

**Hinduism:
One God and 400,000 Gods**

Sermon by Rev. Jim Eller

**All Souls
Unitarian Universalist Church
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Opening Words

“The Stream of Life,” by Rabindranath Tagore

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

Readings

First: “Brahman,” from the Bhagavad-Gita

I am the self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature:

I am the beginning, the life span, and the end of all.

I am the radiant sun among the light givers:

I am the mind:

I am consciousness in the living.

I am death that snatches all;

I, also, am the source of all that shall be born.

I am time without end:

I am the sustainer: my face is everywhere.

I am the beginning, the middle, and the end in creation:
I am the knowledge of things spiritual.

*I am glory, prosperity, beautiful speech, memory,
intelligence, steadfastness, and forgiveness.*

I am the divine seed of all lives. In this world nothing
animate or inanimate exists without me.

*I am the strength of the strong; I am the purity of the
good.*

I am the knowledge of the knower. There is no limit to my
divine manifestations.

*Whatever in this world is powerful, beautiful, or
glorious, that you may know to have come forth from
a fraction of my power and glory.*

Second: excerpt from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by
Joseph Campbell. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University
Press, 1949

Sermon

One way to understand Universalism is the ability to see

truth in all of the great religions of the world. There is in each a piece of the truth, but none of them captures all Truth. Therefore as Unitarian Universalists we are called to explore the great traditions and to find new truth and new understanding.

Hinduism is a powerful and great world religion. Part of its unique gift is the realization that there are many different types of people and personalities which invite differing understandings. Hinduism offers not just one religion's vision nor just one story but a host of stories and philosophies. Hinduism also realizes that these stories are not "The Story" nor are they to be taken literally, but are like fingers pointing at the moon. They are not the moon nor should they be mistaken for the moon. They are suggestions of ways to see the elusive nature of the Ultimate.

There are some who say that to look broadly at religion prevents a person from making a deep commitment to any one religion or from reaching a profound level of religious depth. But, our tradition is that of the religious quest. Depth for us **is** the quest. For centuries, we have been a people interested in the religions of the world. For more than one hundred and fifty years Unitarians have been studying Hinduism. Ours is a history of religious discovery. This is our depth and not some trivial appropriation.

"Hinduism became a lively part of the intellectual life of our ancestors, the transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson

and Henry David Thoreau, James Freeman Clark, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller and others. As early as the 1820s Emerson began to write of India in his journals. He was introduced to Hindu literature by his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. By the 1830s he had copies of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Laws of Manu*, and by the 1840s he began to publish excerpts from "Ethnical Scriptures" in the transcendentalist journal *The Dial*."

Emerson said about this time, that he realized that he was God. Some would wonder about his sanity. A Hindu would say, "So, it took you so long to finally realize your true nature." For within Hinduism is the understanding that each of us is a part of the Divine and the Holy exists within each of us.

At that time, Emerson wrote his poem "Brahma," which goes like this: "If the slayer think he slays, Or if the slain think he is slain, They know not well the subtle ways I keep, and pass, and turn again. Far or forgot to me is near; Shadow and sunlight are the same; The vanished gods to me appear."

Thoreau clearly had the *Bhagavad-Gita* with him during his time at Walden. "In the morning," he wrote, "I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gita* . . . in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial." In the winter, he marveled at both the physical and mystical connection between the land of the holy Ganges and his

beloved Walden. As he contemplated the *Bhagavad-Gita* from his hut, big ice-blocks of the pond he called "God's drop" were cut to be sent by rail to Boston and then by ship to India. He wrote in *Walden* that the same water flowed in the Ganges as was present in Walden Pond and in his well at Walden, it was one and the same. All three were equally manifestations of the Holy.

In 1855, these Concord philosophers received from a British friend what must then have been America's largest collection of the wisdom of India -- including the *Rig Veda*, the *Upanishads*, the *Laws of Manu*, and *Hardy's Manual of Buddhism*.

Now, let us look at Hindu scriptures, the Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism and two of the reform movements that sprang up in response to it.

Hindu scriptures begin with the four Vedas, most well known is *Rig Veda* written about 2000 BCE and the *Atarvad Veda*, sections of which are considered to be from oral transmission dating back as far as 5000 BCE. Hindu literature is additive rather than subtractive. The *Upanishads* that came later are not like our *New Testament* and *Old Testament*. Western religion tends toward a dialectic way of thinking; a new truth replace the old, new revelation replaces the old. Within Hinduism there is an enormous body of sacred literature, including the *Mahabharata*, which includes the *Bhagavad-Gita*, also called the *Song of the Blessed One*. These date back to

2000 BCE, but Hinduism also includes the wonderful and more contemporary writing of Tagore and the philosophic work of Ramkrishna and Vivekananda.

There is one God, and there are three Gods and there are four hundred million Gods, which are all aspects of the same divine mystery, which is infinite and eternal.

There is Brahma, the Creator God, and Vishnu, the Sustainer God and Shiva, the destroyer. Each has feminine aspects. Shiva has a consort Parvati, and this same destroyer energy is also the black goddess Kali that devours, is endlessly hungry and never filled. Shiva can also be understood as time, which destroys all. The God Vishnu has ten avatars. The eighth is Krishna, who sustains by teaching a sustaining love. The tenth is the one yet to come.

We are saved by love, but love comes in many forms. Certainly union with God's loving power is, for many religious people, to attain the highest.

One of the most popular stories about the playful nature of God, is this story of Krishna. As the young Krishna grows into his late teens, he begins to attract the attention of the young cow herding girls, the milkmaids of his village. These girls are referred to as gopis in Hindu mythology. Krishna woos the cowgirls and all of them instantly fall in love with him. But Krishna is a capricious lover. He hides from the girls. He makes them chase him and sing songs

for him. Krishna is a tease. He lets the gopis see and experience just enough of him so that they know he is near, but does not stay around long enough for them to be satisfied. Then when he does spend some time with them, he casts a sort of spell over them so that each of them thinks that they are dancing with Krishna when in fact they are holding the hand of another girl dancing in a circle. Krishna plays with them.

While this may seem par for the course for male behavior these days to play games with women they love, that is actually not the underlying point to Krishna's seduction.. This story is meant to be a metaphor for relationship between God and humanity.

All of us are the cowgirls, the gopis, longing for the presence of God or the Goddess, knowing deep down that he or she is close, but not being able to perceive that presence directly. The divine is elusive, tricky; we can't get a firm grasp on it with our minds."

Yet, say the Hindus, there is something deep inside of us longing to be united with our beloved source of Life. The problem is that God likes to tease us, play with our emotions. The result is that we long for that presence even more. Furthermore, each gopi feels like Krishna has a relationship with her specifically. Sometimes this is even portrayed as a sexual relationship. Lord Krishna is said to make love with ten thousand milkmaids in the same moment. In Hinduism, union with God is the ultimate form

of salvation, what they call moksha.

This is very like the Songs of Solomon, and yet, this is just one story among thousands and thousands of stories, myths and rituals that help make some aspect of Gods or the Goddesses more present. There are stories about Agni, the Fire God, or about Genasha, the elephant headed God whose job it is to sweep the obstacles out of the road of our lives. Some of the rituals are very elaborate. The excesses of Hinduism gave rise to three reform movements. Buddhism being one, but still within the Hindu tradition are two worth considering, in part for their depth and insight and in part because of their close association with Unitarianism.

Ram Mohan Roy studied Hindu scriptures in depth and became convinced that Hinduism had lost its sacred thread. He believed that Brahman – the cosmic soul – was the core of Hinduism and that it was in this pure core and the living out of ethical principles that Hindus could be faithful. He saw no use in the worship of idols. He witnessed his own sister-in law burn to death on his brother's funeral pyre and he was profoundly opposed to the practice of suttee - of burning widows - he recalls his family responding to her screams by shouting "God's wife! Good Wife!" It became a life purpose to eradicate that evil. He was a nonconformist. He was a Unitarian and had made friend with Unitarian missionaries. He was aware that he was not alone in his vision of a reasonable and just religion.

Ram Mohan Roy formed The Society of Friends which would evolve over time into the Brahma Samaj – “the gathering of the highest.” It was a place in which skeptical Hindus could dialogue and practice Hinduism in greater simplicity. “Every living being has an element of God. These noble ideas sparkle in the *Upanishads*. Moreover, as these books encourage people to think for themselves, they strike out new paths. They should not chain our intelligence.” He was an iconoclast in the truest sense – refuting the icons of his own religion if they failed to serve goodness and faith and refuting the icons of other faiths if they seemed to place stumbling blocks in front of seekers.

He fought long in protest of suttee and lived just long enough to see it made illegal in the last two years of his life. This movement became a powerful force under the leadership of Rabindranath Tagore, one of the world’s greatest poets.

Our early American Unitarians admired Ram Mohan Roy, and for all of their interchange none of them had ever met a living Hindu until a few years later, in 1893, when Swami Vivekananda arrived in Boston. On the way to Boston he met Kate Sanborn, a professor of literature at Smith College, who introduced him to various intellectual leaders of her day. She arranged for his first speaking engagement to be at a Unitarian Church just outside Boston.

At the World Parliament on Religion, instituted and organized by Unitarians and others, Vivekananda was received with enthusiasm, as he called for a universal religion "which would have no place for persecution or intolerance in its beliefs and doctrines, and would recognize divinity in every man or woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force would be centered in aiding humanity to realize its Divine nature."

During his repeat visits to Boston he made friends with William James, lectured at Harvard and continued to refine his understanding of Vedanta.

This form of Hinduism promotes the understanding that the infinite is eternal. It stresses the value of knowledge and learning, and the elimination of ignorance. According to Vedanta, religion is experience and not mere acceptance of certain time-honored dogmas or creeds. To know God is to become like God. Vedanta asserts that Truth is universal and all humankind and all existence are one. It teaches the unity of God, or ultimate Reality, and accepts every faith as a valid means for its own followers to realize the Truth.

Hinduism understands that all paths lead to God. All paths, whether they are an individual's quest or a major religion, lead to the Ultimate realization of our divine natures. Think of it as being like spoke on a bicycle wheel. Each path is separate. Each path is necessary. Each leads to the center, which is divine realization.

Vedanta imagines the pursuit of truth to be like a bicycle wheel. Each spoke on the wheel leads to the center. No one spoke is better, each is needed and each is different, yet all are a part of the whole.

The principles of Vedanta can be summed up as, the oneness of God or Ultimate reality, the divinity of each living being, the unity of existence and the harmony of religions.

Vivekananda was well aware of the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. He was aware of their influence upon Rom Monde Roy and upon liberal Hindu and Vedantist thinking. Both stress divine living or a lived faith. Both stress that reason, insight, and experience are more important than doctrine.

This same Sunday that we are considering Hinduism, our children are gaining a wonderful painting by a member of our Church, Rich Scherubel, of icons representing all the great world religions. It will teach them, in the same way that the adults value the truth of all religions, that they too can be seekers.

All of the religions of the world can be windows for our enlightenment. The truth is yours to discover. Here is another door and another path and another partner with whom we dance in the world's religious community.