

A. What is Vaishnavism?

ISKCON

Vaishnavism is one of the major traditions within the broader Vedic, or Hindu, spiritual culture. Unlike some Vedic traditions, Vaishnavas believe that the ultimate reality is personal. Thus, they understand that God is the Supreme all-attractive person, or Krishna. They acknowledge that all living beings are eternal persons, and that all life's problems are rooted in the individual soul's forgetfulness of his or her relationship with God.

Vaishnavas teach that by chanting God's names the soul can reawaken his original spiritual knowledge, live peacefully in this life and return to the spiritual realm, or Vaikuntha, the place of no anxiety, at the time of death.

There are four main sampradayas or Vaishnava lineages all based originally in India. Vaishnavas worship Lord Vishnu, Lord Rama, and Lord Krishna as different manifestations of the same Supreme Lord or one supreme divinity, although the styles of worship and emphasis differ.

The Vaishnava tradition has widely influenced South Asian culture through music, dance, theater and art. Vaishnavism's heartfelt philosophy and poetic sacred texts integrate a profound theology with astute social discourse. The key Vaishnava sastras, or scriptures, are Krishna's teachings in the *Bhagavad-gita*, included in the longer work, the *Mahabharata*, the *Srimad Bhagavatam* (one of the eighteen Puranas), the *Ramayana*, and the more recent 16th Century Sri Chaitanya-charitamrita.

ISKCON is part of the Gaudiya, or Chaitanya Vaishnava, tradition, which hails from the eastern regions of India. Gaudiyas place special emphasis on the teachings of 16th Century saint and avatar, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Gaudiya Vaishnavism in turn gave rise to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which was founded by Srila Prabhupada in 1966. His organization, ISKCON, has increased the awareness and growth of Vaishnavism worldwide since the late 1960s. Today Vaishnava teachings have crossed all geographic borders and proven relevant in addressing humanity's essential needs.

B. Bhakti Yoga

Yoga is more than just a physical exercise. The word "yoga" comes from the Sanskrit root Yuj which means to link up with, or combine. Bhakti is derived from the Sanskrit word bhaj, which means – loving service. Bhakti-yoga means to connect to the Supreme by means of loving devotional service.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, the core spiritual text for ISKCON, describes variety of yoga practices. Among them are karma-yoga (the practice of conscious action), jnana-yoga (philosophical study and contemplation), and hatha-yoga (the practice of yoga-asanas and breathing exercises).

Today, some yoga practitioners consider the physical benefits of yoga to be the end in themselves. But according to the traditional yoga systems, physical exercises are just one step on path of God realization. The *Gita* ultimately prescribes bhakti-yoga (the path of dedication and love) as the culmination of other yoga practices. Bhakti-yoga focuses on developing our dedication, service and love for the Divinity, Lord Krishna.

The path of bhakti-yoga is developed through a variety of activities. These include mantra meditation, or the chanting of the names of God. The chanting is done either individually on beads (japa) or in community by chanting mantras accompanied by music (kirtan). The study of sacred texts such as the *Bhagavad-gita* and *Srimad Bhagavatam*, associating with like-minded spiritual aspirants, eating sanctified vegetarian food, and living in a way that upholds the principles of truthfulness, mercy, austerity, and cleanliness, are all core practices for a life of follower of bhakti.

C. God is a Person

Even though God is widely recognized as the greatest person, His form and personality are not widely known about. Even many theists think that, in the ultimate issue, God is formless. Pictures of Lord Krishna playing a flute are commonly dismissed as quaint, mythological representations of the ineffable, faceless “Divine.”

However, there is overwhelming evidence suggesting that the Supreme Person is not abstract at all. In the Vedas—the oldest and most comprehensive of all world scriptures—one can discover that the Absolute Truth has both impersonal and personal aspects. His eternal, blissful, all-knowing, and all-attractive personality tends to remain hidden behind His all-pervasive majesty and overwhelming greatness.

Since everything in our experience has form and qualities, it makes sense that the source of all sources should also, to an infinite degree. As drops of ocean water have the ocean’s qualities in minute degree, our forms and personalities are infinitesimal samples of the infinite Supreme Person.

Vedic writings describe in detail the unlimited names, activities, opulences, and associates of the Supreme Person. Krishna (“all-attractive”) is how He’s referred to by those who are interested more in His supreme, transcendental personality than in His greatness.

Books such as the [Srimad-Bhagavatam](#) and *Brahma-samhita* contain elaborate accounts of Krishna’s many attractive forms and activities, both in this temporary universe and in the world beyond.

D. Meditation

Meditation is a spiritual practice found in practically all religious and spiritual traditions, although the methods differ.

Traditional yogic systems employ complex meditation techniques, often working with different postures to align our external and subtle selves and focus our minds towards self-realization. To quiet the mind and provide a point of focus, yogis are advised to concentrate on upon mantras including Sanskrit syllables and the names of God.

The Vaishnava tradition recommends the chanting the names of God to be a particularly effective method of spiritual awakening, simultaneously opening us to an incredibly empowering experience.

In this system, meditation has three distinct forms: japa, kirtan and sankirtan. In japa, the meditator individually and softly recites God’s name with the use of beads, similar to a rosary. Kirtan is a public

meditation, in which one loudly sings the names of God accompanied by musical instruments. When performed in a group this is called sankirtan.

This entire process is centred around the recitation of the names of God. The prayer or mantra that ISKCON devotees repeat is called the Maha Mantra, or the “great mantra for deliverance.” It is made up of three words Hare, Krishna and Rama. Hare refers to God’s energy. Krishna and Rama refer to God as the all-attractive and all-powerful one who is the source of all pleasure. Repetition of this mantra awakens the soul and brings strength, peace and happiness. It ultimately connects us with Lord Krishna and reveals our original spiritual life of eternal bliss and knowledge.

E. Vegetarianism

Sometimes referred to as the “kitchen religion,” ISKCON, or the Hare Krishna Movement, believes the art of cooking is a sacred experience. The preparation and eating of food should be based on principles of compassion, non-violence and balanced living. Thus, Krishna devotees advocate a lacto-vegetarian diet, strictly avoiding meat, fish and eggs.

The *Bhagavad-gita* further declares that one who lovingly offers his food to God according to scriptural guidelines becomes freed from sinful reactions, or karma. Stopping animal killing reduces our collective karmic debt, and thus helps alleviate the horrors of war which so plague the modern world.

More than just practicing a vegetarian diet, ISKCON members actively promote vegetarianism. Krishna devotees have authored many highly acclaimed cookbooks, including the best selling *Higher Taste Vegetarian Cookbook*, with more than a million copies in print. As early as 1992, Yamuna Devi was awarded the James Beard Award for Best International Cookbook for her classic vegetarian text *Yamuna’s Table*. And, Australian-born chef Kurma Dasa has not only authored several cookbooks, but his popular “Cooking with Kurma” series was aired on public television stations around the world.

In addition, there are nearly 100 Hare Krishna restaurants around the world including New York, Los Angeles, New Dehli, Mumbai, Kolkata, Rome, London, Lima, Buenos Aires, Durban, Nairobi, Sydney and Melbourne. ISKCON temples also host vegetarian cooking classes, and millions have been exposed to, and encouraged to adopt, a vegetarian diet at ISKCON temples’ weekly Sunday Feast programs.

ISKCON also distributes over one million plates of free sanctified vegetarian food daily through its Food for Life program, making it the world’s largest free vegetarian food relief program.

Several ISKCON farm communities like the Gita Nagari farm in rural Pennsylvania and Bhaktivedanta Manor outside London produce cruelty free or ahimsa milk, ensuring that no cows, calves or bulls are slaughtered in the production of milk, but are instead treated with respect, love and care.

F. Studying Sacred Texts

1. Bhagavad-Gita

No sacred treatise, has a setting as intriguing as the Bhagavad Gita. The dialogue between the princely warrior Arjuna and Lord Krishna, the Supreme Godhead before the onset of the Mahabharata War is universally renowned as the jewel of India's spiritual wisdom.

Paralyzed by the fear of killing his kinsmen, friends and teachers in the opposite army, Arjuna decided not to fight putting aside his social duty as Kshatriya (warrior). Krishna, who agreed to become the driver of Arjuna's chariot, eloquently explains him on the battlefield about His duties of being a warrior. The conversation moves to a series of questions and answers about metaphysical concepts such as soul, relationship with God, liberation, Karma Yoga (the principle of non-attached action), Gyaan Yoga (knowledge) and Bhakti Yoga (devotion).

In translating the Gita, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada has unlocked all the secrets of the ancient knowledge of the Gita and placed them before us as an exciting opportunity for self-improvement and spiritual fulfillment. The Bhagavad Gita As It Is the largest selling edition of Gita in the Western world and translated in over 76 languages.

“When doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and I see not one ray of hope on the horizon, I turn to Bhagavad-Gita and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. Those who meditate on the Gita will derive fresh joy and new meanings from it every day.” **Mahatma Gandhi**

2. Vedas

The word Veda can be traced to the sanskrit word vid which means “to know” or “knowledge.” The Vedic texts contain information on varied topics: from medicine to cosmology, from techniques of yoga and meditation to explanation of lessons in governmental organisation and military protocols.

Written by Lord Vyasadeva, the vedas are divided into four books Rig Veda (earliest sacred hymns of Vedas), Sama Veda (the Vedas of melodies), Yajur Veda (Rituals) and Atharva Veda (the Vedas of incantations.). The Vedas also included Upanishads, numerous Sutras (books of concise truth) and the Vedangas (auxiliary science related with Vedic study like astronomy, astrology and phonetics.)

In addition, there are Upavedas (sciences not directly related to Vedic study) like Ayurveda (study of holistic medicine) and Gandharva-Veda study of music. It also included Puranas such as Srimad Bhagavatam and epics like as Mahabharata and Ramayanas.

According to the Vaishnava tradition, this knowledge was passed down, from master to disciple in disciplic succession or parampara.

G. Reincarnation

Everyone at some time in life wonders what happens after death. Throughout history, some of the most thoughtful minds have advocated that life does not end with the death of our body, but continues on via a process known as reincarnation. In the Western world, followers of the Orphic religion in ancient Greece were the first known exponents of reincarnation. They were succeeded by Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and a host of other philosophers.

The Vedic literature of India advocates that the soul, or atma, gives life to the body. Life does not arise from a particular combination of material elements as some modern scientists theorize. At the time of death, we leave one body and enter a new one. That is called reincarnation.

The concept is not as alien as it might seem. We can observe that we change from one body to another throughout our lifetime. Our body at birth is completely different from our adult body. Yet throughout these changes, the conscious self remains the same. Similarly, the conscious self remains the same at death and transfers from one body to the next in the cycle of reincarnation.

Our present body is the result of a long series of actions and reactions in previous lives. The law that governs this is known as karma: every action has a reaction. Our previous actions have produced our present body, and our current actions will determine our next body.

Only in the human form can we free ourselves from the endless cycle of reincarnation, of birth and death, by re-establishing our eternal, loving relationship with Lord Krishna. As Krishna states in Bhagavad Gita 8.16, "From the highest planet in the material world down to the lowest, all are places of misery wherein repeated birth and death take place. But one attains to My abode.. never takes birth again."

H. Karma

Ever wondered why bad things happen to good people? Why we suffer? Why some days are awesome and others morose? If God exists, why does He keep quiet about it? The answer to all the above questions is karma.

Karma is one of those topics that many people know about, but few understand the intricacies of it. In literal terms, "karma" means "activity" and the law of karma regulates the reactions to our activities. If we act in good, or pious ways, we reap good reactions. If we act in impious, sinful, or destructive ways, we reap bad reactions in the future. Christian theology explains, "As ye sow so ye shall ye reap" while in physics karma is expressed by Newton's Law, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."

Karmic reactions include not only things that happen to us, but determine our health, wealth, intelligence, physical appearance, and social status, as well as our personalities and inclinations. While we have some degree of freedom to choose our current actions, our choices are influenced by our natures, or personalities, which have developed from our previous actions.

Karma thus locks us up in a cycle of action and subsequent reaction. As long as we are in this cycle, we will experience both happiness and distress. Even if we act in a pious way, we destine ourselves

to accept another material body at death to enjoy the reactions to our materially good actions. As long as we accept a material body we can not avoid the miseries of disease, old age, and death.

Fortunately karma is temporary. We can break free from its bonds by performing spiritual acts in service to Krishna. Such acts of devotion, or bhakti-yoga, purify the soul and gradually awaken our spiritual knowledge and innate love for Krishna. Thus, both our karma and our long-standing desire to enjoy life within the illusory material world—the root cause of our bondage—are destroyed.

I. What is ISKCON?

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), otherwise known as the Hare Krishna movement, includes five hundred major centers, temples and rural communities, nearly one hundred affiliated vegetarian restaurants, thousands of *namahattas* or local meeting groups, a wide variety of community projects, and millions of congregational members worldwide. Although less than fifty years on the global stage, ISKCON has expanded widely since its founding by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda in New York City in 1966.

ISKCON belongs to the *Gaudiya-Vaishnava sampradāya*, a monotheistic tradition within the Vedic or Hindu culture. Philosophically it is based on the Sanskrit texts *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Bhagavat Purana*, or *Srimad Bhagavatam*. *These are the historic texts of the devotional bhakti yoga tradition, which teaches that the ultimate goal for all living beings is to reawaken their love for God, or Lord Krishna, the “all-attractive one”.*

God is known across the world by many names including Allah, Jehovah, Yahweh, Rama, etc. ISKCON devotees chant God's names in the form of the *maha-mantra*, or the great prayer for deliverance: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

Many leading academics have highlighted ISKCON's authenticity. Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University, describes the movement as “*a tradition that commands a respected place in the religious life of humankind.*” In the 1980s Dr. A. L. Basham, one of the world's authorities on Indian history and culture, wrote of ISKCON that, “*It arose out of next to nothing in less than twenty years and has become known all over the West. This, I feel, is a sign of the times and an important fact in the history of the Western world.*”

ISKCON's founder, Srila Prabhupada, has drawn appreciation from scholars and religious leaders alike for his remarkable achievement in presenting India's Vaishnava spiritual culture in a relevant manner to contemporary Western and worldwide audiences.

Members of ISKCON practice bhakti-yoga in their homes and also worship in temples. They also promote bhakti-yoga, or Krishna Consciousness, through festivals, the performing arts, yoga seminars, public chanting, and the distribution of the society's literatures. ISKCON members have also opened hospitals, schools, colleges, eco-villages, free food distribution projects, and other institutions as a practical application of the path of devotional yoga.

Members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) believe that the Earth's resources, nature, and our own bodies are all sacred gifts from God and should be treated responsibly. The Vaishnava philosophy that the Hare Krishna movement is rooted in teaches that all living beings are interrelated through Krishna, the common father. Krishna devotees respect the animals' right to live, and practice a diet that seeks to minimize violence and exploitation. Thus they see vegetarianism – with its countless documented ecological, social, and health benefits – as most conducive to a compassionate, environmentally friendly, and wholesome way of life.

Sometimes referred to as “the kitchen religion,” the Hare Krishna movement actively promotes the benefits of vegetarianism. ISKCON temples offer visitors delicious sanctified vegetarian food, and host weekly Sunday open house programs that culminate in a free multi-course feast.

The Krishna movement has established more than 100 vegetarian restaurants around the world, and has distributed more than 300 million nutritious vegetarian meals to the disadvantaged through its affiliate, Food for Life. Krishna devotees regularly teach vegetarian cooking classes at their temples and local universities, and several ISKCON members are authors of acclaimed cookbooks. Australian-born chef Kurma Dasa's popular “Cooking with Kurma” series has aired on public television stations around the world, and ISKCON member Yamuna Devi was awarded the 1992 James Beard Award for Best International Cookbook for her vegetarian text *Yamuna's Table*.

While some Krishna devotees are vegan, most ISKCON members are lacto vegetarians, avoiding meat, fish, and eggs, but eating dairy products. All Hare Krishna devotees oppose exploitative treatment of animals, especially the cow. Traditional Indian culture favored organic farming and gave distinctive recognition to the cow, who provides nourishing milk, and the bull, who plows fields, calling for these gentle creatures to be protected. This custom continues today in North America at several ISKCON rural communities, which have made cow protection a primary focus. These communities educate the public, run cruelty-free dairies, and allow well-wishers to help save cows from slaughter through an innovative “Adopt a Cow” sponsorship program.

ISKCON's founder, Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada included in the movement's mission statement an aim to “bring the members closer together for the purpose of teaching a simpler, more natural way of life.” To that end, internationally some ISKCON members are developing agrarian communities. These communities aim at self-sufficiency, exploring self-contained techniques such as natural pest and weed controls, the production of alternate fuel, waste management, and crop rotation.

In keeping with the Krishna conscious ideal of “simple living and high thinking,” these ISKCON members make it their goal to produce only what they need and to avoid selfish excesses, thus providing a model for a conscientious spiritually-centered society.