

## *Dedication*

To celebrate the graduation of my daughter Smita, I have been inspired to write these reflections on the history and meaning of our Hindu heritage. This publication is a gift which I hope will accompany her as a guide in the journey of her life as she ventures into the multi-religious world. I have written an epistle to my daughter, rather than a scholarly tome, because it summarizes the origins and truths of our religion as I have found them through my own understanding and experience. May she ponder them, be proud of their beauty and wisdom, and keep this summary as a remembrance of my devotion. Hari Om.

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Durham, North Carolina  
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# An Introduction to Hinduism

## What is Hinduism?

The word “Hindu” does not occur in the Vedas, the revelations of this religion; rather, it derives its name from the river Sindhu in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent Sindh, now in Pakistan. At the time of Alexander the Great, the Greeks and the Persians mispronounced the name of the inhabitants of the country to the East of the river Sindhu as Hindus; thus, the religion of these inhabitants became known as Hinduism. Others called the Sindhu river, Indus; hence the origin of the words India and Indians.

The correct nomenclature for Hinduism is the Vedic Religion or Sanatana Dharma. The word Sanatana means Eternal in Sanskrit and the word Dharma, although rather complex, basically means religion. Sanatana Dharma is a religion based on eternal principles and values of life.

Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are all religions founded by individuals. The dates of their inception are well established and their authors are known. No such dates or founder can be identified for Hinduism. It has grown and evolved naturally, and therefore remains gloriously undefined. Sanatana Dharma also means it is without a beginning or end. Inasmuch as Hinduism began with the world, continues to exist, and will only end with the world itself, it is truly eternal.

## Hinduism - A Way of Life

Hinduism is not merely a religion. It is more appropriate to call it a fellowship of religions because of its liberal absorption of the faiths of others. Hinduism is a way of life. It deeply permeates the life of every Hindu from the moment of birth, be he a believer or a non-believer, a scholar or an illiterate. An atheist is not precluded from being a Hindu; hell is not envisioned for the agnostic.

Hinduism accepts the *reality* that there are varying intellectual and spiritual levels in each one of us; hence, we may strive to obtain the same goal, but follow different paths.

Hinduism offers different religious approaches to persons of different aptitudes, depending on whether one is a philosopher or a technician, a mystic or a person of action, an intellectual or a simple person of faith. Hinduism allows each one of us to be guided by our individual spiritual experience. The Sanskrit term for this is Adhikaribheda.

## The Scriptures

The Vedas are the revealed scriptures of this religion and are written in Sanskrit. The Scriptures are divided into two groups: revelations (Sruti) and tradition (Smriti). The Vedas are considered to be the primary authority, while the Smriti texts are deemed secondary (Chart 1).

The Vedas literally mean “knowledge,” which is believed to be eternal, valid for all time and ages. By tradition, they have been passed down by sages and rishis. The Vedas are four in number: Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. Each Veda text is divided into three parts: Karma Kanda, Upasana Kanda and Vedanta (also called the Upanishads). The Upanishads contain the essence of Hindu philosophy and mysticism.

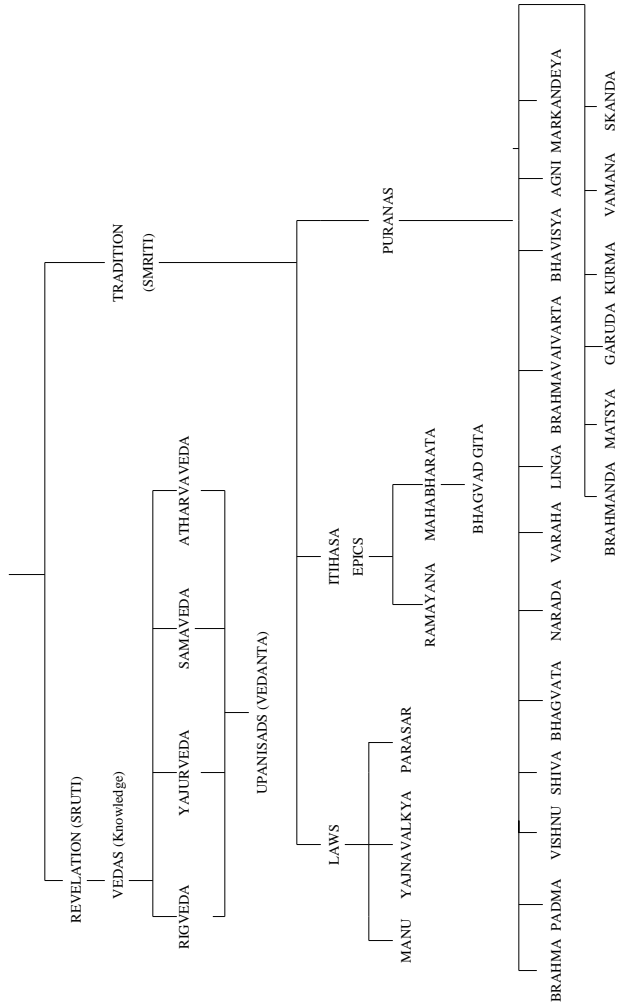
The secondary texts are further divided into three groups: Laws, Epics and the Puranas. The three major law texts are: Manu smriti, Yajnavalkya smriti and Parasara smriti. These laws can be modified or adapted to the needs of an age.

Two major Epics or Itihasas are *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The former has been dated around 2300 BC and the latter around 1400 BC. *Mahabharata* contains the famous dialogue between Lord Sri Krishna and Prince Arjuna, called the *Bhagvad Gita*. The *Bhagvad Gita*, the Divine Song, is the gist of Hindu philosophy. It is a primary text considered a part of Vedanta.

The epics teach the greatest of truths in a story form. Stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are related in gatherings, big and small, throughout India. They are known even to the most illiterate Hindu, and have been handed down through the ages by word of mouth. From these stories, people have learned the rules and the codes of ideal conduct for

Chart 1

RELIGIOUS LITERATURE



man and woman, patrician and plebeian.

The Puranas are eighteen in number, the most popular one being the Bhagvata Purana.

Vedic teachings were related orally. The Vedas had been in existence for many centuries prior to Vyasa, who only classified the Vedas into four parts. He was the compiler of the Vedas, rather than its author.

Hindu mythology revolves around Vedic Gods, the two Epics, and the Puranas.

### **No Dogmatism: Freedom to Think**

Though Hinduism accepts the authority of the Vedas, it does not believe in a dogma and rejects the exclusive claim of even a highly evolved individual to a monopoly on Truth. Intelligent and critical inquiry is one of the canons of scriptural interpretation recognized by Hinduism.

The Rigveda states, "Let noble thoughts come to us from every side." A vivid example of this attitude is found in the *Bhagvad Gita*. Lord Krishna says to his disciple Arjuna at the end of his teaching, "Thus has the wisdom, the secret of all secrets, been declared to you by me; having reflected over it fully, then act, as you choose to act," (Chapter 18, Verse 63).

In accord with this ideal, Lord Buddha advised prince of Kosaladesh, "Do not accept what I have said to you because it has been so said in the past; ... do not accept it because it is also in holy scriptures; ... but if you find that it appeals to your sense of discrimination and conscience as being conducive to your benefit and happiness, then only accept it and live up to it." Thus, according to the Hindu way of thought, a prophet will constantly counsel his generation, but will never compel.

The combination of reason and revelation is responsible for the affinity of religion and philosophy in Hinduism. Religion without philosophy tends to be dogmatic and superstitious. Philosophy without religion degenerates into dry intellectualism.

## On Religious Tolerance

The fundamental tenet of Hinduism is -- as many minds, so many faiths. The Rigveda states, "The Truth is one, and sages call it by various names." The Upanishads declare that, "Just as cows which are of varied hues yield the same white milk, all the different paths lead to the same goal." Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagvad Gita*, "As men approach Me, so do I receive them. All paths lead to Me, O Arjuna." Around 300 BC King Ashoka had this edict inscribed on his stone pillars: "The king, beloved of the Gods, honors every form of religious faith, but considers no gift or honor so much as the increase of the substance of religion, whereof this is the root: to revere one's own faith and never to revile that of others. Whoever acts differently injures his own religion while he wrongs another's."

A great Hindu saint of the last century, Sri Ramakrishna, conducted a series of successful experiments with God realization, and came to the conclusion that the different faiths are like different tributaries which finally merge into the river and become one.

In our own time, Mahatma Gandhi said, "I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God-given, and I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe that, if only we could all of us read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at the bottom all one and were all helpful to one another."

Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Hinduism certainly included the Vedas, but it also contained a broader vista. Without impairing the dignity of Hinduism, he saw no inconsistency in paying equal homage to the best of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. Mahatma Gandhi's prayer book, *Ashram Bhajanavali*, contains Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Zoroastrian and Christian Prayers.

From early history, Hindus have been known to shelter the persecuted fleeing from other lands. They gave shelter to the early Christians and Jews who were fleeing from perse-

cution and also to the Parsis, Zoroastrians being persecuted in Persia.

Religious tolerance may be a politically correct term in today's context; however, Swami Bharati Krishna Tirtha disagrees. He says, "I object to the word religious tolerance. You tolerate something that is injurious, according to your view. And when we talk about tolerating other religions, it means that we dismiss beforehand all those other religions as being wicked or unrighteous, but which we have the great magnanimity, the great breadth of mind, to tolerate! That very word tolerate [used in this context] is an objectionable word; it is an insult." This is the tradition of Hinduism -- reviling no religion and honoring truth, wherever it may come from and whatever garb it may wear.

Hinduism does not believe in horizontal conversion, that is, switching from one formal faith to another. In contrast, Hinduism believes that real religious conversion is vertical which means striving to become a better person. If the heart is not converted, conversion of faith is of no avail.

A conversation between C. Bharati Swami and an American tourist in 1953, sets forth the correct Hindu attitude towards conversion. " 'Why must it be,' impatiently demanded an earnest foreign tourist, 'that you will not convert other peoples to Hinduism? You have such a beautiful religion, and yet you keep so many struggling souls out of it. If you say 'yes' I will be the first to become a Hindu!'

'But why' came the counter question, 'do you want to change your religion? What is wrong with your faith?' Taken aback, but not daunted, the tourist said, 'I cannot say what is wrong, but it has not given me satisfaction.'

'Indeed, it is unfortunate,' was the reply, 'but tell me honestly whether you have given it a real chance. Have you fully understood your religion and lived according to it? Have you been a true follower and yet found the religion wanting?'

'I am afraid I cannot say that, Sir.'

'Then we advise you to go back and be a true follower of your faith first; live truly by the word of the Lord, and if even then you feel unfulfilled, it will be time to consider what

should be done.’

‘Then, Sir’, exclaimed the tourist, ‘your religion would inspire a Christian a better Christian, a Muslim a better Muslim and a Buddhist a better Buddhist. This day I have discovered yet another grand aspect of Hinduism! What you must change is not your faith but your life’.

### **Brahman: Ultimate Reality**

One of the things that greatly impressed our ancestors was transient nature of things and beings. Of every subjective and objective experience, it may truly be said, “Even this shall pass away.” Our ancestors wondered whether change itself is the ultimate reality, or an unchanging essence is the ground of all changes? Just as the later Greek philosophers, Hindu sages first hoped to answer this question by analysis of external nature. But they found that the problem of ultimate reality cannot be solved through the study of the visible outer universe.

Other seekers directed their attention to the inner world -- within man himself. By means of self-control and concentration they discovered that the realm of the mind is infinitely more real and more deep than the realm of gross physical matter. The ultimate reality they discovered is known to us as Brahman and the symbol for Brahman is AUM.

The word Brahman comes from the root “brh” with two meanings: “to increase” and to “nourish.” Thus, it literally means “that which is big.” There is no higher degree of the superlative with which it may be compared. “Big” means it takes up all the space; it has nowhere to go because it is everywhere. Brahman never diminishes. Being the biggest, it contains everything else. It is larger than space and not limited by time. It is the reality of existence and non-existence alike. Brahman is beyond speech. Plato comprehended this when he said he would never try to put the highest truth in writing because it cannot be done. The Absolute is without shape and form and without beginning or end.

The Universal Spirit is not considered either male or female, and is referred to by the impersonal pronoun, *Tat*,

meaning *That*. The one statement that encompasses all of Vedanta is *Tat Tvam Asi* meaning thou art *That*, as well as you are that eternal Truth and you need not look around you to find God.

In the Upanishads, there is an illuminating story about a young boy who asked his father for proof that the Absolute, which is not visible, really exists. The father asked his son to bring a fruit from the mighty banyan tree, and to break it open. The young boy split the fruit and found a tiny seed within. But when he split the seed he found nothing inside the seed. The father explained that inside the seed is something invisible to the eye, out of which the mighty banyan tree grows. It may not be seen, but it exists; we know it does, because of its effects.

As a matter of fact, we are thinking of the unthinkable, describing the indescribable and seeking to know the unknowable. That is why our speech falters; it is inadequate and often contradictory. Thus, the nature of this reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately comprehended, except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and pure in spirit. Self purification, self control and meditation are the means of preparing the mind for *Vicara*, an enquiry into the nature of Truth. *Vicara* is in the form of *Sravana*, *Manana* and *Nididhyasana*. *Sravana* refers to hearing of the Truth from the Sruti. *Manana* refers to reflection upon what is heard, and *Nididhyasana* means contemplation of the Truth.

In the past many saints such as Gautama Buddha, Sri Ramakrishna and Adi Sankaracharya have realized Brahman. I believe that many saints of our time such as Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi have also realized Brahman.

We, the members of the human family, are not all philosophers. Only a highly qualified spiritual aspirant can attain an understanding of Brahman and meditate upon it. For the rest of us, the approach to Brahman lies through the personal God, the Isvara. We want something which we can touch and feel; something which we can see; something before which we can kneel. It does not matter whether it is a book, an empty

building or a building inhabited by numerous figures. A book will satisfy some, an empty building will satisfy others, while yet others will not be satisfied unless they see something visible inhabiting the building.

The Brahman is transcendental meaning beyond the senses; Isvara is immanent meaning all pervading or omnipresent. The Brahman is often called *Nirguna* or attribute-less, while Isvara is *Saguna* or with attributes. A high degree of symbolism has evolved to explain the attributes and qualities of the Absolute to the layman. Diverse iconographical features are depicted for the various deities at different times, depending on the roles they perform.

### **Many Gods or One God?**

Usually a newcomer to Hinduism is confused about many Gods and idol worship. Hindu sages have not given different Gods to posterity; they have only given us different concepts of the same Godhead, taking into consideration the limitations and emotional demands of the human mind and intellect.

An idol is like the flag of a country. The flag is not the country, but it represents the country; therefore, the countrymen have an emotional attachment to the flag itself. Similarly, an idol is a symbol of God. The mind cannot worship in abstraction. Hinduism states that an individual may worship God in any form they like. The form is not important; the name is not to be debated; it is the intensity of devotion to God that matters. It is the attitude of worship, called *Bhakti* in Sanskrit, that is of real consequence. Worshiping an idol in the tradition of Hinduism does not mean we are worshiping that inanimate object as God, but it means that we are worshiping that omnipresent Divinity in the form of an icon before us. We are worshiping God in the idol and not the idol as God.

Gods and goddesses of the Hindu Pantheon are shown with several arms, faces, weapons and superhuman qualities. This is done to show the Ultimate to be above all human qualities.

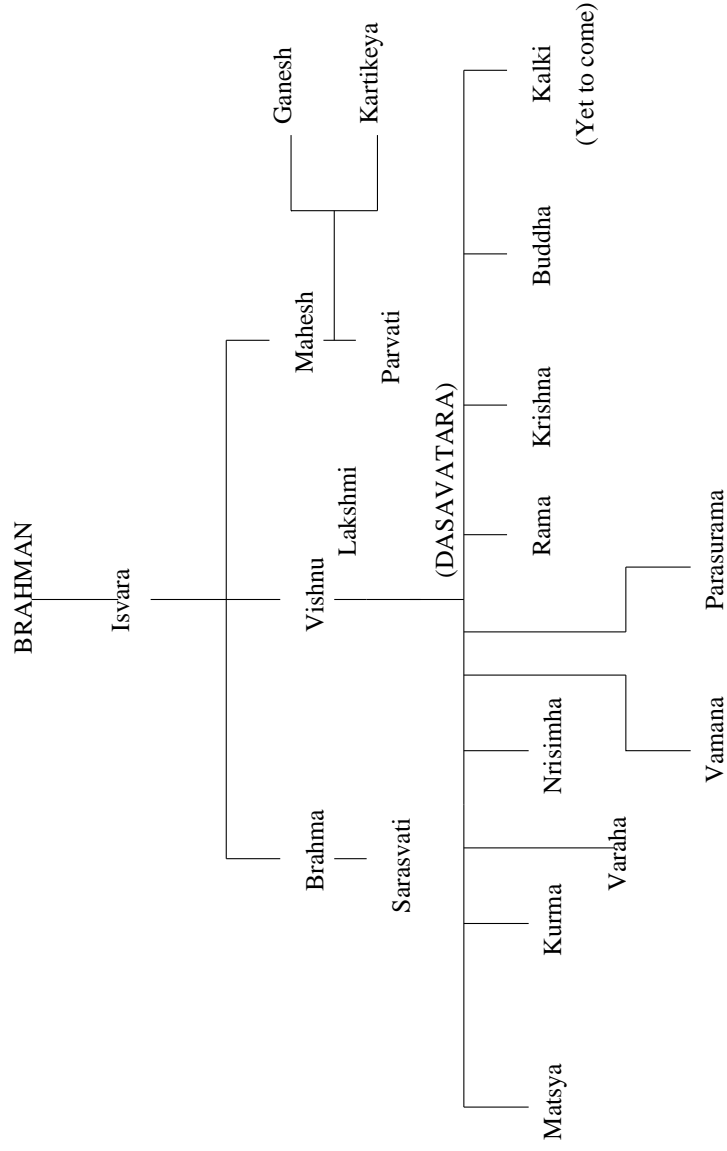
The “active” Isvara is responsible for the creation, sustenance and ultimate re-absorption of the visible universe. The Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are three aspects of Isvara responsible for the three functions. The energy needed to carry out the respective functions became personified in the Goddesses Sarasvati, Lakshmi and Parvati. Sarasvati is the Goddess of wisdom and learning. She holds the Veena, the embodiment of music and rhythm, in the cosmic universe. Lakshmi is the consort of Vishnu. She brings prosperity and grace to the human race. Parvati is the consort of Shiva, prodding us towards the path of righteousness. Ganesha and Kartikeya are two sons of Shiva and Parvati.

In order to save the pious from the evil forces, Vishnu and Lakshmi incarnate on this earth from time to time, for example as Rama and Sita, and Krishna and Radha (Chart 2). Much of Hindu mythology revolves around the Deities shown in this chart.

Whatever form of the supreme is adopted for worship, they are all different forms of the same Godhead. Truth is one, but sages call it by different names. These names, honored and worshiped by various religions, are but symbols which enable finite minds to grasp the infinite. Just as all rainwater finally flows into the ocean, so does all worship, offered to any Deity, ultimately reach the Supreme. What is needed is a loyalty to one’s own ideals and a positive respect, not mere toleration, for the ideals of others.

All of us approach one God by various names, such as Isvara, Rama, Krishna, Jehovah, Allah, God, and so on. The Allah of Islam is the same as the God of Christians and the Isvara of Hindus. The God of Gandhi cannot be different from the God of Mother Theresa. The names do not indicate individuality but indicate attributes. The common man has tried in his humble way to describe almighty God by giving Him attributes, though He is above all attributes — inde-scribable, inconceivable and immeasurable. He is one and yet many. He is smaller than an atom, and bigger than the Himalayas. He is contained even in a drop of ocean, yet not even the seven seas can encompass Him. Pure reason is pow-

Chart 3: The Deities



erless to know Him. Living faith in God means acceptance of the brotherhood of mankind. It also means equal respect for all religions.

### **Many Paths**

Due to the freedom of intellectual inquiry, we find a variety of views within Hinduism. According to Mahatma Gandhi, belief in one God is the corner-stone of all religions. “But I do not foresee a time when there would be only one religion on earth in practice. In theory, since there is only one God, there can only be one religion. But in practice, no two persons I have known have had an identical conception of God. Therefore, there will perhaps always be different religions answering to different temperaments and even climactic conditions.”

Hinduism believes that the Supreme Being may be approached through several paths, such as Jnana (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion), Nishkama Karma (selfless action) and Raja Yoga (meditation). In a lighter vein, the first three have been referred to as www -- wisdom, worship and work. In fact the path trodden by the seeker may be a combination of two or more of these disciplines, depending upon individual choice in consonance with temperament, aptitude and attitude. All paths, as long as they are based on righteousness, love, truth, and non-violence, are acceptable according to the Hindu way of life.

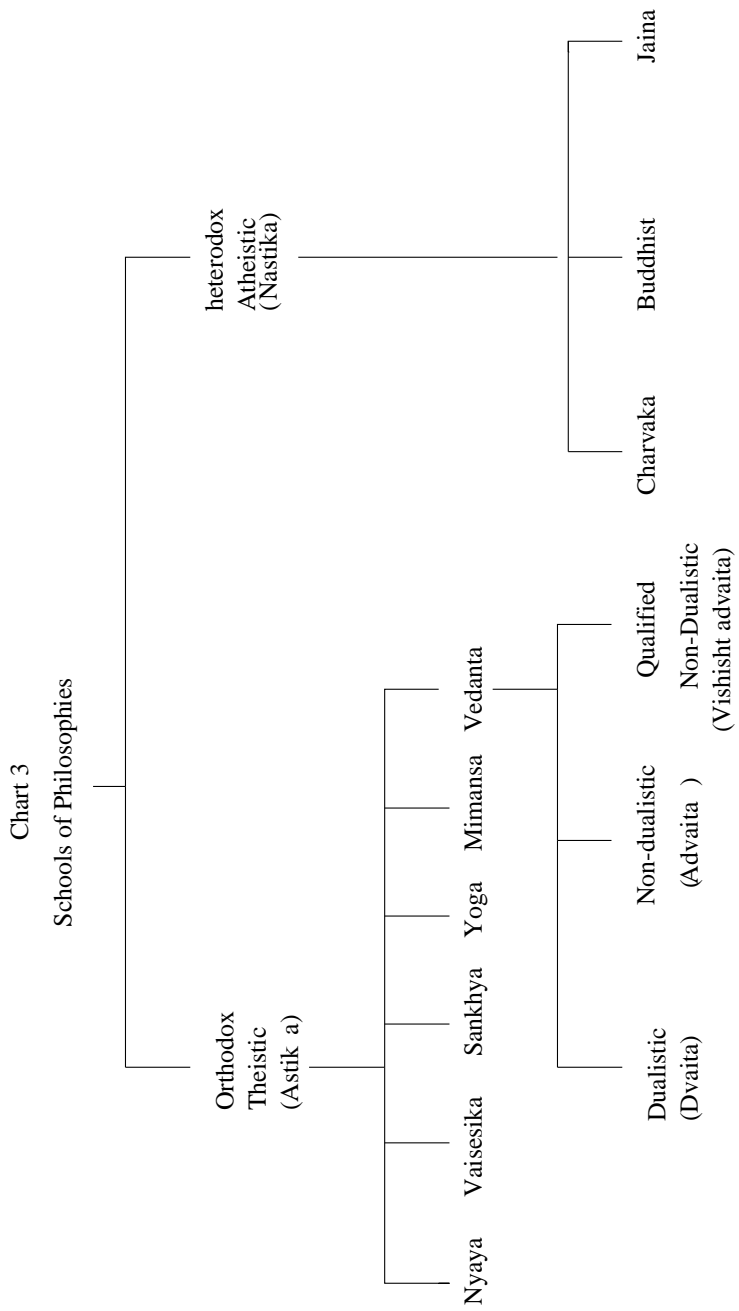
In the *Bhagvad Gita*, Sri Krishna says, “You have choice over your action but not over the results thereof. Do not [take yourself to] be the author of the results of action; do not be attached to inaction.” Overcoming laziness and indifference, we are exhorted to work. Karma Yoga refers to the performance of action with the attitude that all results are shaped by the laws of the Lord. By cultivating this attitude, we no longer suffer the sorrow and regret that arise when the result of our action falls short of our expectations. Sri Krishna further says, “Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work a man attains the supreme goal of life.”

There are six main obstacles or vices which could detract us from performing the right action: lust, anger, greed, infatuation, vanity, and jealousy. To overcome these, one should practice some of the essential virtues taught to us in our epics -- *Satyam* meaning truth, *Ahmisa* meaning non-violence, and *Vairagya* meaning the detachment from desires.

### **Different Philosophies**

There are various philosophies of Hinduism that attempt to address the central theme of the relationships among God, soul, and matter. The schools of philosophies are divided into two major categories -- orthodox or theistic, and heterodox or atheistic. The former believe in the Vedas as the primary authority while the latter do not. Three major schools in the latter group are Charvaka, Buddhist and Jain. There are six schools in the first group Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. The most popular among these is Vedanta with its own schools -- Dvaita meaning Dualistic, Vishishtadvaita meaning Qualified Non-Dualistic and Advaita meaning Non-Dualistic (Chart 3).

The Advaita school believes that God is both the efficient and the material cause of the world, much like the spider who creates the web out of himself. Soul is not different from God. The Dvaita school believes that there are differences between (1) God and Soul, (2) Soul and Soul, (3) God and matter, (4) Soul and matter, (5) one material thing and another. God is the efficient cause of the world and not its material cause. The example of a potter making the pot from clay is given here. Soul is saved by the knowledge that it is dependent upon and is under the control of God. The Vishishtadvaita school believes that there are three ultimate realities: God, Soul, and matter. Of these, God alone is independent reality, while the other two are dependent upon Him. God is the Soul of souls and of nature. He is the supreme moral governor and redeemer.



## Oneness of Creation

Once Mahatma Gandhi was asked to define the essence of Hinduism. They argued, “we have no simple Kalma that we find in Islam, nor do we have 3-16 John of the Bible.” After some reflection, Mahatma Gandhi said that he regarded the first Mantra of Isopanishad (one of the Upanishads) as containing the essence of Hinduism. This mantra is divided into four parts or gems. The first part is, “All this, whatsoever moves in this universe, including those that move not, is indwelt or pervaded or enveloped or clothed by the Lord.” The other three parts are corollaries to the first part. Thus, God is everywhere. We search for Him in vain in temples, churches and mosques, and do not find Him. We have looked everywhere but have forgotten to look in our own hearts. Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagvad Gita*, “O Arjuna, Isvara abides in the hearts of all beings.” Eknath Easwaran says, “When we discover that the Lord of Love is within us, we have entered into the state of joy and security which Jesus calls the kingdom of heaven within.” But the Divinity cannot be restricted to one individual, to a group, or to a geographic region. God is everywhere. Based on the unifying idea of this mantra, the spirit of Hinduism has grown so large that it embraces everyone and everything.

From Atharvaveda, we learn, “The whole world is one nest.” We may belong to different countries and cultures, races and religions, yet we all dwell in the same house. We must learn to live happily together. From Kathopanishad, we learn, “Let us share and enjoy together.”

What nationality is the Sun? Russian or American?

What color is the air? Black, Brown or White?

What is the religion of water? Hinduism, Christianity, Islam?

Which class does the Earth belong to? Lower class or upper class?

Which race does space belong to? The human race?

All five essential elements of Nature are universal — owned by no one, enjoyed by everyone. Nature is God’s gift to mankind. Let us share it and enjoy it together. Let us preserve it and protect it together.

We may wear different skins, we may speak different tongues, we may think in different shades, yet we are linked and locked together. “The whole world is one big Family.” Born on the same planet, gazing at the same stars, living for the same purpose, we are one family. The Earth is our home. God is everywhere and in everyone; therefore, our love for God must translate into our love for fellow human beings. This led the Vedic sage to proclaim, “May I be able to look upon all beings with the eye of a friend.” This love for our fellow beings is conveyed in the Upanishadic prayer, “May all be happy. May all be free of disease. May all realize what is good. May none be subject to misery.” As a further step in the spiritual evolution, Isopanishad in a later Mantra declares, “When to the seeker, all beings have become one in his own Self, how shall he feel deluded thereafter? What grief can there be to him who sees oneness everywhere?”

If God is all, then all living beings, not just humans, must be sacred, and no injury should be caused to any living being. The highest value is non-violence. The implied reverence to plants, trees and animals from time immemorial, has made a Hindu give spiritual emphasis to ecology and the environment — considered contemporary issues. Eknath Easwaran states, “It is an urgent need of our time to recognize the unity of all forms of life, and the ultimate relationship between water, earth, air, plants and all creatures ... Salvation, self-realization, nirvana, moksha — these are just different words for the same discovery of the unity of all life. This is what we have come into this life to accomplish and until we accomplish this, we have not attained fulfillment.”

### **Who is a Hindu?**

Balgangadhar Tilak once said, “One who believes that Truths given in the Vedas are self evident and eternal, is a Hindu.” Some say, “One who says I am a Hindu is a Hindu.” There are many opinions regarding the core beliefs. The following are the underlying beliefs common among Hindus.

1. Hindus believe in reincarnation, meaning the evolution through many births until all karmas have been resolved, and moksha meaning spiritual knowledge and liberation from the cycle of rebirth. No one will be eternally deprived of this destiny.
2. Hindus believe in karma, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words and deeds.
3. Hindus believe in a one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent.
4. Hindus believe that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution.
5. Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore they practice non-violence.
6. Hindus believe that no single religion provides the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine religious paths are facets of God's pure love and light, deserving respect and understanding.

*Ahimsa paramo Dharma* -- "Non-violence is the greatest of laws" is perhaps Hinduism's greatest contribution to mankind. Mahatma Gandhi used this as the cornerstone of the Indian Independence struggle in the first half of this century. Since then, oppressed people all over the world have adopted it or drawn hope from it. The Reverend Martin Luther King in the United States and South Africa's Nelson Mandela adopted Mahatma Gandhi's teachings to achieve their own goals.

Swami Vivekananda said, "Thus the whole object of the system is by constant struggle to become perfect, to become divine, to reach God and see God, and this reaching God, seeing God, becoming perfect, 'even as the Father in Heaven is perfect,' constitutes the religion of the Hindus." This, in a nutshell, is the crux of Hinduism. It is a religion, a way of life, a belief, that offers paths of spiritual development and

exploration of the Ultimate Reality that aims at realization of and union with the Ultimate Truth.

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