

What is Hindu Dharma?

One of the major living religious traditions of the world, Hinduism is also recognized as the most ancient. It is different from most others because it was not started by any single individual, seer or prophet, and its origins cannot be traced to a particular period of human history.

It is not based on one single book or a set of dogmas; on the contrary, it allows a great deal of freedom of thought, faith and worship. Hinduism is not a single religious faith system because it does not insist on any fixed set of doctrines. There are a variety of religious sects or traditions in Hinduism. However, in spite of this diversity, there is a unity among all the doctrines and schools of thought because their basic principles are based on the 'eternal laws of nature' which can be rightly defined as Sanatana (eternal) Dharma (laws of nature). The knowledge of the universe and the laws contained in the Vedas and in the subsequent scriptures is considered to be applicable at all times and places. As these laws bind the universe and its components together, it is called 'Dharma', i.e. that which keeps all together.

'Dharma' is one of the most intractable terms used in the Hindu philosophy and is derived from the root 'dhru', meaning to uphold, sustain or support. Hindu Dharma comprises a medium, an instrument or an integrated scheme of life by which one is prevented from falling down and is uplifted spiritually. It is thus a way of life or a value system. The word 'Religion' is used for the lack of a better synonym for 'Dharma' in English language.

Hinduism describes Dharma as the natural universal laws whose observance enables humans to be contented and happy, and to save himself from degradation and suffering. Dharma is the moral law combined with spiritual discipline that guides one's life. Hindus consider Dharma the very foundation of life. Atharva Veda describes Dharma symbolically: Prithivim Dharmana dhritam, that is, "this world is upheld by Dharma".

Anything that helps human being to reach god is Dharma and anything that hinders human being from reaching god is Adharma. For instance, in the epic poem Maha Bharata, the Pandavas represent Dharma in life and the Kauravas represent Adharma. According to the Bhagavat Purana, righteous living or life on a dharmic path has four aspects: austerity (tap), purity (shauch), compassion (daya) and truthfulness (satya); and adharmic or unrighteous life has three vices: pride (ahankar), contact (sang), and intoxication (madya).

Manusmriti written by the ancient sage Manu prescribes ten essential rules for the observance of Dharma: Patience (dhriti), forgiveness (kshama), piety or self control (dama), honesty (asteya), sanctity (shauch), control of senses (indraiya-nigrah), reason (dhi), knowledge or learning (vidya), truthfulness (satya) and absence of anger (krodha). Manu further writes, "Nonviolence, truth, non-coveting, purity of body and mind, control of senses are the essence of Dharma". Therefore dharmic laws govern not only the individual but all in society.

The purpose of Dharma is not only to attain a union of the soul with the supreme reality; it also suggests a code of conduct that is intended to secure both worldly joys and supreme happiness. Hinduism is the religion that suggests methods for the attainment of the highest ideal and eternal bliss here and now on earth and not somewhere in heaven.

In essence Hinduism is a way of life and culture in which several religious practices are harmoniously blended and bound by the common bond of 'Dharma'. In the words of a Hindu scholar and writer, Ram Swarup, "it is the name of one religion or one truth lived at hundred points in hundred ways by people of different capacities and preparedness. Unity of Hinduism is

not external and geographical; it is deep, subtle, spiritual; it has multiple expressions; it lives in them all; it also exceeds them."

The word 'Hindu'

History is mostly guessing; the rest is prejudice. - Will Durant

The word 'Hindu' has its origin in Sanskrit literature. In the Rig Veda, Bharat is referred to as the country of 'Sapta Sindhu', i.e. the country of seven great rivers. The word 'Sindhu' refers to rivers and sea and not merely to the specific river called 'Sindhu'. In Vedic Sanskrit, according to ancient dictionaries, 'sa' was pronounced as 'ha'. Thus 'Sapta Sindhu' was pronounced as 'Hapta Hindu'. This is how the word 'Hindu' came in to being. The ancient Persians also referred to Bharat as 'Hapta Hind', as recorded in their ancient classic 'Bem Riyadh'. That is why some scholars came to believe that the word 'Hindu' had its origin in Persia. The Greeks, who invaded Bharat under Alexander, dropped 'H' and used the name Indoos or Indus, which later led to the formation of the word 'India'.