

# JAGRITI

EDUCATIONAL ARM OF THE HINDU CULTURAL CENTRE OF LONDON ONTARIO

The screenshot shows a Netscape browser window displaying the website for The Hindu Cultural Centre of London Ontario. The browser's address bar contains the URL <http://www.hcclondon.ca/>. The website's header includes the text "The Hindu Cultural Centre Of London Ontario" and the URL [www.HCCLondon.ca](http://www.HCCLondon.ca). A navigation menu on the left lists: About Us, The Mandir, Events Calendar, Publications, Youth Groups, Resources, Site Links, and Contact Us. Below the menu is a logo with the text "YOU BEGINS THE DESIRE TO KNOW REALITY". The main content area features a photograph of the Hindu Mandir building with the caption "Click On The Door To Enter The Mandir". Below the photo is a welcome message: "Welcome To The Hindu Cultural Centre Of London Ontario". At the bottom, there are buttons for: About Us, The Mandir, HCC Events, Publications, Youth Groups, Resources, Site Links, and Contact Us. The browser's status bar at the bottom indicates "Document Done (3.68 secs)".

SPRING '04  
ISSUE



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## Message From The President

I came to London in December of 1984 to teach at the University of Western Ontario and, in the fall of 1985, Bimla and our two very young children joined me. We moved to a townhouse in Byron, and late one afternoon, we noticed a group of Indians going into a community hall on Commissioners Road, and this was how we discovered the Hindu Cultural Centre of London Ontario.

We were welcomed with much affection by members of the Board and other senior members of the community. These individuals, based on my recollection, included such stalwarts as; Mr. Vijay Kumar, Mr. P.L. Gupta, Mr. H. K. Sharma, Mr. N. P. Sharma, Mr. B. Saxena, Mr. A. Nahata, Dr. Asha Bhardwaj, Mr. Jai Desai, Mr. S. Verman, Mr. V. Khanna, Dr. P. C. Shah and others. Professor Balse came to speak to us about Hinduism from time to time, and every one treated him with reverence. Mr. Kailash Dhir spent considerable time working with the children. So impressed was I with the activities of HCC that I volunteered my services to the then President Mr. P.L Gupta. As the time for the change of office bearers approached, I was surprised that Mr. Gupta suggested that he would nominate me for the position of secretary of the organization under the leadership of Mr. Chetram Singh, who was completely unknown to me at that time. Like me, he was also new to the Board. I was reluctant to accept this magnitude of responsibility but Mr. Gupta persisted and in 1988, I was elected to the Board as the Secretary. From then on, Bimla and I got involved in this great organization of ours and we have since been grateful that we were afforded the opportunity to serve the Hindu community that had the wisdom and foresight, at that time, to handover the helm of HCC to relatively new people to London.

Our first objective was to construct a building that we could call our own so that we could stop using rented halls, many of which were unsuitable for our form of worship. With a population of about 150 Hindu families in London at that time, when the Sod Turning Ceremony took place on June 26, 1989, many individuals saw our objective as a pipe dream. But we persisted and every member of this community contributed to this project by cash, voluntary labor and in other ways. On Diwali day on November 18, 1990, the temple on 62 Charterhouse Crescent was completed and, at its opening, the organization was debt free. This is a real tribute to the magnanimity and generosity of the Hindu community who made this dream a reality. This community has grown substantially since then and is today stronger than it ever was.

The present Board is very strong and composed of individuals who are deeply devoted to bringing excellence to the management of the Centre. It is our stated goal to be always transparent in the governance of HCC and we encourage all members to freely express their ideas or concerns to us at any time. After all, HCC is yours and you elected us to manage the organization on your behalf.

Some of the priorities of the Board's for the coming year include: the repair, refurbishing and painting of the inside of the building, instituting measures to bring about and maintain greater unity within the community, and to provide the mechanism which will allow individuals to freely communicate their ideas and thoughts with the Board on all matters. For the future, we have to build a dome above the Altar area of the main prayer hall, as was envisaged by the Architects at the time of construction. This will form part of our Strategic Plan for the future but in the short term, much needed repairs, renovations and painting have to be among our immediate priorities.

The time has come to start grooming our youths to take over leadership of HCC since the upkeep of Sanatan Dharma in the future will be left in their hands. Experienced members of the community must work along with the youths, guide them and ultimately hand over the reigns of HCC to them. If Hinduism is to remain strong and vibrant in this area, it is crucial that the community should remain unified. We are all aware of the saying that "United we stand and divided we fall". Let us bury our egos and urge for personal gratification and glory and work as a united Hindu community to keep the flag of Sanantan Dharma flying very high in London and South Western Ontario.

I will conclude this message of mine with a very powerful Doha (दोहा) that declares that negativity has no place at all.

बुरा जो देखन मैं गया, बुरा न मिलया कोय।  
जो दिल दूढ़ा आपनो, मुझ से बुरा न कोय ॥

The state of the Centre is good. May Lord Vishnu continue to bless us all.

आनंद विजय सिंह  
Dr. Anand V. Singh, Ph.D., P.Eng.  
President, HCC London

## Editorial - Full Circle or Thereabouts...

After somewhat of a long hiatus, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Spring 2004 Issue of HCC's Jagriti Magazine. We hope you will enjoy reading it and will derive some pleasure and benefit from the articles contained therein. The contributors have worked very hard in providing their articles, and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

Well, the irony of my writing another editorial for this magazine is not entirely lost on me. This one comes some years after the last one, and as I reflect on the emergence of another Issue, I consider that nothing has changed for me with respect to Jagriti, but the World has changed for and around me. I still sit, as I did back in my bachelor days, in the middle of the night, alone in the darkness and quiet of my home, my face lit by the flicker of my computer monitor as I write this Editorial and contemplate the endless hours of production work yet to come. This time, however, I type with one hand, my other hand cradling my youngest daughter, who had awoken all of a sudden, but now, on my shoulder, once again slips back, ever deeper into the arms of Hypnos and Morpheus. I am once more, alone with Jagriti.

I have had a very long association with this Magazine and, I must admit, I have developed somewhat of a 'love-hate' relationship with it. I dearly love what the Magazine stands for, what it has become and what we, as a Community, could make it again. I enjoy the creative process of putting it together, and the flurry of activity associated with its production and the anticipation of its printing.

What I do not enjoy as much as I am told I should, is the seemingly endless process of gathering articles together to comprise an issue. That is a process, nay even an art, I am quite happy to leave to others far more suited to this task, than am I. Thankfully, for this issue, we have been blessed with significant content contributions as well as a diligent committee, and so, I was largely able to stay out of the gathering process! I trust we will live up to your expectations with our current effort, and that you will all be encouraged to contribute to future issues.

This issue, at least in my mind, marks a milestone for both the Magazine and our Community. The magazine has a fresh new look and for the first time since its inception, Jagriti will appear both in print as well as on-line on our Website: <http://www.HCCLondon.ca> While this may not be such a milestone in any of your minds, for us, it marks a first step on a long journey of a continued evolution of our community. We hope, that through the print and electronic mediums, we will be able to reach out to a wider audience, locally, nationally and internationally, and continue to showcase the talents and capabilities of our community.

It is also my hope, (no doubt, as with past editorial committees as well), that we will be able to produce Jagriti on a more regular schedule. I understand the realities of this situation only too well, but as always, I remain hopeful & optimistic.

Jagriti, however, does not simply magically appear. It can take approximately 150-200 hours, to produce an issue, exclusive of printing, with somewhere between half and three quarters of that time being spent in editing, design and layout. A lot of time, work & energy are put into the production of this magazine, and its success is predicated on your articles, your advertisements - your support.

Jagriti is a symbol of what we can do when we work together and contribute unselfishly to a good cause. The Magazine, (and potentially our committee as well), is not without its faults, but Jagriti is, and should be, a centerpiece for the exchange of knowledge, experiences, philosophy, culture, religion, humour, news and values. Above all however, it is, as its byline suggests, an educational vehicle of *The Hindu Cultural Centre of London Ontario*. It is my firm hope and desire to make this a publication of value, of interest, of joy, and a magazine of which we can all be truly proud. Ultimately, it is not me who will make this happen - it is you, our Community, who will prove me right or wrong. If you will indulge me for one more moment, while I borrow some words from my Father and many of the parents in our Community, we are doing this for our children - we are trying to establish them in their community and to provide them with a firm grounding in the culture and traditions of the richest civilization in the history of this planet.

I very truly feel that we have an opportunity to make significant impacts on the cultural mosaic of The City of London, and to establish ourselves as one of the anchor communities in the area. However, as much as I may voice an opinion, it is up to all of us to do our part. Please help us in this endeavour - let us celebrate our achievements, learn from our differences, build on what we have accomplished to date and, above all, don't make me come out there and ask you for articles - contribute generously to your magazine - *Jagriti!*

Dr. Dev R. Sainani, Ph.D., P.Eng.  
Chair, Publications Committee, HCC London

*"If there is one place on the face of earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India."*

*- French Scholar, Romain Rolland*

# HCC Youth Scholarship Award

The HCC has recently embarked upon the formation of a “Youth Scholarship Award”, the objective of which is to recognize and promote excellence in academic, extra curricular activities and community participation of our youth graduating from high schools and to encourage them to pursue higher studies.

A terms of reference document and application form are available at our Mandir, and the documents are posted on our website, and may be downloaded, filled out and submitted by all interested & eligible parties. The document may be retrieved by following the ‘Youth Groups’ link on the main page.

## OBJECTIVES

The objective of the awards program is to recognize and promote excellence in academic, extra-curricular activities and community participation of our youth graduating from high schools and encourage them to pursue higher studies.

## CATEGORIES OF SCHOLARSHIPS.

The scholarships known as “ H.C.C. LONDON Scholarships “ will be awarded in the following categories:

1. **Excellence Award:** One award will be given to eligible person obtaining highest score in the best six courses of Grade 12 courses.
2. **General Achievement Award:** One award will be given to the eligible graduating youth based on his or her academic and extracurricular achievements.

**In all cases participation in H.C.C. activities is a prerequisite.**

Note: The exact amount of each award will be finalized by the committee depending on the amount of funds available. All H.C.C. London youths who have completed the Grade 12 high school are encouraged to apply. The award is for the year graduating in June of that year.

## ELIGIBILITY:

1. Youth members of H.C.C. or the children of H.C.C. members in good standing are eligible for consideration. Definition of good standing is as defined in H.C.C. constitution.
2. Applicants shall have successfully completed at least 6 Credits, with at least one being in the academic year of the award.
3. All extra curricular activities carried out in the schools and community at large in any previous year are also eligible for consideration.
4. Applicants must submit the completed application form and copies of any supporting documents together with the application.
5. The decisions of the H.C.C.London board are final.
6. The completed application together with all supporting documents shall reach H.C.C.London on or before **August 31<sup>st</sup>** of the award year to H.C.C.London. The awards will be announced during the Annual Diwali function every year.

# Symbolism Of Hindu Gods: NARAYANA

Vijay Kumar

Signs and symbols form an important function in all religion, more so in Hinduism, for it is primarily a Wisdom Religion. Anyone who studies Hindu scripture is struck by the unique blend of the highest philosophy of Vedanta on one hand and gross fetish worship and the myths on the other. Often students wonder how a Vedantic scholar with firm conviction in one and only One Reality can go to a temple and worship various gods and goddesses. Is Hinduism monotheistic or polytheistic? They are confounded, even a western educated Hindu is confused at times.

Another aspect of the same phenomena is the ready acceptance of innumerable stories of various gods and goddesses in the Puranas, which are very popular with the Hindu masses. Many of these stories are absurd and ridiculous, yet not only the illiterate but highly educated read these stories with great devotion and derive real spiritual inspiration from them. However, when an ardent scholar reads these accounts, he does not find them absurd, but knows that he is reading an allegorical account of great mystery. Symbolism is defined as, the pictorial representation of an idea or a thought. A symbol, therefore, is a recorded parable, and a parable a spoken symbol. A series of symbols is known as Emblem. A story in which people, things, happenings have a hidden or symbolic meaning is called an Allegory. Allegories are used for teaching or explaining abstract ideas and moral principles. Besides symbols Hindu sages use another technique called *anthropomorphization*, from ‘anthropos’ meaning man. That is an act of giving gods a human form and human attributes or qualities.

Symbols are used in two ways:

1. For general information of the public, such as road signs and signs directing the public to particular locations like food areas, rest rooms, etc.
2. To hide the truth from the general public.

The latter technique is employed in religion, since the abstract ideas of the religious philosophy are beyond the comprehension of the common man. Hence the truth is hidden from the masses. It is given only when one is ready and is initiated into the mysteries of nature and God by the great Masters. In St. Matthew 13, verses 11-13 of the New Testament (Bible), Jesus said, ‘I talk to the masses (multitude) in parables and give the truth to my closest disciples for they know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven’.

For the purpose of this article we shall take an allegory from the Puranas, chiefly Vishnu Purana and Bhagavata Purana, and try to unlock the profound mystery enshrined therein.

Most of us are familiar with the pictorial representation of Lord Vishnu, which is found hung on the walls of many Hindu homes (see picture overleaf). The picture symbolizes the closing

of the period of *dissolution* (Pralaya), wherein the Four-armed Vishnu is said to rest in Yogic Sleep (Yoganidra) on the folds of the serpent Ananta-Shesha, the Serpent of Eternity – the couch of Vishnu during Pralaya, with its five-headed or seven-headed (sometimes thousand-headed) hood over the Lords' Head. This couch is floating in the foaming deep blue waters of ocean. He generates out of his navel Brahma (the Creator), who is seated on a full-blown lotus, which is connected with the navel by a long lotus stalk. In the two upper hands of Him are represented, the Discus (Chakra) and the Conch (Sankha). At His feet is the Goddess of Wealth – Lakshmi. In the two lower hands are the Mace (Gada) and the Lotus (Padma). All these symbols and other on His person are emblematic of Creation.



Let us decipher the symbolism. Etymologically ‘Vishnu’ means one who pervades entire universe. Vishnu or Mahavishnu in this pose is usually referred to as NARAYANA. The word *Narayana* is composed of the term *Naarah*, ‘waters’ and *Ayana*, ‘moving’. The ‘waters’ in religion always symbolizes SPACE. Hence Narayana may be defined as the “Mover on the Waters of Space: a title of Vishnu, in his aspect of Atman, moving on the waters of Creation. The term Narayana is used in a philosophical sense in the Mahabharata and the Puranas as an equivalent for Cosmic Purusha, the Primordial Universal Man. Narayana, then, is associated with Vishnu or again with Brahma and the Cosmic Waters (Space). For instance, in the Mahabharata, III, 189, 3, where Vishnu says “I called the name of water *Naarah* in ancient times, and am hence called, Narayana, that was the abode I moved in *Ayana*.”

The foaming deep blue waters represent SPACE. For ‘waters’ and ‘water’ stand as the symbol for Akasha, the primordial Ocean of Space, on which Narayana, the Self-born Spirit, moves, reclining on the couch of Ananta, the endless Time.

Next we go to the Serpent, known as Ananta-Sesha, literally, the endless remain – symbolizing the circle of infinity as well as Endless Time. Then too: “The active is attracted by the passive principle and the Great Nag, the serpent, emblem of the eternity, attracts its tail to its mouth

forming thereby a circle (cycles in eternity) in that ceaseless pursuit of the negative by the positive.” Thus Ananta (endless), the great Serpent of Eternity, the couch of Narayana, is the symbol of infinite Time in Space.

With reference to Time in Space, it will arise only when there is Motion in Space. In dissolution (pralaya), when Tamasa prevailed in space, space was like a still ocean without waves. When the equilibrium of the three qualities (gunas) was disturbed, and when activity (Rajas) asserted itself, then the space was set in Motion like waves. This wavy motion is likened to the zigzag motion of a serpent. Hence the symbol of serpent is applied to the TIME. In the higher aspect, the serpent of Time was circular, having no beginning and no end. A serpent, which forms the great circle, swallowing its own tail in its mouth, represents the cycle of Eternity or great spiral of evolution.

In the dissolved state, called as ‘night of Brahma’, the universe is latent in its higher states. In the latent state of the universe, three things alone subsist, out of which universe is created. These are what metaphysics call Time, Space and Causality. Space is Matter and Causality is that Consciousness which has awareness of the law of cause and effect. Hence three are Time, Matter and Consciousness (Kala, Prakrti and Purusha). The Consciousness (Purusha) in our allegory is Narayana – the mover in space, may also be called Abstract Motion. Therefore, the three constituents: Space, Time and Motion together results in the Creation of the Universe.

Let us now take briefly the four objects held by the Lord in His four hands. The discus (Chakara) stands for the consciousness or thinking faculty of man. Its outgoing movement, the centrifugal force, represents creation and the inward movement, the centripetal force indicate dissolution. These movements are periodical, like breathing. Outgoing breath is followed by the incoming breath and again followed by outgoing breath. So is the Creation. The conch produces Sound, which is the subtle property (Tanmatra) of Akasha, where the first manifestation of the great elements (Mahabhutas) takes place. The Mace signifies the Authority – that He is the Lord. The Lotus or Padma too, is the symbol for Creation. The Lotus is said to contain within itself a perfect miniature of the future plant. Also the lotus plant grows up through the water, having its root in the mud and opening up its flower in the air above. The root of the Lotus sunk in the mud represents material life (sthula), the stalk passing up through the water signifies the astral (shuksama) world, and the flower floating on the water and opening to the sky is emblematic of spiritual being.

In conclusion, we can say that the allegory with its three main constituents of Causality (Motion), Space and Time, is the story of Creation. Even at our gross physical level, Space, Time and Motion (or energy) are required for any work done.


Our salutations to those great Sages of ancient times, whose creative genius gave such marvelous treasure for us to cherish.

*“OM TAT SAT”*

# The Distinguishing Characteristics Of Hinduism

Chetram Singh

There are numbers of characteristics that distinguishes Hinduism from other religions and, in this article, I will attempt to identify and discuss some of them.

1. **KARMAYOGA** or the performance of duty form duty's sake and with no expectation of rewards. One of the most remarkable things about Hinduism is that there is no concept of "our rights" in it. In Hindu literature, much emphasis is placed on what our duties are but little or no mention is made of our benefits or rights, which, in modern social life, play such an important role. In the Bhagwad Gita, Lord Krishna taught us to perform our duties without any desire for gain. He regards the performance of selfless service without desire for gain, as the worship of God. Unfortunately, in today's modern age, most people think of the rewards rather than the duties assigned to them.
- 
2. **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.** Hinduism allows utmost freedom in religious beliefs and worship. It does not say dogmatically that MUKTI or salvation is only possible by having absolute or blind faith in a prophet or holy book. Hinduism gives the utmost freedom to the rational mind of man and allows man the utmost freedom in matters of worship. It gives perfect freedom to the human reasoning regarding the nature of God, the soul, creation and the goal of life. It does not force anyone to accept a particular dogma or tenet and allows everybody to reflect, investigate and enquire. In short, Hinduism is a synthesis of all types of religious experiences and, Hinduism is free from fanaticism.
  3. **DISCIPLINE IN LIFE.** Hinduism lays special stress on SAMSARAS or Discipline in Life. An individual without SAMSARA or discipline is like a horse without reins. A disciplined individual is someone who has brought his or her natural propensities under his or her control. MANU, the earliest lawgiver of the world, says that by nature (birth) we are all barbarous, uncultured and uncivilized. It is the SAMSARA or discipline that raises us to the highest level of life.
  4. **DIFFERENT FORMS OF WORSHIP.** All of us are not born alike. Some are more intelligent and more spiritually advanced than others. Hinduism takes into account all these differences and provides different spiritual food for everyone ranging from the highest philosophy and metaphysics to the simplest type of idolatry and rituals. All other religions of the world preach only one path for all and make no provision for addressing the differences between individuals. Hinduism caters for all differences and makes requisite provisions for every kind of devotee. The result is that no earnest

aspiration for salvation is declared incapable of pursuing happiness or salvation because of his physical, mental or spiritual disability. There is a path, in Hinduism, for everybody to satisfy his spiritual form of worship that suits his nature and inclination.

5. **INDIVIDUAL & UNIVERSAL SOUL.** Hinduism teaches that Man, in his ultimate essence, is one with the essence of the world. The Hindu seers believe that not only man, but also all things and creatures in the Universe are rooted in one and the same Supreme Being. One of our scriptures tells us “Whoever beholds all beings in the same self and the same self in all beings, does not hate anybody. When a man knows that all beings are ultimately the self and realizes this unity, there remains no delusion of grief for him.”
6. **REASON AS A GUIDE OF LIFE.** According to Hindu DHARMA, BUDDHI or reason is the highest principle in man. It is the BUDDHI or reason that determines the true or falsity of judgement. The greatest prayer of the VEDAS, the GAYATRI MANTRA is not to forget our BUDDHI or reason inspired by God. Hindu religion focuses on being reasonable in all activities of life. In their daily prayers, Hindus ask God to make their BUDDHI or intelligence pure, inspired and well-directed.
7. **THE LAW OF KARMA.** The Law of Karma, or the doctrine by which every individual has to bear the consequences of his good or bad actions in this or in a future life, is one of the fundamental principles of Hinduism. As a man sows, so will he reap. This is the law of Karma. One’s past actions are responsible for one’s current condition. One’s current actions will shape or mould one’s future.
8. **THE DOCTRINE OF REBIRTH.** This is often referred to as the transmigration of the soul. Hindus believe that one does not cease to exist after death. Before his birth, one has passed through countless lives. Birth is inevitably followed by death and vice versa. The BHAGWAT GITA says “just as man casting off worn garments taketh new one, so does the dweller in the body (the soul) casting off worn bodies entereth into others that are new”. Births and deaths continue until one attains knowledge of BRAMHA or Supreme Being and attains NIRVANA or salvation. The individual soul then merges with the Universal Soul or God, and then the process of birth ceases.
9. **THE INSTITUTION OF VARNASHRAM.** The institution of VARNASHRAM is the chief peculiarity of the Hindu social system. Originally, division of the society into four VARNAS or castes was based on Gunas or qualities and KARMA or action on occupation. The entire world is divided into 4 main occupational divisions. These are the Teachers and Preachers, The Rulers & Warriors, the Merchant & Traders and the Manual Labourers. Each of us possesses these four qualities but in every one of us, one of those qualities predominates. That determines our caste. None of the four Caste is higher than the other. For example, someone may be born from a labouring family but has excellent business acumen and is very successful in business. That individual will belong to the Merchant & Trader caste although he was born in the labouring caste.

The Caste System has been a very controversial matter in India and has led to much controversy over the years. Mahatma Gandhi fought vigorously to abolish the concept of high and low in the caste system. There are, also, the 4 ASHRAMAS or stages of life and Hinduism assigns duties and responsibilities to each stage.

#### CONCLUSION.

The factors that distinguish Hinduism from other forms of worship are, therefore, KARMA YOGA, religious freedom, discipline in life, absence of dogma permitting different forms of worship, the concept of the individual soul and the universal soul and their relationships, the influence of BUDDHI or reason, the law of Karma, the doctrine of reincarnation or the transmigration of the soul, the Caste System and the and the four stages of life. While these are all important, to me the most important characteristic is the freedom that exists in Hinduism to call God by any name and to worship Him in any form.

**“India is, the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grand mother of tradition. Our most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India.”**

– Mark Twain

**“India conquered and dominated China culturally for 20 centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border.”**

– Hu Shih

Former Ambassador of China to the USA

## The Bal Vikas Group & Heritage Classes

Indian heritage is very rich in arts (creative & performing), architecture, handicrafts, religion, philosophy, history, traditions, classical dance and songs.

The heritage class of the Hindu Cultural Centre runs on alternate Sundays from 11 to 12, for one hour. An attempt is made to give children an introduction of Indian heritage covering bhajans, prayers, language, and short stories where festivals and religious aspects are covered. Children are encouraged to perform on the stage of the HCC on the occasion of most of the festivals, (like Diwali, Holi/Ugadi, Vijay Dashami/Durga Pooja, Shankranti, etc.) to display whatever they have learned in the class.

There are speakers/presenters who help the children on various occasions explaining some of the important aspects of certain festivals. Mrs. Anita Prakash gave a very entertaining and well received presentation of Sankranti explaining the way it is celebrated in South India.

## The HCC Youth Group

The Youth Group of the Hindu Cultural Centre has been running since the 1980's and has initiated and participated in many activities.

The Youth Group was formed with the idea of bringing the youths from the Hindu community together to:

- Learn about the Hindu religion
- Learn about the Indian culture and heritage
- Participate in culturally-rich and fun filled activities.

Throughout the years, we have served the London community in a few ways. We volunteered three nights to the Ark Aid Street Mission and served lunch at the Intercommunity Health Centre. Just recently, members of the Youth Group helped out at the Diabetes Screening Event held at HCC. We have also organized skits and performed these skits at various functions organized by HCC and ICAL.

Meetings, led by Pandit Doobay and Mr. Kumar, are held one Sunday a month. These meetings are designed to discuss issues relating to Hinduism, and to examine ways we can integrate Hindu concepts into our everyday lives.

We encourage any interested youths in high school and college/university to attend our monthly meetings at the Mandir to share their ideas and discuss issues. For further information please contact:

Neha Khandekar  
Dr. Arun Prakash

660-1183  
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[YouthGroup@HCCLondon.ca](mailto:YouthGroup@HCCLondon.ca)  
[HCCBoard@HCCLondon.ca](mailto:HCCBoard@HCCLondon.ca)

# Why Do We Do 'NAMASTE'?

Compiled by: Meena Soni

Indians greet each other with *namaste*. The two palms are placed together in front of the chest and the head bows whilst saying the word *namaste*. This greeting is for all - people younger than us, of our own age, those older than us, friends and even strangers.

There are five forms of formal traditional greeting enjoined in the shastras of which namaskaram is one. This is understood as prostration but it actually refers to paying homage as we do today when we greet each other with a *namaste*.

## WHY DO WE DO NAMASTE?

*Namaste* could be just a casual or formal greeting, a cultural convention or an act of worship. However there is much more to it than meets the eye. In Sanskrit *namah* + *te* = *namaste*. It means - I bow to you - my greetings, salutations or prostration to you. *Namah* can also be literally interpreted as "na ma" (not mine). It has a spiritual significance of negating or reducing one's ego in the presence of another.

The real meeting between people is the meeting of their minds. When we greet one another, we do so with *namaste*, which means "may our minds meet" indicate by the folded palms placed before the chest. The bowing down of the head is a gracious form of extending friendship in love and humility.

The spiritual meaning is even deeper. The life force, the divinity, the Self or the Lord in me is the same in all. Recognizing this oneness with the meeting of the palms, we salute with head bowed the Divinity in the person we meet. That is why sometimes, we close our eyes as we do *namaste* to a revered person or the Lord - as if to look within. The gesture is often accompanied by words like "Ram Ram", "Jai Shri Krishna", "Namo Narayana", "Jai Siya Ram", "Om Shanti" etc - indicating the recognition of this divinity.

When we know this significance, our greeting does not remain just a superficial gesture or word but paves the way for a deeper communion with another in an atmosphere of love and respect.

Swamini Vimalananda,  
Chinmaya Mission



# The Bhagavad Gita

Neha Khandekar

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the holiest books of the Hindu religion which explains how we should live our lives, how and when we should act. For many Hindus the Gita reveals the concept and true meaning of God. For thousands of years, the Gita has fascinated intellectuals and philosophers from India as well as the Western world. The Gita entered the Western world, when the British came to India. The British were seeking a book of authority (similar to the bible) that reflected the fundamentals and principles of Hinduism. In 1785, for the first time, the Gita was translated from Sanskrit into English, and offered people in the west a whole new way of examining religion and spirituality. The American writer, Henry David Thoreau said; “The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, rarer region of thought than in the Bhagavad Gita.” The Gita is the centrepiece of the epic poem Mahabharata. The Gita begins with the two great armies, the cousins, the Kauravas and Pandavas, about to face each other in battle.

After looking across the battlefield, Arjuna of the great Pandavas is baffled. His heart is filled sorrow and despair as he looks across the battlefield. He turns to his trusted advisor Krishna, and asks; “How can I fight against my own family? I’ll be committing great evil by killing my own brothers and uncles I have known my entire life. How can I go against Bhishma, the patriarchal figure in my life, or against my own teacher Dronacharaiya who has taught me how to fight? I cannot carry through with this Krishna. How could I possibly kill my own family?” With those words, Arjuna drops his bow & arrow with tears streaming down his face.

Krishna responds to this question by explaining the reality of life and death. Krishna explains; “Never was there a time when I, yourself or these great kings did not exist. In everyone lies an indestructible and eternal soul that passes through the stages of childhood, youth and old age. Therefore, after death this soul passes to a new body. These bodies may come to an end, but the soul will remain forever. That is why wise men do not grieve for the living or dead. Look beyond this disillusion, and realize the reality of life and death. Fight Arjuna!”

These words of Krishna have never been interpreted literally by Hindus. Hindus have not gone around killing each other because the soul is immortal. Instead these words of Krishna offer hope at times of despair. For example, lines of this verse are read during funeral services to provide comfort to the mourning.

As time proceeds, Krishna attempts to persuade Arjuna to fight. In the next portion of the Gita, Krishna uses the sense of duty as a method of persuasion. The idea of responsibility or duty is key in understanding the Gita. In Sanskrit the work is Dharma, which can have numerous meanings. It can mean duty, righteous law or even virtue. In Hinduism every person has a certain Dharma at the various stages in life.

He tells Arjuna; “Know what your duty is and do it without hesitation. For a warrior there is nothing better than a battle.” However, Arjuna opposes this idea by stating; “If I kill my whole entire family, than I’ll put the whole social order into chaos. When a family is destroyed, the laws of the family are destroyed and the lawlessness will overwhelm the family. And as a warrior, it is my duty to protect society from disorder and confusion. Therefore, I must not fight against my family.”

However, as usual Krishna interprets the situation much differently. He says to Arjuna; “No Arjuna, confusion of society will occur if one does not fulfill his duty in the first place. And as a warrior it is your duty to fight.”

Krishna proceeds onward, this time trying to persuade Arjuna to fight by attacking Arjuna’s honour. He says, if you refuse to fight this war and withdraw from what your honour and duty dictate, you’ll bring down chaos upon yourself. Decent men of all time, will talk about your disgrace, shame and say fear has driven you from the battlefield. Your enemies will sneer, laugh and mock you. What other deeper shame could there be. Therefore, you must fight Arjuna to uphold your dignity and honour.

In this portion of the Gita, Krishna reveals the principles of Hinduism with topics such as life and death, righteous duty and honour by answering Arjuna’s questions and persuading him to fight against the Pandavas. The Gita is not only a religious text, but is also the encyclopedia to Hinduism.



# Mera Jeevan Tere Havale

Contributed By: Mr. Narinder P. Sharma

Mera jeevan tere havale, Prabhoo ise pug pug too hi sumbhale  
Mera jeevan tere havale, Prabhoo ise pug pug too hi sumbhale

Moh maya ke bandhan kholo, hey Prabhoo apni sharan mein lelo  
Moh maya ke bandhan kholo, hey Prabhoo apni sharan mein lelo  
Hey Prabhoo apni sharan mein lelo  
Is paapi ko apna le, Prabhoo ise pug pug too hi sumbhale

Bhav Saagar mein jeevan nayya, dol rahi hai O'rakh-vayya  
Bhav Saagar mein jeevan nayya, dol rahi hai O'rakh-vayya  
dol rahi hai O'rakh-vayya  
Ise ab tu aake bachale, Prabhoo ise pug pug too hi sumbhale  
Mera jeevan tere havale, Prabhoo ise pug pug too hi sumbhale

Yeh jeevan hai tumse paya, sab tere koyee na paraya  
Yeh jeevan hai tumse paya, sab tere koyee na paraya  
Sab tere koyee na paraya  
Savikaaro Bansi wale, Prabhoo ise pug pug too hi sumbhale

## Taj Mahal Poetry

Contributed By: Mahen Rawal

### As a Bachelor

Takdir hai, magar kismat nahi khulti  
Taj Mahal banana chahata hoon  
lekin Mumtaz nahi milti

### As a Lover

Takdir hai, magar kismat nahi khulti  
Taj Mahal banana chahata hoon,  
Mumtaz mil gayi hai magar  
woh shaadi nahi karti

### As a Husband

Takdir hai, magar kismat nahi khulti  
Taj Mahal banana chahata hoon  
lekin Mumtaz nahi marti!



# The Dalai Lama

Rajesh Bhayana

We are very fortunate in Canada to have the Dalai Lama visiting us in the month of April. The word Dalai is Mongolian for ocean and the word Lama is Tibetan for spiritual leader. Basically, the name means ocean of wisdom. The Dalai Lama was born on July 6, 1935. His name was Lhomo Thondup. He was born to a family of farmers in the province of Amdo. When he was three years old a search party from the Tibetan government was sent to find the fourteenth reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. They interviewed him and discovered that he was the next incarnation. He was separated from his parents and taken to a monastery. In 1940, he was taken to Patala Palace where he was designated as the spiritual leader of Tibet. He studied to prepare him for this role. He learned Sanskrit, philosophy, logic, art, culture, and metaphysics.

In 1950, the Chinese army, known as the Peoples Liberation Army, entered Tibet and took over the capital Lhasa. The Dalai Lama tried to enlist the help of the world community, but they were not interested in helping Tibet. In 1959, General Chiang Chin of the Chinese army, extended an invitation to the Dalai Lama to attend a play. It was thought by his advisors that this was a way to capture him. The Dalai Lama also felt that his presence in Tibet was causing violence between Tibetan's and the Chinese Army to increase. Disguised as a soldier, he escaped into exile. For three weeks, he traveled to the Indian border. Indian guards at the town of Bomdia met him. The Indian government had agreed to give him refuge.

The Dalai Lama met with the Prime Minister Jawaralal Nehru in the city of Mussoorie Nehru agreed to form the Independent society for Tibetan education under the Indian ministry of education. The Indian government has provided refuge for the Dalai Lama and for fifty thousand Tibetans in the city of Dharamsala. This has benefited the Tibetans because they have a "homeland" within India. It has also benefited India because of the presence of such a great spiritual leader.

"Whenever I meet people, I always have the feeling that I am encountering another human being, just like myself. I find it much easier to communicate with others on that level. If we emphasize certain characteristics such as I am Tibetan or I am a Buddhist, then there are differences. But those things are secondary. If we leave the differences aside, I think we can easily communicate, exchange ideas and share experiences."

The Dalai Lama

"No matter how much violence or how many bad things we have to go through, I believe that the ultimate solution to our conflicts, both external and internal lies in returning to our basic and underlying human nature, which is gentle and compassionate"

The Dalai Lama

# Tolerance: An underrated human value in today's life

Chitra Prasad

“As I glance over my shoulders these days, I am always struck by what else is going wrong with the world. This was not what I had imagined the world to be when I was growing up. I always thought that people will be kind, caring and compassionate to one another, but now it seems that intolerance has taken over most of our human values.

We dislike each other's point of view, we identify with our skin color, our country of origin, our religion, our beliefs and so on foremost refusing to see the harmony, the splendor of this existence”.

While writing these thoughts, I would like to seek help from our ancestors and see how they handled these very questions. From time immemorial man has faced the dilemma of how to interact with his/her kin or society at large. When we are in disharmony and are refusing to accept the other person's viewpoint we are least productive and can cause great harm to our selves and others around us.

As a traveler in this journey of life, I have picked up a few pearls that I would like to share with you. Some of you might already be familiar with these and may already be practicing these in your own lives.

The best philosophy that comes to my mind as a solution (very simple but very profound!) is of “Live and let live” and “multiplicity of views”. This has been one of the cornerstones of the “Jainism” teachings. To go back and think about this some more, why is it that we find it difficult to listen to views that may not be similar to ours. Why should we be friends with people who can only agree with us? Are only those individuals truly our friends? This philosophy of multiplicity of views always reminds me to accept other's views without the necessity of always agreeing with them. The practice of this philosophy is difficult and only regular practice and commitment can keep one focused on this path.

As one reads life of “Divine Gurus”, people who are enlightened, for example Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Mahavir Jain, Guru Nanak, Sant Kabir, Shirdi and Satya Sai Baba and all such divine souls, one thing is clear: they all start first with preaching the lesson of tolerance to the other human beings. As an avid reader of all religions and their philosophies, I have yet to come across teachings of a true divine being who advises harming the fellow human being. Then why is it that the real teachings of these great souls are not followed and yet people claim to be true Christians, Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims.

The Buddhist philosophy nicely summarized recently by “Dalai Lama” states that this world is full of suffering, to overcome this suffering one has to rise above pleasure and pain. A

middle path is recommended which simply translated means that extremes of any thing are not healthy. This is also the same principle described in the “Gita” of “Sthith Pragna” a person who is in the most balanced state of mind and does not get affected by failure, success, highs and lows. Interestingly as a student of medicine, I have learnt about the principle of “Homeostasis” a state where body fluids, chemistries are in the perfect balance. What is all this telling us? The nature likes to be in balance and harmony for all the functions to be performed properly. When we deviate from this steady state, the end result is often unhappiness and “Dis-ease”.

The intolerance in our lives makes us identify only with our body and not the real soul, which is common to all. For most people, this has been so ingrained that their identification is with century old beliefs, the hatred that they may be carrying over from one generation to the next. All this can certainly be very harmful and surely we see the results of these kinds of views when we pick up the morning newspaper. Stories of kindness, joy, and service never make it to the front page of any newspaper most of the time. Why do we allow this to happen? Are there not thousands of instances of courage or mutual cooperation that might help our youth to feel differently about this world?

When I think about the examples of “Tolerance” in context of the human body, I am reminded of the example of transplantation of organs from another individual. For a transplant to be successful the host body has to become “tolerant” of the foreign tissue. This has to be done using a number of medications and other therapeutic procedures. Clearly only if this is successful the recipient will be able to survive. Similarly we have to overcome our toxic feelings of intolerance if we want to live in a nurturing society. Einstein’s statement sums up this by stating that the most important decision that we ever make in our lives is if we live in a friendly or unfriendly universe.

For the youth of the Hindu community, my request is for an open mind and a quest for learning from every thing and every being. Once the mind is open and free to learn, the discriminatory intelligence and powers will develop. The right decisions will be made and we will be able to actually practice the lessons that we have all learnt in Grade 2 of respect, love, tolerance and kindness.



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## Some Interesting Facts About India

- 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the World's Population in 1/40<sup>th</sup> of the World's Land Mass.
- A Technology-Savvy workforce of Engineers greater than the total population of Canada.
- 6 Nobel Prize winners for: Peace, Literature, Medicine, Physics, Economics.
- India has never invaded any country in her last 10000 years of history.
- India invented the Number System. Aryabhatta invented the Zero.
- The World's first university was established in Takshila in 700 BC. More than 10,500 students from all over the world studied more than 60 subjects. The University of Nalanda built in the 4th century – Continuing Education was one of the greatest achievements of ancient India in the field of education.
- Sanskrit is the mother of all the European languages. Sanskrit is the most suitable language for the development of computer software - a report in Forbes magazine, July 1987.
- Although modern images of India often show poverty and lack of development, India was the richest country on earth until the time of British in the early 17th Century. Christopher Columbus was attracted by her wealth.
- The art of Navigation was born in the river Sindh 6000 years ago. The very word Navigation is derived from the Sanskrit word *Navgatih*. The word navy is derived from Sanskrit *Nou*.
- Bhaskaracharya calculated the time taken by the earth to orbit the sun hundreds of years before the astronomer Smart. The time taken by earth to orbit the sun: (5th century) 365.258756484 days.
- Budhayana first calculated the value of “pi”, and he explained the concept of what is known as the Pythagorean Theorem. He discovered this in the 6th century long before European mathematicians stumbled across this fact.
- Algebra, trigonometry and calculus came from India. Sridharacharya propounded quadratic equations in the 11th century.
- The largest numbers the Greeks and the Romans used were 10<sup>6</sup> whereas Hindus used numbers as large as 10<sup>53</sup> (10 to the power of 53) with specific names as early as 5000 BCE during the Vedic period. Even today, the largest used number is Tera: 10<sup>12</sup>.
- According to the Gemological Institute of America, up until 1896, India was the only source for diamonds to the world.
- USA based IEEE has proved what has been a century old suspicions in the world scientific community. The pioneer of wireless communication was Prof Jagdeesh Bose & not Marconi.
- Chess (Shataranja or AshtaPada) was invented in India.
- The place value system, the decimal system was developed in India in 100 BC.
- The earliest evidence of civilisation in India, can be dated from around 3,500 BC.
- Law of Gravity: In the Surya Siddhanta, dated 400-500 A.D. the ancient Hindu astronomer Bhaskaracharya states, “Objects fall on the Earth due to a force of attraction by the earth. Therefore, the earth, planets, constellation, moon, and sun are held in orbit due to this force.” Approximately 1200 years later Isaac Newton rediscovered this phenomenon and called it the Law of Gravity!

# Holi

Swati Nikumb

Namaste, my name is Swati Nikumb and I am a member of the youth group here in the mandir. Every year, many of us join together in the Mandir to celebrate the spring festival of Holi, by showering each other with handfuls of coloured powder. But why do we celebrate this auspicious occasion? Just like every other aspect of Hinduism, Holi also has a religious significance behind it.

The story starts with a king named King Hiranyakashapu. He wanted to acquire great power and also to be seen as a great man. Therefore he performed a yadhnya and was granted three wishes. He asked that: he would not die as a result of a human or animal, he would not die at his home or outside and he would not die in the day nor the night.

Knowing that his three requests were fulfilled, he became overwhelmed with power and ordered everyone to worship him. Everyone obeyed, with the exception of his son, Prahlad, who was completely devoted to Vishnu. His father became extremely angry and made several attempts to kill Prahlad such as telling him to hold a red-hot pole, telling him to jump off a cliff and even ordered an elephant to stomp on him. But each time, Prahlad chanted Vishnu's name and he was saved. Fed up by these failed attempts, King Hiranyakashapu asked his sister Holika, who had a special gift, which prevented her from being harmed by fire, to sit in the fire with Prahlad on her lap, in the hope that Prahlad would perish while Holika remained unharmed. Again Prahlad chanted Vishnu's name and was rescued, but Holika was burnt to a crisp because she had used her powers for evil. The moral of the story is that good always triumphs over evil.

At the time of Holi, spring is in the air and flowers soon blossom signifying the renewal and rebirth of the earth. The air is filled with warmth as the earth discards the cold winter to greet the bright spring sun. People are in a festive mood because the sudden range of full exciting colours of nature is exposed. Friends and family gather to share their happiness with others and celebrate the good feeling we feel when spring arrives. During Holi we light the fire to symbolize the burning of Holika, hence the burning of evil. We make sweets and play with colours to help bring you and happiness into each other's lives. Holi is thus a celebration of life, love, joy and good spirits.

Thank You



# What is Mehndi?

Krutika Patil, Grade 10

Mehndi is the traditional art of adorning the hands and feet with a paste made from the finely ground leaves of the henna plant. The leaves, flowers, and twigs are ground into a fine powder, then mixed with hot water. Various shades are obtainable by mixing with the leaves of other plants, such as indigo. Tea, coffee, cloves, tamarind, lemon, sugar, and various oils are also used to enhance the colour and longevity of design.

There is still some speculation as to the first origin of the use of henna. What is known for sure is that henna has been used as a cosmetic, as well as for its supposed healing properties for at least 5000 years. Centuries of migration and cultural interaction make it difficult to determine where certain traditions began. There is some historical evidence to support that mehndi as an art-form may have originated in ancient India.

The art varies from country to country, spanning different cultures and religious traditions, and making it possible to recognize distinctions in cultural style. There are three main traditions that can be recognized, aside from the modern use of henna as a trendy temporary tattoo. Generally, Arabic (Middle-eastern) mehndi features large, floral patterns on hands and feet, while Indian (Asian) mehndi uses fine line, lacy, floral and paisley patterns covering entire hands, forearms, feet and shins; and African mehndi art is large, and bold with geometrically patterned angles. African mehndi patterns usually use black henna while Asian and Middle Eastern mehndi is often reddish brown.

While much of the tradition and symbolism around the use of mehndi has been lost over the generations, there are still some traditions, which are still followed by some. In many eastern places, henna is thought to hold special medicinal or even magical properties. It is used to help heal skin diseases, prevent thinning hair, and cool the skin to reduce swelling in hot climates. It is made into a beverage to heal headaches and stomach pain. Henna is used as a protection against the “evil eye”. The foreheads of bulls, milk cows, and horses are sometimes decorated with henna for their protection.

It is said that when a bride has mehndi done for her wedding, the darker the design, the more her mother-in-law loves her. A good deeply-coloured design is a sign of good luck for the marital couple. It is common for the names of the bride and groom to be hidden in the mehndi design. While much of the symbolism of mehndi designs is being lost some examples remain. The peacock, which is the national bird of India, the lotus flower, and an elephant with a raised trunk, which is a symbol of good luck, are all popular images.

In recent popular culture, mehndi has enjoyed a renewal. Western musicians and Hollywood personalities have adopted and altered the tradition so that mehndi, as a temporary, pain-free body decoration alternative to tattooing is now the hottest new trend among women & men.

Mehndi is a sacred practise that is not just for beautifying the body, but also to invite grace and good fortune.

# My Upanayanam

Kartik Vaideswaran, Grade 7

My Upanayanam (thread ceremony) took place in Bangalore, India on August 22, 03. I really enjoyed it. It was a novel experience for me. I was able to spend time with my extended family. It was a big step for me in terms of religion and responsibility as well.

Upanayanam is the ceremony in which I received my sacred thread. The thread sits on the left shoulder and winds around the right side of the trunk. After I received this thread, I was called a brahmachari or a vatu. I was initiated into the Gayatri, the holiest of all the mantras and I became eligible to study the Vedas. When one chants Gayatri mantra it protects him and if chanted with devotion, it enables the chanter to achieve knowledge of the Supreme Truth.

The Gayatri must be chanted in a certain manner, thrice a day as a part of Sandhyavandanam. Sandhyavandanam is an excellent meditation exercise which all Brahmins are supposed to perform after their Upanayanam. Whenever I perform it, I feel very peaceful. Sandhyavandanam has now become a part of me forever.



One of the ceremonies during my Upanayanam that I really enjoyed was called Bhiksakaranam. In the olden days, the young brahmachari had to beg for alms from various houses. This was done to induce humility and quell the ego. Its purpose was to root out the differences between high and low and rich and poor as every brahmachari regardless of his family's standing had to practice it. In my ceremony, it was done symbolically.

The brahmachari needs to understand the thought and spirit underlying this practice and try to imbibe the virtues it inculcates. Bhiksakaranam enables the brahmachari to resist the craving of the tongue and induce the restraint of the senses both of which are necessary for learning the Vedas properly.

At first I was a little nervous about wearing the thread to school but I wore it and my friends and teachers thought it was quite interesting. Now I am very comfortable wearing it and feel proud about it.

My Upanayanam ceremony has opened many gates for me and will enable me to fulfill the ultimate goal of human existence, the realization of God.

# A Trip To Our Holy Cities – Random Reflections

Usha Tripathi

Three – in – one, a pilgrimage, a holiday, and a wedding. These distinct events were all part of my recent trip to India. The various stops on the journey included Chennai, Tirupati, Tirumala, Hyderabad, Delhi, Varanasi, and Allahabad. Each stop gave me an opportunity to fulfil my religious duties, family visits and tourist curiosity. It was a wonderful feeling to experience all three events in one place, India.

India, as we know, is a land of incredible contrasts. We can experience a vast scale of diversity in terms of language, religion, and traditions. Inevitably great change is taking place as modern technology is entering into the life of the society. However, what appears to be a major change of attitude and life-style is largely ‘surface gloss’ underneath, we can experience the generations of old traditions and practices still flourishing. However, there appears to be some reticence towards civic duties. This might be attributed to a lack of understanding of priorities in the changing times and to some extent economic restraints.

## Tirumala and Tirupati

From Chennai to Tirupati, a three hours journey by car was an interesting experience. Tirupati, besides being the town from where one can reach Tirumala, functions as a service centre to Tirumala Temple providing a variety of facilities to the pilgrims. Walking up the hills from Tirupati to Tirumala is a major vow of the pilgrims. The footpath is well protected with all facilities for the pilgrims. But it is well connected to the road as well.



The Tirumala-Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), the administrative body, controls and maintains the Temple properties, extend many amenities to thousands of pilgrims who visit Tirumala-Tirupati for “Darshan of Lord Balaji.”

People from all walks of life, religions, and faiths from all over the world come to Tirumala to visit the ancient temple of Sri Venkateshwara, an incarnation of Vishnu. As it is a very popular place, making the Temple one of the richest Temple in India. Among the powers attributed to Sri Venkateshwara is granting of any wish that is made in front of the idol at Tirumala. From the pre-dawn hours to late night various worshipping rituals are performed to the Lord. Starting with the hymns of “Suprabhatam” to the Lord and darshan (viewing of God) gives the devotees mystical feelings, and they believe, will relieve them from their sins. Pilgrims young and old stand in long queue waiting for their turn to have “Darshan of the Lord”.

Now, there is provision of different types of special Darshan. Tokens can be purchased in Tirupati. It gives priority to go ahead of all those who have to queue often hours in the wire-

caged type corridors that ring the outer wall of the Temple. Once inside the Temple, special pass holders shuffle along with everyone else and quickly move out. Sacred Laddu-prasad is given to all devotees after the Darshan. A huge Hundi is kept in the Temple to receive offerings. The pilgrims make offerings of gold, silver and money in the Temple Hundi.

### **Tonsuring-Fulfilling a vow**

The pilgrims often get the head tonsured. Especially those devotees whose desires have been achieved offer their hair in complying with the vows they had taken.

People attach special importance to hairstyles. It enhances the beauty of an individual and reflects the very pride of a person. Offering their hair to the Lord is similar to sacrificing one's arrogance (Ahankar).

There are many more pilgrim centres in the area we were unable to visit owing to constriction on our time and groups schedule. However, a visit to Sri Venkateswara Museum was an enlightening experience.

### **Sri Kalahasteeswara Temple**

Srikalahasti is regarded as a prominent pilgrimage centre in Andhra Pradesh. Lord Shiva manifest in the form of "Vayu Linga" is known to the devotees as Sri Kalahasteeswara.



The following legend focuses on the theme of three animal devotees. The temple was built on the spot where they had worshipped a divine being. In the story, a spider (Sri), a snake (Kala) and an elephant (Hasti) worship the "Linga."

They worshipped Shiva, each with their own method. The spider spun a fine web above the linga, the snake placed a gem upon it and the elephant washed it with water. The snake, however, was unaware of the other two devotees. One day approaching the linga to perform its daily devotion, it noticed some holy bilva leaves around it and some water. Thinking that some one was trying to defile the symbol of the Lord it coiled around the linga, to discover the culprit. The next morning the elephant came with water in its trunk and prepared to do ceremonial washing of the linga as was his habit. The snake thinking that the elephant was defiling the linga slithered into its trunk. At that the elephant dashed its trunk against the linga thereby crushing both the spider and the snake. Unable to bear the agonising pain the elephant died on the spot. Pleased with their devotion Lord Shiva released the three animals from the chain of birth and rebirth. Even today the pilgrims are shown some discoloration on the pedestal of the linga which bears witness to the event, (Ref: Hindu myths by A.L, Dallapiccola, London, The British Museum, 2003).

## Mahabalipuram

A visit to this ancient sea-side town about 60 kilometres south of Chennai was an educative excursion into history. The Pallavas a gifted imperial race have left their memorials at Mahabalipuram, their principal port. The temples of Mahabalipuram, most of them rock cut belong to the earliest phase of Dravidian temple architecture. We saw the seashore temple stand on the very edge of the shore, the waves beating against it. Firmly poised Butterball recalls the mythological pranks of Krishna. The cave temples are a treasure house of sculptor art. The Rathas which are small-size models of shrines had been chiselled out boulders in the form of temple chariots. The Pandva brothers 'chariots' (rathas) carved out of free standing rocks reflect the earliest stage of Hindu temple architecture.



## Welcome to Pavan City Varanasi

The Indian Airlines flight from Delhi to Varanasi touched the ground of Babatpur airport. A large sign board 'Welcome to Pavan City' instantly mesmerizes the visitor. The city has been known as 'Kashi' and 'Benares' but its present name is a restoration of an ancient name meaning the city between two rivers the Varuna and Assi.



Varanasi has been a centre of learning and claims to be one of the oldest living cities in the world. The Vishwanath Temple, the shrine to Lord Shiva, the ruling deity of Varanasi, is the most sacred temple in Varanasi. The present temple was rebuilt in 1776 by Rani Ahilya Bai Holkar and the gold plating on the towers was provided by Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Lahore. It is located in the narrow alley of the old city, guarded by strict security.

The new Vishwanath Temple located within the campus of the Banaras Hindu University was built by the Birla family. It is open to people of all faiths. Banaras Hindu University has long been a centre of learning built in 1917, founded by Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, and attracts students from all over the world.

The temples (Annapurna, Durga, Sankatmochan, and Tulasi Manas); ghats, galis (alleyways), shops and the unique character of the city make it a fascinating experience.

Varanasi's ghats are liveliest part of the city. They are crowded with devotees performing rituals. A boat-ride on the Ganges was an important part of our visit to Varanasi. At dusk as the evening 'Arati' (offering) takes place, a lot of little oil-lamps lighted; with flowers in small cups of folded leaves go floating into the river. There are some ghats which serve as 'Burning ghats' where bodies are cremated.

## Sarnath

Guatam Buddha preached his first sermon here. It became one of the great centres of Buddhism. The Emperor Ashoka erected magnificent stupas and structures. The Museum of Sarnath was constructed in 1910. It has on display the 'capital' from the Ashoka pillar with the four lions, the official symbol of modern India. Other relics found on the site include the earliest Buddha image and many images of Hindu gods.



Mulgandha Kuti Vihar's the Mahabodhi Society Temple has a series of frescoes by the Japanese artist. A Bodhi tree growing here was transplanted in 1931, from the tree in Sri Lanka which in turn is said to be an offspring of the original tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment. There is a group of statues here showing Buddha giving his first sermon to his five disciples. Buddha came to preach his message after he achieved enlightenment at Bodhgaya. Later the great Buddhist emperor Ashoka erected stupas and monasteries at Sarnath.

## Allahabad – Sangam

Allahabad is at the confluence of India's most important rivers – the Ganges and the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati. The meeting point known as Sangam is considered to have great religious significance. Pilgrims come to bathe at this confluence for the 'Holy Dip,' by boat and perform special rituals.



We visited the popular Hanuman Temple. It is unusual because the Hanuman idol is reclining rather than upright. Each year during the floods, the Ganges rises to touch the feet of sleeping Hanuman before receding.

The city was a centre of Indian National Congress. Anand Bhavan, the shrine to the Nehru family, is now a highly organised museum. The exhibits and displays reveal the Nehru family's part in the struggle for India's independence. We had a walk around the Verandas of the two storey mansion looking through the glass panels into the rooms. In the close proximity is the Swaraj Bhavan, residence of Motilal Nehru until 1930, the birth place of Indira Gandhi. Now it houses a museum.

## Sitamarhi – Temple of Sita Maiya

A visit to Sitamarhi – one and only temple of Sita situated between Allahabad and Varanasi, Gopiganj was a unique experience. Sita is revered as a deity however Sita is rarely worshipped in her own right.

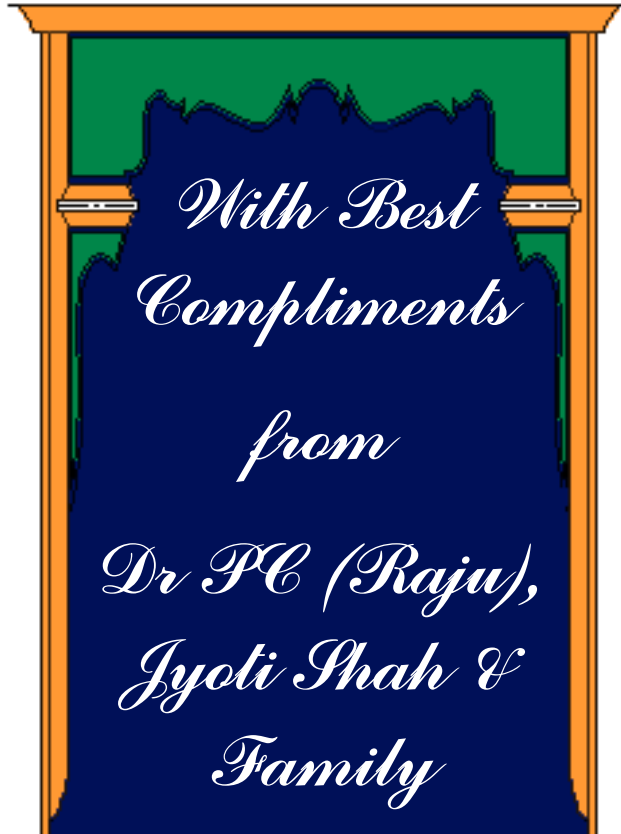


On the site Maharishi Valmiki gave shelter to Sita, near his ashram. Ram's twin sons Lav-Kush were born here; Sitamarhi is the holy place where Sita was asked to prove her innocence once again. She entered into Mother Earth. Hence the name is Sitamarhi.

Sitamarhi has been beautifully developed and the temple has been constructed on two levels. It has images of Sita in different postures – one embracing the earth and the other an artistic idol. For pilgrims a high quality guest-house and Dharmashala have been constructed. The Sita Samahit Trust administers very high quality facilities for national & international visitors and devotees alike.

In India, one finds holiness in every temple or sacred place one encounters no matter which deity the person may especially worship. A deity is chosen for worship according to one's aptitude. The image of a deity, though humanly created, represent the invisible divinity by means of performing worship. Hymns and songs describe the supreme spiritual nature of the deity and oneness of all the deities with different names and forms. The ritualistic worship brings closeness with deities, which takes recourse to mental worship through closing eyes and concentrating the mind on the Divine power.

The days at Tirumala and Tirupati were packed with visits to temples and a traditional marriage ceremony at Tirumala. However, the memory of my trip including visits to many other temples and holy cities remains 'like a temple joss-stick burned down to ashes and yet the sweet fragrance of which lingers on' (quote of an unknown spiritual guru).



# Hindu Achievements In Mathematics

Dr. S.P. Singh

The contribution of Hindus in the development of early math is immense. When most of the civilization were ignorant of the fundamental mathematical concepts, such as counting, India had established a system of notation which is the foundation of the Math of present day.

Hindu-Arabic (still used)	१	८	७	६	०	५	४	३	२	१	.
Arabic	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	

The system of notation, which we use, is known as the Hindu-Arabic system, is believed to have originated in central India about 500 B.C. The earliest occurrence of the zero in India is in inscription of 876 A.D. The Hindu-Arabic system of notation has ten symbols called the digits and when combined they form numerals according to the following principles.

- i) The principle of place value and,
  - ii) The principle of addition.
- In fact, 323 = 3 hundred + 2 tens + 3 units

Cajori writes in his book “A History of Mathematics”: The greatest achievement of the Hindus and one which, of all mathematical inventions, contributed most to the general progress of intelligence, is the principle of position in writing numbers.

The eminent mathematician Laplace showed a great admiration for the invention of the Hindu-Arabic system of notation when he wrote; “It is from the Indians that there has come to us the ingenious method of expressing all numbers in ten characters, by giving them, at the same time, an absolute and a place value, that for this very reason we do not sufficiently recognize its merit.... How difficult it was to invent such a method, one can infer from the fact that it escaped the genius of Archimedes & Apollonius of Perga, two of the greatest men of antiquity.”

Arabs themselves called mathematics the Indian art (Hindisat), and there is no doubt that the decimal system was learnt by the Moslem world either through merchants trading with the west coast of India or thru the Arabs who conquered Sind in 712 A.D.

The method of addition, very similar to modern method, was used by the Hindus in 12th century. They used several methods of subtraction and multiplication. The method of division was also known to them.

Medieval Indian mathematicians such as Aryabhata, (author of Aryabhattiyam), Brahmagupta, (author of Brahma sphuta - Siddhanta), Mahavir, Cridhara, (author of Ganita-Sara), Padmanabha, (author of an algebra book) and Bhaskara, (author of Siddhanta Ciromani), made remarkable discoveries in Mathematics. They were well versed with positive and negative

quantities and the method of determination of square and cube roots. They could also solve quadratic and cubic equations.

Aryabhata gave the value of  $\pi = 3.1416$ . Bhaskara proved that  $x/0$  is equal to infinity, however divided, remains infinite by the equation  $\text{inf.}/x = \text{inf.}$  Cridhara solved the quadratic equation. Mathematicians of that period developed tables of sines and cosines.

The Hindus gave mathematical problems clothed in pleasing poetic garb, which were a favorite social amusement. An example of such problems, which were popular, is given below.

Beautiful maiden with beaming eyes tell me as thou understandeth the right method of inversion, which is the number multiplied by 3, then increased by  $3/4$  of the product, divided by 7, diminished by  $1/3$  of the quotient, multiplied by itself, diminished by 52, the square root extracted, addition of 8 and division by 10, gives the number 2? (Aryabhata).

The process consists in beginning with 2 and working backwards. Thus square  $(2 \cdot 10 - 8) + 52 = 196$ , sq root  $196 = 14$ , and  $(14 \cdot 3/2 \cdot 7.4/7)$  division by 3 = 28.

The greatest Indian mathematician of the 19th century was Ramanujan. Prof. Hardy writes in his book "Ramanujan". It was Littlewood who said that every positive integer was one of Ramanujan's personal friends. I remember going to see him once when he was lying ill in Putney. I had ridden in taxicab #1729 and remarked that the number seemed to me rather a dull one & that I hoped that it was not an unfortunate omen. "No" he replied, it is a very interesting number, it is the smallest number that may be expressed as the sum of two cubes in two different ways.

$$1729 = 12^3 + 1^3 \quad \& \quad 1729 = 10^3 + 9^3$$

It was his insight into algebraic formulae, transformation of infinite series, and so forth, that was one of his most amazing attributes. On this side most certainly I have never met his equal, and I can compare him only with Euler and Jacobi.

**"We owe a lot to the Indians, who taught us how to count, without which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have been made."**

– Albert Einstein

# Diabetes Prevention and Screening in South Asians

Dr. Bhooma Bhayana

One of the largest epidemics threatening human health in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is type 2 diabetes. Over the past two decades there has been a disconcerting explosive rise in the prevalence of diabetes world wide. There are many factors that have contributed to this increase. Our population is aging and type 2 diabetes or maturity onset diabetes as it was once called increases in prevalence with age. We have become increasingly obese and less physically active as a population over the past two decades. Increasing urbanization and “digitalization” of our lives have contributed to this trend.

## WHAT IS DIABETES?

Basically, diabetes means a high blood sugar. All foods that we eat are converted to a basic building block called glucose. This glucose is used by our cells to give us energy.

The pancreas produces a hormone called insulin. Insulin is a very important substance that allows our cells to use the glucose that is presented to them. If we do not produce enough insulin or the body’s cells do not “listen” to the insulin that is there, the glucose is not absorbed by the cells. This results in a high blood sugar or diabetes.

The most common symptoms experienced with diabetes are:

- |                                 |                                    |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. excessive thirst             | 5. cuts and sores that do not heal |
| 2. increased urination          | 6. dry itchy skin                  |
| 3. feeling very hungry or tired | 7. burning or tingling in the feet |
| 4. weight loss without trying   | 8. blurred vision                  |

There are loosely two types of diabetes.

**Type 1 diabetes** or juvenile onset diabetes presents mostly in children or adolescents. The immune system attacks the pancreas so that insulin is not produced. The treatment for type 1 diabetes is the administration of insulin and an appropriate diet.

**Type 2 diabetes** or maturity onset diabetes is the most common type of diabetes. In this form of diabetes, the pancreas produces decreased insulin but also the cells of the body do not respond to the existing insulin. This phenomenon is called **insulin resistance**. Insulin resistance is increased by being overweight, especially by weight carried in the abdomen or **abdominal obesity**. The treatment for type 2 diabetes is diet, exercise, oral medication & sometimes insulin is administered as well.

## DIABETES IN SOUTH ASIANS

Unfortunately, the prevalence of diabetes is disproportionately high in our South Asian population. The International Diabetes Foundation reported in 2001 that the prevalence rate

of diabetes was 8% in North America. The “hot spots” in the world were Central and South America and the Indian Subcontinent all coming in at 14%. In the South Asian population in North America, it is estimated that the prevalence is 20% in people aged 30 to 64. The reasons are unknown and probably multifactorial. A genetic propensity, diet, relative inactivity and “rapid westernization” all seem to contribute.

The American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin have been quite proactive in studying this issue. In a report that summarizes a number of studies, they note that there seems to be a lower weight threshold as well as a lower threshold for waist to hip circumference (a measure of abdominal obesity) at which South Asians develop diabetes. They have also found that South Asian children have higher levels of insulin and insulin resistance than their Caucasian counterparts. They might, therefore, be prone to developing diabetes at a younger age. Across the general population, there is a trend to higher rates of childhood obesity and a higher rate of type 2 diabetes in children and teens.

### **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO EFFECT CHANGE?**

In order to stem the tide of this epidemic it is imperative that we take action on many fronts. We must work towards earlier diagnosis of pre-diabetes and diabetes. It is thought that most people who develop diabetes have had it up to ten years by the time that they are diagnosed. By then, many of the complications are well on their way to developing. We must also look at developing a healthier lifestyle. It is estimated that by losing just 7% of one’s body weight and exercising 30 minutes 4 times a week, one can reduce one’s risk of diabetes by 58%. It only takes a little to get a lot!

### **THE SCREENING EVENT**

A screening event was held on Sunday May 9, 2004 in the priest’s quarters on the grounds of the Hindu Cultural Centre. During this event, well over a hundred people attended in order to learn about how to prevent diabetes. Forty eight people chose to get screened for diabetes and pre- diabetes. Although the analysis of the data was not complete at the timing of this screening, we know that several people were diagnosed with diabetes and a number of people were diagnosed with pre-diabetes. Hopefully this information will help them in accessing timely care.

The event was a success both in terms of achieving the goal of providing necessary screening and, as well, in terms of providing an informative forum for dialogue pertaining to this critical health issue.

Many people were instrumental in helping to organize this event. A special vote of thanks goes to Sarita Gupta, Dr. Vranda Kamath, Dr. Meera Manchanda, Dr. Valsa Thomas, Anita Prakash, Dr. Bo Venkatesan, Indira Harricharan, Manju Singhla, Dr. Asha Bhardwaj, Dr. Brij Sarup, Dr. Rupareilia, Sudesh Arora, Sushma Saxena, Neelam Sainani, Mini Singh, Frank Graat, Suresh Kamath and Dr. Vipin Bhayana. A very special thank-you goes to Neha Khandekar, Ruchi Khandekar, Sneha Iyer, Charu Prasad, Rahul Sharma, Archana Prakash, Swati Nikumb, Manisha Harricharran, Sapna Sharma, Isha Gupta, Ashana Gupta, Namisha

Singh, Anu Bhalla, Dinesh Bhayana and Rajesh Bhayana. These very dynamic members of the youth group taught the adults a thing or two about giving of themselves and their energy wholeheartedly. This event could not have been possible without the support and hard work of Betty Harvey, a nurse practitioner with the Latin American Diabetes Project of the London Intercommunity Health Center and videographer Blanca. Thank-you also to the HCC board for their helpful encouragement.

We look forward to planning for the next event in November, 2004 which will coincide with Diabetes Month.

### *Did You Know...?*

...When many cultures were only nomadic forest dwellers over 5000 years ago, Indians established Harappan culture in Sindhu Valley (Indus Valley Civilization).

...Ayurveda is the earliest school of medicine known to humans. Charaka, the father of medicine consolidated Ayurveda 2500 years ago. Today Ayurveda is fast regaining an important place in our civilization.

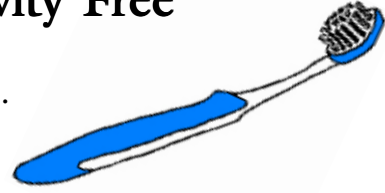
...Sushruta is the father of surgery. 2600 years ago he and health scientists of his time conducted complicated surgeries like cesareans, cataract, artificial limbs, fractures, urinary stones and even plastic surgery and brain surgery.

...Usage of anesthesia was well known in ancient India. Over 125 surgical equipments were used. Deep knowledge of anatomy, physiology, etiology, embryology, digestion, metabolism, genetics and immunity is also found in many texts.

...The earliest reservoir and dam for irrigation was built in Saurashtra. According to Saka King Rudradaman I of 150 BCE a beautiful lake aptly called 'Sudarshana' was constructed on the hills of Raivataka during Chandragupta Maurya's time.

# Working Towards Being Cavity Free

Manisha Jindal BSc D.D.S.



An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of care...

Current health care trends are moving towards preventing a problem...before it happens. People are eating healthier, taking more vitamins, and exercising more. However, when it comes to one's teeth...most take the opposite stance...."I will go to the dentist...when I have a problem (pain)."

Common misconceptions:

If I have a cavity... I will have pain... False

I brush and floss everyday... so I won't have any dental problems... False

My child just has baby teeth... so they don't need to go to the dentist... False

Regular dental checkups can offer you much more than just clean teeth. Cavities can be detected when they are quite small, before there is pain. As a result, these areas can be treated with small restorations (fillings), which will cost less and hurt less! If you wait to go until there is pain, often the cavities are quite large by this point, and may possibly require a root canal and antibiotics (depending on the situation).

Good oral hygiene is one great step towards a healthy mouth. Brushing at least twice a day disturbs the plaque buildup on your teeth, removing it, and preventing it from hardening onto your teeth. These hardened plaque deposits are called calculus. Once calculus has formed on your teeth, only a dental professional (hygienist or dentist) can remove this. It is important to note that brushing your teeth harder, will NOT remove this calculus, and in fact can damage your teeth and gums irreversibly. Thus always brush with a SOFT toothbrush, for at least 2 minutes. If this calculus is left on your teeth, it can cause cavities & gum disease.

Good habits start young. Instilling good oral hygiene when your child is young is very important. Their first dental visit should be at age three, unless a problem is detected earlier by a parent. Children should have approximately 20 teeth by age 2 (this age varies). These teeth are not only for a beautiful cute smile, but play an important role of holding the space for the adult teeth to come in. So some of these baby teeth must last until age 11-12...when ones adult teeth should be erupted. Good habits last a lifetime as do bad habits. So start early.

In addition to healthy teeth and gums, the dentist can detect other problems early. At your dental visits, your entire mouth will be checked, including your tongue, the back of your throat and the top of your mouth (hard palate). Any signs of abnormality (as serious as cancer) can be detected early and can potentially be life saving.

So see your dentist regularly... because remember... An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of care.

# Fighting a critical illness isn't something you plan on.

But it is something you can plan for. The excellent health you enjoy today could be interrupted by a critical illness tomorrow. Suddenly, what was once the last thing on your mind becomes the only thing — recovery. And that's where Lifecheque critical illness insurance can help.



Providing you with access to additional resources you could use toward recovery and rehabilitation, giving you the peace of mind to focus on getting better.

The time to talk is now. Because recovery will be your first priority.

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## Recipe Corner



### Bagaira Baingan

1 lb. (1/2 kg) small eggplants  
3 (three) small onions diced  
3 tbsp. (50 ml) grated coconut  
3 (three) red chilies (dried)  
1 tbsp. (15 ml) coriander leaves  
1 tbsp. (15 ml) sesame seeds  
2 tsp (10 ml) ginger/garlic paste  
1 marbled ball of tamarind  
1 handful of cashew nuts  
1 bay leaf  
1 ½ tbsp (22 ml) veg/canola oil  
To taste...salt

Heat a little oil (to cover bottom of pan) and fry separately, the following: red chilies; cashew nuts; onions; grated coconut; sesame seeds, and coriander.

Grind to a paste with the ginger/garlic paste.

Wash and slit eggplants, keeping stem intact.

Add salt to the ground paste and mix well.

Stuff eggplants with this masala.

Heat remaining oil and season with bay leaf.

Add stuffed eggplants and fry lightly for five minutes.

Add remaining masala paste and a little water.

Cover and cook until done.

Extract tamarind pulp and add to eggplants.

Simmer until gravy is thick, and serve hot.

## Management Lessons

Mahen Rawal

### Scenario

A crow was sitting on a tree, doing nothing all day.

A small rabbit saw the crow, and asked him, “Can I sit like you & do nothing all day long?”

The crow answered: “Sure, why not.”

So, the rabbit sat on the ground below the crow, and rested.

All of a sudden, a fox appeared, jumped on the rabbit and ate it.

### Management Lesson

To be sitting and doing nothing, you must be sitting very, very high up.

# A Simple Introduction to Hinduism: A Religion or a Way of Life<sup>1</sup>?

Dr. P. K. Lala

## History

### WHO FOUNDED HINDUISM?

Most of the world's great religions were each founded by a single individual, a prophet who inspired a mass following. For example, Judaism was founded by Moses, Christianity by Christ, and Islam by Mohammed. But who founded Hinduism? Before we can address this question, we have to talk about what is meant by "Hinduism", because nowhere in ancient history or ancient scriptures one finds the mention of a religion named "Hinduism" or "Hindu Religion". On

the other hand, the Indo-Aryan people who settled and lived in the valley of the river "Sindhu" (Indus Valley) were referred to as "Hindus" by traders and visitors from Persia, the land bordering on the west. This term survived for many centuries, and at a much later date, the term "Hinduism" was coined by the British to refer to their religion. In ancient Sanskrit scriptures, this religion is called "Sanatan Dharma", that is, "The Eternal Religion of the Mankind". Is this description an overstatement? Does it deny or negate other religions? Not in the least, as we shall see later.



### HINDU SCRIPTURES: THE VEDAS, THE UPANISHADS AND SRIMAD BHAGABAD GITA

Unlike other religions, no one particular individual founded "Santatan Dharma" (henceforth, for convenience, we shall call it "Hinduism"). The principles of this religion are considered as "the eternal truth", that is, applicable to the whole humankind-irrespective of creed, race or geography, at all ages – past, present and future. They were derived from the experiences of many (unnamed) saints and seers passed on as a body of knowledge initially in the form of "shruti", that is, verbally from the teacher to the disciple. Much later, they were compiled and transcribed by a sage named Krishna Dvaipayana Vya (popularly known as Veda-Vya) into scriptures known as the "Vedas" (Vid = to know; Veda, Vidya = knowledge). Many historians consider them to be the most ancient scriptures in human history. Bal Gangadhar Tilak estimated the age of the Vedas to be 5000 years B.C. "Vidya" or knowledge can be of two kinds: that derived from the experience of our sense organs about our external world – the secular knowledge ("Para Vidya"); and that derived through the experiences of a disciplined mind, enabling us to know our true nature and realize God – the spiritual knowledge ("Apara Vidya"). The "Vedas" embody the second form of knowledge. There are four Vedas: "Rik", "Yajur", "Sama" and "Atharva", each consisting of two sections: "Samhit" and Brhmana.

<sup>1</sup> This article is written with the younger reader in mind.

The former contains hymns and the latter explains those hymns and instructs how and when to use them. Vedas deal with both the rituals (“Karmakanda”) as well as the philosophy (“Gnna-kanda”) in the practice of religion. The essence of the philosophical component is also called “Vedanta” (Vedanta = Veda + anta, or the culmination of the Vedas), laid down in the Vedas as a large number of segments known as the “Upanishads”. Thus the fundamentals of Hinduism are to be found in the Upanishads, where they are either presented as “Mahabakyas” (great proclamations) or more interestingly as dialogues woven into stories.

Ancient Hindus were not very good at preserving their scriptures. As a result, many segments of the Vedas – so also many of the Upanishads disappeared with time. The fact that sacred books were considered as objects of assimilation by listening from the teacher, rather than by writing, is partly responsible for this lamentable loss. Thus there is controversy about the original number of Upanishads. One hundred and eight of them have survived. Of these, eleven major Upanishads have remained highly popular because of the authoritative commentaries written on them by the great Hindu saint and scholar Sankarchrya (AD 788-820). He was a remarkable genius, who in a life time of only 32 years, travelled the length and breadth of India and revived Hinduism at a critical juncture of Indian history. Invaders such as Sakas, Tartars, Beluchis and the Huns brought in their grotesque religious ideas and ceremonies and embraced Buddhism – greatly distorting this religion. At this time Hinduism was also split by conflict amongst the vedic ritualists, Yogi ascetics and other factions each asserting their own dogmatic views. Sankarchrya courageously cut through the cobweb of this conflict by his rational interpretation of the Upanishads and also his own profound spiritual experience. His interpretations of Vedanta form the basis of the “Advaita” or the nondualistic, impersonal concept of God (Monoism). Subsequently another great teacher Rmnujchrya (AD 1017-1137) propounded the Vedantic school of thought emphasizing “Bishistdvaita” or Qualified Monoism, whereas Madvchrya (AD 1199-1276) propounded the “Dvaita” or the dualistic view of a personal God. In more modern times, the great Hindu saint of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886) demonstrated from his own experience that there is no real conflict amongst these three schools of thought; that one can realize God by adopting any one of three approaches depending on one’s personal preference or mood.

Many of the Upanishads have been translated into other languages as early as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD. Under the patronage of Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of the Mughal emperor Shahjehan, some fifty Upanishads were translated into Persian (ca AD 1650). Were he not assassinated by his younger brother Aurangjev, who took over the throne by killing three brothers and imprisoning his father, a great era of religious harmony might have dawned during the Mughal rule of India. The Persian translations of the Upanishads were translated into Latin in 1801-1802. The great western philosopher Schopenhauer read the Latin translation and declared, “In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It will be the solace of my life; it will be the solace of my death”.

To understand Hinduism, one has to turn to the Upanishads. Many modern commentaries are available in English, e.g. by late Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (the first president of India), and by late Swami Nikhilananda of the Ramakrishna – Vivekananda Centre, New York. However, a study of the Upanishads is not an easy task for the beginner. Fortunately for us, the cream of

the Upanishads (the Vedanta philosophy) has been presented lucidly in the great Hindu scripture “Srimad Bhagabad Gita” (the song of the divine) – the bible of the Hindus. Gita forms a part of the Hindu epic, the “Mhbhrata”. It contains eighteen chapters (Cantos) and 700 (believed to be 745 in the original version) verses, presented in the form of a dialogue between the divine incarnation Lord Krishna and the dejected worrier king Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. This dialogue is engagingly presented in a question-answer format and thus highly readable even by the uninitiated. Gita is compared to the life-giving milk of the great milch cow which is the Upanishad; Arjuna is the calf, whose suckling helps the flow of this milk in the hands of the milkman – Lord Krishna. Historians have estimated the age of Gita between 2000-3000 BC. Many commentaries on Gita including those of Shankarchrya have been written in Sanskrit. It has been translated into nearly all major languages of the world, and a large number of excellent English translations are currently available. Of these, a poetic version entitled “The Song of God: Bhagabad Gita” by Swami Prabhavananda and Chistopher Isherwood (Vedanta Press, Hollywood, CA) is very popular in the west, and appeals to the young reader.

### **ESSENCE OF HINDUISM**

Now I shall return to the essence of Hinduism, as laid down in the Vedantic Philosophy (comprised in the Upanishads and Srimad Bhagabad Gita). In this brief summary I shall expound upon the philosophy, and not the various rituals commonly practiced by a Hindu. For further reading, the reader is directed to two excellent texts: “Vedanta – a Simple Introduction” by Pravrajika Vrajaprana (Vedanta Press, Hollywood, CA) and “The Essentials of Hinduism” by Swami Bhaskarananda (Viveka Press, Seattle, WA).

### **THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN VEDANTA:**

Vedanta embodies the supreme knowledge – the knowledge of one self and the knowledge of God. What do we mean, when we say “God”? According to Vedanta, God is “Sat-Chit-anananda” or infinite existence, infinite consciousness and infinite bliss. This impersonal, transcendent representation of God is captured by the term “Brahman”, the divine ground of being. Vedanta declares that God dwells within our own hearts as the divine self or the “Atman”. The Atman is never born or nor will ever die. Atman is totally unaffected by the fluctuations of our body or mind, that is, afflictions of age, disease or mood. It is perfect, unchanging and free from any limitation. In other words, it is one with “Brahman” – which may also be viewed as the “Universal Atman”.

### **THE GOAL OF HUMAN LIFE**

Vedanta proclaims that the goal of human life is to realize and manifest our own divinity. Not only is this possible, Vedanta asserts that it is inevitable, because our true nature is divine. This may happen in this life or in future lives. This concept of Vedanta – that is, we are all born divine, pure and untainted – is in sharp contrast to the preachings in some religions that we are all born “sinners”. Swami Vivekananda, in his famous address to the first world Parliament of Religions (1898), proclaimed this message of Vedanta, “Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth - sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal!”

## **HARMONY OF RELIGIONS**

Vedanta also asserts that “Truth is one, sages call it by various names” (“Ekam Sad, Viprah Vahudha Vadanti” – Rik Veda). In other words, all religions teach the same basic truth about God, the world and our relationship to one another, although they may ascribe different names to the same God and prescribe different approaches for God realization. This assertion is reinforced in Srimad Bhagabad Gita (Canto IV,verse XI) in the words of Lord Krishna: “Whoever worships me in whatever form or by whatever means realizes me. All their paths eventually lead to me (God)”. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa demonstrated the validity of this Vedantic assertion in his own life. He realized God by not only practicing different approaches prescribed in Hinduism, but also practicing other religions – Christianity and Islam. Swami Vivekananda, the foremost disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, reinforced the Vedantic message of religious harmony in the west by declaring that this precept not only means tolerance, but also acceptance and even assimilation of some of the universal values presented by other religions. The spirit of tolerance, acceptance, and nonconversion, the basic tenets of Hinduism, explains why people belonging to so many different religions could settle in India and peacefully practice their faiths during the long history of India. It also explains why some very old religions such as Zoroastrianism (originating in Persia) have survived only in India.

## **GOD WITH AND WITHOUT A FORM**

Vedanta maintains that the all-pervading Brahman is the timeless, infinite entity that underlies and connects all the life forms, matter and energy, that is, we are all connected. This view of an impersonal God is hard to conceive and realize. For this reason, Vedanta also prescribes easier ways of God realization for the common man. Although every one of us are divine, that is, Brahman is our true nature, this divinity is manifest to a greater degree in some humans than in others. This divinity is seen to be manifest to the highest level in some one who has realized God, and has all the Godly qualities. Although rare, such humans in the Vedantic view are considered as incarnations of God or “Avatras”. It is easier to accept such an Avatra (for example, Lord Rama, Lord Krishna, Lord Buddha, Lord Mahavir Jain and Lord Sri Chaitanya Mahpravu) as a personal God in a human form. Similarly, scriptures also describe many mythological God- heads or deities, who are endowed with some specific attributes of God. Depending on the likings, a devotee may chose to worship such a deity or an Avatra as a personal God. The worship is facilitated by installing an image or an idol of the personal God on which the devotee’s mind can focus upon. This dualistic approach (that is, “me” and “God” are two entities) is most suited for a “Bhakti-Yogi”, whereas the nondualistic approach (that is, me and God are one and the same) are more suited for a Gnna-Yogi. (The different approaches or Yogas prescribed for God realization will be discussed later). Thus a Hindu is given a great freedom of choice for approaching God, depending on his or her likings, temperament and limitations, – worshipping a God without any form or attribute (an abstract or “Nirguna” Brahman), worshipping a formless God with some attributes (“Saguna” Brahman), or worshipping a God with form and attributes (a personal God or “Ista”). These approaches respectively constitute “Monoism”, “qualified monoism” and “dualism”. An understanding of these approaches should dispel the misconception that Hinduism is a religion which perpetuates belief in “multiple Gods” or “idolatry”. In fact, all these approaches for God realization can be practiced by the same individual either in a progressive and stepwise

manner or depending on one's mood – as was practiced by Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. He achieved “Samdhi” or the highest mental state representative of God-experience through all these means.

### **WHY ARE WE IGNORANT OF OUR DEVINE NATURE?**

Vedanta raises the fundamental question: Who am “I”? Am “I” the body or the mind or the ego driving my mind, and consequently, my actions? “None of them”, declares Vedanta, “I am the Atman, the unchanging divinity dwelling in me, unaffected by the changes and turbulences of the body, mind and the ego”. Vedanta also says that often we are unaware about our true identity, because it is covered with “My” or the veil of ignorance obscuring our vision. As a result, we misidentify ourselves with the ever-changing and transient body-mind-ego complex. This misperception creates a spiral of more ignorance and pain – fear of disease, old age and death, and sufferings from lust, greed, anger, hatred and hundred other miseries. How can we dispel the cloud of “My” to see our true self shining through? Vedanta advises us to practice mental purification by adopting a dual approach: getting rid of all the negative thoughts, feelings and habits such as selfishness, hatred, jealousy, cruelty, laziness and so forth, and actively practicing positive ones such as truthfulness, contentment, self-restraint and unselfish attitude and deeds for others. This mental purification is an integral part of the “Yogas” (to be discussed later). It drives away the clouds of “My” and allows our divine nature to shine forth. Once we can visualize our own divinity or Atman, we are then capable of seeing the same Atman in others, and can eventually connect with the universal Atman or the Brahman. Not only then we are incapable of doing any harm to others, we are also spontaneously moved by the pain and misery of others, and we take actions to relieve them even at a great self-sacrifice. A transformation in our nature, that is, our divinity shining through, is also then noticeable by others around us without any advertisement.

### **KARMA AND REINCARNATION**

Two concepts of Vedanta are unique to Hinduism: the concepts of “Karma” and “Reincarnation”. These concepts explain the problem of human suffering – a most compelling mystery in any religion. It is not rare to see an innocent human, even a saint or a child, suffer. While a saint can rise above physical or mental sufferings, that is not easy for others. Why should this happen? Is God unkind or indifferent? Vedanta takes the problem out of God's court and places it firmly in our own. We can blame neither God nor a devil. Vedanta explains that we ourselves are responsible for what life brings to us. This is due to our “Karma” (derived from the Sanskrit verb “kri” = act). It means both action and the results of action. We are reaping the results of our own actions in this life as well as in our previous lives – “as ye sow, so shall ye reap”.

“Actions” are implied in a broader sense – deeds both physical and mental. Whatever acts we have performed and whatever thoughts we have contemplated, have created an impression both in our own minds and also in the universe around us. The universe gives back to us what we have given to it (Newton's first law?). Vedanta says that when we repeat such deeds and thoughts, they make indelible imprints in our minds which grow stronger and stronger by the process of repeating. These imprints are called “Samskaras” which mold our individual characters and strongly influence our subsequent thoughts and actions. An angry mind, if allowed to

dwell on, perpetuates as an angry temperament and invites anger from others. Vedanta says that if we don't get rid of them soon in this life, our bad samkaras as well as the fruits of our thoughts and deeds are carried forward like a bank balance in subsequent lives, and we are bound to be at the receiving end sooner or later. On the other hand, if our actions and thoughts are those of kindness, love, compassion and unselfishness – these very actions and thoughts will be returned to us sooner or later.

Does the law of Karma make Vedanta a cold and fatalistic philosophy? Does it imply that every course in our life is predetermined for us as “fate”, so that we have no recourse to change it? Not in the least; Vedanta is both personally empowering and deeply compassionate. Vedanta emphasizes that God's grace, like sunshine, is bestowed upon everyone, the saintly and the wicked alike. The difference lies in how we make use of it. For example, we are empowered with free will to redirect our actions and thoughts; we can adopt those which we would like to receive from others – the acts of love, kindness, and unselfishness etc. By conscious efforts and practices, we can not only make others happy, but also bring happiness to ourselves.

The concept of the laws of Karma raises other important questions. Does it imply that we can be indifferent to the sufferings of our fellow beings, because, after all, their sufferings are due to their own Karma? Not so, it is our duty to try to alleviate their sufferings. Being indifferent is to chalk up bad Karma for ourselves. Do the Karmic laws enslave us to repeat the cycles of birth and rebirth for eternity to face the effects of our own actions in the past and present lives? Not so, Vedanta tells us that we free ourselves from the bonds of Karmic laws when we can detach ourselves from our Karma – that is, our thoughts and actions are executed in a detached and unselfish manner without the expectation of any return. This is a practical approach for God realization as part of “Karma Yoga” (see later). Vedanta assures us that the Karmic cycle of birth and rebirth ceases when an individual has realized his or her true identity. At that point the individual Atman becomes one with Brahman - the infinite existence, consciousness and bliss.

## **THE CASTE SYSTEM IN HINDUISM**

The caste system in the Hindu society is seen by many as a great paradox, because the practice of discriminating individuals on the basis of caste violates the very basic tenet of Vedanta, that is, every human is born divine. How did this system originate and how did it evolve? The answer to the first question is found in Sreemad Bhagabad Gita (Canto IV, verse XIII) in the words of Lord Krishna: “I have created four castes (professions) to suit the abilities and qualifications of individuals in the society. However, I myself (the creator) remain detached from my actions”. This profound statement unequivocally documents that the original caste system classifying professions into four broad categories (Brahmana or Brahmin – the priest and the teacher of spiritual knowledge; kshatriya – the administrator and the worrier cum protector; Vaishya – the businessman engaged in commerce; Shudra – the artisan, the craftsman and the provider of physical labor) was not meant to compartmentalize them by birth, or assign superiority of one above the other. We shall see later (see Karma Yoga) that no action or profession was to be less respected than the other, because any action when done with the spirit of service to God, is considered as an approach to God-realization. A great story in the Upanishads illustrates this point vividly. It describes a spiritual seeker who received some

occult power through the act of intense meditation in a forest. He discovered that a flying bird which interrupted his meditation by defecating on his head was burnt to ashes by his glance alone. Very proud and happy, he set out for the adjacent village as a travelling “holy man”. He arrived at a house and asked for some food from the lady of the house. The lady made him wait, since she was tied up taking care of her sick husband. The long waiting made the “holy man” very angry and he cast his wrathful glance at the lady to punish her. But the lady remained unharmed and smilingly retorted that she was not a bird; she admonished him emphasizing that occult powers are a hindrance to spiritual progress. She directed him to a meat-seller (a butcher, evidently a shudra) in the adjacent market, to receive spiritual knowledge. The man wondered how could a lowly butcher be a teacher of spirituality. Nevertheless, he accepted her advice. After meeting, observing and conversing with the butcher he realized that the butcher had made great spiritual progress simply by practicing his profession as a service to God. He received the knowledge that no profession is lowly; that it is the attitude behind every deed that makes it good or bad; that any secular act, even cutting and selling of meat, can become spiritual, when offered as a service to God.

In the Vedic ages, quite understandably, Brahminhood received the highest societal respect, because those engaged in acquiring and then imparting spiritual knowledge had to go through great austerity of forsaking worldly pleasures, learning and character building. Although the descendants of a Brahmin were expected to go through this rigorous process, descendants of other castes were not prevented from doing so. For example, the great Vedic sage Vashista was accorded Brahminhood by other sages, even though he was not born into it. The natural tendency of people to adopt similar professions within the family may have led to the initial compartmentalization of castes by birth. However, the system possibly became corrupt with time and evolved into a rigid framework of caste assignment and hierarchy by birth. The discriminatory practice against the “lower castes” came along with the evolution of a power structure. Sadly also, training in Brahminhood became more of a training in conducting rituals rather than in spirituality in many Brahmin families. The fact that during the long history of India, every Hindu saint boldly rejected the discriminatory practice of the caste system, attests to its unacceptability as a religious practice in Hinduism. Major reforms were initiated by a number of saints and reformers of Hinduism in more recent times. Of them, Lord Sri Chaitanya Mahpravu, considered by many as an “Avatra”, not only broke all the barriers of caste in the contemporary Hindu society, he also embraced seekers from other religions such as Islam, as his favored followers. In more modern times, Lord Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and lately Mahtma Gandhi greatly contributed to the riddance of social discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or religion.

### **APPROACHES TO GOD REALIZATION: THE YOGAS**

I shall now summarize very briefly the various approaches to God realization prescribed by Vedanta. These approaches are termed as “Yogas”. The word “Yoga” comes from the Sanskrit Verb Yuj (=to Yoke or to unite), so that the goal of Yoga is to unite oneself with God. Unfortunately, in the west, the term Yoga has lost its original meaning and is often identified with certain physical exercises practiced as a part of “Hatha-Yoga”, a bit dissociated from its spiritual practices.

Four types of spiritual practices or Yogas have been formulated to match four types of psychological profiles of the spiritual aspirant: “Bhakti-Yoga” or the path of love and devotion, best suited for the predominantly emotional; “Gnna-Yoga” or the path of knowledge, best suited for the predominantly intellectual, possessing a rational and discriminating mind; “Karma-Yoga” or the path of work for those who love to work; “Rja-Yoga” or the path of meditation for those who are meditative and reflective. Nevertheless, neither these paths nor the respective psychological profiles are exclusive air tight compartments. Every individual is born with a combination of the four psychological attributes at varying proportions, and thus one can practice all the four paths of Yogas to various degrees. In fact, these paths are interdependent and complementary.

**Bhakti-Yoga.** The Bhakti-Yogi (the practitioner of Bhakti-Yoga) approaches God with the force of devotion and love – the most powerful and the irresistible form of human emotion. Love is the fundamental bond between a child and the parent, amongst the siblings and eventually other members of the society whom we call friends. Bhakti-Yoga utilizes this natural, God-given emotion not only for building an intimate relationship with God (a God with or without a form), but also to see God in others. Most Hindu rituals of worship are the tools of Bhakti-Yoga. A devotee can approach God with the unselfish and unblemished love for his or her own child, such as worshipping baby Krishna (similar to the worshipping of baby Jesus by some Christians). The devotee sings to please the baby, offers him his favorite food also performs rituals to put him to sleep, so on and so forth. The devotee can approach God with the love of a son or a daughter for the mother or the father. Worshipping God as the divine mother in various forms (such as Durga, Yagaddhatri, Kali, and so on) is a common practice in Hinduism, whereas Christians typically worship God as the heavenly father. A devotee can approach God with the love of a dedicated servant to his or her master (as Hanuman did to Lord Rama), or the love of a very close friend (as did Arjuna to Lord Krishna) or the love of a wife to her husband (as did Gopees to Lord Krishna or as Christian nuns who adopt Jesus as their husband). Thus, in Bhakti-Yoga, the approaches of love and adoration for God are many. Our love for God may initially be selfish and blemished; we pray for worldly things such as good health, wealth, success, fame, so on and so forth. However, true love seeks nothing in return; this is fundamental to our nature, such as the love of the mother for her new born. God realization is possible only when the devotee worships God with unselfish love and prayers. The devotee seeks no worldly possession or power, but seeks God’s grace to rise above selfishness and develop Godly qualities. Vedanta says that the devotee is then rewarded with those qualities; at some point, the devotee not only realizes his or her own divinity, but also sees the same divinity in others.

**Gnna-Yoga.** God can also be approached by “Gnna-Yoga” or the path of knowledge and discrimination - the knowledge of the divine self or Atman, and its unity with the universal Atman or Brahman. Rather than following the promptings of the heart (of a Bhakti-Yogi) the devotee uses the power of mind to discriminate between the real and the unreal, the permanent and the transient. The devotee adopts a nondualistic approach to God-realization, that is, identification of oneness with God (with or without any attribute – the Saguna or the Nirguna Brahma). Although the Bhakti-Yogi also attains the same goal, he or she prefers to think of God as distinct from oneself in order to enjoy the sweetness of a relationship. The Gnna-Yogi,

by contrast, feels that duality is not truth, it is a stage of ignorance; there is no need to look outside oneself for divinity, because we ourselves are divine. He or she attempts to remove the veil of ignorance or “My” by adopting a dual approach – a negative approach of rejecting the transient and the unreal (“neti, neti” – this is not Brahman, that is not Brahman etc.), and a positive approach of self affirmation, visualizing the eternal, the perfect and the real – the true nature of Brahman, dwelling within us as the Atman.

**Karma-Yoga.** This is the path of dedicated work, renouncing the fruits of our actions as spiritual offerings to God, rather than hoarding them for ourselves. By disengaging the ego from actions and thoughts, the Karma-Yogi can stop the chain reaction of cause and effect of the Karmic Law. With practice, the Karma Yogi can transform every secular act – involuntary or voluntary, such as the acts of breathing, eating, sleeping, and doing a variety physical and mental chores during the day and night, into spiritual acts – as a service to God. According to Swami Vivekananda, God realization by the Karma-Yogi comes through the progressive steps of “work and worship”, “work as worship”, and finally “work is worship”, in which the boundary between work and worship dissolves completely. The path of Karma Yoga is a powerful tool for the average human being with a busy active life to approach God. When the devotee offers every thought and action as a service to God, he or she can not allow thoughts or actions that are harmful to others. The devotee resorts to those that are not only harmless, but also holy and beneficial to others. The devotee enjoys sharing his or her wealth, abilities and expertise for the benefit of those in need, without the expectation of any recognition or fame (“Let not your left hand know what your right hand gives” – Bible). When the acts of service are done with no ulterior motive, they become acts of joy, because the Karma-Yogi then sees God in everyone, like the Bhakti-Yogi or the Gnna-Yogi.

**Rja-Yoga.** The path of “Rja-Yoga” or Meditation utilizes our mental powers to realize our true divinity or the Atman through the process of psychological control. This approach is based on the premise that our perception of the divine self is obscured by the disturbances of the mind. If the mind can be made to stand still, totally free from disturbing thoughts perturbing and polluting our mind, our self will instantly shine forth. Patanjali, a great sage, wrote a most comprehensive treatise on the science and the art of meditation which is beyond the scope of the present article. Interested readers may consult “Meditation: mind and Patanjali’s Yoga” by Swami Bhaskarananda (Viveka Press, Seattle, WA).

Our mind can be compared to a present day lake that is turbulent with strong waves produced by speed boats, polluted by thousand pollutants discarded by industries and tourists. One finds that this analogy is not too far from the state of affairs, if we try to sit quietly for a few minutes and meditate upon our true self, the Atman. What happens? A thousand different thoughts rush through in all directions – the thought of my daughter who arrived late last night without a valid reason, the thought of a colleague at work who can never be trusted with a job, that I forgot to do the oil change in my car that is overdue, that I must complete my tax return on time, that I have not returned the call of a friend who left a voice message,...so on and so forth. The minute we discard one thought, another rushes in with equal force! It is said that like a polluted lake, many of the thoughts of the past have only settled to the bottom, not only to resurface under conditions of mental turbulence, but also to obscure the bottom

surface of the lake, the self. A mind that is free from disturbing thoughts and rid of all stored thoughts of the past, on the other hand, can be compared with a beautiful transparent lake with no wave and no pollution – calm, quiet, and tranquil, so that we can see the bottom, that is, our true self. How can one achieve such a state? Vedanta says that this can only be achieved by dual means: practice of meditation to make the mind still, and mental purification to get rid of the pollutants through the practice of moral virtues. Meditation is an intense personal matter; the aspirant must follow a qualified spiritual teacher for directions on how to meditate and what to meditate upon. The method and the object of meditation need to be personalized, depending on the person’s attributes and likings. However, it has been proven that when practiced properly, it results in removal of stress, as well as physical and mental well-being even for an atheist. Unless combined with mental purification, meditation alone is considered to be inadequate for God realization.

***Mental Purification.*** Mental purification, according to Patanjali, depends on practice of two classes of moral precepts, “Yama” and “Niyama”, each consisting of five precepts. Yama includes nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, chastity and nonreceiving of gifts (because gifts are often given with the hidden intent of obliging the recipient to return a favor to the giver; however, gifts given with no motive other than pure love are acceptable). Niyama consists of cleanliness (of body and mind), contentment, austerity (physical and mental discipline), study (study of sacred literature and repeating the holy name of God) and surrendering oneself to God. Practicing these precepts continuously makes them a natural habit of the aspirant and transforms the aspirant’s mind and behavior.

It is said that great progress along the spiritual path can be achieved by performing three “holy” things: repeating the holy name (in the form of “Japam”, that is, silent utterance or chanting of holy “mantras”), keeping holy company (being in touch with holy people), and reading holy books. Finally, prayer is considered as one of the most powerful tools for spiritual progress not only in Hinduism but also in every religion. In Hinduism, prayer in any form, solitary or collective, expressive (for example, singing Lord’s name) or contemplative (silent, as part of meditation) is a simple and effective means of turning one’s mind towards God. It is said that the objective of prayer is “communion” or mental communication with God, making it easier for the devotee’s mind to achieve the ultimate objective, that is, “union” with God by adopting various approaches such as mediation.

The four paths of God-realization (Yogas) remind me of a circular-shaped European town with four broad avenues leading to the “Centrum” or “Zentrum”, the central compound where the church of the town is located. These avenues are connected many times with parallel concentric roads which allow the traveller to move freely from one avenue to the other and then reach the church by a different avenue. Each avenue as well as the connecting roads are lined with wonderful shops where the traveller can taste tasty wares of different kinds to his or her heart’s content and also enjoy the company of other travellers. The life and the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, a recent spiritual giant, who within a short life of 39 years (AD 1863-1902) rejuvenated Vedanta in the east & the west, vividly demonstrates how these four paths can be utilized in our every day life in a complementary manner for our own spiritual progress.

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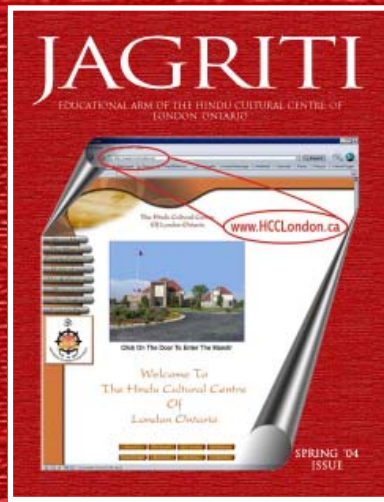
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