

Systems of Thought



The Sanskrit term “*Darshana*,” which refers to the experience of spiritual sighting or vision, is also commonly used to describe the thousands of systems or schools of thought that have developed in Hinduism. Because Hindus have understood God as a vast, abstract, and often complex concept, over time, different understandings about the nature of God led to the development of these various schools of theology. Hindus are not troubled by this vast diversity within their larger understanding of Hinduism because they acknowledge that just as there are infinite ways of experiencing the Divine or having *darshana*, so too can there be many ways of understanding the nature of Divine and its relation to existence.

These are the six most influential systems of thought, all of which hold the Vedas to be sacred:

The Logical Approach: Nyaya

This approach involves proving the existence of the Divine as well as other core Hindu concepts such as *karma* through a system of logic. *Nyaya* insists that nothing is acceptable unless it is in accordance with reason and experience. To reason clearly, one can rely on the following four sources of information:

- *Pratyaksha* or Perception - Any data one gathers with their senses
- *Anumana* or Inference - Conclusions made based on the available data
- *Upamana* or Comparison - Understanding something unknown on the basis of its similarity to something known
- *Shabda* or Verbal Authority - Using the statements of enlightened seers

Through observation and study of data obtained in this fashion, *Nyaya* philosophers decided that God must exist for a number of logical reasons. One example of their logical reasoning: atoms cannot coordinate themselves into an intelligible universe, but there are signs of purpose and planning everywhere one looks. Therefore there must be an intelligent will (God) guiding the force that directs these atoms (*adrishta*, which will be further explained).

The thoroughness of *Nyaya* logic and epistemology greatly influenced succeeding orthodox and unorthodox schools of thought.

The Atomic Theory: Vaisheshika

Vaisheshika focuses on the reality of the physical world and beyond. This *darshana* aims to scientifically represent the diversity of the universe without losing any particularities. Accordingly, the universe is boiled down to seven categories - substance, quality, action, generality, particularity, inherence, and non-being. The substances are looked at most closely - there are nine that constitute

matter: earth, water, light, air, and ether as well as time, space, the soul, and the mind. The atom is the most basic element - indivisible, eternal, and extremely tiny - of matter. The combination of atoms makes the physical world as we experience it. An unseen but extraordinary force called *adrishta* controls the formation and subsequent disintegration of the atoms that make up the world. This force is controlled by the will of God. While the atoms are the material cause of the world, God is the intelligent cause. However, God is not the creator of the atoms or the Selves. They are coeternal with him. Through the lens of this *darshana*, suffering is due to ignorance of the true nature of things (especially the self) and liberation is effected when true knowledge dawns. Sage Kanada was a proponent of this theory. *Vaisheshika* and *Nyaya* eventually merged together.

Spirit and Matter: Sankhya

Many scholars consider this one of the oldest schools of thought in the world. The system was founded by Sage Kapila. It was strongly atheistic, and forwarded many arguments against the existence of God. The word *Sankhya* means number. Sankhya delineates the categories that constitute reality - both physical and mental. There are 25 categories:

- 5 physical elements - Earth, water, fire, air, space
- 5 subtle elements - Matter as one experiences it in their mind (that which is felt, heard, tasted, touched, and seen)
- 5 organs of action - The ability to excrete, procreate, move, handle objects, and speak.
- 5 sense organs - The sense of smell, taste, sight, touch, and hearing.
- 3 faculties of mind - the thought process (*manas*), the sense of self (*ahankar*), and the sense of judgment (*buddhi*)
- Matter, or *Prakriti*
- Spirit, or *Purusha*

The brain does not see and hear - it simply registers physical stimuli, then lets *manas* process it all. *Manas* continues the thought process in many dimensions, and is only routed through our physical brain. *Ahankar* is the awareness one has of themselves. *Buddhi* is decision making ability, and it is what separates a human from an animal. *Purusha*, or the real self, exists outside of everything above, and is distinct from matter. *Purusha* is the only piece of this puzzle that is conscious and eternal, and the mind is a tool for the *purusha* to interact with the world.

Techniques for Higher Awareness: Yoga



This is more aptly titled Raja Yoga, and focuses on quieting the mind through an eight limb system (*Ashtanga yoga*) as described in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* for a balanced life and ultimately *moksha*. Yoga means union, and is focused on separating the self from its false identification with matter. In a sense, it is its practical branch of the *Sankhya* philosophy - as the spiritual

techniques espoused move one from talking about higher levels of reality to experiencing them. *Prakriti*, or energy, is manifest in three modes, or *gunas*:

Rajas- motion

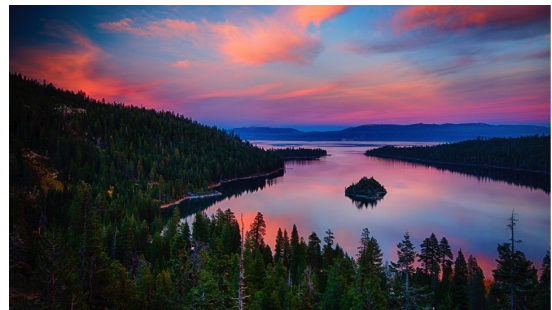
Tamas- inertia

Satva- harmony

When all three *gunas* balance each other, the materiality of the universe fades away. Yogis, or practitioners of yoga, try to balance the *gunas* within themselves through diet and exercise, so they can disengage from matter entirely, and merge into pure consciousness. When this is achieved, the burden of *karma* falls away, leading one to *moksha*.

The Way to Heaven: Mimamsa

The ancient sage Jaimini is credited with this *darshana*, which complements Vedanta. Mimamsa emphasizes the performance of duty as the law that binds together families, nations, and the universe. As its emphasis is mostly on these matters of *dharma*, it takes no strong position on God and includes both theistic and atheistic variants. Those who favor this *darshana* spend every waking moment conscientiously performing religious duties. The focus here is not on defining the nature of



God or the universe, but performance of sacred ritual so one lives righteously on earth, and obtains a heavenly state post death. Ending the cycle of *samsara* (birth and rebirth) is less important than living ethically in the present. To those who see reality through the lens of *Mimamsa*, the universe is an unending sacrifice - life is offered to a creature who dies to feed another and so on - that one must align themselves with. Opposed by the heretics who questioned the validity of the views contained in the scriptures, later *Mimamsa* thinkers were forced to provide philosophical justification for their school's views, which led to the school producing many logicians. Though the goal of early *Mimamsa* writers seems to have been the attainment of heaven (*svarga*), the prevailing philosophical concerns regarding the liberation and *moksha* seems to have influenced the later *Mimamsa* writers to write on the subject and accommodate their school's views with it.

From Fleeting to Eternal: Vedanta

Vedanta is arguably the most influential on modern Hinduism and relies primarily on transcending one's identification with the physical body for liberation. *Vedanta* literally means "end of the Vedas" and it focuses on the teachings in the Upanishads, which come at the end of the Vedas. The means by which an individual can transcend one's self-identity is through right knowledge, meditation, devotion, selfless service, good works amongst other religious, and spiritual disciplines. There are major sub-schools within *Vedanta* that differ in their view of the nature of *Brahman*, the soul, the universe, the path to *moksha*, the nature of *moksha*, and so on. The three most popular are:

Advaita: According to Shankara, the main exponent of the *Advaita Vedanta* school of thought, Brahman is the One, the whole, and the only reality. Everything else - including the universe, material objects, and individuals - are *maya*, or name-form manifestations. *Brahman* is often described as “*neti neti*” meaning "not this, not this" because of the limits of language. It is more accurately described as what it is not. Within this school, there is no separation between the *atman* (individual soul) and *Brahman* - they are one and the same.

Visishta Advaita: Ramanuja is the foremost exponent this school. The perception of *Brahman* as the infinite, omnipresent, omnipotent, incorporeal, transcendent reality from the *Advaita* lens applies to the *Visishta Advaita* approach as well. The difference is that the *atman* is seen as dependent on *Brahman* - the soul can experience union, but not unity, with *Brahman*. While Shankara emphasized using intellect to contemplate the nature of the universe, Ramanujacharya emphasized the importance of rituals and love of God.

Dvaita: Madhva rejected both of the *advaita* points of view, and created this school, the *Vedanta* of duality. Through this lens, the world is seen as real, humanity is real, and God is real - however each is eternally separate. There is no union or unity with *Brahman*.

Many Hindu teachers are not interested in these differences in *darshanas*, as they believe that they are all simply different ways of looking at the same concept - the nature of the Universe. At different states of meditation, each person’s experience of God is different, but each is true, just like each *darshana*.

This Hindu pluralism, or the respect for diversity, is not limited to schools of thought within Hinduism - it applies to all religions and faith traditions. Hindus believe that each religion offers a different path to the same omnipotent God, and that each path has the potential of being a valid route. The goals of Hinduism may be different from those of other faiths, but Hindus believe that anyone who follows their *dharma*, or duty, while bringing their karmic balance to a zero is capable of attaining moksha and finding the Divine, regardless of what name they choose to call the Divine by. Due to the emphasis on pluralism in Hinduism, proselytization is frowned upon - since every path has its own strengths and potential, there is never a need to convince one to adopt a different path.

Key Takeaways

- Darshanas are the schools of theology, or Hindu ways of understanding the nature of God and God’s relation to existence
- There are six main darshanas that describe the nature of the soul and divinity differently
- Many Hindu teachers are not interested in the differences in the darshanas, because at the end of the day, they believe that each individual’s unique experience of divinity is all that matters