

PHILOSOPHY 353

(Fall 2009)

Philosophies of India

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Class Times: Wednesdays 11:30-2:20 pm

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Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday: 10:00-11:00 am (or by appointment)

Course Text:

Koller, John M. (2006). *The Indian Way: An Introduction to the Philosophies and Religions of India*. Second Edition. Pearson Prentice Hall.

Other readings will be freely available through online sources.

Course Description:

This course introduces the major philosophical traditions in India. Philosophical thought in India is concerned with issues and questions similar to those studied in the western world, but there is a marked difference in the ways that Indian thinkers approach these questions. Indian thinkers are as concerned as western philosophers with questions regarding reality, the self, causality, knowledge and the best way to live. However, Indian philosophy is, in an important sense, far more practical than Western philosophy: Indian thought is primarily concerned with how one ought to live. Whereas in the Western world the primary focus is on ascertaining the truth (and avoiding falsity), the Indian focus is on overcoming suffering. This is not to say that Indian thinkers are not concerned with truth—nor that Western thinkers are not concerned with overcoming suffering—but merely that the foci are different in the two traditions.

This basic distinction between the two orientations helps to explain other differences between the two traditions. First, Indian philosophy is much more closely tied to religion than is Western thought. Indeed, the lines between Indian philosophy and religion are much less clear than similar lines drawn in the Western world. This is in part a function of the practical character of Indian thought. Secondly—and this is related to the first point above—Indian thought pays less heed to Heraclites’ dictum “listen not to me but to my argument.” Because Indian thought is intensely practical, the role of personal experience is much greater than it is in the West. In Indian thought, special regard is paid to some people on account of their spiritual achievements: the ‘seers’ are given special regard in Indian philosophical traditions. In other words, the theoretical equality accorded to all thinkers in Western thought is denied in the Indian tradition.

Our investigation of Indian philosophical traditions will proceed through a close reading of Koller’s *The Indian Way* along with other readings and films. We shall conduct the course as a seminar, which means that the success of the course depends partly on the contributions of students.

The first three weeks of the course are concerned with the foundational texts and traditions of Indian thought. These texts are essential to understanding further Indian thought; one of the basic distinctions in Indian philosophy is between traditions or schools that accept the authority of these texts (orthodoxy) and those that do not. Then we will confront two ideas that strike many contemporary westerners as peculiar if not downright immoral—the caste system and the idea of stages in one’s life. We will see that the issue is more complex than often supposed.

We will then proceed to an examination of two unorthodox but influential schools of Indian thought: Buddhism and Jainism. Today, Buddhism is a minor religion/philosophy in India, but it is very much an Indian philosophy, at least in its origins. Jainism is a very minor religion in terms of numbers of adherents, but it has exercised a great influence on Indian thought. No study of Indian philosophy would be complete without some examination of these traditions.

In Week 8, we will examine the single most important text in Indian thought, the Bhagavad-Gita. This text is said to encapsulate the main teachings of the earlier texts, and occupies a position of singular importance in Indian thought. It is fascinatingly beautiful, but it also presents an intriguing dilemma with which nearly everyone can relate.

From this point, we will consider two distinctive dimensions of Indian thought. First, we will briefly consider the more religious aspects of the tradition in what Koller calls “devotional Hinduism,” which seeks a mystical union with ultimate reality. Second, we will consider the principal systematic schools of Indian philosophy.

In the final weeks of the course we will briefly consider Islam, Sikhism and some contemporary developments in India. Islam is not properly an *Indian* religion or philosophy, but has greatly influenced thought on the Indian subcontinent. Sikhism is relatively young religion, squarely within the Indian tradition, and is widely practiced in Greater Vancouver and the Fraser Valley. We will end with a brief discussion of 20th century developments in Indian thought.

Course Objectives:

1. Students will acquire an understanding and critical appreciation of the principal schools, both orthodox and non-orthodox, of Indian philosophy
2. Students will develop an understanding of the ways in which Indian philosophy affects Indian society and culture
3. Students will develop an awareness of the ways in which the philosophies of India differ from the philosophies of the West
4. Students will develop their ability to write clear, rational and persuasive essays.

Course Evaluation:

Two short papers	25%; 30%
Midterm	20%
Take Home Final exam	25%

- The midterm will include several short answer, multiple choice and true/false questions. It will take about an hour of class time.
- The papers will require answering reflective questions based on course readings and class discussions.
- The Final will be take-home and require you to answer questions that reflect on the course as a whole.

Tentative Course Schedule

DATE	TOPIC	READING/EVENT
Sept 14	Introduction: Diversity, Change, and Continuity	Chapter 1: pp. 1-18
Sept 21	Roots of the Indian Way: Indus and Vedic Beginnings Creation and Celebration in the Vedas	Chapter 2: pp. 19-37 Chapter 3: pp. 38-55
Sept 28	Liberating Knowledge: the Upanisads	Chapter 4: pp. 56-78
Oct 5	Self and Society: Norms of Life	Chapter 5: pp. 79-104
Oct 12	Holiday	No Class!
Oct 19	The Jaina Vision First paper due	Chapter 6: pp. 105-127
Oct 26	The Way of the Buddha	Chapter 7: pp. 128-162
Oct 26	Yoga Midterm	Chapter 8: pp. 163-178
Nov 2	The Bhagavad-Gita	Chapter 9: pp. 179-200
Nov 9	Systematic Philosophy: Bondage, Liberation and Causality	Chapter 12: pp. 241-264

Nov 16	Systematic Philosophy: Knowledge and Reality	Chapter 13: pp. 265-285
Nov 23	Islam in India	Chapter 14: pp. 287-308
Nov 30	The Faith of the Sikhs Second paper due	Chapter 15: pp. 309-327
Dec 7	Conclusion	