Hinduism

- Practiced by the various cultures of the Indian subcontinent since 1500 BCE.
- Began in India with the Aryan invaders.
- Believe in one supreme force called Brahma, the creator, who is in all things.
  - Hindu gods are manifestations of Brahma - notably Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer.
  - The life goal of Hindus is to merge with Brahma but that task is considered impossible to accomplish in one lifetime. Therefore, Hindus believe that who you are in this life was determined by who you were in a past life; and how you conduct yourself in your assigned role in this life will determine the role (caste) you are born into in a future life.
  - If you behave well and follow the dharma (the rules and obligations of the caste you’re born into), you’ll keep moving up the ladder toward unification with Brahma. If not, you’ll drop down the ladder.
  - This cycle of life, death, and rebirth continues until you achieve moksha, the highest state of being, one of perfect internal peace and release of the soul.
Hinduism

- No central sacred text but the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* guide Hindus with prayers, verses, and descriptions of the origins of the universe.

**Broader Impact**

- Hinduism is a religion as well as a social system (the caste system).
  - You are born into your caste, and if you are dissatisfied with it, it’s an indication you are not following the dharma; therefore, you will have an even worse lot in the next life.
  - This is why most faithful Hindus quietly accepted their station in life. They knew social mobility within one lifetime was out of the question, but they were confident they would accomplish it at death if they lived according to the tenets of Hinduism.

- Its connection to Indian social structure and customs prevented its acceptance in other parts of the world.

- Today Hinduism as a whole remains a powerful force even though some modern Hindus are beginning to rebel against the caste system.
Buddhism

- Practiced in Eastern civilizations, most notably in India, China, and Southeast Asia
- Founded by a young Hindu prince named Siddhartha Gautama who lived in Nepal from 562-483 BCE. He rejected his wealth to search for the meaning of human suffering. After meditating under a sacred Bodhi tree, he became the Buddha, or Enlightened One.
- There is no supreme being in Buddhism.
- Buddhists follow the Four Noble Truths:
  - All life is suffering
  - Suffering is caused by desire.
  - One can be freed of this desire.
  - One is freed of desire by following the Eightfold Path.
Buddhism

- The Eightfold Path is made up of right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right endeavor, right mindfulness, and right meditation. Following this path enables one to move toward nirvana, the state of perfect peace and harmony.
- The goal in one’s life is to reach nirvana, which may or may not take several lifetimes. This means that Buddhists also believe in reincarnation.
- Buddhism holds that anyone can achieve nirvana, it is not dependent on an underlying social structure, such as the caste system.
- After the death of Buddha, Buddhism split into two large movements: Theravada (Hinayana) or Mahayana.
Buddhism

- **Theravada (little raft)** = emphasis on meditation, simplicity, and an interpretation of nirvana as the renunciation of human consciousness and of the self; Buddha himself is not considered a god, and other gods and goddesses have very little significance; requires men and women to seek monastic life to reach the degree of meditation for enlightenment; dominant in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia

- **Mahayana (big raft)** = more complicated and involving greater ritual than Buddha specified; appealed to people who believed his original teachings did not offer enough spiritual comfort and therefore they hypothesized that other forms of salvation were possible; the Buddha becomes a godlike deity; other deities appear, including bodhisattvas or those who have achieved nirvana but chose to remain on earth; relied more on priests and scriptures; people can lead a lay life and still pursue enlightenment with the help of monks and nuns in their communities
Buddhism

- **Broader Impact**
  - Because it rejected social hierarchies of castes, Buddhism appealed strongly to members of lower rank.
  - Because it isn’t attached to an underlying social structure, it can apply to almost anyone, anywhere which is why it rapidly spread to other cultures throughout Asia.
  - It became a major force in Asia when the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka converted to it and supported its missionary efforts.
  - Eventually, it was reabsorbed into Hinduism in India but continued to thrive in China, Japan, and Southeast Asia as it spread via trade routes.