

TEN (parables) of Hinduism

The reason Hinduism has been so effective is because it has been able to bridge the gap between philosophical reflection with stories and metaphors and has very effectively been able to communicate Hinduism to the average person. This is important because it helps us to understand how Hinduism is identified and is understood by the ordinary persons that are studying or growing up with Hinduism, even as young children.

ARUNDHATI

The first of our key metaphors in Hindu thought is the term, "Arundhati." Arundhati is a term which actually refers to a star in the Great Bear Constellation which we would call The Dipper. It is actually not one of the main ones that you can see; it is actually a very tiny star in that constellation, which is known by Indians as "Arundhati." This becomes the terminology to describe this particular metaphor, or picture that Indians have which helps them to communicate their thinking.

Let me explain what this Arundhati refers to. Picture yourself outside, underneath a starry sky, looking up at the stars. You are with a teacher who is a very experienced stargazer. He is very, very adept at looking at stars and he points out a very dim star to you that he wants you to see. This star happens to be classically the star, Arundhati, which is in the Great Bear, the Big Dipper Constellation; but it is the most difficult one to see in the constellation. So, naturally an experienced observer who has been used to looking at star charts and has had many nights learning the stars, would be very quick to identify the star and find it; but a young stargazer would not be able to see the star. What the experienced stargazer will do is first begin to point to stars which surround the dim star and see if the student can locate those stars. We'll say he finds a star that is, generally speaking, in proximity to the dim star, but is slightly to the west of it. He first points out that it is a very bright star and says, "Can you see that star?" and the student of course says, "Yes, I can see that star." Okay, then he moves to a star just slightly to the east of this dim star, "Do you see that star?" "Oh yes, I see that star." Then maybe he moves to one star that is slightly to the north of the dim star and the student locates that one. "Okay" he says, "You have seen these three stars. The one I am trying to show you is actually located in the middle of those three stars." It is only then that the student is finally able to see the very, very dim star.

The point of this metaphor is simply to say that great teachers do not teach directly, but teach by the way of inference or by indirect speech. I cannot

overestimate the importance of this concept in ordinary Indian discourse. Because in the West, western discourse is largely around very precise, direct statements regarding the things that we approve or disapprove. In the Indian context, oftentimes direct statements are actually indirectly pointing to something, rather than directly pointing to something. So, a very clear argumentation along a certain line may lead us to one point; but actually, the real point is somewhere else. The real point is the dim star, not the bright star. It is important because in eastern thought in general, something we take to be clear teaching about X or Y are actually merely pointers to a mystery which transcends them all. So, Indians are often much more open to mystery, much more willing to recognize that the main things we are talking about are not exact designations, but merely pointers and something which goes beyond it. Because of that, we have this term, Arundhati, which summarizes the whole indirect speech-making that is present in Indian thought.

ROPE-SNAKE

The second of the key metaphors is known as “rope-snake”, the famous “rope-snake metaphor.” This is widely believed to be the most famous metaphor in all of Hinduism. Let me picture it for you. A man comes into his tent at night to go to sleep. He walks in the door, the light is getting dim, it is getting dusk. He can't see very well. He walks into the tent, he looks down and he sees, to his horror, a snake curled up on the bottom of his tent. He is absolutely frightened to death. But on closer examination he recognizes that actually it is not a snake, it is only a coil of rope, a completely harmless coil of rope. This metaphor is so well known, that many times when the philosophers discuss philosophy and they want to make the point that the way we see the world is not the way the world may actually be, they will simply allude to this metaphor by saying, “as in the rope-snake story,” or “as in rope-snake.” This story is so famous, so well-known that it is simply referred to very generously as “the rope-snake” and no more needs to be said, as everyone knows the basic story line. The idea is that the person goes into the tent. He sees what he thinks is real, that is, a snake. But in fact, it is not a snake, it is a coil of rope. So, in the same way, Hindus argue that we believe that the world has certain kinds of objective basis of reality to it. But upon closer examination, the world does not have this kind of reality that we think is the ultimate reality. It is above reality and therefore we don't have the ability to see the world clearly. It is a metaphor for the world viewed falsely. We think we see a snake, but actually it is a rope. We think we see the world as it really is, and really we do not, etc.

There are many that follow along the kind of axis of rope-snake. There is the metaphor of a guy who is on the beach and he sees a shell shining. He

is so sure it's a piece of silver, he runs with such excitement to pick it up. It turns out it is just a piece of mother of pearl, it is worthless. This shows you that even though he had this joy and excitement; that in fact when he actually saw it as it really was, it was not what he thought.

Any of these metaphors that talk about the distinction between the perceptual ideas of the world and the actual reality of the world are often alluded to in these stories, like the rope-snake.

CLAY POT

The third of the key ten metaphors in Hindu thought is the metaphor of the clay pot. A clay pot, you must picture in your mind as sitting on the shelf. This is again, a very common metaphor, well-known to all Hindu thinkers. The pot is an empty pot, so the pot has simply air inside of it. In that sense, the pot defines a space and gives a sense of separateness to the air inside the pot. It is different from the air outside the pot. However, even though this pot contains a little space of air, once the pot is broken you realize there is no differentiation between the air on the inside of the pot and the air on the outside of the pot. You have to picture in this metaphor, the picture of someone who walks into a room, sees a clay pot and then they want to release what is inside it. They break the pot and they find there is no distinction between the air inside the pot and the air outside the pot.

Why is this important? The pot is an analogy for the human body. The body and the clay pot which surrounds the Atman, surrounds the self. Because the clay pot is there – that is, your human body is there – it gives you the illusion as if you have a separate existence, you have an “I, a self.” The illusion of separateness is part of what needs to be dispelled through all the Hindu religious ideas. Therefore, the “pot” analogy is saying that really the Atman on the inside of your life, your body, is no different than the Atman in everything else, the Tat Tvam Asi, “You are that, thou art that.” The identification of your Atman would be the essence of the universe and all the essences of the universe are ultimately one essence, which is Brahman. So, the clay pot is a metaphor for the false sense of separateness which we carry about in our various ways we live and think and act in the world.

Another one along this line, still in this third category of the clay pot, is the story of the waves in the ocean. When the waves roll across the ocean, they appear to have a distinction from the ocean. The waves and the foam appear to be above or on top of the ocean. In fact, as we all know, there is no difference of essence between the waves and the actual ocean water itself. The waves are simply the ocean water that has been tossed up and

appears different, appears white, foamy and bubbly just for a brief moment. In the same way, your body can have the appearance of being separate, it can have its own sense of individuality, etc., when actually it is all an illusion. We have no ultimate separate existence. The air into the pot and the air outside of the pot; the waves' essence is the same as the essence of the rest of the ocean. This clay pot, the waves of the ocean, the category of metaphors is very important and is often used to communicate this particular doctrine in the Hindu worldview.

MONKEY-KITTEN

The fourth of our ten metaphors is known as the “monkey-kitten” metaphor. Those of you who are familiar with the kind of friendly debate between Calvinists and Armenians will be quite delighted to know that there is the same distinction that occurs within Hinduism. There is a lot of debate in Hinduism between the acts of divine grace in saving someone, and necessity for human activity, or works. Hinduism, like everything else, is not simply taught as grace versus works, salvation as a gift from God, salvation as earned. Instead, it is spoken of in terms of a metaphor.

The metaphor, of course, is this one, the monkey and the kitten. Baby monkey, baby kitten, what are they referring to? If you observe a baby monkey or a baby kitten, you notice that there are some real important differences between the two that need to be understood. If you are a baby kitten, the mother cat will pick up the kitten by the scruff of the neck and the little kitten just simply hangs limp and is extremely passive while the mother carries the kitten to a place of refuge or safety. If a cat is in danger or has just given birth to a litter of kittens, then the mother cat will pick up the kittens, one by one, by the scruff of the neck. They will hang limp as a rag and they will be brought to safety and the cat will deliver all of the kittens in this same manner. That is the classic kitten analogy.

But if you notice, a monkey is very, very different. Of course, India is full of monkeys and it is not unusual for Indians to be aware of the different behavior of a baby kitten and a monkey. A mother monkey, like a mother cat, also wants to rescue her children in danger; but instead of the kitten, being passive, the baby monkey has to cling to the mother. The mother walks over to the baby monkey and kneels down and the baby monkey reaches up and grabs hold of the hair of the mother monkey and clings to the mother as the mother jumps away and takes the babies to safety.

This has become the classic analogy of salvation through divine grace and salvation through human activity. Some groups in India argue that they advocate the baby kitten; that is to say that we should passively and

completely surrender ourselves to God and not try to do anything to save ourselves because that would show that we are not totally surrendering unto God. Others say, “No, God requires that we have actions and we have works, we have the necessity of our participation with this strength and his efforts.” This becomes a very important point that is developed in Indian thought.

THE GRIEVED MAN CONCERNING HIS SON

The fifth of our ten key metaphors in Hindu thought is known as “the grieving man concerning his son.” This is a metaphor that is told about a liar who came and told a man, whose son had gone to a faraway land, that the son was dead, even though he was really alive. So, this poor man lived in the days when you didn’t have e-mail and forms of communication, and it was not unusual for a son to leave home and the parents would have no idea of the welfare of their children. In this story, the son has left home, gone to a faraway country and the father has no way to find out how his son is doing. This liar comes along and the liar says to the father, “Oh, I got word about your son and am sorry to inform you, but he is dead.” Even though the child is actually alive, the Hindus point out, when the father hears the news from this person whom he thinks is reliable, that his son is dead, the father breaks into a deep form of grief because he experienced the full weight of the emotions, as if his child were truly dead, even though the child is very much alive. If, on the other hand, the story goes on to say, his son had really died, had gone abroad and really died, and nobody knew about it and learned about it and the father was not informed, then the father would go around quite happy and he would be quite relaxed and go about his normal duties. He would not have any sense that his son was dead. Therefore, he would not have the grief or the agony or the pain about it, even though in reality, the son was dead. This shows, according to the Hindus, that the real cause of a person’s bondage is not in external events, that is, whether your son is truly dead or truly alive; but in our own mental world. That our minds have the ability to create distress or joy in us. We cannot assume that the emotions of our lives, the mental qualities of our mind, do in fact correspond to the actual world.

Another story that is told along the same line is about ten men who were seeking to cross a river. It was a raging river and the ten men go across the river and they get to the other side and they all begin to count to find out if they all came across safely. They each counted and all of them counted only nine. So, they began to weep and wail because they were so upset that one of their number had fallen into the river and drowned. A traveller

who was passing by counted and pointed out that there were in fact ten men there. Of course, the reason why each of the men had only counted nine is because each of them had forgotten to count himself. The point is, they had gotten this terrible grief and agony that they had lost one of their ten, when in fact, it was based on their own ignorance. All of these stories are about grief concerning someone who is dead or not; they are all pointing to the gap between our mental world and the actual reality that is present in the world.

THE PAINTED CANVAS

The sixth key theme is known as “the painted canvas.” This is of course a reminder of in the ancient world, especially when they would paint on a piece of canvas, they would unroll it; and then when they were done, they would roll it back up again, rather than having it framed as we often do today. If a painted canvas is rolled up, the picture is no longer visible. When you unroll it, the picture becomes visible. The idea of a painted canvas that is either rolled up or not rolled up, is a way of describing the circular or cyclical ways the world is manifested. Because in Hindu thought, even if the world has a beginning and an end, it is simply the unrolling of the canvas. Then it is rolled back up again and then rolled back out again. Even though the world has a beginning and has an end, it is simply part of a larger cycle where the world is re-admitted and contracted into a never-ending cycle of birth and rebirth, or emergence and non-emergence.

THE DIRTY MIRROR

The seventh metaphor is that of a dirty mirror. This is used very often in Hindu thought and the Upanishads. I refer to this quite a bit. It is the story of someone that has a mirror that is very dirty. Obviously, if you have a mirror that is dirty, you cannot see your reflection properly; you see either nothing at all, or you see a very distorted image of yourself. In the same way, Hindus argue that life is like a dirty mirror. Karma has so encrusted our lives that we are unable to see the true nature of ourselves. So, we are not able to see reality the way it actually is because we have been encrusted with so much karma, we cannot see properly, like a mirror that is covered in dirt.

This is an important metaphor because it reminds us of how karma will impede our ability to see reality as it truly is. If you follow a certain yoga, you follow a certain path to enlightenment, it involves essentially removing the dust, removing the dirt from the mirror so you can see your Atman properly and see that your Atman is Brahman, Tat Tvam Asi, “thou art that.”

The idea of the dirty mirror, is that we are all born with a dirty mirror, as it were. We all bring into our life karma that has accumulated from past lifetimes that may cloud our ability to see properly. But through meditation and through various spiritual disciplines, maybe through going on pilgrimage or sitting under the tutelage of a yoga teacher, then you will be able to gradually clean the mirror so that you can see reality properly. The dirty mirror is a very important metaphor for our current situation and the need to “clean our vision” so we can see properly.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE

The eighth metaphor is known as “the hidden treasure.” This is one of the metaphors that is remarkably parallel to the Biblical metaphor about the person who uncovers the pearl of great price. In this story a man is digging in a field and strikes something with his pickaxe and discovers that it is a great hidden treasure. In the same way, this story is told because it argues that if through a lot of effort and work, you can remove the impediments and the problems that impede you from seeing the true nature of reality and you can get to the true hidden treasure of the self. In this metaphor, the Atman is viewed as the hidden treasure in the field. When you are digging through the rubble and throwing back rocks and all of that, that is removing all of the human impediments to our lives.

THE SEED AND THE EGG

The ninth of our ten metaphors is that of a seed and an egg. Again, this is similar to the one about the painted canvas. It is a little better metaphor because it is a living metaphor. The idea is that the whole world is latent in Brahman or in the self, the Atman, in the same way that a whole mighty oak tree is latent in a seed, or a chicken is present in an egg, etc. This is an important metaphor because they are trying to show the continuity between a small seed or a small egg, and the full manifestation of it. The world is in an unmanifested state, like in seed form, where it is gathered back up into Brahman, or it is re-admitted out into the world as a phenomenon in the world you can observe and see and feel, the wind blowing against your face. Continuity is there. In seed form, the world is present even inside the body of Brahman and is later admitted and it is understood will be revealed in its full form. Therefore, the seed/egg kind of analogy is quite dominant in Hinduism. This is, a little seed like an acorn becomes a mighty oak tree; so, the entire universe is summed up in the Atman or in the individual self.

SALT IN WATER

The tenth and final metaphor is the metaphor of salt in water. The story here is the story of a teacher who is trying to explain to his pupil how the Atman cannot be fully found or identified in ways that we would like. People often say, "What is the Atman?" "How can we identify the Atman?" "Where is the Atman?" "If it is so important, the essence of everything; if we tear somebody into bits, can we find the Atman?" Many early Hindus tried to find a way to locate where the Atman resided in the individual. If it is transmigrating from body to body after you die, then obviously, it is really important to identify where the Atman is and how it leaves the body and how it transmigrates to another place.

To deflect this concern, the Hindus tell the story about salt and water. This is how the story goes. The teacher is talking to his student one day and he requests that he bring a bowl of water. The son brings the bowl of water. He comes and he tells the son, "Okay, thank you for the water. Please bring me some salt." He gets some salt, comes back. He puts salt in the water and they let it sit overnight. The next day he comes to the teacher and the teacher says to the young man, "Remember yesterday we put salt in the water?" He says, "Yes, Sir." He says, "Okay, I want you to bring me the salt." Of course, the water has become salty, but there is no separate existence of the salt on the water. The salt has been diffused into the water. Of course, the servant or the young student, claims, "I cannot bring you the salt. It has become completely diffused into the water." "In the same way" says the teacher, "is the Atman diffused into our existence. It is there. It is that which has continuity from life to life; but you cannot put your finger on it; you cannot identify it in a way that we would like to have it identified."