

An abstract painting featuring a central, swirling, golden-brown shape that resembles a stylized 'S' or a flame. This central element is surrounded by a dense field of radiating, brush-stroke-like lines in various shades of green, yellow, and brown, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall composition is dynamic and textured.

HINDUISM EXPLAINED

Dr. R. Neerunjun Gopee

‘Hinduism Explained’ is a concise and succinct statement of the core ideas of Sanatana Dharma, more commonly called Hinduism. They are derived from its source book, the Vedas. In easy to understand language, the author presents the Hindu world view of the fundamental unity of existence. This vision is the spiritual or Higher Knowledge which is within reach of every individual, and which can transform his life and society for the better.

This book will help the reader to dispel the erroneous and common perception of Hinduism as being a mere repetition of rituals. It shows that there is a rationale underlying its rites, customs and way of living. All these involve performing actions—provided that they are done in a spirit of detachment, that is, without desire for the results of work; they open the path to Higher Knowledge which leads to *moksha*, the ultimate goal of Hinduism. Light is thrown on key concepts such as Karma and Dharma as the ethical foundation of righteous living – which means understanding one’s role and responsibilities at each of the four *ashramas* or stages of life. Short but lucid accounts are given of the ‘why’ of performing *pujas* and of the importance of festivals in making life enjoyable as well as in purifying the mind, the instrument of knowledge. There is a brief introduction to Hindu scriptures also.

At the end there is a selective bibliography for those who would wish to deepen their understanding.

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Dr. R. Neerunjun Gopee

RAMAYANA CENTRE

HINDUISM EXPLAINED

by Dr. R. Neerunjun Gopee

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Dedication

Respectfully Dedicated to My Revered Gurus

In Mauritius

- Pujya Swami Pranavanandaji, Spiritual Head, Chinmaya Mission, Mauritius
- Pujya Swamini Karunanandaji, Spiritual Head, Institute of Vedanta, Mauritius

In India

- Late Pujya Swami Dayanandaji of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Coimbatore
- Pujya Swami Tejomayanandaji, Spiritual Head, Chinmaya Mission, Worldwide
- Pujya Swami Suddhanandaji of Self-Knowledge Institute, Uthandi, Chennai
- Pujya Mataji Tanmayanandaji and Pujya Swamini Shraddhanandaji of Param Praman Darshan, Valsad, Gujarat.

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Acknowledgement

'Picture of OM from a painting by renowned Sino-Mauritian artist Late Anna Lan presented by her to the author in 1986'.

Foreword

Among the countries of the Indian diaspora, the Hindu society of Mauritius is very aware about matters pertaining to religion, philosophy and rituals. Festivals such as Maha Shivratri, Ramnavmi and Janmashtami are quite popular, and are recognized and celebrated nationally. On the occasion of such festivals, Ramayana Centre publishes reading material that promotes Hindu culture, so that lay people get to know about their religion and philosophy.

Thus, for example, the Vice-president of Ramayana Centre and a scholar of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy, Dr. Mrs. Vinu Arun has edited pamphlets and books on Maha Shivratri, *Stuti Suman*, *Chalisa sangrah* and *Aarti sangrah*. She also written about ethical values in Ram Katha, which has been widely acclaimed. We have been inspired to continue this line of work further from the positive response of the people.

Hindu religious organisations in Mauritius made a request to Ramayana Centre to prepare a booklet on the occasion of Maha Shivaratri that would provide basic information about Hinduism to the new generation.

In this context, I approached Dr. R. Neerunjun Gopee, Trustee of Ramayana Centre, an Orthopedic and Plastic Surgeon who is a serious student of Hinduism and senior editor of the local English weekly *Mauritius Times*, for such a publication that would be easily understood by our youth in particular. Dr. Gopee humbly and gladly acceded to my request.

I thought of Dr. Gopee for this important assignment for several reasons. Dr. Gopee keeps reading and writing about Indian religion and philosophy regularly. Besides his command of English language, he is well aware of the mindset and concerns of the youth. He is able to translate his thoughts clearly into the written form, presenting his

topics in a simple and reader-friendly manner. This has endeared him to his readers.

As head of Ramayana Centre, I am glad to present our readers with this booklet. We are confident that our readers will make us proud by accepting it, and learning, sharing and using the contents as a guide to further understanding of Hinduism.

—**Pt. Rajendra Arun**

Preface

The idea of writing this book 'Hinduism Explained' arose from my contacts with Hindus, both young and old (in Mauritius and abroad), who had no clear idea of what Hinduism is all about, and from the positive responses I got after the series of ten 8-9 minute talks that I gave in French on the local TV station on the occasion of Maha Shivratri, 2014.

In particular, several non-Hindu friends and acquaintances of mine expressed their appreciation that for the first time, they were able to have a basic understanding of the important concepts of

Hinduism in a familiar language. The articles in this publication are an English translation of these talks with, however, modifications for the purpose of the written version.

I have tried to paint a canvas of the broad conceptual framework of Hinduism, and to remove the widespread impression that Hinduism is nothing but meaningless rituals. Unfortunately, Hindus themselves are the first ones to make this 'complaint', but are reluctant to find the time necessary to try and understand the true fundamentals and purport of Hinduism.

My intention in writing this short volume is to help them and non-Hindus as well to clear their misconceptions about the sublime 'way of thinking' that Hinduism or, more accurately, Vedic Sanatana

Dharma, is, and to stimulate their appetite for a genuine understanding of its real teachings. These have been handed down to us by the rishis and other sages over the millennia down to the present times.

The focus has been on the rationale underlying the customs and practices of Hinduism rather than to go into detailed accounts of them; these can be found in the appropriate texts. Additionally, those who wish to go deeper into specific aspects will find at the end of the book a list of references which they can look up.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Pt. Rajendra Arun, President Ramayana Centre, Mauritius, who suggested that I give the series of talks when he was a member of the Maha Shivratri, 2014 Task Force and Ramayana Centre was assigned to deliver these

talks. He had also proposed to me that they should eventually be published in book form.

I owe a word of thanks also to my son Ajay for his precious and timely help in the word processing of the manuscript.

I am very grateful to the staff of Prabhat Prakashan for their patience and their painstaking efforts in seeing the book through to publication given the short time that was given to them for this noble task.

Most of all, I dedicate this book to the gurus at whose feet I have been blessed to sit and learn, and the contents of the book are based mainly on their teachings. Any failings in transmitting them properly are my responsibility, and for this reason, I would welcome any suggestions for further improvements in this publication.

—Dr. R. Neerunjun Gopee

Overview of Hinduism

What is Hinduism?

Hinduism is a voyage of discovery of the Self starting with self-control and eventually self-mastery of the mind, in the process resulting in a noble individual who ennobles society. This is achieved by following principles and practices based on the Vedanta, which is the essence of the Upanishads, themselves the 'philosophical portions' of the Vedas, which are the sourcebook of Hinduism.

The Goal of Human Life

The goal of human life is twofold: (a) to achieve a state of lasting happiness where there is freedom from fear, freedom from sorrow and freedom from wants; (b) to understand the meaning and purpose of existence and our place in it.

The Goal of Hinduism

The goal of Hinduism is to help everyone (a) to obtain knowledge of the Self which allows one to go beyond fear, sorrow and want and to attain ananda or Pure Bliss which is eternal; and (b) to gain the correct knowledge of existence by making full use of all faculties one is endowed with, so as to live one's life harmoniously.

Self-knowledge means finding out for oneself that our essential nature is not the perishable body, with which we usually tend to identify, but the imperishable atman.

Hinduism recognises and acknowledges that science and technology (S&T) through the use of human reason have brought much comfort, convenience and pleasure to human beings. It holds, however, that there is a flip side to S & T and that the satisfaction of material wants alone has not helped people to attain *ananda*.

THE CENTRAL TENETS OF HINDUISM

Just as scientists study the external world by techniques of observation, and experimentation and analysis known as the scientific method, so did our

sages or *rishis* seek and gain insight into the totality of human experience by techniques such as meditation and systematic, logical enquiry so as to understand the true nature of the human being. This led them to propose the following broad framework as the foundation of Hinduism:

- There is an infinite, changeless Reality (Brahman) underpinning the world of change;
- The same Reality lies at the core of human personality (Atman or the Self);
- The purpose of life is to discover or obtain the knowledge of this Reality for oneself – a process that some sages call *Self-realisation* – upon doing which the person will attain *Sat-chit-ananda*, i.e. Existence, Consciousness, Bliss, which is the nature of the Reality;

- The road to this discovery proceeds through stages, popularly described as four main paths which are, in fact, ascending steps on the same path. Known as the *yogas*, the first three culminate in the fourth, *Jnanayoga*:
Bhaktiyoga – the path of devotion
Rajayoga – the path of mental control
Karmayoga – the path of selfless service
Jnanayoga – the path of knowledge

‘Knowledge is the culmination of devotion and devotion is the fulfilment of knowledge’.

- To walk on the path properly requires both individual and collective discipline in following prescribed, logical rules which have been derived from experience gathered over

thousands of years by our forbears. Hence, practices such as pujas and various other ceremonies/festivals, as well as guidelines relating to individual, family and social life which must be adhered to in our daily lives so as to provide social cohesion and the environment conducive to attainment of the goal.

- Deviations from the path are obstacles and cause delay on the road to Self-realisation so that one may have to undergo 'rebirth' – *punarjanma*, loosely translated as *reincarnation* – to make good for one's incorrect/inappropriate behaviour, according to the *Law of Karma*, the non-physical counterpart of the phenomenon of cause and effect. Conversely, appropriate

behaviour is accompanied by a positive balance of *karma* which helps one to advance spiritually faster.

- At which point one joins the path depends upon one's inclination; this, in turn, depends upon one's temperament and one's *karma*. One's temperament is made up of a combination of three *gunas* or fundamental qualities which represent one's natural tendencies. Usually one *guna* is predominant in any given person.
- These 3 *gunas* are: *tamas* (inertia, tendency towards inactivity), *rajas* (activity, vigour, drive), *sattwa* (tendency towards calmness, serenity).

This concept of *gunas* can also be used to analyse human actions as also the food we eat in terms of the effects which they produce on us.

A mix of these *gunas* allied to individual *karma* defines the four universal types, *Varnashramas*, of human beings:

Brahmins – the wise who lead a life of contemplation, teaching, sharing their spiritual knowledge/experience, and serving as shining examples to others.

Kshatriyas – those who protect the people and the country.

Vaishyas – those who produce the wealth of a country.

Shudras – those who excel in physical performance and bodily labour.

Usually, and wrongly, referred to as castes, these types denote a person's attitude and concrete attainment and not his status by birth, as is taught by Sri Krishna Bhagavan in the Bhagavad Gita (Ch. 4).

It may also be noted that these four universal types are reflected in the individual's life, according to the specific roles one may be engaged in at given moments, e.g. when I am cleaning my house/working in the garden, I am performing a *shudra* function.

- Four *purusharthas* or universal pursuits drive all types of people:

Dharma – right conduct that allows one to live in harmony with others and with the environment

Artha – pursuit of security (emotional, social, economic)

Kama – pursuit of pleasure (sensual, intellectual, aesthetic)

Moksha – going beyond worldly bondage, that is, attaining *Satchitananda*.

- Even as one evolves towards *Moksha*, which is also the supreme goal, one has to go through the four stages of life:

Brahmachari – student life, a preparatory stage for the next one:

Grihastha – family life;

Vanaprastha – life of service to the community;

Sanyasa – life of introspection and enquiry in order to attain *moksha* after giving up worldly duties and responsibilities which must have been completed in each stage before taking exclusively to the spiritual path.

Specially evolved persons can take to *sannyasa* very early in life, and many people are able to strike a balance such that they can combine some elements of each stage in their daily lives, obviously with the concerns of each stage predominating.

- The accumulated experience of our rishis has been compiled in the **Vedas** which are the sourcebooks of the Hindus. The Vedas are four in number and each consists of two main parts (*Karmakanda* and *Jnanakanda*) dealing with rituals and mantras, and knowledge of the Self respectively. The latter was transmitted by a special method consisting of the pupil 'sitting at the feet' of the *rishi* and engaging in question-answer sessions. For this reason, such teachings were known as *Upanishads*,

and each Veda, therefore, contains several *Upanishads*, which add up to 108; 10 of them were commented upon extensively by Adi Shankaracharya and they are known as the 10 Principal Upanishads. Because they were the final truths or conclusions ‘emerging’ out of the questionings and are found towards the ends of the Vedas, the Upanishads are also known as the *Vedanta* (*Veda* = knowledge; *anta* = end).

- However, throughout the length and breadth of India and down the ages – and continuing to this day – several men and women have lived exemplary lives showing how far they had reached on the road towards *moksha* by displaying the ideal human qualities in

individual, family and social situations, such as respect of the rights and feelings of others, brotherly and filial duties and love, mutual respect between the ruler and the ruled, ideal form of society, etc. *Epics* such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* record the lives of many such pure and inspired people who should act as models for us. The *Puranas* illustrate in story form and allegories the essential truths and messages of our *dharma*. Included in *The Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita* which is considered to be a concise statement of the Vedanta. Other works such as the *Tiruk Kural* compiled by the Tamil Saint Tiruvalluvar and the *Yogasutras* of Patanjali contain aphorisms which are based on the living experiences of

their authors and serve as wise guidelines for everybody in their day to day living.

- Also, down the centuries, many teachers and practitioners have continually expounded the teachings of Hinduism for contemporary times, and they or their disciples have recorded these teachings in written form for posterity. Some of them are, for example, Adi Shankaracharya, Sri Ramanuja, Ramana Maharishi, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Dayananda, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Swami Chinmayananda...

If one considers the corpus of Hinduism as the hub of a wheel, then the sages/teachers can be

thought of as so many points on the periphery of the wheel which all lead, via the spokes, to the hub. In other words, the writings/messages of any one of them can be used as an 'entry point' or gateway to the corpus, and all are equally valid in the sense that each can lead one to an understanding and knowledge of Vedanta, and of Hindu culture in its diverse aspects.

Comment

It goes without saying that, as with other societies, in Hindu society also, there is a gap between theory and practice: many Hindus probably do not live by *all* the values and principles which the above framework lays out, and do not take the trouble to delve deeper into the conceptual bases of their *dharma*

or way of life. Nevertheless, the framework provides a coherent perspective based on internal and external realities verifiable by human reason, knowledge and experience. To that extent, therefore, it is self-validating (for everyone willing to test it), and is a journey worth undertaking. Like all journeys into the vastness 'out there' it leads to discoveries, and Self-discovery, which open up new vistas to the infinitude of which we are part and with whose rhythm we try to attune.

I am a Hindu

I accept and abide by the teachings of Hinduism found in its sourcebook, the Vedas, which are comprehensively explained in the Bhagavad Gita and are illustrated extensively by profuse examples in the two great epics of India, the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

According to these teachings, the universe emanates from Brahman. Invisible, changeless and infinite, Brahman is the Unique Truth of all that exists (*sat*), Pure Consciousness (*chit*) and Pure Bliss (*ananda*): *satchitananda*.

Through the creative power of *maya* – *mayashakti*-Brahman becomes manifested as Ishwara who rules the world through a cycle of creation-preservation-destruction, which concurs with our human experience of the world.

Ishwara as creator is referred to as Brahma, as preserver Vishnu and as destroyer Shiva, and they each have their consort, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati respectively. Destruction takes place by the process of disintegration of the created object, living or non-living, into the five constituent elements (*tattwas* or *mahabhutas*) of which the universe is made, namely space, fire, air, water and earth and from which new entities are created afresh.

As part of the creation my body is also subject to the same cycle of creation-preservation-destruction, that is, is born, grows and matures, declines and then dies.

But 'I' am the atman, identical in nature to Brahman and therefore imperishable, unlike my body. As such I take rebirth or reincarnation in successive bodies and stop doing so when I attain *moksha*, that is liberation from the cycle of birth and death known as *samsara*.

For this, I have to gain knowledge (*vidya*) of Atman (*Atmavidya*) and Brahman (*Brahmavidya*) by means of *sadhana* or spiritual discipline which includes prayer, *satsang* and meditation.

At the same time I can earn my living and enjoy my life through the legitimate pursuit of pleasure and material comfort and security, based on a code of ethics. It enjoins me to perform the actions or *karmas* necessary for living in harmony with everyone according to *dharmā*, which encompasses a number of values such as non-injury, truth, non-stealing etc.

Introduction: Who we are, Purpose of Life

Hinduism is considered to be the oldest religion of mankind. Its messages were 'heard within' (hence, *shruti*—'that which is heard') by the *rishis* or sages of ancient India while in deep meditation, in the form of *mantras* or sacred sounds in Sanskrit. Long transmitted orally, the mantras were compiled by Guru Ved Vyasa in four groups, known as the

Vedas, at least 5,000 years ago. The Vedas are thus the sourcebook of Hinduism.

Veda means knowledge and is derived from the Sanskrit word *vid*, meaning 'to know'.

Globally, the Vedas comprise two broad divisions: *Jnanakanda* and *Karmakanda*, which is the longer of the two. *Karma* means action or work, and *kanda* means section or part. *Karmakanda* is, therefore, the part of the Vedas that contains hymns and instructions regarding rites and ceremonies, rules of conduct, and other actions that we have to accomplish in our daily lives and throughout our life cycle from birth to death. If we use a modern terminology, we could say that the *Karmakanda* is the 'operational' part of the Vedas.

On the other hand, the *Jnanakanda* (*jnana* = knowledge) contains the key ideas, concepts and principles which underlie the practices and customs that are detailed in the *Karmakanda*. It may be noted that the terms *gyan* and *vidya* also refer to knowledge, and are often used interchangeably with *jnana*.

This body of knowledge has been put together separately in texts known as the *Upanishads*, and since they are to be found towards the end ('*anta*') of the Vedas as well as being the concluding or highest wisdom of the Vedas, they are also designated by the term Vedanta or Vedanta philosophy. Vedanta is looked upon as the basic conceptual framework of Hinduism, which is here presented briefly, followed by short accounts of some key aspects of Hinduism.

CREATION AND THE CYCLE OF EXISTENCE

Brahman

Brahman is the source of and is in the whole of existence, which refers to all that is to be found in the universe, comprising the living and non-living. Invisible, changeless and infinite, Brahman is in a potential, inactive state, and thus unmanifest, as the Unique Truth of all that is or exists (*sat*), Pure Consciousness (*chit*) and Pure Bliss (*ananda*): *satchitananda*.

Hinduism proclaims '*Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti*' – 'The Truth is One, sages call it by various names'. Thus, the terms such as Absolute or Ultimate Reality, Reality, God, Lord, Supreme, Supreme

Being, Unique Truth or, simply, Truth are all used to mean that unchanging, constant great force and presence which lies behind life and existence (which are ever-changing) and which in Hinduism is known as Brahman.

The same Brahman is at the core of the human personality; thus individualised, Brahman is referred to as *Atman*, the individual being known as the *jivatma*, who possesses mental and physical attributes.

To understand what is consciousness, the following analogy helps: if we imagine a room full of objects without any light in it and we enter it, we cannot see anything. When we open the window, however, suddenly sunlight streams in and exposes everything to our sight. Not only is the darkness lifted,

but the illumination provided by the sun, which is itself the source of its light, brings knowledge about the objects and thus 'enlivens' them so to speak.

So too does the self-luminous, universal consciousness illumine and pervade the universe.

Ishwara

Brahman through the power of *maya* or *mayashakti* becomes manifest or active as Ishwara, bringing forth the universe that undergoes change which takes place in space and time. Thus is initiated a cycle comprising three successive stages: creation, preservation, destruction, and this concurs with our human experience.

For, upon simple reflection, we will readily see that all that is created is preserved for a certain time and is finally destroyed. For example, a tree begins as a small seed, becomes a sapling, grows bigger into a mature tree and then comes to an end, that is, it dies or is destroyed, leaving seeds which renew the cycle afresh.

An illustration is needed here to clarify what is meant by the terms manifest/unmanifest: we know that there is something called the force of gravity which, however, is not visible as such, that is, it is unmanifest, but becomes manifest through its effects. In other words, a *cause* becomes manifest through the *effects* it gives rise to. Another example would be electricity, which manifests through its effects such as

movement (of a motor), heat or cold depending on the appliance used.

This perpetual cycle of creation, preservation and destruction is common to all that has been created by Ishwara, who as creator is known as *Brahma*, as preserver *Vishnu*, and as destroyer *Shiva*. Together they are referred to as Trimurti, that is the three facets or aspects of Ishwara.

At this point, it is important to appreciate that Ishwara-Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva are not separate, but are the manifestations of the One Brahman who have been designated by distinct names based on their specific roles in the universe. A simple analogy would be a person who is father to his children, husband to his wife, brother to his siblings, but he is one and

the same person, known by different appellations depending on which role he is identified with in a specific context.

The same vision led the rishis to conclude that the feminine and masculine are subsumed within Brahman and, similarly, are expressed in the manifested world of our existence, and are then given different names according to the roles that they perform therein.

Thus, since in order to create, one must have knowledge, Brahma is associated with His consort Saraswati, who represents learning and wisdom. Similarly, to preserve, there must be wealth, so Vishnu is associated with Lakshmi, representing wealth; and Shiva is associated with Parvati, an embodiment of *shakti* or divine power.

Here it must be pointed out that destruction by Shiva does not at all mean devastation: it is very important to understand this notion of 'destruction' in the context of the cycle of creation-preservation-destruction.

According to the Hindu model of existence, creation is made up of five primordial elements – *panchmahabhutas*: space, fire, air, water and earth. From this standpoint, destruction means *disintegration* or the breaking down by Shiva of any created object, including the human body, into these five primordial elements, and then bringing them together again in various combinations as new entities which may be inert such, as minerals, or are endowed with life, such as various organisms including humans.

It is essentially in this sense that Shiva is called the 'destroyer'.

One could, therefore, say that disintegration is the *mechanism* by which the act of destruction is carried out in all created objects.

And since in doing so, the five elements are again made available to Brahma for the creation of new entities, Shiva is, therefore, considered to be the essential link between destruction and creation. It is but one (conceptual) step to appreciate that Shiva both destroys and creates, hence His supreme place and importance in the cosmic cycle of existence.

From this perspective, therefore, Shiva disintegrates in order to create, since death is the medium for rebirth into a new life by releasing the

primordial elements. So, what seem to be opposites, namely life and death, creation and destruction are, in fact, part of a process and a continuum of 'creative destruction' in the cosmic cycle under the 'responsibility' of Shiva.

The Ultimate Purpose of Human Life

Given that the human being is uniquely endowed with the capacity to think and imagine, it behoves every person to discover and gain knowledge of his atman, that is, acquire *Atmavidya*, as well as that of Brahman, *Brahmavidya*, and the relationship between them, with him and with the world. That, indeed, is the ultimate purpose of human life.

As he pursues this quest, the individual will eventually realise that Brahman and Atman are of identical nature, in other words that as an individual person or a self, a *jivatma*, he too is but *satchitananda*, though temporarily in a finite or limited form of a human body.

Again, by way of analogy, one can give the example of the ocean and its waves: they are identical in nature, since both are only water, but their names differ because of the form they assume. Once the wave resolves into the ocean however, if it were 'aware', it would realise that it is not a puny wave but the mighty ocean itself. So too is atman Brahman.

The understanding thus gained is known as the Supreme or Higher Knowledge or *paravidya*,

knowledge of the Self or Inner World, in contrast to Lower Knowledge or *aparavidya*, which is knowledge of the external world or the world of objects. Someone who gains paravidya is known as a *gyani* or *jnani*. Frequently, instead of Supreme or Higher Knowledge, the word 'Knowledge' is used, with a capital 'K', as opposed to 'Lower Knowledge' for which 'knowledge' is used.

So far, we have seen, therefore, that the Vedas:

1. Teach the principles of existence (origin of universe, Creator and creation, relationship between the created and Creator, what are birth and death etc.);
2. Are a *shastra*: they strengthen and protect the individual;

3. Give the person a sense of direction.

Note that a shastra is a weapon which stays with the person to strengthen and protect him, for example, a shield or an armour. Knowledge remains with a person and empowers him. This is in contrast to an *astra*, which refers to a weapon that the person directs away from himself towards another person or an object, for example, the *gada* used by Hanuman.

Two Questions

At this stage, two key questions arise: (1) Can anyone become a jnani? and (2) Why is it that we do not usually recognise our atman and do not experience Brahman?

As regards the first question: Certainly, is Hinduism's reply, anyone can access paravidya and become a jnani by following *sadhana* or a spiritual discipline under the guidance of someone who has already done so and is a living embodiment of the teaching, a *guru*. In Sanskrit, *gu* means darkness and *ru* means to remove. A *guru* is, therefore, someone who removes the darkness of ignorance and replaces it by the light of paravidya.

The reply to the second question is that because of our ignorance, we identify ourselves only with our body which is constantly subject to change and is perishable: infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and finally old age followed by death. This

error of identification with the thick material covering that is our body, effectively hides the atman from us.

Similarly, in our daily life, the decisions and choices we make based on our likes and dislikes generate agitations in our mind. The resulting restlessness acts as an obstacle that prevents us from rising beyond them to gain a true understanding of Brahman, in the same manner that a dark cloud hides the all-powerful sun. And yet the sun *is*, Brahman *is*.

An analogy which is used to illustrate the preceding point is to imagine the reflection of a full moon on the surface of a lake on a clear, windless night. The surface of the lake is placid and wherever we look, we will see a single, bright full moon. However, if there is a strong wind blowing, the surface

is disturbed by unruly waves; under these conditions, the single full moon is reflected in the multiple waves and looks broken up into many moons. If we think of the bright full moon as Brahman and the lake as our mind, then the waves represent the agitated mind which sees many instead of one Brahman, and the placid lake represents the mind free of agitations which correctly apprehends one Brahman. Hence, 'Ekam Sat...'. This is what we mean when we talk of a pure mind, which is one that sees the Truth.

We would very much like to remain young, beautiful, live as long as possible, and, if possible, not die so as to continue enjoying life. But the cruel reality is that changes and sufferings of all kinds, including disease, are inevitable. They cause us pain, suffering

and sorrow and, invariably, take us towards death which we fear.

So, what is the solution to this human condition of fear, suffering and sorrow, which are caused by these inevitable changes?

The Solution: Gain Atmavidya and Brahavidya

In the first instance, we have to accept the postulate that we are not simply this changing, perishable or mortal body. Then, we have to understand, internalise and live the Truth that we are the changeless atman, which is identical in nature to Brahman. In other words, we must obtain Atmavidya and Brahavidya.

But how? Naturally, as is the case for all kinds of knowledge, it is through the mind or the mental faculty, as a first step. But a mind which is serene and not restless because of our desires that include likes and dislikes (*ragas/dveshas*), and, therefore, fully awake and ready to receive the teaching.

To reach this state of mental purity or steadiness, and then make the effort to gain paravidya, we have to follow the sadhana or spiritual discipline known as *yoga*, which is made up of four complementary aspects/dimensions:

- Bhaktiyoga* – the path of devotion;
- Rajayoga* – the path of *upasana* or meditation;
- Karmayoga* – the path of selfless action or dedicated service;

Jnanayoga – the path of knowledge.

Please note that the form of yoga which is more commonly popularised, that is the *asanas* or physical postures, is but one aspect of yoga, though it is equally important as a part of the whole process. After all, a healthy mind is more likely to be found in a healthy body.

In the words of Swami Suddhananda, 'Knowledge is the culmination of devotion and devotion is the fulfilment of Knowledge'.



A Roadmap for Life

In the first part, we have seen that in order to obtain Higher Knowledge or *paravidya*, we must possess a calm mind. Our life, in fact, should be a constant preparation to achieve this. At the same time, this quest makes us lead a sound and balanced life, and our progress on this path acts as a shield, which protects us and supports us in facing life's challenges.

But we have to put in the effort or *prayetna*, which requires discipline and rigour. The starting point is a healthy body – come to think of it, why shouldn't we

want to be in good health! – for, generally, a sound mind is to be found in a sound body.

However, our body is not merely a perishable entity but is part of the total human personality whose core is the imperishable atman.

The human personality is made up of five sheaths, known as *koshas*, which range from the gross to the subtle, the atman being the subtlest. They are: *annamayakosha* (the food sheath, i.e. the inert material body built up from the food we eat and which itself after death turns into food for others); *pranamayaskosha* (the physiological functions that maintain life); *manomayakosha* and *vigyanmayakosha* (the mind and intellect); *anandamayakosha* (the bliss sheath, experienced during sleep).

We could say that the human personality is the temple of atman. As such, therefore, it deserves that we take good care of it and that we protect it by leading a well-ordered or *dharmic* life.

The well-ordered or Dharmic Life

What does a dharmic life imply? It is to live our life with guidance from the Vedas and texts based on them such as the dharmashastras, as also to follow the advice about health regarding the physical state of the body that is dispensed by competent authorities in the matter relating to our lifestyle, such as prudent eating, performance of adequate physical activity, avoidance of substance abuse, etc.

The Vedas and related texts indicate the actions we have to undertake in our life. These include, for example, daily worship (*sandhya*) at the beginning and at the end of the day – dawn and dusk respectively; performance of the *sanskars*, 16 in all, which are the rites and ceremonies marking various stages of our life from conception to death (such as before and after birth has occurred, giving a name to the child, setting off as a student, marriage and so on); the various subjects we have to study and the skills we have to acquire; as well as celebration of festivals among others. These have a bearing at individual as well as at family and social levels, providing coherence and a favourable environment for the attainment of our purpose.

The result of this well-ordered life with, as a proximate objective, the development of a predominantly *sattvic* (see below) tendency – that is, the tendency towards mental serenity, keeping the other two tendencies, *rajas* and *tamas* in check – is a mind that is ready to receive paravidya.

Deviating from the Path

We may encounter obstacles (such as bodily disease, or emotional/mental problems) on the path that prevent us from being less rigorous than we should, so that we fall behind and are not able to obtain paravidya in one lifetime. In this case, we then have to come back, that is, to be reborn in a new body so as to continue on the journey. This is known

as *punarjanma* or rebirth, which is commonly referred to as the less correct term 'reincarnation'.

This happens according to the *Law of Karma*, which is the spiritual counterpart of the phenomenon of cause and effect that operates in the material world. Not having followed genuinely the way of life recommended results in an accumulation of *punya* and *paapa* (the consequences of good and bad actions respectively) which constitute the cause of rebirth, which itself is the *effect*.

This repeated cycle of birth-death-rebirth is known as *samsara*. We escape from or are freed from this cycle when we have not only attained paravidya, but when we actually are 'established' in this state, effortlessly. It is a state beyond the mind where all

differences disappear and we apprehend existence as One, the multiplicity that we see being the manifestations of that One and only Brahman: that is the Unique Truth, Pure Consciousness and Pure Bliss: *satchitananda*.

This freedom from the bondage to the material cycle of *samsara* is known as *moksha* – and the sages aver that we can achieve this in our present lifetime, even before we leave this body (death). The one who attains this is known as a *jivanmukti* (*jiva* – a living being, *mukti* – one who has attained moksha). One is then not reborn in a body, which amounts to undergoing pain and suffering.

One can, therefore, appreciate that following a dharmic life will allow us to make faster progress on the path towards achieving moksha.

Where do We Join the Path?

Where we join the path depends on our temperament and our *karma*. Our temperament is a reflection of our *gunas* or innate tendencies, which are three in number, each one finding expression on the physical, mental and emotional planes:

1. *Sattwa*: Light, balance, order; happiness, equanimity, balanced judgement.
2. *Rajas*: Life, force, movement; desire, restlessness, passion.
3. *Tamas*: Darkness, mass, inertia; fear, laziness, stupidity.

These tendencies interact among themselves, usually with one of them predominating in an

individual. This dominant tendency is the one that conditions the person's relationships and his attitude in his interactions with the external world of objects and phenomena, including men and women, plants and animals, and inert matter. In sum, with everything that exists in the universe. We can only be at peace when sattwa predominates, which is essential for us in seeking paravidya through Karmayoga, Bhaktiyoga, Jnanayoga or Rajayoga singly or in combination.

In fact, our rishis or great spiritual masters of ancient India came to the conclusion that every person has not only the possibility, but also the capacity to cultivate the sattwa tendency, and thus eventually to accede to the genuine state of Pure Bliss – *ananda* – that seems to elude us but is really our true nature.

Varnashramas: The Four Universal Categories of Human Beings

A combination of gunas and karma in the individual defines the four major, universal types of human beings in society, the *varnashramas* as follows:

- *Brahmins* – predominance of sattva, with rajas in second place: the wise, sages and thinkers, who lead a life of contemplation as well as teaching and sharing with others their spiritual experiences, and serving as an example to others by their noble behaviour.
- *Kshatriyas* – predominance of rajas with sattva in second place: leaders whose duty it is to protect the people and their territory, ensuring the environment for putting the teachings of the sages into practice.

- *Vaishyas* – predominance of rajas with tamas in second place: those who produce and distribute the wealth of a country, engaged in trade, business and other professions.
- *Shudras* – predominance of tamas: the labour class who perform service for others, doing practical labour.

Usually these four types are referred to as castes, which, in fact, refer to the *jatis*, the multiple social categories that are defined by the occupations they are engaged in. The varnashrama types refer rather to the overall accomplishments of a person and not to his status at birth, as has been taught by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* (18, 40-44).

Throughout the history of Hinduism, there have been great thinkers, including several contemporary spiritual leaders, who have made it very clear that there is no question of superiority or inferiority among these types, for society needs all of them for its smooth functioning. This the *organismic* view of society where, as in any organism, every part is essential to the proper functioning of the whole organism.

On the other hand, it is pointed out that these four types are reflected in every person's life, depending upon the role that he is playing at a given moment in his life. Thus, when he is cleaning his house or his garden, he is a shudra, and so on.

The Four Purusharthas

In analysing human life, we find that every individual is taken up with four pursuits which Hinduism calls *purusharthas*:

- *Dharma* – seeking perfection in the mental and moral fields, which allows one to live a righteous life and at peace with others.
- *Artha* – seeking material well-being, security in the social and economic spheres.
- *Kama* – seeking enjoyment in the sensual, intellectual and sentimental aspects of life.
- *Moksha* – spiritual aspiration that transcends the demands of *artha* and *kama*, and that results in freedom from worldly bondage.

The Four Ashramas or Stages of Life

Even as one undertakes these four purusharthas, one has to go through life's four stages or ashramas:

Brahmachari – student life, preparing for the next stage;

Grihastha – family life;

Vanaprastha – service to community and society once family commitments are fulfilled;

Sanyasa – moving away from the mundane world to pursue a life of introspection and spiritual search, so as to obtain paravidya and attain freedom from material bondage or moksha, after having duly fulfilled the duties and responsibilities pertaining to each stage.

Those who have travelled far in the cycle of existence, *samsara*, may reach the *sanyasa* stage early on. But there are many people who are able from the beginning to lead a balanced life by combining elements of each of the four stages in their day-to-day living, but focusing primarily on the aspects of the stage in which they find themselves at the given moment.

Journey

At this point, one can make out that Hindus prefer to use or Hinduism as *Sanatana Dharma* or Eternal Truth.

One would also appreciate that Hinduism views human life as a journey towards the discovery

and Knowledge of the Self, atman, which is of the same nature as Brahman – infinite, immortal and changeless – whence originates and unto which resolves all that exists.

It is a journey of finite matter towards the immensity of the incorporeal infinite, when one gives up all worldly bondage and attains Bliss Absolute.



Dharma

So far, we have understood that Hinduism is Truth or Eternal Law, *Sanatana Dharma* (*sanatana* means eternal) that any person, through the *sadhana* or spiritual discipline known as yoga can and must seek and discover for himself (helped by a guru), which amounts to obtaining the Supreme Knowledge or *paravidya*. In this chapter, we will take up *dharma*, which is a key concept that encompasses several aspects, and which it is not possible to translate into a single word.

We have also seen that dharma is one of the four purusharthas or life pursuits of any human being: *dharma, kama, artha and moksha*. As we make our way towards moksha or spiritual liberation, which comes to us through paravidya, we must also survive and live in this world.

Our Life in this World

Our life is a non-stop struggle to:

1. Acquire what we need or desire;
2. Avoid that which we do not need or desire.

What we wish for are: *artha*, security and *kama*, pleasure.

Artha has three aspects: emotional (our relationships with others, starting with the family); social (peace); economic (finance, material resources).

Kama has three aspects also: sensual (relating to our five senses – vision, hearing, smelling, taste and touch); intellectual (e.g. solving a science problem, playing sudoku or crosswords); aesthetic (e.g. admiring a nature view – sunrise or sunset – or a work of art).

We are able to fulfil our needs and desires according to *artha* and *kama* by means of actions (*karmas*) that we perform towards this end. However, compared to animals whose actions are practically under the total control of their instincts, as human beings we have a *choice of action* which is founded on reason, knowledge, and experience.

Consequently, we have the possibility of thinking well before we act in accordance with our desires, for it is desires which trigger actions. In other words, we can *choose the means to attain our objectives*. This is where dharma comes in, according to which the means we choose must not cause harm either to ourselves, nor to all that we depend upon to lead a good life (our overall environment comprising other human beings, society, plants and animals, and our physical environment). In other words, we must perform karma according to dharma, and this is the fundamental basis of Hindu ethics.

One aspect of it are the virtues which we must practise constantly, and which prepare us to make the right choice of the means we use to fulfill our actions.

There are many virtues, but the following are considered as the cardinal ones:

Saucam or purity – of body and mind;

Samyama or self-control – of the mind, implying other virtues, such as humility and modesty, patience, forbearance, self-sacrifice and self-effacement;

Vairagya or non-attachment – overcoming what is bad and being independent of the good things as well, which are fleeting, and identifying oneself with what endures, which is the next virtue, truth;

Satyam or truth – implies not only truthfulness, but the pursuit of what is true in knowledge (including science), what is right in conduct, and what is just and fair in social relations;

Ahimsa or non-violence – in thought, word, and action.

By the same token, one must avoid the sins of: *Kama* (lust), *Krodha* (hate), *Lobha* (greed), *Moha* (delusion), *Mada* (pride) and *Matsarya* (malice).

Dharma means...

Dharma comes from the Sanskrit root *dhr* which means support, and *ma* meaning immensity. Dharma is, therefore, the Truth, and knowledge of the Truth that holds up or sustains the vastness of the universe comprising all that is found in it, both non-living, and living including human beings.

By analogy, one can imagine dharma as a software: it operates in an intangible but perceptible manner rather than being a visible or tangible support. The gravitational force which allows celestial objects to maintain their orbits – without which there would be no universe let alone humans! – is a good illustration in the physical realm.

And since the universe extends from the infinitely small to the infinitely large – microcosm to macrocosm – it is implied that dharma is to be found at all levels.

Quoting Swami Ramdas, late Jean Herbert, an eminent indologist, has written that 'it is only in light of this knowledge that the life of a human being can be harmoniously adjusted in all its diverse aspects. Thus,

dharma is meant to infuse in all life's activities the splendour, the bliss and the peace of divine reality'.

It follows that we can deduce that from a scientific point of view, dharma is the specific characteristic of something, without which it wouldn't be what it is – for example, the reactivity or non-reactivity of an atom, the heat of fire, the coldness of ice, the light of the sun and other stars, and so on.

From a moral and legal point of view, it is duty; from a psychological and spiritual point of view, it is religion; from a general point of view, it is law and justice; but *above all*, it is Duty with a capital D.

From all these points of view collectively, we can say that in the larger sense, dharma is the *cosmic order* or *rta*, which emanates from Brahman and

which underlies creation at all levels, as has been noted above. The pursuit of dharma, therefore, means gaining a clear understanding of its place in the universe, and its implications in the running of our life.

If we think of all these dimensions, we arrive at an overarching definition of dharma as:

‘that which upholds, nourishes, sustains, unfolds, integrates, strengthens, and unites’. Further, ‘dharma is that which ensures the overall well-being of the individual and society’.

Thus, it is said in the Ramayana, for example, *raghukulrit sada chali ayi, praan jayi par vachan na jayi* – it is the rule, the law, the *rta*, in sum the dharma of the

Raghu clan that one can give one's life if need be but one cannot breach a promise that has been made.

Everyone and everything in their place, fulfilling their role

If one scales down from its universal sense of *cosmic order* to the individual level, we will perceive dharma as meaning that everything is in its place and fulfils its assigned role – that is, does its duty.

And if every entity and every individual performed their duty as expected, harmony and peace would reign for the good of everyone.

We can, therefore, conclude that all that tends towards peace and harmony constitutes dharma, is *dharmic*. Contrarily, everything that takes one away from peace and harmony – and gives rise to conflict – constitutes adharma, is *adharmic*.

And when the world goes astray towards adharma, when peace and harmony are threatened, then the Divine takes birth and comes down to eliminate adharma and re-establish dharma; such a divine incarnation is an *avatar*. This is what Rama and Krishna, both avatars of Vishnu, do in the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita respectively.

Dharma at Each Stage or Ashrama of Life

Coming to the life of an individual, we can easily understand that:

- The dharma of the *brahmachari*, the student, is to go to school and to study seriously; it is not the time to focus on relationships of the boyfriend/girlfriend type, to indulge in smoking and drinking and other nefarious

habits, while the parents are struggling hard to meet the needs of their children;

- The dharma of parents, who are at the *grihastha* stage, is to bring up their children properly and to protect the family; and not to abuse or harm them, unfortunately a wrong which is spreading because people have forgotten about dharma.

In this stage, further, there begins and gets established the dharma of husband and wife, which is the maturing of mutual supporting bonds without which there can be neither stability nor happiness in the family.

- The dharma of the *vanprastha*, having fulfilled his family obligations and responsibilities, is to serve society; and finally,

- The dharma of the *sanyasa* stage is to renounce material things and to dedicate oneself entirely to spiritual pursuit.

Also, each one in his line of work or his occupation must respect the relevant dharma, *swadharma*, for example, the dharma of the teacher is to teach; of the doctor is to treat his patients, and so on.

Dharma in Two Broad Categories

To summarise, we can look at dharma in two broad categories:

1. *Vishesh* or *manav dharma* – that is, the dharma of the individual according to the ashrama of life that he is in and his social/professional role;

2. *Samanya dharma* – that is, the dharma by which everyone must abide so as to maintain the social order, which we can define as conforming to the rules of the game in a moral and legal order.

This is where an important aspect of ethics comes into play. Essentially, it is that in trying to fulfill the objectives of *artha* (material security) and *kama* (pleasure) the means must be strictly according to dharma, in order to ensure individual as well as family and social integrity, which will lead to the wider harmony.

In the *Manusmriti*, a code of social ethics, it is said that *dharmo rakshati rakshitah*: the one who protects dharma is, in turn, protected by dharma.

In the Karna Parva of the Mahabharata (one of the sacred texts of Hinduism), dharma is explained as follows:

Dharma sustains society;

Dharma maintains the social order;

Dharma ensures the well-being and the progress of humanity;

Dharma is, assuredly, what fulfills these objectives.

There is a collective effort which all the people of the world must make to understand and to put into practice dharma, which is of universal application – that is, concerns everyone – and is an important vector of integration of unity, hope and harmony for mankind's future.



Karma

In the previous chapter on dharma, we have learnt that every person wishes to have *artha* or material comfort and *kama* or pleasure, and that we are able to fulfil our needs and desires arising out of *artha* and *kama* by means of *karmas* or actions that we undertake towards these ends. As human beings, we have a *choice of action* basing ourselves on reason, knowledge and human experience – unlike animals who act mainly according to their instincts.

We have also understood an important aspect of ethics which essentially denotes that in pursuing the objectives of *artha* and *kama*, the means that we use must strictly abide by the principles of dharma or righteousness. In other words, karma must be done according to dharma. In so doing, there is no mental tension, and our mind remains, therefore, calm and composed. With the mind thus at peace, we are able to examine our situation continuously and understand it objectively and realistically, which enables us to take life in our stride despite the pains and sufferings which inevitably come in our way and which can cause us sorrow. We are also, thus, better prepared mentally to obtain *paravidya* or Higher/Supreme Knowledge, which, in turn, leads us to

the attainment of moksha or freedom from material bondage represented by the repeated cycle of birth-death-rebirth or samsara.

Performing Actions

In order to be alive, and then to live, the fundamental requirement is food, which we must procure, implying that we must have the means: money, which we must obtain by working.

To work, we perforce get involved in activities and engage in multiple actions. Thus, we see that action proceeds from a desire to accomplish something in order to ensure our survival in the world.

When we examine our life, we will find that there are two aspects: one in which we are active, another when we are inactive.

Being active means performing actions, that can be of two types: those that must be done grouped under *karma*, and those that are *vikarma*, to be avoided.

Vikarma refers to actions that go against dharma or are adharmic, such as cheating, lying, stealing, doing harm to others and so on; they obviously lead to the downfall of the person.

Karma

On the other hand, *karma* comprises actions that are positive and constructive and that, potentially, will bring about the flowering of the personality. They are threefold:

- *Nityakarma*: Actions to be performed daily, beginning with personal care and hygiene,

actions relating to domestic life and to work, to studies and so on.

- *Naimittika karma*: Actions to be performed on special occasions. For example, participation in *pujas*, religious and non-religious festivals, national events, etc.
- *Kamyā karma*: Actions undertaken with a specific objective in mind, for example, to get a better examination result or to obtain a better job.

The Fruits of Karma

Each action is followed by a result, or as is said in Hinduism, each action bears its fruit or *phala*. This *phala* can be visible, *drishtaphala*, that is, the doer or

author of the action experiences the fruit of his action in his lifetime; or invisible – *adrishtaphala*, namely that the fruit of action will be experienced ulteriorly by the individual in his cycle of *samsara*.

Every action is attended by an expectation, and there are only four possible results or fruits of an action: equal to expectation, more than expectation, less than expectation, and the opposite of what is expected.

Let us take the example of a student who is about to take his Higher School Certificate examination, and who sits for three subjects at principal level. He expects or hopes to get the best possible results in his three principal subjects (graded from A: highest to E: lowest) – that is, 3As.

When the results are announced, there are four – *only four* – possibilities to his expectations: 3As (equal), he becomes a laureate (more), 2As + 1B (less), failure (opposite).

Karmayoga: Accepting Any Fruit of Action as a *kripa* or Grace from Ishwara

Faced with these possibilities, how should the student respond?

Naturally, in the case of the first two (equal or more), he will be happy and would want to celebrate, which is quite legitimate, but he must not allow himself to be overtaken by euphoria. By the same token, in case of bad results or failure, the student must not feel guilty or become depressed, and nor should his parents.

Whether the result was higher or below his expectations, the student must keep a cool mind. The typical reaction to this advice is: easier said than done!

Granted – but this is where, precisely, prior preparation on a sustained basis is necessary. In living a dharmic or well-ordered life as has been explained previously, from an early age, we equip ourselves to face any eventualities in our life. With our mind serene, we are able to make an *objective analysis* of any situation that we encounter, to understand the ‘why’ of things, and then to respond appropriately.

We have to understand what is involved in performing actions as we go through life, in any of the four *ashramas* or stages. To accomplish any action, there are three basic factors that come into play. The

first is time or *kalam*, next comes the required effort or *prayetna*, on both of which the person has a degree of control; the third is the 'divine' factor or *daivam* over which the person has no control and that is often designated by the terms 'fate' or 'destiny'.

For example, if on the day of examination, the student has a health problem or is delayed on the road (e.g. due to an accident), this can impact on his performance and lead him to obtain less good results.

But does this mean that one should choose to be inactive, to refrain from action because of the possibility of obstacles coming in the way as illustrated above by way of example?

The answer is clear: certainly not. What is important, therefore, is to undertake any action

with *detachment*: that is, to focus on accomplishing the action irrespective of the fruit of the action, as Bhagavan Shri Krishna puts it in the Bhagavad Gita (*sloka* 47, Ch. 2): ‘Your right is to action only, not to its fruit; may you not be motivated by inaction’.

The teaching which will give succour to the student (as also to his family) is: to accept any fruit of action as *kripa* or divine grace from Ishwara, as a *prasad* of divine origin, keeping in mind the explanation given above about the three factors that go into the performance of an action. We are never in control of everything: there is always some element that is beyond our control.

We are here at the basic premise of *karmayoga*: the accomplishment of any action with an attitude

of detachment produces an inner purification (that is, a mind free of the tensions that result from our likes or dislikes) which is the essential prerequisite to spiritual awakening and union (*yoga*) with the divine. By 'dedicating' any action we perform and its *phala* to Ishwara, we are not shunning our responsibility, but are agreeing that provided that we have proceeded in line with dharma, we will accept any outcome as a gift from Ishwara and move on from there.

If we are to complete this section with the same example: the student accepts his result with equanimity, and starts afresh. He need not do anything rash such as committing suicide; at the same time, parents must refrain from having undue expectations, accepting the result with similar equanimity.

The Law of Karma

The second sense in which the term karma is used is in relation to the Law of Karma: which we have referred to earlier as the spiritual counterpart of the Law of cause and effect: we reap what we sow.

From this larger perspective, the actions that we accomplish are perceived as being:

Prarabhda karmas – the *karmas* which we come with at birth; for example, the circumstances and the dates of our birth and death;

Agami karmas – the new *karmas* that we accumulate in our life;

Sanchita karmas – the accumulated *karmas* that accompany us in our successive lifetimes, including the invisible fruits of actions or

adrishtaphala. They are like a bank balance to which we keep adding (*agami*) and subtracting (*prarabhda*).

A clarification is needed here about *adrishtaphala*: invisible in no way means that there is no result or consequence, because any action is invariably followed by a reaction, whether this is in a given timeline to be experienced by its author, or is experienced in due course by persons close to him, or by him in a subsequent reincarnation.

The fruits of good actions that we perform accumulate as *punya* and allow us to progress on the journey towards *moksha*; the consequences of wrong

actions increase our reservoir of *paapa*, causing us to lag behind on the journey towards *moksha*. It is, therefore, a balance of *punya* and *paapa* that determines our spiritual progress, which is speeded up when the balance tilts towards *punya* and is delayed when *paapa* predominates.

However, both *punya* and *paapa* bind us to the cycle of *samsara*, which means that we are born or incarnated and are reborn or reincarnated according to the Law of Karma, and it is only by going beyond *punya* and *paapa* that we can attain *moksha*. For this to happen, we have to follow the *sadhana* that leads us towards acquiring *paravidya*, as has been explained earlier.

Assuming Responsibility

The ball, as can be seen, is squarely in our camp: our choice of action is solely ours, from which it follows that the fruits thereof are entirely our own responsibility.

If we assume our responsibility fully and knowingly, and if we make the choices which are conducive to personal advancement without causing any harm to others – in other words, if we make *dharmic* choices which we fulfil by equally *dharmic* actions, then our spiritual awakening and our evolution towards *moksha* are assured.



What is Puja?

Why do We make offerings?

Our life and all that is necessary for living can be considered as a gift from Ishwara. In the ordinary course of life, it is customary to offer thanks and gratitude to the giver for whatever gift(s) we receive. How much more important it is, therefore, to express one's gratitude to Ishwara for all that one has been given. Ishwara does not need nor seek anything from us, and so the only way we can express ourselves is through prayers.

In the discussions on dharma and karma, we have seen that in the quest for the purusharthas, we need to lead a dharmic life, for which we have to perform actions, and accept whatever results that come as kripa or grace from Ishwara. This acceptance counteracts the agitations in our mind, as explained earlier, thus calming and steadying or purifying it, allowing us to cope with results that do not meet our expectations because of obstacles that came in our way.

Obstacles are of three sorts: 1. *Adhidaiivika* – those which are natural and over which we have no control, e.g. storms, floods, etc., 2. *Adhibhautika* – created by one's surroundings, e.g. noisy neighbours, traffic, distractions caused by one's family, and

3. *Adhyatmika* – those within oneself, e.g. tiredness, sickness, an agitated or distracted mind.

Along with other measures we may take, *praarthna* or prayer supports us in facing these obstacles. This is because through prayer, we purify our mind and come to nurture a special relationship with Ishwara – that between created and creator, which ultimately helps us to gain the maturity to qualify as recipient of the higher or spiritual knowledge. In turn, this knowledge teaches us our identity with Ishwara and helps us to discover freedom and happiness, the Pure Bliss or Ananda that is our true nature.

Prayer can be of three types: physical (*kayika*) – performing a ritual or puja, oral (*vacika*) – singing in praise of Ishwara/ chanting verses, or mental

(*manasa*) – doing *japa* (chanting of a holy name) silently in one's mind, without moving the lips or tongue.

In practice, a puja can combine all three types of prayers.

Puja

In every Hindu home, there is a special corner or even a room which is reserved for praying and doing puja. There are also the pujas which are done at community level in the temples on the occasion of the major religious festivals or the pujas which are done to mark important events in our life; for example, the Saraswati puja when children embark on their studies, those done to celebrate marriages or anniversaries, other specific occasions, etc. For the major pujas, one

usually keeps a fast or takes a light meal of sattvic food (sweetened, or if salted, not hot and spicy) that will not cause any disturbance to the mind.

In the puja space at home, we place pictures and *murtis* of chosen deities representing diverse powers and aspects of creation, as well as articles used for performing the puja, such as lamps, wick, oil, bell, etc.

The worshipper usually freshens up or, if possible, has a bath before sitting in front of the altar to do the puja in several steps: lighting the lamp, symbolic purification of oneself and the articles to be used with water, stating the purpose of the puja, making offerings to the deity, praying for the well-being of the family and all creatures in the world and for one's own spiritual illumination. Throughout this

process, appropriate mantras are recited. At the same sitting, one may also read from the scriptures as also do *japa*.

The daily practice is to do *sandhya* or prayers twice 'at the junction (in Sanskrit: *sandhi*) of time', that is when night turns into day and evening changes into night, at dawn and at dusk.

From a wider perspective, *sandhya* can be looked upon as an appointment with oneself to begin with, and with the family to bond and strengthen the sense of oneness and togetherness. These precious moments of turning inwards and of contemplation help us to re-energise ourselves so as to be better prepared to face the coming day and to regain our calm when it is over.

Hindu Perspective on Existence: Correspondence with Offerings

As we have seen earlier, in the Hindu model, creation – that is, all things created, living and non-living – consists of five *panchmahabhutas* or elements (not, though, in the sense the term is used in chemistry), which are Space, Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. A correspondence has been established between the elements and the five sensations, and each element is as well symbolised by an item used in the performance of the puja. This is set out below schematically as follows:

Space (*Akasha*) – Sound – Flowers (*pushpa*)

Air (*Vayu*) – Touch – Incense (*dhupa*)

Fire (*Agni*) – Vision (Form) – Light (*deepa*)

Water (*Apah*) – Taste – Fruits, food (*naivedya*)
Earth (*Prithvi*) – Smell – Sandalwood paste
(*gandha*)

It may be noted that we use some other items too in puja, such as a *ghanta* or bell, the pleasant sound of which represents Space too, but also gives rise to vibrations that enhance the spiritual atmosphere. Camphor, besides giving light that symbolises knowledge, burns down completely without leaving any residue; this represents the cleansing of our mind of all *vasanas* or impressions so as to be rendered pure, prepared to receive the highest spiritual teachings. For specific pujas, we use specific items, such as the coconut, which again has symbolic significance.

Why do we 'Offer'?

For the same reason that when we receive a gift, we express our thanks in gratitude to the giver. And here it is about the gift of life, and of the things created that are needed to sustain or maintain this life for a certain duration. Although we know that whatever we are offering has come to us from Ishwara, we still 'offer' in the same spirit that a child 'offers' a birthday gift to his parents using their own money. Will the parents refuse or make fun of the child? Never, they will gracefully accept it and even thank the child. So too Ishwara 'accepts' these offerings, and, as a result, we feel happy too. Further, making these offerings is an act of humility on our part, signifying that nothing really belongs to us.

And that is why too, after these items have been 'offered' to and received Ishwara's *kripa* (grace), they become *prasad* which we take back and distribute (the fruits and food) to others, who too receive the *kripa*. By the same token, and as we know, nobody ever complains that s/he has received a lesser portion of *prasad*, because *kripa* is the same whatever be the size of the portion.

As has been beautifully put in 'Purna Vidya', 'Puja is one of the most beautiful ways to bring out the devotee within oneself and establish a relationship with Ishwara, the Lord. Puja is called *kayikam karma*, an action involving one's limbs. It also includes speech and mental action in the form of chanting and thinking of the Lord.'

On another level, in making these offerings, we

are acknowledging the five elements that make up creation by symbolically representing them with the items shown above, which, it must be underlined, are all natural. An additional point about offering of fruit is that it symbolises the results or fruits of our actions which we humbly accept in return as Ishwara's *prasad* as has been pointed out before.

At the same time, though, we are recognising that as human beings, we are as one with all of creation, since we are made of the same five elements. This realisation of our connectedness with the larger whole, of our being an integral part of it, and of our mutual interdependence leads to an expanded awareness of both our place and that of everything else in the universe: that everything and everyone has got a rightful place in it.

From this profound understanding of what is referred to as the 'fundamental unity of all existence' flows such profound, inclusive axioms as *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family) and *Ekam sat vipra bahuda vadanti* (Truth is one, the sages call it by various names). These axioms have profound practical implications for peaceful coexistence in the world, because they signify that behind the diversity of humankind, there is a profound unity, a deeper Oneness which, if properly understood, would make it easier to accept each other despite our differences and refrain from wishing to impose our ways of thinking or doing upon others through force or violence. This is what true tolerance would be.



Festivals and Celebrations in Hinduism

What we have seen so far is that if we pursue a life of fulfilling our biological and emotional needs (*kama*) and ensuring our material comfort and security (*artha*) by performing whatever actions are required (*karmas*) for the purpose in a righteous or dharmic manner, and accepting whatever comes our way as a result as Ishwara's *kripa* or grace, this gives us the mental purity that allows us to progress

on the path towards *moksha* or freedom from worldly bondage – a journey which may require us to go through more than one birth.

Such a life demands discipline and a certain rigour, and it would be a tough, stifling and monotonous call to follow if that were the only thing life was all about. In this world, we need a change of routine and some entertainment every now and then. Fortunately for us, in the Hindu calendar, there are several occasions throughout the year which answer to this need. They are festivals, several of which may be of a religious nature and are known in Sanskrit as *utsav*.

These differ from other festivals in that they are not of the 'eat, drink and be merry' type. As the word festival implies entertainment, it is worthy of note that

the Sanskrit word for entertainment is *manoranjan*, which means entertaining or delighting the mind.

In fact, during an *utsav*, which is usually accompanied by a period of prior fasting, in addition to feasting, singing and dancing and merry-making, one takes part in prayers and pujas. These, as has already been pointed out, purify the mind, lifting it towards the higher goal of acquiring *paravidya* and making continued progress on this path: this is the equivalent of 'entertainment' for the mind. And as a result, although one may feel physically exhausted on such occasions, they also prepare us to face life with more enthusiasm to live life more happily and fully.

As for the reasons to celebrate festivals, it may be noted that many of them are based on the cycle of

nature. They mark the change of seasons, celebrate the harvest, and encourage fertility of the land. Others are dedicated to a particular deity, such as Shiva or Ganesha.

Still other popular festivals commemorate the *jayantis* or birth anniversaries of, for example, Rama or Krishna. In addition to the major Hindu festivals that are celebrated throughout India, many regional festivals are also held in honor of various deities.

Major festivals are: Makar Sankranti, Pongal, Onam; Maha Shivaratri; Thaipooam Cavadee; Holi; Baisakhi, Guddi Parva, Varusha Pirappu, Ugadi; Navaratri, Ram Navmi, Durga Puja; Krishna Jayanti, Gita Jayanti.

Irrespective of the reasons for the festivals, all of them are premised on:

1. Determination of the date of the festival;
2. Preparations for the festival;
3. The actual celebrations;
4. The symbolism of the festival; and
5. The post-festival.

The dates of these festivals have been set according to the *panchang* or Hindu calendar dating from ancient times, based on observations of the planets and stars by astronomers, and calculations that they and famed mathematicians made as a result. Hindus have used both the solar and the lunar calendars, and there are also dates fixed on a lunisolar basis. This

is what explains the variations in the dates of some celebrations, depending upon which system is used. Mostly, however, nowadays the dates are based on the lunar calendar which has a 60-year cycle.

As regards the preparations for the festivals, it goes without saying that these start days before the actual date of the festival, especially with a thorough cleaning of the house when it comes to 'New Year'. Then there is shopping for new clothes, paraphernalia for the ceremonies and pujas, ingredients for the sweets to be prepared as also for any particular food item, and so on at individual and family levels. And nowadays, when public cultural events are held to showcase the festival, the logistical and other aspects are naturally attended to by those concerned in the organisation.

The actual celebrations mostly begin early on the morning of the festival, though in the case of Deepavali, for example, there are some rituals that are carried out a few days before. But generally, there is a ritual bath using oil (traditionally mustard oil or coconut oil) that is taken in the morning. Mango leaves are strung up on the front door as a sign of auspiciousness and prosperity, and *rangolis* or *kolams* are displayed on the ground in front of the house. These are colourful and elaborate floral patterns which are made with rice, which may be ground, that is mixed with different bright colours, and which children especially delight in designing. It is a collective activity that draws and bonds them with the adults who participate, mainly ladies.

Then the family will hold a *puja*, with everybody gathered around the decorated shrine of the deity which would, of course, have been thoroughly cleaned and arranged. There will also be attendance at *pujas* and ceremonies being held in the mandirs, kovils and mandirams, but a home *puja* is an absolute must.

Every festival is associated with some special food preparations, e.g. *khichree* for Makar Sankranti and sweetmeats made of *til* seeds; in Mauritius, *sept carris* or seven dishes and *payasam* made from sago pearls are enjoyed during Cavadee. Deepavali is the festival *par excellence*, when sweets of a bewildering variety are prepared and consumed as well as shared with relatives, friends and neighbours. On the occasion of Ugadi, which originates from Andhra Pradesh in

India, Ugadi *pachadi* has become synonymous with it: made from new jaggery (unrefined, dried sugar chunks), raw mango pieces and neem flowers and new tamarind which truly reflect life – a combination of six different tastes – sweet, sour, spice, salt, tanginess and bitter tastes symbolising happiness, disgust, anger, fear, surprise and sadness.

The fundamental aspect of any festival is, of course, the symbolism that underlies it in all its dimensions, as, for example, in the case of Ugadi, the *pachadi's* mix of tastes signifying that life is made up of joys and sorrows, of ups and downs and that one must learn to understand and accept them as part of the reality of living. It will also be seen that all the materials used during the *pujas* are natural

ingredients, which represent the five primordial elements or *panchmahabhutas* which constitute the Hindu model of existence, namely *akash* (space) – *agni* (fire) – *vayu* (air) – *apah* or *jal* (water) – *prithvi* (earth), and of which all that is created is made up, and that includes us: so as we perform these pujas and as we partake of the foods, we acknowledge our connectedness and oneness with the whole of nature which it is our duty to, therefore, protect, as it both nourishes us and takes us back in its lap when we die.

Likewise, other powerful symbolisms are expressed, in particular that of righteousness, and the dispelling of the darkness of ignorance and replacing it by the light of knowledge. Such understanding is gained when one goes to listen to gurus and

others involved in dispensing knowledge about the teachings enshrined in the scriptures. And that is why, post festival, it is important not to forget all that has gone into it, and to commit oneself to constant renewal by continuing to live in the spirit of the festivals all of which as stressed above, are primarily about purifying the mind though infusing it with the proper knowledge, that is *Atmavidya* and *Brahmavidya*. This demands the same discipline, preparedness and dedication that goes into the festival, and that must become part of our daily life, effortlessly.



Symbolism in Hinduism

A story is told of a *sadhu* or holy person in India who was visiting a king, and talked to him about worship of *murtis* of deities in temples, what is referred to as idol worship. The king told the sadhu that he did not agree that the *murti* could represent God and, therefore, did not believe in worship using *murtis*.

There was a framed picture of the king's late grandfather hanging in the room. The sadhu, with the king's permission, asked a minister present there to take down the picture, which he did. Next he told

him to put it on the floor, trample on it and then spit on it. Naturally, the minister hesitated and the king got angry, asking the sadhu what he was up to. The latter asked the king why he was getting so upset because after all that was only a picture. 'No!' said the king, it's my grandfather!' To which the sadhu then replied, 'no it's not, it's only a picture representation of your grandfather!' The king got the message.

Of course, we know that the picture is only a *representation* of the person. In a similar manner, whenever we want to represent ideas, concepts or principles, we use symbols. For example, the symbol for infinity in mathematics is a double interlocking loop.

Through the ideas and concepts that symbolism encompasses, an attempt is made to represent the Hindu vision of existence. The objective is to facilitate understanding of the profound truths and abstract concepts by means of forms and objects which are more or less familiar.

Symbols that are more frequently used are either geometrical forms, such as the triangle, the circle, the dot, or natural objects from the world of plants and animals.

For the latter are, just like us humans, creations of the same Brahman, whence we emanate and, further, possess characteristics which can be similar, different or even surpass those of man.

A few examples of symbols used in Hinduism are given below.

Aum: Symbol of Brahman ॐ

Aum or Om (rhymes with home) is the sound produced starting with the mouth fully open (Aaa...) which terminates with the lips closed (Mmm...), and in between Au (sounds like 'o') as the mouth gradually closes with the lips shut. We normally speak with our mouth partially open, so that the sounds produced during speech are partial sounds compared to Aum, which is the only complete sound that can emanate from the mouth. As such, the syllable Aum subsumes all the sounds of existing human languages and any possible future ones. In this sense, therefore, it can be considered a universal sound.

On the other hand, Brahman is the source of everything, including sound, and *all* sounds produced

by the human vocal cords which, as explained above, are subsumed in the Aum sound. Words also are sound, and it is through words that practically all our knowledge comes, *sabda pramana*, including Knowledge of Brahman. From this viewpoint, Aum is, therefore, the unique apt symbol for Brahman.

Looking at the symbol, the lower curve, which is the longest, represents the waking state. The upper curve represents the state of dreamless sleep. Between these two states – at their junction so to speak – there is the dream state, represented by the third curve that springs from the junction of the two other curves.

The dot signifies the fourth or *turiya* state of consciousness, which illuminates the other three states; these are separated from the dot by the semicircle which symbolises *maya*. The semicircle is

open at the top, meaning that the Absolute is infinite and is not affected by *maya*, which is related only to manifested phenomena. Thus, Aum symbolises both the Unmanifest (Brahman) and the manifest world of our common experience, which takes place in the waking, dream and dreamless states.

Beyond the explanations given above about the symbol, however, the deeper significance of Aum is the mystic power it generates when it is chanted: this is done at the beginning and end of any *puja*. In particular, however, when Aum is chanted as a stand-alone mantra for meditation purposes, and done with the correct intonation – for Aum is fundamentally about sound – it so resonates throughout the body that one can literally feel it penetrating to the depth of one's being. And when this is repeated, it takes

the mind deep into concentration, meditation and finally to the heightened state of consciousness called *samadhi*. Of course, this cannot happen haphazardly, and requires constant and regular practice.

As for everything profound, talking or writing about it is not enough: one must put into practice what is taught, and then only the effect will be felt. That chanting Aum brings peace to one's being has to be experienced to really feel what this means, and what it does to one's personality.



Jnanamudra: Symbol of Higher Knowledge

Jnanamudra is the symbol of Knowledge formed by joining the three fingers and separating them from the index. The index then joins the thumb to form a

circle. It is in this position that we arrange both hands when we are doing *japa* (mental prayer) or meditation so as to purify the mind and gain Knowledge.

The index finger stands for the atman or Self, the 'I' and is usually joined with the other three fingers which stand for the body-mind-sense complex. By separating them out, we signify that the body-mind-sense complex is *anatma*, that is, not 'I'. As we have learnt, atman is identical in nature to Brahman, which is limitless or infinite.

Without the thumb, the fingers cannot grasp anything, and the thumb must be away from the fingers in order to do so. Similarly, the infinite Brahman is away from, unattached to the body-mind-sense complex. But, at the same time, without Brahman, it has no being, much less any function.

The circle is the most perfect geometrical figure and represents the Higher Knowledge, which is perfect, and is obtained when atman merges and identifies with Brahman: the index joining the thumb and forming a circle. To do this, the index has to separate from the other fingers, that is, atman has to separate from the body. Like Knowledge, the circle has no beginning and no end, and is infinite.

Lighting a Lamp: Symbol of Lower and Higher Knowledge

Everyday during their morning and evening prayers, Hindus light a lamp. This is also done on all auspicious functions such as festivals, and even many social occasions such as inaugurations commence

with a lighting the lamp ceremony, the lamp being maintained lit throughout the function.

Darkness symbolises ignorance and light symbolises knowledge. As Brahman is the source of all that is, is the *chaitanya* or consciousness that illumines everything, light is, therefore, regarded as Brahman, the Lord himself.

Knowledge is an inner wealth by which all outer achievements can be accomplished. Hence, we light the lamp to bow down to knowledge as the greatest of all forms of wealth. Indeed, Hinduism says that the greatest wealth is *jnana* or knowledge, and the greatest poverty is *ajnana* or ignorance.

Further, knowledge backs all our actions, good or bad. That is why, we keep a lamp lit throughout any occasion as a witness to our thoughts and actions.

Why use the traditional lamp and not a bulb? The oil or ghee in the lamp represents our *vasanas* or negative tendencies, and the wick symbolises the *ahankar* or ego. When lit by knowledge, the *vasanas* gradually get exhausted and the ego too vanishes. Moreover, the flame always goes upward: so too should we always aim to reach higher ideals by acquiring knowledge.

Another important symbolism is that a single lamp can light many more lamps just as a man of knowledge can give it to many more people. In so doing, neither the brilliance of the lamp nor the knowledge shared is diminished in any way. On the contrary, the person gains in clarity and understanding, so that both giver and receiver benefit.



Namaste: You and I are as One

Hindus greet each other by joining the two palms together in front of the chest and bowing the head while saying *namaste*.

At the simplest level, this gesture means: my greetings, 'I bow to you' – in Sanskrit *namah + te*.

At the deeper, spiritual level, it is a recognition that the atman of the person who is greeting is identical – and, therefore, but one entity – with that of the opposite person, hence the two palms coming together as one in the gesture of *namaste*.

Expressed another way, *namaste* means: the Self in me recognises the Self in you and bows to you.

Use of Animal and Plant Symbols

Elephant: The elephant is associated with Lord Ganesha, of whom it forms the upper half of the body. Lord Ganesha is worshipped first in any puja as the remover of obstacles. The elephant is an apt symbol of this power because as it moves forward, it has the capacity to remove everything on its way, using its trunk, almost effortlessly as it sweeps the trunk to the left and to the right, lifting the object and bodily throwing it away. Whoever has watched an elephant in action will have seen that for himself.

Rat: Also associated with Ganesha. The rat darts hither and thither and gnaws away at things uncontrollably, and is difficult to bring under control or to catch. It is here a symbol of the mind,

in which thoughts relating to our likes and dislikes (*raga-dvesha*) continuously arise and similarly gnaw at us until we have satisfied the desires – but only temporarily because they keep troubling our mind. Ganesha keeps the rat under control, and worshipping Ganesha helps us to purify our mind.

Cobra: The cobra is worn by Shiva around his neck. It is absolutely still with its hood open and facing forward, watching and ready to spring at the slightest signal of danger. Shiva is in meditative posture, but his mind is 'awake' and alert, in readiness as is the cobra. So too must our mind remain awake and alert, ready to be a recipient of Knowledge on the night of Maha Shivaratri. Why night? Because normally at night we are asleep – but to receive Knowledge, we must be awake, as happens on Maha Shivaratri.

The swan: The swan is the mount or vehicle of Brahma as well as being associated with Ma Saraswati, who also wears the white colour. White is a symbol of purity, and the swan is mythically reputed to be the only creature that is capable of separating milk from water once they have been mixed; symbolically this is the display of great spiritual discrimination or *vivekah*. It is symbolic for a spiritually advanced being as, to acquire Higher Knowledge, we must be able to distinguish it from Lower Knowledge – distinguish the real from the unreal. Hence, the association of the swan with Ma Saraswati, who symbolises knowledge and wisdom.

The lotus: The lotus represents both beauty and non-attachment. It grows in fresh water ponds and

lakes, arising from and out of the mud below. But even though it is rooted in mud, it continues to float on the water without becoming wet or muddy, and is used as a symbol of how we ought to live in this world, in a spirit of karmayoga, that is work incessantly without being attached to the surroundings or the results, accepting the latter as the *kripa* of Ishwara.

These are but a very few of the vast array of symbols that are to be found in our rich and diverse Hindu culture. The important point here is that practically all symbols and the symbolism are of a 'universal' type, that is drawn on the one hand from what nature presents to us in the form of plants, animals or even inert objects. On the other hand, they are figures and forms used by another universal language: mathematics which people can relate to.

Hindu symbolism is, therefore, a discipline worth going deeper into not only for intellectual enrichment, but also for understanding and appreciation of Hinduism more profoundly and, of course, in so doing, journeying towards spiritual enlightenment.



Scriptures of Hinduism

As was mentioned at the beginning, the Vedas are the source book of Hinduism. They are known as '*shruti*': *sru* in Sanskrit means to hear, and *shruti* means 'that which is heard', and the Vedas were 'heard' by the rishis while in a state of deep meditation.

The second category of books all convey in different ways and styles, in abstract 'philosophical' terms or as stories suitable for common understanding, what is taught in the Vedas; they are, therefore, a secondary authority, literally meaning 'that which

is remembered' from what one has been told or narrated.

VEDAS

(See also chapter on 'Introduction')

They are four in number, Rigveda, Samveda, Atharvaveda, and Yajurveda, comprised of two broad divisions: *Karmakanda* and *Jnanakanda*. The latter is the knowledge portion which has been compiled separately as the Upanishads which are also referred to as the *Vedanta*.

UPANISHADS

The word Upanishad is derived from the Sanskrit *upa* (near), *ni* (down) and *sad* (to sit); it means sitting

at the feet of a master and listening devotedly to him so as to gain the Higher Knowledge, Paravidya. There are 108 Upanishads in all, but ten are known as the Principal Upanishads as they have been extensively commented upon by Adi Shankaracharya. They are: Isha, Kena, Katha, Mundaka, Mandukya, Aitereya, Taittiriya, Chandogya, Prashna, Shwetashvatara and Brihadaranyaka.

The Upanishads are in the form of a dialogue, or question-answer, between pupil and master, whose spiritual experiences reveal the truths of the Vedas to the pupil, who ultimately progresses to gain the Higher Knowledge.

PURANAS

The term *purana* means ancient, but in the sense

of timeless. As the Vedas were written in Sanskrit, they were not easily accessible or understood by the layman. Their teachings were, therefore, transmitted to the people in accessible language in the form of *Puranas*, which are 18 in all, of which six are devoted to Brahma, six to Vishnu and six to Shiva respectively. The most popular ones are the Bhagavad Purana, Shiva Purana and Vishnu Purana. During *pujas*, the officiating priests known as *purohits* or *pandits* draw mainly from the *Puranas* to convey the messages and lessons from the Vedas.

The *Puranas* explain the truths of the Vedas through stories and legends about numerous saintly as well as ordinary persons, sages and dynasties of ancient India.

They do this through exploration of five major topics: creation of the primordial elements; creation of diversity in the universe; the cosmic cycle comprising four *yugas* or eras: *satya yuga*, *treta yuga*, *dwapara yuga* and *kali yuga* (we are currently in the *kali yuga*); the lunar and solar dynasties; the lives of individuals in these dynasties.

The *Puranas* describe things that actually are and things that are possible, given man's imagination. They teach how from good people we learn how we should lead our lives, and from the wicked how not to lead our lives. But also, some of the latter were subsequently able to change themselves by associating with holy people. In this way, therefore, the *Puranas* show the path to Truth.

EPICS

Next are the two itihisas or epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Itihasa means *iti hi asa* – this is the way it was, as we have heard in the tradition. So, they are not commandments or injunctions about what and how to do. They are accounts of people who faced real, live situations in the course of their lives, and how they faced them, and from them we, therefore, learn lessons of coping with comparable challenges in our own lives.

RAMAYANA

Ramayana is an epic written by Rishi Valmiki in Sanskrit, and was rendered in Avadhi by Goswami Tulsidas, which was the current language at that

time. The latter is the more popular version used, and is known as *Ramcharitmanas*.

It narrates the life of Prince Rama of Ayodhya and of his wife Sita, daughter of King Janaka of Mithila. Rama is forced into exile for fourteen years in the forest accompanied by Sita, upon pressure being put on his father King Dasratha by his third wife Kaikeyi. He is bound by a promise he made to her earlier of granting her boons. Sita is abducted by King Ravana of Sri Lanka. Rama has to fight the demoniac forces to rescue Sita and to occupy the throne, which his father had renounced to lead the life of *sanyasa*. Bharata, the son of Queen Kaikeyi, categorically refuses to be crowned king instead of Rama, as desired by his mother, out of respect and love for his elder brother

and to abide by the wish of his father who wanted Rama to be crowned king as was the custom.

Through the lives of the characters of *Ramayana* – Rama, Sita, his brothers Bharata and Lakshman, Ravana, Sugriva, Mandodari among others – we are shown how the values which should guide our lives sustain filial and other social relationships and help to uphold dharma in society.

MAHABHARATA

In a similar vein, the *Mahabharata* narrates the events leading to the great war – and what happens afterwards – when two clans of cousins, the Pandavas representing dharma and the Kauravas who are adharmic, face each other on a battlefield in Kurukshetra in North India.

Dharma eventually is victorious, but at the cost of enormous loss of lives and damage to the country. This could have been avoided if the Kauravas had chosen the dharmic instead of the adharmic path. It is considered that the war that is depicted in the *Mahabharata* is an external reflection of what takes place within ourselves. Our daily life is itself the kurukshetra, and it is only by balancing the positive and negative tendencies that we will be able to lead a dharmic life.

Mahabharata is the longest epic written in the world, and has 100000 verses spread over 18 *parvans* or chapters.

BHAGAVAD GITA

It is in the *Mahabharata*, on the field of battle, that

Krishna teaches about dharma to Arjuna, one of the five Pandava brothers who is a master archer. He is confused at the sight of his relatives amassed to fight him. He does not want to engage with them, and wants to avoid doing karma, action. But Krishna reminds him that no one can avoid performing action, but must do it with a sense of detachment as one's duty. So, Arjuna must pursue his *swadharma* as a *kshatriya*, enjoined to protect his territory and people.

Krishna goes on to elaborate on the path of yoga that one must follow so as to obtain Knowledge, what that Knowledge is and its relation to *moksha*. Why we are born, why we die and what is death, what is the purpose and the meaning of human life, how we must conduct ourselves so as to achieve our goal –

these are, among other things, some of the profound issues that Krishna throws light on in the 700 verses in three sections of six chapters each that make up the Bhagavad Gita: the 'Song of the Lord'.

Bhagavad Gita is considered to be a complete and comprehensive statement of the essence of *Vedanta*, a clear expose of the human condition which can serve as a guide for the welfare of humanity at large.

OTHER TEXTS

Satyarthprakash

Satyarthprakash, 'The Light of Truth' is a book written in Hindi in 1875 by Maharishi Swami Dayanand, the founder of the Arya Samaj movement.

It was meant to spread the knowledge of the Vedas and to educate people on the true qualities of God. It, therefore, contains an exposition of Vedic principles and clarification thereof. It advocates elimination of the caste system, eradication of superstitions, false notions and meaningless customs, and aims at promoting the brotherhood of man.

Concluding Remarks

A very important and interesting feature of these texts, especially the Upanishads, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is the approach to the understanding of life and of the human condition. Light is thrown on the fundamental human problems by means of dialogue, and through questions and answers, among

various sages and other personalities with students and devotees who meet them in diverse situations and contexts to seek guidance and Knowledge.

Far from being embarrassed or showing reluctance or annoyance at being asked questions, their interlocutors are only too pleased to share their experiences as one way of providing the answers. In fact, they egg on the students to ask as many questions as they want, for this is the only way to gain understanding and Knowledge. There is no limit on types or amount of questions that can be asked. This should be of interest to the modern youth in particular, who are not prepared to accept anything that is not rational or plausible.

One may think that so many texts can give rise to confusion. But this is not the case if we imagine

the Hindu universe of Knowledge to be like a big wheel. Remember that the circle is a symbol of Higher Knowledge, which is perfect as the circle is a perfect geometrical figure. It has neither beginning nor end: it is the wheel which turns eternally, cycles which repeat endlessly.

If the axle represents the core Vedic teachings, then the several points on the circumference of the wheel may be taken to represent the texts mentioned above as well as the writings of great sages and thinkers of Hinduism. Anyone of these writings can be an entry point to the core teachings of Hinduism, just like from any point on the circumference of the wheel one can go down a spoke and directly reach the axle.



Appendix: Hindus and Beef-Eating

Even if they did, there is such a thing as evolving practice – practice changing for the better and adapting to changing circumstances over time. This is the concept embodied in *smriti* – which guides the social, cultural and religious practices and customs which vary with the age and the given context of the times; they are therefore not immutable, and coexist side-by-side with the core truths and principles of

existence whence they are derived, those that were 'heard' by the rishis – the *sruti*, which is timeless and universal, whereas *smritis* are local and time-bound. So, there is no contradiction, as practice does not alter the core concepts enshrined in the Vedanta.

Many years ago, a book by the historian Dr. Jha of the University of Delhi had stirred controversy about whether Hindus ate beef in Ancient India – and his own conclusion is that they did. Even if this were true, so what? Beef-eating or rather, absence of beef-eating, is not a defining characteristic of *sruti*. *Sruti* is untouched by matters which pertain to the domain of *smriti*, and thus at the core Hinduism remains stable.

However, even if they did eat beef, the fact that at some stage they stopped doing so and made the

non-eating of beef an important aspect of the Hindu way of life is itself a confirmation that they adhered to the *smriti* principle of adapting to a changing context. So, the issue is not whether beef-eating was allowed. More importantly, it is: what were the circumstances that led to the stoppage of beef-eating and make it an important part of the dharma?

Why Hindus do not Eat Beef/Prefer Vegetarianism

1. Babies fed on their mother's milk are usually weaned on to cow's (or buffalo's) milk. As the human newborn is totally dependent on the mother's milk to remain alive, in other words the mother is not only the procreator of the baby but its sustainer through her milk, so the

cow is symbolically a mother to the human. Whatever is one's concept of God or worship, nobody can deny that mothers are worthy of the highest reverence.

2. At a time when, in ancient days at the beginnings of human settlements, there were probably not as many vegetables grown as is the case now, cow milk provided a complete food. Cow milk as such is recommended as a source of protein and calcium amongst other things. It can be converted into butter and *paneer* (cheese), the whey is used in cooking, and *ghee* (clarified butter) is made from the milk and used for cooking purposes as well as for medicinal purposes.

3. Cowdung not only has some antiseptic properties but it is also used for plastering of walls and floors. When the plaster dries, there is a mildly aromatic smell which is, in fact, rather pleasant. As far as is known, the excrement of no other animal has similar properties allowing its use in human habitation.
4. Cow dung is used as manure. Dried cow dung cakes are used as fuel, and these days biogas as well is produced from it.
5. When the cow dies, the hide is available as leather for multiple uses.
6. The cow was used in agriculture for tilling the land, and as a means of transport, *vide* the bullock-cart.

For all these valid reasons, at some point in the development of Hindu civilisation, the cow may have been elevated to the status of a sacred symbol, presumably so that humans would not get addicted to the taste and, therefore, consumption of its flesh. This would have led to killing cows on a large scale, and, therefore, possibly the extinction of the then developing civilisation.

(However, the way that modern Hindus treat the cow in some parts of India is absolutely appalling. Allowing them to roam freely, in cities in particular, and shoving them here and there is not only a cruelty but a denial of the symbolic respect which they deserve. Hindus, of all people, should give serious thought to and find the means to deal with stray

cows, giving them a decent treatment when alive, and disposing of them properly when they die.)

Alternatively, the reasons for avoiding beef-eating in the modern context may be considered as follows:

1. Spiritual – beef, or animal flesh in general, is not *sattvic* food.
2. Nutritional – there are equivalent, and as tasty, sources of protein.
3. Medical:
 - (a) beef is red meat and a rich source of purines and pyrimidines, the breakdown products which convert into uric acid, responsible for micro-crystalline joint disease, notably gout.

- (b) red meat is rich in cholesterol too, a substance responsible for much of cardiovascular disease and which may aggravate existing diabetic lesions.
- (c) consumers of red meat have the highest incidence of cancer of the large intestine and rectum because of the carcinogenic breakdown products whose harmful effects are enhanced by the prolonged contact with the intestinal lining owing to the constipating effect of a meat-based diet.



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Conquer yourself, and the whole universe is yours.

—**Swami Vivekananda**

Hinduism is a movement, not a position; a process, not a result; a growing tradition, not a fixed revelation.

—**Dr. S. Radhakrishnan**

Hinduism does not repudiate the world, negate social values, or forbid the enjoyment of legitimate pleasures; it points the way to enduring happiness, both here and hereafter, and to the highest good as well.

—**Swami Nikhilananda**

Caste divisions, as they exist today, are very much against the basic Hindu doctrine of the all-pervading Brahman identified with the Atman.

—**K.M. Sen**



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