Publisher's Desk: Hinduism, Religion or Way of Life?
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P U B L I S H E Râ□□S D E S K

Hinduism: Religion or Way of Life?

Our publisher confronts a long-standing misapprehension about our faith, showing us why Hinduism is more than a way of life

B Y S A T G U R U B O D H I N A T H A V E Y L A N S W A M I

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“ISNâ□□T HINDUISM SIMPLY A WAY OF LIFE?â□□ This is a question I am frequently asked at satsang gatherings. It invariably makes for spirited discussion, as there is

avid interest and a lively diversity of opinion. Years ago, Swami Chinmayananda, founder of Chinmaya Mission, gave a dramatic lecture on the subject (bit.ly/hinduism-way-of-life). Here are key excerpts: â□□â□□Hinduism is not a religion. It is a way of life.â□□ You can today hear it in every drawing room wherever youngsters are sitting and discussing Hindu culture and India. You can hear them blabbering this quotation: â□□Hinduism is totally different; it is not a religion. Then what is it? It is a way of life.â□□ This is a false statement! No thinking man will accept it or give it any credit at all. What an abominable stupidity is wrapped up in such an attractive sentence! â□□Hinduism is not a religion; it is a way of life.â□□ Oh! I see! And Christianity? It is a religion? Oh! So it is not a way of life? What is religion without a way of life? How can there be a way of life without religion? Think! It is a self-contradiction to say it is not a religion; it is a way of life. If Hinduism is not a religion, it is only a way of life; then Christianity is a religion and therefore no way of life. What is religion without a way of life? Does not a religion guide us in our world, in our life? So, it is an empty, high-sounding statement.â□□

Swamiji goes on to explain that the notion originated with German Indologists who, in the late 1800s, translated the word mata as religion: â□□The Germans, who first tried to translate our Sanskrit literature, unfortunately made a great mistake. They used mata for religion: â□□Buddha mata,â□□ the religion of Buddha; â□□Chraistava mata,â□□ the religion of Christ; â□□Muhammediya mata,â□□ Islam. Then they came to Hindu mata, and the poor Germans got confused, because in the Hindu religion there are very many mata. It is a composite mata. Mata comes from the Sanskrit word mati, meaning â□□buddhi,â□□ â□□intellect.â□□ That which is crystallized in the intellect is called a mata. Mata only means an opinion! Hindu religion contains Shankara mata, Ramanuja mata, Madhva mata. Various acharyas who have given various viewpoints of life, and the attitudes or the thoughts of the Upanishadsâ□□ they are all called mata, mata, mata. So [the Germans] they came to the conclusion that Hinduism is not a religion. Then, what is it [they wondered]? It is â□□the way of life!â□□â□□

Hindus inquiring about the merits of this infamous statement are generally not immersed in the practice of Hinduism. They may have in mind that the sum total of Hinduism is to follow dharma, to live virtuously and fulfill oneâ□□s duty, and that there is no need to do more.

Hinduism is a way of life, but it is a spiritual way of life, encompassing good conduct, worship, selfless service, scriptural study and meditation. And what is the definition of a spiritual way of life? Religion!

While Sanatana Dharma is, as the Germans observed, a family of faiths, it also stands strong and proud as a religion in its own right. These faiths all share certain common elements of culture, liturgy, scripture and basic philosophy as reflected in the core beliefs: karma, dharma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity and more. Hinduism gloriously fulfills all the qualities of a religion in every sense of the word.

Remember, the Germans were no friends of Hinduism. Their redefinition of our faith as a non-religion was a powerful criticism, one that unfortunately Hindus themselves adopted. It is intellectual suicide and a global public relations disaster to deny that our faith is a religion. Hinduism stands proudly with the great faiths of the world, and it does this not because it is a way of life. Vegetarianism is a way of life. Nonviolence is a way of life. But neither is a religion and neither will be invited to a parliament of the worldâ□□s religions, as Swami Vivekananda was back in 1893. He was invited and he spoke to the world from that Chicago podium precisely because he was a Hindu.

Yes, there are those who think using the â□□H-wordâ□□ demeans something. But they are wrong. They are neglecting the import of the word religion on the global stage as well as in the local community, among other faith groups. Standing together under the banner of Hinduism, we enjoy the many protections given to religions, and we have a respected, unified voice to the media, to government, to boards of education and planning departments. We have known quasi-Hindu groups who normally refuse to use the H word, but eagerly adopt it when they seek credibility in the broader community, such as in court cases.

Hinduismâ□□s finest future is to stand side-by-side with other religions, not other ways of life. Hindus who parrot the notion that Hinduism is not a religion are not serving Sanatana Dharma well. They have failed to see how wrong-headed this posturing looks in the eyes of the world. What if the Muslims claimed Islam is not a religion but just a way of life? Or Christianity? Judaism? They donâ□□t do that. They are proud of their spiritual identity. But for various reasons, including the persistent nuisance of the colonized mind, Hindus hold on to this self-destructive fallacy. Numerous swamis who established movements in the West in the mid 20th century perpetuated this idea as a means to teach Vedanta, yoga and meditation to Christians and Jews without provoking religious objections. As a result, such concepts have become household words but without being acknowledged as Hindu. Swami Chinmayananda said it so well: â□□It is an empty, high-sounding statement.â□□ One we can all avoid.

Happily, this is changing in small but important ways. The Hindu youth we encounter today are proud of their religion, eager to learn more about it. In universities the world over, Hindu students want to stand proudly side-by-side with students of other religions. The Hindu American Foundationâ□□s â□□Take Back Yogaâ□□ campaign, which works to reestablish the practice as having its roots in the worldâ□□s oldest faith, is a bold indictment of the â□□way of lifeâ□□ argument.

In each satsang I hold, one basic question invariably arises: â□□How can I make Hinduism practical in daily life?â□□ I stress that to know and practice Hinduism in the fullest sense, one should engage in all the areas it encompasses: dharma, worship, selfless service, philosophical study and meditation. Together these five make for a complete physical, mental, emotional and spiritual regimen to follow throughout life.

Devotional practice without philosophy can easily turn into superstition. Philosophy without devotion and selfless service can devolve to mere intellectual argumentation and speculation. Taking Hinduism as only a way of life, one misses out on the inner benefits of devotion and philosophy. And without meditation, one has no way to experience the oneness of atman and Brahman, of jiva and Siva, which leads to illumination and liberation. Letâ□□s look at these five layers more closely.

Dharma is the foundation of Hindu religion, as capsulated in the code of conduct called yamas. Yama means â□□reining inâ□□ or â□□controllingâ□□ the base, instinctive nature, such as the tendency to become angry and harm others, to lie or manipulate events in our favor, and to steal to acquire something we desire and otherwise could not have. Such expressions of oneâ□□s instinctive nature need to be harnessed, as actions based on them create negative karma and keep one constantly in an upset state of mind. Dharma also includes a wide array of cultural observances.

Seva, selfless service, is the next facet of Hindu practice. Many individuals serve through giving a monetary donation to a religious or other nonprofit organization. While it is easy to open your wallet or purse and give, say, $50, selfless service offers a more serious commitment, requiring the sacrifice of oneâ□□s time. Selfless service need not be limited to the temple; it can be done at work, at school,

wherever we are in the world.

Devotional practices, such as attending puja at a temple, going on pilgrimage, conducting puja in oneâ□□s home shrine and repeating a mantra on japa beads, deepen humility and raise the subtle energies to the higher chakras of cognition and divine love.

Scriptural study builds a firm foundation of philosophical clarity, an accurate understanding of God, souls and world that enhances and informs every aspect of oneâ□□s life. Such study includes the Vedas, Agamas, the texts of oneâ□□s denomination and the teachings of the saints and sages of oneâ□□s guru lineage. Choice of study material should be in consonance with oneâ□□s sectarian philosophy. For example, if oneâ□□s lineage is advaitic, that study should reinforce the idea that we are already one with God, that nothing has to happen for this to be true.

Meditation and other yogic sadhanas, the fifth aspect of Hinduism, are the doorway to personal realization. Meditation can propel the individual beyond philosophical concepts about Divinity to actual experience of those truths. This can be compared to reading about the taste of a ripe, juicy mango versus actually taking your first bite. Which would you prefer? There are two primary approaches. The first, raja yoga, consists of regulated breathing, sense withdrawal, concentration and meditation. The second, jnana yoga, is a path of scriptural study, reflection and constant, profound meditation.

These five religious dimensions are found in all of Hinduismâ□□s diverse lineages, with each sect and sampradaya treasuring and preserving its own cultural, devotional and philosophical uniqueness.

Five Facets Of Faith

In essence, Hinduism is a spiritual way of life, a full-fledged religion consisting of five key elements: dharma, worship, selfless service, philosophical study and

sadhana/meditation.

1. Dharma, Culture 2. Worship, Devotion

3. Selfless Service

4. Philosophical Study

5. Sadhana & Meditation