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Preface

As a teacher of Hinduism, I repeatedly encounter views and representations of the Hindu tradition which are inconsistent with its teachings and spirit. Many of these continue to persist, although distinguished Hindu scholars and teachers have untiringly explained and clarified the Hindu world-view. It is not uncommon also to find such misunderstanding about Hinduism among Hindus.

This fact prompted me to prepare this work in which I address many popular misconceptions about the Hindu tradition. The structure of the text is simple. In each section, I identify a common misunderstanding and then proceed to discuss a correct Hindu viewpoint. I have kept my responses concise and deal only with what I consider to be the essential arguments.

While I have dealt with twenty topics in this publication, these are not exhaustive. My hope is to revise regularly and add, in subsequent editions, to the topics discussed here. If this work helps the reader to understand and become interested in the Hindu tradition, my intention will be fulfilled.

FALSE: Hindus worship many Gods

TRUE: Hindus worship one God in many forms and call God by many names

Hinduism teaches that there is only one God who is the creator of everything. In the Bhagavadgita (10:17-18), Krishna explains that He is the father, mother and ancestor of the universe. He is the Lord, the Supporter, the Beginning and the End of all things. At the same time, Hinduism teaches that this one God can be called by various names and we can think of God in different forms. For instance, we may think of God as Ganesha who is represented with the body of a human and the head of an elephant or as the Goddess Durga seated powerfully on a lion.

There are many reasons why Hinduism allows us the freedom to address God by many names and to think of God in various forms. Hinduism teaches that God is infinite and we cannot, therefore, put any limits on the names of God. The names of the limitless God are limitless. If we claim that God only answers to one name, we are attempting, as human beings, to control and restrict God's divine freedom. The belief that we worship one God under different names and forms is a very ancient one in Hinduism. In the Vedas (Rig Veda I.64.46), Hinduism's

most ancient scripture, we are told: *Ekam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti* (Truth is One; the wise call it by many names).

To understand another reason for the many names and forms for God in Hinduism, we must also think of the land of India where Hinduism developed and where most Hindus still live. India is a vast country with many languages, cultures, customs and practices. In different parts of India, Hindus called God by different names and thought of God in various forms. In the state of Maharashtra, for instance, Ganesha, is the popular form of God, while, in Bengal, God is worshipped as a mother in the form of the Goddess Kali. Hindus discovered that they were worshipping the same God with different names and in different forms. Since each one loved the names and forms which were common in his or her region, all of these were retained in Hinduism. The names and forms of God which are dear to us help us to love God and feel God's presence.

The important point to understand is that having different names and forms for God does not mean that there are many gods. God is one, but there are no limits to God's names and forms.

2

False: Hindus believe in predestination

True: Hindus believe in the law of karma which teaches responsibility and freedom of choice.

Predestination is a belief that the circumstances of our lives in the present or in the future are determined by someone or some force other than ourselves. Some who hold such a view describe God as responsible for all that comes to pass. There are others who believe that the various planets determine our destiny.

The law of *karma*, however, is very different from such beliefs. It teaches that all of our actions (mental, vocal and bodily) determine our character and the condition of our lives in the present and future. What we are today is a consequence of the ways in which we have thought and acted in the past and we are shaping our futures by the choices we are making in the present. We are the ones responsible for our destinies, individually and as groups.

The law of *karma* teaches us that certain kinds of actions will produce certain kinds of results for us.

Virtuous actions, for example, like self-control, sharing and compassion, bring about peace and happiness for us in the present and in the future. Sinful actions, on the other hand, like, untruth, violence and greed, are the causes of sorrow and unhappiness. It is entirely up to us, however, to make the right choices and to select happiness over sorrow. We have the freedom to do so.

It is true that when we make wrong choices over a long period of time, we seem to lose the freedom to choose. A wrong habit grows in power when it is allowed to continue. It takes control of us and we may feel that we cannot do anything to change. Let us consider the example of smoking. The longer one smokes, the more difficult it becomes to break the habit and one may argue that he has no choice in the matter. One may blame others or even claim that it is his fate to smoke! One forgets that a choice was made, sometime in the past, to smoke and the habit has grown by repetition. Since the habit is so strong, a powerful effort of will and determination is required to overcome it. The choice is still ours. If our past choices have created unfavorable circumstances for us in the present, it is up to us to alter these by new choices in the present.

Hinduism teaches that we must be careful and responsible about all that we do. We have the freedom to make our lives happy or unhappy.

3

False: Hindus worship idols**True: Hindus use murtis to describe the nature of God and as an aid to worshipping and developing a close relationship with God**

Let us begin with what is most obvious. "Idol" is an English term which has no Sanskrit equivalent. The English term, however, is used inappropriately to refer to the various forms which Hindus use to represent the divine. The Sanskrit word for these forms is *murti*, which refers to something having a form, a figure or a definite shape.

Murtis serve many purposes in Hinduism. They are a powerful visual medium for imparting information about the nature of God. The term "iconography" literally means "writing in images" and Hindus have "written" extensively about God with *murtis*. For this reason, the English word "icon" is the most suitable one for a *murti*. If one looked carefully at the features of any *murti*, there is a lot which it tells us about God. Multiple arms in a *murti*, for example, is an artistic way of suggesting that God is omnipotent. Similarly, the third eye represents unlimited

knowledge or omniscience. Venomous snakes around the neck of Shiva suggests fearlessness and the conquest of death, while a trident in His hands represents justice and moral rule. Every feature of the *murti* is a meaningful statement about God and one must have the skill to understand its meaning.

Worship (*puja*) includes all of the actions which we do in order to express our love for God. *Puja*, however, also refers to a very specific ceremony in which God is adored as the most honored guest in one's home. In this ceremony, various traditional Hindu actions of hospitality, like the offering of a seat, washing of the feet, sandal paste, food etc., are extended to God. Since God is invisible, these offerings are made in the presence of the *murti* which represents God. It is important to understand that it is not the particular *murti* which one is honoring in worship, but God. The *murti* is a sacred symbol which reminds us of God and through which we offer our worship

Strictly speaking, idolatry is the act of wrongfully identifying God with any particular finite form. An idolater, then, is someone who worships a finite form thinking that it is God. Hinduism, however, teaches that God's presence is not to be limited to any specific form. In the Bhagavadgita, Krishna reminds us repeatedly that God is equally present everywhere in the universe and also beyond it. It is not wrong to think that God is graciously present in the *murti*, but it would be wrong to think that God is present there alone! This would be contradictory to the fundamental teachings of Hinduism.

Finally, *murtis* are very important for helping us to keep our minds centered on God during worship and prayer. There is a restless quality to the mind which makes it difficult to maintain concentration during prayer. *Murtis* are a powerful reminder of the divine and provide a focus for our attention on God during worship.

Murtis are not idols and the ways in which they are used in Hindu worship do not constitute idolatry.

4

False: Hindus worship the cow

True: Hinduism requires us to see God in all forms, human and non-human

God alone is and ought to be the focus of worship in Hinduism. In the Bhagavadgita (9:24), Krishna explains that He alone is Lord and the enjoyer of all worship. Hinduism, however, teaches that God is not limited by space or by time and is equally present in all beings. He is the imperishable spirit in all perishable bodies. The aim of Hinduism is to help us develop our understanding so that we are constantly aware of God's presence. Krishna emphasizes this aim in the Bhagavadgita (6: 30):

One who sees Me everywhere, and sees all things in Me; I am not lost to him and he is not lost to Me.

It is important to underline the fact that Hinduism does not confine God's presence to human beings. In the verse above, Krishna speaks of seeing Him everywhere (*sarvatra*) and in everything (*sarvam*). Members of the animal species are not excluded and we are called upon to see God in them. They must also be the objects of our active compassion and care. *Bhuta-yajna* or the service of non-human life forms is one of the traditional duties of human beings.

While Hinduism upholds the sacredness of all animals, it is obvious that its relationship with the cow is special. This clearly has to do with the traditional role of the cow in the Indian economy. In an economy still dominated by small farms, cows are an important source of power for cultivating the land. In addition to providing milk and its various by-products, the cow supplies dung which is used for fuel and as building material. Other types of fuel are expensive or unavailable.

The cow is one of the best examples of the generosity of the animal world towards human beings, and Hindus reciprocate the many ways in which the cow serves human needs by treating the animal with respect and reverence. The cow symbolizes the bonds between the human and non-human worlds and the dependence of human beings on the latter. Gratitude is an appropriate response to an animal which continues to provide for the well-being of so many. We must understand, however, that

attitudes of respect, reverence and gratitude are not the same as worship.

In honoring the cow, Hindus are recognizing and affirming the relationship which we have with all animals. For Gandhi, the cow was a symbol of the entire animal world which deserves our care and protection. In an age of growing ecological awareness, Hinduism has a valuable lesson to teach by its attitude of reverence and respect for all life.

Hinduism teaches reverence for all life. Worship is reserved for God alone.

5

False: Hinduism does not encourage efforts to relieve the sufferings of others

True: Compassion (*daya*) for all beings is one of the most important virtues of Hinduism.

The argument that Hinduism does not promote efforts to relieve the sufferings of others is based on a serious misunderstanding of the doctrine of *karma*. The law of *karma* teaches that our actions, good or evil, produce appropriate effects. Virtuous actions produce positive and joyful results while evil actions produce pain

and suffering for others as well as for ourselves. Some people, however, incorrectly interpret this to mean that we should not undertake any actions to remove the sufferings of another since each one suffers as a consequence of his or her own past choices.

Hinduism does not deny that human suffering is often caused by improper desires and actions. Hinduism, however, never teaches that we must use this as an excuse for not doing anything to help another in need. In other words, understanding the cause of suffering, is not a valid reason for indifference. If my child hurts himself, while running too fast down the stairs, it would be cruel and callous of me not to offer help because I understand the reason for his fall.

If we examine this issue from the standpoint of enlightened self-interest, there is every reason to help others in need. If we choose to do nothing when others suffer and adopt the attitude that "it is his *karma*," we must know that the same argument may be used when we suffer. *Karma*, after all, teaches that we reap what we sow.

Helping others in need, however, should not be motivated by self-interest. Compassion (*daya*) is one of the highest virtues in Hinduism. The scriptures of Hinduism emphasize that God exists in all living and non-living beings and things. Service of those who are suffering and in want provides a special opportunity and privilege for worshipping God in those beings. To refuse to help, when we can, is to be blind to the presence of God in all and to refuse to serve God. *Manushya Yajna*, that is the service

of human beings, is one of the prescribed duties in Hinduism. In the Ramayana, Rama describes the service of others as the highest expression of *dharma*. On the other hand, causing pain to another, through our actions or our refusal to act, is the gravest contradiction of *dharma*. It is wrong, therefore, to blame the suffering of another on his or her *karma* and to ignore the obligations of *dharma*.

A beautiful story of compassion is told about the famous Hindu teacher, Ramanuja. Ramanuja went to a teacher and requested initiation with a *mantra*. The teacher gave him God's name and advised him not to share it with anyone or he would go to hell. Immediately, Ramanuja went to top of the local temple and shouted, "I am going to give you a name which will save you." He then repeated the name loudly. His teacher heard about it and asked for an explanation. "I am prepared to go to hell a hundred times, if I can save thousands," replied Ramanuja.

We are obliged to do all that we can to relieve suffering. The doctrine of *karma* is not an excuse for indifference and inaction.

6

False: A person must be born a Hindu to be a Hindu

True: Hindu teachings are universal and do not depend on the circumstances of birth.

The argument that a person can be a Hindu through birth alone is very difficult to justify. The major problem with this view is that it undermines the claim of Hinduism to teach truths which are valid for everyone.

Let us illustrate this problem by looking at examples of central teachings of Hinduism. Every tradition of Hinduism proclaims a belief in the law of *karma*, which teaches that all of our intentional actions eventually produce appropriate results which we must experience. In other words, we reap what we sow. The consequences of our actions, however, are not necessarily experienced during the same life in which the actions are performed. Hindus believe in reincarnation or future lives in which we experience the consequences of our past and present actions. If we contend that one can be a Hindu only through birth, are we contending also that Hindus alone are subject to the moral law of *karma* and the cycle of rebirth? A view like this would clearly contradict the

scriptures of Hinduism which teach these truths to be valid for all human beings.

The cardinal teaching of Hinduism is the existence of God in everyone and in everything. The divine presence is not limited to those who are born in particular religions, families, ethnic groups, or geographical regions. If the argument about birth is an attempt to limit God's presence, this is both impossible and absurd.

The goal of life in Hinduism is to know God, the absolute reality. All human beings, however, are subject to ignorance (*avidya*). Birth in a Hindu family does not guarantee or lead naturally to the gain of wisdom. Everyone must consciously strive for wisdom. The requirements for gaining knowledge of the divine are universal in nature. These include the ability to distinguish the true from the false, freedom from greed, control of the mind and senses, faith and the desire for liberation. Birth in a Hindu family is not listed among these requirements. Wisdom is available to anyone who is mentally and emotionally prepared for it.

Finally, the argument that a person is a Hindu by birth alone would invalidate the vision and labors of a long line of distinguished teachers including Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharishi, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Sivananda, and A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. They understood the universal relevance of Hinduism and opened their hearts and minds to all earnest seekers of God.

7

False: Hinduism advocates the inequality of human beings.

True: Hinduism teaches that while human beings have different personalities and dispositions, they all share a fundamental unity and equality through the presence of God in everyone.

Hinduism recognizes the diversity of dispositions, and interests which are to be found among human beings. Many Hindu traditions account for this diversity by referring to the three basic qualities or *gunas* which determine the nature of all created things. The three *gunas* are *sattva* (which is of the nature of pleasure and light), *rajas* (which is the principle of motion and activity), and *tamas* (which is heavy and passive). The presence of these *gunas* in different proportions determine the different temperaments of human beings. When *sattva* predominates, for example, one may be drawn to a life of spirituality or scholarship. When *rajas* is the prevalent *guna*, one may aspire to political or social leadership. The specific nature of an individual is referred to, in Sanskrit, by the term *svabhava*, and the work in which this nature finds proper expression is one's *svadharma* or duty. One's work should be, ideally, an expression of one's special nature.

In time, however, the belief grew that one's nature was determined by the circumstances of one's birth and that one's occupation ought to follow that of one's ancestors. Individual choice of occupation was curtailed and birth became more important than conduct and character. Those who were the custodians of sacred texts claimed exclusive rights to study these texts and denied these rights to others. Hindu society became rigidly stratified into caste groups with membership determined solely on the basis of birth. The upper castes claimed special privileges and those at the bottom of the hierarchy or outside of it were regarded as unequal and impure. The ideal of occupational choices based on individual character was lost and replaced by a system based on birth and inequality.

Today, the conditions of life in urban communities, the increase of educational opportunities, and the ideal of equality limit the practice of caste based on hereditary occupations, it is important to remember that the Hindu ideal is one of regard for human diversity and freedom of choice. Work is most fulfilling when it is freely chosen on the basis of interest and aptitude.

In addition, there must be regard for the worth and dignity of every human being based on the common and equal presence of God in each one. The Bhagavadgita (6:32; 13:27-28) asks us to see all beings with eyes of equality through discerning God dwelling everywhere and in all beings. Seeing the indestructible One in the variety of the many is true seeing, for it is through the One that the many are united and seen as equal.



False: Hinduism is anti-materialistic.

True: Hinduism recognizes the necessity and value of wealth. The accumulation of wealth, however, is not the highest goal of human existence.

The Hindu appreciation for wealth is obvious from the fact that the attainment of wealth (*artha*) is one of the four goals of human existence. The other goals are pleasure (*kama*), righteousness (*dharma*) and spiritual liberation (*moksha*). Hinduism never glorifies involuntary poverty. In the Ramayana of Tulasidasa, the fifteenth century Hindi poet, a disciple asks his teacher to identify that which causes the greatest human suffering. "Poverty," replied the teacher, without hesitation. In the Taittiriya Upanishad, the teacher, in his commencement address, urges his students not to neglect material prosperity and well being. The Hindu conception of an ideal community is one in which no one suffers for want of life's basic necessities. Wealth, however, must be acquired by means which are conducive to the welfare of the human and non-human community of which one is a part and must be shared generously with those who are in need.

While appreciating the significance of wealth, the Hindu tradition reminds us repeatedly of its limits. The most important of these is the fact that material things will never fully satisfy us, but keep us always in a state of desire or want. All material things are subject to time and even if they lasted throughout one's life, they cannot be retained after death.

While it is true that there are thoughtful persons who are contented with the wealth which they possess, there are many more who are perpetually discontented in spite of all that they have. They are never free from the desire and anxiety to acquire more and more. The reason is that wealth can easily become the primary means through which human beings give value and importance to themselves. One's value becomes dependent then on having more than those with whom one compares oneself and one is compelled to always stay ahead in the race of acquiring things. The problem is that this is a race without a finishing line! Or worse, it is a race with a finishing line which someone draws further back everytime you are close to what you think is the end!

Hinduism cautions us that unless the desire for material things is controlled through understanding the limits of wealth, it becomes like a raging and unquenchable fire. It can never be quenched by the multiplication of desires for material things. True contentment comes from understanding the nature of the self (*atman*), which is one with God and which is peace and joy.

9

False: Hinduism is other-worldly. It does not approve of the enjoyment of life in this world.

True: Pleasure in its various forms is a legitimate goal of human existence.

Hinduism is not at all opposed to pleasurable experiences in the world. *Kama* or pleasure is one of the approved goals of life in Hinduism along with *artha* (wealth), *dharma* (morality) and *moksha* (liberation). Hinduism emphasizes, however, that we should not seek or engage in pleasurable experiences which cause harm to our bodies or minds or which bring about pain and suffering to others. In the pursuit of pleasure, we must follow the basic moral rules (*dharma*) and be considerate of the well-being of others. In the Bhagavadgita (7:11), Krishna, the Lord incarnate, gives His approval to pleasure by declaring, "I am pleasure which is not opposed to righteousness."

While giving approval to the enjoyment of the world, the Hindu tradition teaches that we can avoid unnecessary pain and suffering to ourselves and to others if we understand the limitations of certain kinds of

pleasure. In Bhagavadgita (5:22) Krishna explains these limitations.

Pleasures which come from the contact between the sense organs and sense objects contain the seeds of unhappiness. They have a beginning and an end. Wise people do not indulge in these excessively.

The pleasures of sense experiences are never lasting. This is what Krishna means by describing them as having a beginning and an end. They are fleeting and momentary and eventually leave us feeling dissatisfied and wanting. This want or desire drives us to seek the same or a similar experience and, before long, we are hopelessly addicted and dependent. We see this clearly in the case of drug or alcohol abuse. We search for a lasting happiness but we do so through substances which provide a momentary thrill and destroy us physically and mentally. The use of such substances is condemned in Hinduism. Hinduism wants us to understand that lasting joy and peace cannot be found in the temporary experiences of the senses. The appreciation of this fact is an important step on our path to maturity and wisdom.

Hinduism approves of pleasure in the world, but urges us to follow the way of moderation and balance in our activities of work and leisure. In Bhagavadgita (6:16), Krishna advises moderation and control in food, recreation, work, and rest. He teaches the avoidance of extremes in all things. This is a valuable lesson in an age that leans to excess in most things.

10

False: Hinduism teaches that the world is an illusion.

True: The world is dependent on God and does not have the same independent reality as God. It is not, however, an illusory projection of the human mind.

When we describe something as an illusion, we want to suggest that it is false or unreal. We also use the term to identify those things which are a projection or creation of the human mind and which do not have any external reality. We do not often, however, reflect on the significance of the fact that when we describe something as an illusion, we are comparing it with some object or thing which we believe to be real or, at the very least, more real.

Let us take an example. Dream experiences are considered to be unreal or illusory. While they are occurring, however, dream experiences are taken to be real. We go through the full range of human emotions in our dreams, suffering in painful experiences and rejoicing in joyous ones. It is only when we awake from a dream, either suddenly or in the next morning, that we dismiss our dreams as illusory. In other words, it is only in relation to the waking experience and world that the dream is

declared to be unreal. Among other reasons, we consider the waking world to be more real than the dream because of greater duration in time. Our dreams are brief in comparison to our waking experiences. There is a continuity in our waking experiences which is lacking in our dreams. We give more value to our waking life because we consider it to be more real than our dreams.

God, in the Hindu tradition, is described, in Sanskrit as *sat*. This means that God exists in all three periods of time, past, present and future, without change. As eternal and everlasting, God is the highest reality. The universe, on the other hand, comes and goes. There was a time when it did not exist in its present form and there will be a time when it will not be in its present form. The universe as a whole and all things within it are subject to continuous change. It is also dependent on God for its existence. It is only when we compare the reality of the universe with the nature of God's reality that we may speak of the universe as having a lesser degree of reality. This is not the same as saying that the universe is an illusory creation of the human mind. The great philosopher, Shankara, argues against the belief that objects of the world exist only in the human mind.

Hinduism teaches that the universe, as we know and experience it, does not exist independently, but is dependent upon and sustained by God who is its origin and source. Its reality is not equal to God. The Hindu tradition gives the greatest value to that which has the greatest reality and since God alone is absolutely real, God has ultimate value. The world, on the other hand, is given less value because it is not as real as God. Finite objects cannot

have infinite value. This does not mean that they have no value or that they should be dismissed as illusory. Life in the world must be taken very seriously since it is the doorway and the means to God who is absolutely real and true.

11

False: Hindus believe that human beings are trapped forever in a cycle of birth death and rebirth.

True: Hindus believe in moksha, which is freedom from the cycle of birth death and rebirth.

Belief in *karma* (the law of cause and effect) and *samsara* (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth) is fundamental to Hinduism. The doctrine of *karma* emphasizes that all voluntary human actions produce two kinds of consequences. Let us illustrate this with an example.

Suppose you are in the midst of a congested city and you observe an elderly woman having difficulty in crossing the street. You decide to take a few minutes from your busy schedule and help her across. This action will

produce certain immediate results. The woman will get to her destination safely and you feel happy because you helped her. Hinduism teaches, however, that your action will also produce an appropriate result for you in the future. Since your actions were good and virtuous, the future result will be one of happiness. This future result may be experienced later in this life or in a life to come. The Hindu belief is that we are reborn because of the need to experience the varied results of our actions in our present and past lives.

Each one has accumulated *karma*, consisting of the effects of various actions performed in past lives which have not yet been experienced. In each life we live, we experience some of the results of past actions and we also add to the collection. We are reborn after death in order that we will experience the results or fruits of our actions. This cycle of birth, death and rebirth, however, does not have to continue eternally. Liberation from it is possible and this is referred to, in Sanskrit, as *moksha*.

The goal of existence in Hinduism is to know God. The Hindu belief is that God is the true object of all human seeking, since God is joy and peace which is not subject to change. As long as we seek the meaning of our lives and our satisfaction in the finite and limited objects of the world, we will continue in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The understanding that finite objects and pursuits will never fully satisfy us, motivates us to seek the eternal God. When we find God, we discover, in this life itself, an abiding peace and contentment. We learn that we were separate from God only in our ignorance. We now live in oneness with God and, upon death, attain God. From God

there is no return to the cycle of *samsara*. This is the truth stated by Krishna in Bhagavadgita (8:5).

And at the time of death, one who dies remembering Me, having left the body, goes to Me. About this there is no doubt.

12

False: Hinduism teaches that the ideal human state is one of desirelessness.

True: Hinduism does not aim for the eradication of desires, but for the replacement of selfish desires by desires and actions for the happiness of others.

It is quite true that popular works on Hinduism often describe the ideal human state as one of desirelessness, and the ideal person as one who is free from all desire. Many translations of Hindu scriptures also suggest this idea. This, however, is an incorrect and misleading understanding of the Hindu viewpoint.

In the Bhagavadgita (3:3-8), Krishna teaches that no living being, even for a moment, can remain actionless. The continuity of life is impossible without action. If life is impossible without action, actions are impossible without

desire. An action cannot be initiated without an end or goal in view. A desireless action is a contradiction in terms.

If we take Krishna, the incarnation of God (*avatara*) as an embodiment of the Hindu ideal, we see clearly that his actions are prompted by certain desires. He becomes incarnate, he tells us in Bhagavadgita (4:7-8), to protect the virtuous, to destroy evil and to restore righteousness. He explains that while he has no personal desires to fulfill, he wishes to set an example of righteous action and work for the benefit of the world. This is the ideal which he calls us all to follow in our own actions.

As the ignorant act from attachment to action, Arjuna, so should the wise act without attachment, desiring the welfare of the world. (3:25).

We see clearly from verses like these that even the actions of the incarnation are prompted by certain desires. In the Bhagavadgita (7:11) Krishna gives his approval to those desires which are not opposed to righteousness (*dharma*).

While clearly not forbidding all desires, Hinduism certainly warns about and condemns those desires which are not conducive to our own well-being and which bring about pain and suffering to others. It speaks out against greed which deludes us by promising a satisfaction which proves to be illusory and unattainable. Greed also makes us reckless in our conduct. We must be wary of those desires which are born out of spiritual ignorance.

A state of desirelessness is neither possible nor desirable in Hinduism. Desires which are necessary for satisfying our legitimate needs in moderation and which are fulfilled through righteous means are approved. The highest motive for action in Hinduism is a desire for the happiness and well-being of others. This desire is to be cultivated and encouraged.

13

False: Hinduism has no central doctrine about the nature of God

True: Hinduism affirms unequivocally that God exists equally in all beings.

In the *Ramayana* of the Hindi poet, Tulasidasa, Lakshmana, the younger brother of Rama, asked Rama to explain the nature of spiritual knowledge. Rama's answer was direct and simple. The essence of spiritual knowledge, explained Rama, is to see God existing *equally* in all beings (*dekha brahma samana saba mahim.*). In this one beautiful line, Tulasidasa summarizes the central Hindu teaching about the nature of God and the essence of all religious wisdom in Hinduism.

There are two equally significant and logically consistent disclosures in this statement about the nature of God. The first is that God is present in all beings. No one is excluded and there are no qualifications which can be made here. With regard to the presence of God, all beings are equal. It cannot be argued that God dwells in men and not women, in select ethnic groups, or among followers of particular religions. To avoid the widow by regarding her as inauspicious, to reject the birth of a girl by considering her less desirable than a boy, to mistreat the elderly and to discriminate against the disabled are all expressions of blindness to God's indwelling presence.

The second disclosure about God's presence lies in the emphasis on the equality (*samana*) of that presence. It does not differ from one being to another. There are no degrees or distinctions of any kind to be made here. Our knowledge of God's presence may differ and so may the extent to which it influences our attitudes and ways of living, but there is no question in Hinduism of any qualitative difference.

Hinduism emphasizes the equality of God's presence along with its inclusivity to ensure that spurious arguments about variations in the divine presence are not used to condone and justify preferential regard for some and injustice towards others.

The central Hindu teaching, about the sameness and equality of the divine presence, requires that we act towards others with reverence and love. Our love for God includes all, since we are able to discern God's presence in everyone. It also implies the practice of respect and

value for oneself. God, who is present equally in all beings, is also present at the heart of one's own existence. This is the true source of one's dignity and sacred worth. Self-hate and engagement in actions and attitudes which hurt oneself physically and mentally are inconsistent with the Hindu view of the nature and worth of the human person.

14

False: Hinduism is not a revealed religion

True: Hindus regard the Vedas as the ultimately authoritative scripture and understand these texts to be revealed by God.

The four Vedas (*Rig, Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva*) are the authoritative sources for Hindu belief and practice. The Vedas are regarded in Hinduism as a *pramana* or valid source of knowledge. They impart knowledge which cannot be gained through sense perception and inference. The two subjects which are discussed in the Vedas and which cannot be known through any other means of knowledge are *brahman* and *dharma*. Through the Vedas, we learn about the nature of God (*brahman*), and the relationship between particular kinds of actions and results (*dharma*). We learn about the effects produced by certain

rituals and the pleasant and unpleasant future consequences of different ethical choices. We learn about the true self (*atman*), the law of *karma*, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth and liberation (*moksha*) from the Vedas. *Dharma* is the subject-matter of the first three sections of the Vedas (*Samhitas*, *Brahmanas* and *Aranyakas*), while *brahman* is the subject matter of the fourth section, the *Upanishads*.

The Vedas are collectively referred to as *sruti*, which means, "that which is heard." Hindus understand the Vedas to be revealed by God at the beginning of each cycle of creation to great teachers known as the *rishis*. The *rishis* are not the authors of the Vedas, but the ones who receive the sacred verses (*mantras*) from God, memorize and preserve these verses and transmit them to future generations. A *rishi* is defined in Hinduism as a *mantra drashta* or a seer of sacred verses. The truths embodied in the Vedas are received, not produced. Even as Newton is not the creator of the law of gravity, the *rishis* are not the creators of the Vedic truths.

A famous verse in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* describes the Vedas as the breath of God. " As smoke and sparks arise from a lighted fire kindled with damp fuel, even so, my dear, have breathed forth from the Eternal all knowledge and all wisdom - what we know as the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and the rest. They are the breath of the Eternal."

Since the Vedas are the authoritative sources of Hindu belief and practice and are believed to be revealed by God, Hinduism must be understood, in this sense, to be

a revealed tradition. The word "Veda" means "knowledge" and this underlines the fact that Hinduism is not focused around a particular historical person, but a body of knowledge. This knowledge is regarded valid because, like all valid knowledge, it does not contradict other sources of knowledge and is not contradicted by them.

15

False: The Hindu doctrine of God is pantheistic

True: Hinduism teaches that God is both immanent and transcendent

It is important to begin by clarifying the meaning of pantheism. As a doctrine, pantheism teaches that the universe is God and that God is nothing but the totality of the matter and laws constituting the universe. As we will see, this is very different from the Hindu understanding of God in several important aspects.

First, Hinduism teaches that the universe has its origin in God. Before the universe is created, God alone exists. There is no pre-existent matter existing along with God and from which God creates the world. God brings forth the universe out of Godself. It is important to note

that God is not transformed into the universe. Without any change of nature or without becoming in any way limited, God brings forth the entire universe from Godself.

Second, the world exists in God. In the Bhagavadgita (9:6), Krishna uses the example of space to illustrate the manner in which the world resides in God.

As the mighty wind, blowing everywhere, exists always in space, so do all beings exist in Me.

The entire world exists in space, but space, which accommodates and supports all things, exists in God. The world is not separate from and outside of God, but within God who is the final support of everything. To say that the world exists in God means also that God is all-pervasive and immanent in everything. Hinduism understands God to be equally present in all beings.

Third, while Hinduism understands God to exist equally in all things, God is not identical with, limited to or bound by the characteristics of the world. God is free and unlimited. God pervades the universe because the universe is in God, but God is much more than the universe. The famous *Purusha Sukta* hymn of the Rigveda underlines the transcendence of God by stating that God pervades the world by a fourth of God's being, while three fourths remain beyond it. The Katha Upanishad (2.2.11) uses the example of the sun to explain the immanence and transcendence of God, and God's freedom from the characteristics of the world.

Just as the sun which helps all eyes to see is not affected by the defects of the eyes or external objects, so God dwells in the heart of all beings and yet is not affected by their defects, being beyond these.

For these reasons, it is incorrect to describe the Hindu understanding of God as pantheistic or pantheism. Hinduism clearly teaches that God is the sole source of the world which exists in God. The world, however, cannot be equated with God. While the world is dependent on God for its existence and reality, God's existence and reality are independent. The universe does not exhaust the nature of God who is much more than the world and free from its limitations. The world, in the Hindu understanding, is clearly not equal to God.

16

False: Hinduism cannot explain evil conduct in human beings since it teaches that God exists equally in all beings.

True: While Hinduism teaches that God exists equally in all beings, ignorance (*avidya*) of this truth is the fundamental cause of evil conduct.

Hinduism affirms without any qualifications that God exists equally in all beings and that all beings exist in God. Space, time, the universe and all things exist in God. God's existence in all beings, however, does not imply that everyone is aware of this truth. Existence, in other words, is not the same as recognition. We have all experienced occasions when we have searched for a ring which is already on our finger, or a pair of glasses which we are wearing. This is a problem of ignorance since the object which we search for is already with us. The ring or the glasses does not have to be created or produced. We are required to recognize that it is already with us. In Sanskrit, ignorance is referred to as *avidya* and knowledge as *jnana*.

Similarly, while God exists equally in all beings, God's presence is not generally recognized. Since God is

peace (*shanti*), happiness (*ananda*) and love (*prema*), one who truly knows God experiences contentment and is compassionate towards others. Such a person, in the words of the Bhagavadgita (5:25), "rejoices in the welfare of all beings." A person, on the other hand, who does not know the reality of God experiences an inner emptiness and discontent. In a futile effort to fill this emptiness, such a person becomes subject to greed of various kinds. In seeking to satisfy his or her selfish desires, the victim of greed does not hesitate to inflict suffering and pain on others and to engage in conduct which is evil. Evil has its roots in greed, while greed springs ultimately from ignorance.

Since ignorance of God is the cause of greed, it is the transforming knowledge of God which enables us to overcome greed and its evil expressions in our behavior. The knower of God is described in Bhagavadgita (12:13) as "one who hates no being, who is friendly and compassionate, without possessiveness and egoism, balanced in pleasure and pain and forgiving." A devotee of God does not intentionally cause pain to another.

17

False: Since Hinduism is not a missionary tradition, Hindus have no motive for sharing the teachings of their religion with others.

True: While Hindus are not implored to convert others to Hinduism, they are encouraged to share the insights of Hinduism.

Hinduism is not regarded as a missionary or proselytizing religion since it has not set for itself the goal of "converting" all persons to Hinduism. The Hindu tradition does not claim that becoming a Hindu is necessary for knowing and attaining God. Changing one's religious label or allegiance is no guarantee of spiritual transformation and growth. If Hinduism may be described as having a hope for people of other religions, this hope was best articulated by Mahatma Gandhi. "We can only pray, if we are Hindus," said Gandhi, "that not a Christian should become a Hindu, or if we are Muslims that not a Hindu or a Christian should become a Muslim, nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted, but our inmost prayer should be that Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim and a Christian a better Christian."

Such an attitude, however, does not mean that the insights and teachings of Hinduism are meant for Hindus alone and that the doors of the mansion of Hinduism must be closed to those who are not born into the tradition. Hindus are encouraged by their authoritative scriptures to make its teachings available to others. At the conclusion of the Bhagavadgita (18:67-69), for example, Krishna tells Arjuna that one who shares the teachings of the text with others is assured of attaining God and is most dear in the eyes of God.

We must not overlook the fact that Krishna also specifies some of the conditions under which such sharing must occur. He mentions, for example, that teachings ought not to be spoken to one who has no desire to listen or no interest. His point is that compulsion in religion is not permissible and that the integrity and freedom of the listener must be respected and honored. Aggressive proselytizing which is not interested in the response of the other and which begins with preconceived definitions of the other has no place in Hinduism. Where there is a true spirit of search and a sincere desire to understand, Hindus must generously make the teachings of their tradition available to all.

18

False: Hinduism teaches that all religious beliefs and practices are equally valid.

True: While Hinduism teaches that the one God is the origin, support and destiny of all beings, it does not teach that all beliefs and practices equally reflect the nature of God.

The Hindu attitude to religious diversity is often simplistically represented as advocating that all religious beliefs and practices are equally valid. Careful examination of Hindu teachings, however, reveal a willingness to evaluate the adequacy of different beliefs and practices.

Let me provide some examples. The Hindu teacher, Ramakrishna (1836-1888) accepted a variety of diverse beliefs and practices. It was Ramakrishna who told us of a lake with four landing spots. People who draw water at one spot call it "jal" and those who draw at a second spot call it "pani." At a third spot, they call it "water" and at the fourth "agua." But it is one and the same thing - water. Close study of the statements of Ramakrishna reveal clear standards from which he

criticized the religious pretensions of his contemporaries. For Ramakrishna, a religious path led to truth only if it was characterized by a sincere and earnest longing for God, the renunciation of materialism and compassion for all. Some paths were clearly more direct than others.

Gandhi was another Hindu who balanced an openness to other religions with sharp criticism of the content of particular traditions. He considered religion without morality to be inconceivable and saw the virtues of truth and mercy as essential to valid religion. Gandhi was aware that no single religion can embody the whole truth and that specific religions demonstrated the errors and limitations of the human condition. Hinduism, like other religions, had its own imperfections.

If we turn to the authoritative scriptures of Hinduism, we also find explicit criticism of false paths. The Bhagavadgita (Ch.17) offers an assessment of faith, charity, discipline and worship based on the distribution of different human tendencies and desires. Some forms of faith and worship are preferable to others.

While Hinduism does not claim exclusive knowledge of God, it does not legitimize everything which transpires in the name of religion and does not claim that every belief and practices leads directly to God.

19

False: In Hinduism, there is no divine forgiveness for the consequences of evil actions.

True: While Hinduism emphasizes responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, it also teaches that God is supreme and compassionate.

Belief in the law of *karma* is a cornerstone of Hinduism. Through the law of *karma*, Hindus see the world as a moral stage on which they must behave responsibly and accept responsibility for the consequences of actions. Virtuous actions of love and compassion bring joy and peace to the doer and to those who are the recipients, while acts of hate and violence bring pain to the doer and to others. The law of *karma* emphasizes that actions have consequences.

In Hinduism, *karma* is not an independent and impersonal law. It is subject to the will of God who is described in Sanskrit as *karmadhyaksha*, which means "the dispenser of the results of actions." In his commentary on the Brahmasutra, the philosopher Shankara argues that blind *karma* cannot produce any result without the

guidance of an intelligent and conscious being. It is the omnipotent and omniscient God who ensures that actions produce results at the appropriate time and circumstances.

While God is just and God's justice is expressed in the operation of the law of *karma*, God is supremely merciful. In the Bhagavadgita (9:30-31), Krishna speaks of the compassion of God.

If one who does the greatest evil worships Me with undivided love, he must be considered a righteous person, for he has indeed made the right decision.

Quickly this person becomes virtuous and gets everlasting peace. Arjuna, know for certain that no devotee of Mine is ever lost.

God's mercy and forgiveness are readily granted when we turn to God with regret, remorse and a willingness to struggle not to repeat evil actions. No human being is so depraved that he or she is undeserving of God's mercy. There are no unforgivable sins and no eternal damnation. God who is merciful is the highest truth in the universe, not the law of *karma* which is subservient to God.

Even when the consequences of an action cannot be negated, we experience God's mercy in the strength and peace with which we are able to accept circumstances which cannot be altered. All *karmas* are eventually overcome when we seek to know God and when we attain liberation (*moksha*) which frees us from the realm of cause and effect and into eternal peace and happiness.

20

False: Hindu worship (*puja*) is an attempt to influence and manipulate God through material offerings of various kinds.

True: The purpose of Hindu worship (*puja*) is to love, honor and serve God. Material offerings are only symbolic.

The nature and purpose of Hindu worship is beautifully described in the Bhagavadgita (9:26).

Whosoever offers to Me, with love a leaf, a flower, a fruit or water, that offering of love of the pure of heart, I accept.

A leaf, a flower, a fruit or water are objects traditionally used in Hindu worship. These are easily available by all. In fact, by mentioning such simple and accessible items, Krishna is making the point that worship ought not to be a costly undertaking and that the material object which is offered in worship is not especially important. What material object, after all, can we give to God who is the creator and giver of everything and who has no unfulfilled needs?

What is significant, therefore, is not the material object which we offer, but the motive and attitude with which the offering is made. God is not influenced or manipulated by material offerings. An offering becomes acceptable to God when it is made "with love" and for the sake of love. In this case, the material offering only becomes a symbol of our love. It is love alone, expressed in virtuous and compassionate thoughts, words and actions, that we can truly offer to God.

Another important expression used in this verse is the "pure in heart". While our worship of God should be characterized by love, this worship becomes acceptable also when we are, at the same time, striving for purity and goodness in our relationships with others. Krishna is emphasizing that our relationship with God includes our relationship with our fellow beings. We cannot worship God with love while being unjust and inconsiderate towards others. God does not expect perfection, but earnest striving.

The aim of Hindu worship is to honor and express love for and serve God. Worship performed in this spirit, draws us closer to God and helps us to develop constant awareness of God. Understanding that God, who is the supreme object of our love, exists in all beings requires that we treat everyone with reverence and compassion. Virtuous actions, performed as an expression of our love and understanding of God, make worship a way of life.