

## more short answers to

## Real Questions ABOUT HINDUISM



**HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION** Promoting Understanding, Tolerance and Pluralism.

## Overview

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an advocacy organization providing a progressive voice for over two million Hindu Americans. The Foundation interacts with and educates leaders in public policy, academia, media and the public at large about Hinduism and global issues concerning Hindus, such as religious liberty, the portrayal of Hinduism, hate speech, hate crimes and human rights. By promoting the Hindu and American ideals of understanding, tolerance and pluralism, HAF stands firmly against hate, discrimination, defamation and terror.

The Hindu American Foundation is not affiliated with any religious or political organizations or entities. HAF seeks to serve Hindu Americans across all *sampradayas* (Hindu religious traditions) regardless of race, color, national origin, citizenship, caste, gender, sexual orientation, age and/or disability.

Hindu Americans comprise one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. Of the one billion Hindus worldwide, the Hindu American population currently numbers over two million, but this does not include the estimated 32 million others who derive inspiration from Hindu spirituality and practice Hindu teachings such as yoga and meditation. With growing numbers comes an increasing awareness of a place in American dialogue and the need for the accurate portrayal of the faith in line with its beliefs and practices.

The Hindu American Foundation presents herein, some short answers to common questions about Hinduism. This has been created with the help of noted Hinduism scholars and religious leaders. We hope this will serve as a useful primer for many.



## I've heard some Hindus use the term Sanatana Dharma. What is that?

Sanatana Dharma and Hinduism are synonymous. The term Sanatana Dharma, loosely translated as "Eternal Law or Way," is self-referential. The term "Hindu" however, is a 12th century Persian abstraction referring to the Indic civilization they found espousing certain beliefs, practices and a way of life on the banks of the Indus (therefore Hindu) river. Over the centuries, the diverse followers of Sanatana Dharma have adopted the references of Hindu and Hinduism. These followers include those who accept the scriptural sanctity of the Vedas and other Hindu scripture; believe in one all-pervasive Divine which has no form (Brahman) or manifests and is worshiped in many and different forms (Ishvara); believe in the laws of karma, dharma and reincarnation; and accept the ultimate goal of liberation (moksha). Other terms used to refer to Hinduism include Vedic, Sanskritic, Yogic, Indic and Ancient Indian.

## Do Hindus have Commandments?

Hinduism is a family of traditions that emphasizes experience and evaluation and thus, offers overarching guidelines rather than absolute lists of do's and don'ts or commandments in regulating individual behavior. For a Hindu, all actions are to be guided by *dharma*. Hindu ethical values flow from one's understanding of the nature of reality and inform the Hindu understanding of right and wrong. [See *What is Dharma*?]

Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* provides a very succinct codification of ten principles which are also found in numerous sources of Hindu scripture and teachings and considered the foundations for dharmic action. Of the ten, five are *yamas*, or guides for social behavior, and five are *niyamas*, or guides for personal behavior. The five *yamas* include non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, sexual responsibility and abstention from greed. The five *niyamas* include cleanliness, contentment, austerity, scriptural study and loving devotion to God.

## What is moksha?

The ultimate purpose and goal for a Hindu's religious and spiritual practice is to attain *moksha*. *Moksha* is achieved through Self-realization (*atma-jnana*) or realization of one's true, divine nature. Hindus believe that each individual (anything living) is a divine soul, but that spiritual ignorance leads one to identify the self completely with the body and ego, thereby forgetting the divine nature of not only one's self, but all of existence. *Moksha* is characterized by the overcoming of spiritual ignorance; the complete elimination of material desires and attachments; the perfected ability to live in the present moment and experience absolute peace; and most importantly, the awakening of pure compassion towards all. *Moksha* also translates to liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*). Someone may attain *moksha* during his or her lifetime or upon the death of his or her physical body.

## What is the red dot many Hindu women wear on their forehead?

The "red dot" or *bindi*, once primarily a symbol of marriage, has largely become a fashionable accessory for Hindu females of all ages, regardless of their marital status. Traditionally, *bindis* were red or maroon in color, circular in shape, made of vermilion paste (*kumkum*) and applied with the ring finger of the right hand. Today, *bindis* come in all shapes, sizes and colors and are often self-adhesive for convenience.

The male version of forehead markings is called a *tilaka* and can be made of *kumkum*, sandalwood or sacred ash. It is applied in a variety of shapes including lines, U-shapes and dots. The *tilaka* can be representative of an individual's deity tradition. The adornment of *tilakas* are not as prevalent as *bindis*. However, the marking of either is amongst the first requisite steps in most rituals and sacred ceremonies.

Both *bindis* and *tilakas* are placed approximately one centimeter above the center of the eyebrows, which is considered to be the sixth chakra, *ajna*, in *Kundalini* Yoga. The *bindi* is associated with the worship of God as the feminine divine. It is also indicative of the conceptual "third eye of spiritual wisdom," which Shiva, the greatest of Yogis, is depicted as having. *Bindis* and *tilakas* may also represent interdependence of both the feminine and masculine aspects of the Divine. Lastly, the *bindi* and *tilaka* serve as reminders of a seeker's ultimate goal of enlightenment, liberation or *moksha*.

## How often is a Hindu supposed to pray?

Prayer is integral to Hindu practice. Many follow set, obligatory guidelines in terms of specificity of prayers as well as timing, frequency and length while others are more fluid and individualized in their practice. One is not necessarily guaranteed *moksha* upon the performance of certain types or amounts of prayer nor is one condemned for lack of prayer, but progress towards *moksha* is proportional to spiritual effort. Hindus may pray at a home altar which is usually placed in a dedicated space; at a temple; or elsewhere (and without a altar). Prayers may be to a specific deity or set of deities or to no deity in particular. Prayer may also vary in form and include:

- Rituals and offerings conducted by the individual or a priest
- Chanting of a particular deity's name or deity specific mantra (*japa*) using a *mala*, a looped thread holding 108 beads that is used as an aid to keep count
- Chanting of time specific *shlokas*, including upon waking, while bathing, while lighting a sacred oil lamp, prior to eating and prior to retiring for the day
- Chanting of *shlokas* for peace and universal well-being (including nature)
- · Singing of devotional poems and songs
- Meditating
- Studying scripture

On special occasions, such as the purchase of a new home, Hindus may sponsor a prayer ceremony at their local temple or invite a priest to their home to conduct a prescribed ceremony. Rites and rituals may vary amongst various *sampradayas*. [See *Do Hindus belong to different denominations*?]



## Do Hindus believe in heaven or hell?

Because Hindus believe in *karma* and reincarnation, the concept of heaven and hell as worlds of eternal glory or damnation do not exist in Hinduism. Hindus also do not ascribe to the concept of Satan or devil that is in eternal opposition to God. [See *What is Karma?* and *Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?*]

Some Hindus may believe in what is described in scriptures as two planes of existence, *svarga* and *naraka*, that can be likened to heaven and hell, respectively. Neither are permament or eternal. Both are intermediary planes of existence in which the soul might exhaust a portion of its karmic debt or surplus before taking physical birth once again to strive for *moksha*. [See *What is moksha*?]

# Why are so many Hindu Gods depicted blue in color or as animals?

The depiction of some Gods as blue toned is an example of the importance of symbolism in Hinduism. Blue, the color of the sky, represents the limitlessness of the sky and universe. Blue is also the color of water, which is life-sustaining. Swami Chinmayanada, a spiritual leader, explained that the human eye sees that which is infinite as blue, so the blue tone serves as a reminder of the Divine's infiniteness.

Because Hinduism teaches that all of nature is Divine, Hindus believe that God manifests in the various forms that are found in nature, including animals, rivers, mountains and earth. For example, Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles, is depicted with an elephant head which symbolizes wisdom, as elephants are recognized to be among the wisest of animals. Hanuman, worshipped as the perfect devotee and depicted as a monkey, symbolizes the individual's ability to quiet the ever racing human mind through loving devotion to God and selfless service.



Do Hindus belong to different denominations? If so, can they intermarry?

Hinduism is not divided by denomination, but by other categories, including deity traditions, *sampradaya*, *parampara* and *darshana*. Most Hindus belong to one of four major deity traditions—*Shaivas*, *Shaktas*, *Vaishnavas* and *Smartas*. While all traditions share many beliefs and practices, the central deity worshipped and certain philosophical tenets differ. *Shaivas* primarily worship forms of Lord Shiva, *Shaktas* worship Shakti, or the Divine Mother, in Her various forms, *Vaishnavas* worship forms of Lord Vishnu and *Smartas* worship different forms of six major deities including Lord Shiva, Shakti, Lord Vishnu, Lord Ganesha, Lord Subrahmanya and Lord Surya, holding them all to be *Ishvara*, or forms of *Brahman*, the eternal, infinite, unchanging principle that is the substratum of the universe and is both immanent and transcendent.

Each deity tradition may branch into *sampradayas*. Adherents of a *sampradaya* have familial connections and/or strong faith in the heightened spirituality, divine experiences and philosophical knowledge of the founder and/or current *swami* (spiritual head) of the *sampradaya*. Hindus may freely choose between *sampradayas*. A *sampradaya* following a particular lineage or succession of *swamis* is said to be of a particular *parampara*. Hindus of different deity traditions, *sampradaya* and *parampara* can intermarry although many choose to marry within these branches. [See *What are the six major schools of thought in Hinduism?*]

## What are the six major schools of thought in Hinduism?

Over the ages, various schools of theology developed in Hinduism through a dynamic tradition of philosophical inquiry and debate. From timeless and universal questions, such as the purpose of life to the relationship between humans and the Divine, emerged many schools of thoughts, or *darshanas*. *Darshana* literally means "seeing." In Hindu teachings, *darshana* relates to the different ways of "seeing" the Divine and attaining *moksha*, or liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Six

*darshanas* are recognized as the most influential include *Sankhya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Nyaya*, *Mimamsa*, *Yoga* and *Vedanta*. While each school is comprehensive and complex, they are succinctly summarized below:

- Vaisheshika: considered one of the most ancient atomic theories founded by Sage Kanada who held that all matter is made up of atoms which are activated through Divine intervention. Vaisheshika and Nyaya eventually merged.
- Nyaya: a system of logic proving the existence of the Divine and other core concepts like *karma*. Nyaya insists that nothing is acceptable unless it is in accordance with reason and experience. The thoroughness of Nyaya logic and epistemology influenced succeeding schools of thought.
- Sankhya: considered one of the oldest schools of thought, Sankhya divides all of existence into two categories: *Purusha* (divine consciousness) and *Prakriti* (matter). Very little *Sankhya* literature survives today, and there is some controversy over whether or not the system is dualistic because it propounds the existence of these two categories.
- *Mimamsa* or *Purva Mimamsa*: interprets the rules of Vedic ritual, proffering perfection in ritual as a path towards *moksha*.
- Yoga: more aptly Raja Yoga, focuses on quieting the mind through an eight limb system (Ashtanga yoga) as described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras for a balanced life and ultimately moksha.
- Vedanta: arguably the most influential on modern Hinduism and relies primarily on transcending one's identification with the physical body for liberation. The means by which an individual can transcend one's self-identity is through right knowledge, meditation, devotion, selfless service, good works amongst other religious and spiritual disciplines. Major subschools of Vedanta include Advaita, Dvaita and Vishishtadvaita.

## What are the major Hindu holidays?

Holidays and their celebrations are richly diverse. There are some holidays that have come to be widely celebrated. Generally, Hindu holidays commemorate a particular deity, season or event in history. Often, the same holiday may celebrate several events or attributes of a variety of manifestations of the Divine (God). The holidays don't necessarily fall on a specific day each year as the Hindu calendar is lunar.

#### **Deity Celebrations**

- *Shivaratri* (February/March): pays homage to Lord Shiva, the divine manifestation of transformation and regeneration
- *Ramanavami* (March/April): celebrates the birth of Lord Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu and embodiment of *dharma* (righteousness)
- *Krishna Janmashtami* (August/September): celebrates the birth and life of Lord Krishna, deliverer of the Bhagavad Gita
- Ganesha or Vinayaka Chaturti (August/September): pays homage to Lord Ganesha or Lord Vinayaka, the divine manifestation of wisdom and prosperity
- Navaratri (March/April, June/July, September/October, December/January, January/February): a nine night celebration of the Feminine Divine that occurs five times a year (the spring and fall celebrations being the more widely celebrated)

#### Seasonal Celebrations

- Makara Sankranti, Uttarayana or Pongal (January 14): marks the transition of the Sun into Capricorn, or Makara rashi, on its celestial path. It coincides with the winter harvest in parts of India. Hindus thank God for the bountiful harvest.
- *Holi* (February/March): welcomes the arrival of spring and its harvests and celebrates triumph over negativity. A stunning event with people tossing colored powders in the air. It is also celebrated by Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists.

#### **Other Celebrations**

- *Raksha Bandhan* (August/September): celebrates the bond between brothers and sisters. Sisters tie a decorated sacred thread on the right wrist of her brother(s) or male cousin(s), with prayers for his well-being. In return, brothers give their sisters tokens or gifts of appreciation.
- *Diwali* or *Deepavali* (October/November): commemorates the victory of good over evil. The light from these lamps symbolizes the illumination within the individual that can overwhelm ignorance, represented by darkness.



# I read that yoga can't be claimed by any religion. Isn't yoga a Hindu practice?

Yoga refers to spiritual disciplines that are essential to the understanding and practice of Hinduism. The term covers a wide array of practices, embodied in eight "limbs," which range from ethical and moral guidelines to meditation on the Ultimate Reality. Yoga is a way of life that combines both physical and spiritual exercises, entails mastery over the body, mind and emotional self, and transcendence of desire. The ultimate goal is *moksha*. [See *What is moksha?*]

In the West, Yoga has largely become an asana-based (posture) physical practice, allowing practitioners to delink it from its Hindu philosophical and spiritual roots. But a perusal of the best known Yoga texts will demonstrate the contrary. Patajanli allots less than 25% of his revered Yoga Sutras to asana. The remainder focuses on what is essentially Hindu philosophy.

Yet, even when Yoga is practiced solely in the form of an exercise, its Hindu roots cannot be avoided. As the legendary Yoga guru B.K.S lyengar points out in his famous Light on Yoga, "Some asanas are also called after Gods of the Hindu pantheon..." It is disappointing that many yogis regularly practicing Hanumanasana or Natarajasana continue to deny the Hindu roots of their Yoga practice.

In effect, this delinking of Yoga from its Hindu roots disenfranchises Hindus of recognition and appreciation for one of their ancestors' beneficial contributions to civilization and inhibits their ability to promote an accurate and deeper understanding of Hinduism.

## Do I have to be Hindu to practice yoga?

Hinduism, as a non-proselytizing religion, never compels practitioners of yoga to profess allegiance to the faith or convert. Yoga is a means of spiritual attainment for any and all seekers. Thus, while one does not have to profess faith in Hinduism in order to practice Yoga or asana, Yoga is still an essential part of Hindu philosophy and the two cannot be delinked, despite efforts to do so.

## Is Hinduism compatible with science?

Contrary to popular perceptions that Hinduism is a mystical religion exclusively concerned with transcendental concepts of spiritual practice, Hinduism has been a wellspring of scientific thought and contributed immensely to global civilization spanning more than five millennia. As a religious practice aspiring to understand the eternal mysteries of existence, Hinduism has never been a regressive or closed dogma bound to historicentric interpretations of any one holy book. Hindu scriptures describe the concept of planets in the solar system circling the sun and the earth as round and rotating on its axis. Ancient Hindus also made epochal strides in astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, metallurgy, medicine (*ayurveda*) and surgery, including many findings upon which modern science, medicine and technology are based.

Revered Hindu sages, such as Swami Vivekanada and Paramahansa Yogananda, spent time working with and learning from scientists and saw compatibility with Hindu teachings. The French Nobel laureate Romain Rolland said, "Religious faith in the case of the Hindus has never been allowed to run counter to scientific laws," while Carl Sagan once called Hinduism the only religion whose time-scale for the universe matches the billions of years documented by modern science.



## **Previously Asked Questions**

### Why Does Hinduism Have Many Gods?

Most Hindus believe in one, all-pervasive Divine Reality, that is formless (*Brahman*) or manifests and is worshiped in different forms (*Ishvara* or God/Goddess). This belief in the existence of one Divine Reality with diverse manifestations can best be described as monism. Hindu monism is the foundation for understandings of God that range from non-dualistic—that existence and the Divine are not separate, but one and the same—to dualistic—that existence and the Divine, while sharing divine qualities, are separate. Hinduism also encompasses theologies of pantheism, that all of existence is Divine, to panentheistism, that all of existence. The Sanskrit hymn, *Rig Veda I.64.46*, states:

#### Ekam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti

Truth is one, the wise call it by many names.

And just as Hindus believe that Truth is one, called by many names, so too is God called by many names.

#### Do Hindus have a "Bible"?

Hinduism is rich in scripture, but does not have a "Bible" in terms of one central, authoritative book. Hindu scripture is an extensive collection of ancient religious writings which expound upon eternal Truths that have been revealed by God and realized by the ancient sages and enlightened wise men. These Truths, which were passed on for generations through an extraordinary oral tradition, include the *Vedas* and *Agamas*, the *Upanishads*, the Epics, including the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Ramayana*, the *Puranas*, lawbooks and many other philosophical and sectarian texts. Scripture in Hinduism, however, does not have the same place as it does in many other faiths. Hinduism is premised on realization, not revelation. To be enlightened, one must have personal experience of the Truths set out in the *Vedas* and other revealed scriptures. Important to note also is that the words of a living, enlightened teacher are as valid as the words of scripture.

#### Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?

Hindus believe that the soul is immortal and evolves by experiencing varied lives through

the process wherein the soul reincarnates into different physical bodies through cycles of birth and death. Guided by the Laws of *Karma* (see below), the soul continues on its path of spiritual evolution. The ultimate aim of Hindus is for the soul to attain freedom from this continuous cycle of birth and rebirth and discover its divine origin.

#### What is Karma?

*Karma* is the universal law of cause and effect. The critical and subtler understanding of karma is that each action has a reaction and that this cycle is endless. Thus if one sows goodness, one reaps goodness and conversely, if one sows evil, one will reap evil. To avoid the cycle of *karma*, Hindus strive to remain unattached to the fruits of their virtuous action in thought, word and deed. When one can work without expecting rewards, Hindus believe that society as a whole benefits and the individual is freed from the cycle of karma and reincarnation. The *Bhagavad Gita*, III.19 and III.20 expound on this:

Tasm d asakta satatam Kryam karma sam cara Asakto hy caran karma

Lokasampraham ev 'pi Sampa yan kartum arhasi Param pnoti p rusah

Therefore, without attachment Perform always the work that has to be done For man attains to the highest By doing work without attachment

Likewise you should perform with a view to guide others And for the sake of benefiting the welfare of the world

#### What is Dharma?

*Dharma* is the mode of conduct for an individual that is most conducive to spiritual advancement. There are several categories of *dharma*, including *Sanatana Dharma*, or Eternal Law, which encompasses the inherent laws of nature and the Divine, and *smanya dharma* and *vishesha dharma*.

Samanya dharma includes general laws that govern all forms and functions, including one's duty to strive towards and achieve contentment; forgiveness; self-restraint; non-stealing; purity; control of senses; discrimination between right and wrong; spiritual knowledge; truthfulness; and absence of anger.

*Vishesha dharma*, or special duties, expound upon social law or the laws defining an individual's responsibilities within the nation, society, community and family; law according to life stage or the laws governing age-appropriate duties related to the natural process of maturing from childhood to old age; and personal law or the individualized application of dharma according to an individual's sum of past *karma*, intelligence, aptitudes, tendencies, physical characteristics and community.

#### Why are many Hindus vegetarian?

In India, more than 20% of all Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are vegetarian because of the fundamental belief in non-violence, or in Sanskrit, *ahimsa*. The *Vedas* propound that all beings, from the smallest organism to man, are considered manifestations of God and members of a universal family. With this worldview, violence in thought, word or deed against a living being is contrary to the natural balance of the universe. Many Hindus, therefore, refrain from killing animals for food when a plethora of vegetarian alternatives are available.

### What is the caste system and untouchability?

Caste was the division of the ancient Indic civilization based on four general occupational groupings, which included workers, business people, law enforcers and lawmakers and priests. Within these four groups were thousands of sub-groups. Over the millennia, what was to be a skills and aptitude based guild system was rigidified into a hereditary hierarchy. This distortion was a result of certain social practices and taboos gaining acceptance over time and countless invasions by foreign civilizations. The "lowest" class, deemed untouchables, was marginalized, facing widespread prejudice. It should be emphasized that there is no basis for a discriminatory caste system in revealed Hindu scripture. Vedic and non-Vedic scripture advance the concept equality of all mankind as demonstrated in the ancient hymn:

#### Ajyesthaso akanishthaso ete sambhrataro vahaduhu saubhagaya

No one is superior, none inferior. All are brothers marching forward to prosperity.

Lacking an authoritative scriptural basis, it is unfortunate that the Hindu religion has been conflated with the reprehensible practice of social discrimination that has manifested as racism, religious persecution and slavery in other cultures throughout the world.

Despite immense societal discrimination and prejudices, however, there have been countless saints and sages from the "lower" castes who have profoundly impacted

Hindu philosophy and devotional practice. To cite only a few: Sant Raidas, a chamar, or cobbler, who was the *guru* of Mirabai, the most famous of the women devotional poets of northern India; Sant Ramdev, a prominent devotional poet from central India important to both Hindu and Sikh traditions; and Sant Tiruvalluvar of southern India who wrote the Tirukkural, an influential scripture of sacred wisdom. Modernday saints, with millions of followers worldwide include Mata Amritanandamayi, or Ammachi, who was born into a fishermen community, and Satya Sai Baba who was born into an agrarian community.

Jurisprudence in modern India outlaws caste discrimination and contemporary Hindu spiritual leaders and organizations, including but certainly not limited to Raja Ram Mohan Roy; Mahatma Gandhi; Narayan Guru; Sri Shivamurthy Murugharajendra; Arya Samaj; Sahayoga Foundation have been engaged in eradicating this system from society.

### What is the status of women in the practice of Hinduism?

One of the most profound attributes of Hinduism is the recognition and worship of the God as feminine. In fact, Hinduism is the only major religion, which has always worshipped God in female form and continues to do so today. Hindus revere God's energy, or *Shakti*, through its personification in a Goddess. The *Vedas* are replete with hymns extolling the equality of men and women in the spiritual, social and educational realms. It is unfortunate, however, that the gender equality of the Vedic period and that of the Hindu view of the Divine has been corrupted by the realities of social practice and taboo. Yet, Hinduism remains one of a few major religions in which women have occupied and continue to occupy some of the most respected positions in the spiritual leadership including, Sharda Devi, The Mother, Anandamayi, Amritanandmayi Devi or Ammachi, Shree Maa, Anandi Ma, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda and Ma Yoga Shakti.



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HAF remains available to actively assist in obtaining information pertaining to Hinduism, offering Hindu perspectives on contemporary issues and providing access to a vast network of well-respected Hindu spiritual leaders and academics.

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