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Non-Indian Practitioners, Yoga, Vegetarianism, and Religious Pluralism

Chapter 6 Summary and Outline

This chapter will turn to the phenomenon of adopters of Hinduism—Hindus by choice—Hindu-inspired meditation movements, and the broader influence of Hinduism and India in American culture: vegetarianism, yoga, religious pluralism.

Adopters of Hinduism

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Adopters of Hinduism

As discussed near the beginning of this book, among the roughly 2.23 million Americans who identify themselves as Hindu, 9 percent do not self-identify as Asian—2 percent of American Hindus self-identify as “mixed,” 4 percent as “white,” 2 percent as African American, and 1 percent as Hispanic. Although Hinduism continues to be seen by many as a way of life to which one must be born, inheriting it from and being acculturated to it by one’s family, it is increasingly coming to be seen as a religion, like Christianity, that one can *adopt*. This reflects the Protestant sensibility which informs American

culture—a sensibility that perceives religion not so much as a way of life, but as a set of beliefs, beliefs one has the freedom to choose to accept or reject. At the same time, to be Indian and Hindu is seen as "normal," whereas a non-Indian self-identifying as Hindu is unusual.

The issue of adoptions of Hindus, thus also among scholars of Hinduism, some of whom not only among some Hindus, but also among some Hindu. For most Hindus, Hinduism continues to repeat the claim that one must be born Hindu. For most Hindus, Hinduism is a precious heritage which they desire very strongly to pass on to their children. Spiritual seekers for whom Hinduism is not a matter of heritage, and particularly who are willing to experiment creatively with rituals and other practices, may not necessarily be welcome in an environment like a Hindu temple, which can be seen not only as a place of religious activity, but as a cultural refuge, where the sounds, smells, and flavors of one's upbringing can be experienced and shared with one's children.

The white community in particular—from which sprang the imperial rulers and colonizers of the past, as well as the racists and religious bigots who, even today, express their disapproval of the Hindu presence in their midst—can quite understandably be viewed with suspicion. This suspicion is expressed in strong terms by Deepak Srini, who writes:

It is ironic that, while so many Diasporic Hindus mimic imaginary archetypes of "white" American culture in order to assimilate, to deny their colonized and oppressed histories, to feignly self-hatred, and to be accepted by the dominant white Christian privileged culture, a select group of white Americans do the opposite. They claim to have "converted" to Hinduism and concurrently mimic their imaginary (and often Orientalist) archetypal "Hindu" in order to reverse-assimilate, to deny their colonial histories, to feignly color their lives, and paradoxically, to be marginalized.¹

To be sure, most non-Indians who have attended a Hindu temple have remarked on what a warm, welcoming place it is—warmer and friendlier, some will even say, than certain churches, they have attended.² But a sentiment on the part of South Asian Hindus of feeling "welcomed" would certainly be understandable, one might argue, and perhaps even warranted, given the historical sufferings Hindus have experienced at the hands of Europeans and their descendants, both in India and in America. Some question whether the warm welcome that is given to "white converts" by many Diasporic Hindus is sincere. "Or is it merely proof that Diasporic Hindus still suffer from post-traumatic, post-colonial, servile disorder?"³

Whatever the answer to this question may be, there are many Hindus who at least express happiness with persons from the majority community in America taking a strong and sincere interest in Hindu traditions. It is likely that, given the experience of racism, as well as rejection of a family religious basis, the belief that Hinduism is a "treasure" left behind which Hindus ought to convert to Christianity, a view still found, or that all religions are "the same word" and should be abandoned, the secular version of this view, it is with a sense of relief that some Hindus encounter non-Indians who have a positive view

of Hindu thought and practice. Indeed, there are non-Indians—adopters of Hinduism—who have been given roles of leadership in Hindu traditions and who are regarded by followers of Hinduism as authorities in their particular traditions. Such "home-grown gurus" are an increasingly prominent feature of the Hindu tradition in America.⁴

The first "white Hindu" to take up a leadership role in a Hindu tradition was Sargun Sanyal Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001). Born as Robert Hansen, he was preceded by the white members of the Paramakrishna Order, such as Sister Nevada, and white disciples of Paramahansa Yogananda who succeeded him in the leadership of the Self-Realization Fellowship. However, it is important to note that, in neither the Paramakrishna tradition nor that of Yogananda, is there an emphasis on being Hindu. Indeed, we have seen that Swami Vivekananda clearly stated that he was not sending converts to Hinduism, and that Vedanta, at least as he understood it, was to be seen as a universal philosophy undergirding all religions. These may be better seen as "Hindu-inspired" traditions.

Subramuniyaswami, however, embraced the terms *Hindu* and *Hinduism* from a very early period as appropriate descriptors for the tradition he had adopted. Subramuniyaswami's guru, a Shava master from Sri Lanka, named Sra Yogeswara (1872-1964), passed the mantle of spiritual succession to Subramuniyaswami in 1949. This event marked the establishment of what came to be called the Sava Siddhanta Church. Sava Siddhanta is an ancient Shava tradition, rooted in Tamil traditions of southern India. Subramuniyaswami's mission, though, was to bring it to the Western world. He returned to the US, practiced intense meditation, and began his active teaching in 1967. The first headquarters of the Sava Siddhanta Church was in Kauai, Hawaii.⁵

In 1979, Subramuniyaswami began the publication of a quarterly journal, *Hindusm Today*, which is seen by many Hindus globally as an authoritative source of authentic knowledge about Hinduism. And as the leader of his particular Sava Sempada, Subramuniyaswami was also a member of Swami Dhanapati Saraswati's Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha. In short, his credentials as a legitimate Hindu, and indeed a legitimate Hindu leader, were beyond reproach from the point of view of the Hindu community. His ethnicity was not seen as a bar to this level of acceptance.

The consistent observation that I have made in my own research, and which other scholars and scholar-practitioners have noted as well, is that, in order to be accepted as truly Hindu, converts need to demonstrate sincerity, that they are not simply passing through a "phase" or "shopping" for an easy spiritual path. Sincerity is demonstrated by showing commitment through in-depth study and devoted practice. And of course taking monastic vows represents the height of commitment.⁶

For many inheritors of Hinduism, being Hindu and being Indian are practically the same thing. For some, the idea of "white Hindus"—or African American Hindus—or Latino Hindus—"is an oxymoron. It may even be seen as uniquely their own, to an ancient and dignified heritage that these Hindus regard as uniquely their own. White Hindus, in particular, might be seen as one more wave of colonialism, seeking to appropriate a culture without fully understanding it, causing untold disruption and destruction in the process. One might identify as a Hindu without an understanding of

what this means or involves for many of those who have grown up as such—or even like other cultural appropriators, while showing disrespect for certain elements or aspects of the tradition. For some inheritors of Hinduism, the local temple can serve as a refuge from the dominant society. In a North American context, while practitioners could well be seen as invaders of this cherished and private cultural space, particularly if they do not behave with proper humility and respect.

Hinduism and Multiple Religious Belonging

There is a pull in a very different direction, though, for many non-Indians drawn to Hindu spirituality. Often, it is precisely the openness and non-boundariness of Hinduism that appeal to many Westerners who are put off by religious dogma and exclusivism. Many of the Hindu teachers who have come to the West have encouraged this view as well, such as Swami Vivekananda who explicitly endorsed either an inclusivist or pluralistic view of religions, many priests venturing their way to the same ocean. Paramahansa Yogananda, too, emphasized the idea of Christ as the great yogi. The aim of these teachers, again, was not so much to promote Hinduism—at least not by that name—but what they took to be a universal philosophy and way of life capable of incorporating all of the world's great traditions into its vast vision.

In a similarly pluralistic vein, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati was “a Brooklyn-born guru whose spiritual journey was guided by Christ, Swami Nityananda, and her guru Neem Karoli Baba” who established an ashram in Florida that has become “an interfaith religious community of service.” For many seekers who are drawn to Hindu thought, and for many Hindu spiritual teachers, to be excessively preoccupied with labels is itself a sign of spiritual immaturity. The point of the path is not to take on a label, but to be liberated from all such limitations: to attain moksha.

Hindu: To Be or Not to Be?

The questions is sometimes raised whether the non-Indian members of organizations and movements like the Vedanta Society, the Self-Realization Fellowship, Transcendental Meditation, and Siddha Yoga are properly designated as Hindus. It one defines Hinduism as something into which one must be born, then all Hindus must by default be South Asian or of South Asian descent. It would be exonymic, from this view, to speak of “non-Indian Hindus” or adopters of Hinduism.

Lola Williamson makes a distinction between those who were raised in a Hindu tradition and those who have taken up a Hindu or Hindu-inspired spiritual practice, pointing out that “there is a qualitative difference between people who have been raised in a tradition in which the rituals, the foods, the prayers, and the ethics are second nature, and people who have incorporated only parts of a tradition into their religious style.”

On the other hand, although Williamson's observations about the differences between the somewhat chaotic atmosphere of a Hindu temple—such as HHH and the Washington Kali Temple—and the highly serene atmosphere of a Hindu-inspired meditation hall—such as that of a Vedanta Society—do justify making some kind of distinction between the types of practitioner that gravitate to these spaces, might variations upon Hindu thought and practice that incorporate elements of the broader American cultural environment—like having quiet halls with rows of seats, having a central altar—end up being perceived, in the long run, as just one more way of being Hindu? Surely the differences between traditional Hinduism and Hindu-inspired meditation movements are no more or less stark than those between a highly formal Roman Catholic mass said in the Vatican and an energetic revival meeting in Appalachia. Yet most scholars would not hesitate to designate the latter two as instances of a single phenomenon called Christianity. Particularly as more second- and third-generation Indian American Hindus have grown up practicing their traditions in a North American cultural environment, with its predominantly Protestant Christian ethos, the distinction between an “ethnic” Hinduism and “Hindu-inspired” movements is already becoming increasingly tenuous. The point is not that non-Indian adherents of Hindu-inspired movements ought or ought not be called Hindu, but that the distinction may simply be losing its relevance.

This issue is a somewhat contentious one, particularly among the non-Indian practitioners whose “Hinduness” is in question. On the one hand, many practitioners do not wish to identify themselves as Hindu because they do not identify their practices with the totality of Hindu practice, but with one specific school of thought. Hinduism historically includes elements such as caste and patriarchy (repugnant to the progressive sensibilities of many spiritual seekers, many of whom are rebelling against these very things in their native traditions. At the same time, it could be replied that there are many born Hindus who do not agree with these things either. Caribbean Hindus, as we have seen, do not often observe caste, for example. Are they not “real” Hindus? This would appear to be a dangerous direction in which to take the discourse. Indeed, Hinduism is such a vast tradition, with such a great variety of systems of belief and practice, that it is hard to conceive of anyone in a single lifetime practicing it “in its totality,” whatever that might even mean.

But there is also a tendency among practitioners of Hindu or Hindu-based paths to see their practices not as religions—and so localized in a faith community—but as “scientific” and universal. This tendency has been facilitated by the founding figures of these paths. For example, Swami Vivekananda, on numerous occasions, claimed that the Vedanta (that he taught was not a religion, but the philosophy underlying all religions—including, but not limited exclusively to, Hinduism, Hinduism, or Vivekananda, was something particular to India and to the people of India. Vedanta, though, is universal, prompting Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan to write that Vedanta “is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance.” On this understanding, one could be a Hindu, Vedantin, or a Christian, Vedantin, or a secular Vedantin. It is not uncommon today, to encounter practitioners of Vedanta who identify themselves either with

no religious label at all, or with the label with which they grew up (if their Vedanta has not led to a break with their "native tradition"). I have met self-identifying Catholic, Presbyterian Vedantins, and Jewish Vedantins—as well as, of course, Hindu, Vedantins. Srimatiji, both Maharishi Maheshi Yogi and Swami Mukundananda, President of Transcendental Meditation and Satcha Yoga, respectively, not as Hindu or Hindu-based spiritual paths, but as universal practices, available in principle to anyone. If they were not for everyone, why go to the trouble of teaching them in America? In the words of Alan MacPhail, a former nun of the Ramakrishna Order (formally known as Parvatiya Gayatri-nal):

Vedanta is my belief system and what I am trying to live in practice. Does it make me a Hindu? In my own mind, the answer is no. I think of myself as a Vedantin, in the sense in which Swami Vivekananda used the word. The word does not imply any specific forms of religious observance. Swami Vivekananda himself left the Vedanta is of universal significance, because it is a map, as it were, of the whole range of spiritual possibilities, covering the dualist through non-dualist positions, including all levels of consciousness which humanity has as yet manifested, and open to all possible forms of depth inquiry, including contemporary science. ¹⁶

On the other hand, there are non-Hindu practitioners of Vedanta and other Hindu-inspired systems of thought and practice who do identify themselves as Hindu. These practitioners will point to the Hindu provenance of their practices and beliefs and express a suspicion of unconscious racism and other holdovers from a colonial mentality in the strong insistence of some non-Hindu practitioners that they not be thought of or referred to as Hindu. The fact that some of those non-Hindu practitioners who self-identify as Hindu have been accepted by many born Hindus suggests that it would be arbitrary to insist that they are not Hindu because they were not born as such.

For a scholar, the question is not "Who is really a Hindu?" or "Who is not really a Hindu?" Rather, the category of Hindu is a scholarly tool. The fact that some people, not of Indian descent, choose to identify themselves with this term, while others who are engaged in the same practices and even inhabit the same organizations as those who do identify themselves, make the opposite choice, is simply another interesting piece of data. It further heightens the awareness that the term *Hindu* is itself a slippery and inexact category for describing a highly complex set of phenomena.

The fact that Western practitioners of ostensibly Hindu or Hindu-based spiritual paths tend to avoid self-identifying as Hindu seems to relate to broad three issues: the general Western trend of avoiding any religious self-identification out of preference for a self-identified as "spiritual," the tendency of the category of *Hinduism* to be constructed in ways that are incompatible with the self-understanding of particular *sampradaya*s—specifically, the *Ganapita/Vishnavaya sampradaya*, as represented in the West by ISKCON, and highly the concern to avoid identification with militant Hindu political movements in India, which place great emphasis on the label *Hindu*.

Regarding the first issue, identifying oneself as "spiritual" rather than "religious" stems from a sense that religious self-identification of any kind is overly limiting. Practitioners who share this sensibility often perceive themselves as in rebellion against religious institutions that they take to be oppressive, while seeing their own belief and practice—despite its historical basis in Hinduism—in non-sectarian, universal terms.

Regarding the second issue, the category of "Hinduism" has generally been constructed in a way that privileges Advaita Vedanta, as taught by many gurus who have come to America, such as Swami Vivekananda. Practitioners in intensive devotional lineages that emphasize bhakti, such as that of ISKCON, therefore sometimes see their beliefs and practices as distinct from Hinduism.

Third, the term *Hindu* has come to be identified by many—particularly in the scholarly community—with militant Hindu politics, with which many Western practitioners do not wish to identify themselves (through which some Western practitioners who do self-identify as Hindu also embrace).

In short, some Western practitioners of Hindu and Hindu-based traditions self-identify as Hindu and some do not. The former could be called "non-dispotic Hindus," identity by choice, who adhere to their tradition as a religious belief and way of the Hindus by choice. In the latter case, self-identifications vary and are to which they have converted. In the latter case, self-identifications—even as the Hindu be respected—as people have the right to define themselves.

Non-dispotic Hindus who have been interviewed about this question have tended to give answers that are either pragmatic in nature or that express their real and pride in being associated with a tradition which has changed their lives in many profound ways. On the pragmatic side, one interviewee says:

I follow Vedanta. That's my religious belief and practice. What does that make me? I'm not a Muslim. I'm not a Buddhist. I'm not a Christian anymore, at least not in any way that my old church would recognize or accept. So what else do I say? I'm Hindu. Most people in America have no idea what the word "Vedanta" means and would look at you like you were from another planet if you said that was your religion. They do that with "Hindu," too, but at least they have some idea of what it means.

On the "Hindu pride" side, there is the interviewee who said:

I love being a Hindu. It connects me with an ancient wisdom tradition—the most ancient in the world—and a vibrant and beautiful culture like no other. I'm a proud Hindu!

Another non-dispotic Hindu, who had his self-identification challenged on social media by born Hindus in India who, it turned out, were much younger than himself, responded in the following way to their claim that he could not be a true Hindu: "I told them, 'I've been a Hindu longer than you've been alive!'"

Practitioners in Hindu or Hindu-based traditions who chose not to identify as Hindu largely responded to this question as discussed above: that they took *Hindu* to be an ethnic designation to which one must be born, that they did not want to show disrespect to their diasporic Hindu friends, that they were spiritual but not religious, or that the word *Hindu* has become too tainted by Indian politics.

Hinduism and Vegetarianism

Beyond those Americans who have either converted to Hinduism and now self-identify as Hindu and those who do not self-identify as Hindu but who adhere to a way of life rooted in Hindu traditions, there is a much wider peninsula of Americans who have assimilated specific practices and beliefs that are typical of Hinduism, and they often have Hindu roots, but that have come to be seen as simply part of the fabric of American society. In many cases, this has often been due to the influence of the countercultural movements of the sixties and seventies.

One such, Hindu-inspired, but now more mainstream American, practice is vegetarianism. Vegetarianism in the West certainly has its own roots, and the reasons given for it typically focus either on compassion for animals or on physical health. The parallels Hinduism and the related Buddhist and Jain traditions, which also argue for vegetarianism on the basis of compassion, but also because meat is considered "tamest" and not conducive to mental clarity such as that needed for the practice of meditation. According to scholar Julia Hauser, vegetarians in Europe during the early modern period often cited other cultures, such as that of India, in favor of their arguments:

In order to buttress what was then a fringe lifestyle, vegetarians in Europe made frequent reference to meat abstinence in other parts of the world. Particularly the figure of the "merciful Hindu," as John Oswald, author of one of the first tracts on vegetarianism, put it in 1791, loomed large in the vegetarian imagination.¹¹

In 1881, when Mohandas Gandhi was still studying law in London, he and another Indian law student, T. T. Majumdar, joined the London Vegetarian Society. The latter Westerners were drawn to vegetarianism on an ethical basis made a deep impression on Gandhi. His attention was first drawn to European vegetarianism by Theosophists in London.¹²

According to Hauser's account, vegetarianism presents an interesting case in which there were mutual influence and mutual reinforcement between India and the West. Members of both societies felt far more in India than in the West) felt drawn to vegetarianism, and both used the arguments of the other to support their own practice, with Westerners drawing inspiration from Indians and vice versa.

Vegetarianism is an important component of many forms of Hinduism. To be sure, not all Hindus practice vegetarianism. According to a 2006 survey, only 31 percent of India's population is vegetarian.¹³ That 31 percent is not made up entirely of Hindus, as there are

non-Hindus who practice vegetarianism in India as well. —ings, of course, but members of other communities, too. Informal polling, taking into consideration not only India, but the Hindu diaspora as well, suggests that roughly one in three Hindus practices pure vegetarianism, avoiding not only meat (including fish) but items such as eggs. Roughly 55 percent of Bahá'ís in India are vegetarian.¹⁴ Bahá'ís are, of course, the priestly community of Hinduism, tasked with preserving the *Vedas* and passing the wisdom of the tradition to the next generation, as well as performing religious ceremonies.

In terms of religious ceremonies, though, even some Hindu deities are offered meat. Goats are regularly offered to the goddess Kali in Bengal, and meat offerings are common in Nepal.¹⁵ Srinethesh, a Nepali Hindu, says, "In Nepal, some of the *grasá* always has to be non-veg [non-vegetarian]." The vast majority of food offerings to the Hindu deities today, though, are vegetarian in nature. This author has witnessed, for example, offerings of gourds, cucumbers, and bananas being made to Kali at worship services in both the United States and India, despite the fact that this goddess is seen as fierce and is widely associated with animal sacrifice.

Hindu vegetarianism developed gradually. In ancient times, there were Hindus who ate meat, and meat was part of many religious rituals, including some of the ancient Vedic sacrifices. Gradually, however, a movement toward vegetarianism and toward disapproval of the offering of animals in sacrifice, began to change the larger Hindu sensibility. Jainism and Buddhism were an important part of this conversation, as both Mahávir and the Buddha rejected animal sacrifice.

The ideal of vegetarianism is an important one, even for those Hindus who do not observe it, or who observe it with various compromises (such as the custom of many Bengali Hindus of eating fish). There are major Hindu texts that condemn the violence required by meat-eating. One of the foundational texts of the Vaishnav tradition, where vegetarianism is particularly strong, the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, condemns violence against animals that is committed in order to feed oneself as does the *Váruṇa Purāna*. A common epithet of Krishna is *Gopála*, or Gopal, which literally means "protector of cows." The *Mānsmṛiti*, one of the *Dharma Śástras*, or legal texts, of Hinduism also states: "Whoever does violence to harmless creatures out of a wish for his own happiness does not increase his happiness anywhere, neither when he is alive nor when he is dead."¹⁶

Hinduism and Yoga: A Case Study

Yoga, as discussed previously, was transmitted to the West primarily by Hindu masters, some of whom presented it as part of a total spiritual path and some of whom focused more upon its physical health dimensions. Some also innovated and incorporated particular postures and approaches which they adapted from the West. Just as Indian and Western vegetarians have drawn from and supported one another's practices, and continue to do so today, there is also now a mutual flow of "yogic" knowledge between India and the West, although the practice began in India.

The question of the relationship between yoga and Hinduism has become a very contested topic in the contemporary world. Many Hindus believe the Hindu roots of yoga have been erased by Western yoga practitioners—many of them Americans—who are focused wholly on the physical side of the practice without regard for its spiritual dimensions and who are making an enormous amount of money off of the Indian spiritual heritage in the process. This is the basis, for example, of the Hindu American Foundation's "Take Back Yoga" campaign:

As the multi-billion dollar yoga industry continues to grow with studios becoming as prevalent as Starbucks and \$120 yoga pants, the mass commercialization of this ancient practice, rooted in Hindu thought, has become concerning. With proliferation of new forms of "yoga," the underlying meaning, philosophy, and purpose of yoga being lost. Take Back Yoga aims to bring to light yoga as a life-long practice dedicated to achieving moksha, or liberation/union with God.¹⁸

Scholars note, however, that yoga has never been an exclusively Hindu practice. If by the term *Hindu* we are referring exclusively to the Vedic family of traditions, yoga practice has also been an integral element of both Jainism and Buddhism. Sifu in medieval India participated in yogic traditions as well, both adopting and adapting the practice to their own spiritual path. Hindu traditions have certainly been a massive part of yoga's history, but not to the exclusion of others.¹⁹

Many American yoga practitioners received this practice, often from Indian masters, as a secular, non-sectarian mode of achieving and sustaining health and peace of mind. Aware of the resistance that a presentation of yoga as Hindu might evoke in their Western students with strong Christian beliefs, or that a presentation of yoga as religious at all might evoke in their students who are not religious, they prefer to present the practice in what they see as neutral terms.

Below follows the case study of Judith, a long-time yoga practitioner and yoga instructor who was asked a variety of questions about her practice in an effort to discern how a serious American yoga practitioner might respond to issues of the kind under discussion here. As we shall see, like many American yoga practitioners, Judith's practice began as a health practice. This has led, however, to a deepened interest and appreciation for dimensions of yoga that many Hindus would recognize as its most "spiritual" side, including the aspiration for moksha.

How did you first become interested in yoga?

In my mid-thirties, I was slowly developing more pain in my spine. (Later it was discovered a car accident at eighteen created this slow undoing of body, mind and spirit for me.) Many unsuccessful doctor visits led me to a woman who was trained in acupuncture by her grandfather. She was fortunately also an American trained physician, so after two treatments she sent me for an MRI of my cervical spine (neck) and found a massive herniated disc. It was described as all the topography

was out of the tube, not good. Two surgeries followed with months of recovery. Realizing that I needed to not only heal physically but emotionally and mentally as well, a friend suggested I try yoga with her. Because I had been a triathlete, I was enthusiastic about the challenge of Bikram Yoga. This practice helped me gain self-confidence that had been lost, lift my mood, feel physically stronger and more integrated within myself.

How did you go about exploring yoga?

My husband would say I read everything I could about yoga once the fire was ignited. But I first was interested in postures (asanas), then breath (pranayama), then meditation (dhyana) and the spiritual components of practice. I found the *Yogas and Nyamas* to be gems of wisdom. I loved a book by Deborah O'Dell. I had her come to lead a seminar at my studio! Delightful! Shortly after I found yoga, I needed more than reading to answer my questions and I started formal yoga training. My first yoga teacher training/certification program was in hot yoga, followed by certification in Hatha Yoga, then Yin Yoga. Most recently, I completed a 500-hour teacher training program with Gary Kraftsow, founder of Yin yoga. I currently read Fariq's *Yoga Sutras* every day, practice with them in many ways, and study from many texts. I have a couple of books by my bedside and around the house on topics like the Vedas, Tantra, Ayurveda, and Meditation. A few authors that help me prepare practices to teach are Gary Kraftsow, Jack Kornfield, David Frawley, and Judith Lasater. I start with CDs daily, practice integrated practices that provide care for my spine, mind and heart.

[The authors whom Judith mentions in answer to this question are eclectic in their orientations. Jack Kornfield, for example, is an American Buddhist and a well-known author on this tradition, and David Frawley is an American Hindu teacher and Ayurveda expert who has a considerable following among both adopters and mentors of Hinduism. He also frequently comments upon contemporary Indian politics, making him a somewhat controversial figure, although Judith did not seem aware of this. Judith's eclecticism is quite typical of Americans, and Westerners generally, who are drawn to Hindu traditions. We shall see this in the case of George Harrison as well.]

How long have you practiced yoga?

Almost a decade.

Are you associated with any school of yoga? With a particular lineage or philosophy?

I am grateful to be a student of Gary Kraftsow's, and am connected to the Krishnamacharya lineage through Gary, who was a student of his and his son, T.K.V. Desikachar. While I am influenced by all my teachers and training, I feel primarily from the Yin yoga tradition.

Are you a certified yoga teacher? Where did you receive your certification?

I have a number of certifications. My yoga certifications currently are listed below: My name are: E-NYT200, RYT500, 200-hour Hatha Yoga, local teacher training program, 200-hour hot yoga, completed in FL and NY, 50-hour Yin Yoga, completed in Vancouver, BC, 500-hour Vinnyoga, completed at YogaVital, Virginia. I am currently studying David Frawley's Ayurveda and Yoga online program.

What are your thoughts on certification, qualifications, authenticity, etc.? In other words, would you see yoga as a field in which there should be maximum freedom of creative expression, or do you see yoga as something that can be done correctly or incorrectly, and that it is important to be doing and teaching yoga the "right" way?

When trained with an authentic teacher connected to a rich history and tradition of a lineage, there is a path to becoming a reputable and well-educated teacher. Very few exceptional programs exist in the states with what I would call a master teacher. I feel a bit uncomfortable sharing that publicly, as it is not a popular view, but I have experienced the poor training of yoga teachers that surround me. There are definitely correct ways yoga should be taught, either for safety reasons, philosophical reasons or therapeutic reasons. It's much more a science than an art. Examples are proper ways to sequence asanas, proper ways to prepare students for pranayama and meditation, and certain yoga tools can be contra-indicated for certain conditions. While yoga is meant to be applied to the individual, the teacher must understand a complete range of tools, how they can be integrated, what the affects can be to offer the student a meaningful practice that changes that condition. There is a method to creating a beautiful practice, and a good teacher honors this with regular practice of their own. Gary frequently reminds us, "You can't teach what you don't have." From our tradition, we teach for ourselves and practice for our students.

From your perspective as a practitioner of yoga, how would you describe the relationship between yoga and Hinduism? Do you see the two as deeply connected or as completely separate and distinct from one another?

For myself, I have not had a path to a Hindu community to connect with, so I have only begun to understand the relationship between the two intellectually. In my personal practice, I am aware of elements that have meaning for me as a yoga practitioner that are deeply rooted in the Hindu tradition.

What are some of the issues that arise for you, as a teacher, in imparting yoga to your students? Is there resistance to the "Hindu-ness" or "Indian-ness" of the practice?

As a teacher, and a studio owner, I find I need to carefully offer deeper teachings slowly. I would describe my approach to be like quietly knocking on a door. My students have become more receptive to pranayama, chanting, mantra, dhara, and

Sutra study and the spiritual components of yoga as they have grown to trust me. Students are primarily coming to yoga to "move and breathe". Many have tight hamstrings or lower back issues and are carrying stress in their neck and shoulders, but beyond that yoga doesn't have a role in their lives. Fortunately, my students appreciate that I am a serious student of yoga and often go away for training. Upon returning home they are curious about I was studying. Over time, my students have become more focused on yoga creating opportunities for personal transformation. Hence, I can introduce these ideas gently, quietly knocking. Recently I have begun to study in Ayurveda as another means to open doors to discussing diet and lifestyle from this ancient perspective.

Site adds:

Even though I might say in class something like, "ultimately yoga creates an opportunity for us to recognize patterns that don't serve us, remove these obstacles or limitations and move closer to our true nature," I don't think the students generally have a deep faith or an understanding of what yoga can really do for them psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. Private sessions are often a more open exchange with an individual student about many tools of yoga. At times, I fault myself for not sharing more with my group classes. I have realized that, like my students, I too am setting my own path as a yoga student, and until I wanted to know what this yoga journey could truly be, I wasn't ready. When the student is ready the teacher appears (in many forms!).

If you had to, how would you define yoga?

Yoga is a path to liberation (moksha) that each individual can explore uniquely, with or without the support of a teacher. From my own experience, I do believe it needs to be done with eagerness, discipline and consistency.

Hinduism and Religious Pluralism

The first statistic that Lisa Miller notes in her 2009 editorial, "We Are All Hindus Now," is the fact that 65 percent of Americans believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life." The association of Hinduism with religious pluralism is a strong one in the American consciousness, going back to Swami Vivekananda's first address at the World Parliament of Religions where he characterized Hinduism as a religion of "not only tolerance, but universal acceptance."

The term *religious pluralism* is sometimes used to refer to the simple fact that there are a great many religions in practice. In a theological sense, though, religious pluralism is the idea that there are many true religions that can lead their practitioners to ultimate reality; to some form of salvation, or ultimate fulfillment.

In this area, as with vegetarianism and yoga, it is possible to trace mutual influences which flow between Hinduism and Western culture. The pluralistic roots of Hinduism run quite deep. From the *Shiva Mahima Stotra*:²⁴ "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which people take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." From the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach them, all are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me." And from the *Rig Veda*: "Truth is One, though the wise speak of it in various ways."²⁵

In the modern period, too, there are the words of prominent Hindu figures such as Gandhi:

Religions are different roads converging upon the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals. I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God-given, and I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe that, if only we could all of us read the scriptures of different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths we should find that they were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another.²⁶

And in the words of Sri Ramakrishna:

I have practiced all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. He who is called Krishna is also called Shiva, and bears the name of the Primal Energy, Jesus, and Allah as well—the same Rama with a thousand names.²⁷

God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up a bamboo pole. ... Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the one ocean. ... All religions and all paths call upon their followers to try to be one and the same God. Therefore, one should not show disrespect to any religion or religious opinion.²⁸

Francis deen of the kind found a ready audience in the Unitarian movement, whose members pursued the way for the assimilation of even more Hindu ideas into the American consciousness in the form of the Transcendentalist movement. There was a universalist undercurrent in Unitarianism which encouraged the kind of receptivity to other traditions that the Transcendentalists exhibited. One may recall that the universalists led to a split in the Unitarian movement for a period time, which was eventually healed when Unitarians reunited as the Unitarian Universalist Association.

In the meantime, though, the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, and other Hindu masters who presented their ideas in a universalist form, as a knowledge available from within all traditions, began to permeate American society through the work of intellectuals in the Vedanta movement and other Hindu inspired organizations. Hooker, influenced by the guru in the Vedanta Society, Swami Prabhavananda, wrote *The Perennial Philosophy*, and Prabhavananda himself authored a commentarial work on the teachings of Jesus entitled *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta*.²⁹

Religious pluralism finally found its way into mainstream Christian theology through the work of philosopher of religion, John Hick (1922-2012). Although his views were long resisted by more conservative theologians, they have gradually become more accepted. Some thinkers, such as the Christian process theologians John Cobb and David Ray Griffin, even argue that Hick's model of pluralism does not go far enough. Hick asserts, in much the same spirit as Ramakrishna and Gandhi, that many religions can lead to the same ultimate goal of unification with "The Real." Griffin and Cobb, however, assert that there can be not only multiple valid paths, but also multiple valid ultimate goals.³⁰ This is a far cry from the exclusivism which is traditionally found in many older, and in the more conservative evangelical, Christian theologies of religions.³¹ Hick's views were shaped by his reading of works by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Sri Aurobindo.³²

Study Questions

1. What are some of the issues involved when someone who is not born Hindu self-identifies as such?
2. What are some of the reasons that some practitioners in Hindu-inspired traditions do not choose to self-identify as Hindu?
3. What are the pros and cons involved in "taking back yoga"?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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 David Ray Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Westminster, KY: John Knox Press, 2006).
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 Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).
 Jeffrey D. Long, *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (London: E. J. Brill, 2007).
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- Holly Roberts, *The Vegetarian Philosophy of India: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Sacred Teachings* (Sequim, WA: Anjeli Press, 2006).
- Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).