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Life-Affirming Or Life-Negating?

Palani, Sivasiva When the first European visitors trekked India a few centuries back, they encountered the philosophies of yoga and witnessed the extraordinary lives of sadhus who had tossed down the material world as if it were so much sand. They encountered mystics who sat in meditation for days at a time, neither sleeping or eating. They saw men stand for hours in icy streams and others who never spoke, having taken vows of utter silence so they might live in unutterable Silence. Such austerities left a deep impression in the minds of visitors. Though they had also seen a rich social and cultural life, it was maya and tapas - illusion and asceticism - which they reported back as the eastern man's way. They even coined a word to describe what they thought they understood - life-negating. "The Eastern faiths," they wrote, "are against life." Like the story of the blind man who touched the elephant's tail and described it as a rope, these men were partly right and mostly wrong. They mistakenly assumed that the practices of the Hindu multitudes were the same as those of a handful of ascetics. The truth is that all of man's religions contain elements which are both life-affirming and life-negating. Consider the Christian Gnostics or the Jewish Essenes, both fervently anti-worldly while most of their faith clung fast to the world. It is the same with Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. Most followers are deeply involved in life's rewards and tribulations, while a rare few renounce the material to embrace the spiritual. Hinduism has a place for the success in life and liberation from life into spiritual awakenings. It calls them samsara and moksha. These two dimensions of Hinduism are discussed below in our second-in-thirteen-years illustrated editorial.

Moksha

While the first three goals of life nurture and enrich body and mind, the final goal, Moksha, speaks to our heart and soul. Its rewards are immaterial, not of this world but of a profound world within.

The Hindu Knows that liberation is for the few, not the many. In fact, one of the prime duties of those in samsara is to support those pursuing Moksha and seek out enlightened souls' blessings.

Just as the sun is the source of energy which draws water from the sea and drives winds to shepherd rainclouds across the sky, so is Moksha the driving force behind Samsara. It is the eternal towards which the temporal leads, the immortal which gives purpose to mortality. Moksha is the final goal of human existence, the summit of life's mountain, the holy Vedas proclaim, "the Self cannot be attained by the weak, nor by the half-hearted, nor by a mere show of detachment. But as strength, stability and inner freedom grow, so does Self-awareness grow. Having realized the Self, the wise find satisfaction. Their evolution complete, at peace and free from longing, they are at one with everything." This oneness is defined differently in various Hindu traditions. In some the oneness is realization of the Self as the Supreme. In others it is freedom from name and form, the removal of beclouding ignorance or the attainment of intimacy with the Divine. It is true that those who step on the path of liberation in this life do not possess an attachment to the world, and may disdain the things others hold dear. Let us call them God-affirming and not life-negating.

Samsara

Just as a nation's abundance derives from the rains which water its fertile fields, so is a life well-lived showered with three blessings: righteousness, riches and the raptures of love. The Hindu path defines four legitimate goals in life: dharma (goodness); artha (wealth); karma (love and pleasure) and moksha (liberation). The first three embrace our movement through samsara, the passage from birth to death and rebirth. These goals are boldly life-affirming. It is considered the duty of all Hindus to fulfill these human objectives. They should cultivate and practice good conduct. They should acquire skills, gather great wealth and use it well. They should unfold love and enjoy life's pleasures. Hindu dharma may be likened to the life-giving rain. Everything depends on its existence - the life of plants and animals, the flow of streams and rivers, even the organic constitution of the vast oceans. When the clouds hold back their watery gifts, life withers and we suffer. Similarly, when dharma ceases to flow, our humanity dries up and we suffer. Prayers for rain are common in the Vedas, as are petitions that dharma may reign in the kingdom. In fact, there is thought to be a subtle link between the two. Like all peoples, Hindus cherish life and turn to their religion to live it fully. Also like our kinsmen everywhere, there are times in every Hindu's life when life, with all its joys and sorrows, is not enough, and we seek a more permanent Reality, yearning for union

with God. In the end, Samsara and Moksha prove to be one journey to enlightenment, the one affirming our earthly existence, the other emphasizing our spiritual Being.

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