Defining Our Faith
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A three-fold answer to the basic questions: "Who is a Hindu?" and "What is Hinduism?"

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I had the opportunity recently to give a number of lectures, classes, seminars and presentations at our monastery in Hawaii, in Hindu temples in Toronto and Edmonton and at the Dharma Summit 2005 conference of North American Hindu temples and institutions in New Brunswick, New Jersey. During question-and-answer sessions and in casually talking to those attending, discussions arose on "Who is a Hindu?" and "What is Hinduism?" The concerns of those asking the questions varied considerably, and therefore the nature of my answers also varied somewhat. I compiled my responses in a three-fold answer that you may find useful when these commonly asked questions come up in your community, business or social circles.

1. Hinduism Is the Eternal Faith

The first part of the answer to "Who is a Hindu?" and "What is Hinduism?" is that Hinduism is the Sanatana Dharma, or "eternal religion." It is the innate, perennial philosophy. Hinduism does not have a founder. It has neither a beginning nor an end. It is coexistent with man himself. It is not one man's teaching or interpretation. Nor is it limited to a single facet of religion. It consists of the entire prism. It is a God-centric religion. The center of it is God. All other religions are prophet-centric. Here is a quote from my Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, on this concept: "The search for Truth, for God, is called the Sanatana Dharma, or the Eternal Path, because it is inherent in the soul itself, where religion begins. This path, this return to his Source, is ever existent in man, and is at work whether he is aware of the processes or not. There is not this man's search and that man's search. And where does the impetus come from? It comes from the inside of man himself. Thus, Hinduism is ever vibrant and alive, for it depends on this original source of inspiration, this first impulse of the spirit within, giving it an energy and a vibrancy that is renewable eternally in the now."

The idea that Hinduism resides within each of us, in our soul, was highlighted in Hinduism Today about ten years ago in an article about Pat Robertson. As part of his goal of making the United States a Christian nation, the evangelical Baptist leader made an outrageous public statement that Hindus should not be allowed to immigrate to the United States. The late and distinguished spokesman for Hinduism, Ram Swarup of New Delhi, gave an insightful reply which we printed. In part he stated: "Robertson wants to keep out Hindus from America. But would he be able to keep out Hinduism from the seeking humanity? Hinduism resides in all seeking hearts and whenever man's seeking for God becomes spiritual, Hinduism, or the tradition of Sanatana Dharma, automatically comes in. In what way and how long could man's innermost truth be kept away from him?"

As expressed in this statement and in Gurudeva's insight, the Hindu concept is that each soul is moving ever closer to God over a period of many lives. And when a soul reaches sufficient spiritual maturity, it naturally awakens a conscious desire to know God as its inmost essence, to experience Truth personally. This spiritual longing then leads the soul to take up the practices and study the philosophy of Sanatana Dharma in order to complete the process of knowing itself. Thus it is quite clear, from the Hindu point of view, that you cannot keep Sanatana Dharma out of a country when it already resides within the soul of every person in that country, waiting to be expressed at some point in the future. We can compare the inherent search for Truth that exists within the soul to a dormant seed hidden in the soil waiting for the right conditions to sprout. This first response is the philosophical and mystical definition of Hinduism.

2. Hinduism Is the Religion of the Vedas

The second part of the answer to "Who is a Hindu?" and "What is Hinduism?" is that Hinduism is the Vaidika Dharma, or religion of the Vedas. In other words, Hinduism encompasses all religious traditions that accept the Vedas as scriptural authority. Religious traditions in India that do not accept the Vedas are Indian but not Hindu. Among these are Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, which rejected the Vedas and thus emerged as completely distinct religions, disassociated from Hinduism, while still sharing many philosophical insights and cultural values with their parent faith.

The Vedas are revealed scripture, or shruti, meaning "that which is heard." They are timeless teachings transmitted to rishis, or seers, directly by God thousands of years ago. For countless centuries the Vedas, particularly their Upanishads, have been the basis of philosophical inquiry, debate and commentary. This attention has given rise to countless schools of thought. Revealed scripture is also the subject of deep study, meditation and yogic practice, to realize the wisdom of the ancients within oneself. Most of Hinduism's sacred mantras are drawn from shruti, used for rites of worship, both public and domestic, as well as personal prayer and japa. Though sometimes the Bhagavad Gita is put forward as Hinduism's core scripture, its "Bible," this, of course, is not the case. The Bhagavad Gita is a historical epic, or Itihasa, accepted as a central scripture by Vaishnava and Smarta followers, but not so regarded in the Shakta or Saiva traditions. The Vedas are the revealed scriptures that all Hindus hold in common.

It is also vital to mention that scripture in Hinduism does not have the same place as it does in many other faiths. Hinduism is premised on realization. To be enlightened, one must have personal experience of the truths set out in the Vedas. It is not sufficient, in Hinduism, to simply own, read and believe in a holy text, even the Vedas.

Another point regarding Vaidika Dharma is that sometimes the words Hindu and Indian are used in ways that make them synonymous. Of course, they are not. All Hindus are not Indians, and all Indians are not Hindus. Strictly using the term Hindu to refer only to those whose religion accepts the authority of the Vedas helps keep this confusion of terms from arising. This second response is the scriptural and liturgical definition of Hinduism.

3. Hinduism Is a Family of Faiths

The third part of the answer to "Who is a Hindu?" and "What is Hinduism?" is that Hinduism is a religion comprised of four primary sectarian traditions, known in Sanskrit as mata: Saivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Smartism. For Saivites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Smartas - who see all Deities as reflections of the One God - the choice of Deity is left to the devotee. In other words, Hinduism is not just a one faith but a family of myriad faiths, which hold such divergent beliefs that each is a complete and independent religion. Yet, they share a vast heritage of culture and belief: karma, dharma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity, temple worship, sacraments, manifold Deities, the guru-shishya tradition and a reliance on the Vedas as scriptural authority.

Grasping this overview of Hinduism's structure is essential to gain a clear understanding of the contemporary Hindu temple. I have met many Hindus, particularly in North America, who find the multiplicity of Deities present in many temples to be a source of confusion. This is even more the case in temples that have Deities from Saivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism all in the same hall. An understanding of the four traditions can provide worshipers with valuable insights into the quandary, making it clear which parts of a temple are traditionally Vaishnava, for example, and which represent the other denominations.

Including the denominations of sectarian worship in answering the question "Who is a Hindu?" also helps distinguish the Hindu from the non-Hindu who is studying Hindu philosophy or practicing yoga. The importance of this distinction may not be readily apparent. Like other religions, Hinduism has a hierarchy of beings in the inner worlds who work with those in the physical world who are Hindus by birth or conversion. This working together of the inner and outer worlds happens most fully in the temple. In those sacred precincts the Deity and the multitude of angelic beings, or devas, are able to bless, uplift and purify devotees. Those who hold a Hindu philosophy but have not fully entered the faith do not receive the same blessings from the Deity, as they have not given the Deity permission to work with them in this way. Permission is given when one formally joins the Hindu religion. It is also important to mention that Hindus new to the religion through birth or conversion do not simply join Hinduism. Rather, they join one of Hinduism's denominations and receive a traditional name through the namakarana samskara, name-giving sacrament.

Here are some insights from Gurudeva on blessings being received from the Deity: "The Gods can be and are seen by mature souls through an inner perception they have awakened. This psychic awakening is the first initiation into religion. Every Hindu devotee can sense the Gods, even if he cannot yet inwardly see them. This is possible through the subtle feeling nature. He can feel the presence of the Gods within the temple, and he can indirectly see their influence in his life."

We offer this explanation as a catalyst and encourage readers to send letters to the editor sharing additional reflections on what makes a Hindu a Hindu.