and mind control with the aim of complete liberation from illusion."<sup>6</sup> There are various kinds of Yoga and various stages of development in all of them. "After complete physical control comes control of the emotions and moral purity which makes possible total concentration."<sup>7</sup>

More elaborate ceremonies are held in memory of ancestors. Agricultural, collective and commemorative rites are numerous. Among the collective celebrations are the feasts and festivals, such as the worship of the goddess Durga which lasts for nine days in October and the Festival of Lights which occurs about the same time.

"The worship of the cow in the past had extensive economic ritualistic implications. Even today the animals must not die an unnatural death and hence are fed although their use value is long gone."<sup>8</sup> Cow manure and urine are believed to be purifying. To this day a correct

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<sup>6</sup>Max Weber, The Religion of India (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958), p. 195.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>8</sup>Harold Watts, The Modern Reader's Guide to Religions (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1964), p. 83.



Hindu who has dined with a European will disinfect himself by use of cow manure. No correct Hindu will bypass a urinating cow without putting his hand into the stream and wetting his forehead, garments, etc. with it as does the Catholic with holy water.

### Rebirth or Transmigration of Souls

All Hindus accept two basic principles, the transmigration of souls and the related doctrine of compensation. A soul is deathless and is reincarnated generation after generation carrying forward compensation or punishment.

The merits and faults of the individual form sort of a "ledger of accounts." The balance of this ledger determines the fate of the soul at rebirth. "Rebirth can drag a man down into the life of a worm in the intestine of a dog, but according to his conduct it might raise him into the womb of a queen and Brahman's daughter."<sup>9</sup>

Originally, however, the departed soul was as little viewed as "immortal" in India as elsewhere. The death sacrifice was intended to put the soul at rest, but when the Brahmans began to speculate about their fate there gradually appeared the teaching of a second death.

In general, both heaven and hell play a secondary role in Indian thought. Hell can be avoided by speaking a certain formula in the hour of death. There is, however, no sort of ritual means and no deed which would allow one to escape rebirth and second death.

There are apparently three exclusive ends in the beyond--rebirth to a new temporary life on earth in circumstances at least as fortunate

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<sup>9</sup>Weber, op. cit., p. 120.

as the present ones, unlimited admission to the blissful presence of a god, and cessation of individual existence and emergence of the soul.

#### Four Stages of Life Concept

The individual life of a caste Hindu follows a fixed course. The first stage of discipleship is a preparation for the other three. The child and the young man are students of a master, a guru. With that master the young person lives as long as needful, serving him and learning many things. In early maturity a man becomes a householder--a good husband and a father. Then later, after he has fulfilled his social function he is free to retire to solitude and meditation. Finally in old age he can renounce all kinds of settled life and go forth as a wanderer.

This is Hinduism as it presents its ancient religious idealism to the world today.

#### Buddhism

Buddhism, the first universalist religion--the religion that was for all, the religion in which neither caste or color was a barrier--was founded by man called Gautama who was born in the present-day Nepal territory.

The Buddha, as he was later called, was born in or about 543 B.C. "His life has been romanticized in folklore, but most modern studies usually try to distinguish humanistic aspects from legend."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Richard Gard, Buddhism (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1961), p. 11.

### Historical Development of Buddhism

Gautama was the son of a chieftan and spent his early years in his father's court receiving education in many areas. He later married and had a son. Shortly after his son's birth, Gautama's sensitive soul began to be oppressed by the problems of life here and the unending series of transmigrations. "He became aware of the sorrows of mankind and sought to learn the meaning of their lives and how they might find salvation from the recurring cycles of re-incarnation."<sup>11</sup>

He left his ancestral home, much to the dismay of his father who had hoped his son would become the emperor of all India. He set out to find the remedy for the ills of existence. "His flight from the house of his parents into solitude, 'the great renunciation,' is considered by the Buddhists as the time of the founding of Buddhism."<sup>12</sup>

Buddha wandered about from place to place for six years. He visited monasteries and talked with monks, but he could find no answer. He tried philosophic meditation and bodily asceticism. Neither yielded results. But he did not give up the struggle.

One day he sat down under a wild fig tree and vowed not to move from that spot until he found the wisdom he was seeking. "There he entered upon a process of meditation that was to affect the thinking of million of men after him."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Joseph Gaer, What The Great Religions Believe (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1963), p. 279.

<sup>12</sup>W. E. Soothill, The Three Religions of China (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 68.

<sup>13</sup>John Noss, Man's Religions (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 320.

Suddenly the answer came. The stumbling-block to his own salvation and the cause of all human misery was desire. The Buddha remained under this tree for seven days preparing to communicate to others his saving truth.

Then the Gautama traveled to the city of Benares. There he gathered around him a number of monks and preached to them his first sermon--forever remembered as The Sermon at Benares. From that day on he was known as Buddha, which means The Awakened or The Enlightened.

#### The Rules and Schedules of the Buddhist Order

In a very natural way arose the great Order of Buddha, governed by definite rules and schedules. "The essential rules, perhaps developed after Buddha's time, were simple: the wearing of the yellow robe, the adoption of the shaven head, the carrying of the begging bowl, and the habit of daily meditation."<sup>14</sup> All members were also subject to the ten commandments laid down by the Buddha:

1. Do not destroy life.
2. Do not steal.
3. Do not commit adultery.
4. Do not lie or deceive.
5. Do not drink intoxicants.
6. Eat moderately and not after noon.
7. Do not wear garlands or use perfumes.
8. Do not use high or broad beds.
9. Do not look on at dancing, singing, or music.
10. Do not accept gold or silver.

The first five of the commandments were for all of his followers and were known as the Five Precepts. The Buddha recognized that there were those who for one reason or another could not give up the household life but who were so sympathetic with the ideals of the Order that

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<sup>14</sup> Francis Wei, The Spirit of Chinese Culture (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), p. 102.

they should be brought into active association with it. "He therefore made provision for them, on the condition that they undertook to obey the Five Precepts, and evinced the spirit of helpfulness in promoting the growth and progress of the Order."<sup>15</sup>

### The Teachings of Buddha

Buddhism is a "salvation religion." It is absolutely indifferent as to the question of whether there are "gods" and how they exist, although Buddha did believe the universe abounded in impermanent gods. Buddhism's salvation is a solely personal act of the single individual. There is no recourse to a deity or saviour. Man's ultimate fate depends entirely upon one's own free behavior.

Buddha propounded the doctrine that no such thing as a permanent soul exists. Any belief in soul and its duration is only the consequence of an unquenchable thirst, and this senseless thirst for life is the basis of all suffering. Therefore, existence is suffering. But how should one live so as to rid oneself of the will-to-live and have? The answer to the problem is compressed into the Four Noble Truths. They are:

First Noble Truth--Old age is suffering; illness is suffering; being exposed to what one dislikes is suffering; failure to realize one's ambitions and desires is suffering.

Second Noble Truth--Suffering comes from the desire for being, together with lust and desire.

Third Noble Truth--Suffering can be dissolved with the complete annihilation of desire.

Fourth Noble Truth--Cessation of all desire can be gained by following the Eightfold Path.

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<sup>15</sup>Geoffrey Parrinder, The Faiths of Mankind (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1965), p. 298.

"The steps of the Eightfold Path are systematic actions which will lead to the destruction of desire--will keep human feet on the Buddhist middle way."<sup>16</sup>

#### The Eightfold Path

1. Right belief-that truth is the guide of man
2. Right will-to be calm at all times and not to harm any living creature
3. Right speech-never to lie, never to slander anyone, and never to use harsh or coarse language
4. Right actions-never to steal, never to kill and never to do anything one may later be ashamed of
5. Right means of livelihood-never to choose an occupation that is considered bad
6. Right endeavor-always strive for that which is good and avoid that which is evil
7. Right mindfulness-of the Noble Truths, in calmness and detachment
8. Right meditation-will then follow and lead to the path of perfect peace and Nirvana

Nirvana is a release from the cycle of reincarnation and the end of individual existence. It is also the blissful state in which all suffering ceases.

With regard to substance Nirvana is conceived as that which is absolutely unchanging. "Nirvana alone represents the meeting point of unchangeability and everlastingness; and hence Nirvana alone is real."<sup>17</sup> In this state lies the highest good for the life that now is.

#### Arahatship

Attainment of the last step of the Eightfold Path also means that arahatship lies in the future. The arahat is a Buddhist saint. The arahat has conquered the "three intoxications of life"--sensuality, ignorance, and thirst for life. He has reached self-fulfillment of

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<sup>16</sup>W. E. Soothill, The Three Religions of China (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 107.

<sup>17</sup>Noss, op. cit., p. 340.

the higher self. He no longer feels suffering and takes no pleasure in earthly joys. The arahat is the Buddhist ideal of what one may become and ought to be.

### Worship

Most of the worship of the Buddhist takes place near pagodas because these contain his images or relics and are in a sense the Buddha presence itself. Therefore, prayers made in these places are more likely to be effective than elsewhere.

The many images of the Buddha are not worshipped but serve as aids to devotion. Gifts are made to beautify the shrine and support the community. These images have recognizable postures with symbolical meanings. The most common are the seated images in which the Buddha sits cross-legged with the soles of his feet facing upwards and a halo behind his head.

Worship is individual. The images in the pagoda courtyard belong to different families, and people go alone or in small groups to their own particular shrine. In Buddhist homes there are small shrines with images before which people stand to recite the Refuge Formula, place incense sticks, and meditate.

Meditation is considered by the Buddhist to be the essence of its way of life. The initial step is withdrawal, both physical and spiritual-mental. Solitude is a primary requisite for the meditation. "The supreme and ultimate goal of this meditation is, of course, Nirvana attainment."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Winston King, Buddhism and Christianity (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), p. 60.

### Mahayana Buddhism

Absence of a Divine Helper ultimately brought revolutionary changes in Buddhism. The Mahayana, the most elaborately developed form of Buddhism, developed about the 2nd century B.C. The supporters of this school profess a belief in a Supreme Being. This Being has manifested Himself in many ways, especially through the Buddha.

In many other aspects Mahayana has brought changes to the original Buddhist doctrines. Not only was the whole aspect of Buddhism changed for the believer, but its fortunes abroad improved at once. "And because Mahayana was by nature expansive, it changed as it moved; the peoples among which it made its way contributed to its development."<sup>19</sup>

### Buddhism Today

For centuries all forms of Buddhism seemed to be in decline. But a strong revival has occurred in recent years.

The missionary efforts of Buddhism now encircle the globe. There are active missionaries in the United States. The Shin sect of Buddhism alone lists over a 100 missionaries at work in the United States and Canada.

"There is a rising hope in the hearts of many Buddhists that the whole world will someday come at last to the feet of the Enlightened One."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>John Noss, Man's Religions (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 356.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 364.



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