

Starting from the beginning: the cosmos in the Vedic imagination

Hinduism is the religion of those humans who create, perpetuate, and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda.

-- Brian K. Smith, a western scholar of Hinduism

When I wake up in the morning... I touch the floor twice with my hand, and bow and address the earth, saying, "You are so great. The ocean is your cloth, the treasures within the ocean are your gems, the mountains are your breasts, and all of their streams are your tributaries. All of the gods and goddesses serve you. With great gratitude I put my feet on you." So in this way, each day I honor the earth before I step on her broad face."

-- Vivek Godbole, a Brahmin priest, translating a Vedic prayer

IN THIS CLASS we will be exploring Vedic religion, the ancient antecedent of Hinduism. Much of what we know about this tradition comes from the Veda, an enormous compendium of hymns and rituals that has been passed down orally since at least 1500 BCE through generations of *brahmin* priests. Belief in the authority of the Veda is a virtual prerequisite for contemporary Hindu traditions. The ritual practice at the heart of this tradition is *yajna*, a fire ceremony in which the most pure substances (harvested grain, clarified butter, precious gems) are offered to the gods through the medium of sacred fire.

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENTS:

READ "Real Knowing" by Gene R. Thursby: A professor of Hinduism (who is also a practitioner) gives a brief introduction to the Veda.

WATCH this video of a *yajna*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4TmOtSBenU>

READ "Whatever You Do Perform it as Sacrifice" by Gurumayi Chidvilasanda: A contemporary Indian guru teaches on the spiritual practice of offering.

EXPERIMENT with the practice of offering. As American citizens, we are often described as "consumers", and our way of life is based on ever-increasing consumption. What if we instead saw ourselves as "offerers"? You can experiment with this mentally, offering the outcome of a particular action to someone or something. Or you can give things to people, to animals, to the earth... the only limit to this practice is your own imagination.

OPTIONAL:

WATCH the movie *Monsoon Wedding*.

READ "A Day in the Life of a Vedic Priest" by Peggy Bendet, a contemporary journalist who visits a Vedic priest in his home and *shala*, or school.