

Hinduism and Chaplaincy: Relating Core Concepts to Spiritual Care

By Asha Shipman

In the U.S., Hinduism still remains much of a mystery to the wider population, a faith tradition most commonly associated with yoga, curry, meditation, and henna tattoos. My own personal understanding, and that which I draw upon in my work as a Hindu chaplain in higher education, is of a faith tradition that prioritizes a humanitarian stance underlain by diverse relevant philosophies and practices.

Unlike other faith traditions, Hinduism has no founder, and Hindus have no central religious body that administers membership. Aside from being born into a Hindu family, which is how most of the 1.1 billion of us gained our affiliation, there are no strict requirements for being an adherent. One need not worship at a Temple, utter any particular prayers, give prominence to any particular form of the Divine, or display any outward markers of the faith, although all of these may be commonly practiced. Even diet is not officially mandated, though many Hindus are vegetarian or at least do not eat beef. Social practices vary considerably within India from state to state, as well as more distinctly north to south. Distinctions exist in cuisine, language, clothing, and marriage practices. Similarly, Hinduism is expressed in various ways according to regional, sectarian, familial, and personal customs and tastes. The same remains true for Hindus all over the world. Thus, in order to understand how an individual Hindu follows his or her faith, one must first ask questions about the family practices and personal beliefs rather than make any assumptions. According to Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), philosopher, statesman, and second President of India:



Hinduism is not a definite dogmatic creed, but a vast, complex and subtly unified mass of spiritual thought and realization. Its tradition of the Godward endeavor of the human spirit has been continuously enlarging through the ages. (Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 8)

All the above being true, here are some select core philosophies that most Hindus would endorse or at least find familiar:

Core Concept 1: Advocacy for Religious Pluralism

Hindus consider all faiths and their representations of the Divine as legitimate. This concept originates in the Maha Upanishad, a sacred Hindu scripture, which pronounces: *Only small men discriminate saying: One is a relative; the other is a stranger. For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitutes but [one] family.*

Such philosophical stances were championed down the ages by Hindu theologians including 8th century sage Adi Shankara and 19th century spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda. Mahatma Gandhi, too, espoused this idea of inter-religious harmony:

Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal?

In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals. If a man reaches the heart of his own religion, he has reached the heart of the others too. (Gandhi, 1958, p. 59)

In my work as a chaplain I often reflect on the many ways in which we relate to the Creator and to one another. Student populations on U.S. campuses are more diverse than ever before, and students seem more open to engaging with multiple religious, secular, and spiritual practices. Hinduism, with its philosophy of lifting all religious and spiritual traditions, offers a welcome ground for such spiritual questers. Hinduism provides a pluralistic and world-embracing attitude that grounds my interactions with students and frames my intra- and inter-faith engagement. In fact, it breaks the walls between the hyphenated and allows simply for open-hearted and intelligent *engagement*.



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Given that the Hindu Life Program is part of an educational institution, we facilitate broad participation in our ritual services by handing out printed programs which include translations of the Sanskrit mantras. I also, from time to time, workshop the services, offering more insights regarding how the practices meld with Hindu philosophies. During interfaith engagement we find universal themes to plumb such as love, service, duty, and divine grace. This was certainly true for the Jewish and Hindu communities on campus, who found common ground in January 2019 while sharing delicious food and melodious chanting. The



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Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale welcomed the Yale Hindu community to a Friday night Shabbat dinner, and the next week our Hindu Life program hosted the Jewish community to one of our worship services and dinners celebrating the Hindu patron goddess of learning, Saraswati. We basked in the shared meanings imbued in *shaanti* and *shalom* during these heart-warming and intellectually stimulating exchanges. Beyond ritual, other wonderful means of interfaith exchange that I have supported include drama, sacred song, and visual art.

Core Concept 2: Cognizing the Divine

Within Hinduism, nuances pertain to exactly *how* the Divine is conceptualized. For many, this is an immanent and transcendent supreme force that has no form, no beginning, and no end. It exists within and without and manifests all that we are conscious of. Hindu scriptures refer to this entity by many names including *Ishwara* and *Brahman*. Alongside this notion of the Absolute coexists a Hindu pantheon with hundreds of gods and goddesses. How can this be?

Anthropomorphizing can be understood from a psychological perspective. God as a Creative Force is a very abstract notion and, for some, too emotionless and woefully lacking in arms to hold and bless His or Her devotees. Visualizing God in the form of “Father,” “Mother,” “Nature,” or as angels and other entities endowed with human-like traits and behaviors may facilitate a deeper personal and emotional communion.

The hundreds of gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon reflect the fullness of human lived experience. Just as many wavelengths comprise white light, the gods and goddesses represent the myriad forms and powers of the One. For many Hindus, to pray to one instantiation is to pray to that Supreme Force. It is the force behind atmospheric phenomena such as rain, sunlight, and wind. It represents the cosmic and micro-cosmic cycles of creation, sustenance, and destruction. It is the granter of wealth, courage, wisdom, and a smooth path ahead, to name but a few attributes. Book 1, Hymn 164, Verse 46 of the Rig Veda, an ancient foundational sacred text neatly summarizes this philosophy: *They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutmān. To what is One, sages give many a title: they call it Agni, Yama, Mātariśvan.*



Ritual services (called *pujas*) at Yale University highlight major Hindu holy days, though celebrations will be added or amended based on student input. For example, we added a hymn to one Navaratri program that one of the student leaders considered central to her own practice. By doing so we continue to broaden our understanding and appreciation of this vast tradition. Once we hosted a “mental” puja in which we asked participants to sit with eyes closed and envision the Divine as they wished to, as well as envisioning all of the offerings. This was unusual but allowed a freer form of ritual observance and (hopefully) deeper contemplation.

See more details about the Hindu Life Program at [Yale University](#)

Many Hindus equate the Divine with the highest truth in the universe. Everything else is said to be a reflection, like moonlight. A popular quote taken from Book 10, Hymn 85, verse 1 of the Rig Veda is: *Truth is the base that bears the earth*. Some Hindus believe the world is a



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complete illusion and that the Divine represents the only truth and reality. I take a more moderate stance. I believe in the reality of the world around me and believe humans are quite capable of parsing physical, social, and emotional truths. Yet, there are human frailties we must also acknowledge.

Humans rely heavily on our sight to interpret the world, and human visual perception is constrained by the morphology of the human eyeball. The point of greatest visual acuity and resolution is the fovea, a tiny portion of the retina. Research on visual cognition suggests that, in accordance with the anatomy of the eyeball, humans can only pay close attention to a small part of their surroundings, filling in the rest with expectations based on prior experience. Color perception, too, is based on the visual processing centers within the brain rather than the

perceived object. This suggests the world around us is actually more veiled and subject to our internal biases than we might otherwise believe.



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Perhaps this is the foundation of Hindu rishis' (enlightened religious teachers) exhortations that the means to true clarity is through opening the inner eye. A popular prayer from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad entreats: *Lead me from Unreal to Real, from Darkness to Light, from Death to Immortality.* In other words: Lead me from what I *think* I see, to what is *truly* present; from the darkness of ignorance, to the light of understanding, and from the fear of death to an understanding of one-ness with the Supreme.

Given how time-pressed and distracted this modern life can be, it is often hard to find a slice of time to stand still and take a long look at what is happening around us. Yet I find such attention vital to my work in supporting the Hindu campus community. Knowing that humans respond to natural and social cycles, I rely on

three particularly useful tools: The academic calendar, Hindu calendar, and the seasons. When we convene in August the weather is hot, trees leafed out, and flowers abound. The campus air itself is energized as students reunite with friends and dive into new courses. Through September the days feel long and the light golden; students read and play on the lawns. At dinner after pujas I encourage first- and second-year students to seek advice from their seniors regarding course selection, faculty mentoring, and clubs to join. Graduate students of Indian origin who are new to the area often rely on Hindu Life programs to connect with others from India and feel a sense of home as they settle into their new surroundings and the campus culture. I cater foods light on the taste buds and stomach.

Cooling weather and the press of midterms push students inside and apart. Students scurry across the bare quads, bundled in coats and hunched against the wind. Pujas now offer a time of respite against hours alone contending with the storm of work. Chanting, quiet at first, rises to fill the Puja room and by the end of the program faces are visibly more relaxed. I choose legumes and more heavily spiced foods bathed in rich sauces for dinner afterwards to encourage some lingering conversation rather than a hasty exit back to study. We incorporate programming that explores Hindu practices and philosophies addressing mind-body balance and anxiety reduction. I reach out to students I haven't seen in a while, invite them to the Hindu Life programming, or to sit in my office armchair for a chat about what's on their



mind. I offer chai to warm against the chill and the hectic pace.

Core Concept 3: The Eternal Soul

Hindus believe that an immortal, individual soul, we call the *atman*, resides within the lotus of the heart. The *atman* is believed to be divinely connected with the Creator, sometimes called the *Paramatman* (the ultimate *atman*). I like to think that due to this higher order connection, all souls are automatically united with a global soul network. Consider the amount of time we each spend tending to various digital social networks, pruning and adding to our lists, keeping in touch and ensuring that our access to such platforms remains open. While this has become more critical during these times of social distancing and sheltering in place, imagine the marvelous dividends should we tend to our soul networks with such devotion. Pun very much intended. The belief among Hindus is that while we are each on our individual path, it places us alongside other souls, and those connections are vital for the development of the *atman*. The paths, each unique, ultimately lead to the *Paramatman*; some might term this Salvation. We are in this together, all imperfect and all trying our best. The best gifts we can offer are attention, time, and love. As the Svetasvatara Upanishad exhorts: *All this universe is in the glory of God, of Siva, the God of love. The heads and faces of men are His own, and He is in the hearts of all.*

Core Concept 4: Reduction of the Ego and Concept of Karma

Connected as we are, we have obligations to our families, communities, the global ecosystem, which we deem sacred, along with our own spiritual development. Our lifelong quest for Truth manifests in our entire being – our work, our domestic lives, our thoughts and plans. Hindu philosophy supports such endeavors but cautions against egoism. Rather than personal gain, the scriptures exhort we act in the name of the *Paramatman* and for the common good. The focus is squarely placed on action and intention rather than the outcomes. In fact, the actions and intentions are cosmically weighed. Herein lies the concept of *karma*. Karma is action with consequence. Souls accrue karma, positive and negative, which affect the next life cycle. Put very simply, actions done properly and for the right reasons purify the *atman* and move it closer to the *Paramatman*. Too much karma is a barrier to merging with the *Paramatman*. The mindset that all we do is for the good of other people, animals, or the environment, for example has two positive outcomes, one prosocial and one personal: it is both a humanitarian stance and a means to reduce the karmic load.

As Rameshbhai Oza, a Hindu religious leader and education advocate, states:

God is with us. It is He only who gives us the strength to work. If we live with this inspiration in our heart, we will

surely experience Divinity in our life. Our work will become our devotion and means of our spiritual progress. (Oza, 2018)

Core Concept 5: *Chaturvidha Purushartha*: The Four Major Goals of Hinduism

Hindus rely on a vast trove of scriptures for philosophical, practical, and spiritual guidance. This literature expounds four key goals: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*. Together they present a framework meant to ensure a well-functioning society in which individuals may flourish. First among these goals is *dharma* (right conduct or right action), which consists of specific duties and behavioral norms, subject to change according to need and circumstance. *Artha* relates to the acquisition of wealth for the benefit of both family and community so that no one is in need. For example, *artha* includes patronage of religious institutions, the arts, and supporting the needy. *Kama* encompasses pleasure, health, and well-being. In the Vedas, *kama* seems directly related to wealth acquisition, which may sound familiar, though in those times the measure was the size of one's cow herd. *Moksha* is the release of the *atman* from the cycle of rebirths such that it can merge with the *Paramatman*. *Artha* and *kama* are pursued within the framework of *dharma*, while *moksha* is achieved by living a *dharmic* life and then transcending earthly bonds.



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The foundational authoritative Hindu scriptures are the four *Vedas* (*Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Artharva Veda*), which contain hymns, rites, incantations, philosophies, and observances of the world and its people. Rooted in the Vedas, there developed four major Hindu denominations centered on worshiping specific anthropomorphic forms of the Divine: Vaishnavism [Vishnu], Shaivism [Shiva], Shaktism [Devi], and Smartism [Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Surya, and Devi]. The broadest differences between the denominations lie

in their conceptualization of the Divine, in their ritual practices, and the mode by which one might attain *moksha*, or salvation. If a devotee prioritizes *bhakti*, love and surrender to the Divine, then the Vaishnava approach might be more appealing. If one's orientation is more towards gaining knowledge, then the Shaiva approach may be a better fit. If the power of maternal love, compassion, and a reverence towards the natural world provides spiritual centering, then the Shakta approach may appeal. And if the concept of *dharma* is central to one's conceptualization of spirituality, then, according to Srinivasan (2011), the Smarta approach may serve one best. It is best to keep in mind that these differentiations are quite broad, mutually acceptable, and not always applicable.

Commentaries branching from the Vedas include rituals for marriage and other important milestones (e.g., pre-birth rituals for expectant mothers, naming rituals for newborns, initiation into religious studies) which many Hindus continue to mark as part of their *dharmic* duty. Also indicated were life stages: the first phase is being a student, the next forming a family of one's own and pursuing a career, then retirement with time spent mentoring the younger generations, and finally a phase tightly focused on tending to the *atman*,

engaging in spiritually nourishing practices, and preparing for the next life. Each phase of life – the student phase included – has its own obligations.

The Upanishads, some of which are quoted here, are esoteric writings; they are tantalizing and poetic, designed to open the inner eye. The epic literature, however, with its focus on society and ethics, seem better suited to offer guidance to students. The two main epics of India, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, focus on dharma, translated as right living, proper conduct and duty – to oneself, to society, and to the Divine. Many Hindu students, particularly those who grew up in India, are very familiar with the stories within these epics, which teach lessons revealing the moral scaffolding provided by the *chaturvidha purushartha*. They provide memorable episodes in which the protagonists and antagonists struggle (against) or flourish in response to artha, kama, and dharma.

Against this philosophical backdrop, in providing student support, I find that student anxiety often arises from *seeming* conflicts between expectations based on the familial denomination, practices and norms, and their personal development and understanding of Hinduism. Usually this is expressed as “I don’t think I am on the right path” or “I don’t see how my family traditions relate to my own life.” What they seem to really be wondering is: What is the dharma of a student? I see my role as accompanying students through this phase and offering resources so they can identify whether the conflict really exists, and the Hindu philosophies and practices that might lend to their spiritual discernment as they navigate this major life phase. I help them determine *their* dharma, with the understanding that it will change.

Hindu students repeatedly are told by their families to study hard and achieve the best grades they can. The pressure for high academic placement is high and seen as their dharmic duty. While I don’t entirely disagree that studies are central to student life, I prefer to temper the message a bit. Students are not disembodied brains; intellectual success requires the tending of their hearts, minds, and souls as well. Engaging in sacred Hindu practices such as yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises helps unfurl and balance the mind and body.

According to Cybele Tomlinson, author of a yoga book and co-director of the Berkeley Yoga Center:

Yoga is about clearing away whatever is in us that prevents our living in the most full and whole way. With yoga, we become aware of how and where we are restricted — in body, mind, and heart — and how gradually to open and release these blockages. As these blockages are cleared, our energy is freed. We start to feel more harmonious,

more at one with ourselves. Our lives begin to flow — or we begin to flow more in our lives. (Tomlinson, 2000, pp. 6-7)

This self-tending instills resilience and fosters the ability to fulfill dharmic potential; in the particular case of students, it lights the fire of their intellect.

But life is not all about achievement. Student life should include fun and the development of deep, nourishing friendships. Returning to the idea of cultivating a soul network, I encourage students to spend time with friends, to enjoying a walk, lunch, a visit to the art museum, and un-scheduled hang-out time. These activities allow the students to see others and in turn, to themselves be seen. This often helps soothe episodic feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Social distancing has put a brake on this kind of interaction; however, it is possible to maintain connections using online platforms, perhaps sharing a meal or taking a video-streamed walk together. During normal times I encourage time alone with devices turned off to allow for reflection, for day-dreaming, and to retain the practice of unplugging from the world and plugging into oneself. That could mean just staring out a window or doing something leisurely like drawing or listening to music. This still seems like good advice if, for nothing else, to reduce eye strain.

When students feel overwhelmed and at risk of burn-out, I like to remind them that they are supported and loved by many communities and that the world will (and in some cases already does) benefit from their work. The work is hard, and the days are long, but they are where they should be for their age and circumstances: students in an institution of higher learning. For a student, artha is the knowledge they are earning through study and in dialogue with teachers; kama is the soul network they are tending to and the times of pause which are necessary for reinvigorating the mind and body. They are fulfilling their dharma as students. I like to remind them of the following maxim which originates in a section of the Mahabharata



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called Yaksha Prashna: “*Dharmo rakshati rakshitah*: Dharma protects those who protect it” (Srinivasan, 1984, p. 69).

The message is clear: responsibility is bi-directional; the framework of dharma will guide and protect us. However, we also have an active obligation to defend and cultivate this beneficial moral ecosystem. Just understanding that they are a part of this larger collective effort often provides a sense of comfort and inspiration to students. It also serves as a reminder that while internal and external gains may feel incremental, they remain possible, and that individual efforts can achieve broad positive outcomes.

While philosophies and practices vary under the immense banyan tree of Hinduism, there exist core concepts, several of which I have mentioned here. They offer a framework for crafting a life path imbued with attention, compassion, integrity, resilience, and purpose that may be recognizable to like-minded individuals regardless of their religious, secular, or spiritual affiliations. As Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), Indian philosopher and reformer, said: “That which we call the Hindu religion is really the Eternal Religion because it embraces all others” (Aurobindo, 1909).

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