***Origins of Hinduism***

**Hinduism** is one of the oldest religions in the world. Over time, the Aryan religion combined with ideas from other Indian people and Hinduism was formed. Hindus believe in one great spirit called **Brahman**. They also believe that all humans and thousands of gods are each a different part of Brahman. Some very old Hindu writings talk about how each person finds this one spirit.

Hindus believe that a person’s soul will eventually rejoin Brahman. Before that can happen, however, a soul must live many lives--even as an animal. The idea of living many lives in different forms, one after another, is called **reincarnation**. According to Hinduism, if people do the duties of their caste, they will get a better next life. They must follow **dharma** or the law of right living, acting how their caste requires. If they follow dharma, they will have good karma.

**Karma** is the result of how a person lives. For example, if you live a good life and do your duty, you have good karma and will be reborn into a better life. Eventually, you will reach Brahman. If you have bad karma, you will be reborn into a lower caste or as an animal and will remain in the cycle of reincarnation.

This belief in dharma and karma meant that people had to obey the rules of their caste because that was where they had to stay until the next lifetime. The idea of reincarnation gave them their only hope.

***Rise of Buddhism***

Prince Siddhartha Gautama was born about 563 B.C. His father ruled a kingdom near the Himalaya. Siddhartha was wealthy, married, and had a son. Sheltered all his life, one day he went outside the palace and saw that most people were poor and suffering. He asked himself why people suffered. To search for answers, he left his family and lived alone. Legend says that Siddhartha sat under a tree and meditated. Finally, he came to understand the meaning of life. This is called “enlightenment.”

Siddhartha spent the rest of his life teaching people about his discovery. People called him the Buddha, which means “Enlightened One.” His lessons about life and suffering are called **Buddhism**.

The Buddha taught that there was one way to get rid of suffering and find the truth. Everyone should stop wanting fame, money, and worldly things. Then they would reach **nirvana,** a state of wisdom, something like a Hindu finding Brahman. The Buddha said that the only way to stop suffering was to stop desiring things. To do this, people should follow the Eightfold Path--the Buddhist rules for right living. The Buddha believed in reincarnation, but with a difference. He thought that people could stop being reborn if they followed the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha did not agree with the caste system. He taught that all people could reach nirvana. This made Buddhism very popular among the lower castes and the Untouchables. They too, could stop suffering and find peace.

*The Eightfold Path*

1. Know and understand the Four Noble Truths.
2. Give up worldly things and do not harm others.
3. Tell the truth, do not gossip, and do not speak badly of others.
4. Do not commit evil acts, such as killing, stealing, or living an unclean life.
5. Do rewarding work.
6. Work for good and oppose evil.
7. Make sure your mind keeps your senses under control.
8. Practice meditation to see the world in a new way.

The Buddha preached his ideas for more than 40 years. When he died, his disciples could not agree about what his message was really about. They split into two groups. One was Theravada Buddhism. *Theravada* means “teachings of the wise men.” It says that the Buddha was a great teacher, but not a god. Theravada Buddhism spread south and east. It also became popular in Indochina.

The other kind of Buddhism is *Mahayana* Buddhism. It says that the Buddha is a god who came to save people. Mahayanas believe people can go to heaven if they worship the Buddha. Once they reach heaven, they can follow the Eightfold Path and reach nirvana. Mahayana Buddhists also honor *bodhisattvas*. Bodhisattvas are enlightened people who choose not to go to nirvana even though they could. They keep coming back to earth to help others.

Mahayana Buddhism spread north into China, Korea, and Japan. In Tibet it mixed with Hinduism and Tibet’s own religions. This mix made a special kind of Mahayana Buddhism. Tibetan *lamas*, or priests, also led the government. This kind of government is called a Theocracy.

Today, many Buddhists live in Japan, Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. Very few live in India, where the Buddha first taught.

*Buddhism*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Theravada Buddhism | Mahayana Buddhism |
| * The Buddha was a great teacher. * The Buddha was not a god. | * The Buddha was a god. * People who worship the Buddha can go to heaven. |

***Jainism***

Another religion also came to the people of India at this time. It is called **Jainism**. No one knows exactly where it started. Its main teacher was Mahavira, who lived at about the same time as Siddhartha Buddha. His followers are called Jains after Mahavira’s title, “the Jina,” or “The Conqueror.”

Much of Jainism is like Buddhism. Its followers practice meditation and try to get rid of worldly desire. Their goal is also to stop being reborn and to reach nirvana. Mahavira did not follow the caste system and taught people to give up wealth.

Jainism has one main teaching: Never harm any living thing. The name of this teaching is *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* means that a person should not kill even insects or worms.

Centuries later, in the early 1900s, an Indian man named Mohandas Gandhi led a movement to free his nation from the rule of the British. Instead of taking up weapons, Gandhi followed the example of *ahimsa*. He and his followers used nonviolent ways of protesting. He told people not to pay taxes or buy British goods. Through peaceful ways, the nation of India gained its independence.