

Hinduism and Adult Learning: Fostering a Mind-Body Connection

Swathi Nath Thaker
University of Georgia

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Thaker, Swathi Nath (2010). "Hinduism and Adult Learning: Fostering a Mind-Body Connection," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2010/papers/76>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Hinduism and Adult Learning: Fostering a Mind-Body Connection

Swathi Nath Thaker, University of Georgia, USA

The Western notions of learning have, and still, dominate the field of adult education, with non-cognitive forms of learning such as somatic learning and spirituality only recently emerging. While much of the Western literature on learning and knowing suggest that the mind and body are split, a number of cultures around the world do not believe in this dichotomy, and Hinduism is no exception. Hinduism, which is said to be over four thousand years old, defines itself according to the Vedas, the most ancient body of religious literature. While much of this content has long been unknown to most Hindus, it is still regarded as an absolute authority which reveals the fundamental truth. It is through these texts, which were originally shared vocally, that individuals come to appreciate multiple ways of learning and connecting to the world. Though Western belief teaches that an individual is empowered through himself or herself, Hinduism argues that true empowerment emerges through an understanding of the sources of knowledge, not just its components, which in turn leads to unity with the universe. Thus, life for Hindus becomes not merely about learning facts and figures, but also about developing wisdom by forming a connection between the mind, body, and spirit.

Before one can begin to discuss the impact of Hinduism on the learning process and the construction of knowledge, it is important to have an understanding of the concept, both on a historical as well as philosophical level. The religion now known as Hinduism encompasses a vast range of practices and beliefs. It has no one founder and no centralized organization. Hindus throughout history have expressed multiple perspectives on the nature of divinity or ultimate reality. It is this richness and diversity that makes it difficult to pinpoint a comprehensive list of the religion's characteristics that would apply to all Hindus. However, it is this openness that forms the cornerstone of this philosophy. According to Hinduism, freedom of religious belief, worship and practice, and diversity of faiths are not incompatible with the unit of religion or religions. A significant consequence of this attitude in Hinduism is its spirit of tolerance. It is noted that individuals who praise their own religion and say that only their faith is true, does a disservice to their religion. Hinduism is a variety of growing beliefs and thus, it became not only a way of life but also a view of life (Chennakesavan, 1974).

This notion of Hinduism representing a way of life has been echoed by a number of researchers (Rinehart, 2004; Boutte, 2002). There is no word in Indian languages that accurately corresponds to the English word religion, which entails assumptions that belief has primacy over practice, that a person can only belong to one religion, that tradition stems from textual, written revelation, and that religion is necessarily coherent (Flood, 2003). Hindu literature and traditions that examine this idea not only discuss God and God's purpose, but they also illustrate how society should be organized and even what one should and should not eat (Rinehart, 2004).

While it can be argued that South Asian cultures are highly textualized, this is in the widest sense of the term, as there are many oral traditions, some of which date back thousands of years. There are traditions of Vedic recitation in several regions of India that are said to function as three thousand year old tape recordings (Witzel, 1997). This revelation of the Veda, verses believed to have been heard by the ancient sages as a symbol and legitimizing reference is critical (Oberhammer, 1997, cited in Flood, 2003), and can be viewed as a defining feature of Hinduism. Thus, the concept of "text" needs to be reevaluated when utilized to discuss Hindu philosophy. Modern day texts typically have a clearly defined content as well as clearly

identified authors. To most modern readers, the term text suggests a printed book, which we read silently. Yet much of what we now think of as Hindu texts were first preserved and transmitted as oral traditions meant to be recited and heard, not read from a written or printed page. Each recitation might include variations, elaborations, or explanations of earlier recitations, creating multiple versions of the same traditions with no one clearly identifiable composer or author. The variations in some instances may be the most informative parts of the text, because they may reflect the specific interests of a particular time period, or region or group of people (Rinehart, 2004).

Hinduism, whether viewed as a religion or as a way of life, offers its followers guidelines to becoming an enlightened individual. In Hindu theory there are two types of learning, each with its own goal and its own method. The first has the aim of gaining knowledge from the world, so it is outer directed. Its source is the environment, and its methodology is twofold – formal study of sacred writings and the informal interaction with the world known as experience. The second type of learning has self-understanding as its aim. Its source is the person's own spirit, and its methodology is introspection as achieved through meditation (Thomas, 1988).

When seeking to gain knowledge from the world, formal study of the scriptures under the direction of a wise *guru* (teacher) is essential. Such knowledge is neither instinctive nor available through inward reflection. And while personal experience in daily living and in observing one's society can furnish some of this information, much depends on formal study. For this, and other reasons, the connection between the teacher and student is critical and often one that is revered.

When considering the second and more complex type of learning, namely self-understanding, several beliefs intersect to lead to this type of introspection. In their development, people get what they earn, what they deserve. Such a belief is contrary to a number of principles espoused by various Western sociologically-oriented or environment-oriented theorists who argue that people are not solely responsible for their own development, but that their fate has been fashioned by environmental influences beyond their control. But in Hindu theory, the individual is clearly master of one's fate and captain of one's soul (Thomas, 1988). With this notion of development, the life of the body and the life of the soul must be considered separately. The body, according to Hinduism, is a passing illusion and is perishable. The essence of a human and the only lasting reality is the soul or mind, so one's psychic self becomes the object that determines the length of development.

There are clear stages outlined for the Indian male during his life span that earth as he is initiated into the study of the Vedas. Beginning with the initiation, Hindu doctrine identifies four periods of life: 1) the student, 2) the householder or family man, 3) the hermit who escapes into a forest, and 4) the almsman who returns to society but abandons any attachment to worldly objects (Thomas, 1988). The length of studentship is defined not in years but in mastery of the scriptures, vows, duties, rites, austerities, and techniques of meditation. The learner's daily life throughout this stage is filled with a host of prescribed rituals and study sessions with the guru. The revered guru-student relationship is one of high importance and can be found in a number of the ancient texts that outline the principles of Hinduism. Though Hinduism does allow for individuation, its purpose is on spiritual growth, thus helping individuals to connect the mind and body. The end of studentship is signified by a ceremony in which the male casts away his garb, shaves, pares his nails, washes his teeth, and has his hair cut. He then dons a new, more elaborate suit, including an umbrella, and other decorative items.

Once the male has completed his education, he is ready to begin the householder stage, which is initiated through marriage. Upon entering this phase, the householder assumes a heavy burden of responsibility, since he is expected to support the members of his family (Thomas, 1988). In the third stage, the householder abandons all his belongings, takes with him the sacred fire and necessities for domestic sacrifices, and lives in the forest, either alone or with his wife. It is during this period of life that he observes the greatest austerities, exposing himself to fire and rain, sleeping on the bare ground, eating roots and fruit, and receiving money and/or goods hardly sufficient to sustain life. It is through these difficulties and the diligent study of sacred texts that the ascetic seeks to achieve complete union with the Supreme Soul, which is the ultimate goal.

In the final stage, the devout Hindu forsakes all earthly ties and concern for his physical self, and he turns ever inward in final search of union with the Divine Reality. No longer is he obligated to observe the complex variety of rituals of the earlier stage, since the function of rituals has been to unite the believer with the Supreme Reality, and the sannyasin has now passed that brink. The earthly end to this stage is death, with the soul proceeding beyond into the next life.

It is important to recognize that these phases are only applicable to Hindu males. Females did not, and still do not, undergo these same rites of passage to signify their development as women. Although today, girls in India attend schools along with boys, they were never meant to leave their family and take up studentship with a guru. This is because a woman's preparation for the householder stage takes place informally within the home, as the mother teaches her daughter about the responsibilities of being a wife and a mother. These skills are essential because it is only through marriage that a woman can continue her search for the ultimate purpose in life. It is only through her husband that she can also unite with the Supreme Reality. Although women have made many strides in India, this belief continues to illustrate the male-dominated view of Hinduism.

So, what do these stages tell us about the goal of development? Though only a small number of males will pass through all the phases mentioned above (Rinehart, 2004), and these phases are largely symbolic, they still offer both men and women an ultimate purpose, as both are seeking the same goal. Hinduism is sometimes called a religion of renunciation, rejection, or denial. The obligation of a Hindu is to renounce or reject the visible world with its illusory succession of lives and deaths in order to achieve relief from both the pains and the joys of mortality. So the key objective is not to attain happiness, pleasure, or success in a worldly sense but, rather, to win release from life. This goal of liberation is attained through a variety of ways, from mastering knowledge of the sacred writings to performing a multiplicity of rites. This journey is marked by transitional goals that are instrumental in attaining this final aim of development. These objectives are found in Hindu literature in two forms – as traits of the good person and as specific behaviors which reflect or comprise these qualities. The characteristics articulated in Hindu writings are clearly not unique to Hinduism and are found in other ethical systems as well. However, by emphasizing certain virtues over other possible ones, Hinduism lends its goals of development a recognizable spirit. The principal valued traits can be clustered into five groupings and are as follows: 1) studious and knowledgeable, particularly well versed in the religion's sacred literature, 2) disciplined, dutiful, devoted, loving and obedient, 3) humble, self-effacing, unselfish, and self-sacrificing, 4) even-tempered, chaste, freed from desire and aversion, exempt from hate and inordinate affection, and pure of speech and thought, and 5) trusting in the correctness of Hindu doctrine (Thomas, 1988). When examined closely, it

becomes evident that missing from the typical list of esteemed characteristics are such attributions as self-assertive, inquisitive, sensuous, enthusiastic, inventive, and independent of thought, all of which would be highly valued among Western society. Although heroes in Hindu epics often display a number of these traits, such features are generally not recognized as desirable in Hindu tradition.

These ideas represent those of traditional Hindu theory. However, are these tenets still active in today's modern society? It can be argued that deviations from these traditional ways have occurred for a variety of reasons. An examination of present-day Indian society and of its history over the past two centuries suggests that the main force has been Western modernization, with a likely secondary force being people's daily observations of life around them.

A large body of evidence supports the argument that the form of education which the British introduced into India in the mid-19th century became the most significant of the influences that have fostered the Western modernization of Indian society (Thomas, 1988). Western style schooling was first brought to India by Christian missionaries. As private mission schools spread, they served as the initial channels for introducing Western values and knowledge into Indian society. Although during the ensuing decades traditional Hindu and Muslim schools continued to operate, each typically centering around a revered guru instructing youths in religious doctrine, such institutions greatly diminished in importance (Paranjoti, 1969). The dominant mode of formal education throughout the land became the British variety of secular schooling, with English as the chief language of instruction.

In this British form of schooling the great majority of India's intellectual and political elite of modern times learned Western science, logic, modes of inquiry, notions of social organizations, viewpoints toward individualism and human rights, concepts of human development, and more (Thomas, 1988). And while Western education was still limited to a minority of Indians during the colonial era, it did become increasingly widespread. Thus, when India achieved independence in 1947, political and educational leaders in the dominantly Hindu regions of the land had in their experience two major persuasions on which to draw, the Hindu and the Western, with minor traditions (such as Muslim and Buddhist) complicating the decision in certain districts. The leaders' problem was that of melding elements of Hinduism and the West into a harmonious blend that would serve as a foundation for modern nation-building.

The present day task of developing government social policies and the schools' curriculum content have presented planners with difficult decisions, because so many Western notions about human development, scientific inquiry, and social organization conflict sharply with Hindu tradition. For example, two Hindu human development beliefs that clash with a Western egalitarian social philosophy have been those regarding caste and female inferiority (Thomas, 1988). Among modern-day Indians, Western schooling that includes concepts of widespread equal rights has somewhat eroded traditional Indian beliefs about caste and women's status, but clearly these Hindu traditions have not been eliminated. Even with an increasing number of Indian women now entering the workforce, the conceptualization of their role both in the home and in society has still not drastically changed. Furthermore, though over the past century or more females in Indian society have been accorded increasingly greater rights and status in comparison to males, they are still considered to be inferior and thus should be submissive to males is attested by studies of the position of women in Indian society (Sarkar, 2001; Ray, 2000; Riessman, 2002).

As society continues to progress and technology advances, the Western perspective continues to dominate mainstream thought. Additionally, in order to remain competitive in

today's global economy, countries are often forced to adopt the "American work ethic", and India is no exception. However, as non-cognitive means of knowing have begun to be valued, elements from Eastern philosophies have begun to be adopted around the world. Yoga is one such practice. Yoga is an ancient spiritual practice that originated in India and is seen as a means to enlightenment. More specifically, these techniques provide a method for self-realization, allowing individuals to identify their own personal layers in order to understand their true identity. This process begins with physical pleasure, though this represents the smallest and most limited layer of the self. This self-indulgence of the senses, in Hinduism, is encouraged until one realizes that this type of pleasure seeking is incomplete in its meaning and gratification. Once this is recognized, it becomes possible to focus on gaining recognition from society or achieve worldly success, such as fame, wealth and/or power. Although this level is broader in its sphere, it is still restricted because it is based on the concept that the well being of the individual is separate from the well being of others. Once one understands that promoting the little self is not rewarding, that person is ready to proceed to a more inclusive way of viewing the world. This requires a dedication to the well being of society and an overall connection to humanity. Throughout this journey the ultimate goal is not only for self-actualization, but also to experience a link between the body, mind, and spirit, and offers an alternate approach to knowing and relating to the world.

Even though Indians are less focused on following the traditional way of life outlined earlier in this chapter, a number of its characteristics continue to influence the growth and development of Hindu individuals. For example, while the written word has become a popular vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, Hindus still rely on a number of other approaches when imparting information. Stories, dance, music, and drama are still popular vehicles for sharing and disseminating information. While it can be argued that these variations alter the original meaning, it can also be noted that it is precisely these alterations that keep these stories alive by allowing the orator the opportunity to situate ancient words in current times.

While this concept of narrative remains strong, it can still be questioned whether Hinduism is actually *practiced* in today's modern society. It cannot be denied that numerous changes have occurred over the centuries that this philosophy has been in existence. Adherence has weakened and rituals have been shortened to accommodate the fast pace of the 21st century. However, the core beliefs underpinning these customs remain strong and certain traditions even continue to be followed just as they were at the time of their inception. For example, though most individuals no longer live and study the Vedas with a guru, passage through the various stages of life is still extremely important and thus continues to be highlighted in practice. These rites of passage are still believed to help an individual reach the ultimate goal of liberation, and thus continue to be performed even in today's modern society.

Summary

Throughout life, Hindus strive to become learned in multiple ways. It is not simply about developing cognitive skills, but rather to discover oneself as this is the only means and path to liberation and wisdom. However, this self-discovery is not the end of the spiritual journey, but rather a stepping stone to gaining a more holistic understanding of the universe. Though Western belief teaches that an individual is empowered through himself or herself, Hinduism argues that true empowerment emerges through an understanding of the sources of knowledge, not just its components, thus leading to unity with the universe which at times, requires a

renouncing of the self and worldly possessions. Thus, life for Hindus becomes not about the acquisition of knowledge, but about developing wisdom through gaining an understanding of oneself through a holistic manner.

References

- Boutte, V. (2002). *The phenomenology of compassion in the teachings of JidduKrishnamurti (1895-1986)*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Chennakesavan, S. (1974). *A critical study of Hinduism*. New York: Asia Publishing House.
- Flood, G. (Ed.). (2003). *The Blackwell companion to Hinduism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hawley, J.S. (1991). Naming Hinduism. *Wilson Quarterly*, 63, 20-34.
- Iyer, K.B. (1969). *Hindu ideals*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
- Paranjoti, V. (1969). *East and west in Indian education*. Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House.
- Ray, S. (2000). *En-gendering India: Woman and nation in colonial and postcolonial narratives*. Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press.
- Renou, L. (1961). *Hinduism*. New York: Braziller.
- Riessman, C.K. (2002). Analysis of personal narratives. In J. Gubrium & J.A. Holstien (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2nd ed. (pp. 923-958.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rinehart, R. (Ed.). (2004). *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, culture, and practice*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Sarkar, T. (2001). *Hindu wife, Hindu nation : Community, religion and cultural nationalism*. New Delhi: Permanent Black
- Thomas, R.M. (Ed.). (1988). *Oriental Theories of Human Development: Scriptural and popular beliefs from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto, and Islam*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Witzel, M. (1997). *Inside the texts, beyond the texts: New approaches to the study of the Vedas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.