

Radix



Identity

Roots of Our Identity

Hinduism, dating back to 1500 BC, is the world's oldest religion. It is not only a snapshot of the diverse cultural history of the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years, but also the glacier out of which numerous streams of philosophical and religious doctrines, such as Jainism and Buddhism, have sprung. Simultaneously, Hinduism provides its subscribers no set rules of conduct to follow, no particular divine being to pray to and no specific philosophical direction to adopt. It is almost divisive in the sense that it provides various interpretations of the universe that are ever evolving as a result of the passage of time and the inclusion of other religious ideologies. Therefore, **it seems as though it would be hard for an individual to seek any specific religious identity through Hinduism, given its multi-dimensional nature. However, this is not the case**—Hindus, both within India and across the world, strongly identify with their religion. Furthermore, tolerance and a vivid curiosity for a fellow Hindu's interpretation of the Vedic and post-Vedic doctrines are paramount to the religion. The fact that Hinduism today is a culmination of 3000 years of knowledge and does not omit any alternative interpretations that have arisen thus far, is a strong testament to this statement.

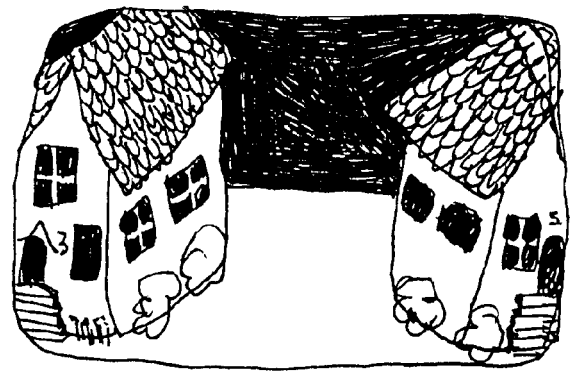
Nonetheless, there are contrasts inherent to Hinduism. One of the main areas of tension lies in the underlying concepts of *dharma* and *moksha*. *Dharma*, deeply rooted in the earlier Vedic literature, postulates that the primary role of religion is to maintain the cosmic order, which in practical terms means order within society. It states that a person's first obligation is to others and he must fulfill his duties within the hierarchical role that is assigned to him. On the other hand, the concept of *moksha* introduces the *Brahman*, which is the eternal, conscious, spatially and temporally unqualified reality. All human beings, that is, every *atman* or soul, is not real and can transcend to become the *Brahman*. This process of salvation from the endless cycle of *karma* can only be brought about through asceticism and world renunciation.

Since 500 BC, the religion has grappled with ways to reconcile these two inherently conflictual concepts, in order for the followers of the religion to be able to live in society and still attain the ultimate goal of every pious Hindu's life: *nirvana*. In fact, these reconciliatory measures have often become a means of defining Hinduism itself. For example, many Hindu scriptures prescribe the four stages or *ashramas* of life, which allow a human being to preserve the social order and also pursue the quest for *moksha*. Alternatively, the Bhagavad Gita advocates the path of devotion to God as a means to perform action within society without personal motive, which can also lead one to salvation.

A Hindu does indeed have various paths to choose from in affirming her beliefs, and this is exemplified by Hindus in India and abroad. They are comprised of *yogis* (ascetics) that meditate in the caves of the Himalayas; *Brahmins* (priests) who perform elaborate *yajnas* (ceremonial fires); and normal working class citizens who express their devotions through a countless number of *bhajans* (chants), *pujas* (prayers) and other rituals that tend to reflect the culture and local customs of a region.

Considering the variety of Hindu experience, what is it that imparts such a sense of identity among Hindus the world over? One might consider that the sheer longevity of the religion, and the steadfastness of its basic precepts in the face of adversity, instills a strong sense of pride among its followers. However, a more vital reason is that the sense of identity that Hindus hold stems from an understanding of the conceptual nature of the religion, rather than its prescriptive one. Hindus might not always acknowledge the daily customs and beliefs of their fellow Hindus, but these disparities are often unified by the realization that all followers of the religion share the common notions of *dharma* and *moksha* in varying degrees. Hence, a strong sense of commonality is formed not only on a faith level, but also on an intellectual one. This leads to an identity that is immutable in the face of adversity and drastic change in religious thought, which have been staples of Hinduism for 3000 years.

—Siddharth Pharasi, U3 student in Civil Engineering



—Suzie Smith

the spaces in between.

From: Joelle Levesque
To: radix@yours.com
Subject: Re: Radix newsletter
Date: Thu, 23 Jan 2003 17:23:39 -0500

hey folks,

I recently returned from living in Ghana, West Africa, for a year. The journey was incredible and spiritual, confusing and difficult. I felt lost in my skin so many times (and certainly today, the same applies). Before I left though, I learned a prayer that ended up being a helpful resource for me during moments of utter identity chaos. I do not identify with one particular religion, but I am still comfortable with addressing the greater energy that governs the universe as "god". Here it is:

*O god,
who am I now?
Once I was secure
in familiar territory
in my sense of belonging
Unquestioning of
the norms of my culture
the assumptions built into my language,
the values shared by my society.*

*But now you have called me out
and away from home,
and I do not know where you are leading.*

*I am empty, unsure, uncomfortable.
I have only a beckoning star to follow*

*Journeying god,
pitch your tent with mine
so that I may not become deterred
by hardship, strangeness, doubt.
Show me the movement I must make
toward a wealth not dependent on possessions,
toward a wisdom not based on books,
toward a strength not bolstered by might,
toward a god not confined to heaven.*

Help me to find myself as I walk in other's shoes

Sincerely,
Joelle Levesque
a wish for joy

—Joelle is a first year student (UO) studying in the school of environment...loving the learning but not always the school



Response:

Whose Problem is it?

In the last issue of the *Radix*, Kathryn Lum brought up an excellent and very interesting point about being bi-spiritual in our society. Many of us, if not all, have had a firsthand experience of our society's obsession with the "boundaries of identity", which make it increasingly difficult for anyone who does not distinctly identify with a particular category. **Our ability to fully express ourselves in the terms provided by society is extremely limited.** In this sense, these are not "boundaries of identity," but barriers to the expression of humanity. If a person does not fall into a category, as is the case with religion, they can feel penalized by society for not following the conventional norm.

I find it incredible and very unique for someone to be at home within several religions and converse with God through different channels. **In my opinion nobody is qualified to assess anyone else's spirituality, because none of us have reached spiritual perfection.** Whether a person decides to obtain his or her "spiritual nourishment" from one religion or from several religions is up to the discretion of that person and that person alone. If someone can achieve "spiritual growth" through the practice and belief of more than one religion, who are we to criticize that person when many of us have not truly experienced "spiritual growth" ourselves?

Those who do not identify themselves within one category, whether it is religion or any other category that society tosses our way, should not feel compelled to justify their stance for the sake of validation. Falling into a category does not give a person any more worth than someone who derives his or her identity from several sources. In a sense, all of us have felt incomplete and on the margins at one point or another, even if we can identify ourselves within a certain category. There are too many aspects of humanity that cannot be fully expressed and included within a category, which would inevitably be left out. It is society's problem if it thinks that everyone can fit into a box, but it becomes our problem if we think that we should fit into a box.

—Noreen Keyler, U2 polisci

Erratum: The *Radix* wishes to apologize for a significant oversight made in Issue 3, Religious Institutions. The background text on the front page was taken from the Torah. In the Jewish tradition one is forbidden from writing the name of G-d on anything that will be thrown away. If the name of G-d is written on paper, it must be buried in a religious ceremony, and so, as you may have noticed, in many Jewish articles the name "G-d" is written to avoid this situation. Clearly, printing a section of the Torah in the newsletter violates this requirement, and we apologize for this mistake.

On the cover:

This month's coverboy is Ron Calixto. He's one-fourth Spanish, Greek, Filipino, and Chinese



Get Up, Stand Up

It seems that we Sikhs, as a people over the last 50 years, have lurched from one major crisis to another. From partition to Operation Blue Star, the Delhi massacre, tortures in Punjab, Air India bombing, tables and chairs, government killings in Kashmir and the latest crisis in the USA, one has to wonder, is it worth being a Sikh anymore or has it become a liability?

Being raised with cut hair I have not had to endure the same racial profiling and racism that many of my baptized Sikh friends have. I have heard recent stories on the internet about young *Amritdhari* (baptized) boys suddenly cutting their hair—for their safety, their relatives are telling them to shave off their beards and remove their turbans. I'm sure that such discussions and crises are going on in many Sikh households across the country.

I have this theory that Sikhs as a people have only advanced and been strengthened when they have been faced with a major crisis; this is the case for many different faiths. Most of the "Sikhs" that I see out there today are cultural Sikhs and not practising Sikhs. Many knowingly violate the spiritual and physical tenants of Sikhism with a matter

of fact attitude. Some have no idea why they are Sikhs, while others oppressively force their children to endure the rituals of the religion blindly, with no commitment to fostering an understanding or an appreciation of the faith. **It's times of crisis like this that make each and every one of us question our faith and ask: is it worth it anymore?**

We should stop for a moment and ask ourselves this question. Sikhs around the world, and especially those in North America, are facing a hurricane of racial stereotyping and it does not look like it will end any time soon. Any person who does not look like an "American" (whatever that means) is about to face a period of overt and subtle racism. Those men and women who wear or carry the articles of faith will face double the pressure than that of other "Arab-looking" people. It is not a good time—how are we going to react to or deal with this impending storm?

No religion should be considered as a burden or as something that holds you back. The whole purpose of religion, after all, is something to draw strength from and to provide some sense of purpose and direction in one's life. If you don't feel that, then Sikhism is not for you. It's time to

make a decision, not straddle a fence. Either you want to be a Sikh, are prepared to face the challenges and persecution that are ahead and are willing to make the effort to be a practising Sikh, or it's something that's a liability for you and perhaps this latest crisis is an opportune excuse to denounce your allegiance to Sikhism and move away.

To be a Sikh for me is an honour and a blessing, not a burden. I may not be a baptized Sikh, but when Guru Gobind Singh gave his people that choice 300 years ago, it was just that: a choice. It's now time to reaffirm that choice. For me the decision is clear. I draw strength from the spiritual aspects of Sikhism, though I have not yet committed myself to becoming baptized. I feel honoured to be a Sikh, and I honestly enjoy being different from everyone else. It pains me incredibly to see orthodox Sikhs hide or cower. It's not a time to be afraid but a time that **Sikhs should proudly stand up and consciously be ready to face both the consequences and the rewards of their decision.** Today I'm honoured to be a follower of the House of Nanak and I challenge those orthodox and non-orthodox to stand by their faith and their values, for it is a principle of Sikh doctrine not to place fear on one another and not to fear another.

—Shaminder Singh Bhullar, U3 anatomy and cell biology

Some call him the friendly giant. The saddest thing is that he never actually feels after a meal!



The Word

In Judaism we call it “Hashem” or “The Name”, the Lord, the capital He, and “Adonai”, but even that is not its true name. For we cannot utter it. And we cannot say what it is. We say it is everywhere. Incomprehensibly vast. And we have volumes, many volumes, generations of dusty tomes that congregate on the shelves of creaking *yeshivot* and lean towards each other in the posture of old men praying. The most revered of our texts are inscribed on scrolls of skin and ink, within the ark of our places of worship. And so we are told it is found in books, this vast it, this He of all ages. In words. In tome upon tome of generational interpretation, commentary upon commentary: Maimonides, Iben Ezra, Nachmanides, Sforno, Sadya Gaon. These are the names of the great scholars, cited always in our search for meaning. We are looking, my friend, for God. **Have you found it? Can you tell me what it is?** You cannot. But we learn from these books that somehow God must breathe through words. His presence must penetrate each uttered syllable.

And the *Torah* is only one collection of true poetry. Reading Rainer Maria Rilke provides evidence that even twentieth-century poetry can be a gateway to that continual mystery we call God. I found Rilke at a time in my life when it seemed as though my insatiable desire to live meaningfully (which meant believing in all those youthful notions of true love, possibility, destiny, truth) was slipping away. I had allowed myself to enter that outside world of wanting, the world where you grasp and grasp but remain perpetually empty. In Rilke’s *A Book for the Hours of Prayer* or *Das Studienbuch*, I found the voice of one who lives from the inside world, outwards:

*I live my life in growing orbits
which move out over the things of the world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
but that will be my attempt.
I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years,
and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,
or a great song.**

What I share with Rilke is that incessant hunger to know oneself and the universe. His words, “*I live my life in growing orbits...*” recall the symbol of the meditating Buddha, radiating love and inner peace. Meditation is a way to learn to watch oneself in the universe, to circle around God, to unfold.

*I want to unfold.
I don't want to stay folded anywhere,
because where I am folded, there I am a lie.*

But what does this mean? The problem with talking of God is that His name is unutterable. God is real only at the conception of experience. And so when experience is articulated, is translated via the intellect and imparted onto spoken tongue, it loses God. (Even this word “God” seems to me to be just a word. Just look, I will repeat it for you: God God God. You see, your eyes keep moving across the page and you have not been transformed.)

Yet Rilke recognizes the frailty of human portraits of God; he sees how defining God in human terms can suffocate the possibility of experience:

*We construct paintings around you like walls,
so that thousands of walls are standing around you now.
Our pious hands lay a cover over you
whenever we feel that you are open toward us.*

How then can one know God? Perhaps poetry can act as a passage to God if the poetry itself engenders experience. **If the experience of writing or reading poetry changes you, wakes you or surprises you, then all is not lost.**

In my writing group, we choose random phrases as starting points and just write; we write for ten minutes and then read, write, then read, write, read. There have been times during writing when I feel as though the world flows through me, word after word (*world* after



—Erykah Zeifand

world), and when I reread the passage, I am dumbfounded. Who really wrote this? Was it I? Who is this “I”? Am I “I” or the universe?

Writing is a form of reaching. I write and write and it is as if “*I am circling around God*”, and this circling is endless. **The more I speak of God, the more inadequate my words become.** There are times when it is as if

*...I am pushing through solid rock
in flintlike layers, as the ore lies, alone;
I am such a long way in I see no way through,
and no space: everything is close to my face,
and everything close to my face is stone.*

How can I pretend to know what God is? I may say, “Truth is God, Love is God,” but then I am playing the same game. For what is Truth, what Love? Can we claim to have the authority to define that which is infinitely beyond us? Look, Rilke’s God is not the God we expect to find:

*Yet no matter how deeply I go down into myself
my God is dark, and like a webbing made
of a hundred roots, that drink in silence.*

The uncertainties are endless and the wish is never-ending. Rilke whispers to God through his poetry, “*I want to be a mirror for your whole body... I want to acknowledge you, I want to announce you, / as no one has before... I want my best strength to be like a shoot, / with no anger and no timidity, as a shoot is... And I want my grasp of things / true before you...*”

*You see, I want a lot
Perhaps I want everything:
the darkness that comes with every infinite fall
and the shivering blaze of every step up.*

*So many live on and want nothing,
and are raised to the rank of prince
by the slippery ease of their light judgments.*

continued on page 5...

Remembering the Source

It seems that so many of us are lost these days. It is not only that we do not know our purpose in life, or what we should be, **the problem is that we do not even know ourselves!** Any free-thinking individual must ask him or herself two fundamental questions: "Who am I?" and "Who should I be?"

The very first thing we should realize is that we were created, just like every other thing in this universe. I believe that there is really no other plausible explanation for why everything in our existence is in perfect order. If we accept this first truth, the second thing we should clearly understand is that if we are a creation, then there most certainly has to be a Creator. When we comprehend this we will know who we should be.

The Creator clearly warns us in a verse from His Book, the Qur'an: "And be ye not like those who forgot God; and He made them forget their own souls! Such are the rebellious transgressors!" (59:19)

Here we see the reason for our state of confusion. Residing here in North America we face the onslaughts of materialism and popular culture almost every second of every day. There is no consideration of spirituality, except maybe on a philosophical level. All we think about is money, entertainment and physical pleasure. God is never even given a thought. So why should we be surprised when we find ourselves in a state of loss?

In Islam and in the Qur'an, God Himself describes who He is by bestowing on us His Most Beautiful of Names (*Asma ul-Husna*). Knowing God and His many names and attributes is actually the primary obligation of every Muslim. If we truly take the time to understand who God is, then we will become conscious of who we should be. God is the All-Merciful, so we too should show mercy. He is the Forgiving so we too should show forgiveness. He is the Just, so we too should show justice. **If we forget these aspects of God's identity, we will invariably forget them in ourselves.**

However, one last thing must be understood. God possesses these qualities to the utmost degree, and no matter how hard we strive we will never come close to that level. So we must know and accept our limitations as human beings—we are but the creation of God. At the same time, we should still try our utmost to be good people and attain these characteristics. When you know God, you will find yourself. And maybe then, through you, others will discover the way.

—Asim Baig

Asim is a U2 student in mechanical engineering



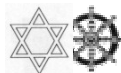
the word, continued from page 4

*But what you love to see are faces
that do work and feel thirst.
You love most of all those who need you
as they need a crowbar or a hoe.*

I am hungry. I am thirsty. I work for the poem, and God works through me. I cannot know God, but like Rilke, I can work towards God, I can write and write and catch glimpses of the way life is miraculous. And the more I devote myself to this pursuit, the more I might confirm the words of poet, Jane Hirshfield: "The poem isn't something I make; the poem is something I serve."

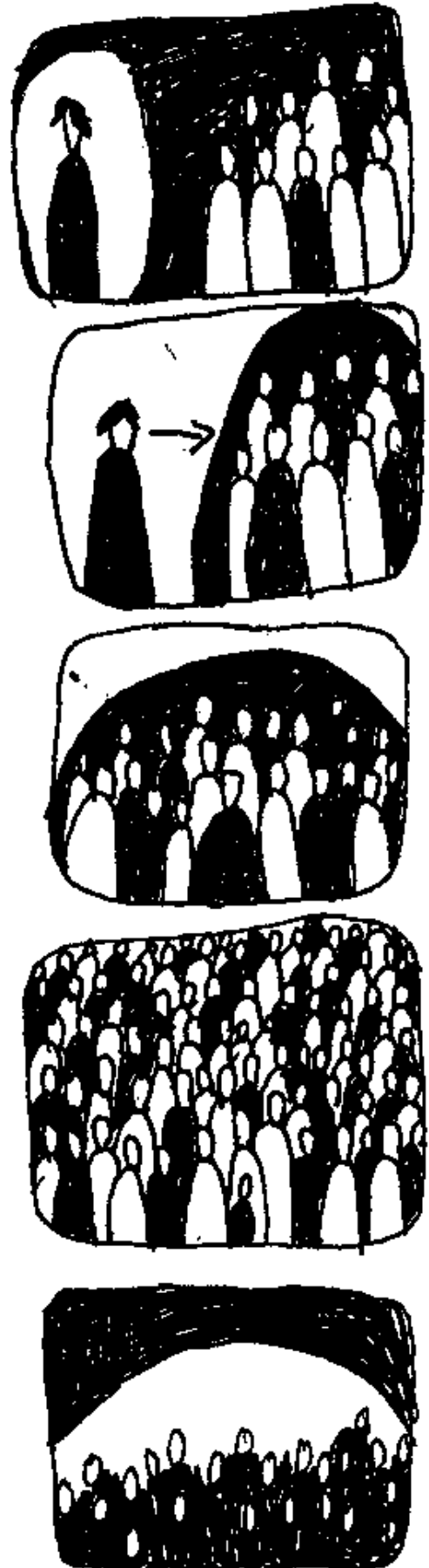
Poetry lets me venture into "the forest / no one has explored, with paths leading everywhere."

—Rebecca Hart



Rebecca is a vipassana meditator, Jewbu and Earthling studying English literature and Environment in U1

*quotations from Rilke, Rainer Maria. "From a Book for the Hours of Prayer." *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Trans. Robert Bly. New York: Harper, 1981.



—Suzie Smith

Baptism Song

Baptism is a traditional rite of passage in becoming Christian, which involves submersion, or pouring water over someone. It is a sign of blessing, of calling, of commitment, of mystery, of love. It comes with both a commitment to live in the Spirit of God, and an assurance that God's love is ever present. While most baptisms happen during infancy (depending on one's denomination), it is particularly meaningful when chosen in adulthood.

Written for a friend last year, this song remembers the story of Jesus' baptism and the eccentric prophet John who performed it. It reminds us of the blessed oddity that we enter into as Christians, and the community we build by risking and listening for God.

For Emma, April 2002

*John the Baptist, clothed in camel hair,
Spreading words of mischief everywhere,
came upon the Messiah in a stream.
"This must be a mix-up or a dream".*

*"Who am I to baptize one as thee?
It is you my Lord should baptize me".
But Jesus, knowing what the prophets spoke,
reassured his cousin it was so.*

*And he came up, up, out of the water.
Spirit God descending as a dove.
And he came up, up, out of the water.
God pronouncing, 'it is you I love'.*

*Can you imagine what a sight he saw?
Jesus clothed in glory, crowd in awe.
A first of many miracles to come,
through a man divine and mortal, both in one.*

*We welcome you with arms extended wide.
And stand with you, in faith, by your side.
May blessings find you each and everyday.
And God be with you as you find your way.*

*And you came up, up, out of the water.
Spirit God descending as a dove.
And you came up, up, out of the water.
God pronouncing, 'it is you I love'.*

—Marcie Gibson
Marcie is a recent graduate of McGill



—Shireef Darwish

Of Death and Gravity

"Let me give you a tip: don't talk about G-d around a dying man." I can still remember his face and body, worn away by the disease that had made its "formal appearance" only six weeks prior to my visit. He could no longer eat full meals. I ran around the whole hospital looking for a box of Corn Flakes. The nurses warned me that he was a difficult patient. I was glad of it—"I'm good with difficult people."



I try to explain to people why I've become a more Torah observant Jew. It was certainly not as a result of my efforts to come closer to my "religion". Coming closer to G-d, on the other hand, is a different story. Sometimes G-d pulls you close—whether you're prepared for His embrace or not.

My visit with this patient lasted for no more than half an hour. **Half an hour is enough to change anyone's life around, although you never see it coming.**



It's funny, the whole time I was with him, I was reminded of a dream I had that same week:

Dream, night of November 12, 2002:

A man who was dying of AIDS was trying to stab himself. I managed to wrestle the knife out of his hand (he was so much bigger than me!). I tried to comfort him saying, "I know how you feel". And he answered, "No you don't". He was right and I told him so, and then I just held him with my small arms (he was so big!). Then there were all these angels dancing.



He reproached me about raising the topic of G-d around him. After that, he felt more at ease with me. He started telling me about his state of being, how he felt alone, how he felt like no one cared about his welfare. He said he felt he could trust me because I was Jewish. About two minutes earlier, he had dismissed my idea of talking to a Rabbi, saying, "What do I have to say to those people? A Rabbi is no more interesting than anyone else I've met".



One doesn't point to the forces of gravity every time an apple falls. We take gravity for granted, because it's at work whether we notice it or not. So here we were, two "secular" Jews, held together by a force that is no more pronounced than gravity but just as operative. Being Jewish is a mystifying thing. I guess you could say that the apple finally fell where it needed to fall (right between the eyes!) **And then a question formed: what is the bare necessity of my existence?** Besides life, what can I absolutely not live without? I'm a Jew. I cannot live without Torah. The light bulb went on because of a Jewish friend of mine who once gave me this tip: "Don't talk about G-d around a dying man."

—Tsipora Mankovsky
Tsipora is a U1 student in humanistic studies, with a minor in social studies of medicine



—Marcie Gibson

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Know Thy Self

The morn illuminates the tranquil blanket of snow, which shrouds campus with an effervescent glow. Students busying themselves with daily pursuit walk in and out of buildings, some clutching their morning beverages, occasionally sipping them to ward off the cold. I stand at Milton Gates, in surroundings familiar to me, yet knowing that I am far away from home.

Whilst traveling to Montréal I was confronted with a Platonic thought, which probed my intellect throughout the journey. In ancient Athens the temple occupied by the Oracle of Delphi had the words “Know Thy Self” inscribed on its entrance. This statement, which promotes the question of identity, had always been relevant to me. Yet upon deeper inspection I realized that **this question is faced by all of humanity.**

A ‘Muslim’, translated, is one who submits to the will of God, and Muslims have historically subordinated other personal traits to faith. Coming from England has undoubtedly moulded my identity, yet religion takes precedence over geographical locality. In the Qur’an God says, “Surely the believers are but brothers. So set things right between your two brothers, and be aware of god—perhaps you will obtain mercy” (49:10). Even in periods of great distress and turmoil, Muslims have persevered in maintaining their identities. Some of the most impressive examples of this can be found amongst those Muslims enslaved in the Americas. Charles Ball, a native slave whose autobiography was published in 1837, relates the stories of Muslims enslaved in South Carolina. He writes, “In the evening, as we returned home, we were joined by the man who prayed five times a day: and at the going down of the sun, he stopped and prayed aloud in our hearing, in a language I did not understand”. Amongst other noticeable individuals of this era were Job Ben Solomon (Ayub ibn Suleiman), Yarrow Mamout, and John Mohammed Bath, all of whom were known for their impeccable character and religious adherence.

even the great mentors of humanity, the prophets, were all of different localities yet they were bound by belief. This is beautifully articulated in an oral tradition of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) “...And all the Prophets are of different mothers but belong to one religion...”. Therefore a religious identity is one that transcends colour and culture to the inexhaustive paradigm of belief.

While I had prior knowledge of the bitter cold that lay ahead of me in Montreal, I can say that I have only abated the winter with the sincere warmth of the people of Montréal. The local love of poutine, shopping and ...more shopping, have increased my affection towards this city.

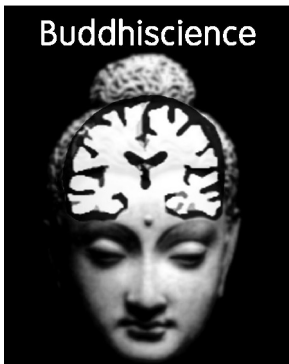
With respect to my own journey, I contemplated on the ‘great immigration’ or *Hijra* which took place in seventh century Arabia, the date from which the Islamic calendar begins. This was an epic movement of Muslims in Mecca who had, for over a decade, been persecuted for their religious beliefs. These Muslims were set to immigrate to a small oasis called Medina, due north of Mecca. The Meccans and Medinians were two people of different localities and traditions, yet they were brothers and sisters in belief. The gelling of their personalities that followed the *Hijra* was preceded by the gelling of their hearts through faith.

In many ways humanity is fast losing this understanding. As the Irish poet Thomas McCarthy wrote, “We have enough religion to hate each other, yet not enough to love one another”. In times of confusion and rage we must come to the realization that that which unites us as a human race is considerably more important than anything that dis-unites us.

—Mujadad Zaman is an exchange student from Royal Holloway, University of London



Within Islam diversity is honoured, for



Buddhiscience

“Learn meditation for free, earn \$20!”

Does that sound familiar?

If it does, well... I’m the one to blame. The posters and ads...that was me, conducting a semi-esoteric study measuring the psychophysiological effects of meditation. Sounds cool, doesn’t it? Or maybe boring? Or sacrilegious?

Ideally, it is cool. It’s awesome. **Both science and spirituality are dedicated to the pursuit of truth—it’s only logical to put them together.** And

I really thought that since people are so crazy about science these days, maybe associating meditation with science would make them think meditation is good for them. Then they’d do it, and eventually the world would be a better place (*sounds of birds singing*).

Western science, in fact, is beginning to establish links between meditation and positive mood, using MRI (brain scans) and electroencephalograms.* Meditators have been shown to have increased activity in brain areas linked to positive mood and decreased activity in brain areas linked to emotional distress. Mood can be measured in the brain! Finally, hard physical evidence.

Also, for 15 years now, cognitive scientists and psychologists have been meeting with the Dalai Lama and sharing knowledge, stimulating new research. For example, Dr. Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin tested a senior Tibetan lama and found that he had the most extremely positive results out of 175 people measured. Studies done by Dr. Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School showed many improvements in the immune system thanks to meditation.

However, as I have discovered through the harsh reality of experience, results in print are very remote, ideal representations of what actually happens in the lab. Designing the perfect study is very hard, especially with limited time and resources. Not only is it hard to

find adequate equipment that works, and to coordinate busy participants without making them feel enslaved, but the results are also very hard to interpret. Would we get the same results if the meditation instructors didn’t have deep soothing voices? If we taught people in a sunny penthouse in California rather than in a small window-less lab in Montreal? The confounding variables are countless. And if we ended up with a perfectly controlled study, how would it ever compare with reality?

But my main concern beyond this is that I don’t even believe that people should meditate. Not if they think it’s going to end their problems. Not as a “technique” to become healthy and wise. And maybe that’s why a Buddhist monk said “no” when I asked him for help with my research. I’ve said to my subjects, “you should meditate for the sake of meditating, not to get rid of stress.” Stress-relief might come later, but only as a side effect. But most of all, **one should NEVER forget that meditation involves compassion and cultivating kindness.** It’s very nice to want to improve your health and be more relaxed. But meditation seen that way is a selfish, isolating endeavour. Meditation has always been part of a religious context for a reason. Without the support, rules and duties of a community, we might as well live in chaos. Being relaxed and content is not always best, if it makes us turn our backs to suffering and prevents us from helping others.

—Marie Eclache (with thanks to Indi Samarajiva)

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*For more information on current studies and thought on science and meditation, check out this recent article by Daniel Goleman, “Finding Happiness: Cajole Your Brain to Lean to the Left” (New York Times, 4 Feb 2003); take a look at the website: www.investigatingthemind.org; or drop in on a class given by Thupten Jinpa, translator to the Dalai Lama, Tues and Thurs at McGill this

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