



Essence of Hinduism

Hinduism is perhaps the least propagated among its own followers. When there is a fairly common opinion among Hindus about who their saints and leaders are, and which their scriptures are, there is very less understanding of the formal definitions and concepts that they teach. Almost every Hindu would agree on many of the names of their saints and leaders - Rama, Krishna, Vyasa, Suka, Sankara, Alwars, Nayanmars, Ramanuja, Madhva, Caitanya, Vallabha, Nimbarka, Maratha and Kannada saints like Jnaneswar, Tukaram, Purandaradasa, North Indian saints like Kabir, Tulsidas, Surdas, Meerabai, modern saints and leaders like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ramana, Gandhi, Tilak, Tagore, Aurobindo, Bharati, etc. But, if we ask the person, "What was the leader's understanding of Hinduism?", "What did the leader teach about Hinduism?", he will not know. The kind of answers we might get are like "Hinduism cannot be defined.", "Hinduism is merely a way of life.", "There is no common concept of Hinduism.", etc. Much of these statements are unfounded. We can easily find that more than 99% of the Hindu saints and leaders in the past thousand and more years share a set of basic principles (called Vedanta) that are common. Almost every Hindu knows that the Vedas, Gita, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, various stotras and scriptures are the ones that define the concepts of Hinduism. But if you ask him what they say about Hinduism, he will not be able to list even a few concepts. Even though the common Hindu might not know or might not have thought about a structured presentation of concepts, there exists a structure. If the salient points of the structure are listed and told to the common Hindu, he will be surely able to relate his beliefs, practices and "way of life" to be in consonance with the list of concepts.

Here are listed some of the high level common salient concepts. References to the relevant verses in the Bhagavad Gita are given in brackets.

1. The individual, called **jiva** is the possessor of freewill. As freewill is "free" from matter, memories and emotions, the jiva is not a part or product or property of the body or mind. The jiva is an independent entity, who expresses and experiences through the body and mind. (15.7, 15.8, 15.9, 15.16, 2.12, 2.13, 2.22)
2. The jiva is wholly responsible for all the situations faced in life. (6.5) The present situation faced by the jiva is the result of the past actions (physical, verbal and mental) of the jiva. The future situations that will be presented to the jiva will be the result of the past and present actions of the jiva. The jiva cannot escape the good and bad consequences of its actions, even by death. (6.41, 6.42, 16.18, 16.19, 16.20, 9.3, 13.22) This is called the **Law of Karma**.
3. **Isvara** is the sum total of all that exists. (7.4, 7.5, 11.7, 11.13, 11.38) Isvara is that Supreme Being, to whom, the entire material Universe is the body, the sum total of the minds of all jivas is the mind and identifies with the whole of existence. So, Isvara is everywhere as everything. (11.5, 9.4, 13.14, 13.15, 13.16, 13.17)
4. Isvara has created, or rather has become or appears as, the **jagat** (Universe) for the benefit of the jivas to express and experience, by which they will mature in wisdom, which is the purpose of the existence of the Universe. For this, Isvara creates, sustains and recycles the Universe. (9.17, 10.20, 13.17) The jivas continue to exist with all their past effects and impressions intact even on recycling of the Universe. (8.19)
5. Isvara knows the innermost thoughts and intentions of every jiva. (10.20, 18.63) Isvara oversees the reward of every physical, verbal and mental action of every jiva in a fair and appropriate manner. (9.19, 7.21) This does not make Isvara judgmental because, Isvara is not different from the

whole of existence. It is Isvara, as it were, that enjoys or suffers as the jiva itself. (13.15, 13.23, 9.24) Isvara is compassionate to every jiva because the jiva is not apart from Isvara. (7.7) It is just the Law of Nature that results in the reward. Isvara wants every jiva to learn from the good and bad experiences in life and grow in wisdom. (4.33)

6. Isvara's teachings are available in the form of the **Vedas**, which was revealed to rishis in the distant past. (4.1) Isvara teaches the jivas through various saints in all places in all ages. (4.3, 4.34) Isvara is accessible to any sincere jiva in any place in any age. (7.21, 4.10) Occasionally, Isvara comes in the midst of the jivas in the garb of another jiva (incarnation) to help and teach the jivas. Isvara has come innumerable times in the past and will come innumerable times in the future. (4.6, 4.7, 4.8) Any teaching of anyone in any age is acceptable as authentic if it does not contradict the Vedas. (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 13.25, 13.26, 16.23, 16.24)
7. By having a relationship with Isvara, which is based on faith, gratitude and love, the jivas can face the ups and downs of life with poise. The relationship will help them to be honest, compassionate, disciplined, unselfish, peaceful and happy even under extreme situations in life. With this equanimity and poise, the jivas will be able to learn from the various experiences, grow in wisdom and understand that they are not apart from Isvara. (12.13-12.20, 9.34, 12.6, 12.7) This relationship is called **Bhakti**.
8. To develop the relationship with Isvara, **worship** is a very effective exercise. Isvara can be worshiped as without form or through any form. It depends on the temperament of the worshiper. (12.2, 12.3, 12.4) The worship can be physical, verbal or mental. As Isvara is everywhere, knows the innermost thoughts and is compassionate, all that is needed is love and sincerity. (9.26) Isvara will know even if the jiva calls by any name. Isvara can be worshiped as male or female or neither or beyond. Isvara can be worshiped as any aspect of Nature or any form. (11.5) Different forms of

mental worship is called **meditation**. Hinduism has developed a detailed system of preparations and procedures of meditation that is suitable to people of different temperaments. (6.10-6.28) Usage of images and other representations of Isvara helps to concentrate the mind and form a personal emotional relationship with Isvara. Stories of incarnations, saints and devotees, stories of divine personalities which incorporate various aspects of Isvara, allegories that help meditation on various qualities of Isvara and various legends help forming a personal relationship with Isvara. Any form of worship invoking an all-pervading, all-knowing and all-powerful entity is accepted as worship of Isvara. (7.21, 7.22)

9. As Isvara is the whole of existence, anything that the jiva does is an offering to Isvara and any situation that the jiva faces in life is from Isvara only. Thus, every moment of life is an interaction with Isvara only. So, doing full justice to the current situation in which the jiva is placed by doing its duty as an offering to Isvara, is itself a form of worship of Isvara. (18.46, 9.27, 11.55) This is called **Karma Yoga**.
10. When the jiva understands fully and deeply that it is not apart from Isvara, the goal is reached. Freed from the cycle of desire, action and result, the jiva merges with Isvara and attains real peace. This goal is called **moksha** - freedom. (13.31, 13.32, 6.29, 6.30, 6.31, 2.71, 2.72)

With these as the common salient points, the details and practices vary from sect to sect and even person to person. Hinduism gives that freedom to the individual. Hinduism welcomes the forming, merging and dissolution of any number of sects to cater to the different needs of people of various temperaments, provided the basic principles of honesty, love, discipline and unselfishness are upheld. Hinduism also encompasses various non-Vedanta viewpoints, which differ from the above listed points to various degrees. However, as mentioned earlier, almost all of the today's practicing Hindus would agree with the above mentioned points.