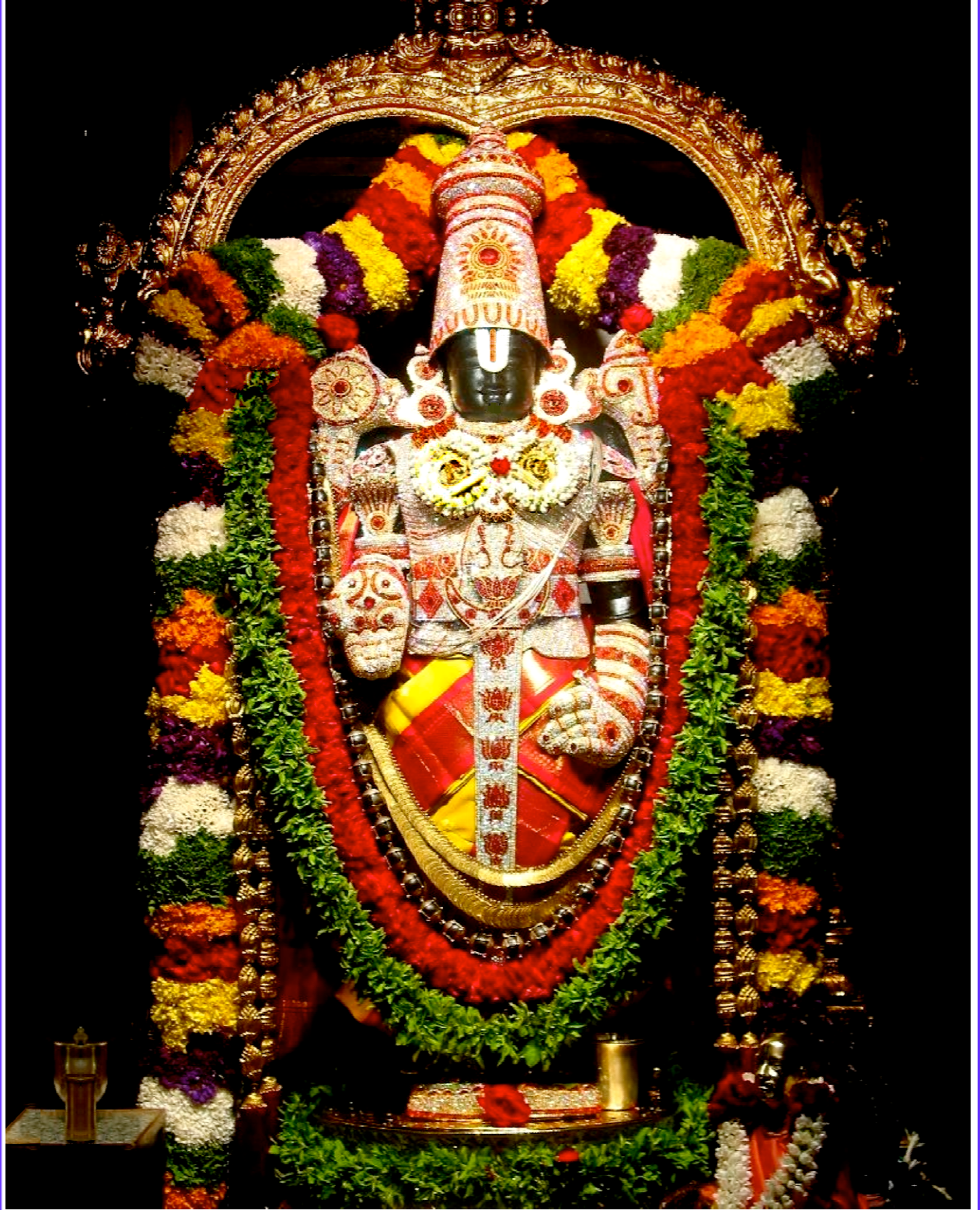


Hinduism
or
Sanatana Dharma

By
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VKR

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श्रीवेङ्कटेश्वराय नमः

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An Essay

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Who is a Hindu?

The word Hindu has existed for centuries to denote the land to the east of the Sindhu or Indus River. It is not found in the Sanskrit language. Sindhu River is mentioned in all the Vedas, Kavyas and Upanishads. The Persians and the Arabs when pronouncing Sindhu used the guttural 'Ha' and called it Hindu to represent the land beyond the Sindhu River. Later on it also denoted the people of the Hindu land. These people practiced what is known as Sanatana Dharma and called their country Bharathavarsha or simply Bhaaratha to represent the land where Bharatha ruled. The English who came to Bharathavarsha named the Hindu land as India. They did not understand the way of life these people followed. They knew Christianity, Judaism and Islam as religions and they arbitrarily named the Sanatana Dharma followed by the Indians as the religion Hinduism. This nomenclature is perhaps only about 300-400 years old.

Basic Features of Hinduism

Hinduism is not a religion in the accepted sense like Christianity, Judaism or Islam but a philosophy. It is a way of life or Dharma and follows what is contained in the Vedas and systematized by the philosopher king Manu. It is a Dharmic way of life called Sanatana Dharma meaning eternal law, practiced by the people of India for more than 5000 years. It is the most ancient form of practice and predates all other religions and philosophies. Hinduism cannot be classified as a dogmatic adherence to religion since it gives individuals their own freedom of ethical and moral living following the guidelines laid down by the Vedas and Manu. It does not recognize a central authority that dictates how one must live. It is the most democratic religion dictated by one's own sense of moral and ethical living. The result is that each region in India has developed its own philosophy, theology, ethical values and rituals. This freedom of thought, deed and action resulted in the ancient Hindus being very proficient in arts and sciences, poetry, rich imagination and philosophy. One can see the seeds of Hindu philosophy in every other religion of the world.

Basic Tenets of Hinduism

Essentially Hinduism consists of the four fundamental ways of living called Purusharthas meaning objectives of human living. The purpose of life on earth is to follow the first three tenets assiduously and achieve salvation in the end. These tenets convey that to attain salvation one has to go through these aspects of life fully. What they characterize is not a life of self-denial, but of balance, action, richness and desire, with moderation that fulfills the purpose of creation. They have to be pursued for a higher and greater cause without expecting rewards. Depending upon the attitude and the manner in which they are pursued they will either set the persons free or entangle them deeper with the allurements of human life.

1. Dharma (ethics and righteousness)
2. Artha (material possessions or wealth)
3. Kama (Love or desire)
4. Moksha (Salvation or liberation)

Dharma

Dharma is ethical and moral way of living in Hinduism and Buddhism. Many of the teachings of Buddha who was a Hindu prince have origins in Hinduism. The first path is that each one has a duty (Karma) to perform to himself or to the society and does it to the best of his ability without expecting any rewards for his actions. The second method is through knowledge (Jnana), meaning erudite learning whether it is mathematics, science, astronomy or seeking the true nature of God. The third method is through devotion (Bhakthi) either to family, society or God. These constitute Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Bhakthi Yoga.

In the context of human life, Dharma consists of all what a person practices in harmony with divine injunctions and his own sense of morality and ethics. Hence this practice relies on the edicts from the Vedas, Vedangas and the Upanishads, which are the basic sources of Dharma. In fact, the prayer of a Buddhist starts with the three incantations: I take refuge in Buddha, I take refuge in Dharma, and I take refuge in Sangha or society. It should also be realized that dharma cannot be viewed as an end in itself but the means to liberation a still higher end.

Artha

Artha means material possessions or wealth. Hinduism recognizes the importance of material wealth for the overall happiness and well being of an individual. A householder requires wealth, because he has to perform many duties to uphold dharma and take care of the needs of his family and society. A person shall not seek wealth for the sake of wealth but to help uphold dharma and the members of his family and society achieve their goals. Hinduism therefore rightly places material wealth as the second most important objective in human life after dharma. While dharma and moksha are meant for the individual, wealth and love are to be pursued for the sake of others.

Unlike Christianity, Hinduism does not glorify poverty but advocates austerity, simplicity and detachment. Wealth is not an impediment to self-realization, but attachment to wealth is. Desire for wealth is different from greed for wealth. Money and wealth are a form of divine energy exemplified by Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth.

Seeking wealth through human actions is not discouraged in Hinduism. The Vedic hymns are mostly invocations addressed to gods and goddesses by men desiring wealth and prosperity. However they also emphasize the need for right intention, right means and moderation in the pursuit of wealth. Aiming for wealth is a virtue, but greed is not. Amassing wealth for the family and for the welfare of oneself is not sinful, but taking what does not belong to one is. Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism benefited greatly in the past by the individual contribution of rich merchants, their wives and children.

Kama

Kama in a broader sense means desire and in a narrow sense sexual desire. Both Hinduism and Buddhism consider desire as the root cause of human suffering. The way out of suffering is to become detached from the sense objects through such practices as yoga and meditation and perform desireless actions without hankering after the fruit of one's actions. According to the laws of Manu man performs sacrifices because of the desire for rewards, with the expectation that his actions will bear fruit. Not a single act of him here on earth appears ever to be done by a man free from desire. So he who performs his prescribed duties out of desire in the right manner will obtain the fulfillment of all the desires and reach the deathless state or Nirvana.

In Hinduism and Buddhism there is permission for sexual activity up to a limit, so long as it is not in conflict with the principles of dharma and used for the purposes of procreation, perpetuation of family and social order, within the boundaries established by tradition, social norms and scriptures. Sexual activity is part of obligatory duty and not to be misused for enjoyment, as it would lead to attachment, delusion and one's downfall. *Sexual relationship outside marriage is not permitted in both Hinduism and Buddhism.* Marriage is a sacred institution in which both the husband and wife join their energies and destinies to promote each other's liberation by performing their respective obligatory duties, which only married couple, can perform. Through the bonds of marriage they also bind their respective karmas. Celibacy before marriage is expected because without that the sanctity of marriage is destroyed. Marriage in western countries is based purely on individual union and the family may or may not participate in the well being of the couple. In a Hindu marriage the union is not only between two individuals but also between two families so that they are very much involved in the well being of the couple. Family togetherness and closeness is of paramount importance in a Hindu society. This one factor alone accounts for the longest continuous civilization of the Hindus whereas other civilizations have died.

Again unlike Christianity, in Hinduism as well as Buddhism sex by itself is not considered unclean or sinful. Sexual desire is an important and legitimate aspect of dharma (human obligations) and is created by nature to perpetuate life in the material plane. Creation itself is a continuation of the union between Purusha and Shakthi, the male and female aspects of the manifest universe. On the one hand celibacy is considered as a great virtue and on the other celibacy before marriage and faithfulness to the one and only wife are a necessary condition for salvation.

According to Hinduism and Buddhism, sex is an important aspect of human life, but sexual misconduct or lust is not. Lust is one of the chief enemies of man. It has a demoniac quality, just as greed and pride, and one of the biggest hurdles towards spiritual path. All lustful activity would result in sin (Paapa) with unhappy consequences for all those involved in it directly or indirectly. *For the vast majority of Hindus premarital sex is a taboo since it violates the trust of God and parents and extramarital sex is completely forbidden since it is considered violating the trust of God and society.* The question of divorce does not even enter into a Hindu marriage since the marriage once performed according to Hindu rites is indissoluble even by the death of one of the partners.

Moksha

In Hinduism and Buddhism, the pursuit of dharma regulates the personal life of a human being and keeps him on the righteous path. The pursuit of Artha and Kama is for the enrichment of society and in that process impart to the person the way to liberation. The pursuit of Moksha or salvation liberates him and leads him to the world of Brahman. The pursuit of Dharma usually begins in the early age when one is initiated into religious studies. The pursuit of Artha and Kama begins in most cases after one becomes a householder. The pursuit of Moksha however is the most important of all aims and can begin at any time. The other aspects are preparatory for this final aim.

Moksha actually means absence of moha or delusion. Delusion is caused by the inter play of the triple gunas, the activity of the senses, attachment to and desire for sense objects. A person achieves liberation when he increases the quality of goodness overcoming his desire for sense

objects by detachment, self control, surrender to God and offering of one's actions to God. There are many paths to salvation among which are the path of knowledge (Jnana), path of action (Karma), path of devotion and renunciation (Bhakti). Each path has its own advantages and disadvantages. Whatever may be the path, the help and guidance of a guru or preceptor is indispensable to one's spiritual journey.

The purpose of the above four purusharthas is to ensure that people would not neglect their obligatory duties in their deluded state by becoming obsessed with particular desires that may lead to moral and social decadence and destruction of family values and family values are the keystone that keeps the civilization. The four purusharthas are responsible for balance in human life and make life a rewarding and an enriching experience. They cater to the spiritual and material aspirations of human beings and lead them in the right direction on the path Nirvana or salvation.

Hindu Ideas of GOD and Worship

As mentioned earlier, a Hindu has the freedom to form his own personal God, so much so it is not surprising that there are various levels of thinking about what God is. At the highest level he believes in only one all compassionate Supreme Being called Brahman with no human attributes. Since this is not satisfactory to most Hindus they have formulated their own images of God with whatever attributes they want. Thus when Brahman becomes a personal God to the individual and it is called Ishwara. The three main attributes of Ishwara are called Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Protector and Shiva the Destroyer and Rejuvenator. Since marriage and procreation are integral parts of the dharma, these personal Gods have Goddess consorts called Saraswathi (Brahma) for Learning, Lakshmi (Vishnu) for Wealth and Parvathi (Shiva) the Mother Goddess. However, all Hindus strongly believe that the Supreme Being resides within every animate (Chara) and inanimate (Achara) beings and without. In fact most of them believe in the oneness of the Creator and the Creation. In other words, one does not have to look for an external savior to obtain liberation but can get the same from looking into oneself. In general, pooja or worship involves chanting of prayers or mantras composed by the sages or devotees in front of stone or bronze sculptures of gods and goddesses. It is primarily an individual act involving personal offerings like water, fruits, flowers and incense to the personal God.

One of the most important aspects for Hindus is the worship of these Gods and Goddesses. Unlike other religions this is mostly done at home. Every Hindu home has a shrine or personal worship room called a pooja room where everyday prayers and meditation occur and offerings made. The pooja room can be anything from a small room or a small altar or pictures of the Gods and Goddesses on the wall. Periodically they worship in temples, which are also an integral part of Hindu living. Going on a pilgrimage to holy places is also an integral part of Hindu living.

Conversion to Hinduism

Concepts of conversion, evangelization and proselytization are absent in the Hindu Scriptures and in practice have never played a significant role, though acceptance of willing converts is becoming more common. Early in its history, in the absence of other competing religions, Hindus considered everyone they came across as Hindus and expected everyone they met to be Hindus.

Hindus today continue to be influenced by historical ideas of acceptability of conversion. Hence, many of them believe that anyone who follows Hindu beliefs and practices is a Hindu. Hindus in Western countries generally accept and welcome willing converts, and in India acceptance of willing converts is becoming more common. Conversion into Hinduism through marriage is well accepted and is often expected in order to enable the non-Hindu partner to fully participate in their spiritual, religious, and cultural roles within the larger Hindu family and society. There is no formal process for conversion to Hinduism, although in many traditions a ritual called *Diksha* (initiation) marks the beginning of spiritual life. A ritual called *Shuddhi* (purification) sometimes marks the beginning of spiritual life after conversion. Most Hindu sects do not seek converts, as they believe that the goals of spiritual life can be attained through any religion, as long as it is practiced sincerely. In general, Hindu view of religious freedom is not based on the freedom to proselytize, but the right to retain one's way of life (religion).

Concluding Remarks

An attempt has been made in this essay to inscribe the very basic essence of Hinduism. The very fact that this is the oldest continuous civilization while other contemporary civilizations like the Egyptian, Greek and Roman have become extinct is a testament to its universality. It is very difficult to capture all the attributes of this universal philosophy in this very short essay. The sages and the great Hindu philosophers have spent their lifetime in explaining the concepts. To learn everything about this Universal Philosophy called Sanatana Dharma will be a lifetime endeavor.

For discussiona please contact: Prof. V. Krishnan at V_Krishnan@uml.edu

A large, light blue, stylized signature consisting of the letters 'V', 'K', and 'R' in a cursive, calligraphic font. The 'V' is on the left, followed by a large 'K', and then a large 'R' on the right. The signature is centered horizontally and vertically in the lower half of the page.