"I Want To See God!"
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"I Want To See God!"

Some pertinent suggestions to sincere seekersOn where and how to look for Divinity

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The focus of many religions is on helping those who do not believe in God to believe in God. For them, belief in God is the beginning and the end of the process. Once you believe in God, there is nothing more to do. However, in Hinduism belief is only the first step. Hindus want to move beyond just believing in God to experiencing God for themselves.

There is a classic story from the life of Swami Vivekananda, one of Hinduism's most well-known modern teachers, that illustrates the Hindu perspective of experiencing God. When Vivekananda was still a university student, he asked many of the foremost religious leaders in the Calcutta area where he lived if they had seen God. It was, in part, his college-age intellectual challenge to their religiosity. He never got a clear and authoritative answer from anyone until he met Sri Ramakrishna. It was during his second meeting with the saint that he asked the question, "Sir, have you seen God?" Calmly Sri Ramakrishna replied, "Yes, I see Him as clearly as one sees an apple in the palm of the hand; nay, even more intently. And not only this, you can also see Him." This deeply impressed the young Vivekananda, who soon after accepted Sri Ramakrishna as his guru.

Ramakrishna was taking the young seeker beyond belief in God and pointing toward direct experience of the Divine. It is clear that the Hindu's belief in God is only a step toward the eventual experience of God. An important second point is that in Hinduism the experience of God, in the sense of complete God Realization, is the

ultimate goal of life. It is an experience we will all eventually have when our soul has achieved sufficient spiritual maturity. It is the experience which liberates us from the need to be reborn on Earth. It is, to the Hindu, everybody's goal.

A great saint of North India, Anandamayi Ma, stated the goal of God Realization quite beautifully: "Man is a human being only so much as he aspires to Self Realization. This is what human birth is meant for. To realize the One is the supreme duty of every human being." In our own guru parampara, Satguru Yogaswami thundered a similar mahavakya: "Tanai Ari, " "Know thy Self." His disciple Markanduswami liked to stress that "Yogaswami didn't give us a hundred-odd works to do, only one: 'Realize the Self yourself,' or 'Know thy Self' or 'Find out who you are.' " "Yogaswami said, 'You can't find the truth in a thousand books or by listening to people talk. You must realize the Self by yourself!' "

This experience is called God Realization or Self Realization. Hinduism distinguises between self with a small s, which is the ego, and Self with a capital S, which is the soul. In Western, self-improvement terminology, self realization refers to manifesting the full potential of your outer self. In Hinduism, the first step toward realizing the Self is claiming one's identity as a spiritual being, a divine soul. The next step is realizing the soul's essence, which at the deepest level is also God's essence, so in experiencing our inmost nature we also experience God.

Besides God, religion is also concerned about evil. Again, Hinduism looks at evil as internal to man, not external. Evil relates to man's instinctive nature, which is capable of wrong actions based in anger and violence. We can say that man's nature is three-fold: instinctive, intellectual and spiritual. The goal is to subdue the instincts, direct the intellect, harness the ego and manifest the spiritual nature.

Though many individuals are inspired by the thought of seeing God, to most, the experience seems distant and unattainable. This is because they think of jumping somehow from a zero percent consciousness of God's presence to 100 percent awareness of God's presence. This is where one's concept of enlightenment may be a barrier that enlightenment is an instantaneous event coming out of nowhere, totally transforming us like a flash of lightning. It is more helpful to think of enlightenment as a gradual process which involves increasing our control over our instinctive nature, directing our thoughts better and expressing more and more of our innate Divinity. Said another way, we do not need to wait for the total, transforming and liberating experience of complete God Realization to know God in

simpler ways. This approach allows us to start seeing God now.

Let's look now at some specific suggestions on where and how to first look for God. To experience God, do we sit on a mountaintop, go into a cave or simply close our eyes? Where do we go to see God? Perhaps the easiest place to start is to see God in great religious teachers. We feel a spiritual aura about them that is uplifting. We see a light in their eyes that we do not see in others. The mere sound of their words encourages us to live a more spiritual life.

Another way to see God, which is a little more difficult but still easy to do, is to look deeply into the eyes of another person. Look beyond the personality, go deeper than his or her intellect and see the pure life energy, which is God. The great saying, mahavakya, that describes this approach to experiencing the Divine is the Tamil word Uyirkkuyir, "God is the Life of our life."

This practice does not stop with people but should also include trying to see the life energy in trees, birds and animals. This is because God is our life. God is the life in all beings. Becoming aware of this life energy in all that lives is becoming aware of God's presence within us. A beautiful verse from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad elucidates this concept: "He who knows God as the Life of life, the Eye of the eye, the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, he indeed comprehends fully the Cause of all causes." In Hindu culture, every time we greet another person with the traditional gesture of namaskar, we have the opportunity to practice looking deeply enough into his or her eyes to see God within as the life of their life. This is fulfilling the deepest meaning of namaskar, which means, "I greet God in you."

A third place to look for God is in the Hindu temple. This is the devotional or theistic approach. The Hindu temple is not simply a place we go to socialize or listen to lectures on Hinduism. It is a sacred place, built and maintained in such a way that we can go there and experience the Divine. Invoked by ordained priests through daily puja rituals, the Gods and angelic beings, or devas, in the inner, spiritual worlds are able to bless us through the Deity's image in the temple. The image is like a temporary physical body the Gods use during temple ceremonies.

Though a devotee may have a vision of God, the more common way we experience the Gods and devas is as an uplifting, peaceful energy, or sakti, that radiates out

from the image. It is easiest to feel these blessings at the peak of the puja, when the flame is held high. The Gods' blessings are most strongly felt on their major festival days, such as Vinayaga Chaturthi for Lord Ganesha.

A fourth place to look for God is within ourselves, through the practice of meditation. Meditation is internal worship going deeply enough into ourself to find that part of us that is identical with God. At first we experience God as peaceful and blissful feelings, later as a brilliant, clear white light, later still as a consciousness that permeates all, and finally as Transcendent Reality, which is timeless, formless and spaceless.

Meditation is the essence of ashtanga yoga, which means "eight limbs." The first two limbs, which are often glossed over by eager yoga students, are yama and niyama, Hinduism's ten ethical restraints and ten religious observances. These form a very necessary, secure basis for meditation, a foundation of good character without which no progress in spiritual life can be made. The restraints are noninjury, truthfulness, nonstealing, divine conduct, patience, steadfastness, compassion, honesty, moderate appetite and purity. The observances are remorse, contentment, giving, faith, worship of the Lord, scriptural listening, cognition, sacred vows, recitation and austerity. Once this platform of virtuous living is established, ashtanga yoga's subsequent six limbs can be pursued, beginning with asana sitting quietly in yogic posture, and pranayama, breath control. Then pratyahara, sense withdrawal, brings awareness into dharana, concentration, then into dhyana, meditation. Dhyana finally leads to samadhi, God Realization.

The key to deepening our experience of God is the regular practice of spiritual disciplines. And it is fair to say that no other religion contains such a vast range of spiritual practices, from such fundamental virtues as noninjury and purity, to temple worship, advanced yoga practices and meditation.

Even though God pervades us and the entire universe, in the beginning stages, we don't see Him. This is because He has intentionally hidden Himself from us, allowing us freedom to grow and learn through experience and eventually strive to find the Self within. This is called His veiling grace. Once we awaken to a certain stage and yearn with all our heart to see and know God, we can do so by seeing Him in great religious teachers, in the eyes of other people, and by seeing Him as the Life of the life within all that lives. In the temple we can experience God's peaceful energy, or sakti. And within ourself, we can come to know God through the fine art of

meditation. Through all these joyous spiritual practices of Hinduism, we can become more and more aware of God's presence within and around us. But be patient! This is a gradual process. It takes practice, lifetimes of practice.