A woman bathes in the Ganges River. What could be simpler? After all, Hindus repeat this act millions of times every year. But, like many other aspects of Sanatana Dharma, her actions layer meaning upon meaning, embodying the richness and complexity of Hindu traditions and symbols.

First, consider the Ganges, an Indian river that flows more than 1,500 miles from its source in the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. Mother Ganga, or the Great Ganga, as Hindus call it, contains all the promise and problems of India between its shores. More human waste, industrial runoff, burnt remains, and urban sewage are dumped into the Ganges than any other river in the world. And yet it provides drinking water and irrigation to feed a hungry land. It teems with every kind of pollutant yet cleanses the souls of those who wash in her. The Ganges embodies the goddess Ganga, while struggling to provide its traditional sweet water to the millions of pilgrims who seek her during life and find solace in her waves after death (Jacobs 2010, 37–39).

Bathing in the Ganges reminds us of the importance of purity and ritual in Hindu belief. An annual ritual bathing festival takes place here in February. The waters of the river cleanse the believer of the pollution and impurities contracted through improper actions or through interactions with other people or certain foods (Michaels 2004, 184–186). Beyond the bathing rituals, every day at dawn, pilgrims come to the river to pray; to set votive lights, flower garlands, and other offerings afloat on its surface; to drink from the river; and to take away vials of the water. The river is also the place where the cremated remains of the dead come to rest after being consumed in funeral pyres on the river’s banks, to be returned to heaven by Mother Ganga.

And so the woman steps gingerly into the water as it slowly flows past. Sari afloat, she immerses herself both in the water of Mother Ganga and in her devotions. With the Ganges, there is a sense of paradox and unity. The water is full of both pollution and the divine. It nourishes Indian soil and accepts the bodies of countless Hindus who desire a watery burial in it. Then it flows to the sea, mixing with the ocean.
As we saw on the previous page, the Ganges River plays a sacred role in Hindu society. Flowing through India, the river is equally goddess and geography, often depicted as the locks of Shiva’s hair. To die there is blessed, to see it a blessing.

But what happens when you live in New York City, thousands of miles from the great Ganga? For many Hindus, the Gateway National Recreation Area, with its surf and tide, take the place of Mother Ganga. Here is a recent report from the *New York Times*:

It was just after dawn last Sunday when a pair of pilgrims lighted incense on the shore and dropped two coconuts into the sacred waters, otherwise known as Jamaica Bay.

The shells bobbed in the surf, not far from clay bowls, rotting limes and waterlogged rags that had washed back ashore, flotsam from previous Hindu ceremonies to mark festivals, births, deaths and everything in between.

As the Hindu population has grown in Queens over the last decade, so too has the amount of ritual debris—clothing, statues, even cremation ashes—lining the banks of the bay in Gateway National Recreation Area.

“We call it the Ganges,” one pilgrim, Madan Padarat, said as he finished his prayers. “She takes away your sickness, your pain, your suffering.”

But to the park rangers who patrol the beach, the holy waters are a fragile habitat, the offerings are trash and the littered shores are a federal preserve that must be kept clean for picnickers, fishermen and kayakers. Unlike the Ganges, they say, the enclosed bay does not sweep the refuse away.

The result is a standoff between two camps that regard the site as sacrosanct for very different reasons, and have spent years in a quiet tug of war between ancient traditions and modern regulations. Strenuous diplomacy on both sides has helped, but only to a point.

“It can’t stop the people and say, ‘You can’t come to the water and make offerings,’” said Pandit Chunelall Narine, the priest at a thriving Ozone Park temple, Shri Trimurti Bhavan, who sometimes performs services by the bay. “We are at a dead end right now.”

“It’s been a mounting problem for years,” said Kathy Krause, the supervisory park ranger. “The breakdown of these items is very, very harmful.”

It started with the coconuts.

John Zuzworsky, a former ranger, noticed dozens of them washing up in Jamaica Bay a decade ago, even though the nearest coconut trees were probably 1,200 miles away. Then he found flags, bamboo sticks, saris and coins.

After asking around and witnessing a few Hindu rituals, he learned that the items were religious offerings. Hindus must go to the shore and leave offerings to Mother Ganga, the goddess of the river, to show respect and ensure blessings in this life and the next.

“The offering is not complete unless it’s finally put in the water,” Mr. Narine explained.

Mr. Zuzworsky saw an opening for discussion. “A lot of the Hindu traditions are based in respecting the earth, and we were a national park,” said the former ranger, who trained as a wildlife biologist but volunteered his services as a liaison to Hindus. “I thought there was a real connection.”

He visited dozens of Hindu temples to discuss the area’s fragile ecosystem—how saris could strangle the sea grass, flowers could choke the birds, and fruit could disrupt the food chain. Since Mr. Zuzworsky left the park in 2008, rangers have become even more creative in spreading the word, joining a panel of priests on a local television channel. Ms. Krause discussed litter before more than 1,000 Hindus at an outdoor reading of the Ramayana.

The beach was “really disgustingly filthy,” said Nagassar Ramgarib, a retired electrician and a leader at a Queens temple, Shiva Mandir. “I was deeply ashamed of what my culture, Hinduism, has contributed to.” He rallied several members of his temple to help clean up, and he began working with park officials.

“They should understand we are in a different country now,” said Pandit B. Rishi Misir, a Brooklyn priest who leads a Hindu group, USA Pandits’ Parishad. “Our scripture does mention that we should follow the country’s rules and regulations. But some people are very stubborn.” (Dolnick 2011, 1)
Hindus interact with the divine at nearly every level of human existence: mental, physical, emotional, historical, mystical, and social. Such relationships in turn give rise to a huge variety of practices and rituals. These overlap one another, as if in layers like the sand art we discussed in Chapter 3. If this concept seems a little difficult to grasp, recall that Hinduism is a religion of and rather than or.

Also think back to the many meanings of the term dharma, which embodies religion, law, way of life, and virtuous action. We will investigate human–divine interaction through three different dharma paths, any of which might be taken by a Hindu believer (Klostermaier 2008b, 155–239). Be careful not to think this is the only way to describe the yoga paths: some scholars talk about 3 paths, while others mention 4, 5, or 18! Many Hindus look to the Bhagavad Gita to learn about the various yoga paths, including elements of action, devotion, and knowledge. We will concentrate on the following three:

- **Karma Yoga:** This form of yoga emphasizes the dharma of one’s caste, Vedic sacrifices, purity, and rituals. Many millions of followers take this route.
- **Bhakti Yoga:** This form of yoga focuses on devotion and love. Sometimes separated into two separate paths (jnana means “knowledge,” while raja means “royal,” in regard to meditation), this is the most intense course. The path of knowledge can lead a Hindu toward renunciation of the world in the quest for spiritual knowledge and unity with the divine (Mitchell 2002, 19–20).

Sometimes you’ll see the word path as a translation for yoga. In the West, we tend to equate the term yoga with postures that help us stretch, concentrate, and grow more physically limber. In Hinduism, however, yoga refers to any kind of religious practice, not specifically physical postures such as Downward Facing Dog. Think of it as spiritual and physical stretching on the long road toward ultimate consciousness.

**Karma Yoga: Actions**

You read in Chapter 3 that pujas can take place in a temple or in a home. In Bangalore, Queens, and thousands of other places every day, Hindu priests perform pujas to wake up deities, dress them, feed them, or put them to bed. Pujas are a form of sacrifice to the gods, a gift of time and attention.

**VEDIC SACRIFICE**

Another way to connect with the gods, however, can be seen in an extremely ancient practice of sacrifice, called **yajna.** It is the original basis of Hinduism, developed thousands of years ago, during the Vedic period.

Vedic scriptures point out that sacrifice has been essential since the beginning of time, forming the essence of Vedic Hinduism. The Vedas teach that the gods found pleasure by receiving offerings from their devotees. The gods then produced harmony and order in the cosmos. Good weather, bountiful crops, good health and long life, and success and prosperity of all sorts—including offspring—could result from proper sacrifice.

It is crucial to understand that, in the ancient Vedic world, all beings existed for sacrifice to the gods. However, only a precisely trained priest could make a powerful sacrifice. If he did not recite words correctly, for example, the sacrifice might not have been acceptable to the deities. This placed both tremendous power and responsibility with the priests. On the one hand, they controlled the world around them through sacrifice. On the other hand, a priest could easily make a fatal error in a ritual that included the recitation of long, intricate texts by heart. The high stakes for these rituals helped ensure the Brahmins’ leading place in Indian caste society.

But back to the sacrifice: As you move up the karmic ladder from plants through animals and human beings, sacrifices become ever more powerful. In early Hinduism, birds and other animals, especially goats, were the most common sacrifices. Priests often also used clarified butter (called ghee), cakes of grain, and an intoxicating drink called soma as offerings. In fact, soma has been lost to history, although scientists continue to guess from what plant it might have been derived.

Goats and horses carried even more power than ghee and soma, but there was a final sacrifice, even more powerful than animals. Until the 19th century, Hindus occasionally sacrificed human beings. The most famous of these were supposed to be a form of suicide, when a widow would sacrifice herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. (We’ll discuss this in more detail later in the chapter.) The goddess Kali, that wild torrent of power, also demanded human sacrifices. Even in present-day India and abroad, newspapers occasionally report a ritual murder allegedly performed to appease the goddess (“Home Guard Kills, Drinks Blood to Appease Kali” 2005). Although no Hindu leaders condone human sacrifice, the pace of other Vedic sacrifices has grown in the past few decades. Ironically, the revival of Hinduism’s most ancient form of worship has been undertaken by newly wealthy Indians who can afford to pay for the elaborate sacrificial rituals.

The Vedic tradition of sacrifice offers a fascinating paradox with the Hindu tradition of ahimsa, which promotes nonviolence and avoids killing. You saw a glimpse of this in Chapter 3, when you read about the place of cows in Indian society. Ahimsa developed ever-more deeply in Hinduism as it incorporated elements from Buddhism and Jainism, where the concept plays a central role. Thus, one Hindu might save money to pay for a sacrifice, but another one—more attuned to ahimsa—would ask, “How can a human being kill another living thing when we too might have been—or might yet be—reincarnated in nonhuman form?”

**RITUAL PURITY**

For ritual sacrifice to work, all participants—including the object to be sacrificed—must have ritual purity. You may remember that Hindu temples often include outside bathing areas, so people can walk into the sacred place cleansed of both dirt and impurity. When you visit a temple, you’ll undoubtedly be asked to take off your shoes before entering. As you can imagine, this small gesture keeps the temple clean from outside dirt and retains its ritual purity, too.
Ahimsa and Social Movements

The practice of ahimsa has strongly influenced political and social movements around the world for the past century. In leading a struggle for Indian independence from Great Britain, Mohandas Gandhi developed his theory of satyagraha—nonviolent resistance—in part from ahimsa. He insisted that his followers respond to British violence with nonviolent actions, sparing lives and preventing bloodshed. Gandhi successfully led a peaceful campaign that resulted in India gaining its independence in 1947. In the process, however, he enraged other Hindus, who saw him as overly welcoming of Muslims in India and too friendly with non-Hindu religions. In 1948, just months after India gained its independence, a militant nationalist assassinated Gandhi.

Gandhi’s success has inspired social leaders around the world to adopt his views of ahimsa and satyagraha in their struggles against injustice. In the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., led nonviolent protests—such as bus boycotts, restaurant sit-ins, and marches—against racial segregation in the United States. In the 1990s, Nelson Mandela led a similar nonviolent protest against racial segregation and apartheid in South Africa, where Gandhi once lived.

Imagine yourself in the shoes of both a nonviolent protestor and a soldier standing across from her. Why do you think that nonviolent protests sometimes initiate radical social change but other times fail?

Rituals and Festivals

As repeated actions with sacred meanings, rituals occur across the spectrum of Hindu interaction with the gods. As we discussed in Chapter 3, pujas are ubiquitous, and they can contain elements of ritual purification. In reading about the many steps of sacred action in a temple puja, think about where ritual purity might have a place.

Later in this chapter, we’ll examine rituals that relate to important points in a person’s life. For now, let’s turn our attention to some of the great festivals that represent ritual communication between Hindus and their deities. Unlike pujas, which can be performed privately, festivals include whole communities. Given the great diversity of Hinduism, you can find a holiday being celebrated nearly all the time in some part of India.

A festival brings together many elements—food, sacrifice, time, place, people, history, and myth. No doubt, some Hindus celebrate without knowing the “real” meaning behind an important day. Yet the participation of many folks in one place at one time creates a feeling—an experience—crucial to the religious life of Hinduism. It reminds Hindu believers that Sanatana Dharma encompasses all of life rather than being constrained to a few minutes of puja in the morning or evening.

Let’s use the Holi festival as an example. Occurring in February or March, it celebrates Vishnu, his avatar Krishna, and the arrival of spring. Hindus may abandon their usual habits, dress up in bright clothing, and throw colored powders at one another. They light a huge bonfire to symbolize the destruction of the demon Holika, dance in the street, and revel in colorful, crazy exuberance. Then, at the end of the festival, people bathe, change into clean clothes, and resume proper social conduct. In Holi, Hindus simultaneously take part in rituals that celebrate a new season, disgrace a demon, and solidify relationships between friends and family members. These actions—from throwing colored powder to eating special food or building the fire—help them communicate with the divine world (Michaels 2004, 310–313).

Festivals can align with personal pilgrimages—journeys taken for spiritual or religious reasons. Hindus from across the United States,
for example, set off on a pilgrimage in May 2009 to the watch the consecration of a new temple in Chalfont, Pennsylvania. In a traditionally Hindu land like India, though, thousands of pilgrims crisscross the land every day, traveling by crowded railways, automobile, or on foot to destinations related to gods, events, or natural sacred places. In Chapter 3, we mentioned the animal-god temples that attract thousands of believers every month. Perhaps the most famous pilgrimage destination, however, is the ancient city of Varanasi, called the “City of Temples” because of its spiritual significance (Kanitkar and Cole 2003, Chapter 9).

Hindus travel to the Ganges for the Maha Maha Kumbh Mela, arguably the most important pilgrimage date in all of Hinduism and sometimes called the largest gathering of people in the world. During a recent celebration, more than 70 million Hindus participated in the 15-day pilgrimage—that’s the equivalent of 25 percent of the U.S. population, all traveling at one time over 44 days of communion with the divine.

**Bhakti Yoga: Devotion**

Instead of involving killing animals or leaving fruit before a murti, the bhakti path of devotion focuses on a person or group’s devotion to a specific god, relying on the deity’s grace for help and strength. Bhakti (from the Sanskrit bhaj, meaning “to share” or “to love”) developed in Southern India in two periods around 600 and 900 CE. Bhakti hearkens back to the older Vedic sacrificial rituals. Yet bhakti doesn’t grow out of fear of cosmic disharmony, which often then promotes ritual sacrifices or purifying baths. Instead, followers of the bhakti path seek to find a consensual relationship between themselves and their gods. In bhakti, a person often perceives one deity as supreme and trusts in the grace of that god for aid and comfort. Bhakti does not involve sacrifice in the Vedic sense but instead cultivates emotional connections (Michaels 2004, 253–254). In this way, believers often anthropomorphize the gods, attributing human characteristics and purposes to them. People tend to devote themselves to gods who represent traits that the practitioner would like to develop. A young couple might look to Vishnu and Lakshmi for guidance in their marriage, or an injured son might seek solace from Ganesha, whose head his father Shiva cut off in a rage.

Daily activities at a temple may mix sacrificial, ritual, and bhakti elements. For example, while a priest cleans and awakens a murti of Rama as the sun rises, another person may stand at the back of the temple, singing a song of praise, wearing a special piece of clothing or perhaps a bit of jewelry related to Rama. In fact, followers of the bhakti path desire to see a deity and to be seen in return. In the presence of a murti, a person may sit quietly, gazing at the statue and gaining strength from its presence, both seeing and being seen by the deity, the “auspicious sight” that comes from being in the same room (Jacobs 2010, 28). She may also offer a verbal prayer, read the story of Rama’s life aloud, take part in kirtan chant, or repeat a mantra—a word that may have no literal meaning but hold important mystical connotations. (The most important mantra is “om,” the sound emanating from all the cosmos.) Each of these actions shows her devotion for Rama and implicitly asks for Rama’s affection in return (Michaels 2004, 257).

**Jnana-Raja Yoga: Knowledge**

The Jnana-Raja path toward moksha can be taken by any person through education of mind and body. No matter your caste or personal situation, you can dedicate yourself wholly to this course, even excluding all other responsibilities. It is the ultimate path of knowledge, seeking a cosmic understanding of all things. Like other Hindu forms of communication with the divine, the path of knowledge regularly overlaps with traditions of sacrifice, ritual, and devotion. Even more confusing for an outsider, the many yogic pathways of knowledge also intersect with one another, creating a rich map of philosophy, mysticism, and experience on the road to enlightenment.

The goal of yoga is to achieve kaivalya, the experience of ultimate timelessness. Travel on this path requires a guide: a guru. More than just a teacher, a guru can have an immense influence on a person’s spiritual development. He (less often she) can guide you through vast amounts of arcane study, including philosophy, theology, psychology, physics, textural study, languages, physical activity (including physical yoga and martial arts), and meditation. No matter what you’re learning, though, your goal must be to push past maya and to experience unifying consciousness, atman.

Traditionally, the yogic path describes four potential states of human consciousness, as described in a story from the Upanishads:

1. Wakefulness, in which we perceive the “gross” material world.
2. Dreaming, when we begin to understand a more “subtle” reality than when awake.
3. Dreamlessness, in which we blissfully open ourselves to the universal soul.
4. Pure consciousness, where we traveled past cognition, dream, knowledge, and bliss. It is the unity of all, the atman (Klostermaier 2008b, 104–105).

**The control of one’s breathing (pranayama) is one of the focal efforts in yoga, so that one can reach kaivalya. How long do you think one waits to achieve kaivalya? How do you think that ultimate freedom varies from person to person?**
The steps toward enlightenment begin with leading a virtuous life. Why do you think it is necessary to proceed through the subsequent steps?

To achieve the state of pure consciousness, you need both physical and mental power, which you derive from the kinds of yoga described above. As you gain power, you also find spiritual release as your self (purusha) breaks free from the repression of matter (prakriti) (Klostermaier 2008b, 116–122). This is subtle philosophical work, so don’t be surprised if you need some time to understand even a little bit about purusha and prakriti. They denote two aspects of Brahman, and together they create the universe. In the most general sense, purusha usually relates to forces of spirit, oneness, and consciousness. Prakriti, on the other hand, often refers to creation, including everything variable and changeable in life. Connected to our old friend maya (illusion), prakriti seems more real to us here on Earth than purusha, since we’re generally taught to concentrate on things that have been created: buildings, wealth, and even families.

If you choose the path of knowledge, your goal will be to stop caring about the ever-changing life of this world and to transcend to a final experience of pure consciousness. This takes years of training both your mind and body. In the West, you mostly learn asanas—postures—that help you to control your breathing, the first step toward awakening your atman. At that point, you can begin to prepare for the intense concentration and trance states that open the doors to true knowledge and experience.

We can roughly equate purusha to the human soul, whereas prakriti aligns with the mind and body. Given that human beings have both purusha and prakriti, a traveler on the yogic path hopes to move past the maya—illusion—created by prakriti. When you fully realize that prakriti exists, but you don’t let it impede your understanding of purusha, your job will be done. You will have unmasked the illusion of change and experienced the unchanging unity of the universe. You will have achieved moksha.
Let’s return to our sand art example from Chapter 3. We discussed how the individual grains of sand interact with one another to create layers and pictures. Hinduism relies on communication between ourselves (the grains) and our communities (the bands of sand) to create cosmic harmony (the whole jar). Similarly, Hinduism relies on the family and the caste to integrate Sanatana Dharma into society.

Religion and the Family

Hindu families mark different stages of life by performing life cycle rituals at important events such as birth, marriage, and death. Although one might celebrate as many as 16 of these practices, very few people actually experience each one. Instead, most Hindus take part in a select few. We’ll look at birth, second birth, marriage, renunciation, and death. 

**BIRTH AND SECOND BIRTH**

Shortly after birth, Hindu children receive their names and horoscopes. Far removed from popular magazines or the back of the newspaper, such a horoscope orients a child in the universe, noting auspicious days. The family remembers these days as they take care of the child, often doting on youngsters until they come of age. Traditional families still tend to concentrate their energy and wealth on boys, since they will someday take responsibility for family rituals and sacrifice. Other families coddle all their children, knowing that modern girls often assume religious responsibilities if no men are present. In either case, custom dictates that young children have few responsibilities and get spoiled by their older siblings, parents, and extended family.

All of this easy life stops for a young boy when he reaches about eight years old. At that point, Hindu families will begin preparing for his second birth, a coming-of-age ritual also known as the thread ceremony. The passageway from childhood to responsibility begins with a ceremonial head-shaving, leaving the youth with only a topknot of hair that is obvious to anyone who sees him. From this point onward, he must begin his education. He may study the Vedas, memorize passages for repetition, and learn about appropriate rituals and sacrifices for local gods. Given Hinduism’s great complexity, boys used to spend 12 years sojourning away from home for their education. Today, however, a boy may attend a school and study with a pandit, or scholar of Hindu law.

As you can imagine, the thread ceremony traditionally applied only to upper-caste boys. Modern Hinduism, however, has expanded the ritual to youths in the top three castes and has broadened the range from 8 through 12 years of age. Even some girls now celebrate a second birth ceremony. Members of the sudra caste and untouchables still do not receive the sacred thread, an illustration of the power of caste even today.

**MARRIAGE**

If you have Hindu friends or have watched a Bollywood movie, you’ll already know stories about Hindu marriage: You must marry only in your caste; parents pick your mate, whom you might not see until the wedding; and arranged marriages last longer than “love marriages.” To be sure, there are kernels of truth in each of those statements, but real life complicates Hindu marriage far more than you might see on screen or in a novel.

For example, child marriage has largely died out in India. For centuries, parents sometimes arranged mates for their young children. By law in 1860, girls could be married at age 10. This later increased to 12 in 1891 and 14 in 1929. Today, a bride must be at least 18, and her groom must be 21 (Michaels 2004, 113–120). In the most traditional parts of Indian society, the parents of a couple may still arrange the marriage when both the bride and the groom are young, with the understanding that the two will wed when they are older. In this case, love plays no role in the decision, although all parties hope the couple will grow to care for one another over time. Instead, marriage joins two clans, forming an alliance to strengthen finances and to bolster both families’ genealogies.

Brides become part of the groom’s clan, which can be defined either genetically or ritually. (Through this malleable system, families can even slowly migrate between jatis and castes.) Weddings include several different ceremonies that take place over an extended period and include family members and friends, dancing and eating. One of the most serious moments, however, comes as the newly weds light a sacred domestic fire in their home. Dating back to Vedic times, this ancient ritual invokes one of the few gods left from the Vedic tradition, Agni, a word denoting both fire and the god of fire. By tradition, the ritual especially honors the bride, the new head of a household. Once lit, the sacred fire will help produce “happiness, fidelity, and progeny” (Klostermaier 2008b, 45).

Given the potential for economic and karmic gain, Hinduism celebrates marriage above most other rituals. Yet today, village and urban Hindus often differ. Rural Hindu still tend to associate marriage with strengthening the system of kinship that permeates local society. In urban areas, however, more and more couples find each other and get married, sometimes to the chagrin of their elders.

That being said, most marriages still do follow many aspects of tradition. They usually occur within the same caste, and the couple seeks parental approval. Couples who hope to marry someone outside their caste may encounter opposition.

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**Life cycle rituals** are performed at important stages of a person’s life, such as birth, marriage, and death.

**Second birth**, also called the thread ceremony, is a coming-of-age ceremony in Hinduism.

**Pandit** is a person who studies and teaches Hindu law.

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**A wedding couple performs the fire-lighting ceremony.** In this context, how might fire suggest the virtues of humility and selflessness?
or anger. I will never forget two very good students of mine, both Hindus from the same region of India. They had a heritage, language, and interest in science. They met and fell in love during college, only to break off their engagement when one parent would not agree to a mixed-caste marriage. Not a Hindu myself, I had never previously witnessed this collision of U.S. collegiate life and traditional Hindu culture. Describing the situation, one of the students sighed and hoped that they would marry in their next life.

Although civil divorce exists in Indian law (not to mention in other countries where Hindus live), Hindu tradition strongly discourages couples from breaking apart. It’s therefore very hard to claim that arranged marriages are more successful than marriages made for love. They do, however, tend to last longer and contribute to a highly developed sense of Hindu identity that includes family, clan, jati, and caste.

Outside marriage, or after his or her spouse has died, a Hindu may assume a whole new place in the community. The person—usually a man but sometimes a woman—will leave family and friends, home and job to wander the land without following the guidelines of his or her jati or caste. Such people have renounced the world and their communal roles to follow the path toward moksha, and they are often called renunciants, or sometimes “forest dwellers.” If you travel to India, you’re bound to see such a holy wanderer—a sadhu—near a sacred place, or a temple or even standing alone in the wilderness. By giving up their traditional places in society, sadhus free themselves from prescribed duties but also from the shelter of caste identity and familial relations. A sadhu may follow a charismatic guru, develop extraordinary physical abilities, or practice meditative exercises to overcome maya. These people play a part in Hindu society that most of us can barely imagine, for they have left everything behind for an intensive search for the divine.

Hindu Views of Death

An important ritual occurs at death. Over thousands of years, Hinduism has developed many different funeral rites, but most people will follow these steps: After any loved one’s death, mourners place the corpse on the floor with the head pointing south, the ritual direction of the dead. Family members then prepare the body by bathing it, trimming hair and nails, and wrapping a shroud around the corpse. Soon after death, mourners light an oil lamp and keep it burning for three days. As they do this, the family members acknowledge that they have become ritually impure through contact with the body. They will have to ceremonially purify themselves at the end of the funeral process.

Only very few Hindus receive a burial in the Western sense. Instead, they are usually cremated, and family members scatter the ashes, often in a sacred river. A death priest, often assisted by the eldest son of the deceased, performs the funeral rites, and the son often lights the funeral pyre. (Today, the eldest daughter may take on these responsibilities if the deceased has no son.) The priest and family may ask the god of fire, Agni, to take the body to the place of the fathers. The family then gathers the ashes left after the cremation, saving them to be scattered at a sacred place on a propitious day.

Rituals of the Life Cycle

Might these rituals have parallels in other religions or in secular ritual ceremonies? Which, if any, seem particular to Hinduism? Why?

The cremation signals the beginning of the mourning period, and the family ritually bathes as a step toward ritual cleanliness. Survivors often won’t eat salt or wear leather to help rid their spirits of the impurity arising from death. On the 11th day, after one more ritual, the family rejoins society. At this point, the family members hope that their loved one has found a new place in a better body, born again a bit further along the path toward enlightenment.

Unlike the family of the deceased, people who work around death never lose the taint of ritual impurity. This leads to one of the paradoxes of the caste system: Cremators, although impure, can eventually become low-status Brahmans. “Death priests,” however, so regularly interact with death that they are regarded as untouchable by much of society.

THE AFTERLIFE

In the ancient Vedic tradition, life after death depended on a person’s gender, caste, and funeral ritual. A high-caste man would join his ancestors, but only if proper last rites had been performed. His afterlife would then be spent (poetically) on the cool moon (Klostermaier 2008a, 46–47). The Rig-veda explains that those who have entered the afterlife can influence what happens on Earth, so the living ought to continue performing rituals to keep the deceased appeased.

Starting around 500 BCE, however, reincarnation began to take the place of Vedic teachings regarding life after death. As we’ve learned, the concept of reincarnation explains that a person’s soul continually goes through the process of being born, dying, and being reborn. The reincarnation of a living thing depends both on the soul’s karma and its desire to be born again to enjoy the pleasures of Earth. Good karma will lead to a higher level upon rebirth but also a diminishing desire for worldly delight. Put another way, the soul will cease the cycle of rebirth and attain unity with the divine only when it becomes bored with worldly gratification and seeks further spiritual experiences.
Sati: Ritual Widow Burning

It’s against Indian law and nearly never followed today, but ritual wife burning—known as sati—casts a long shadow over Hindu culture. Either voluntarily or by force, a widow would be burned along with her dead husband. Sati emphasized the lasting marriage between the couple, with the widow dressed in wedding clothes before being incinerated on the funeral pyre. As a result of her ritual suicide, the woman gained tremendous respect from the living. Family members might mark the spot of her death with stones and even build shrines to her as a local deity.

Hindu traditions sometimes also describe the need to play loud music during a funeral. Did this encourage 18-year-old Roop Kanwar to throw herself on the pyre of her late husband in 1989, or did music cover her screams after she was pushed by members of her family? Traditionalists, scholars, feminists, and modernists may all have different answers to this question. Although the Indian government had taken steps to prohibit sati, no one was found guilty in Kanwar’s death, the last known sati in India (Jacobs 2010, 70).

Sanatana Dharma and the Caste System

Think back to Chapter 3 and our comparison of Hinduism to sand art. Every layer and every grain in the jar helps create the final picture. Each layer depends on the others to help make the image and avoid falling into the wrong place. The principles of Sanatana Dharma are like layers of sand in the jar: Take away even one layer, and the picture won’t be finished. Many Hindus see caste in a similar way, with each person fitting into the picture at a particular place.

As you know, you can follow dharma by living appropriately to your caste (also called a varna) and jati. It’s a lot easier to describe caste and jati in theory, however, than to define them in real life. Especially if you have grown up in a rural Hindu village, the caste system includes nearly endless overlapping beliefs, traditions, teachings, and customs that make it impossible to differentiate completely among family, clan, jati, and caste. In fact, Hindus often use the terms varna and jati interchangeably.

For the most part, Hindus are born into a specific varna and jati. As they grow up, Hindu children learn how their varna and jati determine appropriate behavior. How you greet others, speak, eat, give gifts, and pay for services all relate to your jati. Your place in the family and your age will further affect how you interact with the world around you.

As you might suspect, higher caste generally confers intensified ritual purity, more prescribed rituals to be performed, higher social prestige, and proximity to moksha. Members of lower castes may not have to follow so many explicit rules regarding ritual cleanliness or food preparation, but they also experience less prestige in society and can expect to have longer paths toward enlightenment.

Caste constantly reminds every person that his or her place in society results from actions taken during previous lives. Therefore, it makes good sense to follow sruti (scripture) and smrти (tradition) to create good karma. Violating sruti and smrти has the opposite effect, developing bad karma that the person will have to wash away through religious rituals, pilgrimage, or perhaps gifts to the temple.

As you learned in Chapter 3, good karma speeds your way toward moksha, while bad karma keeps you unenlightened. Although it may sound silly, I often think about this as a cosmic game of Chutes and Ladders. You spend life living according to Sanatana Dharma, accumulating good karma as you move along the path toward moksha. Break the dharma rules, though, and you may slide down the chute to a lower social caste. On the other hand, if you leave the troubles of the world behind and become a sadhu, perhaps you’ll find a ladder that leads you quickly toward enlightenment.

Religion + GENDER

Women in Hinduism

Primarily male gods. Widow burning. These things make you wonder: What roles do women play in Hinduism? Some scholars argue that, during the ancient Vedic times, women actually had a prominent place in the religion. Women were allowed to study the Vedas, some participated in sacrifice, and others traveled to war with male caste members. Many Vedic hymns sing the praises of women and goddesses.

As the Vedic tradition spread and began to develop its many ritual levels, men began to take control of society. Women moved into the domestic sphere, where they tended the sacred domestic fire and looked after children. Women’s duties in the home were often so great that they were taught not to go out in public. Yet Hindu traditions and texts, including the Puranas, offer pictures of free, powerful women who live outside traditional restrictions. Not just a consort to a male god or his feminine aspect, the goddess became a powerful force in her own right. Don’t forget Kali’s terrible influence or Shakti’s erotic power. Closer to Earth, some women have become important gurus and spiritual advisers called Mas (or “Mothers”). They are renowned among devotees for their spiritual power and insight.

As India has developed modern forms of education, economy, and politics, women have taken increasingly larger roles in society. The late Indira Gandhi remains an icon of female political power, and the exploding technology sector looks for women to fill its huge employment needs. Still, women in the countryside tend to be undereducated and economically disadvantaged. Traditionalist Hindus have been slow to accept changes that would give women more modern political or social rights, preferring instead to uphold older traditions. Coupled with issues of the economy, caste, and education, the particularly Hindu role of women in India continues to evolve (Klostermaier 2008b, 361–376).
Gandhi, Hinduism, and Politics

Mohandas Gandhi (later called “Mahatma,” the Great Soul) originally wanted to become a medical doctor. His place in Hindu society, however, did not allow this profession, so he became a lawyer and moved to South Africa. When the government there forced all Indians to be registered and fingerprinted, Gandhi began his life of social activism and passive resistance. He believed that it was better to go to prison than to follow an unjust law.

When Gandhi returned to India in 1915, Great Britain ruled the subcontinent as a colony. In 1919, in reaction to harsh British measures, Gandhi began to support Indian nationalism and to train others in passive resistance. He encouraged nonviolent protests based on the commandments of the Bhagavad Gita. He inspired a powerful sense of nationalism that had long been dormant in India.

Gandhi also hoped to reform some aspects of Hinduism, which made him countless enemies among Hindu traditionalists. He identified and spoke out about areas of Hindu belief that he thought could be improved, including women’s rights. Gandhi encouraged women to fight for independence alongside their husbands. He even nominated a woman for president of the Indian Congress. Likewise, Gandhi fought for the rights of the outcastes—the untouchables—whom he renamed Harijan, or “people of god.” In this way, Gandhi sought to preserve much of traditional Hinduism while bringing a modern sense of fairness to Indian society.

Gandhi’s belief in nonviolence extended to the active care and love of all beings. Although he was devoutly Hindu, Gandhi tolerated and accepted people of all religions, looking even to the Russian Christian writer Leo Tolstoy for inspiration. He reached out to all levels of society, not just the upper middle class of his jati. This helped to foster a single national identity for India rather than multiple ones based on caste, jati, language, religion, or region.

Today, Hindu nationalists have separated themselves from secular nationalists, and they battle for political power. Traditional Hindus have, for example, prohibited the slaughter of cattle in areas they control, even though Indian Muslims and Christians eat beef. Far worse, Muslims’ and Hindus’ disagreements regularly flare into violence, especially when sites sacred to both traditions seem to be threatened. At the geographical edges of India, Hindu and Muslim groups also fight with Sikh and Kashmiri separatists. All these movements undermine the carefully crafted “Indian” identity that Gandhi hoped all would share.

In the contemporary political world, Hindu nationalists have transformed his ideas into “Hindutva,” political Hinduism, which Muslims sometimes counter with “Islamism,” the politicization of Islam. Yet the competition for political, economic, and social power in modern India—the world’s largest democracy—continues to illustrate the power of Hinduism and other religious traditions in the region. Thus, while Gandhi hoped to use Hinduism as a springboard for harmony in India and throughout the world, his successors sometimes focus on the distinctions between Hinduism and other traditions in their quest for political influence (Varshney 1993).

Creating good karma isn’t as simple as it sounds. You should act appropriately because Sanatana Dharma tells you it’s right, not because you want to act a certain way. “Desireless action” helps to create harmony in the world by keeping the element of unpredictable desire out of the system. For example, a businessman should develop his firm because that’s appropriate to his place in society. If he acts with greed or personal ambition, though, he will accumulate bad karma.

Desireless actions have three important effects. First, they help drain bad karma from your soul, ultimately helping you along the path to enlightenment. Second, they aid in the focus on permanence instead of change, preserving and protecting your soul from the confusion of maya. Finally, desireless actions help to preserve social and dharma harmony—in other words, you won’t be rocking the dharma boat.

Think back to the sand art example. If you imagine yourself as a grain of sand in the jar, what will happen if you decide to change positions or move to another location? You might not alter anything significantly, but you also might upset the balance of the total structure. Similarly, many Hindus see greater good in sustaining their position rather than introducing confusion and change by acting according to personal whim, ambition, or expediency.

Harijan means “people of God,” a term Gandhi used for the outcastes of the Hindu caste system.

Conclusion

Our jar of sand reminds us that Hinduism’s ideas and philosophies, practices and rituals, relationships and structures lay like bands of colored sand on top of each other; move the sand with a spoon, and you’ll change the patterns. Even so, you won’t alter the basic unity of sand and glass.

Like sand art, Hinduism embraces the paradoxes of one and many, of change and permanence. It accepts one, three, or countless gods. Humans also live a paradoxical existence, striving for moksha in the midst of maya. By way of rituals, sacrifices, devotions, and study, a Hindu may attain higher levels of consciousness. Yet enlightenment often comes through long karmic struggle, rooted in family rituals and communal responsibilities. When Hindus help build a new temple or attend a puja, they simultaneously cement spiritual and social bonds.
Like the Hindu deities Brahma and Shiva, Vishnu is a manifestation of Brahman. How do the different forms of their gods allow Hindus to relate to them in a personal way?

The funeral rites in Hinduism involve the cremation of the deceased on a pyre, often by a river where the ashes will be scattered. What does the scattering of ashes on a sacred river say about the Hindu view of humanity?

**WHAT IS ESSENTIAL?**

Though it has developed in many different forms, Hinduism relies on Sanatana Dharma—the eternal law of all creation. While Hindus can worship either one or numerous gods, many believe that all divinity originally comes from one source: Brahman. This source can manifest itself in many forms, thus the Hindu worship of multiple gods. The three primary deities—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—represent the most elemental aspects of human existence.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?**

Humans, gods, animals, and the planets all come from Brahman. Our day-to-day experiences, though, cause us to lose sight of this ultimate reality. However, as human beings, we can work toward enlightenment. Hindus believe a person’s soul will be reincarnated until that person achieves enlightenment, called moksha.

**HOW DOES THE SACRED BECOME COMMUNITY?**

Just as individuals interact with the gods, so does society as a whole. For Hindus, this begins with the family and at the beginning of life. Hindus normally focus on major events such as birth, second birth (or coming of age), marriage, renunciation of the world, and death. Finally, when Hindus follow the teachings of Sanatana Dharma, they are acting according to religious, social, ethical, and moral precepts. In this case, there is no difference between religious dharma and social dharma.

**HOW DO HUMANS INTERACT WITH THE SACRED?**

Hindus interact with the sacred world through puja ceremonies, rituals, sacrifices, and personal or communal devotion. These practices allow individuals to communicate with divine power on spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional levels. More generally, Hindus interact with the divine whenever they follow dharma. Hindus may also choose the path of knowledge, seeking oneness with Brahman through the yoga tradition.

**<<<<< A Hindu bride and groom at their wedding. How would rituals of marriage and birth help to support Hinduism? >>>>>**

**A Brahmin priest dispenses blessings in a temple. How might public worship affect both individuals and the community?**
Summary

**HOW DO HUMANS INTERACT WITH THE SACRED?**  p. 41

- The Vedas teach that the gods produced harmony and order in the cosmos after receiving offerings from their devotees. Animals may be offered as sacrifices to the Hindu gods, and in the past, sometimes even humans were sacrificed.
- In addition to sacrifice, Hindus also rely on developing a relationship with one or more gods through devotion called Bhakti.
- Finally, people may set out on a path of knowledge that leads them to ever-higher levels of yogic wisdom.

**HOW DOES THE SACRED BECOME COMMUNITY?**  p. 45

- Rituals and holidays often help to cement bonds of community. Second birth marks the passage from childhood to responsibility. From this point onward, a Hindu child must begin his or her education.
- During a Hindu wedding, for example, a sacred “domestic fire” is lit in the couple’s new home. Once lit, the sacred fire—associated with the ancient god Agni—will help produce happiness, fidelity, and children.
- Hindus often follow strict rituals following death, including cleansing, cremation, and scattering of the ashes. Survivors may adhere to strict rules, such as not eating salt or wearing leather, to rid their spirits of the impurity of death. This ritual purity and impurity remind us that Hinduism has long structured communities according to castes, which differ in their cleanliness.

Key Terms

- **Bhakti Yoga** is a path of devotion by Hindu individuals and groups toward a specific god. 43
- **Harjjan** means “people of God,” a term Gandhi used for the outcastes of the Hindu caste system. 48
- **Jnana-Raja Yoga** is the path of knowledge that includes movement, contemplation, and meditation. 43
- **Kaivalya** is the experience of ultimate timelessness or detachment in Hinduism. 43
- **Karma Yoga** is the path of actions that include sacrifice and puja. 41
- **Life cycle rituals** are performed at important stages of a person’s life, such as birth, marriage, and death. 45
- **Om** is the sound of the universe and the sound emanating from all Brahman. 43
- **Pandit** is a person who studies and teaches Hindu law. 45
- **Path of knowledge** is a means by which one can arrive at an understanding of all things in Hindu belief. 41
- **Sati** was a funeral practice in which a widowed woman would, voluntarily or by force, be burned on a pyre with the body of her husband. 47
- **Second birth**, also called the thread ceremony, is a coming-of-age ceremony in Hinduism. 45
- **Varna** means “color” and refers to caste in Indian society. 47
- **Yajña** is the sacrifice that Hindus use to connect to deities. 41
- **Yoga** generally refers to any religious practice, but it is often used in connection with the development of physical and spiritual discipline that leads to enlightenment. 41
Questions for Study and Review

1. Describe two ways in which a Hindu can achieve purity.
   A Hindu can achieve purity by cleansing him- or herself after going through the unavoidable changes experienced every day, such as waking, moving from place to place, and eating. A Hindu can also achieve purity by avoiding impure things, such as the killing of animals and interacting with members of different age groups or social castes.

2. How is the movement of devotion, or bhakti, related to both sacrifice and ritual? Give two examples.
   Bhakti relates to both sacrifice and ritual. Bhakti includes many ritualistic activities, such as saying the name of the god or goddess, singing songs in honor of the deity, and dressing in or bearing Hindu symbols. Additionally, a follower of Bhakti may make pilgrimages to holy places connected to a particular god. Daily sacrifices in the home or temple are also practices of bhakti.

3. What is the practice of yoga?
   The term yoga can be used for many religious practices. Specifically, though, yoga connotes a form of education. People begin by living a virtuous life, then learn to discipline their bodies and breathing through yoga postures, leading to greater insight and, finally, kaivalya—timeless existence.

4. For Hindus, what is the relationship between karma and reincarnation?
   Karma affects reincarnation. A Hindu's actions in one life can influence his or her social and religious position in the next.

For Further Study

BOOKS:

WEB SITES:
Hinduism Today. www.hinduismtoday.com
Srirangam Temple. www.srirangam.org/index.html