

CHAPTER 2

THE GOAL AND PATHS OF HINDUISM: AN OVERVIEW

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Everybody without exception seeks happiness. Other goals such as money, power, and reputation are all desired because we think they will make us happy. Although we all seek happiness, we often fail. Is failure unavoidable? Is there a way to rise above the roller-coaster of life and experience happiness at all times? One way to understand Hinduism is as a positive answer to these questions.² Hindu scriptures assert that there is an eternal, unchanging Consciousness that pervades the entire universe and that anyone can gain limitless bliss by connecting with that Divinity. This is called *moksha*.

If blissful Consciousness is all-pervasive, each of us must necessarily dwell in it. Then why do we feel miserable? Hindu sages answer that it is because we forget who we really are and how we relate to Divine Consciousness. When our minds are clear and calm, we automatically become aware of our true nature, which is blissful. One way to understand Hindu spiritual practice is as transforming our minds so that we become aware of our connection with Divine Consciousness and reclaim our blissful nature, attaining *moksha*.

The Hindu spiritual journey is a journey of the mind – from being agitated in the pursuit of material goals (*artha*) and sense pleasures (*kama*) to a state of perfect tranquility. A mind that is clear and calm is no longer an impediment to the enjoyment of Divine bliss. What are the steps in this spiritual journey?

The first step is to discipline the desire for material possessions and sense pleasures. This is done by firm adherence to *dharma*, the ethical foundation that is elaborately explained in Hindu scriptures. By performing one's duty and cultivating qualities such as honesty, self-discipline, love and compassion, the mind becomes less agitated by base emotions such as greed, anger and lust. The second step in the Hindu spiritual journey is dedication to selfless service, undertaking all actions without focus on personal gain. This is known as *karma yoga*. Practice of *karma yoga* softens the personal ego by discovering the joy to be found in serving others and working as an instrument of God.

Beyond this point on the spiritual journey, the Hindu spiritual path has several branches. Recognizing that spiritual seekers differ greatly in personal temperament, physical and mental abilities and preferences, scriptures offer a variety of ways in which the mind can be further refined and made ready for the practice of meditation and gaining spiritual enlightenment.

One possible path is *Raja Yoga* that trains the mind to meditate using exercises of the body, breath and mind. This path is good for those who have good health and a lot of discipline.

² See the opening verse of the ancient text *Sankhya Karika* by Ishvarakrishna.

Another path is *Jnana Yoga*, the path of knowledge, which involves deep study of the *Upanishads* and related scriptures to understand who we are and how we relate to the world and to God. This path is good for those who have sharp minds and intellectual stamina for years of study and practice of philosophy. Another path is *Bhakti Yoga*, the path of devotion, where the seeker is asked to rest his or her mind and heart in God. Unlike other paths, the path of *Bhakti Yoga* is free of prerequisites but it is by no means “easy” to develop a deep and abiding personal devotion to God. Hindu scriptures offer ways to facilitate this by encouraging worship of God in specific forms with whom the seeker can form a close personal relationship. This is often misrepresented as polytheism and worship of “idols.”

Hindu scriptures are replete with techniques and practices that can help refine the mind and overcome deep-seated mental habits that block spiritual progress. The spiritual journey might take very many lifetimes. Each life begins where the previous life left off and, depending on one’s actions, may take one closer to or further away from the goal of moksha. But in the end, liberation is assured for all, as there is no permanent resting place other than in one’s own Divine nature.

Far from being mutually exclusive, the various paths of *yoga* are strongly complementary. *Karma Yoga* is recognized as powerful in purifying the mind and a necessary foundation for all spiritual practice. A deep practice of the path of knowledge leads to the flowering of devotion; and the deep practice of the path of devotion leads to the emergence of knowledge. All these paths culminate in a mind that is clear and calm, aware of the Divine’s presence everywhere at all times in oneself, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. Such a person rises above sorrows and spreads peace and joy to others.