Educational Insight: Four Questions People Ask About Hinduism
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Educational Insight

# Four Questions People Ask About Hinduism

## ...and four tweetable answers!

In this addendum to our popular booklet "Ten Questions People Ask About Hinduism," we address four new hot-button issues: "Is yoga a Hindu practice?" "How do Hindus view other religions?" "Why do some Hindu Gods have animal features?" and "Why do Hindus cremate the dead?"

Have you ever been put on the spot with a provocative question about Hinduism, even one that really shouldn't be so hard to answer? If so, you are not alone. It takes some good preparation and a little attitude adjustment to confidently field queries on your faith--be they from friendly co-workers, students, passersby or especially from Christian evangelists. Back in the spring of 1990, a group of teens from the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, Lemont, sent a request to Hinduism Today requesting "official answers" to nine questions they were commonly asked by their peers. These questions had perplexed the Hindu youth themselves; and their parents had no convincing answers. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami took up the challenge and provided answers to the nine questions. Years later we added a crucial tenth dialog on caste, since that is the most relentless criticism Hinduism faces today. We now add four more, to round out the series.

Let's begin with advice on the attitudes to hold when responding. First, ask yourself, "Who is asking the question?" Millions of people are sincerely interested in Hinduism and the many Asian religions. So, when asked about Hinduism, don't be defensive, even if the questioner seems confrontational. Instead, assume that the person really wants to learn. Of course, some only want to harass, badger and turn you to their view. If you sense this is the case, feel free to smile and courteously dismiss yourself without any attempt to answer, lest you simply add fuel to his fires.

Bearing this in mind, it is still best never to answer a question about religion too

boldly or too immediately. That might lead to confrontation. Offer a prologue first, then come to the question, guiding the inquirer toward understanding. Your poise and deliberateness gives assurance that you know what you are talking about. It also gives you a moment to think and draw on your intuitive knowing. Before going deeply into an answer, always ask the questioner what his religion is. Knowing that, you can address his particular frame of mind and make your answer most relevant. Another key: have confidence in yourself and your ability to give a meaningful and polite response. Even to say "I am sorry. I still have much to learn about my religion and I don't yet know the answer to that" is a meaningful answer. Honesty is always appreciated. Never be afraid to admit what you don't know, for this lends credibility to what you do know.

Here are five prologues that can be used, according to the situation, before you begin to actually answer a question. 1) "I am really pleased that you are interested in my religion. You may not know that one out of every six people in the world is a Hindu." 2)"Many people have asked me about my tradition. I don't know everything, but I will try to answer your question." 3)"First, you should know that in Hinduism, it is not only belief and intellectual understanding that is important. Hindus place the greatest value on experiencing each of these truths personally." 4) Repeat the question to see if the person has actually stated what he wants to know. Rephrase it and ask if you have understood his query correctly. 5) If it's a complicated question, you might begin by saying, "Philosophers have spent lifetimes discussing and pondering questions such as this, but I will do my best to explain."

Have courage. Speak from your inner mind. Sanatana Dharma is an experiential path, not a dogma, so your experience in answering questions will help your own spiritual unfoldment. You will learn from your answers if you listen to your inner mind. This can actually be a lot of fun. The attentive teacher always learns more than the student.

After the prologue, address the question without hesitation. If the person is sincere, you can ask, "Do you have any other questions?" If he wants to know more, then elaborate as best you can. Use easy, everyday examples. Share what enlightened souls and scriptures of Hinduism have said on the subject. Remember, we must not assume that someone who asks about Hinduism is insincere or is challenging our faith. Many are just being friendly or making conversation to get to know you; others, having reincarnated into a strange culture, are searching for the way back "home." So don't be on the defensive or take it all too seriously. Smile when you give your response. Be open. If the second or third question is on something you know nothing about, you can say, "I don't know. But if you'd like, I

will find out and email you what I find out." Smile and have confidence as you give these answers. Don't be shy. Your birth karmas ensure that nobody can ask you a question to which you are unable to provide a fine answer that will fully satisfy the seeker. You may make lifelong friends in this way.

In the following pages, each question is addressed by a short response that can be committed to memory, a longer answer, and a detailed explanation. Many questioners will be content with the short, simple answer, so start with that first. Use the explanation as background information for yourself, or as a contingency response in case you end up in a deeper philosophical discussion.

To order the booklet with all fourteen questions and other Hindu literature, email: pamphlets _@_ hindu.org. Additional resources can be found at: www.himalayanacademy.com/basics/.

## 1. Is yoga a Hindu practice?

Deeply rooted in Hindu scripture and belief, yoga is, and always was, a vital part of Hindu religion and culture. Today it is embraced by tens of millions of non-Hindus seeking its renowned benefits to physical, mental and spiritual health.

In recent years a vigorous debate has arisen as to whether yoga is intrinsically a Hindu practice or a universal science. The word yoga has changed as the practice moved west. Its original meaning, "union with God," has been replaced with the more secular definition presented by upscale yoga studios around the world that teach a regimen of asanas along with basic breathing and a little meditation. A typical studio ad focuses on the physicality, stating that "yoga increases the circulation of oxygen-rich blood, nourishing and detoxifying the internal organs, musculature, cardiovascular, immune, endocrine, digestive, reproductive and nervous systems." The United States alone has over 20 million practitioners, and there are hundreds of millions worldwide.

B.K.S. Iyengar, a renowned yoga teacher, gives a more traditional definition on his website: "Yoga is one of the six systems of Indian philosophy. The word yoga originates from the Sanskrit root yuj, which means 'union.' On the spiritual plane, it means union of the Individual Self with the Universal Self."

Elaboration: The term yoga actually refers to a wide range of Hindu practices; so it is important to specify what kind of yoga is being discussed. In common modern usage, yoga typically refers to hatha yoga--the performance of yoga postures, or asanas, which are drawn from ancient Hindu scriptures. Hatha yoga has always been performed by Hindus as a preparation for meditation; today, especially in the West, its health benefits commonly supersede the spiritual. Hatha yoga is just one facet of a broader body of knowledge and practice known as ashtanga yoga, which consists of eight stages. (Ashta means eight; anga means limb). The famous Yoga Sutras of Sage Patanjali, who lived around 200 bce, is considered the first systematic presentation of the ancient tradition of yoga.

To appreciate yoga's spiritual and religious nature, one need only consider each of its eight limbs, or facets. The first is yama, the ethical restraints; of these, the most important is ahimsa, noninjuriousness. The second is niyama, specific religious observances, including puja in one's home shrine and repeating mantras. The third is asana, the widely practiced hatha yoga postures. The remaining five limbs are all related to meditation: pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (sense withdrawal), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (illumination, or oneness with God).

Can those of other faiths benefit from the practice of yoga--without threatening their religion's beliefs? Certainly followers of liberal religious traditions can do so. However, clerics of conservative faith traditions have spoken against its practice for their adherents. For example, in 2008 the leading Islamic council in Malaysia issued an edict prohibiting the country's Muslims from practicing yoga. Council chairman Abdul Shukor Husim explained: "We are of the view that yoga, which originates in Hinduism... destroys a Muslim's faith. There are other ways to get exercise. You can go cycling, swimming, etc."

The Reverend Richard Farr, vicar of Saint Mary's Church in Henham, England, commented in 2001: "I accept that for some people it is simply an exercise. But it is also often a gateway into other spiritualities, including Eastern mysticism." The Vatican has issued numerous edicts about the pursuit of yoga. In 1989 it warned that practices like Zen and yoga can "degenerate into a cult of the body" that debases Christian prayer.

It is sometimes argued that yoga is not Hindu per se; only the roots are Hindu. The fact that yoga is pursued by many non-Hindus is irrelevant to its validity as a Hindu

practice. The roots of yoga, its scriptural origins, are Hindu. The stem of yoga, its practice, is Hindu; and the flower of yoga, mystical union with God, is Hindu. Yoga, in its full glory, is entirely Hindu. Practice at your own risk!

## 2. How do Hindus view other religions?

Hindus honor all religious traditions and the people within them. While regarding our faith as uniquely endowed, we believe that there is no exclusive path, no one way for all.

In India, where hindus are the overwhelming majority, the rights of minority religions have always been honored. Hindus have welcomed, embraced and lived peacefully among other religions for centuries. During those same centuries, Hinduism itself evolved into hundreds of strains, and thus Hindus are fully at home with many different traditions and viewpoints within their own faith. Hence, they are naturally tolerant of other religions, respecting the fact that each has unique beliefs, practices, goals and paths of attainment, and not objecting when the doctrines of one conflict with those of another. Hindus readily accept the idea that it is not necessary, desirable or even possible for everyone to hold the same beliefs. And certainly such differences should never be cause for tension, criticism, intolerance or violence.

An ancient Sanskrit verse summarizes the Hindu attitude: "As the different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

Hindus do not proselytize, meaning they do not try to convert members of other faiths to their own. Proselytizing is based upon the belief that one's religion is the only true religion and everyone else should join it. Hindus hold the view that all faiths are beneficial. A devout Hindu is supportive of all efforts that lead to a pure and virtuous life and would consider it unthinkable to dissuade a sincere devotee from his chosen faith. They know that good citizens and stable societies are created from groups of religious people in all nations. While encouraging others to follow their chosen path with dedication, Hindus hold Sanatana Dharma to be the fullest expression of religion, and do accept sincere souls who seek entrance into Hinduism.

Elaboration: When discussing other religions, Hindu leaders often quote a verse

from the Rig Veda (1.164.46): "Ekam Sat, viprah bahudha vadanti," meaning "Truth is One, sages describe it variously." It conveys a core Hindu idea: that there can be multiple valid viewpoints about the Supreme. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, philosopher and former president of India, stressed this point: "The Hindu recognizes one Supreme Spirit, though different names are given to it."

In expressing religious tolerance, Hindus sometimes cite the above verse to assert that all religions are the same. In reality, all religions are not the same, nor is that indicated by this verse. It simply says that all religions revere the One Truth; all believe in the One Supreme Being. Their beliefs and practices are different; their paths are distinct. Instead of saying, "All religions are the same," it is better to state that "all religions are good."

Hindus share values common to all faiths: piety, love of God, respect for tradition, a stress on duty, responsibility and basic human virtues, such as nonviolence, truthfulness, compassion and charity. They know that good citizens and stable societies are created from groups of religious people in all nations. They also acknowledge and honor the many ways that religions differ. For example, meditation and yoga are commonly practiced in Eastern religions but not usually in Western faiths.

The heart of a religion is its understanding of the soul's relationship to God. Hinduism and most Eastern religions believe that, at the highest level, God and soul are one, inseparable, while Western faiths maintain that Creator and creation are eternally distinct.

Hindus support and participate in ecumenical gatherings with other religions, while upholding their own traditions. They confidently defend their faith, proceed contentedly with their practices and avoid the enchantment of other ways, be they ancient or modern.

## 3. Why do some Hindu Gods have animal features?

In dreams and visions the inner-plane beings have revealed themselves to mankind to be of many forms, expressing many powers. Some appear human, and others, like Ganesha, have animal features.

The various gods in hinduism's wide-ranging traditions possess distinct personalities and forms based on how they have been seen in visions and how they are depicted in stories and legends. Hindus feel no need to question the fact, for instance, that Lord Ganesha has the head of an elephant. They know He has been seen in this way by rishis and even by ordinary devotees. Did He choose that form to distinguish Himself as the Lord of Obstacles? No one really knows. The important fact is that millions of Hindus worship and receive blessings from the benevolent Elephant-Faced God every day. Many Hindus seeking an explanation hold that Ganesha is a real being who looks like an elephant. Others believe the elephant form is symbolic. Millions are content with the ancient stories in the Puranas that explain how He came to have an elephant head. Interestingly, and perhaps because of His endearing visage, Ganesha is the most popular of all the Hindu Deities. Numerous other Hindu Divinities have animal attributes, including Hanuman, Varuna, Kamadhenu, the Nagas, the vahanas (animal mounts of the Gods) and four of Vishnu's ten incarnations (fish, turtle, boar and half-man-half-lion).

Elaboration: An exploration of other ancient faiths shows that Hinduism is not alone in having Divinities with animal attributes. The ancient Greeks worshiped the God Pan, who has the hindquarters, legs and horns of a goat, and the Sea Gods Ichthyocentaurs, with human heads and torsos, the front legs of a horse and the serpentine tails of fish. In Egypt's pantheon, Anubis (God of the Underworld) is a falcon-headed man, as is Ra (the Sun God). Thoth (Lord of Wisdom and of the Moon) has the head of an ibis or a baboon, and His consort, Bastet, has the form of a cat or a lioness. The Mesoamerican peoples worshiped Quetzalcoatl, a feathered serpent. The Assyrians feared the powerful serpent Goddess Tiamat and revered various winged beings. In Japan--where Buddhism and Shintoism are intertwined--Kitsune the fox and Tengu the bird man are powerful shape-shifters who can transform into human or inanimate shapes to trick humans. Many shrines there are guarded by a pair of magical lion-dogs known as the Koma-inu or Shishi.

In a discussion with Christians, who tend to ridicule Hinduism on this point, you can recall that winged angels are half-human and half-bird. Four-headed beings called the Cherubims were central in the early Christianity. In the Bible's Book of Revelation, John writes: "I saw a throne standing in heaven; and the One who was sitting on the throne... In the center, grouped around the throne itself, were four animals with many eyes, in front and behind. The first animal was like a lion, the second like a bull, the third animal had a human face, and the fourth animal was like a flying eagle. Each of the four animals had six wings..." (4:1-8). The description matches an account by Jewish prophet Elijah centuries before. Importantly, these beings are the most powerful beings in the pantheon, closest to the Creator.

Over the millennia, worship and awareness of Deities with animal features was eclipsed in most cultures as the monotheistic religions grew into prominence. Were these beings mere myth and imagination, as depicted by modern scholars? Or were the peoples of ancient times aware of a mystical reality that has been sealed off? In most cultures, the old Gods have been put in exile. Only in Hinduism does such worship thrive in unbroken continuity.

One might note the obvious fact that Homo sapiens, too, is an animal specie, one among many.

## 4. Why do Hindus cremate the dead?

Hindus arrange swift cremation of the dead, ideally within 24 hours. The fire and accompanying rites sever ties to earthly life and give momentum to the soul for its continuing spiritual journey.

Hindus traditionally cremate their dead because a fiery dissolution of the body brings swifter, more complete release of the soul than burial, which preserves the soul's psychic connection to its just-ended earthly life. After death, the departed soul hovers close to the earth plane in its astral body, emotionally attached to the physical body and its old surroundings, still able to see this material world. The funeral rites and burning of the body signify spiritual release, notifying the soul that, in fact, death has come. Some of the funeral chants address the deceased, urging the soul to relinquish attachments and continue its spiritual journey. The Gods and devas are invoked to assist the soul in its transition. The fire severs ties to earthly life and gives momentum to the soul, granting at least momentary access to refined, heavenly realms. All attention is on a singular goal, as expressed in this prayer from the Rig Veda: "Release him again, O Agni, to the fathers. The one offered to you now proceeds to his destiny. Putting on new life, let him approach the surviving, let him reunite with a [new] body, All-Knowing One!" (10. 16. 5).

Elaboration: Hindus do not believe in bodily resurrection and the reuniting of each soul with its physical body, so they place no importance on preserving the corpse, which is the intent of burial in Christianity and Islam. The Hindu belief in reincarnation gives assurance that death is merely the soul's release from the current life. An ancient text puts it simply, "Even as the snake sloughs off its skin, even as the bird leaves its shell, even as in its waking state the soul forgets happenings of the dream state, thus does the soul migrate from one body to another..." (Tirumantiram 2132).

Family and friends take an active part in releasing the departed soul: preparing the body, joining in the rituals, transporting the body to the cremation grounds and lighting the pyre. After cremation, the ashes are ceremoniously committed to a river (often the Ganga), lake or ocean, along with garlands and flowers. While the rites allow family a dignified farewell and an opportunity to express grief, all present know there will be other bodies, other lives. Mourning is never suppressed, but scriptures admonish against excessive lamentation and encourage joyous release. The departed soul feels the impact of emotional forces directed at him, and prolonged grieving can hold him in earthly consciousness, inhibiting full transition to the inner worlds. Hindus speak of death as the Great Departure, regarding it as life's most exalted moment. The death anniversary is called Liberation Day.

Cremation is prescribed in the Vedic texts, and Hindu funeral customs are remarkably uniform throughout India. Cremation is also practiced by other Indic faiths, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism, and is becoming popular worldwide. Many believe the body should be disposed of as swiftly and cleanly as possible and that fire is the purest way to return the physical elements to their source. It is less expensive than burial, with a smaller impact on the environment. Recent figures show cremations are chosen by 35% in the US, 72% in the UK, 99.9% in Japan, 68% in Canada and 49% in China.

Infants and small children, however, are buried in Hindu tradition. Another exception pertains to enlightened souls, for whom the body is often interred in a crypt filled with salt, and a shrine or temple is constructed at the site. Sacred texts assert their remarkable disciplines have endowed the physical body with immense spiritual power, which can radiate for generations, giving blessings through this sacred samadhi, especially if that soul remains aware of the Earth plane.