

Lecture 5

Overcoming Illusion through *Yoga*

My last lecture was focused on the Hindu idea of God. I should of course say “ideas” in the plural, since (as I told you) there’s a considerable variety in Hindu theology. I began the session by describing nine distinct conceptions of the Divine, which I labeled Atheism, Deism, Dualism, Henotheism, Monotheism, Polytheism, Panentheism, Animism, and Monism. And I explained that Hindu beliefs include all four of the “immanent” viewpoints. Hindus believe, like other *polytheists*, in many different gods who are all worthy of worship; and yet they also agree with the *panentheists* that the world is contained inside a single Divinity, and again with the *animists* that this Divinity is contained in the world. When push comes to shove, however, what many Hindus tend to emphasize most is the *monistic* idea: that the Divine is ultimately the only thing that truly exists. I then gave you a quick introduction to several key Hindu theological names and terms, and I concluded the lecture with what I predicted might be for most of you the most startling of all Hindu doctrines: the idea that each of us *is* God: *Tat tvam asi*. In other words, *Brahman* is *Atman*: God is your own deepest Self.

Today I’d like to turn the discussion toward the topic of method. Every religion, as I’ve told you before, is a combination of beliefs and practices, or of doctrines and methods. A religion not only tells us something about The Way Things Really Are; it also provides us with specific advice on what we might do to experience what is Real for ourselves. In the case of Hinduism, spiritual method or practice is closely tied to the different *margas* or “paths”, which we discussed in connection with the “Four Fours”; as you’ll remember there are four distinct ways of relating to the Ultimate: the path of knowledge, or *jnâna*; the path of love, or *bhakti*; the path of work, or *karma*; and the path of meditation, or *raja*. Today I want to speak in greater detail about these different paths, especially *raja*, and in doing so I’m going to refer to some of the Hindu scriptures—in particular to a very famous sacred text of India called the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*. I mentioned the *Gîtâ* last time in connection with the Hindu doctrine of the *Avatâras*, when I quoted the words of Krishna about his periodically returning to the earth to re-establish the Divine Law. Before quoting from this book again, however, it’s a good idea, I think, if I give you some context.

The *Bhagavad Gîtâ* has been called “the most important, the most influential, the most luminous of all the Hindu scriptures”, “the most popular book in Hindu religious literature”, and

the text that “most Hindus regard as containing the essence of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*”. These claims are all the more striking when you consider the fact that the *Gîtâ* is only a tiny fragment of a vast collection of Hindu scriptures or sacred writings. It is itself—to give you some sense of this vastness—just a very small part of a much longer book called the *Mahâbhârata*, which is said to be the world’s longest poem; containing around 100,000 verses, the *Mahâbhârata* is approximately fifteen times the length of the entire Bible (both Old and New Testaments). And even the *Mahâbhârata* is just the tip of the Hindu scriptural iceberg!

The setting of the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* is a battlefield, and this is both historically and symbolically important. As the narrative begins, a great battle is about to begin, itself one of many such conflicts in an on-going war comparable in its scope and in the power and nobility of its participants to the Trojan War described by the Greek poet Homer in the *Iliad*. At the opening of the first chapter, one of the mightiest of the warriors, a prince named Arjuna, has just realized that he’s caught in a no-win situation. He orders his charioteer to drive his chariot between the two opposing armies so that he can survey their ranks, and as he looks at them it dawns upon him that no matter what happens, whoever the victor, a great many men whom he loves and honors are going to be killed. Arjuna has relatives in fact in both armies, and he sees that regardless of the eventual victor, those who survive will bear a great burden of guilt for the rest of their lives. And so, casting down his bow in grief, he resolves not to fight. Let his enemies “come with their weapons against me in battle,” he says. “I shall not struggle or strike them. Now let them kill me. That will be better.”

Now as I’m sure you can guess, the real “battlefield” being described in the story is not only the plain of Kurukshetra—the geographical site, according to Hindu tradition, of the actual engagement in ancient India—nor is the real “war” simply the one that was fought there according to the Hindus around 3000 B.C. In fact, with the exception of a few references here and there, the rest of this sacred text never even mentions the physical or historical setting. What follows instead is a dialogue between Arjuna, the prince, and his charioteer, who turns out to be none other than Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu. And their dialogue makes it very clear that the *real* battlefield is an inward one—a battlefield within the heart of the prince himself, but also within all human beings. The true war, in other words, is a spiritual war, and the results of successful combat are not worldly power or wealth, but final union with God.

According to Hinduism, as I suggested in my last YouTube lecture, man is enmeshed in a vast cosmic illusion—he’s a tiger who’s been conditioned to think he’s a goat—and the battle of which the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* is speaking is a struggle to break free from the grip of this illusion. To be more precise, each one of us is *doubly* deluded. We’re deluded on the one hand in thinking that the world around us is fully real; whatever my senses take in—all the colors, and shapes, and sounds, and textures, and smells—I simply *assume* corresponds with the truth. I assume without question that what these senses are telling me provides me with a valid knowledge of what’s really there. But that’s false, says the *Gîtâ* in particular and Hinduism in general. For everything you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell—the whole of that seemingly solid thing we mean by the “world”—is in fact an illusion. To use the Sanskrit term for this important teaching, it’s only *Mâyâ* (the English word “magic” is an etymological relative). Only *Brahman* is real; everything else is the product of *Mâyâ*.

This, however, is only half of our problem. I said we’re *doubly* deluded. We’re deluded in our understanding of the world around us, but we’re *also* deluded on the other hand in our understanding of ourselves. Like a tiger cub that thinks it’s a goat, I’ve grown up thinking of myself strictly in terms of physical, emotional, and mental categories. I identify myself with my body on the one hand and with the contents of my emotions and my mind on the other, and I go around acting as though this physical thing is really me, or at the very least I think of “myself” as somehow lodged irrevocably *inside* of this thing—somewhere, perhaps, behind my eyes and between my ears. And when I think of that inner and imprisoned self I tend to do so in terms of its memories, and dreams, and expectations, and impulses, and fears, and desires; in short I identify my true “I” with the various contents of my consciousness. But once again, says the Hindu, that’s a huge mistake. Neither the physical bodies in which we seem to exist, nor the emotions and thoughts that seem to exist within us, *are* us. Who we really are is something far deeper and infinitely more profound, which the *Gîtâ*, like many other Hindu scriptures, refers to as *Atman*, or the “Self”, a Self—as I told you last time—which is identical with the Supreme Spiritual Reality of *Brahman*. Far down inside, beneath the many layers and veils of your ego, you’re in fact of one essence with God. *Tat tvam asi*: “That (ultimate Reality) Thou (in your heart of hearts) art.”

Fair enough, but if that’s really true, you might ask, what exactly are we supposed to *do* about it? Just supposing for the sake of argument that this Hindu view is correct, how is a person to put it into practice? Here is where Hinduism would ask us to take a closer look at the *margas* or

paths. For this is precisely the purpose of the paths: to give us the precise and very practical directions we need in order to disentangle our minds from this double illusion and in order to verify, in our own experience, the ultimate truth of our identity with God. As it happens, Krishna's advice to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* amounts to a kind of synthesis of *all* the margas—*jnâna*, *karma*, *bhakti*, and *raja*—and reading this classic text in its entirety (when you have time at some point in the future!) would be your very best way of going more deeply into this subject.

Given the space available in this single lecture, however, I'm going to focus on just one of these *margas*, namely, the fourth path of *raja*, which is the way of meditation and *yoga*. I've made this choice for a couple of reasons. In the first place, of all the many spiritual techniques one finds in India, meditation and *yoga* are usually what come to mind first for most westerners when they think about Hindu spiritual practice. But at the same time they're also forms of spirituality that are very foreign to the practice of people from a predominantly western religious background—as most of you in this course probably are. A Christian who's asked how people might become more closely related to God will typically recommend among other things that they should study the Bible and endeavor to understand what it says, and in saying this the Christian is advocating (though of course she doesn't call it that) a kind of *jnâna marga*, that is, a path of knowledge. Many (though not all) Christians will also tell you that you ought to perform good deeds or good works as a complement or supplement to your faith, deeds dedicated to the service of others and undertaken without any concern for reward or applause, and in saying this Christians are recommending (again in Hindu terms) a kind of *karma marga*—that is, the way of work, or “non-attached action”. And of course a Christian also says, most emphatically, that people should do their best to love God as completely and as fully as possible, with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and in this respect the Christian is putting the stress on what Hindus call *bhakti marga*, that is, the path of love and devotion toward God.

Most Christians, however—at least those who hail from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds; the case is different for Orthodox Christians—do *not* engage in the sort of practices that are typically associated with the fourth kind of *marga*, that is, the way of meditation and *yoga*. *Yoga* is meant to do at least three basic things: first of all, it's a means of detaching our senses from the world around us; second, it's a way of cultivating indifference toward the feelings of pleasure and pain or disappointment and joy that are constantly arising within us; and third, it's a means of promoting a one-pointed mental focus or concentration on the *Atman* or true Self. And

of course the goal of all this—the same goal all the *margas* are seeking—is to overcome *Mâyâ* and to realize our inward identity with *Brahman*. The outer world of physical or empirical objects, on the one hand, and the inner “world” of our ordinary day-to-day consciousness, on the other, must both be conquered by the true spiritual warrior. For all of this is illusory, and it must be seen as such if we’re to have any hope of being united with God.

I can’t even begin to go into all the details, but I’ll mention just a few of the most important techniques that are used by those who follow this path.

First of all, as many of you probably knew even before signing up for this course, *yoga* includes the use of very precise bodily postures, called *asanas*. The principle behind this aspect of yogic practice is that it’s impossible for a person to overcome illusion without first gaining control over his mind, and gaining control over the mind requires in turn that one eliminate all of those bodily itchings and aching and irritations and imbalances that dominate so large a part of our normal consciousness. By learning to sit or stand comfortably in very specific positions, it’s possible to reduce physical effort to an absolute minimum, and this in turn frees up a whole realm of attention which, whether we know it or not, is in most of us wasted or squandered just trying to keep the body going. The best known of these *asanas* is the “lotus posture” (*padmasana*), so called because in sitting in this position one mimics the shape or the structure of the water flower that goes by that name. Here’s the way it’s described in one of the traditional yogic treatises: “Place the right foot on the left thigh and similarly the left foot on the right thigh, cross the hands behind the back, and firmly grasp the large toes of the feet so crossed, the right hand on the right large toe, and the left hand on the left. Then place the chin on the chest and fix the gaze on the tip of the nose”. If you’ve never tried to sit this way, you’ll find that at first this is an extremely difficult, in fact quite painful, position to achieve. But according to the *yogis*, some of whom are able to sit in the lotus posture for hours, and even days, at a time, it’s the most stable position the body can be in, a stability that in turn gives rise to a corresponding mental or spiritual control and balance, and hence to a greater freedom than would otherwise be possible from the distractions of the world.

A second very common practice of *yoga* is control of one’s respiration, called *pranayama* in Sanskrit—literally, the “stopping” (*yama*) of the “life force” (*prana*). Once you’ve mastered the various *asanas* and have achieved a certain measure of equilibrium in relation to the physical world outside of you, your next task is to gain a similar mastery over the physical world inside of you, including the bodily processes we normally associate with the autonomic nervous system, like

digestion and circulation. In order to do this, Hindus recommend starting first with a physical process over which even the novice has at least some degree of control, namely, breathing. Anyone just by relaxing can slow his breathing rate, and of course we can also hold our breath and even completely stop breathing for short periods of time. What *yoga* asks that you do is to make a very deliberate practice of concentrating on the quality and rate of your respiration with the goal of slowing it more and more so that your breathing becomes accustomed to the rhythm it ordinarily has only in the deepest sleep. To this end, they practice such things as inhaling and exhaling through opposite nostrils, and also exhaling in so shallow a way as not to ruffle even a bit of goose down held right in front of their noses. By these and other such means, they say, it's possible to begin experiencing other states of consciousness, states of awareness that are inaccessible in our usual waking condition. For in fact every night (according to Hinduism)—when we're totally relaxed and reach the point of deepest, dreamless sleep—each of us actually enters once again into our original union with *Brahman*. But because there's no continuity between that state and our ordinary waking lives, we don't remember it. By contrast, the *yogi* is someone who teaches himself to become, if you will, “consciously asleep”, and in that condition he can actually become aware of this intimate identity with God.

A third method I wanted to mention, which is also very characteristic of Hindu *yoga*, is the use of *mantras*. *Mantras* are special words and phrases, containing either a name of one of the gods or of an *Avatâra* or else some other sacred sound. According to Hinduism the repeated chanting or silent invocation of these sacred formulas can be of tremendous assistance in controlling attention and harnessing the conscious energy we need to break through our illusions. They say that the mind is usually as restless as “a monkey in a cage”, and if we're to have any hope of taming it, calming it, stilling it, we must practice giving it a definite task to accomplish—not just any task, of course, but the specific work of invoking a sound that is of Divine and supernatural origin and that contains the power and presence of the Divine. You should have read by now the assignment in *A Book of Saints* for this section of the course, and you will have seen how this practice was used by Swami Ramdas, who constantly repeated the name of the Vaishnavite *Avatâra* Rama. Perhaps the best known of the Hindu *mantras* is the single syllable OM (also transliterated AUM), which I mentioned in YouTube Lecture 3. Hindus believe this is the primordial sound of creation, the sonic force with which the universe first came into being. What was *made* by this sound, they say, can also be *unmade* or dissolved by this sound, and so, by

uniting their minds with the vibration of OM, and thus tuning in to the frequency (as it were) of the universe, they hope to be able to set up certain “interference patterns”—to continue speaking in the language of physics!—and in this way gradually to transcend the many layers of *Mâyâ*. I realize this claim may seem exaggerated to many of you, but it’s nonetheless true and a well-attested fact that the powers of concentration and attention that people are able to acquire in this way, and by using the other yogic techniques I have mentioned, are quite remarkable. I’ll describe for you in the YouTube talk that accompanies this written lecture what a good friend of mine reported in this regard from his meeting with a *yogi* in India.

Finally, a fourth method characteristic of the yogic path involves a deliberate and systematic meditation on death. I’ll discuss this more fully in my audio lecture, but to give you just a taste of what this entails, let me quote here briefly from an e-mail message I received a few years ago from a former student who’d been traveling in India. His words convey very clearly, and I must add very graphically, something of the “liberational” benefit (if I might use such a term) that can be gained from the confrontation with death:

“About a month ago, I stood before the burning pyre for the dead body of a human being during cremation. There was a moment so profoundly grotesque, and yet so profoundly moving at the same time, that mere human words fail me. At one level, I was simply disgusted and horrified by the image before me. But the disgust was immediately replaced with a ‘release’ of such magnitude that no words can possibly describe it. I deeply felt peace, bliss, and the utter absence of fear. Nothing was left between me and the Real. I simply stood before the body of a human being as it was slowly consumed by fire. I watched as the flesh melted away, as the eyes continued to boil long after the hair had evaporated. Suddenly and unexpectedly the abdominal cavity, bubbling and rippling, burst open with an unusual force. Hot, green bile splattered on my clothes. At that moment the whole of this earthly existence melted away as illusion or shadow vanishes in the face of the Truth and the Sun. Death, ending, not ending, beginning, not body, not mind, *Atman*. Only *Atman*. I find that I do not know what else to write such as I am now.”