Seeker's Wordbook
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INSIGHT

# Seeker's Wordbook

Navigate your way through Hinduism with this lexicon of key Sanskrit terms

For years, readers have been asking for definitions of the most common and basic Hindu terms. Here is a glossary that can get you through a dinner conversation or next month's issue of this magazine. Save it as a reference or download and study 700 more at this amazingly long web address!
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abhisheka: "Sprinkling; ablution." Ritual bathing of the Deity's image with water, curd, milk, honey, ghee, rosewater, etc. A special form of pÃ»jÃ¢ prescribed by 'gamic injunction.

ahimsa: "Noninjury," nonviolence or nonhurtfulness. Refraining from causing harm to others, physically, mentally or emotionally.

Ã¢ratÃ®: "Light." The circling or waving of a lamp--usually fed with ghee, camphor or oil--before a holy person or the temple Deity at the high point of pÃ»jÃ¢. The flame is then presented

to the devotees, each passing his or her hands through it and bringing them to the eyes three times, thereby receiving the blessings.

Ã¢nava mala: "Impurity of smallness; finitizing principle." The individualizing veil of duality that enshrouds the soul. It is the source of finitude and ignorance. The presence of Ã¢ava mala is what causes the misapprehension about the nature of God, soul and world, the notion of being separate and distinct from God and the universe. 'ava is the root mala and the last bond to be dissolved.

Aum: Often spelled Om. The mystic syllable of Hinduism, placed at the beginning of most sacred writings. As a mantra, it is pronounced aw (as in law), oo (as in zoo), mm. Aum represents the Divine, and is associated with Lord GaeÃ□a. The dot above represents the Soundless Sound, ParanÃ¢da.

bhajana: Spiritual song. Individual or group singing of devotional songs, hymns and chants.

bindu: "A drop, small particle, dot." 1) The seed or source of creation. In the 36 tattvas, the nucleus or first particle of transcendent light, technically called ParÃ¢bindu. 2) Small dot worn on the forehead between the eyebrows, or in the middle of the forehead. It is a sign that one is a Hindu. Mystically, it represents the "third eye," or the "mind's eye," which sees things that the physical eyes cannot see. The forehead dot is a reminder to use and cultivate one's spiritual vision.

brahmacharya: "Divine conduct." Controlling lust by remaining celibate when single, leading to faithfulness in marriage.

chakra: "Wheel." Any of the nerve plexes or centers of force and consciousness located within the inner bodies of man. The seven principal chakras are situated along the spinal cord from its base to the cranial chamber. Additionally, seven chakras exist below the spine. They are seats of instinctive consciousness and constitute the lower or hellish world.

The seven upper chakras, from lowest to highest, are: 1) mÃ»lÃ¢dhÃ¢ra (base of spine): memory, time and space; 2) svÃ¢dhish hÃ¢na (below navel): reason; 3) maipÃ»ra (solar plexus): willpower; 4) anÃ¢hata (heart center): direct cognition; 5) viÃuddha (throat): divine love; 6) Ã¢jÃ±Ã¢ (third eye): divine sight; 7) sahasrÃ¢ra (crown of head): illumination, Godliness.

The seven lower chakras, from highest to lowest, are 1) atala (hips): fear and lust; 2) vitala (thighs): raging anger; 3) sutala (knees): retaliatory jealousy; 4) talÃ¢tala (calves): prolonged mental confusion; 5) rasÃ¢tala (ankles): selfishness; 6) mahÃ¢tala (feet): absence of conscience; 7) pÃ¢tÃ¢la (located in the soles of the feet): murder and malice.

darsana: "Vision, sight." Seeing the Divine. Beholding, with inner or outer vision, a temple image, Deity, holy person or place, with the desire to inwardly contact and receive the grace and blessings of the venerated being or beings.

deva: "Shining one." A being living in the higher astral plane, in a subtle, nonphysical body. Deva is also used in scripture to mean "God or Deity."

dharma: "That which contains or upholds the cosmos." It is divine law, the law of being, the way of righteousness, religion, duty, responsibility, virtue, justice, goodness and truth. Essentially, dharma is the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature or destiny. Relating to the soul, it is the mode of conduct most conducive to spiritual advancement. There are four principal kinds of dharma, as follows. They are known collectively as --chaturdharma: "four religious laws." 1) --Â®ita: "Universal law." The inherent order of the cosmos. 2) --vara dharma: "Law of one's kind." Social duty. 3) --Ã¢Ãrama dharma: "Duties of life's stages." Human dharma. 4) --svadharma: "Personal law." One's perfect individual pattern through life, according to one's own particular physical, mental and emotional nature.

dÃ®kshÃ¢: "Initiation." Action or process by which one is entered into a new realm of spiritual knowledge and practice by a teacher or preceptor through the transmission of blessings. Denotes initial or deepened connection with the teacher and his lineage and is usually accompanied by ceremony. Most Hindu schools, and especially Ãaivism, teach that only with initiation from a satguru is enlightenment attainable.

grace: "Benevolence, love, giving," from the Latin gratus, "beloved, agreeable." God's power of revealment, anugraha Ãakti ("kindness, showing favor"), by which souls are

awakened to their true, Divine nature.

grihastha: "Householder." Family man or woman. Family of a married couple and other relatives. Pertaining to family life.

guru: "Weighty one," indicating a being of great knowledge or skill. A term used to describe a teacher or guide in any subject, such as music, dance, sculpture, but especially religion.

hatha yoga: "Forceful yoga." A system of physical and mental exercise developed in ancient times as a means of rejuvenation and used today in preparing the body and mind for meditation.

hell: Naraka. An unhappy, mentally and emotionally congested, distressful area of consciousness that can be experienced on the physical plane or in the sub-astral plane (Naraka) after death of the physical body. It is accompanied by the tormented emotions of hatred, remorse, resentment, fear, jealousy and self-condemnation. In the Hindu view, the hellish experience is not permanent, but a temporary condition of one's own making.

Hindu: A follower of, or relating to, Hinduism. Generally, one is understood to be a Hindu by being born into a Hindu family and practicing the faith, or by declaring oneself a Hindu. Acceptance into the fold is recognized through the name-giving sacrament, a temple ceremony called nÃ¢makaraa saÂµskÃ¢ra, given to born Hindus shortly after

birth, and to self-declared Hindus who have proven their sincerity and been accepted by a Hindu community. While traditions vary greatly, all Hindus rely on the Vedas as scriptural authority.

japa: "Recitation." Practice of concentratedly repeating a mantra, often while counting the repetitions on a mÃ¢lÃ¢ or strand of beads. It may be done silently or aloud. For Saivites, Nama SivÃ¢ya in its various forms is the most treasured mantra used in japa. The mantra Hare-RÃ¢ma-Hare-Krishna is among the foremost Vaishava mantras.

jÃ®vanmukta: "Liberated soul." A being who has attained nirvikalpa samÃ¢dhi--the realization of the Self, Parabrahman--and is liberated from rebirth while living in a human body. This attainment is the culmination of lifetimes of intense striving, sÃ¢dhana and tapas, requiring total renunciation, sannyÃ¢sa, in the current incarnation.

karma: "Action, deed." Karma refers to 1) any act or deed; 2) the principle of cause and effect; 3) a consequence, "fruit of action" or "after effect" which sooner or later returns upon the doer. What we sow, we shall reap in this or future lives. Selfish, hateful acts will bring suffering. Benevolent actions will bring loving reactions. Karma is a neutral, self-perpetuating law of the inner cosmos, much as gravity is an impersonal law of the outer cosmos.

Karma is threefold: saÃ±chita, prÃ¢rabdha and kriyamÃ¢na. --saÃ±chita karma: "Accumulated actions." The sum of all

karmas of this life and past lives. --prÃ¢rabdha karma: "Actions begun; set in motion." That portion of saÃ±chita karma that is bearing fruit and shaping the events and conditions of the current life, including the nature of one's bodies, personal tendencies and associations. --kriyamÃ¢na karma: "Being made." The karma being created and added to saÃ±chita in this life by one's thoughts, words and actions, or in the inner worlds between lives.

kundalinÃ®: "She who is coiled; serpent power." The primordial cosmic energy in every individual which eventually, through the practice of yoga, rises up the sushumnÃ¢ nÃ¢Ã®. As it rises, the kunalinÃ® awakens each successive chakra. Nirvikalpa samÃ¢dhi, enlightenment, comes as it pierces through the door of Brahman at the core of the sahasrÃ¢ra and enters!

loka: "World, habitat, realm, or plane of existence." From loc, "to shine, be bright, visible." A dimension of manifest existence; cosmic region. Each loka reflects or involves a particular range of consciousness. The three primary lokas are 1) --BhÃ»loka: "Earth world." The world perceived through the five senses, also called the gross plane, as it is the most dense of the worlds. 2) --Antarloka: "Inner or in-between world." Known in English as the subtle or astral plane, the intermediate dimension between the physical and causal worlds, where souls in their astral bodies sojourn between incarnations and when they sleep. 3) --Sivaloka: "World of Siva," and of the Gods and highly evolved souls. The causal plane, also called KÃ¢ranaloka, existing deep within the Antarloka at a higher level of vibration, it is a world of superconsciousness and extremely refined energy.

MahÃ¢deva: "Great shining one; God." Referring either to God Ã□iva or any of the highly evolved beings who live in the Ã□ivaloka in their natural, effulgent soul bodies. It is said in scripture that there are 330 million Gods.

mahÃ¢prasthÃ¢na: "Great departure." Death of the physical body.

mahÃ¢samÃ¢dhi: "Great enstasy." The death, or dropping off of the physical body, of a great soul, an event occasioned by tremendous blessings. Also names the shrine in which the remains of a great soul are entombed.

mantra: "Mystic formula." A sound, syllable, word or phrase endowed with special power, usually drawn from scripture. Mantras are chanted loudly during pÃ»jÃ¢ to invoke the Gods and establish a force field. Certain mantras are repeated softly or mentally for japa. To be truly effective, such mantras must be given by the preceptor through initiation.

moksha: "Liberation." Release from transmigration, saÂµsÃ¢ra, the round of births and deaths, which occurs after karma has been resolved and nirvikalpa samÃ¢dhi--realization of the Self, Parabrahman--has been attained. Same as mukti.

monastic: A monk or nunk (based on the Greek monos, "alone"). A man or woman who has withdrawn from the world and lives an austere, religious life, either alone or with others in a monastery. Terms for Hindu monastics include sÃ¢dhaka,

sÃ¢dhu, muni, tapasvin, vairÃ¢gÃ®, Ã»dÃ¢sin and sannyÃ¢sin. (Feminine: sÃ¢dhikÃ¢, sÃ¢dhvÃ®, munÃ®, tapasvinÃ®, vairÃ¢gÃ®nÃ®, and sannyÃ¢sinÃ®.)

mudrÃ¢: "Seal." Esoteric hand gestures which express specific energies or powers.

nÃ¢da: "Sound; tone, vibration." Metaphysically, the mystic sounds of the Eternal, of which the highest is the transcendent or Soundless Sound, ParanÃ¢da, the first vibration from which creation emanates. From ParanÃ¢da comes Praava, Aum, and further evolutes of nÃ¢da.

nÃ¢dÃ®: "Conduit." A nerve fiber or energy channel of the subtle (inner) bodies of man. It is said there are 72,000. These interconnect the chakras. The three main nÃ¢Ã®s are named iÃ¢, pigalÃ¢ and sushumÃ¢. --iÃ¢: Also known as chandra ("moon") nÃ¢Ã®, it is pink in color and flows downward, ending on the left side of the body. It is feminine in nature and is the channel of physical-emotional energy. --pigaÂ¬Ã¢: Also known as sÃ»rya ("sun") nÃ¢Ã®, it is blue in color and flows upward, ending on the right side of the body. It is masculine in nature and is the channel of intellectual-mental energy. --sushumÃ¢: The major nerve current which passes through the spinal column from the mÃ»lÃ¢dhÃ¢ra chakra at the base to the sahasrÃ¢ra at the crown of the head. It is the channel of kualinÃ®.

namaskÃ¢ra: "Reverent salutations." Traditional Hindu verbal greeting and mudrÃ¢ where the palms are joined together and

held before the heart or raised to the level of the forehead.

namaste: "Reverent salutations to you." A traditional verbal greeting. A form of namas, meaning "bowing, obeisance."

nirvikalpa samÃ¢dhi: "Enstasy (samÃ¢dhi) without form or seed." The realization of the Self, Parabrahman, a state of oneness beyond all change or diversity; beyond time, form and space.

Pati-pasu-pÃ¢sa: Literally: "master, cow and tether." These are the three primary elements of Ãaiva SiddhÃ¢nta philosophy: God, soul and world--Divinity, man and cosmos--seen as a mystically and intricately interrelated unity. Pati is God, envisioned as a cowherd. Pasu is the soul, envisioned as a cow. PÃ¢sa is the all-important force or fetter by which God brings souls along the path to Truth.

prÃ¢na: Vital energy or life principle. Literally, "vital air," from the root pran, "to breathe." PrÃ¢na in the human body moves as five primary life currents known as vÃ¢yus, "vital airs or winds." These are prÃ¢na (outgoing breath), apÃ¢na (incoming breath), vyÃ¢na (retained breath), udÃ¢na (ascending breath) and samÃ¢nThe part for my recorder is not available on the island (bou so I am ordering it from the company directly.a (equalizing breath). Each governs crucial bodily functions, and all bodily energies are modifications of these.

pÃ»jÃ¢: "Worship, adoration." An 'gamic rite of worship

performed in the home, temple or shrine, or to a person, such as the satguru. Its inner purpose is to purify the atmosphere around the object worshiped, establish a connection with the inner worlds and invoke the presence of God, Gods or one's guru. During pÃ»jÃ¢, the officiant (pujÃ¢rÃ®) recites various chants praising the Divine and beseeching divine blessings, while making offerings in accordance with established traditions. PÃ»jÃ¢ is the 'gamic counterpart of the Vedic yajÃ±a rite, in which offerings are conveyed through the sacred homa fire. --Ã¢tmÃ¢rtha pÃ»jÃ¢: PÃ»jÃ¢ done for oneself and immediate family, usually at home in a private shrine. --parÃ¢rtha pÃ»jÃ¢: "PÃ»jÃ¢ for others." ParÃ¢rtha pÃ»jÃ¢ is public pÃ»jÃ¢, performed by authorized or ordained priests in a public shrine or temple.

punarjanma: "Reincarnation." From puna, "again and again," and janma, "taking birth."

reincarnation: "Re-entering the flesh." Punarjanma; metempsychosis. The process wherein souls take on a physical body through the birth process. The cycle of reincarnation ends when karma has been resolved and Parabrahman has been realized. This condition of release is called moksha. Then the soul continues to evolve and mature, but without the need to return to physical existence.

sacrifice:YajÃ±a. 1) Giving offerings to a Deity as an expression of homage and devotion. 2) Giving up something, often one's own possession, advantage or preference, to serve a higher purpose. The literal meaning of sacrifice is "to make sacred," implying an act of worship. It is the most common

translation of the term yajÃ±a, from the verb yuj, "to worship." In Hinduism, all of life is a sacrifice--called jÃ®vayajÃ±a, a giving of oneself--through which comes true spiritual fulfillment.

sÃ¢dhana: "Effective means of attainment." Religious or spiritual disciplines, such as pÃ»jÃ¢, yoga, meditation, japa, fasting and austerity. The effect of sÃ¢dhana is the building of willpower, faith and confidence in oneself and in God, Gods and guru.

sÃ¢dhu: "Virtuous one; straight, unerring." A holy person dedicated to the search for God. A sÃ¢dhu may or may not be a yogÃ® or a sannyÃ¢sin, or be connected in any way with a guru or legitimate lineage. SÃ¢dhus usually have no fixed abode and travel unattached from place to place, often living on alms.

Saivism (Saiva): The religion followed by those who worship Ã□iva as supreme God, of whom there are about 400 million in the world today. Oldest of the four sects of Hinduism.

SÃ¢kÃ¢hÃ¢ra: "Vegetarian diet." From Ã□Ã¢ka, "vegetable;" and Ã¢hÃ¢ra, "eating; taking food."

SÃ¢ktism (SÃ¢kta): "Doctrine of power." The religion followed by those who worship the Supreme as the Divine Mother--Ã□akti or DevÃ®--in Her many forms, both gentle and fierce. Ã□Ã¢ktism is one of the four primary sects of Hinduism.

samÃ¢dhi: "Enstasy," which means "standing within one's Self." "Sameness; contemplation; union, wholeness; completion, accomplishment." SamÃ¢dhi is the state of true yoga in which the meditator and the object of meditation are one. SamÃ¢dhi is of two levels. The first is savikalpa samÃ¢dhi ("enstasy with form or seed"), identification or oneness with the essence of an object. Its highest form is the realization of the primal substratum or pure consciousness, SatchidÃ¢nanda. The second is nirvikalpa samÃ¢dhi ("enstasy without form or seed"), identification with the Self, in which all modes of consciousness are transcended and Absolute Reality, Parabrahman, beyond time, form and space, is experienced. This brings in its aftermath a complete transformation of consciousness.

sampradÃ¢ya: "Traditional doctrine of knowledge." A living stream of tradition or theology within Hinduism, passed on by oral training and initiation.

samsÃ¢ra: "Flow." The phenomenal world. Transmigratory existence, fraught with impermanence and change. The cycle of birth, death and rebirth; the total pattern of successive earthly lives experienced by a soul.

sannyÃ¢sa: "Renunciation." "Throwing down or abandoning." SannyÃ¢sa is the repudiation of the dharma, including the obligations and duties, of the householder and the acceptance of the even more demanding dharma of the renunciate.

SatchidÃ¢nanda (SachchidÃ¢nanda):

"Existence-consciousness-bliss." Lord Ãiva's Divine Mind and simultaneously the pure superconscious mind of each individual soul. It is perfect love and omniscient, omnipotent consciousness, the fountainhead of all existence, yet containing and permeating all existence. It is also called pure consciousness, pure form, substratum of existence, and more. In Advaita VedÃ¢nta, SatchidÃ¢nanda is considered a description of the Absolute (Brahman). Whereas in monistic, or Ãuddha, Ãaiva SiddhÃ¢nta it is understood as divine form--pure, amorphous matter or energy--not as an equivalent of the Absolute, formless, "atattva," Parabrahman. In this latter school, Parabrahman is radically transcendent, and SatchidÃ¢nanda is known as the primal and most perfectly divine form to emerge from the formless.

sin: Intentional transgression of divine law. Akin to the Latin sous, "guilty." Hinduism does not view sin as a crime against God, but as an act against dharma--moral order--and one's own self. It is thought natural, if unfortunate, that young souls act wrongly, for they are living in nescience, the darkness of ignorance. Sin automatically brings negative consequences. In Hinduism, there are no such concepts as inherent or mortal sin .

SmÃ¢rtism: "Sect based on the secondary scriptures (smriti)." The most liberal of the four major Hindu denominations, an ancient Vedic brÃ¢hminical tradition (ca 700 bce) which from the 9th century onward was guided and deeply influenced by the Advaita VedÃ¢nta teachings of the reformist 'di Ãakara.

soul: The real being of man, as distinguished from body, mind

and emotions. The soul--known as Ã¢tman or purusha--is the sum of its two aspects, the form or body of the soul and the essence of the soul--the essence or nucleus of the soul, Pure Consciousness (ParÃ¢Ãakti or SatchidÃ¢nanda) and Absolute Reality (Parabrahman). This essence was never created, does not change or evolve and is eternally identical with the Supreme God's perfections of ParÃ¢Ãakti and Parabrahman.

swÃ¢mÃ®: "Lord; owner." He who knows or is master of himself. A respectful title for a Hindu monk, usually a sannyÃ¢sin, an initiated, orange-robed renunciate, dedicated wholly to religious life.

tantra: "Loom, methodology." 1) Generally, a synonym for ÃÃ¢stra, "scripture." 2) A synonym for the 'gamic texts, especially those of the ÃÃ¢kta faith, a class of Hindu scripture providing detailed instruction on all aspects of religion, mystic knowledge and science. The tantras are also associated with the Ãaiva tradition. 3) A specific method, technique or spiritual practice within the Ãaiva and ÃÃ¢kta traditions.

tapas: "Heat, fire." 1) Purificatory, psyche-transforming spiritual disciplines, severe religious austerity, penance and sacrifice, including endurance of pain and bodily mortification. Scriptures generally warn against extreme asceticism which would bring harm to the body. 2) On a deeper level, tapas is the intense inner state of kualinÃ® "fire" which stimulates mental anguish and separates the individual from society. The association with a satguru, SadÃ¢siva, brings the devotee into tapas, and it brings him out of it. The fire of tapas burns on the dross of saÃ±chita karmas. This is the source of heat, dismay,

depression and striving until the advent of final and total surrender, prapatti. Guru bhakti is the only force that can cool the fires of tapas.

tattva: "That-ness" or "essential nature." Tattvas are the primary principles, elements, states or categories of existence, the building blocks of the universe. Ã□ishis describe this emanational process as the unfoldment of thirty-six tattvas, stages or evolutes of manifestation, descending from subtle to gross.

Vaishnavism (Vaishnava): One of the four major religions, or denominations of Hinduism, representing roughly half of the world's one billion Hindus. It gravitates around the worship of Lord Vishu as Personal God, His incarnations and their consorts. The doctrine of avatÃ¢ra (He who descends) is especially important to Vaishavism.

vrata: "Vow, religious oath." Often a vow to perform certain disciplines over a period of time. Vratas extend from the simplest personal promise to irrevocable vows made before God, Gods, guru and community.

yajÃ±a: "Worship; sacrifice." One of the most central Hindu concepts--sacrifice and surrender through acts of worship, inner and outer. 1) A form of ritual worship especially prevalent in Vedic times, in which oblations--ghee, grains, spices and exotic woods--are offered into a fire according to scriptural injunctions while special mantras are chanted. The element fire, Agni, is revered as the divine messenger who

carries offerings and prayers to the Gods. YajÃ±a requires four components, none of which may be omitted: dravya, sacrificial substances; tyÃ¢ga, the spirit of sacrificing all to God; devatÃ¢, the celestial beings who receive the sacrifice; and mantra, the empowering word or chant.

yoga: "Union." From yuj, "to yoke, harness, unite." The philosophy, process, disciplines and practices whose purpose is the yoking of individual consciousness with transcendent or divine consciousness. One of the six systems of orthodox Hindu philosophy. Yoga was codified by PataÃ±jali in his Yoga SÃ»tras (ca 200 bce) as the eight limbs (ash Ã¢ga) of rÃ¢ja yoga. It is essentially a one system, but historically, parts of rÃ¢ja yoga have been developed and emphasized as yogas in themselves. Prominent among the many forms of yoga are ha ha yoga, kriyÃ¢ yoga (emphasizing breath control), as well as karma yoga (selfless service) and bhakti yoga (devotional practices) which could be regarded as an expression of rÃ¢ja yoga's first two limbs (yama and niyama).