

Hinduism: various paths to salvation

Religion



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Hinduism: Various Paths to Salvation While many religious scholars focus on the idea of soteriology as a fundamental principal of world religions, regardless of their differing belief systems, one must keep in mind that soteriology is fundamentally a Western concept. Western philosophical patterns are often very different from Eastern thought patterns. That being said, within Hinduism there are two different ways of reaching salvation: worldly soteriology and a renunciant soteriology. Worldly soteriology focuses on celestial rebirth through sacrifice and good karma. Renunciant soteriology focuses on achieving liberation (moksha) from karma through yogic practices. In order to better understand how these two principals are reconciled in smriti texts, the four duties of Hinduism and the four ashramas will be explored.

The four purusharthas, or objectives, of Hinduism are: dharma (righteousness); artha (wealth); kama (desire); and moksha (salvation).

Dharma can be seen as all that a person does that is in harmony with his or her inner spirituality and the outer environment. It is at the root of the other three purusharthas. Artha means wealth. According to Hinduism, there is no conflict between accumulating wealth and leading a spiritual life. What is central is if dharma is maintained. The arthashastras discuss the proper handling of money to be able to lead a proper spiritual life that coincides with the guidelines of dharma. The same is true with kama, or desire.

Celibacy is not necessarily a precursor to spiritual awareness. What is important is dharma. For example, the Bhagvad Gita teaches that householders are completely at liberty to express sexual desires. However, students and ascetics are to practice celibacy (Hinduwebsite). Moksha, attained through complete detachment, is the absence of illusion. How

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moksha is attained depends upon one's particular path. Thus, it becomes apparent that the importance is not placed on the sacrifice of worldly pleasures, but rather on how one follows his or her path.

The ashramas serve as representations the four basic paths one may take at various moments of his or her life to achieve moksha (Sivananda). The first of these is studentship. This time is marked by renunciation, discipline, celibacy and poverty. It is a time of complete dedication to the Vedas. It may be followed by the period of the householder. This is a time of accumulated wealth, worldly pleasures, and marriage, within the constraints of dharma. Once the man has his own grandchildren, he enters into the hermit stage. Free from social obligations, he dedicates his time to meditation and religious study. The final stage is that of renunciation. This marks a time of solitude and meditation, of indifference to earthly pleasures. It is at this stage that he is free to achieve moksha. Much like the purusharthas, the importance does not lie in how to reconcile worldly soteriology and renunciant soteriology, but rather in which method best serves one's life position.

Thus, Hinduism does not profess one path to liberation, but rather various. This can be seen in the four ashramas as well as in various yogic techniques. One is expected to follow his or her dharma. If this is done properly throughout various lifetimes, moksha will follow.

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