



UNDERSTANDING HINDUISM

SPECIAL EDITION: MAHASHIVARATHRI

A fortnightly publication.

Keeping Hindus in touch with their great cultural heritage.

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Om Namah Shivaya!

Om Namah Sivayah! A Happy Shivarathri to you! We celebrate this important occasion by publishing a special edition of Understanding Hinduism. In addition to the regular pages, we discuss the significance of Shivarathri and Lord Siva in an extra page. We hope that this edition is received in time for you to use it to prepare yourself to maximize the benefit you can realize from the occasion.

We once more thank all you readers for your encouragement and for forwarding these issues to other interested parties. We have also been receiving some questions, and an additional 'regular features' page has been added to answer these questions. Finally, many subscribers are now contributing research, which is an indication that it is time to initiate the next phase in the Understanding Hinduism project: The Surrender. See the last page for details.

Given the level of interest from our readers, we feel it is important to give you all the opportunity to participate in production of this publication. The participation avenues are outlined on the last page.

Finally, please keep spreading the knowledge of Hinduism by forwarding this newsletter. It is perhaps region-specific at present; consider also forwarding to your overseas contacts as well. Please keep a note of the number of local and overseas email addresses you include in your forwards; we sincerely appreciate your efforts and would like to credit you at some point.

Om Namah Shivaya!

Slokas from the Bhagavad Gita

First Discourse. The Yoga of the Despondancy of Arjuna

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most important Hindu texts, said to grant peace, happiness and success simply by studying it. A special place is reserved in the heavens for he who has heard it even once.

Slokas 10 to 12: [Duryodhana continues] 'Our army under the command of Bhishma is mighty, whereas that commanded by Bhima is not. All of you stationed in your respective places are to protect Bhishma alone.'

In order to give Duryodhana courage, Bhishma, the eldest of the Kauravas, roared like a lion and blew his conch.

Bhagavad Gita [First discourse ctd.]

Slokas 13:15: Following Bhisma, conches and kettle-drums, cow-horns, tabors and drums blared from the side of the Kauravas. Then also Krishna and Arjuna, seated in their magnificent chariot yoked with white horses, blew their divine conches. Hrishikesa blew the conch *Panchajanya*, Arjuna *Devadatta* and Bhima *Paundra*.

Slokas 16 to 18: King Yudhisthira blew the conch *Anantavijaya*, Nakula *Sughosha* and Sahadeva *Manipushpaka*. The king of Kasi, Sikandi, the chariot warrior Dhristadyumna, Virata and Satyaki all blew their conches. Drupada and the sons of Draupadi and the son of Subhadra blew their respective conches.

Sloka 19: The deafening roar tore into the hearts of Dhritarashtra's party, making heaven and earth resound.

Sanskrit Lessons

The final set of vowels is given below.

ए	ओ	औ	अं	अः
uu	ri	ru	lu	e
boot	Acre	worm	table	'Fair'/'eight'

By reviewing this set and comparing with the sets presented in the previous issues, it should be clear by now that each of the vowels can be summarized with a

modifier. For instance, the ए 'e' becomes the long 'ee' by the use of the overhead ऎ symbol. Identify the nine modifiers from the three issues published so far as your homework. There are a total of fifteen modifiers which will be reviewed in the following issues.

Contact us/Subscription

Do you wish to receive this newsletter regularly?

Comments, questions, suggestions, subscriptions? Please

send them to editorUH@hotmail.com

Article submissions, artwork, stories, all welcome!

Download the back issues at:

www.geocities.com/UnderstandingHinduismVPH

Please consider signing the guestbook as well.

MAHASHIVARATHRI – THE MYSTIC NIGHT

On the 18th of February 2004, Hindus around the globe will observe the vigil of MahaShivarathri. What is the significance of this event? How did this festival originate? What is its inner spiritual meaning? There are two schools of thought on the exact origin of Shivarathri, and both of these are presented here. But rather than involving ourselves in an academic debate, it is perhaps more important for us to reflect on the deeper spiritual significance behind these events.

The Infinite Column of Light

The story goes that Lords Vishnu and Brahma (two of the Hindu trinity) were engaged in conflict. Each believing himself to be superior to the other, an argument had developed and was slowly turning to a violent confrontation.

Observing this petty behaviour, Lord Shiva could not but step in. 'I propose a challenge' he said. 'The victor may declare himself as the superior member of the trinity, which is to say, superior to myself also. But I warn you, it will not be easy to complete this challenge.'

The two stopped their arguments out of intrigue.

'Brahma, you will search for my head, and Vishnu, you for my feet. Whosoever finds his prize first may declare himself to be superior.'

The two Gods glanced skeptically at each other in view of the apparent simplicity of this task, and they approached Shiva stealthily. But as they did, his body exploded into light, a pillar of Flame that went roaring across Creation, piercing far into the skies and smashing deep through soil and rock. Taking the form of a swan, Brahma leapt toward the heavens, in search of the head. Changing his body into a boar, Vishnu gouged deeply into the earth.

And neither one of them succeeded, for the Pillar of Light stretched across infinity, tearing into the cold darkness of space. At last admitting their defeat, the two Gods hung their heads in shame, bowing to Lord Shiva and praying for forgiveness for their egotism. He appeared before them, granting his blessings. 'Remember your roles' he said 'Discharge your respective duties of Creation and Preservation in the knowledge that each of us has a valuable role to play.'

What does this story signify? One possible interpretation is that Vishnu and Brahma are representing the opposing poles of duality. Creation cannot exist without duality, that is, the play of Light and Dark, Good and Evil, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. Just as the two Gods sought the head and the feet, we search for some happiness in this world, but the search stretches on and on, and we never do find it. Only once we give up the search for the lower happiness, surrender our ego and bow our heads to the Divine, do we at last come home to the bliss of peace and quietness.

The appearance of the Pillar of Light, the Shivalingum, occurs on Shivarathri – the mystic night that is lit by the fire of Lord Shiva's wisdom.

Do you have an alternate interpretation? Feel free to submit it to the editor and on the web-site Guestbook.

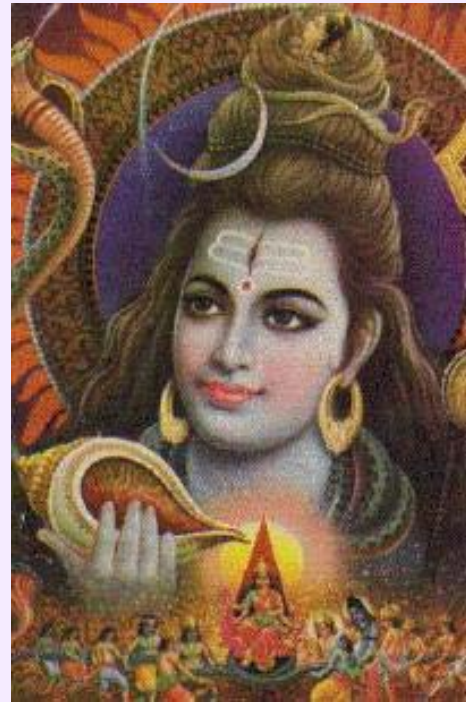
The Poison Drinker

Others believe that Shivarathri originated from the time when the gods and demons felt the lack of sustenance from the Universe. They realized that the materials they needed could only be obtained by a cooperative effort, and so they came together to churn the ocean of the Universe to find the Amrita, the Divine nectar that grants bliss and immortality.

They tore Mount Madura from its roots for use as a churning stick. The serpent Vasuki was brought forth as the churning rope. The gods took the tail end and the demons the head, and they churned the ocean.

But before the Amrita could appear, a terrible dark poison welled up. Its horrid vapors burned in their nostrils, and it began to scorch and burn the planets. 'What have we done?!' both God and Demon cried in anguish.

It was then that Lord Siva appeared. In one gulp, he swallowed this poison and Creation slowly stabilized. The searing acid scorched his throat, and from that time on, Lord Shiva is known as the Blue-Throated One.



Drinking of the poison

What is the inner meaning behind this story? When we begin our spiritual practices, all our hatred and rage and lust boil out of us. It becomes a poison that must be swallowed or surrendered to a higher power. With courage and faith, we pass through this stage and drink the Amrita – the Knowledge of Immortality.

APPROACHING LORD SHIVA

The Shivalingam

The Holy Mark of Shiva is the Shivalingam; it is regarded as a symbol of the One, the True Self, the Inner Divine. The Pillar of Light described on the previous page is symbolized by the Shivalingam.



The Shivalingam

During Shivarathri, Hindus make offerings to the Shivalingam, the mark of Infinity, with an awareness that all the names and forms of this universe are only illusions. The Divine is present everywhere, in the good and evil, beautiful and ugly, happy and unhappy, the wise and ignorant. The Divine is the substrate matter of the brick in the wall, the leaf falling from the tree, and the thought rays that surge out from the mind. For millennia, we have labored under the delusion that this universe is real. Worship of the Shivalingum grants the perception that all these names and forms are only re-arrangements of the the Field of Consciousness.

Preparing for Shivarathri

Consider practicing the following mantras such that you realize the full potential of your observance of Shivarathri.

1. Om Namah Shivayah

Meaning: Praise to Lord Shiva; I bow to Lord Shiva

Benefit: This simple mantra, when repeated for some time, creates a spiritual current that accumulates in the body and mind. It invites the vibrations of awareness and strength that are associated with Lord Shiva.

2. The Mahamrityunjaya mantra

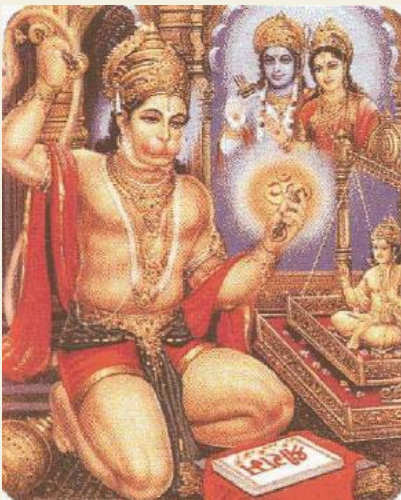
*Om tryambakam yajamahe sugandhim pushtivarddanam
Urvaarukamiv bandhanaan mriyoy mukshiyaa maamritaat.*

Meaning: We worship the three-eyed Lord Shiva who is fragrant and nourishes all beings. May he liberate us from death and grant us immortality, just as the cucumber is severed from its bondage to the creeper.

Benefits: This mantra wards off death by all kinds of accidents and dangers. It is ideal for these times of violence and insecurity. It also has a great curative power: diseases pronounced incurable by medical science are cured by this mantra. Repeat it at the bed-sides of ailing persons. It also grants wealth, peace, prosperity and long-life. Repeat this mantra on your birthday with faith. It will bestow spiritual growth.

On the day of Shivarathri, try to fast. If this is not possible, ensure that your meals are free of any salts and flavorings. Observe vigil (stay up all night) at the nearest Satsang. During your vigil, maintain a mental contact with Lord Shiva. Repeat Om Namah Shivayah to bring yourself back on track. Be careful of your thoughts during the day.

An Incarnation of Lord Shiva



Sri Hanumanji, devoted servant of Lord Rama

Sri Hanumanji, shown below worshipping Lord Rama and Mother Sita, is one of the most popular Hindu deities. Due to his lifetime of selfless and dedicated service, he was granted the special privilege of constant companionship with Lord Rama. By the order of Lord Rama, whenever a devotee prays to him, he is automatically praying to Sri Hanumanji as well. Lord Rama is well known as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Who was Hanumanji?

Hanuman is an incarnation of Lord Shiva. He may be seen as a servant, but, in truth, as an incarnation of a God of the Trinity, Hanumanji is deserving of equality with Lord Rama. The incarnation of Shiva as Hanuman therefore reveals his supreme humility. Ignorant people of this world will fight amongst themselves about whether Vishnu or Shiva is superior. In truth, Shiva has such confidence in himself that he will serve Vishnu in complete humility without concern for his status.

And Lord Vishnu himself pays obeisance to Lord Shiva. In the Ramayana and Mahabharata, you will find countless instances in which Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, the two main incarnations of Lord Vishnu, pray to Lord Shiva. Use these ideas to help you overcome your likes and dislikes in this world. Go beyond the urgings of your lower ego. Think of the fact that one of the Hindu trinity has taken birth as a monkey on earth so as to serve another.

THE HINDU EPICS

Did you know that the Lord Shiva had something to do with the union of Lord Rama and Mother Sita? The story brings together various elements: humility, devotion and concentration. The whole of Karma Yoga may be understood from this single incident. Remember that our Hindu Epics are not merely interesting stories that will help you pass an uneventful Sunday afternoon. Look deeply for the inner message in every event. This approach also fosters awareness and intellect within you.

At times, it may seem that ethics and morals are botherations. Immoral persons justify their lifestyles by presenting themselves as sophisticated and enlightened. And yet, in every single instance, a lack of a strong ethical backbone will result in unhappiness. What is the hidden power behind morality? A study of the life of Yudhistira, the eldest Pandava brother, reveals the answer.

The Ramayana

Just as Lord Vishnu incarnated on earth as Lord Rama, son of King Dhasharath, so too did his consort, Mother Laxmi, as Lady Sita, the daughter of King Janaka. Lady Sita was not born in the conventional way. It was only after austere penance that King Janaka was granted the boon of a child. He was told to plough a certain piece of land, and as he did so, his plough came upon a clay jar. Inside this jar, he found a delightful baby girl, who grew to become the most beautiful woman in the world, Lady Sita.

In ancient times, a princess was married to one who had proven himself in a severe test or challenge given by her father. King Janaka had in his possession a bow that belonged to Lord Shiva. The test that he laid out was deceptively simple: 'String this bow and you may have Lady Sita's hand in marriage.'

Princes came from far off lands, trembling with excitement for marriage to Lady Sita. A typical suitor would grab at this bow, and find it heavier than he'd anticipated. After straining to get just one finger beneath the bow, he would eventually give up, considering himself lucky to liberate his hand from under bow without bruising and bloodying it.

In fact, King Janaka began to grow concerned that he had set too hard a test and was wondering whether Lady Sita would ever be married, when Rishi Vishwamitra and Lord Rama visited him. The Rishi encouraged Janaka to allow Lord Rama to attempt the challenge.

On seeing the beautiful bow of Lord Shiva, Rama put his hands together and bowed in supplication. He performed a pradikshina (walking around the bow with reverence), and mentally prayed to Lord Shiva to be forgiven for fouling his bow with his touch.

Casually, he lifted the bow with one hand. Pleased by his method of approach, Lord Shiva released his strictures on the bow. As Lord Rama bent the bow to string it, he applied such force that the bow shattered to pieces. Lord Rama and Lday Sita were soon married.

Perform all your actions with concentration and focus. Forget the end result; set aside your feverishness for the final reward. Focus in the present moment, have mental contact with the Divine. All actions performed in this way cannot but be crowned with success.

The Mahabharata

Duryodhana was in a state of fury. It was the last year of the exile of the Panadavas. If they passed the year of exile without being found, they would be legally entitled to their share of the Kingdom. In desperation, Duryodhana asked any and all how he might find the five brothers.

A novel answer was suggested to him by a wise man. 'Observe carefully all the of the kingdoms of the realm. See which one has suddenly grown more prosperous, its citizens more refined and intellectual, its soldiers bolder and the weather it was exposed to more gentle.'

'How can that have anything to with finding them?!' roared Duryodhana.

'Yudhistira is the most noble and virtuous man on this earth. The force of his morality was so potent that it affects the environment around him. Reality is affected in his presence; wherever he resides, the earth grants fertility, milk of the cows are sweeter, the mines bring forward greater treasures, and the minds and hearts of men are stilled in purity and silence. Observe where such a change has happened, and there you will find all five brothers.'

And yet, it was due to a weakness that the brothers were exiled in the first place. When Yudhistira was forced into playing a game of dice with Sakuni, the cunning uncle of Dhuryodhana, he did not merely go through the motions of participation. Instead, he was totally consumed by the game, staking everything he had and finally losing it all. Even this noble man was consumed by the darkness of ignorance.

What hope is there for us if even Yudhistira can fall so far? In truth, anyone who is on the spiritual path is prey to this sort of danger. In an ordinary man, the inner impurities are so well established and accepted, that they are not even noticed. But the moment one begins his spiritual practices, he begins to confront his inner demons, and the awakening can be a rude one.

Virtues do not fall out of the sky into your lap. They have to fought for, and you must expect to accumulate your fair share of battle scars. But as you fight these battles, your understanding of the inner nature deepens. You begin to see that this life is more than the mundane world of eating, sleeping, procreating and rotting to a slow death. As you free yourself from the lower nature, you are summoned to higher spheres, and your bliss deepens.

YOGA

We associate yoga vaguely in our minds with something spiritual. And yet, the intellectual mind questions: "How can doing something so physical help with spirituality? Isn't it just a physical exercise? Sure, you might feel good by raising positive energy, but I thought spiritual growth was more abstract." We shall explore this very valid question on this page. We also learn the meditative posture of Lord Shiva, which will be useful when sitting for Shivarathri.

Why do we use Yogic Postures?

A human being contains a variety of matter in differing grades of density, with seven major types identified. The most obvious, densest type of matter is the physical. The physical human body is what we can see and touch, and medical science has documented its various functions fairly well. But we also possess an electrical system whose anatomy has a specific arrangement in the body. The nerves and brain are the circuitry that the electrical body uses to express itself on the physical level. And the converse is also true: The physical body, in turn, may be used to affect the electrical body.

The process of using the physical body to regulate and enhance the electrical system is yoga. In a given *asana*, we are putting pressure on particular energy centres, or *chakras*. There are seven major chakras in line with specific locations along the spinal column, each one regulating a particular human function. For instance, the chakra at the solar plexus regulates the strength and power available to us, whilst the chakra at the forehead regulates thought, mentality and intelligence.

This then explains the purpose behind putting the body in particular positions when attempting to regulate aspects of human consciousness.

Raja Yoga, Discourse 3: Asteya (non-Stealing)

The practice of truthfulness discussed last time extends itself naturally to the practice of non-stealing. There are obvious implications to ethics and morality in the practice of non-stealing, and these do not require elaboration.

In a subtler sense, however, we must be careful not to steal with our minds. It is the mind that clings to the objects of pleasure, and this is what robs us, what *steals* from us, our peace. To allow the desire for objects to penetrate the awareness and disturb its tranquility is then to allow stealing – stealing from ourselves, or perhaps, from our Self.

Who are the policemen that will prevent this type of stealing? They are the awareness and the Knowledge. As we practice yoga, our awareness grows. Whilst in the past, we might have fallen prey to a desire without even realizing that we had, we might now become able to step outside of ourselves and notice: 'Oh, a desire is arising in me.' Achieving this level of awareness enables you to apply your knowledge of the Self, your remembrance of the perishable nature of the world, to outlast the desire, to turn it aside and to refocus yourself on the Inner Divine Being. How much subtlety is hidden within the simple command 'Do not steal!'

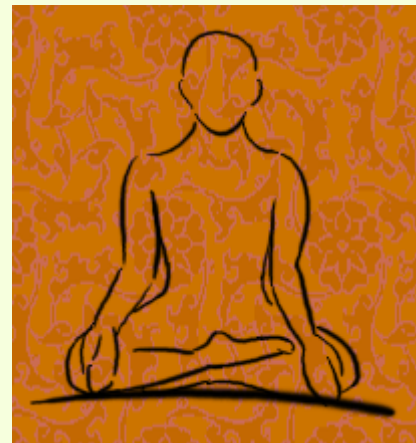
A Note on Desires

A Caveat: In order to function in this world, we necessarily require an ego as a vehicle. Without it, we lack definition and purpose. And yet, this ego, this sense of purpose, automatically guarantees the presence of desire. Desire is therefore unavoidable. The skill, however, is to use desire with awareness. On permitting yourself the desire to learn yoga, your mind creates the energy needed to start your practices. However, when a desire that has no useful purpose arises and you would prefer to be rid of it, then awareness and Knowledge must be applied.

How to Sit for Meditation

The common complaint of those who attempt meditative postures is that pain gathers in the legs or in the back. It is difficult to focus the mind when the body is sending out signals of pain. And yet, there needn't be any pain if you have some skill.

The key to sitting comfortably in meditation is to relax into a kind of a poise and balance. Balance your torso such that your weight is channeled through your buttocks into the ground. Most of us hunch forward, which then causes our upper body weight to pull on the lower back. Such a posture is guaranteed to give you pain. Rather, think about making the spine erect. Imagine that you are sitting back on your spine comfortably, as if in your easy chair.



Siddhasana: The perfect pose

In siddhasana, the right foot is drawn in such that the heel is against the perineum. The left foot is tucked beneath the right calf or ankle. Again, relaxation is the key. Stick to this pose until you are stable in it. It's somewhat important for the pose to look 'nice'. Try to sit gracefully. Keep this ideal in mind.

READER PARTICIPATION

You are Invited to the Party!

The Understanding Hinduism project is an opportunity for us all to accumulate spiritual merit. The project coordinator and producers do not selfishly consider it to be their domain. Your articles are therefore invited for publication. There is a particular structure in Understanding Hinduism; download from the web-site a list of topics for the future issues. If you would like to write an article on any one of these, contact the editor, and he will reserve it for you. You will also find on the web-site some resources – documents containing research that you could use to help you write your article.

Questions from our Readers

If you have alternative answers to the ones suggested by the editors, feel free to post on the main web-site guestbook. Send your questions and comments to chief editor or post in the guestbook of the web-site.

1. Please explain to me, what are the rules when reading the Baghavath Gita. Lots of people say that that one has to read it on a certain day & one needs to fast & end on a certain page. Is it true? I want to read the Gita, but I am too scared in case I do something wrong. Can you explain it to me?

Ed: My impression is that these rules help us to maximize our benefit from studying the Gita, but there is no offence if they are not strictly adhered to – we simply won't receive as great a benefit. Most published copies of the Gita have such rules outlined before the slokas. But let's not over-rate their importance; discipline is important, yes, but you should never feel afraid to pick up your Gita. The Gita should free your from fears, not create even more!

2. Regarding the Lamp in the home: Who brings the lamp into the home? Does the Girl's parents or the Boy's parents offer this to the married couple? Who should and when should the lamp be lit? My understanding is that the wife normally should light the lamp and both of them should pray together in the morning and the afternoon. Should there also be a lamp at the prayer place outside of the house?

Ed: I have to admit, I have no experience with marriage at all! Readers, some help please?

3. Would it be possible for you to also send me pictures on yoga as I would really like to practice yoga and meditation.

Ed: Spend some time establishing the ethics and morals first. We will soon begin asanas, pranayama and meditation through this newsletter, but all these will be at a very gentle pace. If you wish to take up more rigorous sadhana, it is best to have an experienced teacher at your side who will correct your subtle mistakes.

Publishing Understanding Hinduism

At present, UH is distributed through electronic media only – such as via. email and the internet. In truth, there are many readers out there, perhaps the majority, who do not have access to this medium, or who prefer the printed hard copy. In order to continue the spread of Hinduism, it is necessary for us to consider publishing this newsletter in hardcopy and distributing it to interested readers.

The difficulty this poses is that printing UH at the high level of quality of the digital document requires considerable funding. Given the rate of reader subscription that we are currently enjoying, we might expect that core readerships develop in at least 7 countries. Assuming that 3000 copies of each issue is to be printed and sent for distribution in each country, we then require the resources to print 21000x2 issues/month = 42000 copies per month.

We are considering a number of suggestions to deal with this challenge. The first is to wait for 216 pages (2 volumes) to accumulate, to edit into a book for publication. The funds that accrue from this enterprise would then be used in hard-copy printing, either by way of purchasing printing equipment (which might be more economical in the long run) or by contracting printers. A second suggestion is to recommend a subscription fee to the readers. However, we do not favor this option since that would automatically reduce the readership and act against the objective of this project – to spread the Knowledge of Hinduism without commercial gain. In fact, it is intended that the 42000 copies be made available without any cost to the receivers. The only way a subscription fee approach would work is if it was done strictly on the honor system – paying for a subscription is strictly optional. But even this approach has elements of commercialism that the producers wish to avoid.

A third option would be to invite publication from existing Hindu organizations. Several of these have printing facilities and it might be the case that some of these would be interested in carrying UH, at least for their region. Your suggestions are invited.

A Request from the Producers

It is clear from your messages that several of you are quite knowledgeable about Hinduism and have access to several resources. Please consider contributing research materials to UH by writing these up and forwarding the documents to the editor. The research will then be made available on the web-site for our growing pool of international writers.

Your most important contribution, however, is still the forwarding of this newsletter. Please continue to forward each issue of UH to the interested persons in your contacts list. Consider especially forwarding to contacts in other countries. Let's see if UH can start hopping around the globe!