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INSIGHT

Nine Questions

Hinduism, with its ritual and philosophical richness, naturally arouses questions from non-Hindu's. Do you have any good answers?

Back in the spring of 1990, a group of teenagers from the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, Lemont, sent a formal request to Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, for "official answers" to nine questions they had been commonly asked about their religious heritage by their American peers. These same questions had perplexed the Hindu youth themselves, and their parents, they confided, had no convincing answers. Hinduism Today took up the challenge and provided the following answers to the nine questions. We begin with advice on the attitudes to hold when responding.

First, ask yourself, "Who is asking the question?" Millions of Americans are sincerely interested in Hinduism and the many Asian religions. Therefore, when asked questions about Hinduism, do not take a defensive position, even if the questioner seems confrontational. Instead, assume that the person really wants to learn. With this in mind, it is still important never to answer a question about religion too boldly or too immediately. This might lead to confrontation. Offer a prologue first and then come to the question, guiding the

inquirer toward understanding. Your poise and deliberateness give the sense that you know what you are talking about. It also gives you a moment to think and draw upon your intuitive knowing. Before going deeply into an answer, always ask the questioner what his religion is. Knowing who is asking, you can address his particular frame of mind and make your answer most relevant. Another important key: have confidence in yourself and your ability to give a meaningful and polite response. Even to say, "I am sorry. I still have much to learn about my religion and I don't yet know the answer to that," is a meaningful response. Honesty is always appreciated. Never be afraid to admit what you don't know, for this lends credibility to what you do know.

Here are four prologues that can be used, according to the situation, before you begin to actually answer the question. 1. "I am really pleased that you have shown an interest in my religion. You may not know that one out of every six people in the world is a Hindu." 2. "Many people have asked me about my spiritual tradition. I don't know everything, but I will try to answer your question." 3. "First, you should know that in Hinduism it is not only belief and intellectual understanding that is important. Hindus place the greatest value on experiencing each of these truths personally." 4. The fourth type of prologue is to repeat the question, to see if the person has asked exactly what he wants to know. So, repeat the question in your own words and ask if you understand his query correctly. If it's a complicated question, you might say, "Philosophers have spent lifetimes discussing and pondering questions such as this, but I will do my best to explain in a simple way."

Have courage. Speak from your inner mind. Sanatana Dharma is an experiential path, not a dogma, so your experience in answering questions will help your own spiritual unfoldment. You will learn from your answers if you listen to your inner mind speak. This can be a lot of fun. The attentive teacher always learns more than the student.

After the prologue, address the question without hesitation. If the person is sincere, you can say, "Do you have any more questions?" If he wants to know more, then elaborate as best you can. Use easy, everyday examples. Share what enlightened souls and scriptures of Hinduism have said on the subject. Remember, we must not assume that everyone who asks a question about Hinduism is insincere or is challenging our faith. Many are just being friendly or making conversation to get to know you. So, don't be on the defensive or take it all too seriously. Smile when you give your response. Be open. If the second or third question is on something you know nothing about, you can say, "I don't know. But if you are really interested, I will find out or mail you some literature or lend you one of my books." Smile and have confidence as you give these answers. Don't be shy. There is no question that can be put to you in your birth karmas that you cannot rise up to with a fine answer to fully satisfy the seeker. You may make lifelong friends in this way.

The nine answers below are organized with a one-line response, followed by a longer answer, then a more detailed explanation. You may be surprised to find how many people are content with the most simple and short answer, so start with that first. You may use the explanation as background information for yourself, or as a contingency response in case

you end up in a deeper philosophical discussion. Memorize the answers and use them as needed. So now we begin with the questions your classmates and friends have been asking you all the time.

Question 1: Why does Hinduism have so many Gods?

While acknowledging many Gods, all Hindu's believe in one Supreme God who creates and sustains the universe.

Longer answer: Hindus believe in one God, one humanity and one world. We believe that there is one Supreme God who created the universe and who is worshiped as Light, Love and Consciousness. People with different languages and cultures have understood the one God in their own distinct way. This is why we are very tolerant of all religions, as each has its own pathway to the one God. One of the unique understandings in Hinduism is that God is not far away, living in a remote heaven, but is inside each and every soul, in the heart and consciousness, waiting to be discovered. This knowing that God is always with us gives us hope and courage. Knowing the One Great God in this intimate and experiential way is the goal of Hindu spirituality.

Explanation: Hinduism is both monotheistic and henotheistic. Hindus were never polytheistic, in the sense that there are many equal Gods. Henotheism better defines the Hindu view of a single Supreme God with many other divinities. We Hindus believe there is one all-pervasive God who energizes the entire universe. We can see Him in the life shining out of the eyes of

humans and all creatures. This concept of God as existing in and giving life to all things is called "panentheism." It is different from pantheism, which is the belief that God is the natural universe and nothing more. It is also different from strict theism which says God is only above the world, apart and transcendent. Panentheism is a beautiful concept. It says that God is both in the world and beyond it, both immanent and transcendent. That is the Hindu view. Hindus also believe in many devas or Gods who perform various functions, like executives in a large corporation. These should not be confused with God. There is one Supreme God only. What is sometimes confusing to non-Hindus is that Hindus of various sects may call the one God by many different names, according to their regional tradition. Truth for the Hindu has many names, but that does not make for many truths. Hinduism gives us the freedom to approach God in our own way, without demanding conformity to any dogma.

Question 2: Why do Hindus believe in reincarnation?

We Hindus believe the soul is immortal and reenters a fleshy body time and time again in order to resolve experiences and learn all the lessons that life in the material world has to offer.

Longer answer: Carnate means "of flesh." And reincarnate means to "reenter the flesh." Yes, Hindus believe in reincarnation. To us, it explains the natural way the soul evolves from immaturity to spiritual illumination. I myself have had many lives before this one and expect to have more. Finally, when I have it all worked out and all the lessons have been learned, I will attain enlightenment and moksha,

liberation. This means I will still exist, but will no longer be pulled back to be born in a physical body. Even science is discovering reincarnation. There have been many cases of individuals remembering their past lives. These have been researched by scientists, psychiatrists and parapsychologists during the past decades and documented in very good books and videos.

Explanation: At the time of death, the soul leaves the physical body. But the soul does not die. It lives on in a subtle body called the astral body. The astral body exists in the nonphysical dimension called the astral plane. Here we continue to have experiences until we are reborn again in another physical body as a baby. Each reincarnating soul chooses a home and a family which can best fulfill its next step of maturation. After enlightenment, we do not have to re-experience the baseness of Earthly existence but continue to evolve in our inner bodies. Similarly, after we graduate from school we never have to go back to the fifth grade. We have gone beyond that in understanding. Many young children speak of vivid past life memories, which fade as they grow older, as the veils of individuality shroud the soul's intuitive understanding. Great mystics often relate their past lives as well. Reincarnation is also believed in by the Jains and the Sikhs, by the Indians of the Americas, and by the Buddhists, by the Pagans and the many indigenous faiths. Even the Christians originally taught reincarnation, but formally renounced it in the twelfth century. It is, in fact, one of the widest held articles of faith on planet Earth.

Question 3: What is karma?

Karma is the universal principal of cause and effect, actions and reaction which governs all life

Longer answer: Karma is one of the natural laws of the mind, just as gravity is a law of matter. It simply means "cause and effect." What happens to us that is apparently unfortunate or unjust is not God punishing us. It is the result of our own past actions. The Vedas, Hinduism's revealed scripture, tell us if we sow goodness, we will reap goodness; if we sow evil, we will reap evil. The divine law is: whatever karma we are experiencing in our life is just what we need at the moment, and nothing can happen but that we have the strength to meet it. Even harsh karma, when faced in wisdom, can be the greatest catalyst for spiritual unfoldment.

Explanation: We cannot give anything away but that it comes back to us. A few years ago in Madras an American devotee said to me, "Shall I give money to the beggar who is asking?" I said, "Give him ten rupees. You may need the fifty rupees when karma pays you back, just as he needs the ten rupees now." The karmic law pays higher interest than any bank when you give freely with no strings attached. Karma is basically energy. I throw energy out through thoughts, words and deeds, and it comes back to me, in time, through other people. We Hindus look at time as a circle, as things cycle around again. Professor Einstein came to the same conclusion. He saw time as a curved thing and space as well. This would eventually make a circle. Karma is a very just law, too, as it is equal in repayment. Karma, like gravity, treats everyone the same. Because we Hindus understand karma, we do not hate or resent the people who do us harm. We understand they are giving back the effects of the causes we set in motion at an

earlier time. At least we try not to hate them or hold hard feelings, by reminding ourselves of the law of karma. The Hindu law of karma puts man at the center of responsibility for everything he does and everything that is done to him.

Karma is a word we hear quite often on television. "This is my karma," or "It must have been something I did in a past life to bring such good karma to me." In some schools of Hinduism, karma is looked upon as something bad. A Hindu guest from Guyana, South America, visited us in Hawaii and mentioned that karma means "sin," and that this is what the Christians in his country are preaching that it means. Some non-Hindus also preach that karma means "fate," which we know is untrue. The idea of inexorable fate, of a preordained destiny over which one has no control, has nothing to do with Sanatana Dharma. Karma actually means "cause and effect."

The process of action and reaction on all levels--physical, mental and spiritual--is karma. Here is an example: I have a glass of water sitting in front of me on a table. Because the table is not moving, nor is the glass, the water is calm. Shake the table; the water ripples. This is action and reaction, the basic law of nature. Here is another example: I say kind words to you; you feel peaceful and happy. I say harsh words to you, and you become ruffled and upset. The kindness and the harshness return to me, through others, at a later time. This is karma. It names the basic law of the motion of energy. An architect thinks creative, productive thoughts, and draws plans for a new building. But were he to think destructive, unproductive thoughts, he would soon not be able to accomplish any kind of positive task even if he desired to do so. This is karma, a natural law of the mind. We must also be

very careful about our thoughts, because thought creates, and thoughts also make karmas, good, bad and mixed.

Question 4: Why do Hindus regard the cow as sacred?

The cow represents the giving nature of life to every Hindu. Honoring this gentle creature who gives more than she takes, we honor all creatures.

Longer answer: Hindus regard all living creatures as sacred--mammals, fishes, birds and more. The cow symbolizes all other creatures to the Hindu. The cow also represents life and the sustenance of life. It represents our soul, our obstinate intellect and our unruly emotions. But the cow supersedes us because it is so giving, taking nothing but grass and grain. It gives and gives and gives, as does the liberated soul give and give and give. The cow is so vital to life, the virtual sustainer of life for humans. If you lived in a village and had only cows and no other domestic animals or agricultural pursuits, you and your family could survive with the butter, the cream, yogurt, ghee and milk. The cow is a complete ecology, a gentle creature and a symbol of abundance.

Explanation: Who is the greatest giver on planet Earth today? Who do we see on every table? In every country of the world, breakfast, lunch and dinner? It is the cow. The golden arches and their rivals have made fortunes on the humble cow. When we were in Moscow in March, 1990, we learned that McDonalds had opened 11 of its cow-vending outlets there. The generous cow gives milk and cream, yogurt and cheese, butter and ice

cream, ghee and buttermilk. It gives entirely of itself through sirloin, ribs, rump, quarterround, porterhouse and beef stew. Its bones are the base for soup broths. It gives the world leather belts, leather seats, leather coats and shoes, beef jerky, cowboy hats--you name it. The cow is the most prominent giving animal in the world today. The only cow-question for Hindus is, "Why don't more people respect and protect this remarkable creature?"

Question 5: Are Hindus idol worshippers?

No, Hindus are not idol worshippers. They worship with great vigor and devotion.

Longer answer: Hindus are not idol worshippers in the sense implied. We Hindus invoke the presence of God, or the Gods, from the higher, unseen worlds, into stone images so that we can experience His divine presence, commune with Him and receive His blessings. But the stone or metal Deity images are not mere symbols of the Gods; they are the form through which their love, power and blessings flood forth into this world. We may liken this mystery to our ability to communicate with others through the telephone. We do not talk to the telephone; rather we use it as a means of communication with another person. Without the telephone, we could not converse across long distances; and without the sanctified icon in the temple we cannot easily commune with the Deity. Divinity can also be invoked and felt in a sacred fire, or in a tree, or in the enlightened person of a satguru. In our temples, God is invoked in the sanctum by highly trained priests. Through the practice of yoga, or meditation, we invoke

God inside ourself. Yoga means to yoke oneself to God within. The image or icon of worship is a focus for our prayers and devotions. Another way to explain icon worship is to acknowledge that Hindus believe God is everywhere, in all things, whether stone or people. So, it is not surprising that they feel comfortable worshipping the divine in His material manifestation. The Hindu can see God in stone and water, air and ether, and inside his own soul.

Explanation: Humorously speaking, Hindus are not idle worshipers. I have never seen a Hindu worship in a lazy or idle way. They worship with great vigor and devotion, with unstinting regularity and constancy. There's nothing idle about our ways of worship! (A little humor never hurts when answering a silly question.) But, of course, the question is about "graven images." All religions have their symbols of holiness through which the sacred flows into the mundane. To name a few: the Christian cross, or statues of Mother Mary and Saint Theresa, the holy Kaaba in Mecca, the Sikh Adigranth enshrined in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the Arc and Torah of the Jews, the image of a meditating Buddha or the totems of indigenous and Pagan faiths, the artifacts of the many holy men of all religions. These icons, graven images, are held in awe by the followers of these faiths. The tooth of the Buddha in Sri Lanka's town of Kandy is another loved and respected image. The question is, Does this make all the above religions idol-worshippers? The answer is, yes, and no. From our perspective, idol worship is an intelligent, mystical practice shared among all of the world's great faiths.

The human mind releases itself from suffering, as shown by all the religions, through the use of forms and symbols that

awaken reverence, evoke sanctity and spiritual wisdom. Even a fundamentalist Christian who rejects all forms of idol worship, including those of the Catholic and Episcopal Churches, would resent someone who showed disrespect for his Bible. This is because he considers it sacred. In Hinduism one of the ultimate attainments is that the seeker transcends the need of all form and symbol. This is the yogi's goal. In this way Hinduism is the least idol-oriented of all the religions of the world. There is no religion that is more aware of the transcendent, timeless, formless, causeless Truth. Nor is there any religion which uses more symbols to represent Truth in preparation for that realization.

Question 6: Are Hindus forbidden to eat meat?

HIndus teach vegetarianism as a way to live with minimum of hurt to other beings. But in todays world, not all Hindus are vegetarian.

Longer answer: Simply put, vegetarians are more numerous in the south of India than in the north. This is because of the north's cooler climactic conditions and past Islamic influence. Our religion does not lay down rigid "do's and don'ts." There are no commandments. Hinduism gives us the wisdom to make up our own mind on what we put in our body, for it is the only one we have--in this life, at least. Priests and religious leaders are definitely vegetarian, so as to maintain a high level of purity and spiritual consciousness to fulfill their responsibilities, and to awaken the more refined areas of their nature. Soldiers and law-enforcement officers are generally not vegetarians, because they have to keep alive their aggressive

forces in order to perform their work. To practice yoga and be successful in meditation, it is mandatory to be vegetarian. It is a matter of wisdom--the application of knowledge at any given moment. Today, about twenty or thirty percent of all Hindus are vegetarians.

Explanation: This can be a very touchy subject. When you are asked this question, there are several ways that you can go, depending on who is asking and the background in which they were raised. Basically, there is an overlying rule which gives the Hindu answer to this query. It is called ahimsa, refraining from injuring, physically, mentally or emotionally, anyone or any living creature. The Hindu who wishes to strictly follow the path of noninjury to all creatures naturally adopts a vegetarian diet. It's really a matter of conscience, more than anything else.

When we eat meat, fish, fowl and eggs, we absorb the vibration of the instinctive creatures into our nerve system, and this chemically alters our consciousness and amplifies our lower nature. Our lower nature is prone to fear, anger, jealousy, confusion, resentment and the like. Many Hindu swamis advise followers to be well-established vegetarians prior to initiation into mantra, and then to remain vegetarian afterwards. But they do not insist upon vegetarianism for those not seeking initiation. These swamis have found that families who are vegetarian have fewer problems than those who are not.

There are many scriptural citations that counsel not eating meat, such as in the Vedas, Tirukural and Manu Dharma

Shastras. For guidance in this and all matters, Hindus also rely on their own guru, community elders, their own conscience and understanding of the benefits of abstaining from meat. Of course, there are good Hindus who eat meat, and there are bad Hindus who are vegetarians.

Today in America and Europe there are millions of vegetarians. This is because they simply want to live a long time and be healthy. Many feel a moral obligation to shun the mentality of violence to which meat-eating gives rise. There are some good books on vegetarianism, such as *Diet for a New America* by John Robbins. There is also a fine magazine dedicated to the subject called *Vegetarian Times*.

Question 7: Do Hindus have a book like the Bible?

Our "Bible" is called the Veda. The Veda is comprised of four ancient holy scriptures which all Hindus revere.

Longer answer: Like the Taoist *Tao te Ching*, the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, the Sikh *Adigranth*, the Jewish *Torah*, the Christian *Bible* and the Muslim *Koran*--the Veda is the Hindu holy book. The Veda is the ultimate scriptural authority for Hindus. It permeates Hindu thought, ritual and meditation. They open a rare window into ancient Indian society, proclaiming life's sacredness and the way to oneness with God.

Explanation: For untold centuries unto today, the Veda has remained the sustaining force and authoritative doctrine,

guiding followers in ways of worship, duty and enlightenment. The Veda is the meditative and philosophical focus for millions of monks and a billion seekers. Its stanzas are chanted from memory by priests and laymen daily as liturgy in temple worship and domestic ritual. All Hindus wholeheartedly accept the Veda, yet each draws selectively, interprets freely and amplifies abundantly. Over time, this tolerant allegiance has woven the varied tapestry of Indian Hindu dharma. Today, the Veda is published in Sanskrit, English, French, German and other languages. But it is the metaphysical and popular Upanishads, the fourth section of the Veda, which have been most amply and ably translated.

Question 8: Why do many Hindus wear a dot near the middle of their forehead?

The dot worn on the forehead is a religious symbol. It is also a beauty mark.

Longer answer: The dot worn on the forehead is a sign that one is a Hindu. It is called a bindi in the Hindi language, bindu in Sanskrit and pottu in Tamil. In the old days, all Hindu men and women wore these marks, and they both also wore earrings. The dot has a mystical meaning. It represents the third eye, of spiritual sight, which sees things that the physical eyes cannot see. Hindus seek to awaken this sight through yoga. The forehead dot is a reminder to use and cultivate one's spiritual vision to perceive and understand life's inner workings, to see things not just physically, but with the mind's eye as well. Today it is the women who are most faithful in wearing the bindi. There are many forehead marks, known as

tilaka, other than the simple dot. Each mark represents a particular sect or denomination of our vast religion. We have four major sects: Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktism and Smartism. Vaishnava Hindus, for example, wear a v-shaped tilaka made from clay. Elaborate tilakas are worn by Hindus mainly at religious events, though many wear the simple bindi, indicating they are Hindu, even in the general public. By these marks we know what a person believes, and therefore know how to begin conversations.

For Hindu women, the forehead dot is also a beauty mark, not unlike the black mark European and American women once wore on the cheek. The red bindi is generally a sign of marriage. A black bindi is often worn before marriage to ward off the evil eye. As an exotic fashion statement, the dot's color complements the color of a lady's sari. Ornate bindis are seen on actresses in popular American TV shows.

Explanation: Men and women of a particular faith often wish to identify themselves to each other, and they do so by wearing distinctive religious symbols. Often these are blessed in their temples, churches and synagogues. In some countries Muslim girls cover their face with a veil. Christians wear a cross on a necklace. Jewish boys wear small leather cases that hold scriptural passages, and the round cap called yalmuka.

Do not be ashamed to wear the bindi on your forehead in the United States, Canada, Europe or any country of the world. It will distinguish you from all other people as a very special person, a Hindu, a knower of eternal Truths. You will never be mistaken as belonging to another nationality or religion. For

both boys and girls, men and women, the dot should be small or large depending on the circumstance, but should always be there in appropriate circumstances. Naturally, we don't want to flaunt our religion in the face of others. We observe that Christian boys and girls take off or conceal their crosses in the corporate business world. Recently a Canadian TV documentary distinguished the bindi by calling it a "Cool Dot." Times are changing, and to proudly wear the symbols that distinguish and define us is totally cool.

Question 9: Are Hindu Gods really married?

To the more uneducated people who are not able to understand high philosophy. Hinduism is taught in story form. Those of the higher philosophy know that each God is complete with himself, neither male nor female.

Longer answer: Hinduism is taught on many different levels to many different people and to the more uneducated people who are not able to understand the high philosophy, Hinduism is taught in story form. These stories are called Puranas and they are the basis of dance, plays, storytelling around the fire in the homes to children as they are growing up to amplify how they should live. Because the temple is the center of every Hindu community and village and everyone is focused on the temple and the Gods within the temple, the Gods became the major players in these stories. In the higher philosophy, all Hindus who understand it know that they find God on the inside. In the lower philosophies, they strive to be like a God, or like a Goddess. The stories illustrate how a family should live, how they should raise their children, and much, much

more. So there's a big division between those whose religion is and perhaps always will be in story form and those whose religion is and will always be of realization, of personal experience. Each God is complete within himself, neither male nor female.

Explanation: Those who are privileged to the higher philosophies know that Gods are neither male nor female, which is the yoga of ida and pingala blending into sushumna within each individual. Those of the higher philosophy know that the Gods don't get married, that they are complete within themselves, and this is depicted by Ardhanarisvara, as Siva being half man and half woman, depicted in the philosophy that Siva's energy is Shakti. Hindus are very peaceful people, they believe in ahimsa, not hurting physically, mentally or emotionally, but in times of war, the stories become violent, stimulating the young man to get out and fight, showing how the Gods killed the demons, and how battles were won. Before the printing press, there were a few books and owned only by a few families, therefore Hindus are a visual community and they're taking pictures in their mind on how they should behave in peacetime, how they should behave in war time. Some modern swamis now urge devotees not to pay any attention to the Puranic stories, saying that they have no relationship with the world today--they are misleading and confusing. They encourage them instead to deepen themselves with the higher philosophies of the Vedic Upanishads and the realizations of the Hindu seers.