

## HINDUISM---ITS ESSENTIAL FEATURES IN BRIEF

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Hinduism is negatively and stereotypically portrayed in the West with an eye for sensationalism. Described in this short article are essential features of Hinduism. The contents may be used to introduce Hinduism to Western audiences.

### Introduction

Hinduism is among the world's oldest living traditions. Hinduism is also called *Sanatan Dharma*—the Eternal Path. The Hindu tradition goes back 5,000 years, perhaps even longer. Hymns composed in ancient times are recited even today. Example:

<i>Asato Ma Sad gamaya,</i>	Lead me from the Unreal to the Real
<i>Tamaso Ma Jyotir gamaya</i>	From Darkness to Light
<i>Mritor Ma Amritam gamaya</i>	From Death to Immortality
<i>OM Shanti, Shanti, Shantih</i>	OM, Peace, Peace, Peace

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam. The numbers below are approximate, and change over time.

Christianity:	2.0 billion (Catholics 57%, Protestants 29%, E. Orthodox 14%)
Muslims:	1.5 billion (Sunni 80-90%; Shia 10-20%)
Hindus:	800 million
Buddhists:	500 million
Jews:	20 million

Hinduism survived 700 years of Islamic and British imperial rule. Islamic rulers (1201-1707) destroyed numerous Hindu and Buddhist temples and killed millions. The British (1757-1947) debunked Hindu religion as pagan and primitive. The long colonial rule also impacted the land economically. Put simply, when India was subjugated by Islam, she was the richest country in the world. When the British left in 1947, she was among the poorest. The Italian traveler Marco Polo visited southern India during his return voyage from China to Venice (Italy), about 1290 CE. He wrote: "India is the richest and most splendid province in the world . . . Workshops make cotton and leather goods, shiploads of which go west every year."

A revival in Hinduism occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo spearheaded this revival. In spite of the negative portrayals of Hinduism in the media and Western textbooks, Hindu spirituality is in resurgence and has a global reach. The New Thought or New Age churches, described at the end, derive many of their teachings from Hinduism, although unacknowledged. A longer treatment of this topic is titled: "The East in the West—the New Thought Movement," at: [www.uwf.edu/lgoel](http://www.uwf.edu/lgoel).

## SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS

### GOD

Hindus worship God as One Reality, One Consciousness.

Behind the diversity of existence, there is Unity; behind individual souls, there is the Self. All beings are unified in that One Self. The ultimate Reality is called Brahman (the One who grows and expands multitudously).

The ancient teachers (the Rishis and Gurus) taught that the One Reality and Consciousness is beyond number, gender and definitions. They taught that this reality is seen in the cave of one's heart, and they described it as *Sat, Chit, Ananda*. Your own inner being, then, is an authentic path to enlightenment.

**Sat:** Sat is absolute, primal existence. The One Existence or Reality is beyond time and space as a supreme transcendence. What it manifests, whether the macrocosm or the microcosm, is necessarily within its own being, much as an object floats in ethereal space. The One Reality is self-existent without a cause. It just is.

**Chit:** The One Reality is fully Conscious Power. It is not inert or dead matter. It possesses all knowledge about the past, present and future. It is the source of all knowledge. It is the eye of the eye and the ear of the ear. The One Consciousness is not a passive reality. It is accompanied with Power. It is *Chit-Shakti*.

**Ananda (Bliss):** The One Reality lacks nothing; it contains all and encompasses everything. As it lacks nothing and possesses all, its nature is one of delight. The state of bliss is an integral part of the One Reality.

The One Reality and One Consciousness may be called God.

### CREATION

God is complete in Himself/Herself. He/she lacks nothing. God is not compelled to create. God creates for joy. Creation is an act of *Ananda*, joy or bliss. God fulfills himself in his creation, just as an artist fulfills himself in his creative work.

As God contains all, the creation is more accurately described as a manifestation. The creation is His *Lila*, a play. But we should not conclude that it is whimsical. There is a purpose in the cosmos which is both earnest and joyful.

God dwells in each article of his creation. He is in us, and we are in Him. Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita that the universe is strung around his neck like pearls on a string.

By me is this entire universe pervaded. All things are in Me, and I in them.

Know that as the mighty wind blowing everywhere rests in the sky,  
all created beings rest in Me. I am the Father, the Mother, the Supporter and the  
Grandsire of the universe. (Bhagavad Gita, 9:4, 6, 17)

God is not diminished by his creation. He is full and complete before creation and full and  
complete after creation. A Sanskrit verse says:

*Om Purnamadah Purnamidam  
Purnat purnam udacyate  
Purnasya purnamadaya  
Purnameva vasisyate*

Om. That (referring to God) is complete.  
This (referring to Creation) is complete.  
From the complete springs forth the  
complete. When the complete is taken from  
the complete, what remains is still complete.

**Is Creation Accidental?** Material scientists would have us believe that creation is an accident  
or the work of chance. Hinduism teaches that creation is the work of a Mighty hand. It is not a  
machine that somehow got started without purpose or goal. Creation is not an illusion or Maya.  
It is not a dream. It carries in itself the Word of God. Writes, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950):

This world was not made with random bricks of chance  
A blind god is not destiny's architect,  
A conscious power has drawn the plan of life,  
There is meaning in each curve and line.

Jesus made a similar statement: "Your very hair are numbered."

## ONENESS

A fundamental Hindu principle is one of Unity of all created beings. Behind diversity, there is  
unity. Behind individual souls, there is the Self, one with the Divine.

Not only human life but all created life including animal life is a unity. We spring from one  
source. Differences and divisions are unreal. The belief that we originate from one common  
source has ethical implications: it leads to a kinder and a gentler world.

By its very nature, Hinduism is not a religion of a chosen people or an appointed community. It  
rejects the approach which divides humanity into believers and non-believers, kafirs and  
heathens. It regards such divisions as spiritually untenable. It expresses man's seeking for truth;  
therefore, it belongs to all.

**Vegetarianism.** Hinduism's reach is not limited to humanity; its compassion reaches out to all,  
human and animal. Modern science perceives man as having evolved from animals. Hinduism  
sees God and the power and presence of God reflected in animals. All life is manifested from  
one source, and hence all life is sacred. Widespread vegetarianism among Hindus is a practical  
expression of this belief in the oneness of all life. Vegetarianism grows from ethical and moral  
considerations.

**NO ROOM FOR DEVIL.** God is *Ekam Sat, Advityam*--- One Truth, without a Second. There is no room for the existence of Devil or Satan. There is only one power and one presence in the universe, God the Omnipotent.

Hinduism teaches *Advaita*, non-dualism. It says God alone is. This teaching is different from the teaching of “only one god” (Christianity and Islam). The concept of “god alone” is different from the concept of “the only one god.”

Christian and Islamic thought admits of a power co-equal with God, the Devil or Satan. The Satan is believed to be the trickster and a tempter; he is ever ready to delude the Christian flock.

But if God is all powerful, it is not rational to posit a malevolent power co-equal with God. The Abrahamic religions claim that God is both all good and all powerful. But this cannot be. If God allows evil, then He is not all good. On the other hand, if God cannot overcome evil, then He is not all powerful.

## **EVOLUTION**

Hinduism accepts the notion of evolution. Existence is not a finished product. God did not create the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Existence is a Truth of things unfolding by a gradual process of evolution. The Truth of Existence is its Becoming.

Evolution is not the evolution of matter but of consciousness. Consciousness is the fundamental thing. Consciousness is the life force, the energy, the motion that creates everything in the universe, from the microcosm (the smallest) to the macrocosm (the largest). The vegetable kingdom of trees and plants exhibits a certain degree of consciousness. Consciousness evolves into life in the animal. The mental plane in man is the highest expression of consciousness. But evolution does not end with Mind. There is the ‘Higher Mind.’ In deep contemplation, Rishis (seers) reach the higher mind.

**Man.** Hinduism has the noblest, the most sublime conception of man. Man has a Divine origin. Man is invested with a soul, called the Atman in Sanskrit. Atman is a spark of the Divine, it is a ray of the all-bright Sun; it is a drop from the celestial ocean. There is no such thing as death for the soul. Being a spark of the divine, the soul is immortal. That which is eternal cannot cease to be. When we die, it is the body that dies, not the soul.

In this view, man has a middle ranking, above the animals but below the gods. Man is a transitional being. He is not a finished product. He is destined to grow into a more complete being, just as a seed is destined to grow into a mighty tree.

In the English language the term “man” is related to “manual,” meaning one’s ability to work with hands. In Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, man is called “manush,” which means “to think.” Man is thus a thinking animal. Man in Sanskrit is also called “Purusha,” a witness soul. The Hindu greeting “Namaste” acknowledges divinity in each other. Sri Aurobindo writes in *Savitri*, Canto 4:

A deathbound littleness is not all we are:  
Immortal our forgotten vastnesses  
Await discovery in our summit selves;  
Unmeasured breadths and depths of being are ours.

**Faith.** Hinduism teaches that man is the architect of his own life. Man is shaped according to his Faith, his deepest aspirations, and his yearning. Man becomes what he thinks, desires, and aspires to. In this view, the Spirit exists prior to Matter. If you wish to change your life, you have first to change your consciousness. Sri Aurobindo:

The erring race of human beings dreams always of perfecting their environment by the machinery of government and society; but it is only by the perfection of the soul within that the outer environment can be perfected. What thou art within, that outside thee thou shall enjoy; no machinery can rescue thee from the law of thy being.

On this path there is no discontinuity, no break. There is no loss of effort. Even a little bit of faith protects a man from great fear (Bhagavad Gita, 2:40).

**Ignorance.** Even though man is made in the image of God, this knowledge is veiled. Man forgets his Divine origin. This is *Maya*, illusion. In Hinduism, the cardinal problem of humanity is Ignorance, with a capital 'I'. Once I heard a Unity Church minister say: "Human beings are angels with amnesia." This is an apt statement. Meditation and contemplation help remove one's state of ignorance. It is a personal effort. The Guru or Teacher can show the way. Several methods or Yogas are developed for self-discovery.

The Hindu prays for light of knowledge: Lead me from the Unreal to the Real; lead me from Darkness to Light.

In Christianity, man's problem is Sin. Sin consists in disobedience to God's commandments. On account of the sin of disobedience, man is consigned to Hell in eternity. Hence man needs a Savior. The aim of yoga is self-realization—to make real the Self.

## **REBIRTH AND KARMA**

The central fact in nature is evolution of consciousness: from matter to life, from life to mind, and from mind to Higher mind. If evolution of consciousness is granted as a central fact, then rebirth is a necessity. The soul grows through successive births. Perfection is not achieved in the course of a single life-time.

Rebirth or re-incarnation is accepted by a large majority of the human race. This includes people in India, China, Japan, and countries of Southeast Asia (Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, parts of Indonesia). Pre-Christian Celtic people of Europe believed in re-incarnation.

**Karma.** Karma is the theory of Divine or cosmic justice. Good deeds produce good Karma, and bad deeds produce bad Karma. One's present station in life is the result of Karma earned in

previous life or lives. Karma explains high and low birth. It offers a reasonable explanation for misfortune. It impels people to do well. Doing well has instrumental value.

Why don't we remember our past lives? What is reborn is the soul, not the outer personality. Memory is a function of the outer personality. The soul carries with it the essence of the life's experience as it moves to a new birth.

**Hindu Teachers.** The Hindu teacher is a seer, a Rishi, the person who sees, the one who is a witness to the Truth. The teacher is also called a Guru—one who removes the weight of darkness. The representative figure of Hinduism is not the missionary or the martyr.

Only those who are good, and are men of knowledge and wisdom are regarded as saints. The characteristic preaching mode of a Hindu teacher (this is true of Buddhist teachers also) is a seated position, in calmness and serenity. He does not prance on the stage. He is not a sales person. He does not use threats of life in Hell.

**Hindu Tolerance.** By its very nature Hinduism is pluralistic and tolerant of diversity. Hinduism is not organized as a national church. It has no Pope or Ayatollah who exercises supreme religious authority. Hinduism is decentralized and is not hierarchical.

The decentralization is both a curse and a blessing. Decentralization led to extreme diversity and variety. On the other hand, Hinduism survived the Muslim onslaught of India (1201-1707) because it was decentralized. Hinduism could not be eliminated by killing its head. The extreme variety and decentralization is also a curse. Hinduism cannot successfully meet the challenge of proselitizing religions: Christianity and Islam.

Hinduism is not dogmatic. It preaches search for the Truth, not a particular belief system. Gautam Buddha was a critic of certain Hindu ritual practices of his times. He was not persecuted. He lived to the ripe age of 80. The Sikh Founder Guru Nanak and Jain Founder Lord Mahavira also lived full lives. Pluralism and tolerance of diversity are built into Hindu theology.

*Ekam Sat, Viprah bahuda vadanti* –Truth is One; Sages call it by various names.

Small communities of Christians and Jews have lived in India for some 2,000 years. Christianity entered India with Thomas Cananeus of Syria in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Judaism came to India in the first century, when the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in 70 A.D. and expelled the Jews. Jews have never been persecuted or discriminated against in India. Dr. Nathan Katz describes three Jewish communities that have lived and prospered in India for centuries. In his book, *Who Are the Jews of India?* (University of California Press, 2000), he writes at page 4:

“The Indian chapter is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora. . . Indian Jews lived as all Jews should have been allowed to live: free, proud, observant, creative and prosperous, self-realized, full contributors to the host community.”

Parsis (or Parsees) from Iran (Persia) entered India in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries to flee Islamic conquest. The word Parsi means Persian. The Parsi community is derived from the ancient

Zoroastrian religion. The Parsis are among the richest persons in India, settled mostly in the city of Bombay, now Mumbai. For example, the Parsi Tata family controls a huge industrial empire. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the powerful Prime Minister of India, was married to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsi (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi).

## **Hinduism and Other Earth-Based Traditions**

Hinduism has much in common with other earth based traditions such as Native Americans, Taoists, Pythagoreans, Egyptians, Shintoists, and pre-Christian European Celts. It sees Divinity residing in Nature, on the hill tops, in forests and in the sacred rivers. Places of pilgrimage are often on mountain tops (Kedarnath, Badrinath), ocean fronts (Rameshwaram), forests (Vrindaban), and rivers (Ganges, Yamuna).

The native and earth-based traditions have mostly disappeared. Examples of lost civilizations include: the European Celts, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Persian Zoroastrians and the Native Americans. The Communists in China are engaged now in destroying Buddhism in Tibet and Taoism within the Chinese mainland.

Hinduism is distinguished by the fact that it survived, although wounded.

## **The “New Thought” Movement**

Hinduism is in resurgence today. Hindu spiritual teachings have a global reach. The New Thought or New Age churches in the West derive part of their theology from “Eastern Religions”, especially from Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. New Thought churches include: Unity, Unitarian Universalist Church, Divine Science, Temple of the Universe, and several others. Meditation and quiet contemplation are now commonly incorporated in their religious services.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau spearheaded the ‘Transcendentalist’ movement in the US in 1830s and 1840s. This impacted the so-called “New Thought” movement in the United States. Many of their ideas were derived from Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Emerson wrote:

In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Gita, and the Vishnu Purana. .

I owed a magnificent day to the Bhagavat-Gita. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.

Thoreau:

In the morning I bathe my Intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad-gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.

I have attended Unity as well as Unitarian Sunday services over the years. Once I served on Unity's Board of Directors. Unity's truth statements include:

1. God is absolute good, everywhere present.
2. Every human being has a spark of divinity within, the Christ Spirit within. Our essence is of God, and therefore human beings are inherently good.
3. As human beings we create our experiences by the activity of our thoughts. Everything that shows up in our lives has its beginning in thought.
4. Prayer and meditation is the best way we can heighten our connection with God.
5. Knowing and understanding these principles is not enough—we must also live the truth that we know.

The close association between Hindu spiritual teachings and Unity principles is quite evident. Vegetarianism has also gained ground in the West. This is in keeping with Hindu veneration for all life.

Hinduism or Sanatan Dharma is not a relic of the past. The Vedic teachings have relevance for modern age.

***Satyam eva Jayate. Truth verily wins.***

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Additional Reading:

Parmahansa Yogananda, *The Life of a Yogi*.

Ram Swarup, *On Hinduism: Reviews and Reflections*, New Delhi: Voice of India, 2000.

Voice of India and Voice of Dharma books are freely available at:

<http://voiceofdharma.org/books/>.