Since 1979 the international magazine HINDUISM TODAY has been producing a treasury of educational features on all aspects of Sanatana Dharma. Guided by the founder, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, the magazine’s editors, who are initiated monks of Kauai’s Hindu Monastery, collaborated with holy men and women and experts around the world in creating graphically rich guides to virtually every important aspect of Hinduism. The best of those works are assembled in What Is Hinduism? for Hindus and non-Hindus alike to discover the culture, beliefs, worship and mysticism that is India’s greatest gift to humanity.
What Is Hinduism?
को हिन्दुधम
What Is Hinduism?

Modern Adventures Into a Profound Global Faith

From the Editors of Hinduism Today Magazine

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At the height of puja, a priest lights the sacred lamp which he will slowly wave before the Deity as an act of veneration, carrying out liturgy that is thousands of years old. Such ceremonies facilitate communion between this physical world and the realms of the Gods and angels.

PREFACE

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

All faiths are grappling with their self-definition as we rev up to the breathtaking speed of the information age—a period more intense and kinetic than any other in the history of the world. Teachings and practices that were once accepted without question are often now rejected unless evidence and logic are marshalled to give them plausibility. To survive, customs and traditions must bear up under intellectual scrutiny, must prove themselves helpful and immediately usable.

Hinduism is no exception. Hindu education for youth is languishing, and communities around the world are struggling to compose clear, concise presentations of the dharma. It would be possible to spend an entire lifetime, indeed, many lifetimes, absorbing and practicing the teachings of just one sect or of the Hindu faith. Yet, there is also a need to understand this complex conglomerate as a whole. There is a preeminent need, the world over, for cogent, comprehensive explanations of the various facets of Hinduism—and the shared features of its various sects—from a mountain-top perspective—to answer the sincere questions of children, coworkers, neighbors, critics and colleagues, and to provide a nonacademic presentation for those of other religious seeking insight into this ancient path.

Producing quality educational materials on Hinduism is inherently difficult precisely because it is one of the world’s most paradoxical and easily misunderstood religious traditions. It can be equally confounding to the outsider and to those born in the faith's embrace. This is because it is actually a family of many different faiths that share essential practices and characteristics.

Most Hindus have an intuitive sense of, but can't articulate, the "whys and wherefores" of their philosophy and practices. The boldness to ask questions about such matters has only recently developed. Just confer with Hindu parents who have stumbled when confronted with the direct and innocent questions posed by their own children, questions they never voiced and therefore never learned satisfying answers to. This book seeks to be a bridge between generations of past centuries that grew up immersed in a pristine Hindu culture—with vast communal knowledge available to them—and current generations that have little or no access to such knowledge. In those olden times, living in a homogenous society with the faith’s culture and traditions interwoven in every aspect of daily life, one didn’t need to ask the whys of everything. He only needed to participate, enjoy and absorb the nuances and meanings from the inside out. In today’s fragmented societies, we no longer have such cocoon-like training for children, so teachings must be rearticulated and presented in ways that will make intellectually clear their purpose, relevance and value in competition with the compelling flood of media that youth and adults are subjected to day after day. Hinduism must also compete in the arena of ideas with its aggressively evangelical counterparts.

The idea of creating a book called “What Is Hinduism?” came to me from the inner sky—one day while I was meditating on our faith’s educational need. It was as if the inner plane masters, among them our dear Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, were sending the thought form that such a work would be just what is needed at this time. Approached from scratch, the book in your hands would take years to produce, especially with the amount of patience and care that you will find here in each chapter. Thus, the serendipitous beauty of the project was that the necessary thousands of hours of loving attention had already gone into researching and designing its chapters, as Educational Insight sections over the last ten years by the talented team of editors, writers and photographers of our international magazine, Hinduism Today. All that was needed now, in 2007, was to choose the best features and put them together in a way that offers a thorough yet highly readable introduction to Hinduism. Viva! As a small group of renunciate Hindu monks at Kauai’s Hindu Monastery in Hawaii, we have produced Hinduism Today for more than a quarter century, tracking, monitoring and encourag­ ing the current renaissance of the grandfather faith of the human race. One of the many reasons Gurudeva founded the magazine was to help Hindus become more aware of the activities of their Hindu brothers and sisters in other parts of the world and thus draw strength and courage from that knowledge. Another was to dispel myths and misinformation promulgated by invaders and missionaries of alien religions. A third was to present the beliefs and practices common to all Hindus, as well as the teachings and traditions of the individual sects, traditions and lineages that together form this quilt of dharma. What Is Hinduism? is an insider’s view, honoring the beauties of culture, tradition, celebration, worship, belief and discipline.

In addition to the reams of scripture available to readers, there are many books on Hinduism by writers and scholars of both East and Wests. But few offer much relief to the parent looking for simple answers, or the social studies teacher looking for an authentic overview of the faith. Texts by Westerners, often aca­ demic in nature, tend to paint Hinduism into the past and distort it by wrong emphasis, dwelling on peripheral, controversial is­ sues such as caste and the “Aryan Invasion.” Those by Easterners generally focus on just one sampradaya or lineage—such as San­ kaasan Vedanta, Madhva Vaishnavism or Saiva Siddhanta—often presenting its philosophy and tradition as if it were the whole of Hinduism, which, of course, it is not. When each sect and lineage is presented in this way, it is no small wonder readers get confused.

Rare is the book that presents Hinduism in a comprehensive, contemporary, complementary way—as a family of faiths and philosophies—that a modern, English-speaking audience can relate to, understand and appreciate. What Is Hinduism? is just such a rare gem. Exploring it, readers now and then spontaneously stop and sigh, “Ah, now I get it. I now understand this basic concept of Hinduism.” It is an authoritative and inspired work, an inclus­ ive, sophisticated, user-friendly explanation of Sanatana Dharma. Far from the arcane, sea-of-text descriptions of Hinduism, this book is rich with potent images, traditional symbols and pho­ tographs depicting each aspect of the culture and faith. If one were to simply study the photos and art and their captions, that would itself serve as a meaningful glimpse into the Hindu heart.

This book is inspired by and draws heavily from the remark­ able spiritual legacy of Gurudeva, without doubt one of the most significant Hindu saints and leaders of the twentieth century. An American by birth, Gurudeva showed the world by his pure and dedicated life that Hinduism is a vibrant, relevant and living force. He renewed the pride of Hindus in their faith and gave them guidelines for following Hindu Dharma. He boldly spoke of Hinduism as the greatest religion in the world and showed millions that Hinduism is destined to teach our newly emerging global civilization that harmonious coexistence—in peace, mu­ tual respect, and with a deep sense of spiritual values—is not merely a dream, but a living reality. We know that Gurudeva is smiling approvingly at the creation of What Is Hinduism? We believe it will be hailed as a classic, and hopefully a best seller, so that uncounted souls may enjoy its heartfelt messages.

Bodhinatha Veylanswami

PUBLISHER OF HINDUISM TODAY
Google search on the title of this book yields some 15,000 answers. Many are from outsiders offering their best take; many are from antagonists taking their best shot. Too few are knowledgeable; fewer still are authentic. Rare is the answer that goes beyond parochial sectarian understandings; scarcely any encompasses the huge gamut implied in the question. For these reasons alone, this book was inevitable. Written by devout Hindus and drawn from the deepest wells of spiritual experience and cultural insight, it is a 416-page definition coming from deep inside the inner sanctum and depicting in words and amazing images the living, breathing entity that is Hinduism.

The forty-six chapters of this book have been drawn from Hinduism Today magazine, whose founder, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927–2001), well understood the challenges that all religions face in today’s world, whether from outside or within. He wrote that every religion consists of the spiritual precepts, practices and customs of a people or society, transmitted from generation to generation, that maintain the connection to the past, that preserve and promote their diverse spiritual heritage. There are three different ways to convey to their children the best of their faith to help them do better in school and live a fruitful life. Swamis and lay missionaries are campaigning to counteract Christian conversion tactics. Hinduism of all denominations are banding together to protect, preserve and promote their diverse spiritual heritage.

A major reason why Hinduism seems difficult to understand is the notion that this is a faith of the past, not the future. Even today,晃 it was feared by some and hoped by many that Hinduism—the religion of a billion people, one sixth of the human race living mostly in India—would meet the same fate. That it survived a history of religious conquest and extermination that wiped out virtually every other ancient religion is exceptional. Ironically, this noble faith, having withstood the ravages of invasion, plunder and brutal domination by foreign invaders for over a thousand years, stumbled into the 20th century to meet the subtler forces of secularism and the temptations of materialism. Christian propaganda, fabricated by 19th-century Jesuit missionaries, empowered by the 19th-century British Raj and carried forth today by the Western and Indian media, had dealt heavy blows over the centuries to the subjugated, prideless Hindu identity. A typical Christian tactic was to demean the indigenous faith, impeaching it as rife with superstition, idolatry, antiquated values, archaic customs and unempowered false Gods. India’s Commu­nist/sectarian media stressed caste abuse and wretched social ill, branding as radical, communal and fundamentalist all efforts to stand strong for anything Hindu.

Most recently, safeguarding the anti-Hindi mind-set, Western professors of Asian studies branded the tarnished term Hindutva to suppress pleadings by Indian parents to improve the pitiful portrayal of their faith in the textbooks their children must study in American schools—a portrayal that makes them ashamed of their heritage.

More than a few Hindus, succumbing to the avalanche of ridicule, gave up their faith, changed their names to Western ones and stopped calling themselves Hindu, giving more credence to the notion that this is a faith of the past, not the future. Even those who were Hindus in their hearts would demur, “No, I’m not really a Hindu. I’m nonsectarian, universal, a friend and follower of all religions. Please don’t classify me in any particular way.” In a further dilution, many swamis and other leaders promulgated the false claim that Hinduism is not a religion at all, but a universalistic amalgam of Vedu, yogan wisdom and life-style that anyone of any religion can adopt and practice without conflict. Tens of thousands who love and follow Hindu Dharma avoid the H word at all costs. Rare it is to find a spiritual leader or an institution who stands courageously before the world as a Hindu, unabashed and unequivocal.

Despite these erosive influences, an unexpected resurgence has burst forth across the globe in the last twenty years, driven in part by the Hindu diaspora and in part by India’s newfound pride and influence. Hinduism entered the 21st century with fervent force as recent generations discovered its treasures and its relevance to their times. Temples are coming up across the Earth by the thousands. Communities are celebrating Hindu festivals, parading their Deltas in the streets of Paris, Berlin, Toronto and Sydney in grand style without worrying that people might think them odd or “pagan.” Eloquent spokesmen are now representing Hinduism’s billion followers at international peace conferences, interfaith gatherings and discussions about Hindu rights. Hindu students in high schools and universities are going back to their traditions, turning to the Gods in the temples, not because their parents say they should, but to satisfy their own inner need, to improve their daily life, to fulfill their souls’ call.

Hinduism is going digital, working on its faults and bolstering its strengths. Leaders are stepping forth, parents are striving for ways to convey to their children the best of their faith to help them do better in school and live a fruitful life. Swamis and lay missionaries are campaigning to counteract Christian conversion tactics. Hinduism of all denominations are banding together to protect, preserve and promote their diverse spiritual heritage.

INTRODUCTION
A SIMPLE OVERVIEW OF A COMPLEX FAITH

What is Hinduism?

In mystical Bali, where Hindus are intensely sensitive to the inner worlds, deus and demons are known to walk beside men and women. Nature sees, hears, feels and responds. On a remote beach in that sacred land, devotees perform Kecak, the spectacular monkey dance.

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thought, the beauty of its art and architecture and the grace of its people. Hinduism remains a mystery. Twisted stereotypes abound that would relegate this richly complex, sophisticated and spiritually rewarding tradition to little more than crude caricatures of snake-charmers, cow-worshippers and yogis lying on beds of nails.

While Hindus do not share these coarse stereotypes, they are often aware of just one small corner of the religion—their village or family lineage—and oblivious to the vastness that lies outside it. Many Hindus are only aware of the Northern traditions, such as that of Adi Shankara, and remain unaware of the equally vigorous and ancient Southern traditions, such as Saiva Siddhanta.

Unfamiliarity with the greater body of Sanatana Dharma may be unavoidable in earlier centuries, but no longer. Those who are sufficiently determined can track down excellent Earth. Mountains of scriptures exist in dozens of languages; but a preceptor, study his teachings, embrace the ally rewarding tradition to little more than crude caricatures of the vastness of Hinduism. From the countless living gurus, teach­ a seeker would need to read and analyze myriad scriptures and as that of Adi Shankara, and remain unaware of the equally vig­

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Back to Basics

For Hindus and non-Hindus alike, one way to gain a simple (though admittedly simplistic) overview is to understand the four essential beliefs shared by the vast majority of Hinduism, karma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity and dharma.

Karma: Karma literally means “deed” or “act” and more broadly names the universal principle of cause and effect, action and reaction which governs all life. Karma is a natural law of the mind, just as gravity is a law of matter. Karma is not fate, for man acts with free will, creating his own destiny. The Vedas tell us, if we sow goodness, we will reap goodness; if we sow evil, we will reap evil. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determines our future. It is the interplay between our experience and how we respond to it that makes karma devastating or help­fully invigorating. The conquest of karma lies in intelligent action and dispassionate reaction. Not all karmas rebound immediately. Some accumulate and return unexpectedly in this or other births. The Vedas explain, “According as one acts, so does he become. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, had by had action” (Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.5).

Reincarnation: Reincarnation, punarjanma, is the natural pro­cess of birth, death and rebirth. At death we drop off the phys­ical body and continue evolving in the inner worlds in our subtle bodies, until we again enter into birth. Through the ages, rein­ carnation has been the great consoling element within Hinduism, eliminating the fear of death. We are not the body in which we live but the immortal soul which inhabits many bodies in its evolutionary journey through samsara. After death, we continue to exist in unseen worlds, enjoying or suffering the harvest of earthly deeds until it comes time for yet another physical birth. The actions set in motion in previous lives form the tendencies and conditions of the next. Reincarnation ceases when karma is resolved, God is realized and moksha, liberation, is attained. The Vedas state, “After death, the soul goes to the next world, bearing in mind the subtle impressions of its deeds, and after reaping their harvest returns again to this world of action. Thus, he who has desires continues subject to rebirth” (Yajur Veda, Brihada­ramyaka Upanishad 4.4.6).

All-Pervasive Divinity: As a family of faiths, Hinduism upholds a wide array of perspectives on the Divine, yet all worship the one, all-pervasive Supreme Being hailed in the Upanishads. As Absolute Reality, God is unmanifest, unchanging and transcen­dent, the Self God, timeless, formless and spaceless. As Pure Con­sciousness, God is the manifest primal substance, pure love and light flowing through all form, existing everywhere in time and space as infinite intelligence and power. As Primal Soul, God is our personal Lord, source of all three worlds, our Father-Mother God who protects, nurtures and guides us. We beseech God's grace in our lives while also knowing that He/She is the essence of our soul, the life of our life. Each denomination also vener­ates its own pantheon of Divinities, Mahadevas, or “great an­gels,” known as Gods, who were created by the Supreme Lord and who serve and adore Him. The Vedas proclaim, “He is the God of forms infinite in whose glory all things are—smaller than the smallest atom, and yet the Creator of all, ever living in the mystery of His creation. In the vision of this God of love there is everlasting peace. He is the Lord of all who, hidden in the heart of things, watches over the world of time” (Krishna Yajur Veda, Sheshashatam Upanishad 4.14.15).

Dharma: When God created the universe, He endowed it with order, with the laws to govern creation. Dharma is God's divine law prevailing on every level of existence, from the sustaining cosmic order to religious and moral laws which bind us in har­mony with that order. In relation to the soul, dharma is the mode of conduct most conducive to spiritual advancement, the right and righteous path. It is piety and ethical practice, duty and ob­ligation. When we follow dharma, we are in conformity with the Truth that inhere and instructs the universe, and we naturally abide in closeness to God. Ahdharma is opposition to divine law. Dharma is to the individual what its normal development is to a seed—the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature and des­tiny. The Tirukural (verses 31–32) reminds us, “Dharma yields Heaven's honor and Earth's wealth. What is there then that is more fruitful for a man? There is nothing more rewarding than dharma, nor anything more ruinous than its neglect.”
Hinduism’s Unique Value Today

There are good reasons for today’s readers, Hindu and non-Hindu alike, to study and understand the nature of Hinduism. The vast geographical and cultural expanses that separate continents, peoples and religions are becoming increasingly bridged as our world grows closer together. Evolution in communications, the Internet, business, travel and global migration are making formerly distant peoples neighbors, sometimes reluctantly.

It is crucial, if we are to get along in an increasingly pluralistic world, that Earth’s peoples learn about and appreciate the religions, cultures, viewpoints and concerns of their planetary neighbors. The Sanatana Dharma, with its sublime tolerance and belief in the all-pervasiveness of Divinity, has much to contribute to such close and harmonious proximity as in India. For thousands of years India has been a home to followers of virtually every major world religion, the exemplar of tolerance toward all paths. It has offered a refuge to Jews, Zoroastrians, Sufis, Buddhists, Christians and nonbelievers. Today over one hundred million Indians are Muslim, magnanimously accepted by their majority Hindu neighbors. Such religious amity has occurred out of respect for all genuine religious pursuits. The oft-quoted axiom that conveys this attitude is Ekam sat akshepak panthah, “Truth is one, paths are many.” What can be learned from the Hindu land that has given birth to Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism and has been a generous protector of all other religions? Indians original faith offers a rare look at a peaceful, rational and practical path for making sense of our world, for gaining personal spiritual insight, and as a potential blueprint for grounding our society in a more spiritually rewarding worldview.

Hinduism boasts teachings and practices reaching back 5,000 years and more, its history dwarfing most other religions. In fact, there is no specific time in history when it began. It is said to have started with time itself. To emphasize the relative ages of the major religions, and the antiquity of Hinduism, Raimon Panikkar, author of The Vedic Experience, cleverly reduced them to proportionate human years, with each 100 years of history representing one year of human life. Viewed this way, Sikhism, the youngest faith, is five years old. Islam, the only teenager, is fourteen. Christianity just turned twenty. Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism and Confucianism are twenty-five. Zoroastrianism is twenty-six. Shintoism is in its late twenties. Judaism is a mature thirty-seven. Hinduism, whose birthday remains unknown, is at least eighty years old—the white-bearded grandfather of living spirituality on this planet.

The followers of this extraordinary tradition often refer to it as Sanatana Dharma, the “Eternal Faith” or “Eternal Way of Conscience.” The holiest and most revered are the Hindu Scriptures; in fact, the largest body of sacred texts known to man. While Vedas, two massive compendia of shruti (that which is “heard”), revealed by God to illumined sages centuries and millennia ago. It is said the Vedas are general and the Agamas specific, as the Agamas speak directly to the details of worship, the yogas, mantra, tantra, temple building and such. The most widely known part of the Vedas is the Upanishads, which form the more general philosophical foundations of the faith. The array of secondary scripture, known as smriti (that which is “remembered”), is equally vast, the most prominent and widely celebrated of which are the Puranas (epic dramas and history—specifically the Ramayana and Mahabharata) and the Puranas (sacred history and mythology). The ever-popular Bhagavad Gita is a small portion of the Mahabharata. The Vedic arts and sciences, including ayurveda, astrology, music, dance, architecture, statecraft, domestic duty and law, are reflected in an assembly of texts known as Vedangas and Upavedas. Moreover, through the ages God-realized souls, sharing their experience, have poured forth volumes upon volumes that reveal the wonders of yoga and offer passionate hymns of devotion and illumination.

The creation of Hindu scripture continues to this day, as contemporary masters reiterate the timeless truths to guide souls on the path to Divinity. A clear sign that a person is a Hindu is that he embraces Hindu scripture as his guide and solace through life. While the Vedas are accepted by all denominations, each lineage defines which other scriptures are regarded as central and authoritative for its followers. Further, each devotee freely chooses and follows one or more spiritual guides within his tradition, be it a selection of Vedangas or the writings of his own guru. This free-flowing, diversified approach to scripture is unique to the Hindu faith. Scripture here, however, does not have the same place as it does in many other faiths. For genuine spiritual growth to take place, its wisdom must not be merely studied and preached, but lived and experienced as one’s own.
What is the nature of God in Hinduism? A question that defies a facile answer, for in the Hindu family of faiths each has its own perspective on the Supreme Being, and its own Deity or Deities. For this reason, Hinduism may, to an outsider, appear polytheistic—a term avidly employed as a criticism of choice, as if the idea of many Gods were primitive and false. For the Hindu the many Gods and Goddesses, who are invoked for protection, health and such mundane matters as a fruitful harvest, are not limited by gender, which is an aspect of physical bodies. This view of God as existing in and intimate with the life shining out of the eyes of humans and all creatures. This view of God as existing in and giving life to all things is called panentheism. It differs from the similar sounding view, pantheism, in which God is the natural universe and nothing more, immanent but not transcendent. It also differs from traditional theism in which God is above the world, apart and transcendent but not immanent. Panentheism is an all-encompassing concept. It says that God is both in the world and beyond it, both immanent and transcendent. That is the highest Hindu view.

Unlike purely monotheistic religions, however, Hinduism tends to be tolerant and welcoming of religious diversity, embracing a multiplicity of paths, not asking for conformity to just one. So it's impossible to say all Hindus believe this or that. Some Hindus give credence only to the formless Absolute Reality as God, others accept God as personal Lord and Creator. Some venerate God as male, others as female, while still others hold that God is not limited by gender, which is an aspect of physical bodies. This freedom, we could say, makes for the richest understanding and perception of God in all of Earth's existing faiths. Hindus accept all genuine spiritual paths—from pure monism, which concludes that "God alone exists," to theistic dualism, which asks, "When shall I know His Grace?" Each soul is free to find its own way, whether by devotion, austerity, meditation, yoga or selfless service.

The Nature of Self

The Vedas teach that the Divine resides in all beings. Our true, spiritual essence is, like God, eternal, blissful, good, wise and beautiful by nature. The joining of Brahman, or God, and the atman, or soul, is known as yoga, a Sanskrit word that shares the same root as the English word yoga. We spend so much of the early morning hours of July 24, 2004, at the Stafford Performing Arts Centre in Houston, a peacock wanders near His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, spiritual head of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), as he performs a rite of worship to bless his saffron-clad monks and thousands of devotees from around the world who came to witness the ten-day consecration of Houston's new Swaminarayan Temple. The growth of this large institution is representative of Hinduism's benevolent strength and global presence.

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we can discover an infinite inner treasure that easily rivals the worship and meditation, identifying with our true spiritual self. Hindu does not take death to be the end of existence, as does Every ethically good act results, sooner or later, in happiness and spiritual development; whereas ethically wrong actions end in suffering and rebirth. This is known as the wheel of samsara. Dur­ nation. The individual soul undergoes repeated cycles of birth, death and rebirth. This is described as karma, the soul’s destiny after liberation. This comes when earthly karma has been resolved, dharma has been well performed and God is fully realized. All souls are destined to achieve the highest states of enlightenment, perfect spiritual maturity and liberation, but not necessarily in this life. Hinduists understand this and do not delude themselves that this life is the last. While seeking and attaining profound realizations, they know there is much to be done in fulfilling life’s other three goals: dharma, righteousness; artha, wealth; and kama, pleasure.

In some Hindu traditions, the destiny of the soul after liberation is perceived as eternal and blissful enjoyment of God’s presence in the heavenly realms, a form of salvation given by God through grace, similar to most Abrahamic faiths. In others, the soul’s destiny is perfect union in God, a state of undifferentiated oneness likened to a river returning to its source, the sea, and becoming one with it—either immediately upon death, or following further evolution of the soul in the inner worlds. For still others, the ultimate state has no relationship with a Godhead, but is understood as undifferentiated oneness without form or being, a return or merger in the infinite All, somewhat akin to the Buddha’s nirvana.

Hinduism in Practice

Hinduisn’s three pillars are temple worship, scripture, and the guru-disciple tradition, around which all spiritual disciplines revolve. These include prayer, meditation and ritual worship in the home and temple, study of scripture, recitation of mantras, pilgrimage to holy places, austerity, selfless service, generous giving, the various yogas, and following good conduct. Festivals and singing of holy hymns are dynamic activities. Hindu temples, whether they be small village sanctuaries or towering citadels, are esteemed as God’s consecrated abode. In the temple, Hindus draw close to the Divine and find a refuge and Gods, who then come to bless and help the devotees. Personal worship during puja may be an expression of spontaneous celebration of important events in life, of adoration and thanksgiving, penance and confession, prayerful supplication and requests, or contemplation and the deepest levels of superconsciousness. The stone or metal Deity images enshrined in the temple are not mere symbols of the Gods; they are the form through which their love, power and blessings flow forth into this world. Devout Hindus adore the image as the Deity’s physical body, knowing that the God or Goddess is actually present and conscious in it during puja, aware of devotee’s thoughts and feelings and even sensing the priest’s gentle touch on the metal or stone. Hindus consider it most important to live near a temple, as it is the center of spiritual life. It is here, in God’s home, that the devotee nurtures his relationship with the Divine. Not wanting to stay away too long, he visits weekly and strives to attend each major festival, and to pilgrimage to a far-off temple annually for special blessings and a break from his daily concerns.

For the Hindu, the underlying emphasis of life is on making spiritual progress, while also pursuing one’s family and professional duties and goals. He is conscious that life is a precious, fleeting opportunity to advance, to bring about inner transformation, and he strives to remain ever conscious of this fact. For him work is worship, and his faith relates to every department of life. Hinduism’s spiritual core is its holy men and women—millions of sadhus, yogis, swamis, sannyasis, saints and satgurus who have dedicated their lives to full-time service, devotion and God
Realization, and to proclaiming the eternal truths of Sanatana Dharma. In day-to-day life, perhaps no facet of dharma is as crucial as the spiritual teacher, or satguru. These holy men and women are a living spiritual force for the faithful. They are the inspirers and interpreters, the personal guides who, knowing God themselves, can bring devotees into God consciousness. In all Hindu communities there are gurus who personally look after the spiritual practices and progress of devotees. Such preceptors are equally revered whether they are men or women. In few other religions are women allowed such access to the highest seats of reverence and respect.

Within the Hindu way is a deeply rooted desire to lead a productive, ethical life. Among the many virtues instilled in followers, Selfless service, seva, to God and humanity is widely pursued as a path to God consciousness. In day-to-day life, perhaps no facet of dharma is as crucial as the spiritual teacher, or satguru. Among the many virtues instilled in followers, seva, to God and humanity is widely pursued as a path to God consciousness.

Recognizing that the soul lives on and will inhabit a new body on Earth, perhaps one of this faith's most refreshing characteristics is that Hinduism is world-negating. This depiction was foisted by 19th-century Western missionary Orientalists as an false concept, commonly found in academic texts, that Hinduism is world-negating. This depiction was foisted by 19th-century Western missionary Orientalists as an.

In our magazine and books we have offered this dictionary-style definition of our faith: India's indigenous religious and cultural system, followed today by nearly one billion adherents, mostly in India, but with large populations in many other countries. Also called Sanatana Dharma, "eternal religion" and Vaidika Dharma, "religion of the Vedas." Hinduism is the world's most ancient religion and encompasses a broad spectrum of philosophies ranging from pluralistic theism to absolute monism. It is a family of myriad faiths with four primary denominations: Saivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Smartism. These four hold different beliefs and values; each is a complete and independent religion. Yet, they share a vast heritage of culture and belief—karma, dharma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity, temple worship, sacraments, manifold Dasties, the guru-shishya tradition and a reliance on the Vedas as scriptural authority. Great minds have tackled the thorny challenge of defining Sanatana Dharma, and we would like to share a few of their efforts here.

Definitions from Prominent Hindus

One continuous movement. Every type has its own nature which should be followed. We should do our duty in that state of life to which we happen to be called. Hinduism affirms that the means to any end is essentially the same. Hinduism is world-negating. This depiction was foisted by 19th-century Western missionary Orientalists as an false concept, commonly found in academic texts, that Hinduism is world-negating. This depiction was foisted by 19th-century Western missionary Orientalists as an false concept, commonly found in academic texts, that Hinduism is world-negating.

Perhaps one of this faith's most refreshing characteristics is that it encourages free and open thought. Scriptures and gurus encourage followers to inquire and investigate into the nature of truth, to explore worshipful, inner and meditative regimens to directly experience the Divine. This openness is at the root of Hinduism's famed tolerance of other cultures, religions and points of view, encapsulated in the adage, Ekam sat viprah bahu-dad savanti, meaning "Truth is one, the wise describe it in different ways." The Hindu is free to choose his path, his way of approaching the Divine, and he can change it in the course of his lifetime. There is no heresy or apostasy in Hinduism. This, coupled with Hinduism's natural inclusiveness, gives little room for fanaticism, fundamentalism or closed-mindedness anywhere within the framework of Hinduism. It has been aptly called a threshold, not an enclosure.

The law of karma tells us that the individual life is not a term, but a series. Heaven and Hell are higher and lower stages in the community. The emphasis is not on self-fulfillment and freedom but on the welfare of the community, as expressed in the phrase, Bahujau hitaya bahujau sukhaya, meaning "the welfare of the many and the happiness of the many."

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, renowned philosopher and president of India from 1952 to 1962, states in The Hindu View of Life: "Hinduism recognizes one Supreme Spirit, though different names are given to it. God is in the world, though not as the world. He does not merely intervene to create life or consciousness, but is working continuously. There is no dualism of the natural and the supernatural. Evil, error and ugliness are not ultimate. View is so utterly erroneous, no man is so absolutely evil as to deserve complete castigation. There is not a Hell, for there means there is a place where God is not, and there are sins which exceed His love. The law of karma tells us that the individual life is not a term, but a series. Heaven and Hell are higher and lower stages in the community. The emphasis is not on self-fulfillment and freedom but on the welfare of the community, as expressed in the phrase, Bahujau hitaya bahujau sukhaya, meaning "the welfare of the many and the happiness of the many.""

As a modern young Hindu family enjoy breakfast together in Delhi, the daughter asks Mom a pressing question about their faith.

1. A belief in the existence of God. 2) A belief in the existence of a soul separate from the body. 3) A belief in the existence of the limiting principle known as avidya or moksha. 4) A belief in the principle of matter—prakriti or maya. 5) A belief in the theory of karma and reincarnation. 6) A belief in the indispensable necessity of temple worship in religious life. 7) A belief in the indispensable need of religious scriptures, both internal and external, until one realizes God. 8) A belief in ahimsa, the greatest dharma or virtue. 9) A belief in moksha, or liberation, as the goal of human existence. 10) A belief in the indispensable necessity of temple worship in religious life. 11) A belief in the indispensable need of religious scriptures, both internal and external, until one realizes God. 12) A belief in the existence of God.

Vedanta, one, supreme, all-powerful God. He is the Creator, has a divine form, is immanent, transcendent and the giver of moksha. 2) Austerely, manifestation of God on Earth: God Himself incarnates on Earth in various forms to revive dharma and grant liberation. 3) Karma, law of action: the soul reaps fruits, good or bad, according to its past and present actions, which are experienced either in this life or future lives. 4) Purusha, the mortal soul is continuously born and reborn in one of the 104,000 species until it attains liberation. 5) Moksha, ultimate liberation: the goal of human life. It is the liberation of the soul from the cycle of births and deaths to remain eternally in the service of God. 6) Guru-vidya sambandha, master-disciple relationship: guidance and grace of a spiritually perfect master, revered as the embodiment of God, is essential for an aspirant seeking liberation. 7) Dharma, that which sustains the universe: an all-encompassing term representing divine law, law of being, path of righteousness, religion, duty, responsibility, virtue, justice, goodness and truth. 8) Veda, scriptures: spiritual authority of the Vedas: all Hindu faiths are based on the teachings of the Vedas. 9) Muirti-puja, sacred image worship: consecrated images represent the presence of God which is worshipped. The sacred image is a medium to help devotees offer their devotion to God.

Sri Swami Vivekananda, speaking in America, proclaimed: “All Vedantaists believe in God. Vedantaists also believe the Vedas to be the revealed word of God—an expression of the knowledge of God—and as God is eternal, so are the Vedas eternal. Another common ground of belief is that of creation in cycles, that the whole of creation appears and disappears. They postulate the existence of a material, which they call akasha, which is something like the ether of the scientists, and a power which they call prana.”

Sri Jayendra Saraswati, 69th Shankaracharya of the Kamakoti Pashram, Kanchipuram, defines in his writings the basic features of Hinduism as follows. 1) The concept of idol worship and the worship of God in His nirguna as well as saguna form. 2) The wearing of sacred marks on the forehead. 3) Belief in the theory of past and future births in accordance with the theory of karma. 4) Cremation of ordinary men and burial of great men. 5) Acceptance by all systems of Hindu philosophy of the belief in a path of righteousness, religion, duty, responsibility, virtue, justice, goodness and truth. 6) Acceptance of the great world rhythm—vast periods of creation, maintenance and dissolution follow each other in endless succession—by all six systems of Hindu philosophy. 7) Acceptance by all systems of Hindu philosophy of the belief in endless rebirth and pre-existence. 8) Recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are many. 9) Realization of the truth that numbers of Gods to be worshipped may be large, yet there being Hindus who do not believe in the worshiping of idols. 10) Unlike other religions, or religious creeds, Hindus who do not believe in the worshiping of idols.

The Vishva Hindu Parishad declared its definition in a Memorandum of Association, Rules and Regulations in 1966: “Hindu means a person believing in, following or respecting the eternal values of life, ethical and spiritual, which have sprung up in Bharatkhand [India] and includes anyone calling himself a Hindu.”

The Indian Supreme Court, in 1966, formalized a judicial definition of Hindu beliefs to legally distinguish Hindu denotations from other religions in India. This list was affirmed by the Court as recently as 1995 in judging cases regarding religious identity. 1) Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence as the highest authority in religious and philosophic matters and acceptance with reverence of Vedas by Hindu thinkers and philosophers as the sole foundation of Hindu philosophy. 2) Spirit of tolerance and willingness to understand and appreciate the opponent's point of view based on the realization that truth is many-sided. 3) Acceptance of great world rhythm—vast periods of creation, maintenance and dissolution follow each other in endless succession—by all six systems of Hindu philosophy. 4) Acceptance by all systems of Hindu philosophy of the belief in rebirth and pre-existence. 5) Recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are many. 6) Realization of the truth that numbers of Gods to be worshipped may be large, yet there being Hindus who do not believe in the worshiping of idols. 7) Unlike other religions, or religious creeds, Hindus who do not believe in the worshiping of idols.