

na hi jnaanena sadrisham pavitram iha vidyate - (bhagavad gita)

HINDUISM

FAQs



- [Uday Acharya](#)

Trustee, [Vidya Vaaridhi Trust](#)

Director, [Mindflex – The Learning Organization](#)

A-101, Mani Bhavan, 11th Road, Chembur, Mumbai 400071

TOPICS

- Scriptures, Beliefs and Practices of Hinduism
- Vedas
- Hindu Gods
- God
- Knowing God
- Dakshinaamurti
- Upanishads
- Puraanas
- Itihaasas
- DHYAANA
- GAAYATRI MANTRA
- MRITYUNJAYA MANTRA
- OM
- YOGA
- HINDU CONCEPT OF TIME
- Sage Vyaasa
- Gurukula System Of Education
- Respect for life
- Customs and Rituals
- Many gods
- Impact of Hinduism
- Who is a Hindu?
- Belief or is it a philosophy?
- Samskaaras – life cycle of a Hindu
- Respect for Religions
- Astrology
- Management Principles
- One God
- Ishtha Devata
- Teaching Children
- Criticisms
- Individual approach

- Hindu New Year
- Siddhas
- Dattatreya
- Reference Books
- Universalism
- Mlechchaas
- Havan
- Kumbhabhishekham
- Applying Vermillon
- Chanting before eating meals
- The prefix 'Maha'
- Demise of Avataar Purusha
- Sects of Hinduism
- Inter-faith marriage
- Hindu sites
- Varnas – Caste?
- Books on Vedas
- Bhrigu Samhita
- Krishna – Symbolism
- Location of altar

Scriptures, Beliefs and Practices of Hinduism

Every religion involves basically a set of beliefs in some truth higher than mere material existence. It also involves a set of practices and disciplines that help the seeker to enhance his/her spiritual life. A religion may not necessarily involve God as in Buddhism and Jainism. Even within a religion, there can be differences, and hence there can be different subdivisions, as in Protestant and Catholic among Christians, Hinaayana and Mahaayana in Buddhism, Sunni and Shia among Muslims, Dvaita and Advaita in Hinduism, etc.

Hinduism is not just limited to religion. Hinduism covers all aspects of human endeavour viz. Moral Codes, Possessions, Pleasures and Liberation - Dharma, Artha, Kaama and Moksha.

What goes by the name of Hinduism is actually Sanaatana Dharma. The name 'Hindu' is a corruption of 'Sindhu', - the river where our culture flourished in the past. Any one who respects and accepts the teachings given in the Vedas and related scriptures like Bhagavad Geeta etc. is a Hindu (to the best of my knowledge). In fact, even in the absence of other works, just following the teachings of the saints and sages are adequate for a person to be called a Hindu. "Hinduism" is Sanaatana Dharma, - Eternal Law /Order. Sanaatana Dharma stands for the culture, values, attitudes, practices, beliefs and a holistic worldview of the people of ancient India. These were based on a timeless wisdom that holds good even today and is not restricted to a cult or creed.

Sanaatana Dharma has been a mother to many great religions of the world. It has sown the seeds for Buddhism and Jainism, both of which has had a significant impact on the world.

It is the source of the oriental concept of holism - i.e. all round (or well-rounded) approach to situations. It is also the source of the oriental concept of rebirth and karma. Systems analysis has much similarity to the Vedic unfoldment of the "one and the many". And Modern Physics speaks the same language as the Vedanta while explaining the phenomena of basic particles - "it is and it is not".

Sanaatana Dharma stands for the culture, values, attitudes, practices, beliefs and a holistic worldview of the people of ancient India. These were based on a timeless wisdom that holds good even today and is not restricted to a cult or creed. It contains the elements of religion, philosophy, spirituality, ethics and materialism all put together to form a holistic vision of life.

Hinduism percolates into all aspects of life including fine arts, architecture, nature, etc. Every business or undertaking too, starts with a prayer, and there is no distinction between secular and sacred in our culture.

The Hindu view of life is holistic and integrates both material & spiritual life through the four pursuits of Dharma, Artha, Kaama and Moksha. It sees the entire creation as an organic whole emanating from a single source - Brahman (Pure Consciousness), and resolving back into it.

Every aspect of creation is interconnected as in a network, and there are no individual independent entities separate from the whole. Creation as a whole is seen as the cosmic form of Brahman, who is beyond the limitations of the created forms.

Every form in creation is divine and can be visualised as a deity. In some cases, the whole is invoked through the parts; i.e. the individual deity is invoked as Brahman, - the source and reality of creation.

Living becomes a spiritual exercise, with individual aspirations being harmonised and balanced to match the greater order of the universe, - Dharma and the Laws of Karma.

The individual and the whole form a unity. This oneness is seen at different levels, i.e., form, interconnections, and content. For instance, consider the waves in the ocean. There are many individual waves in the vast boundless ocean.

Form-wise, the ocean and the waves are not the same. In terms of interconnections, the waves are integrated into the ocean and are intimate parts of the whole. In the ultimate analysis, in terms of what essentially is, there is only water and nothing else. Both the wave and the ocean are nothing but water.

This is how the three schools of Vedanta, - Dvaita, Vishishtha Advaita, and Advaita see reality. Each view is valid from its own place. An understanding of the whole, and alignment of us to the harmony of creation that is the manifestation of the whole, is what Sanaatana Dharma is all about.

Yes, Hinduism does encourage an individual approach to reality. Hinduism is not a cult or an organised religion. It has no hierarchy or a pope to set down the law. It allows diverse forms of worship and freedom of thought.

Spirituality is always personal and individual, - it is not a set of exercises to be done and finished with. Each person is given the opportunity to grow at his own time and pace, and choose the practices that best suits his personal growth. No two individuals are alike, and Hinduism gives everyone adequate room for all to grow.

No system of thought or philosophy is looked down upon, and each school of opinion is considered as a link in the dialectics of thesis, antithesis and synthesis that helps one ultimately to understand the truth in a holistic way. Truth is not opposed to any system since it goes beyond opposites. Rather, truth goes beyond systems and integrates them within an overall scheme - a grand unification!

Hinduism encourages the student to experiment and discover for himself the nature of reality while at the same time giving enough guidance and support so that the seeker can always seek clarification and feedback. For the less enterprising student, Hinduism throws in many practices, activities, group worship etc., so that no individual is left out from the pursuit of truth.

It is another thing that realisation of truth may be a matter of many lifetimes for many. What matters is that every step takes a person that much closer towards the goal.

Hinduism is not limited to a cult or a religion even though it has place for formal religious beliefs and forms of worship. Hinduism is holistic in approach and includes in its ambit lifestyles, duties, ethics, psychological maturity, relative and overall perspectives of events, spiritual practices and meditations, attunement and harmony with nature and creation, search for truth and its fulfilment in terms of realising the underlying unity in and through difference.

It allows and encourages different forms of practices and worship as well as diverse opinions regarding reality. We not only tolerate other religions; we actually validate them as being on the same footing as our own religion. Worshipping Christ or Allah is no different from our standpoint than worshipping Rama or Ganesha. All forms of worship are stepping-stones to the ultimate reality and are equally sacred for us.

The contrast between other religions and Hinduism is that Hinduism offers a holistic paradigm that integrates all differences into an essential unity - the one in many and the many is the one. The one and many are not opposites

- they form the spirit and body respectively. Seen from three different points of view, they can be taken as two totally separate entities, or as extensions of each other, or as essence and shadow; - this is how the three schools of Vedanta i.e. Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Advaita present reality.

The integrating quality of the Hindu thought is able to reconcile and incorporate the radically opposite streams of thought, philosophy and religion. That Hinduism has survived over the last few thousand centuries and has integrated into itself the strengths of the major world religions without feeling threatened, is itself proof of its universal vision. The sighted person who sees the whole elephant is not threatened by the claims of the 10 blind men.

Sanatana Dharma has made a significant contribution to Philosophy, Astronomy, Mathematics, Ethics, Aesthetics and Fine Arts, Ecology, Political Science, Metallurgy, and a whole lot of other sciences.

It has inspired great world leaders like Gandhi and Vivekananda in the present, Vyasa and Shankara in the past. It has in it the roots of co-operation and peaceful co-existence that has brought forth the concept of world peace and oneness of the human race.

Most important, it validates all other religions and incorporates them in its own vision of spirituality and pursuit of liberation or Moksha. It is not what religion one belongs to that is important; it is the values and spirituality that are common in all religions that is highlighted in Sanatana Dharma.

Vedas

The Vedas are the sacred source books of Hinduism. The Vedas, also known as Shruti (lit. - "Heard"), are considered as revealed knowledge imparted to the sages by the Lord at the onset of creation. These teachings have been put together by Sage Vyaasa in four volumes - Rigveda, Yajurveda, Saamaveda and Atharva Veda.

These chants have been preserved intact over thousands of years by word of mouth, complete with words, inflections, and meter. There are many families present even today who have maintained an unbroken tradition of retaining and transmitting large sections of the Veda through several generations.

One can get a very good picture of the Vedic times and Vedic culture by reading K M Munshi's "Krishnaavataara Part 6 - The Book of Vyaasa" published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. For details of Vedic deities, read Arthur Anthony McDonnell's "A Vedic Reader" published by Oxford University Press, Anna Salai, Madras 600006 (1984). Hence we can at most refer to a period when the Vedas was presented in the form that we know it today. The dates - earlier or later - are meaningless as far as the Vedas themselves are concerned.

The original script of the Vedas is the Braahmi script that predates the devanaagari. The Vedas however predates even the Braahmi script because it was not available in a written form; - rather it was literally through word of mouth, memorised and passed down through generations of teachers and disciples. A few samples of the Braahmi script are available scattered in a few university libraries and museums in the country.

Each Veda is subdivided into the sections known as Mantra, Braahmana, Aaranyaka and Upanishad. The Mantras are a collection of hymns to different deities invoking their grace and favour. They also contain description of characteristics of these gods and praise of their divine powers. Different aspects of nature like sun, fire, earth, etc. are connected to their corresponding divinities like Soorya, Agni, Prithvi and the like.

The Braahmanas describe how mantras are to be employed in different rituals (a fire ritual wherein oblations are offered to a particular deity is called Yagna). The fire deity, Agni, conveys these offering to the respective gods. The gods in return bless the person performing the ritual with their grace and rewards - both material and spiritual.

The Aaranyakas describe many forms of meditation, prayer and visualisation. These meditations help in steadying the mind and yeild subtle powers of the mind. The Upanishads, also known as Vedanta, constitute the end portions of the Vedas and talk about the relationship between God, World and the Individual. This section deals with Self-knowledge, bondage and liberation.

There is no definite date of commencement for the Vedas. It goes back into the indefinite period of history where we have no definite dates to refer to. However we know that the Vedas were very much popular before the time of Buddha which is roughly estimated at approximately 600 BC.

Historians take the Mantra portion of the Vedas as anterior in time followed next by the Braahmanas Aaranyakas and Upanishads respectively, and give a time span of about 1000 years for

the transition. This is the western interpretation. Other interpretations date it back to 3000 BC and earlier.

The Vedic rishis however do not claim to be the authors of the Vedas. They simply state that these were revealed to them by their own past teachers, the chain going back to the timeless past. Traditional interpretation is that the Vedas are revealed knowledge and hence timeless. They are present in each cycle of creation beginning with the Satya Yuga, followed by Treta & Dvaapara Yugas and ending with Kali Yuga.

All the sections of the Veda have a unity of approach, and though talking about apparently different topics, converge in addressing the four pursuits of life Dharma, Artha, Kaama, Moksha (Righteousness, Prosperity, Pleasure and Liberation). Even here Moksha is given the status of Shreyas (the Ultimate Good) whereas the rest constitute Preyas (Secondary Goals). Thus the Vedas recognise two types of goals- Short-term fleeting results and Long-term lasting results.

The Vedas also give a sort of life-plan for the pursuit of these goals. The four stages of life are Student, Householder, Retired, and Renunciate. Each person spends the first part of his or her life learning about life, religion and culture from the teacher as a resident inmate of the teacher's family. The next part is spent in household chores. In the third part, responsibilities are handed over to the next generation, and the couple retires to a quiet place for contemplation and meditation. The last part of life is lived as a monk pursuing the ultimate good; - Moksha.

Hindu marriage rituals involve Vedic rituals with mantras invoking the deities like Agni to witness the marriage. Rituals are also the order of the day for birth, religious initiation, death and other ceremonies. House warming ceremonies, temple worship etc. Involve Vedic mantras and rituals. Chanting of Vedic hymns in itself is considered auspicious and sanctifies the atmosphere.

The Vedas speak about yagnas to the various deities like Agni, Soorya, Indra, Varuna, Vishnu, Rudra and others. Yagnas are fire rituals wherein oblations like ghee and other food articles like cooked rice, sweetened wheat cake are offered. In some rituals, even meat was offered, the logic being that the deities are offered the best of whatever is consumed by ordinary mortals. There is also mention of the juice of the Soma plant which is a mild intoxicant, and it is said that the one who partakes of the soma juice offered in the yagna attains heaven.

It must be understood however, that heavenly results are not the consequence of mere offering of oblations. It is the shraaddha behind the offering that is really important. Whether or not such yagnas result in heaven, the whole ritual is a form of prayer that involves mass participation and feeling of oneness in the community - something like our Ganesh festival.

The four stages in life - Brahmacharya, Gaarhastyha, Vaanaprastha and Sanyaasa are still followed in India, although not as a rule. Students still go to Banaras, Tirupati and other places to get traditional learning. Sanyaasa is an extremely honoured status, and a monk is highly respected for his lifestyle and pursuit.

The Vedas also envisioned a society where everyone was equal in status, but working in different stations of life. The four Varnas (or the so-called caste system) sprung from this vision. Think of a monastery where every person contributes his or her talents and skills to the common pool and

jointly manage to run the place efficiently. The Vedic society functioned in the same way. When everyone had their vision in the ultimate liberation, differences regarding duties did not matter. It is a sad thing that the system has degenerated into the present day caste system and a caricature of the original vision.

Most Rishis were kshatriyas, Vaalmiki was a hunter, Vyaasa was the son of a fishergirl. Varnas were not watertight as it became in later times.

During the early Vedic period, Varnaashrama was a principle rather than a rule. The idea was maintain culture over centuries by each family specialising in a particular branch of knowledge and profession. It was much later that some professions were considered low and inferior.

All said and done, it was the Varnaashrama tradition that kept Hinduism alive in all its facets - be it in sculpture, vastu shastra, scriptures, fine arts, yoga, aayurveda, astronomy, history, literature, temple traditions, martial arts, environmental science, logic, philosophy, and the like.

It took many generations of artisans to complete the great temples of ancient times - all because there was a continuity of vision and skill that was passed on from father to son through the ages. Every profession was noble in the sense that each person offered his/her skill unto society and considered it a form of worship unto the Lord.

Indian philosophy and religion is founded on the bedrock of Vedanta. The Upanishads reveal the immanent nature of the Lord - who exists in and through every form in creation. There is nothing away from the Lord - He is everywhere. Creation is centred in Him, for He is not only the source and sustenance of creation, but also its resolving point. Everything is rooted in Him, and He is established in Himself. Everything in creation is thus sacred and to be respected rather than be taken for granted.

The concept of rebirth and past lives, which plays a great part in all oriental societies, is based on the cyclical nature of creation. According to the Vedas, time and space are relative entities that emerge from, and resolve back into, the Lord. Everything is recycled, yet connected through cause-effect relationship. Individuals, being conscious entities, are eternal and assume different forms and births as per this cause-effect relationship. All creatures big and small are then but souls at different stages of evolution.

As human beings, we have the privilege to move up the evolution ladder or go down according to the choice we make in living our present lives. Other creatures, bereft of this choice, may lack this freedom to direct their evolution, and are driven purely by the actions done in their past lives as human beings. Heaven and Hell represent the experiences gained at the highest and lowest points - the apex and troughs of an endless evolution wave. Liberation from endless births and deaths is the ultimate objective in this scheme.

Liberation arises on the dawn of knowledge that I am eternal by nature and untouched by all the changing forms of creation. As the changeless witness of the different changing experiences, I am always independent of experiences.

The Vedas are said to be revealed knowledge. It could have been revealed anywhere and not necessarily in India. All I can say is that Indians had a great value for learning and kept this knowledge alive, practically intact, as can be seen from the great pains taken by the Brahmins to memorise whole sections of the Vedas and recite it by heart. It is possible that the Vedas were universal knowledge but were received by the sages in the language familiar to them - Sanskrit.

Other races and traditions of the world too speak of revelation as can be seen from the Old testament and other scriptures. Seen from the mystical point of view, Christian and Muslim scriptures seem to reflect almost the same standpoints that are found in the Vedas. Note how Jesus spoke - "The Father and I are one and the same" and "The kingdom of Heaven is within you". It is a different thing that the official church interpretation does not allow for the mystical approach.

Varnashrama was not something absolute in Vedic religion. Most Rishis were kshatriyas, Vaalmiki was a hunter, Vyaasa was the son of a fishergirl. Varnas were not watertight as it became in later times. The word "Mlechha" was applied to persons from outside the Vedic fold - what we would now call aliens or foreigners.

An interesting fact is that Classical Indian Music, Herbal Medicinal system of Aayurveda, Yoga, etc. have their origins in the Vedas and are very much a live and vibrant part of modern India and the World.

God

Christians have only Christ, Muslims only Allah. Sikhs only one god. Why do Hindus have so many gods? We seem concerned that Hinduism is different from other religions. God is the same in all religions - One, Absolute. God is also the source of creation, the Many.

The Creation, Many, is not really separate from the One. The One can appear as the Many. Every form thus lead you towards the One. Don't get confused by the different forms. Look for the One in the Many.

Like one actor with many roles, the same Lord appears in various manifestations. Our culture has a common name for all Gods. It is called Om. All our mantras begin, -- Om Namah Shivaaya, Om Namo Naaraayanaaya, Om Chamundaayai Namah. Shiva is Om, Naaraayanaaya is Om, and Chamundi is Om.

The choice of form is purely personal. But the Lord that you worship is the same Lord that I worship. The Lord of the Christians, Muslims and the Hindus is essentially the same.

To know God we go beyond the form -go to the content. The Lord is the Essence, the Truth, and the Reality of all. He is in everything. He is everything. In fact He alone is.

There are not many Gods. We wouldn't even say there is "One" God. There is "ONLY" God. Whatever exists is God - OM.

Yes, it would be simpler to have one god for all mankind. However, it is not the "many" that create problems. "Many" actually add colour and zing into our lives. Rather, it is our divisive thinking that is responsible for creating problems.

It is we who create differences with our narrow thinking. The world is one. We draw boundaries and create nations. The ocean is one. It is we who draw territorial boundaries for the seas. Humanity is one.

It is we who draw distinctions based on creed, colour and religion. Note that even the children of "one god" within the same religion have their own internal differences.

We divide everything into black and white, into right and wrong, and therein lies the problem. Until we re-evaluate our thinking and see the possibility that there are more than one "correct answer", all of which can be right from their own points of view, our society will be fragmented and fractured spiritually and otherwise.

Having "one god" is not the ultimate solution. Rather, we have to re-educate our minds to see "oneness" in "difference".

Hinduism gives us the concept of the Ishtha Devata. It means that every person can freely worship a deity of his/her choice. Worshipping the Lord in a particular form is something personal, and the Vedic tradition present a variety of devatas to choose from. Sometimes, one particular form worshipped over generations becomes the traditional family deity.

The Vedic deities of the past have been replaced by the deities of the Puraanas, -- Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, Paarvati and Ganapati being most prevalent among the Hindus today. This is not to say that the gods have changed. The Vedas present the same God in different forms, and each form is regarded with the same respect and devotion.

In fact, the Vedic vision reveals the entire creation as enjoying oneness with the Lord. Hence whatever exists is but the Lord. It is not ONE God - we say there is ONLY God. The five elements are gods, the rivers, ocean and mountains are gods, the city of Banares is God, the earth and heavens are gods. Tell me what is not God?

We do not ask why our devata is different from others. Like different rivers leading to the same ocean, any forms of worship reach the same Lord.

There is beauty in diversity, as long as we keep in mind the essential unity that exists deeper down. Brahma is Vishnu, Brahma is Mahesh, Brahma is the entire creation. Brahma alone is.

Knowing God

God realisation is in recognising the presence of God in and through our lives and the world around us. God is the source and substance of creation, and cannot be away from his creation. The Bhagavad Geeta says that the Lord is in everything and everything is in the Lord. In fact, God alone is all this. Whatever exists, is the Lord.

The Lord is the Creation, the Cause, as well as the Reality beyond these two, - Kshara, Akshara and Uttama Purushas. Thus you have the Viraat form of the Lord that is the manifest creation. There is the Avyakta form of the Lord that is the unmanifest cause. And finally the Nirguna formless nature of the Lord that is the essential reality. The first two are relative, the last is absolute.

God realisation begins with the relative and culminates with the absolute. Spirituality is holistic, not fragmented. There is no piecemeal approach or "best" path to Spirituality. If you want an example, tell me, which one of these things give me perception of colour - extra light, eyes, spectacles, nearness to the object, blinking or rubbing your eyes (to see better) etc.? Under different circumstances and conditions, they all become important. None of them can be said to be unnecessary. Yet some of them are variable, others are invariable.

It means that some of these things like eyes etc., are universally necessary. Others like spectacles are necessary for correcting the vision. So eyes are the invariable means for seeing, whereas spectacles are an aid for seeing.

In Vedanta too, Jnaana, Bhakti, Meditation, Activity, Practising right values, etc are all important. Among these, knowledge is like your eyes, the invariable means for knowing the truth about yourself. Bhakti, meditation etc. help you to remove all obstacles to this knowing the truth.

Every thing has a place in arriving at the truth, and nothing can really be ignored. The mistake that we make is to take sides and place our bets on one means. Jnaana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga are not different alternatives; they all come together in handling the different aspects of the human personality. They work differently, but together. And in the process, one comes to enjoy one's real nature - Limitlessness, Freedom, and Fullness.

Hindu Gods

There are a great number of gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. Each god or goddess represents a particular aspect of nature through which the highest reality "GOD" manifests.

Since God is the all-pervading reality, it is in and through creation and also beyond. God is both immanent as well as transcendent. Hence the scriptures say - God manifests as the manifold creation of names and forms, and each aspect of creation is essentially divine, represented by the gods and goddesses in our culture.

The deities of the Vedic period are :

Agni (fire), Vayu (wind), Indra (rain), Yama (death), Surya (sun), Dyau and Prithivi (Sky and Earth), Rudra (storm), Vishnu (all-pervasive), Brahma (fate), Usha (dawn), etc.

The Vedas speak about Yagnas to the various deities like Agni, Soorya, Indra, Varuna, Vishnu, Rudra and others. Yagnas are fire rituals wherein oblations like ghee and other food articles like cooked rice, sweetened wheat cake are offered. In some rituals, even meat was offered, the logic being that the deities are offered the best of whatever is consumed by ordinary mortals. There is also mention of the juice of the Soma plant which is a mild intoxicant, and it is said that the one who partakes of the soma juice offered in the yagna attains heaven.

It must be understood however, that heavenly results are not the consequence of mere offering of oblations. It is the shraaddha behind the offering that is really important. Whether or not such yagnas result in heaven, the whole ritual is a form of prayer that involves mass participation and feeling of oneness in the community - something like our Ganesh festival.

The deities of the later Pauranic period are Vishnu (Sustainer) & his spouse Lakshmi (Spiritual and material Wealth), Brahma (Creator) & his spouse Saraswati (Learning, Knowledge), and

Shiva (Destroyer) & his spouse Shakti (Energy, Power).

Some other deities are Shiva's sons Ganapathi (elephant-headed devourer of obstacles) & Kartikeya (commander of divine forces). Vishnu is also described as being born in 10 different incarnations - Matsya

-Fish, Kurma - Tortoise, Varaha - Wild Boar, Narasimha - Man-Lion, Vaaman - Young boy, Parashurama - The militant sage, Rama - The just ruler, Krishna - The statesman, Buddha - The wise, and Kalki - the horse rider.

The stories of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna are found in the great epics of Hindu literature - Ramayana and Mahabharata.

The description of the deities varies from book to book, and hence the gods are many faceted. Stories of these gods and goddesses are told and miraculous powers of healing and punishment are attributed to them. The main deity in each purana varies and similarly each devotee has his or her own 'favourite' deity who is considered GOD.

The Puraanas have stories of gods like Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Paarvati, Laxmi etc. and each of these deities are said to have their own favourite items of food, dress, etc. Krishna is associated with butter, Ganesh with modak, etc.

You can find books of pooja vidhi like Satyanaaraayana pooja, etc. wherein the background story of the pooja and the things offered therein are elaborately mentioned. In Bombay, Giri (Books) Trading Co., Matunga has a very good collection of such books.

The puranas also teach moral values through stories of gods and goddesses. On many an occasion, the deities are presented as having human tendencies and limitations who are then made to pay for their sins. This is to highlight the fact that even evolved souls are not infallible and have to take refuge in a higher reality - "GOD", that transcends them all.

The main Hindu festivals are:

Shiva Ratri: - night dedicated to Shiva spent in prayer and fasting,

Ganesh Chaturthi: - birth of Ganesh,

Raama Navami: - birth of Raam,

Janmaashtami: - birth of Krishna,

Vaikuntha Ekadashi: - dedicated to Vishnu,

Holi: - burning of a she-monster Holika who tried to kill the devotee Prahlad,

Navaratri & Dassera: - Goddess Durga's fighting a demon for nine days and killing him on the tenth, and

Diwali: - festival of lights when Lakshmi brings prosperity to the people

Dakshinaamurti

Shiva is presented as the original teacher who revealed the Vedas to the four sons of Brahmaji - Sanaka, Sanandana etc.

We have the shloka –

Sadaa Shiva Samaarambhaam Shankaraacharya Madhyamam
Asmad Acharya Paryantaam Vande Guru Paramparaam.

"I salute the tradition of teachers, of which Sadaashiva is the first (link), Shankaraacharya the central (link), and our own personal teacher is the final (link)."

Since the Vedas are said to have been revealed, we do not attribute them to a human agency. Hence the scriptures say that they were revealed by the Lord Himself.

Shiva is said to have appeared as a young boy in contrast to the Rishis who were old. He sat under a banyan tree and faced South (Dakshina moorti). His Jnanamudra represents Self-knowledge which was communicated in silence. With respect to Vedanta the interpretation is that He is Adept (Dakshina) as well as formless (Amoorti). His teaching is not limited to literal words (vaachyaartha) but extends to their implied meanings (lakshyartha) which goes beyond the words. Hence the word mauna is itself symbolically represents the body of Vedanta teaching that extends beyond the expressed words.

Shiva as the Destroyer also represents freedom from the cycle of birth and death. He destroys ignorance that is the cause of Samsara by imparting Self Knowledge. Hence he is both the phenomenon of time as well as the timeless one who swallows time.

The prayer verses to Dakshinaamoorti are :

1.

Mauna Vyaakhyaa Prakatita Para Brahma Tattvam Yuvaanam
Varshishthaantevasad Rishi Ganaih Aavritam Brahma Nishthaih
Aachaaryendram Karakalita Chinmudram Aananda Roopam
Svaatmaaraamam Mudita Vadanam Dakshinaamoortim Eede

"I worship Dakshinaamoorti of joyful countenance, who revels in his Self, who is the best of teachers, who bears the Chinmudra sign, who is happiness incarnate, who is youthful, who reveals the essence of the Absolute Self through silent discourse, and who is surrounded a group aged sage-disciples who are themselves established in the (knowledge of the) Self."

2.

Vatavitapi Sameepe Bhoomi Bhaage Nishannam
Sakala Muni Janaanaam Jnaana Daataaram Aaraat
Tribhuvana Gurum Eesham Dakshanaamoorti Devam
Janana Marana Duhkha Chheda Daksham Namaami

"I salute Lord Dakshinaamoorti, teacher of the three worlds, who is capable of destroying the sorrows of birth and death, who, seated on a piece of land near the forest of Banyan trees, imparts Self knowledge instantly to all sages."

3.

Chitram Vatataror Moole Vriddhaa Shishyaa Gurur Yuva
Gurostu Maunam Vyaakhyaanam Shishyaastu Chhinna Samshayaah

"Near the roots of the colourful banyan tree are the aged disciples and the young teacher. The teacher is eloquently silent, and the disciples are free from doubt."

4.

Nidhaye Sarva Vidyaanaam Bhashaje Bhava Rooginaam
Gurave Sarva Lokaanam Dakshinaamurtaye Namah

"Salutations unto Dakshinaamurti, the teacher of the entire world, who is the treasury of all knowledge, and who is the physician for the sickness of transmigration."

5.

Om Namah Pranavaarthaaya Shuddha Jnaanaika Moortaye
Nirmalaaya Prashaantaaya Dakshinaamoortaye Namah

"Salutations to Dakshinaamoorti, who is tranquil and pure. Salutations unto the one who is revealed by the word "OM", and is Pure Knowledge incarnate." Different Puranaas present different deities as the Supreme Lord. Vishnu in his turn is presented as the First teacher in the shloka -

Naaraayanam Padmabhuvam Vasishtham
Shaktim Cha Tat Putra Paraasharam Cha
Vyaasam Shukam Gaudapadam Mahaantam
Govinda Yogeendram Athaasya Shishyam

Shree Shankaraacharyam Athasya Padma-
Paadam Cha Hastaamalakam Cha Shishyam
Tam Totakam Vaartikakaaram Anyaan
Asmad Gurum Santatam Anatosmi

"I wholly and constantly offer prostrations unto all the teachers i.e. - Lord Vishnu ; Lord Brahma ; Sage Vasishtha ; Sage Shakti ; his son Sage Paraashara ; Sage Vyaasa ; (his son) Shuka ; the renowned Gaudapaada ; (his disciple) Govindapaada ; (his disciple) Shri Shankaraacharya ; his (four) disciples - Padmapaada, Hastaamalaka, Totakacharya and Sureshwaraacharya ; and (so on until the last link who is) my immediate teacher."

Upanishads

Upanishads are the end portions of the Vedas. The Upanishads deal with the ultimate human objective - moksha (liberation), the other three being dharma, artha, kaama. The Upanishads talk about God, man, and the world, and reveal their essential oneness. "Eight Upanishads" published by The Ramakrishna Math contains Aadi Shankaracharya's commentary translated into English by Swami Gambhirananda.

Every Veda has a few Upanishads connected to it, e.g. Taittiriya Up. With Yajur Veda, Maandookya Up. With Atharva Veda, Aitereya Up. With Rig-Veda etc.

There are over 100 Upanishads, and the most popular 10 are : Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Maandookya, Aitereya, Taittiriya, ChhAandogya and Brihad-aaranyaka.

The word Upanishad means Ascertained Knowledge of the Self that leads one to Brahman (the Limitless), destroys ignorance, and releases one from bondage. It deals with the ultimate human objective - moksha (liberation), the other three being dharma, artha, kaama. Moksha is pointed out as one's own nature, and so self-knowledge brings about moksha in terms of removing ignorance. The Upanishads talk about God, man, and the world, and reveal their essential oneness.

Yes, the Upanishads are found at the fag end of the Vedas, although there are exceptions, e.g. Taittiriya Upanishad is included within the Taittiriya Aaranyaka of the Yajur Veda. The Upanishads are generally in the form of a dialogue and introduced through a story like in Kathopanishad. They are found both in prose &/or poetry. Isha and Katha are metered stanzas:

Eeshaavaasyam Idam Sarvam, Yat Kinchit Jagatyaam Jagat
Tena Tyaktena Bhunjeetha, Maa Gridah Kasyasvit Dhanam.

The Upanishads are known as Vedaanta, (lit: end of the Vedas). The significance of their being placed at the end may be that it answers the ultimate Purushaartha (human goals) among the four Purushaarthas - Dharma, Artha, Kaama and Moksha. The bulk of the Veda talks about Karma (rituals) and Upaasanas (mental invocations and meditations), meant for attaining quantifiable goals like wealth, long life, enjoyment of heaven, etc. It speaks of past and future lives, all of them being connected by the individual's Karmas (good/bad deeds). The search for release begins when a person sees the endlessness of the cycle of Karma, -- the whole cycle of action and results repeating itself mechanically.

Think of a joy ride at an amusement park with all its thrills and anxieties. Imagine now that you can't get off it and are stuck in it for eternity. There, you have the complete description of Life. The Upanishads come in as an answer to this problem. They help you to re-orient yourself and question the very basic assumptions about yourself, world and god. In the process you are made to see the essential oneness through the many.

The whole cycle of change is superimposed on the changeless, and the changeless happens to be exactly what you really are. Knowledge, and not activity, is the means to this realisation. Your search ceases when you understand that searcher and searched are one. Put differently, there is no seeker and sought. There is only timeless awareness, - YOU.

Puraanas

The sage Vyaasa, who compiled all of the Vedas into four volumes, is also credited with the authorship of the Puraanas. There are in all about 18 puraanas and another 18 upa-puraanas. The Puraanas are a storehouse of stories built around some of the deities mentioned in the Vedas. These have given flesh and blood to the more popular of the deities - especially the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva who are placed in the highest level of prominence. The other pantheon of gods, like Indra, Varuna, Vaayu, Agni etc. have been reduced to minor gods residing in heaven with the blessings of the Trinity.

The Puraanas relate the stories of gods like Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Paarvati, Laxmi in great detail. These deities are said to have their own favourite items of food, dress, etc. Krishna is associated with butter, Ganesh with modak, etc. One can find books of pooja vidhi like Satyanaaraayana pooja, etc. wherein the background story of the pooja and the things offered therein are elaborately mentioned. In Bombay, Giri (Books) Trading Co., Matunga has a very good collection of such books.

Every puraana favours one particular deity over the others as the Supreme Lord. The Agni Puraana, Vaayu Puraana, Vishnu Puraana and many others are dedicated to Lord Vishnu, while Shiva Puraana, Linga Puraana, etc praise Lord Shiva. Mother Shakti, Lord Ganapathi and Lord Kaartikeya also considered supreme in some puraanas.

To highlight the powers of a particular Supreme Deity, comparisons are made with lesser gods who are consequently seen as powerless and at the mercy of the Supreme One. Such comparisons are only to build a strong sense of faith in the people who happen to follow that particular puraana, and not to be taken literally. A comparison of the different Puraanas makes it clear that each of these deities is mere manifestation of the Supreme Godhead who is formless, limitless and unique. The truth goes beyond the form and is not limited by it.

The puranas also teach moral values through stories of gods and goddesses. On many an occasion, the deities are presented as having human tendencies and limitations who are then made to pay for their sins. This is to highlight the fact that even evolved souls are not infallible and have to take refuge in a higher reality - "GOD", that transcends them all.

All temple worship in modern times are based on the Puraana style, with Vishnu, Shiva, Mother Shakti, Ganapathi and Kaartikeya being most prominent.

Incarnations of Lord Vishnu, like Raama and Krishna are specially revered. Hanumaan, a devotee of Lord Raama, is also worshipped as God. The sacred Tulsi plant and the holy cow associated with Lord Krishna, or the Bilva plant, Holy River Gangaa and the coiled snake associated with Lord Shiva, are likewise worshipped independently. Associated pilgrimage places like Vaaraanasi and Raameshwaram are also considered holy.

Temples are designed like the body that houses the Spirit. The architecture represents a fortified city with many concentric walls surrounding the main shrine where the Lord resides. The main gate has a flagstaff that welcomes the devotee to enter. The outer walls have paintings and sculptures of ordinary people engaged in their daily activities in the city, or images portraying the stories of

different gods. Some temples even have erotic architecture, perhaps to show that every activity has a place in the divine scheme. The temple is thus a miniature universe, and the devotee moves from the outer to the inner gates towards the inner sanctum, reflecting the pilgrim's progress from the outer to the inner worlds.

The main idol is sanctified by mantras at the time of installation and the Lord is invoked to pervade the idol. The temple as a whole is also separately sanctified. A similar custom is followed at a housewarming ceremony of a traditional Hindu, - he invites the Lord to grace the house with His Presence. Extend this similarity to the whole creation, and you will find that the universe itself is a temple with the Lord as its heart and soul. The devotee's attitude is that everything belongs to the Lord and that whatever the devotee possesses is the entrusted property of the Lord.

Seen from this point of view, there is nothing that is purely secular - everything is divine. The whole world is one family, and all living beings including animals and plants are kinsmen. The Hindu prayer says - "May all gain happiness, enjoy good health, see suspiciousness all around, and be free from misery". Different religions are seen merely as different ways of invoking the same Lord. The language of religions may be different, but the grammar is the same. Every religion is sacred for the person who has a big heart.

Itihaasas

The Raamaayana and the Mahaa-bhaarata are historical epics of a bygone age, and recount the story of King Raama's adventures and the story of the Paandava Princes respectively.

Raama was the epitome of virtue who willingly gave up his kingdom in order to fulfil his father's promise. Living in the forest along with his wife Seetaa and his brother Lakshmana, he helped the sages to ward off attacks from dangerous bands of Raakshasas. His wife Seetaa's beauty enchanted the Raakshasa King Raavana who kidnapped and carried her off to Lanka. Raama was heartbroken, and set off in search of Seetaa. With the help of the Vaanara King Sugreeva and his minister Hanumaan, Raama marched to Lanka. The Vaanara army fought the Raakshasa hordes bravely and in the end Raavana was killed and Seetaa restored to Raama.

The Mahaa-bhaarata relates the story of the epic Kurukshetra battle fought between the Paandava princes and their cousins - the Kaurava brothers. The Kaurava brothers led by Duryodhana were denied the kingship of Hastinaapura since their father Dhritaraashtra was born blind. The kingdom passed on to the hands of Paandu and after his death to the Paandavas led by Yudhishtira, Bheema and Arjuna. The princes grew up in an atmosphere of hostility and there was no love lost between them. On discovering a plot against their lives, the Paandavas secretly left the kingdom and went into hiding. Duryodhana, thinking that the Paandavas had perished, became the crown prince. The Paandavas, helped by Lord Krishna, survived many difficulties and won the hand of Draupadi of Paanchaala.

Having returned more powerful and influential, the Paandavas were welcomed back by the blind Dhritaraashtra and the Grandsire Bheeshma. They were given half the kingdom against Duryodhana's wishes. Duryodhana, at the behest of his maternal uncle Shakuni, invited Yudhishtira for a game of dice. Using loaded dice, Duryodhana won the game and forced the Paandava princes to exile for 13 years. Returning from exile, the Paandavas were forced into war, as they were denied their rightful share of the kingdom. In all their travails, they were constantly helped and guided by a resourceful Lord Krishna.

The Mahaa-bhaarata war was fought in Kurukshetra with all the kings of the land participating with their army, wealth and weapons. Great exploits by Bheeshma, Drona, Karna, Abhimanyu, Arjuna, and Bheema followed. Ultimately the Paandavas prevailed, but with a great loss of life. The Bhagavad Geeta is a philosophical dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna that took place right in the battlefield just as the battle was about to start. Krishna consoled the Paandavas both before and after the battle. The Paandavas ruled Hastinaapura for a long time. When they finally retired and repaired to the Himalayas, their grandson Parikshit was placed on the throne as the next emperor of Hastinaapura.

Krishna's accidental death by a hunter's arrow was the result of a curse. Krishna accepted and submitted gracefully to his fate as the purpose of his avataar was already fulfilled. The same is the case with Raama who having fulfilled his duties walked into the Sarayu river and gave up his life.

These stories highlight the complex nature of dharma - i.e. the sense of right and wrong. Many a situation arises wherein there is a conflict between what is right and what is appropriate. A study of

these Itihaasas becomes helpful to prepare us face similar conflicts. What is evident is that there is no absolutes in regard to right and wrong, and that there are various shades of grey between black and white. The Itihaasas also show that no matter how great a person, one is still human enough to commit mistakes and pay for it.

Both the Ramayana and Mahabharata are based on historical events. They are not myths. You are right when you presume them to be true as they have lasted so long in our collective consciousness. Recent discoveries, like that of Dwaaraka submerged under the sea, seem to clinch the evidence.

However all the events related in these epics are not strictly factual. This is not unlike modern historical novels like "Agony and Ecstasy" based on the life of Michaelangelo where facts and imagination are woven indistinguishably into one absorbing thriller of a story.

Many incidents and stories have been added to make the epic more engrossing. Thus stories like Nala and Damayanti are incorporations to the main story of the Kuru Princes. The characters themselves have been embellished and made larger than life by the poets who wrote about them. This is seen in the portrayal of Rama and Krishna as Avataars - i.e. The Lord in human form.

Certain events have also been presented differently by different writers according to how they visualised the incidents. Thus Seeta is transformed into a Maya-seeta in certain versions of Ramayana and the real Seeta is kept under safe custody of Agni until Rama reclaims her after the war. "Krishnaavataara" of K M Munshi is another example of how the original epic is modified by the poet's imagination.

The core story however is unquestioned and accepted by all as something that actually happened and not something born of imagination.

The puraanas and itihaasas have been an inspiration for all art and craft in India. From handicrafts onwards to sculpture, dance, music, literature, drama and cinema, the Hindu gods are all pervading. Devotional music of the highest order by later day saints like Meeraa, Tukaaraam, and Kabir are inspired by the puraanas like the Bhaagavata, etc. No house in a village is complete without a picture of the gods hanging on the walls. Vows are made in the name of gods and pilgrimages undertaken for the fulfilment of cherished desires. Mothers also sing these stories as lullaby, and every child in the village is brought up with a strong dose of the puraanas Bhagavad Geeta

The Bhagavad Geeta is another sacred book of the Hindus. It mirrors the Upanishads in content and presents it in a practical context of day to day life. Arjuna, the Paandava prince and hero of the Mahaa-bhaarata, has a personal conflict raging within him. His teachers, cousins, and Grand sire Bheeshma were facing him in battle and he was caught in a dilemma between his duty and his love for his kin. He puts down his arms in the midst of the two armies before the battle is about to begin, and looks for a philosophical solution to his problem.

Lord Krishna deals with Arjuna's problem at different levels. Krishna invokes Arjuna's sense of duty as a soldier and asks him to take up arms and fight for justice. Duty goes much beyond personal attachment and affections. True, there is a lot of pain in performing an unpleasant task, but that is what war is all about. A soldier lives and dies by his arms, and there is honour whether one gains

victory or one dies fighting. Dealing with pain becomes second nature for a soldier, and to avoid the unpleasant would amount to cowardice.

In a philosophical vein, Krishna speaks about pain and death as certain inevitable facts of life. Every one has to die some day. Only a person who has come to terms with sorrow is fit to pursue immortality. The wise do not grieve for the dying or for the dead. Before birth, the individuals were unmanifest; death is only completing the circle and going back to the unmanifest. Sorrow itself, seen from another point of view, is impermanent and fleeting, and the wise ones brave it with fortitude. As for the inner soul, there can be no question of sorrow, for the Self neither dies nor causes death.

Bhagavad Geeta takes a psychological approach too in confronting life's problems. Two attitudes in particular are highlighted by the Geeta as beneficial, - one pertaining to action, the other to the result. The Sanskrit equivalents are respectively Eeshwara Arpana and Praised. These two attitudes together constitute Karma-Yoga or Enlightened Activity.

The Geeta says "You have choice only over action and not over the result". Is it not true? We can set goals and work to achieve them, but there are no guarantees as far as results are concerned. Results come in accordance with the laws of the universe. There are unknown factors that can affect the result for better or worse. I trust the universal laws and the lawgiver and understand that there cannot be an unfair result. What I can do is to give my best shot as far as action goes, and then accept the result gracefully. I can however learn more about the laws from my successes and failures and make best use of what I have learnt. Emotional maturity is about handling success with grace and defeat with dignity. This is what Prasaada attitude is all about.

As far as my efforts are concerned, I have to realise that I do not create anything new, I can only re-create. All the material I require for achieving the desired objective is already provided for me. My hands and legs, my intelligence and thinking, my health and strength are given to me. I did not create these. The nourishment that I require like oxygen, food, medicines; the raw materials like wood, iron, silicon; the laws that connect cause and effect etc. are all given. Nothing then really belongs to me. If everything belongs to the Lord, I am not the owner of anything, and everything that I possess is sacred trust property. As a trustee, I am responsible for preserving the ecological balance and harmony of creation. I see to it that I am a net producer contributing to nature and society rather than becoming net consumer exhaustion the resources of creation. What I have is the Lord's gift to me. What I make out of it is my gift unto the Lord. Even when I act to fulfil my personal goals, I dedicate my actions unto the Lord as an act of worship and gratitude for everything given unto me. Thus whatever I do is a form of prayer unto the Lord - Eeshwara Arpana.

What is mistakenly thought to be fatalist attitude of Hinduism is really nothin but Prasaada Buddhi. A realistic acceptance of situations is in fact a healthy attitude to life. In Hindu temples, whatever is offered at the altar of the Lord in the form of food, flowers etc. is sanctified and distributed among the devotees as "Prasaada". No true devotee thinks twice about accepting prasaada, be it a leaf, flower, fruit, sweetmeat or whatever. Prasaada is not always sweet or pleasant, yet it is always welcome. Prasaada is considered as a blessing and received with total acceptance.

Acceptance of situations is different from resignation of defeat. Success is not necessarily winning all the time. A successful person is one who can manage both victories and failures successfully. This

is what prasaada attitude is all about. If Hindu culture has survived over thousands of centuries, it is due to this attitude - we are survivors, not victims of situations.

It is interesting to know that most secular projects in India are associated with some religious ceremonies. A "pooja" or prayer is considered a must before commencing any new activity. At the conclusion of the project, there is generally a thanks-giving ceremony. Once a year, there comes a festival where people offer worship to their tools of labour - vehicles, machinery, books, etc. All these are reminders of the sacredness of work - 'Dignity of Labour' in action. For most Indians, duty comes before pleasure.

Chapter 2 of Bhagavad Geeta gives a bird's eye view of the whole teaching, and the same is elaborated in the next 16 chapters. Geeta can be confusing for most people. Geeta cannot be taken at face value, because it talks about life and truth from different points of view. These points of view have to be integrated into one vision of the whole.

Geeta cannot be taken piecemeal. It has to be approached as a whole; otherwise you miss out its essence. See the paradox here: -- To understand the whole, you should know the parts, and to know the parts you should have the context of the whole. How does a beginner go about this?

Mere reading is not enough - guidance is required. You should have someone who has understood both, -- the parts as well as the whole. Hence the importance of a guide in our tradition. A beautiful verse states that if all the Upanishads are comparable to cows, then Geeta is the milk (essence) extract. Lord Krishna is the milker and Partha is the calf who gets to taste the milk. But it is really the wise ones who enjoy the full benefit of it.

The entire Geeta deals with two topics: Who you are, Who is God, What is the relationship between you and God. 2) How you can live an intelligent life wherein you prepare yourself to assimilate the knowledge about the above.

Realisation is recognising God in and through our selves and the world around us. God is the source and substance of creation, and cannot be away from his creation. The Bhagavad Geeta says that the Lord is in everything and everything is in the Lord. In fact, God alone is all this. Whatever exists, is the Lord.

The Lord is the Creation, the Cause, as well as the ultimate Reality. Thus you have the Viraat form of the Lord that is the manifest creation - Kshara Purusha. There is the Avyakta form of the Lord that is the unmanifest cause

- Akshara Purusha. And finally there is Nirguna formless nature of the Lord that is the ultimate reality - Uttama Purusha.

The first two are relative, the last is absolute. Which is the best way to realise it? Before I answer that, tell me which one of these things: - extra light, eyes, spectacles, nearness to the object, blinking or rubbing your eyes etc., - give you perception of colour? Under different circumstances and conditions, they all become important. None of them can be said to be unnecessary. Yet some of them are variable, others are invariable. It means that some of these things, like eyes, are essential. Others, like spectacles, are required only in some cases. Eyes see, whereas a pair of spectacles only aids seeing.

In Vedanta too, Jnaana, Bhakti, Karma, meditation, right values, etc are all important. Among these, knowledge reveals the nature of reality -it is the invariable means for knowing the truth about you. Bhakti, meditation etc. help by removing obstacles to this knowledge. Every thing has a place and nothing can really be ignored.

The mistake that we make is to take sides. Jnaana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga are not different alternatives; they all come together in handling the different aspects of the human personality. They work differently, but together. And in the process, we come to enjoy one's real nature - Limitlessness, Freedom, and Fullness.

For the beginner, the book "The Teaching of the Bhagavad Geeta", by my teacher Swami Dayananda Saraswati will be very helpful. For a more elaborate study, I suggest "The Bhagavad Geeta Home Study" (in 4 volumes) which consists of his lectures on Bhagavad Geeta delivered during a 3 year course meant for residential students.

DHYAANA

Dhyaana is defined as "saguna brahma vishaya maanasa vyaapaarah" - i.e. mental activity whose object is the Lord with form" and "sajaateeya chitta vritti pravaaha" - i.e. a stream of similar thoughts.

Meditation is our attempt to connect with the universe and to receive grace through prayer. All other aspects of meditation are secondary - i.e. relaxation, feeling good, quietening the mind, etc.

Hence "maanasa pooja" is as much a meditation as chanting a "mantra". In maanasa pooja, one invokes the Lord and receives the Lord like one would receive an honoured guest. The Lord is honoured with various amenities and services that are part of a regular pooja.

Ratnaih Kalpitam Aasanam Himajalaih Snaanam Cha Divyaambaram Ratna Vibhooshitam Mrigamada
Aamodaankitam Chandanam Jaati Champaka Bilva Patra Rachitam Pushpam Cha Dhoopam Tathaa
Deepam Deva Dayaanidhe Pashupate Hrit Kalpitam Grihyataam

Sauvarne Nava Ratna Khanda Rachite Paatre Ghritam Paayaasam Bhakshyam Panchavidham Payo
Dadhee Yutam Rambhaa Phalam Paanakam Shaakaanaam Ayutam Jalam Ruchikaram Karpoora
Khandojjwalam Taamboolam Manasaa Mayaa Virachitam Bhaktyaa Prabho Sveekuru

Chatram Chaamarayor Yugam Vyajanakam Cha Aadarshakam Nirmalam Veena Bheri Mridanga
Kaahalakalaa Nrityam cha Geetam tathaa Saastaanga Pranatih Stutir Bahuvidhaa Hyetat Sarvam
Mayaa Sankalpena Samarpitam Tava Vibho Poojaam Grihaana Prabho

Aatma Tvam Girijaa Matih Sahacharaah Praanah Shareeram Griham Poojaa Te Vishaya Bhoga
Rachana Nidraa Samaadhis Sthitih Sanchaarah Padayoh Pradakshina Vidhih Stotraani Sarvaa Giro
Yad Yad Karma Karomi Tat Tat Akhilam Shambo Tava Aaradhanam

Kara Charanam Vaak Kaayajam Karmajam Vaa Shravana Nayanajam Vaa Maanasam Vaaparaadham
Vihitam Avihitam Vaa Sarvam Etat Kshamasva Jaya Jaya Karunaabdhe Shri Mahaadeva Shambho
MANTRA

A mantra ideally is a short set of words denoting surrender unto the Lord. "Om Namoh Naaraayanaaya", "Om Namoh Bhagavate Vaasudevaaya", "Om Namoh Ganapataye Namah", "Om Namoh Shivaaya" etc. are all mantras that can be chanted mentally or orally.

Normally the mantra is chanted after the maanasa pooja. Here there is no attempt to recall the form of the Lord separately, for the sound itself is the form now. Also, the mantra is short, and is repeated time and again, giving a chance for the mind to move with the chant easily. Whenever the mind gets distracted, we remind ourselves and come back to the process of chanting consciously, until the process becomes natural and easy.

The mantra is interspersed with silence, and in chanting, we rotate mantra and silence. Silence, which is the source of the mantra, remains when the chanting is done. The mantra is considered as the Lord in the form of sound, whereas silence is the Lord free of the sound.

You can do the pooja for any deity you choose, just like you choose the mantra associated with your favourite deity. It can be taken on by choice, or you can get your guru to select it for you, - it makes no difference. However there seems to be a greater commitment to the mantra when it is received from the teacher, because of the shraddha involved. All said and done, it is not the mantra that works, - it is you who make it work! Right?

Meditation helps in bringing one's awareness to the object of meditation. You can choose to become more aware of the routine sounds around you, you can pay attention to the various body sensations or your breathing, or your thought flow. Each of these practices help to focus the mind on its intended object for a sustained period of time.

GAAYATRI MANTRA

Chanting a short mantra repeatedly is also a very good help. And in our scriptures, we have the gayatri mantra which is a prayer to the Lord in the form of the luminous Sun. The prayer invokes the Lord to enlighten and inspire our intelligence and thought.

There are many hymns in the Rigveda and other books dedicated to Agni and Surya. These hymns are in the form of praise and are called 'stuti's or 'stava's. The most popular of the Surya mantras is the Gaayatri mantra. Surya is looked on as the visible god whose brilliant light of consciousness illumines our minds.

Om Bhoor Bhuvah Svah
Tat Savitur Varenyam,
Bhargo Devasya Dheemahi
Dhiyo Yo Nah Prachodayaat.

"Om, the Supreme Reality, is everything - Earth, intermediate world and the heavens. We meditate on the worshipful effulgence of the Sun God, (as He is) the one who inspires and enlightens our intelligence and wisdom."

Word meanings:

Om : - The Supreme Reality
Bhoor: (Bhooh) : - The earth
Bhuvah : - The intermediate world
Svah:- The heavens
Tat : - That
Savitur (Savituh) : - of the Solar (God)
Varenyam : - Worshipful, Auspicious
Bhargah : - Effulgence, Brilliance
Devasya : - of the (Solar) God
Dheemahi : - We meditate upon
Dheeyo (Dheeyah) : - Intellect, Intelligence
Yo (Yah) : - the one who
Nah : - Our
Prachodayaat :- Impels, Directs, Inspires.

There is also the Surya Namaskara that addresses the Sun God by twelve different names. The Aaditya Hridaya is another hymn found in the Raamaayana, supposed to have been chanted by Sri Rama in the battlefield.

One of the well known mantras to Agni is from the Rigveda -
Agnim Eede Purohitam : - I worship Agni, Placed before me
Yajnasya Devam Ritvijam : - The Lord of the Yajna, Priest of the Rigveda
Hotaaram Ratna Dhaatamam : - Singer of Saamas and Bestower of riches.

MRITYUNJAYA MANTRA

The mrityunjaya mantra is directed towards Lord Shiva, the conqueror of death. The story goes that Markandeya was blessed with 16 short years lifespan. He was a great devotee of Shiva and worshipped the shivalinga.

At the end of the 16 years, when Yama came to take his soul, Markandeya embraced the shivalinga to escape from Yama. Shiva then manifested himself and protected him from Yama's clutches.

This mantra is chanted for the health of someone who is ill. It is also chanted when someone is dying or dead. It is a prayer for freedom from birth and death - i.e. moksha. The prayer goes like this:

Tryambakam Yajamahe Sugandhim Pushtivardhanam Oorvaarukam Iva Bandhanaat Mrityor Muksheeya Maa-mritaata.

"I worship the three-eyed Lord Shiva who spreads fragrance and enhances health. O Lord, please release me from the bonds of death which is like the stalk of the Oorvaaruka fruit (similar to a melon) and do not deprive me from immortality."

The Oorvaaruka plant is a creeper with large fruit whose stalk dries up and breaks away. This happens when the fruit is fully mature and no longer needs to hang on to the creeper for sustenance. In the prayer, the devotee asks the Lord for self-knowledge which will make him independent from the hold of samsara.

In contrast to the Oorvaaruka stands the fruit which does not separate from the plant unless it is cut apart. Often the prayer is taken to mean a request to the lord to cut away the bondage that is holding the devotee to the world of limitation.

Word meanings:

Tryambakam : - The three-eyed Lord

Yajamahe : - We worship

Sugandhim : - The one enveloped with fragrance

Pushtivardhanam : - The one who nourishes and strengthens

Oorvaarukam Iva : - Like the fruit "Oorvaaruka"

Bandhanaat : - From Bondage

Mrityor : - Of Death

Muksheeya : - Do thou release

Maa : - Not

Amritaata : - From Immortality

OM

Mantras are vibrations and vibrations have different effects on different persons. Colours, crystals, etc. are also vibrations. We interact with the world with our thoughts and feelings which too are vibrations. Certain people are extremely sensitive to vibrations. Perhaps you are one such person. If you find you are being helped by the Om mantra, please continue.

However, their effects on the psyche are secondary in nature, and have no direct connection with salvation or inner spiritual development. These are experiences that make you feel good about yourself, and inspires you to continue your search. We these as encouraging experiences, and then let go of them. The goal lies beyond, in terms of self knowledge and getting in touch with your self that is beyond limitation.

The OM mantra is really meant for contemplation, if you know its meaning. Om signifies your three worlds of waking, dream and sleep, or of earth, heavens, and atmosphere. Om is also the fourth that is in and through all the three. It is one with the three and at the same time, free from all the three. Om is verily the self that is the nature of consciousness and the source of all creation. And self-knowledge is the recognition Om, the universal self, is really the Atma, the individual self. The Upanishads being the source of self-knowledge that liberates, should we not endeavour to grasp its real significance? And how else should we be thoroughly exposed to the vision of the Upanishads other than the grace of the Guru and the Lord who is Om?

The teacher unfolds the inner meanings of the Upanishads through the process of teaching. Every time you expose yourself to the teaching, you get a deeper insight into the Upanishad. The outlines start filling up and you slowly start seeing more and more, until you reach a stage where things can't get more clear - the vision is crystal clear.

The Lord's grace is equally important in order for you to arrive at this knowledge. It is the Lord who directs our path and provides the means. By chanting the mantra, you are invoking his grace, so that you may be blessed with self-knowledge and liberation from limitation.

We obtain the necessary guidance and the Lord's grace through prayer. We also need to invoke your own grace - rely on ourselves to do whatever is necessary for reaching our destination.

YOGA

Yoga is a discipline of the body, mind and spirit. Yoga is a system of creating body-mind-spiritual health through the practice of eight steps:

Yama (attitudes) Niyama (practices) Aasana (Yogic postures) Praanaayaama (mastery over breathing) pratyahaara (withdrawal) dhaarana (concentration) dhyaana (contemplation) and Samaadhi (Absorption of mind)

The "Yoga Sutra" written in Sanskrit by Patanjali is the source book for Yoga. Yoga is an excellent discipline for integrating oneself as a person. Yoga is more than mere postures or exercises. It involves examining your values and attitudes, your understanding of dharma (i.e. the sense of right and wrong), your goals and priorities, etc. It includes learning to relax, focus, enhance your awareness of self and surroundings, - all of which are the different aspects of meditation.

Yoga means "Joining together". The individual comes close to the Lord and becomes absorbed in Him. In Yoga Shaastra, the two entities come together in union.

The Yoga Shaastra speaks of seven Chakras (spheres) that are symbols associated with various parts of the body and used for the purpose of meditation. All these chakras are like lotus flowers that are linked by one root nerve from the bottom (moola) to the top (sheersha).

Every Chakra is said to be associated with certain psychic experiences and powers. The meditations are in the form of prayers or mantras to the deities, and are assigned specific results. The Kundalini is the psychic energy (Prana) that moves progressively from the lower to the higher chakras as one becomes adept at the Chakra meditations. Meditation on the chakras opens up the respective centres and release the Prana energy to move upwards.

These meditations are associated with Moral Values, Disciplined Living, Bodily Postures, Breath Control, Withdrawal of the Senses, Concentration, Meditation and finally Absorbion of Mind in which the external world of

experiences is tuned off and one enjoys peace, joy and personal fulfilment). Taken together, this practice of meditation is called Astaanga-Yoga (eight-fold Yoga).

The Yoga philosophy as expounded by Patanjali is different from the teachings of the Upanishads known as Vedanta. Yogic practices however can be incorporated to suit the students of Vedanta in as much as Yoga is a system of mind-body healing.

HINDU CONCEPT OF TIME

The perspective of Hinduism extends beyond this life - into the past before our birth, and into the future beyond our death. Creation is a cycle and time is not linear but cyclic. The present is connected to the past and the future through the principle of causation, resulting in a patterns that yields itself to analysis and inference. Patterns tend to repeat themselves and can be often relied as predictors of forthcoming events.

Another relevant aspect is the basic unity of the universe. Everything is interconnected with everything else in an organic system e.g. our body, our ecosystem etc. We have begun to predict weather, even though we are at the mercy of multiple parameters that are constantly varying and spread over different parts of the world. We diagnose diseases through symptoms like temperature, colour changes and the like. The same principle applies with respect to astrology. The stars and planets do not rule our lives; rather they are as much an effect of the same causes that have caused events in our lives.

Does all this mean that our lives are totally controlled, run by destiny? Not really. Patterns suggest probability of events taking place, and probabilities are not certainties. When we consider the multiple parameters model of the universe, the distinction between cause and effect is reduced significantly, since each parameter is a cause as well as an effect of the other parameters. In a circle, can you tell which point comes before and which later? And has not the poet said: "When you pluck a flower, you are shaking a star?"

As human beings, our choice of action may be limited by the past causes, but is not totally negated. The horsepower of your car is destiny, whereas your steering wheel control is free will. We can choose to be or not to be different, we can choose to break through our past or to confirm the past, we are free to look forward to a significantly different future or to live in the dungeons of the past. The steering wheel is in our hand.

It is good to know about past influences and causes, for these give us a sort of map regarding where we stand today. The past is not meant for regret or for pride; the past is dead and gone. But it leaves behind in its trail the present and we have to deal with the present. Any insight into the past can help in this work. We can set more realistic and reachable targets when we are made aware of our strengths and weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT). We look back only to learn.

Sage Vyaasa

Vyaasa was the rishi who wrote the Mahabharata. Vyaasa's was born on a full moon day and this day is celebrated all over as Guru Poornimaa.

Vyaasa's real name was Krishna, the dark one. He was the son of the great Rishi Paraashara and a fishergirl Matsyagandhaa. Matsyagandhaa later on married King Shantanu and was known as Satyawati, the great grandmother of the Paandavas and Kauravas. Krishna, was born on an island (Dveepa) and was also called Dvaipaayana.

Krishna grew up to be a great Rishi in his own right. He studied the different branches of the Vedas and collected them into four volumes - the four Vedas. The Vedas are said to have been revealed as Mantras to the ancient Rishis. Thus the Vedas are also known as Shruti ("Heard" or Revealed Knowledge).

In those days, the Vedas were not written on paper, but was memorised and passed on from master to student orally. Krishna became the first compiler of the Vedas and was given the title of "Vyaasa" or the great Compiler. He is also known as Veda Vyaasa.

In his times, the only means of transportation were bullock carts and horse carriages. Most people travelled on foot and had to pass through dense forests to go from place to place. Vyaasa, as the master of his band of disciples, travelled all over the country facing great danger from wild animals and robbers in the forest.

Vyaasa became the spiritual advisor to all the kings of the land and taught them to value "Dharma" or Righteousness as a way of life. He taught them to look beyond mere material riches and pleasures, and to pursue "Moksha" or Liberation as the ultimate goal of human life.

Vyaasa's son Shuka and other disciples continued his tradition of preserving the Vedas, passing it down to the next generation through teaching. Vyaasa thus became the teacher of teachers and his birthday became celebrated as teacher's day - Guru Poornimaa. In fact, the dais on which a speaker sits to deliver spiritual discourses is called Vyaasa Peetha and the person sitting on stage is regarded as Vyaasa himself."

Vyaasa composed the Mahaabhaarata and invoked Lord Ganesha to write it down. Lord Ganesha, according to legend, agreed on the condition that Vyaasa dictate the whole Mahaabhaarata without a break. Vyaasa put a counter-condition that Ganesha should write only after understanding every word. After both had agreed to the conditions, the dictation started. Every once in a while, Vyaasa dictated a difficult verse that Ganesha took time to understand fully, and this break was good enough for Vyaasa to finish his personal work for the day.

According to a verse of the Mahaabhaarata, its original form was only 24,000 verses and was known as Jaya. It later grew in length to be called as Bhaarata, and further expanded to 1,00,000 verses now famous as the Mahaabhaarata.

Vyaasa himself played a great role in the story of Mahaabhaarata. He was always at the side of Satyavati, his mother, with words of comfort whenever she was in distress. Satyavati was married to King Shantanu and had two sons

- Chitraangada and Vichitraveerya. They succeeded the kingdom but themselves died without any children.

Vyaasa was summoned by Satyavati and asked to bless the two wives of Vichitraveerya with children to succeed the kingdom. Accordingly, the two princes - Dhritaraashtra and Paandu - were born. Dhritaraashtra, being born blind, could not become king and Paandu ruled the kingdom. Dhritaraashtra had hundred children, the eldest being Duryodhana. Paandu retired to the forest with his wives after a curse. He had five children born to him in the forest - Yudhishtira, Bheema, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva.

The Mahaabhaarata story centres around the war between the cousins - the Kauravas and the Paandavas. At every turn of the Mahaabhaarata story, Vyaasa was invoked by Satyavati, to give right advice for the good of the country. But all advice fell on deaf ears, as Duryodhana was obsessed with destroying the Paandavas.

Ultimately the Paandavas triumphed and the Kauravas were destroyed. This triumph was largely engineered by another person sharing the same name as Vyaasa's. This was Krishna, The Lord of the Bhagavad Geeta.

Vyaasa also wrote the Puraanas. Vyaasa wrote 18 Puraanas highlighting the stories of Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva and Lord Brahma. These Puraanas not only reveal the divine nature and power of these Gods, but they also contain stories with a moral. They show that nobody is perfect in this world including gods, and the result of pride, greed, etc are always tragic and painful.

Every Puraana has its own favourite God who is all powerful and excels over

other Gods in all respects. This is not to say that the other Gods are inferior. You can choose whichever God is your favourite and pray to him. God is one, but he can be invoked in different forms.

Vyaasa also wrote a work analysing the Upanishads. It is in the form of short sentences known as Sootras and is thus called Brahma Sootras. Vyaasa, the spiritual master, combined clarity of knowledge with melody of devotion. Vyaasa achieved much in his life time. He left a legacy of learning and spirituality for us.

The prayer to Vyaasa goes like this: Namastu Te Vyaasa Vishaala-Buddhe Phullaaravindaayata-Patra-Netra Yena Tvayaa Bhaarata-Taila-Poorna -Prajvaalito Jnaanamaya-Pradeepah.

"Salutation unto Thee, Oh Vyaasa of great intellect, whose eyes resemble the long petals of the beautiful lotus. By you the story of Mahaabhaarata became the oil that kindled the lamp of knowledge (the Bhagavad Geeta)"

Truly he was the teacher of teachers - the master whose birthday we celebrate as Guru Poornimaa. On this day, we remember all our teachers and offer them our gratitude and a token of our love.

Gurukula System Of Education

For a boy in the Rig vedic times began around 8 years of age when he was initiated by his father into the Gaayatri hymn (dedicated to God in the form of light of the sun). The father formally endowed the sacred thread around the boy's shoulder which represented commitment to vedic studies. The three strands of the sacred thread represented the Rig, Yajus and Saama Vedas. The knot represented the Atharva Veda.

After this ceremony, the boy had to do daily prayers to the Sun God three times a day at sunrise, noon, and at sunset. These prayers were known as Sandhya Vandana.

The boy after initiation was formally sent to his teacher's house for Vedic studies. The boy stayed in the teacher's house and was entitled to go house to house asking and collecting food on behalf of his teacher.

Society supported both the teacher and the student in this way. Studies included Vedic chanting learnt by heart, sanskrit literature, grammar, logic, six systems of philosophy, cultural traditions, etc. Students could study one or more Vedas according to their capacity. Sometimes, the student had to study under and stay with different masters for higher education. Generally a period of 12 was considered adequate for general studies.

A student after graduation was given a formal send off after a ritualised bath. In the book "Raghuvamsha", the student goes to the king to display his learnt skills, and the king rewards the boy. This reward is duly carried by the student to his teacher as a mark of gratitude.

Gifts by the student was called Guru Dakshina and this tradition continues even now with the students offering gifts to the teacher on Guru Poornima day - (teacher's day - the birthday of Sage Vyaasa.)

After this the student could marry or continue a life of dedicated study according to his choice. The boy was invested with a second sacred thread on behalf of his wife. He was now fully qualified to lead a socially useful life according to his qualifications or to start his own school where students could reside and learn from him.

The Gurukula system of education is as old as the Vedas which are believed to be atleast 3000 years before Christ. Vedic education included learning to chant mantras and study of rituals where these mantras were to be employed.

The mantras contain prayers and discriptions of various deities and were said to be revealed to the Vedic sages like Vishwamitra etc. who is the seer (mantra drishta) of the Gaayatri mantra.

Since the rituals were elaborate, there were families specialising in a particular branch of the Vedas, and these were transmitted from father to son or from teacher to student. According to Vedic tradition, mother is the first teacher, father the second, and Guru is the third teacher. The Guru is like a father to the students and the students reside with the teacher's family until the completion of their education.

Vyaasa, also known as Veda Vyaasa (compiler of the Vedas) cemented the Vedic traditions by collecting the different recensions (shaakhaas) of the Vedas and compiling them. "The book of Vyaasa" by K M Munshi gives a wonderful account of the enormous work done by Vyaasa in bringing to light the many rare recensions that were known only to few families scattered throughout the country and considered lost for all practical purposes. Even today, the situation is the same, with many aged pandits deceasing without having trained sufficient disciples to keep their recension alive.

Vyaasa had many students to whom he entrusted the study and propogation of the Vedas. Vyaasa gave new impetus to the gurukulas of old by moving from place to place and training new teachers to keep the traditions alive. His students settled in many places in the country and became teachers in their own right. Students could specialise in one or more Vedas or their recensions. The most famous among his students were Jaimini - author of the "Meemaamsaa sutras" and Vyaasa's own saintly son Shuka.

Vedic studies included within its scope the study of Sheekshaa (phonetics), Chhandas (metre), Vyaakaranam (Grammar), Niruktam (Etymology), Kalpa (science of ritualism), and Jyotisham (astronomy). These six subjects were known as the limbs of the Vedas (Vedaanga).

Apart from Vedic studies, students were also taught philosophy, fine arts, and martial arts like archery etc. Narada, the celestial sage is said to be the master of 64 arts (vidyaas) including physics, fine arts, use of weapons and astronomy. He is said to have approached sage Sanatkumara for self knowledge, humbly admitting that all these accomplishments were not enough to conquer the existential human sorrow.

The six systems of philosophy which trace their origin to the Vedas are Nyaaya, Vaisheshika, Saankhya, Yoga, Meemaamsaa and Vedaanta. The teachers associated with these systems are the authors of the textbooks in the form of sootras or aphorisms (condensed pregnant sentences strung together).

Gautama wrote the Nyaaya sootras, Kanada the Vaisheshika sootras, Kapila wrote Saankhya sootras, Patanjali the Yoga Sootras, Jaimini wrote Meemaamsaa sootras and Vyaasa the Brahma (Vedaanta) sootras. A study of the Vedaangas and six systems of philosophy were essential before one could study the Upanishads (Vedaanta) in greater depth.

Each of these systems specialised in certain areas where they broke new ground. For instance, Nyaaya specialised in reasoning and logic, Vaisheshika in classification of phenomenal universe into elements, Saankhya in the principle of causation (effect is nothing but cause transformed), Yoga in practices of meditation, Meemaamsaa in Karma and science of ritualism, and Vedaanta in Self knowledge.

In hindsight, it seems that these systems acted as counterpoints to each other, whetting the interest and thinking skills of the student. This preparation made him ready to appreciate the teachings of the Upanishads that is the culmination of Vedic Philosophy. The teachers of these philosophies were probably Vedaantins themselves as can be seen from the relationship between Vyaasa and his disciple Jaimini who authored Vedaanta and Meemaamsa sootras respectively.

A renowned student of the Vedic times was Satyakaama who was granted permission for studies by his teacher solely on the account of his love of truth (satya kaama). When questioned about his parentage, Satyakaama admitted that he did not know who his father was, and neither did his mother know. This story is taken to mean that Braahmanas always told the truth and that Satyakaama could only have been a braahmana. The real significance of the story is that a braahmana is one who speaks the truth, not one who is merely born in the braahmana family.

Women too could learn the Vedas in ancient times. Women like Gaargi and Maitreyi were learned in the scriptures. In later times, Bhaarati - wife of Mandana Mishra officiated as the judge in the scholarly dispute between Shankaracharya and Mandana Mishra. Women were equal partners in all rituals done by their spouses. No religious or social ceremony was complete without her participation. However she remained in the background while the spouse actually performed the rituals. The husband wore two sacred threads, one for himself and another on her behalf.

In the times of Mahaabhaarata, Drona and Drupada were co-students who studied in the gurukula of Drona's father. Drona himself was the royal preceptor to the Kaurava and Pandava princes. Ekalavya learnt archery from Drona without Drona's knowledge and had to offer his right hand thumb unto the teacher as Guru Dakshina.

Parashuram was the preceptor to Karna martial arts training. Krishna and Sudaama studied together at Saandeevani's gurukula. Krishna is said to have revived the dead son of Saandeevani as Guru Dakshina.

Raama and Lakshmana were taught by Vasishtha and later by Vishwaamitra. Lava and Kusha grew up in Vaalmeeki's aham and learnt the Raamaayana from him. Prince Prahlada learnt under his teachers but perplexed them with his prayers to Lord Vishnu which had been banned by Hiranyakashipu, the King of Asuras. Kacha, among gods, is said to have stayed with Shukraachaarya, preceptor of Asuras for learning the secret of Sanjeevani mantra which revives the dead.

The Taittiriya Upanishad contains a section where the teacher gives the convocation address to the students:

Vedam Anoochya Acharyah Antevaasinam Anushaasti Satyam Vada Dharmam Chara Svaadhyaat
Maa Pramadah Aachaaryaaya Priyam Dhanam Aahritya Prajaatantum Maa Vyavachchhetseh

"Having taught the Veda, the preceptor advises the disciple; Speak the truth; follow the prescribed conduct; be not careless about reciting scriptures; offer to the preceptor the gift liked by him, and do not break the line of (your future) progeny."

Satyaat Na Pramaditavyam Dharmaat Na Pramaditavyam Bhootyai Na Pramaditavyam Svaadhyaaya
Pravachanaabhyaam Na Pramaditavyam Deva Pitri Kaaryaabhyam Na Pramaditavyam

"Do not be indifferent to truth; Do not be neglect duty; do not be negligent of well-being; do not be indifferent to the study and imparting of the Veda; do not neglect offerings to the gods and manes."

Maatridevo Bhava Pitridevo Bhava Aachaaryadevo Bhava Atithidevo Bhava

Let your mother be (like) a god to you; let your father be (like) a god to you; let your preceptor be a god to you, let your guest be a god to you."

Yaanyanavadyaani Karmaani Taani Sevitavyaani No Itaraani Yaanyasmaakam Sucharitaani Taani Sevitavyaani No Itaraani "Those acts that are faultless alone are to be performed, and not any other. Emulate our virtuous actions and not any other."

Ye Ke Cha Asmaat Shreyaamso Braahmanaah Teshaam Tvayaasanena Prasvasitavyam Shraddhayaa Deyam Ashraddhayaa Adeyam Shriyaa Deyam Hriyaa Deyam Bhiyaa Deyam Samvidaa Deyam

"Put the learned ones who are our superiors at ease by offering a seat and other requirements. Bestow gifts in good faith ; never give an unwilling gift. Let gifts be in keeping with your status, given with due modesty and fear. Let there be also agreement in opinion (or friendly feeling) when the gifts are offered."

Atha Yadi Te Karma Vichikitsaa Vaa Vritta Vichikitsaa Vaa Syaata Ye Tatra Braahmanaah Sammarshinah Yuktaa Aayuktaah Alookshaa Dharmakaamaah Syuh Yathaa Te Tatra Varteran Tathaa Tatra Vartethaah

"Now, should there arise any uncertainty regarding your acts, or doubt in respect of your conduct in life, you would rule yourself, exactly in the same manner as those learned ones, who are able to judge impartially, who are experienced, independent, gentle, and leading a life of Dharma, would act in regard to such matters."

Atha Abhyaakhyaateshu Ye Tatra Braahmanaah Sammarshinah Yuktaa Aayuktaah Alookshaa Dharmakaamaah Syuh Yathaa Te Tatra Varteran Tathaa Tatra Vartethaah

"And now with regard to those who are falsely accused for some crime. Conduct yourself on the model of those cautious, experienced, independent, gentle Brahmanas who lead a life of Dharma."

Esha Aadeshah Esha Upadeshah Eshaa Vedopanishat Etad Anushaasanam Evam Upaasitavyam Evam Uchaitad Upaasyam

"This is the command, this is the advice; this is the secret instruction of the Vedas; this is the commandment. One must rule oneself in life in the manner stated. Verily, after having understood, one must act in the way taught above."

Respect for life

For a hindu, every thing in creation is sacred including mother earth. However that does not mean that earth is not to be stepped on. What it means is that we are sensitive to our environment and commit the least destruction possible and wherever possible, compensate for the damage that is done to it. The scriptures talk about replacing each felled tree by planting ten new trees.

Respect for life in all its forms marks the life of a hindu. Being an agrarian economy, domesticated animals were honoured and deified. We worship snakes, cows and even trees like the peepul, and in the process grow sensitive to the ecological balance in nature that they represent. We do not disrupt in the cycle nor do we abuse it. When a cow dies, it was simply buried underground.

Even when leather and bones are of economic value and utility, animals were not hunted and killed. Rather, domestic and wild animals that died a natural death was sought after, as is the case in modern Indian cottage industry known as Khadi & Village Industries Commission.

Most Hindus are vegetarians simply because that creates the least damage to life forms. The human being, representing the pinnacle of creation, is a co-partner in preserving the harmony that is the God's creation. Whereas might is right in the jungle, compassion and balance is the creed of the human being.

Meat was eaten during the Vedic and pauranic ages. However, this was occasional, generally during yajnas, with the food being formally dedicated to the gods before being distributed.

The cow also has figurative significance in the Vedas. The word 'go' in sanskrit denotes cow, earth, ray of light, and also the Vedas. Lord Indra is said to have destroyed the demon of darkness Vritraa and released the cows (light, knowledge) from the cave of darkness (ignorance).

Customs and Rituals

As you said, certain forms of worship are customary and differ from person to person. What is required is shraddha in some form of worship. Every worship is prayer and prayer is a direct communion with god. Lord Krishna says that even a leaf offered with total devotion pleases him as much as the performance of any elaborate ritual.

Generally certain rules are associated with each ritual, and shraddha involves that we try to perform the ritual as prescribed. There is no sin involved in non-performance or incorrect performance. At most, the desired result may not come. Rules are prescribed so that the person takes the ritual seriously and makes an effort to perform it properly. In a sense, the ritual is the outer manifestation of our inner prayer, and the more sincere the prayer, the greater the pains taken.

Certain periods are considered auspicious or inauspicious for certain activities. These are not absolute rules but only guidelines. There is no sin involved in cutting hair on tuesdays; and such abstinence is prescribed only as a sign of respect for the Shanideva (Saturn God) and as a request for his favours.

For a true devotee, it is said, there is no inauspiciousness whatsoever at any time. That is why you find stories of Hanuman protecting his devotees from the wrath of Shani, and Shiva protecting Markandeya from Yama.

Sadaa Sarvakaaleshu Naasti Tesham Amangalam
Yeshaam Hridi Sthito Bhagavaan
Mangalaayatano Harih. "Always, at all times, there is no inauspiciousness for them in whose heart resides Lord Hari, the abode of auspiciousness.

Prayers and rituals are to draw you nearer to god through shraddha. They are certainly not meant to make you lose your sleep or to make you feel guilty. At the end of every ritual, there is a prayer asking for forgiveness for mistakes of commission or omission in performing the ritual.

We can rarely be 100% perfect in whatever we take up. However our intention to make amends and seek forgiveness helps a great deal. This is why shraddha is so important. With it, even a minor act becomes prayer. Without it, even a major ritual becomes just a pointless physical exercise. All of which goes to prove that it is not the ritual or the mantra alone that works for you - it is you who make it work by invoking its power through shraddha.

Many gods

Q. Christians have only Christ, Muslims only Allah. Sikhs only one god. Why do Hindus have so many gods?

R.

You seem concerned that Hinduism is different from other religions. God is the same in all religions - One, Absolute. God is also the source of creation, the Many.

The Creation, Many, is not really separate from the One. The One can appear as the Many. Every form thus lead you towards the One. Don't get confused by the different forms. Look for the One in the Many.

Like one actor with many roles, the same Lord appears in various manifestations. Our culture has a common name for all Gods. It is called Om. See how all our mantras begin, -- Om Namah Shivaaya, Om Namo Naaraayanaaya, Om Chamundaayai Namah. Shiva is Om, Naaraayanaaya is Om, and Chamundi is Om.

The choice of form is purely personal. But the Lord that you worship is the same Lord that I worship. The Lord of the Christians, Muslims and the Hindus is essentially the same.

Go beyond the form. Go to the content. The Lord is the Essence, the Truth, and the Reality of all. He is in everything. He is everything. In fact He alone is.

There are not many Gods. I wouldn't even say there is "One" God. All I can say is there is "ONLY" God. Whatever exists is God - OM.

Impact of Hinduism

Q. Give me some information how our religion affected the world as a whole.

R.

Sanaatana Dharma has been a mother to many great religions of the world. It has sown the seeds for Buddhism and Jainism, both of which have had a significant impact on the world.

It is the source of the oriental concept of holism - i.e. all round (or well-rounded) approach to situations. It is also the source of the oriental concept of rebirth and karma. Systems analysis has much similarity to the Vedic unfoldment of the "one and the many". And Modern Physics speaks the same language as the Vedanta while explaining the phenomena of basic particles - "it is and it is not".

Sanatana Dharma has made a significant contribution to Philosophy, Astronomy, Mathematics, Ethics, Aesthetics and Fine Arts, Ecology, Political Science, Metallurgy, and a whole lot of other sciences.

It has inspired great world leaders like Gandhi and Vivekananda in the present, Vyaasa and Shankara in the past. It has in it the roots of co-operation and peaceful co-existence that has brought forth the concept of world peace and oneness of the human race.

Most important, it validates all other religions and incorporates them in its own vision of spirituality and pursuit of liberation or Moksha. It is not what religion one belongs to that is important; it is the values and spirituality that are common in all religions that is highlighted in Sanatana Dharma.

Who is a Hindu?

Q. Who is a Hindu? What is Hinduism? Is it a religion?

R.

One who respects or accepts the teachings of the Vedas as revealed to the Rishis or sages, or follows the scriptures like Bhagavad Geeta is a Hindu. In fact, just following the teachings of the saints and sages is adequate for a person to be called a Hindu. "Hinduism" is Sanatana Dharma, - Eternal Law / Order.

Religion involves basically a set of beliefs in some truth higher than mere material existence. It also includes practices and disciplines to help a seeker enhance his/her spiritual life. A religion may or may not involve God

e.g. Maadhyamika Buddhism sees reality as non-existence, of which souls and the universe are the mere manifestations, apparent in nature. Even within a religion, there are differences, and hence there can be different sects and subdivisions, as in Protestant and Catholic, Hinaayaana and Mahaayaana, Sunni and Shia, Dvaita and Advaita, etc.

Hinduism covers all aspects of human endeavour - Dharma, Artha, Kaama and Moksha i.e. Moral Codes, Possessions, Pleasures and Liberation. It is not limited to religious beliefs but includes philosophy, spirituality, ethics and materialism to reveal a holistic vision of life. Hinduism percolates into all aspects of life including fine arts and architecture - even business undertakings start with a prayer, since there is no distinction between secular and sacred in our culture.

Belief or is it a philosophy?

Q. Is Hinduism a belief or is it a philosophy.

R.

The name 'Hindu' is a corruption of 'Sindhu', - the river where our culture flourished in the past. What goes by the name of Hinduism is actually Sanaatana Dharma. Sanaatana Dharma stands for the culture, values, attitudes, practices, beliefs and a holistic worldview of the people of ancient India. These were based on a timeless wisdom that holds good even today and is not restricted to a cult or creed.

The Hindu view of life is holistic and integrates both material & spiritual life through the four pursuits of Dharma, Artha, Kaama and Moksha. It sees the entire creation as an organic whole emanating from a single source, Brahman, and resolving back into it.

Every aspect of creation is interconnected as in a network, and there are no individual independent entities separate from the whole. The total creation constitutes the cosmic form of Brahman who is beyond the limitations of the created forms. Every form in creation is divine and can be visualised as a deity. In some cases, the individual deity is invoked as Brahman, - the source and reality of creation.

Living becomes a spiritual exercise, with individual aspirations being harmonised and balanced to match the greater order of the universe, - Dharma and the Laws of Karma. The individual and the whole form an organic unity.

For instance, consider the waves in the ocean. There are many individual waves in the vast boundless ocean. Form-wise, the ocean and the waves are not the same. In terms of interconnections, the waves are integrated into the ocean and are intimate parts of the whole. In the ultimate analysis, in terms of what essentially is, there is only water and nothing else. The wave and the ocean are nothing but water.

This is how the three schools of Vedanta - Dvaita, Vishishtha-Advaita, and Advaita see reality. Each view is valid in its own place. An understanding of the whole, and aligning of us to the harmony of creation that is the manifestation of the whole, is the message Sanaatana Dharma.

Sanaatana Dharma is not a belief, because it welcomes diverse views and integrates them into the whole. It is not a philosophy (literally 'love of knowledge') or speculation, - rather it is a way of life wherein every aspect of human pursuit, - Dharma, Artha, Kaama and Moksha, are integrated into the vision of the whole.

Samskaaras – life cycle of a Hindu

Q. At present I have been attempting to research Hindu rituals. I have found this very difficult as I don't believe I have come across any written material on the matter. My reading of late has been the Rg Veda and Artharva Veda, however I find that I have been struggling somewhat as without a commentary on these, the concepts, themes and myths are not easily recognisable to myself. If you can offer any guidance on these matters I would be very appreciative.

R.

The most common hindu rituals are garbhadhana (during impregnation) pumsavana (in third month of pregnancy) simanta (in the sixth or eighth month of pregnancy) jatakarma (on the birth of a child) namakarana (naming ceremony on the eleventh day) annaprasana (weaning ceremony) caula (shaving the head, retaining a tuft) upanayana (wearing the sacred thread, and residing with the teacher) samavartana (graduation ceremony) vivaha (marriage ceremony) sraddha (death)

In his book "Hindu Dharma, The Universal Way of Life" Swamii Candrasekharendra Sarasvati defines samskara as a sacrament involving mantras. He mentions forty samskaras:

1. **garbhadhana**

2. **pumsavana**

3. **simanta**

4. **jatakarma**

5. **namakarana**

6. **annaprasana**

7. **caula**

8. **upanayana**

9 -12. The four rites like **prajapatya (Vedavratas)** performed during gurukulavasa

13. **ritual bath** on completion of gurukulavasa

14. **marriage**

15-19. **five mahayajnas** are: brahmayajna (chanting of the Vedas), devayajna (Sacrifices and puja), pitryajna (Tarpana), manusyayajna (Feeding guests) and bhutayajna (offering bali to various creatures)

20-26. **seven pakayajnas** - astaka (& anvastaka), sthalipaka, parvana, sravani, agrahayani, caitri, asvajji

27-33. **seven haviryajnas**: agniyadhana, agnihotra, darsa-purnamasa, agrayana, caturmasya, nirudhapasubandha, sautramani

34-40. **seven somayajnas:** agnistoma, atyagnistoma, uktya, sodasi, vajapeya, atiratra, aptoryama.

"Aupasana is a part of the daily religious routine. Through a pakayajna, aupasana is not included in the group of seven pakayajnas mentioned above. Agnihotra also forms part of the daily routine and is one of the seven haviryajnas. Darsa-purnamasa is a havir-yajna to be performed once in fifteen days. The other five haviryajnas and the seven somayajnas are to be performed once a year or, at least, once in a lifetime.

The five mahayajnas (brahmayajna, devayajna, pitryajna, manusyayajna and bhutayajna) together with agnihotra and aupasana are to be performed every day; darsa-purnamasa and sthalipaka once a fortnight; parvani sraddha once a month. The other yajnas are to be conducted once a year or at least once a lifetime."

- Hindu Dharma, The Universal Way of Life (Voice of the Guru Pujoyasri Candrasekharendra Sarasvati Svami) This book is published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kulapati Munshi Marg, Bombay 400007. This book covers the gamut of hinduism, its culture, rituals, philosophy, customs written by one of the respected Shankaracharyas of our times.

Samskaaras...(continued)

Nitya-karma consists of seven pakayajnas, seven haviryajnas and seven somayajnas.

The Grhyasutras are Smritis that deal with rites in which the aupasana fire is used and pertain to an individual and his family. The seven pakayajnas also belong to these Smritis and are called Smarta-karmas. Aupasana is an additional grhyakarma. The haviryajnas and somayajnas are known as Sruta-karmas and are described in the Kalpa shastras based on Sruti (Vedas).

The aupasana fire (lighted at the time of marriage from that of the groom's father) is divided into two in a ceremony called agniyadhana. One part, called grhyagni, is meant for rites to be performed at home. The daily rite of aupasana is performed in the Grhyagni. The second part, srautagni, is meant for sruta rites. These two sacred fires must be preserved throughout.

Srautagni meant for the sruta rites is in the form of three fires burning in three mounds - Garhapatya, Dakshinagni and Ahavaniya.

No oblations are to be made directly in the Garhapatya mound. Fire must be taken from it and tended in the Dakshinagni mound for rites relating to the forefathers and certain deities. Fire from the Garhapatya is tended in the Ahavaniya mound for making offerings to deities in general. Big sacrifices like somayajnas etc. are to be conducted in the fire taken from the ahavaniya mound to the hall where the sacrifice is held.

Agnihotra is a haviryajna included within sruta-karmas. It too must be performed twice a day. Those who perform agnihotra are called agnihotrins. If the agnihotra fire is extinguished for whatever reason, it must be kindled again through a new adhana (agniyadhana) ceremony. The same applies to the aupasana fire. (Source: "Hindu Dharma, The Universal Way of Life" Swamii Candrasekharendra Sarasvati)

Respect for Religions

Q. How does Hinduism incorporate all forms of belief and worship without damaging any religion?

R.

Hinduism is not limited to a cult or a religion even though it has place for formal religious beliefs and forms of worship. Hinduism is holistic in approach and includes in its ambit lifestyles, duties, ethics, psychological maturity, relative and overall perspectives of events, spiritual practices and meditations, attunement and harmony with nature and creation, search for truth and its fulfilment in terms of realising the underlying unity in and through difference.

It allows and encourages different forms of practices and worship as well as diverse opinions regarding reality. We not only tolerate other religions; we actually validate them as being on the same footing as our own religion. Worshipping Christ or Allah is no different from our standpoint than worshipping Rama or Ganesha. All forms of worship are stepping-stones to the ultimate reality and are equally sacred for us.

The contrast between other religions and Hinduism is that Hinduism offers a holistic paradigm that integrates all differences into an essential unity - the one in many and the many is the one. The one and many are not opposites

- they form the spirit and body respectively. Seen from three different points of view, they can be taken as two totally separate entities, or as extensions of each other, or as essence and shadow; - this is how the three schools of Vedanta i.e. Dvaita, Vishishtha-Advaita, and Advaita present reality.

The integrating quality of the Hindu thought is able to reconcile and incorporate the radically opposite streams of thought, philosophy and religion. That Hinduism has survived over the last few thousand centuries and has integrated into itself the strengths of the major world religions without feeling threatened, is itself proof of its universal vision. The sighted person who sees the whole elephant is not threatened by the claims of the 10 blind men.

Astrology

Q. Why does Hinduism believe too much on faith and astrology?

R.

Yes, Hinduism does incorporate it into its philosophy. But astrology is not the preserve of the Hindus alone. It has been prevalent the world over. The difference is that Hinduism integrated astrology intimately into its worldview and gave it its due whereas in the west, astrology developed independently.

The perspective of Hinduism extends beyond this life - into the past before our birth, and into the future beyond our death. Creation is a cycle and time is not linear but cyclic. The present is connected to the past and the future through the principle of causation, resulting in a patterns that yields itself to analysis and inference. Patterns tend to repeat themselves and can be often relied as predictors of forthcoming events.

Another relevant aspect is the basic unity of the universe. Everything is interconnected with everything else in an organic system e.g. our body, our ecosystem etc. We have begun to predict weather, even though we are at the mercy of multiple parameters that are constantly varying and spread over different parts of the world. We diagnose diseases through symptoms like temperature, colour changes and the like. The same principle applies with respect to astrology. The stars and planets do not rule our lives; rather they are as much an effect of the same causes that have caused events in our lives.

Does all this mean that our lives are totally controlled, run by destiny? Not really. Patterns suggest probability of events taking place, and probabilities are not certainties. When we consider the multiple parameters model of the universe, the distinction between cause and effect is reduced significantly, since each parameter is a cause as well as an effect of the other parameters. In a circle, can you tell which point comes before and which later? And has not the poet said: "When you pluck a flower, you are shaking a star?"

Another significant difference between western and oriental astrology is that in the former, the system is predictive (and absolute) whereas in the latter the system is diagnostic (and curative). Indian astrology imputes destiny to the individual's own past karmas (in past lives).

As human beings, our choice of action may be limited by the past causes, but is not totally negated. The horsepower of your car is destiny, whereas your steering wheel control is free will. We can choose to be or not to be different, we can choose to break through our past or to confirm the past, we are free to look forward to a significantly different future or to live in the dungeons of the past. The steering wheel is in our hand.

It is good to know about past influences and causes, for these give us a sort of map regarding where we stand today. The past is not meant for regret or for pride; the past is dead and gone. But it leaves behind in its trail the present and we have to deal with the present. Any insight into the past can help in this work. We can set more realistic and reachable targets when we are made aware of our strengths and weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT). We look back only to learn.

Management Principles

Q. Can you please relate Hinduism and management? How can Vedas be connected to management?

R.

One can certainly draw inspiration from Indian Philosophy and Traditions for dealing with management and other aspects of life. Hinduism has a lot to give, if one goes beyond specific forms and enters into the spirit behind it. As I see it, the spirit goes beyond all cultures and religions.

Management is all about dealing with people and systems. And Bhagavad Geeta is all about right attitudes, objective thinking, effective communications, motivation, and personal growth - all of which are directly concerned with management.

Vedas deal with human goals - dharma, artha, kaama and moksha. And management involves motivating oneself and others through these Purusharthas.

Vedas also speak about Yagna, where the individuals and the divine forces co-operate for mutual benefit. Management Teams are based on mutual co-operation and fulfilment of mutual needs.

One God

Q. There is a power above all of us. I see all the 'gods' as one. I respect all 'religions'. The teachings of all 'religions' are same. So, why not have just 'one god' for the whole of mankind to make things simple in this 'complicated' world?

R.

Yes, it would be simpler to have one god for all mankind. However, it is not the "many" that create problems. "Many" actually add colour and zing into our lives. Rather, it is our divisive thinking that is responsible for creating problems.

It is we who create differences with our narrow thinking. The world is one. We draw boundaries and create nations. The ocean is one. It is we who draw territorial boundaries for the seas. Humanity is one. It is we who draw distinctions based on creed, colour and religion. Note that even the children of "one god" within the same religion have their own internal differences.

We divide everything into black and white, into right and wrong, and therein lies the problem. Until we re-evaluate our thinking and see the possibility that there are more than one "correct answer", all of which can be right from their own points of view, our society will be fragmented and fractured spiritually and otherwise.

Having "one god" is not the ultimate solution. Rather, we have to re-educate our minds to see "oneness" in "difference".

Ishtha Devata

Q. I have had this spiritual conflict - every time I meditate and chant mantras to Ganesha and Krishna and Vishnu, I have Lord Brahma on my mind the entire time. Since Lord Brahma is rarely worshipped, why is He on my mind every waking hour?

R.

I wonder whether you are familiar with the concept of the Ishtha Devata. It means that every person can freely worship a deity of his/her choice. Worshipping the Lord in a particular form is something personal, and the Vedic tradition present a variety of devatas to choose from. Sometimes, one particular form worshipped over generations becomes the traditional family deity.

The Vedic deities of the past have been replaced by the deities of the Puraanas, -- Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, Paarvati and Ganapati being most prevalent among the Hindus today. This is not to say that the gods have changed. The Vedas present the same God in different forms, and each form is regarded with the same respect and devotion.

In fact, the Vedic vision reveals the entire creation as enjoying oneness with the Lord. Hence whatever exists is but the Lord. It is not ONE God - we say there is ONLY God. The five elements are gods, the rivers, ocean and mountains are gods, the city of Banares is God, the earth and heavens are gods. Tell me what is not God?

I am happy that you have chosen Brahma as your personal deity for worship. The Lord will bless you with his grace. Do not ask why your devata is different from others. Like different rivers leading to the same ocean, any forms of worship reach the same Lord.

There is beauty in diversity, as long as you keep in mind the essential unity that exists deeper down. Brahma is Vishnu, Brahma is Mahesh, Brahma is the entire creation. Brahma alone is.

Teaching Children

Q. How do you teach Hinduism to a child in a mother's womb?

R.

Don't you think all of us learnt about our culture from inside our mothers' womb? Just as they say - "England's battles were won in the playfields of Eton", would it not be proper to say that Hindu culture flourished and thrived on the laps of mothers? To educate a man is to educate a single person. To educate a woman is to educate a whole family and posterity.

Criticisms

Q. How to chide-off criticism towards Hinduism?

R.

Let us start looking inward at our strengths and weaknesses. Instead of resenting criticism, let us start understanding our culture and religion better and see whether criticisms have a basis. All things that glitter is not gold. So also what is ancient is not necessarily good. We have to separate the grain from the chaff. The spirit lives long after the flesh has deteriorated and died. So too, cultural forms will die out and yield to new forms, while the spirit behind it continues fresh as ever.

Change goes hand in hand with the changeless, and we need not need to feel threatened by other forms and cultures if our roots are well founded. As Gandhi said: "The doors and windows of my house are open to the winds of all cultures; but I refuse to be blown away by them."

Individual approach

Q. Why does Hinduism recommend approaching the divine individually?

R.

Yes, Hinduism does encourage an individual approach to reality. Hinduism is not a cult or an organised religion. It has no hierarchy or a pope to set down the law. It allows diverse forms of worship and freedom of thought.

Spirituality is always personal and individual, - it is not a set of exercises to be done and finished with. Each person is given the opportunity to grow at his own time and pace, and choose the practices that best suits his personal growth. No two individuals are alike, and Hinduism gives everyone adequate room for all to grow.

No system of thought or philosophy is looked down upon, and each school of opinion is considered as a link in the dialectics of thesis, antithesis and synthesis that helps one ultimately to understand the truth in a holistic way. Truth is not opposed to any system since it goes beyond opposites. Rather, truth goes beyond systems and integrates them within an overall scheme - a grand unification!

Hinduism encourages the student to experiment and discover for himself the nature of reality while at the same time giving enough guidance and support so that the seeker can always seek clarification and feedback. For the less enterprising student, Hinduism throws in many practices, activities, group worship etc., so that no individual is left out from the pursuit of truth.

It is another thing that realisation of truth may be a matter of many lifetimes for many. What matters is that every step takes a person that much closer towards the goal.

Hindu New Year

Q. Most of the Indians are confused about Hindu New Year. We have Tamil New Year, Bengali New Year, Malayalam New Year, Punjabi New Year, Marathi New Year, Gujarati New Year, Ugadi New Year, etc. coming on different days. Please explain how the Hindu calendar began and what are the different types of panchagams.

R.

The Hindu new year is based on two different calendars - Sauramaana Yugadi and Chaandramaana Yugadi. One is based on the position of the sun while the other is based on the phase of the moon.

Generally the Tamil and Malayali new year comes around April 14th whereas Marathi, Andhra, and Karnataka new year comes on a different day - (April 5th this year). Occasionally the day is celebrated one day apart in different states due to differences in interpreting the calendar.

There are also different eras like Vikram Samvat (Gujarat) and Shalivahana Saka which have separate calendars created in honour of heroic kings of the past. These differences are akin to the differences between the Christian and the Muslim calendar designed in honour of individual personalities.

Siddhas

Q. who are Siddhas and do they exist amongst us?

R.

As far as I know, Siddhas are people who have mastered themselves through yoga and self knowledge. There is a mention of Siddhas in the puranas as a group of semi-divinities that go along with gandharvas, kinnaras, sadhyas, guhyakas, devas, etc. In the Geeta, the Lord mentions Kapila Muni as the chief among Siddhas. There is also a book called "Siddha Geeta" which deals with self knowledge.

In esoteric literature, siddhas are spoken of as higher evolved souls who guide human beings without being seen. Whether they really exist among us is a matter of faith, I guess. What do you think?

Dattatreya

Q. Could you please tell me if Dattatreya was originally a human being?

R.

Dattatreya was the avataar of the three gods - Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The story goes that these gods wanted to test the purity of Anasooya, the wife of Sage Atri. Having approached her in the guise of mendicants (wandering monks), they asked that she serve them without wearing any garments. Anasooya, realising that the holy men were none other than the Trinity of Gods, reduced them to the form of babies and obliged them.

The spouses Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, prayed to Anasooya to change back the Gods into their original form. The Gods assumed their previous form and blessed Anasooya with a baby who had the combined essence of all the three Gods. This child Dattatreya grew up to become a great sage and is pictured as being followed by four pet dogs representing the four Vedas.

Reference Books

Q. Please let me know about some books through which I can enrich my knowledge about Hinduism especially Vedas.

R.

You can read the History Culture Chandrashekharendra Saraswati. This is an elaborate treatise written by the previous pontiff of Kanchi Shankaracharya Muth. In addition you can read Krishnavatara - The Book of Vyaasa by K M Munshi to have a glimpse of the Vedic religion. The translation of the Upanishads with short notes by Swami Swahanananda of Ramakrishna Mission is also recommended.

Universalism

Q. If the Vedas, Vedanta and Varnashrama are divine revelation, why were they not revealed to the whole world ? Why only to India ?

R.

The Vedas are said to be revealed knowledge. It could have been revealed anywhere and not necessarily in India. All I can say is that Indians had a great value for learning and kept this knowledge alive, practically intact, as can be seen from the great pains taken by the Brahmins to memorise whole sections of the Vedas and recite it by heart. It is possible that the Vedas were universal knowledge but were received by the sages in the language familiar to them - Sanskrit.

Other races and traditions of the world too speak of revelation as can be seen from the Old testament and other scriptures. Seen from the mystical point of view, Christian and Muslim scriptures seem to reflect almost the same standpoints that are found in the Vedas. Note how Jesus spoke - "The Father and I are one and the same" and "The kingdom of Heaven is within you".

It is a different thing that the official church interpretation does not allow for the mystical approach.

Regarding Varnaashrama : this was not something absolute in Vedic religion. Most Rishis were kshatriyas, Vaalmiki was a hunter, Vyaasa was the son of a fishergirl. Varnas were not watertight as it became in later times.

During the early Vedic period, Varnaashrama was a principle rather than a rule. The idea was maintain culture over centuries by each family specialising in a particular branch of knowledge and profession. It was much later that some professions were considered low and inferior.

All said and done, it was the Varnaashrama tradition that kept Hinduism alive in all its facets - be it in sculpture, vaastu shaastra, scriptures, fine arts, yoga, aayurveda, astronomy, history, literature, temple traditions, martial arts, environmental science, logic, philosophy, and the like.

It took many generations of artisans to complete the great temples of ancient times - all because there was a continuity of vision and skill that was passed on from father to son through the ages. Every profession was noble in the sense that each person offered his/her skill unto society and considered it a form of worship unto the Lord.

Mlechchaas

Q. The Manu Smriti talks about Mlechchas (Barbarians). If everyone were

We have the white race, black race, asian race, and the red race. They all have different customs, different systems altogether. How can one explain that they have common ancestry ?

R.Mlechhas were people from outside the Vedic fold - what we would now call aliens or foreigners. The story of Manu as the progenitor of humanity is figurative. Even if is taken literally, it is possible that over period of time, some families got cut of from the mainline traditions and developed their own customs and practices.

The Vedas speak about Devas as well as Daanavas being born from Kashyapa Rishi. Isn't there a world of difference between the two?

Difference in races are not only genetical but also due to changes in climatic conditions. The people living in the Tundras definitely need not have the same features as that of one living in the equator.

Havan

Q. I deeply believe in Hinduism. I have always been interested in performing "havas". Since childhood I believed that "agni" is very powerful and purifies the self and surroundings. Please guide me how a havana should be performed and what are the correct mantras that should be recited.

R.

Your best bet for learning about havanas is through Arya Samaj. If there is a branch close to you, you can try approaching them. They are quite informal and explain the mantras in detail. The whole ceremony is kept short and sweet and they encourage you to do it at home.

However they do not encourage idol worship in temples etc., and you will have to decide whether you want to follow their philosophy. The Arya Samaj believes only in the Vedas and not in the Puranas and other related scriptures.

f

Kumbhabhishekham

Q. I want to know why Kumbabishekam is performed in our temples? what is your personal opinion on this extravagance?

R.

Kumbhabhishekam is a ritual that is supposed to give or restore sanctity to a temple newly built or one which is renovated. Along with the praana pratishtha, it makes the temple alive with the sacred presence of the lord. If the main deity in the temple is the heart, the temple itself is the body, and both have to be kept in good repair.

It is also a social function that brings people together in a common cause and has a beneficial bonding effect that is sorely lacking in today's world. And temples and religious institutions provide a platform for keeping alive our cultural and spiritual heritage, and keep the spirit of the people alive. And faith is a very big thing to people. Have you not heard this - "When everything is lost, there is still hope?"

That many of our rituals and ceremonies have become corrupted and caricatured is a tragedy. What we require is to educate people about the significance of these rituals and the way to extract maximum benefit from them. Yes, we can do with a little less extravagance too, in the bargain.

Applying Vermillion

Q. I want to know the significance of putting vermilion on the forehead.

R.

Kumkum (vermilion) is red in colour - the color of fire and also of blood. It is symbolic of purity and commitment. Applied on the forehead near the eyebrows, it represents the third eye of knowledge. It also serves as ornamentation for this body-temple which houses the Lord within. Nothing including your body really belongs to you - they are all the Lord's creation.

The bindi or dot that hindu ladies wear on their forehead, is actually a fashionable substitute for the sindoor or kumkum that signifies auspiciousness. The sindoor is worn from the time of marriage onwards by the woman along with the mangala sootra. Kumkum when applied to the parted hair of the bride represents symbolically the consummation of the marriage in northern tradition .

Chanting before eating meals

Q. What is the significance of chanting Bhagavad Geeta - Ch.15 before eating food?

R.

Chapter 15 talks about the Creator who is manifest as the creation. He is the effulgence in the sun that energises, and is the light in the moon that nourishes the plant kingdom.

Through his nourishing sap, he manifests as food ready for digestion. He is also the digestive fire that assimilates the food that is eaten in four different ways (i.e. masticating, swallowing, sucking and licking).

Thus He is the Eater and He is the Eaten. Everything is the Lord. It is this Lord we remember whenever we eat a meal, and hence the 15th chapter.

The prefix 'Maha'

Q. I have been praying, since I started practicing Hinduism, in a personal sense to Brahma. But in my mantras I've referred to him and his consort as MahaBrahma and MahaSaraswati. I was wondering if the prefix of Maha has any more or less work on the mantra(s) or not?

R.

You are right. The word Maha means Great. Referring to the Lord with the Maha prefix makes a lot of difference in the devotee's attitude. It invokes shraddha or intense faith in the person, which is necessary for any prayer to work its way.

It is good that you are beginning with a personal prayer and following it by the mantra. Generally the mantra is a sound symbol and even the mere chanting is a prayer in itself.

Demise of Avataar Purusha

Q. I was recently told by a learned person that Lord Krishna was killed accidentally by a hunter's arrow and that Lord Rama ultimately committed suicide. Is this true ? If so in which religious books is this mentioned ?

R.

Yes, it is true. The incidents are found in the Mahaabhaarata and Raamaayaana respectively. Krishna's accidental death by a hunter's arrow was the result of a curse. Krishna accepted and submitted gracefully to his fate as the purpose of his avataar was already fulfilled. The same is the case with Raama who having fulfilled his duties walked into the Sarayu river and gave up his life.

Sects of Hinduism

Q. I'd like to ask about ISKCON controversy. Some say that ISKCON is not Hindu or that they are not an authoritative tradition. For me here in the West is quite a difficult thing to figure things out - what is what. I want to know what is a view of Indians towards ISKCON and how should I understand this controversy correctly.

R.

ISKCON was a society inspired by Sri La Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, a swami from Bengal and a devotee of Lord Krishna. He follows in the tradition of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a great saint and devotee of the previous century, also from Bengal.

The mainstream traditions of Hinduism are the Advaitins, Vishishtha Advaitins and Dvaitins, all tracing a common source in Vedanta portions of the Vedas.

There are also minor variations of these traditions. Whereas most Hindus look up to Krishna as an avataar of Lord Vishnu, poets like Jayadeva and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu pictured Krishna as the Supreme Lord with Vishnu being seen only as a manifestation of Lord Krishna.

The bhakti tradition of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu gave rise to the dynamic dance form of worshipping the Lord, and chanting the name of Krishna through uninhibited dance is considered as ultimate devotion.

Swami Prabhupada took this tradition to the USA where it caught the imagination of young westerners looking for meaning and order in life. The movement has taken on a rigidity akin to western religions where religious conversions are the order of the day. Thus you find shaven monks in orange clothes at airports and public places entreating people to buy books and flowers and chant Hare Krishna. Very often, even Hindus are put off by American sadhus unabashedly peddling religion in the streets.

Inter-faith marriage

Q. I am a practicing Hindu for many years. I am married to an ethnic Indian who is a born Hindu. Should I change my name since I have become a Hindu? I prefer to keep my given name but will consider changing my name if necessary.

R.

I do not see any necessity of you changing your name for the moment. You yourself too have preferred to remain Kim. Hinduism respects all cultures and religions and is all inclusive. To practice being a Hindu, you do not have to stop being a Christian or a Muslim.

If you wish, you could have an additional Hindu name just to feel at home in the Hindu culture. I wish you the very best.

Hindu sites

Q. I am looking for a good site for the beliefs of hinduism.

R.

I found this site <http://www.san.beck.org> quite interesting. Sanderson Beck has written on many religious, philosophical and cultural topics including Yoga, Sankhya, and Buddhism. You may also find the following pages useful.

You can also access the hinduism through the following sites:

[Http://www.vedanet.com/resources_hindu.htm](http://www.vedanet.com/resources_hindu.htm) [Http://www.hindulinks.org](http://www.hindulinks.org) (one of these links leads to Hindu Universe/ Hindunet.org)

Varnas – Caste?

Q. Does one become a braahmana only by birth or by one's deeds? Which is correct according to shastras?

R.

The scriptures make it very clear: Janmanaa Jaayate Shoodrah Samskaaraat Dvija Uchchayate "A person is born low-caste, he becomes a Braahmana by initiation into the scriptures."

There is an Upanishad story about Satyakaama asking for initiation from his Guru. Satyakaama disclosed to his teacher that neither he nor his mother knew the name of his father. The teacher was highly pleased by his honesty and promptly accepted Satyakaama as his disciple. Honesty had become the criterion for Satyakaama to be accepted as a Braahmana.

It is said that Vishwamitra was born a kshatriya but became a Braahmana by his deeds. He is acclaimed by everyone as a Brahmarishi.

The four divisions (Varnas) of Braahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shoodra were originally drawn in terms of guna, not birth. Varna stands for colour and represents the gunas - Sattva (white), Rajas (red) and Tamas (black). The Braahmanas were predominantly Sattvik, Kshatriyas Raajasic backed with Sattva, Vaishyas Raajasic backed by Tamas, and Shoodras predominantly Taamasic. Karmas were allotted according to the gunas -

Braahmanas maintained the spiritual traditions and lived a simple life of limited needs. These needs were taken care of by society. Kshatriyas maintained the military traditions and government. Vaishyas engaged in trade, commerce and agriculture. Shoodras were the service class and lived on employment. These divisions were similar to what we find in ashrams where the inmates themselves are allotted their respective duties which they carry out while pursuing their personal spiritual practices. Each varna is considered divine as they have been born of the limbs of Lord Brahma.

Later on custom transformed the divisions into water-tight compartments as the four castes. To accommodate the intermingling of castes by marriage, the castes multiplied until it lost all relevance to the original purpose of Varnas. The caste system of today is really a fragmentation of the original concept of an interconnected healthy society.

In terms of cycles of creation, each of us have gone through millions of births and a shoodra of today might have been a braahmana of yesterday! What do you think?

Saints have appeared in all ages and have talked about the oneness of humanity - in the eyes of God, there is no high born or low born. When God does not judge, do we have the right to judge someone by her birth? Should we not look into her spirit and accept her for what she is? If the Vedas have spoken about Varnas, let us look into its original spirit and appreciate the context, rather than trying to quote it to justify the degenerate practices, born of custom, that have set in over the length of time.

Books on Vedas

Q. I want some information about books on Vedas.

R.

A Vedic Reader for Students by A A Macdonell is a good book to begin with.

Rigveda, Yajurveda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda are available separately with english translation by Devi Chand covers in detail all the mantras found in the vedas.

A comprehensive History of Vedic Literature: Brahmana and Aranyaka Works by Satya Shrava will give you detailed information about the Brahmanas and Aranyakas.

Eight Upanishads translated by Swami Gambhirananda with commentary by Adi Shankaracharya gives you a fairly detailed understanding of the Upanishads. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad translated by Swami Madhavananda and Chhandogya Upanishad translated by Swami Madhavananda are the other major Upanishads.

All these books are ideally studied through a master. Otherwise they can be highly confusing and misleading.

These books are available from Chetana Book Centre and other leading booksellers.

Bhrigu Samhita

Q. How was the Bhrigu Samhita prepared? Is it true that it can predict the past present and future of any individual ever born? Also, does it still exist, if so where?

R.

The Bhrigu Samhita is an ancient form of predictions written on palm leaf manuscripts and attributed to the sage Bhrigu. It is also known as naadi shaastra. Manuscripts are available with some astrologers in South India and also in the Saraswati Mahal library in Tanjore, I am told.

The entire text is said to have been written intuitively, and is supposed to contain individual predictions and answers to specific questions. The appropriate pages are selected by comparing certain details concerning the person with similar details mentioned in the pages. People are often surprised at finding their names, parent's names, etc. in the manuscripts that were written over thousand years ago.

Rather than basing the predictions on birthcharts and horoscopes, the Bhrigu Samhita is said to be a record of premonitions regarding incidents occurring in the lives of individuals spanning over thousands of years - something similar to Nostradamus's predictions in a way.

As to the accuracy of predictions, I think each person has to decide that for himself or herself as it is a matter of opinion, and there are votaries to argue for or against it.

Krishna - Symbolism

Q. What does Krishna's flute signify, and why does he have a cow in his picture, and why are his legs always crossed???

R.

If you are looking for metaphorical meaning, I would say the flute represents the wise person who has resolved his ego and allows the music of the Lord to flow through him. The cow traditionally represents the Vedas or the teachings of the Lord. As for the crossed legs, it represents the grace of the dancer - for after all isn't the Lord dancing the cosmic dance of creation? Perhaps you have a different explanation?

Q. For several years I have had an intense interest and some involvement in Hinduism. Currently I am writing a book on Hinduism and this is partly why I seek correspondence. The other reason is for my own personal growth and unfoldment. I wish to know where I could find sincere and knowledgeable Hindus to correspond with.

R.

I welcome your correspondence. My name is Uday Acharya and I am a student of Vedanta associated with Swami Dayananda Saraswati and the late Swami Chinmayananda.

You can also write to Swami Tadatmananda in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, USA (arsha@epix.net), Swami Sakshatkritananda in Rishikesh, India (sakshat@hotmail.com) or Swamini Brahmaprakashananda in Anaikatti, Coimbatore, India (brahmapr@eth.net).

Location of altar

Q. Which deity's picture should adorn the inside of the home front door. Which is the best location and direction to place an altar. Is there a specific ritual or instruction needed to place the altar.

R.

Since I have not studied Vaastu shaastra, I cannot answer the questions you have asked. As a layman, I can only state that the altar is generally placed to the east or north within the house. East is the direction of sunrise, and north is the direction of immortality.

If the altar contains just pictures or small images of deities, there need not be an elaborate ritual to place the deities. In a temple generally, the praana pratishtha is done to install life force in the idol. For large images and for special objects of worship like saligraama (representing Vishnu) etc. kept at home, strict observances for pooja such as daily rituals are enjoined.

In case such pooja is not done at home, such images are generally taken and left in a temple where regular rituals can be offered. In case of doubt, the temple priest or a learned person can be consulted in regard to the rituals associated with the deities kept at home.

na hi jnaanena sadrisham pavitram iha vidyate - (bhagavad gita)

HINDUISM

FAQs

- End -



- [Uday Acharya](#)

Trustee, [Vidya Vaaridhi Trust](#)

Director, [Mindflex – The Learning Organization](#)

A-101, Mani Bhavan, 11th Road, Chembur, Mumbai 400071

