

Tenets of Hinduism

What everyone, especially Hindus, should
know about Hinduism



Gokulmuthu Narayanaswamy

<http://www.practicalphilosophy.in>

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Preface to the First Edition

Most of the problems faced by the Indian society today are because of the lack of proper understanding of Hinduism. Practicing Hindus mostly have an incomplete and often incorrect understanding of Hinduism. This causes lack of self-confidence, immoral life, differences between people, etc. Swami Vivekananda was very clear in his conviction that **India can be rejuvenated only by reviving Hinduism in its purest form as presented in the Upanishads.**

This small book is a small contribution to the Hindu community to aid better understanding of Hinduism. All the ideas here are from the Upanishads and Gita only. Only the presentation is slightly different in some places.

Some parts of the book were originally written as appendices to my earlier book – “Essence of the Gita”. Some of them are from articles written for my blog at <http://www.practicalphilosophy.in/>.

I hope this helps bring in some clarity and interest in knowing more about Hinduism.

Gokulmuthu Narayanaswamy

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Preface to this Edition

This small booklet got very good response from the people that I distributed to. I got very good feedback from various people. Here, I am happy to bring out this booklet with the feedback incorporated. A chapter on Karma Yoga is added. A chapter on Frequently Asked Questions has been added at the end. I am thankful to the people who gave feedback.

This book has already been used in some Vivekananda Study Circles as resource material. **Vivekananda Study Circles** meet once in a week to read and discuss topics on personal development, social service, religion, philosophy and life, in the light of the life and works of Swami Vivekananda. If you are interested to know about such a Study Circle in your locality, or if you want to start such a Study Circle, we will be very happy to provide you guidance. Please get in touch with us through the website at <http://www.practicalphilosophy.in/>.

If anyone wishes to publish this book for commercial or non-commercial purposes, please free to do so. You may get in touch with me if you need any assistance.

Gokulmuthu Narayanaswamy

1st January 2013 (Sri Ramakrishna Kalpataru Day)

The Perennial Flow

Hinduism is the philosophy and way of life of the people belonging to the particular tradition and culture. The name by which it is called in the tradition is **Sanaatana Dharma** – The Eternal Order. The ancient Western cultures like the Romans and Greeks called the land around and to the East of the River Sindu as Hindu and the people also by the same name. That is how the country also got the name Hindustan and India, and the philosophy and way of life of the people got the name Hinduism. For the sake of convenience, we can continue to call the religion as Hinduism.

Hinduism is **based on principles and not on personalities**. It was not originated by anyone. It is like Science. Hinduism is based on the eternal laws of nature discovered by sages of ancient times and recorded in the Vedas. The eternal laws were existent and functioning before the sages discovered them and they are accessible to everyone today also. Thus, Hinduism is **universal, eternal and impersonal**. It is natural and not manmade.

Hinduism clearly separates out religious principles from social rules. Religious principles like nature of the self, nature of the world, nature of God, injunctions like “Speak the truth”, “Don’t harm others”, etc. are eternal laws applicable to everyone in all times and places. They are called Sruti. The social rules like food habits, family structure, governance, etc. are manmade laws that are applicable only to the time, place and people that they are designed for. They are called Smriti. Smriti can and should change from time to time and place to place. However, Smriti cannot contradict the Sruti. With this system,

Hinduism is **very dynamic and is actively revised** according to the need of the time, keeping the fundamental principles intact.

This gives Hinduism its **self-organized** nature. There is no central authority. There are thousands of denominations. Everyday several arise, several die away and several get merged into others. It is the followers that make their leaders and declare their saints. People are totally free to follow any or multiple or none of the denominations. It is very common that each member of a family has his or her own way of following Hinduism. This tremendous dynamism is the characteristic of Hinduism. It gives **full freedom to the individuals**.

Another interesting aspect of Hinduism is the importance given to **rational questioning**. Every question has an answer, if you are intellectually prepared for it. Hinduism is not a preaching religion. It is a teaching religion. Every moral injunction is backed up with strong logic of why something should be done in a particular way. The Vedas never stop at saying, “you should do this”. It always says, “If you want that, you should do this”. What a person wishes is his or her choice. When it comes to philosophy, it is strongly supported by rigorous logic.

In the course of the thousands of years of glorious history, Hinduism faced a temporary decline in the past few hundred years because of the section of society that was supposed to teach the religion to others failed to do so due to various reasons. Because of that, there is a severe **lack of awareness** about Hinduism among Hindus. The advent of various great saints and institutions in the past one and a half centuries has created a great revival of the great ancient religion.

It is very important for India and the world that Hinduism is revived in its grand form. Modern times are characterized by three trends:

1. The entire humanity of the world has come closely into interactive contact. People of different religious views need to live together in peace and harmony. **Hinduism holds the template for religions of the world** to manifest this unity in diversity.
2. There is a shift towards decentralized approach to everything in society like governance, values, etc. Religion is no exception. Hinduism holds the template to structure religion in a decentralized manner.
3. There is a quest by humanity to scrutinize everything through the test of reason. Hinduism holds the template for religions to cast their principles in a rational way.

Thus the revival and flourish of Hinduism is very important for the world and its religions. Religion is not a static entity. It is a live and dynamic process. The **biggest service**, which Hindus can do to themselves and to humanity, is to learn, revive and practice the grand principles of Hinduism in their everyday lives.

Goal of Life

Every one of us wants to be happy. We think that our happiness is dependent upon people, objects and situations. With this idea, we keep on trying to change our surroundings. Sometimes we succeed. Sometimes we fail. Even when we succeed, it is not permanent.

Hinduism declares that our happiness is not dependent on anything external. It is not dependent on people, objects and situations. The very concept of “external” and “others” arises because of our identification with our body and mind. This is a misconception. We are the pure conscious subject, which can never be objectified. As body and mind can be objectified, they are not us. When we realize this truth, we will find that we have been all through free from all problems. **Happiness is our very nature.**

However, to understand this, the mind should be prepared. So, to take us from where we are in our understanding, Hinduism proposes a philosophy and way of life at the empirical level. There are three levels of identification:

1. Gross (animal) level: I am the body. I have a mind to be able to protect myself and propagate my species.
2. Medium (human) level: I am the mind. I have a body to experience and express myself in this world. I have a spark of consciousness within, which make me conscious.
3. Highest (divine) level: I am pure consciousness.

First, Hinduism asks us to get away from the identification with the body by identifying with the mind. After we are established in that level, as we mature, there will naturally come a time when we start questioning that understanding. Then Hinduism provides the highest level of understanding, which is the absolute truth. The medium level is called the outward way (**pravritti maarga**). The highest level is called the inward way (**nivritti maarga**).

The person who has realized the truth is the ideal person. He will be **free from all psychological problems** like lust, greed, jealousy, arrogance, anger, fear, anxiety, etc. He would consider everyone as his own self. He would not be shaken by adversities in life. He would always be cheerful and happy. He would ever be ready to help others. He is the culmination of the development of the human race. In fact, he is the culmination of the evolution of the whole of creation.

The society is made of individuals. All problems in the society is because of problems with the individuals. The earth has enough for everyone's need. It is the uneven distribution of wealth that is the cause of poverty. Even during natural calamities, there are enough hands that can help. It is the drive to help that is needed. Social inequalities are totally unjustifiable by any means. All problems of society are because of problems with the individuals. It is only by improving the individuals that the society can be improved. No amount of law-making and enforcement can fully solve the problems in the human society.

At any point of time, most of the people in the society would be in the pravritti maarga. Hinduism gives a strong logical philosophy and practical ways of life for these people to be peaceful and prosperous, as much as possible. However, the order in the society can be maintained only by the presence of some people on the nivritti maarga. The people who are on the nivritti maarga serve as guiding lights for the rest of the society.

Similarly, for most of the people, majority of their lifetime would be spent in pravritti maarga. However, everyone should keep in mind that

the culmination of human endeavor is only in the nivritti maarga and not in the pravritti maarga.

Thus, the goal of human life is not accumulation of material things and enjoyment of various pleasures through the senses. None of these can fully satisfy any person. No society can provide enough to satisfy even one person fully with these. The goal is to understand the truth, which will make the person go above all desire. To realize the futility of material things in the world, a person has to experiment with them by trying to gain happiness through them.

To enable this, Hinduism proposes a way of life, which is **based on duties and not rights**. One person's duty automatically becomes the other person's right. Defining duties and letting the rights take care of themselves would lead to a more peaceful and prosperous society. Defining rights and letting people fight for their rights would lead to a tense and dissatisfied society.

Also, Hinduism tries to **avoid competition** as much as possible. Among different the pursuits of people – pleasure, wealth, power and knowledge – it advises that a person should pursue only one of these four at any point of time. This will avoid competition and corruption in the society.

Following the proposal of Hinduism will lead to a peaceful and prosperous society, which is conducive to each person to develop. Hinduism is not against material development. But, it is against having material development as the goal of individual life and society. Material development is the means. The wisdom that “happiness is our very nature” is the goal. By attaining this wisdom, the person becomes

free from psychological defects like lust, anger, greed, jealousy, fear, anxiety, etc.

Law of Karma

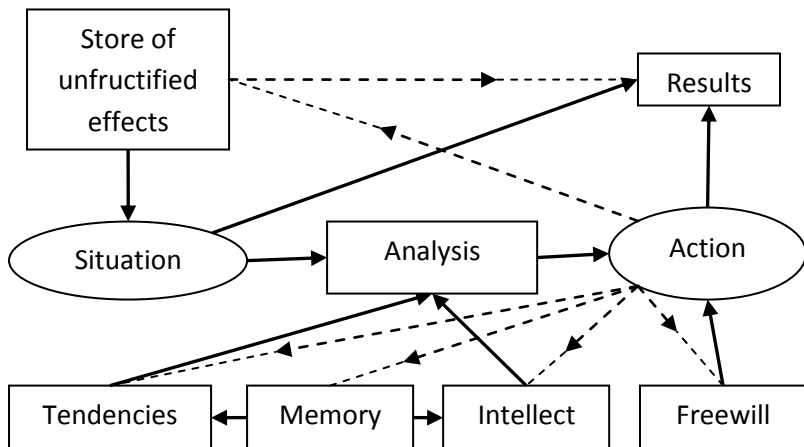
Freewill is the foundation of all actions of man and the possibility of man to improve himself. If there were no freewill, we would not be free to make any decisions. In that case, all human aspirations would have no meaning. Also, no person would be responsible for his or her actions. All concepts of morality would become invalid. There would not be any possibility of any discussions on ethics, morality, human development, purpose of life, social order, etc.

Exercise of freewill is in the context of a **cause-and-effect system** in the world. Every result should be appropriate to the action that caused it. Otherwise there can be no basis to exercise the freewill. If there is no constant law, freewill is of no use. Now, if I am hungry, I eat. I know that if I eat, my hunger will go. If there is no strict causality, sometimes my hunger would go without eating, sometimes my hunger would not subside even after eating, and sometimes my eating would quench my friend's hunger. In that case, I cannot decide to eat when I am hungry. The same is the case with moral decisions. Unless there is a law that "As you sow, so shall you reap", there can be no meaning to freewill.

Thus, moral causality and freewill are two sides of the same phenomenon. They cannot be separated. One cannot meaningfully exist without the other.

Now, Hinduism introduces one more concept – **accumulation** of the effects of decisions. The effect of a decision does not fully fructify

immediately. Some of it is accumulated for the future. It affects the future situations and results.



Any given situation (praarabdha karma) in life is the fructification of some of the accumulated effects of past actions (sanchita karma). Memory provides input about past similar situations, the action taken and the result attained. Based on this, the situation is analyzed by the intellect (buddhi) as regards to what is right and what is wrong. Past tendencies (samskaara) try to influence the action by proposing what is desirable and what is not. Using all these information, the person takes an independent decision on what to do in the current situation.

The result is the effect of the situation, the action and the influence of the effects of the past actions. Not all the current action fructifies as the current result. A part (aagaami karma) of it is added to the store of unfructified effect, which will contribute towards future situations and results.

For the freewill to be really free, it cannot be a part or property or product of any other entity, including the physical body. It has to be independent. This free entity is the individual, called **jiva**.

The jiva is the holder of the freewill, store of unfructified effects, tendencies, memory and intellect. These unfructified effects are stored as the state of the sytem. For example when an object is kept at a higher place, we say it has higher potential energy. This energy is stored as the state of the whole system, which includes the object and the earth. Similarly, the unfructified effects are stored as the state of the whole system. Memory is stored as subtle matter, which is not physical matter. The jiva continues to exist and plays this part across multiple lives. When the body dies, the jiva takes on a new body (which is also a situation) and continues. The new body can be of a human being or an animal or a plant. Depending on the past actions that fructify, the body can be strong or weak to be able to manifest the various faculties like memory, intellect and tendencies to various degrees.

This cycle of cause and effect, which manifests as the situation-action-result cycle goes on and on.

The freewill becomes stronger if decisions are made more towards the way shown by the intellect as **right** than towards the way shown by the tendencies as **desirable**. This is the way to improvement of the jiva.

Using this model, Hinduism answers most of the questions that arise about the world that we see, like:

- Why do we see good people facing bad situations in life?

- Why are some children born in rich families and some in poor families?
- What will happen to me after death?
- When a person dies, what will happen to all the good and bad things done by a person?
- Why should we be good?
- What is wrong in cheating others and harming others?

This model explains only the current iteration in the cycle. Questions like “how did the whole process start?” are not answered by this model. So, the jiva is said to be without beginning. However, this is a good working model for all day-to-day activities.

The final goal is to realize that the jiva’s individuality is only a relative one. The weaker the individuality, the purer and mature is the jiva. To drop the individuality and thus to get out of this cycle is the ultimate goal of life. It need not be done immediately. As the jiva evolves by repeatedly choosing the “good” over the “desirable”, it becomes purer and purer. This can take several lifetimes.

At one point of the evolution, the jiva becomes pure enough to start the quest on the real nature of itself. Then it gets the knowledge from the exposition of the scriptures by a teacher. By assimilating the knowledge, the jiva disidentifies from its limited individuality and realizes its eternal freedom from the cycle.

What is Good and What is Bad?

During discussions with people, especially youth, one question that often comes up is this: How do I decide what is good and what is bad? What is Hinduism's answer to this?

This question assumes three things:

1. I have the freedom to choose.
2. My action will lead to an appropriate result, for which I am responsible. That is why I am worried about what I choose.
3. I have priorities of the various things that I want in life. That is why I want to choose rightly.

When I understand these three points well, the answer to the question comes to light automatically.

The first two points have been explained in the previous chapter on **Law of Karma**.

Now, I have a number of long term goals in life. I want to be alive. I want to lead a healthy life. I want to be happy. I want to have a good name in society. I want my parents to be proud of me. I want to earn money. I want to contribute to society. At any point of time, I also have a number of short term wants in life. I want to watch a match. I want to go out and play. I want to watch a movie. I want to eat a nice sweet.

There is no confusion when my short term want does not conflict with my long term goal. It becomes complicated when there is a conflict. For example, I have an exam tomorrow, for which I still have a lot to study. There is also a cricket match on TV, which I want to watch live. I cannot have both. I need to choose. Any choice of a short term want

that conflicts with a long term goal is called “**bad**”. Any sacrifice of a short term want that conflicts with a long term goal is called “**good**”. Usually, the short term want is more attractive because the result will be got almost immediately. But, the damage that it can cause to my long term goal will be very painful to repair. And, any amount of repair done will leave an ugly scar behind. Prevention is always better than cure.

There are times when the consequence of my action is clear, like watching a cricket match when I should be studying for the next day’s exam. Sometimes, the consequence is not clear. The situation is complex and there are several known and unknown factors contributing to the result. That is where we need to understand the law of Karma to help us make a wise decision. Every action has an appropriate result. As I sow, so I shall reap. If I cheat someone, I should be ready to get cheated. If I tell a lie, I should be ready to be lied to. It is very clear that I don’t want to be cheated and I do not want to be lied to. What I do not want others to do to me, I should not do to others, for the simple reason that, what I do will come back to me.

Thus, by knowing my **priorities** in life and by applying the law of Karma, what is “good” and what is “bad” becomes a logical conclusion. But there are two problems. I may not be sure of all the implications of my action. The system is very complex with innumerable factors. Also, I cannot be making this analysis every time in my life. The situation may not wait for me. And, doing the analysis every time is inefficient. It is like working out every problem in Physics or Mathematics based on the fundamental axioms. If we do it, we will not be able complete the exam in time. We need to remember the well-proven theorems and

formulas so that we can make quick calculations. Similarly, with the basic axioms like I want to be secure, I want to be peaceful, I want to be happy, I want to be free, etc. the wise people have worked out the thumb-rules. These are the general moral rules like “speak the truth”, “do not hurt others”, “help others”, etc. These can be applied to most of the situations in life. Where the situation is complex and not straight forward, we can always apply the fundamentals and derive what is “good” and what is “bad” from the basics. There will be exceptions, like a judge needs to grant punishment to a criminal, which would surely be hurting to the criminal. But, exceptions are exceptions. They should not be confused with the general rules. When not sure, the general rules are always a safer bet.

Thus, by understanding these principles, we can decide what is “good” and what is “bad”. If there is confusion between them, it indicates that the person’s priorities in life are not clear. When the priorities are made clear, what is “good” and what is “bad” become clear automatically.

Do’s and Don’ts

Hinduism has some popular lists of general guidelines. The Vedas, the Gita and other Hindu texts have several such lists. Here are given the five don’ts and five do’s from the Patanjali Yoga Sutras, and the five duties from the Vedas. It is advisable to memorize the lists with their meanings and follow in life. Without trying to follow these, a person who claims to be a practicing Hindu would only be bringing a bad name to Hinduism.

Five Don'ts

1. **satya** – Don't tell a lie. It is not necessary to speak all the truth that we know. But when we speak and act, there should be perfect alignment between our knowledge, intention, words and action.
2. **ahimsa** – Don't take advantage of the weakness of others. It is not possible to live without hurting smaller life forms. We should try to be as harmless as possible. We should not wish harm to anyone.
3. **brahmacharya** – Don't have indecent and inappropriate attitude towards the other gender. The appropriate attitude towards everyone is to look upon people as thinking and feeling human beings, and not as physical entities.
4. **asteya** – Don't have any unfair possession.
5. **aparigraha** – Don't have possessions or consume beyond what is reasonably necessary. Lead a simple life.

Five Do's

1. **soucha** – Maintain everything neat and tidy.
2. **santosha** – Always be cheerful and contented. Don't keep complaining about everything. Have positive attitude.
3. **tapas** – Maintain discipline in life. Wake up, eat, go to sleep, etc at the right times. Have control on what you eat, read, see, hear, speak, think, etc.
4. **swaadhyaya** – Entertain healthy thoughts. Have a habit of reading good books and thinking deeply about them.

5. **ishwara pranidhaana** – Believe in the fairness of the world – “As you sow, so shall you reap.” Do everything as an offering to God and face everything as a gift from God. Face success with humility and failure with dignity.

Five Duties

1. **deva runa** – Duty to environment – Take care of nature. Don’t pollute. Plant trees. Conserve resources.
2. **bhuta runa** – Duty to other creatures – Take care of animals. Treat them with dignity. Preserve them. Avoid harming them.
3. **manushya runa** – Duty to society – Take care of people. Treat everyone with dignity. Donate to and involve in social service activities. Help people. Pay fairly for services availed from people.
4. **pitru runa** – Duty to lineage – Take care of parents, grand parents, children, grand children, etc. Respect old people. Help them. Pray for the wellbeing of departed ancestors. Be kind to young children. Donate to and involve in orphanages and old-age homes.
5. **rishi runa** – Duty to culture – Take care of teachers. Acquire, develop and disseminate knowledge. Help education of children and adults. Donate to and involve in schooling of underprivileged children. Support the study of science, mathematics, literature, arts, music, dance, philosophy, religion, etc.

Following these fifteen items will lead to peace and prosperity in individual and social life. It will lead to faster evolution of the jiva.

Who is God?

Each of our bodies consists of innumerable cells, each of which is a living being by itself. Still, we identify it as our body. Similarly, what we call our ideas and thoughts are based on the ideas and thoughts that we have learnt and picked from various sources during our life. Still, we identify it as our mind. Thus, the concept of our individuality is only notional.

Similarly, we have the concepts of groups of people like city, state, country, continent, etc. They all have a physical component, of which each of us is a part, and a mental component, of which each of us is a part. For example, when we say, “India has decided to allow more foreign investment”, “USA has sent a rover to Mars”, etc., we mean the country as an entity, very much like a living person. Similarly, the whole of the earth with all its living beings, geological features and oceans can be considered as a single living entity. The whole Milky Way galaxy can be considered as one living entity.

When we extend this concept to cover the whole of existence, we come to the idea of God. God is like the **supreme person** (parama purusha) to whom, the whole of physical existence is the physical body, and the whole cosmic dynamics is the mind. (We say “like” because, God is more of a principle than a person.)

Also, **God is the essence** of all that exists. He is the heat in fire. He is the liquidity in water. He is the strength in the strong. He is the intelligence in the intelligent. He is the life principle in the living things.

Thus, God is the whole and the essence of all that exists. When we consider ourselves as individuals, we transact with God as the whole.

Depending on the context of the transaction, God interacts with us in various ways.

If we consider ourselves as living beings, God interacts with us as the life principle, all the living beings in the world put together and all that in the universe that supports or obstructs life. If we consider ourselves as jivas doing actions, God interacts with us as the bestower of the results of our actions. This is the concept behind the Hindus worshipping God through various deities. If we are starting a work, God is worshipped as Ganesha. If we are studying, God is worshipped as Saraswati. If we are doing business, God is worshipped as Lakshmi. If we are seeking prosperity in the family, God is worshipped as Satyanarayana. If we are seeking spiritual knowledge, God is worshipped as Dakshinamurthy, the divine Guru. If we are taking bath in the Ganga, God is worshipped as the deity of the river Ganga. If we consider ourselves as Indians, God is worshipped as Bharat Mata (Mother India). If we consider ourselves as earthlings, God is worshipped as Mother Earth. Also, a devotee can worship God through any form and in any manner he likes. Thus, the one God is worshipped in different ways based on the idea of individuality of the person worshipping and based on the context of worshipping.

When we are serving people, God interacts with us as the people being served. Thus, every action is an interaction with God. There is no activity which is not spiritual. There is nothing called a secular activity. **There is nothing that exists other than God.** Whatever we do is an offering to God and whatever results we get is a gift from God. Doing our duty sincerely with this attitude is worship of God. Also, serving the world and the living beings in the world is worship of God.

Let us consider some of the important contexts from which we need to understand God.

In relation to the world, God is the **material cause** (upaadaana kaarana) of the world, just like clay is the material cause of a pot. God, being a sentient being, is also the **sentient cause** (nimitta kaarana) of the world, just like a potter is the sentient cause of a pot. Thus, you can say that it is God who appears as this world.

There are three stages of understanding God as the cause of the world:

1. God created the world – Everything in this world has been created by God, and belongs to God.
2. God has become the world – If God has created the world, what did He create the world with? If there is something other than Him, for Him to create the world out of, then that would limit Him. God would not be infinite. That is not possible. So God created the world out of Himself. In other words, God has become the world.
3. God appears as the world – If God can become the world, then He would be subject to change. Anything that is subject to change has to go through stages of growth, decay, pollution, purification, etc. That is not possible. So, God only appears as the world. The changes are only apparent. They are not real. In reality, God does not change.

Still, for the sake of brevity, we can use the expression, “God creates the world.” Though we use the words, “God creates the world”, we actually mean, “God appears as the world”. God is not away or different from the world.

In relation to the jivas, God creates the world for the benefit of the jivas to take a body, so that, they can experience and express themselves. This will give them maturity to finally realize their real nature. God is the **bestower of the fruits of action** (karma-phala-daata). The sum total of all natural laws, including the physical and moral laws is the will of God.

God has knowledge of everything in the world and has the capacity to create and destroy everything in the world. However, the knowledge and power of God is limited by the freewill of jivas. God has control over the situation presented to the jivas, but God does not have control over the freewill of the jivas. Even that situation presented would be only in line with the past action of the jivas. Every jiva has the freedom to choose to do what it wants, and God gives the result of the action according to the Law of Karma as an impartial judge. Thus, though God is the bestower of the fruits of action, the jiva alone is responsible for its situations and actions.

Thus, God is a formless, genderless, compassionate, impartial, eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, sentient person, to whom the whole of physical existence is the physical body and the whole of cosmic laws is the mind.

Prayer is an action. It is in the form of asking God to help in a tough situation, thanking God for a favorable situation or asking God for strength to go through all situations in life. This action can fully or partly counter balance any weak undesirable effects of our own past actions. It also gives mental preparedness and strength to face tough situations in life. It helps to face success with humility and failure with dignity.

As the human mind can only think in terms of forms and names, God can be worshipped through forms and names. As God knows the innermost thoughts and intentions of every person, and is compassionate, God can be worshipped through **any form and name**. Depending on the taste of the person, he/she can choose any form and name that is to his/her liking.

As time goes by, the Law of Karma becomes sluggish because of accumulation of actions that are yet to be fructified. The time gap between the action and the result increases naturally. This creates a situation where some individuals seem to be living well off even though they do a lot of bad actions. Also, people lose faith in the Law of Karma because they are not able to see the action and the result side by side. At such times, God comes in the garb of a jiva into the world and cleans up the system, like a fast-track court being setup by the government for special and serious cases. God may speed up the Law of Karma by clearing of the backlogs by personally dispensing punishment for the vices and rewards for the virtuous actions. Also, more importantly, God teaches the people about the nature of the jiva, world and God, and about the Law of Karma, to instill back the faith in the system. These special manifestations of God are called **incarnations** (avataara). The incarnations are effective means to worship God through. There are innumerable incarnations. There is no limit or a fixed number.

Also, **saints** and holy people who have stood for these principles in their life remind us of these principles when we think of them. So God can be worshipped through them also. When we worship God, it is the God principle that is being worshipped and not any individual. So, any

symbol, book, person or object associated with the principle of God can be used to worship God through.

When we consider ourselves as conscious beings, God is the **Consciousness** (caitanya) that powers the jiva. Just as different electrical appliances are powered by the same electricity running through them, God is the light of Consciousness in each jiva. Just as depending on the nature of the electrical appliance, it can create wind, heat, light or coolness, depending on its nature, a jiva thinks and behaves in its own manner, powered by the same Consciousness, which is God.

Thus, by defining God in all these aspects, Hinduism brilliantly brings together the metaphysical reality and the moral authority, while still retaining the freewill of individuals. Thus, **God is not a person to be believed. God is a principle to be understood.** Also, Hinduism brilliantly brings together the formless and the formed aspects of God. It gives the full freedom for people to access God through any number of means and names, using the simple logic that God knows the innermost intention of the individual.

The concept of God in Hinduism is a satisfying logical reply to all critics of religion. Also, this concept allows coexistence of several ways to God. It accommodates and appreciates **all forms of worship** from the simple worship of God through natural forces like rain, natural features like rivers, departed ancestors, saints, deities, symbols and formless person with attributes like compassion, to the abstract formless, attributeless, pure Consciousness. Broadly, the ways of worship can be enumerated as below:

- pratima – human-like form (Indra, Vayu, Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, Krishna, Hanuman, etc.)
- pratika – generic form (Om, shivalinga, salagrama, river, etc.)
- vishwarupa – cosmic form (the whole world is the form of God)
- niraakaara-saguna (formless but with attributes like compassion, beauty, valor, justice, etc.)
- niraakaara-nirguna (formless and attributeless pure undivided infinite consciousness).

The Vedas contain various descriptions of the forms of various deities and instructions for various kinds of meditation. During the Vedic times, God was worshipped mostly in the form of the presiding deities of various natural phenomena like sun, rain, water, fire, etc. and as the presiding deities of various faculties like sight, hearing, thinking, etc. However, with the passage of time, this has changed. Today, God is mostly worshipped by Hindus in the form of deities like Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi, Ganesha, etc., incarnations like Rama, Krishna, etc. and saints like Hanuman, etc. However, the basic principles are the same. This is an excellent example of how, keeping the fundamental principles as the same, Hinduism has been able to adapt beautifully to the changing times and the psychological needs of people.

For example, Hindus are ready to accept Buddha and Christ as incarnations of God. Any religious group of any land or culture, which does not insist on narrow concepts, is acceptable to Hindus as if it is their own. Narrow concepts like, “God can be worshipped only in this way and not any other”, “What is told in this book alone is true and not others”, “God can be called only by this name and not by any other”, “God lives only in such and such a place, different from the

world around us”, etc., are alien to the Hindu ethos. Such concepts are, in fact, harmful to peace in the world.

This broad principle of God as propounded by Hinduism can help in bringing together all the religions and even people who do not believe in any particular religion. It brings together all the human aspirations of the intellect, emotion, morality, social harmony and useful enterprise. This understanding is vital to the peace and prosperity in individual and public life in the world today.

Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga is doing right action with right attitude.

There are three types of action:

1. taamasa karma – Harmful action – These actions cause harm to others. These will cause downfall in our spiritual development. We should **totally avoid harmful actions**. These are actions like involving in actions that will spoil our physical and mental health, cause harm to others, etc.
2. raajasa karma – Selfish action – These actions give more material benefit to us than to others. These will neither cause progress nor downfall. We should **reduce selfish actions**. We cannot avoid some actions like sleeping, bathing, eating, etc. We should keep these actions as less as possible. It is OK to occasionally indulge in some grand dinner, healthy entertainment, etc. They should be moderate.
3. saatvika karma – Selfless action – These actions give more benefit to others than to us. These will enable our progress. We

should **increase selfless actions**. We will discuss this in more detail below.

Selfless action is divided into two types: general duties (saamaanya dharma) and particular duties (swadharma). General duties are applicable to everyone. They are of three types – yagna (giving back to balance what has been taken), daana (giving more than what has been taken) and tapas (austerities). yagna has been already listed as the Five Duties. tapas has been already listed as the Five Do's and Five Don'ts. When charity is given to the needy without expecting anything in return, it is called daana.

Particular duties are based on our position in life, profession, etc. It is God who has placed us in our position in life. So, doing our duty as required by our position is a way to worship God.

Whatever we do, we should do as a **gift to God** – Ishwara arpanam. This means, we should put our best effort into every action. Whatever we face, we should accept as a **gift from God** – Ishwara prasaadam. We can try to change unfavorable situations by doing remedial action and by doing things differently the next time. But we should accept the result got currently without complaining. This is the right attitude.

Every action will give us four kinds of results:

1. artha – means of sustenance, which provides the basic necessities to us and our dependants
2. kaama – means of comfort, which provides various kinds of luxuries to us and our dependants

3. dharma – benefit to society in the form of service, which reduces our indebtedness to the world
4. moksha – means to improve our character, which will take us towards the ultimate freedom

For example, let us consider a person who runs a provision shop. He earns money by the business. By this money, he is able to provide sustenance and comfort to himself and his family. As he buys in wholesale from the market and sells in retail to his customers in the neighborhood, the neighborhood is benefitted by his business. When he goes about his business, he will have to face several situations where there is a possibility for him to get angry, jealous, arrogant, etc. This provides him opportunity to expose the shortcomings in his character and also the opportunity to him to correct himself. Thus his business is like a gymnasium to hone his character. Also, the experiences that he gets will give him the lesson in life that everything is transient and that his happiness does not depend on external things.

The social benefit is availed only if he does his business in an **honest** manner. Otherwise, it will turn out to be harmful to the society. The character benefit is availed if he is **alert**, evaluates the situations and tries to improve himself.

The artha and kaama results are called **external results**. The dharma and moksha results are called **internal development**. Karma Yoga is focusing on the internal development and letting the external results take care of themselves as by-products. This is what is meant by “working without having the results as the goal” (nishkaama karma). When done in this manner, the action gradually results in a mind that

is free from strong likes and dislikes, which prepares the mind for meditation and spiritual knowledge.

For example, let us consider a person studying for an exam. Marks can be considered as external result. Knowledge of the subject can be considered as internal development. Karma Yoga is to focus on knowledge and let the marks come as by-product. As the person develops, even knowledge will become external result. Skill of studying will be internal development. As the person proceeds further, skill will be external result; character will be internal development. Finally, character will be external result; spiritual knowledge about the truth of one's real nature will be internal development.

At any time, if we choose internal development over external result, we will develop gradually and automatically. This is called Karma Yoga.

Meditation

Meditation is an important discipline to develop a personal relationship with God, imbibe a moral value that is understood and to deeply think about the nature of the self.

Though there are several types of meditation, one sequence of steps for a type of meditation called mental worship (maanasa puja) is presented here for the benefit of the reader. For this type of meditation, before you start, you need to decide your favorite form of God and the name or mantra that you want to chant. You can spend about 5 to 10 seconds at each step, unless a longer procedure is mentioned. Read through all the steps carefully and understand them before attempting to follow them.

1. Sit in a comfortable posture, with body and head straight without any strain. Let the hands rest together on the lap.
2. Gently close the eyes.
3. Be aware of the sounds outside.
4. Be aware of the form of your body.
5. Relax all the muscles of the body. Be aware of the different parts of the body and relax them – feet, calf muscles, thigh, hip, abdomen, chest, shoulders, upper arms, lower arms, hands, neck, face, jaw, forehead and ears.
6. Be aware of the movements of the body due to breathing.
7. Be aware of the breathing, without changing the breathing pattern.
8. Mentally wish good to everyone in this world. Forgive everyone for everything bad that they might have done. Thank everyone for everything good that they might have done. Wish everyone in this world with peace and prosperity in life.
9. Mentally detach yourself from all worldly roles like father, son, mother, daughter, brother, sister, student, teacher, employer, employee, neighbor, etc. Take on roles like a devotee of God, disciple of your Guru, aspirant after peace, pursuer of spiritual knowledge, etc.
10. Visualize the forms of your spiritual teachers and thank them for the inspiration, knowledge and guidance that they have given you.
11. Visualize a fully bloomed lotus at the center of your chest. Visualize the infinite all-pervasive God slowly condensing into a golden yellow luminous form of your favorite form of God seated in the lotus. The form of your deity should be seated facing the same direction as you are facing.
12. Let the deity slowly turn into live natural color.

13. Offer your salutations to the deity. Visualize the deity to gracefully accept your salutations with a slight compassionate smile.
14. Offer some welcome drink to the deity to refresh Himself/Herself. Enjoy the deity enjoying the taste of the drink.
15. Offer sandal paste on the forehead, hands and legs. Enjoy the deity feeling pleasant by the touch.
16. Offer a garland of flowers. Offer various flowers of different colors, shapes and sizes. Enjoy the deity being happy at the colors and forms.
17. Offer incense of mild sweet fragrance. Enjoy the deity being happy at the nice fragrance.
18. Offer light. As you wave the light in front of the deity watch the beautiful play of shadows on the form of the deity. Enjoy the smile on the face of the deity.
19. Offer various kinds of fruits, sweets and other tasty food items. Enjoy the deity tasting a bit of each of the items.
20. Chant the name of the deity or a short mantra of the deity 108 times or for 10 minutes. Offer each utterance to the deity, being aware that the deity is accepting your gesture of love.
21. Sit for sometime enjoying the peaceful presence of the deity.
22. Mentally prostrate before the deity and offer the fruits of your worship to the deity.
23. Let the form of the deity turn golden yellow, and then expand into infinite golden yellow light and merge with the infinite world in all directions. Now the whole world is the form of the deity.
24. Be aware of the breathing.
25. Be aware of the form of your body.
26. Be aware of the sounds around.
27. Slowly open your eyes. See your deity in the form of the world, including the various objects, people and creatures.

28. Bow down to the deity and get up slowly. Maintain the worshipful attitude towards the entire world for the rest of the day, and eventually for the rest of your life.

This simple mental worship will help establish a personal relationship with God. It will help improve the willpower to stick to morality and ethics. It will improve the judgment of what is right and what is wrong. It will give forbearance to face the ups and downs of life with poise. It will lead to a more peaceful life.

The steps 11 to 23 can be replaced by thinking deeply about a moral concept, a philosophical concept, meaning of a set of verses, etc. depending on the type of meditation. You can replace these steps by thinking deeply about any of the other sections in this book.

What is the Nature of Reality? Who am I?

We all perceive objects and beings with the senses, conceive ideas with the mind and we have an awareness of ourselves. Everything that we know and experience can be broadly brought under three entities – matter, mind and consciousness.

So far, in most of the discussions, we have mentioned that the individual is the jiva, which is essentially the mind. We said that God powers the jiva as the Consciousness within, and God forms the material and sentient cause of everything that exists, including matter and mind.

This model, consisting of the triad of individual (jiva), world (jagat) and God (Ishwara), is only an empirical model. This model helps us to start

our spiritual journey from our current experience and conviction. When we have developed sufficient purity and experience, we would naturally question the validity and utility of this system. There is no limit to the pleasure and possessions that can be achieved. How much ever we have, there will always be scope for having more and there will always be someone else who has more. And everything that is achieved in time has to be lost in time. This would leave us no hope for any absolute fulfillment. This will result only in suffering in the form of desire, greed, anger, jealousy, fear, arrogance, etc. Also, what is the purpose of going round and round in the Karma cycle?

When a jiva develops this dispassion (vairaagya) towards the pleasures, possessions and fame, which can be achieved as the result of action, then it opens up to a new goal and a new path. This is the quest after the absolute. This is the inward way (nivriddhi maarga). The jiva realizes that no amount of finite effort can lead to absolute fulfillment. The jiva approaches a teacher, who is knowledgeable (srotriya) and is established in wisdom (brahma nishtham), to know the way to absolute fulfillment.

The senses and mind are designed only to study the finite properties of objects. They do not have access to the subject which is behind the senses and the mind. Similarly, they do not have access to the nature of the substance behind the properties. Also, they perceive only differences in space and time. They cannot perceive something which does not change with space and time.

Today's science is based on materialism, which considers matter as the fundamental substance. Mind and consciousness are considered as

emergent phenomenon. This is a non-verifiable assumption. It is a belief based on which today's science stands.

Vedas take a different stance. **Consciousness (caitanya)** is the fundamental entity. [Please note that this is different from the Consciousness being talked about in the modern scientific discourses. They mean the sense of limited individuality (ahamkaara), which is a function of the mind.] Mind and matter are emergent phenomena. Also, the true nature of the individual is also pure Consciousness. Thus, my true nature and the fundamental entity of which everything is made of are not different.

No other experience or logic can prove or disprove these two axioms because they are beyond their jurisdiction. We can only take these as axioms and work out the logical implications. The implications, when analyzed carefully, are found not contrary to experience. So they can be accepted without any conflict with logic (yukti) or experience (anubhava). The benefit of the implications is astounding. It brings an end to all sorrow.

There are several methods (prakriya) to explain this concept. Here is a brief outline of one of them in the form of a series of steps.

Step 1: I am Saakshi Caitanya.

When we see a colour with our eyes, we identify ourselves with the eyes and judge the colour of the object being judged. When we judge the eyes, like myopia, color blindness, etc., we identify ourselves with the mind and judge the qualities of the eyes. When we judge the state

of the mind, like anger, confusion, love, hatred, etc., we identify ourselves with the intellect and judge the qualities of the mind.

The real 'I' is that entity which can never be the object of perception by the senses or conception by the mind, intellect, etc. I am the pure Subject, which can never become an object. This is called Consciousness. The body and mind are objects. I am the Subject. I am not this body or mind. I am not a part or product or property of the body or mind. **I am pure Consciousness (caitanya).**

Step 2: I am Brahma Caitanya.

Qualities belong only to objects. In any subject-object relationship, like seeing a form or hearing a sound or thinking about a sense organ or judging the mind, etc., the qualities being judged always belong to the object and not the subject. I am the ultimate Subject (aprameya), which can never become an object. So I am free from qualities (nirguna). Any change is change of qualities only. So I am changeless (nirvikaara). Any limitation posed by space and time is only change of qualities with respect to space and time. As I am changeless, I am not limited by space and time. So I am omnipresent (sarvagatah) and eternal (nityam). Thus, **I am Infinite (Brahman).**

Step 3: I am Advaita Caitanya.

My nature is of pure Existence and Consciousness. I am Infinite. There cannot exist two infinities. So, nothing exists other than me (ekam, adviteeyam). As I have no attributes, I am partless (akhanda). So I am one absolute partless infinite conscious existence. All diversity is only

transient appearance with me as the background. I am the screen, I am the projecting light and I am the witness of this movie called the world.

Step 4: I am Sarvaatmaka Caitanya.

Just as the dreamer creates a dream and identifies himself with one of the dream roles as himself, I have created this world and entered it as one of the jivas in the world. In reality, I am the pure Consciousness, the only Existence, like the dreamer of the dream. I am the material and sentient cause of the world. Just as all the dream objects are products of the dreamer, everything in this world are my products. If I identify myself with the pure Consciousness, I am Brahman. If I identify myself with the whole creation, I am the Ishwara. If I identify myself with a particular body-mind complex, I am a jiva. I am the one who plays the roles of the Ishwara and all the jivas.

Step 5: I am Sat-cit-aananda Caitanya.

Just as Existence and Consciousness are intrinsic to me, Happiness is also intrinsic to me. That is why, under any circumstance, I can decide to ignore everything and remain peaceful and happy. If I have decided to be happy unconditionally, no person, object or situation can make me unhappy. This freedom to be happy is intrinsic to me. This is an integral aspect of me. Thus, I am not only pure Existence and Consciousness, I am pure Happiness also. I am the one who lends **Existence, Consciousness and Happiness** to every living and non-living entity in the world, including the Ishwara himself.

This understanding of the essential unity of the triad of the individual (jiva), world (jagat) and God (Ishwara) is the last word in science and

religion. The goal of Hinduism is to take the individual to this. Everything else is a preparation towards this grand finale.

Essence of the Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is the essence of the teaching of the Vedas. It beautifully summarizes the concepts of Hinduism.

Gita's teaching is about how to live in the world without being touched by sorrow.

We cannot avoid possession and action. Bad action gives sorrowful results. Good action gives good results. But, one has to undergo some temporary inconvenience to do a good action. Also, nothing gained in this world is permanent. So the good results will come to an end. Thus, they also will cause sorrow. In fact, usually the sorrow of losing a convenience that we are used to, is much greater than not having had it at all. Also, however much a person possesses, there will always be scope for more. There will always be someone else who has more. These will cause sorrow in various forms like depression, greed, jealousy and anger. Thus, all possessions and actions are tainted by sorrow.

Wise men do not grieve over the arrival or departure of people, objects and situations in life (gataasoon agataasoons ca na anusocanti panditaah – Gita 2.11). The real nature of a person is not the body and the mind. It is pure Consciousness, which is eternal and of the nature of unconditional happiness. A person's sense of security, peace and happiness does not depend on any external entity. He is really free from all emotional dependencies. It is the ignorance of this fact that

causes all the sorrow in life. The only permanent solution to sorrow is to gain this knowledge of one's own true nature.

Strong likes and dislikes, attachment to the sense pleasure and uncontrolled mind are hindrances to gaining this knowledge. So he has to first become free from these. Then he should gain the right knowledge from a qualified teacher in a systematic manner. Right understanding and conviction of this truth is the only way to complete and permanent freedom from sorrow. This freedom from sorrow in its various forms like lust, greed, jealousy, anger, fear, anxiety, etc is called liberation (mukti). Such a person will move around in the world free from all expectations and helping everyone out of compassion.

Gita takes the person from wherever he is, gradually and systematically to this freedom.

Gita in One Verse

yogayukto vishuddhaatmaa vijitaatmaa jitendriyah

sarva bhootaatma bhootaatmaa kurvannapi na lipyate (5-7)

These are the stages of development:

1. yogayuktah - Doing right actions as offering to God and accepting the results as gift from God
2. vishuddhaatmaa - Becoming free from likes and dislikes, and their effects like greed, anger, jealousy and arrogance
3. vijitaatmaa - Controlling your mind by not perpetuating unwanted thoughts and by entertaining good thoughts
4. jitendriyah - Subduing your senses by removing all value attached to enjoyment of sense objects

5. sarva bhootaatma bhootaatmaa - Gaining the right understanding by which you see your own Self in all beings and all beings in your own Self

Having gone through all these stages in sequence, even if you work in this world you will not get tainted by the action (kurvannapi na lipyate).

Shades of Hinduism

Though at the absolute level, the true nature of the individual is infinite pure consciousness, Hinduism does not mandate that everyone should understand it here and now. It gives full freedom for a person to take from the teaching, only whatever he is convinced about and practice. He will gradually elevate himself step by step naturally over a period of time.

This has given rise various shades of Hinduism, which sometimes seem even contradictory. Here are some of the broad shades of Hinduism.

- **Atheistic:** Accepts freewill and law of karma, but does not accept that there is a sentient Ishwara. Nature and the law do not need a sentient Ishwara to create or manage. They can take care of themselves. Only the jivas are sentient. Nature and its laws are insentient. The purpose is to do good actions and enjoy good results, avoid bad actions and avoid bad results. There is no concept called getting out of the cycle.
- **Dualistic:** Accepts Ishwara as the supreme person, material and sentient cause, consciousness that powers the jiva, etc. as mentioned before. But jiva and Ishwara can never be essentially one. Ishwara is the whole and jiva is a part. The jiva

can get out of the cycle by dropping all desires for enjoyment and only desiring to serve Ishwara.

- **Non-dualistic:** Accepts Consciousness as the fundamental substance and the true nature of the individual to be of Infinite Blissful Conscious Existence at the absolute standpoint. However, accepts the triad of jiva, jagat and Ishwara at the empirical standpoint.

Hinduism has a concept of heaven and hell. They are temporary places that can be visited to enjoy or suffer special kinds of merits or demerits gained through action. Only the atheistic schools give some importance to going to heaven. The other schools play it down heavily as a big waste of time and effort. Heaven and its attraction are considered as distraction from the real goal of life, which is to get out of the cycle.

Hinduism accepts different shades as different concepts of reality from different points of view, required for different kinds of people in different stages of development. As long as these shades are not considered as the absolute truth from the absolute point of view, they are all acceptable.

Hindu Way of Life

Often Hinduism is called more as a way of life than as a religion. The following constitute the Hindu way of life.

- The core of Hinduism is a loving and reverential attitude towards the world and the living things in the world. It is God alone who has become the world and everything in it. So there

cannot be hate, fear or exploiting attitude towards the living and non-living things in the world. The relationship with the world is one of mutual love, reverence and help.

- A person should gradually move towards maximum contribution and minimum consumption. The success of a person is not determined by how much he has accumulated in life, but on how much he has given to the society, and has become pure and selfless.
- A disciplined and self-controlled life based on the understanding that one's happiness does not depend on external people, objects or situations. The body and mind are instruments. They should be maintained as useful servants and not be served like masters.

To lead a life with these principles, Hinduism prescribes several practices. Here are some of them. Not all Hindus follow these. However, it is recommended that every Hindu follow these in everyday life:

- Wake up before sunrise.
- Start the day by reminding yourself that it is God who has become the world.
- While putting the feet on the ground, worship Mother Earth thus: O Mother, I am stamping you only because I have no other option. Please forgive me and support me as a mother forgives and supports her child.
- While taking bath, pray to the water asking all the holy rivers like Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Narmada, Godavari, Sindhu and

Kaveri to merge in the water and sanctify it. Pray to the rivers to purify your body and mind by the bath.

- After bath, light a lamp and thank God for all the good things that you have got in your life.
- Before taking food, pray to God thus: O Lord, it is you who is the food, the vessels and the digestive fire in the body. I offer this food to you in the form of the digestive fire to sustain this body, which your temple. Please sanctify this food and give me strength, intelligence and dispassion.
- In the evening, during sunset time, light a lamp and thank God for all the good things you have got in your life.
- Either in the morning or in the evening, or both, spend about an hour in activities like:
 - Chanting some stotras (verses in praise of God composed by saints)
 - Singing some bhajans (devotional songs set to music)
 - Reading from books like Gita, Ramayana, Bhagavatam, Upanisads, life of saints, etc.
 - Doing puja (worship) using ingredients like flowers, incense, lamp, etc.
 - Doing mental puja (See the instructions given before)
 - Repeating a name of God for sometime
 - Listening to spiritual discourses
- Before going to sleep, remember the good things that happened to you and thank God. Remember the situations where you could have done better. Make a resolve to try to do better next time. Forgive all the people who might have misbehaved with you.

These types of activities will help to maintain the mind calm, loving and reverential throughout the day.

There are a number of festivals celebrated by the Hindus. Many of them are in the form of thanking God for the various blessings during the major season changes. These maintain the symbiotic relationship with nature. Many of them are in remembrance of various aspects of God like Rama, Krishna, Ganesha, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, etc. Many of them also mark occasions when God helped humans to ensure that virtue wins over vice.

Hindus also follow austerities of various kinds at various times of the month and year. These help us to gauge ourselves as to how much we are addicted to certain luxuries of life. These bring to light the limitations of our mind, and also serve as exercises to strengthen our mind.

Indian culture is an integral part of Hinduism in India. The art, literature, poetry, music, dance, drama, architecture, etc. are all very highly refined and subtle. They help us to elevate ourselves from the level of animals to humans. They help us to come out of gross animal instincts like lust, greed and violence.

Thus, Hinduism is not a part of life that has relevance only during some hours of the day or some days of the week. It provides the background for every moment of life every day, providing the right attitude to every action. It helps a person to move from lethargy (tamas) to activity (rajas) to harmony (satva). It makes the person live an integrated, peaceful and fruitful life that is in harmony with the whole world and all of humanity.

Frequently Asked Questions

Here are presented some frequently asked questions which are not already discussed in this book so far.

Why do we worship images?

We do not worship images. We worship God. God is everywhere. But to transact emotionally the human mind needs a symbol. For example, if you want to show your respect to the country, you hoist the national flag and salute it. Similarly, to worship God, there is no alternative than to invoke God in a symbol and worship God through the symbol. No one says, “Oh stone, thank you”. Everyone worships as “Oh God, thank you” only. Every religion and science too uses symbols. Every word that you are reading now is a symbol only. We cannot think or communicate without symbols. It is sheer prejudice to accept some symbols and not accept some other symbols.

Why do we follow rituals?

Rituals are also a necessity of the human mind. When you meet someone, you shake hands. That is a ritual. When you leave a person, you say good bye and wave your hand. Both are rituals. When you love someone, you give a greeting card and a flower. They are rituals. When you write a letter, you start with “Dear ...” and end with “With regards, ...” They are all rituals. Rituals help us to communicate our emotions and also to deepen our emotions. God knows the innermost thoughts in our mind. So God does not need any ritual. However, we need the ritual to communicate with ourselves and also to enhance our emotion. When we offer a flower to God, our love for God becomes deeper. Different religions have different rituals. If you watch the

proceeds of a church or an event like the inauguration of Olympics, you can see tons and tons of rituals followed. Humans cannot do away with rituals.

Why do we immerse the images of Ganesha and Durga after puja?

During Ganesh puja and Durga puja times, the images are immersed in water and destroyed after the puja. This is to remind ourselves that we do not worship the image. We invoke God in the image, worship God through the image and revoke God back into our hearts after the worship. After that the image has no value. Hinduism poses an open challenge to the people of other religions, who call Hindus as idolaters, to ritually destroy their symbols of worship in the manner that Hindus do. This shows who the real idolaters are and who are not.

Why is OM used to represent God?

The sound OM is composed of three parts: A (as the first vowel sound in apple), U (as the vowel sound in put) and M (as the last consonant in him). A is the basic sound. Every alphabet of every human language starts with this sound. It uses the inner most part of the human sound producing system. U uses the middle part of the human sound producing system. M uses the last point in the human sound producing system. Thus, these three sounds represent the whole human sound producing system, and thus they represent all the sounds that a human being can create. Thus, OM is a word that represents all the words. As God is all that exists put together, OM becomes the sound symbol of this concept of God. Almost all religions use a sound symbol which has A and M. Some religions use V instead of M, which also uses almost the last part of the sound organ.

Are Rama, Krishna, etc. historical?

Here are a few points to note:

1. Hindus are not really bothered much about the historicity. Hinduism is based on principles and not on personalities. So Hinduism does not depend on the historicity or not of even great people like Rama and Krishna.
2. The principles that are represented in the lives of Rama and Krishna are more important than their historicity.
3. The time of Rama and Krishna are much earlier compared to what is available to history. Because of that, not much physical historical evidence is available.
4. The verbal tradition of the Puranas (pre-history) and the Itihaasaas (epics), the living traditional memory of the people in the various places in India, which are associated with the events mentioned in the Puraanas and Itihaasaas, are enough pointers to the historicity.

Why is there discrimination based on birth in Hinduism?

The Vedas and the Gita talk only of division of people based on character and profession, and not based on birth.

- shudraas are defined as people who are naturally lethargic and not self-motivated. They pursue sense pleasures as the goal. They work best for the society only when guided by others. They are laborers.

- vaishyaas are defined as people who are selfishly active. They pursue wealth as goal. They are traders who run businesses and skilled craftsmen.
- kshatriyaas are defined as people who are selflessly active. They pursue power as goal. They are rulers, soldiers, etc.
- braahmanaas are defined as people who are intellectually active. They pursue knowledge as goal. They are teachers.

The division based on birth is of later origin. It might have been introduced due to difficulties of judging character. So profession became hereditary and division was based on that. Law of karma would work with this system to have the people born in the right family. Still, only duties were based on the divisions, and not privileges. When the society got corrupted over a period of time, the kshatriyaas and braahmanaas started usurping privileges for themselves. The other two were denied privileges. Finally, when knowledge was denied to the rest of the society, real degeneration started. This discrimination is not limited to Hinduism in India. Followers of every religion in India discriminate based on birth. It is a social problem and not a religious problem. Today, things are changing by making knowledge available to everyone. Secular knowledge is available through schools to everyone. There is a lack of spread of religious and spiritual knowledge. One of the goals of this book is to fill this gap. There is a lot of work to be done in this front to get the society back to its original glory.

Similarly, Hinduism does not have discrimination based on gender also.

Is Hinduism the cause of India's poverty?

India was rich when Hinduism was followed properly all over India. Every Muslim invader and every European trader came to India for its riches only. The descriptions by Chinese, Arabian and European travelers, who visited India even till the mid of the nineteenth century, talk about the great wealth, architecture, agriculture, trade and industry of India. The material decline of India started after the Muslim invasions. It was rich even when Europeans set foot on the soil of India. But, by the time Europeans left India, India was reduced to abject poverty. This points to the cause of India's poverty.

Can people convert to Hinduism?

If you believe in the basic tenets of Hinduism, you are already a Hindu. Here are some of them to recapitulate:

- I am wholly responsible for everything happens in my life and everything that I do in my life.
- There is one God who exists in and through everything in this world and the living beings in the world.
- God can be called by any name, and worshipped through any form and ritual.
- The goal of life is to become a better person, which means to be free from psychological defects like anger, greed, jealousy, lust, arrogance, etc.
- My happiness does not depend on external people, objects and situations. Happiness is an attitude and I have the full freedom at any point of time to be happy.

Hinduism is broad enough for people of other cultures to integrate the principles of Hinduism into their life without hurting their culture. This can be seen by the way Buddhism, which is an offshoot of Hinduism and shares a lot with Hinduism, has blended with the local cultures of every place that it got accepted, unlike some religions which destroy and replace the local cultures. Thus Buddhism in Tibet, China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, etc. are each unique and are very close to their native religions. The same is the case with Hinduism in Thailand, Cambodia, Bali, etc.

Thus Hinduism does not believe in horizontal conversion from one set of beliefs, culture and rituals to another. It believes only in vertical conversion of every human being to become a better human being.

Still however, if a person wants to pick up some aspects of Indian culture, he or she is welcome. The perennial Indian culture is rooted in and is inseparable from Hinduism.

Conclusion

This essential knowledge of Hinduism is necessary to everyone, especially to Hindus. I hope this small booklet helps in this.

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About the author

I am a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. Most of my understanding of religious, spiritual and philosophical ideas comes from the tradition Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The traditional foundation in Vedanta comes from the tradition of Swami Paramarthanandaji. You can visit the website <http://www.practicalphilosophy.in> for more details.

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