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A Personal Journey: Growing Up in a Hindu Missionary School
As presented during the worship service at UUSS on 1 November 2026.

Good morning. For about a year now I have been cornering Reverend Jones after the service to talk about eastern religions. I thought he was enjoying those conversations. I thought he liked me. Then he asked me to explain a five-thousand-year-old tradition in five minutes, and I began to wonder whether he liked me after all.

Most of you already speak some of the language of Hinduism. Karma, which just means action. Also: Mantra, Guru, and Yoga. Pundit is our word for a priest and an American word for a talking head on cable news. So I will skip the five thousand years and take you straight to my eighth grade.

I grew up in a residential school in India run by the Ramakrishna Mission, a monastic order. The same order runs the Vedanta Societies here in America, including one in Sacramento. The monks were our spiritual guides, and also our teachers, wardens, coaches, umpires, and when needed, our bouncers.

They taught us two things early, and both separate us from the Abrahamic faiths. First, your moksha, your liberation, is your own job. Nobody carries you, and believing the right thing does not get you there by default. Second, there is no original sin. It runs the other way. We come from the infinite, already whole, [purnam adah, purnam idam: that is whole, this is whole].

Of course, we get muddied by earthly business, and are heading backward. Religion, as Swami Vivekananda put it, is simply the manifestation of the divinity already in us. The mud is the problem. The soul never was.

Religion was taught in my school the way physics was taught: with exams. In eighth grade one question read: You must work toward your own moksha through selfless karma. Give an account of your good and bad karma and describe your progress.

I did what any future engineer would do. I drew a line down the middle. Bad karma on the left, good on the right. This was a strict school, so the left column looked like a trap. In American terms, I was pleading the fifth. I was not joining that fishing expedition.

The right column was worse. Helping someone with her homework was good karma, no? But I had feelings for her. That is not selfless. That is strategy, the thirteen-year-old version. Every good deed of mine failed the test. I left both columns blank. A hard pass from thirteen-year-old me, and the only exam question I have ever left empty.

So I went back to the monk who taught the class. This selflessness business is hard, I said. Is there another road? He smiled. There are three more. First: Gyan yoga, the path of knowledge,

for people who must argue their way to God. Next: Bhakti yoga, the path of devotion: temples, idols, chanting, unconditional surrender to a supreme being, which, he warned, is also the easiest way to be exploited. Every guru scandal starts there. And third, raja yoga, the path of meditation. Patanjali laid it out as eight steps: two on how to behave, one on how to sit, one on how to breathe, and four on how to quiet the mind. The yoga class at your gym or studio is the one on how to sit. The poses exist so you can sit still long enough to meditate. America took that *one step* and built an industry. Different temperaments, different doors, same destination.

I had one more question that year, and the answer explains Hinduism's unusual tolerance for R-rated material. On Maha Shivaratri, the night of Shiva, what is worshipped is a lingam: a stone form of Shiva that is, to put it plainly, a symbol of sexual union. I was thirteen and scandalized. Do we really worship that? The monk smiled again. What is wrong with it? We cannot touch the creator. We can touch the creation. So we honor the creation, and this is how creation continues.

That is why Hindus find divinity, God's reflection, everywhere. The Upanishads spell it out: matri devo bhava, pitri devo bhava. Your mother is a god. Your father is a god. Your teacher. The guest at your door.

Your children are your chance to serve without reward. And the one divinity we rarely say out loud: our spouses are divine too. A dimension of love no temple can offer: a god who lives with you, and gives feedback.

That is the Hinduism I carry. Not one gate with one gatekeeper, but many paths, and a Supreme you can touch, feel, argue with, love and cherish. Sri Ramakrishna said it in four words of Bengali: jato mat, tato path. As many faiths, so many paths. I suspect that sounds familiar in this room.

Decades later, I still keep that ledger, in my head. Bad deeds on the left, which I still hide. Good deeds on the right, each one followed by the same question: was that for them, or for me?

You keep one too. You call it conscience. And the same doubt runs through every path. We hide our bad karma and doubt our good karma. We study, without knowing what for. We meditate, and fidget. We pray, with one eye open. [Most of us take the spiritual exam the way I did at thirteen: hoping nobody checks.]

The tradition I grew up in expects exactly that. It does not call the ambivalence a failure. It calls it a temperament, and it built four doors so every temperament has a way in. Pick yours. Nobody will judge you.