

# **Hinduism, Buddhism & New Age Spirituality**

## **Hinduism:**

### **I. A Quick Look at Hinduism**

- The word *Hindu* comes from the Sanskrit word *shindu*, meaning river, and more specifically the Indus river.
- There are 790,000,000 Hindus worldwide making it the third largest religion
- 13% of the world's population is Hindu
- More than 80% of the people of India practice some form of Hinduism
- Nepal, where 89% of the population is Hindu, is the only nation where Hinduism is the state religion
- One million Hindus live in the United States primarily in major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area.

### **II. The Origins of Hinduism**

- Hinduism isn't a single religion, but rather a collection of interwoven beliefs that can trace their roots to the Hindu culture in India.
- There isn't a stated creed or set of beliefs in Hinduism, and that is a great appeal for many. There are not absolutes or formal doctrines, and is said to be a "designer" religion. In Hinduism gods are not essential or have as many as you please.
- Hinduism has no specific founder or historical event or city to mark its beginning.

- 4,000 years ago a highly developed civilization known as the Mohenjo-Daro was flourishing in the Indus River valley in northwest India. The people of this civilization were known as Dravidians. Archaeologists have said they were most likely a pacifist's culture because no weapons have been found.
- The Aryans, who is thought to have come down from Persia, present day Iran, came down and assimilated their culture after invading the Dravidians. So the Aryan religious practices were mixed with those of the Dravidians producing fundamental practices such as:
  - Belief in reincarnation
  - The worship of a diverse group of gods who took various forms
  - Belief in the essential spiritual unity of humankind.

### III. The Foundational Understanding of Hinduism

What matters is attaining freedom from matter, or the world as we see it. The idea is to eliminate any ties to the material plane of existence and to understand how you are personally related to the spiritual whole. Historically, the two mantras, repetitious phrases, of Hinduism have been "All is One" and "All is God."

#### **If you want a god, here are the Big Three**

1. **Brahma** – This is the main god, known as the "Impersonal Absolute" and the "Ultimate Reality"
2. **Vishnu** – Vishnu rules in heaven and rules over earth as the preserver. According to religious expert George Braswell, "Vishnu" has been compared to the Christian concept of God. Vishnu has taken many human forms, known as avatars, the most popular of which is Krishna.

### ***Who is Krishna?***

Krishna is the human incarnation of Vishnu and one of the most popular of all Hindu deities. Vishnu has also taken on animal forms such as fish, turtle, boar, man-lion, horse, and dwarf. Stories of Krishna are told in the Bhagavad Gita.

3. **Shiva** – Shiva is the third god of the Hindu Big Three takes on many roles including creator and destroyer. Shiva signifies eternal life-death rhythm of the universe. A popular Hindu idol or image of Shiva shows him with four arms.

## **IV. The Varna Caste System**

The Brahmins, the priests, supervised temple worship and the rituals. Eventually their position ensured them to be the top of the social class known as castes. The rules of the caste system were known as Varna hence the Varna Caste system.

- The Brahmins (priests)
- Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers)
- Vaisyas (merchants and artists)
- Shudras (slaves)
- ☆ “Untouchables” (lower than the Shudras)

Only the top three were allowed to practice Hinduism. The Shudras, or the slaves, were not even allowed to hear the Vedas, Because the caste system became so oppressive some Hindus rebelled and broke away. One of those that broke away was Siddhartha Gautama who we know as the Buddha. So Buddhism came out of Hinduism this is why you will see many similarities.

## **V. Sacred Writing of Hinduism**

**Veda** - [treated as singular or plural] the most ancient Hindu scriptures, in particular the Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda.  
—ORIGIN Sanskrit, literally ‘(sacred) knowledge’.

**Upanishad** - each of a series of Hindu sacred treatises written in Sanskrit and expounding the Vedas.

## VI. The Wheel of Misfortune

**Reincarnation** – Hindus believe there are two types of souls. There is the individual soul, known as the *atman*, which is eternal and uncreated. And there is the Universal soul, known as the *Brahman*. One of the major goals of Hinduism is for the individual soul to unite with the Universal Soul, and therefore become one with the ultimate reality. In order for this to happen, the atman must die and be born again time after time into the world in different bodies (some Hindus believe you can come back as an animal or a plant). This death-birth cycle is called reincarnation, or the Transmigration of the Soul. In Hindu terms it's called *Samsara*.

The ultimate goal of Hinduism is to break free from this wheel of misfortune by uniting with the Universal Soul. This is called *moksha*. How does this happen? Karma

**Karma** – The law of karma has to do with good works and bad works or good karma, bad karma. The more good karma you can produce, the better your chances of attaining freedom from the reincarnation nightmare. However, if the individual soul produces more bad karma than good then you are destined to be reincarnated as something else and have another go at it. So when one sees suffering in the world it is because their bad karma outweighed their good karma and suffering is the way to freedom. So to ease one's suffering would only force one back on the reincarnation wheel.

## VII. The Way of Moksha

So the ultimate goal for the Hindu is to attain Moksha, which is freedom from Samsara to be united with Brahman. So how does one get more good karma than bad karma? There are three ways also called Margas.

### **The Way of Activity (karma marga)**

This way to ultimate freedom is a popular form of Hinduism, and is best summarized as daily duty. You build up good karma by fulfilling certain religious and social obligations. Activities such as waking up the god and talking to it by chanting for example.

### **The Way of Knowledge (jnana marga)**

This way is the least popular form of Hinduism because it is quite a bit more mystical and much more difficult than the way of activity. First taught in the Upanishads, the way of knowledge is based on the belief that you can experience the unity of the individual soul with the Universal Soul through the practice of yoga meditation.

There are 4 ways to accomplish the way of knowledge and all involve a Guru.

1. Student stage – study the Hindu Scriptures
2. Householder state – when a man gets married and raises a family.
3. Forest Dweller stage – he basically abandons the family and leaves home for the forest and meditates far from the worldly distractions.
4. Ascetic stage – when he has learned all he can and is now ready to practice yoga where through the Yoga posture with head erect and spine straight and breath control enables the Hindu to attain supreme concentration. Through gazing upon certain sacred symbols and reciting certain sacred sounds, the Hindu approaches mystical union with the absolute, the world soul.

### **The Way of Devotion (bhakti marga)**

The third way to moksha is the way of devotion, known as bhakti. This is the most popular belief and practice in Hinduism because you get to choose your own god, and there are millions to choose from, as many as 330 million. The most common choice is Vishnu, the god of incarnations, and the most popular incarnated god, or avatar, is Krishna. To the Hindu, Krishna offers freedom from the karma wheel from the karma wheel of misfortune through love and grace toward the individual, as long as the individual gives love and devotion to Krishna.

It's easy to understand why this way of devotion is the most popular because you don't have to go through all those rituals every day, you can stay home with the wife and kids and there's no need to torture yourself or stay in the yoga position for half the day. Braswell writes, "Devotion and grace work hand in hand to provide good Karma, break the transmigration of the soul, and enable the Hindu to attain liberation."



# Buddhism

## **I. A Quick Look at Buddhism**

- There are more than 350,000,000 Buddhists worldwide
- Buddhism is most prevalent in the countries of China, Japan, Korea, and in Southeast Asia
- There are probably around 500,000 Buddhists in United States.
- Buddhism is the main religion in Hawaii

## **II. Buddhism and its Beginnings**

It all started in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. with the birth of Buddha, who was then known as Siddhartha Gautama. Actually, birth is just the continuation of a preexisting cycle so really according to Buddhism the story of Buddha began before this.

The expectant parents were the rulers of a small kingdom in the region of Nepal. First of all, on the night of the conception of their child, the mother had a vision of a white elephant (the sign of an exceptional being) entering her womb. Then, before the birth, an astrologer gave the following prediction: The child would turn out to be a great world ruler, or, if he witnessed great suffering, he would become a great religious leader.

Siddhartha's father wanted his son to become a great world leader, so he did everything within his power to keep his son away from the suffering of the world. This meant that Siddhartha grew up behind the palace walls and never ventured out into the real world. He married a princess from another region, but their courtship and marriage were within the palace walls. This was a luxurious life that would have given most everyone else complete contentment, not Siddhartha.

At the age of 29, with a wife and kids of his own, Siddhartha had to see what the rest of the world was like. He persuaded his chariot driver to take him on a drive through the village beyond the palace. On that brief trip, he saw for the first time an aged man, a sick man, a corpse being carried to cremation, and a wandering holy man. These "Four Signs" caused him to start thinking about old age, sickness, death, and the meaning of life. With knowledge of these realities, he could no longer live in the extravagance of the palace.

## **The Great Renunciation**

After struggling within himself to reconcile the harsh realities of life with his own wealth and privilege, Siddhartha split from the family, shaved his head, and led a homeless life in the forest now called **The Great Renunciation**.

While in the forest, he met two holy men who taught him meditation. Hoping to find a spiritual dimension, Siddhartha decided to begin a long and strict fast until he reached the point where he could “feel his backbone through his stomach.”

Despite physical deprivation, he didn’t obtain spiritual enlightenment. He kept at this for the next 6 years but nothing worked out spiritually. He decided to meditate under a Bodhi tree and stay in one spot until he found the answer to his search.

## **The Awakening**

During the night he struggled with Mara (the personification of change, death, and evil.) By morning he came to great clarity of how things really are. In his “Awakening,” Siddhartha realized that the best spiritual way is a middle path between extremes of self-denial and self-indulgence.

Siddhartha began to share this message that true knowledge exists between extreme self-indulgence and rigorous self-denial. The people who listened to him sensed a radiance and authority in his message. They gave him the designation of “The Buddha” which means “Enlightened One.”

## **The Middle Way & the Four Noble Truths**

Buddha preached the message that the key to living “the Middle Way” between unreasonable excess and unnecessary deprivation were found in the

### **Four Noble Truths:**

- ***Noble Truth #1*** – Life is all about suffering.  
Life is tough. Existence is painful. And because reincarnation keeps the pattern of birth-life-death in a repeating cycle, the suffering doesn’t stop with death.
- ***Noble Truth #2*** – The cause of suffering is our desire and greed.  
There are three root evils: desire, hatred and ignorance.

- **Noble Truth #3** – There is a way to overcome our desire and greed. One can transcend these three fires of “desire, hatred, and ignorance.”
- **Noble Truth #4** – The path to happiness and relief of suffering is an 8 step process.

### **The Noble Eight-Step Process**

#### *The Way of Wisdom:*

- Right understanding of the world as it really is.
- Right thoughts of purifying the mind and heart through thoughts of unselfishness and compassion.

#### *The Quality of Mental Discipline:*

- Right effort to prevent evil arising within your mind.
- Right mindfulness to total attentiveness to the activities of the body, speech, and mind.
- Right concentration to training the mind through meditation.

#### *The Quality of Ethical Conduct:*

- Right speech which refraining from lying and any other speech that is hurtful to other people
- Right action which is refraining from killing and taking what is not given; avoiding inappropriate sexual conduct, improper speech and intoxicants
- Right livelihood which is earning a living in a way that doesn't bring harm to other people

### III. The Way of Nirvana

- Samsara  
Life consists of three components: suffering, change and the absence of an eternal soul that survives independently after death. Buddhists don't consider their personalities to be permanent or individual because they consider each person to be "a flow of being." Everyone is subject to constant physical and psychological change which continues even after death as the birth process starts its cycle again.
- Renunciation  
The true reality of life involves renunciation of life as we know it and believe it to be before we have attained the dharma of understanding. Without realizing it, we are grasping and craving for a life that doesn't really exist. Only by letting go of it can we obtain the real meaning of life.
- Reincarnation  
The philosophy that nothing is permanent not even death. It is just part of the change process and what you might consider to be a person is only a chain of life. The dead are reborn according to their karma. People are reborn into several new realms, depending on the progress they made in the last one. The state of mind of a person at the moment of death is important determining the state of rebirth.
- Nirvana  
Nirvana is the final state of liberation from the cycle connected to life with suffering. It defies description.
- More Buddhas to come:  
Siddhartha was the first Buddha, but he wasn't the only one. As others reach enlightened status, they are Buddhas as well.

## IV. The Three Jewels

There are not a lot of doctrinal rules or regulations in Buddhism but there are three fundamental principles upon which the religion is based called *Tiratna*:

- *The First jewel: Buddha*  
He found the path of enlightenment and taught it to other people
- *The Second jewel: Dharma*  
This is the teaching about the true way of things
- *The Third jewel: Sangha*  
This is the community of monks, nuns, and laypeople who practice and promote the dharma

## V. Where Does God Fit In?

Buddha wasn't big on God. In fact, while Buddhists aren't opposed to God, they don't consider any deity particularly relevant. After all, Divine intervention is not necessary in the process of finding truth and reality through self-introspection. Buddhism is directed toward the spiritual goal that comes through self-discovery and awareness. No importance is placed upon establishing a relationship with God or even becoming aware of God's existence.

## IV. Two Major Divisions

### 1. Buddhists of Tibet

In the regions of Tibet and northern Asia, including China and Japan, the main strain of Buddhism is referred to as Mahayana. This tradition includes diverse ways to nirvana and recognizes the important roles of *Bodhisattva*. This is a term with both general and specialized usage. Generally, it means a person who is destined for enlightenment, a Buddha in the making.

2. Buddhists of Southeast Asia

This branch of the Buddhist family tree is the more conservative and doctrinally strict branch. It is called *Theravada* meaning the Doctrine of the Elders. It is found in countries of Southeast Asia and in Sri Lanka

### VIII. What about Zen?

Meditation is the central religious practice for Buddhists. Meditation is the process by which Buddhists pursue the understanding of truth about the nature of reality. It is the means for obtaining dharma. The goal of meditation is complete mindfulness, not mindlessness as some critic's say, in which the practitioner is totally aware of the present moment.

Zen isn't the most popular form of Buddhism in the United States. The word Zen means "meditation." This type of Buddhism rejects traditions of form and doctrines and emphasizes instead the realization of one's true self that comes from the personal experience of meditation. In other words, you learn by doing. The essence of Zen was illustrated by Zen Master Suzuki Roshi when he was asked to explain the techniques and strategies of Zazen which is sitting meditation. Rather than lecture on the subject, he hopped on a table and sat in silence in the cross-legged position for 30 minutes.

Zen was once described as "a special transmission outside of the scripture. There was no need for dependence on words and letters; direct pointing to the real person; seeing into one's nature, which was identical with all reality, justified Buddha-life and led to attainment of Buddhahood.

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# New Age

## I. A Quick Look at New Age Spirituality

- According to Russell Chandler, “New Age is not a cult or a sect, per se,” but rather a hybrid mix of spiritual, social, and political forces, and it encompasses sociology, theology, the physical sciences, medicine, anthropology, history, the human potential movement, sports and science fiction.
- As many as 12 million Americans are active New Age participants.
- Another 30 million are avidly interested
- There is no definitive statement of New Age beliefs, no founder, no central church or headquarters, and no formal structure.
- More than 3000 publishers offer New Age and occult books
- Bestselling New Age books include: *A Course in Miracles*, *A Return to Love*, *Out on a Limb*, *The Celestine Prophecy*.

Millions of New Age advocates and practitioners now believe it’s time to actively bring about a new era of self-discovery, spiritual awareness, personal enlightenment, and global unity. New Age spirituality is hard to pin down because there are many layers embedded in all aspects of society such as health care, business, science, politics, sports, and entertainment. The influence of New Age beliefs is there and its growing. New Age spirituality is impacting the world, especially America.

### **Deepak Chopra**

New Age values are conscious evolution, a non-sectarian society, a non-military culture, global sharing, healing the environment, sustainable economies, self-determination, social justice, economic empowerment of the

poor, love, compassion in action, going beyond religious fundamentalism, going beyond nationalism-extreme nationalism, culture.

David Spangler describes New Age in his book *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age*:

The New Age is a concept that proclaims a new opportunity, a new level of growth attained, a new power released and at work in human affairs, a new manifestation of that evolutionary tide of events which, taken at the flood, does indeed lead on to a greater things, in this case to a new heaven, a new earth and a new humanity.

## II. The Corporate Mystic

Gay Henricks wrote a book called *The Corporate Mystic* where he offers ‘a unique and thought-provoking perspective on management and leadership. His perspective is rooted in mysticism and intuition rather than objective business principles.

### **Mysticism**

1. the beliefs or state of mind characteristic of mystics.
2. vague or ill-defined religious or spiritual belief, especially as associated with a belief in the occult.

Encarta World English Dictionary defines mysticism as ‘the belief that personal communication or union with the divine is achieved through faith, ecstasy, or sudden insight rather than through rational thought.

Dr. Stephen Covey, whose books have been studied by church and business leaders alike, endorses *The Corporate Mystic* as a book that will ‘sweep you into a different level of consciousness-one of spiritual perspective and feeling.’”

The publisher of the book *The Corporate Mystic* thinks that “If you want to find a genuine mystic, you are more likely to find one in a boardroom than a monastery or a cathedral.”

### III. A Mixture of Things

Dr. Ron Rhodes list several characteristics of the New Age Movement, but since there's no central authority or set of beliefs not all might agree. It is very relativistic in its nature.

Here are some major characteristics of New Age:

- **Religious syncretism** – combining of different systems of religious and philosophical beliefs.
- **Monism** – the belief that ‘All is One’
- **Pantheism** – The belief that ‘All is God, God is All’
- **Deification of humanity** – Since God is in everything, then human beings are divine or at least capable of becoming like God. Dr. Hendricks teaches in *The Corporate Mystic* that real power and real fun come from being a source which has promoted a powerful corporate world idea called ‘human potential movement.’ ‘Whatever one thinks they are, they are.’
- **Transformation** – This is not like the Biblical idea of transformation because a personal God doesn't enter into the equation. Personal transformation hinges on one's personal recognition of oneness with God, humanity, and the universe. This is equated with “enlightenment or self-actualization.
- **Ecological Centeredness** – New Agers go beyond management of God's creation to reverence and worship of nature. The philosophy of monism opens the door for this perspective since everything is part of one reality then we are related to the earth.
- **Belief in a new world order** – The whole idea of a coming utopia is nothing new. What is new is that leading New Age thinkers are openly calling for a new world order featuring a one-world government and unified global society in which all people are one through their common spiritual beliefs and consciousness. Many New Agers are hopeful that this will occur by the middle of this century.

## IV. Ancient Belief Systems

- **Hinduism** – New Age draws heavily from Hinduism. Where Hinduism denies the world and self, New Age affirms and glorifies the self.
- **Buddhism** – New Age favors Zen Buddhism which prepares for enlightenment by clearing the conscious mind.
- **Taoism** – teaches that ultimate reality is beyond categories. Opposing values such as yin and yang. There is no absolute truth, which is a foundational belief in New Age spirituality. New Age, like early Taoism, combines meditation with breathing techniques.
- **Gnosticism** – this ancient Greek philosophy was a system of belief that taught salvation by knowledge. Each ‘person has a divine spark’ which is a product of dualism, believing the two ultimate forces of reality are matter and God. New Age can trace its roots to Gnosticism.
- **Native America religions** – Traditional Native American religions recognize three levels of spiritual beings: supreme god, nature spirits, and ancestor spirits. Of these nature spirits are held in highest regard. New Age belief in a sacred Earth is consistent with these traditions. Also, the practice of shamanism (shaman heals through contact with the spirits). Don Miguel Ruiz is a shaman who wrote the book *The Four Agreements* and *The Mastery of Love*
- **Occultism and Spiritism** – Occultism is a belief in a power based on hidden knowledge about the universe and its hidden forces. New Age spirituality focuses on this hidden knowledge. Spiritism, also known as channeling, is the practice of communication with departed human or extra-human intelligence through the agency of a human medium.

## V. New Age Belief

**Belief #1** – God is who or what you want Him to be

**Belief #2** – Truth is what you want it to be

**Belief #3** – Salvation depends on you

## **Questions:**

1. What did you learn about Hinduism?
2. What did you learn about Buddhism?
3. What did you learn about New Age?
4. Can you see the similarities of Buddhism and Hinduism?
5. Can you see the New Age Movement better now as a real player in the thinking of our society, particularly our politics?
6. Can you see how these three have major disagreements to the Christian faith?
7. What would you say are the main conflicts?

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