



# Wisdom from World Religions: Indra's Net

Tara Stephenson

Today, we consider the wisdom of the world's religions as one of the sources of our faith. Indra's Net—what a fascinating metaphor!

UUCLV

07/28/2013

This summer, the worship associates have been exploring our Unitarian Universalist sources. We talk more about our principles and purposes, but an understanding of our sources gives insight into where those values come from.

The third source from which we, as UUs draw is wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life. This includes all religions other than Christianity, Judaism and earth-based spiritualities such as Wicca and Native American religions. My primary focus today will be what are often called the dharmic religions. These are roughly the four found on the Indian sub-continent—in historical order, Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Dharma is a term common to all of them meaning “law”, specifically the law that upholds, supports or maintains the

regulatory order of the universe. This is usually understood to mean natural law, or the nature of reality. It might also mean actions taken to be in conformity with this law. The goal of dharmic religions has less to do with adherence to any doctrine, and more to do with aligning oneself with the nature of reality. For example, in Buddhism, this is the aim of enlightenment, or having awakened to one's true nature, one's Buddha nature. This nature is the luminous awareness of the self as "not self", or at least very different than we in the west usually think of self. Most of us in this room were brought up to believe that what we regard as "self" is relatively constant throughout our lives. The Buddha understood the reality of "self" as malleable, in flux, not fixed at all. We change as our lives change; we realize that natural law or the impersonal nature of reality applies to us as well.

Jainism is the oldest of the four and many of the terms we associate with Hinduism, such as “ahimsa” or non-violence, actually originated with the Jains. Jains are the ultimate peaceniks among world religions, adhering strictly to non-violence in all things. Almost all Jains are vegetarian, and some will not even eat root vegetables because of the lives of tiny organisms that suffer when the potato or carrot is pulled from the ground. Jains are taught from birth to be scrupulously aware of the effect they have on the world around them. There are about 5 million Jains, which might sound like a lot, until you realize that about a billion people consider themselves to be Hindus.

Hinduism is actually an umbrella term for several religious practices. You might almost talk about “Hinduisms”. Most of these differences are marked by

openness and tolerance for variation in belief. Most Hindus venerate the usual pantheon of Vishnu, Shiva and Krishna and many often also include in this worship deities who are particular to their own town or region. The sacred scriptures common to all forms of Hinduism are the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. From the Bhagavad Gita comes the following prayer: “Lead us from the unreal to the real, lead us from darkness to light, lead us from death to immortality, Om let there be peace.” The Sanskrit word for peace is “shanti”. Many Hindu prayers end with a petition for peace. (*sing shanti-shanti-shanti hi*) **(invite the congregation to sing it with me?)**

Buddhism has become popular in this country, with the result that many people know more about it than they do the other dharmic religions. Its popularity may also mean that

there is more misinformation about Buddhism than about the other religions. Rev. Don has talked about the fact that the word “*dukkha*” (*spell it out loud*) is generally understood as “suffering” is really an exaggeration. The word just means “dissatisfactoriness”. Yes, the Buddha said that life is characterized by “*dukkha*”, but he probably just meant that sometimes life is **NOT** a bowl of cherries. Sometimes, life isn’t what we want it to be, and that’s just the way it is. Often, there’s no one to blame; when bad things happen, it isn’t always someone’s fault. We certainly don’t “deserve” to suffer.

Dharma, remember that word? We may, from time to time, add our own struggle against reality and suffer for it, but that’s really our choice. The Buddha taught that life

already contains suffering, but we could choose whether to add to it by not being able to accept reality.

The last dharmic religion I want to say a little about is Sikhism. Since Sikhism comes from the Punjab region of India, which is close to Muslim countries, and cultural practices being portable and kind of fluid as they are, Sikhism bears some similarities with Islam. The strong monotheistic belief system may reflect the influence of Islam. Sikhs generally are very family oriented and egalitarian in their practices.

There are no priests in a Sikh community and there is a long tradition of women leaders. Those turbans with the knot in front that you may have seen on some people are worn by Sikhs to cover their hair, which they may not cut.

Social justice and service to the community are some of the primary ethical teachings within Sikhism, however, gossiping, indeed any form of loose talk, is strongly discouraged. The most important Sikh sacred text, Guru Granth Sahib tells the Sikh, "Your mouth has not stopped slandering and gossiping about others. Your service is useless and fruitless."

Thus, they not only emphasize justice and service, but illustrate what they consider to be ethical and unethical behavior within a community. Other teachings from this text are: Women are equal to men, there is one God for all, we must speak and live truthfully, we must try to control our vices, we must live in God's order, and we must practice humility, kindness, compassion, and love.

The religions I mentioned differ in a number of aspects, including both practices and beliefs, but acceptance of what you might call “the way it is” is central to all of them. Jainism and Buddhism do not include a god concept and would probably be regarded as non-theistic. The Buddha is known to have refused to answer the question of whether or not there was something called “God”. He just didn’t consider it to be an important question to his understanding of spirituality. He considered awakening to be the goal of the spiritual life, and he found that debates about different beliefs to be a distraction from that. Hinduism is monistic. Monism means that everything is regarded as a manifestation of one underlying unity. Hundreds of gods are worshipped, all of them with different personalities and stories, but they are imaged as different aspects of one

central reality. As I mentioned, Sikhism is explicitly monotheistic. The one God of the Sikhs is already aligned with the nature of the world, thus, union with this God essentially means alignment with natural law.

---

Last February, I attended the Joseph Priestley District's Worship Arts Festival at the UU church in Cherry Hill, NJ. One of the workshops I went to was called "Navigating the Worship Wars: How We Can Be Theist, Atheist, Humanist, Etc. Together" led by their senior minister, Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti. Manish was raised in a Hindu family and considers himself to be a Hindu Unitarian Universalist. His first venture into Unitarian Universalism came during a period of turmoil in his life. He was estranged from his family and though he loved his Hindu upbringing, was

questioning whether or not he belonged there either. He began attending All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Washington, D.C. This was the church that would eventually ordain him.

During the workshop, almost as an aside, Manish referred to “Indra’s Net”, a metaphor central to Hinduism, and thence, to Buddhism. There isn’t much of a story behind the metaphor. Indra was a major god in early Hinduism. There are several stories about his relationships, his exploits in battle, assorted objects that are associated with him. He is mentioned in the Rig-Veda, a very early Hindu scripture. From the Rig-Veda, we note the following passage: “He under whose supreme controls are horses, all chariots, the villages, and cattle; He who gave being to the Sun and Morning, who leads the waters, He, O men, is Indra.” (2.12.7,

trans. Griffith) So we kind of know something about his personality.

However, I could find only one passage linking the name of Indra directly with the concept of Indra's Net. I found it in a variety of sources. What follows is from a UU world religions curriculum for eight and ninth graders entitled "Building Bridges". From that curriculum comes the following:

Far, far away, in the abode of the great god Indra, king of heaven, hangs a wondrous vast net, much like a spider's web in intricacy and loveliness. It stretches out indefinitely in all directions. At each node, or crossing point, of the net hangs a single glittering jewel. Since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. The

sparkling jewels hang there, suspended in and supported by the net, glittering like stars, dazzling to behold.<sup>1</sup>

The net is a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all existence and a reminder of the illusoriness of so much that we regard as fact. In each of the jewels at the nodes of the web, you can see the reflection of every other jewel and also, every other reflection. We are called to stop and wonder, “What is real here and what is mere reflection?”

The story of Indra’s Net helps to illustrate 3 concepts in Buddhism that we also find traces of each in all the dharmic religions-emptiness, dependent origination, and interpenetration.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Building Bridges: A World Religions Program*, by Mary K. Isaacs. Unitarian Universalist Association. (2013).

Remember that I said that Buddha nature involved realizing one's nature as "not self". This is the Buddhist idea of Śūnyatā, translated as "emptiness" or "openness". This is the understanding that the way we usually think of ourselves may not be helpful—our idea of an independent and separate self, discrete and unchanging, isn't reality.

Dependent origination or dependent arising basically means that we didn't create ourselves. What we consider our "self" is conditioned by everything in our environment for our whole life long. We are influenced by, shaped by, all other selves.

About a month ago, I was talking to my older son, Nathan. Nathan is in a doctoral program in neuroscience at the University of California in San Francisco. He's a really smart

guy, in fact, don't tell my husband, Crafford, but I think Nathan is the smartest one in our nuclear family.

His trained neuroscientist's understanding of the brain leads him to the conclusion that every experience you ever have changes and influences your brain. It's unavoidable! We can stop trying to resist being changed by other people! Being changed is just another part of reality-the way it is. This is one way that modern science corroborates something that eastern religions have understood for centuries and explained through the metaphor of Indra's Net.

The third part of the metaphor illustrated by Indra's Net is the concept of interpenetration. This really just means that all these influences are part of each other and also that they influence each other. Also from the curriculum I spoke of comes the impact of this, "whatever you do to one jewel

affects the entire net, as well as yourself. You cannot damage one strand of a spider web without injuring the entire web, and you cannot damage one strand of the web that is the universe without injuring all others in it, whether that injury is known or unknown to them.”<sup>2</sup>

Stop for a moment and imagine that YOU are one of those jewels in Indra’s Net. Your nature is śūnyatā, you are open and influenced, even changed by every other jewel in the net. You understand this as another normal reality of life, just as real as gravity. You know this, and you don’t resist. And just as you understand that you are changed, you know that all the other jewels are also changed, whether those jewels be people, or trees, or whales, or cars, or oceans, or the sky, or something else. All these things are changed by every other

---

<sup>2 2</sup> *Building Bridges: A World Religions Program*, by Mary K. Isaacs. Unitarian Universalist Association. (2013).

jewel. All these things are changing constantly. All these things are parts of each other. This is the way it is. Every jewel is reflected in every other jewel, so much so that we can't be completely clear about what is really there, and what is mere illusion. And because it's the way it is, we are pretty relaxed about the whole thing; we don't fight it.

I think that Manish was suggesting that this metaphor may help us in our struggle to be theist, atheist, humanist, etc. together. We can relax about our differences. We can relax because we understand each other to be interconnected and because we understand our differences to not be so rigid after all. Who knows what's really real?

The thread of dharma running through these four also comes with a deep regard for the quality of compassion. You can see it in the Jain's gentleness, in the Hindu's continual

homage to peace, in the Buddhist acceptance of life's occasional dissatisfactoriness and concern for all living beings, and in the Sikh's attention to a level playing field and concern for social responsibility. Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism have an understanding of nirvana in common, even though they use different words to describe it. They generally understand it to mean the peace and liberation that come when we lose our attachment to things, including our concept of ourselves. Things change and we must be able to accept all those changes and "go with the flow". Sikh teachings usually refer to a goal of liberation, which includes letting go of ego needs--very similar to the other three.

These religions, when institutionalized, acquired warts.

*No doubt about it; they're no more perfect than anything else run by people.* But, the ideal remains the same. There is an

emphasis on liberation common to all the dharmic religions. It is acknowledged to take time to be liberated. Imperfection lasts a **long time** and it is important to be compassionate to everyone who has not yet attained their goal of liberation and peace, whether that be community or world peace or the more personal peace of nirvana. The Buddha said, “Each morning we are born again. What we do today is what matters most.” You always get another chance at liberation; you always get another chance to express compassion for all who have not yet achieved it. And include yourself in that compassion, because you haven’t achieved liberation either. We are all imperfect and we all deserve compassion.

The last thing that I will mention as something to learn from the story of Indra’s Net is from an address given at Columbia University in 1996, “When we learn to recognize

what Henry David Thoreau refers to as "the infinite extent of our relations," we can trace the strands of mutually supportive life, and discover there the glittering jewels of our global neighbors. Buddhism seeks to cultivate wisdom grounded in this kind of empathic resonance with all forms of life." Buddhism, like the other dharmic religions, has a compassion grounded in its understanding that our lives are interconnected and that as such, our behavior affects all others.

May we always be so understanding and so compassionate.

## References

1. Cole, W. Owen, *Understanding Sikhism*, Dunedin Academic Press: Edinburgh, 2004.
2. Doniger, Wendy, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1999.
3. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dharma>
4. Prabhavanananda, Swami & Christopher Isherwood, (translators), *Bhagavad Gita (The Song of God)* Vedanta Press: Hollywood, 1987.
5. Tobias, Michael, *Life Force: The World of Jainism*, Asian Humanities Press: Berkeley, 1991.
6. Williams, George M., *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, ABC-Clio Press: Santa Barbara, 2003.