

FIVE FAITHS PROJECT



Hinduism

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Introduction to Hinduism

Brahman and the wisdom of the ancient sages

*O Gods! All your names and forms are to be revered, saluted, and adored.
Rig Veda X, 63, 2*

Hinduism is both an ancient philosophy and a living tradition with historical roots in the Indian subcontinent. More than 3,000 years ago, great teachers, both male and female, known as rishis, came to understand Brahman. According to the rishis, Brahman is the Supreme Spirit-Soul of the universe, the all-encompassing Ultimate Principle by which and through which all things exist. Brahman is present in every particle, every molecule, every object, life, element and breath. There is no place where Brahman cannot be found, no moment in which Brahman does not exist. And yet, while Brahman may be understood as present in all things, Brahman is also without gender, attribute, shape, or form. No singular image of Brahman alone, no matter how intricate or beautiful or powerful, can express the fullness of Brahman. All life, all death, all that appears before our eyes and in our thoughts, all the mysteries combined cannot contain Brahman, for Brahman is always this and that, neither this nor that. One well known verse from Hindu sacred texts speaks of Brahman in this way: "Truth, knowledge and infinity is Brahman". (Taittiriya Upanishad II, 1).

The sacred texts

Because the rishis received the sacred teachings directly from Brahman, the revealed wisdom was memorized and preserved in texts known as the Vedas. In Hinduism, the rishis are not considered the authors of the sacred texts, but rather, the ones who received the sacred wisdom of Brahman and passed it on to future generations. The oldest texts are written in a language called Sanskrit, which means "perfected." Many Hindus believe that Sanskrit holds a unique capacity for communicating sacred truths. In much the way a textbook might be said to hold the laws of physics, Sanskrit contains the laws of Brahman.

The sacred texts do not offer techniques, per se, but rather, words of power. The texts are very long and are carefully and respectfully regarded by Hindus. Recorded in hymns, poems, and stories, these are the words of worship and devotion, as well as a record of the nature of an individual human being to the Supreme Spirit. The oldest, and most sacred of all the texts is called the Rig Veda. It is the "Song of Knowledge." The Rig Veda contains over 1,000 hymns, all of which are believed to grant knowledge of the way things really are to those who study the song. The Upanishads are a part of the Vedas. They constitute the last section of each of the Four Vedas. The Four Vedas are the Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. Because Hindus

believe that the Vedas constitute what the rishis heard from Brahman, they are collectively referred to as sruti or “that which is heard.” Joining with the Vedas are other texts, referred to as smriti, or “remembered” texts because, unlike the Vedas, they are acknowledged as having human authors. Within these texts, there are two great epic poems: Ramayana and Mahabharata. Within the Mahabharata is a dialogue between the teacher, Krishna, and his disciple, Arjuna, a dialogue known as Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most widely read portions of the Hindu Scriptures. Individuals and communities who studied the Vedas composed these remembered texts over the centuries. Whether the stories come from the “heard” texts of the Vedas, or the “remembered” texts, they are among the world’s oldest religious stories. Faithful Hindu storytellers kept the tradition alive and intact for generations by memorizing the stories and communicating them orally. Eventually in the last few hundred years before the beginning of the Common Era, all these stories were written down.

These writings discuss and delineate the nature of life according to the rishis and the revealed knowledge of Brahman. The sacred texts comprise the center of Hinduism and offer insights into the journey of each individual, through many lifetimes, in search of Brahman.

Understanding the soul's journey

Hinduism teaches that all souls seek a full understanding of Brahman. The soul’s journey to understanding may be seen as a mountain climb. Imagine that a hundred people determine that they are going to climb a mountain. Some are young, some very old. Some have great physical strength, and others are weak and will need assistance. Some of the mountain climbers have enormous endurance, while a few are winded and tired with every passing step. Some will climb the mountain alone. Others will travel in groups. There are many ways to get to the top of the mountain, but if everyone is careful, persistent, pays attention to their individual aches and pains and abilities, sooner or later all the mountain climbers will reach the top of the mountain. A guru, the teacher or guide, may assist them with the climb. When they get to the summit, it will not matter which path they took, for each one will have discovered their path and will have the joy of standing at the top, each will have a story to tell and lessons that they have learned along the way. They will all stand at the top of the mountain together, and that shared moment, when it comes, will be one of great joy and unity.

Huston Smith, an American scholar and student of world religions says:

If we were to take Hinduism as a whole – its vast literature, its complicated rituals, its sprawling folkways, its opulent art – and compress it into a single affirmation, we would find it saying: You can have what you want.

But Hinduism teaches that what we want can never be satisfied by mere hedonism or satisfaction of the ego. The answer lies in the nature of existence and the individual's relationship to Brahman.

Samsara, karma and moksha

The sacred texts of Hinduism teach that each soul is born and reborn in a continuing cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The individual living being is called jiva and the cycles of death and rebirth are called samsara. The human soul is atman. Many Hindus believe that the true aim of life, what Smith refers to as what the soul wants, is to finally break free of samsara and reach moksha, that is, liberation. The sacred texts are clear that each soul must uncover for itself, with the aid of teachers, the means and methods for realizing this liberation of the soul, but there is no one prescribed path. Every Hindu must come to their own realization of Brahman. At the very heart of the teaching is karma. Karma literally means "works", but in the context of Hinduism karma is a universal law, a principle which ensures that good actions have positive consequences, and bad actions have negative consequences. The more there is good, the closer the atman moves to moksha.

The Four Paths

The Hindu scriptures offer four paths to moksha. Each individual must find the path which best suits their needs, their personalities and the time and place in which they live. The paths are not exclusive and many Hindus incorporate elements from other paths while being generally faithful to one. These four paths share certain common characteristics. For example, all four acknowledge that ignorance of Brahman is the fundamental cause of all suffering. They also share their belief in the doctrines of karma and samsara and in the possibility of moksha. The four paths are:

- *The Path of Devotion* – Bhakti Yoga – living a life in which prayer, worship, and acts of devotion to God are central.
- *The Path of Knowledge* – Jnana Yoga – finding a teacher, or guru, who will help you to study and learn.
- *The Path of Right Action* – Karma Yoga – controlling all your actions by regarding the needs of others without concern about any benefit to yourself.
- *The Path of Yoga* – Raja Yoga – learning to control the body and the mind by rigorous physical exercises and routines, combined with meditation.

Each of these paths is demanding and each offers the follower a way to climb the mountain. The climber may not reach the summit in this lifetime, but the jiva will

continue, and in each lifetime, have the opportunity to deepen its understanding of Brahman. This opportunity will continue lifetime after lifetime, possibly for millions of years, until the jiva reaches the top of the mountain.

Neti, neti: not this, not that

According to this tradition, in each lifetime, the jiva learns new lessons and affects karma. In each lifetime, Brahman may be understood in new and different ways. Because Brahman is infinite, and because each jiva is finite, the sacred texts tell stories of the many expressions of God-Spirit. Each story demonstrates, illustrates, or illuminates an aspect or characteristic of Brahman. Even if a man or woman memorized all the stories of the Vedas and the other sacred texts, and knew them inside and out, there would still be more to know. The fact that Brahman is unknowable is central to Hinduism. Brahman cannot be known in the way that one might be said to know an object. According to the sacred texts, Brahman is infinite and therefore can never be known in the same way that any "thing" in time and space might be.

In Sanskrit, the phrase *neti neti* (literally, "not this, not that") serves to remind Hindus that "no matter what might in a sense be legitimately said concerning the nature of Brahman, must be followed with the statement that this is not ultimately so." No thing, not even a deep understanding of Brahman can possess or contain Brahman. There is always more. Any positive assertion must be followed by its negation in order that "the depth and richness of the unfathomable are preserved."

Again, it is like the mountain climber. Even once she has reached the summit of the mountain and sees the vistas around her, she has not seen every steppingstone on the sides of the mountain. Everything she has seen is Brahman, and everything she has not seen is Brahman. Every steppingstone is Brahman. The mountain is Brahman. The vista is Brahman. The climber is Brahman. All things are Brahman, and no one thing is Brahman.

One God, many names and forms

While Hindus believe that there is only one Supreme Source (Brahman), God of everything, at the same time, Hindus also affirm that Brahman can be called by many names, thought of in many forms, and worshipped in many ways. In allowing for this diversity, Hindus worship one God under many names. In the Rig Veda, the oldest Hindu scripture, the principle is expressed in this way: "'Truth is One; the wise call it by many names (*ekam sat vipraha bahuda vadanti*).'"

To understand the many names and forms of God in Hinduism, we can look at the land where Hinduism developed. India is a country with many regions, languages, cultures, customs, and practices. Under the umbrella of Hinduism, a term coined by

Westerners attempting to understand this diversity, individuals and communities have called God by different names and thought of God in various forms for centuries. Each tradition and practice has both ancient roots and modern expression. In the state of Maharashtra, for example, Ganesha is the popular form of God, while in Bengal, God is worshipped as a mother in the form of Kali. Brahman is understood as infinite truth, while individual deities are expressions of various aspects of that truth.

It is also helpful to remember that the different forms and names of God in Hinduism may also represent different functions of God. While focusing attention and devotion on one aspect or function, the believer still acknowledges the many other aspects and the infinite possibilities. Each individual chooses one or more of these aspects of Brahman to be the object of their devotion. The Hindu doctrine of *ishtadeva*, which is Sanskrit for “chosen God,” “implies deep commitment, emotionally and intellectually, to one’s choice, knowing that others have chosen the same God under different names and conceptions.” In this context, Hindus refer to three main Gods: Brahma the creator, Vishnu, the protector, and Shiva, the one who causes all things to change, and literally thousands of other Gods and Goddesses, each worthy of devotion as aspects of the one God.

Brahman, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva

Brahma, the creator, is often depicted in art as having four faces, although you can only see one at a time, because each face points in one of the four directions of a compass. Brahma made the universe as we know it and is God of wisdom. Brahma sees all things and understands all things. It is important to note that unlike the other names and forms of God found in Hinduism, Brahma is rarely worshipped. Brahma has a female consort or aspect, named Saraswati. She is concerned with art, music and literature.

Vishnu is the protector and sustainer. Over the eons, Vishnu has come to the earth ten times in order to save and protect. Each time Vishnu has come, the destiny of the universe has been at stake, and Vishnu has performed a mighty deed or action in defense of the world. He has come as Matsya, the fish; Varaha, the boar; Vamana, the dwarf; and as Krishna, among others. Vishnu also has a wife, Lakshmi. She represents the aspects of God concerned with beauty and good luck. Vishnu is often depicted with four arms, holding in each hand an object which represents care and provision for the world.

Shiva is the destroyer, the one who causes all things to change. Shiva makes certain that night ends so that day may begin and day ends, in order that night may begin again. Shiva also causes the changes of the seasons, and controls birth and death. Shiva holds all things in balance and is often seen dancing within a circle which depicts the ebb and flow of all the energy of the world. Shiva, too, has four arms to

show the power and reach necessary to accomplish the many tasks which Shiva has done. When Shiva dances, he dances on the back of ignorance.

There are many other names and forms for God. Parvati, Shiva's consort, is the mother of Ganesha, the boy with the elephant's head. Ganesha is the patron of travelers and the remover of obstacles. Parvati has come in many forms as well. She is the Great Mother, and she is the Goddess of war. In the Ramayana, one of the great epics, Rama, another avatar of Vishnu, is born on earth as a royal prince. Hanuman, Rama's faithful servant, helps to defeat evil in the story of Rama and his wife, Sita, as they strive to be good, loyal and kind. Rama, Sita, and Hanuman are worshipped within Hinduism, each representing different aspects of God.

To an outsider, all these aspects of God may seem confusing at first, in exactly the way that the mountain climber may find the path unfamiliar. But careful attention and respect is shown to each of the Gods as Hindus meet them in the stories and find them meaningful for their journey. Hindus are freely encouraged and instructed to perform puja: worship and devotion to any and all of the names and forms of God within Hinduism, for any and all of these may aid the jiva in the journey to moksha.

Puja may be performed in temples, in nature, or in front of home altars. The term also refers to specific rituals in which God is welcomed into the home as the honored guest. Mutris (objects or statues with specific form and shape designed to express the nature of God) are often employed as a focus for devotion. By looking at a statue of Ganesha, devotees may learn more of the nature of Ganesha. Hindus study the mutri as one might study a sacred text, reading the image for its deeper meaning. In puja, the care and devotion given to the mutri are understood to be tangible offerings to the intangible God.

The Four stages of life: student, householder, retiree, wandering holy one

The Vedas teach that human beings' journey through four stages of life. In each stage, the soul must face the responsibilities given and fulfill them. The four stages are the life of the student, the life of the householder, the life of retirement, and the life of the wandering holy one. In every stage, teachers, called gurus, may play an important role in guiding the jiva toward moksha, but the guru cannot do the work of individual jiva. Each soul must discover and climb the mountain for themselves.

In the first stage of life, as a student, the youth is trained for the responsibilities of the adult life that lies ahead. It is the time for the acquisition of skills and knowledge, habits and a strong character. Hindu youths are trained in order that they might face the responsibilities of the future stages of life with strength and courage. Youth is understood as a time of apprenticeship, when knowledge is tested, tried, proven and transformed into skillful ability.

In the second stage of life, householding, individuals learn to satisfy three basic human desires. The desire for pleasure, called kama, is satisfied principally through family and marriage, the desire for success, artha, is satisfied through career or vocation, and the desire for duty or responsibility, dharma, is satisfied through participation in the life of the greater community. Hindus hope that all of these desires are fulfilled and satisfied because as these desires are fulfilled, another need and desire is born: the desire for moksha, liberation. Once the soul has achieved pleasure, success and responsibility, this new longing for liberation is born. Individuals begin to ask for meaning, to look for a philosophy of life. It is the time when, according to Hindu wisdom, the heart and mind turn to questions which cannot be answered from sources outside the self. Attention must turn inward, toward the inner life. One will ask, perhaps for the first time, "Who am I? Who is, what is, where is Brahman?" Hindus in this stage of life will begin to ponder the mysteries of the Vedas with a deeper awareness of and appreciation for the fleeting pleasures, duties, and concerns of any one lifetime.

The final stage of life is that of the wandering holy one, the sanyassa. Toward the end of this lifetime, the jiva may seek to let go of, to renounce, all that has preoccupied life. The individual seeks only to find the deepest connections to Brahman and fulfill the true aim of Hinduism: awareness that we are one. The distinctions of youth, its strength and agility, no longer hold the same charm. The prestige of the householder, with all the pleasures, duties, and responsibilities, no longer seems important. Even the inner search of retirement was limited in its scope. In the final stage of life, the lesson is one of mystery and one-ness. According to the sacred texts, in this final stage, souls may satisfy their deepest longing: moksha, true liberation from the cycles of life and death.

Hindu practice and tradition

Approximately 900 million Hindus live in the world today. Hindu practice varies widely, by location, age, occupation and a host of other particularities. However, Hinduism affirms that just as Brahman may be expressed or understood in many forms, individual believers may express and travel the faith journey in a multitude of ways. The tradition honors the infinite, the universal, the all-encompassing Brahman and affirms that no human soul will be forsaken. The Hindu tradition of honoring diversity and multiplicity affirms that ultimately all souls will come to know what was revealed to the rishis: "Truth, knowledge and infinity is Brahman."

Further Research & Points for Discussion

- Hinduism is a religious tradition filled with varied expressions and practices. Students may wish to uncover more of this diversity by looking to textbooks, art books and other print resources to find additional images of Hindu names and forms of God. It may also be possible to find images of Hindu worship practices.
- Understanding neti, neti. Ask a student secretly to choose an object and place it inside a box or bag so that it cannot be seen by the rest of the class. Ask the student to describe the object in terms of what it is not. For example: a spoon is placed in the bag. The student might say, "It is not a shovel. It is not made of clay. It is not a fork." Select increasingly complex objects. The more complex the object, the greater the number of descriptors needed before the class can identify the object. Ask students to consider how this idea has an impact on faith in Hinduism and a true understanding of Brahman. The number of negative descriptors for Brahman is virtually endless because Brahman is infinite.
- The Story of the Elephant. In one Hindu story, in the Land of the Blind, a land in which all people were born without sight, a mysterious beast appears. The children in the land come up to the beast. Each touches a different part of the animal. One says, touching the side of the beast, "It is like a wall." Another while touching a leg announces, "It is like a tree." Others say, "It is like a fan." Touching the ear. "It is like a snake." Touching the trunk. "It is like a rope." Touching the tail. Each child is comparing a particular part and aspect of the elephant to other things which are familiar, but no one can see the whole. How is this a useful story in illustrating some of the central aspects of Hinduism? How might the children in the story come to know what they are touching?
- Using an atlas, find modern India. Research the population, its culture and diversity. Create a fact sheet for modern India. Students may include information such as per capita income, industry, arts and technology in modern India. Ask students to consider how the climate, landscape, population density and other factors might have influenced the growth of Hinduism. Remind students that while stories from this tradition are ancient, the practice is contemporary.
- Create a postcard. India has become a popular destination for travelers. Imagining that the students have traveled to India, what images might they choose to send home to family and friends that would illustrate the Hindu culture of India, its beliefs and practices. Check with local travel agencies for brochures and other resources, as well as newspapers and periodicals.

- Using the Hindu stories as a starting point, encourage students to check the local library and the Internet for additional stories of Hindu gods and goddesses. Once a story has been found, students may wish to tell the story to the class. Ask students to practice the story, work on including details which are evocative, calling on the imaginations of listeners. Students should retain a copy of the original story, as well as drafts of their story. Teachers may wish to record the story as part of a larger unit on storytelling.
- Using the library, newspapers and periodicals, as well as the Internet as resources, ask students to find images and stories of contemporary Hindu practice. Gandhi was a famous Hindu whose life exemplified many of the teachings and practices of Hinduism. Research the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Teachers may also wish to present segments of the movie, *Gandhi*, as part of the course of study.
- As mentioned in the introductory materials, there are four main types of yoga in Hinduism. In each type, physical exercises may be included as a way to discipline the body. In America today, many people practice yoga movements and stretches as part of a health regimen. Students may wish to research and demonstrate several such postures and moves to the class. One aspect of the physical demands of yoga is the concentration necessary to maintain the postures. Ask students to reflect on how this compares with other exercises, such as jumping jacks or pushups. Does it seem that yoga might be more conducive to meditation practice than jumping jacks might be? Why? Why not?

Contemporary Research Options

- Hinduism identifies four stages of life: student, householder, retiree and wandering holy one. Ask students to find four people who (loosely) fit these categories. Interview each one, asking how his or her stage of life influences the ways in which he/she views life, priorities, money concerns, health, death, faith.
- Hinduism also places a high value on duty, sometimes referred to as dharma. Ask students to discuss what their duties are. How do they define duty? How do they demonstrate their duty? What are our duties as American citizens?
- Over the decades, world music has become widely available in America. Students may wish to find recordings of Indian music. Hinduism, like most religions, teaches that the most meaningful worship involves the whole person, body and soul. Music and dance are two of the ways that the body may be engaged in worship. Some formal Hindu dances tell the stories of the gods and goddesses. Not all Hindu people consider dance to be an appropriate expression of devotion because the physical pleasure of dancing may become a distraction from their spiritual disciplines.

**Dancing Ganesha, mid-10th to 11th century
Indian
Sandstone, 23 x 13 11/16 x 7 1/4 in.**

According to the sacred stories, Ganesha was out one evening, riding on the back of his tiny mouse. He had been eating sweets and dancing all evening. On his way home, a snake crossed their path and startled the mouse. The mouse jumped, and Ganesha fell. When he fell, his belly broke open and all the sweets came pouring out. Ganesha put all the sweets back in his stomach and tied his belly closed with the body of the snake. At this, the moon and stars began to laugh at Ganesha. Embarrassed, he broke off one of his tusks and threw it at the moon, carving out the face of the moon into a crescent. The heavens wept and the stars trembled. The event is recalled in the heavens once a month, in the cycles of the moon.



- The sculptor establishes Ganesha as the central figure of this piece, by making him larger than all the surrounding figures. Ganesha is revered as the God of beginnings, remover of obstacles.
- He is shown in a dancing posture. Note that he has several arms, reinforcing his capacity to accomplish many tasks.
- Both of his tusks are missing. One is gone because of the story, the other was broken. When a Hindu sculpture is damaged it can no longer be used as an object of devotion.
- The bowl of sweets.
- The snake.
- The mouse can be seen tucked under Ganesha. The mouse is also skilled at overcoming obstacles as he can gnaw and chew through barriers and sneak and squeeze through small spaces.

This sculpture of Ganesha is a fine example of the relief sculptures that cover the exterior surfaces of Hindu temples. In it, we see the beauty and joy of Ganesha. The artist depicts this by giving him a full belly, a curving trunk and a dancing pose. Worshippers surround him. In Hindu culture, the elephant is a symbol of wisdom and strength. Ganesha has six arms in this sculpture indicating that he is not an ordinary person, but rather, a god capable of accomplishing many things at once.



Unknown, India, possibly Madhya Pradesh; *Dancing Ganesha*, mid 10th to 11th century; Sandstone; 23 1/16 x 13 11/16 x 7 1/4 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gift of Clara T. and Gilbert J. Yager, 85.2.1

Krishna or Saint Sambandar, 1175-1225 C.E**South India****Bronze, 15 ¾ x 11 x 5 in.**

Krishna and the Butter Pot: Thousands of years ago in India, people of the village Gokul would nap in the afternoon because it was too hot to work outside. One boy, named Krishna, loved butter and while everyone slept, he crept up to their butter pots and ate until he had his fill. When his mother discovered what he had done, to punish him, she tied him to the fence post where they usually tied cattle. As the villagers watched, the more she tightened the rope, the more it loosened, and an unusual golden glow appeared around from his head. When his mother heard the gasps of the people, she looked the boy in the eye, and saw a halo of light around his head. Everyone realized that Krishna was blessed, and from that day on set out crocks of butter just for him.



- As a freestanding sculpture, this dancing Krishna would have been found within a Hindu temple. On holy days, it would have been dressed and carried through the streets in procession. This is done to remind followers that Krishna, and other Hindu gods and goddesses, are available to people and willing to come to their aid.
- The bronze reflects light, suggesting the glow of divinity.
- Both hands on this sculpture are broken off. A damaged sculpture cannot be used in rituals.

Krishna has attracted many devotees within Hinduism. He is one of the many avatars of Vishnu. The stories about Krishna focus on love. He was a loved infant, a loved child, a loved man and a beloved God. Within his lifetime, he exemplified ideals of parental, familial, erotic and devotional love.

The artist's name does not appear anywhere on the piece (as is common in Hindu art) because the creation of the sculpture was seen as an act of devotion and no attention should be called to its manufacture.

Within the Hindu tradition, devotees and the spiritual leaders of the community must offer true puja, or acts of devotion, to the sculpture, in order that the sculpture may become a true vessel for divinity. They offer prayers, clothing, light, and food to the God. There is an exchange of spiritual energy between the God and the devotee through the sculpture. When these ritual offerings are complete, the artist opens the eyes of the god and the spiritual leader aids in the first breath.



Unknown artist, India, Vijayanagar; *Krishna or Saint Sambandar*, 1175-1225 C.E.; Bronze; 15 3/4 x 11 x 5 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gift of Clara T. and Gilbert J. Yager, 97.8

Vishnu/Shiva, 11th century
South India
granite, 53 1/8 x 23 1/4 x 9 in.

By the 11th century, Buddhism had lost much of its distinct identity in India. Some scholars suggest that the seated figure seen in the headdress may be the Buddha. Some Hindus believe the Buddha was another of the avatars of Vishnu.



- Precise guidelines for the making of a standing Vishnu are found in ancient Hindu texts. Although the arms of this sculpture are broken, scholars confirm that a six-armed Vishnu would have made a hand gesture meaning, "Fear not", and would have held a conch, a discus and a mace in his other hands.
- This nearly life-sized, freestanding statue was carved for installation in a south Indian temple during the 11th century.
- Note the ornate carving in this granite sculpture. The artist has made the figure appear strong and ready to care for the earth and all its inhabitants.
- Although powerful, Vishnu is a completely benevolent, generous God. Note his Facial expression. His primary goal is to maintain the cosmic order. Some of his devotees see him as responsible for the entire cycle of creation, preservation and destruction.

There are three main Gods of Hinduism. Shiva, the destroyer, Brahma, the creator, and Vishnu, the sustainer. There is only one temple in India dedicated to Brahma. The other two, Shiva and Vishnu are the focus of two major strains of Hindu practice. In this image we see Vishnu, the all-powerful God in heaven who is prepared to take form and come to earth. The times when Vishnu has come to earth are called Divine Descents. In each descent, Vishnu protects and restores the world. Vishnu has come to earth as a tortoise, a fish, a boar, a man-lion, dwarf, ax-welder, as Dancing Krishna as well as in other forms.

In creating this sculpture, the artisan selected a material considered to be well suited for an image of divinity. Granite is a strong and hard stone, representing the strength of Vishnu. When depicted as a freestanding sculpture, as with the other Gods of Hinduism, Vishnu would have been fully dressed in fine clothing, and adorned with flowers and fabric draping Vishnu's body.

How does the figure reinforce the strength of Vishnu? His benevolence? What indicates his divinity?



Unknown artist, India, Tamil Nadu, Kaveri ; Vishnu/Shiva, 11th century; Granite; 53 1/8 x 23 1/4 x 9 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund, 82.6.1

Voices of Faith

The Story of Ganesha

Summary

In this story, students are introduced to the deities, Shiva and Parvati, and their son Ganesh (or Ganesha).

Discussion Questions

- Ask students to consider the qualities which Ganesh possesses.
- How does he demonstrate his youth and his growing maturity?
- How does Shiva show his love and devotion to Parvati?
- What does Ganesh come to stand for because of his experiences?
- How might this story hold special appeal for children and parents?

Transcript of recorded story: The Story of Ganesha

My name is Lisa Rahangdale, and I am from Fayetteville, North Carolina, and I am a student at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where I've lived for the past seven years. Having been born and grown up in the United States, one of the ways that my parents passed down our Indian heritage was through the telling of stories from the Hindu tradition. I'd like to tell you one today.

Hinduism is a religion that is thousands of years old. Many of its traditions are passed through stories of gods and goddesses and amazing individuals. One of these stories is that of Ganesh.

In a time long, long ago, there was a couple that lived on the mountain Kailash in the Himalayas, Lord Shiva and Parvati. Shiva was the husband. And he was a dark-skinned god who wore a tiger skin around his waist, beaded necklaces that fell across his bare chest, and a mighty cobra that sat on his shoulder almost like a scarf. He had long, flowing black hair that he wrapped into a bun on the top of his head that was so strong and thick that it could hold the mighty Ganges River in its lock. In his hand he was known to carry a powerful trident. And he was always followed by an army called the ganas who served his every desire.

Parvati was his wife. She was known for her beauty, virtue and devotion in all three worlds: the heavens, earth, and the netherworld. She wore long sheets of silk, embroidered with gold, and wrapped around her body. And she adorned her ankles and wrists, toes and fingers, waist and neck with gold ornaments that only paled in beauty when held up to their mistress. On her head was a crown of gold befitting a goddess that held up her long, shiny black hair as well.

Though both Shiva and Parvati were divine it did not mean that they could not have problems. One day Parvati asked Nandi to guard the palace. Nandi was one of Shiva's ganas and his most trusted personal attendant. She said, "I am going to take a bath. Do not let anyone enter and disturb me." Nandi readily agreed to follow the orders of his master's wife but soon found himself in a dilemma when Shiva came to the door. He thought, "How can I stop him? This is his house. He is her husband. I'm sure she won't mind." So Shiva passed without question and walked in on Parvati, who was bathing in her inner chambers. Parvati was, of course, angry and told Shiva that she was upset that Nandi had disobeyed her. Shiva only laughed and did not take her seriously at all, which, of course, annoyed Parvati even more. She thought to herself, 'I must find a gana who will only obey me.'

So the next day she told her friends what had happened. And her friends agreed. But they also told her that none of the ganas could really ever be called her own, because their first allegiance was to Shiva. They suggested that her only hope was to create a gana that was hers alone. She thought this was a good idea and immediately returned home and sculpted a boy from clay. She took special attention in carving his eyes, his fingers and his toes and all the little things that make little boys special. She looked at him with admiration and covered him with silk clothing and adorned him with gold ornaments. And then she blessed him. And he came to life.

She called him her son and hugged him with the same love that any mother would have for her child. He looked up at her and said, "Tell me mother, what should I do?" And Parvati smiled. She took him to the door of the palace and handed him a staff. She told him, "Stand here and let no one enter without my permission." Well, I'm sure you can guess who came walking up to the door. It was Lord Shiva, of course, and he obviously did not recognize this new boy in his household. As he approached to pass him, the young boy stepped in his way. "Halt," he said, "No one enters without my mother's permission." Shiva was shocked, to say the least, but did not pay much attention to the little boy and said, "Do you know who I am? Get out of the way." And the boy, without saying a word, started beating the mighty Shiva with his staff. Well, Shiva was so confused and frustrated with this boy's disobedience that he turned to his army of ganas and told them to find out who this boy was and left. The boy stood, unafraid, in front of the entire army, as they attempted to threaten him as well. But he was a little confused. He knew that Shiva was his mother's husband and was not sure if she would want him to fight his army or not.

However, in the meantime, Parvati had heard all this commotion in her rooms, and she asked one of her friends to find out what was going on. Her friend returned with the news of what was going on outside, and she said, "Parvati, they are threatening your son. Don't allow them to embarrass you like that." But Parvati hesitated for a moment. She thought, "After all, he is my husband." But then she went on and thought, "But why is he trying to force himself in?" And she turned to her friend and said, "Tell my son not to give in to anyone."

And so her friend reported back to the little boy. And he cried out to the ganas, "I am the son of Parvati. You are the ganas of Shiva. We must both carry out our orders." When the ganas heard this they, too, hesitated and returned to Shiva with this information. He was thoughtful for a while and then said to his army, "This boy, as Parvati's son, is my own. You may feel that it is wrong to fight him. However, she has put me in a situation that if I do not fight him we may be thought to be subservient. So go, defeat him. It should be easy."

And so the ganas left to begin battle. But they were no match for this brave youth. He even defeated the mighty Nandi single-handedly. The ganas fled as fast as they could. They could not believe a little boy, maybe eight years old, had defeated them. The commotion was heard all over the heavens, which led several gods to come to Shiva's service. Shiva told them this story and asked them to bring the child under control. And so they sent the powerful army of the gods. But he fought on. When Parvati heard that her little boy was being fought, by first the army of Shiva and now the army of the gods, she was furious. She said, "How dare they harass my son!" With her powers as a goddess, she created two powerful goddesses, Kali and Durga. Kali defended the boy by standing between him and the army and opening her mouth wide open, so that all of the weapons would come flying into her mouth. She then, in turn, spit them back at the forces, killing many of them. Durga took the form of lightning and destroyed their remaining weapons before they could even reach the boy. The army of the Gods was defeated.

When Shiva heard this, he decided that he was going to have to take care of the matter himself. And he stormed towards the palace with all of his allies. Shiva saw his opportunity, for the little boy had turned his head in order to face an enemy in the opposite direction. Shiva picked up his trident and came up from behind and cut off the little boy's head. The army stood still. No one was able to take their eyes off this brave young hero. Soon the silence was broken. And the ganas and the army of the gods began dancing with joy, for they had won the battle; it was over. They were very happy. But Lord Shiva was troubled. "What have I done? How will I face Parvati? He was her son, and that made him mine too."

Parvati, when she heard of her son's death, was not troubled. She was angry. "My son was killed unfairly. For that, they shall all die." With her anger she created thousands of goddesses like Kali and Durga, and she told them to devour all of the army. As the goddesses set out on their task, the gods were terrified and ran to Parvati for mercy. She said, "Bring my son back to life, and give him honor and status." They reported this back to Shiva, and he agreed to this compromise for the sake of peace and happiness. He told them, "Go north. Bring back the head of the first creature that crossed your path and fit it to the boy's body. He will come back to life."

They did as Shiva told them and, as luck would have it, the first creature that crossed their path was an elephant with only one white tusk. They cut off its head and attached it to the boy's body. The boy immediately sat up and began looking around as if nothing had ever happened and, in fact, did not really even notice that he now had the head of an elephant. And the gods took him back to Parvati, and she held him in her lap and gave him the love and devotion that she would give any child, whether they had an elephant head or not. But she still was not happy, for all of her demands had not been met. At that moment Shiva entered the hall. He said, "Forgive me for my arrogance Parvati, this brave boy will be another son of mine. He placed his hand on the little boy's elephant head and continued, "Even as a boy he showed unmatched courage. Therefore, I will call you Ganesh. And you will be the commander of all my ganas. You will be worthy of worship and be known as the conqueror of all obstacles."

With that, Shiva and Parvati began to live happily again in their home at Mount Kailash with their two sons. But, to this day, before anything important or any challenge is started it is Ganesh's blessing that is sought by Hindus around the world.

Voices of Faith

The Story of Hanuman

Summary

In this story, students are introduced to Hanuman, a central character in the Hindu epic poem, the Ramayana, the story of the great king Ram (or Rama). In this story Hanuman demonstrates his unique abilities to aid and protect Ram.

Research Option

Look for images of Ram, Sita, and Hanuman and translations of the Ramayana in a library or on the internet.

Discussion Questions

- What strengths and abilities does Hanuman demonstrate?
- How might this story deepen the faith and devotion of Hindu people?
- How might this story hold special appeal for women?

Transcript of recorded story: The Story of Hanuman

When mankind has faced great evil, Hindus believe that God comes down to earth in the form of a man, to rid the earth of that evil. One of these times is narrated in the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana, which tells the story of the great king Rama who is believed to be the incarnate of God on earth. Through this story, one learns about honor, duty, morality and justice. For it is believed that if God could have come and lived among the sin and evil of the earth as a man, then man can strive to live as God. The Ramayana is filled with many famous characters and stories that are still told today. One of these is the story of Hanuman.

Let me take you to a forest. This forest is a place that hasn't been inhabited by man yet. It is a place that is filled with trees, filled with fruit, filled with flowers. It is a place where the tigers still roamed, and the elephants still marched, and perhaps you might have seen a peacock or two. In this forest there was an individual sitting on a tree, keeping watch. His name was Hanuman. He was a unique individual, because, you see, though he had legs like a man, arms like a man, basically a body like a man, he had the face of a monkey and a tail like a monkey. And though he could talk and walk and think like a man - in fact he was probably smarter than most men - he had a face like a monkey and a tail like a monkey. And that might seem interesting to us, since we've never seen anybody like that. But there was, in fact, an entire race of people like that. And Hanuman lived in a kingdom full of people that looked like monkeys.

Now why was Hanuman in the forest? Well, he was in the forest with his king, Sugriva, who had been exiled from their kingdom by his brother, who had forced them out. He lived in the forest in a cave with Hanuman and many of his other trusted friends and advisors, and they were in constant fear that King Sugriva's brother would come and kill them. Hanuman kept watch in this forest.

One day, walking through the forest, he saw two young men. They looked like simple hermits. They were dressed in cotton clothes; they had no shoes on; they had no jewels or crowns. But they were carrying bows and arrows, and they had a presence about them that radiated through the forest, and he wondered who they could be. Perhaps they were people who were sent to kill his king. It was his job to find out. And so, he disguised himself as a holy man, and he approached the two young men, and he said, "Who are you two?" The younger of the two said, "My name is Lakshmana and this is my elder brother Rama, and we are princes from the kingdom of Ayodhya. We are wandering through the forest because we were sent away from our kingdom for fourteen years, in order to fulfill a promise of our father's. When Rama left the kingdom, I went with him. And we were also accompanied by his wife, Sita, who has now been kidnapped by the evil demon-king Ravana. And we are wandering through the forest searching for her. We have heard that there is a king named Sugriva who lives in the forest, and we have come to find him so that perhaps he may help us."

Well, Hanuman, though he had never met these individuals before, immediately felt a warmth and affection for them and introduced himself and revealed his true identity. He said, "I am Hanuman, and I am the chief minister of King Sugriva. We are in hiding from his brother who has kicked him out of the kingdom. Would you like to go meet him?" And the two young men agreed, and they met King Sugriva, and they met his ministers, and they all became very good friends. And while Rama and Sugriva exchanged stories, they decided to help each other. And Rama helped Sugriva regain his kingdom, and, in turn, Sugriva decided to help Rama find Sita.

And so they assembled a search party. And in this search party were many different types of monkey people. Some had red faces. Some had black faces. Some had brown faces. Some had long tails, some had short tails, some came in hopping, some came in running, and some came in swinging through the trees. They all assembled in the kingdom in order to help Rama find his wife. They were split into four search parties: one was sent north, one was sent east, one was sent west, and the last was sent south. And they were to search to the four corners of the earth and report back in one month and give any news of Sita, Rama's wife.

Hanuman led the search party south, and they searched desperately through the forest through caves, in the trees. They asked animals. They asked people. But no one had seen Sita. There were times that they were giving up hope, but it was always Hanuman who kept his mind on their task and his devotion to Rama and got them through it. So that finally, one day they reached the shores of the mainland. What

could they do? They could not swim across the ocean. There was no bridge, and they had no boat. What were they going to do? They all sat down and began debating. "Well, could we fly? Is there a bird that could carry us?" No, they didn't think they could do that. "Well, we're all able to leap incredible distances. Perhaps we could try to leap across the ocean." No. None of them were that strong.

And the whole while Hanuman sat quietly, for he was a humble and modest fellow and didn't really want to speak up unless it was necessary. And finally they all turned to him, and they said, "Hanuman, you are the only one who can help us. Why do you sit there so quietly? Please. You know what needs to be done." So Hanuman smiled, and he stood up. And, you see, though Hanuman was unique, because he had a face like a monkey and a tail like a monkey, he wasn't unique to them for that reason. He was unique to them because he had the power to change shape and size as he willed. And so, Hanuman began growing taller and taller and taller until he was the size of an enormous mountain, and his body glistened in the sunlight so brightly that his friends had to cover their eyes because of the glare. And he stood there looking magnificent, and he looked around for a place to prop his foot so that he could leap. He found a hill nearby, and as he put his foot down to leap into the air, he crashed the hill down so that the rocks melted into lava. And the snakes came out of their holes hissing, and the birds flew out of the trees, and the animals ran out of the forest. And Hanuman stepped on that hill and leaped into the air.

As he leaped, he had a few interesting adventures on his way across the ocean, as one might expect. One of those adventures included running into a monster who came out of the ocean, and she stopped him, and she said, "Hanuman, I am hungry. I want you to enter my mouth so I can eat you." And Hunuman said, "With all due respect, I have a very important mission I am trying to accomplish, and I really cannot stop and discuss this with you. Please let me pass." And the monster said, "I am quite determined to get what I want. And I want you to enter my mouth so that I can eat you. I will not let you pass."

So, Hunuman, realizing that he wasn't going to pass this monster, started growing bigger and bigger and bigger. Now, imagine he was pretty big to begin with, but he was still growing. And the monster had to open her mouth wider and wider and wider until her mouth was so wide open that she couldn't open it anymore. And Hanuman stood there, and suddenly he shrunk down to the size of a little monkey. He darted in her mouth and darted back out, before she could shut it. And so then he said, "See, I have entered your mouth as you asked me, you must let me pass." The monster laughed, and she said, "Oh Hanuman, you will be successful in your mission." And so Hanuman kept leaping across the ocean.

And finally he saw the golden shores of Lanka, which was the kingdom of the demon-king Ravana - the demon king who had kidnapped Sita. And so he landed on the shores, and he shrunk himself down to the size of a little monkey. See, Hanuman

realized that he would probably stand out - having a face like a monkey and a tail like a monkey - in the kingdom, so he figured it was best for him to go in the disguise of a little monkey. So he climbed through the city gates, and he began exploring the city. And it was a beautiful city. The buildings were made of marble. There were people singing in their homes. There were people dancing in the courtyards. There was an active marketplace where people were buying fish and jewels and clothing. He heard the priests in the temples singing their hymns. And there were beautiful gardens and trees and fountains everywhere he went. He eventually reached the palaces of Ravana, and there he saw many beautiful women dressed in silks and jewels. And they were playing instruments and playing chess and eating and laughing, and, though many would have been distracted by such a scene of beauty, Hanuman was steadfast in his devotion to Rama in fulfilling his mission.

And so he kept looking. He even saw Ravana, lying in his bed, being fanned by one of his queens and being fed grapes by another one of his queens and having his feet rubbed by yet another one of them. You see Ravana had many wives already, and he still wished to have Sita as yet another one. But Hanuman still saw Sita nowhere. "Where could she be?," he thought. "Had Ravana killed her? Was he hiding her somewhere else? Where else could he look?" And so he began wandering out of the palace, and he saw a beautiful garden in the distance. And in that garden he saw a group of evil, horrible, ugly demon women. And they were sitting in a circle around a tree, and a woman was sitting underneath the tree. And they were cackling like hyenas and howling like wolves. They had horns. They were fat, short, tall, thin. Some were bald. Some were covered with hair. They were an ugly lot, and Hanuman began to wonder what they were doing.

He climbed into a tree nearby and started watching. Soon, from the distance he saw the great Ravana walking through the garden, and he interrupted the cackling and howling of the evil demon women. And he started talking to the young woman who was sitting under the tree, and he said, "Oh, Sita, why do you reject me when I love you so? Come, be one of my queens. I will give you all the riches and the jewels and the beautiful clothing that you could ever want. Why do you want to be with that Rama? He has no kingdom. He lives in the forest. He has nothing. Come, come into the palace and become my wife."

And Sita replied, "Rama is my husband. He is my only husband, and he will be my only husband. Don't you know, Ravana, that it is a sin to covet another one's wife? Please stop this before Rama has to come and destroy you and your entire kingdom."

Hanuman then realized that this individual was indeed Sita. And though she was dressed in simple cotton clothing, had no shoes and her hair was unkempt, she was indeed the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. And he began to listen more closely. Ravana, he became very angry at Sita's reply, for he was used to getting his way, being an evil demon king and all. And he said, "Sita, I only have so much

patience for you. I will give you two months, and if you do not become my wife in those two months, you will be killed." And he stormed off.

Sita began crying, for she was scared even though she was very strong in her resolve to never marry him. And the evil demon women, they started their cackling and howling again. One of them said, "How foolish you are. It is because you are human that you have no sense." One of the other ones said, "How dare you defy the great Ravana? Who do you think you are?" A third one did not really care what Sita decided, she said, "I am hungry. I think we should eat her before she gets any thinner. Bring me some sauce. Bring me something good to drink. Oh, she will make a great meal." And they all started cackling and howling again, and Sita continued to cry. And finally the demon women fell asleep.

And Hanuman saw this as his chance to talk to Sita. But she was so beautiful and so virtuous Hanuman did not know how to approach her. What would she think of a man that had a face like a monkey and a tail like a monkey? Maybe she would be afraid? He stayed in the form of a little monkey in the tree, and he began singing a song. He sang a song of a prince from the kingdom of Ayodhya with three brothers. And how he had grown up very happy and eventually won the heart of a beautiful princess, and they were married. And eventually they had to leave their kingdom and go to the forest. And that one day the beautiful princess was kidnapped by an evil demon-king, and now this prince wandered through the forest in search of her, desperately missing her.

And Sita looked around, and she realized that someone was singing the story of her husband, Rama. And she looked around and saw no humans in sight that could be singing with such a beautiful voice. And she looked up and saw a little monkey sitting in the tree next to her. And she said, "Monkey, is that you? Are you the one who is singing the story of my husband?"

And Hanuman climbed out of the tree, and he said, "Oh Mother, my name is Hanuman, and I am a messenger of your husband. Here, I have brought you his signet ring in order to prove who I am." And she looked at the signet ring, and she immediately recognized it from seeing it so many times on the hand of her husband for so many years. She began crying, and she was very happy, and she began asking, "How is Rama? How is Lakshmana? Where are they? Are they eating well? Does Rama still love me? Is he still going to come find me? Tell me, tell me what is going on?" And so Hanuman reassured her, and they immediately became very good friends. And finally it was time for Hanuman to leave. And he said, "Sita, come, why don't you just sit on my shoulder, and I can carry you back across the ocean? And then you can be returned to your husband."

And she said, "No Hanuman. Though I know you have good intentions, Rama must come and rescue me. It is a matter of his honor, and mine. Rama must defend it." And

so Hanuman agreed, and he took leave of Sita, taking with him one of her jewels to take back to Rama. And as he left the garden he sat on a wall, and he worried about Sita. And he wanted to give her a way to have hope and to feel that it would indeed be possible for her husband to come to Lanka and get her back.

And so he grew in size into a fierce monkey with fangs and claws and fiery eyes. And he began jumping around that garden. He started jumping and pulling out trees and trampling flowerbeds and scaring the birds away, and he was jumping all over that garden. Those evil demon women woke up and went running to Ravana telling him that there was this crazy monkey in the garden, tearing it up. Well Ravana was not happy. And he sent his warriors to go fight this monkey. He didn't think it would be a problem at all. But Hanuman, he was a great warrior himself, and he picked up some tree trunks and just started swinging them at the warriors, and they were no match for Hanuman. And so he sent more warriors. Still, Hanuman could not be conquered.

Finally, Ravana had to send his son, one of his best warriors, in order to fight Hanuman. And his son even had to use a special weapon that would tie him up in such a way that he would not break loose. And so he used it on Hanuman, and Hanuman was captured. And Ravana said, "Who dares disturb my peace? Speak. Tell me who you are." And Hanuman looked up at Ravana and looked right into his eyes and said boldly, "I am Hanuman, messenger of Rama, chief minister of King Sugriva. And I am here to tell you that you must return Sita to her husband or you will be destroyed."

Ravana was not used to people speaking to him in that way, for most people were afraid of Ravana. And, being as evil as he was, he had quite a big ego to match. He was very angry. And he said to his servants, "That monkey has a lot of nerve coming into my palace and speaking to me that way. They say the pride of a monkey is in his tail. Bring me some oil and rags. Let's burn it." The evil demon servants gleefully went running for their oil and rags. They started wrapping up Hanuman's tail in the rags and pouring oil on it. And as many rags as they got, they never had enough. They kept on having to run back and get more! They kept on wrapping, and they kept on pouring the oil, and they just never had enough. Until finally they realized that Hanuman's tail was growing longer and longer and longer and coiling in a loop right next to them, and they just couldn't keep up with it.

Finally Ravana, he got angry, and he said, "Take him to the streets. Let the people of Lanka see what happens to someone who tries to defy me. Take him, burn his tail!" And so they took him out into the streets, and they lit his tail on fire. And it began burning. Hanuman, though, he was not bothered by this fire. He started moving around and walking through the streets. He started moving some more and then suddenly started dancing. Well, the demons all thought that was great fun, and they started dancing around him. And so Hanuman kept on dancing, and they danced, and... everyone was dancing and having a great time. But Hanuman felt that it was time to go home, and it was time to teach these demons a lesson. Remember I told

you that Hanuman could change size and shape at will? Well he just shrunk himself down to the size of a little monkey again and those ropes that were holding him fell from around him, and he was free. And before anyone knew what was happening, Hanuman was on top of a roof, and no one could catch him. He jumped from one roof, to another roof, to another roof, the whole time his tail being on fire. And with each leap he lit the entire city of Lanka on fire. And eventually he went back to the ocean and let his tail out, and he watched that city burn down, and he knew it was time to go back home.

And so he leaped back across the ocean, and his friends were there waiting for him, and they were very excited to hear that he had been successful, and they returned back to where Rama was waiting for them. His friends began to tell the story, and Rama began to get very excited, and he wanted to know the details. They finally turned around, and they saw Hanuman was standing in the back, being humble and modest as he always was. And waiting for someone to ask him to tell the story. They did. And he told Rama what had happened, and he gave Rama the jewels that Sita had sent with him, and Rama pressed the jewels to his eyes, and he remembered his beautiful wife and became strengthened in his resolve to go and fight for her.

And so a great war began between Rama, Lakshmana and the monkey armies and Ravana and his demon kingdom. Hanuman had many more adventures during this war, and eventually the war was won, and Sita was returned back to Rama, and they returned to Ayodhya, where Rama became king again. And when it was time for Hanuman to leave Rama, Hanuman realized that he could not leave Rama's side and chose to be his humble servant for the rest of his days. And, to this day, when one looks at a picture of Ram he is always accompanied by Lakshmana on one side and Sita on the other side - and kneeling before him is Hanuman. And, to this day, though Hanuman might be known around the world for having a face like a monkey and a tale like a monkey, he is revered by Hindus for his humility, his wisdom, his courage, and, most of all, his devotion to God.

Voices of Faith

Krishna Lifts the Govardhan Mountain

Summary

In this story students are introduced to Krishna, one of the most beloved avatars of Vishnu. Krishna teaches humanity about the many aspects of love.

Research Option

The storyteller mentions that she used to live in Hyderabad, India. Ask students to locate this town in southern India on a map, to determine its climate and culture as fully as possible. She also mentions a little town called Gokul in northern India. How is the terrain of southern India different from northern India? Does terrain affect the story? When is monsoon season?

Discussion Questions

- How does the storyteller foreshadow the true nature of Krishna?
- What extraordinary aspects of Krishna's life suggest that he is capable of extraordinary actions on behalf of the people in the town?
- What qualities are apparent in the images of Krishna?

Transcript of recorded story: Krishna Lifts the Govardhan Mountain

My name is Surekha Pendyal. I live in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. But before I came here, long, long ago, I lived in India. I lived in a town called Hyderabad, which is in the southern part of India. I grew up there in my parents' house, along with my brothers and sisters, playing with my cousins. And I remember, as a child, when we all children would play outside in the yard in the evenings. When darkness fell we would all come inside. My grandmother would light a lamp by the god's altar. We would all wash our feet and offer up prayers to the god. After that, before dinner would get ready, we all children would sit around our grandmother and listen to stories.

Storytelling was a big part of my childhood - listening to stories told by my grandparents, my parents, my aunts and uncles. Stories all year round. And that's how I learned about everything around us. And when I grew up and had children of my own, I made sure I told them stories. I would tell them stories about my childhood in India, about the place I grew up in, about Indian festivals and culture and Indian mythology. And my children really enjoyed my stories. And now they are grown up, so I don't tell them stories anymore. But I would like to tell you a story today.

This story is located in a little town called Gokul in the northern part of India. Gokul was a small town with green pastures. It was located at the foothills of a mountain called

Govardhan. And small little rivers ran down from the mountain. A river called Yamuna flowed by the side of Gokul. In this town there was a young lad by the name of Krishna. Krishna was a dark-skinned boy with beautiful big eyes. He was a favorite child of the town. Krishna's father, Nanda, was the chief of the Yadavas, which means chief of the cowherd clan. Because, you see, the people of Gokul were mostly involved in the occupation of cow-herding or dairy farming.

The people of Gokul lived a simple life. They felt safe and very happy in Gokul. Every morning Krishna's friends would come to his house along with their herds of cows. And Krishna would join his friends along with his own herds of cows, and the whole gang would go to the mountain and graze their cows on the pastures all day. And while the cows were grazing on the Govardin Mountain, Krishna and his friends would play in the green pastures. They also would play in the river, Yamuna, which ran by the Govardhan Mountain. Krishna would entertain his friends by playing his flute. Krishna played the most beautiful flute in the world. When Krishna played the flute his friends would just sit in silence and listen to his flute. Even the cows loved to listen to Krishna's music, because when Krishna played the flute, the cows would just follow the music and come back to Krishna. It was said that even the birds would stop chirping. The air would hold still just to listen to Krishna's flute. Even the wild waters of Yamuna would stop flowing when Krishna played the flute. This is how Krishna grew up, loved by everybody. Not only did everybody consider Krishna their friend, but Krishna was also considered to be a savior. Because, you see, he had saved his people from some of those wicked demons, and also a huge snake called Kaliya, who resided in the Yamuna River.

As Krishna was growing up, one morning he got up, and he looked around, and his friends had not come to his house like they normally did. Krishna wondered what was happening, and then he saw his father, and he said, "Father, what's the matter today? Why don't I see my friends?" Krishna's father, Nanda, said, "Son, don't you remember? Today is our day of prayer to Lord Indra. Indra is the god who brings rain, and we need to worship Indra every year so that we get good rain. Everybody is busy preparing for the prayer. That's why you don't see your friends here today."

Krishna said, "But why Indra father? Why do we need to worship Indra every year?"

Nanda said, "Krishna, it's Indra who gives us rain. And when we get rain our pastures get green, our cows get food, and they give milk, and then we sell the milk, and we get money. And that's how we grow rich. So it is Indra who needs to be worshipped so that he can give us good rain."

Krishna thought for a minute and said, "No father. I think we need to change this whole custom. Because I don't believe it's Indra who gives us rain. I think we need to worship our cows because they are the source of our livelihood. And also it is Mount Govardhan that really gives us the rain. Because, see, this huge mountain,

Govardhan, when it stops the clouds, it makes rain. And when the rain falls on Govardhan the rivers start flowing. And when the rivers start flowing, we get these beautiful pastures, and that's how our cows get food to eat. And that's how they give us milk. And then we sell the milk, and we get money. So that's how we get rich father. So I think, father, it's Govardhan who needs to be worshipped, not Indra."

Nanda smiled, and he said, "Son, I think you have a point here." And while Nanda and Krishna were talking, all the people from the town had gathered around them, and they had listened to this whole conversation. Somehow Krishna's idea appealed to them because Krishna was not only their favorite child, but they had also developed a lot of trust in him. The people of Gokul said, "Yes, Krishna has a point. Why don't we worship Mount Govardhan this year? Let's just do that." So the attention just focused on worshipping Mount Govardhan, rather than Lord Indra. People started bringing their flowers and fruits and their grain to offer sacrifice to Mount Govardhan. And this whole prayer was conducted, and after that there was a feast. Everybody was happy. Everybody was happy except Lord Indra, of course. He was watching this whole scene from up in the heavens, and he was not happy. He was angry because he considered this an insult. The people of Gokul had worshipped him from generations to generations, and now suddenly they had focused their affections on Mount Govardhan instead of Indra. He said, "I'm not going to tolerate that. I'm going to teach them a lesson. I'm going to pour rain on Gokul until they come and surrender to me."

So as the people were continuing with their celebrations of praying to Mount Govardhan, it started raining on Gokul. First, it rained a little bit. And the people thought, "Oh, this is the season of monsoon anyway, we are getting our rain. That's nice. Monsoon has arrived on time. No need to worry."

It rained a little bit; people went home. But it didn't stop there. It rained. It rained all day. It rained all night. And it rained and rained for many days. It rained like it had never rained before. It rained so much that people's houses started leaking. The river Yamuna overflowed, and the water of Yamuna rushed into the town of Gokul. Along with the water flowed people's belongings and the cows and the calves. It was just a miserable sight. It rained so much there was not one dry spot left in the whole town of Gokul. Finally the people of Gokul were not only tired of the rain, but they were also worried. And they came running to Krishna and said, "Krishna, what are we to do now? We listened to you, and we prayed to Mount Govardhan, and Indra has caused this rain on us. His anger is something that cannot be controlled. Please save us, Krishna. Show us the way." Krishna said, "Don't worry my people, I'll take care of you. Let's all go to Mount Govardhan."

So the whole town of Gokul followed Krishna towards Mount Govardhan. As the people were watching, Krishna, the little lad, just lifted the whole Mount Govardhan on his hands. He lifted it way up into the sky. That huge mountain he lifted like it was a cloud, high above his head. The people of Gokul, along with their children and their

animals, took shelter under Mount Govardahm, and they kept dry. Indra saw this whole scene from up in the heavens, and he realized Krishna was not just a little lad, but he was really a savior - a reincarnation of Vishnu himself.

Indra decided it was a mistake he had made, and he said, "It's time to stop the rain." As it stopped raining, slowly, slowly the waters receded. The sun came out, and the people of Gokul rejoiced. They came from under Mount Govardhan and went into their own houses. Gokul was back to its original self in a few days, and soon life returned to normal.

Voices of Faith

The Story of The Elephant and The Rabbit: The Story of Madgumar

Summary

In this story, students are introduced to a branch of Hinduism called Jain. The story centers on the teaching of Mahavir, a wise man, and a story he tells to a young man in order to help him decide how to live more faithfully.

Research Option

Ask students to create a working definition for compassion, using a dictionary and the details of this story. Students may be encouraged to research the branch of Hinduism called Jainism.

Discussion Questions

- What did Mahavir offer to those who came to hear him?
- Ask students to consider for whom they might travel great distances in order to hear speak? What would you take with you for such a journey?
- What did Medgumar bring with him on his journey to hear Mahavir?
- How did Mahavir's story demonstrate his compassion for Medgumar?
- How does this story introduce reincarnation, the diversity of Hindu practice and the interconnected nature of all things?

Transcript of recorded story: The Story of The Elephant and The Rabbit: The Story of Madgumar

My name is Surabhi Shah, and I grew up in Canada, but I spent many of my holidays and summer vacations in my parents' hometown of Kapadvanj, in Gujarat state of India. While I was there I would spend a lot of time with my relatives, especially my grandmother, and she taught me a great deal about Jain traditions and Jain stories. Jainism is my family's religion, and this visit to India and the stories that I learned allow me to feel more Jain, even though I live in North America. I now live in Raleigh, North Carolina, and I work here as an environmental engineer.

This is the story of the elephant and the rabbit. It is a very ancient Jain story. Once upon a time a long, long time ago in India there lived a man named Mahavir. Now, the Jains call him Lord Mahavir - not because he has special powers or because he was able to grant wishes but because he was an ordinary man who lived his life in an extraordinary way. He lived his life with compassion for all living things. For many, many years Mahavir meditated in the jungle until, at last, he reached keval gnyan - the knowledge and understanding of the past, the present and the future, and an understanding of the world as it is. This knowledge allowed Mahavir to live in peace

with the world and with all things around him. And he wanted to share this understanding with everybody. So Mahavir went from place to place and city to city and preached his message of compassion and peace.

He would go to so many places, and every place he went people would come from miles and miles and miles around. They would leave behind their family and their work. They would walk for days and days with a few belongings on their back till at last they would come to the place where Mahavir would be speaking. They would stay in the pilgrim shelter every night, putting down their bedrolls on the floor and sleeping until the next morning. This is what they would do, for every day that Mahavir stayed, they, too, stayed. You might ask why. Why would people suffer such hardships, leaving their families behind, walking on barefoot for days? Sleeping on the ground for many nights? Why? Why would they come to hear Mahavir? They came because it was said that if even one word from one sermon was to enter your mind and your heart, your life would be changed forever, and you could live the rest of your life with peace.

One such man who came to hear Mahavir was a young man named Medgumar. Medgumar came from the furthest of villages, but he had heard that Mahavir would be speaking in the land. Even though he knew that he would have to walk for many days, that it was far away where Mahavir was speaking, he was determined to go. So he walked for long hot days and long, long nights till at last he reached the place where Mahavir would be speaking.

He was exhausted and ready to rest, but he noticed, when he entered the pilgrim shelter, that there was not a single spot on the ground for him to sleep. He looked around, and the entire huge hall was already covered with bedrolls and other pilgrims who had arrived earlier and were already lying down to rest. He looked, and he looked for a spot but to no avail. And at last he settled in the doorway, the only place he could find. He put his bedroll down, and he tried to rest for the night. But that night, with all the people coming in and out at all odd hours, Medgumar didn't get a single wink of sleep. And the next day during Mahavir's sermon, he found himself yawning and rubbing his eyes and even almost falling asleep in the middle of Lord Mahavir's sermon. Can you imagine? He thought to himself, "This won't do at all. This won't do. No, no. I can do without many things. But I can't do without sleep."

So he resolved that he would go home, but he decided to share his decision with Lord Mahavir. He went to Lord Mahavir, and he said, "Lord, I've decided to go home." Now, Lord Mahavir was very surprised. He had heard of this young man, Medgumar, and he knew that he had come from the most distant village and traveled for days just to hear Mahavir's speech. "Why?" he asked Medgumar, "Why is it that you are leaving after only the first day?" "Well," Medgumar explained, "You see, I come from the furthest village and I walked for so many days, and by the time I got to the pilgrim shelter, there wasn't a single place for me to lie down and sleep. So I slept in the doorway, and people coming in and out all night did not allow me to sleep even one

wink. Well, Lord, during your sermon I almost fell asleep. I can do without many things but I cannot do without sleep." he said. "So I've decided to go home."

Now Lord Mahavir knew that Medgumar was capable of great, great sacrifice and that one sleepless night should not bother him at all. But he was not the type to interfere with another person's decisions. So instead of saying something else he just said, "Medgumar, wait. Let me tell you a story. A long time ago in the jungle there was a great, great fire, a fire that struck fear into the hearts of the animals large and small. And everywhere the animals looked to find safety from that fire. And at last they found it on a small island between two streams protected from the fire. So the animals flew, and they swam, and they waited till they covered the entire island, and you couldn't see a blade of grass. Animals that otherwise might have fought or even devoured each other lay side by side, grateful to have sanctuary from that fire.

One of those animals was the mighty elephant. The elephant found himself squished between all the other animals when he realized that he had an itch on his knee. What an inconvenient time, when he could barely move, to try to reach his knee and scratch it. So he raised up his leg till he could reach it, and he scratched it, and he scratched it. 'Ah, that felt better,' he thought. And he was just about to put his foot back down on the ground when he noticed, on that tiny spot of grass where his foot had been, a tiny little rabbit. 'Now where had that rabbit come from?' He thought to himself. And what should he do? He certainly couldn't put his foot back down, for he would surely, surely crush that rabbit. And he certainly couldn't ask the rabbit to leave, because there was nowhere to go but that fire. So for five long days and five long nights that elephant stood with leg upraised, just to give safety to that rabbit. And at the end of five days, when the fire had burned itself out, and the forest was nothing but ashes and dust, the elephant fell, exhausted from pain and suffering."

Mahavir ended the story there and said, "That elephant, Medgumar, was you. That was you in a previous life. Would you, who suffered so much for the sake of a tiny rabbit, would you now let one sleepless night turn you away from hearing this message of compassion which you have come here to hear?" Medgumar then understood that Mahavir knew a great deal about him and his abilities. And he reconsidered his decision and decided to stay.

This story is still told, and the symbol of an elephant with leg upraised and a tiny rabbit underneath is still the symbol of Jainism's first law, Ahimsa - compassion for all living things.

Glossary

Atman

the individual human soul

Avatar

(Sanskrit) a human or animal identity taken on by a deity when making a visit to earth. Avatars first appear in the Bhagavad Gita and are generally associated with Vishnu, who, while in his incarnation as Krishna, explains that he has been born into the world many times: as a fish, a boar, a man-lion, a dwarf, a tortoise, the Hindu Noah who saves the world from a flood, and Rama. In the future, he explains, he will come to overthrow barbarians and reestablish a rightful world order.

Bhagavad Gita

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: "song of the glorious one") epic Indian poem recounting the dialogues of the god Krishna and a young man named Arjuna. 700 two-line stanzas in length, the Bhagavad Gita constitutes eighteen chapters of the sixth book of the Mahabharata. In this story, Krishna, one of the most popular Hindu gods, acts as Arjuna's charioteer and advisor. Krishna helps Arjuna understand his relationship and responsibilities to himself, his family and community, the gods and the cosmos.

Brahma

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning "swelling, growth, expansion") Brahma is the creative aspect of Brahman.

Brahman

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: a swelling, expansion, growth") Brahman is the term used to describe the supreme principle of the universe. The unknowable aspect of power and holiness present in all things.

Common Era / Before Common Era (CE and BCE)

BCE and CE replace traditional western use of BC: before Christ, and AD: anno domino, in the year of the Lord, both of which are Christian in orientation.

Educator's note: particularly in the context of these materials, it is recommended that years be noted with CE and BCE in order to acknowledge fully the diversity of beliefs.

guru

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: heavy, weighty) teacher, generally applied to individuals who have a special connection with and understanding of Brahman and Hindu deities.

jiva

(Sanskrit) the individual human being.

karma

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: "action, deed") the law of consequences. This law establishes that any and all actions have ethical and physical consequences. Educator's note: in the earliest texts, karma refers to actions of the deities and to religious actions such as devotion and sacrifice. In later texts, karma became linked with reincarnation and was established as a universal principle, that is, that one can affect one's cycle of birth and rebirth by actions in the current lifetime.

Mahabharata

(Sanskrit: pronounced with the stress on the third syllable: ma-hab-ha'-ra-ta) Indian epic poem, originally written in Sanskrit. The central story is of a dynastic struggle between two branches of an Indian ruling family. The Mahabharata also contains secondary story lines which offer moral, social and worldview backgrounds for the ultimate battle between the two branches. Readily available in English translation.

moksha

(Sanskrit: literal meaning: "release, liberation") the most commonly used term applied to the release of the human soul from the cycles of birth, death and rebirth. Moksha is the goal of many Hindu practices.

puja

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: “worship, honor”) Ritual offerings of various items, services and signs meant to show respect and devotion to a deity. It is not uncommon for Hindu practitioners to have a home altar on which is placed an image of a favored deity. Puja may include the simple offerings of flowers, water, food and burning incense as signs of love and devotion. Puja also applies to devotions performed in and around Hindu temples.

Ramayana

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: the adventures of Rama) The story of Rama, one of the sons of King Dasaratha, and his wife Sita.

Rig Veda

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: “knowledge of the verses”) The oldest of the Vedas; a collection of 1,028 hymns in ten books. Believed to be composed in the oral tradition c. 1400-1200 BCE in what is now northwestern India.

samsara

(Sanskrit, Pali, et al: lit. meaning: “wandering, going through”) term applied to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, also everyday life in the world and transmigration (rebirth of the jiva in lifetimes as both humans, animals and other living beings).

Sanskrit

the language of Aryan tribes who entered India in the second millennium BCE. Sanskrit is also applied as the name of the literature as a whole generated by the Aryans. Sanskrit is the ritual language of Hinduism, containing the laws of Brahman, in much the way a textbook might be said to hold the laws of physics.

sanyassa

(Sanskrit) the final of four stages of life. After fulfilling the requirements of youth, householder and retiree, sanyassa is the time of renunciation and wandering, during which the individual searches for wisdom and insight.

Shiva

Shiva is "the destroyer," the name and form of God who accomplishes endings in order that new beginnings may occur. Shiva appears to Arjuna in the Mahabharata as an outcaste hunter who subjects him to combat and supplies him with magic weaponry.

shmr̥iti

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: "remembered") term used to describe certain sacred texts within the Hindu tradition. These texts, principally the Vedas, were not composed but recalled. The Vedas do not contain what might otherwise be considered "original human thought," but rather the remembered revelations or principles known by the ancient sages.

Upanishads

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: "to sit down near to") Meaning secret, mystical teaching, the term Upanishad is generally applied to the sacred texts of Hinduism which contain the culmination of Vedic wisdom.

Vedas

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: "knowledge") The Vedas are the entire corpus of collected sacred knowledge and wisdom of Hinduism, heard by the ancient sages and ultimately recorded in a series of hymns and ritual texts.

Vishnu

Vishnu is the creator and protector, appearing on earth at intervals to rescue, restore order and protect life. Krishna is one of the many avatars of Vishnu.