# Finding Someone Else’s Center

Eastern Religion and Spirituality

Eastern religion is a very broad topic. It encompasses at least two religions that most would consider ‘major’: Hinduism and Buddhism. It also has its share of minor groups: Shintoism, Taoism, and Confucianism to name a few. There are even a few well known cult groups within Eastern religions, such as the Hare Krishna, a Hindu cult focused on the worship of Krishna who is considered by many Hindus to be a supreme god and an aspect of one of their other gods (Vishnu). The real Krishna was a kid born in what is now India sometime close to 3228 BC. The how and why of a farmer’s kid being elevated to god status is something completely alien to our way of thinking, yet to a Hindu it makes perfect sense. This example and others just like it demonstrate why it is necessary to unpack some of the mystery surrounding these religions, which most of us (if we’re honest) know almost nothing about.

The history of Hinduism is as broad as its belief system. In effect it was the official religion or religions, really, of India for centuries. This didn’t change much until the 19th century when Western countries began sending missionaries to India in the name of spreading Christianity. What matters for us is the fact that India decided to return the favor. Our story starts with this guy **(Slide 2)**, Swami Vivekananda. By most accounts, he is credited with establishing a beached for Hinduism in America in 1893. He was a wonderfully charismatic individual who made quite an impression on the west, setting the stage for future religious leaders who would follow in his footsteps. The next of these notables came along in 1920 at the International Conference of Religious Liberals. **(Slide 3)** Paramahansa Yogananda, the author of the bestselling book Autobiography of a Yogi **(Click, Yogi Bear. Click, real cover)**, was so well received that he founded the Self-Realization Fellowship, a movement which persists to this day.

Another aspect of this growth in Eastern Religion on our shores has come from immigration, of course, as people native to India (and other Eastern nations) have made their way to North America and Europe. In 1965 Congress abolished the Oriental Exclusion Act, which limited the number of people from Asia who were able to enter the United States. This, as you might imagine, opened the floodgates. Many Gurus and their adherents moved to the West and set up shop immediately, which greatly accelerated a trend toward eastern mysticism that was already underway. Ultimately this led to what is now known as the New Age Movement. New Age really began to gain traction in the 1980s, but it is summed up best, I think, by a song that was very popular in the 1960s: Age of Aquarius **(Slide 4)**.

Harmony and understanding  
Sympathy and trust abounding  
No more falsehoods or derisions  
Golden living dreams of visions  
Mystic crystal revelation  
and the minds true liberation

Most of us are familiar with some of the concepts of eastern religions, even if we don’t know what religion they are rooted in. Consider: Reincarnation, karma, nirvana, chi, chakras, Zen, yin and yang, and yoga. You have probably heard of most or all of these… but what do they mean and why are they important? How do they impact you as a Christian? At a glance, it may seem like and alphabet soup of ideas; we can’t possibly lump all of these faiths together in one study, can we? What do Buddhists who are focused on personal enlightenment have in common with a Hindu family that worships the god of destruction (yes, they have one of those)? More than you might think.

Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age philosophy, and the whole panoply of eastern religions have several common threads. They all view them slightly different, but it’s kind of like asking a Christian and a Jew for their beliefs about God’s Law. They both believe in it, but they have different opinions of what it means and how it impacts them personally. The first of these similarities is pantheism **(Slide 5)**. We get the English word from two Greek words: Pan, meaning ‘everything’ and Theos meaning ‘god’. Thus, pantheism literally means ‘everything is god’. This is what pantheism teaches. The universe and god are one and the same – indistinguishable one from the other. The divine is in everything and everything, including you and me, is divine. Hold on to this definition… it will come back to play when we dig deeper into Hinduism.

The next commonality is the related ideas of reincarnation and karma **(Slide 6)**. Reincarnation is the notion that souls go through thousands of birth, life, and death cycles. This cycle is the result of karma. We have westernized the idea of karma as ‘what goes around comes around’, but from an eastern religious perspective it is closer to ‘the past affects the present and the future’. Actions taken in past lives affect your current life and future lives. Current actions will affect your future lives as well. It is effectively spiritual cause and effect. Some kind of reward or punishment will result from every action you take, whether it is good or bad.

Finally, Yoga and meditation **(Slide 7)**; at their core, these are physical disciplines designed to alter mind (consciousness) and body. In the eastern tradition, this can be for enlightenment, for liberation, or even salvation depending on the type of meditation and the beliefs of the person practicing the discipline. I will say, with a degree of caution, that the concept of meditation is not necessarily a bad thing. Wait… what? Meditation is something we as Christians are called on to do – meditate on His words day and night. It is a function of what you meditate on. When a Hindu refers to meditation they are talking about realizing their own oneness with the universe/god (pantheism). Meditation along these lines is dangerous. No matter what you are meditating on, meditation is a relaxation technique. It is designed to clear the mind and allow you to focus on one thing, so make sure that one thing is worth focusing on. Relaxation naturally lowers your defenses. As Christians we do not need to be concerned about demonic possession – assuming we are all Christians here the presence of God within us prevents that – but that is not an excuse to intentionally open ourselves to negative influences. To a person who does not know God, meditation can be very dangerous. There are lots of spirits out there that are most definitely not from God.

Yoga is similar to meditation in many ways. Again, it is not necessarily a bad thing. As an exercise routine it is fantastic – I’ve used it myself. Just be careful *how* you do it and with *whom*. Along with many yoga disciplines are chants, even single syllables, which are most definitely not Christian in origin. This focusing chant is also known as a mantra **(Click)**. The Ohm, for example, that is stereotypically associated with this sort of discipline is a realization that you are the center of and one with the universe. That, my friends, is very much contrary to what the Bible teaches us. Do yoga if you want… it’s great exercise. Just do it in silence or with your iPod. Also be careful with whom you do yoga. I have it on good authority that none of you are married; therefore guys if you chose to do yoga do so alone or with other guys. The same is true for you, ladies. No, this has nothing to do with the fact that yoga pants tend to be a little on the form-fitting side. **(Click)** Many yogic poses are what is called tantric yoga and the forms are, to one degree or another, sexual. For the sake of your purity I implore you to be careful. From there I will defer to your parents and their opinions on the matter.

We’ve looked at the commonalities between all eastern religions. Now let’s look at the differences. They can’t be the same in all areas or they wouldn’t be different religions, after all. **(Slide 8)** We’ll start with Hinduism since it is by far the largest of the three we are going to look at. This religion traces its roots to about 1500 BC in what is now Northern India. Unlike most of the groups we’re talking about in this class, Hinduism does not have a single founder. It also has no single, unifying philosophy or tradition. It has evolved over time as a mingling of religious influences that aren’t necessarily compatible with one another. This is, in large part, why Hinduism looks so strange to those of us on the outside looking in.

Hinduism has scriptures; far more scriptures than any other religion, in fact. There are literally hundreds of holy books spanning in time from 1500 BC to 1100 AD. Prominent among these are the Four Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita which you may have seen lying around in an airport or been offered a copy of in exchange for a donation if you’ve ever run into a Hare Krishna devotee.

**(Slide 9)** Since there is no singular philosophy in Hinduism, what does this religion believe about god? Think back to the definition of Pantheism. Everything is divine and the divine is in everything. God and the universe are one and the same. Hindus believe this, but they also hold a belief in many gods – polytheism. In fact, there are as many as 33,000,000 gods in Hinduism. No Hindu worships all of them, however most do worship one or more. Some of the names may be familiar to you: Krishna, Vishnu, and Shiva. For most Hindus, god is not a personal distinct creator as we see in the Bible. Rather, he is part of a greater, universal reality called Brahman-Atman. Brahman is the divine totality – god is everything. Atman is the soul – everything is god. Swami Muktananda, an early 20th century Hindu guru summed this up well when he said, “Worship your own inner self. God lives within you, as you.”

**(Slide 10)** The concept of salvation in Hinduism is not really salvation at all as you and I understand it. Most gurus teach that the individual soul is destined to eventually merge with Brahman – the divine totality – after thousands or reincarnations and a whole lot of suffering. Sounds like a real picnic to me. These life cycles are called samsara – wanderings – until finally the soul achieves moksha, or liberation. This is not liberation in the same sense that Heaven is liberation from the curse placed on the Earth as a result of Adam and Eve’s fall (see Genesis), but rather a tranquility that results when the soul finally dissolves into the universe.

As for the world around us, everything we perceive with our senses is Maya – illusion. The goal of enlightenment is to understand that the distinction between self and everything else in the universe is a false one. Everything physical is an illusion. The distinction between consciousness (the mind) and physical matter, between mind and body, is produced by us existing in an unenlightened state. The idea of Maya, that everything we perceive is not real, may seem strange, but it is not as alien to us culturally as you might think. Watch. **(Play Matrix Clip)** In advanced Hinduism many practitioners seek the guidance of a guru, who roughly equates to the oracle in The Matrix for those familiar with the movie. This is a person who claims to have attained personal enlightenment. Such a guru would say that he will not be reincarnated again. The logic goes that sitting under the tutelage of an enlightened person can help accelerate your own enlightenment and thus Moksha from reincarnation.

Hinduism is big, though as a percentage of the world’s population it still lags behind both Christianity and Islam. About 80% of Hindus still reside in India and it is far and away the dominant religion in that country. There are three major expressions of Hinduism and dozens of minor ones. For the sake of sanity, we’re only going to discuss the ‘big three’, and briefly at that. **(Slide 11)** When most people say ‘Hindu’ what they are referring to is Vaishnavism, the veneration of Vishnu in his many forms, one of which is Krishna – the aspect worshipped by the Hare Krishna sect. This is by far the dominant sect of Hinduism, both in India and abroad. There are other Vaishnava groups as well. Transcendental Meditation, headed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi until his death in 2008, is one of many possible examples. It is a form of mantra meditation that focuses, predictably, on realization of self and development of right living. In Hinduism all roads lead to the same goal, Moksha, but the path may vary. There’s the Swaminarayan movement, also a Vaishnava group, which is responsible for the construction of gigantic Hindu temples, hundreds of them like this slightly ostentatious example in Houston, all over the world. These naturally draw a lot of attention to the movement by merit of their visibility. Followers of this branch are in theological agreement with most other Vaishnava organizations save that they worship their founder, who died in 1830, as an aspect (or avatar) of Vishnu in addition to other practices.

**(Slide 12)** The second of the three major Hindu sects, much less known here in the west, is Shaivism which focuses on the worship of Shiva. Adherents of this sect believe that Shiva is all and in all, the creator, preserver, destroyer, revealer and concealer of all that is. Shiva is also considered to be the patron of yoga and of the arts. He is a family man, as well, being married to another Hindu goddess, Parvathi, and having two children named Karthikeya and Ganesha. **(Slide 13)** The third is Shaktism, which centers around Shakti (also called Devi), the divine mother. This has gained some prominence among western feminists. If you ever hear someone refer to ‘the mother goddess’ this is likely who they are talking about although there are several other possibilities (Parvathi [Love and Fertility], Lakshmi [Wealth and Prosperity], and Saraswati [Knowledge and Learning] among them).

**(Slide 14)** Springing out of Hinduism is another major religious group that is very well known: Buddhism. What many people don’t know is that Buddhism’s origins lie within Hinduism. It can be tied back to the 4th century BC, and a man named Siddhartha Gautama. He was born into the royal family of Nepal sometime around 485 BC, and lived a good life in virtual isolation from the people who lived far more difficult lives in the kingdom surrounding the palace grounds. His father was determined to keep young Siddhartha shielded from those harsher realities, but it was not meant to be. Siddhartha made his way outside the palace grounds, and saw what are known as the four signs: An old man, a sick man, an ascetic (one who renounces worldly pleasure in all its forms), and a corpse. These convinced him that there was a lot of suffering in life that he had never considered. I should probably remind you at this point that Siddhartha Gautama is a historical figure. Unlike the Hindu deities he is not mythological. The experience so moved him that he renounced his royal lineage and left on a pilgrimage. In fact, it was on the day that his first child was born that he left his wife and child, never to return. I guess that makes him history’s first recorded deadbeat father… but I’m pretty certain that’s not part of the eightfold path. He took a six year journey as an ascetic, meditating, depriving himself, and practicing austerity in various forms to the point that he nearly starved himself to death.

Now having lived both a life of plenty in the palace and austerity on his wanderings, he came to the conclusion that neither extreme would lead to enlightenment. Finally, at age 35, Siddhartha reached enlightenment as he was meditating under what is known as the Bodhi Tree. He realized that there is a ‘middle way’. According to tradition, in that moment he became a Buddha, literally an ‘enlightened one’. He spent the rest of his life as an itinerant teacher, spreading the message of the Middle Way between harsh asceticism and opulent hedonism. In Buddhism, no god is needed. There is no creator, and nothing behind this reality which, if you will recall, they see as an illusion to begin with. They have no need to explain its existence, which is the role of God in the Bible, and the lower case gods of virtually every other religion.

**(Slide 15)** Buddhism espouses four ‘noble truths’. The first is suffering, or ‘dukkha’. This is summed up in many ways but as you know by now I prefer the humorous way. “Life is pain, princess;” or so says the Dread Pirate Roberts in the classic bit of cinema *The Princess Bride*. In a nutshell, life’s a drag and then you die. How enlightening. Oh… and then you get to do it again and again and again courtesy of reincarnation. Dedicated optimists, these guys are. The second noble truth is the cause of dukkha: Ignorance. On this, I largely agree with the Buddhists. John Wayne did too. “Life is hard, and it’s even harder when you’re stupid,” he once famously quipped. The Buddhist, however, would argue that it is not ignorance in terms of knowledge that leads to suffering, but ignorance of the Middle Way. This leads to extremes of desire or craving, which in turn lead to suffering or in the opposite direction to deprivation and hunger which also lead to suffering.

The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering: Nirvana. The concept of Nirvana can be compared to a candle flame that has been blown out; an extinguishing. Remember that the ultimate goal in eastern religions is to be absorbed into – to become one with – the universe. That is the closest thing they have to Heaven. This is liberation from the cycle of reincarnation. Finally the fourth noble truth, which is the Middle Way or the eightfold path **(Slide 16)**: Right understanding, thoughts, speech, action, livelihood, endeavor, mindfulness, and concentration.

The major sacred writing of Buddhism is known as the Tipitaka, or Three Baskets. They are followed, along with assorted other writings, by the three major expressions of Buddhism. **(Slide 17)** Theravada Buddhism, the path of the elders, is best described as a religion of and for monks. If you see a picture of rank upon rank of men with shaved heads wearing orange robes, it is likely that they are Theravada Buddhists. These monks are the only ones who are pressing on toward enlightenment according to Theravada. They have renounced all worldly cares, begging by day for a subsistence living supported largely by the average practitioner of Theravada, who believes that as the cycle of reincarnation continues he or she will eventually be reincarnated as a monk and thus be able to press on to enlightenment themselves. This is the form of Buddhism you will find most frequently in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

Far more widespread is Mahayana Buddhism, which literally means ‘The Larger Group’ or ‘Larger Way’. Creative, right? In Mahayana, unlike Theravada, all can advance toward enlightenment, not just the monks. This is accomplished, in their theology, with the aid of spiritually advanced beings known as Bodhisattvas. These are beings that are still advancing toward enlightenment, but have stopped temporarily out of compassion to help others along their journey to enlightenment. This would be the Buddhist equivalent of a Hindu guru. Mahayana is the Buddhism of China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.

**(Slide 19)** Third and finally is Vajrayana, the Diamond Way. This is Tibetan Buddhism. It combines aspects of Mahayana with other… disciplines. It is, not to put too fine a point on things, a sort of sexualized enlightenment philosophy combined with elements of folk magic. I’ll stop there so that your parents don’t turn against me. The same practices can be found in Mongolia as well, but it is best known here in the west by its most visible proponent **(Click)**: The Dali Lama. I promise you’ll never see him the same way again.

Buddhism has really found a foothold in the west thanks to celebrity conversions, which is a nice segue into the east-meets-west sort of philosophy popularly known as the New Age Movement. It combines elements of the Hinduism and Buddhism we have discussed with the 19th century transcendental ideas of men like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Zen Buddhism is a western outpouring of this sort of ideal and is actually more of a calculated rejection of Biblical Christianity than it is a form of Buddhism in its own right. It emphasizes the pantheism of eastern religion, but adds ideas like subjectivism – you have your truth and I have my truth so don’t you dare judge me. We’ll dig deeper into this and its real roots in week six.

**(Slide 20)** Before we move on, a quick word on Taoism since it came up in our very first session. We won’t dig into the history of Taoist thought like we did with Hinduism and Buddhism, but here is the Reader’s Digest version. Taoism is a religion of balance. It originated in China sometime around 142AD when the ‘most venerable elder’ as they call him, Lao Tzu, reached an enlightened understanding of balance in all things. If you are familiar with the idea of yin and yang, that is Taoism. Unlike Buddhists, Taoists do have a deity that they worship… sort of. They worship Lao Tzu, but only in the sense that he was the first to reach one-ness with the universe so it is still a pantheistic way of thinking. Lao Tzu is nothing more than a personification of the Tao. Tao is a religion of unity and opposites; Yin and Yang. The principle of Yin Yang sees the world as filled with complementary forces - action and non-action, light and dark, hot and cold, and so on. Through steady progression toward balance, unification with the cosmos is attained.

So how do we apply the Bible to all of this? First of all, and to go straight for the heart, we must deal with pantheism. The God of the Bible is personal and is distinct from the creation he has made. If you recall the lesson on apologetics, you know that there were two forms of legitimate revelation we looked at. General Revelation is God revealing himself to us through His creation. Genesis 1 and Romans 1:19-23 speak of this very clearly **(Slide 21)**. Pantheism stands in direct opposition to these scriptures.

**(Slide 22)** Eastern philosophy teaches that ultimately man can redeem himself by reaching enlightenment. The Bible teaches that Jesus is our unique redeemer. He is God in the flesh, not just a ‘great teacher’ as some would suggest. He is our savior, not a guru or a Buddha. First Timothy 2:5-6, Matthew 7:13, John 14:6. Similarly, it is important to teach adherents of eastern philosophies why Jesus took on flesh, not just who he was. There is a gulf of sin between us and God in our natural state. There is no way that any human could hope to bridge that divide on his or her own. We need a mediator and that mediator is Christ.

The Dali Lama has said that Jesus also lived previous lives and reached a high state of enlightenment through Buddhist practice. What a dangerous and destructive idea! Can we possibly look at such direct opposition to the clear message of the Bible and assume that its source is anything other than Satanic? Don’t let people get away with repeating absurdities like this and other New Age catchphrases without gently, but firmly, challenging them.

The idea of reincarnation directly undermines the concept of grace. Karma – the law of cause and effect expressed spiritually – is completely unforgiving. Not even the Buddha himself could intervene to prevent the consequences of one’s karma. Reincarnation also undermines morality, justice, and individual significance. Christian apologist Mark Albrecht has given us a fantastic scenario to consider involving Adolf Hitler and reincarnation. No one can sensibly deny that Hitler was responsible for the deaths of millions of people in the 1930s and 40s, as well as the suffering of millions more. He died in 1945, Albrecht reminds us. Two years later a guy named Edgar Jones is born. Poor Edgar has no idea that he is the reincarnation of a man most would call the greatest evil of the 20th century. But thanks to karma he’s going to pay big time for what Hitler did. So will the next umpteen thousand incarnations of Hitler/Edgar Jones, without so much as an inkling of why their lives suck so badly or what gross misdeeds they are paying the price for. Reincarnation is not a fun idea, it’s a curse! No grace, no forgiveness… and no way out. Yet what does the Bible say? Hebrews 9:27 shoots the idea of reincarnation in the foot. It is appointed to man 4.6 billion times to die and after that nothingness. Hold on… no… ONCE! It is appointed to man *ONCE* to die and after that, *JUDGEMENT*. **(Slide 23)**

What the Bible teaches is not reincarnation, it is resurrection. John 5:28, John 6:40. In Hindu thought the world is continually undergoing massive cycles of creation and destruction that go on throughout the ages. This present reality is but one of untold numbers of such cycles. To the Christian, however, history is linear. It has a beginning, and it will have an end. A never ending cycle removes the possibility of ultimate judgement by starting over when the cycle is complete. Linear time does not permit this. The end comes, and then judgement just as Hebrews 9:27 tells us. **(Slide 24)** Philippians 3:10-11 wonderfully expresses the Christian hope. Jesus has conquered death and freely gives us the assurance that, if we place our faith fully in Him, we will one day conquer death as well. The Hindu and the Buddhist have no such hope. We are told that our salvation allows us to live forever, retaining our individual identity, with Christ. In Hindu meditations one is seeking to merge with the universe in order to vanish forever into nothingness. In Buddhist meditation one is seeking detachment from reality and from this world of experiences, eventually fading away into the void. But in Christian meditation, the goal is attachment to the one, true personal and living God. Psalm 48:9. Within your temple, oh God, we meditate upon your unfailing love.

All of us are seeking the same thing: Freedom from this world of sin and suffering. I pray that God can use you to show them that there is true and lasting freedom, and spiritual power, that comes not from reincarnation and karma, but from the one who died and took upon Himself the penalty for all of our sins. The enlightenment we need is not in being absorbed like a drop into the ocean or vanishing like the flame of an extinguished candle. It is found through Jesus alone. Speak life.

Homework for next week:

We didn’t have much time to dig into Taoism, and no time at all for Shinto. Both are significant religions, however, and are worth a small amount of study. I have a worksheet for each of you with a few short answer questions on each of these religions. Research these on your own and bring the completed sheet back next week. Please have it ready to hand in as soon as you arrive. There won’t be any time to work on it here.

Also, study for next week by completing pages 66-74 in your participant guide. The notes and slides from tonight will be posted online by tomorrow afternoon.