Hindu considers Hinduism as not only a religion, but also a way of life. A Hindu strives to evolve from a materially focused human to a spiritual one, and considers God a silent partner and an inspirer. Therefore, to provide culturally and religiously sensitive treatment to Hindus, clinicians must understand the common practices of Hindu followers.

In Hinduism, there is a concept referred to as, ‘Maatha, Pithaa, Guru, Deivyam’, which suggests, Mother, Father and Teacher are all pathways to God. For a Hindu client, a clinician is a Teacher who helps them to navigate difficult periods so that they can continue on their path to divinity. Just as the client’s parents are often the main role models for the values and beliefs of the Hindu client, the clinician is expected to provide a directive role for the Hindu clients healing, recovery and good health.

The Four Paths to God

Hinduism recognizes four fundamental human temperaments. People are essentially reflective, emotional, active, and empirical or experimental. For each personality type, a different path to God or self-realization is appropriate.

It must be noted that God in Hinduism is a formless omnipresent, omniscient being that cannot be comprehended by the ordinary human intellect. The forms or idols that are found in Hindu temples are deities or representations of certain elements of God. One of the reasons that Hinduism uses the symbolism of God in an incarnate form is because humans are already socialized to love other humans.

1. Bhakti Yoga, the Path of Devotion

This path is best suited to persons whose primary means of receiving input is through their emotions. Bhakti yoga advocates love and devotion to God as a pathway to self-realisation.

Bhakti yoga recognizes that loving that God or Goddess and devoting oneself to the positive principles espoused by God will result in the person showing love to everything around them. To cultivate bhakti (devotion) as a means of expressing one’s devotion, Hindus sing songs of the glory of God, study sacred scriptures, chant mantras and perform temple worship.

The deepest connection of Hindu clients may often be the devotion they have in God. Prayers are said in the morning, before meals, and at night to express gratitude to God. Through prayers (referred to as thevarams, krtans, bhajans) Hindus are able to express their devotion and have a personal connection to divinity. This allows individuals to release their burdens or stress, which in turn acts as a release of emotional baggage. Hence, learning about your client’s conversation with God can provide insights into understanding their inner world.

In Hinduism, the Temple and the idols within it are venerated by Hindus as sacred structures that act as focal points of positive energy. Hindus, who are distressed, anxious, and ill at ease, find great solace in temple worship, prayer and chanting. Temple worship not only provides a Hindu the opportunity for personal communion, it also serves as an opportunity for individuals to engage with the community, especially during the many religious festivals hosted by the Temple. Temple festivals are designed to encourage participation of all devotees, irrespective of wealth or status, with each devotee contributing towards the festival in some small way such as with food, money or their personal services. Temple festivals offer a great focal point that a clinician can draw upon as a ‘safe place’ for the Hindu client, or alternatively, as a place where the client can engage constructively with the community around them.

2. Karma Yoga, the Path of Work

The motivation to be active is a significant drive in human nature. For persons inclined to action, there is karma yoga. God may be found through the mechanics of one’s daily activities; it is not necessary to renounce life or enter a contemplative order to achieve self-realization. What one does and how the work is done are the keys to success.

In the path of Karma Yoga, an individual must perform work that is considered their ‘Dharma’ or duty, as well as be the instrument for the work of God. An individual’s duty is determined by the individual’s circumstance or stage of life (e.g., a student has a ‘Dharma’ to be studious and respect their teachers; a parent has a ‘Dharma’ to care for their children and raise them with good moral values). The work of God relates to the caring for human kind and the preservation of nature (e.g., the ‘Dharma’ of a wealthy person may be to support poorer people through a charity).

“Therefore, without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty, for by working without attachment one attains the Supreme” (Hindu spiritual text, The Bhagavad Gita).

Karma Yoga also espouses that this ‘Dharma’ should be performed without attachment to its effects and as a service to God. This attitude purifies his or her mind and helps the individual to realise that the outcomes of their actions are not always under their control, and that when the results are not as they were hoping, it is as a result of an intervention of God. I.e., God gives you what you need as an outcome to ensure you learn for your future spiritual progress, rather than always giving you what you want.

The doctrine of ‘Dharma’ can be utilised from a strength-based perspective to get the client to focus on performed duty and action to the best of their abilities. The client can start to separate what is within their control from the outcome of events such as an application/visa status that may not be within their control. In reality, it is difficult for clients not to experience significant anxiety around such big decisions that can impact their life, however, I am constantly amazed by how much faith my Hindu clients have both in themselves and in God.
‘Seva’ (charity and personal service) within Karma Yoga is ‘giving’ through one’s resources, whether it be physical, emotional or economical. By serving those in need as a ‘Dharma’, individuals will also be given an opportunity to understand how relative their issues or concerns may be in comparison to those less fortunate.

For those Hindu clients who may suffer from depression, anxiety and phobia, providing ‘seva’ is also an opportunity to improve their social skills, make new friends and develop a sense of community. This is a source of achievement and healing for many clients.

3. Jnana Yoga, the Path of Knowledge

This path is designed for persons who are philosophical and intellectual in nature. Such persons are encouraged to contemplate, meditate, and consider ideas that will gradually shift their locus of identity from the small personal self (what Western psychology defines as the ‘ego’) to the infinite Self or the Divine within.

Hindus are encouraged to practise the W.A.T.C.H principle—Watching your Actions, and Thoughts to develop good Character and a loving Heart—a detached aspect of self that watches all actions but remains unattached to them, as an actor dons individual roles but is unattached to these roles. Hindus believe that the self underneath the surface self is perfect in nature, but covered with layers of ‘maya’ (illusion). These layers are solidified as one continues to identify with one’s personality, mind, emotions, body, beliefs, and so on. As one ceases to identify with these aspects of the small self, the layers are removed, revealing one’s true nature as the infinite Self.

A Hindu client may read and listen to various scriptures, or discourses given by a Guru, that offer spiritual knowledge to develop positive thoughts for living a righteous life, or carrying out an individual’s ‘Dharma’ (duty). Some of my Hindu clients attend regular ‘satsungs’, similar to bible studies, whereby individuals read spiritual texts. By attending ‘satsungs’, Hindu clients establish a positive social connection with like-minded individuals, thus alleviating social isolation, removing the state of helplessness and hopelessness, and create a sense of belonging and safety in the country.

A wise guru, Adi Sankaracharya, suggests that the biggest enemy in the world exist only within the Self. Weeping and wailing is a result of deprivation of self-awareness. As such, self-enquiry is a precious gem of spiritual wisdom that can free you from misery and suffering.

4. Raja Yoga, the Path of Psychological Experimentation

Finally, a Hindu can adopt the path of mental concentration, Raja Yoga, in which he or she practices disciplinary measures that involve physiological and psychological restraints to free the self from all impurities so that the Divine self of the person can then manifest itself, leading to spiritual liberation.

This path is designed for those scientifically-inclined. Raja yoga leads the inquirer through a series of meditation ‘experiments’ to discover one’s true nature. This meditative typology ‘is a psychophysical method or a technique of training the mind and developing its subtle powers of perception to discover spiritual truths that provide the basis for religious principles and practices’ (Pandit, 1998). Thus, meditation is the key in Hindu religious philosophy and spirituality.

To assist in the practise of meditation, Hindus utilise mantras to help focus the mind. Mantras are repetitive thought forms uttered audibly or silently and mentally, which are known to create positive vibrations for a Hindu. In addition, ‘Japa’ is the technique of repeating a mantra constantly to bring about the devotee’s change in consciousness.

The west has acquired the taste of Meditation through the concept of Mindfulness. There are various techniques utilised to train the mind to focus on single-pointedness, however one should not confuse concentration exercises with that of the highest state of consciousness, Meditation. During treatment sessions with Hindu clients, I have effectively utilised guided imagery and visualisation in the form of meditation to address negative emotions. This allows clients to re-connect themselves to their True Self for the effective healing to occur.

For Hindu clients who might be suffering from anxiety disorders, utilisation of chanting mantras, ‘OM’ or ‘Shanti’ (peace) is highly effective. In scientific terms, inhaling is a sympathetic autonomic process for the nervous system. Alternatively, the exhale breath is a parasympathetic autonomic process of the nervous system, basically it induces physiological relaxation. From a therapeutic perspective, chanting also gives voice to those who have not been able to articulate feelings for various reasons, empowers people who have been silenced and offers expression for those who cannot find words. Further, it creates positive thought that relieves one from distorted and catastrophic thinking, allowing them to experience a profound connection to their Divinity, which also psychologically empowers Hindu clients. Finally, sound and the vibrations created through the use of specific tones and frequencies in chanting (such as ringing of bells in many religions) is also recognized for its capacity to encourage peacefulness, and inspire an atmosphere of reflection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Hinduism is guided through an interconnected and philosophical religious compilation of spirituality, yoga and meditation. The Vedas has prescribed four main branches of yoga philosophy suitable to four types of personalities: Karma (action) yoga; Bhakti (devotion) yoga; Jnana (knowledge) yoga; and, Raja (meditation) yoga. It is hoped that this glimpse of the core elements of Hinduism will aid clinicians to have a world-view of working with Hindus, in assisting them to reach the ultimate goal. These components of Eastern practice become translated to a search for meaning in life through exploration of self-identity and self-expression in the West. As such, when you can engage effectively with Hindu clients, it is possible to obtain treatment efficacy.

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