

[On the Importance of Faith](#)

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FROM THE THE VEDAS

On the Importance of Faith

Raimundo Panikkar assesses the Vedic perspective

Man is endowed with faith as he is endowed with other human qualities. For this reason, there are ultimately as many types of faith as there are types of men, or even as there are human beings. Vedic faith is not primarily an intellectual decision. Nor is it a kind of blind trust in certain superhuman beings. It is rather a quality of the full human being; it is something given to or rather grafted into his being.

You act with faith when you act from such a depth that hesitation is not possible, when you are sure that what you are doing is what you are doing, not some external influence or force. It is when you perform an action that springs up from your inmost self and not whispered from an external influence. The man of doubt perishes; he, in fact, destroys himself. It is not intellectual hesitation we are now talking about, or indecision of the will. It is the main and central thrust of the human being which is our theme here.

Faith is not made up of those beliefs about which you can entertain intellectual doubt; faith is made of those convictions that are rooted so deeply in your own being that you are not

conscious of them; faith is the first emanation of life, as we shall read in one text; faith is the hidden root of Man out of which real human growth proceeds; faith is rooted in the heart and is composed of the heart's intention, the heart being the symbol for the core of Man. This faith is expressed in beliefs and actions which, when they come directly from that inner source, can be called authentic; otherwise they are make-believe, pseudo actions which shoot wide of their mark. Faith is authentic human existence.

The two groups of Vedic texts given here stress different aspects of faith. The titles, "Acting Faith" and "Thinking Faith" are intended to express this emphasis. The concrete manifestation of faith, according to our first hymn from the Rig Veda which is representative of the first, consists in a belief in the meaningfulness and effectiveness of the sacrificial action. Indeed, such belief is essential for the man performing the sacrifice, for without it there would be only a mechanical and thus a fruitless action. In the second text, that of the Upanishads, faith is represented as the condition for approaching the guru, for without such an approach no real knowledge can be transmitted or received. For example, the beginning of the story of Nachiketas shows how the Katha Upanishad envisages faith as a grace that takes possession of the young man and gives him the courage to resist his narrow-minded father, a courage that leads him up to the kingdom of death, guides him throughout his discourse with Death, and leads him finally to attain the highest wisdom. Faith acquires here the form of a concrete personal confidence for the sake of supreme realization. Yet this faith does not depend on our will alone, for, although the seed of faith is given with life itself, an awakening to faith is given as a second grace.

Raimundo Panikkar, 82, holds doctorates in science, philosophy and theology. His anthology of verses, *The Vedic Experience*, excerpted above, is the result of ten years spent in Banaras translating with the help of Vedic scholars.

The Vedas are the divinely revealed and most revered scriptures, *sruti*, of Hinduism, likened to the Torah (1,200 bce), Bible New Testament (100 ce), Koran (630 ce) or Zend Avesta (600 bce). Four in number, Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva, the Vedas include over 100,000 verses. Oldest portions may date back as far as 6,000 bce.

Who Is a Hindu?

"Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and the realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshiped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion." B.G. Tilak's definition of what makes one a basic Hindu, as quoted by India's Supreme Court. On July 2, 1995 the Court referred to it as an "adequate and satisfactory formula."