What Is Hinduism?
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What Is Hinduism?

This magazine previews our new book, which offers an inclusive, user-friendly presentation of Sanatana Dharma

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Our regular readers will already have noticed that this installment of Hinduism Today is not in our standard format. It is a special issue entirely devoted to a singular topic: "What is Hinduism?" Our gatefold (pages 3, 4 and 5 of print edition) introduces the subject by presenting the voices of prominent Hindu leaders offering their responses to the question. I am sure you will enjoy reading and reflecting on their varied answers which so clearly show the diversity, inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of the Sanatana Dharma. This magazine is a condensed version of our latest book, What Is Hinduism? We wanted to give you, as a reader of hinduism today, a sneak preview of the book and share some of its finest chapters. And here is the story behind it's creation.

All faiths are grappling with their self-definition as we rev up to the breathtaking speed of the information age--a period more intense and kinetic than any other in the history of the world. Teachings and practices that were once accepted without question are often now rejected unless evidence and logic are marshalled to give them plausibility. To survive, customs and traditions must bear up under intellectual scrutiny, must prove themselves helpful and immediately usable.

Hinduism is no exception. Hindu education for youth is languishing, and communities around the world are struggling to compose clear, concise presentations of the dharma. It would be possible to spend an entire lifetime,

indeed, many lifetimes, absorbing and practicing the teachings of just one sect or sampradaya of the Hindu faith. Yet, there remains a need to understand this complex conglomerate as a whole as well. There is a preeminent need, the world over, for cogent, comprehensive explanations of the various facets of Hinduism--and the shared features of its various sects--from a mountaintop perspective--to answer the sincere questions of children, coworkers, neighbors, critics and colleagues, and to provide a nonacademic presentation for those of other religions seeking insight into this ancient path.

Producing quality educational materials on Hinduism is inherently difficult precisely because it is one of the world's most paradoxical and easily misunderstood religious traditions. It can be equally confounding to the outsider and to those born in dharma's embrace. It is accurately a conglomeration, union, a family, of many different faiths and practices that share essential characteristics.

Most Hindus have an intuitive sense of but can't articulate the "whys and wherefores " of their philosophy and practices. The boldness to ask questions about such matters has only recently developed. Just confer with Hindu parents who have stumbled when confronted with the direct and innocent questions posed by their own children, questions they never voiced and therefore never learned satisfying answers to.

What Is Hinduism? seeks to be a bridge between generations of past centuries that grew up immersed in a pristine Hindu culture--with vast communal knowledge available to them--and current generations that have little or no access to such knowledge. In those olden times, living in a homogenous society with the faith's culture and traditions interwoven in every aspect of daily life, one didn't need to ask the whys of everything. He only needed to participate, enjoy and absorb the nuances and meanings from the inside out. In today's fragmented societies, we no longer have such cocoon-like training for children, so teachings must be rearticulated and presented in ways that will make intellectually clear their purpose, relevance and value in competition with the compelling flood of media that youths and adults are subjected to day after day. Hinduism must also compete in the arena of ideas with its aggressively evangelical counterparts.

The idea of creating a book called "What Is Hinduism?" came to me from the "inner sky " one day while I was meditating on our faith's educational needs. It was as if the inner-plane masters, among them our dear Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya

Subramuniyaswami, were sending the thought form that such a work would be just what is needed at this time. Approached from scratch, the book in your hands would take years to produce, especially with the amount of patience and care that you will find here in each chapter. Thus, the serendipitous beauty of the project was that the necessary thousands of hours of loving attention had already gone into researching and designing its chapters, as Educational Insight sections over the last ten years by the talented team of editiors, writers and photographers of our international magazine, Hinduism Today. All that was needed now, in 2007, was to choose the best features and put them together in a way that offers a highly readable, yet thorough, introduction to Hinduism. VoilÃ !

As a small group of renunciate Hindu monks at Kauai's Hindu Monastery in Hawaii, we have produced Hinduism Today for more than a quarter century, tracking, monitoring and encouraging the current renaissance of the grandfather faith of the human race. One of the main reasons Gurudeva founded the magazine was to help Hindus become more aware of the activities of their Hindu brothers and sisters in other parts of the world and thus draw strength and courage from that knowledge. Another was to dispel myths and misinformation promulgated by invaders and missionaries of alien religions. A third was to present the beliefs and practices common to all Hindus, as well as the teachings and traditions of the individual sects, traditions and lineages that together form this quilt of dharma. What Is Hinduism? is an insider's look, honoring the beauties of culture, tradition, celebration, worship, belief and discipline.

In addition to the reams of scripture available to readers, there are many books on Hinduism by Western scholars, and by Eastern writers. But few offer much relief to the parent looking for simple answers, or the social studies teacher looking for an authentic overview of the faith. Texts by Westerners, often academic in nature, tend to paint Hinduism into the past and distort it by wrong emphasis, dwelling on peripheral, controversial issues such as caste, sati and the "Aryan Invasion." Those by Easterners generally focus on just one sampradaya or lineage--such as Sankaran Vedanta, Madhva Vaishnavism or Saiva Siddhanta--often presenting its philosophy and tradition as if it were the whole of Hinduism, which, of course, it is not. When each sect and lineage is presented in this way, it is no small wonder readers get confused.

Rare is the book that presents Hinduism in a comprehensive, contemporary, complementary way--as a family of faiths and philosophies--that a modern, English-speaking audience can relate to, understand and appreciate. What Is Hinduism? is just such a rare gem. Exploring it, readers now and then

spontaneously stop and sigh, "Ahh, now I get it. I now understand this basic concept of Hinduism." It is an authoritative and inspired work, an inclusive, sophisticated, user-friendly explanation of Sanatana Dharma. Far from the arcane, sea-of-text descriptions of Hinduism, this book is rich with potent images, traditional symbols and photographs depicting each aspect of the culture and faith. If one were to simply study the photos and art and their captions, that would itself serve as a meaningful glimpse into the Hindu heart.

This book is inspired by and draws heavily from the remarkable spiritual legacy of Gurudeva, without doubt one of the most significant Hindu saints and leaders of the twentieth century. An American by birth, Gurudeva showed the world by his pure and dedicated life that Hinduism is a vibrant, relevant and living force. He renewed the pride of Hindus in their faith and gave them guidelines for following Hindu Dharma. He boldly spoke of Hinduism as the greatest religion in the world and showed millions that Hinduism is destined to teach our newly emerging global civilization that coexisting in peace, mutual respect, and with a deep sense of spiritual values, is not merely a dream, but a living reality. We know that Gurudeva is smiling approvingly at the creation of What Is Hinduism? We believe it will be hailed as a classic, and hopefully a best seller, so that uncounted souls may enjoy its heartfelt messages.

In this special issue of the magazine we present nine of the forty-six chapters from What Is Hinduism? which we hope you enjoy as a representative selection that collectively answers this enigmatic question. For a bit more about the book and how to order, see page 16.