

Hinduism: An Overview

Hinduism is the major religion of the Indian sub-continent, it is also known as Sanatana Dharma, or the "Eternal Way," it is our planet's original and oldest living religion, with over one billion adherents spread around the world. Today it has four main denominations: Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism, each with hundreds of lineages. They represent a broad range of beliefs, practices and mystic goals, but virtually all concur on certain bedrock concepts.

All Hindus worship one Supreme Reality, though they call it by many names. There is no eternal hell, no damnation, in Hinduism, and no intrinsic evil--no satanic force that opposes the will of God. Hindus believe that the cosmos was created out of God and is permeated by Him--a Supreme Being who both is form and pervades form, who creates, sustains and destroys the universe only to recreate it again in unending cycles.

Hinduism is unique among the world's religions. To begin with, it is mankind's oldest spiritual declaration, the very fountainhead of faith on the planet. Hinduism's venerable age has seasoned it to maturity. It is the only religion which is not founded in a single historic event or prophet, but which itself precedes recorded history. Hinduism has been called the "cradle of spirituality" and the "mother of all religions," partially because it has influenced virtually every major religion and partly because it can absorb all other religions, honor and embrace their scriptures, their saints, their philosophy. This is possible because Hinduism looks compassionately on all genuine spiritual effort and knows unmistakably that all souls are evolving toward union with the Divine, and all are destined, without exception, to achieve spiritual enlightenment and liberation in this or a future life.

Each soul is free to find his own way, whether by devotion, austerity, meditation, yoga or selfless service.

Hinduism's three pillars are temple worship, scripture and the guru-disciple tradition. Hinduism strongly declares the validity of the three worlds of existence--physical, astral and spiritual--and the myriad Gods and Devas residing within the inner worlds. Festivals, pilgrimage, chanting of holy hymns and home worship are dynamic practices. Family life is strong and precious. Love, nonviolence, good conduct and the law of dharma define the Hindu path.

Hindus are generously tolerant of other faiths. Hinduism explains that the soul reincarnates until all karmas are resolved and God Realization is attained. All souls, without exception, will attain this highest spiritual summit, though it may take many lives. This is a mystical religion, leading devotees to personally experience its eternal truths within themselves, finally reaching the pinnacle of consciousness where man and God are forever one.

Hindus prefer cremation of the body upon death, rather than burial, believing that the soul lives on and will inhabit a new body on Earth.

While we have many sacred scriptures, all sects ascribe the highest authority to the scriptures called the Vedas and Agamas. Hinduism has tens of thousands of holy temples and shrines, mostly in India, but now located around the world. Its spiritual core is its holy men and women who have dedicated their lives to full-time service, devotion and God Realization, and to proclaiming the eternal truths of the Sanatana Dharma.

Nine Beliefs of Hinduism

Our beliefs determine our thoughts and attitudes about life, which in turn direct our actions. By our actions, we create our destiny. Beliefs about sacred matters--God, soul and cosmos--are essential to one's approach to life.

Hindus believe many diverse things, but there are a few bedrock concepts on which most Hindus concur. The following nine beliefs, though not exhaustive, offer a simple summary of Hindu spirituality.

- 1.**Hindus believe in a one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.
- 2.**Hindus believe in the divinity of the four Vedas, the world's most ancient scripture, and venerate the Agamas as equally revealed. These primordial hymns are God's word and the bedrock of Sanatana Dharma, the eternal religion.
- 3.**Hindus believe that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution.
- 4.**Hindus believe in karma, the law of cause and effect by which each

individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words and deeds.

5.Hindus believe that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved, and moksha, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, is attained. Not a single soul will be deprived of this destiny.

6.Hindus believe that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments and personal devotionals create a communion with these Devas and Gods.

7.Hindus believe that an enlightened master, or satguru, is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, pilgrimage, self-inquiry, meditation and surrender in God.

8.Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice ahimsa, noninjury, in thought, word and deed.

9.Hindus believe that no religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine paths are facets of God's Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

Hinduism, the world's oldest religion, has no beginning--it precedes recorded history. It has no human founder. It is a mystical religion, leading the devotee to personally experience the Truth within, finally reaching the pinnacle of consciousness where man and God are one. Hinduism has four main denominations--Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism.

Herewith are ancient Vedic principles from humanity's most profound faith, preserved and collected over five thousand years ago; almost all of the principles are prescribed for practice by the major religions and faiths of the world.

Hinduism's Code of Conduct

Twenty keys for spiritual living in contemporary times

Ten Vedic Restraints - YAMA

Yama 1 - Noninjury, Ahimsa

Practice noninjury, not harming others by thought, word or deed, even in your dreams. Live a kindly life, revering all beings as expressions of the One Divine energy. Let go of fear and insecurity, the sources of abuse. Knowing that harm caused to others unfailingly returns to oneself, live peacefully with God's creation. Never be a source of dread, pain or injury. Follow a vegetarian diet.

Yama 2 - Truthfulness, Satya

Adhere to truthfulness, refraining from lying and betraying promises. Speak only that which is true, kind, helpful and necessary. Knowing that deception creates distance, don't keep secrets from family or loved ones. Be fair, accurate and frank in discussions, a stranger to deceit. Admit your failings. Do not engage in slander, gossip or backbiting. Do not bear false witness against another.

Yama 3 - Nonstealing, Asteya

Uphold the virtue of nonstealing, neither thieving, coveting nor failing to repay debt. Control your desires and live within your means. Do not use borrowed resources for unintended purposes or keep them past due. Do not gamble or defraud others. Do not renege on promises. Do not use others' names, words, resources or rights without permission and acknowledgement.

Yama 4 - Divine Conduct, Brahmacharya

Practice divine conduct, controlling lust by remaining celibate when single and faithful in marriage. Before marriage, use vital energies in study, and after marriage in creating family success. Don't waste the sacred force by promiscuity in thought, word or deed. Be restrained with the opposite sex. Seek holy company. Dress and speak modestly. Shun pornography, sexual humor and violence.

Yama 5 - Patience, Kshama

Exercise patience, restraining intolerance with people and impatience with circumstances. Be agreeable. Let others behave according to their nature, without adjusting to you. Don't argue, dominate conversations or interrupt others. Don't be in a hurry. Be patient with children and the elderly. Minimize stress by keeping worries at bay. Remain poised in good times and bad.

Yama 6 - Steadfastness, Dhriti

Foster steadfastness, overcoming nonperseverance, fear, indecision and changeableness. Achieve your goals with a prayer, purpose, plan, persistence and push. Be firm in your decisions. Avoid sloth and procrastination. Develop willpower, courage and industriousness. Overcome obstacles. Never carp or complain. Do not let opposition or fear of failure result in changing strategies.

Yama 7 - Compassion, Daya

Practice compassion, conquering callous, cruel and insensitive feelings toward all beings. See God everywhere. Be kind to people, animals, plants and the Earth itself. Forgive those who apologize and show true remorse. Foster sympathy for others' needs and suffering. Honor and assist those who are weak, impoverished, aged or in pain. Oppose family abuse and other cruelties.

Yama 8 - Honesty, Arjava

Maintain honesty, renouncing deception and wrongdoing. Act honorably even in hard times. Obey the laws of your nation and locale. Pay your taxes. Be straightforward in business. Do an honest day's work. Do not bribe or accept bribes. Do not cheat, deceive or circumvent to achieve an end. Be frank with yourself. Face and accept your faults without blaming them on others.

Yama 9 - Moderate Appetite, Mitahara

Be moderate in appetite, neither eating too much nor consuming meat, fish, shellfish, fowl or eggs. Enjoy fresh, wholesome vegetarian foods that vitalize the body. Avoid junk food. Drink non-alcoholic beverages in moderation. Eat at regular times, only when hungry, at a moderate pace, never between meals, in a disturbed atmosphere or when upset. Follow a simple diet, avoiding rich or fancy fare.

Yama 10 - Purity, Saucha

Uphold the ethic of purity, avoiding impurity in mind, body and speech. Maintain a clean, healthy body. Keep a pure, uncluttered home and workplace. Act virtuously. Keep good company, never mixing with adulterers, thieves or other impure people. Keep away from pornography and violence. Never use harsh, angered or indecent

language. Worship devoutly. Meditate daily.

Ten Vedic Practices - NIYAMA

Niyama 1 - Remorse, Hri

Allow yourself the expression of remorse, being modest and showing shame for misdeeds. Recognize your errors, confess and make amends. Sincerely apologize to those hurt by your words or deeds. Resolve all contention before sleep. Seek out and correct your faults and bad habits. Welcome correction as a means to bettering yourself. Do not boast. Shun pride and pretension.

Niyama 2 - Contentment, Santosha

Nurture contentment, seeking joy and serenity in life. Be happy, smile and uplift others. Live in constant gratitude for your health, your friends and your belongings, Don't complain about what you don't possess. Identify with the eternal You, rather than mind, body or emotions. Keep the mountaintop view that life is an opportunity for spiritual progress.

Niyama 3 - Giving, Dana

Be generous to a fault, giving liberally without thought of reward. Tithe, offering one tenth of your gross income (dashamamsha), as God's money, to temples, ashrams and spiritual organizations. Approach the temple with offerings. Visit gurus with gifts in hand. Donate religious literature. Feed and give to those in need. Bestow your time and talents without seeking praise. Treat guests as God.

Niyama 4 - Faith, Astikya

Cultivate an unshakable faith. Believe firmly in God, guru and your path to enlightenment. Trust in the words of the masters, the scriptures and traditions. Practice devotion and sadhana to inspire experiences that build advanced faith. Be loyal to your lineage, one with your satguru. Shun those who try to break your faith by argument and accusation.

Niyama 5 - Worship, Ishvara-Pujana

Cultivate devotion through daily worship and meditation. Set aside one room of your home as God's shrine. Offer fruit, flowers or food daily. Learn a simple puja/prayer and the chants. Meditate after each puja/prayer. Visit your shrine before and after leaving the house. Worship in heartfelt devotion, clearing the inner channels to God, Gods and guru so their grace flows toward you and loved ones.

Niyama 6 - Scriptural Listening, Siddhanta Shravana

Eagerly hear the scriptures, study the teachings and listen to the wise of your lineage. Choose a guru, follow his path and don't waste time exploring other ways. Read, study and, above all, listen to readings and dissertations by which wisdom flows from knower to seeker. Avoid secondary texts that preach violence. Revere and study the revealed scriptures, the Vedas and Agamas.

Niyama 7 - Cognition, Mati

Develop a spiritual will and intellect with your satguru's guidance. Strive for knowledge of God, to awaken the light within. Discover the hidden lesson in each experience to develop a profound understanding of life and yourself. Through meditation, cultivate intuition by listening to the still, small voice within, by understanding the subtle sciences, inner worlds and mystical texts.

Niyama 8 - Sacred Vows, Vrata

Embrace religious vows, rules and observances and never waver in fulfilling them. Honor vows as spiritual contracts with your soul, your community, with God and guru. Take vows to harness the instinctive nature. Fast periodically. Pilgrimage yearly. Uphold your vows strictly, be they marriage, monasticism, nonaddiction, tithing, loyalty to a lineage, Vegetarianism, non-smoking or non-alcoholism.

Niyama 9 - Recitation, Japa

Chant your holy mantra daily, reciting the sacred sound, word or phrase given by your guru. Bathe first, quiet the mind and concentrate fully to let japa harmonize, purify and uplift you. Heed your instructions and chant the prescribed repetitions without fail. Live free of anger so that japa strengthens your higher nature. Let japa quell emotions and

quiet the rivers of thought.

Niyama 10 - Austerity, Tapas

Practice austerity, serious disciplines, penance and sacrifice. Be ardent in worship, meditation and pilgrimage. Atone for misdeeds through penance (prayashchitta), such as 108 prostrations or fasting. Perform self-denial, giving up cherished possessions, money or time. Fulfill severe austerities at special times, under a satguru's guidance, to ignite the inner fires of self-transformation.

–