Hinduism: The Tangible Presence of the Divine

Sunday, Nov. 1, 2026
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: Seat at the Table (Melanie DeMore), #123 Spirit of Life, #118 This Little Light of Mine
Music, sitar and tabla: Raga Todi and Raga Bhairavi; choir: Nada Brahma (Brian Tate).
Reading: *The Light of Diwali* by the Rev. Dr. Abhi P. Janamanchi, Cedar Lane UU Church
Homily in two parts, Rev. Dr. Roger Jones
Personal Reflections by Kaushik Das

Chalice Lighting words inspired by the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, trans. Abhi Janamanchi

> May the light from our Chalice lead us
> from untruth to truth,
> from ignorance to wisdom,
> from animosity to love,
> and from bondage to freedom.
>
> Let us rededicate ourselves before this light
> to affirm and promote
> truth, wisdom, love, and freedom
> today, and in the days to come.

Reading

Diwali, a joyous festival of lights, is celebrated by Hindus but also by Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists around the world. For many Hindus, it marks the beginning of the new year.

Diwali symbolizes the victory of good over evil, of life over death, and celebrates awareness and awakening of the Inner Light. Although it is not seen externally, this Inner Light removes all obstacles and dispels all ignorance; it awakens the individual to our true nature, not as the body, but as the unchanging, infinite and transcendent reality.

Diwali is a time to reflect on our thoughts and deeds over the past year; a time to acknowledge where we have fallen short; a time to recommit ourselves to being more loving, kind, and forgiving toward others and ourselves; and a time to shine our inner light into the world.

In a household, the way to celebrate Diwali is to light small lamps and arrange them in patterns by doorways, windowsills, steps, walls, and terraces. While children are free to playfully arrange and rearrange these lights, there are some basic requirements. In every home, one is required to place a light at the threshold of the house – the space where the outside meets the inside – to symbolize the space where the inner self meets the outer self, the world. The simplicity of a tiny light, shining from the threshold, is a powerful symbol of the call of Diwali.

In the Hindu tradition, the home is a metaphor for the body. Within the home, shines the light that is God (Atman). It's the light that enables us to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Its radiance allows our mind to think and imagine, our heart to feel compassion and express love, and our hands to serve and bless the world. According to the Kena Upanishad, this light is the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of speech. It is the breath of the breath, the eye of the eye.

This light is present in everyone. It enlivens all bodies and minds. The purpose of one's life is to realize this truth and to embody it in deeds and actions.

In order to find inner peace, it can be tempting to keep ourselves away from all the suffering and pain we encounter in the world. On Diwali, however, the light at the home's threshold reminds us that our awakening is incomplete if the light does not radiate from within us to dispel the shadows of the outside world. The Inner Light that does not shine outward in service of a Life larger than our own is selfish and deficient.

So this is the challenge: How may Diwali provide illumination for us in this turbulent time when we yearn for light and wisdom?

How might we overcome ignorance, fear, and bigotry? How might we overcome our hatred of the other? How do we make everything that we put out into the world an offering of devotion, an invitation to Divinity to reside in our hearts?

Let us remember to take the time to be still, and quiet. Let us be present enough to see and hear that Divinity when it dwells within.

Homily Part Roger Jones

In our year-long look at neighboring faiths, this month we share glimpses of the ancient and vital Hindu tradition. And *glimpse* is the right word, for it's not easy to wrap your arms around this tradition. The best we can do with just a little time is to capture a few looks.

Indeed, Hinduism is an umbrella for a great variety of religious ideas and practices. This umbrella embraces several schools of intellectual philosophy. It includes millions of people devoted to one or more deities in various incarnations. Hindu spiritual practices have ranged from silent meditation, songs and hymns, and ecstatic or emotional dancing. Hinduism includes seasonal celebrations at local shrines and major temples, food offerings in family homes, rites of passage from birth to death. For those who participate, these practices give structure and purpose to life; they deepen a sense of belonging and a sense of connection with universal divinity.

In the Western world, one might be tempted to ask: What does a Hindu believe? That's not a very relevant question. While Hinduism contains countless concepts and philosophies, it is primarily a culture of practice.

Some people might call Hinduism a polytheistic tradition: it has so many gods that nobody could name them all. There is no Hindu headquarters which might keep a list of which ones are suitable for what kinds of petitions or prayers. But there are centuries of tradition, and in the scriptures known as the Vedas and the Upanishads, there are great legends, prayers, and hymns. And there are divine personalities who are objects of devotion. Here are just a few.

Lord Vishnu is a major deity. He's considered to be "the supreme Lord who creates, protects, and transforms the universe." Whenever the world is threatened with evil, chaos, and destructive forces, Lord Vishnu descends to restore cosmic order. To do this, he takes on the form of one of his 10 avatars, most often by Rama or Krishna. There are temples to both of them all over India. These avatars or incarnations demonstrate that the deity cares about human beings. He will help us in troubled times. And he can be fun to worship. For example, Krishna is depicted as a handsome young man, often with black or dark blue skin, playing the flute. In some depictions he's a cowherd, as there are stories of his affairs with several milkmaids.

Lord Ganesh is the son of Krishna and the goddess Parvati, who is the goddess of beauty, fertility, love, marriage, and children. Ganesh is an elephant. People make offerings to him for wealth and success. Ganesh is called the remover of obstacles.

Lord Shiva is the bad boy of the major deities. He's called the Lord of the Dance of Life, and at the same time, Shiva is called the Destroyer of worlds. He is also a fertility god. Many followers worship him with great zeal and emotional ecstasy. For this reason, Shiva's emblem is a phallic symbol, often carved in stone. It's called a Shiva lingam. (pictured)



Hindus worship a number of goddesses too. Kahli, for example, is called the mistress of death. On the brighter side, there are images of the Great Mother and more local goddess avatars with various names. In southern India a nine-day festival celebrates nine goddesses, with each night more energetic than the last one.

You can find large temples in big cities as well as in small villages to which people go on pilgrimage. Moreover, there are roadside shrines in the form of a stone or painted idol built near sacred rivers, trees or mountains where travelers can pay respect to their deities. In a Hindu household, there may be a carved altar or just a corner of a room reserved for performing puja, which is another name for ceremony. Puja can include songs, prayers, incense, and food. On our chalice table today are some oil lamps, called diyas, which are used in puja, especially for Diwali.

The scholar of religion Diana Eck writes that Hindu devotion is highly visual. Bronze and stone statues are tangible incarnations of deities. In her book *Darshan,* she writes that the devotee or worshipper actively looks at the deity, and the deity looks back at the devotee. Many divine images are carved or painted with large, prominent eyes—this is make it clear that the deity is exchanging your gaze. Altars, temples and shrines are places of divine-human encounter.

For a few years until last December, my household in Sacramento included a family from northern India: dad, mom, and a girl who grew from age 2 to 5 while with me. After preparing food for an evening meal, they would place small amounts of cooked food, especially rice, on a tray with a lighted candle on a table. An offering to a god. After leaving the offering in front of the deity for some time, they would retrieve what was left of it and serve it at the dinner table.

On a January evening two years ago, they hosted a dinner to celebrate Lohri, a winter harvest festival. Before the meal they invited other guests and me to join them on the patio. In the chilly dark air, a Duraflame log was burning in a disposable aluminum pan. In India this would have been a bonfire in the community, around which people would sing folk songs. We circled round for the puja. Each person took a turn. We cupped water in one hand and sprinkled it around the fire. Then each one tossed sesame seeds, peanuts, popped popcorn, and sweets made from sugar cane. As the mom showed their four-year-old girl how to do the offering, the child

squealed with delight. After everyone had taken a turn, we went back into the house for a feast. It touched me to imagine that their child was not only practicing rituals of her culture; she was also building memories for a lifetime. Rituals and altars are places of divine-human encounter; moreover they are occasions for deepening our human connections.

For me that experience is an example of what the late scholar Huston Smith had to say: "Religion is not primarily a matter of facts; it is a matter of meanings." We will consider more meaning in the concluding part of the sermon.

Hymn: Spirit of Life

Personal Reflection by Kaushik Das: Growing up in a Hindu Missionary School

Good morning. For about a year now I have been cornering Reverend Jones after the service to talk about eastern religions. I thought he was enjoying those conversations. I thought he liked me. Then he asked me to explain a five-thousand-year-old tradition in five minutes, and I began to wonder whether he liked me after all.

Most of you already speak some of the language of Hinduism. Karma, which just means action. Also: Mantra, Guru, and Yoga. Pundit is our word for a priest and an American word for a talking head on cable news. So I will skip the five thousand years and take you straight to my eighth grade. I grew up in a residential school in India run by the Ramakrishna Mission, a monastic order. The same order runs the Vedanta Societies here in America, including one in Sacramento. The monks were our spiritual guides, and also our teachers, wardens, coaches, umpires, and when needed, our bouncers.

They taught us two things early, and both separate us from the Abrahamic faiths. First, your moksha, your liberation, is your own job. Nobody carries you, and believing the right thing does not get you there by default. Second, there is no original sin. It runs the other way. We come from the infinite, already whole, (*purnam adah, purnam idam*: that is whole, this is whole). Of course, we get muddied by earthly business, and are heading backward. Religion, as Swami Vivekananda put it, is simply the manifestation of the divinity already in us. The mud is the problem. The soul never was. Religion was taught in my school the way physics was taught—with exams. In eighth grade one question read: You must work toward your own moksha through selfless karma. Give an account of your good and bad karma and describe your progress.

I did what any future engineer would do. I drew a line down the middle. Bad karma on the left, good on the right. This was a strict school, so the left column looked like a trap. In American terms, I was pleading the fifth. I was not joining that fishing expedition. The right column was worse. Helping someone with her homework was good karma, no? But I had feelings for her. That is not selfless. That is strategy, the thirteen-year-old version. Every good deed of mine failed the test. I left both columns blank. A hard pass from thirteen-year-old me, and the only exam question I have ever left empty.

So I went back to the monk who taught the class. This selflessness business is hard, I said. Is there another road? He smiled. *There are three more*. First: Gyan yoga, the path of knowledge, for people who must argue their way to God. Next: Bhakti yoga, the path of devotion: temples, idols, chanting, unconditional surrender to a supreme being, which, he warned, is also the easiest way to be exploited. Every guru scandal starts there. And third, raja yoga, the path of meditation.

Patanjali laid it out as eight steps: two on how to behave, one on how to sit, one on how to breathe, and four on how to quiet the mind. The yoga class at your gym or studio is the one on how to sit. The poses exist so you can sit still long enough to meditate. America took that one step and built an industry. Different temperaments, different doors, same destination.

I had one more question that year, and the answer explains Hinduism's unusual tolerance for R-rated material. On Maha Shivaratri, the night of Shiva, what is worshipped is a lingam: a stone form of Shiva that is, to put it plainly, a symbol of sexual union. I was thirteen and scandalized. Do we really worship that? The monk smiled again. What is wrong with it? We cannot touch the creator. We can touch the creation. So we honor the creation, and this is how creation continues.

That is why Hindus find divinity, God's reflection, everywhere. The Upanishads spell it out: *matri devo bhava, pitri devo bhava*. Your mother is a god. Your father is a god. Your teacher. The guest at your door. Your children are your chance to serve without reward. And the one divinity we rarely say out loud: our spouses are divine too. A dimension of love that no temple can offer: a god who lives with you—and gives feedback.

That is the Hinduism I carry. Not one gate with one gatekeeper, but many paths, and a Supreme you can touch, feel, argue with, love and cherish. Sri Ramakrishna said it in four words of Bengali: *jato mat, tato path*. As many faiths, so many paths. I suspect that sounds familiar in this room.

Decades later, I still keep that ledger, in my head. Bad deeds on the left, which I still hide. Good deeds on the right, each one followed by the same question: was that for them, or for me? You keep one too. You call it conscience. And the same doubt runs through every path.

We hide our bad karma and doubt our good karma. We study, without knowing what for. We meditate, and fidget. We pray, with one eye open. (Most of us take the spiritual exam the way I did at thirteen: hoping nobody checks.)

The tradition I grew up in expects exactly that. It does not call the ambivalence a failure. It calls it a temperament, and it built four doors, so every temperament has a way in. Pick yours.



Homily Part 2

One of Hinduism's contributions to the religious traditions which grew out of it is the concept of the transmigration of souls, also known as reincarnation.

That is, for each person, our soul passes through a sequence of bodies, from one life to the next. Here are words from the Sanskrit book known as the *Bhagavad-Gita* (11:22): "Worn-out garments/ Are shed by the body: / Worn-out bodies/ Are shed by the dweller."

As I understand the concept, our deeds and actions in this present life will shape the future embodiment of our soul, whether it's incarnated in a human body or in another creature. This is our karma, a word which means action. Ideally, by your actions in this life, you want to improve your soul's embodiment for the next one. Given the ancient Hindu caste system, many people would aspire to achieve a social class or caste in their next incarnation better than their current one. Moreover, as one scholar noted, for centuries in India women and girls lived with harsh limitations on their freedom and safety. If they were to become widows, their survival would be even more precarious. Thus, it was tragic but common for a woman to make assiduous actions—that is to do her karma—in the hope of being reborn as a male person.

Starting in the 19th century, leading Hindu reformers in India argued against society's limitations on women as well as against the caste system. In 1950, when the newly independent Republic of India ratified its first constitution, it outlawed the caste system. Of course, in the United States, as we have seen ever since racial discrimination was outlawed, though legal changes are necessary, they alone cannot change cultures or overturn unfair social structures.

For a Hindu the goal of action—the goal of karma—is liberation of their soul into a final state of being, a state in which there are no more reincarnations. As we heard from Kaushik, this liberation is called Moksha. The 19th century Hindu saint Ramakrishna said this is the mystic loss of the self in God. In uniting with God, the soul gains ultimate knowledge and eternal bliss.

Hinduism is not one thing. Indeed, there can be different ways to live it out in the same household or family. Yet even while priests all over India preside over pujas for countless deities, Hinduism's philosophers promote the unity of all things. They proclaim that above the deities—and beyond all of us—is the Ultimate Reality of the universe, known as Brahman. It is the origin and principle from which all existence proceeds. It is not the creator, but the cause of creation. Brahman is not represented visually, but it is represented by the sound Om, the sound of the universe. When Brahman operates in a living human being, it is called Atman, the divine soul which occupies every being.

In the words of the scholar Huston Smith, to demonstrate the Atman within us calls for attention and action. He writes: "A lamp can be covered with dust and dirt to the point of obscuring its light completely. The problem that life poses for the human self is to cleanse [our impurities] to the point where its infinite center can shine forth in fullness."

Lamps, fires, candles and other sources of light are common themes to most religious traditions. Light represents illumination and understanding of this world and the world beyond. Light represents the Atman, the spirit of the Divine which all people possess inside us.

Regardless of how many new incarnations our soul will have, we are conscious of the life we have right now. And we know that our karma—our action—shapes the lives we are living today. Our words, deeds, and attitudes make a difference for others and in our own lives as well

as for the future. Words of kindness touch other people, and they enlarge the light within us. Attitudes of patience and goodwill toward ourselves and others can warm our hearts.

Deeds of service, generosity and mercy can help those we know and some we'll never know, and they help our hearts to shine.

As we heard in the reading from Rev. Janamanchi, the upcoming festival of Diwali is a challenge and an invitation to everybody. As he encouraged us, let us remember to take the time to be still, and quiet, take the time to be present enough to see and hear Divinity when it dwells within.

Amid the lights of Diwali, let us mediate on the light at every threshold in our lives. This is the place where the light of Love radiates from our hearts to shine in the world with mercy, kindness, compassion and courage.

This is the place where the light meets the darkness, where the inner meets the outer, and where your spirit meets the world. May you go shining.

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