



## Hinduism

Hinduism is not merely a religion; it is a collection of religious traditions. These various strands of Hinduism are linked together as far as their concepts and history are concerned. But they have evolved in such a manner that they now present a wide variety of views about most matters. The ideas of some groups even contradict those held by other groups. It is hard to find any concepts or doctrines about which all the strands of Hinduism are agreed. There are, however, a number of important concepts about which most of the different strands in Hinduism have something to say - even if they do not agree about them. Among these are the following:

### Brahman

It is agreed among almost all Hindus that Brahman (Brahma) is the Absolute Reality or the supreme deity in the cosmos. Those that follow the Vedanta prefer to think of Brahman in an impersonal way as Absolute Reality. And so each soul (atman, atma) is part of Absolute Reality, if only human beings could see things as they really are. On the other hand, those Hindus that follow the theistic traditions prefer to think of Brahman as a personal God. Among these Hindus, Brahman becomes Bhagwan or Ishvara, the Lord. In each strand of the theistic tradition, this is developed in a different way. In Vaishnavism, it is the god Vishnu who manifests Brahman; while in Shaivism, the god Shiva manifests Brahman.

### Dharma

It is not possible to translate the word Dharma into English in such a way as to represent all of its meanings. These include: the universal law, the right way of living, the moral order. At the cosmic level there is the Sanatana Dharma. This is the eternal, unchanging, universal law which governs the universe and to which all things conform. At the level of man, there is firstly the Sadharama Dharma. This is the general code of ethics. It includes the requirement to perform good deeds (such as going on pilgrimages and giving to charity) and also prohibits evil deeds (such as causing injury and lying). Secondly, there is the

### Varnashrama

Dharma. This is the customs and duties relative to each person's caste, as well as the social duties relative to the stages in each person's life as set out in Hindu Scripture (study of the scripture, raising of a family, retiring from family life, and the wandering mendicant). There is also a personal meaning to Dharma. Everyone has his own personal Dharma, the right way for him to live.

### Samsara and Reincarnation

The world is the source of all suffering and grief (dukkha). Many Hindus consider that human beings are locked into a cycle of repeated rebirths (samsara) into this world, and so there is continual exposure to dukkha. However, reincarnation is not a unanimous belief among Hindus. Many of the greatest movements in modern Hinduism, including the

Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj, reject it.

Moksha (liberation)

The way out of the cycle of rebirths is moksha (liberation).

How to achieve this has been of central concern to Hinduism for thousands of years. Needless to say, there is no way of achieving it that is agreed upon by all. But the ways that have been suggested can be divided into three main groups:

- a. Karma (the way of works) This refers to a constant control over all of one's actions so that one is always acting in accord with Dharma. This involves not only the duties of one's caste but also the wider moral obligations to be found in the Sadharama Dharma.
- b. Jñana (enlightenment) It is avidya (ignorance) or maya (illusion) that prevents man from knowing what is real and what is unreal - especially with regard to that part of himself that is immortal. Through a number of means, such as yoga, man is able to distinguish between what is real and what is not. This enables him to realize his own immortal self and so achieve moksha. This way is followed in particular by the Advaita Vedanta and other schools of speculative philosophy.
- c. Bhakti (loving devotion) This is the path of total surrender to the Lord. Its ideal is the state of constantly remembering the Lord through devotions, prayer and meditations. But those that follow this path do not look solely to themselves for salvation. They believe God to be kind and full of grace. And so they look to God to lift the burden of their sins, for God's grace is able to override the laws of karma.

The Bahá'í Faith

Bahá'ís believe that the Bahá'í Faith does not come not to supplant Hinduism. Rather its aims are:

- to take Hinduism on to a further stage of its evolution;
- to resolve some of the differences that we have noted above;
- and above all to unite Hinduism.

In the next few chapters we will examine the philosophy and the ethical Dharma

in both Hindu and Bahá'í belief. This will enable us to see that there is no conflict between the two. Indeed we will see that the Bahá'í position resolves some of the disagreements in philosophy that exist between the various schools within Hinduism.

In the later chapters, we will describe the social teachings of the Bahá'í Dharma. We will examine the Bahá'í claim that this will take Hinduism on to a further stage of its evolution. Bahá'ís believe that they will bring this about by reforming those elements that are no longer suited to the social conditions of today and by renewing the spiritual force that is inherent in all mankind.

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