

Basics of Hinduism - 14 Questions People Ask about Hinduism and 14 Terrific Answers

[Simple Gems of Sanathan Dharma [courtesy of Himalayan Academy, Kauai's Hindu Monastery]

Have you ever been put on the spot with a provocative question about Hinduism, even one that really shouldn't be so hard to answer? If so, you are not alone. It takes some good preparation and a little attitude adjustment to confidently field queries on your faith--be they from friendly co-workers, students, passers-by.

Question One: Why does Hinduism have so many Gods?

A: Hindus all believe in one Supreme God who created the universe. He is all-pervasive. He created many Gods, highly advanced spiritual beings, to be His helpers. Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, Hindus all worship a one Supreme Being, though by different names. This is because the peoples of India with different languages and cultures have understood the one God in their own distinct way. Through history there arose four principal Hindu denominations—Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. For Sai-vites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Smartas—who see all Deities as reflections of the One God—the choice of Deity is left to the devotee. This liberal Smarta perspective is well known, but it is not the prevailing Hindu view. Due to this diversity, Hindus are profoundly tolerant of other religions, respecting the fact that each has its own pathway to the one God.

One of the unique understandings in Hinduism is that God is not far away, living in a remote heaven, but is inside each and every soul, in the heart and consciousness, waiting to be discovered. This knowing that God is always with us gives us hope and courage. Knowing the One Great God in this intimate and experiential way is the goal of Hindu spirituality. Hinduism is both monotheistic and henotheistic. Hindus were never polytheistic, in the sense that there are many equal Gods. Henotheism (literally "one God") better defines the Hindu view. It means the worship of one God without denying the existence of other Gods. We Hindus believe in the one all-pervasive God who energizes the entire universe. We can see Him in the life shining out of the eyes of humans and all creatures.

Question 2: Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?

A: Yes, we believe the soul is immortal and takes birth time and time again. Through this process, we have experiences, learn lessons and evolve spiritually. Finally we graduate from physical birth. Carnate means "of flesh," and reincarnate means to "reenter the flesh." Yes, Hindus believe in reincarnation. To us, it explains the natural way the soul evolves from immaturity to spiritual illumination. Life and death are realities for all of us. Hinduism believes that the soul is immortal, that it never dies, but inhabits one body after another on the Earth during its evolutionary journey. Like the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly, physical death is a most natural transition for the soul, which survives and, guided by karma, continues its long pilgrimage until it is one with God.

At death the soul leaves the physical body. But the soul does not die. It lives on in a subtle body called the astral body. The astral body exists in the nonphysical dimension called the astral plane, which is also the world we are in during our dreams at night when we sleep. Here we continue to have experiences until we are reborn again in another physical body as a baby. Each reincarnating soul chooses a home and a family which can best fulfill its next step of learning and maturation. After many lifetimes of following dharma, the soul is fully matured in love, wisdom and knowledge of God. There is no longer a need for physical birth, for all lessons have been learned, all karmas fulfilled. That soul is then liberated, freed from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Evolution then continues in the more refined spiritual worlds. Similarly, after we graduate from elementary school we never have to go back to the fifth grade. We have gone beyond that level in understanding. Thus, life's ultimate goal is not money, not clothes, not sex, not power, not food or any other of the instinctive needs. These are natural pursuits, but our real purpose on this Earth is to know, to love and to serve God and the Gods. That leads to the rare and priceless objects of life: enlightenment and liberation.

Question 3: What is Karma?

A: Karma is the universal principle of cause and effect. Our actions, both good and bad, come back to us in the future, helping us to learn from life's lessons and become better people. Karma is one of the natural laws of the mind, just as gravity is a law of matter. Just as God created gravity to bring order to the physical world, He created karma as a divine system of justice that is self-governing and infinitely fair. It automatically creates the appropriate future experience in response to the current action. Karma simply means "action" or "cause and effect." When something happens to us that is apparently unfortunate or unjust, it is not God punishing us. It is the result of our own past actions. The Vedas, Hinduism's revealed scripture, tell us if we sow goodness, we will reap goodness; if we sow evil, we will reap evil.

Karma is basically energy. I throw energy out through thoughts, words and deeds, and it comes back to me, in time, through other people. Karma is our best teacher, for we must always face the consequences of our actions and thus improve and refine our behavior, or suffer if we do not. We Hindus look at time as a circle, as things cycle around again. Karma is a very just law which, like gravity, treats everyone the same. Because we Hindus understand karma, we do not hate or resent people who do us harm. We understand they are giving back the effects of the causes we set in motion at an earlier time. The law of karma puts man at the center of responsibility for everything he does and everything that is done to him.

Question 4: Why do Hindus worship the Cow?

A: The cow represents the giving nature of life to every Hindu. Honoring this gentle animal, who gives more than she takes, we honor all creatures. Hindus regard all living- creatures as sacred—mammals, fishes, birds and more. We acknowledge this reverence for life in our special affection for the cow. At festivals we decorate and honor her, but we do not worship her in the sense that we worship the Deity. To the Hindu, the cow symbolizes all other creatures. The cow is a symbol of the Earth, the nourisher, the ever-giving, undemanding provider. The cow represents life and the sustenance of life. The cow is so

generous, taking nothing but water, grass and grain. It gives and gives and gives of its milk, as does the liberated soul give of his spiritual knowledge. The cow is so vital to life, the virtual sustainer of life, for many humans. The cow is a symbol of grace and abundance. Veneration of the cow instills in Hindus the virtues of gentleness, receptivity and connectedness with nature.

In India, more than 3,000 institutions called Gaushalas, maintained by charitable trusts, care for old and infirm cows. By her docile, tolerant nature, the cow exemplifies the cardinal virtue of Hinduism, noninjury, known as ahimsa. The cow also symbolizes dignity, strength, endurance, maternity and selfless service. In the Vedas, cows represent wealth and joyous Earthly life. From the Rig Veda (4.28.1;6) we read. 'the cows have come and have brought us good fortune. In our stalls, contented, may they stay! May they bring forth calves for us, many-colored, giving milk for Indra each day. You make, O cows, the thin man sleek; to the unlovely you bring beauty. Rejoice our homestead with pleasant lowing. In our assemblies we laud your vigor.'

Question 5: Are Hindus idol worshipers?

A: Hindus do not worship a stone or metal "idol" as God. We worship God through the image. We invoke the presence of God from the higher, unseen worlds, into the image so that we can commune with Him and receive His blessings. The stone or metal deity images in Hindu temples and shrines are not mere symbols of the Gods. They are the form through which their love, power and blessings flood forth into this world. We may liken this mystery to our ability to communicate with others through the telephone. We do not talk to the telephone; rather we use it as a means of communication with another person. Without the telephone, we could not converse across long distances; and without the sanctified icon in the temple, we cannot easily commune with the Deity.

Another way to explain icon worship is to acknowledge that Hindus believe God is everywhere, in all things, whether stone, wood, creatures or people. So, it is not surprising that they feel comfortable worshipping the Divine in His material manifestation.

In Hinduism one of the ultimate attainments is when the seeker transcends the need of all form and symbol. This is the yogi's goal. In this way Hinduism is the least idol-oriented of all the religions of the world. There is no religion that is more aware of the transcendent, timeless, formless, causeless Truth. Nor is there any religion which uses more symbols to represent Truth in preparation for that realization. The human mind releases itself from suffering through the use of forms and symbols that awaken reverence, evoke sanctity and spiritual wisdom.

Question 6: Are Hindus forbidden to eat meat?

Hindus teach vegetarianism as a way to live with a minimum of hurt to other beings. The overlying principle that defines the Hindu answer to this query is Ahimsa—refraining from injuring, physically, mentally or emotionally, anyone or any living creature. The Hindu who wishes to strictly follow the path of non-injury naturally adopts a vegetarian diet. It's a matter of conscience more than anything else.

When we eat meat, fish, fowl and eggs, we absorb the vibration of the instinctive creatures into our nerve system. This chemically alters our consciousness and amplifies our lower nature, which is prone to fear, anger, jealousy, confusion, resentment and the like. Many Hindu swamis advise followers to be well-established vegetarians prior to initiation into mantra, and to remain vegetarian thereafter.

Swamis have learned that families who are vegetarian have fewer problems than those who are not. Poignant scriptural citations counsel against eating meat. The Yajur Veda (36.18) calls for kindness toward all creatures living on the Earth, in the air and in the water. The Tirukural, a 2,200-year-old masterpiece of ethics, states, "When a man realizes that meat is the butchered flesh of another creature, he will abstain from eating it" (257). The Manu Dharma Shastras state, "Having well considered the origin of flesh and the cruelty of fettering and slaying corporeal beings, let one entirely abstain from eating flesh," and "When the diet is pure, the mind and heart are pure." For guidance in this and all matters, Hindus also rely on their own guru, community elders, their own conscience and their knowledge of the benefits of abstaining from meat and enjoying a wholesome vegetarian diet.

Question 7: Do Hindus have a Holy Book?

A: Our "Bible" is called the Veda. The Veda, which means "wisdom," is comprised of four ancient and holy scriptures which all Hindus revere as the revealed word of God. For untold centuries unto today, the Vedas have remained the sustaining force and authoritative doctrine, guiding followers in ways of worship, duty and enlightenment. The Vedas are the meditative and philosophical focus for millions of monks and a billion seekers. Their stanzas are chanted from memory by priests and laymen daily as liturgy in temple worship and domestic ritual. All Hindus wholeheartedly accept the Vedas, yet each draws selectively, interprets freely and amplifies abundantly. Over time, this tolerant allegiance has woven the varied tapestry of Indian Hindu Dharma.

Each of the four Vedas has four sections: Samhitas (hymn collections), Brahmanas (priestly manuals), Aranyakas (forest treatises) and Upanishads (enlightened discourses). The Samhitas and Brahmanas affirm that God is immanent and transcendent and prescribe ritual worship, mantra and devotional hymns to establish communication with the spiritual worlds. The hymns are invocations to the One Divine and to the Divinities of nature, such as the Sun, the Rain, the Wind, the Fire and the Dawn—as well as prayers for matrimony, progeny, prosperity, concord, protection, domestic rites and more.

The Aranyakas and Upanishads outline the soul's evolutionary journey, provide yogic philosophical training and propound realization of man's oneness with God as the destiny of all souls. It is the popular, metaphysical Upanishads that have been most amply and ably translated.

The Vedas advise: "Let there be no neglect of Truth. Let there be no neglect of dharma. Let there be no neglect of welfare. Let there be no neglect of prosperity. Let there be no neglect of study and teaching. Let there be no neglect of the duties to the Gods and the ancestors" (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.1). "United your resolve, un-ited your hearts, may your spirits be one, that you may long-together dwell in unity and concord!" (Rig Veda 10.191.4). "there, where there is no darkness, nor night, nor day, nor being, nor nonbeing, there is the Auspicious One, alone, absolute and eternal.

There is the glorious splendor of that Light from whom in the beginning sprang ancient wisdom" (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4.18). 'taking as a bow the great weapon of the Upanishad, one should put upon it an arrow sharpened by meditation. Stretching it with a thought directed to the essence of That, penetrate that Imperishable as the mark, my friend" (Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.3).

Question 8: Why do many Hindus wear a dot near the middle of their forehead?

A: The dot worn on the forehead is a religious symbol. It represents divine sight and shows that one is a Hindu. For women, it is also a beauty mark. The dot worn between the eyes or in the middle of the forehead is a sign that one is a Hindu.

The dot has a mystical meaning. It represents the third eye of spiritual sight, which sees things the physical eyes cannot see. Hindus seek to awaken their inner sight through yoga. The forehead dot is a reminder to use and cultivate this spiritual vision to perceive and better understand life's inner workings—to see things not just physically, but with the "mind's eye" as well.

Do not be ashamed to wear the bindi on your forehead in any country of the world. Wear it proudly. The forehead dot will distinguish you from all other people as a very special person, a Hindu, a knower of eternal truths. You will never be mistaken as belonging to another nationality or religion, and don't be intimidated when people ask you what the dot means.

Question 9: Are the Gods of Hinduism really married?

A: It is true that God is often depicted with a spouse in our traditional stories. However, on a deeper philosophical level, the Supreme Being and the Gods are neither male nor female and are therefore not married.

In popular, village Hinduism God is represented as male, and God's energy, or Shakti, is personified as His spouse—for example, Vishnu and Lakshmi. In Hindu temples, art and mythology, God is everywhere seen as the beloved, divine couple. Philosophically, however, the caution is always made that God and God's energy are One, and the metaphor of the inseparable divine couple serves only to illustrate this Oneness.

Those who learn the higher Hindu philosophies know that Gods are neither male nor female. In fact, attaining to that Godly level of being is one of the mystical goals of yoga. This is accomplished by blending the feminine and masculine currents, ida and pingala, into the spiritual current, sushumna, in the center of the spine within each individual.

Hindus know that the Gods do not marry, that they are complete within themselves. This unity is depicted in the traditional icon of Ardhanarishvara, Siva as half man and half woman, and in the teaching that Siva and Shakti are one, that Shakti is Siva's energy. Siva is dearly loved as our Father-Mother God. Yet, sexual gender and matrimonial relations are of the physical and emotional realms, whereas the Gods exist in a stratum that far supersedes these levels of life. For that matter, the soul itself is neither male nor female.

Some modern swamis now urge devotees not to pay any attention to Puranic stories about the Gods, saying that they have no relationship with the world today—that they are misleading and confusing and should no longer be taught to the children. Instead, they encourage followers to deepen themselves with the higher philosophies of the Vedic Upanishads and the realizations of Hindu seers.

Question 10: What about caste and untouchability?

A: Caste is the hereditary division of Indian society based on occupation. The lowest class, deemed untouchables, suffer from discrimination and mistreatment. It is illegal in India to discriminate against, abuse or insult anyone on the basis of caste.

Caste, from the Portuguese word 'casta', meaning "clan" or "lineage," refers to two systems within Hindu society. The first is varna, the division of society into four groups: workers, business people, lawmakers/law enforcers and priests. The second is jati, the thousands of occupational guilds whose members follow a single profession. Jati members usually marry within their own jati and follow traditions associated with their jati. In urban areas they often enter other occupations, but still usually arrange marriages within the jati.

Caste is, no doubt, the biggest stick that Hindus get beaten with. It is taught as the defining attribute, or fatal flaw, of Hinduism in Western schools. Untouchability as a formal system shocks Westerners. One response we can make is to separate social stratification from the issue of racial/class discrimination.

Question 11: Is Yoga a Hindu Practice?

A: Deeply rooted in Hindu scripture and belief, Yoga is, and always was, a vital part of Hindu religion and culture. Today it is embraced by tens of millions of non-Hindus seeking its renowned benefits to physical, mental and spiritual health. "Yoga is one of the six systems of Indian philosophy. The word yoga originates from the Sanskrit root yuj, which means 'union.' On the spiritual plane, it means union of the Individual Self with the Universal Self."

To appreciate yoga's spiritual and religious nature, one need only consider each of its eight limbs, or facets. The first is yama, the ethical restraints; of these, the most important is ahimsa, non-injury. The second is niyama, specific religious observances, including puja in one's home shrine and repeating mantras. The third is asana, the widely practiced hatha yoga postures. The remaining five limbs are all related to meditation: pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (sense withdrawal), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (illumination, or oneness with God).

Question 12: How do Hindus view other religions?

A: Hindus honor all religious traditions and the people within them. While regarding our faith as uniquely endowed, we believe that there is no exclusive path, no one way for all. In India, where Hindus are the overwhelming majority, the rights of minority religions have always been honored. Hindus have welcomed, embraced and lived peacefully among other religions for centuries.

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The heart of a religion is its understanding of the soul's relationship to God. Hinduism and most Eastern religions believe that, at the highest level, God and soul are one, inseparable, while Western faiths maintain that Creator and creation are eternally distinct.

Question 13: Why do some Hindu Gods have animal features?

A: In dreams and visions the inner-plane beings have revealed themselves to mankind to be of many forms, expressing many powers. Some appear human, and others, like Ganesha, have animal features. The various Gods in Hinduism's wide-ranging traditions possess distinct personalities and forms based on how they have been seen in visions and how they are depicted in stories and legends. Hindus feel no need to question the fact, for instance, that Lord Ganesha has the head of an elephant. They know He has been seen in this way by rishis and even by ordinary devotees. Did He choose that form to distinguish Himself as the Lord of Obstacles? No one really knows. The important fact is that millions of Hindus worship and receive blessings from the benevolent Elephant-Faced God every day.

One might note the obvious fact that Homo sapiens, too, is an animal species, one among many.

Question 14: Why do Hindus cremate the dead?

A: Hindus arrange swift cremation of the dead, ideally within 24 hours. The fire and accompanying rites sever ties to earthly life and give momentum to the soul for its continuing spiritual journey. Hindus traditionally cremate their dead because a fiery dissolution of the body brings swifter, more complete release of the soul than burial, which preserves the soul's psychic connection to its just-ended earthly life. After death, the departed soul hovers close to the earth plane in its astral body, emotionally attached to the physical body and its old surroundings, still able to see this material world. The funeral rites and burning of the body signify spiritual release, notifying the soul that, in fact, death has come. Some of the funeral chants address the deceased, urging the soul to relinquish attachments and continue its spiritual journey.

Family and friends take an active part in releasing the departed soul: preparing the body, joining in the rituals, transporting the body to the cremation grounds and lighting the pyre. After cremation, the ashes are ceremoniously committed to a river (often the Ganga), lake or ocean, along with garlands and flowers. While the rites allow family a dignified farewell and an opportunity to express grief, all present know there will be other bodies, other lives. Mourning is never suppressed, but scriptures admonish against excessive lamentation and encourage joyous release. The departed soul feels the impact of emotional forces directed at him, and prolonged grieving can hold him in earthly consciousness, inhibiting full transition to the inner worlds. Hindus speak of death as the Great Departure, regarding it as life's most exalted moment. The death anniversary is called Liberation Day.

Cremation is prescribed in the Vedic texts, and Hindu funeral customs are remarkably uniform throughout India. Cremation is also practiced by other Indic faiths, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism, and is becoming popular worldwide. Many believe the body should be disposed of as swiftly and cleanly as possible and that fire is the purest way to return the physical elements to their source. It is less expensive than burial, with a smaller impact on the environment.

Infants and small children, however, are buried in Hindu tradition. Another exception pertains to enlightened souls, for whom the body is often interred in a crypt filled with salt, and a shrine or temple is constructed at the site. Sacred texts assert their remarkable disciplines have endowed the physical body with immense spiritual power, which can radiate for generations, giving blessings through this sacred samadhi, especially if that soul remains aware of the Earth plane.