This list is particularly interesting because sometimes fathers' and other times mothers' names are given, and the lineage goes back to a creator god Brahmā. So, while it is clear that a male spiritual lineage is generally accepted (after all, it is the male teachers who are being named), it may be possible to interpret this passage by saying that in some cases the teachers received spiritual instruction from their mothers.

**Classical Hinduism**

**The Epics**

The Vedas, which are considered by the many Hindu traditions to be of cosmic or divine origin, are termed śruti ('that which was heard'). However, the literature that was composed after their period, starting approximately around 500 BCE, was acknowledged as human and loosely called smṛti ('that which is remembered').

Though of human authorship, the material called smṛti was nonetheless considered inspired. And though this literature has been theoretically of lesser authority than the Vedas, it has played a far more important role in the lives of the Hindus for the last 2,500 years. Sometimes this category is divided into the epics (itiḥāsas), ancient stories (parāṇas), and codes of law and ethics (dharmaśāstras). The term smṛti can also mean the codes alone.

The two epics, the Rāmāyana (Story of Rāma) and the Mahābhārata (Great Epic of
India or, alternatively, the Great Sons of Bharata), have been the best-known works within the Hindu tradition. Children hear these stories from their grandparents or parents. Almost any child can tell you the story of Rama, the young prince who is the hero of the Rāmāyana, and many households have printed copies of it. Invariably the narration of the epics is a child's first and most lasting encounter with Hindu scripture. In fact, for many Hindus, the phrase 'sacred books' refers to these epics in particular.

In some houses one will find copies of the Bhagavad Gītā (The Song of the Blessed One). The Gītā is an episode of eighteen chapters from the much longer epic, the Mahābhārata. With approximately 100,000 verses, the Mahābhārata has the dubious honour of being the longest poem in the world. The complete Mahābhārata is not a book one would find in a typical home, but the Gītā’s presentation of the hero Arjuna and the lord Kṛṣṇa is a widely copied portion of the Mahābhārata.

The Rāmāyana
The Rāmāyana has been memorized, recited, sung, danced, enjoyed, and experienced emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually for the last 2,500 years. It has been a source of inspiration for generations of devotees in India and in many parts of the world. When the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata were broadcast for more than sixty weeks on Sunday morning television, the show drew the largest audience in the history of Indian television and turned Sunday morning from inexpensive into prime advertising time. The epic is danced and acted in places of Hindu (and Buddhist) cultural influence throughout Southeast Asia. Its characters are well known as far away as Thailand and Indonesia.

The story of the Rāmāyana concerns the young prince Rāma, who is born in Ayodhya, the capital of the Kosala kingdom. He has three half-brothers named Laksmana, Bharata, and Śatrughana. On the eve of his coronation, his father, Dasaratha, exiles Rāma. Dasaratha is heartbroken about his own action but is bound by a promise he made previously to one of his wives. Rāma accepts his father's decision cheerfully and leaves for the forest, accompanied by his wife Sītā and his brother Laksmana, who both refuse to be separated from him. Dasaratha dies of grief. Bharata, the brother who has now been designated to be king, returns from a trip to find
his father dead and his brother in exile. Because of his love for Rāma, he hastily follows his brother and begs him to return and rule Ayodhya, but Rāma refuses because he feels he has to honour his banishment by his father. He asks Bharata to rule as his regent in Ayodhya.

While in the forest, Sītā, the beautiful wife of Rāma, is captured by Rāvana, the demon king of Lankā. She refuses to marry him, and Rāvana keeps her captive in a grove. Rāma, full of sorrow at being separated from his wife, searches for her with his brother. They are helped by a group of monkeys. Hanumān, a monkey with divine ancestry, is particularly helpful and on a search mission finds Sītā. He reports her whereabouts to Rāma, who, aided by the monkeys, goes to war with Rāvana. After a protracted battle, Rāma kills Rāvana and is reunited with Sītā. They eventually return to Ayodhya and are crowned. Rāma is held to be such a just king that the phrase Rām rājya (‘kingdom or rule of Rāma’) has become the Hindu political ideal.

Both Rāma and Sītā have become idealized figures in the Hindu tradition; the story is said to represent many relationships. Rāma is the ideal son and husband, at least in most of the story. In a sequel to the Rāmāyana, Rāma banishes Sītā because his subjects are suspicious about her virtue since she was held captive in Rāvana’s grove. Because there is no way of proving her innocence, and he does not want to create a legal precedent for excusing a wife who has slept outside the home, Rāma banishes his own wife. Rāma comes to this painful decision after learning about a washerman who does not want to take back his unfaithful wife, but the wife retorts that if Rāma can take back Sītā after she spent several weeks in Rāvana’s house, surely she can return to the washerman’s house. The pregnant Sītā is thus banished and gives birth to twins. Several years later, the twins prepare to meet Rāma in battle, and it is then that Sītā tells them that he is their father. There is a brief reunion. Rāma asks Sītā to prove her innocence in public by undergoing some ordeal, but Sītā refuses and asks Mother Earth to take her back. She is then swallowed by the ground.

Whereas many Hindus have traditionally seen Sītā as the ideal wife who follows her husband to the forest, others see her as a model of strength and virtue. She complies with her husband as he does with her; their love is one worthy of emulation. Yet, she is also a woman who stands her ground when asked by her husband to prove her virtue on at least two different occasions. Once in Lankā she acquiesces, but the second time, she gently but firmly refuses and so rules out any possibility of a reunion. There have been other versions of this tale called Sītāyana, which tell the story from Sītā’s viewpoint. Even traditional interpreters agree with the comment, Sītāyās cartam mahat (‘the deeds of Sītā are indeed great’).

There have been many vernacular versions of the Rāmāyana, and the story has been interpreted theologically in many ways. In one thirteenth-century interpretation, Sītā voluntarily undergoes captivity and suffering to save other human beings and the world from evil. Another interpretation is allegorical: Sītā is the soul, captured by the material body. The ten heads of Rāvana represent the five sense organs and five motor organs. Rāma will vanquish the earthly body and rescue the human soul from the clutches of the sense organs.

Whatever the interpretation, the story of Rāma, Sītā, and their devotee Hanumān has
endured through the centuries in simple and complex forms, engaging the piety and adoration of generations of Hindus. In later centuries Rama was considered to be an incarnation of the lord Viṣṇu. He is a paragon of human virtue; temples to Rama and Sītā, his wife, are found all over India. According to a traditional statement, the story of Rama and Sītā will be told as long as the rivers flow on earth and as long as human beings live.

The Mahābhārata

The Mahābhārata is the story of the great (maha) struggle among the descendants of a king called Bhārata, the modern name for India. The main part of the story deals with a war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. Though they are cousins, the Kauravas try to cheat the Pāṇḍavas out of their share of the kingdom and will not accept peace. After all peace initiatives are repudiated by the Kauravas, a battle ensues in which all the major kingdoms are forced to take sides. Kṛṣṇa, by this time considered to be the ninth incarnation of the god Viṣṇu, is on the side of the Pāṇḍavas. Refusing to wield arms, he nevertheless agrees to be Arjuna's charioteer, a role that is interpreted allegorically in later centuries.

Just as the war is about to begin, Arjuna, who has hitherto been portrayed as a hero emerging victorious from several battles, becomes distressed at the thought of having to fight against his cousins, uncles, and other relatives. Putting down his bow, he asks Kṛṣṇa whether it is correct to fight a war in which many lives, especially of one's own kin, are to be lost. Kṛṣṇa replies in the affirmative; it is correct if we fight for what is right. One must fight for righteousness (dharma) after trying peaceful means. The conversation that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa have on the battlefield takes about eighteen chapters. These are the chapters called Bhagavad Gītā.

The Gītā

The Bhagavad Gītā is held in high esteem as one of the holiest books in the Hindu tradition. The political leader Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948), for instance, referred to the Gītā as his spiritual mother. The Gītā speaks of loving devotion to the lord and the importance of selfless action. The Bhagavad Gītā was probably written around 200 BCE or during the following three centuries and added to the epic Mahābhārata. It is frequently printed separately, and many people have a copy of this sacred text. For centuries people learned it by heart. In the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa instructs his cousin Arjuna (who is generally understood to be any human soul who seeks spiritual guidance) on the nature of the human soul, God, and how one can reach liberation.

In verses that are still recited at Hindu funerals, Kṛṣṇa describes the human soul as being beyond the reach of human senses and thought; it is not affected by the sense organs or physical nature and is removed from it. Just as a human being casts off old clothes and wears new ones, so too does a soul discard bodies and assume new ones. Thus the soul inhabits bodies that are born and that die. This continues through the ages until the soul is finally liberated from the cycle of births and death. The soul does not die when the body dies; it is never born and never killed.

Thus Arjuna is told that he is not to grieve at what is to happen; however, he is also warned that if he does not do his duty (dharma) and fight for righteousness, he is guilty of moral cowardice. If he fails in his duty, he has to face the consequences of quitting when it is time to wage a just war and protect the people.
[On the immortality of the soul:]

Our bodies are known to end,
but the embodied self is enduring,
indestructible, and immeasurable;
therefore, Arjuna, fight the battle!

He who thinks this self a killer
and he who thinks it killed,
both fail to understand
it does not kill, nor is it killed.

It is not born,
it does not die;
having been,
it will never not be;
unborn, enduring,
constant, and primordial,
it is not killed
when the body is killed....

As a man discards
worn-out clothes
to put on new
and different ones,
so the embodied self
discards
its worn-out bodies
to take on other new ones.

Weapons do not cut it,
fire does not burn it,
waters do not wet it,
wind does not wither it.
It cannot be cut or burned;
it cannot be wet or withered;
it is enduring, all-pervasive,
fixed, immovable, and timeless....

[On the way of action:]

Be intent on action,
not on the fruits of action;
avoid attraction to the fruits
and attachment to inaction!

Perform actions, firm in discipline,
relinquishing attachment;
be impartial to failure and success—
this equanimity is called discipline....

Wise men disciplined by understanding
relinquish the fruit born of action;
freed from these bonds of rebirth,
they reach a place beyond decay....

When suffering does not disturb his
mind,
when his craving for pleasures has
vanished,
when attraction, fear, and anger are gone,
he is called a sage whose thought is sure.

When he shows no preference
in fortune or misfortune
and neither exults nor hates,
his insight is sure....

[On the mystery and purpose of incarnation:]

Though myself unborn, undying,
the lord of creatures, I fashion nature,
which is mine, and I come into being
through my own magic.

Whenever sacred duty decays
and chaos prevails,
then, I create
myself, Arjuna.
To protect men of virtue
and destroy men who do evil
to set the standard of sacred duty,
I appear in age after age....

[On the nature of God and the way of
devotion.]
Always glorifying me,
striving, firm in their vows,
paying me homage with devotion,
they worship me, always disciplined....
I am the universal father,
mother, granter of all, grandfather,
object of knowledge, purifier,
holy syllable OM, threefold sacred love.
I am the way, sustainer, lord,
witness, shelter, refuge, friend,
source, dissolution, stability,
treasure, and unchanging seed.
I am heat that withholds
and sends down the rains;
I am immortality and death;
both being and nonbeing am I....
Men who worship me,
thinking solely of me,
always disciplined,
win the reward I secure.

When devoted men sacrifice
to other deities with faith,
they sacrifice to me, Arjuna,
however aberrant the rites.
I am the enjoyer
and the lord of all sacrifices;
they do not know me in reality,
and so they fail....
The leaf or flower or fruit or water
that he offers with devotion,
I take from the man of self-restraint
in response to his devotion.
Whatever you do—what you take,
what you offer, what you give,
what penances you perform—
do as an offering to me, Arjuna!

You will be freed from the bonds of
action,
from the fruit of fortune and misfortune;
armed with the discipline of renunciation
your self liberated, you will join me....

If he is devoted solely to me,
even a violent criminal
must be deemed a man of virtue,
for his resolve is right....

Keep me in your mind and devotion,
sacrifice to me, bow to me,
discipline your self toward me,
and you will reach me!

(Miller 1986:32-87)
Krṣṇa also makes several statements about himself that reveal a new shift in Hindu theology. In the Upaniṣads, the sages were reluctant to describe Brahman; but in the Bhagavad Gītā, Krṣṇa reveals himself as the ultimate deity, a personal one filled with love for human beings, and one who incarnates himself periodically to protect them.

Whenever righteousness diminishes and evil arises...
I send myself forth ...
To protect the good people and to destroy the evil ones
To establish righteousness, I incarnate myself age after age.
(Bhagavad Gītā 4:7–8)

There has been a clear move from what is sometimes called the absolutism or the monistic trends of the Upaniṣads, where the Supreme Being was beyond any human conceptualization, to the loving, gracious deity of the Bhagavad Gītā. Krṣṇa describes himself as the goal, supporter, lord, witness, refuge, sanctuary, and friend of the human being. He is the origin, dissolution, and maintenance of the universe. Many of the traditions within Hinduism have retained this overtly theistic flavour from the time of the Bhagavad Gītā till today, at least in domestic and public worship. When Arjuna is not quite clear about Krṣṇa’s claim to be God incarnate, Krṣṇa reveals his own cosmic form, which is visible only to Arjuna’s divine eye. Arjuna quakes at this vision and is filled with love and awe. Trembling, he seeks forgiveness of Krṣṇa and implores him to resume his normal form.

The Three Hindu Ways

In the course of the Bhagavad Gītā, Krṣṇa describes three ways to liberation (or as some Hindus believe, three aspects of one way to liberation) from the cycle of births and death: (1) the way of action, (2) the way of knowledge, and (3) the way of devotion. Each way (mārga) is spoken of also as a discipline (yoga).

The way of action (karma yoga) entails the path of unselfish action; one must do one’s duty, but it should not be done either for fear of punishment or hope of reward. The right action should be done without expectation of praise or blame. For example, one is to study or do good acts because it is correct to do so—because it is one’s duty (dharma) to do so, not because other people will reward and praise one for it.

Acting with the expectation of future reward leads to bondage and unhappiness. On one level, such actions instigate further action and thus further karma is incurred, for one is never satisfied when one reaches a goal. One may long for a promotion, more money, or to be loved by a particular person, and when one acts with these goals in mind, one may meet with disappointment and react with anger or grief. Even if one is temporarily successful, the goal that has been reached is replaced with another. Thus the thirst for material success is never quenched. Instead, one succeeds only in accumulating more karma, which leads to further rebirth.

Indeed, on one level (according to other books of the time), even the karma one gets from performing good deeds is ultimately bad and causes bondage because to enjoy the good karma, one has to be reborn. A later Hindu philosopher calls good karma ‘golden handcuffs’. Therefore, one is to act according to one’s dharma. Krṣṇa urges Arjuna to act without any attachment to the consequences. Then evil will not touch such a person, just as water does not stick to a lotus leaf. All ac-
tions are to be offered to Kṛṣṇa. By discarding the fruits of one’s action, one attains abiding peace.

Kṛṣṇa also talks of the way of knowledge (jñāna yoga): through the means of attaining scriptural knowledge, one may achieve a transforming wisdom that destroys one’s past karma. True knowledge is an insight into the real nature of the universe, divine power, and the human soul. Later philosophers say that when one hears scripture, asks questions, clarifies doubts, and eventually meditates on this knowledge, one achieves liberation. Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that just as fire reduces firewood to ashes, so too does the fire of knowledge reduce all karma (actions) to ashes.

The third way, which is the one emphasized most throughout the Bhagavad Gītā, is the way of devotion (bhakti yoga). If there is a general amnesty offered to those who sin, those who have a karmic overload, it is through the way of devotion:

**Even if a sinful person adores me with exclusive devotion**
**He must be regarded as righteous ... quickly his soul becomes righteous and he gets eternal peace....**
**My devotee is never lost.**

*Bhagavad Gītā 9:30–1*

Ultimately, Kṛṣṇa makes his promise to Arjuna: if one surrenders to the lord, he will forgive that human being all sins:

**Letting go all dharma, take refuge in me alone,**
**I shall deliver you from all sins; do not grieve.**

*Bhagavad Gītā 18:66*

These are held to be almost the ‘last words’ of the Bhagavad Gītā and thus the ultimate teaching of this work.

**The Deities of Classical Hinduism**

Hinduism flourished during the Gupta Empire (c. 320–540), which was a time of great cultural and scholarly activity in India. Noteworthy advances were made, such as in mathematics the use of zero and the decimal system, which are seen in inscriptions. Around 499 Āryabhata calculated that the value of π is 3.14 and that the solar year has 365.3586 days. He also stated that the earth is spherical and rotates on its axis. In commerce, there was increased contact with Greek and Roman trade missions from the Mediterranean, and coastal towns flourished, particularly in southern India.

The Gupta period also saw a renewed surge in religious and literary activity. Temple building was encouraged, pilgrimages were undertaken, and playwrights used religious themes in their dramas. Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists composed poems and dramas from which we can learn a great deal about the religion of the time. Temple architecture, literature, astronomy, and astrology received royal patronage.

During the previous seven centuries, under the Mauryan dynasty, the Kushan invasion, and a number of other regimes, the Hindu tradition had by no means been dormant; the Bhagavad Gītā, to take only one example, comes from those years. But what we know in retrospect as Hindu tradition had coexisted with the ascendancy and patronage of Buddhist teachings and institutions in India. Now, under the Guptas, Buddhism receded, while the Hindu tradition came to dominate. Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha, was eventually assimilated in some Hindu texts as one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu.

It would be impossible to locate the transition at a single time or in a single text, but