

300QAs on Hinduism



Hindu Speakers Bureau
HinduSpeakers.org
February 25, 2024

300QAs on Hinduism

Contributors: Rajeev Singh (17), Dr. Dilip Amin (16.5), Geetha Ravula (10), Dr. Jyoti Lulla (9), Gaurav Rastogi (8), Nilesh Chaudhary (6), Vikash Gupta (4), Lakshmi Subramanian (4), Madhu Kopalle (3), Monita Sharma (3), Swati Sughandhi (3), Kaushik Macherla (2), Dharmi Sarkar (2), Fred Stella (2), Dr. Mona Raval (2), Shan Lahiri (1), Soma Chatterjee (1), Manju Gupta (1), Dr. Raman Khanna (1), Avatans Kumar (1), Mukta Vadera (1), Swamini VishwaPratibha (1), Madhukar Adi (0.5), Sandeep Tiwari (0.5)

Editorial Board Members: Rajeev Singh (121), Dharmi Sarkar (88), Sudershan (77), Gaurav Rastogi (73), Geetha Ravula (47), Soma Chatterjee (21), Deepali Kulkarni (16) and Sandeep Tiwari (7).

A community project of
Hindu Speakers Bureau

HinduSpeakers.org

HinduSpeakers@gmail.com

© Hindu Speakers Bureau 2024

Contents

Disclosures.....	ix
Introduction.....	xi
Chapter 1: Hindu God Concept.....	13
Section 1.1: Can God be seen?	14
Section 1.2: Why are we separate from God?.....	15
Section 1.3: Is Hinduism a polytheist religion?	16
Section 1.4: Who are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva?.....	18
Section 1.5: What is God’s grace?	19
Section 1.6: What is “God” concept in Hinduism?.....	20
Section 1.7: Is Hinduism monotheistic?	21
Section 1.8: Does God Really Exist?	22
Section 1.9: Are Hindus monotheistic or monist?	24
Section 1.10: What is Advaita?.....	25
Chapter 2: God Forms in Hinduism.....	26
Section 2.1: Is God Male or Female?.....	27
Section 2.2: Can you explain more about the Monkey God, Hanuman?	28
Section 2.3: How many Gods Hindus have?	30
Section 2.4: Significance of deity/form worship in Hinduism	32
Section 2.5: Does God have a form?	35
Section 2.6: Why does Hinduism have many Gods?	36
Section 2.7: Why is Shivlingam not a phallic symbol?	37
Chapter 3: General Questions on Hinduism	38
Section 3.1: Are you a Hindu?	39

Section 3.2: Introduction to Hinduism (3 min).....	40
Section 3.3: Is Hinduism a religion?.....	42
Section 3.4: Why is Hinduism difficult to understand?.....	43
Section 3.5: Why was HSB created?	44
Chapter 4: The Name Hinduism	45
Section 5.1: What is the original name of Hinduism?	46
Section 5.2: Why do people use Sanatan Dharma, instead of Hinduism?.....	47
Chapter 5: Traditions	48
Section 5.1: What are Four Deity Traditions?	49
Section 5.2: What are basic tenets of Hinduism?	50
Chapter 6: Life Goal	51
Section 6.1: What is the goal of human life?	52
Section 6.2: What is self realization?.....	53
Section 6.3: What is True Happiness?	54
Chapter 7: Scriptures.....	55
Section 7.1: Do Hindus have a Bible?	56
Section 6.2: What are the Upanishads?.....	57
Section 6.3: What are major Hindu scriptures?	58
Chapter 8: Bhakti	59
Section 8.1: What is Devotion or Bhakti?	60
Section 8.2: What is Hindu Prayers for Covid-19 Situations?..	62
Section 8.3: Does God answer our prayers?	65
Chapter 9: Dharma.....	66
Section 9.1: What is Dharma?	67
Chapter 10: Karma.....	68
Section 10.1: How could a perfect God create an imperfect world?	69
Section 10.2: What is Karma?	70

Section 10.4: Do animals acquire new Karma?	71
Section 10.5: Are our actions predetermined?	72
Section 10.5: Why are so many innocent people suffering or being killed?	73
Section 10.6: Why do bad things happen to good people?	74
Section 10.7: Does God not control our actions?	75
Section 10.8: Can you wash off bad karma by good ones?	76
Section 10.9: Why did something bad happen to me?	77
Section 10.10: Why does God allow suffering?	78
Chapter 11: Commandments.....	79
Section 11.1: Do Hindus have Commandments?	80
Chapter 12: Origin	81
Section 12.1: Where does the Universe come from?	82
Section 12.2: What is the Hindu concept of creation?	83
Chapter 13: Heaven and Hell	84
Section 13.1: What is sin?.....	85
Section 13.2: Do Hindus believe in heaven and hell?	86
Section 13.3: What is moksha?.....	87
Section 13.4: Is heaven in Hinduism the same as Christianity?	88
Chapter 14: Afterlife	89
Section 14.1: Is RIP an appropriate expression for a departed Hindu?.....	90
Section 14.2: What happens when we die?.....	91
Chapter 15: Reincarnation	92
Section 15.1: God incarnate?	93
Section 15.2: Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?	94
Section 15.3: How much has one's past life had an impact on the current life?	95
Section 15.4: Is there a possibility of me being an ant in the next life?	96

Section 15.5: Why don't we remember our past life?	97
Chapter 16: Soul	98
Section 16.1: If a soul goes to a new body, where does a new soul come for increased world population?	99
Section 16.2: Can the soul die?.....	100
Section 16.3: Why did God create souls?	101
Section 16.4: How many souls are there?.....	102
Section 16.5: Is the soul of an ant bigger than the soul of a whale?	103
Chapter 17: Gurus, Saints and Apostles	104
Section 17.1: Difference between apostle and guru?.....	105
Section 17.2: What is a saint?.....	106
Chapter 18: Hindu Practices	107
Section 18.1: How often is a Hindu supposed to pray?	108
Section 18.2: Namaste: What does it mean?.....	109
Section 18.3: Why do you give food to God/idols?.....	110
Section 18.4: Why do you use light-aarti to pray?.....	111
Section 18.5: What is the red dot many Hindu women wear on their forehead?	112
Section 18.6: What is the meaning of the Swastika?	113
Section 18.7: What is Samskara (or Sacrament)?.....	114
Chapter 19: Hindu Life	115
Section 19.1: Are there Hindu's daily and weekly rituals?	116
Section 19.2: What kind of education do your kids receive about Hinduism?.....	117
Section 19.3: Why do we have desires and how to control them?	118
Chapter 20: Holidays	119
Section 20.1: What is Diwali?	120
Section 20.2: What is Holi?	121

Section 20.3: is spiritual meaning of colors in Hinduism?	122
Chapter 21: Nature	123
Section 21.1: Why are cows sacred?.....	124
Section 21.2: Why do you pray to a plant, like Tulsi?.....	125
Chapter 22: Diet.....	126
Section 22.1: Why don't Hindus eat beef?	127
Section 22.2: Why are many Hindus vegetarian?.....	128
Chapter 23: Yoga and Meditation.....	129
Section 23.1: OM: What does it mean?	130
Section 23.2: Is yoga a Hindu practice?.....	131
Section 23.3: What are Four Paths of Yoga?.....	132
Chapter 25: Caste System	133
Section 25.1: What is the caste system?	134
Section 25.2: What does Gita say about the Caste system?....	135
Chapter 25: Marriages.....	136
Section 26.1: Hindus belong to different denominations? If so, can they intermarry?	137
Section 26.2: Can a Hindu Marry Christian?.....	138
Section 26.3: What is a Hindu wedding like?.....	139
Chapter 27: Science	141
Section 27.1: Is Hinduism compatible with science?	142
Chapter 28: Other Faiths	143
Section 28.1: Do different religions have different Gods?	144
Section 28.2: What is a Hindus attitude towards other faith beliefs?	145
Section 28.3: What are the main differences between Abrahamic and Dharmic faiths?	146
Chapter 29: LGBTQ	147
Section 29.1: What are Hindu Views on LGBTQ?.....	148

Chapter 31: Hindu Terminologies	149
Section 31.1: What is Ananda?.....	150
Section 31.2: What is the difference between Brahm, Brahma and Brahmin?	151
Section 31.3: Explain Sanskrit words that are translated to God	152
Chapter 32: Hinduphobia.....	153
Section 32.1: How would you define Hindutva?	154

Disclosures

This book endeavors to address inquiries about Hinduism through a compilation of 300 questions and answers. Hinduism, unlike some other faiths, does not rely on a single scripture, nor does it adhere to a centralized authority. Consequently, there exists a wide spectrum of interpretations and beliefs within the Hindu community. This diversity allows for the freedom of expression and interpretation of one's faith. Therefore, it's important to recognize that there isn't a singular "correct" response to questions regarding Hinduism. The answers provided in this book are but one perspective among many, and it does not claim to be the ultimate authority on the subject.

The primary aim of this book is to offer concise and accessible answers to questions about Hinduism, tailored especially for audiences unfamiliar with its intricacies, such as ninth-grade students in Western educational settings. Each answer is designed to be digestible within a three-minute timeframe, catering to individuals with limited prior knowledge of Hindu dharma. While our responses may not delve deeply into the profound teachings of Hinduism or cover every possible angle, we have endeavored to make them comprehensible to all, minimizing the use of complex Sanskrit terminology. For those seeking further exploration, we provide references to additional reading materials and videos.

It's important to note that this book is a collaborative effort, reflecting the contributions of approximately 50 speakers from the Hindu Speakers Bureau (HSB). The questions and answers were subjected to scrutiny and refinement by the Editorial Board members at HSB over a three-year period, aiming for consistency in style and content. However, due to its communal nature, the book may not exhibit the uniformity one might expect from a single-author publication.

While some questions may appear similar, each one was included based on subtle differences in phrasing and context, reflecting the diverse array of inquiries that Hindu speakers encounter.

300QAs on Hinduism

Additionally, certain questions may seem unconventional to some Hindu readers; however, they were included to encompass the breadth of inquiries that individuals may pose to Hindu speakers.

Total 104 questions are answered in this draft book, and we plan to update with all 300 Q&As in the future.

Introduction

Welcome to "300 Questions and Answers on Hinduism," a comprehensive exploration of Hindu philosophy, beliefs, and practices. Hinduism, characterized by its rich diversity and ancient heritage, encompasses a tapestry of traditions, scriptures, and philosophical perspectives. Unlike some other faiths, Hinduism does not rely on a single scripture, nor does it adhere to a centralized authority. This inherent pluralism allows for a myriad of interpretations and expressions of faith, fostering a dynamic and evolving spiritual landscape.

This book aims to address common inquiries about Hinduism through a curated selection of 300 questions and answers. Our objective is to provide accessible and succinct responses, catering to individuals with varying levels of familiarity with Hindu dharma. Whether you're a ninth-grade student exploring world religions for the first time or a curious seeker seeking to deepen your understanding, we endeavor to offer clarity on a diverse range of topics within Hinduism.

Each question has been carefully crafted to reflect the inquiries faced by Hindu speakers in various contexts, ranging from classrooms to community discussions. The answers provided draw upon the insights of approximately 50 contributors from the Hindu Speakers Bureau (HSB), ensuring a breadth of perspectives and expertise. While we strive for consistency in style and content, we acknowledge the organic nature of this collaborative effort, which may result in nuanced variations in responses.

It's important to note that this book does not claim to be the ultimate authority on Hinduism or provide definitive answers to complex theological questions. Rather, it serves as a starting point for exploration, offering insights into the fundamental principles, rituals, deities, and philosophical concepts that form the bedrock of Hindu thought.

As you delve into the pages of "300 Questions and Answers on Hinduism," we invite you to approach each inquiry with an open mind and a spirit of inquiry. Whether you're seeking clarification on the concept of karma, the significance of Hindu festivals, or the diversity of Hindu deities, we hope this book serves as a valuable resource on your journey of discovery.

300QAs on Hinduism

Readers can also access all these QAs at
<https://www.hinduspeakers.org/faqs/>

Chapter 1: Hindu God Concept

Section 1.1: Can God be seen?

Seeing is believing. But seeing is not the only confirmation of existence. Time cannot be seen. Gravity cannot be seen. And yet, no one can deny the presence or effects of either time or gravity.

To see God, we have to go beyond ordinary perception. For Hindus, yes, God can be seen. All-seeing is the seeing of God.

When you dip a straw into water, it bends due to refraction. Is the straw really bent? No, of course not. But it appears bent. Its broken-ness is an illusion. For Hindus similarly, God himself has separated a part of Himself (not gendered) into the material world and the individual selves. The fact that we see the world and yet don't see God, is the success of this magician's illusion. Just like the straw that seems to bend inside water, God has obscured himself in this illusory world, and the Hindus refer to this magic act as *Maya* ("it is not there"). And just the way you can learn a magic trick with persistence and patience, you can see through this illusion and see God directly through the practices in the Hindu traditions of yoga (meditation and devotion).

Hinduism's core principle is the recognition of the Brahman – the primary source of energy and creation, all-pervasive and eternal. We are a result and a part of this Brahman – often also referred to as the "Truth".

The premise of the question that there is a God, is not a valid interpretation of the "Truth" for Hindus. It is all energy (the Truth) and its creation (*Maya*). The question, therefore, for Hindus is not, "Can God be seen?" Rather the question is, "How can I get closer to the Truth?", and "How can I learn to get detached from *Maya*?"

But in simpler terms, this universe is a creation of the Brahman. Therefore, yes, it can be said that God is in everything that exists in this creation. God is everywhere.

Other reading material:

Relevant videos: [Swami Nikhil Anand1](#), [Swami Nikhil Anand2](#)

Contributor: [Rajeev Singh](#)

Section 1.2: Why are we separate from God?

Hinduism's core principle is the recognition of the Brahman—the primary source of energy and creation, all pervasive and eternal. We are a result and a part of this Brahman—often also referred to as the “Truth”. Hindus, therefore, often say, “Aham Brahmasmi”, or, “I am the Universe”. This view of our world, including us, as Brahman (God) asserts an identity that is not separate from God. It will rather generate a good debate from a Hindu.

Relevant videos: [Swami Nikhil Anand](#)

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 1.3: Is Hinduism a polytheist religion?

Hindus have a very modern relationship with Divinity. We know that the one single divinity, that pervades everything and everyone, can be known to our hearts in our own unique ways.

I will answer your question, but first I must ask—what is the color of your car? (assuming the answer isn't "Black". If they say Black, just ask another person that doesn't have a black car).

So you have a Silver colored car? Did you pick it yourself? Why? Because you liked it!! Surely you liked the Black car as well?

Hindus have many expressions of divinity. You may translate these roughly into "gods", but that is just a mis-translation. We have many expressions of divinity, and so you can say that Hindus are poly-theistic. That would only be partially right because usually, polytheism relates to the Roman/Greek pantheon of warring gods that are always at odds with each other. The Hindus don't approach divinity in the same manner.

Now let me tell you the story of Mister Ford. He invented the modern factory, making automobile cars cheaply through his use of the conveyor belt. He was very famous, as I am sure you know, but he had some detractors. You see, some people didn't want black cars. Why did they have a problem with our Mister Ford? He didn't want to sell them colored cars. His Model-T car was only available in Black because he didn't want to stop his conveyor belt to change the color of the car. So he declared that "people can have ANY color of car they want, as long as the color is BLACK".

This Model-T-ism is the state of today's monotheism. "You may have only one God as-long-as he is a white-bearded old man who is somewhat grumpy and gets angry at times". That monochrome monoculture may work for those religions that spring from sparse ecologies but denies the obvious richness and variety that all creation represents.

To recap, Hindus have a much more modern relationship with God. We know that the one single divinity that pervades everything and everyone can be known to our hearts in our own unique ways. Whatever conception of divinity is dearest to us, Hindus believe that the idea of their chosen deity (Ishta devata) is the god (or deva) they will pray to.

Some hearts want a silver car, and they should have the ability to drive a silver car, wouldn't you agree? Why should all of us have to deal with the Model-T-ism of divinity?

Other reading material:

Relevant videos: [Swami Nikhil Anand](#) , [Dilip Amin](#),

Contributor: Gaurav Rastogi

Section 1.4: Who are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva?

God is one, however God manifests in different forms. Hindus believe in the trinity (Sanskrit: त्रिमूर्ति trimūrti) of gods (three main forms): Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the dissolver). The trinity is the triple deity of supreme divinity Ishwara or Parmatma.

Other reading material: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trimurti>, ^{[2][3][4][5]}

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: Who are Brahma Vishnu & Shiva](#), [Bho Shambho Shiva Shambho \(Lyrics & Meaning\) – Aks & Lakshmi, Padmini Chandrashekar](#),

Contributor: Nilesh Chaudhary

Section 1.5: What is God's grace?

Hinduism emphasizes righteous, dharmic actions, performed with the purity of intention. When we act thus, focusing on the quality and sincerity of the action, rather than worrying about past actions or future results, the action is considered fruitful. The best actions are those that are surrendered unto the Divine; whatever may be the act, when done with an attitude of surrender and devotion, it gains extra momentum and x-factor; this is what some refer to as “grace”.

Lord Krishna advises in the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 18, Verse 62:

tam eva śharaṇaṁ gachchha sarva-bhāvena bhārata

tat-prasādāt parāṁ śhāntiṁ sthānaṁ prāpsyasi śhāśhvataṁ

*Surrender and take refuge exclusively unto Him with your whole being,
O Bharata;*

by His grace, you will attain supreme peace and the eternal abode.

Depending on the practitioner, the grace of God will be experienced in different ways; while some may see signs of God's grace in every daily activity, others may feel it on a deeper level, terming it as inner fulfillment.

God's grace is experienced by a devotee as different forms of blessings or favorable circumstances. The great 19th-century saint Sri Ramakrishna said, “The winds of grace are always blowing, but it is you who must raise your sails.” This is the essence of how Hindu tradition views the concept of grace. Devotees chant specific prayers, visit famed pilgrimage sites, and engage in austere spiritual practices in order to seek God's grace. These are tools that enable the spiritual aspirant to face life with courage and humility, exercising dynamic action as well as accepting Divine will, such that the grace of God freely flows through them.

Other reading material:

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What is God's Grace](#)

Contributor: Lakshmi Subramanian

Section 1.6: What is “God” concept in Hinduism?

Hindus believe in the one all-pervasive God who energizes the entire universe. However, Hinduism does not deny God concepts in other religions.

There is the Godhead (The Divine Nature – Impersonal), there is God (personification of the abstract Divine Nature – Personal) and there are deities known as Devas and Devatās often translated as “gods”.

Everything in the universe moving and stationary is nothing but a manifestation of Brahman (The Supreme Divine Consciousness). One can think of quantum energy as God.

The material cause of the universe, the efficient cause of the universe and the accessory causes of the universe are all ONE. Some examples of many in one and one in many are: 1) everything made of clay is ultimately just clay, 2) all jewelry made of gold are nothing but gold and 3) all the manifestations of the ocean – water, currents, waves, icebergs, clouds, rain, etc. are in fact nothing but H₂O.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What is The Definition Of God, Idol or Murti?](#) [Intro to Hinduism](#) by HAF,

Contributor: Niles Chaudhary

Section 1.7: Is Hinduism monotheistic?

The Truth is One, The Wise Refer to It in Many Ways. In Sanskrit: *Ekam Sat, Vipra Bahudha Vadanti*.

The search for a single Truth is a core part of the Hindu tradition. So also is the understanding that the single Truth can be expressed in multiple ways of truth (with a small t).

Pop quiz: Why are leaves green? One *correct* answer is that they contain chlorophyll, and chlorophyll is green colored. Another *correct* answer might be that leaves are green because they absorb red and blue color, and reflect the green color. Both are correct answers, but only one might be considered right depending on whether you are writing a quiz for Biology (Chlorophyll) or Physics (color theory).

Why shouldn't there be more than one way to approach the truth? Who would disagree with something this obvious? That person will be who is trained to look only for a *single* right answer.

Truthfully, monotheism's invention is a more recent, and political, invention. The Hebrew Bible is not monotheistic (Yale's [Christine Hayes](#) has a wonderful course on it), even though modern interpretations tend to read a type of monotheism into old texts. The modern insistence on a "single Truth" runs counter to all mystical traditions that know that there are as many ways to know the truth as there are people.

The habits of thought resulting from monotheism have led to the modern education system, where we are taught to seek a "single right answer" to the quiz question. Is that always correct? Should we accept this way of thinking? The "single right answer" is true only for a very small fraction of mathematical truths. In the vast majority of life's truths, there are multiple truths all competing for attention, and all equally true, but only from a certain perspective.

Hinduism certainly arrived at that conclusion; a single Truth can be expressed in myriad ways. *Ekam Sat, Vipra Bahudha Vadanti*.

Other reading material: Yale's [Christine Hayes](#),

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Is Hinduism Monotheistic](#), [Why Does Hinduism Have So Many Gods](#), [How Many Gods Are There](#),

Contributor: Gaurav Rastogi

Section 1.8: Does God Really Exist?

Absolutely Yes, and Absolutely Not, with a definitely Maybe inserted in there, I think. (laughter)

This is not a trivial question, because much depends on the intention and perspective of the person asking the question. If you are looking for a white-bearded gentleman about 60 miles in a geospatial orbit, then you are very likely to be disappointed, and many Hindus would agree with you that THAT God does not exist.

Hindus approach the idea of Divinity by exploring the true nature of reality, the same underlying motive that drives modern Physics and Biology, but the Hindu seers worked to identify events and their causes down the chain of causation. There is something, but where does it come from? That underlying Truth (capital T) must be the closest that the western mind can come to the idea of “God”.

However, if you are looking for proof that there is an order to the Universe, then you will agree with those Hindu sages who looked for Rta (Sanskrit ऋत), the cosmic order, and then inferred that the order must be

maintained through some processes and an organizing principle. We can see evidence that the Universe is not random, and that laws of physics seem to be followed. That’s your indication that there is a divine order.

If you are looking for physical proof, then just open your eyes and close them. What you see with open eyes is a Universe that seems to exist materially, even though scientific microscopes seem to find only probabilities and space between. A ball that retains all colors except red, but still you will call it a red ball. This is all a play of consciousness, and we say “Jagan Mithya, Brahm Satya”...the material world is an illusion, only the knowing Self is the Truth.

So when you close your eyes, YOU still exist. When you die, your body exists, but not YOU. And if YOU exist, then surely there is SOMEONE that exists (even if it’s just you). Recognizing the self, or the Self behind all subjective experiences is the recognition of God.

Words can be limiting in experiencing the Limitless. “God” is a small word, and that which has created everyone cannot be constrained into it. The vocabulary of spiritual experiences can be broader, and the subjective experience of causeless bliss is proof of divinity to all those that have tasted it.

For Hindus, all-seeing is the Seeing of God, and all Tasting is the tasting of God. Raso-vai-Sah (“He is taste”).

Other reading material:

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: Does God Really Exist](#)

Contributor: Gaurav Rastogi

Section 1.9: Are Hindus monotheistic or monist?

Hinduism does not conform to the archetypal definitions of monotheism or monism, even while maintaining the “only one God” framework.

Religions are generally classified as monotheistic, polytheistic, monistic, etc. Hinduism differs markedly from the predominant monotheism (there is only one true God, there are other not true “gods” or belief systems) of the Western religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism), in which God is held to be both the creator of the world and ‘above and independent’ of it (meaning there are **two separate entities**).

Hinduism is classified as Eastern Monism or Advaita (Advait = not-two-ism) Monism. Most Hindus (though not all, Dvaita School for example) believe in monism, the idea that all reality ultimately has one foundational commonality upon which are the layered expressions that we see as differences. For example, the ocean, clouds, snow, rivers and lakes may look different but all are ultimately H₂O.

Monists believe that similarity of forms of reality—gods and goddess, plants and animals, the material universe, and humans—share a common foundational essence. Hindus call this essence of Brahman, which is one.

[Monism](#) as a word and concept has meanings that are different from the above, as a result Hinduism, Sikhism, and large parts of Mahayana Buddhism had to be classified under the term Eastern Monism or Advaita Monism.

David Hume (1711-1776) [argues](#) that monotheism is less pluralistic and thus less tolerant, because monotheism stipulates that people pigeonhole their beliefs into one tenet.

Other reading

material: <https://houseoflac.wordpress.com/2018/05/08/theisms-and-sanatan-dharma/>

Relevant videos

Contributor: Dilip Amin, Sandeep Tiwari

Section 1.10: What is Advaita?

Since the Vedic scriptures are highly cryptic, several schools of philosophical thought emerged in Hinduism, owing to different interpretations. Among them the most prominent one is the Advaita School.

The term *Advaita* refers to the *darshana* or *philosophy* that *Brahma* alone is ultimately real, the phenomenal transient world is an illusory appearance (*maya*) of *Brahman*, and the true Self, *atman*, is not different from *Brahman*.

Advaita is the path of knowledge. By removing ignorance of Self, knowledge is attained. It is a path of self-enquiry that leads to realization.

In *Advaita* you have to come to the knowledge that you are not the body, you are not the mind. Advaita leads to the knowledge that there is no self. Through that knowledge it leads to the state of no-self.

Advaita is the idea that there is only *Brahman*, and that everything is *Brahman*—non-dualism or monism.

Relevant videos: [Swami Tadatmanda on reincarnation](#),

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Chapter 2: God Forms in Hinduism

Section 2.1: Is God Male or Female?

Hinduism's core principle is the recognition of the Brahman—the primary source of energy and creation, all-pervasive and eternal. We are a result and a part of this Brahman—often also referred to as the “Truth”. Brahman at its core is conceptually genderless.

In non-Indic and Western parlance, Brahman's loose translation and interpretation as “God” raises the natural question of it being male or female, which for Hindus is not an inquiry. The recognition of the divinity of the eternal truth (Brahman) has many conduits, which may have a gendered identity. Most often, these are the deities that represent aspects of the Brahman and have both male and female identities.

Gender is related to a physical body. Brahman is an all-pervading cosmic life force that is genderless and formless. Brahman in a male body and Brahman in a female body—that is how Hindus see the Brahman. Brahman (God) is a genderless cosmic life force.

Other reading material:

Relevant videos: [Swami Nikhil Anand](#)

Contributor: [Rajeev Singh](#)

Section 2.2: Can you explain more about the Monkey God, Hanuman?

In Hindu temples, homes, and countless folktales, you will hear of Hanuman, “the Monkey God”. What is important about him is neither that he’s a “monkey” nor that he is considered a divinity or “God”; he is revered as a powerful heroic figure filled with devotional surrender.

Hanuman is one of the dearest deities in the Hindu tradition, imbued with valor, mischief, strength, and devotion. He is the personification of strength and devotion, and that is why his tales are loved all over the world.

Hanuman in Ramayana

It is his complete Devotion that sets him apart. The story of Hanuman comes to us from Ramayana, the earlier of the two major epics in Hinduism (the other being the Mahabharata). In the epic, Lord Sri Rama, (God incarnate in human form) is engaged in an epic battle with the king of Lanka, who has wrongfully kidnapped his wife. Hanuman is part of a tribe of monkeys that meet Sri Rama, and this ragtag army of monkeys help Sri Rama (and his younger brother, Lakshmana) win against the rich, mighty and arrogant Ravana.

Hanuman as Yogi

Hanuman is a complete yogi. One of his names is Bajrang (or Vajra-anga, the thunderbolt Bodied one), which is one of the highest achievements for a yogi, to have a thunderbolt energy body (in yoga the subtle body is an energy body). He is the son of the Wind, a reference also to his mastery of the breath, which you know as Pranayama. He has all the mystical powers that a yogi can acquire (there are eight siddhis, or yogic superpowers, such as the ability to be tiny, heavy, fly, and so on). He is also the symbol of Bhakti Yoga, the yoga of devotion, being completely surrendered to his master. So Hanuman is the complete yogi, with excellence in all the yogas of Action, Meditation, and Devotion.

Hanuman Chalisa

Many western adherents to the Bhakti tradition (like the singer Krishna Das) make it a point to memorize the Hanuman Chalisa, the forty verses in praise of Hanuman. Singing the Chalisa is a tradition followed all over India, and a large percentage of modern Hindus will be able to recite and chant along. The chanting of the Hanuman Chalisa brings joy, relief, and a connection with a powerful-yet-surrendered Yogi. Something we should all aspire to become.

Sundar Kand

There are many fun stories associated with Hanuman. Let me tell you just one. He was born with immense powers but was very playful as a child. After one such naughty episode, he was cursed to forget all his powers. He would stay forgetful until someone reminds him. As it happens, he is reminded of his powers at a pivotal point in the epic, when someone is needed to cross the Ocean to go to the island of Lanka to look for Rama's wife. This is the beginning of some of the most beautiful poetry in the epic, and even today many Hindus chant the "Sundar Kand", (beautiful chapter) which describes the exploits of Hanuman in Lanka.

We all have powers that we don't remember. A mentor or coach can help us by reminding us of our own super-powers. Isn't that a memorable story?

Ask for His help!

Hanuman is one of the few Chiranjeevis in the Hindu tradition (Chiranjeevi means "lives forever"), and it is said that he still roams this Earth and comes to help when he is invoked.

Other reading material: [Hindu God Hanuman](#),

Relevant videos: [Krishna Das on Hanuman Chalisa](#)

Contributor: [Gaurav Rastogi](#)

Section 2.3: How many Gods Hindus have?

Hinduism is a religion popular for its identity of being a theology with an ocean of gods. It is believed that Hindus worship millions of gods. What is the truth behind this claim?

The word 'God' itself has many names in the Indian languages, the prime language being Sanskrit. Deva, Ishvara, Prabhu, Bhagwan, Sura, Parmatman and many more are the synonyms used to denote the almighty divine power.

To get an idea about the number of gods, first we need to acquaint yourself with the fact that most religions of the world are classified into one of the three theories of religion depending on the numbers of gods they believe in; namely monotheism, polytheism and henotheism.

A religion that believes in one god is monotheistic, many gods is polytheistic and a religion that believes in the existence of many gods but it's members may choose to worship one or two gods of their choice are known as henotheistic religions. Hinduism is one very unique religion which belongs to all of the categories that represent the three theories in religion. Hinduism is monotheistic in one sense, polytheistic in another and henotheistic in a very general way.

A core concept in one of the most ancient Hindu texts, Upanishads, is the concept of one ultimate underlying supreme cosmic reality residing in the universe known as "Brahman". Brahman is the one and only indivisible eternal divine spiritual substance in the universe. If a Hindu believes 'only' in this highest spiritual substance 'Brahman' which is genderless, then he is monotheistic. This concept of god is that of an impersonal god, who has no form or physical quality.

The Brahman represents itself in millions of different ways; each representation of Brahman is named as a god which could be either feminine or masculine. These are energies that oversee every aspect of the functioning of the universe. When one experiences god in these forms, one thinks his faith in Hinduism is polytheistic. These gods could be elements from nature like the sun, moon, wind, fire, rivers, mountains, trees or they could be personal gods that existed in some time in a form of an animal or a human or a semi human. These gods do have a physical form, a name, a quality ascribed to them. Each of these gods represent some special power or symbolize a certain character trait very typical to them.

Lastly when someone chooses to worship one of the many divine forms of the Brahman, one participates in the Hindu religion in the henotheistic

sense. Hindu henotheism is an attitude of worshipping one god without denying the existence of other gods. That one god could be any element from the nature of a physical god.

The number thirty three has a significance in the Hindu scriptures. The Rig Veda, a very ancient Hindu text, talks about eleven gods belonging to the realm of heaven, eleven belonging to earth and eleven to the waters. Again these are the most distinctively known gods but there are more than thirty three.

Here we have seen there is not a hierarchy of gods in Hinduism but there is a hierarchy of belief systems. No one god is higher than the others, all gods enjoy equal status in the Hindu culture. Hinduism is a kaleidoscope of beliefs and the number of gods you believe in defines your lens of looking at the divinity.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: How Many Gods Are There](#),

Contributor: Mona Rawal

Section 2.4: Significance of deity/form worship in Hinduism

The religious practices of most Hindus include visiting temples and praying before an image of a deity. To a non-practitioner, this looks exactly like the “graven image” worship that the Christian Bible rejects. The truth is exactly the opposite. Hindus see divinity everywhere and are not required to pray at a temple or to an image. Hindus go to the temple and bow before the life-force that is inside the image.

What separates a living person from his otherwise dead body is the life force. No sane person burns or buries living people, but dead bodies are disposed of by cremation or burial. It’s the life force that matters. It is that life force that Hindus revere. That life force is everywhere in this living Universe. We invite that life force to inhabit the visible form of a statue so that we can see the unseen and pray from our hearts.

Let’s look at this question in detail.

It is important to understand that Hindus are not Idol worshipers. They visit temples to worship a deity that is infused with a life force in that Idol. This process of consecrating (by mantras and other Agama rituals) an idol with a life force or Prana is known as **Prana Pratishtha**. Hence it is no longer a mere stone or a statue, but a living entity that possesses a life force, which is thereafter called Vighraha (a manifested form of the Divine). So, Idol is not God, but it is God inside the Idol.

Examining closely and seeking help from the very source of Hindu scriptures, the Vedas. This is a verse from Chandogya Upanishad from Sama Veda:

Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma – Everything is Brahman

सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत अथ खलु क्रतुमयः पुरुषो यथाक्रतुरस्मिल्लोके पुरुषो भवति तथेतः प्रेत्य भवति स क्रतुं कुर्वीतः| 3-114-1
From Him do all things originate, into Him do they dissolve and by Him are they sustained. In other words, everything is Brahman. On Him should one meditate in tranquillity. For as is one’s faith, such indeed one is; and as is one’s faith in this world, such one becomes on departing hence. Let one, therefore, cultivate faith.

This means **God is present everywhere**, in You, in Me, and in all human beings including your worst enemy. Not only is He present in humans, but He is also present in all animals, even in the smallest of the smallest beings. He is even present in a stone.

Let’s look at other references in the Vedas. These are the mantras from the

Sri Rudram 9th Anuvaka Nama ireenyaya cha prapadhyaya cha (Sri Rudram 9.1.1) Nama kimsilaaya cha kshyanaaya cha (Sri Rudram 9.1.2)

This mantra states that the Lord is present even in small, small stones. It's very evident from the scriptures that God is present everywhere both in living/non-living and visible/invisible objects.

Then the question arises, why do we dedicate a place such as an Altar at home or a **temple to worship the deity**? The process of connecting with the Divine is filled with subtle descriptions to contemplate the object of worship. The Hymns and verses are capsuled with subtle details. They are not just words/statements that are uttered or chanted mechanically. Its benefit is fully attained when the same worship is done with the awareness of its intended purpose. For instance, deity worship is typically a four step process. After entering the sanctum, the devotee stands near the deity and performs:

1. Dhyana (meditate upon the God in your heart),
2. Avāhana (Invoke the object of meditation into the Vighraha in front of you),
3. Samarpana (present your offerings to the Deity) and
4. Udvāsana (Bringing the object of meditation back to your heart)
You can now appreciate the meaning of Vighraha, as a mediating vehicle through which the divine within, becomes real to the worshipper for Worship.

Now, let us move on to some misconceptions in this form of worship.

Vedic hymns and verses can easily be misunderstood without the guidance of a bonafide Guru. For instance, this verse is from the
Yajurveda

न तस्य प्रतिमा अस्ति यस्य नाम महद्यशः । हिरण्यगर्भ इत्येष मा मा
हिंसीदित्येषा यस्मान्न जात इत्येषः ॥

na tasya pratimA asti yasya nAma mahadyashah | hiraNyagarbha ityEsha
mA mA himsI ditye ShA yasmA nna jAta ityEshah || 32.3

The word 'pratima' in this verse can easily be mistaken for the word 'Idol', but there are two words here 'prati' & 'ma'. 'prati' means 'like' and 'ma' is the 'negation', which means no comparison. In this verse, the usage of pratima is to describe that, '**there is no comparison of Him**, whose name is Great Glory'.

Let's hope this clears most of the common questions and the philosophical background for Vighrahāradana (Deity Worship).

300 QAs on Hinduism

Visual presentation of the above text: <https://youtu.be/G08IWGw-cKs>

Other reading material: [Idol-Worshipper: Who Is And Who Is Not?](#),
Relevant videos: [Dharma Speaks](#), [Significance of forms and temples \(String\)](#),

Contributor: Dharmi Sarkar

Section 2.5: Does God have a form?

Hindus believe in the one all-pervasive divinity that energizes the entire universe. Being the source of all visible and invisible forms, Hindus have liberty to worship this divinity both as having a form (sagun or saakaar) or as being formless (nirgun or nirakaar). If you know gold, you also know gold jewelries are also gold.

The formless “God” may be approached as if S/He is a person with form, without necessarily implying that the form is all there is. The name and form are just ways for us humans to engage with the ultimately nameless and formless but is not mandatory.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: Does God Have A Form](#)

Contributor: Niles Chaudhary

Section 2.6: Why does Hinduism have many Gods?

Hindus believe in one Supreme God who created the universe. It is an all-pervasive divine reality, formless (Brahman, nirgun), or manifested in different forms (Ishvara, God/Goddess or Deities; sagun). Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, Hindus worship One Supreme Being, though by different names.

The Sanskrit hymn, Rig Veda I.164.46:

Ekam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti

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

The government may be contacted through the postal service, the police, the judiciary and the office of the President. We can distinguish between different *aspects* of the functioning of the government, while still agreeing that there is only ONE government. Hindus believe that the ONE divinity can be experienced in myriad ways. Even for one form of divinity, say Vishnu (the all-pervading one), Hindus routinely memorize 1,000 names for an essentially nameless and formless divinity. There is one Truth, and the wise know to call it by many names.

Other reading material: HAF: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#)

Hinduism Today: [Why does Hinduism have so many Gods?](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: How Many Gods Are There](#)

Contributor: Kaushik Macherla

Section 2.7: Why is Shivlingam not a phallic symbol?

Ordinary Hindus and Hindu scholars do not consider Shivalingan a phallic symbol. For them, the formless representation of Shiva has no likeness to any human anatomy.

Arvind Sharma, the Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at Canada's McGill University, doesn't deny the possibility of an anatomically accurate interpretation of Shivalingam. However, he blames such misrepresentation on the cult of phallic worship that mistakenly identified Shivalingam as a phallic symbol.

Even Mahatma Gandhi was not aware of any such interpretation. On September 15, 1927 Gandhiji wrote in Young India that "It was in a missionary book that I first learnt that shivalingam had any obscene significance at all. And even now, when I see a Shivalingam, neither the shape nor the association in which I see it suggests any obscenity."

Like any other language, Sanskrit also has words with many meanings depending on the context. The term 'linga' in Sanskrit means 'mark' or 'sign' as well as 'phallus.' Hindus use the word 'linga' in the former sense. As the sign of Shiva, writes Eck, "the linga is honoured in the sancta of many temples and shrines of India."

Shiva represents the pure light of consciousness. The linga, or sign, is a physical manifestation of a more intuitively understood phenomena. It is an abstract or aniconic representation of the Hindu god Shiva.

The significance of Shivalingam in Hinduism in general and Shaivite tradition in particular is immense. According to Shiva Purana (Vidyasvara Samhita: Chapter 5 to 11) the Shiva lingam is a fiery column of light–Niskala Lingam which has no beginning and end. Niskala means nameless and formless aspect of Brahman. There is no mention of any likeness to human anatomy.

Other reading material: [Western reading of Shivalingam as phallic symbol is incorrect. For Hindus, Shiva is formless](#)

Relevant videos: [Sex & Shiva Lingam](#)

Contributor: Avatans Kumar

Chapter 3: General Questions on Hinduism

Section 3.1: Are you a Hindu?

Yes, I am a Hindu and happy to be one. Hinduism offers me lots of liberty and freedom. I can pray that formless One Ultimate (God) or use any number of forms as Devas (gods). I am not bound to follow strict doctrines, but our scriptures provide me with a very high-level guidance to live a good Dharmic life. Hinduism is not a human centric religion; we are taught to respect animals, mother earth, Sun, Moon and more. The best part of Hinduism is—we believe all religions are valid—a true pluralistic religion.

Relevant videos: [Joy of Hinduism](#), Nikhil Anand: [Why I become Hindu](#), [Intro to Hinduism](#) by HAF

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Section 3.2: Introduction to Hinduism (3 min)

There are one billion Hindus, meaning one out of seven people on this earth is a Hindu.

You may be wondering why in this world there are so many religions, names of God, scriptures, etc? Rig Veda explains it this way in Sanskrit... Ekam Sat, Vipra Bahuda vadanti. There is absolutely One Truth (God, Brahman, Atman...), but the sages call it by many names.

Hindus have liberty to see God in any number of ways. Most Hindus pray to God in many forms as Devis and Devtas. They are not gods but are divine manifestations of God. To use an analogy, if God is Sun then these Devis and Devtas are sun-rays.

Another way of looking at it—assume God as a big government. The finance department is managed by Goddess Laxmi and the education department by Goddess Saraswati. Hindus pray to Lord Ganesh to remove obstacles in life and take guidance from Lord Krishna for how to live a good life.

To seek God, one does not have to look outside but inside. God is sitting inside us, that is your soul or atman. The day God leaves you, your worthless dead body remains. Hindus believe in reincarnation; meaning after death, the soul moves to a new body.

We have many ways to unite or yoga with God, like meditation—Raja Yoga, knowledge—Gnana Yoga, service to others—Karma Yoga and the most popular being the Bhakti Yoga. The Bhakti yoga can be performed at home or at a mandir along with certain rituals.

God is omnipresent. Namaste means I see divinity in you and bow to you. Further, God's kingdom includes animals, plants, mother earth, sun and moon. We do not have doctrines, like—thou shall not eat beef. Hinduism teaches us to follow our Dharma and follow a non-violent path. Further, it teaches us that animals have a right to life, just as all humans do. Hence, there is an inclination towards vegetarianism.

Important aspect of Hinduism is how to live material life righteously and evolve spiritually which is covered in 4 Purushartas—Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha.

We have many scriptures, like Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, etc. Gita is one of the better known texts and can be considered a self-improvement guide. It teaches us how to be happy in this life and teaches us to do good karma without expectations of fruits.

Hari Om.

*Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#),
Relevant videos: [Spiritual Growth through Faith – Hinduism by Mukta Vadera](#), [Living with faith-Dilip Amin](#), [Hinduism by Dilip Amin](#).*

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Section 3.3: Is Hinduism a religion?

Hinduism is the oldest **major religion**. Hindus have scriptures, have temples in most countries and one in seven people on this earth is a Hindu.

If you are trying to understand Hinduism with Abrahamic viewpoints, it will get confusing. For example, Hinduism has 1) no founder, 2) has no beginning or projected end, 3) has no commandment but have Dharmic guidance, 4) has no central authority, like Pope, 5) has no apostle (to whom God talked to) but have many learned Rishis and Gurus, and 6) has not “The” Scripture like Torah, Bible and Koran, but have Veda, Upanishad, Gita, Ramayana, and more.

The word “religion” comes from the Latin word Re-Ligare, meaning Re-connect with God. That word serves the Abrahamic ideology that God and human beings are physically separate entities and will get re-connected on Judgment Day. Contrary to that, fundamental Hinduism belief is—God and human beings are inseparable. The day soul (Atman or God) leaves us, our worthless dead body remains. In this respect, the word Re-Ligion is not technically applicable to the Hindu belief system.

In many senses, **Hinduism is not a religion** but it’s a righteous way of living. It’s originally called Sanatana Dharma, the law and order that holds value at all times for the entire mankind. Anyone can follow the principles of Hinduism without being born as a Hindu. No one in a real sense is called a Hindu but you can practice the principles of Hinduism. By practicing principles you don’t become a Hindu but you have become a practitioner of principles of Hinduism. These principles can be anywhere from performing rituals for materialistic benefits to spiritual evolution of realizing Self. Hinduism embraces various philosophies and is also considered as the mother of all religions.

Relevant videos: [Swami Chinmaya Nanda](#), [Satguru Bodhinatha](#),

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Section 3.4: Why is Hinduism difficult to understand?

In the West, often the material prepared to teach Hinduism has not been created by practitioners of the religion and thus lacks the understanding that only comes from actually living the tradition. Further, people (including Hindu youths in the West) exposed to Abrahamic faiths have certain expectations from a religion. Such comparative religion knowledge seekers get confused when they don't find a specific answer in Hinduism. For example, Hinduism doesn't have an origin, has no founder, has no commandment but provides lots of guidance. It has no "the" scripture but has a wealth of scriptures. Because of its wealth of scholarship, and traditions of many millenia, it takes time to appreciate the richness of Hinduism.

Relevant videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWLf5qGmIhI>

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Section 3.5: Why was HSB created?

In the United States, close to 95% of literature on Hinduism is written by non-Hindus, and almost all educators and instructors in schools and colleges teaching Hinduism are non-practicing Hindus. Unfortunately, that has led to misconceptions about Hinduism and often has created a negative stereotyping of Hindus and Hinduism.

Many Hindus lack the skill to articulate their views on Hinduism concisely. HSB is a platform that brings together those Hindus who want to be public speakers. It also provides opportunities to followers of Abrahamic faiths to learn about Hinduism from practicing Hindus.

Mission Statement: Engage Hindus to academic and religious institutes around the world to promote pluralism and to increase understandings between different faiths.

HSB is a non-profit organization based in the San Francisco Bay Area but has about 130+ speakers [around the world](#).

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 4: The Name Hinduism

Section 5.1: What is the original name of Hinduism?

Hinduism is third largest and the world's most ancient religion with over 5000 years old history. Hinduism is most popularly known as Sanatan dharma or Vedic dharma. Sanatan literally in English means "eternal". Dharma is duty, virtue and morality, and it refers to the power which upholds the universe and society. The very reason it is called Sanatana (eternal) is because no one knows how and when it started.

While the origin of most religions can be traced back to a certain person, like Christianity starts with Jesus Christ and the idea of Islam was propagated by Prophet Muhammad, nobody can point out a certain person who started the idea of Sanatana Dharma.

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism, http://veda.wikidot.com/dharma](http://veda.wikidot.com/dharma)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What is the Original Name Of Hinduism](#),

Contributor: Nilesh Chaudhary

Section 5.2: Why do people use Sanatan Dharma, instead of Hinduism?

Sanatan translates to eternal. Dharma is universal order and conformity to natural righteousness.

Saints and seers of India codified their experienced spirituality into the ethics, arts, sciences, architecture, food, practices, and rituals based on the observation of the order in the universe around them – something that has always existed and is eternal. Hence the term Sanatan Dharma, which is too broad to be any kind of an “ism”.

Hinduism is a modern term invented after “Indus” valley civilization which compromises the essence of Sanatan Dharma.

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#), Rajeev Singh: [About Sanatan Dharma](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What is the Original Name Of Hinduism](#), [What is Sanatan Dharma?](#),

Contributor: Geetha Ravula

Chapter 5: Traditions

Section 5.1: What are Four Deity Traditions?

Most Hindus belong to one of four major deity traditions (denominations)—Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava, and Smarta. The central deity worshipped and certain philosophical tenets differ. All denominations, however, share many core beliefs such as maya, karma, and moksha. All uphold the validity of Vedas. **Shaivas** primarily worship different 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 Subramanya and Lord Surya, holding them all to be forms of Brahman, the eternal, infinite, unchanging principle that is the substratum of the universe and is both immanent and transcendent.

Contributor: Dharmi Sarkar

Section 5.2: What are basic tenets of Hinduism?

The basic tenets of Hinduism that all Hindus believe in are the concepts of:

1. **Dharma:** Dharma is laws and order by which this universe is sustained. Dharma is the mode of conduct for an individual that is most conducive to spiritual advancement.
2. **Karma:** We are responsible for our actions. Sometimes, we might not understand the events of life, but they are the sum total of our karma over multiple lifetimes. However, our past karma only decides some situations in life (prarabdha), we still have control over our karma in this lifetime, and all our life in this lifetime is not predestined.
3. **Atman/Soul:** meaning that there is a light within each living being and that we are beyond our physical bodies. The Atman cannot be killed or destroyed, only the physical body can be destroyed.
4. **Kaal chakra (Samsara, Wheel of life):** meaning that there is a continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth.
5. **Moksha:** That it is possible for human beings to realize their true nature and be one with their soul while in their physical body. Once the self realization happens, then one is said to attain moksha, and become free from the cycle of birth and death.

Contributor: Swati Sugandhi

Chapter 6: Life Goal

Section 6.1: What is the goal of human life?

Aim of Human life is known as Purushartha (endeavours), “goals of human existence” or “the soul’s purpose.” The Hindu Human Pursuit is a progression through the four endeavors – Dhama, Kama, Artha, and Moksha.

Dharma is the right way of living, being conscious in your actions, words and thoughts and living a life that is lawful and harmonious. Kama is desire. We cannot live without a desire or a goal in life. Desire should follow Dharma.

Artha is money. Money is an important goal in human life and should be earned according to Dharma and is best when utilized towards Moksha. The ultimate goal for a human life is to attain Moksha, which means liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What is the aim of life?](#)

Contribution: Geetha Ravula

Section 6.2: What is self realization?

The ultimate purpose and goal for a Hindu's religious and spiritual practice is to attain *moksha*. Moksha is Self-realization (*atma-jnana*) or realization of one's true divine nature. Hindus Consider each individual (anything living) to be a divine self (*atman*, soul, life principle, consciousness), 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. Self realization is knowledge of the true self beyond both delusion and identification with material phenomena.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism O & A: What is Self Realization](#)

Contribution: Kaushik Macherla

Section 6.3: What is True Happiness?

A true word used in Hinduism is Ananda, a state of causeless bliss and joy. There are many theories about True Happiness (sukha). Happiness is a state of mind and is achieved in many different forms for different people. Some may say happiness is fulfilment of desires, e.g. people striving for something in their lives and upon achieving their goal, they can say they found happiness. But, True Happiness, according to the sages, is a State of Being that cannot be acquired from the world outside, but comes from within. When one is at peace within oneself, then there is true joy and calmness.

When you are in a state of ananda, you are able to find joy in little things like being outside under blue skies, a bird singing, or being in sunshine or the rain. When you are in a state of ananda, you find a purpose in life by doing greater good for humanity.

The other side of happiness is dukha (sadness) that comes out of not accepting the world as it is but desiring a world of your dreams and then having an attachment to the desire. Desires and attachments to worldly things bring miseries in life.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Hinduism Q & A: What is True Happiness](#)

Contributor: Mukta Vadera

Chapter 7: Scriptures

Section 7.1: Do Hindus have a Bible?

No. However, there are numerous Hindu texts that hold the equivalent importance amongst Hindus. Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas are some examples. Then, there are some others such as The Bhagavad Gita. In the vast Hindu scholarship, an attempt to cast one book as the “Bible of Hindus” will probably be a fruitless pursuit.

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#)

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 6.2: What are the Upanishads?

Just like the Bible and Quran are the fundamental scriptures for Christianity and Islam, the Vedas are Hinduism's oldest and most important scriptures. Vedas are meditations that explore the nature of reality, or the "Truth", and are classified into 4 books. Each of the 4 Vedas have 4 sections:

1. Samhitas – Hymns
2. Brahmanas – Priestly Manuals
3. Aranyakas – Forest treatises
4. Upanishads – Enlightened Discourses

Upanishads are also known as Vedanta, that which comes at the end of the Vedas. They are the metaphysical discourses that are usually in an entertaining story format, with a teacher and a student, exploring the nature of "Truth".

Upanishad, the word literally means "come sit near". The seers of the Vedic age were used to giving public talks (similar to the stories of the Buddha giving large sermons). However, not all the secrets can be revealed to a crowd. If Einstein were asked to explain the Theory of Relativity to a crowd at the Madison Square Garden, he would likely give a lighter-weight TED-talk on his findings. Crowds do not understand nuance.

The Truth (ultimate truth) is subtle. Understanding the truth requires a preparation of the body, mind and spirit. When the student is ready, the teacher would ask the student to "come sit near", so the truth may be revealed with clarity and precision. The Upanishads record the Truth with nuance, clarity and precision. It is best to approach these texts with reverence and a reasonable estimation of one's readiness.

Other reading material: [Book-The Upanashads by Eknath Easwaran](#),

Contributor: Madhu Kopalle

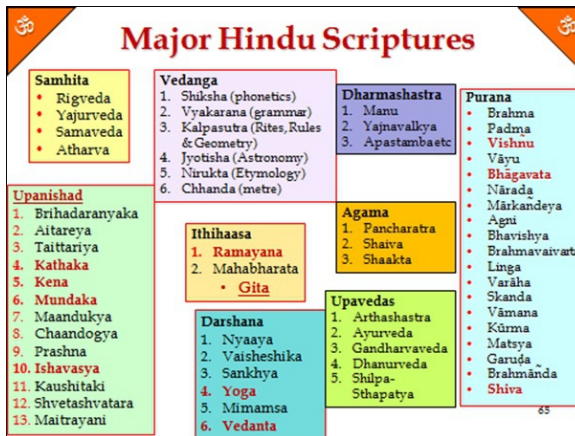
Section 6.3: What are major Hindu scriptures?

Hinduism has a long line of scriptural traditions that continue to evolve *to this day*.

Hinduism’s core scriptures are Shruti (that which is heard, eg. *Vedas*), Smriti (that which is remembered, Manusmriti), Itihasa (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) and Puranas. The **Upanishads** are also Shruti, which are sublime philosophical meditations on the nature of reality, the Self (Atma), and the permanent and unchanging *Brahman* (Divinity/God/God substance). Within the *Mahabharata* is actually contained the ***Bhagavad Gita***, perhaps the text most familiar to non-Indians/Hindus, which describes paths for liberation and also elaborates on both righteous duty (*dharma*) and the states of detachment (*vairagya*) under which such duty needs to be undertaken.

Even after these original scriptures were composed, Hindus continued to create new variants. The *Ramayana* itself has been adapted multiple times with minor and major variations, including in Hindi as the ***Ramacharitmanas of Tulsidas***. Many other religious texts have developed in various sampradayas, panths, maths, and other religious organizations which are too numerous and substantial to summarize here.

The Hindu corpus is alive, not just through the reinterpretation of old scriptures but in the writing of new scriptures.



Contributors: Madhukar Adi & Raman Khanna

Chapter 8: Bhakti

Section 8.1: What is Devotion or Bhakti?

The words *bhakti* (devotion), *bhagavan* (god), *bhakta* (devotee) and *bhajan* (devotional song) all share the Sanskrit root “bhaj”, which means sharing and participation. The root connotes intense devotion by emphasizing personal experience, relationship, emotional engagement, and expression. A spiritual aspirant feels deep love, or “bhakti,” towards the Divine.

The **goal** of cultivating Bhakti in one’s heart is the ultimate experience of love that dissolves all boundaries between the individual and the external world, feeling a sense of divine oneness and harmony with all living beings.

Bhakti comes in **many flavors**, and causes a devotee to completely forget oneself. According to some Hindu schools of thought, there are five kinds of underlying emotions that can arise when feeling devotion towards the Lord: *Shanta* (peaceful devotion), *Dasya* (servitude), *Sakhya* (friendship), *Vatsalya* (parental love) and *Madhurya* (romantic love).

Historically, the expression of the beautiful sentiment of Bhakti brought about a change in the way religion was accessed in India. It made religion available to all people regardless of gender, language, or social status. We have evidence of this as early as in the 5th century in South India, with the devotional poetry of the Tamil Nayanars (Shiva worshippers) and Alvars (Vishnu worshippers). Common themes in these poems include love, service and grace. This marked the beginning of the Bhakti Movement, a time period which gave voice to countless devoted men and women throughout the Indian Subcontinent. The devotional songs of these poet-saints, such as Kabir, Mirabai, and Saint Thyagaraja live long after their physical passing, carrying on the spirit of their soulful love and longing for God.

In **modern times**, the path of devotion (*bhakti marga or yoga*) is followed by many Hindus worldwide. This is practiced in conjunction with the path of knowledge (*jnana marga*). While a devotee enjoys devotional songs that help reflect on their personal relationship with Lord Krishna when in *bhakti marga*, another day they might engage in philosophical discussions on life’s most meaningful questions in the spirit of *jnana marga* (*Knowledge Yoga*).

Other reading material: [Bhakti Yoga](#),

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What is Devotion or Bhakti](#) , [Bhakti on a street of San Francisco](#)

Contributor: Lakshmi Subramanian

Section 8.2: What is Hindu Prayers for Covid-19 Situations?

Every Hindu prayer begins with Om, the sacred sound in Hinduism that holds a lot of spiritual significance. This is followed by an invocation to Lord Ganesha, the giver of auspicious beginnings and remover of obstacles: Om Śhrī Mahāgaṇapataye Namaha.

These are selected Sanskrit prayers for the Welfare of the World:

- *Om sarve bhavantu sukhinaha. Sarve santu niraamayaaha. Sarve bhadraani pashyantu. Maa kaschid dukha bhaag bhavet* “May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings experience prosperity. May none in the world suffer.”
- *Lokaah samastaah sukhino bhavantu* “May all beings be always happy”
- *Om shanti, shanti, shantihi* “Om, peace, peace, peace”

Many Hindus meditate on this Sanskrit word, “Shanti,” thereby invoking inner peace and radiating the same in external circumstances.

A popular hymn chanted in times of fear, danger, and uncertainty is the Hanuman Chalisa, forty verses that glorify Lord Hanuman, the giver of strength, courage, and protection.

Advanced practitioners chant these Sanskrit mantras and stotras (devotional hymns) to seek the grace of various deities in the Hindu tradition. Chanting these prayers with utmost faith is the key to reap their full benefits. These are specifically for good health, expedited healing, and the elimination of disease:

Prayers to Lord Vishnu:

Om Achyuta Ananta Govindāya Namaha

Salutations to Achyuta Ananta Govinda! (These are all names of Lord Vishnu.)

Stotra: Śhrī Sudarśhana Ṣhatkam, śhloka 3

Srākārasahitam Mantram

Paṭhantam Śhatrunigraham

Sarvarogaprašhamanam

Prapadyeham Sudarśhanam

I salute Lord Sudarshana, who destroys all enemies,

and cures all diseases of those who chant his mantra “Sra”.

Stotra: Śhrīman Nārāyaṇeeyam, daśhakam 8, śhloka 13

Asmin Parātman Nanu Pādmakalpe

Tvमित्थामुत्थāpita Padmayonihi

Anantabhūma Mama Rogarāśhim

Nirundhi Vātālayavāsa Viṣhno

Oh Supreme Lord of incomprehensible powers,

you made Lord Brahma emerge from the lotus.

Oh Lord Vishnu who has manifested in the temple of Guruvayoor,

Please cure all my diseases.

Prayer to Lord Shiva:

Stotra: Śhrī Vaidyanātha Aṣṭakam, śhloka 4

Prabhūtavātādi Samastaroga

Pranāśha Kartre Munivanditāya

Prabhākarendvagni Vilochanāya

Śhrī Vaidyanāthāya Namah Śhivāya

I bow to that Lord Shiva, who is the king among physicians, who cures all great diseases like rheumatism and arthritis, who is worshipped by great sages, and to whom, the Sun, Moon and God of Fire are eyes.

Prayer to Goddess Devi:

Stotra: Śhrī Lalitā Sahasranāmāvali, 551 & 552

Om Sarvavyādhi Praśhamanyai Namaha

(Salutations to the goddess who cures all diseases)

Om Sarvamrtyu Nivāriṇyāi Namaha

(Salutations to the goddess who removes all types of death)

Prayer to Lord Kārtikeya, also known as Sharavana Bhava:

Om Śharavaṇa Bhavāya Namaha
(Salutations to Lord Sharavana Bhava)

Prayer to Lord Rama:

Āpaduddhāraka Śhrī Rāma Stotram, śhloka 1
Āpadām Apahartāram
Dātāram Sarvasampadām
Lokābhirāmam Śhrīrāmam
Bhūyo Bhūyo Namāmyaham

I respectfully bow down again and again to Shri Rama, who removes all obstacles, blesses one with all types of wealth, and pleases all in the world.

Prayer to Lord Hanuman:

Āpaduddhāraṇa Hanumat Stotram, śhloka 5
Ādivyādhi Mahāmāri Grahapīḍāpahāriṇe
Prāṇāpahartre Daityānām Rāmaprāṇātmane Namaha

I prostrate before Lord Anjaneya, who is the destroyer of worries (ādhi), illnesses (vyādhi), chronic illnesses (mahāmāri), evil effects from the changes in the position of planets (grahapīḍā); he is the annihilator of demons, he is the protector of living beings.

Other reading material: Relevant videos: [Health & Healing Mantras for Coronavirus Protection](#), Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: Does God Answer Our Prayers](#) (this one is general on prayer, not covid)

Contributor: Lakshmi Subramanian

Section 8.3: Does God answer our prayers?

God always answers prayers of his devotees in a manner that is most beneficial for that individual in the long run. Like parents, God also likes to see his children happy. He feels very good when he sees his children and devotees happy. Many of our saints have said that He is also very compassionate.

Remember, whatever happens, happens for one's benefit. The answers may not exactly be what we want to see at the time of the request, but God can see ahead, in the future and the answer will in the long run be more for the person's benefit and spiritual growth. This may be difficult to accept, but having faith in God in these situations is necessary. You have to then ask God, to give you strength to accept the decision. So do not hesitate to ask Him whatever you want.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilnand [Hinduism Q & A: Does God Answer Our Prayers](#)

Contributor: Dr. Jyoti Lulla

Chapter 9: Dharma

Section 9.1: What is Dharma?

Dharma is not the same as religion. Dharma has the Sanskrit root *dhri*, which means, “that which upholds”, “that without which nothing can stand” or “that which maintains the stability and harmony of the universe.” Dharma is often translated as laws and order by which this universe is sustained.

This dharma is not only limited to human beings. Fire’s dharma is to burn and a tree’s dharma is to bear fruits. This dharma principle also applies even to an inert material, like an electron’s dharma is to constantly moving in an orbit around proton and neutron. The day electrons decide to be a-dharmic and stop moving in that orbit, the world will fall apart in a second.

Dharma is the mode of conduct for an individual that is most conducive to spiritual advancement. Dharma encompasses ethics, morality, natural laws, conduct, etc. that is the most harmonious and aligned way to live as a society and on this planet. Dharma is, therefore, a conduct according to principles of universal order, social and moral conduct, that is righteous and takes an individual closer to divinity.

Abrahamic traditions are looking for a moral code. Dharma is searching for T/truth.

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#), Rajiv Malhotra: [Dharma is not the same as Religion](#), Rajeev Singh: [What is Dharma?](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Hinduism Q & A: What Is Dharm](#),

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 10: Karma

Section 10.1: How could a perfect God create an imperfect world?

God created the Universe and gave us many resources along with spiritual knowledge. We can put our senses to enjoy materialistic pleasures of the world and use the spiritual knowledge to elevate our soul and break the cycle of life and death. Choice is ours. It's all up to human beings how rightfully or wrongfully we use these resources.

For example, God created fire; fire can be used to cook a nice dish, can be used as a bonfire in winter or can be used to set a house on fire. Human beings' endless selfish desire and greed to accumulate has created disparity in this world and made the world imperfect.

If only human beings share just like nature we would make it a perfect world. Just like trees, rivers, sun and forest; they all take minimal from what is available to them and give and share all what they have.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: How Could A Perfect God Create An Imperfect World](#)

Contributor: Geetha Ravula

Section 10.2: What is Karma?

Karma in Sanskrit means ‘Action’. It is the universal law of cause and effect that dictates that your life is your own making. Goodness reaps goodness and conversely, evil reaps evil. Karma is not just physical actions; in-fact the thoughts we create and the words we speak are Karma too.

In Yogic Science, Karma is considered a glue between the soul and the body. As long as humans have desires and thus associated karma with those desires, they will continue to go through reincarnations (the cycles of life and death) until they have dissolved all their Karmas. In the endless Karma cycle, at birth, humans are allotted a certain quantity of (**Prarabdha**) Karma from a repository of (**Sanchita**) Karma (accumulated Karmas from the soul’s past lives) to be resolved in the current life, however in the process, new (**Agami**) Karma is accumulated that is added to your total Karma and this endless cycle continues. Perform selfless Karmas that are not binding and hence have the possibility to liberate themselves (achieve **Nirvana**).

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Hinduism Q & A: What is Karma?](#), [Hinduism Q & A: What is Good Action](#), [Vikas Gupta](#),

Contributor: Vikas Gupta

Section 10.4: Do animals acquire new Karma?

Every birth is a result of their karmic deeds, whether it's an animal or a human birth. Animals are born with just basic survival instinct (food, shelter, safety), with a bottom line (birth) and top line (death) between which they live their entire life. For them, they don't accumulate new karma as they live by their natural instincts and tendencies. They rather dissolve karmas from their previous lives (e.g. if your longing was for food in your previous life, in your new life you may be born as a well-fed domesticated pig).\

Only humans have the ability to break the cycle of birth and death. They do so by dissolving their previous and current lives' karma (prarabdhi).

Relevant videos: Swami Mukundanand [Can Animals do Karma?](#)

Contributor: Vikas Gupta

Section 10.5: Are our actions predetermined?

Our actions are not predetermined but our habits and karma push us to act or react in a certain way. This can be changed by cultivating new habits. We have the free will to act anyway we want to.

You have a hundred percent free will to think, say and do what you want to. We cannot say “Oh, I hit you because I was destined to hit you, so don’t blame me.” We’re in control of our actions.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q&A – Does God Control Our Actions?](#), [Why I become Hindu](#),

Contributor: Geetha Ravula

Section 10.5: Why are so many innocent people suffering or being killed?

This is a very poignant question, especially in times like a global pandemic, when thousands of people are dying every day. It strikes at the very root of the concept that God is compassionate.

First, we must understand that Soul, the expression of Life Force within us, is immortal. It is a traveler that is occupying this body temporarily and must move on.

Second, someone may think that death is a punishment, permanent. This is not true. We have come here with an agenda, propelled by our past, and with limited resources, including time. Our time is best utilized when we understand the goal of life, and pursue it with sincerity and devotion. Death is not a punishment. It is a window of opportunity. We will move on to better places, depending on our performance in this and earlier lives.

God IS compassionate. He promises in the Gita—"Na me Bhakta Pranashyathi". My devotee shall never perish. You take one step closer to me, and I will come 10 steps closer to you.

Then why do all these people suddenly die? We are all sent to this world to learn. Some learn quickly, some take time. All actions must produce results. When and where, we don't know. Perhaps we have been to places where we should not go or did things we are not supposed to or ate something we are not supposed to. Nature and the Law of Karma enforces the consequences of those actions.

It is only our attachment to this ephemeral body that makes death seem so painful. The Upanishads say that to the Realized Master, death is but a pickle on the tongue, to be enjoyed.

I am not the body. Aham Brahmaasmi. I am that Immortal Reality.

This is true for even those that do not understand it or accept it.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Hinduism Q & A: Why Does God Allow Suffering](#)

Contributor: Madhu Kopalle

Section 10.6: Why do bad things happen to good people?

Good or bad things we experience now are the accumulation of our past actions from not only this lifetime but many lifetimes. This is karma.

Humans are bound to reap the results of their past actions, either in this lifetime, or the next. We cannot attribute good or bad things happening to people based on just this lifetime's actions.

A person's actions can be of 3 types, good actions (Satvik Karma), bad actions (Tamasik Karma) and mixed good and bad actions (Rajasik Karma).

For example, a person does lots of good karma and gets fruits for it and then utilizes those fruits for bad work. Before experiencing the results of his bad karma, he leaves his body. Another person does lots of bad karma and gets fruits for it and then utilizes those fruits for good work. Before experiencing the fruits of his good work, he too leaves his body. Now, these pending results of past actions that are to be experienced are extended to their next birth. Whether they become good or bad natured in their next life, they are bound to reap the results of their past actions. So bottom line, we cannot judge good things happening to bad people based on this lifetime's actions. The bad person might have accumulated many good karmas in the past and might be experiencing their good *prarabdha* (a collection of past karmas) in this lifetime whereas a good person might be going through his bad *prarabdha* in this lifetime.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Hinduism Q & A: Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People](#)

Contributor: Geetha Ravula

Section 10.7: Does God not control our actions?

GOD doesn't control our actions. One must control one's actions and will.

Many external things that happen in our life, some of them are considered to be controlled by our destiny. However, not everything is controlled by destiny so the most important thing you have to understand is that your thoughts, your words and your actions are never controlled by destiny. You have a hundred percent free will to think, say and do what you want to. However, our choices for our action in this life are limited by our past and present karmas. We cannot say "Oh I hit you because I was destined to hit you, so don't blame me." We're in control of our actions but some of the things that happen to us that we would consider good luck or bad luck according to Hindu philosophy, there's no such thing as luck but it's the outcome of your past life's actions.

Source: [*Swami Nikhilanand*](#).

Contributor: *Geetha Ravula*

Section 10.8: Can you wash off bad karma by good ones?

Answer is a big No. You will get what you have given. One cannot counteract bad karma by performing good ones. Karma means action. Yes, one may counteract bad karma by performing acts that will nullify the effects of a previous action, but the unexperienced result of an action will last forever, until it is experienced.

But it's important to note that aside from the deed itself, the state of consciousness that prompts any action is what we must consider. A person who steals from another may get some merit by returning the item to the victim if the thief does so because he fears the bad karma of going to jail. But what will further his journey to moksha will be the development of pure compassion, and the sense of not wishing to bring pain to any other being.

One who, for example, steals bread from a wealthy, well-fed man to feed a starving family (and is pained to do it) may not suffer the same karmic effect as someone who steals purely out of greed. Before becoming Sage Valmiki he (had name Ratnakar) murdered and robbed people for his living. Upon Sage Narad's advice he did penance by meditating on Bhagwan Ram's name. He evolved as a Sage and then wrote Ramayan.

Bramhavaivarta Purana, Prikriti 37.16:

*Avashyam eva bhoktavyam krutakarma shubha ashubam |
Naa bhuktam kshiyate karma kalpa-koti-shaitairapi”||*

(A person will definitely enjoy the fruits of his action; it may be good or bad; for without giving the results, an action does not die out even after billions of years.)

Contributor: Fred Stella

Section 10.9: Why did something bad happen to me?

Something good or bad happening to us is our Prarabdha. Prarabdha karma are the part of sanchita karma, a collection of past karmas, which are ready to be experienced through the present body (incarnation).

There can be no effect without cause. Our good or bad tastes or tendencies, whatever they may be, are all simulations of Samaskaras (impressions) accumulated in the past. Only those among them which find favorable circumstances manifest themselves and become active. The others remain stored up, waiting for a suitable occasion, and bear good or bad results at the opportune moment. Whatever we do is a mixture of good and evil, hence we reap fruits in which both happiness and misery are mingled. We term a thing good or bad accordingly as the one or the other predominates in it.

Based on 'Towards The Goal Supreme' by Swami Virajananda

Contributor: Jyoti Lulla

Section 10.10: Why does God allow suffering?

Suffering is relative. To a billionaire with all the luxuries and security of life available, an individual residing in a small apartment in a crime-ridden neighborhood of a metropolis is suffering. A wealthy person, despite his/her wealth can be suffering from depression, while a young boy playing with marbles on the dusty streets of a poor country can be in bliss.

Suffering has a purpose for all. It is not just physical and what is visible on the surface. Suffering, the state of mind, is *karmic* accounting at work—for both the one who suffers, and for the one who is the cause of the suffering. For the one who is suffering, it is a repayment of karmic debt, and a cleansing activity. To the one who is the cause of suffering, it is an accrual of karmic debt for a future settlement. For those (hopefully us), who are not suffering and notice the suffering in the world, it is an opportunity to address it to further cleanse ourselves and get closer to the divine.

We must understand that the Atma or Soul, the expression of the Life Force within us, is immortal. It is a traveler that is occupying this body temporarily and will move on.

We think that death is bad. This is a misconception. It is the only certainty we are the most sure about. The issue is death that is inflicted by others and unnatural causes. Being killed, just like suffering, is a karma-driven interruption, in what is otherwise expected to be a natural course of life.

Other reading material:

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: Why Does God Allow Suffering](#)

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Chapter 11: Commandments

Section 11.1: Do Hindus have Commandments?

Hinduism is a family of traditions that emphasizes personal 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.

To paraphrase Coco Chanel, "Fashion changes, Style is eternal", Hindus would agree with "Commandments change, but Dharma is forever".

Source: HAF <https://www.hinduamerican.org/hinduism-short-answers-real-questions>

Chapter 12: Origin

Section 12.1: Where does the Universe come from?

We don't know. There is no Hindu scholarship that talks about the origin or the end of the universe, other than the cyclicity of it. Infinite past and infinite future, with cycles of annihilation and rejuvenation is the nature of the universe.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand: [Where Does The Universe Come From](#) and [How Does God Create the Universe](#) ,

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 12.2: What is the Hindu concept of creation?

Abrahamic concept of creation of the world is it was created in seven days or dissolution of it on the Judgment Day. Hindus believe this universe is the result of a continuous process of creation and dissolution. The universe was there billions of years before and it will still be there after billions of more years; though it will continuously be changing.

When creation happens, the unmanifest becomes manifest, takes a form. When dissolution happens, the manifest becomes unmanifest.

According to Shrimad Bhagwad Gita, there was no time when Bhagwan Krishna was not there and there was no time when Arjun was not there. The only difference was that Bhagwan Krishna remembered all His births while Arjun did not.

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 13: Heaven and Hell

Section 13.1: What is sin?

Sin is called *Paap* in Hinduism. Paap is an action to satisfy one's senses and mind, and is therefore forbidden. Paap (sin) can be committed by mind, speech or body.

Thinking ill of others, pride and jealousy are sins committed by mind. Talking ill about others, speaking untruth, gossiping, blaming and finger pointing others are sins committed by speech. Killing living beings for mere sensual enjoyment, drinking alcohol, robbery, hitting people, eating condemned food, or any kind of violence to human beings, animals or living beings is sin committed by the body.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What is Sin](#), [Hinduism Q & A: Hell in Hinduism, is it the same as in Christianity?](#)

Contributor: Geetha Ravula

Section 13.2: Do Hindus believe in heaven and hell?

There is no eternal heaven or hell in Hinduism. Hell (naraka) and heaven (swarga) are a state of mind, brought about by our thoughts, and deeds. These states of mind result in a temporary astral orientation of the atman – naraka or swarga, wherefrom the next birth is determined.

The destiny of Hell or Heaven is NOT a permanent one in Hinduism. The soul or *jeeva* moves through even these worlds, based on the past *karmas*. When the results are exhausted, it moves on. Sometimes coming back to a human form.

Thus, in Hinduism, if we do good deeds (*punya*), we are rewarded with a bout in *swarga*. When the Credit Card balance runs out, we are kicked out. When too many sins (*paapa*) accumulated, we end up in *naraka*, where we are roasted like *mirchi bajji* (tempura). But that is also temporary.

The keeper of *naraka* is *Yama Dharma Raaja*, Lord of Justice, not a Satan of temptation or damnation.

Other reading material: [Do Hindus believe in heaven or hell?](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand: [Heaven in Hinduism, is it the same as in Christianity?](#), [Hell in Hinduism, is it the same as in Christianity?](#), [What is Sin](#),

Contributor: Madhu Kopalle

Section 13.3: What is moksha?

Moksha means liberation; it's the concept of ultimate freedom from the cycle of life and death.

Hindus believe that there is no death for the soul or atman. When the soul leaves this body it passes through a cycle of successive lives. Its next incarnation is always dependent on past deeds. Without ultimate liberation, we reincarnate again and again in the form of human or any other living being. This cycle of life and death can only be broken when a soul attains Moksha.

Moksha is one of the human pursuits and it can be achieved when a human being pursues self-realization. It is achieved by ending false ego and desires. Moksha is attained only when all good and bad karmas of many lifetimes are exhausted and God is fully realized.

Other reading material: [HAF: What is moksha?](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Swami Nikhil Anand: What Is Liberation](#)

Contributor: Geetha Ravula

Section 13.4: Is heaven in Hinduism the same as Christianity?

According to Biblical scholar Bart Ehrmann, Jesus didn't preach about Heaven or Hell. These are later interpolations and misunderstandings that are glorified in modern religious dialog.

Hindus do believe there is a "place of no-anxiety" (*Vaikuntha*), which is the highest realm and the home of Vishnu, the creator. This is the place of no-anxiety, as the name suggests, but we do not live there as our currently embodied selves. In the Hindu tradition, our current bodies are like clothing that we wear and discard, while our inner self, Atman, is the one that continues the onward journeys. Relationships made by this physical body are also considered, therefore, impermanent.

There are lower realms that correspond a little more closely with the modern Christian concept of heaven or hell, except we don't have harps and virgins. These realms are also meant for enjoyment of the results of our actions (if good, you go to the higher realm, and if bad, well, no soup for you, and you go to the lower realm). But this isn't permanent. When you have done your time, you can return back to this physical realm, and start counting up your deeds again.

Hindus are more likely to interpret Jesus' teaching of the "Kingdom of God" (which he talked extensively about), as a reference to the heart filled with devotion (and not to heaven, as such). Hindus would agree that God lives in our hearts filled with love. And if you can find your way to your heart, you are in a place of no-anxiety, or heaven.

Welcome home, to your own heart!

Other reading material:

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Heaven in Hinduism, is it the same as in Christianity?](#), [Hell in Hinduism, is it the same as in Christianity?](#), [Bart Ehrmann's interview on NPR](#)

Contributor: Gaurav Rastogi

Chapter 14: Afterlife

Section 14.1: Is RIP an appropriate expression for a departed Hindu?

Rest in Peace (RIP) is an Abrahamic concept, as per which the body waits or rests in a grave. On Judgement Day, the body gets united with the soul and rises again. God will make judgement for who will go to heaven or eternal hell.

Hindus believe in reincarnation of the departed soul to a new body and soul does not rest. Hindus have a concept that if the soul is trapped inside the earth, then it's called as a *Preta* (a disturbed soul and in suffering). Suffering in Hell is better as it's temporary, but not getting trapped here. Thus to tell RIP is a disrespect to the departed Hindu.

“*Param Gati Mile*” (may the soul attain *moksha*), “*Om Sadagati*” and “*Om Shanti*” are appropriate expressions when a Hindu passes away.

Other reading material: [Here is why saying 'Rest in Peace' is a disservice to the departed Hindu soul.](#)

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Section 14.2: What happens when we die?

Death is inevitable and deterministic (uncontrollable) according to the Hindu religion.

Death does not imply the cessation of our existence, but it means a new beginning. Death is just a small milestone on the journey of infinite miles of eternal existence. Thus the phenomena of death is linked to the concept of rebirth.

Hinduism has a deep rooted belief in the theory of rebirth; the idea of rebirth is connected to the idea of the 'Atman' or the Soul, the individual's non-material inner self that is eternal. The soul cannot be experienced with the five sense organs but it does exist as a spiritual substance. When a human dies, the soul from his body detaches itself from the literal body and moves out in search of another body and there occurs rebirth.

How does the soul decide what it wants to be reborn again as? This question takes us to one of the most basic philosophical theories of Hinduism; the concept of Karma. Karma is the accumulated past actions waiting to come to fruition. One's rebirth depends on past actions (Karma), good deeds taking you towards better births and immoral deeds taking you towards birth in lower category creatures like animals.

Thus Hinduism gives a highly positive interpretation to the concept of death and the journey beyond this life. We will always live in the form of a soul and death is a milestone on the journey of the soul.

In Bhagavad Gita, Supreme GOD Sree Krishna says to Arjun (Chapter 2, Sloka 22):

*vāsānsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya
navāni grihṇāti naro 'parāṇi
tathā śharīrāṇi vihāya jīrṇānya
nyāni sanyāti navāni dehī*

As a person sheds worn-out garments and wears new ones, likewise, at the time of death, the soul casts off its worn-out body and enters a new one.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [What happens when we die?](#), [What is Reincarnation?](#)

Contributor: Mona Raval

Chapter 15: Reincarnation

Section 15.1: God incarnate?

Yes, God does incarnate. Hindus believe in incarnation (called avatars or descent). The incarnation of a deity in human or animal form is to counteract some particular evil in the world to establish balance.

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भव- ति भारत ।

अभ्युत्थान- मधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम्- ॥४-७॥

परित्राणाय- साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।

धर्मसंस्था- पनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥४-८॥

Lord Krishna in Bhagavad Gita tells his best friend Arjun (chapter 4.17):

Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati bharata

Abhythanamadharmasya tadatmanam srijamyaham

Paritranaya sadhunang vinashay cha dushkritam

Dharmasangsthapanarthay sambhabami yuge yuge

Whenever there is a decline of righteousness [dharma] and rise of unrighteousness then I send forth Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age (I descend myself).

Lord Vishnu (lord of sustenance or protector of humanity) had 10 popular incarnations (or appearances): Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (half man, half lion), Vamana (dwarf), Parashurama (Rama with the axe), Rama (hero of the Ramayana epic, in Treta yuga/time period), Krishna (author of Bhagwad Gita, in Dvapara yuga/time period), Buddha (established Buddhism), and Kalki (the incarnation yet to come). The number of Vishnu's avatars is sometimes extended or their identities changed, according to local preferences.

Actually, we are all God incarnate. Only in our case, we don't remember our essential divinity.

Other reading material: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/avatar-Hinduism>

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism O & A: Does God Incarnate](#)

Contributor: Nilesh Chaudhary

Section 15.2: Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?

Hindus believe that the soul is immortal passing through the process wherein the soul reincarnates into different physical bodies through cycles of birth and death. Guided by the Laws of Karma, 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.

Imagine a single tennis game where the person who has the serve, also has been given an ability to serve an Ace 100% of the time. What are the rules for success where the coin toss can determine game outcomes? Would you believe there is any merit in learning to play the game well? What if you just play one game, a single event? Would you think the game is fair?

If your answer is NO, then you have just made an argument in favor of reincarnation. You just have to conclude that for the world to be non-random, there have to be multiple games played, and the success in one game improves the beginning odds in the next game.

If you disagree, then you have just concluded that all life is random, and there is very little advantage in learning to live better.

Despite the dogma against it in the western world, there are still scientific studies done on remembering past lives. The Medical school at University of Virginia maintains a site and has written several scientific papers journaling reported pre-birth experiences that are very analogous to the detailed descriptions in the Hindu Tradition. Just read with an open mind.

Other reading material: [HAF: Do Hindus believe in reincarnation? Division of Perceptual Studies | University of Virginia School](#)

[Back When I Was Older : Invisibilia](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [What is Reincarnation?](#), [What happens when we die?](#), [Can I be born as a plant or animal?](#)

Contribution: Gaurav Rastogi

Section 15.3: How much has one's past life had an impact on the current life?

Hinduism does not teach ideas such as eternal Heaven or Hell. It sees life as a process of evolution where we grow spiritually over many lives.

Behavior in a past life, combined with *dharma* (the duty you are born with) for this life, creates the lives we live in the present.

With each incarnation we get new lessons, based on what lessons we passed and failed in the last life. If you were an abusive person in a past life, your karma dictates you will be on the receiving end of abuse in this or future lives. Forgiving your abuser where appropriate, and asking for forgiveness for yourself, frees you from the karma.

When a Soul persists in not learning lessons, abusing, not forgiving; a vicious cycle of birth and death is created until the soul evolves and attains *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death).

Other reading material: [The Momentum of Karma](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What is Good Action](#), [Why I become Hindu](#), [Transcending Karma](#), [The Deeper Meaning of Dharma](#).

Contributor: Swamini VishwaPratibha

Section 15.4: Is there a possibility of me being an ant in the next life?

Hindus consider all living beings to have an *atman* (soul). The *atman* reincarnates, and subsequent births are determined by past *karma*. *Karma* rooted in higher consciousness leads to births in species of higher consciousness (humans). *Karma* of lower consciousness birth the *atman* in species of lower consciousness. Yes, you can be an ant in the next life.

There is a story of Jada Bharatan from Sriman Bhagavatam. Bharat was a king who performed many pious rituals for the betterment of his people and kingdom. In old age, wanting to retire, he chose a lonely place around a pond. There he stayed several years, doing penance for his Moksha. He found a fawn that had been attacked by a tiger and hurt badly. He rescued it and started caring for it. He grew an attachment for it, looking for its welfare. At the time of his death, he was very worried for this fawn. Therefore he was born as a fawn in his left life.

Inference: This is the concept of “Antima Smriti” – what you think of at the time of death is what you are born as in the next life. In this story, it is clear that human beings, even the most pious, can be born in a lower life form.

Contributor: A team

Section 15.5: Why don't we remember our past life?

Do you remember what you had for breakfast a week ago? We don't carry all memories even to the next day, so how will we carry all memories from this lifetime to the next, or from the past to this life? However, there are some examples of a few people who remembered something from their past life.

Actually, not remembering your past life is a blessing, is it not? Won't we be totally miserable if we remembered all of our past 1000 lives?

We do carry some subtle memories even after we leave our physical body. For example, we have inherent liking and disliking for certain things. One might inherently like mountains and another person might find more solace at a beach. We also have inherent personalities. One sibling is an extrovert and the other an introvert—how do you explain that?

Other reading material:

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q&A: Why Don't We Remember Our Past Lives?](#), [HG Chanchalpathi Dasa, Iskon](#)

Contributor: Swati Sudandhi

Chapter 16: Soul

Section 16.1: If a soul goes to a new body, where does a new soul come from for increased world population?

Think of Soul as the life energy within you that moves from one body to another body in the cycle of life and death that we call Samsara. This life energy is a part of the infinite, unbounded energy that prevails the entire cosmos (Parmatama). When one talks about life energy, it is unbounded and not in terms of numbers.

People ask when more births are happening than death, does that mean souls are coming from other life forms (animals, plants, etc.) and the total aggregate number of souls is constant on Earth?

Please know that numbers are only for the physical world, the life force (atma) knows no such physical limit and its arithmetic as the fundamental life force is unbounded and permeates the entire existence.

I have one lit candle. Five people come by and light their candles from my one light. Where have the new flames come from? The rules of physical mathematics do not apply to the spiritual realm.

Can we reach infinite by counting 1, 2, 3 to 100, to 1000, to millions and so on? We will keep counting endlessly but will never reach the Infinite. So the question of the finite number of souls on earth would not be a valid one as soul is an infinitesimal part of this unbounded infinite energy and we cannot count in terms of numbers.

Source: [Sadhguru Satsang](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Is the soul of an ant bigger than the soul of a whale?](#)

Contributor: Vikas Gupta

Section 16.2: Can the soul die?

According to Hindu scriptures, there is no death for the soul. The human soul (*jīvātma*) is considered to be of the same essence as the Divine Supreme Soul (*paramātma*), also termed as Consciousness. Hence the soul, in the Hindu context, is eternal, imperishable, changeless, and that which illumines everything.

The soul can be thought of as a source of light. While the furniture in a room might keep changing, the reason one can see and experience these items is due to the presence of the light. Similarly, we are able to perceive, feel and think in the world because of our soul.

Lord Krishna declares in the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 20:

*na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin nāyam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ
ajo nityaḥ śhāśhvato 'yam purāṇo na hanyate hanyamāne śharīre*

The soul is neither born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. It is without birth, eternal, immortal, and ageless. The soul is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

Thus, Hindu theologians conclude that the soul does not die. When a person passes on, their body decays, mind stops thinking, but the soul, however, continues to exist. It leaves the body and moves onto a different realm of experience, based on what that particular soul needs for evolution. This is valid for all living beings, and not just humans. It is due to this belief system that Hindus propound the theory of karma and reincarnation. The soul evolves by taking on different births, until it reaches spiritual maturity and finally merges with the Divine Consciousness. This, liberation (*moksha*), is the goal of life on earth.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: What happens when we die?](#), [Hinduism Q & A: Can the soul die?](#), [Hinduism Q & A: What is Reincarnation?](#)

Contributor: Lakshmi Subramanian

Section 16.3: Why did God create souls?

Just as the combination of many strong and weak, visible and invisible forms of energy gives rise to waves in an ocean, the brahman/atma (energy) gives life to entities around us and including us. Why were the waves created? We don't know. Why were souls created? We don't know. It just is.

GOD didn't create souls. Souls existed in the past, exist in the present and will exist in the future

*na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin
nāyaṃ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ
ajo nityaḥ śhāśhvato 'yaṃ purāṇo
na hanyate hanyamāne śharīre*

The soul is neither born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal, and ageless. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: Why did God create souls?](#)

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 16.4: How many souls are there?

Not every soul (*Atman*) that is manifested is incarnate in human form at any given time. Aside from the souls that are now embodied in the plant and animal kingdom, there are other spheres of existence where souls reside. And souls are consistently emanating from Divinity. The Hindu scriptures do not place an exact number of souls, either in the created universe or beyond.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: How many souls are there?](#)

Contributor: Fred Stella

Section 16.5: Is the soul of an ant bigger than the soul of a whale?

Soul or Atman is an eternal entity that animates the life of all living creatures. The divinity of the soul gives life (consciousness or life installed by the prana) to the creature. A soul is like a powerful small light, illuminating the entire dark room. All souls, that of an ant or a whale, are inherently the same.

According to Svetasvatara Upanishad (5.9) the size of the soul is ten-thousandth part of the tip of the hair.

balagra sata bhagasya

satadha kalpitasya ca

bhago jivah sa vijneyah

sa canantyaaya kalpate ||

Translation: When the upper tip of a hair follicle is divided into one hundred parts and again each of such parts is further divided into one hundred parts, each such part is the size of the soul.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: Is the soul of an ant bigger than the soul of a whale?](#), [Hinduism Q & A: What is the size of the soul?](#)

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 17: Gurus, Saints and Apostles

Section 17.1: Difference between apostle and guru?

In general, apostles are people God conveyed messages to. Messages conveyed to apostles become scriptures. Christianity has 12 Apostles associated with Jesus. They were the original direct disciples of Jesus.

Hinduism does not have apostles. Gurus are learned people working as teachers. However, unlike the physics and chemistry teachers in schools, Gurus are the ones who teach the subject called “Self Realization” which deals with the question, who am I really?

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#)

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Hinduism Q & A: What Is A Guru](#), [Hinduism Q & A: What Is A Saint](#)

Contributor: Dr. Jyoti Lulla

Section 17.2: What is a saint?

A saint is a man or a woman who has renounced worldly life and taken up the path of liberation and attempts to get as close to the divine as possible. He/she is the one who is free from egotism, my-ness and duality. Saints are usually unselfish, practice unconditional love for all, and are endowed with equal vision. Saints are beyond dualities like likes and dislikes, bad and good, profit and loss, pleasure and pain, and heat and cold. They are devoid of greed, anger and lust. They are embodiment of Divine knowledge.

Hindu Saints are from many walks of life, they are called Gurus, Sadhus, Rishis, Swamis and other names as well. However, saints are not apostles.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Hinduism Q & A: What Is A Saint](#)

Contributor: Geetha Ravula

Chapter 18: Hindu Practices

Section 18.1: How often is a Hindu supposed to pray?

Worship comes in many forms and frequency to Hindus. The “form” a Hindu chooses to express his/her piety through, or the deity that best represents the aspects of divinity that appeals to an individual, influences the nature of worship. Therefore, the reverence for places, objects, sages, seers, mantras, or even the denial of forms towards spirituality marks an influence on a Hindu’s approach to worship.

If a Hindu considers Sun to be essential for life on this planet and sees the causation, chances are that (s)he will fold hands in gratitude every sunrise and sunset. If a Hindu sees a river as sacred for the life it has sustained for thousands of years, (s)he may aspire to take a dip in it once in his/her life. If a certain alignment of Moon and Sun, which can raise tides in the ocean, does something to the energies of an individual he’d want to remember to take a pause and think of it, perhaps with folded hands or sitting in silence.

To another Hindu every breath may be worship, and to yet another worship may not be necessary at all. How often – as often as you want, or not at all. Some Hindus worship daily during festivals. Quite a few Hindu homes have a consecrated deity that they worship daily.

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#); [Worship in Sanatana Dharma](#):

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 18.2: Namaste: What does it mean?

In general Namaste means, “Greetings” or “Hello” or “How are you”. It is just a way of greeting people. However, technically speaking, Namaste is made up of two words, Namaha + Te. Namaha means ‘I bow’. Te means ‘You’. Hinduism teaches us that God is sitting inside us, that is your soul or atman. Namaste means I see divine in you and bow to you.

Relevant videos: [HAF: Namaste – Simply Divine](#).

Contributor: Dr. Jyoti Lulla

Section 18.3: Why do you give food to God/idols?

Hindus who choose to go to temples or have a temple at home, offering food is an approach to strengthen devotion. For others it is the aspect of giving something of importance, which strengthens their material detachment. To others it is the solace of donating food that can be used for feeding the temple priests or even the poor and the hungry. Hinduism permits different vehicles of piety, practices and devotion. Offering food, with many different motivations behind it, is yet another example of the many vehicles of devotion that Hindus choose.

Hindus can offer water, leaves, fruits or flowers as an expression of their devotion. That which comes from the divine is being offered back as *prasad*—this is an important way to remember the source of all material opulence.

It is important to recognize that not all Hindus go to temples nor all Hindus believe in going to temples. In fact, there are schools of thought within Hinduism that do not have temples or don't believing in offering to any deity.

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 18.4: Why do you use light-arti to pray?

Lamps were the only source of artificial light in olden days. Consider a dark room, where God, a symbol/representation of the divine, is placed (in the sanctum of temples). The priest shows a lamp in the form of Aarathi close to the murti. The purpose is to make sure the picture is registered in our minds.

Light represents knowledge. When praying we are saying that the Lord gives me enough knowledge all the time.

Contributor: Dr. Jyoti Lulla

Section 18:5: What is the red dot many Hindu women wear on their forehead?

The red dot is called a bindi. The bindi can be in different colors and shapes. Here are a few reasons for wearing a bindi:

- The bindi is associated with the worship of the Ultimate Reality as the feminine divine.
- It is also indicative of the conceptual “third eye of spiritual wisdom”, as Shiva, the greatest of Yogis, is depicted as having.
- It is regarded to be the symbol of being a Hindu woman. A married Hindu woman puts a bindi along with vermillion (sindoor) on her forehead.
- It is believed to restore concentration of the mind. Hindus think of the midpoint of the forehead between the eyebrows as the zone of wisdom.
- It is a beauty mark during festivals or rituals such as the Holi and wedding ceremony.
- The male version of forehead markings is called a *tilak* 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 tilak is a representation of the school of philosophy and divinity that an individual subscribes to..

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism, Sharma, S, 2013, Hinduism for Kids: Beliefs and Practices](#)

Contributor: Monita Sharma

Section 18.6: What is the meaning of the Swastika?

Swastika is a symbol of divinity for Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists. It is a symbol to represent well-being, the good, and the auspicious. While the use of this symbol has existed for at least 10,000 years across ancient Europe, the Middle East, Africa, China and the Indian Subcontinent, today it is primarily found in active use in India, China, Korea, and Japan.

This is a universal symbol that exists in every culture of the world. It represents many of nature's phenomena; blooming of flowers, rotation of the Big Dipper constellation around Polaris as viewed from mid-northern latitudes.

The word Swastika originated from the root word Swasti which means may you be well. The four arms of the Swastika symbolize the four main directions: North, South, East, West. Also the four Vedas: Rig, Atharva, Yajur, and Sama, the four aims of human life (Purusharthas): Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha, and the four stages of life (ashramas): Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sannyas.

In a 2008 Hindu-Jewish leadership summit the Chief Rabbinate of Israel had recognised that the Swastika has been sacred to Hindus for a millennia prior to its misappropriation. Swastika should not be confused with Nazi's Haken Kreuz (hooked cross).

Other reading material: [What is meaning of the Swastika?](#)

Relevant videos: [BBC Podcast: Reclaiming the Swastika](#), [Importance of Swastika in Hinduism](#)-Artha,

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 18.7: What is Samskara (or Sacrament)?

The time-honored Saṃskṛta word Saṃskāra (Samskar or Sanskar) has a number of different meanings such as making perfect, refining, polishing, training, cultivation, molding, etc. All these meanings point in the direction of betterment. A saṃskāra takes a living being or even an inanimate object to a higher state of existence.

The etymology of this word in Samskrta is–

Samyak kriyate anena karmanā, iti Saṃskārah

सम्यक् क्रियते अनेन कर्मणा इति संस्कारः

(The ceremony which imparts the quality of appropriateness is a Saṃskāra)

Saṃskāras make lasting impressions and channel our thoughts and actions in the direction of refinement.

Samskara is an vedic ritual that literally implies making someone eligible for doing something that he/she isn't before the samskara. For example: Annaprasana makes the child ready to start eating rice/solid food graduating from living off its mother's milk. Similarly, Upanayan samskara makes the person eligible for learning vedas.

The closest English word to “saṃskāra” is “sacrament”, though the English word has many limitations.

Source: The book [Vivāha Saṃskāra: The Hindu Wedding Ceremony](#).

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 19: Hindu Life

Section 19.1: Are there Hindu's daily and weekly rituals?

Hindu daily rituals include Pancha Karma (5 coveted aspects):

1. Taking shower (ablution)
2. Meditate (controlled breathing, mantra chanting)
3. Tarpan (offering to God, guru, ancestors): Could include water, food, lamp-lighting, incense, creating a pious environment
4. Yoga: Establishing connection between mind, body, and higher learning
5. Contemplation (focused deliberation, self-reflection)

The 7 days of the week are dedicated to invoking various virtues via worshipping energy sources (manifestation of Shiva for cosmic & inner balance, manifestation of Lakshmi for expansive prosperity via pious means, manifestation of Sun for vital energy, etc).

Other reading material: [Atharva Veda](#)

Contributor: Soma Chatterjee

Section 19.2: What kind of education do your kids receive about Hinduism?

Kids mostly receive education on festivals like Diwali and Holi, chanting daily slokas, doing Arti and attending a local temple on special religious occasions.

Children receive education about Hinduism mainly through their parents (first guru) and temples. Nowadays, parents try to teach Hinduism in a practical way so that children understand the purpose and meaning behind it and then relate and apply it in their life (for example, character building). Temples offer educational programs such as *balvihar* classes (language and cultural).

Many parents have a prayer altar at home to pray or worship together daily. Other more committed parents teach them devotional song, chanting, reading from holy books, performing yoga and meditation.

Other reading material:

https://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/2007/1-3/pdf/section-2_2007-01-01_p17-45.pdf

Relevant videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tt62Sljuv7Y&t=31s>

Contributor: Monita Sharma

Section 19.3: Why do we have desires and how to control them?

Desire is born out of attachment that human beings have with the material world. This material world is perceived by human senses. Therefore, desire is natural.

Eastern wisdom – especially in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism – has highlighted the absolute absence of all (personal) desires as the hallmark of the highest spiritual wisdom. Upanishads declare that desire is the sign of ignorance (*avidyā*), and arises from the false sense of incompleteness (*apoomatā*).

Swami Visharadananda writes, “Why do we have desires? Because we tend to identify ourselves with our body-mind ego or body-mind adjuncts/appearance (*upādhi*). We forget our divine nature, our atman-nature which is ever fulfilled and free from all worldly needs.”

The enlightened man, who has higher knowledge (*vidyā*), feels complete (*poorna*) and therefore has no need for seeking pleasure or for acquiring any object.

akāmo nishkāma āptakāma ātmakāmo

na tasya prānā utkrāmanti

brahma eva san, brahma āpnoti

Free of want, devoid of desire, having all his desires fulfilled,
delighting in the Self alone, this man is Brahman;
he attains Brahman. His energies do not lead to another birth.

Brihadāranyaka Upanishad, 4.4.6.

Contributor: Jyoti Lulla

Chapter 20: Holidays

Section 20.1: What is Diwali?

Diwali or Deepavali is one of the most popular festivals known as “Festival of lights”. It is celebrated by Hindus to mark the triumph of good over evil forces after Lord Ram (incarnation of Lord Vishnu) returns to his kingdom Ayodhya after killing the demon king Ravan (evil) to establish Dharma (righteousness). Deepavali literally means the “row of lamps” used to decorate homes during the festival. There are other stories behind Diwali celebration in various parts of India with common themes.

Other reading material: [What are the major Hindu holidays? Diwali Tool-kit](#) (HAF), [Diwali Tool-kit](#) (CoHNA)

Relevant videos: [Diwali Explored – The Festival of Lights](#) (Pushpita Prasad), [What is Diwali?](#) (CoHNA), [Why Sikhs celebrate Diwali? Utsav Deepavali](#),

Contributor: Nilesh Chaudhary

Section 20.2: What is Holi?

Holi is a festival of colors, one of the popular and joyous festivals celebrated by Hindus. Holi is celebrated as a symbolic triumph of good over evil.

Holi derives its name from Holika. According to the popular Hindu text Bhagavatam, there was an evil powerful king who forced his citizens to worship him as God. But King's son, Prahalad, became an ardent devotee of Lord Vishnu. The angry king after failing to punish Prahalad many times he plotted with his sister, Holika, to kill his son. Holika, who was immune to fire, tricked Prahalad to sit in a pyre with her. When the pyre was lit, the boy's devotion to Lord Vishnu helped him walk away unscathed while Holika was burned to death. The immunity boon she had lost is due to its misuse.

Holi begins with lighting up a bonfire on Holi eve. People often throw wood, dried leaves and twigs into bonfires. Next day, people play Holi with colors, water balloons and water guns. Later, people enjoy delicious sweets. People also dance in the beats of Holi songs and popular folk music.

Other reading material: [What are the major Hindu holidays? Holi Toolkit](#),

Relevant videos: [Short video on Holi by HAF](#),

Contributor: Geetha Ravula

Section 20.3: is spiritual meaning of colors in Hinduism?

The spiritual meaning of colors in Hinduism are listed as follows:

- Red – is auspicious and represents the spiritual power that overcomes evil. This color motivates us, increases our vitality, and makes us passionate. It also gives us power and courage that strengthens our faith, confidence, and strong will as well as reinforces loyalty.
- Orange or Saffron – represents fire that burns away impurities and signifies the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Swamis, Saints or holy devotees who choose a spiritual life commonly wear this color. This color increases our sensitivity, generosity, and compassion as it builds up our energy and enthusiasm for life.
- Yellow – represents the spiritual light that illuminates the truth. Yellow stimulates our mind and intellect so that we acquire wisdom and clarity, which increases our inner strength and self-esteem. Yellow also increases our creativity and curiosity.
- Blue – represents the imperishable nature of the soul and the infinite presence of the Supreme Creative Force. It symbolizes immeasurable and pervading reality – formless Brahman. Whatever is immeasurable can appear to the mortal eye only as blue. For example, the cloudless summer sky is blue to us because the endless distance of space is interpreted by the eyes as blue in color.

Other reading material:

http://www.hinduism.about.com/b/a/2004_03_20.htm; <http://www.janik.com/kitiana/hindu/index.html>

Relevant videos: <https://youtu.be/wIer9hmMh0A>

Contributor: Monita Sharma

Chapter 21: Nature

Section 21.1: Why are cows sacred?

The cow was the first animal that the Hindus domesticated. In the Vedic age the cow was a blessing to the rural community.

The cow is a maternal figure [Gau mata or mother cow], a caretaker of her people, also seen as a divine bounty of the earth. Lord Krishna was raised as a cowherd, and played His flute with the rest of his friendly cowherd mates. He is a friend and a protector of the cows, often called “Gopala”.

The cow is considered a sacred animal as it provides us with life-sustaining milk. It is considered an auspicious act to feed the cows first before eating one's food.

Ayurveda promotes the Sattvic qualities of milk, and dairy products, so most Hindu families drink milk and eat milk based products to provide the essential proteins and nutrients. In the rural communities, bulls are used for ploughing the fields and transportation. Cow dung is used as a fuel, and can generate heat. Village homes are plastered with a mixture of cow dung/mud mixture, providing insulation. Cow dung is rich in minerals and is an excellent fertilizer. Rituals involving cow dung and ghee [clarified butter] for sacred fires are considered to purify the atmosphere, are antipollutant and anti-radiation. Some of the Hindu rituals use a combination of milk, yogurt, ghee, honey and sugar as offerings for prayer services.

It is hardly surprising that the cow occupied the position as a mother in the life of a child. It is considered a sin to kill a cow and eat beef. The vedic scriptures emphasize that the cow must be protected and cared for.

Other reading material: Read Why Hindus don't eat beef? (Section 22.1)

Contributor: Dr. Jyoti Lulla

Section 21.2: Why do you pray to a plant, like Tulsi?

Hinduism, at its core, has a reverence for universal Truth. It can be said that Hindu text, practices, and traditions are a codification of multiple approaches to recognize and honor the universal truth. That universal Truth and its divinity can be recognized and honored by folding hands, service to others, deity worship, chanting, meditating, yoga, dance, music, vegetarianism, etc. The choice of approach can be theistic, atheistic, nature worship, object based, or may simply have a philosophical school of thought associated with it.

In case of Tulsi, there are Puranic (one of the many sacred Hindu texts) stories of it being associated with deities. Tulsi is also a medicinal plant that has many benefits when consumed. As true with many things, Hindu have more than one reason to pray to Tulsi—both theistic and practical. Simply put, Tulsi can be an object to enable a Hindu's devotion, or it could be a Hindu's mooring in nature, and a reminder of our inter-dependence and obligation to preserve it, or it can simply be a somewhat selfish desire to keep the sacred blossoming in our courtyards as a symbol of divine's presence in our homes.

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Chapter 22: Diet

Section 22.1: Why don't Hindus eat beef?

Non-violence (ahimsa) is one of the fundamental teachings of Hinduism. Killing another life form to service their dietary existence is, therefore, considered sacrilege. That being the foundation, most Hindu's journey towards divinity is only complete when he or she takes care of all other beings. There are, however, situations in which eating animals becomes a necessity for various reasons—topography, climate, famines, etc. In those cases, Hindus do consume non-vegetarian foods. However, for reasons related to health/digestion consumption of less complex life forms is recommended – fish, chicken, etc. Cow being a mammal is not only a more complex life form but also happens to be a multi-utility animal. In addition to being a farm animal, it provides dairy and fuel, among other benefits. Killing a cow for food has never made an economic sense for an agrarian society in fertile lands where the Hindus have flourished for many millennia.

Cow, traditionally, being the center of a household in India holds an emotional place in a family as pets do. Just as we do not kill our pet dogs for food, Hindus do not kill cows for feeding themselves.

Other reading material:

<https://houseoflac.wordpress.com/2018/10/09/the-wedge-of-vegetarianism/>

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhil Anand [Hinduism Q & A: Why Do we eat Vegetarian Food?](#) , [Zakir Naik and Rajiv Malhotra](#)

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 22.2: Why are many Hindus vegetarian?

Hinduism is not a ‘human centric’ religion. God (Brahman) is omnipresent. God’s kingdom is the Universe. Every leaf, every drop of water, every cloud in the sky, every object, animate and inanimate, including animals, plants, planets, the Sun and the moon are all Brahman. Hinduism is not doctrine centric, it does not contain doctrines like–thou shall not eat beef.

Hinduism teaches the understanding of self dharma and then to follow our dharma. Hindus are taught to follow a non-violent or least harmful path. Further, it teaches us that animals have a soul, just as humans do, and have a right to life as well, just as all humans do. Hindu sages’ deep study of nutrition, its impact on health and mind, leads it to recommend a lacto vegetarian path for improved health and alertness. Hence, there is an inclination towards vegetarianism.

Those in the path of dedicated learning and practice are required to adhere to vegetarian food that is light and digestible, as these foods are believed to raise the consciousness levels of the practitioner.

Relevant videos: [Swami Nikhil Anand Hinduism Q & A: Why do we eat Vegetarian Food?](#) , [Zakir Naik and Rajiv Malhotra](#) , [Rajeev Singh](#)

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 23: Yoga and Meditation

Section 23.1: OM: What does it mean?

OM, ॐ or AUM (pranava) refers to Atman (soul, self within) and Brahman (ultimate reality, truth, divine, supreme spirit, cosmic principles).

OM is a mantra. Its meaning slightly differs depending on how it is used. First of all OM is a sound symbol for God or Divinity. Just like cross is a physical symbol for Christ, OM is also a symbol, but it is in a sound form. OM is used as a sound during meditation practice. You chant OM and listen to it. Here it is used just as a soothing sound. OM also means “Everything together” as in Infinity.

OM is made up of 3 letters followed by silence; (In Sanskrit; breathing pattern is explained) A (expel air from stomach area) + U (expel air from the chest region) + M (think like you are expelling air from your mind and mouth) + silence (a brief breathless period). AUM stands for beginning, middle and end + silence.

Other reading material: [Yoga Sutra 1.27](#) , [What is AUM?](#)

Relevant videos:

Contributor: Dr. Jyoti Lulla

Section 23.2: Is yoga a Hindu practice?

The word 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj', meaning 'to join' or 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. Yoga is essentially a practice and a spiritual discipline to reach your inner consciousness, to touch the non-physical dimensions (beyond body, mind and emotions) that we call the soul or atman.

Yoga, as posture and meditation, is the practical branch of a wider school that also includes philosophical inquiry and religious ritual practices. All these branches form the core of Hinduism.

As you gain understanding of Hinduism and Yoga, you will understand Yoga is a personal tool for self break away from the cycles of birth and death and to unite with Divine. As such, Yoga and Hinduism are inseparable from each other, the way Gravity is inseparable from the Physical realm of this Universe.

Unfortunately this question comes up because Yoga in the Western world has been confined to the Asanas (physical postures) that have gained popularity and wider adoption through the fitness studios for the physical wellbeing it brings. However, it limits and devoids one of the full potential Yoga can bring in attaining peace, joy, happiness, calmness and realization that one's inner self is nothing but the manifestation of omnipresent God.

It should be called out that Hinduism doesn't ask Yoga practitioners to follow or convert to Hinduism, rather encourages all seekers to practice Yoga as a means of spiritual discovery and realization. As such, while Yoga belongs to the world, it finds its roots and essence in Hinduism and two can not and should not be seen separately.

This is time to recognize the roots of Yoga to its Hindu origin so it can be brought in its full glory by the Masters and Enlightened Gurus, rather than by the charlatans or self-proclaimed Yoga teachers who learn through textbooks or through limited training.

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism, The Origins and Ownership of Yoga](#)

Contributor: Vikas Gupta

Section 23.3: What are Four Paths of Yoga?

The four paths of yoga are Bhakti, Karma, Gyana and Raj Yoga. These are four different approaches to connecting with the Divine or connecting with the Self. All individuals can benefit from any or all of these paths in their spiritual journey. However, it is up to the individual to find the right mix to devote their time towards the practice of each path. Most Hindus follow all of these in some manner. All four paths lead to the ultimate goal of Enlightenment.

Bhakti Yoga, or the path of love and devotion to the Divine is ideal to rid the mind of negative thoughts and emotions and replace it with blissful love of the divine. It teaches us to see the divinity or the Supreme Self in everything and everyone.

Karma Yoga teaches selfless action. It encourages the practitioner to seek perfection in actions without attachment to the fruits of the actions. It is also a central teaching based on the famous doctrine of Karma—*actions have consequences*. It is the best path for individuals seeking to make a positive difference in this world with their actions.

Jnana (Gyana) Yoga is the path of pursuit of divinity through pursuit of knowledge of the Self. It provides a set of reasoning contained in scriptures that allow the practitioner to achieve Enlightenment or Self-realization. It is the path that most directly addresses the famous question “Who am I?” or the process of Self-realization.

Raj yoga is the path for those seeking a spiritual journey through self-discipline. Many Hindu scriptures provide a detailed guide to the spiritual journey of a Raj yogi. This is also the path which is the basis of what most westerners know as ‘Yoga’ and meditation. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras provide an eight-step approach to enlightenment through the control of the body, mind and its senses.

Other reading material:

<https://chopra.com/articles/the-4-paths-of-yoga>

<https://sivanandayogafarm.org/blog/4-paths-of-yoga/>

<https://www.ekhartyoga.com/articles/philosophy/the-4-paths-of-yoga>

Contributor: Shan Lahiri

Chapter 25: Caste System

Section 25.1: What is the caste system?

The word **Caste** comes from “chastity” or European rules of purity for their own three layer caste system. It’s not the same thing as the Hindu system. It is not sanctioned by the Vedas nor other Hindu texts and teachings, and is neither intrinsic to the practice of Hinduism nor did it span all of Hindu history. Hinduism has *Varna* (personality types, tendencies) and *Jati* (occupation), not Caste.

The **Varna** system in *Dharma-shastras* classified society into four *varnas* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra). Creating thriving ecosystems requires specialization and mutual dependence. Varna-Jati enabled that. A farmer’s son will inherit land and skills needed for farming. “Everyone is exactly the same” does not allow for either specialization or foster a healthy mutual dependence.

Jati is simply explained when you see that a goldsmith’s son is also a goldsmith. Case in point, George Herbert Walker Bush and George Walker Bush shared a common profession. Over several generations you have a *Jati*. A Kennedy is naturally expected to be a politician. That’s *Jati*.

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 foreign invasions.

Other reading material: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#), [HAF articles on Not Cast in Caste](#), [Caste and Class in Colonial India](#), [HAF on Caste](#), [Original Varna Shastra in Sanatana Dharma Vs Today’s Caste System](#)

Relevant videos: [Swami Chinmayananda and Rajiv Malhotra](#), [Rajiv Malhotra, Caste and Hinduism Explained](#), [Living with Faith-Dilip Amin](#) (8:30 min), [The State vs Hindus](#),

Contributor: Gaurav Rastogi

Section 25.2: What does Gita say about the Caste system?

Gita predates the modern British imperial social construct of Caste, thus Gita has no mention of caste. However, Gita talks extensively about varna and gunas but that is not caste.

In Bhagawad Gita Lord Krishna says, “*According to the three modes of material nature and the work ascribed to them, the four divisions of human society were created by Me.*” (BG 4:13) Then He continues, “*Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras are distinguished by their qualities of work in accordance with the modes of nature.*” (BG 18:41)

It is important to observe that there is no mention of birth as a determining factor for one’s varna or classification. They are ascertained by their quality of work.

Lord Krishna adds, “By following his qualities of work, every man can become perfect... By worship of the Lord, who is the source of all beings and who is all-pervading, man can, in the performance of his own duty [or occupation], attain perfection.” (BG 18:45-46).

Forced designation or untouchability was never a part of the Vedic process.

Source: <https://www.stephen-knapp.com/casteism.htm>

Other reading material: <https://www.hinduamerican.org/all-about-caste>

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 25: Marriages

Section 26.1: Hindus belong to different denominations? If so, can they intermarry?

Hinduism is not divided by denomination, but by other categories, including deity traditions, *sampradaya* (lineage/school), *parampara* (disciplic succession) and *darsana* (school of thought). Most Hindus belong to one of four major deity traditions—Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava, and Smarta. While all traditions share many beliefs and practices, the central deity worshipped as well as certain philosophical tenets differ.

Shaivas primarily worship different 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 Subramanya/Karthikeya and Lord Surya, holding them all to be 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 also further 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 *guru* or *swami* (spiritual head) of the *sampradaya*. Hindus may also freely choose between different *sampradayas* based on their liking and understanding. 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 for a variety of reasons.

Source: [Short answers to real questions about Hinduism](#)

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Section 26.2: Can a Hindu Marry Christian?

There is no specific mention of inter-religious marriages in Hindu scriptures. However it has been a common practice amongst Hindus to marry within one's *varna* and *jati* to maintain good harmony with two sets of families.

Interfaith marriage is not only a marriage of two individuals but, in many respects, it is an union of two sets of extended families and communities. If two communities are at odds and have major historical conflicts, that may spill into every step of your planned married life. For this reason, parents and faith leaders from all religions wish their young ones marry a like kind person.

Many times it is not the religion but what that person has learned from it is important. A religious fanatic will certainly create unexpected problems in the planned married life, especially while raising children in two faiths. An exclusivist supremacist will want children to follow only their faith and not the other.

A Christian in love with a Hindu has to find out if he/she or your children will have to be a part of Hindu religious ritual practices and if that will be in conflict with fundamental Christian religious beliefs.

A Hindu in love relationship with a Christian should find out if raising children in two faiths is acceptable to the Christian intended spouse, more specifically if Baptism/Christening of children is expected. Baptism is not a hollow ritual devoid of meanings. It will set a religious tone for your planned married life and may have major legal consequences in a child custody battle during the divorce proceedings.

There are many other points to be discussed, including what will be names of children, if it involves mandated financial contribution to a church or *mandir* and what will be the final rite—Hindu cremation or Christian burial—for a family member.

Ideally it is good to share two faiths, truly respect each other's beliefs and with equality.

Other reading material: Book—[Interfaith Marriage: Share and Respect with Equality](#)

Relevant videos: [Interfaith Marriage With Equality](#),

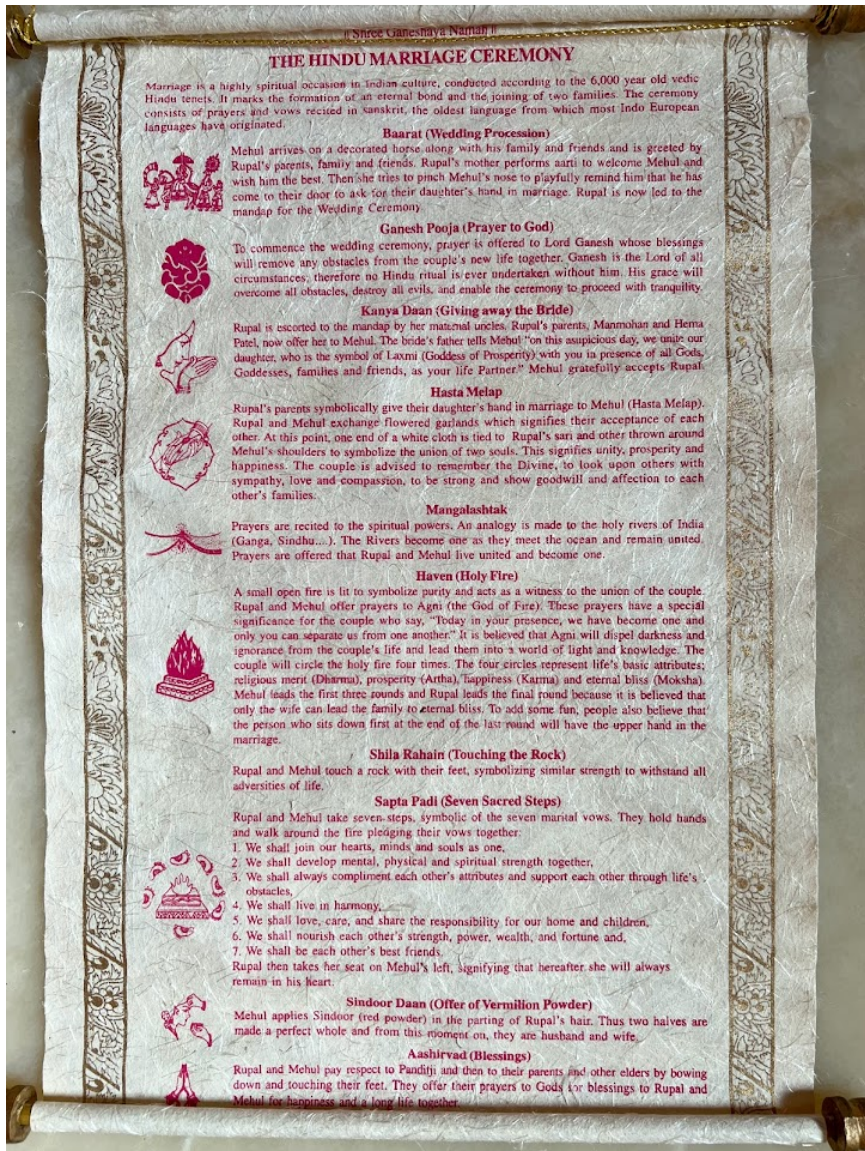
Contributor: Dilip Amin

Section 26.3: What is a Hindu wedding like?

The Hindu wedding, called Vivaha, is the most important samskara (sacrament, rite of passage) of Hindu life. Hindu weddings are colorful and elaborate extending to several days. Prior to the wedding day, there are mehdi (hand painting), a music festival, Garba dance programs, and more.

On the wedding day, the groom and family arrive at the bride's home. The groom is considered to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The bride, considered to be an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, arrives at the venue with her maternal uncle. At the beginning of any Hindu religious ceremony, Lord Ganesha's blessings are sought as He is the remover of all obstacles. The groom adorns the bride's neck with a necklace called mangala-sūtra i.e. auspicious thread. The ends of the sari worn by the bride and the shawl worn by the groom are formally tied. It has the symbolic meaning of tying two lives together. There is a homa (offerings to Agni) where the couple is seeking Agni's blessing. Then there is Saptapadih, the seven-step circumambulations around Agni (fire), which is recognized as the essence of a Hindu wedding. These are Saptapadih oaths:

1. Be a provider of food in abundance
2. Bring vigor and energy to the household
3. Be a harbinger of prosperity to the family
4. Always bring comfort to the household
5. Have many children together with the husband
6. Enjoy with him all that the seasons have to offer
7. Become his true and unwavering friend for life.



Source: The book [Vivāha Saṁskāra: The Hindu Wedding Ceremony](#).

Relevant videos: [Fusion Hindu wedding](#),

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 27: Science

Section 27.1: Is Hinduism compatible with science?

Science is “the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment”. This definition applies to Hinduism as well since it has a deep history of experimentation, proof and logical argumentation. To the extent that Science is the opposite of dogma (“a principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true”), Hinduism is completely compatible with science.

However, scientists are not always above dogma, but in some cases kneeling towards authority figures or clinging to tired theories and retired data. In those cases, dogmatic scientists might find Hinduism’s open-mindedness baffling and contrary to their own unscientific temper.

The two words that seldom go together are “Hindu” and “Belief”. Hindu philosophy, texts, and schools of spirituality follow a deeply investigative and systematic progression of building knowledge – *shravana* (listening), *manana* (reflecting), *pariprashna* (questioning), and *nididhyasana* (meditating). It is this underpinning of enquiry that led to the establishment of a scientific approach in Hindu scholarship. *Ayurveda*, *Vastu*, *Nakshatra*, *Yoga* are some examples of areas of Hindu thought that are scientific in nature. Even traditions such as chanting mantras are deeply rooted in the science of sound.

Other reading material: [Is Hinduism compatible with science?](#)

Relevant videos: [Khurshed Batliwala Debunked](#)

Contributor: *Rajeev Singh*

Chapter 28: Other Faiths

Section 28.1: Do different religions have different Gods?

Yes and no. Some religions consider their God as being the “only” one. Anything else is false. Some reflect the flexibility of modern times and indicate that while others may choose to label it different, it is essentially the same “God”. So, it appears that the God-ful religions in their very own essence talk about their “different” and very “own” God. Hinduism, on the other hand, is a “God” less philosophy. There is all-pervasive energy and its creation.

Relevant videos: Swami Nikhilanand [Hinduism Q & A: Do Different Religions Have Different Gods](#)

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Section 28.2: What is a Hindu attitude towards other faith beliefs?

Since the inner intent of all religions is to bind man back to God, Hindus seek not to interfere with anyone's faith or practice. We believe that there is no exclusive path, no one way for all. Hindus profoundly know that God is the same supreme being in whom peoples of all faiths find solace, peace and liberation. None the less we realize that all religions are not the same.

Each has its unique beliefs, practices, goals, and paths of attainment, and the doctrines of one often conflict with those of another. Even this should never be a cause for religious tension and intolerance.

Hindus respect all religious traditions and the people within them.

Modified from the original source: Sadguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami of Kauai Hindu monastery.

Contributor: Jyoti Lulla

Section 28.3: What are the main differences between Abrahamic and Dharmic faiths?

Main differences between three Abrahamic and four Dharmic faiths are summarized in this table. This is a high level general guidance. Not all religions follow these beliefs equally (example: circumcision).

	Abrahamic	Dharmic
Religions	Judaism Christianity Islam	Hinduism Buddhism Jainism Sikhism
Core Belief Style	Exclusivist	Pluralism
Circumcision	Yes	No
End Ceremony	Burial	Cremation
After life	Judgment Day	Incarnation

Source: From the Book-[Interfaith Marriage: Share and Respect with Equality](#) by Dilip Amin

Other reading material: [Being Different, An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism](#), by Rajiv Malhotra. HarperCollins Publication.

Contributor: Dilip Amin

Chapter 29: LGBTQ

Section 29.1: What are Hindu Views on LGBTQ?

Hindu texts are rich in vocabulary in identifying the various gendered orientations of humans. There is more that exists beyond the duality of male and female in the Hindu view. *Tritiya Prakriti* (third nature) is so mainstream to Hindu thought that not only is it highlighted in Kama Sutra and depicted in ornate carvings of Khajuraho temple, but it is also elaborated into subgroups. This identity is broken down into further specific subgroups, including *napumsaka* (gay men), *sandha* (transgenders), *kliba* (asexuals), *svairini* (lesbians), and *kami/kamini* (bisexuals).

Portrayals of these groups and individuals in the literature were usually expressed in a descriptive and dispassionate voice. Their presence in ancient Hindu society was widely known, accepted and regarded as a natural aspect of humanity.

Hindus won't be Hindus if we do not have a freedom of thought. So there it is, Hindus acknowledge the LGBTQ. Hinduism has a rich theme of LGBTQ, not only in their stories but also in their theology.

Other reading material: Hinduism Today- [Tradition: Same-Sex marriage and Hinduism](#)

URL of this page: <https://www.hinduspeakers.org/ufaqs/what-are-hindu-views-on-lgbtq/>

Contributor: Rajeev Singh

Chapter 31: Hindu Terminologies

Section 31.1: What is Ananda?

Ananda is a state of causeless bliss and joy.

The Hindu tradition teaches that this is our original state, not a destination to be achieved through effort and strife. We are caught in a web of ignorance and greed that deludes us about our true nature and causes us to be happy or unhappy on account of external events.

A fish does not strive to be in water, it already is. We already swim in the Ocean of ananda, but behave like a fish out of water, helpless and distraught. Realizing the truth of our original state, we can go about naturally in this world.

This is also the reason why many Indian holy men have the suffix “ananda” in their names. They have dropped their ignorance and now live in a perpetual state of causeless bliss.

Contributor: Gaurav Rastogi

Section 31.2: What is the difference between Brahm, Brahma and Brahmin?

Brahm is limitless, eternal all pervasive energy that is in everything and powers everything and it has no beginning and no end. It is the source of this universe, the Ultimate Truth.

Brahma: Per Hinduism, everything in the universe follows the wheel of time (*kaal chakra*): cycle of birth-death-rebirth. Even the universe follows this wheel of time/*kaal chakra* and is created- preserved – dissolved and then created again. Brahma is the God of creation, responsible for manifesting the new srishti (creation, universe) after its dissolution/recycling by Shiva.

Brahmin: Brahmins are those (human beings) who have 'sattva' *guna* (harmony, knowledge and contentment) pre-dominant in them. According to Gautama DharmaSutra, a Brahmin should possess eight virtues: truthfulness, teaching the virtuous, following the rules of rituals, studying the Vedas, gentleness and nonviolence, self control and kindness and others. Brahmin's dharma in society is to interpret and share the knowledge of Hinduism across generations. One does not become Brahmin by birth but by gunas (qualities) and karma (action).

Contributor: Swati Sugandhi

Section 31.3: Explain Sanskrit words that are translated to God

Few of sanskrit words used related to God are:

Brahman is limitless, eternal all pervasive energy that is in everything and powers everything and it has no beginning and no end.

Devata from root word div or dev (दिव, that which shines) with tva (त्व/तल् प्रत्यय, being) becomes devata (देवत्वम्/देवता; a masculine form) meaning the one capacity to give. The feminine form is “Devi” and the word Devta means both Dev and Devi. Anyone who has achieved a state of supreme mastery over something and has owned it is called a “Dev”/”Devi”.

Ishvar means the supreme lord through which everything came into existence. Shiva and Vishnu are considered as “Ishvars”.

Bhagavan is Bhag + Van (someone who uplifts the Bhagya (luck) of the subject), one that possesses Bhag: Collection of 6 qualities (1. Aishwarya, 2. Veerya, 3. Yashas, 4. Shree, 5. Jnaana, and 6. Vairagya). Bhagavan (sometimes translated as “Lord”) is an epithet for a deity, particularly for the deities of Lord Krishna, Rama, Vishnu and Lord Shiva. The term is also used by Jains to refer to the Tirthankaras, particularly Mahavira, and by Buddhists to refer to Lord Buddha in India.

Parmatma (Par + atman) means the supreme soul of an Individual. Something which is above and beyond the “atman” (soul). Every individual has a “Parmatman” inside it. You are nothing but a soul, trapped in a cage of flesh and bones. Your parmatman is the state of pure consciousness.

Prabhu means lord. The provider (master) is called “Prabhu”.

Other reading material: <http://www.lonelyphilosopher.com/difference-between-prabhu-ishwar-bhagwan-devta-and-parmatma/>

Contributor: Manju Gupta

Chapter 32: Hinduphobia

Section 32.1: How would you define Hindutva?

As per the Supreme Court of India, “Hindutva is a way of life”. It is the essence of being (-tva) a Hindu.

Swamini Svatmavidyananda says, “The one who is intolerant of intolerance is a Hindu.” This Hinduness, which identifies its origins from the land of Bharat (India) and takes utmost pride in its respect for others with a strong sense to not only preserve but propagate this respect, is called Hindutva.

Hindutva is the encapsulation of tolerance and respect that has its roots in Bharat, which has sustained a multitude of theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic beliefs.

Other listening material: <https://tinyurl.com/ydbx4mc2> (Swamini Svatmavidyananda audio). [Hinduphobia](#)

Relevant videos: [Who is misrepresenting Hindutva? | BJP's Tejasvi Surya, BSP MP Danish Ali | Times Now Summit 2020](#),

Contributor: Rajeev Singh