**Reading One: Vedic Creation Hymn**

This short passage is actually one of several creation hymns in the Vedas.  There are several different stories and explanations of creation in the Hindu tradition, which underlies the main theme of this creation story – that no one knows exactly what happened at the creation of the world.

This hymn discusses skepticism at knowing exactly what existed at the beginning of existence, as it states that there was neither “existence nor non-existence” – most likely because those are human concepts and therefore meaningless beyond our realm.

The text refers to “that one” which is a reference to Brahman, the ultimate reality or Spirit of Hinduism.  The term “God” is usually not used in reference to Brahman – words like “one”, “spirit”, or “unity” are often used instead.

The text also describes the beginning of existence as coming from “desire”, and “poets” who sought “wisdom” and therefore created a “bond”.  This connects to one of the essential teachings of Hinduism, which is that the goal of all our lifetimes is to overcome desire for this world.  Desire is what keeps us trapped in the cycle of reincarnation.  When we give up the “desire” that creates a “bond” to this world, which in Hinduism is a form of ‘original sin’, then we can be released back to Brahman and eternal, perfect existence.

The last section of the hymn focuses on the unknowability of the specifics of the creation of the universe.  The hymn mentions that not even the gods know, because they came “afterwards” – in Hinduism the gods are part of this creation, and also have to find their way back to Brahman.  The hymn ends with the mysterious claim that maybe not even God himself, the “one who looks down on it” knows exactly how this universe came to be.

This hymn gives us an important insight into Hinduism, which does not emphasize believing in certain doctrines in order to return to God after death.  It instead emphasizes that there are multiple paths, multiple understandings of the truth.

**Rig Veda Book 10**

**Hymn 129**

Then there was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.  
What covered it, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?

Death was not then, nor was there anything immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider.  
That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.  
Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this All was indiscriminate chaos.  
All that existed then was void and formless: by the great power of Warmth was born that Unit.  
Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit.  
Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent.  
Transversely was their severing line extended: what was above it then, and what below it?  
There were creators, there were mighty forces, free action here and energy up yonder  
Who really knows and who can here declare it, from where it was born and from where comes this creation?  
The Gods are later than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?  
He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it,  
Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not.

Access the reading here:

<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10129.htm>

The Isha Upanishad

**Reading Two: The Isha Upanishad**

This Upanishad focuses on the “Self,” which is called the “atman” in Sanskrit.  The atman is our eternal soul, the one part of us that does not die.  For Hindus, this “Self” is also divine – so you will see in the passage that the “self” is often connected with the “Lord”.  Our atman/self is our divine spark within us that connects us to Brahman.

This passage emphasizes the idea in Hinduism that one’s spiritual journey is the journey to understand our “self," our soul.  Hindus claim that coming to know the self will also lead one to better understand God, because our soul is divine.

So this passage focuses on how important our soul is, and so it should be the focus of our lives.  Then the passage goes on to create a dichotomy between “real knowledge” and “not knowledge,” and that one will lead to eternal life and one will not.  This section can be interpreted many ways (as all scripture can!) but the “not knowledge” is connected in the passage with “good works” while the “real knowledge” seems to focus on looking within and to the gods.  So while the passage definitely does not denigrate “good works,” it seems to insist that “good works” alone will not bring a person to true enlightenment.  Good works have to be coupled with strong spiritual work focused on the Self, usually done through meditation and yoga.

One of the most important phrases in this Upanishad is the teaching that we should “see all beings in our self and our Self in all beings” – and that those who can do that will no longer have fear or taste death.  Hinduism teaches that our soul is the most important part of our being, and that our soul is divine.  Furthermore, all beings have the same divine soul within them, making us all, ultimately, one.  In other words, we are all one, and we are all part of God.

**Isha Upanishad**

 ALL this, whatsoever moves on earth, is to be hidden in the Lord (the Self). When thou hast surrendered all this, then thou mayest enjoy. Do not covet the wealth of any man!

Though a man may wish to live a hundred years, performing (good) works, it will be thus with him; but not in any other way: work will thus not cling to a man.

There are the worlds of the Asuras (gods) covered with blind darkness. Those who have destroyed their self (who perform works, without having arrived at a knowledge of the true Self), go after death to those worlds.

That one (the Self), though never stirring, is swifter than thought. The Devas (senses) never reach it, it existed before them. Though standing still, it overtakes the others who are running. Mâtarisvan (the wind, the moving spirit) bestows powers on it.

It stirs and it stirs not; it is far, and likewise near. It is inside of all this, and it is outside of all this.

And he who sees all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, he never turns away from it.

When to a man who understands, the Self has become all things, what sorrow, what trouble can there be to him who once beheld that unity?

He (the Self) encircled all, bright, incorporeal, scatheless, without muscles, pure, untouched by evil; a seer, wise, omnipresent, self-existent, he disposed all things rightly for eternal years.

All who worship what is not real knowledge (good works), enter into blind darkness: those who delight in real knowledge, enter, as it were, into greater darkness.

One thing, they say, is obtained from real knowledge; another, they say, from what is not knowledge. Thus we have heard from the wise who taught us this.

He who knows at the same time both knowledge and not-knowledge, overcomes death through not-knowledge, and obtains immortality through knowledge.

All who worship what is not the true cause,

enter into blind darkness: those who delight in the true cause, enter, as it were, into greater darkness.

One thing, they say, is obtained from (knowledge of) the cause; another, they say, from (knowledge of) what is not the cause. Thus, we have heard from the wise who taught us this.

 He who knows at the same time both the cause and the destruction (the perishable body), overcomes death by destruction (the perishable body), and obtains immortality through (knowledge of) the true cause.

Access reading here:

<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01243.htm>

The Chandogya Upanishad

**Reading Three:  Chandogya Upanishad**

The Chandogya Upanishad is one of the most famous and often-read Upanishads.  It tells the story of a father teaching his son the ultimate truth of Hinduism.  In the beginning of the Upanishad, the father sends the boy away to study the Vedas with a religious instructor.  This was a common practice among the Brahmin caste (the class of Hindu society that every Hindu priest must come from).  It takes the boy 12 years to study the Vedas!  When he returns home, his father apparently thinks that he is too full of himself because he believes that the Vedas (the most sacred Hindu scriptures) tell everything that needs to be known about Hinduism.  But the father decides to teach his son that there is more to Hinduism – there is a mystical knowledge as well that cannot come from reading scriptures alone.  The Upanishads, ironically, emphasize this theme over and over again – in a work of scripture the stories keep repeating that religion is more than just scripture!

The father then teaches the boy about the underlying unity of everything in the world.  He uses examples of several different elements – clay, gold, iron – to demonstrate this point.  He says that if you know one item of these elements you know them all, because underneath all their differences, they are all the same.  In Hinduism, the same is true for everything in the world – there are differences, but they are only superficial.  Since everything has the divine essence within it, everything is actually Brahman, and all is one.

In the next section the father uses a few experiments with a seed and salt to teach his son about the “Self” and “subtle essence” of the whole world.  The father is connecting the Hindu concept of “Brahman”, “Truth,” or in western terms, God, that pervades the entire universe, and the “atman”, or personal soul that we each have within us.  In Hinduism, the two are one and the same – our personal soul is divine, our divine spark, that is made of the same essence as God.  This teaching is summarized in the phrase that he repeats to his son over and over, “thou art That” – or you are Brahman.

**Chandogya Upanishad**

**Ch. 6, Khandas (aka sections): 1, 12, 13**

There lived once a boy named *S*vetaketu Âru*n*eya. To him his father said: '*S*vetaketu, go to school; for there is none belonging to our caste, darling, who, not having studied (the Vedas), is, as it were, a Brahmin by birth only.'

Having begun his apprenticeship (with a teacher) when he was twelve years of age *S*vetaketu returned to his father when he was twenty-four, having then studied all the Vedas,--conceited, considering himself well-read, and stern.

His father said to him: '*S*vetaketu, as you are so conceited, considering yourself so well-read, and so stern, my dear, have you ever asked for that instruction by which we hear what cannot be heard, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived, by which we know what cannot be known?'

'What is that instruction, Sir?' he asked.

The father replied: 'My dear, as by one lump of clay all that is made of clay is known, the difference being only a name, arising from speech, but the truth being that all is clay;

'And as, my dear, by one nugget of gold

all that is made of gold is known, the difference being only a name, arising from speech, but the truth being that all is gold...--thus, my dear, is that instruction.'

The son said: 'Surely those venerable men (my teachers) did not know that. For if they had known it, why should they not have told it me? Do you, Sir, therefore tell me that.'

'Be it so,' said the father.

'Fetch me from thence a fruit of the Nyagrodha tree.'

'Here is one, Sir.'

Break it.'

'It is broken, Sir.'

'What do you see there?'

'These seeds, almost infinitesimal.'

'Break one of them.'

'It is broken, Sir.'

'What do you see there?'

'Not anything, Sir.'

The father said: 'My son, that subtle essence which you do not see there, of that very essence this great Nyagrodha tree exists.

'Believe it, my son. That which is the subtle essence, in it all that exists has its self. It is the Truth. It is the Self, and thou, O *S*vetaketu, art That.'

'Please, Sir, inform me still more,' said the son.

'Be it so, my child,' the father replied.

 'Place this salt in water, and then bring it to me in the morning.'

The son did as he was commanded.

The father said to him: 'Bring me the salt, which you placed in the water last night.'

The son having looked for it, found it not, for, of course, it was dissolved.

The father said: 'Taste it from the surface of the water. How is it?'

The son replied: 'It is salty.'

'Taste it from the middle. How is it?'

The son replied: 'It is salty.'

'Taste it from the bottom. How is it?'

The son replied 'It is salty.'

The father said throw it away and then come back to me.'

He did so; but salt exists for ever.

Then the father said: 'Here also, in this body...you do not perceive the Truth (Sat), my son; but there indeed it is.

'That which is the subtle essence, in it all that exists has its self. It is the Truth. It is the Self, and thou, O *S*vetaketu, art That.'

Access the reading here:

Khanda 1: [https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01119.htm (Links to an external site.)](https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01119.htm)

Khanda 12: [https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01130.htm (Links to an external site.)](https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01130.htm)

Khanda 13: [https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01131.htm (Links to an external site.)](https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01131.htm)

The Bhagavad Gita

**Reading Four: Bhagavad Gita**

In this section near the beginning of the Bhagavad Gita, we enter into the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna.  Arjuna, a soldier, feels hesitation before a battle in the civil war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.  He does not want to have to kill people he knows, even though he knows that they are in the wrong for starting this war.  He tells Krishna that he will not fight that day.

What follows is Krishna’s response.  Krishna is a god who has disguised himself as Arjuna’s driver in order to help save humanity from the disastrous consequences of this war.  He encourages Arjuna to fight because it is important that the war come to a resolution so that the fighting will stop.  It is Arjuna’s duty (or Dharma) to fight because that is his role in society, and the violent Kaurvas must be stopped so that the country can be at peace again.

But he also justifies fighting in the war by teaching Arjuna about the difference between the soul (atman) and the physical body.  They are different and separate from each other.  The soul is eternal while the body is temporary.  He says that this is important for a warrior to understand because he’s not really killing his enemies on the battlefield – he is only killing their bodies and their souls will live on, reincarnating back into the world.  (In this story, Arjuna is the good guy and those he will fight are the bad guys).  Krishna says that we have always existed and will always exist, because our souls are eternal – our physical bodies and lives are just temporary.

So we should do what is right, what our society needs of us, focusing on our soul and not our physical body.

**Bhagavad Gita**

**Chapter 2, Verses 4-30**

Arjuna said: How shall I strike my grandfather, my guru, and all other relatives, who are worthy of my respect, with arrows in battle, O Krishna?

It would be better, indeed, to live on alms (aka to be poor) in this world than to slay these noble personalities, because by killing them I would enjoy wealth and pleasures stained with their blood.

We do not know which alternative, to fight or to quit, is better for us. Further, we do not know whether we shall conquer them or they will conquer us. We should not even wish to live after killing our cousin brothers, who are standing in front of us.

My senses are overcome by the weakness of pity, and my mind is confused about duty (Dharma). Please tell me what is better for me. I am Your disciple, and I take refuge in You.

I do not perceive that gaining an unrivaled and prosperous kingdom on this earth, or even lordship over all the celestial controllers will remove the sorrow that is drying up my senses.

After speaking like this to Lord Krishna, the mighty Arjuna said to Krishna: I shall not fight, and became silent.

O King, Lord Krishna, as if smiling, spoke these words to the distressed Arjuna in the midst of the two armies.

Lord Krishna said: You grieve for those who are not worthy of grief, and yet speak words of wisdom. The wise grieves neither for the living nor for the dead.

There was never a time when these monarchs, you, or I did not exist; nor shall we ever cease to exist in the future.

Just as the soul acquires a childhood body, a youth body, and an old age body during this life; similarly, the soul acquires another body after death. This should not delude the wise.

The contacts of the senses with the sense objects give rise to the feelings of heat and cold, and pain and pleasure. They are transitory and impermanent. Therefore, one should learn to endure them.  Because a calm person who is not afflicted by these sense objects, and is steady in pain and pleasure becomes fit for salvation.

The invisible Spirit (Atman) is eternal, and the visible physical body, is transitory. The reality of these two is indeed certainly seen by the seers of truth.

The Spirit by whom this entire universe is pervaded is indestructible. No one can destroy the imperishable Spirit.

The physical bodies of the eternal, immutable, and incomprehensible Spirit are perishable. Therefore fight, O Arjuna.

The one who thinks that the Spirit is a killer, and the one who thinks the Spirit is killed, both are ignorant. Because the Spirit neither kills nor is killed.

The Spirit is neither born nor does it die at any time. It does not come into being, or cease to exist. It is unborn, eternal, permanent, and primeval. The Spirit is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

O Arjuna, how can a person who knows that the Spirit is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and immutable, kill anyone or causes anyone to be killed?

Just as a person puts on new garments after discarding the old ones; similarly, the living entity or the individual soul acquires new bodies after casting away the old bodies.

Weapons do not cut this Spirit, fire does not burn it, water does not make it wet, and the wind does not make it dry. The Spirit cannot be cut, burned, wetted, or dried. It is eternal, all pervading, unchanging, immovable, and primeval.

The Spirit is said to be unexplainable, incomprehensible, and unchanging. Knowing the Spirit as such you should not grieve.

Even if you think that the physical body takes birth and dies perpetually, even then, O Arjuna, you should not grieve like this. Because death is certain for the one who is born, and birth is certain for the one who dies. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable.

All beings are unmanifest, or invisible to our physical eyes before birth and after death. They manifest between the birth and the death only. What is there to grieve about?

Some look upon this Spirit as a wonder, another describes it as wonderful, and others hear of it as a wonder. Even after hearing about it very few people know what the Spirit is.

O Arjuna, the Spirit that dwells in the body of all beings is eternally indestructible. Therefore, you should not mourn for anybody.

Access the reading here:

[https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/gita/agsgita.htm (Links to an external site.)](https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/gita/agsgita.htm)