

Hinduism 1 – Vedas and Upanishads

The Self: East and West

The Vedas

Orthodox Hinduism bases itself on scriptures called the Vedas. These were composed in the course of the Aryan migrations into northern India: population shifts occurring from around 2000 to 1100 B.C. They are called the Rig Veda, the Sāma Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda and are regarded by mainstream orthodox Hindus not as human (or divine) compositions but as a simply given timeless and infallible source of knowledge about religious and social duties. Enactment of those duties brings us into harmony with the natural universal order (*dharma*). The eternal sounds of

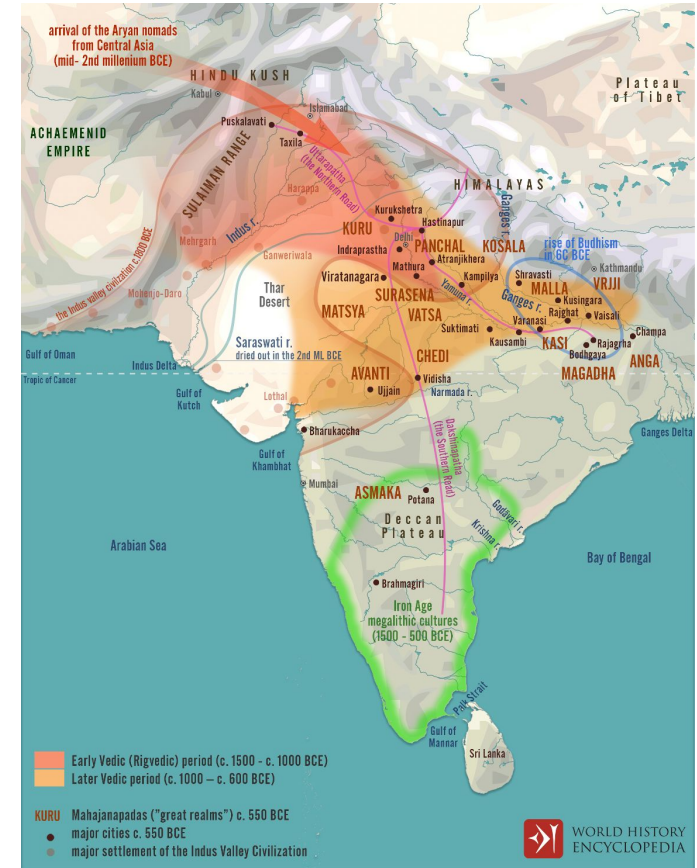
Aryan Migration

Aryan Migrations into Northern India

The migration of Indo-Aryan peoples into northern India is understood to have occurred over several centuries, beginning approximately around 2000 BCE.

These semi-nomadic populations, thought to have originated from the Central Asian steppes, introduced Indo-Aryan languages, domesticated horses, and distinctive cultural practices, including Vedic ritual traditions.

Initial settlements were established in the northwestern regions, followed by a gradual expansion into the Indo-Gangetic plains



Aryan Migrations into Northern India



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The migration and subsequent settlement of the Indo-Aryan peoples in northern India brought about profound societal transformations, particularly in the realms of social organisation and religious life.

As these once semi-nomadic groups transitioned to more settled, agrarian communities, the need for structured forms of governance, social hierarchy, and ritual coordination became increasingly pronounced.

This shift gave rise to the early varna system, which organised society into distinct social categories based on occupation and ritual status, laying the foundation for later caste-based divisions.

Aryan Migrations into Northern India

Vedic Hinduism: Sociogony, Social Organization

Cosmic Body (<i>Purusha</i>)		Human Body (<i>sharir</i>)	Social Body (<i>Varna</i>)	Functional Body (<i>Kriya/ Karma</i>)	Salient Qualities (<i>Gunas</i>)
	Heaven	Head	Brahmins	Priests: Deliberative	Thought: perception, speech
	Mid-space	Heart	Kshatriyas	Warriors: Defensive	Strength: energy, courage
	Earth	Thighs	Vaishyas	Producers: Commercial	Support: sexuality, appetite
	Underworlds	Feet	Shudras	Servants: Servitorial	Service: protection, help

Aryan Migrations into Northern India

Religion, too, evolved as a unifying and regulatory force: the Vedic rituals, initially centred on household and clan-based worship, became institutionalised through the authority of priestly classes, who codified spiritual knowledge in the Vedas.

This institutionalisation not only reinforced social cohesion but also established a moral and cosmic order that legitimised emerging political and social structures.

We see the development in Indo-Aryan settlement of complex social hierarchies and a deeply intertwined religious framework that would shape the trajectory of early Indian civilisation.

The 4 Vedas

The 4 Vedas

THE FOUR VEDAS OF HINDUISM



Rigveda

Mainly hymns and praises addressed to various deities, emphasizing theology, cosmology, and the importance of rituals



Samaveda

Focuses on melodies and chants, providing the musical foundation for Vedic hymns, highlighting devotional and liturgical aspects



Yajurveda

Contains prose mantras and ritual instructions, serving as a guide for priests in performing sacrificial rites and detailed ritual practices



Atharvaveda

Encompasses a range of hymns, spells, and incantations, addressing practical aspects of life, including health, healing, and domestic rituals

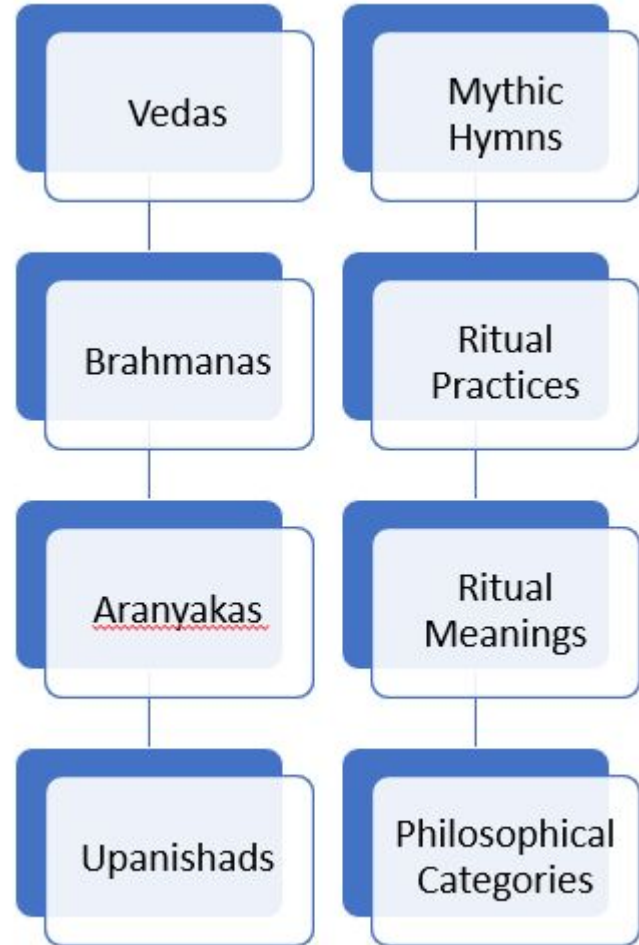
Vedas and Brahmanas

preserve the different traditions of recitation of the sacred sounds. The basic component of each of the four Vedas is its collection (*saṃhitā*) of verses (*mantra*), evocative of the divinities whose sonic forms they are, which are used in rituals. Attached to each collection are works called '*Brāhmaṇas*' that prescribe, describe and elucidate the purposes of the sacrificial rituals performed by Brahmin priests and their householder patrons. They include explanations of the meanings of the ritual actions, and posit correspondences between aspects of the rites and features of the cosmos including the social structure and the human body. It was believed that ritual performance orders, sustains and perpetuates the universe, creating new time and ensuring the regular succession of the seasons. Most rituals involve some sort of oblation to divine powers, thrown into a sacred fire. Agni, the god of fire, delivered the offerings to the other gods whose favour would confer benefits such as children, healthy cattle, a good harvest, long life, prosperity, wealth and martial success. Some obligatory rites are to be performed at crucial junctions of each day; some are seasonal requirements, and others are performed by people with specific ends in view.

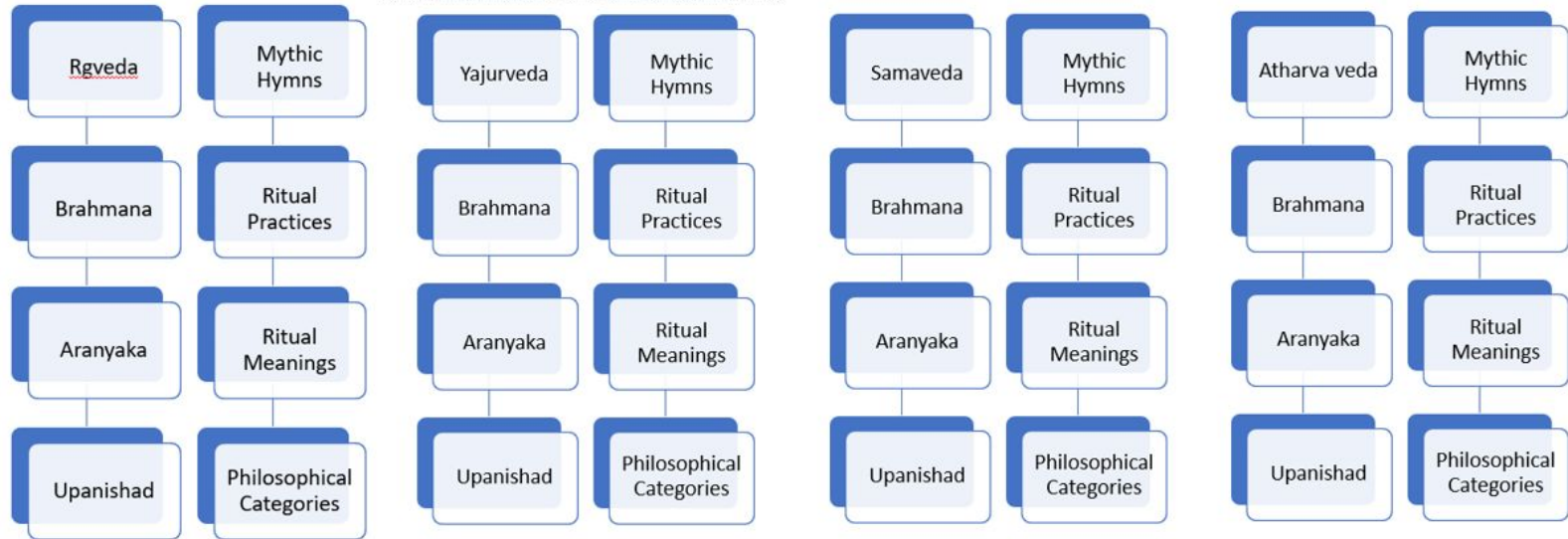
Aranyakas and Upanishads

Also included under the heading 'Veda' are the 'Āraṇyakas' ('Forest Books') that speculate about the 'inner' meaning of the rituals. These are closely associated with what are called the Upaniṣads. The latter were composed by Brahmins who had probably renounced the actual performance of ritual. The view was that the mental re-enactment of the meaning of the ritual is just as effective as its overt performance. These compositions contain many reflective explorations of fundamental metaphysical questions and encompass a diversity of viewpoints. I treat them as a starting point because

Vedic literature



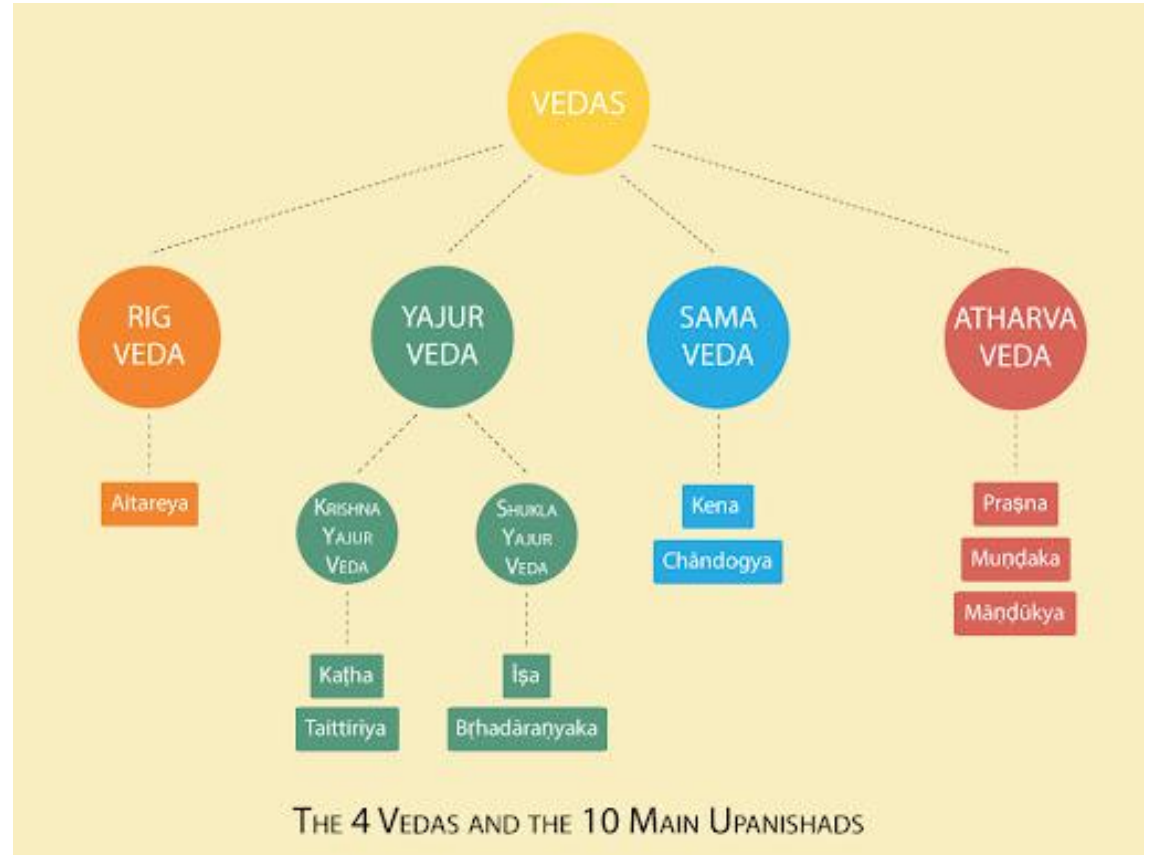
Vedic literature



Upanishads

There are many works bearing the name 'Upaniṣad', of which twelve are usually deemed 'major'. These were composed between 800 and 400 B.C. The doctrines they contain are many and various. For instance, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka, the vastest in extent, contains at least three cosmogonies. These texts are assemblages, recording many different views. It would be a mistake to expect consistencies in meaning throughout the postulated 'corpus'. The meanings of terms such as '*sat*', '*ātman*' and '*brahman*' differ according to context. In what follows, we shall be concerned with Brahminical concepts of substance, essence, first cause, sustaining cause and truth in the sense of the permanently real, all of which are examples of fictions according to Buddhists.

10 Major Upanishads



Brahman / Atman

Brahman

While the Upaniṣads contain many different views (including the idea that the original substance is water³), the idea that exercised the greatest influence on subsequent thought is that there is an ontologically independent primary reality or underlying substance. That concept was variously expressed as ‘the *brahman*’, ‘*sat*’, ‘*ātman*’ and *mahad bhūta*. This primary or original being is understood as a timeless, unconditioned and unlimited substance that needs nothing else in order to exist. *Sat*, sheer being without categorical determinations, is also the source, basis, support and final cause of all existents. It makes worlds and experiencers, mind and matter, while itself remaining intact. It is what Vedānta and Sāṃkhya thinkers, as we will see in later chapters, describe as the universal material cause (*upādāna-kāraṇa*) that is capable of self-transformation.

Brahman

This primal being has the spontaneous capacity to transform itself into a complex cosmos of individual cognizers and material things, while itself abiding unchanged. The *brahman* lacks nothing, which is why it is sometimes said to be blissful. The *brahman* is the essence of whatever actually exists. The *brahman* is the truth in the sense of the perfect reality. This reality behind and underlying all contingent, finite and mutable entities is sometimes characterized as the One, sheer Being beyond existence and non-existence. Those categories apply only to determinate entities falling within the sphere of our experience. The *brahman*, not being an identifiable individual, cannot be spoken of as 'this' or 'that'.

Atman

According to this outlook, the cosmos has immanent order and purpose (*dharma*) independently of any meanings that human beings might create for themselves. It is a leading concept of the Upaniṣads that the universal nature (*ātman/brahman/sat*) individualizes itself into sentient beings limited by space and time. They participate in the universal reality. It is what they really are, the immortal element, the 'inner guide' immanent in the heart (rather than the mind or intellect), dwelling in the body and dwelling in the sun. And thus we often find the word '*ātman*' (meaning the *nature* of something) used to mean the individualizations of the universal primary Being. Under the influence of much later Vedāntic ideas, the word '*ātman*' is often translated as 'soul', 'self' or even 'The Self'. Translation as 'soul' (essential nature of something) is fitting in some contexts, and 'self' is appropriate for reflexive usages. The reified notion 'The Self' is much more problematic. My

Dharma / Karma / Moksha

Dharma

In Hindu thought, Dharma refers to the moral and cosmic order that sustains the universe, society, and individual conduct. It encompasses the duties, responsibilities, and ethical principles that guide a person's actions according to their stage in life, social position, and circumstances.

One's Dharma represents a dynamic and contextual ideal of right living, aligning personal behaviour with the greater harmony of the cosmos. It serves as both a spiritual and social foundation, providing a legitimization of certain social roles, ethical behaviour, and social differentiation.



Dharma

Brahmins (priests and scholars) had the dharma of preserving and transmitting sacred knowledge, performing rituals, teaching the Vedas, and guiding others in moral and spiritual matters. Their lives were expected to embody purity, self-discipline, and devotion to truth.

Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers) were charged with upholding justice, protecting the people, and maintaining order. Their dharma involved courage, leadership, and a willingness to sacrifice personal interests for the welfare of the realm.

Vaishyas (merchants, farmers, and traders) had the dharma of sustaining the economy through honest trade, agriculture, and resource management. They were expected to generate wealth responsibly and support religious and social institutions through charity.

Shudras (labourers and service providers) were tasked with serving the other classes through skilled and dedicated work. Their dharma emphasised loyalty, diligence, and fulfilling one's role with sincerity and humility.

Dharma

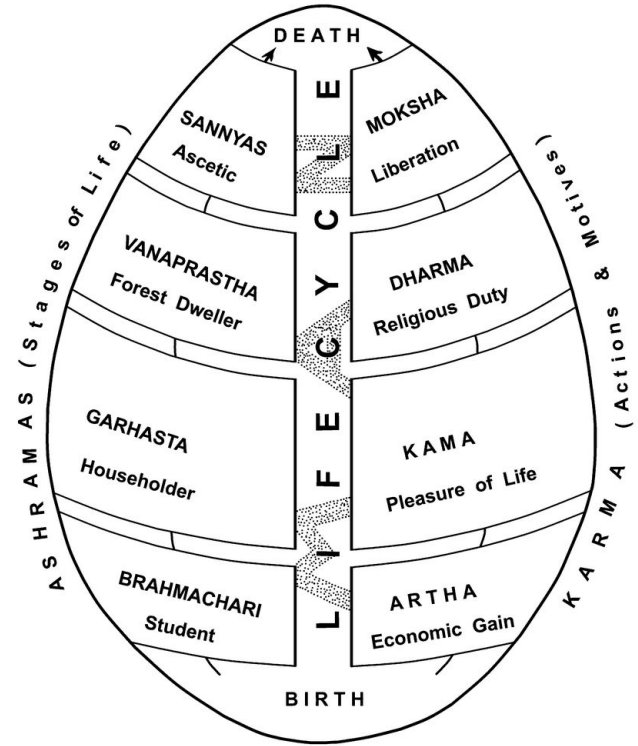
In Hindu tradition, life is divided into four stages, or āśramas, each with its own dharmic duties designed to guide an individual's moral and spiritual development.

The first stage, Brahmacharya (the student phase), focuses on education, discipline, and the pursuit of knowledge under a teacher's guidance, preparing one to live responsibly.

The second, Grhastha (the householder stage), emphasises family life, work, and social contribution—fulfilling dharma through marriage, earning a livelihood, and supporting society.

The third stage, Vānaprastha (the forest-dweller or retiree), marks a gradual withdrawal from worldly attachments, encouraging reflection and spiritual contemplation.

Finally, Sannyāsa (the renunciate stage) involves complete detachment from material concerns, dedicating oneself to the pursuit of liberation (moksha)



Karma

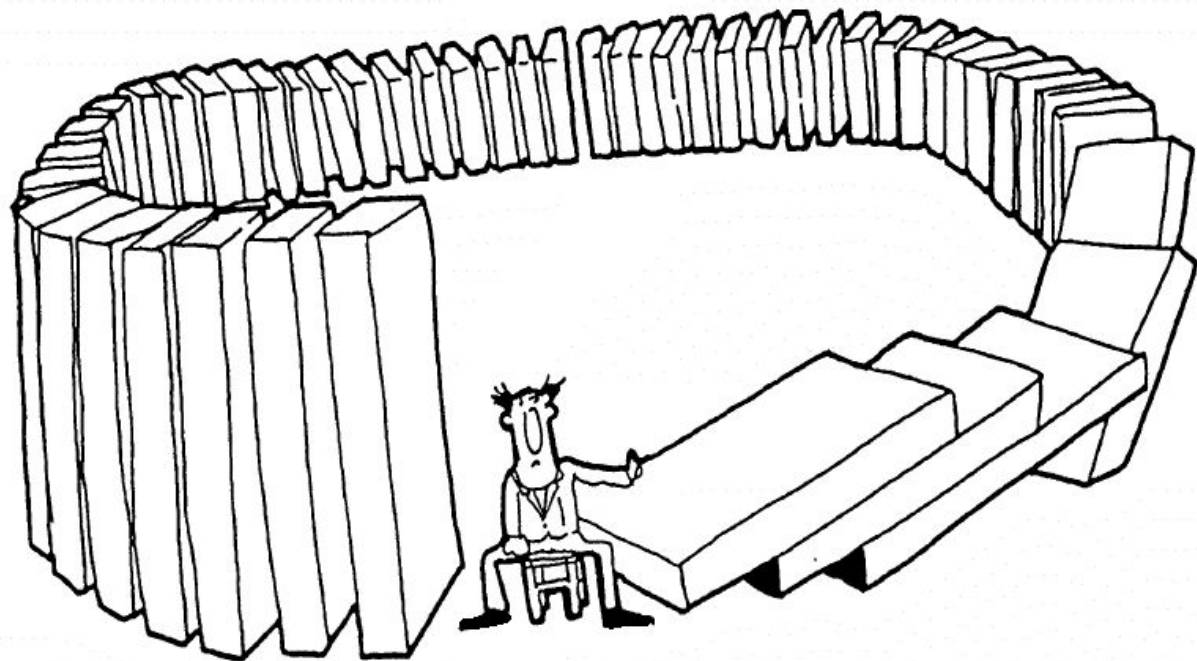
In Hindu philosophy, Karma refers to the universal law of cause and effect, which holds that every action—whether physical, verbal, or mental—produces corresponding consequences that shape one's present and future experiences.

Rooted in the principle of moral responsibility, Karma links an individual's deeds to their destiny, influencing their current life circumstances and future rebirths.

Good actions, meaning actions **aligned with one's Dharma**, generate positive outcomes, while harmful or selfish actions lead to suffering.

Ultimately, understanding and mastering Karma is essential for spiritual growth, as it encourages self-awareness, ethical conduct, and the pursuit of liberation (moksha) from the cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara).

Karma



Samsara

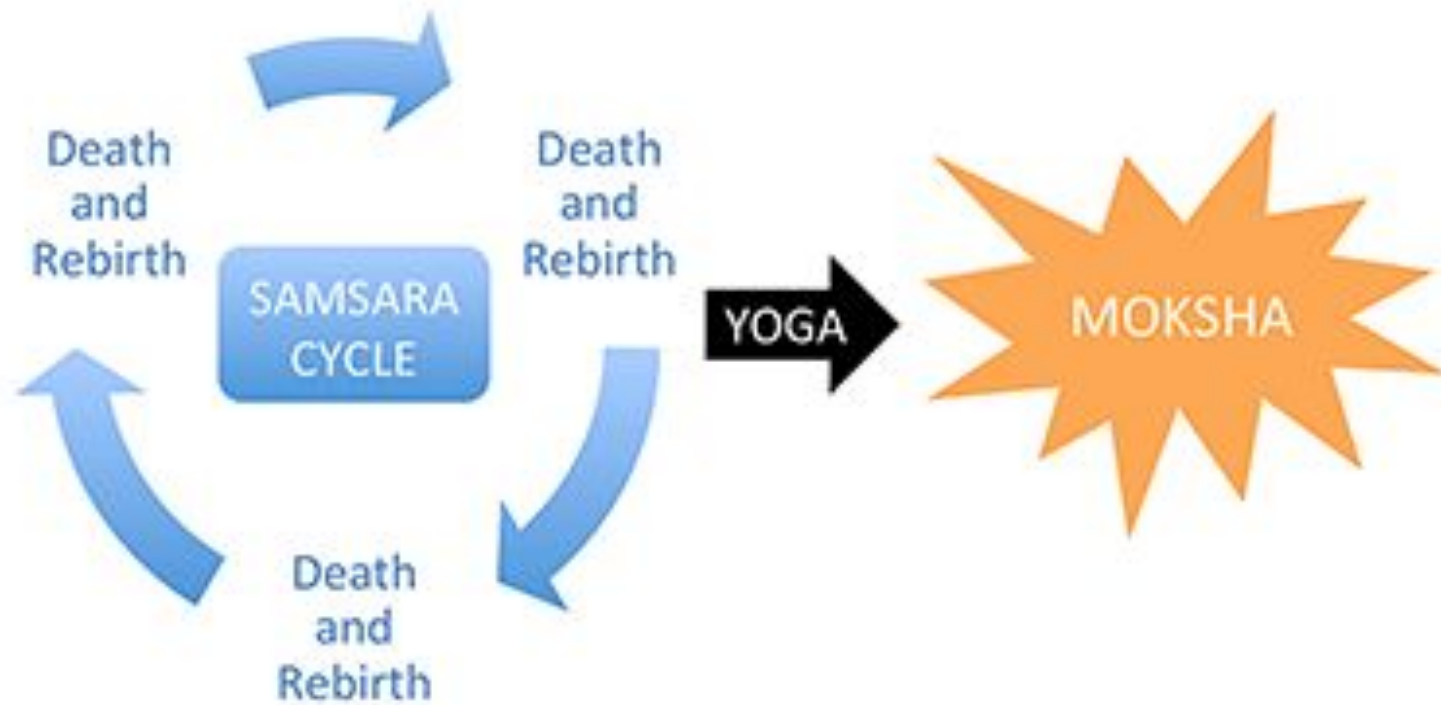
Samsāra refers to the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth through which the soul (ātman) passes as it experiences the consequences of its actions across lifetimes.

Governed by the law of karma, this cycle ensures that one's deeds—whether virtuous or harmful—determine the conditions of future existence.

Rebirth may occur in different forms of life, depending on the moral quality of one's actions and spiritual development.

Samsāra is thus viewed as a state of bondage and suffering, from which the ultimate aim is to attain liberation (moksha), freeing the soul from the perpetual cycle and uniting it with the eternal reality of Brahman.

Samsara



Moksha

Moksha, or the liberation of the self from the cycle of rebirth, represents the ultimate goal of human existence—the liberation of the soul (ātman) from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsāra).

It signifies the realisation of one's true nature as identical with the Supreme Reality (Brahman), transcending ignorance, desire, and attachment.

Attaining moksha brings eternal peace, bliss, and freedom from the consequences of karma.

Different paths, such as knowledge (jñāna yoga), devotion (bhakti yoga), selfless action (karma yoga), and meditation (rāja yoga), offer ways to achieve this spiritual release.

**Karma / Bhakti / Jnana / Raja
Yoga**

Karma Yoga

Work for every one

Sarve jana sukhino bhavanthu
Maintain equality (Treat all
beings same as self)
Self-less service
Niskama karma/ service
without expectations

Work for Community

Serve needy people around
Look for happiness of
community

Work for Family

Serve family
Build responsible children
Values & education
Provide security and good health

Work for self

Serve self, achieve independence
Good health, happiness, duty
mindedness, food & shelter

Bhakti Yoga

God is everywhere

See God in all beings

Unattachment

Sarve jana sukhino

bhavanthu

God in myself

Realize God in Self

Study on inner self

Meditation

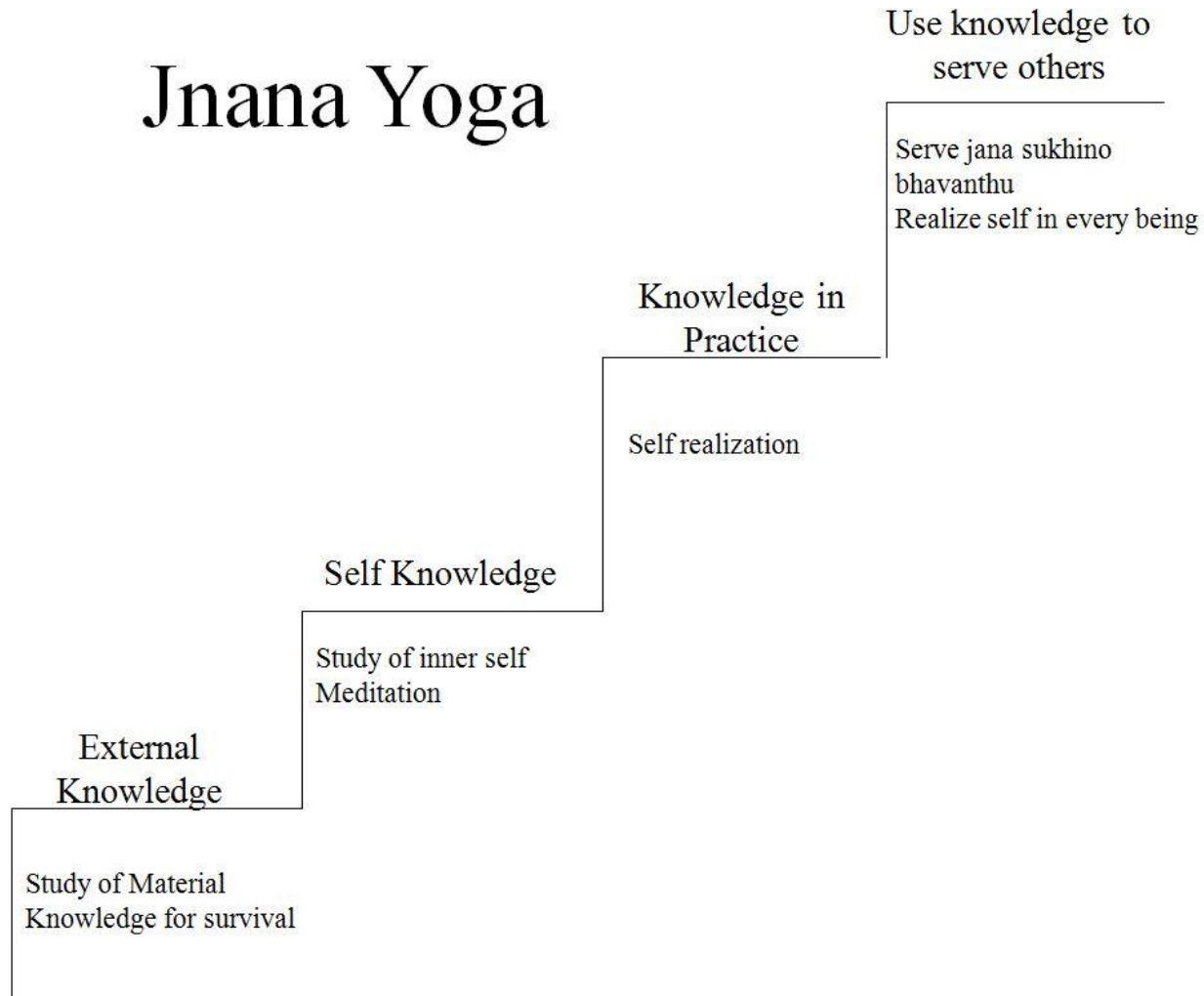
God in home

Prayers, Bhajans, Stotras, Fasting
etc

God in Temple

Going to temples
short prayers

Jnana Yoga



Raja Yoga

Oneness

Serve jana sukhino
bhavanthu
Realize self in every being

Self-Control

Breath control towards
Self realization

Self-study

Asana / Pranayama and Study of inner
self with Meditation

Self-discipline

Meditate with goodness
Follow Yoma, Niyama