



Understanding
HINDUISM
basic concepts explained

D.C. RAO

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UNDERSTANDING HINDUISM*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

By Dr. D.C. Rao

Hinduism elicits two opposing reactions. It is admired by many as an ancient philosophy with a soaring vision of cosmic unity and an unreserved respect for other religions. But others regard Hinduism as an ethnic religion that is complex, full of contradictions, and riven by superstition and caste divisions. Despite scores of introductory books on Hinduism and decades of closer contact with the West – as the number of Hindus in North America and Europe has grown to five million – a coherent understanding of Hinduism is yet to emerge. Promoting such an understanding is the aim of these brief essays.

The essays are addressed to the critical reader who seeks an authentic resolution of the opposing views of Hinduism. The goal is that the reader acquires a clear understanding of Hinduism's fundamental concepts which help explain its beliefs and practices.

Hinduism's core philosophy is that the entire creation emerged from, rests in, and will dissolve into the One Source of all Being and that, by experiencing the connection with the Source, anyone can be free of sorrow. This experience is extremely subtle and beyond the reach of our mind and senses. Realizing this truth requires a direct, intuitive personal experience – the result of spiritual practice unique to the needs of each individual. Therefore, Hinduism offers a very wide range of practices to choose from and the individual spiritual aspirant is guided by a spiritual master, a *Guru*.

Once this core structure is understood, it becomes clear that contemporary accounts of Hinduism that present the religion merely as a catalog of beliefs with a bewildering array of practices are misleading. And those who study Hinduism only through its texts or by observing external practices will likely miss its essential integrity and be distracted by the details of its numerous philosophical doctrines and spiritual practices. Instead, a more open-minded study with teachers in the tradition will reveal that Hinduism has an inspiringly coherent vision; and the variety of practices bring seekers of diverse temperaments to the same goal, each in their own way. Accessing this core reveals Hinduism's stunning simplicity.

The barriers posed by Hinduism's apparent complexity are compounded when Hinduism is seen through the lens of other organized religions. There are many ways in which Hinduism differs on features that are familiar to practitioners of other religions:

- Most religions have a single scripture that defines their belief systems; Hinduism's teachings are to be found in a range of scriptures with varying levels of authority.
- Most religions have a founder and narratives about the religion are built around the life of the founding prophet. Hinduism's teachings are composed by a number of anonymous sages a very long time ago and have been modified to suit changing times over millennia.
- Most religions conceive of God as a person, a remote Father figure who is separate from the world. Hinduism conceives of God as Pure Consciousness that is present everywhere, at all times – in us, in every other human being, in the whole of creation. In Hinduism, the One God, all-knowing and all-powerful, is worshipped in many forms, giving rise to the misconception that Hinduism is polytheistic.
- Most religions define the reward for spiritual practice as enjoying eternal life in Heaven. The ultimate goal in Hinduism is *moksha*, liberation, which is defined quite differently.
- Most religions define a doctrine that must be accepted by all adherents. Hindu scriptures emphasize direct personal experience of a transcendental truth rather than adherence to a single doctrine.
- Most religions have lists of commandments that govern personal ethics and social responsibility. Hinduism's ethical foundation is *Dharma*, a nuanced set of contextual guidelines for behavior that vary according to a person's temperament, stage of life and role in society rather than a set of rigid rules.
- Most religions worship in congregations with regularly scheduled worship. Hindu worship takes place primarily at home with temples playing an important but secondary role to private practice.
- Most religions emphasize social action in community. Hinduism stresses the need for personal spiritual evolution as required for building a healthy community.
- Most religions claim that their understanding of the Truth is somehow special, providing a unique path to salvation. Hindu scriptures focus on seeking the eternal, changeless Truth, but do not claim to have found an exclusive path to Truth. Hindus respect the spiritual paths defined by other religions.
- Most religions seek to gain converts to their faith. Hindus do not seek converts, but remain open to accepting all those who wish to embrace Hinduism.

Furthermore, Hinduism has some special features that are unique or shared only with other Indic faith traditions. Inadequate understanding of these unfamiliar concepts is a source of misconceptions about Hinduism. Understanding these concepts on their own terms is important in gaining an authentic understanding of Hinduism as a whole.

- The Hindu spiritual journey extends over many lives in both human and other bodies. There is a complex relationship between rebirth and spiritual growth, with each

- human life being an opportunity to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Belief in rebirth alleviates fear of final judgment based on this life alone.
- The *law of karma* is the unshakeable link between action and consequence that extends over multiple lives. One of the benefits of belief in the law of karma is an acceptance of unexplained hardship. But this is often wrongly characterized as a fatalistic belief in destiny.
 - The language of the scriptures is Sanskrit, hard to translate and rich in metaphors that are often difficult to decipher. Direct access to Sanskrit and to a rich oral tradition of interpretation are vital to gain a thorough understanding of Hindu scriptures.
 - Spiritual practice in Hinduism is about transforming the mind and being aware of God's presence at all times. It offers a variety of paths for practice, known as *Yoga*, suited to seekers of different temperaments. Denominations within Hinduism differ widely in their beliefs and practices, but each one respects the spiritual paths used by others.
 - Hindus use *murtis*, physical representations of God, as a means of focusing the mind in ardent devotion during worship. Some mistake this use of physical images to be idolatry. However, the *murti* is not an independent source of power or divinity.
 - Hindu spiritual enquiry uses scientific method based on personal experience consistent with reason and the scriptures. While going beyond the material sciences, it is ready to embrace the findings of science.
 - Hindu tradition treats time as cyclical and ideas as timeless; this can be frustrating to the Western emphasis on historicity.
 - Hinduism posits an intimate relationship between the cosmos and the individual that is alien to conventional Western ideas. This world-view has profound implications for spiritual practice.

Western attempts to describe Hinduism without sensitivity to these differences have led to deeply ingrained misconceptions. Hinduism is wrongly described as polytheistic and as worshipping idols. The social phenomenon of caste (*jati*) is confused with the scriptural concept of *varna* (temperament), leading to the incorrect conclusion that the caste system is a central feature of Hinduism. These and other misconceptions have dominated teaching about Hinduism and, therefore, public understanding.

Such misunderstanding cannot be remedied by merely conveying information about beliefs and practices of Hinduism. More information does not change the way people might think about Hinduism when they come to the topic with a preconceived framework. Modifying the framework requires going deeper in explaining the rationale and principles that guide religious practices. It is only by going deeper that one becomes aware of the unified vision that underlies the astonishing diversity of practices among the various denominations within Hinduism. Without this, it is hard to gain a better understanding of Hinduism as a whole.

Addressing this formidable challenge is the task of this set of essays. Each essay seeks to promote understanding of a significant concept or practice in Hinduism, showing how they are connected with fundamental ideas at the core of Hindu philosophy. Each essay is intentionally brief and largely self-contained so readers can go directly to topics that interest them. Together, the essays deal with a range of topics necessary to gain a better understanding of Hinduism.

CHAPTER 2

THE GOAL AND PATHS OF HINDUISM: AN OVERVIEW

Dr. D.C. Rao

Everybody without exception seeks happiness. Other goals such as money, power, and reputation are all desired because we think they will make us happy. Although we all seek happiness, we often fail. Is failure unavoidable? Is there a way to rise above the roller-coaster of life and experience happiness at all times? One way to understand Hinduism is as a positive answer to these questions.² Hindu scriptures assert that there is an eternal, unchanging Consciousness that pervades the entire universe and that anyone can gain limitless bliss by connecting with that Divinity. This is called *moksha*.

If blissful Consciousness is all-pervasive, each of us must necessarily dwell in it. Then why do we feel miserable? Hindu sages answer that it is because we forget who we really are and how we relate to Divine Consciousness. When our minds are clear and calm, we automatically become aware of our true nature, which is blissful. One way to understand Hindu spiritual practice is as transforming our minds so that we become aware of our connection with Divine Consciousness and reclaim our blissful nature, attaining *moksha*.

The Hindu spiritual journey is a journey of the mind – from being agitated in the pursuit of material goals (*artha*) and sense pleasures (*kama*) to a state of perfect tranquility. A mind that is clear and calm is no longer an impediment to the enjoyment of Divine bliss. What are the steps in this spiritual journey?

The first step is to discipline the desire for material possessions and sense pleasures. This is done by firm adherence to *dharma*, the ethical foundation that is elaborately explained in Hindu scriptures. By performing one's duty and cultivating qualities such as honesty, self-discipline, love and compassion, the mind becomes less agitated by base emotions such as greed, anger and lust. The second step in the Hindu spiritual journey is dedication to selfless service, undertaking all actions without focus on personal gain. This is known as *karma yoga*. Practice of *karma yoga* softens the personal ego by discovering the joy to be found in serving others and working as an instrument of God.

Beyond this point on the spiritual journey, the Hindu spiritual path has several branches. Recognizing that spiritual seekers differ greatly in personal temperament, physical and mental abilities and preferences, scriptures offer a variety of ways in which the mind can be further refined and made ready for the practice of meditation and gaining spiritual enlightenment.

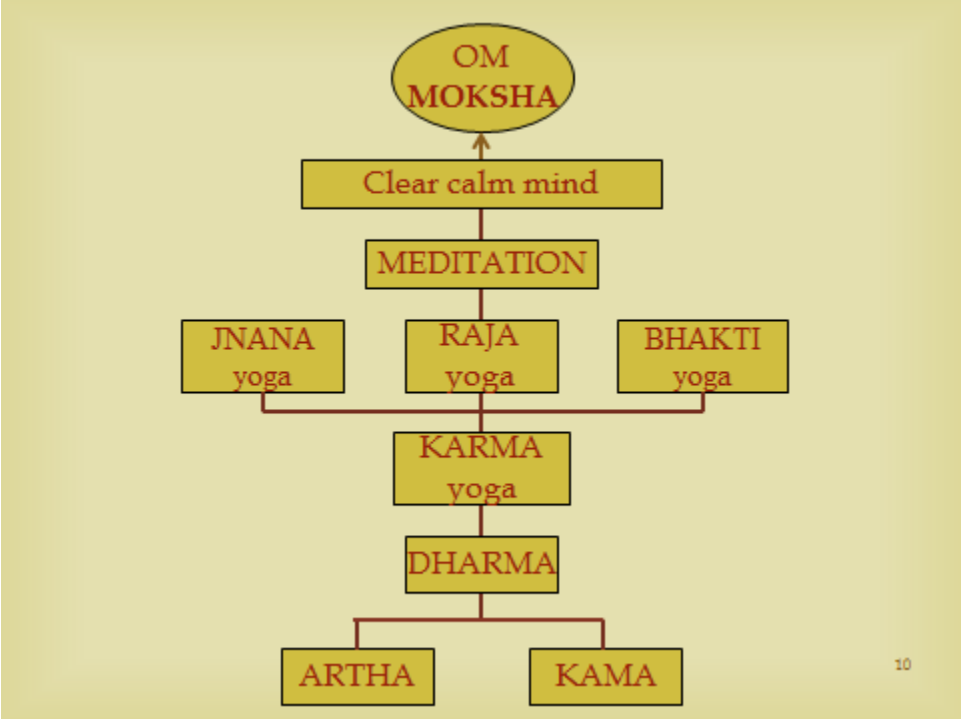
One possible path is *Raja Yoga* that trains the mind to meditate using exercises of the body, breath and mind. This path is good for those who have good health and a lot of discipline.

² See the opening verse of the ancient text *Sankhya Karika* by Ishvarakrishna.

Another path is *Jnana Yoga*, the path of knowledge, which involves deep study of the *Upanishads* and related scriptures to understand who we are and how we relate to the world and to God. This path is good for those who have sharp minds and intellectual stamina for years of study and practice of philosophy. Another path is *Bhakti Yoga*, the path of devotion, where the seeker is asked to rest his or her mind and heart in God. Unlike other paths, the path of *Bhakti Yoga* is free of prerequisites but it is by no means “easy” to develop a deep and abiding personal devotion to God. Hindu scriptures offer ways to facilitate this by encouraging worship of God in specific forms with whom the seeker can form a close personal relationship. This is often misrepresented as polytheism and worship of “idols.”

Hindu scriptures are replete with techniques and practices that can help refine the mind and overcome deep-seated mental habits that block spiritual progress. The spiritual journey might take very many lifetimes. Each life begins where the previous life left off and, depending on one’s actions, may take one closer to or further away from the goal of moksha. But in the end, liberation is assured for all, as there is no permanent resting place other than in one’s own Divine nature.

Far from being mutually exclusive, the various paths of *yoga* are strongly complementary. *Karma Yoga* is recognized as powerful in purifying the mind and a necessary foundation for all spiritual practice. A deep practice of the path of knowledge leads to the flowering of devotion; and the deep practice of the path of devotion leads to the emergence of knowledge. All these paths culminate in a mind that is clear and calm, aware of the Divine’s presence everywhere at all times in oneself, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. Such a person rises above sorrows and spreads peace and joy to others.



CHAPTER 3

THE SCOPE OF SCRIPTURES

Dr. D.C. Rao

Hinduism is defined by a search for the universal and timeless Truth and specific guidance on how to connect with a Supreme Being that is beyond comprehension by the human mind. The direct experience of numerous sages is recorded in scriptures that unfold a variety of paths to the Truth. Thus, “Scripture” in Hinduism refers to a large body of literature rather than a single text. Since spiritual seekers have varying levels of understanding, scriptural messages are presented in a variety of ways to provide direct access to all seekers. The scriptures inspire and support the efforts of all seekers to evolve spiritually. Thus while some scriptures emphasize philosophy, others are replete with stories, while yet others emphasize techniques for spiritual practice. Besides dealing with the transcendental, the scriptures’ emphasis on integrating spiritual practice with daily life leads to their reflections on morals, sciences, and the arts. Not surprisingly, Hindus revere and study numerous texts as scripture.

Hindu scriptures are classified broadly into two categories: *Shruti* and *Smriti*. The word *Shruti* literally means “heard,” and consists of truths that ancient sages realized in their meditation. For many centuries they were transmitted orally, which is another reason why they are known as “heard.” The term *Shruti* is applied to the *Vedas*, including the *Upanishads* that constitute the fourth and final part of the *Vedas*. These texts are revered as “revealed” and are the foundation of all of Hinduism. Rigorous disciplines were devised for chanting of the *Shruti* texts to ensure their accurate preservation in the oral tradition. The second category of scripture is *Smriti* that literally means “memory,” i.e. texts that are designed to help us “remember” the teachings of *Shruti*. Other than *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, all scriptural texts are loosely classified as *Smriti*. Teachings in *Smriti* texts are meant to be read and interpreted in the light of changing circumstances over time. The specific statements in *Smriti* texts do not carry the same weight as *Shruti*. Any conflict in teachings between *Smriti* and *Shruti* is to be resolved in favor of *Shruti*.³

While there is general agreement that the *Vedas* are over three thousand years old, there is little agreement on just how old they are. Evidence is scarce and estimates of their age vary widely, from 1200 BCE to some thousands of years earlier. Similar disagreements are found on dating other ancient scriptures, which were preserved orally for a long time before they were written.

The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* are composed in an ancient form of Sanskrit; the *Puranas* and most of the other older scriptures are in classical Sanskrit; and texts composed in the last millennium are sometimes in the various regional languages.

³ See *Manu Smriti* 4.176 and *Vyasa Smriti* 1-V-4.

Vedas: The word *veda* means “knowledge.” There are four *Vedas*: *Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva*, of which the *Rig (Rk, Rg) Veda* is the oldest. It has over 10,000 *mantras* that deal with a wide range of topics. Superficially, they are seen as hymns to the forces of nature and liturgy for ceremonial rituals; but a deeper study reveals teachings on metaphysical and philosophical issues.

Upanishads: contain extensive exploration of transcendental truths and methods of Self-Realization. There are more than a hundred *Upanishads* of which between ten and fourteen are regarded as major. No individuals claim to have authored the *Upanishads*. Although there are differences in detail among the *Upanishads*, their philosophical content is remarkably consistent and forms the basis of *Vedanta*. The *Upanishads*, along with the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Brahma Sutras*, constitute the primary basis for the practice of *Jnana Yoga*, the path of knowledge.

Vedangas: There are a number of auxiliary texts known collectively as *Vedanga* and classified as *Smriti*. They cover a range of topics: oral chanting of scripture (*shiksha*), grammar (*vyakarana*), prosody (*chhandas*), etymology (*nirukta*), astronomy (*jyotisha*), and obligatory rituals (*kalpa*).

Puranas: Stories in texts known as the *Puranas* bridge the gap between the ancient *Shruti* scriptures and common people. The teachings in the *Puranas* are completely in harmony with the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads but are greatly simplified and made more interesting. There are eighteen major *Puranas* and many minor ones that have compiled stories and narratives over many centuries. Each *Purana* tells stories around a principal character, either a God or a Sage. They cover a wide range of topics, both sacred and secular such as the manifestations of God, including the *avatars* i.e. the forms in which God has appeared on earth, teachings on dharma, karma, death and rebirth, the use of *mantras* and other religious observances, the significance of sacred sites for pilgrimages, the importance of service, genealogies of kings and sages, cosmology, ayurveda and astrology. Modern Hindu beliefs and religious practices are derived mainly from the *Puranas*. Many consider ***Srimad Bhagavatam*** as being the most important *Purana*. It deals with the many *avatars* of Vishnu and provides a philosophical basis for the *Vaishnava* devotional traditions in Hinduism, particularly those centering on the worship of Lord Krishna. *Puranas* contain two of the more important scriptures in the *Shakti* tradition: the ***Durga Saptashati***, also known as ***Devi Mahatmyam***, extols the Divine Mother’s victories over evil forces; and ***Lalita Sahasranama***, the thousand names of the Divine Mother, provides an esoteric understanding of the Supreme Being in Her feminine form.

Ramayana is the single most popular scripture in all of Hinduism and has had an enormous impact in many dimensions of life in India and parts of Southeast Asia. It is traditionally classed as an *Itihasa*, history, and tells the life story of a noble prince, Lord Rama, who is an *avatar* of Lord Vishnu. He suffers exile and many hardships while destroying powerful demons before returning to rule his kingdom for a very long time. This epic story portrays several characters who embody ideal qualities and conduct. Among them are Rama himself as the ideal in every

way: as prince, as king, as son, as husband, as brother, as friend and as enemy; Sita as the ideal wife and emblem of strong womanhood; Hanuman as the ideal friend and servant of Rama; Lakshmana and Bharata as devoted brothers. There are numerous versions of the *Ramayana*, of which the most well-known are those by the original author, Sage Valmiki, and the poet-saint Tulsidas. These texts are recited by devoted Hindus at home and in devotional gatherings; are consulted for guidance on life; form the basis for dances and dramatic presentations; and are popular children's stories. *Aditya Hridaya Stotram* is a popular prayer that originates in the *Ramayana*.

Mahabharata is also a historical epic. It is the longest text the world has known, seven times the combined length of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Against the background of an extended conflict between two branches of the Kaurava family, the *Mahabharata* is a treasure house of stories and discourses on the practice of Dharma. As a scripture, its primary messages are the importance of always upholding Dharma, the need for complete devotion to God and the utter futility of war. Embedded in the *Mahabharata* are two texts of special scriptural significance: the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Vishnu Sahasranama*. The ***Vishnu Sahasranama***, the thousand names of Lord Vishnu, is one of the most important prayers used in the *Vaishnava* tradition.

The ***Bhagavad Gita*** is a primary scripture for all Hindus in modern times. Although it is a tiny part of the *Mahabharata* and hence technically classed as a *Smriti* text, it is traditionally accorded the rank of an *Upanishad*. It presents Lord Krishna's teachings to the warrior Arjuna and is a profound guide to living a spiritual life while being engaged in the world. The text outlines the various paths of *Yoga*, summarizes Upanishadic teachings on spiritual topics and offers succinct advice on how to lead a spiritually fulfilling life.

DharmaShastras are a class of texts that explain how Dharma is maintained in daily life. They deal in great detail with a wide range of topics: responsibilities of each *varna*, temperament, and *ashrama*, stage of life; rituals; civil and criminal law; dietary rules, injunctions on festivals, pilgrimages, charity, forbidden actions; types of sinful actions and required expiation; design of temples etc. Since these texts are part of the *Smriti*, not *Shruti*, their teachings are subject to re-interpretation to suit differences in time and place. Hence there are numerous texts composed by various authors over many centuries. The *Manu Smriti* is one of earliest texts but is still regarded as most authoritative.

DarshanaShastras are philosophical texts that are studied as part of Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge. The subject matter of these texts is the relationship between God, the individual and the phenomenal world, including theories of creation. There are six schools of philosophy in Hinduism with differing views on these subjects. Each of them has a primary text, generally in the form of *Sutras*, aphorisms. Two of these are still widely studied by Hindus: the ***Brahma Sutras*** by Sage Vyasa and ***Yoga Sutras*** by Sage Patanjali.

Agama Shastras are ancient and numerous, including many that have been lost over the centuries. They deal with practical aspects of devotion and worship, including personal and temple rituals, purificatory injunctions and esoteric practices such as the use of *mantras*, *yantras* and *nyasas*.⁴ They define many of the common practices now followed by observant Hindus in the worship of Vishnu, Shiva or Shakti, the Divine Mother. *Tantric* texts are part of this category. Some texts such as *Rama Raksha Stotram*, *Saundaryalahari*, and *Shiva Mahimna Stotram* are popular and used widely in the worship of Rama, Shakti and Shiva respectively.

Bhakti Texts: From popular saints known as *Alwars* and *Nayanars* in the 7th BCE into contemporary times, the teachings, poems and songs composed by many saints in regional languages have been a major source of inspiration. Their messages of devotion, dharma and spiritual practice were conveyed in simple language by innumerable teachers and singers to all parts of India and beyond.

The plethora of scriptures is not as bewildering as might appear at first sight. Most Hindus receive their religious education from family traditions and discourses by spiritual leaders. Individual Hindus follow the prayers and teachings of the denomination to which they belong and possibly the more specific oral instructions of a *Guru*. Few access directly the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* that provide the foundation for all other scriptures in Hinduism. The stories from the *Puranas* and epics and songs composed by saints are the voice of the scriptures for all.

⁴ *Mantra* is a sacred word or phrase; *Yantra* is a geometric design with esoteric significance; *nyasa* invokes the presence of God in each of various parts of the body to 'divinize' the body prior to worship.

CHAPTER 4

PURUSHARTHA: THE GOALS OF LIFE

Dr. D. C. Rao

The goals that each human being might seek to achieve in his/her life are categorized by Hindu scriptures in four groups:

1. *ARTHA*: the pursuit of material security and prosperity;
2. *KAMA* (pronounced *kaama*): fulfill desire;
3. *DHARMA*: doing the right thing in keeping with one's own essential nature; seeking to sustain, protect, nourish the environment in which one lives;
4. *MOKSHA*: liberation from the cycle of birth and death; freedom from sorrow.

Each of these goals is legitimate, and is even necessary at some stage of life. But leading a purposeful life requires skill in how one defines and pursues each goal and how one finds the right balance among competing goals of life. The first two goals, *artha* and *kama*, appeal to our instincts. They can be simply paraphrased as “making money” and “having fun,” which describes the bulk of the activities of most human beings. But they do also have a spiritual dimension. The other two goals, *dharma* and *moksha* are explicitly spiritual in nature.

ARTHA: Each of us is endowed with a physical body that needs food, clothing, shelter and a minimum level of physical comfort. Providing for these needs is an aspect of *artha*. Without that, it is impossible for anyone to pursue the loftier goals of *Dharma* and *Moksha*. Each human being owes a debt to parents and family for protection, nourishment and support, at least in the early years of life; and each adult feels an obligation to provide these to his/her children and spouse. Thus the pursuit of *Artha* to meet the basic needs of the family is an essential goal of life. By extension, promoting the material prosperity of the community in which one lives is also a commendable human aspiration. However, there are two ways in which the pursuit of *Artha* can come into conflict with the broader goals of life. The first is when we use deceit and exploitation to garner more wealth for ourselves and our families, at the expense of the well-being of others. The second is when we fail to distinguish between “need” and “want,” leading to limitless greedy acquisition and an obsessive pursuit of wealth at the expense of other aspects of a fulfilling life. Recognizing this as a common human failing, scriptures advise a practice of charity as an antidote to an excessive focus on *artha*.⁵

KAMA: The force of desire is one of the deepest forces in nature and has fundamental cosmic significance in Hindu scriptures. Desire is the very source of the creative urge that led to creation of the world and is a prerequisite to the acquisition of knowledge and the motivation to act.⁶ The most basic form of desire in all living beings is the urge to survive, which inspires remarkable feats of courage and endurance. One aspect of the urge to survive is the urge to procreate. In animals, desire

⁵ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.2.2

⁶ “Desire entered the One in the beginning; it was the earliest seed...” Rg Veda 10.129.4;

is mostly expressed as instinct—preferring certain foods, the tendency to live in groups, the marking of territory, mating habits etc. In human beings, the force of desire finds more varied expression. Most commonly, it is seeking pleasure by indulging the senses of sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. The scope of such sensory pleasures is vastly greater in human beings than in animals, and is ever expanding. In addition, human beings entertain subtler forms of desire such as ambition for fame and power, a thirst for knowledge and the drive to master nature.

The Upanishads have classified human desire into three broad groups: the desire for wealth, the desire for progeny and the desire to be loved and respected by others.⁷ These categories encompass both *artha* and *kama*. More generally, all these desires may be seen as deriving from a desire to be happy. The issue is whether the pursuit of *artha* and *kama* alone is likely to lead to a fulfilling life characterized by happiness and peace of mind. From this perspective, the scriptures contain strong cautionary remarks. First, the actions in pursuit of *artha* and *kama* must always be in consonance with the principles of *dharma*, the third goal listed above⁸. When actions violate *dharma*, the *karmic* consequences of such wrong actions will inevitably bring unhappiness and agitation in this or in future lives. Second, the scriptures point out that as long as one seeks happiness in external sources—sensory pleasure, acquisition of objects and building relationships with others—happiness is bound to be ephemeral.⁹ Lasting happiness can only be based on sound spiritual practices designed to lead to the fourth goal, *moksha*.

DHARMA: is traditionally stated first in the list of goals, to emphasize that *dharma* should be the ethical foundation for all aspects of life, including the pursuit of *artha* and *kama*. The root meaning of *dharma* is “to sustain or nourish.” A practical interpretation of *dharma* is: those actions that best sustain and uphold our own integrity and that of our surroundings. *Dharma* is not simply a set of laws; it is a highly nuanced set of guidelines whose application requires individual discretion based on one’s particular role and the context of a specific situation. The challenge for human beings is to discern their *dharma* and develop the mental discipline to live by it. Scriptures provide some guidance by explaining the right *dharma* for those at different stages of life: student, householder, retired and renunciate. Another technique used in the scriptures is to define the *dharma* appropriate to different human temperaments. When each person fulfills the *dharma* appropriate to his or her individual temperament, stage of life and role in society, the collective impact is best for the stability and prosperity of society as a whole.

Although there is voluminous literature on *dharma*, it is generally agreed that there are three guiding principles that are most important in guiding actions on the path of *dharma*.

- *Ahimsa*, non-injury: avoiding violent actions, harsh words and hurtful thoughts.
- *Satya*, truthfulness: being truthful to oneself and to others in thought, word and deed.

⁷ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.22

⁸ “...I (Supreme Consciousness) am desire unopposed to Dharma” Bhagavad Gita 7.11

⁹ “The contact of senses with objects which cause heat and cold, pleasure and pain, have a beginning and an end; they are impermanent...” Bhagavad Gita 2.14

- *Brahmacharya*, non-indulgence: a disciplined life that abstains from sensory excess.

Recalling that *dharma* is one's own essential nature, enquiring deeply into our own essential nature as human beings is an important aspect of the pursuit of *dharma*. This aspect of *dharma* is known as the fourth goal, *moksha*.

MOKSHA: *Moksha* is liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth known as *samsara*. Those whose lives are consumed by the pursuit of *artha* and *kama* gradually come to realize that their lives are an endless struggle. Driven by likes and dislikes, they lurch between happiness and sorrow, faintly aware that life might have greater meaning and purpose. The pursuit of *moksha* involves study, reflection and practice of a variety of ways to realize the full potential of being a human being. Those who seek *moksha* work to transform their minds so that they become aware of the Divine's presence everywhere at all times in themselves, in every other human being, in the whole of creation. Such a person rises above sorrows and spreads peace and joy.

All four goals—*dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*—have a place in life. Human beings can realize their full potential only when *dharma* is the foundation of their lives and *moksha* the culmination. The relationship among the four goals is dramatically illustrated in the ancient *swastika* symbol: the bottom left and top right arms of the swastika represent *artha* and *kama*, which plateau in the extent to which they confer happiness. The bottom right and top left arms represent *dharma* and *moksha*, whose benefits are unlimited. The pursuit of *dharma* and *moksha* pays far greater dividends in the long run than the pursuit of *artha* and *kama*.

CHAPTER 5

MOKSHA

Dr. D.C. Rao

Moksha means liberation. It is a common belief that by doing good deeds, we will find our reward in heaven after death. But *Moksha* is a more fundamental liberation that the Hindu scriptures guide us to. *Moksha* is liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth known as *samsara*.

Samsara, more broadly, is the world of change that we live in. Our fundamental experiences in life have to do with birth, death, aging and sickness. In our daily lives we oscillate between pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, success and failure, gain and loss, victory and defeat, honor and insult. In dealing with objects and other people, we classify them into those we like and those we don't. We seek out those we like and try to avoid those we do not like; and are happy when we succeed but unhappy when we fail. More often than not, we are unhappy with our circumstances and our lives are laden with regret about the past and anxiety about the future. That is why ancient sages characterized *samsara* as an ocean of sorrow. Crossing this ocean signifies *moksha*.

This ocean of *samsara* does not end with death. Although our physical bodies cease to exist at death, we live on in a subtle body and are reborn again and again until we achieve *moksha*. What drives this process of rebirth? It is the cycle that connects our bodies and minds with our actions¹⁰. The law of karma requires that we experience the consequences of each action that we undertake. We need a body to experience life and a body inevitably engages in action. Thus our past actions are the cause of our present body; and our actions in this body are the cause of our future births in another body.¹¹ This cycle keeps us mired in *samsara* until we attain *moksha*.

But how is *moksha* to be attained? Hindu scriptures treat this topic in many different ways. For a start, they lead us beyond the simple belief that by doing good deeds we will find our reward in heaven after death. Scriptures have elaborate descriptions of *Svarga*, or heaven, but caution that heaven is a temporary sojourn after which we return to another birth in the world, in *samsara*. Our stay in heaven lasts only as long as is warranted by the stock of merit earned by our good actions.¹² The Upanishads declare that those who rely on good works, charity and austerity take the “path of smoke” after death to the divine realm of the *devas*; and, when their merit is

¹⁰ See *Brihadranyaka Upanishad* 3.2.13 and Shankaracharya's commentary. Having examined various causes of rebirth, the choice is the connection between the body and action.

¹¹ For more on the topic of *Karma* see the author's note: *Understanding Karma and Rebirth*.

¹² *Bhagavad Gita* 9.21

exhausted, they return to take birth on earth again.¹³ While the promise of joys in heaven might make more tolerable the miseries of *samsara*, temporary relief cannot be counted as *moksha*.

Most Hindus see *moksha* as resulting from the grace of God who responds to our efforts to purify our minds and cultivate exclusive devotion to God. The scriptures present a variety of descriptions of this process. The Upanishads speak of the “path of fire” open to those who have purified their minds by the pursuit of knowledge and meditation on the Supreme Truth.¹⁴ This path leads to *Brahmaloka*, the realm of Brahma, the Creator, where they dwell until the creation itself is dissolved into Pure Consciousness at the end of each cycle of creation. At that point they too are merged into Pure Consciousness, never to be born again. This process is known as *Krama Mukti*, or liberation by stages.

A more direct path to *moksha* is described in the Bhagavad Gita where Lord Krishna declares that those who attain His abode are not subject to rebirth.¹⁵ This goal is achieved by those who have overcome attachments, and dedicate all their actions to God with an unwavering devotion.¹⁶ Here *moksha* means living eternally in service to God in his realm.

A radically different view of *moksha* is found in Upanishadic texts: a person with the right understanding is liberated here and now, not having to wait until death and after-life. The understanding we need is that we are all, in essence, eternal and blissful. Our own nature, which the scriptures call *Atman*, is no different from *Brahman*, Pure Consciousness that pervades the whole universe. As *Atman*, we are complete, lacking nothing. But because we fail to realize this and identify instead with our bodies and minds, we think of ourselves as mortal, limited individuals and struggle to find happiness in the world outside rather than claim the happiness that is part of our own being. It is these struggles of ours that give rise to *samsara*, the ocean of sorrow. By constant awareness that we are *Atman*, by dropping our false identification with our mortal body, by overcoming our desires for worldly pleasures and developing a sense of equanimity in the face of hardship or loss, we achieve liberation from *samsara*. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad declares: “he, having been mortal, becomes immortal, and attains *Brahman* in this very body.”¹⁷ Such a person is said to be a *jivanmukta*, liberated while living. The equivalent of a *jivanmukta* is portrayed in the Bhagavad Gita as one of steady wisdom;¹⁸ a true devotee of God;¹⁹ and one who has transcended the qualities that constitute bondage.²⁰

Many scriptures contain vivid portraits of the *jivanmukta*. In summary:

¹³ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 6.2.16; see also *Bhagavad Gita* 8.25.

¹⁴ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 6.2.15; and *Bhagavad Gita* 8.24.

¹⁵ *Bhagavad Gita* 8.21; also 4.9, 8.16 and 14.20.

¹⁶ *Bhagavad Gita* 9.34, 11.55.

¹⁷ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.4.7

¹⁸ *Bhagavad Gita* 2.55-72;

¹⁹ *Bhagavad Gita* 12.13-20;

²⁰ *Bhagavad Gita* 14.22-26

- The *jivanmukta* has a sense of completeness, identifying with the universal Consciousness; and therefore, has overcome all desires. Seeing the One in all diverse forms, he has no attachments to one form rather than the other. He sees beyond all divisions such as those based on race, creed, caste or gender. All his actions are for the wellbeing of all others.
- Since he has no special attachment to his own body or possessions, the *jivanmukta* is completely fearless, with no anxiety about the future. Seeing all happenings as the play of the universal Consciousness, he is ever unperturbed in the midst of extreme turbulence. He lives a life of complete freedom, free of sorrow.
- Constantly aware that his own Self, the *Atman*, is no different from universal Pure Consciousness, *Brahman*, the *jivanmukta* is ever blissful, seeing joy in all aspects of God's creation.

Does liberation from *samsara* mean that a *jivanmukta* can no longer participate actively in life and is condemned to a passive existence? Not at all. Such a person sees the world as it is, not through the lens of petty likes, dislikes, ambitions, regrets and anxieties; and is better able to savor the joy in the wondrous diversity of this creation. A *jivanmukta* who chooses to be active has an intuitive understanding of what is best for the wellbeing of all and can bring undistracted energy to the task at hand.

Isn't the search for *moksha* a selfish endeavor? Should not the *jivanmukta* "reject" *moksha* as long as there are others who are still suffering in *samsara*? The *jivanmukta* knows that *moksha* is no more than our remembering our true nature and is available to all without exception. It is not something to be "attained", any more than we need to "acquire" a vast treasure buried in our own homes. *Moksha* is not something that can be "given" by one to another. The enlightened *jivanmukta* helps those still suffering in *samsara* in two ways: first, by his own example, the *jivanmukta* is living proof that *moksha* is available to all who truly desire it. Second, the *jivanmukta* can share his or her experience with those who are prepared to listen and guide those who are eager to change. The scriptures bemoan the fact that few actually listen and seek change.²¹ Why? That is the puzzle that makes the world go round!

²¹ Yoga Vasishtha Sara Sangraha 6.11; condensed by Swami Tejomayananda, CCMT, Mumbai:

CHAPTER 6

DHARMA

Dr. D.C. Rao

Dharma is commonly understood to mean code of conduct, righteousness or law. But these interpretations are partial. As *dharma* is a central concept not only in Hinduism but also in other religions that originated in India, it is worth enquiring more closely into its meaning. *Dharma* provides the ethical foundation for all aspects of life, not only spiritual, and guides conduct by providing criteria for making good choices in all that we do. Indeed, Hinduism itself is properly known as *Sanatana Dharma*, the Eternal *Dharma*. This note explains what *dharma* is and illustrates how widely the concept is applied in Hindu scriptures to guide life choices.

The Sanskrit word *dharma* has no equivalent in English, which makes this concept more than usually difficult to explain. *Dharma* has the Sanskrit root *dhri*, which means “that which upholds or sustains” or “that without which nothing can stand” or “that which maintains the stability and harmony of the universe.” From these root meanings tradition derives several interpretations. One interpretation of *dharma* is: those actions that best sustain and uphold our own integrity as human beings; the harmony of our family, communities or nations; the ecological balance of our planet; and the future of our civilization. *Dharma* can also be seen as defining our essential nature. Just as the *dharma* of sugar is to be sweet and the *dharma* of fire is to burn, each of us has an essential nature that is our *dharma*. The challenge we face as human beings is to discern our *dharma* and live by it.

Dharma is not simply a set of laws; it is a highly nuanced set of guidelines whose application requires individual discretion based on one’s particular role and the context of a specific situation. Much of Hindu religious literature is aimed at conveying a nuanced understanding of *dharma* through teachings, stories and dialogues on what constitutes appropriate actions and responses in a variety of real-life situations.

Teachings of *dharma* have wide or even universal applicability. An example is the Golden Rule: “This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”²² But to a large extent, the practice of *dharma* requires the cultivation of the right qualities and mental discipline to make the right choices appropriate to the situation. Giving guidance on these matters is a major goal of a class of Hindu scriptures known as *Smriti*, to distinguish them from the revealed scriptures such as the *Vedas* that are known as *Shruti*. Whereas *Shruti* deals with universal truths, *Smriti* deals with relative truths that are subject to change in response

²² The Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, Section CXIII, verse 8; Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993; vol IV pg. 235

to variations in time and place.²³ A subset of the *Smriti* literature are texts that deal specifically with *Dharma*, explaining in detail what constitutes right or wrong action in defined circumstances. Many texts provide checklists of qualities to be cultivated in support of *dharma*²⁴. An authoritative source, the *Manu Smriti* lists *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (not acquiring illegitimate wealth), *shoucham* (purity), and *indriya-nigraha* (control of senses) as the five qualities that constitutes a universal *dharma*.²⁵ The two great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are rich sources of wisdom on *dharma*, providing exemplars of noble behavior such as equanimity in the face of adversity, obedience to parents, brotherly love, service, devotion to truth, trust in God and many more. The *Mahabharata* illustrates how those who oppose *dharma* can be highly successful and prosper for a while but definitely come to a bad end²⁶.

From all this voluminous literature on *dharma*, it is generally agreed that there are three guiding principles that are most important in guiding our actions on the path of *dharma*.

- **Ahimsa, non-injury:** avoiding violent actions, harsh words and malicious thoughts. Violence has its roots in ignorance, intolerance, jealousy, greed, anger and fear. Overcoming such negative emotions and cultivating an all-encompassing love and forgiveness is the goal and the means of practicing *ahimsa*.
- **Satya, truthfulness:** being truthful to oneself and to others in thought, word and deed. Speaking only when necessary and adhering to promises are aspects of this practice.
- **Brahmacharya, non-indulgence:** abstaining from sensory excess that dissipates vital energy and causes harm to others. A common translation, celibacy, is too narrow an interpretation. All forms of sensory indulgence drain energy that could otherwise be used for one's spiritual awakening. Disciplining one's senses is therefore an essential element in living a meaningful life.

A relatively simple approach to *dharma* is to consider the need to discharge our debts. Hindu scriptures identify four categories of debt owed by all humans and fulfilling these obligations can be seen as a basic requirement of a *dharmic* life²⁷:

- **Debt to God**, the One who creates and sustains the universe. This debt is discharged by maintaining an awareness of God through prayer and worship; and ensuring that we act in harmony with cosmic forces in sustaining creation.

²³ "When there is conflict between *Shruti*, *Smriti* and the *Puranas*, *Shruti* should be taken as the authority." Vyasa *Smriti* (1-V-4). Further, when a law is offensive it must be rejected. (*Manu Smriti* 4.176).

²⁴ For one such list of 26 qualities, see *Bhagavad Gita* 16.1-3.

²⁵ *Manu Smriti* X.63

²⁶ *Manu Smriti* IV.174

²⁷ The *Mahabharata*, *Adi Parva*, Section CXX; Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993; vol I pg. 250

- **Debt to the sages** who have preserved ancient wisdom and whose teachings guide us in every aspect of our lives. Study and practice of the scriptures is how we discharge this obligation.
- **Debt to our parents** who have begotten and cared for us. Respecting our parents, preserving their memory and bringing up our children to be good human beings is our obligation to them.
- **Debt to society**, the social environment in which we live. Caring for all living beings with whom we share this world, and supporting the provision of social services are some of the ways in which we meet this fourth obligation.

It is important to note that *dharma* defines an approach to right action; it does not classify a specific action as right or wrong independent of the circumstances. If the action sustains, it is *dharmic*; if it disrupts, it is not *dharmic*. An action that might be *dharmic* in some circumstances might not be *dharmic* in other circumstances. This principle can be illustrated with reference to the physical body. The body is one of the primary means of achieving any goal in life, so actions that help sustain the health of the body are *dharmic*, such as eating, sleeping, bathing, exercising etc. But if a person is sick, these same actions may hurt rather than sustain the body's health. When a person is sick, *dharma* is then defined as rest, fasting, medication etc. Thus the practice of *dharma* does not specify a list of "do's" and "don'ts", but requires the exercise of judgement and attention to the particularity of each situation. The same approach to the definition of *dharma* can be applied at the mental and emotional levels. The highest *dharma* is non-injury at the physical level as well as in speech and thought. But surgeons need to cut the patient's body in order to heal it. Similarly, even war may be *dharmic* if all attempts fail to solve a major social problem without violence. Shrinking from such a war when strong disruptive forces are at work may create problems for society more severe than the violent consequences of war. It all depends on the motivation and whether sincere efforts have been made to minimize the hurt caused by our actions.

Recognizing the contextual nature of *dharma*, scriptures discuss *dharma* that is appropriate at different stages of one's life. A typical life-span may be viewed in four stages following childhood. The first stage is that of *brahmacharya*, which is the equivalent of being a student; the appropriate *dharma* for a student is to excel at acquiring knowledge. The second stage is *grihastha* which means 'householder,' when an adult goes to work and raises a family; the appropriate *dharma* at this stage is to care for the family and meet obligations to society. The third stage is *vanaprastha* which means 'forest dweller' and may be viewed as equivalent of a retired person; the appropriate *dharma* at this stage of life is to allow the next generation to take charge of affairs, reflect on the deeper issues of life and engage in spiritual practice. The final stage, which does not apply to all persons, might be *sanyasa* which means complete renunciation of worldly attachments; such a person is wholly devoted to spiritual evolution.

Another technique used in the scriptures is to define the *dharma* appropriate to different human temperaments. In any society there are some persons who are intellectuals; others are focused on exercising power and leadership; others are engaged in commercial occupations and amassing wealth; and many have no special calling, content to function as workers and followers in society. Based on these four temperaments, Hindu scriptures have traditionally defined four *varnas* and assign tasks and responsibilities to each *varna* so that all people contribute to society in ways for which they are best qualified: the *Brahmana* functions as the priest or intellectual and is required to preserve knowledge of the scriptures by studying and teaching them; the *Kshatriya* is a ruler of society and is required to use his power to maintain social order and especially to protect the weak; the *Vaishya* is the trader or businessman and is required to support society by funding the state treasury and building social infrastructure; the *Sudra* is required to serve his employers loyally. When each person fulfills the *dharma* appropriate to his or her individual temperament, the collective impact is best for the stability and prosperity of society as a whole.

Recalling that *dharma* is one's own essential nature, enquiring deeply into our own essential nature as human beings is an important aspect of the pursuit of *dharma*. This is the subject matter of the *Upanishads*, and is given practical direction in *yoga* philosophy. A life lived according to *dharma* is an essential preparation for spiritual practice leading to Self-Realization.²⁸

Note: There are numerous texts that address the topic of *Dharma*. Two recommended texts:

1. *Hindu Dharma, The Universal Way of Life* by Pujyasri Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati Svami, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1996; ISBN 81-7276-055-8. 828 pages. This book is an extensive treatise by a traditional authority.
2. *Dharma: The Global Ethic* by Justice M. Rama Jois; ebook: https://www.vhp-america.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/DHARMA_Ram_Jois.pdf is a contemporary text drawing on traditional sources including the *Mahabharata*.

²⁸ See the author's note on Spiritual Practice.

CHAPTER 7

VALUES²⁹

Dr. D.C. Rao

The most fundamental value in Hinduism is to be constantly aware of the Divinity in all beings, including ourselves, and in the entire universe.³⁰ Several important principles follow from this core value:

First, it implies that the whole universe is inter-connected in all its aspects; harming the planet is an affront to its divine nature. Second, all persons are seen as innately good: recognizing the innate goodness of my own nature and the innate goodness of all persons is profoundly healing; it overcomes self-doubt and infuses all our interactions with love. Third, the aim of spiritual practice is to experience the universal by seeing myself in all others and seeing all others in me.³¹ From this follows the golden rule: “This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”³² Fourth, discriminating amongst all beings is contrary to this value. Fifth, the spiritual aspirant seeks to rest his/her mind in God and perform all actions as a service to God.³³ Finally, any spiritual practice that helps one see the Divine in everything around us is encouraged.³⁴ Since the capacity to see this varies widely from one person to another, Hinduism embraces a very wide range of spiritual practices.

Living these values is not possible without cleansing the mind and heart of contrary tendencies and emotions such as desire, anger and greed.³⁵ The scriptures present several lists of values that a spiritual seeker must cultivate.³⁶ One of the better known of these lists is found in the Yoga Sutras composed by the sage Patanjali around 200 BCE.³⁷ They constitute the foundation for the practice of Yoga, broadly defined as spiritual practice. Known as the 5 Yamas and 5 Niyamas, they are briefly described here.

YAMAS

1. **ahimsa, non-injury:** avoiding violent actions, harsh words and malicious thoughts. Violence has its roots in ignorance, intolerance, jealousy, greed, anger and fear. Overcoming such negative emotions and cultivating an all-encompassing love and forgiveness is the goal and the means of practicing *ahimsa*.

²⁹ Previously published by InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington [www.ifcmw.org]

³⁰ Isha Upanishad 1

³¹ Bhagavad Gita chp 6 verse 29,30

³² The Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, Section CXIII, verse 8; the Mahabharata, tr. kisari mohan ganguli, munshiram manoharlal publishers, 1993, vol IV pg 235

³³ Bhagavad Gita chp 8 verse 8, 10

³⁴ Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana Bk 7. chp 1 verse 31

³⁵ Bhagavad Gita chp 16 verse 21 cites desire, anger and greed as the three gates to hell.

³⁶ See for example Bhagavad Gita chp.12 verse 13-19; chp13 verse 7-11; and chp16 verse 1-3; and Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.1-

³⁷ Yoga Sutras, by Patanjali, chp 2 sutras 30, 32.

2. ***satya, truthfulness***: being truthful to oneself and to others in thought, word and deed. Speaking only when necessary and adhering to promises are aspects of this practice.
3. ***asteya, non-stealing***: learning not to covet or take what is not rightly mine.
4. ***brahmacharya, non-indulgence***: abstaining from sensual excess that dissipates vital energy. A common translation, celibacy, is too narrow an interpretation. All forms of sensual indulgence drain energy that could otherwise be used for one's spiritual awakening. Disciplining one's senses is therefore an essential element in living a meaningful life.
5. ***aparigraha, non-possessiveness***: not being attached to one's possessions and learning that one's happiness does not lie in acquiring material objects that are necessarily transitory. It is the opposite of greed. Practicing *aparigraha* involves a habit of sharing one's possessions with others and generosity in helping the needy.

NIYAMAS

1. ***shauca, purity***: for the physical body, this means cleanliness; for the mind it means overcoming polluting thoughts such as thoughts of hate and violence, and maintaining an attitude of mindfulness. At a deeper level, it means not being distracted from awareness of our own divine nature and the divinity we share with all others.
2. ***santoshā, contentment***: learning to be happy and content without a greedy scramble for more; finding joy in life as it is; not making selfish demands on others.
3. ***tapas, austerity***: practicing self-discipline that generates intense energy internally and increases spiritual fervor. Recognizing that achieving a significant goal requires sacrificing lesser pleasures and putting forward more concentrated effort.
4. ***swadhyaya, self-study***: making time to study, reflect and meditate in a consistent effort to seek the Truth; knowing ourselves at all levels.
5. ***ishwara-pranidhana, surrender to God***: engaging in action as an offering to God; accepting what we receive as an expression of God's grace; and resting one's mind in God.

While the above values are important all through our adult lives, the scriptures point out that some values are more important than others in certain stages of life. Beyond childhood, the scriptures prescribe duties for each of the four stages of a person's life: student, householder, retiree and renunciate.³⁸ Adapting the scriptural descriptions to match contemporary realities, we gain useful insights into the changing values that we should focus on as we progress through life.

³⁸ Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana Bk 7. chp 12.

A student is expected to devote all his/her energy primarily to learning and to serve with respect the teachers and all sources of knowledge. Excessive attention to personal comfort, entertainment and sense pleasures are harmful distractions.

In the second stage of life, the householder must raise, support and protect a family and be a good citizen of society. Fulfilling obligations to family and society are the primary concern even at the cost of personal hardship.

In the third stage, the householder retires from family and societal obligations while remaining available to advise and counsel younger members of family and community. In this stage of life, one should turn his/her attention to meditation and spiritual study with a view to gaining Self-knowledge. Personal needs are reduced to a minimum and the emphasis is on spiritual practice rather than seeking out new experiences.

The fourth and final stage is renunciation i.e. giving up all self-serving actions³⁹ and setting aside worldly attachments, making a total commitment to serving others and seeking the Truth.

³⁹ Bhagavad Gita chp 18 verse 2

CHAPTER 8

THE ENVIRONMENT⁴⁰

Dr. D.C. Rao

The World View

A core Hindu teaching is that the entire universe, without exception, is pervaded by the One Supreme Being (*Isha Upanishad 1*). This is expressed in a poetic way in the Vedas: the universe emanated from the Divine Cosmic Person: the sun from His eyes, the moon from His mind, fire from His mouth, wind from His breath and so on (*Rig Veda X.90*). The Vedas also speak of Divine manifestations in the most ordinary settings: As water, He dwells not only in the sacred rivers but also in little streams, puddles, ponds, lakes and wells; in the rain and in the clouds (*Yajur Veda 16.37,38*). In short, since the Divine envelops and permeates every aspect of all that we experience, we should view every part of Nature as a celebration and manifestation of the Divine.

Applying this world view in our lives

Our scriptures also instruct us on how to apply this lofty world view in our daily lives. It is our obligation to play our part in the grand cosmic drama. The Bhagavad Gita explains that we owe our existence to food, which is fed by rain, that in turn is the result of cosmic processes presided over by the Creator. Nature and humans have a relationship of mutuality and one who does not honor this relationship “lives life in vain” (*Bhagavad Gita verses 3.9-16*). Nature serves humans; and equally, humans are servants of Nature, not its masters or stewards. Through Nature, the Divine Mother expresses Her love and compassion for all living beings. In return, humans are asked to enjoy the bounties of Nature in a responsible way (*Isha Upanishad 1*). When our greed and self-indulgence disturb the ecological balance, we violate the clear teachings of our scriptures.

Ethical injunctions

Respect for Nature is embedded in many of the fundamental values of Hinduism.⁴¹ For example, *Aparigraha* (non-acquisitiveness) instructs us not to acquire possessions beyond our needs. Hindu philosophy teaches us that our happiness is to be found within ourselves rather than in external objects. Consumerism is contrary to this value because it sets us back on our spiritual journey while also greatly straining the environment. Another value with direct implications for the environment is *Ahimsa* (non-injury). Recognizing the presence of the divine in all beings, our scriptures require us to avoid injury to others, where “others” includes all beings. Thus, Hindu dietary laws prohibit eating beef and express a preference for a vegetarian diet. The

⁴⁰ Previously published by InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington [www.ifcmw.org]

⁴¹ See the author’s note on Values.

ecological benefits of a vegetarian diet are gaining wider recognition. At a social level, non-injury implies the avoidance of violence and war that threaten the destruction of our environment.

Nurturing the forces of Nature

The message that humans and the forces of Nature have a relationship of mutuality is reinforced in our scriptures through stories and practices. One scriptural story is that of the noble King Prithu.⁴² When Prithu ascended the throne, a famine hobbled the land. The king was angry at Goddess Earth for withholding her produce and causing distress. She protested that she had been exploited for generations by his predecessors who had stolen her produce without returning to Earth what was her due. She pleaded with King Prithu to restore the respect due to her and to help her conserve rain water by landscaping the ground and creating water reservoirs. When Prithu agreed and offered to protect earth as his daughter, Goddess Earth again became prolific in her produce. Earth came to be known as Prithvi i.e. daughter of Prithu.

In another story, Lord Krishna eliminates the poisonous serpent Kaliya (*Srimad Bhagavatam Book 10, Chapter 16*). Near Krishna's boyhood home, a pool of water was terribly polluted. Anyone who ventured near it and even the birds that flew over the area were killed by the poisonous fumes. The source of the poison was a giant venomous snake that had made this pool his abode. Krishna subdued the snake, banished him to the ocean, and restored the pool of water to its original purity.

Hindus worship God in multiple manifestations and in each of these manifestations God is associated with an animal or bird. This indirectly teaches Hindus to view all other living beings as possessing divinity. Two of the most popularly worshipped forms are Lord Ganesha who has an elephant head and Lord Hanuman who has the form of a monkey. The cow is regarded as particularly sacred and the eagle, snake, bull, lion, mouse, peacock, dog, fish, tortoise and owl are all associated with divinity. Fragrant flowers, coconuts and fruit form integral parts of ritual worship. Rituals in our life cycle involve sacred rivers, lakes and mountains.

Reverence for Fire is taught to show the interconnections between humans and the Divine. The very first mantra in the oldest Veda, the Rig Veda, invokes the blessings of Fire. With its infinite capacity to transform, Fire is seen as the "mouth" of the Divine, providing Divine guidance to humans and receiving the special offerings made by humans to propitiate Nature which Fire then transmits to the appropriate forces of the Divine. Our most important sacred vows, such as marriage, are witnessed by Fire.

Several simple prayers that we learn as children help us imbibe the message that the Divine is present everywhere: when we wake up we ask Mother Earth's forgiveness before stepping on her; before eating we remember that eating is a part of the cosmic drama presided over by the

⁴² Srimad Bhagavatam Book 4, Chapter 18

Divine; when we bathe, we remember the sacred rivers; we are taught never to disrespect books by putting our feet on them; we remember God before starting a new activity. Hindu homes tend to be filled with religious objects to remind us of God's presence. We are encouraged to take God's name at all times with or without reason! The personal names of most Hindus are derived from the many names of God or His qualities.

In short, our scriptures, our ethical injunctions, and the way we are brought up as Hindus emphasize that we humans are a part of the infinitely grand fabric of Nature. Humans and the natural environment are bound to each other in a mutual relationship where humans are required to nurture the forces of Nature even while enjoying its bounty.

CHAPTER 9

KARMA AND REBIRTH

Dr. D.C. Rao

Karma means action. An action is undertaken by an individual with a specific intention. It is this individual, known as the ‘doer,’ who is responsible for the action and therefore has to reap the consequences of the action. A central idea in Hindu philosophy is the unshakeable link between action and consequence, as between cause and effect. Each action creates a consequence that the doer of the action must necessarily experience; and each experience of an individual has its cause in a prior action by that same individual.

Because of this tight connection between action and consequence, the word *karma* is also used to indicate the result or ‘fruit’ of an action. Depending on the intention behind the action, the fruit may be desirable, undesirable or mixed. Actions that are selfish, malicious and hurtful result in sorrow, tension, regret and guilt. These are known as *papa*. Actions that are driven by a sense of duty and concern for others bring joy and inner fulfillment. These are known as *punya*. Only good actions with good intentions lead to good *karma*: one cannot harvest mangoes by planting a cactus.

The time interval between the action and its consequence may be very short, even immediate, or very long, stretching over many lives. Thus, our experiences in this life may be the result of our actions performed in past lives; and the fruit of our present actions may be experienced by us in future lives. Since we do not remember our past lives, we frequently cannot understand why we suffer pain and sorrow; and we may fail to see in this life the rewards of our good actions that fructify as good experiences in future lives. It is fortunate that we forget our past lives. If we remembered them, we might be plagued by guilt or anxiety and the memory of past associations might poison relationships.

The karmic consequences of all our actions in all our previous lives are accumulated in seed form that produce fruit in future lives. This accumulation is known as *sancita karma*. As long as there is *sancita karma* in our karmic account, we are bound to be reborn until we exhaust this accumulation. Since it has been accumulated over many lives, the burden of the past is too much for us to exhaust in this life alone. If the *sancita karma* is thought of as a warehouse full of our past *karmas*, one part of it, designated to be exhausted in this life, is like a truckload in our front yard. This is known as *prarabdha karma*, a subset of our *karma* that must be experienced in this life. It is our destiny for this life, determining the circumstances of our birth, our life span and the principal elements of our lives.

Who selects *prarabdha karma* as a subset of *sancita karma*? This is the prerogative of *Ishwara*, the all-knowing, all-powerful and compassionate God who set in place the law of karma and oversees its operation. *Ishwara* helps us exhaust our accumulated *sancita karma* in the most

efficient way possible in successive births. The purpose of each birth is to exhaust *prarabdha karma* and, as far as possible, avoid adding to the stock of *sancita karma*. To grasp how this is done, one needs to understand the link between our actions and our latent desires.

Each action is driven by a desire, consciously or unconsciously. Even when we believe we are acting out of a conscious intention, we frequently act out of habit. The habits we cultivate by repeated actions over many lives are known as *vasanas*. Since our actions are driven by our *vasanas*, we can only exhaust our *karma* when we have overcome our *vasanas*. *Vasanas* dwell in our mind and are acted on by our body. In His compassion, *Ishwara* provides us with the body and environment that is best suited to exhaust our *vasanas*. For example, *vasanas* of violence may be best exhausted in the body of a tiger and *vasanas* of stubbornness in the body of a mule. When our mind is overwhelmed by *vasanas* that constitute an obstacle to our spiritual growth, *Ishwara* gives us a birth in a non-human form best suited to exhaust those *vasanas*. Since animals act from instinct, they are not “doers” and do not create any new karma by their actions. Thus each animal ends its life with a reduction in *sancita karma*. Humans have greater choice in how they act. When humans act to fulfil desires, they add to their *sancita karma*. Actions driven by selfish desires such as anger, add to bad karma; and actions motivated by a higher purpose and undertaken in a spirit of dedication to God add good karma to their stock of *sancita karma*. *Ishwara* gives us a human birth only when our minds are sufficiently evolved and capable of the self-control needed to make right choices. When humans fail to exercise self-control and act to fulfil base desires, they are propelling themselves toward an animal birth in the future. Based on the changing composition of *sancita karma*, each of us might have gone through many lives in a variety of different forms, human and non-human.

This cycle of births and deaths in one body after another is a journey undertaken by our minds. Our minds are filled with desires and habits accumulated over many past lives and we are deluded into thinking that the way to happiness is the fulfillment of our desires. It is only through long and bitter experience that we learn that the well of desires is bottomless and that seeking happiness by fulfilling desires is foolish. Spiritual practice consists of seeking fulfillment in helping others; working unselfishly for a higher purpose; training our minds to be detached and single-pointed; reflecting on who we are and how we relate to the world around us; and surrendering all our actions and their fruits to God. That is how we accumulate good *karma*. The goal of spiritual evolution is to realize that our own true nature is eternal, blissful and universal, unaffected by the joys and sorrows that are an inevitable part of all individual experience. This is **Self-Realization**. A Realized person no longer sees himself or herself as a “doer” of actions; and the warehouse of *sancita karma* is as if burnt, bringing complete liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.

The law of karma is not ‘fatalism’ or ‘pre-determination.’ First, our experiences today are merely the consequences of our own actions in the past, maybe past lives that we do not recall. This is a theory of full accountability rather than ‘pre-determinism.’ Second, while what we experience is a consequence of our past actions, how we conduct ourselves in the midst of these

experiences determines our own destiny in the future. This again is individual responsibility and exercise of free will rather than fatalism.

A proper understanding of how the law of karma operates in our lives helps us sustain peace of mind in the midst of turmoil and sorrow while strengthening our motivation to engage positively in meeting life's challenges.

Note: for a fuller treatment of this subject, including important nuances and lessons drawn from engaging scriptural stories, see *From Death to Birth: Understanding Karma and Reincarnation* by Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, Himalayan Institute, 1997; ISBN 0-89389-147-9.

CHAPTER 10

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

DR. D.C. Rao

The ultimate goal of Hindu spiritual practice is to become aware of the Divine's presence everywhere at all times in oneself, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. Achieving this goal requires a mind that is exceptionally clear and calm. Hindu scriptures offer a variety of practices that help the seeker purify the mind and expand his/her consciousness. While the final goal of these practices is *moksha*, liberation, there are also immediate benefits of great practical value. Such a person rises above sorrows and spreads peace and joy to others.

The purpose of this note is to convey a broad understanding of the principles on which Hindu spiritual practices are based and outline the vast variety of practices that are described in the scriptures.

The core of Hindu spiritual practice is to recognize that our true identity is not the mortal body but the immortal, blissful *Atman*. Hindu scriptures offer detailed guidance on how to replace this misidentification with an understanding of our essential inner Divinity. When the physical body dies, our minds live on and carry to our next life the level of understanding that we attained in this life. Each life as a human being is an opportunity to improve our spiritual understanding.

The primary impediment to spiritual evolution is the deep reservoir of habits and misconceptions in our minds that prevent us from realizing the truth about our own blissful nature and seeing Divine glory in the world around us. These misconceptions are the cause of endless agitation as we vainly seek to find happiness in the wrong places. Jerked about by our likes and dislikes, we fail to enjoy the peace of mind we crave for. Replacing false understanding with a realization of the inherent joy in the universe is necessarily a long and arduous process that might take several lifetimes. Hindu scriptures describe this process in depth and offer many suggestions on how to transform our minds and speed our progress on the spiritual path.

In discussions on how to transform the mind, two recurrent themes are *abhyasa* (practice) and *vairagya* (non-attachment)⁴³. As long as our minds are preoccupied with seeking fleeting pleasures in gratifying our senses, accumulating possessions and nursing relationships, we are only reinforcing mental habits that consistently fail to bring lasting happiness and spiritual growth. Disciplining these habits by cultivating non-attachment frees our minds to pursue spiritual goals and connect with the Divine within us. Such discipline requires sustained and well-designed practice.

Hindu scriptures prescribe a vast array of practices that can be helpful to a spiritual seeker. With some ritualistic exceptions, practices are not mandated. The individual seeker is free to adopt the

⁴³ Bhagavad Gita 6.35 and Yoga Sutras 1.12

practices that he finds appealing. Many seekers consult spiritual teachers (*Gurus*) and follow systematic paths. Spiritual practices constitute two broad categories: those practices that can be practiced by all seekers without much preparation; and more intensive practices that require a higher degree of commitment and preparation. The following paragraphs provide some examples of practices in each of these categories.

Common practices:

- *Practices as a part of daily life:* such as daily prayer at a family altar at home; remembering God in simple prayers associated with daily activities such as eating and bathing; celebrating holy days; visiting the temple; regular fasting on a weekly or fortnightly basis; daily or weekly readings of scriptures such as the *Ramayana*.
- *Satsang:* Being a member of a community of spiritual seekers to engage in singing devotional songs, scriptural study, and group prayer. Listening to spiritual discourses by learned teachers. This helps keep the seeker on the spiritual path, reinforces good practices and resolves doubts.
- *Pilgrimage:* Scriptures extol the practice of visiting sacred sites, preferably with the family. This enhances faith. Some pilgrimages can be arduous and strengthen spiritual discipline. There are scores of sacred sites that seekers aspire to visit, ranging from nearby temples dedicated to family deities to distant temples in the Himalayas.
- *Dharma:* Hindu *dharma* is a nuanced set of guidelines on what constitutes right action in given circumstances. Basic principles include not hurting others, being honest and living a life of self-restraint. An ethical life is the foundation of spiritual practice. Many scriptures offer guidance on *dharma*, which is a major emphasis in family upbringing as well.
- *Right attitude in all daily activities.* Basic practices include being diligent in performing all duties and focusing on doing the right thing rather than on enjoying the fruit of our actions. Engaging only in actions that promote the greater good purifies the mind, reducing the force of desire, anger and greed.

Intensive Practices:

Ashtanga Yoga: the 8-fold path is a systematic approach to spiritual practice that includes an ethical foundation; physical and breathing exercises to mobilize inner energies; and mental disciplines that culminate in meditative absorption of the mind and complete liberation. Related *yogic* practices focus on activating internal energy centers (*chakras*) to expand spiritual consciousness. A *yogi* sees everything clearly as it is and remains unperturbed.

Upasana: more intensive forms of prayer that include use of physical images (*murtis*), esoteric patterns (*yantras*) and the repetition of *mantras* (*japa*) that represent the Divine. Formal worship includes the practice of *nyasa* whereby God's presence is ritually invoked in each part of the worshipper's body prior to the worship (*puja*). By recognizing God's presence in everything, one sees oneself in all others and all others in oneself.

Yajna: placing offerings in a sacred fire accompanied by chanting of mantras invoking Divine blessings.

Jnana Yoga: intensive study of the Upanishads and related philosophical texts, resolution of doubts on their meaning, followed by contemplation and application of the teachings in daily life. Seeing the One in all diverse forms, these yogis see beyond all divisions and all their actions are for the well-being of others.

Meditation: practice of deep and prolonged meditation that brings clarity and tranquility to the mind.

Sanyasa: total renunciation of all possessions, family, professional and social ties; and complete immersion in spiritual contemplation. Some renunciates live in spiritual communities, *ashrams*, and many wander freely in a spirit of surrender to the Divine, relying on whatever food and shelter comes their way.

Practices listed above as “common” and “intensive” can be used by both beginners and advanced practitioners to purify and calm their minds. One whose mind is completely clear and calm connects effortlessly with the inner Divinity and attains liberation from worldly agitations and sorrows.

CHAPTER 11

PATHS OF YOGA

Dr. D.C. Rao

The Sanskrit word *Yoga* is derived from the root *yuj*, similar to the word ‘yoke.’ In the spiritual context, *yoga* is that which helps one unite with Supreme Consciousness. The ultimate goal of spirituality in Hinduism is to become aware of the Divine presence everywhere, at all times, in oneself, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. Hindus may seek to connect with the Divine as an all-pervasive Consciousness, *Brahman*, or as a presence that dwells within one’s heart or as the Personality of Godhead. Recognizing that persons have varying spiritual understanding, physical and intellectual capacities and even interest in the Divine, Hindu scriptures offer a variety of spiritual paths or *yogas* to help all seekers progress toward this goal, each in their own way. A key component of all *yoga* is to transform the mind, making it clear and calm; the techniques vary among the different paths of *yoga*.

Karma Yoga: the Yoga of Action:

Actions commonly reflect personal likes or dislikes, and are undertaken seeking personal gain or the benefit of those to whom one is attached. Spiritual evolution requires that all actions, including speech and the thoughts that lead to actions, are unselfish and derive from a dedication to the common good. The path of *Karma Yoga* is about being engaged in purposeful action without any expectation of personal reward, here or in after-life, and achieving freedom from fear and sorrow. The components of this path are:

- Doing one’s duties willingly, cheerfully and with love. This helps overcome likes/dislikes and reduces avoidable stress.
- Surrender the fruit of actions to God. Recognize that the outcome of one’s actions is determined by forces beyond one’s control. Give God the credit for successful actions.
- Do good because it is the right thing to do. Offer all actions as contributions to nature’s cosmic flow presided over by God. Act as an instrument of God.
- Acknowledge that the power to act is itself a gift from God and gratefully surrender all actions to God.

Raja Yoga: the Yoga of Meditation, the “Royal Path”:

Raja Yoga is the systematic practice of precise techniques to become aware of one’s internal energies, make the mind clear and calm and know the Self. This path consists of eight steps: exercising specified disciplines in daily life; cultivating and refining internal awareness; physical postures to improve health and gain awareness of internal energy flows; breathing exercises to access the nervous system and bring clarity to the mind; turning the mind inward, away from the distracting influence of sense organs; making the mind one-pointed in concentration; focusing the mind in meditation; and, finally, achieving *Samadhi*, a super-conscious state of mind that leads to intuitive wisdom and direct experience of the Self. This path requires good health, discipline and a dedication to regular practice.

Jnana Yoga: Path of Knowledge, Vedanta:

Practitioners of the path of knowledge strive to realize the Self by removing ignorance about our essential nature, our relation with the world around us, and the origin and destiny of the universe. The basic technique used on this path is seeking the Truth through deep intellectual enquiry and vigorous debate. The first stage is the study of scripture, mainly the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Brahma Sutras*, along with commentaries and expository texts by learned teachers. The second stage is sustained reflection on the messages of these scriptures and efforts to resolve doubts about their meaning. The third stage is use of meditation to fully internalize the distinction between Pure Consciousness, the eternal, all-pervasive, changeless and blissful Reality and all the rest that is ephemeral and the product of the mind. The conclusions of *Vedanta* are fully accepted only when the statements in scriptures are found to be consistent with reason and the seeker's own direct experience. This path requires a high degree of intellectual rigor, the capacity for patient reflection, a burning desire for liberation and the ability to detach from sensory pleasures in order to concentrate on spiritual enquiry.

Bhakti Yoga: the Yoga of Devotion, Love of God:

The essence of *Bhakti Yoga* is intense love of God, characterized by constant remembrance and an unconditional desire to serve God in both mortal and celestial realms. On this path, devotion is its own reward and the practitioner renounces all other desires, even the desire for *moksha*, liberation. All desires and emotions are directed toward God and the devotee loves God with at least as much intensity as others might love sense pleasures or worldly possessions. In brief, the devotee rests his/her mind and heart in God and consecrates all actions in service of God. The main steps in the path of devotion are:

- Guard against bad habits that pollute body and mind;
- Seek the company of other devotees; listen to and sing about the glories of God;
- Chant God's name, worship God and remember God incessantly to purify the mind;
- Serve all beings with humility and in an attitude of submission to God's glory;
- Cultivate an intimate relationship with God as a dear friend, as a child or as a lover;
- Be open to God's grace by which alone one attains supreme devotion;

The scriptures urge devotees to go beyond mere ritual worship and stress the importance of serving others. The best devotee is one who sees God dwelling in oneself and in all beings, and all beings dwelling in oneself and in God.

Tantra: Esoteric, All-embracing Path:

The central theme of *Tantra* is that the entire universe is one indivisible whole as a manifestation of the Divine Mother, the inseparable union of Pure Consciousness (*Shiva*) and primordial energy (*Shakti*); and that one who has pierced the secrets of the universe can attain all goals, both spiritual and material. The focal point of *tantra* is worship of the Divine Mother in all Her aspects, both creative and transformative. Declaring that each human being is a microcosm embodying the entire universe,

tantric practitioners seek to master their own mind, senses and body as a means of knowing the universe. Tantrics see the Divine in and through every experience; and use every object and experience in the world as tools for spiritual growth. Practitioners embrace a very wide variety of practices including the use of sacred sound, sacred designs, sacred gestures, sacred objects, gems, astrology, alchemy, ritual sacrifice, fire-offerings, prayer and meditation. Building on the techniques of *Raja Yoga*, advanced techniques are used to mobilize the infinite energy that dwells dormant within oneself. When these practices are employed for personal gain and transgress ethics and morality, they cause fear and revulsion. When the goal is spiritual, the path of *tantra* is systematic, comprehensive and effective.

The Yogas are Complementary

Far from being mutually exclusive, the various paths of *yoga* are strongly complementary. A Hindu spiritual seeker typically draws on more than one path in practice. *Bhakti Yoga*, *Jnana Yoga* and *Raja Yoga* have been described as the two wings and the tail of a bird in flight. *Karma Yoga* is recognized as powerful in purifying the mind and a necessary foundation for all spiritual practice. Each path contributes in its own way to the achievement of spiritual goals. Further, these paths converge at the culmination of spiritual practice. A deep practice of the path of knowledge leads to the flowering of devotion; and the deep practice of the path of devotion leads to the emergence of knowledge.

CHAPTER 12

GOD: IS HINDUISM POLYTHEISTIC?

Dr. D.C. RAO

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are often described as the world's three great monotheistic religions, implying that Hinduism is polytheistic. Attempting to label Hinduism as either 'monotheistic' or 'polytheistic' is being unaware of what Hinduism really is. Hindu scriptures speak of a single Supreme Being who is both transcendent and immanent, manifest in a multitude of forms. It is a mistake to seek in Hinduism an equivalent of the Creator God or Father figure who dwells in Heaven, presides over a Final Judgment and offers Salvation to those who believe in Him. To understand what 'God' means in Hinduism, we need to reflect more deeply on the various meanings attached to the word 'God.'

Many would agree that 'God' may be seen as the Supreme or Ultimate Reality. But, in practice, for most human beings, God is not an abstraction but a Person, with personal attributes. Hebrew scriptures, the Bible and the Quran have extensive descriptions of the attributes of God: compassion, love, forgiveness, justice and jealousy (*Exodus 34.6, 7, 14*); seven attributes including power, wisdom and glory (*Revelations 5.12*); the *Quran* refers to Allah as Most Gracious and Most Merciful; and, drawing on references in the Quran, Islamic tradition has compiled a list of 99 Most Beautiful Names that devout Muslims are asked to remember.

In Hinduism, 'God' is truly One but scriptures present various descriptions of 'God' to satisfy the spiritual needs of practitioners and devotees at different levels of spiritual development: the Ultimate Reality, the Inner Controller, and a devotional anchor. The very heart of Hindu spiritual practice is captured in the teaching: "*by any means whatsoever, rest your mind in God*"⁴⁴.

The Upanishads discuss the Ultimate Reality. "*In the beginning there was Existence alone...One alone, without a second*"⁴⁵. "*...that which is invisible, ungraspable, birthless...eternal, the source of all.*"⁴⁶ These statements relate to *Brahman*, Pure Consciousness, that has no name, no form, is indescribable and beyond the human mind. If God means Ultimate Reality, there can be no more monotheistic declarations than these. *Brahman* is free of all attributes since to think of *Brahman* as a Person is to impose limitations on that which is Infinite. The attribute of being tall excludes short; being bright excludes dark; and so on. Being free of all attributes, *Brahman* is said to be "indescribable."⁴⁷ The Upanishads declare that although beyond description, *Brahman*

⁴⁴ *Srimad Bhagavatam 7.1.31*

⁴⁵ *Chandogya Upanishad 6.6.1*

⁴⁶ *Mundaka Upanishad. 1.1.6*

⁴⁷ *Mandukya Upanishad 7*

can be experienced by negating all concepts that arise in the mind and by making the mind so still and pure that we become aware of the very source of our awareness.⁴⁸

Because it is extremely hard for the human mind to grapple with such an abstraction, Hindu scriptures offer another way of thinking about God: *Ishwara*. Unlike *Brahman*, *Ishwara* has attributes: all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal and ever-free of all human limitations.⁴⁹ *Ishwara* is the inner controller who dwells in the hearts of all living beings.⁵⁰ By deep devotion and surrender to *Ishwara* the spiritual seeker is able to realize the true Self and overcome sorrow. *Ishwara* is one.⁵¹ Although Brahman is the only true reality, *Ishwara* arises out of our projection of attributes to meet our own mental needs. In the language of Vedanta, *Ishwara* is a ‘superimposition’ on the One Reality that is *Brahman*, which means that *Ishwara* has no reality separate from Pure Consciousness. Such superimposition is encouraged by the Hindu scriptures as a practical aid to spiritual progress. Meditating on the attributes of *Ishwara* is a powerful spiritual practice.⁵²

For most, *Ishwara* is also too abstract. How are they to connect with God, develop deep devotion to God and ultimately rest their minds in God? Hinduism addresses this human need by presenting God in specific forms. Such forms are clearly recognizable and so lend themselves to deeper personal relationships. For example, Lord Ganesha, the God of Wisdom, is portrayed with the head of an elephant, which is known to be a highly intelligent animal; and there are numerous stories about Lord Ganesha that devotees can enjoy and relate to. Other names and forms in which God is portrayed include celestial, human and other beings; male and female; austere and opulent; fierce and serene; master and servant. These forms reflect the vision that God is not merely a remote ‘Creator’ of the universe; rather, the whole universe is a manifestation of God’s creative energy.⁵³ This is why Hindus regard the whole of nature as sacred. Mountains and rivers, trees, animals and all planets can be objects of worship as manifestations of the One Supreme Reality.

This proliferation of names and forms in which God might be worshipped by Hindus has two important benefits: first, persons of every temperament can find a form of God that appeals to their heart and to whom they can offer deep devotion; and second, seeing Divinity in so many different forms creates in Hindus a reverence for the Creator who has brought forth this wondrous diversity.

In referring to these forms of the Supreme Reality, another Sanskrit term that is used to denote ‘God’ is *Bhagavan* or *Bhagavati*. *Bhagavan* refers to male and *Bhagavati* to female forms of

⁴⁸ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

⁴⁹ Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* 1.24-26.

⁵⁰ *Bhagavad Gita* 18.61

⁵¹ Svetashvatara Upanishad 6.11

⁵² Patanjali: *Yoga Sutras* 1.27-29; 36.

⁵³ “Having created it, He entered into it...He Became the manifest and the unmanifest...and all this whatsoever that exists.” *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.6

Divinity. Both terms signify one who possesses six special attributes known collectively as “*bhaga*”: Knowledge, Detachment, Sovereignty, Righteousness, Renown and Glory. There is of course no limit to the list of Divine attributes. For example, the Divine Mother is described as the source of 21 attributes in each living being;⁵⁴ and Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita: “there is no end to My Divine Glories...”⁵⁵ Reciting the thousand names of Vishnu or Lalita are popular prayers, for each of the names is associated with a Divine attribute and helps in fostering devotion to God.

Does the multiplicity of forms of God mean Hinduism is polytheistic? No, for all these different forms are merely various manifestations of the One Pure Consciousness. The scriptures never tire of pointing this out.⁵⁶ Even the Hindu who is not philosophically inclined and unaware of the scriptures relating to *Brahman* as the One Ultimate Reality does not regard the different forms of God as competing Divinities. The scriptures that present specific forms of God themselves proclaim that form to be the same as the One universal, infinite Reality.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the Upanishads caution against seeing the object of worship as being separate from Brahman.⁵⁸ When Hindus worship God in a specific form, they do so to connect with the all-powerful Higher Being that is the One Ultimate Reality.

Another Sanskrit term that is commonly translated as ‘God’ is *deva* or *devata* for male forms and *devi* for female forms. *Devas* and *devatas* are divine beings that are manifestations of the One Supreme Being in all aspects of creation. *Deva* literally means ‘shining being’ and is seen as the divine force presiding over each field of activity, whose blessings we invoke for success in what we do in that field. Each *deva* is merely one aspect of the Supreme Being who, being transcendent and immanent, is to be seen in all forms. *Devas* exist as cosmic forces as well as forces within us. They are invoked through prayer and worship as well as through a variety of yogic and tantric practices. Translating *deva* or *devata* as ‘God’ or ‘gods’ invites conflict with the idea that there is only One Supreme Being that some other religions call God. From this misinterpretation comes the incorrect inference that Hinduism is polytheistic. If there has to be a label for Hinduism, a better one might be ‘pluriform monotheism.’⁵⁹

Hindu scriptures offer many manifestations of the One Reality – from *Brahman* as the most abstract to *Ishwara*, *Bhagavan*, Personal manifestations such as Vishnu, Shiva, Durga or Lakshmi and Divine incarnations on earth such as Rama and Krishna. The goal of each spiritual seeker is to connect with the infinite Divinity that is both transcendent and immanent, that

⁵⁴ *Sri Durga Saptashati* 5.16-75

⁵⁵ Bhagavad Gita 10.40

⁵⁶ See for example, *Rg Veda* 6.47.18; *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.5.7; *Katha Upanishad* 2.2.9, 10; *Srimad Bhagavatam* 4.7.54

⁵⁷ See for example the *Ganapati-atharvashirsha-upanishad mantras 1 and 5* on *Ganesha* as the Ultimate Reality; *Bhagavad Gita* 7.19 on Krishna; *Yajur Veda* 16.1-66 on *Rudra*; *Mahanarayana Upanishad* 11.6, 13, also known as *Narayana Sukta* which describes *Narayana* as being *Brahma*, *Siva*, *Vishnu*, *Indra*, the Imperishable Supreme.

⁵⁸ *Kena Upanishad* 1.5-9.

⁵⁹ See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1770452/pluriform-monotheism>

can appear in any form even while being essentially beyond all forms. The scriptures encourage all seekers by leaving open all possibilities, allowing the seeker to choose a spiritual practice according to his or her own level of understanding. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the question is posed: “how many Gods exactly are there?” The first answer is “three hundred and three”. The question is repeated many times, eliciting a series of answers: “thirty-three”; “six”; “three”; “two”; “one-and-a-half”; “One”. This discussion ends with the question: “Which is the One God?” to which the answer is “it is *Brahman*...”⁶⁰ All the forms in which Hindus worship ‘God’ are various manifestations of the One.

⁶⁰ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 3.9.1, 9.

CHAPTER 13

WORSHIP: ARE IMAGES IDOLS?

Dr. D.C. Rao

A central teaching of Hindu scriptures is that the whole of creation emerged from the One Supreme Being that is Pure Consciousness. Hindus are taught to see the Divine in all things: within themselves, in all other humans, in all beings and in the whole universe. Mountains and rivers, trees, animals and planets are all seen as sacred, being manifestations of the One. This is not merely a “belief”; it has to be a way of living.

To see Divine presence in everything around us, at all times, requires a mind that is exceptionally pure, calm and one-pointed. Hindu scriptures offer a variety of ways of transforming our minds to achieve this state of mind.⁶¹ For some people the best path might be deep study of the scriptures or a sustained practice of intense meditation. For most Hindus, however, the best way is the path of devotion to God, developing an attitude of total surrender to God.

Surrendering to God is far from easy. It is made less difficult when we can see God in intimate terms as a mother, father or trusted friend; as one who knows our deepest anxieties; as one who is always there to guide and lift us up in our darkest moments. This is a very personal relationship that is nurtured over a long period of growing devotion to God and is a precursor to seeing God in all forms in the universe. Hinduism responds to this yearning for a personal relationship with God by promoting the practice of worshipping God in a specific form. The specific form is represented as a picture or a sculpted image and is used by a devotee to help focus the mind in ardent devotion. It is the nature of the human mind to create a mental image even when thinking of an abstract concept. Pure Consciousness, beyond name and form, beyond the conceptual capacity of the human mind, is the ultimate in abstraction. Worshipping God as represented in a physical image is a means for the human mind to connect with the Supreme Being that is the source of all life and manifests in all forms in the universe.

Hindus worship images as physical representations of particular manifestations of the One Supreme Being that is called God. The devotee focuses his or her mind on the image as a way of making the mind single-pointed and to imbue it with love and devotion to the transcendent Divine Consciousness. The image is not seen as an independent source of power or divinity. Before worshipping an image, a special ritual is undertaken to invoke in this image the energy of the transcendent God-Consciousness. Once this is done, the image, known as a *murti*, is seen as a living entity and suitably worshipped. The ritual worship of a *murti* is known as *puja*. Its components are similar to how one would treat a respected guest to one’s home. The transcendent Divine force is invoked and invited to reside in the *murti* placed on an altar; the *murti* is bathed and adorned; prayers are chanted or sung to the accompaniment of bells; various

⁶¹ See the author’s note on Spiritual Practice.

symbolic offerings are made including flowers, fruit, incense and light; and finally, the devotee takes leave of the Divine force as it departs from the *murti* until it is time for the next worship ceremony, known as *puja*. Sometimes, the *murti* is made of clay and ritually destroyed at the end of the *puja*, having served its purpose. It is these practices that distinguish Hindu worship of an image from the practice of idolatry that is so strongly condemned in the Hebrew Bible and the Quran.

The *puja* ritual is designed to captivate the mind by engaging all of the senses of perception. The sense of smell is stimulated by the incense, camphor and fragrant flowers; the eyes are bathed in the light that illuminates a beautifully decorated *murti*; the ears absorb the sound of bells, cymbals, the chanting of Vedic *mantras* and singing of devotional songs; the sense of taste is satisfied by eating the *prasada*, the food that has been ritually blessed by the deity; and the sense of touch is engaged in all of the activities of performing the rituals. Engaging all the senses keeps the mind fully focused on the *puja* and enhances the worshipper's devotion.

A significant feature of Hinduism is the large number of names and forms in which God might be worshipped. This has two important benefits: first, persons of every temperament can find a form of God that appeals to their heart and to whom they can offer deep devotion; and second, seeing Divinity in so many different forms creates in Hindus a reverence for the Creator who has brought forth this wondrous diversity. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in female form, known as *Shakti* that means energy. Hindus pray to *Ganesh*, the God of Wisdom who helps overcome all obstacles; *Durga* or *Shakti* as Goddess of power, *Sarasvati*, the Goddess of learning; *Lakshmi*, the Goddess of abundance; *Rama* who came to earth to show humans how to live the path of Dharma; *Krishna*, who came to earth to eradicate evil and protect the good; *Hanuman*, who is the ideal devoted servant of Rama; and many other forms that inspire Hindus to express their devotion to God. There is a wealth of stories relating to each of these manifestations and Hindus enjoy retelling them to inspire greater love of God in themselves and in others. A Hindu typically worships God in all these forms on various occasions, though most choose to worship a favorite form, an *Ishta Devata* in their daily prayers.

Some Divine forms resemble animals or birds. Lord *Ganesh* is depicted with the head of an elephant; Lord *Hanuman* with the face of a monkey; Lord *Narasimha* with the head of a lion; Lord *Hayagriva* with the head of a horse; Lord *Adishesha* as a serpent. God has descended to earth for specific purposes as an *avatar* in a variety of forms including a fish, a tortoise, a boar and a dwarf. Gods and Goddesses are depicted as accompanied by animals or birds such as the bull, eagle, lion, peacock, mouse, dogs, owl and swan. Sacred rivers such as the Ganga and Yamuna are worshipped as embodiments of Divinity. It is a common practice to worship the *Tulsi* plant every morning as a part of the daily prayers; and the *Ashwattha* or *Peepul* tree is sacred to all Hindus. The variety of such forms reminds Hindus that the entire creation is merely a manifestation of Divinity, deserving of our reverence.



The *murtis* that depict the various forms of God incorporate symbolic representations that serve to remind the devotees of the transcendent greatness of God. Consider, for example, some of the physical features of the image of Ganesha: the large head represents perfect wisdom; the large stomach symbolizes the Divinity that envelops the entire universe; the large ears represent God's capacity to hear silent prayers; the small feet show that God does not need to go anywhere because God is everywhere already; multiple arms show the all-powerful nature of God; one hand holds an axe that cuts the bonds of false attachments; another hand holds a rope that pulls us to the goal; another hand holds a sweet reward for the sincere seeker; and one palm is held in a gesture of blessing. Similarly, the physical forms and adornments of each of the images create mental associations that enhance love and reverence of God.

Hindus may relate to *murtis* in a variety of ways depending on the level of their own understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism. Some Hindus may believe that their chosen form of God is the only true representation of the Supreme Being; but even so, they respect others who have chosen to worship a different form of God. Those who are more philosophically aware recognize that all the different forms are but manifestations of the One. Sincere devotion to a single chosen form itself leads to deeper love of God and an acceptance of the multiplicity of manifestations described in the Hindu scriptures.

Hindu scriptures repeatedly emphasize that the essence of spirituality is to rest one's mind in God "by any means whatsoever." Scriptures also describe numerous techniques to achieve this goal and one of the most accessible of these techniques is *murti puja*. Worship of a physical representation of God is a reliable means of connecting with the Supreme Divinity that is the Source of all life.

CHAPTER 14

SYMBOLS⁶²

Dr. D.C. Rao



OM: The deepest spiritual truth in the Vedas is the omnipresence of divine consciousness. Absolutely nothing in the universe exists separate from the divine. This supreme truth is beyond form and has no name; and is represented in the Vedas by the Sanskrit symbol *OM*. *OM* is a most sacred symbol: it is recited before all Vedic mantras; written at the start of any document; and even used as a greeting.

The sound *OM* is composed of three sounds that span the whole vocal apparatus: ‘a’ from the base; ‘u’ from the middle; and ‘m’ from the tip at the lips; combining to form *AUM*. The fourth element in *OM* is the silence between successive *OMs*: the silence from which all sounds emerge and into which they all subside.⁶³

The Upanishads explain how *OM* represents the sum totality of all human experience. Its four elements represent the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe and the Pure Existence in which they all happen; they represent the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep that span our entire lives and the Pure Awareness through which we experience all these states; they represent earth, space and heaven and the Pure Bliss which transcends all these fields of experience.

By reminding us of the omnipresence of the Divine, the chanting of *OM* can bring our minds to a profound meditative state. And the vibratory quality of the sound *Om* itself has a profound impact on our inner energies, preparing us for meditation.



LOTUS: The *Lotus flower* is cited widely in Hindu spiritual texts: Gods and Goddesses are frequently depicted holding a lotus or sitting on one; the centers of energy in the human body, known as *chakras* are symbolized by lotuses at each energy center; the Creator, Brahma, is said to have been born from the lotus that sprang up at the navel center of Narayana, who symbolizes Pure Consciousness.

Why do Hindus accord such importance to the lotus? The ancient Sages who were close observers of nature saw a lot to learn from the lotus flower:

⁶² Previously published by InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington [www.ifcmw.org]

⁶³ Mandukya Upanishad 1 and 12.

- The lotus grows in ponds that are frequently murky, yet retains its freshness and beauty. Although in water, the leaves of the lotus do not themselves become wet. That is a lesson for all of us to maintain our purity and nobility even when we are mired in the ugliness and chaos that often surrounds us.⁶⁴
- The petals of the lotus open in the morning when touched by the rays of the sun and close again for the night. True knowledge is like light, and when we recognize our oneness with the eternal, universal consciousness, our Spirit blossoms forth in all its beauty.
- Bees hover over the lotus attracted by its perfume and the careless bee is trapped in the petals of the lotus when they close for the night. That warns us that being overly immersed in seeking sensory satisfaction in the world can lead to our ruin.⁶⁵
- Drops of water tremble on the surface of lotus leaves and are blown off by a passing breeze. This is a reminder to us of the fragility of our lives which may end at any moment.⁶⁶



SWASTIKA: The word *swastika* in Sanskrit means “that which brings good luck and well-being”: “su” means “good” and “asti” means “is”. It appears in one of the most frequently used mantras of the Rg Veda [1.89.6], the oldest scripture known to man.

The swastika is considered extremely sacred and holy by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains and remains very widely used from ancient times to the present day. The symbol is engraved on sacred objects of worship as well as on doorways of temples and homes. It forms part of religious ceremonies to celebrate weddings, consecrations of new homes, embarking on new ventures or any such auspicious undertaking. It is used to decorate books, vehicles, cash registers in stores and myriad other objects in daily use in many Asian countries, especially India.

Because the swastika has been so widely used for so long, it has been interpreted in a variety of ways:

- A solar symbol, spreading light in all directions;

⁶⁴ Bhagavad Gita 5.10

⁶⁵ Vivekachudamani by Shankaracharya: verse 76

⁶⁶ Bhaja Govindam by Shankaracharya: verse 4

- The four goals of human Endeavour: the line from bottom left to top right represents the pursuit of Artha [material security] and Kama [sensual pleasure]. The line from bottom right to top left represents the flow from Dharma [right action] to Moksha [liberation]. Note that the first line levels off, signifying the limitations of material pleasure, while the second is open-ended, signifying the infinite nature of spiritual bliss.
- The swastika symbol is often used as a means of invoking Lord Ganesha, the Remover of obstacles, the Repository of wisdom, at the start of a religious ceremony.



LORD GANESHA: Symbols are especially important when conveying concepts that are subtle and abstract. The Upanishads exhort Hindus to see the presence of Pure Consciousness in all things.⁶⁷ That is hard to do unless the mind is exceptionally pure, calm and undistracted. As a means of developing these qualities of mind, our scriptures guide spiritual aspirants to worship God represented by a specific form and provide a variety of forms to choose from.⁶⁸ Intense devotion to one form of God is a precursor to seeing the presence of God in all forms in the universe. Defining a form invites a physical representation of that form (called a *murti*) as a visual aid to contemplation on the worshipful qualities of God. A special ritual is undertaken to inhale in this *murti* the energy of the transcendent Pure Consciousness before engaging in worship; and in some cases, the image may even be ritually disposed of at the end of the worship ceremony. This worship of a sculpted image or painting as a representation of God, who as Pure Consciousness is everywhere, is emphatically not the “idol worship” that is condemned in the Abrahamic traditions. The devotee uses the image as an aid to form an intense personal relationship with God and does not worship any image as an independent source of power or divinity. Thus the purpose of worshipping an image is to focus the mind and imbue it with love and devotion to the transcendent Divine Consciousness.

⁶⁷ Isha Upanishad 1

⁶⁸ Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 2.3.1

CHAPTER 15

SAMSKARAS: SACRAMENTS

Dr. D.C. Rao

Samskara is the process of refining and making perfect. Hindu tradition prescribes a number of sacraments, known as *samskaras*, which aim to purify an individual's inner being during the journey through life.

Without knowledge of how we as individuals relate to the world around us and to the Divine Being that is the Source of all life, we have difficulty coping with the ups and downs of life. Unlike other forms of life, human beings have the capacity to make choices that can alter the course of their lives. Other forms of life, such as animals, are hard-wired to live by instinct. While their actions exhaust the burden of *karma* with which they are born, they are unable to accelerate the pace of their spiritual evolution. Human beings have the privilege of being able to engage in spiritual practice to purify their minds and connect with the Divinity residing within all beings. However, only a minority of human beings devotes time or attention to serious spiritual practice and that is often in their twilight years when both physical and mental capacity has declined. To offset this deficiency, Hindu scriptures, *Dharma Shastras*, define *samskaras* that require all Hindus to be involved at least to some degree in spiritual practice as a part of their daily lives.

Tradition defines as many as forty *samskaras* that span the entire gamut of milestones in a person's life, from the womb to the funeral pyre. Sixteen of these are said to be more important. This note briefly describes only the most prominent *samskaras* and merely alludes to the others.

The sacred fire, *Agni*, plays a central role in Hindu *samskaras*. The very first set of *mantras* of the *Rig Veda* is the *Agni Sukta*, the hymn in praise of *Agni*. The word *Agni* itself means 'the one who leads us forward.' The hymn praises *Agni* as the One who illuminates our paths and guides us to our true welfare; and appeals to *Agni* to be as a father unto all of us, saving us from harm. The transformative power of fire is well known to all. In the Vedic tradition, prayerful offerings are made into the sacred fire, known as *homa* or *havan*. The subtle essence of these offerings is delivered by *Agni* to the particular Divinity that is the intended recipient. Hence, all Vedic rites require the invoking of the sacred fire, *Agni*, who is like a witness to the prayers and vows uttered in His presence.

Childhood: There are several *samskaras* that are performed during infancy and childhood to pray for the health and well-being of the child and the mother, starting from the time of conception. They include landmarks such as birth, naming the child, first solid food, first outing, first haircut and piercing of the ears. An important *samskara* in this group is the *upanayana* when the child, usually male, undergoes a religious initiation by the *guru* and embarks on formal education and regular religious practices, such as daily chanting of *Gayatri Mantra*. The *upanayana* marks the transition from childhood to the first stage of life, that of a student, and is often a grand ceremony attended by family and friends.

Marriage is the most prominent of the Hindu *samskaras* and has great practical as well as religious significance. Marriage marks the beginning of the second stage of life: that of a

householder, central to the functioning of society. According to the scriptures, a man cannot fulfil his role in protecting dharma without having a spouse.⁶⁹ The Vedic mantras used in the marriage ceremony make it clear that the primary purpose of getting married is to have children and continue the family line. For parents, finding a suitable husband for their daughter is a most serious parental obligation and giving their daughter's hand in marriage is the best gift possible. Traditionally, the proposal for marriage is usually initiated by the girl's parents who approach the parents of the prospective groom. Marriage requires the consent of both families, including the bride and groom.

The core rituals of the marriage ceremony use mantras from the Vedas, with numerous additions that vary greatly by region and family traditions. Only the main steps of the ceremony are outlined here. The marriage takes place at a specially constructed *mantap*⁷⁰ at a venue hosted by the bride's parents. When the bridegroom arrives at the *mantap*, the bride and groom exchange garlands to signify their free intention to marry. The groom is formally welcomed by feeding him a sweet while praying for sweetness in all of nature; and gifts are exchanged. The bride's father places the bride's hand in the hand of the groom, recalling the divine marriage of Lord Vishnu and the Goddess Lakshmi. Bride and groom accept each other, saying "our hearts shall be one and at peace like water" and their scarves are joined by a knot for the rest of the marriage ceremony.

The main part of the ceremony now begins by invoking the sacred fire, *Agni*. To the accompaniment of Vedic mantras, bride and groom make several offerings of puffed rice into the fire, praying for blessings of prosperity and long life and affirming their commitment to support each other. The bride places her foot on a rock, symbolizing her commitment to be firm in her devotion to Dharma. The groom leads the bride for seven steps, praying for progeny, energy, wealth, happiness, health and friendship. Completing these seven steps is seen as the culmination of the marriage. Bride and groom then look at the sun or the pole star as a symbol of being steadfast. Holding their hands over each other's hearts, each of them vows: I place your heart in mine; may our hearts and minds be in harmony. The ceremony closes with the married couple being blessed by all those gathered to witness the marriage.

Cremation: the final *samskara* is performed at death. For almost all Hindus, this means the body is cremated, either on a funeral pyre using wood or in an electric crematorium. Cremation purifies the body and returns it to the five physical elements of which it is composed: earth, water, fire, air and space. When a person is dying, his or her lips are moistened with sacred water from the river Ganga and the name of God is chanted softly. After death, the body is washed and prepared for cremation in daylight as soon as practicable after death. Embalming of the body is not recommended. Family members and friends accompany the body to the crematorium where a priest conducts the rites for this final sacrament. Mourners generally wear white clothes. The pyre is lit by a family member, generally the eldest son. After cremation, the ashes are collected and immersed in a river or ocean. For several days following the death, the family conducts readings of the scriptures at home and specific rituals to help the departed soul on its journey to the next world. Details of the rituals vary widely among different groups of Hindus. Thereafter, on each anniversary of a father's or mother's death, a child, usually the eldest son, performs a ritual in honor of three generations of forefathers as long as he lives.

⁶⁹ *Manu Smriti* 9.42.

⁷⁰ A dome decorated with flowers.

CHAPTER 16

GUNAS: A PATH TO SPIRITUAL REFINEMENT

Dr. D.C. Rao

The goal of Hindu spiritual practice is being able to live in the world and yet be above it. By recognizing the all-pervasive presence of the Divine and understanding our relationship with the world, we can engage in the world without being agitated and distressed. This blissful state can be achieved only by a mind that is highly refined, one that is no longer blinded by ignorance, selfish desire and fear. Hindu scriptures offer many ways to refine the mind and gain freedom from the bondage of worldly attachments. One of them is based on the philosophical concept of *gunas*.⁷¹

Gunas are best understood as building blocks of nature. Everything in the whole created universe is composed of *gunas*. This applies to physical matter as well as subtle energies. Rocks, plants, animals and human beings all represent a varied combination of *gunas*. Only Pure Consciousness, known as *Brahman* or *Atman*, is our true nature and is free of *gunas*. The particular combination of *gunas* in each living being determines its personalities and behavior. Unlike other parts of creation, human beings have the capacity to modify the play of *gunas* in their lives, refining their minds through mindful awareness and practice. Understanding the pattern of *gunas* in the make-up of our personality is a path to refining our minds and evolving spiritually.

One of the literal meanings of the word *Guna* is ‘rope.’ It is the *gunas* that constitute the vast variety of objects and experiences in the world, to which we react with attachment or aversion driven by the pattern of *gunas* in our own personalities. This is how we are bound –by these ‘ropes’ – to worldly matters and remain ignorant of the divinity in our true nature.

Hindu scriptures use a three-fold classification of *gunas* that may combine in an infinite range of variations:

- *Sattva*: purity, knowledge, peace, contentment, clarity, humility, cheerfulness, inspiration, etc.
- *Rajas*: agitation, restlessness, desire, anger, greed, arrogance, ambition, competitiveness etc.
- *Tamas*: inertia, ignorance, darkness, sloth, stubbornness, fear, dullness, lack of motivation etc.

All three *gunas* are present in each of us to varying degrees and, at any time, one or the other might influence our thinking to a greater or lesser extent. To the extent that we allow the *gunas*

⁷¹ Chapter 14 and parts of Chapters 17 and 18 of the *Bhagavad Gita* are devoted to explaining this concept.

to drive our interactions with the world, that prevents us from realizing our own essential nature as eternal and blissful. The impediment created by our *gunas* is relatively small with *Sattva*, more with *Rajas* and much more with *Tamas*. The purity and clarity of *Sattva* make it easy for us to connect with the Light within; the agitation of *Rajas* disturbs our minds, which makes it more difficult; and the darkness and sloth of *Tamas* obscures the Light completely. Overcoming the barrier created by *Sattva* is described as the equivalent of blowing smoke away from fire; overcoming *Rajas* is like having to wipe dust off a mirror; and overcoming *Tamas* is like having to wait patiently for a baby to be born.⁷² The goal of spiritual practice is to gradually overcome the *Tamas* by increasing *Rajas*; then to replace *Rajas* with *Sattva*; and finally to transcend all the *gunas* altogether.

The primary benefit of studying the concept of *gunas* is that it provides us with a tool to monitor spiritual progress in our daily lives. The Bhagavad Gita itself shows how this concept can be applied by illustrating the behavioral influence of each *guna* in many different activities of our daily lives.⁷³ Food, for example: when *Sattva* predominates, we choose food that is pure, substantial and healthy; when *Rajas* predominates we choose food that is highly flavored, dry and causes pain; and when *Tamas* predominates we choose food that is stale, impure and unhealthy. Another example is charity: when *Sattva* predominates, we engage in charity as a duty and direct it discreetly to a worthy cause; when *Rajas* predominates we give reluctantly, but with ostentation and in expectation of a return; when *Tamas* predominates, we help unworthy causes in an insulting manner. In every aspect of our lives, our behavior is determined by the particular *guna* or combination of *gunas* that happens to predominate in us at that time. Introspection and reflection soon reveal to us which *guna* best characterized our own behavior in a given situation. We can identify our persistent tendencies and assess whether or not they are in our best interest. This shows us a clear path toward self-improvement.

The path of spiritual improvement lies in consciously modifying our behavior to reflect *sattva* rather than *rajas*, and *rajas* rather than *tamas* so that we purify our minds and progress towards the goal of connecting with our true nature. When we are dominated by *tamas*, feeling dull and lacking motivation, the remedy is to get engaged in any kind of activity so as to activate the *rajas* in us. When we feel agitated and are driven by greed or desire, it is a sign of *rajas*; the remedy is to calm our minds by deep breathing or meditation and recall the pain caused by ignorance and attachment. That will bolster the *sattva* in us and control the scope of *rajas* and *tamas*.⁷⁴

By recognizing the play of the different *gunas* in our behavior, we can identify our flaws without the self-condemnation that cripples personal growth. Although we are endowed with a combination of *gunas* at birth based on our actions and spiritual development in previous lives,

⁷² See *The Holy Geeta*, commentary by Swami Chinmayananda on *Bhagavad Gita* verse 3.38.

⁷³ See *Bhagavad Gita* 14.6-18; 17.4-22; and 18.20-39. The main points are summarized in the Appendix: "How to identify Gunas". Also see "Not too loose, Not too tight, Just right" by Swamini Vimalananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2011. ISBN 978-81-7597-208-7.

⁷⁴ See *Srimad Bhagavatam* 11.13.1

we have the capacity to modify our behavior and upgrade the profile of our *gunas* in this life. It is this objectification of our *gunas* that enables us to observe and modify our behavior without debilitating guilt. Being more accepting of our own less-than-perfect behavior helps us to better understand the behavior patterns of others and be more forgiving of their actions towards us.

The more mindful we are in identifying our dominant *guna* and the more diligent in upgrading our behavior, the more we refine our minds and prepare it for spiritual understanding. *Gunas* are no more than attributes of our personality, not part of our intrinsic nature or our true Self. *Gunas* are subject to change; my Self is not. While spiritual discipline is designed to maximize *Sattva* in our personality, the ultimate aim of spiritual practice is to transcend the *gunas* altogether and break away from their bondage – even from the silken rope of *sattva*. The *Bhagavad Gita* describes how an enlightened person transcends the *gunas*, becoming totally unperturbed by the ups and downs of life.⁷⁵

APPENDIX: How to Identify Gunas

⁷⁵ See *Bhagavad Gita* 14.24,25. Also see *Srimad Bhagavatam* 11.22.6

APPENDIX: HOW TO IDENTIFY GUNAS

	SATTVA	RAJAS	TAMAS
KEY [Bhagavad Gita verse #]	Purity, knowledge	Agitation, false projections	Inertia, ignorance
ATTRIBUTES [BG 14.11-13]	Light, upward movement, clarity, purity, inspiration, warmth	Activity, movement, agitation, restlessness, throbbing	Darkness, heaviness, inertia, downward movement, lack of clarity, sloth, dullness, stupidity
EMOTIONS	Faith, devotion, humility, contentment, cheerfulness, peace, detachment, yearning for liberation	Desire, Anger, greed, hypocrisy, arrogance, jealousy, egoism, envy, ambition, competitiveness,	Sloth, lack of enthusiasm, stubbornness
BONDAGE [BG 14.6-8]	knowledge and happiness	action	Negligence, sloth and sleep
WORSHIP [BG 17.4]	Gods	Demi-gods and demons	Ghosts and spirits
FOOD [BG 17.8-10]	Tasty, soft, substantial, that promote life, health, joy	Bitter, sour, spicy, dry, burning, causing pain, grief, disease	Stale, tasteless, putrid, impure
ENTERPRISE (Yajna) [BG 17.11-13]	Without desire for fruit; according to scriptures; firm faith in duty;	Seeking fruit; hypocritical; ostentatious;	Fail to observe scriptures or right practice; without faith;
TAPAS [BG 17.14-19]			
a) PHYSICAL	Service to betters; Purity, straightforward, non-injury;	To gain honor, ostentatious, fickle and transitory	With foolish obstinacy; causing pain; with object of hurting others;
b) SPEECH	Causes no agitation; truthful; pleasant; beneficial; scriptural study;		
c) MIND	Serene, kind, silent; self-control; purity of motive		

CHARITY [BG 17.20-22]	as a duty; at fit time and place; worthy cause; expect nothing in return;	Expect return; reluctant;	Wrong place or time; unworthy cause; without respect;
RENUNCIATION BG 18.7-9	Performing right action while abandoning attachment and fruit of action;	Abandoning actions that are painful or may cause discomfort;	Abandoning obligatory duties;
KNOWLEDGE [BG 18.20-22]	Sees the One reality in all; undivided in the divided	Sees plurality in the world; conscious of distinctions;	Clings obstinately to a false view or a partial view as if it were the whole
ACTION [BG 18.23]	Action as required; No attachment; no desire for fruit;	Longing for fruit; ego boosting; with much effort	Careless of consequence; based on misconception;
ACTOR [BG 18.26-28]	Unaffected by success/failure; non-egoistic; enthusiastic;	Passionate, desire for fruit; greedy, harmful, impure, full of delight/grief;	Unsteady, vulgar, unbending, cheating, malicious, lazy, despondent, procrastinating
UNDERSTANDING [BG 18.30-32]	Knows Dharma correctly	Confuses dharma and its opposite	Perverted understanding of dharma
STEADFASTNESS [BG 18.33-35]	Restraining mind, prana and senses by Yoga	sustains duty, pleasure, wealth, Craving fruit of action	Clings to sleep, fear, grief, depression, arrogance
PLEASURE [BG 18.37-39]	Born from within; Like poison at first, nectar in the end;	Born from sense pleasure; Like nectar at first, poison in the end;	Delusory from beginning to end; born of sleep, indolence, negligence;
REBIRTH [BG 14.14-15]	Pure world of the learned	World of activists	World of the stupid
FRUIT [BG 14.16]	Pure	Pain	Ignorance
RESULT [BG 14.17]	Knowledge	Greed	Carelessness, delusion
EVOLUTION [BG 14.18]	Upward	Static	Downward

CHAPTER 17

CASTE

Dr. D.C. Rao

Summary: Caste is a Portugese word that confuses a spiritual concept with a social hierarchy that is not part of Hindu teachings. Hindu scriptures categorize people by different temperaments – known as varna – and prescribe special duties for those in each varna. Persons who are intellectuals, Brahmanas, are required to preserve knowledge of the scriptures by studying and teaching them; those who love power, Kshatriyas, are required to use their power to protect the weak; those who love money, Vaishyas, are required to pay taxes and build social infrastructure; those who have no special calling, Sudras, are required to serve their employers loyally. These classifications by varna were not hereditary. In contrast, the social phenomenon known as jati meant that children generally took on the professions of their parents forming a hierarchy that was hereditary. The thrusting of varna on jati hierarchy came to be known as the caste system. The oppressive practices based on caste were not part of the scriptural classification into varnas; they were an outgrowth of the rigid social classification by jati.

What relation does the caste system have to Hinduism? Answering this question requires understanding the distinction between the religious dimension and the socio-cultural dimensions of the practice of Hinduism and other religions in India. The word ‘casta,’ meaning ‘race’ or ‘breed’ was used by the Portugese to describe the social hierarchies they found in India in the 15th century. In doing so they fused two separate concepts: *varna* that has a scriptural foundation; and *jati* that defines community. The consequences of this confusion have been profound; and made worse by social and political influences in recent centuries.

Hindu scriptures use the word *Varna* to describe a way of understanding the diversity of human temperaments in all human societies. In any society there are some persons who are intellectuals; others are focused on exercising power and leadership; others are engaged in commercial occupations and amassing wealth; and many have no special calling, content to function as workers and followers in society. Based on these four temperaments, Hindu scriptures assign tasks and responsibilities to each *varna* so that all people contribute to society in ways for which they are best qualified: the *Brahmana* functions as the priest or intellectual and is required to preserve knowledge of the scriptures by studying and teaching them; the *Kshatriya* is a ruler of society and is required to use his power to maintain social order and especially to protect the weak; the *Vaishya* is the trader or businessman and is required to support society by funding the state treasury and building social infrastructure; the *Sudra* is required to serve his/her employers loyally.

Which of these human tendencies we are born with is the result of how we lived our past lives: what qualities we endeavored to cultivate and the attitudes that we brought to our work.

Recognizing this as a source of diversity among human beings, our scriptures give us all a two-fold message. First, discharge the duties and functions that accrue naturally to us in our lives – diligently and in a spirit of dedication to God. Second, do our best to cultivate nobler qualities that refine our temperament in this and in future lives. Thus, whatever our particular temperament or social status in this life, we each have the opportunity to evolve spiritually toward the ultimate goal of liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.

Scriptures emphasize that we do not inherit our *varna* from our parents. They reflect our inherent qualities, not our parentage. Nor is there an implied social hierarchy. Those in each *varna* contribute to the betterment of society in their own ways; and spiritual rewards come to those who best fulfill their own obligations as defined by their *varna*.

In modern discourse, this fourfold classification of human temperaments is mistakenly referred to as the ‘caste system.’ The social hierarchy understood by the term ‘caste’ is better described by the term *jati*, which means communities. There are several thousand *jati*’s prevalent in India, each with its own religious and social practices and bound by numerous conventions governing their interactions and perceived hierarchies.

Not distinguishing between the concepts of *varna* and *jati* has led to the mistaken conclusion that the caste system is an integral part of the Hindu religion. This is what has been misleadingly taught to generations of school children in USA. The reality is that *varna* is a feature of the religion and *jati* is a feature of society, with no basis in scripture. *Jati* is inherited from parents; *varna* is not. Being a Brahmana by *varna* requires the cultivation of qualities that characterize this *varna*; and being born of Brahmana parents is neither necessary nor sufficient to be a Brahmana. *Jati* defines occupation, similar to the prevalence of guilds in medieval Europe; *varna* defines personal temperament. Traditionally, the mapping of the thousands of *jatis* into the four *varnas* changed over time. While Brahmanas were the privileged class in the performance of rituals and in educational attainment, this privileged status did not extend to other aspects of social power, wealth or influence. Even in the religious context, some of the greatest saints and teachers in the Hindu tradition were not born of Brahmana parents. There are numerous examples, including the sage Vyasa who is the author of numerous revered spiritual texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the sage Valmiki who is the author of the Ramayana, the most widely known religious story in India. Even the famous *Gayatri Mantra*, one of the holiest in the Hindu tradition was revealed to the sage Visvamitra who was not born of Brahmana parentage.

But over history, several distortions emerged that led to the practice of the ‘caste system’ as we know it today: the mapping of *varna* into *jati* became codified; caste became an inherited attribute that gave rise to a rigid social hierarchy; and dominant castes oppressed the weak. *Jati*’s that were engaged in “unclean” occupations such as scavenging or animal slaughter were treated as “outcastes”, (since variously known as “untouchables”, “harijans” [people of God] or “Dalit”), a category that has no place in the Hindu scriptures. Caste distinctions became a social curse and the source of much suffering. It is important to recall that odious practices

based on caste were not part of the scriptural classification into *varnas*; they were an outgrowth of the rigid classification by *jati*. That *jati* is a social, not religious, phenomena is further evidenced by the fact that caste discrimination is common in India among Christians, Muslims and Sikhs as well, although these religions officially reject caste distinctions.

Caste discrimination and oppression violate a fundamental principle in Hindu philosophy that we should recognize the common divinity in all beings and treat them as we would treat ourselves. The political Constitution of independent India outlaws discrimination by caste. The communities that were classified as outcastes were offered special privileges under official programs of affirmative action in education and employment. The caste system as currently practiced has been roundly condemned by Hindu religious leaders, in the tradition of social reform movements in Hinduism over several centuries. With improved status and opportunity, some Dalits have become very prosperous. With democratic elections, castes that are more numerous have gained greatly in political influence. However, exploitation and poverty among the lower castes undoubtedly continues to be a major social problem in India.

In conclusion, the caste system is a compound of religious and social factors: social hierarchy and attendant oppression has been superimposed on a classification system that is offered in Hindu scriptures as a way of understanding human diversity and defining paths for spiritual evolution. It is seriously misleading to claim that the caste system is an integral part of the Hindu religion. The caste system, which is fundamentally different from the *varna* system that is found in the Hindu scriptures, is undoubtedly a serious social evil. Laws and regulations in India are in place to remedy centuries of abuse of the lower castes. Hindu religious leaders remain active in working against caste discrimination. There is evidence of considerable progress but the lower castes continue to face serious problems.

Note: Further information and copious references on this subject may be found at:

1. *"Hinduism: Not cast in caste: Seeking an end to Caste-based discrimination"* published by the Hindu American Foundation, 2011. Downloadable at www.hafsite.org
2. *"The Caste System"* by Dr. Raj Pandit Sharma, Hindu Council, UK, Feb 20008. Downloadable at <http://www.hinducounciluk.org/reports/333-the-caste-system>

APPENDIX: Excerpts from Hindu Scriptures

APPENDIX: Excerpts from Hindu Scriptures:

Those who claim that the caste system is an integral part of the Hindu religion cite, and misinterpret, the following texts:

1. *The fourfold order (of varnas) was created by Me (the Supreme Being) according to the divisions of guna (quality) and karma (work).* Bhagavad Gita 4.13

This verse is misinterpreted to claim that the caste system is part of the basic design of Hinduism. But note that the verse is about *varna*, not caste. “The emphasis is on *guna* (aptitude) and *karma* (function) and not *jati* (birth). The *varna* or the order to which we belong is independent of sex, birth or breeding.”⁷⁶

2. *Of Brahmanas, of Kshatriyas and Vaishyas and also of Sudras...the activities are distinguished, in accordance with the qualities born of their nature.* Bhagavad Gita 18.41

This verse is misinterpreted to mean that Hinduism locks each person into his/her caste by birth. However, what this verse points out is the need for each of us to be comfortable with the qualities with which we are born. “Each individual has his inborn nature, and to make it effective in his life is his duty....So long as our work is done in accordance with our nature, we are righteous, and if we dedicate it to God, our work becomes a means of spiritual perfection.”⁷⁷

3. The *Purusha Sukta* is a famous hymn in the Vedas that describes the whole universe as emanating from the body of the Cosmic Person (*Purusha*). Some excerpts:

The Purusha, with a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand legs, pervades all the Universe....The entire universe of happenings and creatures constitute but a quarter of Him. The remaining three quarters of His Glory consists of the immutable Consciousness....He pervades all beings that eat and things that never eat. From that yajna came horses and all creatures with two rows of teeth...cows, sheep and goats. From the face of the Purusha were born the Brahmanas, from His arms the Kshatriyas, from His thighs the Vaishyas and from His feet the Sudras. From the Purusha's mind came the moon, from His eyes the sun, from His mouth Indra and fire, and from His breath came vital air. From the Purusha's navel emerged 'inner space' and from His head 'outer space'; from His feet the earth and from His ears the 'directions'. Thus the worlds came into creation....” Rig Veda 10.90.1-16; Yajur Veda 31.1-16.

The reference to the four *varnas* emerging respectively from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet is misinterpreted to indicate a hierarchy and a license for the Brahmanas to oppress the Sudras. The purport of this hymn is different. Just as the head, hands, thighs or feet alone can never be the whole person and every part

⁷⁶ The Bhagavad Gita, by S. Radhakrishnan, Unwin Paperbacks; page 160

⁷⁷ Op cit. page 364

is as essential as the other, so are the four *varnas* of equal importance.⁷⁸ Persons of each *varna* are all part of the body of the same Cosmic Person.

⁷⁸ The Universal Person, by Swami Chinmayananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 1991; page 44.

CHAPTER 18

RESPECT FOR OTHER RELIGIONS

DR. D.C. RAO

Respect for other religions is part of the Hindu fabric. Hindus naturally accept the validity of the spiritual paths defined by other religions and have no hesitation in participating in worship with followers of other religions.

The primary source of this intrinsic respect for other religions is in the core philosophy of Hindu scriptures: that the Supreme Divine Truth is beyond human comprehension. Anyone who thinks he “understands” this Truth, doesn’t.⁷⁹ The essence of spirituality in Hinduism is seeking better understanding of the Truth about our own true nature, our relationship with each other, and with the Divine Source of all being. As each religion is capable of casting some light on this goal, Hindus treat them all with respect and are ready to learn from them. Even within Hinduism, different philosophical traditions co-exist and are vigorously debated, creating a willingness to engage respectfully with other viewpoints. Hindus are not out to defend a doctrine and, therefore, do not feel threatened by the ideas of other religions.

Another fundamental feature of Hindu philosophy is the belief that Divine Consciousness is all-pervasive, present in all beings. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that God does not favor or reject any being.⁸⁰ The idea that any being may be “doomed” is alien to this philosophy. Every human being is believed to be capable of evolving spiritually and God accepts all forms of spiritual practice provided only that it is offered with devotion.⁸¹ Indeed, practitioners are cautioned not to disturb the equilibrium of those who are less spiritually evolved but rather to encourage them in maintaining their practice.⁸²

There is a great variety of spiritual paths within Hinduism. Recognizing that spiritual seekers differ greatly in personal temperament, physical and mental abilities and preferences, scriptures offer a variety of spiritual practices suited to different seekers. Thus, Hindus are accustomed to seeing a variety of practices even within their own families and this diversity is embraced. Some visit temples regularly and frequently, others do not. Some engage in formal worship at home, others are more casual about it. Some fast, others don’t. It is natural, therefore, to refrain from being critical of the practices followed by other religions.

The readiness to embrace diversity is seen also in the concept of “God”. There are those who worship the Divine as abstract Consciousness while most Hindus express their devotion to particular manifestations of Consciousness as a personal God. Hindus believe that God has

⁷⁹ Kena Upanishad

⁸⁰ Bhagavad Gita 9.29

⁸¹ Bhagavad Gita 9.26

⁸² Bhagavad Gita 3.26 and 3.29

appeared in a great variety of forms. They cultivate devotion to God by developing a close personal relationship with a “chosen” form of God through worship of an image, recounting stories and constant remembrance of God. Within a family, preferences might vary and a typical family altar would contain images of several different forms of God. The different images are not seen as different Gods, or as competing forms of God but rather as diverse manifestations of the One Supreme Being. Thus Hindus recoil from the proposition that there is only one legitimate form of God, rendering the worship of other forms as somehow wrong or inferior. They view the Supreme Reality as being beyond all description while yet open to being described in many different ways. Descriptions offered by other religions are thus naturally deserving of respect.

This expansive view of the nature of Divinity has led to a long history of Hinduism co-existing with other religions in India.⁸³ While there were instances in early years of violence between Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, these conflicts have long been resolved. For about 800 years since the 12th CE, India was ruled by non-Hindus—first Muslim and then Christian—until Independence in 1947. Tensions arising from this period continue to reverberate in India today. Throughout Indian history, Hindus have not embarked on wars to subdue other religions. Since independence, India has been governed under a secular Constitution that guarantees the rights of minorities to freely worship and follow their faith.

Buddhism originated in India in the 5th BCE. Siddhartha was enlightened at age 35 and preached extensively in India as the Buddha for 45 years until he died a natural death at the age of about 80 years. Buddhism remained a dominant religion in India for about a thousand years, during which time it spread through most of Asia. Hindus still worship Buddha as one of the major incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Although concepts of God differ greatly, Hinduism and Buddhism share much of their philosophy, ethics and spiritual practices, especially in the field of Tantra. Hinduism adopted from Buddhism the concept of monastic orders to promote scriptural study and practice. Followers of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhist leaders have had shelter and support in India since 1959.

Jainism predates Buddhism and has coexisted with Hinduism since ancient times. Its followers were known first as *Sramans*, then as *Nirgranthis* and, after Lord Mahavira who preached in India slightly earlier than Buddha, as Jains. The first Jain *Tirthankar*, or teacher, has a prominent place in Hindu scriptures. Despite major theological differences between Hinduism and Jainism, worship practices in the two traditions are very similar although specific rituals differ. Many families practice both Jainism and Hinduism and there are temples that serve both religions. The cultures are so intertwined that it is hard to identify boundaries.

Sikhism was founded in Punjab, India, by Guru Nanak at a time when Muslims ruled over most of India and there was a strong wave of Hindu saints who emphasized a devotional approach to spirituality. There are strong similarities and differences between Hinduism and Sikhism in terms

⁸³ Indian history is relevant because over 80% of India’s population is Hindu and over 90% of Hindus live in India.

of theology and religious practice. Culturally, however, there has been a very close affinity among Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs. When the Sikhs fought the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in the 17th CE to defend Hindus' religious freedom, the bonds between Hindus and Sikhs were strengthened. It became common in Punjabi Hindu families for the eldest son to practice Sikhism and Hindu families often prayed at Sikh *Gurudwaras*. Sikh discontent in recent decades reflected political issues rather than any form of religious discrimination.

In addition to the religions born in India, India has provided a home for followers of other world religions too. They have been an integral part of Indian society, made great contributions to the building of modern India and have been prominent leaders in government and business. The world's largest populations of Baha'i and Zoroastrians, and the second largest population of Muslims live in India.

- India has among the oldest surviving Jewish communities in the world and is said to be one of the few countries that has never seen any anti-Semitic persecution. Waves of Jewish migrants came to India more than two thousand years ago, following the destruction of the first and second Jewish Temples. They were welcomed by Hindu rulers and flourished ever since.
- Christianity came to India from its earliest days, perhaps as early as Apostle St. Thomas in 1st CE. Portuguese settlers came in the 15th CE and were allocated land and trading rights by local rulers. The early Christians who were later persecuted by the Portuguese in India were protected by Hindu rulers. However, as Christian missionary activity grew under British colonial rule, it caused distrust. Violent conflicts between Hindus and Christians have arisen in protest against religious conversion or reflecting ancient rivalries among competing social groups that have adopted different religions.
- Muslims came to India in 8th CE both as traders and as rulers. Some Muslim rulers were open-minded on religion; some levied a religion tax, encouraged forced conversions and destroyed temples, replacing them by mosques. The legacy of these actions against Hindus has been continued social tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India that are easily fanned into violence by political forces.
- Zoroastrians took refuge in India in about the 10th CE, fleeing from persecution by Muslims in Iran. They came to an amicable arrangement with the Hindu rulers and have flourished since, preserving their ancient religious practices.
- India's connection with the Baha'i faith goes back to 1844, before the Bahauallah proclaimed himself as the Promised One. The first Indian who became Baha'i in 1909 was a Hindu and there are now more than a million Baha'i in India.

While Hindus readily accept the validity of other religions as spiritual paths, they are offended by claims of exclusivity or dogmatic assertions by which a religion rejects the validity of Hindu religious practices. Missionaries have long been active in India, sometimes with official encouragement and always with substantial funding from overseas. Sometimes their proselytizing zeal takes advantage of economic deprivation or lack of education among poorer

sections of Hindu society. Hindus generally view these activities as a form of coercion and some groups have resorted to violence. But this has not altered the fundamental ethos of co-existence among the diverse religions in India.

CHAPTER 19

FAITH AND BELIEF IN HINDUISM⁸⁴

Dr. D.C. Rao

There is confusion among observers on the role of faith and belief in Hinduism. Some refer to Hinduism as a “belief system” where faith has a minor role. It is also referred to as a “faith” in common with other world religions. Both these statements are problematic to practicing Hindus. The reality is more nuanced and understanding it is a prerequisite for understanding what Hinduism is all about.

Belief: If “belief” refers to uncritical acceptance of the veracity of a proposition, there is no specific belief that Hindus are required to subscribe to in order to be accepted as Hindus. There is no creed or dogma or doctrine that is central to Hinduism as a whole, although subgroups of Hindus may define themselves by belief in certain propositions. Examples of such beliefs would be the primacy of a particular form of God or the divinity of their leader. But these very beliefs may or may not be shared by other Hindus. There are also some beliefs that are so widely held among Hindus as to qualify as “consensus.” Examples of such beliefs are laws of karma and rebirth, that the Vedas are revealed scripture, or the importance of adherence to dharma. Unlikely as it may seem, even these beliefs are rejected in some philosophical treatises that are highly revered by Hindus⁸⁵. At the highest levels in Hindu philosophy, freedom from uncritical belief is a cherished value. To describe Hinduism as “a belief system” is to miss its essence: it is a *seeking* of the Truth by transforming the mind so that one becomes aware of the Divine presence everywhere, at all times, in the whole of creation.

Faith: In Hinduism, the concept closest to faith is *shraddha*. *Shraddha* is broader than faith: it signifies a commitment, trust, and understanding that inspire a sense of reverence. The reverence is for something that cannot be directly observed or proven, which is what makes this the province of faith. Thus, *shraddha* is a term that includes faith – specifically in the validity of scripture and in the teachings of a Guru who is learned in the scriptures and has a well-established experiential understanding of them. In his commentary on Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*⁸⁶ the sage Vyasa points out that for a yogi, *shraddha* is like a mother who protects and nourishes her child.

Shraddha is vital to all of the various paths in Hindu spiritual practice because the end goal is devotion to and direct experience of a Higher Consciousness that lies at the core of all beings,

⁸⁴ A version of this note was first presented for discussion at the Woodstock Interreligious Dialogue on Education in Georgetown University, Washington D.C. The topic was inspired by the book *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them* by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 1979.

⁸⁵ For instance, Gaudapada’s *Mandukya Karika* rejects the concepts of cause and effect inherent in the concept of karma and rebirth; and the *Asthavakra Gita* points out that a Realized person who has dropped the ego is not bound by conventional teachings of *dharma*.

⁸⁶ See Sutra 1.20 of *Yoga Sutras* composed by the Sage Patanjali in approximately 200 BCE.

while also transcending the world as we know it. In the Hindu path of devotion, where the spiritual aspirant surrenders wholly to God and performs all actions as a service to God, *shraddha* is of paramount⁸⁷ importance. In the path of knowledge too, *shraddha* has a foundational role in spiritual practice.⁸⁸

Some spiritual aspirants are not comfortable with being called to accept a claim solely on scriptural authority. But no such authority is dictated in Hinduism. *Shraddha* is to be understood as a conviction that is based on our understanding and experience rather than as blind faith. Indeed, Hindu philosophical scriptures require the spiritual aspirant to subject the teachings to the test of reason. The scriptures, commentaries, and explanatory texts in Vedanta go to great lengths to explain and defend the propositions they make; they provide illustrations, and they pose and rebut arguments that cast doubt on specific teachings. By reflecting on such argumentation, the aspirant gains a bulwark against the doubts and develops greater faith in the scriptures.

Those trained in the physical sciences and its methods are reassured that the scriptures are not in conflict with science and reason. As science has progressed in understanding physical and quantum phenomena, its findings are coming closer to the depictions in the ancient scriptures of time and space, matter and energy, and the cosmos.⁸⁹ For some, this convergence has served to strengthen their faith in the Hindu scriptures. Thus, emphasis on reasonableness, rather than an appeal to faith alone, has made it easier for Hindus to accept the Vedas.

But more important than reason, the scriptural teaching must be supported by one's own experience, not necessarily a mystical experience that is available only to a few, but experience consistent with simple realities that are widely recognized. Hindu scriptures themselves declare unambiguously that direct experience of the Divine has greater authority than the scriptures.⁹⁰ Scrutiny and reflection on our own life-experiences confirm the validity of scriptural injunctions that call on us to be equipoised, fearless, and ever-focused on God. Strengthened by these disciplines, direct experience of the Divine is available to all, regardless of religious affiliation.

Shraddha's place in Hindu spiritual practice is well illustrated by the sage Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras*. In Sutra 1.20, *shraddha* is the first of five requirements for spiritual progress. *Shraddha* is the foundation for other requirements, the second of which is *virya*: the ability and enthusiasm to face hardship and put forth the effort needed to overcome obstacles on the spiritual path. Next, the aspirant needs *smriti*: the ability to retain what he or she has learnt and remember always how we relate to God. All this leads to the fourth requirement, *samadhi*: complete absorption in the object of one's meditation, a one-pointed contemplation on the source of all life and all joy.

⁸⁷ "In the beginning one must have *shraddha*": Rupa Goswami's *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* 1.4.15

⁸⁸ "The one who has *shraddha*... obtains knowledge": *Bhagavad Gita* 4.39

⁸⁹ For examples, see *Pride of India, A Glimpse into India's Scientific Heritage*, Samskrita Bharati, 2006

⁹⁰ See *Mundaka Upanishad* 1.1.5

The culmination of this process is *prajna*, the light of discriminative knowledge by which the practitioner realizes the true nature of all things, the Ultimate Truth. The key point here is that while *shraddha* is the first requirement mentioned by Patanjali, there are many more steps to achieve the fruit of spiritual practice.

Similarly, in Vedanta, the path of philosophical enquiry, *shraddha* is one of six qualities referred to collectively as the “wealth” of a spiritual aspirant.⁹¹

Thus, *shraddha* is a broader concept than implied by the English word “faith.” The scriptures themselves do not encourage reliance on *shraddha* alone, but insist on consistency with reason and human experience. The foundation of Hindu spiritual practice is *shraddha* in the existence of the Divine and, hence, in the scriptures and in the teachings of the Guru. Together with other prerequisites for spiritual growth, *shraddha* carries us on our own journey to the transcendental reality.

⁹¹ The six qualities are: calmness, self-control, withdrawal, endurance, *shraddha*, and tranquility. Vivekachudamani 22-26 by Shankaracharya.