



Hindu Dharma

A Handbook for Parents and Teachers

Kishin J. Kripalani, PhD

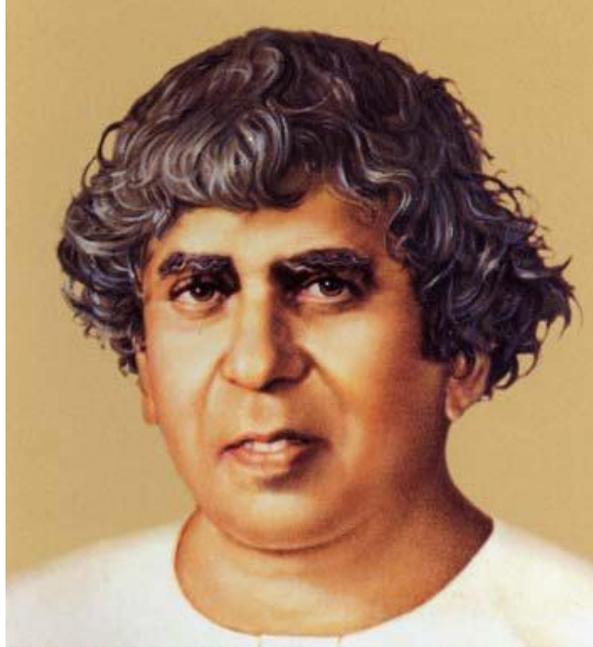
*Foreword by
Swami Tadatananda*

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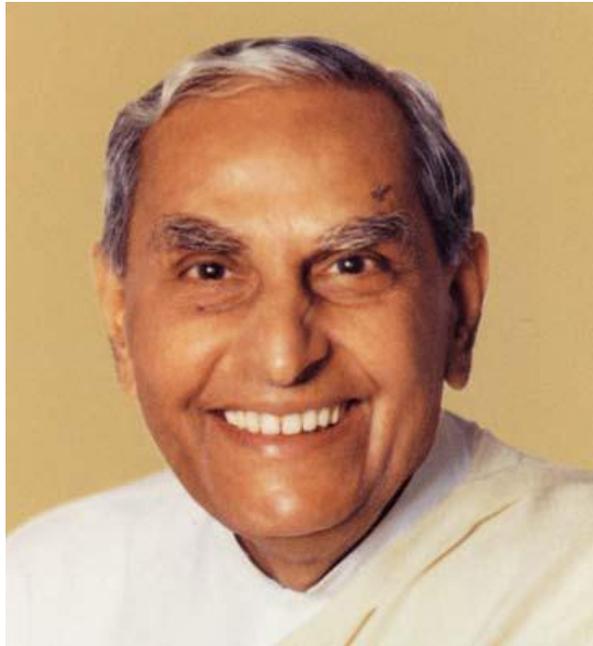
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About the Author



Kishin Kripalani is a dedicated teacher and a lifelong student of Hindu Dharma. Born in 1937, Kishin was raised first in Karachi and then Mumbai following partition of India in 1947.

Kishin received his graduate and postgraduate degrees from the University of Bombay and a PhD from the University of California. Kishin pursued a career of over 30 years in scientific research in the US pharmaceutical industry making significant contributions to the scientific literature in his field and to the development of important new drugs.

While building a life with his wife and two daughters in New Jersey, Kishin expanded his knowledge of Hindu religion and became increasingly active in Indian religious and cultural activities in the U.S.

As Indians rose in prominence and numbers in the West, Kishin saw an increasing need for educational materials that concisely described Hindu Religion, and that provided easy-to-understand explanations of the religion's complex philosophies. It is with this goal in mind, that Kishin wrote this booklet and started teaching Hindu Religion classes.

Kishin is passionate about passing on the rich Hindu heritage to the youth of Indian origin. He is optimistic that future generations of Indian-Americans will develop a deeper attachment to their tradition. "By helping our children identify with their roots, we can make them proud of being Hindus".

Acknowledgment

I am grateful to my Guru, Swami Tadatmananda, from whom I have learned what I humbly present in this handbook. I express my thanks to Swamiji also for his personal guidance and support throughout the many years I have known him.

I express my gratitude to our beloved Dada (Dada J.P. Vaswani) for holding me in his prayers to continue my work with the Sadhu Vaswani Gurukul.

I wish to thank my wife Shanti, who encouraged me to write this handbook and also patiently edited the manuscript.

Kishin J. Kripalani, PhD

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Foreword

Countless generations of Hindus born in India have been blessed to live in a land rich with religious and spiritual practices, culture, teachings and traditions. Temples, ashrams and religious institutions dot the landscape from Kanya Kumari to the Himalayas. Religious festivals are celebrated with fervor in every city, town and village. Wise grandfathers, pious aunties, learned elders and gurus help pass this spiritual wealth to later generations.

Hindus today have dispersed to many countries and every continent. They all live at a time when religious and spiritual traditions have lost some of their importance in this post-modern world. And for those living outside of India, there are fewer resources and less support for the practice of these precious, sacred traditions.

For these reasons, modern Hindus living in the U.S. and elsewhere have a need for suitable educational materials and resources to support their practice and propagation of Hinduism. This handbook, written by my friend and longtime student, Kishin Kripalani, helps fill this need quite admirably.

Kishin has done a wonderful job of distilling the fundamentals of Hindu dharma and presenting them in a clear, concise manner. This handbook will be an invaluable resource for parents to teach their children and for community members to teach the coming generations.

I commend Kishin for his fine efforts in service of the Hindu community and highly recommend the use of this handbook.

With prayers and best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Swami Tadatananda". The signature is written in a fluid, cursive style with a small "Om" symbol at the beginning.

Swami Tadatananda
Arsha Bodha Center
Somerset, NJ

December 22, 2009

Kishin Kripalani

What is Hindu Religion?

Understandably, Hindu religion is too vast a subject to be properly answered in this introductory text. Nevertheless, it is important to have some key points in mind to be able to answer this question which is invariably asked in many instances, e.g., by children and youth of Indian origin or as a casual inquiry by people of other religions.

The following few significant features highlight the major precepts of Hindu religion that can be mentioned as a starting point.

1. Hindu religion is based on the teachings of the ancient scriptures known as the Vedas. There are four Vedas, namely: Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva.
2. According to Hindu religion, God is one all pervasive Supreme Being, manifest as creation and its intelligence, as well as un-manifest reality. His divinity is present in one and all.
3. Core concepts of Hindu religion include:
 - Dharma: Righteousness
 - Karma: The law of cause and effect: good actions incur good results (punya karma) and unrighteous actions incur undesirable results (papa karma).
 - Reincarnation: The belief that after a person dies, that person's soul is reborn in a new body.
 - *Moksha* (liberation); Freedom from suffering in this life as a result of discovering one's true nature. Attaining moksha frees a person from the cycle of rebirth
4. Hindu religion recognizes several spiritual practices for one's spiritual growth; four major practices are: karma yoga, *bhakti* yoga, *jnana* yoga, and *dhyana* yoga (meditation).

See sections on, "Hindu Scriptures", "Core Concepts" and "Other Key Aspects of Hindu Religion" for elaboration of these four key points.

History and Origin

Hindu religion is a dynamic religion that has continually evolved over time in keeping with social and cultural changes. It has undergone reformist movements and has assimilated wisdom of many saints and sages over time to maintain its relevance to devotees. History has shown that religions and cultures that remain static, e.g., Greek, Mayan, Egyptian, etc. become extinct.

History of Hindu religion is presented as segments of significant time periods over almost 5000 years.

The Vedic Period (about 2500-500 BCE)

The truths of Hindu Dharma were revealed to the ancient *rishis* in India, approximately between 2500 to 500 BCE. *Rishis* were enlightened souls who collectively discovered the existent truths through their spiritual insights. Thus, unlike other religions there is no single founder or a specific beginning date for Hindu religion. The truths of Hindu religion are beginning-less (*anadi*) and hence Hindu religion is also known as *Sanatana* Dharma, i.e., eternal religion. The collective knowledge of the *rishis* is compiled as the four Vedas: Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva. Vedas are the foundation and the authoritative scriptures of Hindu Dharma.

Although Vedas describe many spiritual practices, e.g., prayer, meditation, and self inquiry to understand one's true nature, the main form of religious practice was worshipping God as various deities (*devatas*), e.g., Agni, Vayu, Indra, Surya, which represent natural forces, namely, fire, wind, rains, and Sun. The worship was performed as a fire ritual known as *yajnya* (or *havan*), in which various offerings (ghee, etc) were made into the fire to offer prayers to any one of the *devatas*.

Epic and *Puranic* Period (about 500 BCE-800 CE)

Performing *yajnyas* and *havans* was becoming more and more elaborate, to the point where average people could no longer afford to perform them. The Brahmin class became very powerful and started to abuse the caste system. Many felt religiously excluded and yet yearned for some way to worship God. In this environment, the famous Hindu epics became available; Ramayana first, then Mahabharata, followed by *Puranas*, over next few centuries. People listened to the stories from these scriptures with devotion and found this a simple way to relate to God. The story-telling and listening, known as *katha*, became a popular religious practice that continues to date. The stories of Rama, Krishna, and *puranic devatas* and *devis* (Brahma, Visnu, Shiva, Ganasha, Lakshmi, etc) served as teaching tools to convey the morals and the values of Hindu Dharma.

Buddhist Period (about 500 BCE-800 CE)

Buddha, born in India in the 5th century, founded the new religion, Buddhism. Buddha renounced the Vedas, and the authority of Brahmins, shifted the focus from rituals to *tapasya* (austerity), and meditation, but otherwise retained many of the Hindu beliefs. Adhering to the principle of ahimsa (non-injury) was a key principle for living a religious life.

Buddhism gained in popularity and became a dominant religion in India for more than a thousand years. Hindu religion, in keeping with its dynamism, welcomed and adopted many Buddhist reforms, e.g., discontinuation of ritualistic animal sacrifice, respect for all castes, etc. In a manner of speaking, Hinduism embraced Buddhism so tightly that it "hugged Buddhism to death"! Today, Buddhism is a minor religion in India.

Period of knowledge: (about 800-1300 CE)

This period saw a revival of Hindu religion through the influence of some great Hindu teachers (*acharyas*).

With the rise of Buddhism, Hindu religion had become fragmented. Hundreds of Hindu *mathas* (institutions) had evolved with different ideologies. Around this time, a great scholar and teacher was born who is considered to be the most important figure responsible for reviving the Hindu religion. He was Shankaracharya (788-820 CE), also reverently called Adi Shankara, i.e., the first Shankara in his lineage. Shankaracharya, through his brilliant discourses on Vedantic philosophy and successful debates with heads of disjointed institutes gave new life and vigor to the Hindu religion at a time when it was in danger of fading away. Many other influential teachers followed Shankara, e.g., Ramanuja (11th Century) and Madhavacharya (13th Century). Thus, during this period, Hindu religion once again underwent a transition from story-telling and Buddhist influence, to the spiritual pursuit of knowledge, meant to discover one's true nature. The knowledge emphasized during this period is the subject of the Upanishads which are the end portion of Vedas, and are also known as Vedanta (discussed later).

Period of *Bhakti* Movement (about 1400 CE to present)

Although expression of *bhakti* (loving devotion to God) became quite popular as *katha* in the epic and the *puranic* period, a powerful wave of *bhakti* movement swept across India starting from 14th and 15th Century, and its influence continues up to the present. The *bhakti* movement was spearheaded by the 15th century saints such as Vallabhacharya and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It continued with well-known saints that followed, such as Meera Bai, Tulasidas, Tukaram, and many others. *Bhakti* movement shifted the emphasis from the complexity of Vedantic philosophy to simple expression of intense devotional love for God, particularly as Lord Krishna or Rama.

Contemporary Period

During the period of the foreign invasions and subsequent occupations by the Muslim and the British rulers which lasted for almost a thousand years until the 20th Century, the Hindu religion came under enormous pressure and suffered setbacks particularly in Northern India. However, it once again came to life in the late 19th Century, when there were many outstanding personalities (e.g., Rama Krishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Raman Maharishi, Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranth Tagore, etc) who rejuvenated the spirit and the practice of Hindu religion. The British and European influence from 17th Century onwards had made a strong negative impact on Indian religious and cultural values. Everything Western enjoyed an exalted status, especially among the British-educated elitists. The eminent leaders, mentioned above, were religious and social reformists who helped a resurgence of the Hindu awareness and values that had been blunted by the Western influence.

Today, Hindu religion is practiced in every way that has come down to us through the millennia. One may be listening to *katha*, participating in *kirtan*, doing *puja* in a temple, practicing yoga, or pursuing Vedanta—all of them are practicing the same religion. Hindu religion may seem complex for this reason, but with a historical perspective, one can appreciate that in fact it is this complexity that makes Hindu religion rich and relevant to people with a variety of different mental and emotional make-up.

Hindu Scriptures

Hindu scriptures are generally classified as *sruti* and *smriti* literature. *Sruti* means that which is heard and *smriti* means that which is remembered. *Sruti* scriptures are mainly the four Vedas (see below) which comprise the knowledge revealed to the *rishis*. *Smriti* scriptures are *itihasa* and *puranas*. *Itihasa* includes the two great Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. There are 18 major *puranas* and 18 minor *puranas*. These scriptures are briefly described below. There are many other ancient scriptures (e.g., *agama*, *upaveda*, *vedanga*) and sacred texts that deal with a variety of subjects such as medicine (Ayurveda), astrology (*jyotish vidya*), weaponry and warfare (*dhanurvedya*), music (*gandharva vidya*), wealth and economics (*artha vidya*); discussion of these scriptures is beyond the scope of this introductory text.

Vedas

The knowledge revealed to the ancient *rishis* of India forms the basis of the Vedas, which are the foundation of the Hindu religion. The word Veda means knowledge and it is derived from the Sanskrit root word, *vid* meaning “to know”.

The Vedic knowledge of the *rishis* was accumulated over almost 2000 years from approximately 2500 BCE to 500 BCE. Around 500 BCE, sage Vyasa compiled this accumulated knowledge into four Vedas, namely, Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. These Vedas were then passed on by oral tradition from generation to generation over almost 3000 years until they were written down, on palm leaves about 1000 years back. To make the memorization easy, the Vedas were written in a poetry form as *shlokas*. There were families whose responsibility it was to memorize a certain number of Vedas, and that tradition gave rise to family names like Dwivedi, Trivedi, and Chaturvedi, meaning families responsible for two, three, or four Vedas, respectively.

Each Veda is roughly divided into four sections as follows:

1. *Samhita*: *Samhita* are hymns in form of mantras. These hymns are prayers to Vedic gods, written as lofty poems with deep meanings and are evidence to the profound wisdom of the *rishis*, who lived as far back as 4000 years back!
2. *Brahmana*: Ritual instructions
3. *Aranyaka*; Literally, *aranyaka* means forest; these are manuals for meditation techniques, and interpretations of mantras and rituals from the first two sections.
4. Upanishads: In the end portions of Vedas are small texts known as Upanishads, which deal with the highest spiritual teachings of the Hindu religion. The

knowledge of the Upanishads is commonly called Vedanta, which is elaborated in a later section titled “Hindu Philosophy.”

Briefly, Vedas guide us to live a goal-oriented life in accordance with dharma (righteousness), to discover our true nature, and reach life’s ultimate goal of attaining *moksha*, i.e., liberation from suffering in this life.

Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas

The Ramayana and The Mahabharata are recognized as marvelous pieces of literature through out the world. Mahabharata is the world’s longest poem with almost 100,000 verses, followed by Ramayana, the second largest poem, with 24,000 verses! The question often arises whether these are true stories in a historic sense. A reasonable answer is “yes” they are based on simple historic events from which the stories evolved but, over generations, and over a long period of time, there have been many embellishments by many devoted scholarly saints and pundits. These additions have become a part of Ramayana and Mahabharata; they do not diminish the scriptural values of the stories in any way. In fact, they enhance their value by making them more engaging by revealing the inner message and morals in an interesting way, making learning easier. On the other hand, it would be unreasonable to believe that everything in the stories is historical. In fact such claims would raise questions in modern times about the credibility of the sacred scriptures and cause them to be discarded.

Puranas, e.g., Bhagavata Purana, in contrast, are mythological stories and are for the most part not based on any historical events. Stories, such as the battle between Lord Shiva and the child Ganesha, are fictional. Nevertheless, fictional stories can convey very profound truths in a powerful way and help readers understand something about life. Accordingly, stories in *puranas* are meant to teach religious, spiritual, and ethical values.

Bhagavad Gita

Bhagavad Gita is doubtless the most sacred and most popular scripture to Hindus. Bhagavad Gita literally means Song of the Lord. It captures the essence of the Vedas and its teachings guide us to attain the ultimate spiritual goals as we journey along the path of day to day life.

Bhagavad Gita is a small section, consisting of 700 verses in the Mahabharata, which itself is about 100 thousand verses. The profound teachings of Bhagavad Gita have been an inspiration to many of the greatest minds of the Western world, including scientists and philosophers such as Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, and many others

Bhagavad Gita consists of a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Prince Arjuna on the great battlefield of Krukshetra. Arjuna is overcome with grief when he sees in the opposing army many of his respected elders, cousins, and teachers. Arjuna wants to renounce the world rather than fight. Lord Krishna persuades him to fight because as a

prince warrior, it is his moral duty to fight injustice and establish dharma (righteousness) Lord Krishna emphasizes that a person must do his/her own duty whatever that may be.

Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that even though many on the battlefields are going to die, understand that one who is born must die and, those who die will be reborn. The soul is immortal and death only means giving up the old body and acquiring a new one. It is the same as one discards old clothes to get new ones. Further, Lord Krishna talks to Arjuna of the value of karma yoga, which means performing all actions with the attitude of dedication to the Lord and accepting the results as *prasada* coming from God. And it is with this attitude that Arjuna must fight the battle.

Lord Krishna's teachings to Arjuna on the battlefield are meant for all of us. There is a battle of Krukshetra going on within us; all of us struggle constantly with our undesirable tendencies such as greed, hatred, anger, ignorance, etc. Bhagavad Gita shows us a way to fight this battle and attain victory.

Core Concepts

Concept of God

Hindus believe in one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both creator and an un-manifest reality.

This is the understanding of God at the highest level. Because the concept of "creator" is difficult to visualize and "un-manifest reality" is formless, Hindus worship God in various forms to feel a personal relationship and develop a sense of devotion. Some see God in His threefold aspect (Trinity) of Brahma the creator of the Universe, Vishnu, as its sustainer, and Shiva, unto whom the universe dissolves. Others see God as one of the avataras like Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, and yet others worship Him on the altar as one of the many deities (Ganesha, Saraswati, Lakshmi, etc.). All these forms represent one God who, as mentioned above, is the creator of this vast Universe and its immense intelligence, and the one who pervades the Universe. His divinity is present in one and all.

To further understand the relationship between God and the Universe, one needs to ask, "How did this vast and intelligent Universe come about?" After all, what we see is an "effect", and therefore there must be a "cause" behind what we see. Something cannot come from nothing. *Rishis* explained by saying that whatever that cause is, it is God! But God did not create the universe out of some material out there because there could have been no pre-existing material prior to creation. Creation is manifestation of God Himself, just as the dream world is manifestation of the dreamer.

With such a perspective we can realize that God pervades this universe in the same way as thread pervades cloth. Not only that, He is also there beyond the universe. Thus, universe in fact exists in God! If universe ceased to exist, God would still be there as formless supreme consciousness.

To quote Swami Dayananda Saraswati, a distinguished teacher of Vedanta, "It's not that there is one God, but there is only God!" Whatever we see and whatever exists-everything is God, and everything is endowed with His divinity.

Dharma

Dharma is the path of righteousness and living one's life according to moral and ethical values. These values are based on the principle of ahimsa, which means causing the least amount of injury to others: to people, to animals and to the environment.

In a broader sense, dharma means God's intelligent order that supports the Universe and everything in it. The Universe is vast; it has billions of planets, stars and galaxies. It is so vast that our planet earth in comparison is like a speck in a cloud of dust. The Universe is also created with immense intelligence. It is the intelligent laws of the Universe that determine the precise planetary motions; the intricate make-up of atomic structure that holds all matter together, the amazing way the human body functions, etc.; these are all evidence of an intelligent order that upholds creation.

Our dharma is to fit peacefully within the natural order and not go against it. Following dharma for us is to live a righteous life by treating others, as we want them to treat us. And that means living by Universal values guided by the underlying principle of ahimsa.

Law of Karma

The law of karma is a cause and effect relationship between our actions (karma) and the results (karma *phala*) we get. In common usage, karma generally refers to karma *phala*. Our good actions incur desirable results (*punya* karma) and unrighteous actions incur undesirable results (*paapa* karma). The results of our karma do not necessarily bring results immediately. For example if you hit some one with a stone you will cause injury to the person right away but the results you get can be at any time in the future; according to the law of karma you will be the recipient of *paapa* karma, in proportion to the injury you caused, in the future. The *paapa* karma you will receive could be in this life or in any future life. Thus the law of karma necessarily invokes the doctrine of reincarnation (see below).

In principle, the law of karma is a belief because it cannot be proved or disproved. However, it is a very logical belief because it is based on the universal principle of cause and effect and helps us make sense of life situations that are otherwise unexplainable. In the intelligent order of the Lord, it is inconceivable to see how it could be otherwise. For example, when a child is born with birth defects, or a saintly person dies at an early age because of an incurable disease, one may be at a loss to understand the apparent inequity, and as a result lose faith in God. The law of karma explains such situations and does not look upon God as the one making judgments. We receive from God what our karma dictates.

Reincarnation

Reincarnation means being re-born after death. A human being is physical body with life force. The presence of life force is what distinguishes a dead body from a living being. This life force is the subtle body, called *sukshma sharira* in Sanskrit. It is commonly referred to as soul. Upon death, the *sukshma sharira* separates from the physical body which is cremated, buried or disposed of otherwise to become part of the elements that it was originally made up of. The *sukshma sharira*, conditioned by one's karmas and some impressions from the present life (*samskaras*), transmigrates to take on a new body and be reborn.

Lord Krishna exemplifies reincarnation in one of the famous verses in Bhagavad Gita (Ch. 2., V.22) as follows:

“Just as one discards worn out clothes to take on new ones, the embodied soul discards the old body to acquire a new one.”

Avatara

In the Hindu tradition, it is believed that in times of need, God descends to earth to re-establish dharma or righteousness and destroy tyranny and injustice in the world. Such an incarnation of God on earth is called an *avatara*. Lord Krishna describes the concept and the role of an *avatara* in the following two verses in Bhagavad Gita:

“Whenever and wherever there is decay of righteousness, O Arjuna, and a rise of unrighteousness, then I manifest Myself!”(Ch. IV-7)

“To protect good people from harm, to destroy all the wicked ones, to re-establish dharma here, I am born in age after age.”(Ch. IV-8)

Sacred Hindu scriptures, known as *Puranas*, describe varying lists of *avataras*; Bhagavad Purana mentions 22 *avataras* of Lord Vishnu, who provided divine intervention in time of need. Of these, the ten most prominent ones are known as the “*dasavatara*” (ten *avataras*), that are listed below in the order of their appearance on earth:

1. *Matsya* (the fish)
2. *Koorma* (the tortoise)
3. *Varaha* (the boar)
4. Narasimha (the human-lion)
5. Vamana (the dwarf)
6. Parasurama (savior of Brahmins)
7. Lord Rama (slayer of Ravana)
8. Lord Krishna (slayer of Kamsa)
9. Lord Buddha (founder of Buddhism)
10. Kalki (the mighty warrior)-yet to appear.

All of these *avatars* have fascinating stories about their adventures and their conquests to establish justice and righteousness on earth. Lord Rama and Lord Krishna are the two mostly widely known and worshiped *avatars* of Vishnu, with their stories told in the two popular epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Moksha

Moksha means liberation, and liberation in this context implies freedom from suffering in this life. It is inevitable that one will encounter painful situations in life that will cause suffering. The pain is physical or emotional and suffering is the response to that pain. The goal of *moksha* is to empower one to recognize that, “I am not the body-mind-sense complex; I am the consciousness by which I know pain and suffering, and pain and suffering belong to the body and mind. I am the conscious witness of my body and mind, and pain and suffering do not belong to me.” This understanding of one’s true nature is *moksha*, which is the state of enlightenment or self-realization. It is achieved through spiritual pursuit under the guidance of a qualified teacher (a guru). An enlightened person is freed from the cycle of death and rebirth. However, contrary to common belief, freedom from rebirth is not the primary goal of *moksha*; the primary goal is freedom from suffering in this life, also known as *jivan mukti*.

Hindu Philosophy

Traditionally, there are six schools of philosophical thoughts, known as six *darshanas*, in the Hindu system. Three of them, *Vaisheshika*, *Nyaya*, and *Mimamsa* are not considered of much importance now a days; *Samkhya* has been assimilated into Vedanta. Yoga and Vedanta are two of the six philosophies that enjoy wide popularity through out the world and are briefly presented below.

Yoga

Often, the current use of the word yoga refers only to the yoga postures (*asanas*) meant for exercise and physical fitness. In the Hindu tradition, yoga (also known as Raja Yoga) is a spiritual practice which involves inner contemplation and deep meditation that leads to becoming one with supreme consciousness. Asana, one of the eight steps of yoga, helps a spiritual seeker develop the strength and stamina to sit in a meditative posture for a long period of time.

Sage Patanjali (about 200 BCE) described the yoga system in a small text known as Yoga Sutras. The eight steps of Patanjali’s yoga system are known as *ashtanga* (eight limbs) as follows:

1. *Yama*: Abstention from causing injury, speaking untruth, non-adherence to celibacy, attachment to worldly possessions and, greed.
2. *Niyama*: Observance of purity of body and mind, discipline, study of scriptures, surrender to God and, contentment.
3. *Asana*: Proper posture and control over the body.

4. *Pranayama*: Breath control.
5. *Pratyahara*: Withdrawal of all senses.
6. *Dharana*: Concentration on object of meditation
7. *Dhyana*: Focused meditation.
8. *Samadhi*: Oneness with the object of meditation

Vedanta

The word Vedanta is composed of two Sanskrit words: Veda meaning knowledge and anta meaning end. The word signifies that it is the knowledge that is presented in the end portions of the Vedas. These end portions are small texts that are called Upanishads. There are over one hundred known Upanishads, although now a days only about 10 of them are taught; a few of the commonly known ones are Kena, Katha, Mandukya, Mundaka, Ishavasya, Taitreya, etc.

The core teachings of Vedanta answer the ultimate questions one is apt to ask: “who am I? What is this Universe? Who is God? What is my relationship with the Universe and God?”

Vedanta allows us to deal with the fundamental problem of our feeling of inadequacy and limited-ness. By nature, we as human beings want complete and infinite happiness. We want a perfect physical body, a perfect mind and intellect, and perfect emotional status of bliss and happiness. We pursue this infinite goal by fulfilling our desires through our finite efforts; but we invariably fail. We fail because infinite cannot be attained by finite. No amount of effort will take us to the ultimate state of happiness. What is the solution? Vedanta teaches us that the solution is really simple. We don't have to seek perfection outside; we already are what we are seeking! We are not the body mind-sense complex that we have come to identify with. We are “*atma*” -the consciousness by which we know our thoughts, perceptions and emotions. This *atma* is *sat-cit-ananda*: unborn, uncreated consciousness, which is limitless and lacks nothing. We need not look for happiness elsewhere. Why don't we know that? The reason is that we are born with ignorance not knowing our true nature. From infancy onwards, we become dependent on fulfilling our desires to be happy. Vedantic teachings with proper guidance by a guru, a qualified teacher, remove this veil of ignorance.

Atma, the infinite consciousness that is my true Self is the same supreme consciousness which pervades the universe and is present in everything in it. It is the supreme consciousness the ancient *rishis* called Brahman. Brahman is the all pervasive underlying reality of the Universe including everything in it, and whatever lies beyond. Brahman is formless God or *nirguna* Brahman. *Saguna* Brahman is God with attributes, or *Ishwara* or *Paramatma*. Universe is manifestation of *Ishwara*. In essence, Vedanta teaches us, “I am *Brahman*”. This statement is the fundamental principle of *advaita* (non-duality) philosophy of Vedanta.

There are other schools of Vedanta philosophy which view the relationship between the Self and Brahman as “qualified non-duality” (*vishishta advaita*) and as “duality” (*dvaita*).

However, the *advaita* philosophy, expounded by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th Century, is today the most widely held philosophy.

Different forms of Hindu worship

Just as Hindus recognize God in many forms, they worship God in many ways. The most common ways are: *havan* (a fire ritual), *puja* (worshipping a deity on an altar in a temple or at home), *aarti* (generally at the end of a *puja*), *katha* (telling stories from Hindu scriptures), and *kirtan* (devotional singing).

Havan

Even though *puja* is currently the most common form of worship, historically, *havan* (also called *homa*) was the primary means of worship during the Vedic period, way before the introduction of *puja*. In the performance of the *havans*, *Rishis* envisioned Agni (fire) as a messenger or a priest to help in the worship of God in his various forms, e.g., Lord Indra, Surya, Varuna, etc. Agni acts symbolically as the messenger for the one performing the *havan*. All the offerings into the fire are transported through its flames and smoke to the deity whom the worshipper is praying to. A mantra is recited with each offering, pronouncing the deity to whom it is being offered, e.g., “this offering is to Lord Indra and it’s no longer mine”. Agni can itself be worshipped as God too. Thus, *havan* is a simple and a meaningful way of praying. A *yajna* is a *havan* performed on a bigger scale and in a more elaborate way.

Puja

Puja can be simple or detailed; one of the common forms is a 16-step *puja* to worship a deity. Briefly, in a *puja*, the Lord is invoked to come upon the altar and be present in the deity that is being worshipped. Then, the deity is welcomed and received, just as an honored guest would be welcomed in a house and be treated with all the hospitality. Step by step, symbolically, He is offered a seat and his hands and feet are washed. He is then given a bath, offered clothes, ornaments, flowers, incense, lamp (*diya*), etc. and then food is offered. The food that is offered is called *naivedyam*. After the food has been blessed by the Lord, it is received and shared by the devotees as *prasada*. During the offerings of flowers, the deity is offered many salutations and is addressed by various names, numbering 16, 108 or even 1008! These names reveal the glories of the Lord.

Aarti

Aarti, is performed once or twice daily in Hindu temples and it is also performed at the completion of a *puja*. In doing *aarti*, one lights a lamp kept on a platter and then moves the platter circularly in a clockwise fashion around the *murti*. After that is done, devotees make the gesture of receiving the light in their cupped hands and putting the two hands on their eyes. The practice of circling the light around the *murti* goes back to olden days when the *murti* of the main deity was placed in the inner most chamber of the temple where it was dark and it was hard to see the *murti*. As the devotees came to pay their

respects and see the image of the Lord (*darshan*), the priest would light a lamp and circle it around the *murti* so the devotee could have *darshan*. Light represents knowledge, and this symbolism signifies revelation of God through knowledge. The gesture of taking light in hands signifies receiving knowledge and putting it on closed eyes so we can see the Lord within, on the altar of our heart!

Katha

In the Hindu scriptures there are many stories. Listening to such stories is a form of worship because it creates devotion towards God in the heart of the listener. These stories are mainly described in Ramayana, and Mahabharata, which are *itihasa*, based on historical events, and in the 18 *puranas* and 18 *upa-puranas*, which are mythological. There is a great deal of importance placed on these stories because they convey moral, religious and spiritual teachings in a very powerful manner. Not only that, they are beautiful stories-they engage the attention of young and old alike, because they are interestingly complex with a huge cast of characters. Incorporating the teachings in such stories makes learning easier and much more interesting than reading a book that only has the teachings. There is more emphasis on teaching by way of stories in the Hindu tradition than in any other religion.

Kirtan

Kirtan is chanting the glories of the Lord and singing prayerful songs accompanied by music and rhythm. *Kirtan* is performed by a group of devotees gathered in a temple, home, or any other suitable place of worship. The singing may be “the call-and response” singing (one singer leads the group) or solely by one or two singers, as in the Sikh tradition. *Kirtan* is a simple but very powerful form of spiritual practice which transports a devotee to the highest level of spiritual realms. The dynamics of *kirtan* and the vibrant energy created in a group setting inspire love in the heart and evoke a feeling of true joy.

Symbolisms Related to Worship

Chanting OM

The OM sign is the main symbol of the Hindu religion. As a One Syllable sound it represents God. Every sound created by vocal chords emanates starting from the base of the throat and ends with the sound emanating from pursed lips. The chanting of OM starts with “O” at the base of the throat and ends with “M” with the lips closed. Thus, Om is believed to be the basic sound that contains all other sounds. Om itself is a mantra, and chanting OM is prayer in itself. If repeated with the correct intonation, it lets the chanter reach a deep state of meditation merging into the supreme consciousness and becoming united with God.

Repeating “Shanti” three times

Shanti means peace. Hindu religious discourses, many ceremonies and prayers typically end with the words Om *shanti, shanti, shanti*. Chanting *shanti* is an invocation for peace and for the removal of disturbances that are obstacles during spiritual pursuits such as meditation, or prayer. Peace from three kinds of disturbances is sought. There is disturbance from distractions and noises in the immediate vicinity, next the disturbances of nature, such as storms, earthquakes, etc., and finally there are mental disturbances that make it difficult to focus one’s mind on the desired goal of prayer or meditation. Chanting *shanti* three times invokes peace from all three types of disturbances.

Ringling bells and blowing conch in a temple

The ringing of bells and blowing of the conch drowns out the external noises of the surroundings and helps devotees to focus on the prayer (*kirtan, arti, etc.*) going on in the temple and become absorbed in the inner bliss within.

Burning incense

Fragrance of burning incense in a place of worship creates a pleasant atmosphere which is conducive for the mind to flow towards the spiritual realms.

Burning camphor

Camphor also creates beautiful fragrance, just as incense. Camphor signifies something else as well; camphor is one of those substances that leave no ashes or residue after burning. Symbolically this is supposed to remind a devotee to completely burn his ego on the altar of worship without leaving a trace.

Pradakshina (circumambulation)

After offering prayers, the worshipper with folded hands goes in a circular manner around the deity on an altar in a temple; this is called *pradakshina*. *Pradaksina* signifies acknowledgment of God as the focal point in our life. *Pradakshina* is done in a clockwise fashion so that the worshipper’s right side is closest to the Lord. In Hindu religion, as in many other religions, the right side of the body is considered auspicious versus the left side which is considered inauspicious.

When there is no space to go around the altar, a worshipper does *pradakshina* turning clockwise staying in one place. This signifies that Lord is as much within oneself as He is on the altar of worship.

Other Key Aspects of Hindu Religion

Hindu Deities and *Murtis*

God is conceived by Hindus as having various aspects. These aspects or energies of God are represented in various forms known as deities which are portrayed as *murtis*; each deity is referred to as *devi* (female deity), or *devata* (or Lord for male deity). For example, Devi Saraswati represents the learning and knowledge aspect of God. Thus, if a Hindu wants to pray for acquiring knowledge and understanding, she/he prays to Devi Saraswati and to remove obstacles to Lord Ganesha.

Deities are often depicted in extraordinary forms to signify their amazing powers. They all have symbolic features as their defining characteristics. Some of the features and their significance are common to many deities. For example, multiple arms and heads signify omnipresence and omnipotence. Hands bearing a variety of weapons and arms signify power over undesirable qualities. Hand gestures, known as *mudras*, convey various messages to the devotees; e.g., *varada* (or *dana*) *mudra* signifies “giving”; *abhaya mudra* says, “don’t be afraid” and signifies blessings; etc.

Most deities are associated with animals or birds that serve as their vehicles. Each vehicle reflects or accentuates the powers or qualities of the deity with which it is associated.

Note: *Murtis* of Hindu deities must not be referred to as idols; the word idol in Western minds means a “false god” and worship of idols is called “paganism”. One should use the word *murti* as there is no equivalent English word; *murti* may be explained as a “sacred form” or “sacred icon”, or “sacred image”, but even these words don’t quite convey the spirit of the word *murti*.

Examples of some of the deities and symbolism associated with their *murtis* are described in the Appendix.

Four Stages of Life

In the ancient Vedic tradition, the life of a person was divided into four stages known as *ashramas*. The first stage is the *brahamacharya* phase, which is living life as a student under the guidance of a guru. During this stage, the student remains celibate and lives a pure life. The second stage is *grahasta*, when a person marries, pursues a career, raises a family and fulfils the responsibilities of a house holder. In the third stage, *vanaprastha*, the retirement stage, a person gradually delegates his personal responsibilities, engages in activities related to the welfare of society and pays increasing attention to his spiritual growth. In the last stage, *sanyasa*, the person completely renounces the world, goes into seclusion and spends time in prayer and meditation in pursuit of self realization.

The concept of living life by four defined stages is not practiced in modern times. Hindu religion as noted previously is a dynamic religion that continually evolves with the changing times and thereby maintains its relevance.

Four Goals of Life

Hindu religion recognizes four goals of life in a person's life. These are dharma, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. Dharma, as described earlier, is following moral and ethical values and living a life of righteousness in all of one's endeavors, and in pursuit of the other goals of life. *Artha* is gaining security by achieving a measure of success and prosperity and acquiring wealth to fulfill family obligations without resorting to excessive greed. *Kama* which means desires or seeking pleasures is also a legitimate goal of life for one's emotional needs and to live life happily, but again not becoming over indulgent. *Moksha* is the ultimate goal of one's life to attain self-realization and freedom from suffering that is otherwise inevitable in a material life of pursuing *artha* and *kama*.

Four Spiritual Paths

Hindu religion recognizes many spiritual practices for spiritual growth which are commonly classified as four *margas*, or paths. There is a common misconception that one can choose any one of these paths to achieve the ultimate goal of attaining *moksha*; in fact all of these practices go hand in hand and all are necessary to reach that goal. The four paths are briefly described as follows.

Karma-yoga: This is the way daily activities are approached and performed so as to contribute to spiritual growth. This approach is one of dedicating all actions to the Lord and recognizing that the results of our actions are not within our control. The results come from God and we should accept them as *prasada*, i.e., God given.

Jnana-yoga is the path of knowledge to discover one's true self and understand that it is identical with the supreme consciousness, or Brahman.

Bhakti yoga is the way to reach God through devotion and total surrender of the ego.

Dhyana Yoga is merging oneself and becoming one with the supreme consciousness by way of meditation.

Hindu Denominations

In the Hindu vision, God is one supreme consciousness, but He is worshipped in many different forms by His devotees. In spite of differences in this regard, majority of practicing Hindus do not claim to belong to any specific sect or denomination. They all share common beliefs and core concepts of Hindu religion. There is no split among the people based on the deity they worship.

However, over time there have been various philosophical thoughts, and a strong adherence by some segments of populations to one or the other specific aspects of God, which gave rise to established lineages or denominations. The four most recognized denominations are:

1. *Vaishnavism*: *Vaishnavites* worship Lord Vishnu (or his forms of Krishna and Rama) as the supreme God.
2. *Shaktism*: *Shaktas* worship *Shakti*, the divine Mother, in her many forms like Kali, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, etc.
3. *Shaivism*: *Shaivites* primarily worship Shiva as the supreme God, both immanent and transcendent (with form and formless).
4. *Smartism*: *Smartas* are a liberal sect and they consider different manifestations of God to be the same. They may worship any deity, e.g., Lord Ganesha, Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, or Goddess Kali

Hindu Religious-Cultural Practices

Hindu culture is largely a religious culture with many customs and practices reflecting the values espoused by Hindu religion. Both the religious rituals and the customs are full of rich symbolism which has profound meaning.

Namaste

Namaste is the traditional way Hindus greet each other with folded hands, just as in the West people greet with a hand-shake. Namaste has a beautiful meaning associated with it. Namaste is composed of two Sanskrit words *namaha* which means “salutation” (or the act of bowing) and *te* meaning “unto you”. So, Namaste means “I bow to you”. In the Hindu view each person is endowed with the inner divinity of an all pervasive God; thus namaste is offered as a greeting to the divinity within all of us.

Touching elders’ feet

Elders are respected in the Hindu tradition to recognize their maturity, knowledge and wisdom gained over the years, their service to the community, and in the case of mahatmas (gurus, and saints) for having attained a high spiritual level. Touching their feet denotes humility and respect. The elder person in turn places his hand on the one who is prostrating to confer his blessings.

Putting *Bindi* (*tilak*)

Just as we anoint *murtis* of deities with a *tilak* on their forehead, we anoint the devotees; because in Hindu religion a devotee in essence is a divine being; and just as worthy of being worshiped. A beautiful example is the Radha-Krishna *murti* on the altar of many temples and homes. Radha is not a goddess but a devotee, and yet she is honored as a devotee, standing shoulder to shoulder with Lord Krishna on the altar.

After a *puja*, *tilak* is put on the forehead of men and women to indicate that every one’s true nature is divine. Women also use *tilak* or *bindi* as a beauty mark and quite often to symbolize that they are married.

Fasting

Hindus observe many religious disciplines such as pilgrimage (*tirtha yatra*), expiatory acts, etc. Fasting is one such discipline. In Sanskrit, the word for fasting is *upavasa* which means “living near” signifying living in proximity to God. One fasts on special occasions, such as festivals or other family religious ceremonies. The idea behind fasting is to withdraw our senses and discipline our mind to focus on God and feel closer to Him. Fasting once in a while is also believed to impart health benefits.

Common Misconceptions

Hindus Worship Many Gods

Hindus do not worship many gods. Hindus worship one God in many forms. Hindus recognize creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe as different roles of one God; they worship God in these three roles as Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Shiva (The Trinity), respectively. Others see God as one of the *avatars* like Lord Rama and Lord Krishna. God is also worshipped in the form of many deities e.g., Lord Ganesha, Devi Lakshmi, Devi Saraswati, etc. (see section on “Hindu deities and *Murtis*”).

Understanding that God is one, Hindus worship God in various forms. Devotees can worship a form they can relate to and that will evoke a feeling of devotion.

Detailed explanation

There is a common misconception that Hinduism is polytheistic. Vedas clearly state that that is not the case. A quote from Rig Veda goes like this: “*Ekam sat, vipraha bahuda vadanti*” (Sanskrit), meaning, “Truth (God) is one, the wise speak of Him as many”. This quote refutes the notion of polytheism. In fact, it is even incorrect to say that Hinduism is monotheistic. Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) are monotheistic. In monotheistic view God is separate from man. In the Hindu view, there is only God, which means that there is no separation between God and His creation.

With this understanding, Hindus worship God as deities with various forms because it is easy to relate to God with a form in a personal way, and to have a feeling of devotion.

The Caste System

Short answer

Caste system in India refers to a system known as Varna, which recognizes four groups of people, namely, 1) *Sudra*, the workers, 2) *Vaishya*, the business people, 3) *Kshatriya*, kings, and warriors, and 4) Brahmin, the priests or teachers. This system recognizes that people will follow the profession most suited to their tendencies and personalities. It is very true that in the past, the caste system was abused and misused as a social practice in India and it deserves criticism, but it should be noted that caste-based inequity never was

a part of the Hindu religious philosophy. Discrimination based on caste has been illegal in India for over 50 years, and modern Hindus are working hard to improve the situation.

Unfortunately caste system is portrayed in most American school textbooks as a serious flaw and a defining feature of the Hindu religion. Such a portrayal denigrates all the goodness that is there in the Hindu religion.

Detailed explanation:

It is wrong to say that Hindu religion accepts or professes inequality among peoples of different professions. People were recognized as Brahmins (priests and teachers), *Kshatriya* (kings and warriors), *Vaishya* (merchants) and *Sudras* (labor class) based on their nature and personality. They were recognized in their own rights. It's the same as recognizing white-collar and blue-collar workers, or academicians, politicians, business people, and laborers in any modern society.

The Portuguese introduced the word "Caste" when they first came to India some 400 years back; this is a mistranslation of Varna because it implies "clan" or "lineage". Society was recognized as consisting of four *Varnas* meaning groups based on their profession. There are two main references to the so-called caste system in our scriptures. These are often misquoted to show the existence of caste discrimination in the Hindu religion.

One is in Bhagvad Gita (Chapter 4, Verse 13). Lord Krishna says "I created four *varanas*, based on the tendencies and actions of the people. Although, I am the creator of this system, know me to be the eternal non-doer." Those who criticize the system often quote only the first quarter of the verse, i.e. "I created the four *varanas*"; the intent of the verse is to recognize that people should pursue their natural tendencies and act accordingly to become Brahmins, *Kshatriyas*, etc. Such a class distinction has existed in every society and does not imply any disrespect for any social class category

The other reference is from a Vedic hymn (Purusa Suktam), found in slightly different forms in all the four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva). It says Brahmins came from the Lord's mouth, *Kshatriyas* from his arms, *Vaishyas* from his legs and *Sudras* from his feet. Purusha Suktam is beautiful poetry and narrates one of the many stories about creation in Hindu Scriptures. It is a very profound and symbolic poem in which the Lord is envisioned as being sacrificed in a *havan* (a fire ritual) and then arising from the *havan* fire, and bringing forth the whole creation, including, planets, seasons, animals and men as Brahmins, *Kshatriyas*, etc. The implication is that the Lord is immanent and all pervasive in the creation. Feet and legs support the body and are no less important than the arms or the mouth. The critics incorrectly make the point that this hymn implies that *Sudras* coming from the feet are inferior to the Brahmins coming from the head.

Hindus Worship Cows

Hindus do not worship cows, but consider cows to be a sacred animal for the following reasons:

- The Cow was a domestic animal and it was recognized for its giving nature-it gives a lot and takes little; oxen were used to plough the fields. Hence, just as one would not eat pets (dogs and cats), Hindus would not eat cows.
- The Cow was a symbol of prosperity, because it was the source of dairy products (milk, ghee, etc), leather products, and provided the power to generate crops.
- Lord Krishna took cows and calves to graze when he was a child and loved cows; he is often pictured with a cow. Therefore Hindus hold cows in high reverence. There are *Gau-shalas* (shelters for housing and protecting cows). Gifts of cows to Brahmins by the kings were considered to be the greatest charity.
- The Cow has the status of a mother and on the festival of *Pongal*, cows are decorated with garlands and ornaments and shown off with pride, and fed nice foods. This is like a mother's day for mother cow (*Gau maata*).

Appendix

Hindu Deities

Lord Ganesha



Lord Ganesha with a human form but with the head of an elephant represents the power of God that removes obstacles and ensures success in human endeavors. For this reason, Hindus worship Ganesha first before beginning any religious, spiritual or worldly activity.

The large head of an elephant symbolizes wisdom, understanding, and a discriminating intellect.

The large ears signify a great capacity to listen to others and assimilate ideas.

The Trunk represents the versatility to handle big and small objects as it can uproot a tree and yet lift a needle off the ground. An axe in the upper right hand represents power to destroy undesirable tendencies. A lotus in the upper left hand signifies detachment from worldly trappings. Sweets (*Laddus*) in lower left hand denote His rewards to devotees and the lower right hand in the *abhaya mudra* assures the devotee not to be afraid. Big belly signifies a large capacity to face all pleasant and unpleasant experiences of the world.

A mouse sitting near the feet of Ganesha is His vehicle. The mouse runs around ceaselessly similar to the way in which a person's mind wanders. The mouse sitting at Ganesha's feet represents Ganesha's control over a restless mind.

Lord Shiva



Lord Shiva is the Lord of mercy and compassion. Lord Shiva represents the aspect of God that controls the cyclic process of creation, preservation, dissolution and recreation of the universe.

There is rich symbolism associated with the image of Lord Shiva in the meditative posture. Below are a few of the many characteristic features.

The unclad body symbolizes the transcendental aspect of the Lord. His body is covered with ash. All material forms burn down to formless ash and the ash on Lord Shiva's body is meant to signify the formless aspect of God (Brahman). Matted locks on the head of the Lord convey the integration of physical, mental and spiritual energies. His most characteristic weapon, to fight undesirable tendencies, is the trident. Lord Shiva's third eye represents both the spiritual insight and the ability to burn ignorance. The flow of the River Ganges

from his matted locks represents the flow of knowledge, as the River Ganges is often called *Jnana Ganga* (Ganga of knowledge). The Crescent moon next to Lord Shiva represents the cycle of time and the process of continuous change.

Devi Saraswati



Saraswati is the consort of Lord Brahma. She is the Goddess of learning, knowledge, music, and literary and verbal skills. She is worshipped by all persons interested in knowledge, and especially by students of fine arts. Devi Saraswati is often portrayed as a beautiful woman dressed in pure white seated on a white lotus or a rock. The color white signifies the purity of true knowledge, and the rock signifies stability. Devi Saraswati bears four arms. In one hand she holds a book which represents knowledge and literary arts, in another she holds a mala (rosary) of crystal which signifies spirituality, and in two hands she holds the musical instrument *veena*, signifying her as the Goddess of music. A white swan is often located next to her feet. The Swan is reputed to separate milk from water and thus it represents the power of discrimination between desirable and undesirable. Saraswati is usually seated near a flowing river, which may be related to her early history as the Goddess of the ancient river Saraswati.

Devi Saraswati has the peacock as her vehicle. The Peacock is considered to be vain about its beauty and by having the peacock as her vehicle, Devi Saraswati teaches us not to be vain about outer appearances

Devi Lakshmi



Lakshmi is the Goddess of prosperity, and fortune. She is the embodiment of beauty, grace and charm. She is the consort of Lord Vishnu.

Devi Lakshmi is portrayed with four arms, standing or sitting upon a lotus, dressed in fine garments and precious jewels. Two of her hands hold lotus flowers. Lotus rises from mud but remains pure and pristine even in the murky waters of a pond. Thus, the significance of the lotus is that a person living in an imperfect and murky world can remain uncontaminated by it and be spiritually pure. The third hand is held in the *varada mudra*, which signifies giving and bestowing prosperity to her devotees. The fourth hand in *abhaya mudra*, signifies assurance. She is flanked by elephants to convey her royal power. The owl is her vehicle which symbolically stands for intelligence.

Devi Lakshmi is the special focus of worship during the celebration of *Diwali*, a major Hindu festival. *Diwali* is considered the beginning of a new year, when people pray for peace and prosperity for the future.

Hindu Religious Calendar

Dates for Hindu religious observances and celebrations, such as festivals (*Diwali*, etc), birthdays of Hindu deities (*Janmashmti*, etc), monthly auspicious days (*Poornima* or *Satyanarayan*, etc) and ceremonial events (wedding dates, etc), are determined by the Hindu religious calendar known as *Panchang*. For many of us, the Hindu calendar seems mysterious in the way these dates are determined and how they correlate with the western calendar we use for all practical purposes, known as the Gregorian calendar. The following basic explanation should help clear the mystery.

There are actually many Hindu calendars, including the popularly known Vikram Samvat and Shaka Era. All of them are based on the same planetary orbits and differ only in the times in which they originated. Vikram Samvat began in 57 BCE and Shaka Calendar in 79 CE. Presently, there is also an official Hindu calendar, which was adopted as the Hindu National Calendar in 1957. It is a modification of the Shaka calendar. The National calendar never gained much popularity, and the traditional Hindu calendars are used as religious calendars instead.

The solar calendars (e.g., Gregorian and the Hindu solar calendar) are based on the orbiting of the Earth around the Sun. One orbit of Earth equals one year which is divided into 12 months with a total of 365 days.

Hindu religious calendars are based on the orbiting of both the Moon around the Earth and Earth around the Sun. One lunar month is the time it takes for one orbit of the Moon around the Earth, and 12 such orbits make up one lunar year.

Just as the solar month in the Gregorian calendar is made up of 30 or 31 days (except February), the lunar month is made up of 30 *tithis*. One lunar month on average is 29.5 days of a solar calendar, and one lunar year is 354 days. The Lunar year is thus shorter than the solar year by 11 days. If no adjustment were made for this difference between the length of the solar and the lunar year, then over a period of time, the months of the lunar year would be out of alignments with the seasons of the year which are linked to the solar year. Therefore, the Hindu religious calendars add an extra month about every third year to align them with the solar year; this extra month is known as the *adhikamasa*. It is because of this feature that the Hindu calendar is correctly called a lunisolar calendar rather than a lunar one. Because of the addition of an extra month in the middle of the year, all the remaining festivals of the year get postponed by one month; no festivals are celebrated during *adhikamasa*.

The 12 months of the Hindu religious calendar are *Chaitra*, *Baishakh*, *Jeysth*, *Aashad*, *Shrawan*, *Bhadrapad*, *Ashwin*, *Kartik*, *Margashirsha*, *Paush*, *Magh*, and *Phagun*.

Each lunar month of the religious calendar is divided into two halves of 15 *tithis*. The first half of the month comprises the waxing phase of the Moon, and the other half the waning phase. Waxing phase, known as *shukla paksh*, is when the Moon gradually gets

brighter until the 15th *tithi*, when it is completely full; this phase is followed by the waning phase, known as *krishna paksh*, as the moon gradually wanes until the 15th *tithi*, when it is completely dark (new moon). In both phases, the first 14 *tithis* are identically named as first, second, third, etc., with the following names: *Prathama*, *Dwiteeya*, *Truteeya*, *Chaturthi*, *Panchami*, *Shashthi*, *Saptami*, *Ashtami*, *Navami*, *Dashami*, *Ekadashi*, *Dwadashi*, *Trayodashi*, and *Chaturdashi*. The 15th *tithi* in the *shukla paksh* is *Poornima*, when the moon is fully bright (full moon), whereas the 15th *tithi* in *krishna paksh*, is *Amavasya* when the moon is completely dark (new moon).

A day in the Hindu solar or lunar calendar starts with sunrise. A *tithi* of the lunar month can start at any time before or after the sunrise and by convention, the *tithi* in effect at sunrise of a particular day is the *tithi* of that day. Once in a while, a *tithi* may fall on two successive days, or a *tithi* may be entirely skipped, e.g., *saptami* may be followed the next day by *navami*, skipping *ashtami*. This is because the *tithis* are 20 to 27 hours long. A *tithi* of relatively longer duration may continue past the next sunrise and therefore become the *tithi* of the next day; in that case the *tithi* is termed *adhika* (extra) *tithi*. A *tithi* of relatively shorter duration may start after the sunrise and finish before the next sunrise. In that case the *tithi* is skipped over and no day is labeled by that *tithi*; which is termed *tithi kshaya* (loss).

Each lunar month begins with the first *tithi*, *Prathama*, following the new moon. Each New Year begins with the month *Chaitra*, which falls between March and April.

Almost all of the Hindu festivals fall on a specified *tithi* of the lunar month, e.g., *Deepavali* falls on *Amavasya*, *Satyanarayan* on *Poornima*, and *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Janmashtmi*, *Ram Navmi*, on the *tithis* indicated by their suffixes. Some festivals e.g., *Basant Panchami*, *Pongal* or *Makar Sankranti* have a seasonal significance as well and are correlated to the solar calendar. The New Year which begins with the first day of the *Chaitra* month as noted above is celebrated by different names in different Indian regions, as *Ugadi*, *Gudi Padva*, or *Cheti Chand*. It is said that this is the first day of the creation of the Universe by Lord Brahma, the Creator!