India is a subcontinent which includes present day Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and most of Pakistan. It is often referred to as South Asia. High mountains tower over the northern borders of India. They form several mountain ranges called the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas. There were also several great rivers. These two rivers, the Ganges and the Saraswati, carry water for irrigation. Seasonal winds called monsoons shape India’s climate. Because of the monsoons, India has a dry season in the winter and a rainy season in the summer. The summer monsoon provides rain for India’s crops but they can also cause severe floods. Civilization along the Indus River began with agriculture. They also grew cotton and made it into fabric—they were the first people in Asia to do so.

Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were two of the largest and best-known cities in India. Harappa gave its name to the entire Indus River culture. Today the culture is called Harappan civilization. No one has figured out how to read the writing of Harappan civilization which has 500 pictographs, or picture signs. Harappan writing, may stand for words, sounds, or both.

There has been found evidence of religion. There was a huge public bath that may have been used for religious rituals. Many religions have rituals linked to cleansing. For example, Christian baptism stands for the act of washing sin.

Lesson 2 The Origins of Hinduism

The Aryan migration occurred in 1500 B.C. when the Aryans traveled east into India. They belonged to the larger Indo-European group. They spoke an Indo-European language called Sankrit. They practiced a mysterious religion that appealed to many Dravidians—the people living in India when they arrived. When the Aryan religion and language spread, the Dravidians taught the Aryans about city life.

Aryan society was organized into classes: warriors, priests, and commoners. As Indian society grew more complex, the classes developed into what was later called the Caste System because there are thousands of different groups that existed. Those groups were organized into four categories. From top to bottom:

1. Brahmin—priests, scholars, teachers  
2. Ksatriya—rulers, nobles, warriors  
3. Vaisya—bankers, merchants, farmers, and  
4. Sudra—artisans, laborers. After many centuries, another group came into being that was considered below all other groups. This group was called the untouchables. They had to do jobs no one else wanted.

The earlier religion of the Aryans is now called Brahmanism, taken after the name of the Aryan priests, or Brahmin. The Aryans worshiped many nature deities. As time passed, Indians began to question how the ceremonies became more complex. One example was a belief that one spirit governed the universe.

The rituals of the Aryans religion are found in ancient Sanskrit sacred texts. These texts are called the Vedas.

The Bhagavid Gita is an important sacred text of Hinduism. Although Hindus worship many deities, a god or goddess, they recognized one supreme God or life force. The three most important of the deities are Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the protector; and Shiva, the destroyer. Hindus believe in reincarnation. What a person does in each life determines what he or she will be in the next life, according to a doctrine called Karma. Deeds, (good or evil) cause a person to be reborn in a higher or lower life form. Hindus believe that animals, like humans, have the supreme life force in them.
For this reason, many Hindus are vegetarians. They do not eat animals. Reincarnation creates a repeating cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. The cycle ends only when a person achieves a mystical union with God. To achieve that, a person must come to realize that his or her soul and god’s soul are one.

Lesson 3 Buddhism and India’s Golden Age

Hinduism is the modern name for the major religion that is practiced in India. Other religions also had their beginnings in India. One of these is the religion of Jainism. Jains teach *ahimsa*, which means “nonviolence.” Jains believe that every living thing has a soul and should not be hurt. Some Jains even wear masks to avoid accidentally breathing in small insects.

Another religion called Buddhism also began in India. Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. He was a prince who gave up his wealth and position to try to understand the meaning of life. Later, when he began to teach what he had learned, he was called the Buddha, or enlightened one. Siddhartha was born a Hindu prince. A priest had predicted that he would become a wandering holy man. For six years, Siddhartha starved himself, but this sacrifice did not help him find the answers he sought. Then he sat under a fig tree and meditated until he found understanding.

This gave him insights into reality, which he called the Four Noble Truths. 1. People suffer because their minds are not at ease. 2. That condition comes from wanting what one doesn’t have or from wanting life to be different. 3. People can stop suffering by not wanting. 4. People can stop wanting by following the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path involved having the right opinions, desires, speech, actions, job, effort, concentration, and meditation. This path, the Buddha taught, could lead to nirvana or the end of suffering. Reaching nirvana broke the cycle of reincarnation that Buddhists, as well as Hindus, believed in. The Buddha believed in the practice of *ahimsa*, but he didn’t worship Hindu deities. He also rejected the idea that people in the upper castes were holier than others. After the Buddha died, his followers gathered his teachings to pass on to others. These collected teachings are called the dharma which means the true nature of things.

Dharma is often shown symbolically as a wheel. Monks and nuns—men and women who live in religious communities—helped develop the formal religion of Buddhism. Other Buddhists became wandering holy men and tried to live as the Buddha had. Over time, Buddhism split into many branches.

Some branches stressed the importance of being a monk and studying the Buddha’s life. Others stressed meditation. Some Buddhists taught that ordinary people could become a Buddha. Such holy people could work to save others through acts of mercy and love. Most Buddhists worshiped the Buddha as a divine being. One reason Buddhism became so influential is that a famous Indian king ruled by its teachings.

For centuries, separate Aryan kingdoms battled each other. Around 550 B.C., Magadha, a northeastern kingdom, began to gain strength. About 321 B.C., Chandragupta Maurya became king of Magadha. He conquered much territory. His Mauryan Empire soon covered much of the subcontinent. Chandragupta controlled his empire by using spies to learn what people did and an army of soldiers to keep order. Many officials ran the government. To pay these people, Chandragupta taxed land and crops heavily. Surprisingly, legend says that he became a nonviolent Jains monk at the end of his life.

The greatest Maurya king was Chandragupta’s grandson Asoka who began to rule in 269 B.C. Others urge people not to kill living things. As a result of Asoka’s patronage, Buddhism attracted people to its monastic order. Asoka and the Buddhist rulers that followed him sent missionaries to bring new converts to
Buddhism. At the same time, he let people of other religions worship freely. The popularity of Buddhism meant that fewer people were worshiping Hindu deities. Hindu thought began to change.

The Maurya Empire collapsed shortly after Asoka died because of poor rule and invasions. Five centuries of conflict followed until the Gupta family took control. Like the Mauryas, the Guptas began as leaders in Magadha. Chandra Gupta I became king in A.D. 320. (He was not related to Chandragupta Maurya. Right away, he married a king’s daughter and gained new lands. Later, his son enlarged the empire by fighting wars. But Chandra Gupta’s grandson, Chandra Gupta II, was the greatest ruler of the family. During his reign (A.D. 375 to 415), India had a golden age—a time of great accomplishment. Under Chandra Gupta II, Indian arts flourished. Architects erected gracefully designed temples. Artists painted murals and sculpted statues, many of which had religious subjects. Kalidasa wrote brilliant Sanskrit plays and poems. Today Kalidasa is considered one of the greatest writers India ever had.

Indian scholars invented the numeral system we use today. They developed the decimal system and the symbol for zero. One mathematician figured out the length of a year. He also estimated the value of pi. Pi is the number that is used to calculate the length of a circle’s boundary. Doctors added new techniques to the ancient practice of Ayurvedic medicine. It is one of the oldest systems of medicine in the world. It promotes health by using diet, exercise, and other methods to maintain energy in the body. Indian artisans developed advanced methods of metallurgy (metal working). Gupta India profited from foreign trade.

Lesson 4 The Legacy of India

Yoga is as old as the *Bhagavad Gita* and as new as the yoga classes taught in health clubs. Its popularity shows that the ancient religious traditions of India are still very much alive. Four out of five people living in India today are Hindus. Hindus also live in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and many other countries. Also, about 1 million people in the United States practice Hinduism. Buddhism did not remain strong in India. In the mid-1900s, Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi used *ahimsa* (nonviolence) in his fight against British rule. His life inspired U.S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. In the 1950s and 1960s, King led nonviolent protests to gain rights for African Americans. Today Hindu and Buddhist influences continue. For example, millions of people from other religions meditate and practice yoga. The numerals we use originated in India. People in India have been using the numerals for 1 to 9 for more than 2,000 years. Arab traders brought these numerals to the West. As a result, we call them Arabic numerals, or Hindu-Arabic numerals. The number system first developed in India and used today is called the decimal system. The name comes from the Latin word *decem*, which means “ten.” The word yoga means “joining” or “union.” *The purpose of yoga is to help humans unite with the supreme force of the universe. Yoga includes many practices, including exercise, breathing techniques, meditation, and service to others. Since ancient times, Hindus have believed that some animals—such as the cow—are sacred. More generally, they believe that animals also share in the universal life force. Because they respect this life force, devout Hindus do not eat meat.*