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# Sanātana Dharma... a.k.a. Hinduism

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The purpose of the following article is to address some fundamental concepts of *Sanātana Dharma* for both Hindus and non-Hindus.

## **I. What is Hinduism?**

Hinduism, more accurately referred to as *Sanātana Dharma*, is said to have originated in the Indian sub-continent over 5000 years ago. The term *Hindu* was a misnomer used for the people who lived beyond the Sindhu River, and eventually the term Hinduism was coined to denote the Hindu residents of the Indian sub-continent.

*Sanātana* literally means eternal, that which has no beginning or end. Therefore, by definition, it is beyond the constraints of time, and that is why it is said to be the oldest living religion in the world.

*Dharma*, translated as religion, righteousness or duty, is a word that is difficult to translate in English or any other language. It is all that and more. Etymologically it is derived from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ*, which means to uphold. *Dharma* points to the essential Truth which supports life as we know it. At the same time, it also shows us the path of righteousness to reach the goal. That is why *Sanātana Dharma* is referred to as “a way of life”.

In this article, the terms *Sanātana Dharma* and Hinduism/Hindu religion will be used interchangeably.

## **II. Who is the founder of Hindu religion?**

As is evident from an understanding of the literal meaning of *Sanātana Dharma*, it is clear that it cannot be said to have a founder. That which is timeless cannot have a beginning or end. Over the ages there have been several teachers and scholars who have expounded on the timeless Truth in their own way, but none can be said to be the founder.

## **III. What is the aim of Hindu religion?**

The aim of the Hindu religion is Self-realization (*Ātma-jñāna*) by each individual (*jīva*): to seek the Truth, to know the Truth, to be the Truth, to be a liberated soul (*jīvanamukta*) here and now.

## **IV. Who is a Hindu?**

With over a billion Hindus worldwide, Hinduism is the world’s third largest religion after Christianity and Islam. While the majority of Hindus live in India, other countries with large Hindu populations include Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Guyana, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, United Kingdom, Canada and the United States.

From 1,700 people in 1900, the Hindu population in America grew to approximately 387,000 by 1980 and 1.1 million in 1997. Currently, the estimated U.S. population of Hindus of Indian origin is approximately 2 million

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(1.8 million Indian and 200,000 Indo-Caribbean). Estimates are that there may also be as many as 1 million practicing American Hindus, not of Indian origin, in the U.S.

These are some of the fundamental beliefs that define a Hindu:

1. Hindus believe in the existence of a supreme all-pervasive Being, who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.
2. Hindus accept the Vedas as the absolute scriptural authority.
3. Hindus believe in a code of ethics based on 4 pillars of righteous living as defined in *Shrīmad Bhāgavatam*: austerity (*tapah*), purity (*shaucham*), compassion (*dayā*), and truthfulness (*satyam*).
4. Hindus believe in a prescribed method of living, with regard to its objectives, stages and milestones of life.
5. Hindus believe in specific tenets such as the law of cause and effect (*karma*), the theory of reincarnation (*punarjanma*), and the incarnation of the supreme Lord into the world (*avatāra*).
6. Hindus have prescribed methods of offering worship to the Lord.

### **1. What is the Hindu concept of God?**

Before answering this question, it must be unequivocally clarified that for Hindus "God" is not a concept because a concept is a product of the intellect and God is beyond the limitations of the intellect. Having understood that, let us now try to understand who or what God is for the Hindus! From the absolute standpoint, God or the Supreme Being is beyond the plane of physical existence (transcendent), yet within it (immanent), simultaneously surpassing and pervading it.

In the ancient Vedic scriptures, the Supreme Being is referred to as *Brahman*, not to be confused with *brāhmaṇa* (knower of *Brahman*) or *Brahmā* (the Creator). This supreme, eternal, all-pervading, all-knowing, all-powerful, genderless, nameless, changeless substratum supports the entire world of relativity that is ever changing. He is the Creator, the process of creation and the created, without whom the multiplicity of the names and forms ceases to exist, but who exists independent of them. He is beyond the concepts of time and space. His attributes are absolute existence (*sat*), absolute knowledge (*chit*), and absolute bliss (*ānanda*).

With respect to creation, Hinduism also refers to the Supreme Being as *Īshvara*, the Trinity of *Brahmā* (the Creator), *Vishṇu* (the Sustainer), *Shiva* (the Dissolver). Besides these three, there are references to a multiplicity of other forms of God, which leads to the mistaken belief that Hindus worship many gods. It is important to note that Hindus are **not** polytheistic. The Supreme is "one without a second", He can be worshipped as formless or in

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any form that the devotee's heart desires. God is One, but His forms are infinite.

In the interest of simplicity, the masculine gender will be used to refer to the Supreme Being.

### 2. What is the Hindu code of ethics?

Hindus believe in a code of ethics based on 4 pillars of righteous living as defined in *Shrīmad Bhāgavatam*. These 4 pillars form the foundation of values that can be considered as "commandments", if you will, for the Hindu way of righteous living:

- ॐ Austerity (*tapah*): Outer and inner self-control of the sense organs, organs of action, the mind and intellect.
- ॐ Purity (*shaucham*): Outer cleanliness and purity of the inner equipment of the mind and intellect.
- ॐ Compassion (*dayā*): Love and show compassion and reverence to all life forms because they are the manifestation of the one Supreme Being. This is the basis for *ahimsā*, which is more than what is understood as physical non-violence. It is not just abstaining from physical violence, but understanding that violence arises at the level of the mind before it can be expressed in words or deeds. It is not a passive "turning of the cheek", but standing up for one's beliefs without resorting to violence.
- ॐ Truthfulness (*satyam*): In one of the *Upanishad-s* there is a categorical statement, with no qualification that tells us to speak the truth (*satyam vada*). At the same time, speaking the truth must pass the twin gateways of being necessary and kind.

Maharshi Patanjali, the great exponent of *Rāja Yoga*, recommends that ten virtues should be practiced by all men. The first five can be considered as principles of self-restraint (*yama*): non-violence (*ahimsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), celibacy in thought, word and deed (*brahmacharya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), and non-covetousness (*aparigraha*). The other five virtues are religious observances (*niyama*): internal and external purity (*shaucha*), contentment (*santoshā*), austerity (*tapas*), study of scriptures (*svādhyāya*) and surrender to the Lord (*Īshvara-praṇidhāna*).

The development of these values is indispensable for the spiritual seeker. Knowledge and practice of the truthful and righteous way of living, will lead to the purity and fearlessness that is a prerequisite to the absolute bliss of Self-realization.

### 3. What are the main Hindu scriptures?

There is a vast and sometimes bewildering storehouse of Hindu scriptures available that can be classified into several categories. The 4 main ones are

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*shruti* (that which is heard), *smṛti* (that which is remembered), *itihāsa* (history), and *purāṇa* (the most ancient, yet ever-new). *Shruti* and the *smṛti* are the two authoritative sources of *Sanātana Dharma*. It is important to note that the historical accounts given in Hindu scriptures are sometimes referred to as mythology. They are historical accounts of events that happened, not be classified or dismissed as mythology.

*Shruti* is comprised of the Vedas, which are eternal storehouse of knowledge revealed by the Lord Himself to the ancient seers (*rishi*-s). The subject matter of the Vedas is comprehensive, covering various rituals, forms of worship, and the knowledge of the supreme Truth. The Upanishads are the concluding portions of the Vedas. The teaching based on them is called Vedanta.

The *smṛti*-s are based on the teachings of the Vedas. They lay down the laws which regulate Hindu national, social, family and individual obligations. There are eighteen main *smṛti*-s, the most important are the ones given by Manu, Yājñavalkya and Parāshara.

Sage Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* composed by Sage Vedavyāsa are the two main epics that are inspirational sagas of India's glorious history. *Rāmāyaṇa* deals with the life and times of Lord Rāma, at the same time providing us with perfect role models. The *Mahābhārata* is set in the time of Lord Krishna, and through the historical account of the familial war between the royal cousins (*Pāṇḍava*-s and *Kaurava*-s) brings home the ultimate triumph of righteousness. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, the dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield, is a poetic masterpiece that is a sublime combination of the essence of Vedic philosophy and the art of living it in our daily lives.

The *purāṇa*-s, also written by Sage Vedavyāsa, fall within the same class as the *itihāsa*-s. They have five characteristics: descriptions of primary creation, secondary creation, genealogy of sages and patriarchs, historical accounts of the reigns of all the Manus, and the genealogy and history of the solar and lunar dynasties. The *purāṇa*-s contain the essence of the Vedas. Their aim is to generate devotion to the Lord through concrete examples, lives of legendary saints, kings and great men, allegories and chronicles of great historical events. There are 18 main *purāṇa*-s: *Shrīmad Bhāgavatam*, *Vishṇu Purāṇa* and *Linga Purāṇa* to name only a few.

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### 4. What is the “Hindu” way of life?

Hindus believe that life has a distinct purpose with a definite structure. In order to achieve this purpose, a specific blueprint that covers the objectives, stages of life and milestones has been clearly defined.

#### i. Objectives of life:

- ☪ *Dharma* (righteous living): Following the path of righteousness in all pursuits. Hinduism is not a religion to be practiced only on the weekend. The spiritual and the secular are not two separate paths. It is important to note that *dharma* is mentioned as the first objective because observance of *dharma* must guide all activities in the secular world also.
- ☪ *Artha* (material prosperity): Acquiring the material wealth for meeting our basic needs and security is recognized as a valid and legitimate pursuit as long as it is done within the boundaries of righteous living.
- ☪ *Kāma* (enjoyment): Fulfillment of desire and enjoyment of the Lord’s glorious creation should be done at the right place and the right time, within prescribed limits.
- ☪ *Moksha* (liberation): The ultimate goal of human life is to gain freedom from the misery caused by the cycle of pleasure and pain, birth and death.

#### ii. Stages of life:

- ☪ *Brahmacharya āshrama* (student life): In order to achieve the 4 objectives of life, each individual should spend the first 25 years of life as a student, honing the spiritual and secular skills necessary success in the later stages of life. The emphasis is on self-control and learning the principles of *dharma*.
- ☪ *Gṛhsta āshrama* (family life): The student completes his education, and he settles down in both his family and professional life. This is the stage wherein one carries out one’s obligatory duties to the family, society and the nation. In order to do this, material prosperity and the enjoying the pleasures of family life within the framework of righteous living are to be achieved.
- ☪ *Vānaprastha āshrama* (retirement): After leading a rich and fulfilling life in the world, it is now time to slow down, both personally and professionally. This is the third stage of life, traditionally spent in the forest (*vana*), a time to introspect, detach and prepare for the final stage and objective of life.
- ☪ *Sannyāsa* (liberation): The fourth and final stage of life, wherein the detachment should be complete and liberation from all the cycle of birth and death (*moksha*) is achieved by the individual.

#### iii. Milestones:

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Hindu scriptures prescribe 52 rites of passage (*samskāra-s*), of which 16 are considered more significant. They are meant to purify and sanctify the individual at every important milestone in his life from birth to death.

The first *samskāra* starts before conception and is performed after the wedding ceremony for the fulfillment of one's parental obligations. At the *nāmakaraṇa* or the naming ceremony, the new-born child is given a name on the tenth, eleventh or twelfth day after birth. The celebration for the child being given solid food for the first time at the age of six months is called *annaprāshana*.

The most important ceremony which marks the beginning of the stage of youth is *upanayana* (investing of the sacred thread). The word *upanayana* literally means "bringing near", and is considered the second or spiritual birth of the child.

*Vivāha* or marriage is another important milestone that marks the entry into the second stage of the householder's life. *Antyeshṭhi* or the performance of the last rites is one of the final *samskāra-s*.

### 5. What are some of the tenets believed by Hindus?

#### i. The Law of Cause and Effect (*karma*):

The Sanskrit word *karma* literally means action or deed, which covers the spectrum of action starting with the intent and ending with the physical manifestation in speech or action. The law of *karma* states that we are the creators of our own destiny, "as we sow, so shall we reap". Our destiny, if you will, is a result of our past actions that were done by us in this birth or past births. If this was all, then we would all be in caught in a trap with no hope for escape. That is not so. *Karma* is causality, not destiny. We are not hopelessly and helplessly caught in the web of destiny. The conscious choices and resulting actions in the present contain the seeds for the future. This law gives rise to the highest form of individual responsibility.

#### ii. Reincarnation (*punarjanma*):

Reincarnation is the natural process of birth, death and rebirth. At death we drop off the physical body and continue evolving in the inner worlds in our subtle bodies, until we again take birth in a different physical body. We are not the body in which we live, but the immortal soul which inhabits many bodies in its evolutionary journey through the cycle of life.

Reincarnation is also tied to the concept of *karma* since the effects of *karma* can span many lives. This provides us with the only logical explanation of individual differences, without which it would be hard to explain why two children of the same parents are different – one is in perfect health and another is physically challenged.

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The process of reincarnation ceases when all our actions have been resolved. This is the highest state of liberation or *moksha*.

### iii. Incarnation (*avatāra*):

In Sanskrit, the word *avatāra* is derived from a word that literally means “coming down” and denotes the descent of the Supreme in any form into the world for a specific purpose. In *Shrīmad Bhagavad Gītā*, Lord Krishna assures us that He manifests Himself whenever there is a decline of righteousness for the destruction of evil and the protection of the good, and the re-establishment of the righteous way of living in the world.

It has been stated in *Shrīmad Bhāgavatam* that there have been countless incarnations of the Lord. Lord Rāma and Lord Krishna are two of the very well-known incarnations of Lord Vishṇu. It is also important to note that all the incarnations are worshipped as divine manifestations of the Supreme Lord.

### 6. What are the Hindu methods of worship?

There are many forms of worship in the Hindu religion, but regardless of the methods, the main purpose is inner purification. Worship can be performed at home or in the temple. Ideally it is to be performed daily. Most Hindus have a place set aside for the Lord in their home where they offer prayers and worship the Lord before starting their day. Temples have a place of great importance for Hindu families, especially on special festival days.

For the Hindu, worship (*pūjā*) is direct personal communication with the Lord of his heart (*ishṭa-deva*) through a picture or an idol. There are specific steps involved, similar to inviting, greeting and taking care of the needs of an honored guest. The offerings to the Lord are made with the acknowledgement: “I dedicate to You O Lord, what is truly Yours”.

This would be an appropriate point to address a very important and integral concept of Hindu worship, which is misunderstood and negatively presented by non-Hindus. Are Hindus idol worshippers? Yes, Hindus are idol worshippers. Idols are used and revered, but they are symbols. The Hindus worship the ideal behind the idol, the ideal being abstract and formless; the idol is something concrete that is used to help the mind to focus. When the mind becomes steady and subtle, it can go beyond the form to understand abstract ideas such as: “That thou art” (*tattvamasi*). As the spiritual seeker advances in meditation, the form melts in the formless and the duality between the forms and formless ceases to exist.

A *havan* is a sacred purifying ritual (*yajna*) that invokes the divinity within by lighting a sacrificial fire, and offering clarified butter (*ghee*) and various other



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objects in the fire. *Havans* are performed for inner and outer purification of the environment.

The Hindu calendar has numerous festivals that give the Hindus an opportunity to celebrate with family and friends throughout the year. There are colorful festivals like the Festival of Colors (*Holi*), the Festival of Lights (*Dīpāvali*), the festivals celebrating the birth of incarnations like Lord Rāma and Lord Krishna, the seasonal festivals such as *Makar Sankrānti*. All these festivals are meant to bring us closer to the Lord by celebrating different aspects of His divinity.

### V. Why and What? A few common Q-s regarding Hindus:

#### 1. What is meant by the symbol ॐ(OM)?

Om represents the primordial and powerful sound symbol of the Supreme Being, present at the creation of the universe, the original sound that contains all other sounds, all words, all languages and all *mantras* (a series of sounds that can both protect and transform). It consists of 3 syllables: A-U-M. The mouth is open when we pronounce "A", partially closed when we pronounce "U", and totally closed when pronouncing "M". So the 3 syllables A-U-M cover the whole spectrum of sound.

These 3 syllables represent the three states of experience: waking, dream, and deep sleep. Beyond these 3 states represented by these 3 syllables is the fourth state (*turīya avasthā*), which corresponds to the silence that follows after the chanting of AUM, which is the substratum of the other three states. It is called *praṇava*, a Sanskrit word which means both controller of life force (*prāna*) and life-giver (infuser of *prāna*). It is chanted at the beginning of all prayers and rituals, and is an aid to concentration and contemplation.

Om is a vast and subtle subject. For further study, please refer to *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*.

#### 2. Why are many Hindus vegetarian?

In India, a large majority of all Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are vegetarian because of their fundamental belief in non-violence, or *ahimsā*. The idea that every living creature has a right to live, and there should be respect and compassion for all forms of life is a cornerstone of Hindu philosophy. If that is the case, then what about plants, which are also alive? Hindu scriptures tell us that one's right to survive should be accomplished by doing the least amount of harm. Eating fruits, vegetables, cereals, pulses, and dairy products does not involve taking a life in the same manner as killing an animal.

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An important concept in Hindu religion is that all matter, animate and inanimate, possesses 3 basic qualities, with a preponderance of one: pure and balanced (*sāttvika*), dynamism and activity (*rājasika*), inertia and inactivity (*tāmasika*). Vegetarian food is considered *sāttvika*. Eating non-vegetarian food is considered detrimental to both physical and spiritual health, whereas eating vegetarian food is considered uplifting, leading to positive qualities and beneficial to the body.

Modern western science is now coming up with many reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet, the main one being the vegetarian diets are healthier. According to some statistics, **95%** of former meat-eaters report that a switch to a vegetarian diet increases their energy, vitality, and well-being.

### 3. What is the caste system and untouchability?

What we consider today as the caste system is originally the ancient division of all human beings based on their aptitude. This was called *varṇa*, which literally means color. Based on the "color" of their skill set and talents, people were classified as workers, business people, rulers, law enforcers, lawmakers and priests. These classifications were not determined by birth, and allowed movement from one caste to the other. For example, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed by Sage Vālmikī, who was once a low-caste robber.

Originally, the so-called untouchables were not the *shūdra*-s or workers and artisans like the agricultural workers, service providers, cobblers etc. The untouchables were the criminals, who were guilty of committing heinous crimes against society. They were ostracized by society because of their actions not their birth.

As with any system, over time, the skills and aptitude based system, and exclusion of criminals became a rigid hereditary hierarchy. This distortion was a result of certain social practices and taboos gaining acceptance over time and countless invasions by foreign civilizations. It should be emphasized that there is **no** basis for a discriminatory caste system in ancient Hindu scriptures. Vedic and non-Vedic scriptures advance the concept of equality of all mankind.

Modern India has outlawed caste discrimination, and there have been several Hindu spiritual leaders and organizations that have been actively engaged in eradicating caste based discrimination from Indian society.

### 4. What is the status of women in the Hindu religion?

One of the most profound attributes of Hinduism is the recognition and worship of the Divine as both masculine and feminine. The Supreme Being is beyond gender, but the manifestations are worshipped as both male and

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female. The female principle is the energy (*shakti*) of the Lord: Lord Shiva is inseparable from Mother Pārvati, as is Mother Lakshmi from Lord Viṣṇu.

Our scriptures clearly tell us that the mother is to be worshipped (*matṛa devo bhava*) and divinity resides where women are worshipped (*yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devataḥ*). Many of the sages to whom the Vedas were revealed were women (*rishikā-s*). It is unfortunate, however, that the gender equality of the Vedic period and that of the Hindu view of the Divine has been corrupted because of the thousands of years of slavery and foreign domination by the Moguls and the British.

In the name of protection, their freedom was curtailed, and injustices such as child marriage, dowry, covering the face and body as a symbol of subordination (*pardā*). The feminist movement has gathered momentum in India and today women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc.

### **5. What is the significance of *svāstika* in the Hindu religion?**

The *svāstika* is a symbol of auspiciousness in the Hindu religion, not to be confused with the Nazi swastika which has different design and meaning. The word is derived from a Sanskrit word which literally means “well-being”. The four lines of the *svāstika* emanate from the center in the four cardinal directions, and represent the changing world supported on the substratum of an eternal, unchanging center.

### **6. What is meant by the traditional Hindu greeting: *namaskāra* or *namaste*?**

The traditional Hindu greeting of *namaskāram* or *namaste* is done by reverently joining the palms at the chest and bowing the head. In Sanskrit, the word *namaste* means, “I bow to you”, acknowledging the presence of divinity in all beings.

### **7. What are the marks worn on the forehead by Hindus?**

The marks worn on the forehead by Hindu men and women are a mark of auspiciousness. The materials used are sandalwood paste, sacred ashes or a red turmeric powder called *kumkuma*. The different sects apply the sacred marks (*tilaka*) in different shapes with different materials, but the significance is the same. The application is done at a point between the eyebrows, where the spiritual eye of intuition is located. It is done as a reminder to the seeker of his ultimate goal of Self-realization.

The application of *tilaka* is also done as a reminder of vows. The most popular is the red *bindī* applied by married Hindu women as a symbol of their wedding vows.