

Lecture 6

Time, *Karma*, Reincarnation, Liberation

We come today to my concluding lecture on Hinduism. Last time my focus was on method or practice. I set the stage with a few words about the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*, one of the most revered of all Hindu scriptures, in which Krishna, an *Avatâra* of Vishnu, counsels a great prince named Arjuna on the proper methods of fighting in a spiritual war. All of us are engaged in that war, a war against the illusions of *Mâyâ*. And victory consists in realizing that the world around us is really nothing other than *Brahman* and that in our own deepest and most inward reality, in the Self or *Atman*, we ourselves are of one essence with that Supreme Reality. If this is really true, however, one is immediately led to ask: What are we supposed to do about it? How can we come to recognize or realize our identity with God? Hinduism's answer is contained in the *margas* or paths, each of which constitutes a set of specific instructions and procedures on how to be reunited with *Brahman*. I spent most of my time talking about *raja*, the path of meditation and yoga, and I stressed in particular its use of *asanas*, or special physical postures; *pranayama* or control of the breath; *mantras*, which are sacred names and formulas; and meditation on death.

There are several things I'd like to discuss as we wrap up our explorations of the Hindu tradition. I want to spend some time in my YouTube lecture looking with you at two twentieth-century figures who are regarded by many Hindus as saints: Swami Ramdas (1884-1963), a portion of whose autobiography you've been assigned in *A Book of Saints*, and a second great sage named Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), whose life and teachings are portrayed in a short video clip that I've asked you to watch. But first of all, I would be utterly remiss in my role as your teacher if I failed at least briefly to mention another very important, and very characteristic, aspect of the Hindu perspective. Anyone responsible for introducing people to Hinduism needs to say at least something about this religion's view of time and eternity and its understanding of how our present life on this planet fits into the overall scheme of the universe.

Probably the most important point to emphasize is the sheer immensity of the Hindu vision. I've already stressed the scope and vastness of this religion in relation to both its gods and its scriptures, but a similar emphasis is important when considering its understanding of time. For the western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—time tends to be strictly linear, and they tend to think about time in terms of just a few thousand years, confining their attention to the history of

earth. Everything of importance to us human beings began on this planet with Adam and Eve, and everything of lasting significance for us will have been decided when terrestrial time as we know it comes to a grinding halt with the apocalyptic arrival on earth of the Messiah or Christ, whether this “arrival” is understood to be His first visit to our planet (as the Jews believe) or His “Second Coming” (as is taught by both Christianity and Islam). In striking contrast to this comparatively limited view of time and history, Hinduism insists on a much vaster panorama. Not only is planet earth not the only spiritually significant world; the astrophysical universe as a whole is not the only universe. There have been, and there will continue to be, multiple worlds and multiple universes, which exist on the one hand simultaneously in what we might call different dimensions and on the other hand successively or sequentially, one after another, along a timeline which has a cyclical or spiral-like quality and which, for all intents and purposes, is infinite in length.

A second point has to do with the Hindu view concerning what we might call the quality or direction of time. Many (probably most) people in American culture today tend to assume without thinking that time is in some way linked up with progress, that it involves a movement from worse to better or from inferior to superior. As the centuries have passed, or so we’ve been told, there has been a general improvement in man’s lot and in the quality of his life as a whole; there are a number of reasons for this current assumption, the most important being the dominant role that the idea of evolution plays in most people’s minds. Hindus, however, see things in reverse—and in this respect, I should add, they’re in essential agreement with all of the world’s major religions, traditional Christianity included. When it comes to their analysis of any particular world or universe, the Hindu view is *devolutionary*, not evolutionary, and rather than progress they expect to find *regress*.

Take just this planet, leaving aside for the moment all the other inhabitable worlds that may exist elsewhere in other parts of the galaxy or in other galaxies, and consider its history. As the Hindus see it, life on earth may be divided into a series of ages or *yugas*. (I very briefly touched on this earlier in connection with the *avatâras* of Vishnu.) These ages come in sets of four, each set being referred to as a *mahayuga* or “great age”, and the ages in any given *mahayuga* represent states of decreasing spiritual and moral value: in other words the *yugas* range from best to worst. Among the ancient Greeks—as you may know—there was a similar devolutionary perspective, and the successive periods of history were described by analogy with metals of decreasing worth: a first golden age was followed by a silver age, the silver by a bronze age, and the bronze by an

age of iron. Hindus share this conception exactly, and they say we're currently living in the iron age, or as they call it the *Kali Yuga* or Dark Age, which began (according to one calculation) at the stroke of midnight on 18 February 3102 B.C., somewhere at or around the dawn of recorded history. Some believe we're very close to the end of this final *yuga*, which will occur sometime around the middle of our present, twenty-first century. According to other calculations, however, we've a much longer way to go—about 427,000 additional years! In any case, here's the point: long, long before civilization as we know it began, there had already existed numerous previous civilizations, each of them more resplendent than the one coming after it. Beginning with the “golden age” (called the *Krita Yuga*), when people lived in a kind of Eden or paradise, humanity gradually but ineluctably sank to the morally and spiritually degrading conditions of the modern world as we find it today, with its prevalent and persistent war and violence.

As for how long this devolution or degradation took, interpretations vary considerably. If you're a Hindu who follows the shorter dating of the *Kali Yuga* I just mentioned—beginning around 3000 B.C. and ending shortly after 2000 A.D.—then you would probably say the total *Mahayuga* is around 50,000 years long, for the entire cycle of ages is proportionate to the last age by a factor of ten to one; if on the other hand you take the longer view, it's because you've calculated the total length to be 4,320,000 years. I should immediately add, however, that these dates and estimates of temporal length, even though many Hindus themselves often use them, are not to be taken too literally. For according to the Hindu view, time itself varies its “speed” and doesn't flow at a uniform rate. Not only do the *yugas* contain civilizations of differing spiritual values; they also represent states of increasing “velocity”, as it were, according to a proportion inverse to the one I just mentioned. In other words, time during the silver age flows twice as fast as it did in the golden age, in the bronze age three times as fast, and in the iron age four times as fast.

All this, however, is only one part of the story, only the tip of the iceberg of time and eternity. Not only are there all these ages and civilizations and worlds, but there are also—for each of us individually—multiple lives. According to the Hindu tradition, the life each of us is leading right now is just a tiny cross-section or brief stage of an immense cosmic journey. All of us lived long before this present life began, and we shall continue to live long after it has ended. Moreover—and this is a very important idea in the Hindu perspective—each of the segments or stages in our own personal odyssey are intimately linked to each other. What we're thinking,

feeling, and doing right now has resulted from things we thought, felt, and did before. And what we're thinking, feeling, and doing right now is in turn the cause of what we shall think and feel and do at some point in the future. This is what Hindus refer to as the Law of Karma. We've used the word *karma* before in connection with the *margas*: *Karma marga*, as you've learned, is the path to God based on good works or ego-less action. In this case, however, what I'm calling the Law of Karma has to do with the consequences or effects of one's works or actions, whether they're good or bad, ego-less or selfish. Using the word in this way, *karma* might be compared to the law in physics which says that for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction; the Law of Karma simply says that what goes out from us toward others inevitably ends up coming back. To offer a Christian comparison, we can quote the words of Saint Paul: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). If we sow the seed of good deeds, we can expect to reap their harvest at some point in the future; on the other hand, if we act instead with malice or envy or greed, these negative forces are eventually going to come back to haunt us.

On a day-to-day level, you can look at the Law of Karma as simply good basic psychology. If Fred gets angry with Nick and punches him, Nick may punch him back. But even if he doesn't, Nick himself will probably go away angry, and the karmic "path of return" may end up being more complicated. Nick goes home and takes his anger out on his sister, who's friends (let's say) with a woman who knows Fred's cousin, and the cousin finds out about what happened and tells Fred's father about the incident, who refuses to let Fred go on a fishing trip he had planned. This, the Hindus would say, is the result of Fred's *karma*; his payback for hitting Nick is missing out on the trip. Or yet again, the consequences may follow a sort of inward trajectory. Fred grows up punching and kicking and fighting with all sorts of people, but he never actually has to pay the price in terms of getting punched back or not going fishing. Nevertheless his chronic anger eventually is going to take its toll on his body, as the psychic poison of his attitude turns inward. And so at the age of 50 Fred has a massive stroke and is confined to a bed for the rest of his life. Here again, Hindus would say, what we're seeing are the results of Fred's *karma*.

Now, to take things a further step, Hinduism teaches that the Law of Karma applies not only to these sorts of connections *within* a given person's life, but also to certain connections *between* lives. Who we are at the moment, what we are, the gender we are, the race we are, the nationality we are, the moment of history we live in, the talents we have—all of this is the result of the choices we made in a previous life and the deeds (good or bad) we performed. And the

choices we're making right now and the things we're doing at this very moment will in turn have repercussions after we die. Right now, as you sit there reading this lecture, even your basic state of mind—whether it's boredom, resentment, curiosity, or perhaps disbelief!—is helping to determine what kind of being you will be in a future life. Here we come to an idea you will all have heard about before, namely, reincarnation, which is a characteristically South Asian doctrine. What it says is that the inward spirit of a person—indeed of every sentient being, thus including the animals—continues to exist across multiple life spans, surviving many deaths and entering into different bodies in different worlds. What kind of life your “spirit” has led in a given body and a given world determines the type of body and the quality of life you will merit the next time around.

Putting the matter in extremely simple—indeed simplistic—terms, there are basically three options when it comes to reincarnation: your next life may be better, or the same as, or worse than the life you are leading right now. These options correspond in turn to three fundamental “qualities” or “elements”, which Hindus call *gunas*. These *gunas*, which are present in varying proportions in everything that exists, are *sattva*, which is an “ascending” and more or less positive quality; *rajas*, which is “expansive” and more or less neutral; and *tamas*, which is “descending” and more or less negative. Everything from physical forces to the kinds of food we eat can be described in terms of these *gunas*, but for our purposes now we can think of them simply as names for three basic kinds of people or personality types.

In the first category are people whose primary motivations in life are guided by their love of wisdom and their pursuit of moral values and other ideals; these are people of the “sattvic” type. With regard to the four Hindu “wants”, their focus is on salvation and spiritual reward, and as a result of their present aspirations, they will be reborn or reincarnated in a higher state of existence, similar to that of the *devas*. (The word *deva* is often translated as “god”, but to avoid confusion with *Brahman* or its personal manifestations as Brahmâ, Vishnu, and Shiva, it might be better to equate the *devas* with the beings which Jews, Christians, and Muslims call “angels”.) A second category consists of people of an expansive or (we might say) extroverted temperament, whose fundamental aim in life is to advance the good of society and to help their fellow men; these are people of the “rajasic” or active type. When it comes to the wants, their focus is on performing their duty, and as a result of their present aspirations, they will be reborn in a state of existence similar to the one they exist in right now. In other words, they'll enter the next life in a state like the one we humans have in our present world. Finally, there's a third category, which consists of

people whose basic intention is to serve only themselves, whose motivation is strictly one of ego-centric satisfaction, and whose lives are therefore often characterized by greed, pride, and hatred; these are people of the “tamasic” type. Theirs are the two narrowest wants, namely, personal pleasure and success, and as a result of their present tendencies, they will be reborn or reincarnated into a lower state of existence, similar to that of the animals.

Now it’s important to add at once two very important points. First, there’s actually no such thing as a purely sattvic, or a purely rajasic, or a purely tamasic human being. We are all of us mixtures, the Hindu tradition would say, and in the final analysis it’s our *dominant* tendency that determines our thoughts and actions and desires, and in turn the level of our next incarnation. How great is your desire for truth and salvation? How great is your desire for service? How great is your desire for pleasure and fame? The answer to these questions, expressed concretely in the tens of thousands of choices you will make in your lifetime, is what will determine the level or quality of your next life.

The second, even more important, point is this, and it may surprise you: from the traditional Hindu point of view, *all* of these results or rebirths are actually *undesirable*, including even reincarnation at the level of the “gods” or angels. For your ultimate goal should be to *avoid* reincarnation altogether, however wonderful a world it might be into which you would enter. Our efforts should instead be put into getting off the “Merry-Go-Round” of conditioned existence altogether, whatever form it might take, and escaping from the whole process of continuing death and rebirth. And to do that, they say—to effect the escape—we needn’t look elsewhere, for we’re already living in the best of all possible worlds and in the best of all possible positions within that world. This may seem to you a very strange idea, so let me elaborate.

Of all the infinite number of creatures in our universe, human beings already enjoy the most desirable kind of existence, according to Hinduism. This is obviously *not* because human life is consistently satisfying or pleasurable—we all know it’s not—but because it’s the most balanced kind of existence. The idea of living like an angel in Heaven may sound very attractive, and you may think you’d never possibly get tired of such happiness, but in fact it would eventually end up becoming an immensely boring affair—especially if you don’t like harps (that’s a joke!). And besides there’s also this more fundamental point to consider: anyone who is dependent for her happiness on her surroundings, even if they’re paradisiacal and unchangingly perfect, has not really found the key to true happiness. True happiness, the *ânanda* or bliss of *Brahman*, must be a

happiness that transcends all external conditions and maintains itself perfectly no matter what happens or where one is. And according to Hinduism, we as humans are uniquely poised to realize this fact. The angels or gods have it too good, whereas animals and other lower beings have it too bad, leading lives with too much stress and suffering, and without the power of self-reflective awareness. But we live our lives in the midst of both good and bad, and if we're attentive and reflective, taking note of both our blessings and trials, we can use this more or less balanced status as a stepping stone out of the whole cycle of death and rebirth. In other words—to remind you of the highest of all possible aims—we can achieve the liberation or salvation called *moksha*, which will mean never having to return to this world, or any other world, but remaining instead in an eternal union with *Brahman*.

In order to reach this goal, however, you need to get to work right away, for the opportunity for an ultimate escape “into God”—with a few incredibly rare exceptions—is unique to human beings, and we should therefore do our very best to make the most of it now. A human birth is extremely “difficult to obtain”, the Hindus say. In fact the likelihood of your coming back into a central state like that of man in this present world is often compared in South Asian traditions to the chances of a single sea turtle, swimming through the depths of the ocean, to come up for air at just the right point where its head will pass through a single wooden ring floating somewhere on the surface. How incredibly huge are the odds against that happening! But whatever analogy you use, the point is that if you don't get it right this time, you may have to be reincarnated hundreds or thousands or millions of times and lead as many different lives in as many different worlds, all of them of less value than this one, before you again have the chance to attain the supreme liberation. It's therefore only the fool, or perhaps a proponent of “new-age” ideas, who uses the doctrine of reincarnation as a rationale for laziness or indifference, postponing a life of *yoga* and spiritual discipline with the excuse that he'll get “another chance” later on. Such a person has no clue just how long “later” may be!

At this point I want to shift gears completely and make a few comments on the subject of sanctity. As you'll remember, I explained in my introductory YouTube lecture at the start of the course that we'd be looking from time to time “along” the lives and teachings of several remarkable people who are regarded by their respective religions as saints—as paragons or models of the highest state of religious “involvement”, which I've called transformation. Swami Ramdas, whom you should have met by now in *A Book of Saints*, and Sri Ramana Maharshi, whom you'll meet in

the YouTube video I mentioned above, are regarded by many Hindus as members of this elite group of human beings. Or to put the same point in explicitly Hindu terms, we could say instead that these are two people who succeeded in achieving the final goal of liberation or *moksha*. The vast majority of us, according to Hindu teaching, will end up (unfortunately) being reincarnated, while only a relatively small minority will be worthy of passing into union with *Brahman* at the moment of their death. These fortunate few will never have to be reborn again. It turns out, however, that there is yet another, even smaller minority, who succeed in achieving the supreme bliss of liberation *before* they die. Even while they're still alive in this world and still experiencing the turmoil of existence in their present physical body, they're nonetheless totally detached from that body and indifferent to the changing states of their emotions and thoughts, having become wholly identified with the Divine. Such a person, one who has attained *moksha* while still alive on this planet, is called a *jivan-mukta*, meaning a "liberated soul". According to many of their Hindu followers, this was precisely the state of Swami Ramdas and his near-contemporary Sri Ramana Maharshi. Both of these men could be described as *jivan-muktas*.

First of all, just a few words about Ramdas, who lived from 1884 to 1963. As you will have discovered if you've done the assigned reading for this module in *A Book of Saints*, the book from which I took the reading—*In Quest of God*—is in part autobiography and in part travelogue, recounting its author's experiences as he journeyed the length and breadth of India in the early 1920s. I've chosen this selection because it seems to me that much of what we've been talking about throughout the last several lectures comes alive in his story.

As the narrative begins, Ramdas has started turning aside from his business affairs and worldly attachments so as to devote more time to the spiritual life (see *A Book of Saints*, pages 21-22); what this means, of course, is that he's entering the third stage of the traditional Hindu life, the stage of the *vânaprastha* or "forest-dweller", with the aim of giving himself more fully to God. By the time the story concludes he has returned from his wanderings to his hometown, but now as a *sannyâsin* (the fourth stage of life), having completely detached himself from his former responsibilities and family ties (pages 45-47). In between these two decisive moments, Ramdas travels extensively throughout the country of India, sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of other *sadhus* or ascetics, visiting famous cities and temples and other holy sites and meeting with a number of important spiritual authorities. All the while, as I'm sure you've noticed, he has no particular worldly destination or purpose in mind. His only concern is to obey the will

of God, or (more precisely) the will of the *avatâra* Rama, or “Ram”. We find that he’s utterly indifferent to money, food, and shelter—eating only what he’s given in the way of handouts and sleeping wherever he happens to be when he’s tired, even if just on the ground. Christian readers will no doubt recall Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25).

You can also see in this story—to review our discussion of the various spiritual “paths”—how it’s possible for a Hindu spiritual seeker, while focusing on one of the *margas*, nonetheless to combine certain aspects of all of them, precisely as Krishna advised Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*. It’s clear that Swami Ramdas is predominantly a bhaktic saint and that his path is one mainly of devotion and worship: all his hope and love and trust have been offered to Rama. But at the same time he’s firmly grounded in *jnâna*, in the knowledge that the Divine is the only Reality—“It slowly dawned upon his mind that Ram was the only Reality and all else was false” (page 22)—and for this reason he becomes in turn a striking example of what it means to follow a path of *karma yoga*, with its ego-less service of others. I’ve already mentioned the seeming purposelessness of his travels, which helps to show his detachment from fruits or results. But as you’ve surely noticed, this same ego-less attitude comes through even in the way he looks at himself. He always speaks of himself in the third person and never as “I”—always using the name “Ramdas”, which means the “footstool of Rama”, while at the same time addressing everyone else as “Ram” because he sees in all of them the face of God. As for his practice of *raja marga* or *yoga*, we’re told at a couple of points in the story about his solitary meditation in caves (pages 28-29, 46). The most striking and memorable aspect of his yogic efforts, however, is his use of a *mantra*, namely, the continuous repetition of the name “Ram”.

In order to offer you a glimpse of another great Hindu holy man of the twentieth century, I’ve asked that you watch a short YouTube video about Sri Ramana Maharshi (“Maharshi” means “the great seer”), a spiritual teacher who was somewhat older than Swami Ramdas (born in 1879, the Maharshi died in 1950) and whose extraordinary spiritual attainments were known to people throughout the world. Seekers came to him for spiritual direction from every corner of the globe, and he was even featured on the cover of *Life* magazine! In Sri Ramana we have an excellent example of a *jivan-mukta* who followed the way of *jnâna* or knowledge. The video refers to this as his path of “self-inquiry”, a path in which one endeavors to go “in back” of one’s thoughts, to

discover their point of origin, and thereby to find the very root of one's "I", one's "Self". Whenever someone would come to him with a problem or a question or a complaint, Sri Ramana would typically ask the seeker, "*Who* is puzzled? *Who* wishes to know? *Who* is suffering?" in an effort to get the person to step back and to gain a larger, even cosmic, perspective on the ego. It seems from what we know of his life that Sri Ramana had himself perfected this practice and had pierced the veil of illusion completely, becoming fully identified with God—that he was someone, in other words, who could have said with Saint Paul, "It is no longer I, but Christ [God] who is in me" (Galatians 2:20).

In my YouTube lecture I'll share with you a remarkable story I heard from someone who met Sri Ramana near the end of his life and who was present when the doctors were surgically removing a cancerous tumor from his arm—without anesthetic!