**HINDUISM, THE WORLD'S OLDEST RELIGION**

**A SIMPLE INTRODUCTION TO A COMPLEX RELIGION**

**Introduction**

Hinduism is also known as "Sanatana Dharma" to Hindus. In Sanskrit, the original language of India, 'Sanatana' means Everlasting and 'Dharma', by a crude translation, means Religion. The Everlasting Religion, Hinduism was founded, exists and flourishes in India.

What is Hinduism? Is it a religion or is it a culture? The truth is - it is both a religion and a way of life. India gave to the world the original, oldest and most profound philosophy of life. The brilliant ancestors of present-day Indians explored the Truth behind our existence and gave several philosophies and theories to define the Truth. At the same time, they created a set of rules for "good living" on this earth. The philosophical concepts that Indians gave to mankind are eternal and constitute no religion by themselves. However, the rules for good or "Dharmic" living that they laid down constitute the Hindu religion. This article will refer to "Hinduism" for both the philosophy and the religion, for purposes of simplicity.

Sanatana Dharma does not have a starting point in history, does not have a founder, and has no Church. The sages who shaped the Hindu religion merely reiterated the teachings of the Vedas, the Hindu scriptures (most of which is unwritten). The Vedas are believed to have no origin. In ancient India, the Vedas formed the **educational system and broadly comprised all the different spheres of life, such as spiritual, scientific, medical and so on.**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this web page is not to "sell" Hinduism or to seek conversions. As a matter of fact, Hinduism does not believe in conversions. More on that topic follows later. The purpose of this page is to simply try and give a high-level overview of the religion and the culture that continues to fascinate a lot of people in the West and in America.

**The Mother of All Alphabets**

Click on the rotating image above to view the symbol in the image. The symbol is an Alphabet in the Sanskrit language and is the most important symbol in the Hindu religion. It is pronounced - OM - and signifies God Almighty. Om means "That which hath No Beginning nor End". The chanting of Om and meditation on the symbol are believed to bestow good health, peace, and prosperity to the spiritual aspirant.

**Important Concepts and Misconceptions**

In the following sections, I have attempted to highlight popular misconceptions about important concepts in the Hindu religion and Hindu philosophy, while avoiding controversial topics, debate over which will not serve the main objective of this web page.

**The Religion**

**God or Gods?**

**Misconception**

**A popular misconception is Hinduism is polytheistic - believes in multiple Gods.**

**Truth**

The Vedas tell us this about God - "OM Poornamadah Poornamidam Poornaad Poornamudachyate; Poornasya Poornamaadaaya Poornamevaavashisyate". Translated in English, this verse means "What is Whole - This is Whole - What has come out of the Whole is also Whole; When the Whole is taken out of the Whole, the Whole still remains Whole". The essence of this verse is that the Infinite cannot be measured arithmetically - God is Infinite. The Infinite can be represented in Infinite ways and does manifest in infinite ways. This, in short, is the essence of the Hindu belief in God. That He is everywhere, around us and within us. In fact, Hinduism takes the bold step of proclaiming that "we are God".

At the end of the day, Hinduism is monotheistic (Believes in One God). However, Hinduism believes not only in One God, but also in His Infinite manifestations around us and within us perpetually. Realizing that it is impossible for mankind to visualize the Infinite, Hinduism presents us with His forms to help us visualize him. This belief of Hinduism is often confused with polytheism.

To illustrate this point - We all observe the unending processes of birth, existence and death, which seem to be continually taking place around us. We constantly witness these processes and are yet ignorant of them, living as we do in the comfort of our illusory lives. Hinduism gives form and shape to these "works" of the Infinite with the Hindu Trinity - Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. "Brahma" creates, "Vishnu" sustains, and "Shiva" destroys or consummates everything in the Universe.

That the Supreme can be worshipped in any form is a concept unique to Hinduism. Such worship is truly a tribute to His greatness.

Idol Worship

Misconception

Another popular misconception is that Hinduism promotes idol worship.

Truth

Hinduism does not promote idol worship. To the contrary, Hinduism urges us to transcend all physical aids to worship, in our spiritual progress. Realizing that it is impossible for the mortal human to visualize the Infinite and instead of sustaining false hopes of such achievements, the religion urges us to slowly and steadily continue our progress in pursuit of the Truth. For such steady progress, the religion asks us to start with physical aids such as temples and idols, and through practice and devotion, ultimately succeed in visualizing God without the aid of temples and idols.

We are asked not to worship idols, but worship God in the form of idols. This is done to facilitate contemplation of the Infinite with our finite capabilities. To quote none other than the great intellectual, Swami Vivekananda on this matter - "If a person wants to drink milk, he uses a cup as he cannot drink it directly. For the quivering and unsteady mind, there should be a visible form or a symbol, the idol, so that it becomes a foundation for his adoration. The idol form of God is akin to a vessel which enables a man to drink the milk. Through the instrumentality of an idol, a devotee comprehends divinity."

Vegetarianism

Misconception

Another popular misconception is that all Hindus are vegetarians and Hinduism prohibits meat eating.

Truth

Kshatriyas (one of the Hindu castes) are allowed to eat meat, as long as it is offered to the Almighty first before consuming it. "Follow your Dharma perfectly instead of following another's Dharma imperfectly", say the Vedas. At the same time, a Brahmin's Dharma is education and pursuit of knowledge. He is asked to refrain from killing and is encouraged to eat simple food in order to maintain equanimity. More on the topic of castes follows, but suffice to say that this is the "religious" or social perspective of Hinduism.

From a philosophical perspective, a "Yogi" or one who has known and seen the Infinite cannot and will not kill to eat meat. Why? Because he sees God in every form of life. How can he hurt anything or anyone when he loves everything and everyone?

The Caste System of the Hindus

Misconception

Hinduism promotes stratification of society under the "caste system" and encourages discrimination against the less fortunate.

Truth

The caste system, originally described in the Vedas, but much abused and maligned over the years, is nothing but a representation of an efficient human society. The four castes described in the scriptures are - the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras. According to the Vedas, an efficient human society is based on the strength of its educational/knowledge-pursuit system (Brahmin), its military and defense system (Kshatriya), its economical and business system (Vaishya), and a strong, happy, productive workforce (Shudras).

This noble representation was misinterpreted, exploited, and abused by a few in the Indian society, leading to the indiscriminate creation of thousands of castes and sub-castes, including the so-called "upper" castes. Fortunately, the caste system has been more or less abolished since Indian independence and the distinctions are beginning to disappear, although not significantly.

The Importance of Devotion to God in Hinduism - Bhakti Yoga

Devotion to God is presented as one of the several ways to achieve "Moksha" or oneness with the Infinite, but perhaps the easiest. This idea is expressed in the "Bhagavad Gita" (Hindu scripture), ``Whosoever offers to Me with love a leaf, a flower, a fruit or even water, I appear in person before that devotee of sinless mind and delightfully partake of that article offered by him with love. Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as oblation to the sacred fire, whatever you bestow as a gift, whatever you do by way of penance, offer it all to Me.'' Again, ``To those devotees who worship Me, thinking of none else, who devote their mind to Me and are ever perseverant in My service and in My contemplation, I confer that permanent heavenly abode from which there is no return to life.''

Such devotion can be towards any form of the Infinite. A devotee of "Rama" will not spend a minute without thinking of Him and the Divine Mother. A "Shiva" devotee will spend his time eulogizing His "Lingam". If looked at more analytically, a "Karma Yogi" (one who serves the Infinite through service to society) immersed in the service of the poor and destitute sees God in them and hence cannot bear separation from them.

What is devotion? In short, it means submitting totally to God, discharging His obligations at His behest. How do we cultivate devotion? ``Concentrate and fix the mind on Me''. This sounds simple but in practice one knows how tough it is to tame the mind. When we sit in prayer, our minds are naturally unsteady, impetuous, powerfully defiant and unrelenting. To keep the mind subdued is as difficult as to control wayward wind. Concentration requires discipline and constant practice. So, ``If you cannot steady the mind, then seek to realize Me by practice which consists in constant retraction or withdrawal of the mind from worldly affairs. If you cannot discipline yourself, dedicate all your actions to Me." (Chanting His names all the time). "If you cannot do this either, take refuge in Me, renouncing all fruits of your actions." (Do everything as a service to God - looked at analytically, this will lead you into pious actions. Why would you do something evil if you wanted to do everything in the service of God?)

**The Philosophy**

Who are we?

The entire cosmos is subject to the vicissitudes of time and hence whatever has an origin at a point of time has to come to an end. According to Hinduism, everything is conditioned by time. The process of creation (Srishti) and dissolution (Pralaya) of the Universe is a periodic cycle in which the entire Cosmos manifests at the time of creation and withdraws at the time of dissolution. The Infinite alone is beyond time - beginningless and endless.

This endless cycle of births and rebirths that all "souls" experience is called "Transmigration". All souls are cursed to experience transmigration, except the Infinite, which is beyond creation or destruction. This Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality does not perish even though all beings are subject to decay. This unmanifest being is spoken of as the Indestructible, the Supreme Being, God, Almighty. "Yogis" strive to become one with the Absolute Truth, and this oneness is called "Moksha". In other words, it is a state of mind where we are free from encumbrances, where we are indeed the One. "Tat Twam Asi", proclaim the Vedas, meaning "Thou Art That". We simply fail to realize that. It is not this web site's goal nor is it possible for this site to prescribe the method for attaining "Moksha".

A good analogy to transmigration of the soul is provided by the former Shankaracharya of Kaancheepuram in India. A person retiring to sleep wakes up the next morning in the same place. During sleep, the person is unaware of what happens to him. Similarly, the transmigrating soul at birth does not remember its state prior to coming into existence. So, death is also nothing but return to the same state from which one has come to this world. "Adi Shankara" believes that we are indeed the Absolute Truth, but that the illusion of our worldly lives prevents us from realizing this Truth. Others believe that we are "bonded souls" that merge with the Truth once we achieve the Truth. A discussion of these concepts follows later. In brief, however, this transcendental state that we are all asked to strive for is called "Moksha" in Hindu philosophy and "Nirvana" in Buddhist and Jain philosophies.

According to Carl Sagan, the distinguished Cornell University astronomer and Pulitzer Price-winning author of the book "Cosmos", the Hindu philosophy on the creation and dissolution of the Cosmos is the only philosophy that comes closest to the scientific idea that the Cosmos itself undergoes deaths and rebirths.

Karma

Hinduism believes in transmigration of the soul. Such transmigration is what results in reincarnation. This, in short, is the popular theory of Karma.

Clearly, all forms of life on earth do not undergo the same experiences and are not at the same level of existence. Man is the most superior form of life, but there are also billions of life forms which are far less superior than him. Even among us humans, we constantly witness differences in our modes of existence. Some of us are billionaires and some are paupers. Some of us are extremely healthy and some are always disease-prone. There must be a reason for these different experiences that all forms of life go through, even within their own species. Hinduism's answer to this question is the theory of "Karma".

Karma and rebirth are interrelated concepts in Indian philosophy. According to the theory of Karma, we are all part of a cycle of births and rebirths. This cycle has no beginning nor end. We are simply experiencing the results of our own actions in our journey through this cycle. Each spoke in the cycle is a predecessor to the next spoke. When a cycle moves, all spokes move one after the other in a never-ending chain. Similarly, in the cycle of "Samsara", life forms are spokes that evolve from one experience to another, and from one form to another according to their actions. Good actions cause good effects (Law of Cause and Effects), while bad actions cause bad effects. It is as simple as that.

Our actions bind us to this world, and such bondage-causing action is known as "Karma". The bondage refers to the confinement to this "samsara" just as spokes are confined to the wheel of the cycle. While good actions cause us to be reborn to experience the good effects, bad actions cause us to be reborn to undergo pain and suffering. "Yogis", however, are free of karmic actions and reactions, therefore not bound by the cycle of transmigration. Such a state of everlasting freedom from "samsara" is known as "Moksha". Again, the means to achieving such a state of mind cannot be prescribed in a "cook book" manner. There is no specific prescription either. If it were that easy, all of us would be free from "samsara" now. Again, some of us probably wouldn't want to be freed from rebirths, even if given the choice. Remember, this is philosophy and not religion. Religions have doctrines, prescriptions and cook books for happiness; philosophy does not. It is what it is!

'Vedanta' - 'Dwaita', 'Adwaita', and 'Vishishtadwaita'

'Vedanta' refers to all of the intellectual wealth of the Vedas, as well as all individual "enlightenment" that is achieved through severe Yogic experiments. An explanation of Yogas and what they stand for follows later.

There are three Major schools of thought in Hindu philosophy about the relationship between humans and the Truth - Dwaita, Adwaita, and Vishishtadwaita. Translated into English, the three mean - Dualism, Non-Dualism and Conditional Non-Dualism - in the same order as above. The three great Hindu Sages who contributed these three concepts were Madhwa Acharya, Shankara Acharya, and Ramanuja Acharya again in the same order. (Acharya in Sanskrit means Teacher and it is a respectful title given to a deserving few. When written, it is usually written as a part of the person's name. Hence, Ramanuja Acharya becomes Ramanujacharya and so on).

Dwaita

Dwaita means "Dualism". This theory states that man and God are distinct entities and yet share a relationship between them. According to it, man, the finite element, is constrained by the cycle of births and rebirths. The Infinite element (God) is free from all these constraints i.e., He is free from births and rebirths. The Infinite element in this relationship is referred to as 'Paramatman' and the finite element as 'Jivatman'. Through devotion, 'Jivatman' attains 'Paramatman'. Madhwacharya founded the Dwaita school of thought. According to him, God is an ``Independent Being'' possessing unrestricted powers, He is all-knowing and controls all sentient and insentient objects in this universe. According to Madhvacharya, the entire universe is divided into ``Independent'' and ``Dependent'' souls. The former is Infinite in His attributes. According to Madhva's philosophy, all souls except the Lord are under bondage, which prevents them from knowing their identity. This ignorance is responsible for the selfish, violent and unjust activities of man. Not knowing his nature, he identifies himself with the body and seeks the pleasure of the senses.

Adwaita

Adi Shankara propounded the "Adwaita" or Non-Dualistic theory. He proclaimed that the finite and Infinite elements are not distinct elements but are indeed One and the Same. According to him, there is a screen of illusion ('Maya') which separates man from God. As soon as man realizes his folly and comes out of his illusion, he is one with the Infinite.

Adi Shankara

From time to time great spiritual leaders appeared in India whenever there was a threat to the religion of Sanatana dharma, to re-establish its eternal principles for the benefit of humanity. Among them, Adi Shankara Bhagavatpada ('Bhagavatpada' means one with Divine Feet) played the pivotal role of not only reinstating the Vedantic religion but also reorganizing the religion on the lines of systematic worship, known as 'Shanmata', thus establishing that philosophy and religion complement one another in the tradition of Sanatana dharma.

It was very long ago (Since there is unending controversy about Shankara's birth date, I will avoid mentioning any date) that a village by name Kalady neighboring the holy city of Trichur in Kerala State, south of India, was chosen for a divine happening. To a blessed couple, Sivaguru, a scholarly Brahmin, and Aryamba, his pious wife, was born the godly child Shankara, later to be known as Adi Shankara Bagavat Pada to the world.



The period of Shankara's birth was witness to the spiritual degradation of India and a mass adoption of atheistic philosophies by Indians. Atheistic forms of Buddhism were rampant and were slowly diverting people away from the Vedas drawing them into atheism. People started denying the existence of God and adopted "Nihilistic" philosophies.

Buddhism and Jainism

Buddhism and Jainism are both believed to have appeared in India at around the same time thousands of years ago. It is wrong to consider Buddhism and Jainism in their original forms as religions. They were both philosophies propounded by two great Hindu seers, Gautam Buddha and Mahavir Jain. To this day, both Buddha and Mahavira are revered by Hindus in India. Both Buddha and Mahavira preached that all life forms on earth experience pain, pleasure, sorrow and happiness due to their bondage to Samsara. They urged mankind to renounce all earthly attachments in order to achieve liberation from rebirths and attain Nirvana. According to both seers, we are the sum of our thoughts. When we realize this and give up attachment to "bondage-causing" thoughts and resulting actions, we free ourselves of the shackles of "Karma" and attain "Nirvana". Both teachers therefore corroborated the Hindu premise that the Truth manifests itself as us and we continue to manifest as long as we identify with this illusory world and fall into the trap of desires. Unfortunately, both Masters' silence on the topic of God was misconstrued to signal a denial of His existence. This led to a brief period in Indian history that witnessed the growth of atheistic philosophies, questioning the very existence of God. God therefore incarnated as Adi Shankara to convincingly defeat such philosophies and reestablish faith in God and the superiority of Vedic philosophy.

Although Adi Shankara's earthly sojourn was very short- barely 32 years - he traveled the length and breadth of the subcontinent of India, preaching his philosophy of 'Adwaita', and defeated all forms of atheistic philosophers - Buddhists, Jains, Nihilists - in every nook and corner of India, thereby reestablishing the superiority of Sanatana Dharma and the Vedas. Many eminent scholars from all corners of the country became his disciples. He restructured the various desultory Hindu religious practices into six ways of worship or six sects - 'Ganapathyam' (The worship of Lord Ganapathy, the son of Lord Shiva), 'Kaumaram' (worship of Lord Kumaran, the second son of Lord Shiva), 'Sauram' (worship of Lord Surya, the Sun),' Shaivam' (worship of Lord Shiva, the Destroyer) 'Vaishnavam' (worship of Lord Vishnu, the Preserver) and 'Shaktham' (worship of Mother Shakthi, the feminine power of God). He is hence hailed as the 'Shanmatha Sthapanacharya' (The Teacher who established the Six Sects). During his trek across the country, he held debates with several scholars and defeated all of them, establishing the superiority of Hinduism. He also authored several immortal philosophical treatises. Chief among them is the concept of 'adwaita', besides commentaries on the Brahma Sutras, Bhagavad Gita, and the ten principal Upanishads.

The unique, ineffable, absolute reality of "Brahman" or "Paramatman" or God was Shankara's theme. And his mastery of the scriptures enabled him to establish this doctrine. Shankara's youth was spent in extraordinarily swift mastery of the sacred scriptures following his 'Brahmopadesa' (a ceremony in the Priestly Hindu Caste of Brahmins, wherein a Guru initiates his disciple into the hallowed years of Brahmacharyam (Celibacy) for mastering all the Vedas in their entirety) in his fifth year. Shankara became a 'sanyasi' (monk) at the tender age of eight. Becoming a recluse at such an early age is something altogether unique and unusual. Shankara wandered forth on foot across India.

By the end of his short but remarkable life, the greatest Acharya India has ever known, had successfully eradicated Buddhism/Jainism/Atheism from the face of India and reestablished Hinduism firmly.

Adi Shankara is my greatest and most inspiring idol and hero of all times, and I sincerely believe that his Adwaita philosophy is the most outstanding and the best of all (Although I am totally unqualified to make a statement on such supreme philosophical concepts). Salutations to this great seer, who in a span of just thirty-two years of a hectic life, achieved so much so powerfully and so incredibly.

Vishishtadwaita

Vishishtadwaita or "Conditional Non-Dualism" was propounded by Ramanujacharya. His system is known as Vishishtadwaita, which refers to three Realities viz. God, soul and matter, the first alone being independent, and the other two being dependent on Him. The Acharya pointed out that we experience temporary separation from the Lord, which can be overcome through the method of devotion.

Ramanuja was born in Sriperumbudur, to the south of India, in 1017 A.D. According to him, "All creation is the body of the Lord. There is nothing illusory about this world and our experience of the same. Salvation is but the beatific permanence in the presence of the Supreme where such closeness leads to the transformation of the mortal being into a likeness of the Divine". Countless are the ways to attain the Divine but the easiest is the path of devotion, according to Ramanuja. However, this is also a severe discipline and hence a "Yoga". The starting point as well as the final movement in Ramanuja's 'Bhakti yoga' is faith in a loving God. At the same time, Ramanuja cautioned that the personal God must not become a fetish leading to intolerance.