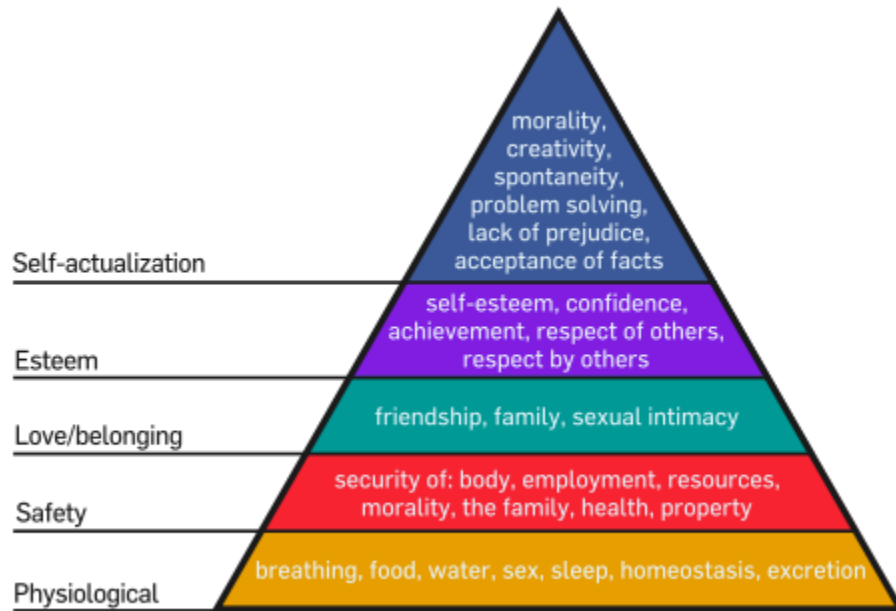


Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the World's Religions

The human pursuit of religion serves a function in our lives. There is a purpose or goal to being religious. Be it the goal of salvation or enlightenment, comfort and guidance for living a moral life, or any of a number of other "higher" purposes in life, religions clearly encourage us to move beyond a life motivated by self-centeredness and pure animal instincts for mere survival. This observation about the ultimate goals, purpose or function of religion can be related to Abraham Maslow's classic theory of a hierarchy of human needs:



From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Religion tends to fulfill the higher needs. Starting with a need for the comfort and camaraderie of community, religion also addresses our need to respect and be respected by others (the "Golden Rule") and, ultimately, to be all that we can be as "God" created us to be or, in the case of many Eastern religions, to become "enlightened" – thus "self-actualized".

Most people seem to live a life in pursuit of the lower or base needs of Maslow's hierarchy. Maslow says that we do first have to fulfill these baser needs before we are free to aim for the higher (deeper) needs. If we are hungry and homeless, our need for food and shelter consumes our every waking moment. Similarly if we are ill, our need to feel better will outweigh any other pursuit. Once these personal and immediate needs are secured, we then turn to safe-guarding them through steady employment and the protection and support from family and friends. We will also seek long-term satisfaction through the personal relationships of friends and family – seeking out a mate and having children of our own. For most people, these lower level needs are the primary consuming drive in our lives.

Religions, however, tell us that there is more to life than these more worldly pursuits. In fact, many religions advocate that we put aside pursuit of these lower needs in favor of the higher needs. Monastic life, as seen in many of the Eastern religions as well as some forms of Christianity, enables the monastic to focus more fully on the higher needs by having the faith community support the lower needs. Thus monastics live in a monastery that provides food and shelter for the monastic. The monks and nuns need not work for money to support themselves. They do not have paid jobs in the larger society. Monastics also do not marry or have children; in fact, they take vows of celibacy and thus do not seek out sex at all. They are more interested in a relationship with some “higher power” (e.g. God), seeking spiritual knowledge, enlightenment and experience rather than more worldly and temporal experiences of human love. Religions talk more of “agape” rather than “eros” – a selfless love for all humanity and even all living beings and the whole universe rather than the romantic/sexual love for any specific other person.

In addition to the qualities noted in the above diagram, self-actualization is also often marked by “peak experiences.” Mystical or spiritual experience is most definitely an example of a “peak experience.” The need for self-actualization is described as the “desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.” (Michelle, Inc.) This is a good description of the Confucian ideal of achieving Jen – human heartedness, becoming more fully human, reaching one’s full potential for what it means to be human. Hinduism teaches that who we really are goes well beyond our current form as a human being: “we are spiritual beings, having a human experience.” An “expanded” hierarchy adds cognitive and aesthetic needs between esteem and self-actualization and then goes beyond self-actualization to Transcendence needs – helping others to achieve self-actualization ([McLeod](#)). This Transcendence level relates quite well to Mahayana Buddhism and the idea of the Bodhisattva who chooses to forgo his or her own entry into Nirvana in favor of helping others become enlightened.

The non-monastic religions like Islam and Judaism, do tend to focus more on the lower as well as higher level needs. Islamic Shariah (religious law) is based around many of the needs identified by Maslow: preservation of life, family, education, property and ultimately of religion. The dietary laws of both Judaism and Islam would seem to protect health as well as morality (causing the least harm to the creatures we eat). Sikhism is an Indian religion that is also non-monastic. It too values family and community, working in the world through honest and moral means, and giving back through charity to support those “in need” (of the lowest needs on Maslow’s hierarchy). The Eastern religions also guide with regard to what we eat: a vegetarian or vegan diet amongst the religions of India or the Taoist natural and organic dietary preferences that also avoid too much of the “bad” stuff (meat, spicy and stale foods).

Taoism seeks long life and good health through the practices of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which includes proactive approaches such as acupuncture, herbal cures, as well as diet and exercise (Tai Chi, for instance). Taoism is also associated with the practice of Feng-Shui, the Chinese art of placement. The Ba-gua tool that is at the center of Feng-Shui practice identifies eight aspects of our life that Feng-Shui seeks to enhance. These eight aspects relate quite well to some of the needs identified by Maslow:

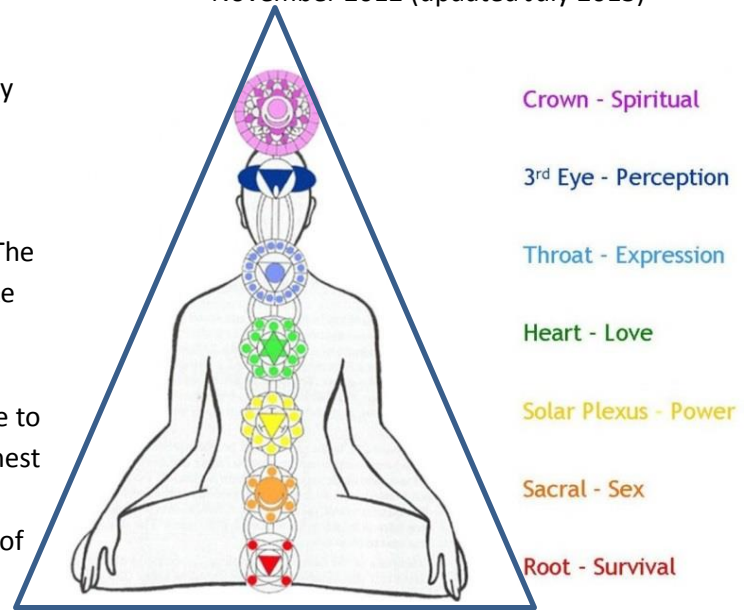
| Fung Shui | Maslow |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Wealth & Prosperity | Safety |
| Family & Health | Safety & Love/Belonging |
| Career | Safety & Esteem |
| Fame & Reputation | Esteem |
| Travel & Helpful people | Love/Belonging |
| Love & Relationships | Love/Belonging |
| Children & Creativity | Love/Belonging & Self-Actualization |
| Knowledge & Wisdom | Esteem & Self-Actualization |

It is interesting to note that none of the areas of concern to Feng Shui relate to the lowest of Maslow’s needs: physiological.

The non-monastic religions emphasize the higher level needs though family values and, of course, encourage us to aspire to the “higher calling” of morality in relation to others. Eating is one of the lowest level needs all living things have. Yet fasting from food is a common practice in many religions, both monastic and non-monastic forms. Jews follow several annual 25 hour fasts associated with several of their holy days. The Yom Kippur fast is the most well-known of these. Islam, of course, has the month long fast of Ramadan when they do not eat, drink water or have sexual relations from sun-up to sun-down for each day of the month (providing health conditions do not dictate otherwise). Baha’is also fast from sun-up to sun-down for one of their 19 day months. Mormons typically fast the first Sunday of every month. Buddhist monastics eat just one full meal a day, around noon time. To forgo this physiological need for basic sustenance as a spiritual pursuit is just one way that religions emphasize the higher needs. The reasons for fasting are many. Most common are to focus on prayer and to identify with and even help the needy who are hungry on a regular basis.

Hinduism is an interesting mix of monastic and more worldly pursuits. The four goals of life, or Hindu Dharma, relate quite nicely to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The lowest of the four goals is that of seeking pleasure in life (such as through the well-known Kama Sutra) – not just about sex, but about all things sensual. This goal would seem most closely aligned with the lowest level of needs in Maslow’s hierarchy. The second goal of Hinduism is that of seeking success in life, living for both yourself and the sake of your family. Here one is the dutiful “householder” – the “family man”, working in the world, supporting and raising a family. Clearly, this goal of life aligns with Maslow’s second and third level needs. Beyond this is the goal of Dharma, one’s duty to one’s society: serving the needs of those who have less (charity – another common theme in many religions), fulfilling one’s role in the larger society of which one and one’s family is a part. This goal might relate to one’s sense of esteem (Maslow’s fourth level of need). Finally, the Hindu goal of Moksha seeks to transcend worldly pursuits as one seeks out ultimate spiritual enlightenment. This is more closely related to what we see in the monastic pursuit of the “peak experience”. Hinduism even refers to this goal as “self-realization” and equates it to “God-realization” – Maslow’s highest need of “self-actualization”.

Kundalini yoga and the chakras of Hindu philosophy also relate quite nicely to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. There are seven chakras or energy centers identified that run up the spine from the lowest at the coxis to the highest at the crown of the head. The lower two chakras relate to basic survival needs like food and sex (Maslow's physiological needs). The chakras then proceed through successively higher needs. Self-esteem, love, and self-expression relate to the mid-range of Maslow's hierarchy. The two highest chakras of wisdom/intuition and, ultimately, spirituality would relate to Maslow's highest need of "self-actualization".



<http://www.pranayogaoc.com/yoga/yoga-chakras/>

Are you self-actualized? Take this self-assessment: <http://similar minds.com/maslow.html>

Works Cited:

[Saul McLeod](http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, <http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

Tools & Tips: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, 2008 Michelle, Inc.

http://www.michelleinc.com/blog_tools_tips/maslows_hierarchy_of_needs