Chapter 5
Fostering Meaning, Social Connection, and Well-Being Through Hindu Beliefs and Practices

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सर्वेपि सुखिनः सन्तु, सर्वे सन्तु निरामयः
सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु, मा कस्चीद दुखं आप्नुयात !
(Let all beings be happy; let all be healthy (without diseases); Let all see good; Let nobody be unhappy.)

In a vast world that surpasses comprehension, individuals seek to know the meaning of life (Frankl, 1946). Religion provides a sense of order and a lens by which to interpret the world (Geertz, 1979). Religion is powerful in alleviating uncertainty and creating connections to others, nature, and the spiritual realm. In this chapter, we will focus on the Hindu religion and examine how Hinduism fosters positive emotions and well-being by helping practitioners make sense of the world and gain a sense of interconnectedness. Our assertions center on the positive effects that Hinduism has on practitioners' well-being, without an assumption that people might choose Hinduism to gain these benefits. That is, we focus on the effects of practicing Hinduism rather than on driving factors that affect someone's choice to practice Hinduism in particular among all religious practices.

5.1 A Brief Overview of Hindu Beliefs

The Hindu civilization is old and diverse. Hinduism is not just one set of beliefs or philosophy; it is a collection of traditions that all ascribe to the Vedas, the most ancient of Sanskrit texts and which are thought to date to 3500 B.C.E. (Klostermaier, 2006). Men and women who call themselves Hindus worship different gods and practice different rites. In spite of the fact that Hindus have no common creed, a body of shared, sacred stories and texts create core beliefs and

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cohesion among Hindus. A Hindu in a small rural village in South India or a bustling city in North India each knows that the chief sacred scriptures are the *Vedas*. They know about the Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which provide moral and philosophical teachings through narrative allegory. These epic texts shape the commonly-held beliefs about individual duty and cosmic order in Hinduism.

In Hinduism, the chief goal for every human being is *Moksa*—liberation from the cycle of life and death which comes from the spiritual realization of unity of all beings that existed in the past, exist in the present, and will exist in the future. *Moksa* is freedom from the delusion of separateness from God. It is achieved through right knowledge (*Jnanamarga*), right desire (*Bhakimarga*), and right action (*Karmamarga*). A simple analogy illustrates why Hindus regard *Jnana* (wisdom), *Bhakti* (devotion), and *Karma* (right action) as essential to move towards Moksha. To reach an arduous destination, there must be a desire (devotion) and a map (wisdom), but one must exert effort (action) to attain the goal. Although this analogy illustrates why all three are necessary to attain Moksa, the *Vedas* are silent about the pre-requisite of all three paths to realize the God.

For Hindus, the path to Moksha is open to everyone (including atheists) and is unique to each. For this reason, and frankly for other logistical ones, our aim is not to compare religious practices. However, in this section, we attempt to distill the tenets of Hinduism and make a few distinctions between Hinduism and other religions in order to highlight core Hindu beliefs.

5.1.1   A Focus on Ethical Actions over Particular Beliefs

The essence of Hinduism has remained the same for thousands of years. The core of Hinduism insists on a spiritual and ethical conduct in life, not on religious conformity. In fact, Hinduism does not emphasize distinctions among religions. The oldest Sanskrit text, the *Rig Veda*, is a collection of over a thousand hymns, one of which says, "Truth is one, the wise call it by different names." Radhakrishnan, a renowned Hindu philosopher wrote, "It is clear that Hinduism is a process, not a result: a glowing tradition not a fixed revelation. It never shut off by force wisdom from anywhere, for there are no distinctions of mine and thine in the Kingdom of Spirit" (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1989).

Hindus place more emphasis on righteous living than correct belief. In common parlance a Hindu often says that Hinduism is a way of life and not a religion, meaning that conduct is more essential than belief. This emphasis on conduct over beliefs may be contrasted with Christian emphasis on faith. For example, Ephesians 2:8–9 in the Bible states "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift from God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

5.1.2 Non-judgment of Others' Beliefs

Consistent with their emphasis on right actions over specific beliefs, Hindus do not judge others for their religious beliefs. Freedom of religion is a fundamental right guaranteed by India's constitution. Hindus do not think that a particular religious belief is necessary for salvation. It is commonly said among Hindus that there are many ways to reach the mountaintop and each person can choose his or her own path.

As a product of this openness to beliefs, Hindus do not strive to convert others to any one opinion. Heresy-hunting is absent. Instead, Hinduism favors an attitude of acceptance and unity. Religious tolerance is evident in one of the rock edicts of the great third century BCE, Hindu king Asoka: "The King honors every form of religious faith. Whoever acts differently injures his own religion while he wrongs another's." Historically, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and peoples of other religions have been allowed freedom to practice their own faith in India. Religious conflicts have occurred in India, but they have been condemned by government, businesses, and legal authorities.

Not only is respect for others' faith explicitly encouraged, a famous quote from Gandhi goes one step further. He actively discouraged others from becoming Hindu: "Supposing a Christian came to me and said he was captivated by the reading of the *Bhagavat* and so wanted to declare himself a Hindu, I should say to him 'No. What Bhagavat offers, the Bible also offers. You have not made attempt to find it out. Make the attempt and be a good Christian' (Gandhi, 2011)."

5.1.3 Karma

As further testament of the Hindu belief on ethical conduct, Hindus believe in karma. The word *karma* translates to "deed" or "action," and refers to the principle of cause and effect by which each person is rewarded or punished for their actions. According to the karmic system, nothing happens by chance because it is related to the goodness of prior actions by the law of cause and effect. Attaining spiritual liberation, or *Moksha*, is more than a single lifetime's work, and thus the notion of rebirth is accepted. One's experiences today are influenced by karma from this life as well as previous lives and one's experiences in future lives will be shaped by karma in this life.

The notion that one's outcomes today are affected by prior actions is often mistaken for fatalism or pre-destination. To the contrary, believing in cause and effect necessarily means that Hindus do believe in the ability to control their own futures by right action in the present. The past can affect circumstances now, and focusing only on the past may lead to fatalistic beliefs. However, Hindu devotees also emphasize the ability of one's actions to affect the future. Sages who wrote the *Upanishads*, sacred texts that continued Vedic philosophy, described the relationship between

will and destiny in this way: "We are what our deep, driving desire is. As our deep, driving desire is, so is our will. As our will is, so is our deed. As our deed is, so is our destiny." According to the sages, then, a person may shape their destiny by first directing their wants and desires. A second century BCE set of aphorisms—or *sutras*—by Sage Patanjali states, "*Heyam dukham anagatam*," or "Troubles that are yet to come are to be avoided." The saying urges people to choose actions in the present that will avoid future problems from manifesting.

Hindus differ in the extent to which they ascribe to a theistic view of karma. That is, some Hindus believe that the fruits of one's actions depend on the discernment of a supreme god, and others believe the rewards are instead meted out by a system that is much like the law of gravity. Belief in karma and practices reflecting karmic beliefs differ from region to region (O'Flaherty, 1980), and between text and practice (Keyes & Daniel, 1983).

With this rather basic overview of the core beliefs of Hindus, we now turn to how Hinduism fosters emotional well-being. Our definition of emotional well-being is coincident with happiness, and it is the total sum, over time, of momentary emotions, feelings, and states of mind. Positive emotions increase happiness, and negative emotions decrease overall happiness. Whereas others have defined and operationalized happiness as self-reported global evaluations (for a review, see Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), we are interested in the net balance of one's emotions over time.

Our central arguments are that Hindu beliefs contribute to well-being by fostering a cumulative view of reality, compassion, and a sense of interconnectedness. In addition to beliefs, Hindu practices and rituals also contribute to well-being. We focus on three practices in particular which contribute to a sense of security and compassion: allowing individuals to choose their own god, individual introspection practices such as meditation, mantras, and prayers, and communal practices such as frequent pujas and festivals.

5.2 Hindu Beliefs That Foster Well-Being

5.2.1 Belief in Karma Creates Meaning Through a Cumulative View of Reality

According to the law of karma, everything a person does is stored in a metaphorical bank of credits and demerits. A person's merit is thought to be cumulative from past lifetimes, into the present and even future lifetimes. Karma is a concept that "unifies time by connecting present events to the past and the future" (Pargament, Poloma, & Tarakeshwar, 2001, p. 269). Because every action—mental or physical—is considered karma, thoughts about karma can be triggered by many types of events and are a part of everyday life for Hindus. Events like an accident on the way to work, or a birth of a child are potential triggers for karmic attributions. The concept of karma introduces a cumulative, pervasive, and long-term concept by which a person measures life.

A cumulative view of goods and activities are those for which reality is perceived to be additive (Baucells & Sarin, 2012). The cumulative view entails building experiences rather than viewing each experience separately. Seeing experiences as adding to a larger goal in one's life creates meaning, which is associated with increased life satisfaction (Frankl, 1946). Completing a work task, making a charitable donation, playing an instrument, and talking with someone new are all activities that can be seen from a cumulative view as making progress in one's career, helping with causes that transcend self-interest, learning a skill, or developing a relationship respectively.

Karma encourages people to see a larger purpose in life; it is a lens by which one's work, consumption, actions, and emotional events are experienced cumulatively. For example, a person may see the work as merely being a job, which is qualitatively different from viewing the work as part of a bigger goal to advance in a career (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). A shopkeeper who focuses on daily profits will necessarily experience a fluctuating cycle of elation and misery than a shopkeeper whose mind is on building net worth.

Choosing to view emotions themselves—not just the events that spark them—in a cumulative way can also add to well-being. For example, experiencing joys and sorrows may be perceived as discrete emotional incidents. However, when one has a cumulative life narrative in mind, one may view fluctuating feelings as a part of the whole trajectory of their existence. Research has found that caring for a child is stressful but in a cumulative view of raising a family, busy parents feel love and joy (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004).

The cumulative view of reality that is spurred by karma may foster well-being in three ways. First, it links each event or activity to the meaning that it brings to one's life. Second, a cumulative view prevents someone from ruminating solely on a single negative event—a pattern that has been linked to depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Finally, the notion of karma reminds Hindus about the ultimate goal in life— spiritual liberation (Reichenbach, 1990).

Taking a cumulative view is not the same as taking a longer lens on time, which merely entails thinking of several events simultaneously. In contrast, adopting a cumulative view means seeing the goal-related relationship among things. A cumulative view is parallel to high-level construal. Thinking about an activity in terms of the decontextualized means is representative of low-level construals, whereas keeping end states in mind is representative of high-level construals (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Trope and Liberman (2003) wrote: "High-level construals are therefore likely to represent actions in terms of features that are related to the primary goals of the actions rather than in terms of incidental, goal-irrelevant features."

5.2.2 Beliefs in Karma and an Interconnected Universe Discourage Harmful Social Comparisons

Next, we move to discuss the influence of Hindu beliefs on another psychological factor that affects well-being: social comparisons. Objective outcomes in life can surely affect happiness levels, but one's subjective interpretation of those outcomes

is also crucial in determining happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2001). One's subjective experience of life outcomes can be heavily influenced by contrasting reference points, provided by social comparisons (see Diener et al., 1999 for a review). The choice to compare oneself to other individuals in a social landscape varies between individuals (Lawrence, 2006; Wood, 1996) and affects global happiness. For example, happy people tend to compare themselves to others who are worse off than they, but unhappy people tend to use as comparison points others who are better off as well as those who are worse off (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997).

The overall propensity to compare one's own life outcomes to others varies among individuals as well, and people who chronically engage in less social comparison than others are relatively happier than those who engage in more social comparison (Fujita, 2008). People who ignore available social comparisons also report being happier (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997; Lyubomirsky, Tucker, & Kasri, 2001). For example, happy individuals who were completing a new task in the presence of a peer were relatively indifferent to the peer's positive feedback than unhappy individuals were (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). Given these findings, we know that limiting social comparison altogether or engaging in positive social comparisons are important to well-being. The ancient epic *Mahabharata* warns Hindus against the potential unhappiness that comes from envy that often results from comparing oneself to others. Although this important text explicitly instructs Hindus to avoid envy and greed that result from social comparison, we focus on two Hindu beliefs that—in themselves—discourage harmful social comparison because of the incompatibility of the beliefs with contrasting social comparisons: belief in the karmic justice of one's outcomes and belief in an interconnected universe. These two beliefs may seem unrelated to social comparison on the surface, but we argue that they have a profound effect on the degree and nature of one's comparisons to others.

Belief in karmic justice discourages social comparison. Ascribing to a world in which positive and negative outcomes are a function of the righteousness of past acts reinforces just world beliefs and provides peace of mind in one's lot in life (Pargament, et al., 2001). Strong belief in justice—not only justice enacted by karma—protects people from ruminating about why a negative event has befallen them (Dalbert, 1998). While beliefs in justice in general have been found to buffer individuals against life stressors (Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994), karmic explanations can apply a greater set of life events because of the potential for karma from past lives to affect events in this life. Indeed, prior research shows that Hindus may attribute some negative life events to karma, whereas a Christian would attribute the same event to chance (Young, Morris, Burrus, Krishnan, & Regmi, 2011).

It is worth noting that the caste system is a part of the social, economic system in India; it is not a religious institution. Having clearly-defined social categories that are prized differently in society must certainly tempt Hindus to make social comparisons. Someone of a lower caste may be very much adversely affected in emotional well-being from comparing their own resources and social standing to those afforded to others of a higher caste. However, belief in karma may temper the urge to engage in self-destructive social comparisons because believing in

karma provides Hindus with a reminder that spiritual liberation is the goal of each person, and it is similarly available to all (Pargament et al., 2001). Each person is not in competition with others to attain liberation, so there is no need to constantly compare one's own good and bad events to those of others. Indeed, sociologists have long surmised that the Hindu adherence to karmic doctrine has prevented lower caste members from comparing themselves upwardly and striving for better outcomes—thus perpetuating the unequal status of castes (Omraprakash, 1989).

Belief in an interconnected universe fosters assimilation rather than contrast in social comparisons. Hinduism encourages belief in an interconnected universe, which discourages contrasting social comparisons and instead fosters a sense of fundamental similarity with others. A traditional aspect of Hindu beliefs is *advaita* or non-duality—the concept that all are one. The oldest texts of the Vedas proclaim that God resides everywhere. The interconnectedness of God with all of nature is captured in the very first verse of the Ishaupanishad: "All that there is in this universe, great or small, including the tiniest atom, is pervaded by God, known as creator or Lord." Because of this belief in divinity in all living creatures and even plants, mountains, and rivers, Hinduism has strong traditions of worshipping animals (e.g. cows), plants (e.g., tulsi and peepul plants), rivers (e.g. Ganga), and mountains (e.g. Himalaya). Thus the view of reality of existence in Hinduism is each thing in the universe is indistinguishable from the primordial God. It is written in the Upanishad that each person is one with the universe: *Tat tvam asi* or "Thou art that."

The belief that each person or thing is divine encourages a feeling of being connected to others rather than different. In fact, according to non-duality, contrasting concepts such as happy and sad, good and evil, beauty and ugliness are considered interconnected opposites; the perception of difference is thought to be an illusion. This belief is not just that one is similar to all others but in fact, at a fundamental level, one is cut from the same cloth as one's neighbor. Swami Vivekananda, an Indian Hindu monk and chief disciple of the nineteenth century saint Ramakrishna (Vivekenanda, 1946), states: "In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself."

The concept of non-duality encourages people to see similarities to all others in the world, which in turn helps them to avoid harmful, contrasting social comparisons. Social psychological findings provide evidence that: (1) There is more emphasis on distinctiveness for meaning-making in Western cultures than non-Western cultures. In Western, individualistic cultures, people value being unique and separate from others, whereas in non-Western cultures, people have a more relational orientation and emphasize knowing one's place in the social network (Vignoles, Chryssochoou, & Breakwell, 2000), and (2) Togetherness versus distinctiveness encourages perceived similarities rather than differences. If a person's working hypothesis of the world is that they are similar, they will find similarities between themselves and others; if their working hypothesis is that they are different, then they will find differences (Mussweiler, 2001). People also see similarities with others when they are primed to think about their social, interdependent self rather than their unique features and independent self (Kühnen, & Hannover, 2000).

In other studies, participants were found to be negatively affected by social comparison information only when thinking about "I" versus "we" (Stapel & Koomen, 2001). In sum, we argue that the Hindu concept of non-duality reduces the absolute level of social comparison devotees engage in. We also argue that non-duality encourages perceived similarity rather than perceived differences among individuals.

We have asserted that belief in karma encourages a cumulative and meaningful view of reality, which fosters well-being. We also posit that belief in karmic justice reduces a person's engagement in social comparisons overall and belief in an interconnected universe encourages seeing similarities as opposed to differences. We next evaluate Hindu practices that foster happiness and well-being.

5.3   Hindu Practices That Foster Well-Being

5.3.1   Practitioners May Choose Which Deity to Worship

Hindus believe in one Supreme God, which can be conceptualized either as a deity or as a diffuse cosmic force, that goes by different names: *Bhagavan*, *Parmmesvara*, *Isvara*, or *Narayana*. A foundational idea in the Hindu religion is that individuals may reach the same goal by different paths. The Rishis of Vedas reckoned with the striking fact that the men and women dwelling in India belonged to different communities, worshipped different gods and practiced different rites. They sought to uncover the truth that unites God, the universe, and humans, so they adopted a democratic approach and allowed for thousands of gods and rituals. In Hinduism, to have faith at all is a personal choice and in whom one puts their faith is another, unlimited choice. If one's goal is to become skilled in music, they may choose to worship Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of music, arts and science. If one seeks to avoid financial trouble, they may choose the goddess of wealth Lakshmi. There is a deity that embodies each life aspiration and activity. The number of deities is considered infinite because of the belief that everything is a reflection of Brahman (Foulston & Abbott, 2009). A common saying reflecting the importance of choice in worship is "*Yad Bhavam, tad Bhavati*," translated as: "What you choose to believe becomes your personal truth." Freedom to believe is always more important than the belief itself.

The ability to choose which deity or deities to worship has positive implications for well-being. Choosing a deity is akin to choosing an advocate. Devotees are familiar with the traits, cares, and strengths of each deity, and by being able to choose one or more based on their own needs and desires, their faith may be enhanced by virtue of a sense of personalization. Devotees may have a heightened sense of what God is, given the distinct characteristics of each deity, rather than having to wonder whether an amorphous Supreme Being can hear their prayers. We will expand on this argument in the section on prayer below.

5.3.2 Practitioners Cultivate Individual Introspection Through Prayer, Meditation, and Yoga

Hindus in every household, including all sects of favored god or goddess, pray and meditate daily in order to foster individual introspection and contemplation. Hindu prayers, like other religions' prayers, are aimed at helping the person commune with God. Prior researchers have distinguished among four varieties of prayer: (1) Colloquial prayer, which is an informal conversation with God, (2) Petitionary prayer, in which a person asks for material changes in life, (3) Ritualistic prayer, in which a person recites or reads already-composed prayers, and (4) Meditative prayer, in which a person quietly thinks or reflects on God (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989). Hindu prayers by and large could be categorized as ritualistic prayer, because Hindu practitioners often chant mantras—sounds, words, or phrases that are thought to catalyze spiritual transformation (Feuerstein, 2003) by helping the person focus their mind on the deity or deities. For instance, a popular mantra called the Gayatri Mantra encourages the chanter to rest his or her mind on the universal God or Brahman: "We meditate on the glory of that Being who has produced this Universe; may He enlighten our minds."

Prayer has been found to be positively associated with health and well-being. Frequency of prayer is particularly helpful (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 2008), but people of many religious faiths pray often. We argue that two distinguishing aspects of Hindu prayer are particularly helpful in fostering well-being. First, prayers focusing on God rather than focusing on one's own plight or needs foster well-being. Whittington and Scher (2010) found that prayers of adoration and thanksgiving had consistently positive relationship with self-esteem, optimism, and life satisfaction, whereas ego-focused prayer (confession and petitionary prayer) were not related or they were negatively related to these well-being measures. As mentioned above, Hindu prayer often takes the form of mantras and chants to express adoration for God, not dwelling on worries and stress. Rather than repenting for one's wrong-doings, Hindu prayers urge the practitioner to exalt and glorify.

A second aspect of Hindu prayer that might particularly foster well-being is related to one's choice of deity. To the extent that the practitioner is in fact engaging in petitionary prayer, and not ritualistic prayer, we assert that praying to a deity that matches your needs and desires increases trust that you will receive help. Prayer serves an important function of increasing a sense of security and optimism. The act of trusting that God will deliver the knowledge or help that is best for you in the situation accounts for much of the positive effects of prayer on well-being (Krause, 2004).

We assert that the ability to choose a deity that shares your particular interests or who has a particular skill that you need bolsters one's faith in the deity's attentiveness and ability to help. In Hinduism, the deity Hanuman represents colossal courage in the face of adversity. Sita blessed Hanuman by saying, "People will worship your image to get out of trouble—in towns, gardens, cities, villages, homes, cowsheds, pathways, temples, forests, and places of pilgrimage; on hills, near rivers and

ponds; in orchards and basil clusters, under bo and banyan tree. Just by remembering your name, they would succeed in warding off evil spirits" (Ananda Ramayana, 1.12.147-9). In this case, directing prayer toward Hanuman might provide the practitioner with even more security, because of the well-known stories of his bravery. The devotional hymn *Hanuman Chalisa* is chanted in temples and millions of homes every morning and evening. Children afraid of darkness, adults anxious about the oppression of those in power, and elderly uncertain about impending health disaster, all take comfort in the visual image of Hanuman standing tall with a gada (mace) in his mighty hands.

Another daily practice among Hindus that fosters introspection is meditation. There are many schools of meditation within Hinduism, and thus many different approaches. For example, some approaches focus on being mindfully aware of thoughts, physical sensations, and emotions, but other schools of meditation encourage concentration on a symbol such as Om, a reminder of the all-encompassing divinity that makes up the universe (Goleman, 1988). However, in spite of the multitude of styles, meditation can be broadly defined as a practice that focuses the practitioner on their inner state with the goal of knowing the essential, eternal Self (with a capital S), compared to everyday consciousness, which is constrained by existential and bodily cares (Rao, 2010). Meditation can be distinguished from meditative prayer (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989) as described above, in which the focus of attention is on God's nature rather than one's own nature. An early reference in the Upanishads may refer to meditation where it is written, "becoming calm and concentrated, one perceives the self (ātman) within oneself" (Flood, 1996).

A growing body of research investigates the effects of mindful awareness and meditation on well-being. One common link among studies on mindfulness—whether associated with meditation or not—and studies on meditation is the effect on emotion awareness and regulation. Mindfulness as a lasting trait or more fleeting state is associated with being psychologically aware of emotions (Brown & Ryan, 2003). People who are mindful are more likely to be able to find solutions to cope with the negative feelings at hand, and they are less likely to ruminate about their problems.

A meta-analysis of meditation studies revealed that meditation is associated with lower levels of experienced negative emotions, less stress, and more emotion regulation compared to relaxation techniques and no-treatment controls (Sedlmeier et al., 2012). The meta-analysis revealed comparable effects for different types of meditation, including ones that promote awareness and ones that promote concentration toward a specific target, although the researchers acknowledged that more data could provide clarity in comparing the relationship between styles of meditation and specific outcomes. In sum, Hindu philosophy extols practitioners to achieve new states of consciousness via meditation, and evidence is growing that meditation is related to decreases in mood disturbance and stress.

A category of practices originating from Hinduism and related to meditation is yoga. *Yoga* is broadly defined as the physical, spiritual, and mental disciplines that promote cessation of movements of the mind (Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, 1.2). In contemporary Western parlance, *yoga* is typically associated more narrowly with

physical postures or *asanas* that are thought to have physical benefits. In this usage, the original intent of *asanas* as fostering stillness of mind is commonly unacknowledged (De Michelis, 2005). The relationship between yoga and well-being is discussed in greater detail in Chap. 12 of this volume, along with an investigation of other mind-body practices.

5.3.3 Practitioners Cultivate Interconnectedness Through Frequent Festivals and Pujas

Besides individual prayers, many Hindu families engage in frequent Pujas—communal worship of God. A puja brings family and community together in a temple or home with the goal of honoring god with songs, rituals, prayers, and offerings. Most festivals are relatively small to modest size gatherings. However, some are celebrated in processions and are huge (Kali Puja in Bengal, for example). The grandest festival is Maha Kumbh Mela, a gathering of over 100 million devotees who make the pilgrimage to bathe in the Ganges river. The Maha Kumbh Mela occurs only once every 4 years. Mark Twain visited it in 1895 and wrote: "It is wonderful, the power of faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and the frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such an incredible journey" (Twain, 1897).

The communal nature of the pujas promotes a sense of community along with increased spiritual connection. Research has found that time spent with friends and family is a consistent source of happiness (Layard, 2005). Of course, one can have community around Earth Day or gathering at a local parade, and these too will contribute positively to well-being. However, religion makes it easier to create a common purpose and predictable routine for people to get together. Religion creates community and social interconnectedness. Americans who say religion is an important part of their daily life and who have friends at church rate their lives more positively and experience fewer negative emotions (Lim & Putnam, 2010).

Aside from these reasons why religion as a whole may prompt well-being, Hindu puja in particular fosters well-being because it creates a sense of interconnectedness in two ways. First, the sheer number of Hindu festivals throughout the year provide a reason for even sworn enemies to come together, and doing so prompts them to set aside differences. There are many festivals, and they are temporally spaced throughout the year. Each brings family and community members together whether they are in the middle of political or interpersonal dispute. Research shows that face-to-face interactions builds rapport among people in conflict (Drolet & Morris, 1999). One festival in particular, Holi, encourages devotees to set aside social constructs that may divide one another, such as caste, age, gender, and status. Holi is a festival which marks the beginning of spring. Devotees generally celebrate Holi for 2 days at the end of winter. Rituals include singing and dancing around a bonfire and throwing colored powder and water at each other to symbolize the arrival of spring blossoms. All people adorned in multiple colors emphasizes the fact that

each person is made of the same ashes. People are known to bury their respective hatchets at Holi. The festival is a time to break down social conventions associated with status and instead see humanity in each person.

A second feature of Hindu pujas that fosters well-being through interconnectedness is the amount of time devoted to engaging in collective action (e.g. singing and chanting). Compared to other religious ceremonies in which just a few hours may be spent together in mass or service, Hindu pujas may last for days at a time. And most of a puja is spent raising voices collectively in song and chants. These collective acts foster social attachment to other group members (Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009). As Graham and Haidt (2010) put it, "If God is the maypole, then the health and happiness benefits of religion come from participating in the maypole dance, not from sitting alone at home thinking about the pole." Given this analogy, we have thus argued that the multitude of Hindu festivals provides followers with many opportunities to come to the maypole and dance together, and the dances themselves last for a long time.

5.4   Conclusion

We have outlined major components of Hinduism, and we have argued that some Hindu beliefs and practices contribute to the well-being. In particular, we propose that belief in karma fosters meaning through a cumulative view of reality and beliefs in karma as well as in an interconnected universe discourage harmful social comparisons. We have proposed that practitioners also benefit from introspective practices such as prayers that exalt and glorify god rather than focus on one's own troubles and needs. Meditation on one's inner states of being, and participation in religious gatherings encourage social harmony and interconnectedness.

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