

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Study Guide

### Chapter 6: The Growth of Asian Civilizations

#### Section 1: Indian Society and Religion

**A Changing Society.** By 500 B.C. a social structure based on the varnas, or social classes, had begun to take shape in India. Certain interactions—such as marriage—were forbidden between people of different varnas. Untouchables, the lowest varna, faced even stronger separation from members of other varnas. During the Vedic period, the varnas divided into **jati**, or subgroups, with different customs, traditions, and worship practices. Westerners called this the caste system.

By the 700s B.C. some Indian thinkers began to question the authority of the Brahmins. Their philosophy became known as the Vedanta, or the “end of the Veda.” This school of thought was powerfully expressed in a series of philosophical dialogues called the **Upanishads**. Seeking a personal connection to spiritual matters, the writers of the **Upanishads** taught that the world was part of a single universal being, or Brahma, and that the purpose of life was to experience the oneness of Brahma.

The teachings of the Vedanta were too intellectual and philosophical to appeal to many ordinary Indians. They turned to two epic poems, the **Mahabharata** and the **Ramayana**, for spiritual comfort. The most famous part of the **Mahabharata**, the **Bhagavad Gita**, taught that salvation was available to everyone and that fulfillment comes through **bhakti**, or complete dedication to god. In the **Ramayana**, two characters of great devotion symbolize the ideals of Indian manhood and womanhood.

**Hinduism.** Hinduism arose from the Vedic texts and the popular epics. It represents a union of Indian religious cultures, recognizing many gods but only one universal spirit—Brahma. According to Hinduism, when a person dies their soul is reborn in a new body, a process called **reincarnation**. During each cycle of incarnation, a person must fulfill a moral duty, or **dharma**. Every action has a moral consequence, or **karma**, which decides the next cycle of reincarnation. People who do not fulfill their dharma will be reborn into a lower social class. People who consistently fulfill their dharma break the cycle and realize their unity with Brahma.

**Reactions Against Vedic Religion.** As Hinduism developed, religious subgroups arose. Jainism and Buddhism, which both began in opposition to the power and beliefs of the Brahmins, were two of the most important subgroups. Jainism began during the 500s B.C., when Mahavira, a member of the warrior class, became a wandering teacher and spread the belief that everything in nature has a soul. His belief in nonviolence, called **ahimsa**, was the law that Jains applied to life at every level. They avoided any action that might harm living things.

Siddhartha Gautama, who eventually became known as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One,” started Buddhism. Born the son of a prince, he gave up his riches to search for the truth. After years of wandering and contemplation he reached a state of inner calm and understanding, which we call enlightenment. Buddhist teachings center around the **Four Noble Truths**: (1) that all human life holds suffering; (2) that desire causes suffering; (3) that by denying desire, people can attain **nirvana**, or perfect peace, freeing the soul from reincarnation; and (4) that following the Eightfold Path, which requires faith and mindfulness, among other actions, leads to the rejection of desire, allowing a person to reach nirvana.

Many of the Buddha’s ideas were new to Indian society. He believed that the Vedas were not sacred, that virtue could not be inherited, and that the rigid varna system was wrong. These ideas appealed to the Sudras, or the lowest varna, and the untouchables. As it spread, Buddhism divided into two branches—Theraveda, or “way of the elders,” which followed the Buddha’s original teachings, and Mahayana, or “greater vehicle,” which turned his teachings into an organized religion.

*Answer the questions below.*

1. What were the *Upanishads*, and which school of thought did they express?

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2. What were the messages of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana*?

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**3. What are the three most important concepts of Hindu belief?**

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**4. Why did Jainism and Buddhism first develop?**

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**5. What were the Buddha's Four Noble Truths?**

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**6. What two branches of Buddhism developed as the religion spread?**

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