

# Introducing World Religions

## Student Discussion Questions

### Chapter 7 Bahá'í tradition

1. Compare and contrast Bahá'ulláh's mystic teaching on the four valleys (Box 7.2) with Farīd al-Dīn Aṭṭār's teaching on the seven valleys (Box 6.3). What similarities and differences do you find? Does the image of "valley" seem to be used in a similar way? Explain.
2. In the Bahá'í view, intermarriage among people of different cultural backgrounds and ethnic groups is seen as a key to creating harmony among people of the world. What do you see as the pros and cons of this approach to world peace?
3. Compare and contrast a few Bahá'í teachings with those of Christians and Muslims. Consider these two questions, and think of one more comparative question to answer: (1) What similarities and differences do you see between the Bahá'í teaching on the Most Great Peace and the Christian or the Muslim teaching on the end of the world, which involve an apocalypse and Last Judgment? (2) How are Manifestations similar and different from prophets in the Abrahamic traditions?

### Chapter 8 Jain tradition

1. The Abrahamic traditions place much emphasis on the existence of a creator God. Talk about how one's understanding of the world might be influenced by the Jain belief in endless cosmic cycles with no mention of a creator deity. Also consider the Jain belief in the numerous kinds of jīvas that exist in the world, which – though not created by a God – have the potential for ending their cycle of rebirths.
2. Review some differences between the Śvetāmbara and Digambara versions of Mahāvīra's traditional life story. What issues are raised by the fact that the two main branches of Jain tradition have sometimes contradictory versions of Mahāvīra's sacred biography? This "problem" of differing "versions" of a sacred biography occurs in many religious traditions. What bearing might such differences have on the development of a religious tradition?
3. What do you consider the true meaning of renunciation? What meaning do you find in Gurudev Shree Chitrabhanu's renunciation of the monk's life? Debate the pros and cons of renouncing worldly life as a basis for religious practice.

## Chapter 9 Buddhist tradition

1. Discuss the positive and negative mental states named in Buddhist psychology. Do you think there is any value in identifying these within one's own mind, as the Buddhists try to do in meditation? The five hindrances to an enlightened mind are:

- unwholesome attachment to sense objects (lust, craving pleasure)
- ill will (resentment, anger, fear, anxiety)
- sloth and torpor (physical fatigue, boredom, mental sluggishness)
- restlessness and worry (lack of concentration, guilt)
- doubts (uncertainties that are not resolved)

The seven factors of enlightenment are:

- mindfulness (going deep into an object through awareness)
- investigation (discerning objects clearly, penetrating their essence)
- effort (meaningful activity based on mental energy that does not collapse)
- zest (joyful, intense interest in what is happening)
- calm (coolness of mind without fatigue or strain)
- concentration (mind does not wander)
- equanimity (balanced, without deficiency or excess – but not neutrality)

2. If Buddha said that ultimate reality is really non-self (*anātman*), or empty of inherent existence (*śunya*) why do you think he bothered to talk about human beings, and other "provisional" things?

3. Discuss the "eight special rules" for nuns in Buddhist tradition, and Gautama's apparent reluctance to form a spiritual community for women. Judging from the extra rules and Buddha's initial refusals to form a nun's *saṃgha*, does it appear that Buddha was a misogynist? Why or why not? What obstacles do religions face in attempting to reconcile their "social" and "doctrinal" dimensions?