

# Sacred Threads

## Lesson 2: Dharma: Basics of Classical Hinduism

2.10.2019

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**Objectives:** Overview of history and literature of classical Hinduism, and foundational understanding of *dharma*.

**Materials:** Flipchart, lesson attachments.

**Time allotments** suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service.

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### 1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
  - ▶ Which do you believe? “Good and Evil are real cosmic forces” or “good and evil are purely human constructs”? (Put a checkmark under either heading.)
  - ▶ What is “henotheism”? (Find out in this lesson!)
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

### 2. Silly Fun: “One Minute, Please!” (5 minutes max)

Pair youth up randomly. Each taking turns, the aim of the game is to talk for one minute straight on a given subject. **Youth must try to speak non-stop for the full duration of their minute!** Teacher announces the topic, and first person begins speaking for one minute on that topic. Teacher calls time, and announces new topic for the second person to speak. Continue alternating as time permits.

Choose subjects to stimulate the imagination and which may be amusing. Topics might include: Whether a hotdog is a sandwich or a taco... Which animals would be rudest if they could talk... 10 things you can do with marshmallows... How many chickens it would take to take down an elephant... 10 things that everyone looks silly doing..... Fads or trends you would eliminate from existence if you could... If all the States in the USA were represented by food, what food each state would be.

### 3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”

**Teacher reads:** (From pioneer scholar in Hinduism and Vedic studies, Max Muller)

*“If I were asked under what sky the human mind... has mostly deeply pondered over the greatest problems in life, I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature... is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human a life... again I would point to India.”*

#### **4. Historical Background (25 minutes)**

**Teacher introduces and guides discussion:**

- People of the Indus River – one of the longest rivers in Asia that flows through China, India, and Pakistan – lived from 2500BCE to 1500BCE.
- These Aryan peoples (“arya” in Sanskrit meaning “honorable, respectable, noble”) migrated into the Indian subcontinent, bringing with them their culture and beliefs. Many of their ancient 3000 year-old Vedas—or sacred hymns praising the natural world and the wonder of existence —formed the cornerstone of Aryan culture.

**Hand out attached copies of “Night” (from the Rig Veda, the oldest collection of Vedic literature):**

- a) Ask a volunteer to the read the hymn aloud.
- b) Based on the poem’s imagery, what inferences can you draw about the way people lived at the time this hymn was composed?
  - Humans interdependent with nature; hymns like this one were sung to seek protection or cooperation from natural forces.
- c) What do you notice about how human’s view nature?
  - The Vedas assign a god/dess to nearly every aspect of nature and life, with Hinduism having 330 million gods, distinct yet all manifestations of Brahma – the unifying principle of the cosmos and sum of all that is.
  - Most forms of Hinduism are “henotheistic” religions: they believe in and worship one god, while accepting other gods/goddesses as manifestations or aspects of One Supreme Divine Source.

**Hand out attached copies of “Hundred Questions” (from the Mahabarata):**

Among the most important works from the classical period (500BCE-1000CE) are the *Mahabarata* and *Ramayana*, some of the oldest surviving epic poems on earth. The *Mahabarata* may well be the longest poem ever written, with nearly 100,000 stanzas in 18 books (about 1.8 million words, ten times the length of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* combined!)

- a) Ask volunteers for different reading parts in the text: Narrator, Voice/Yaksha, Arjuna, Bhima, and Yudhistira. Invite youth to come up with fun voices but should be understandable! Read aloud.

- b) What distinguishes Yudhistira's action from his brothers that keeps him alive while his brothers all fall dead? (*Unlike brothers who rush in only caring about their thirst, Yudhistira does not act rashly. He recognizes the presence of a higher power and approaches with humility and respect.*)
- c) What do Yudhistira's answers to the 100 questions – especially the final question about which one of his brothers to live again – reveal about Yudhistira? (*He displays wisdom about the “true or right way of living”... aka Dharma.*)

## 5. What's Dharma? (10 minutes total)

**Teachers summarizes:** There is no simple translated word in English for *dharma*, a central concept in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. (We will study these other religions later in the course.) In Sanskrit, the root of *dharma* is *dhr*, meaning “to hold, maintain, keep.” So *dharma* is something that holds/maintains/keeps our Life and the Cosmos, and therefore something that people should also hold/maintain/keep.

- a) **For Hindus**, the natural universe is governed by unchanging laws, including physical and moral laws. These laws, duties, behaviors, virtues, and “right way of living” make the universe run smoothly; if people fail to follow these dharma, the universe also fails to run smoothly. There is even a god named Dharma who is in charge of the laws of righteous duty. In Hinduism, Evil is not some cosmic force but merely ignorance of dharma.
- b) **For Buddhists**, dharma similarly means cosmic law and order. But additionally, Dharma (with a capital D) refers to the Buddha's teachings on the laws of reality, and dharma (with a lowercase d) refers to phenomena/facts that make up our reality. None of the laws or phenomena is controlled by a deity; they are simply facts of nature.
- c) **For Jains**, dharma is righteous action as one of the elements that make up the cosmos, along with space, time, matter, soul and rest. Morality is a force like gravity! And most importantly, ahimsa (non-violence) is the absolute, supreme Dharma. It trumps every other law. Both monks and householders should aspire to it. Regular people try not to hurt or neglect their family and neighbors, while monks attempt not to harm any other living being.
- d) **For Sikhs**, dharma is the teaching contained in their holy scriptures. A person's thoughts and deeds are said to be recorded, and upon the individual's death, these will be read in the presence of the “Lord of Dharma.” And as the Dharma is administered by God, depending on the way that one has conducted life on earth, the souls of the dead are either “cleared” or “subject to God's command/decision.”

## **6. What's Your Dharma? Agree or Disagree (10 minutes)**

Youth stand in a large circle. As statements below are read aloud by teacher, youth choose to step toward the center or not, depending on their level of agreement with the particular statement (center is complete agreement, outer edge is disagreement).

- After youth move and take their stand, invite them to look around and observe the positions taken by peers.
- Invite quick comments/observations, before going to next statement.
- **Read aloud:** Which of these would you consider as moral truths/laws that shape a “right way of living” or dharma?
  - To care for your parents
  - To speak only the truth
  - To share what you have with the poor
  - To know one’s place in society and not try to change it
  - To marry someone and have children
  - To perform rituals to cleanse yourself of base thoughts or misdeeds
  - To honor the dead
  - To avoid killing any sentient life, and mainly consuming vegetables
  - To abstain from violence and never go to war
  - To promote “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning?”  
*(inform youth AFTER they take a stand that this is the 4<sup>th</sup> of the 7 Unitarian Universalist Principles)*
  - To promote “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process”  
*(inform youth AFTER they take a stand that this is the 5<sup>th</sup> of the 7 Unitarian Universalist Principles)*

## **7. Extinguish the chalice, saying together: “May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”**

## **8. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.**

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets