

## **Teaching of Hinduism at Hindu Centre**

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### **Introduction**

The roots of Hinduism in Singapore can be traced back to the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century with the migration of Indians. Today, the existence of Hinduism in Singapore is testified by the presence of 24 temples and participation of Hindus, who are both Indians and non-Indians, in Hindu festivals like Thaipusam, Thimithi and Deepavali. Though temples had played a significant role in religious and secular activities, in the seventies it was felt that they were not sufficient to keep the Hindus, especially the young, rooted in Hindu tradition. The rituals and customs had significance and meaning but many Hindus practised these rituals without full understanding. To the older generation, they generally accepted these practices without question in the name of Bhakti (faith). However, for the younger generation, who were only convinced by logic and reason, Hindu rituals only confounded them. The Hindu Centre was thus set up in 1977 to serve the Hindus by promoting the study and practice of Hinduism.

### **Mission of Hindu Centre**

Since then, a number of other Hindu Organisations, largely guru-based have also emerged with the noble aim of creating a better understanding and appreciation of Hinduism amongst the people. The question that naturally arises then is whether there is a need for a Hindu Centre. If there is such a need, what should be its approach to teaching Hinduism? Should the Hindu Centre become a melting pot of the teachings and practices of all the other guru-based or sectarian Hindu organisations or is there something truly unique it can offer? To answer these questions, it is pertinent to study the mission statement of the Hindu Centre which proudly outlines its purpose:

*The Hindu Centre advances the spiritual evolution of Singapore Hindus through Jnana (Knowledge), and by providing opportunities for Dharma (Duty), Bhakti (Devotion) and Seva (Service), relevant to the modern world.*

It is not incidental that Jnana (Knowledge) takes precedence in the mission statement over Dharma, Bhakti and Seva. What is this Jnana that is referred to and what is its importance?

It is an undeniable fact that man has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. He is never one who chooses to remain ignorant. From the time he is born, he is acquiring knowledge. This knowledge, starting at a simple level, such as a baby learning to walk and talk becomes more complex as abstract forms of knowledge are acquired in adulthood. Every perception and cognition is an acquisition of knowledge. Every one of us is on the quest for knowledge every day albeit of different types and quality. This acquired knowledge is utilised in a variety of ways to serve life's pursuits. We can thus see the important role played by knowledge in all that we do. In the field of spirituality too, where the goals may be perceptible or beyond what is perceptible, knowledge has a crucial role to play. It is to serve this end that Hindu Centre has identified Jnana as its main driver to serve the spiritual needs of Hindus. So how does acquisition of Jnana advance the spiritual evolution of Hindus?

### **Importance of Jnana (Knowledge) to pursue Human Goals**

Jnana is sometimes misunderstood as book knowledge that comes from simply understanding a complex philosophical system. It is more than that. In fact it deals with a fundamental basic question that has perplexed thinkers and philosophers throughout the history of mankind – what is the meaning and purpose of human existence. Often the answers given for this question are from lofty standpoints. Hinduism, on the other hand, addresses this important question through the four *Purusharthas* (human goals) by presenting an outlook of life that synthesises both spiritual and material needs.

The Hindu tradition defines the goals of human life or *Purusharthas* to be the acquisition of *Dharma* (ethics), *Artha* (securities), *Kama* (pleasures) and *Moksha* (liberation).

◆ Dharma

Since every human being is endowed with the faculty of choice, one must have norms for controlling one's actions. These norms are the values observed by individuals in the conduct of their lives. There are certain values that apply to everyone. Such values are called Universal Values. For example, the very fact that all of us do not want to be lied to or be hurt verbally or physically, allows us to infer that we should not do unto others what we do not want to be done unto us. Therefore, regardless of race, religion, place or time, certain universal values like telling the truth and not hurting anyone would apply to every one of us. This moral scheme, which is already known to all of us through inference from our own experiences, is known as *Samanya Dharma*. However, the human being is also filled with likes and dislikes and these may come to govern decisions in various situations and even override the values possessed by an individual. For example, in the *Mahabharata*, both *Duryodhana* and *Pandavas* knew it was wrong to hurt others, but *Duryodhana* did not have *Dharma* as his priority and so he compromised his values for his selfish purposes. On the other hand, the *Pandavas* had *Dharma* as their goal and were always striving to protect it. This difference in the appreciation and assimilation of *Dharma* caused the *Kurukshetra* war.

An individual must thus have good knowledge of *Dharma* and the observance of *Dharma* is thus stated in the Hindu scriptures as an important goal to be observed by all Hindus. In fact, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are primarily geared towards teaching man about *Dharma* and the goodness that it brings in its wake. Therefore, Hindus were strictly required to adhere to these values and lead a life of righteousness. The *Shastras* (Scriptures) say: "If you protect *Dharma*, *Dharma* will protect you." The crown and glory of righteous living is the practice of *Yamas* and *Niyamas* found in our *Shastras*. The *Varaha* and

*Shandilya Upanishads* and the *Tirumantiram* mention ten *Yamas* (dos and don'ts) and ten *Niyamas* (observances) which can be a guide to positive living for any human being. For the *Yamas*, it include *Satyam* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (Non-injury), *Asteya* (Non-stealing), *Brahmacharyam* (Chastity), *Kshama* (Patience & Forgiveness), *Dhrti* (Determination), *Daya* (Compassion), *Arjava* (Simplicity or straightforwardness), *Mitahara* (Moderate Eating habits), *Shaucha* (Purity & cleanliness). For *Niyamas*, it include values such as *Hri* (Modesty), *Santosha* (Contentment), *Dana* (Charity), *Astikya* (Faith in Scriptures), *Ishwarapujana* (Worship of God), *Siddhanta Shravana* (Listening to Teachings), *Mati* (Discerning ability), *Vrata* (Religious Vows), *Japa* (Mental or Verbal chanting), and *Tapas* (Austerity).

◆ Artha

*Artha*, the pursuit of security is another human goal in man's life. To be secure, everyone needs food, clothing, shelter and wealth required to raise a family and maintain a comfortable home. Hinduism does not stand against the acquiring of wealth and enjoyment of life as long as the pursuit of *Artha* is governed by *Dharma*. *Artha* that is obtained by non-righteous (Adharmic) means will lead to bad consequences for the individual.

◆ Kama

*Kama* deals with the experience or pursuit of sense pleasures. The creation of this beautiful world and the five sense organs are to appreciate and experience the beauty of the world. However, too much pleasure becomes harmful as we could become slaves to our senses. That is why the pursuit of *Kama* must again be governed by *Dharma*. One should lead a well-balanced and a disciplined life, keeping all the senses under control. Self-control does not mean one has to deprive oneself of enjoyment of worldly pleasures. It is legitimate to pursue pleasures as long as it is governed by *Dharma*.

◆ Moksha

*Moksha* is liberation. It is the freedom from all imperfections and limitations, and also from *Samsara* (rebirths). The *Upanishads* declare that *Moksha* is attainable by any human being in the course of one's life. When a mature person analyses

his experiences and realises that behind one's struggle for *artha* (securities) and *kama* (pleasures), is the basic desire to be adequate and the desire to be free, he finds Moksha as the answer. He realises that no amount of *dharma*, *artha* or *kama* acquired can achieve that goal of completeness (*purnatvam*).

### The Two-Lifestyles

The Vedic culture provides two committed lifestyles for a person. One is a life of activity and duties or *pravritti marga* for a person with the goals of *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kama* and the other is a life of renunciation, *Nivritti marga* for a person with the goal of *Moksha*. As seen earlier, since *Artha* and *Kama* must be governed by *Dharma*, and *Moksha* is a pursuit of freedom from all limitations, it can be concluded that every Hindu requires knowledge pertaining to either *Dharma* or *Moksha*.

Hindu scriptures thus reveal knowledge of *Dharma* and *Moksha* with a view to meeting all four goals of human life. Whatever a person's goals may be, the study of scriptures to acquire knowledge thus becomes essential. However, most Hindus today are ignorant of this fact. For example, although Hinduism has been presented and propagated to the world as a Universal Wisdom, the traditional aspects of its philosophies have been the least exposed to the masses. In fact, there are many definitions as to who a Hindu is but in 1995 the Indian Supreme Court found the following definition by Bal Ghangadhar Tilak as adequate and satisfactory:

*"Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and realization of the truth that the number of Gods to be worshiped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion."*

The above definition, in one way, presents Hinduism as a broad religion but one would notice the emphatic opening line which states the acceptance of the Vedas

with reverence. Indeed Tilak has provided an appropriate definition as this is exactly what Vyasa, the great compiler of the Vedas, says in his Brahma Sutra: “the scripture being the source of or the means of the right knowledge.”<sup>1</sup>

Vyasa emphatically says that the means to gain right knowledge is the scripture. Here we can see an allusion to the foundation of Hinduism as a body of knowledge that finds its source in the Vedas. One of the earliest commentators of scriptures, *Adi Shankara* (700 CE) in his commentary to the *Bhagavad Gita* (18.66) says that scriptures are indeed the source of knowledge for knowing realities that are suprasensuous in nature. Hence, one cannot understate the value of scriptures in understanding Hinduism’s teachings.

### **Scriptural Foundation of Hinduism Teaching**

Hindu Centre’s teaching is based on the Hindu scriptures and thus the scriptures are taken as the final authority. In line with this, Hindu Centre’s teaching does not adhere to any one guru’s teaching in particular. This non-sectarian approach to teaching Hinduism does not mean the Centre dismisses the teachings of all gurus. Conversely, as long as a particular guru’s teachings are in line with the scriptures, those teachings are acceptable to us. So what are the scriptures referred to when teaching Hinduism?

The Vedas, being the oldest known scriptures of the Hindus or perhaps even the world, is considered the source and foundation of Hinduism’s philosophy. In fact the eternal wisdom of the Vedas is applicable at all times regardless of time, place and circumstances. Vedas, along with Agamas, form the primary scriptures of Hinduism which are used as the reference point for all other scriptures written by men. In fact, one of the important features of Vedas is that it is *Apaurusheya*, which is not written by men but revealed by God. The Vedas says: “*The mantras abide in the immutable supreme space where are seated all*

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<sup>1</sup> Shastrayonitvat 1.1.3

*the Gods*<sup>2</sup>. The Hindus see the Vedas and other secondary scriptures as a means of knowledge to accomplish the ends within *Pravritti* and *Nivritti Margas*. All the present day popular teachings such as Yoga, Pranayama, Meditation, Rituals and Philosophy find their genesis in the Vedas.

Contrary to popular view, the Vedas are highly structured in their content and the structure of the Vedas itself is reflective of the evolution of a seeker's self-discovery. There are a total of 4 Vedas, namely Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. Each Veda is structured into 4 specific subjects which are *Samhitas* (Hymns), *Brahmanas* (Rituals), *Aranyakas* (Meditations) and *Upanishads* (Philosophy). It is the Philosophy portion of the Vedas, which is called the Upanishads that has appealed many. However, it would be a great disservice to mankind if the earlier portions are neglected. For example, *Samhitas* which are collections of mantras or hymns which sing the praise of Gods , when chanted correctly, are the most potent methods of invoking God to accomplish the Purusharthas especially *artha* and *kama*. These primordial hymns are considered God's words and considered bedrock of *Sanatana Dharma*. Repetition of mantras like the powerful *Gayatri mantra* with intense devotion and faith not only gives the seeker divine protection but also allows his unexpressed wishes and goals to be realised. Similarly, *Brahmanas*, which are concerned with sacrificial rites, are swiftly dismissed as superstitions by many without understanding that the Vedas contain more than simple instructions for rituals but include lengthy explanations of rituals. Vedic rituals are a vital part of Hindu tradition that provide individuals with direct connection to the inner worlds of the ancestors (*pitr*), *devas* and Gods to receive their blessing to fulfil their *purusharthas*. The presiding deity of fire, *Agni*, is revered as the divine messenger who carries the offerings and prayers to the Gods. That explains why *Homas* are performed sometimes by individuals for securing wealth, children and material security. The importance accorded to rituals is clearly evident when *shastras* exhort individuals to observe 5 daily

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<sup>2</sup> *Rig Veda 1.164.39*

rituals (sacrifices) without fail. These include *Deva Yagna* (daily *puja* in the form of offerings to Gods), *Rshi Yagna* (study and contemplation on Vedic scriptures), *Pitru Yagna* (placing libations of water or setting aside of rice balls to express our gratitude to ancestors), *Manushya Yagna* (offering service to those in need) and *Bhuta Yagna* (offering sustenance to creatures and nature to mark our respect for nature). For those seeking *moksha* as their purusharta, the *Aranyakas* (forest treatises) prepare the seeker to engage in meditation and contemplate on the philosophical meanings of rituals and finally the philosophical culmination of Vedas, Upanishads, contain the teachings which point towards the path of *moksha*.

Apart from the Vedas, there is also a large body of scriptures written by men to elaborate the teachings of the Vedas, called *Smritis*. The *Smritis*, based on the Vedas, are written, taking into consideration, the particular time, place and circumstances of the common people. They echo the same truth but customised in a way to suit the needs of a particular period. The *Smritis* thus offer Hinduism the flexibility to adapt itself with time whilst retaining its fundamental tenets. This is a crucial reason why Hinduism has been able to continually embrace change, modernity and stay relevant.

Among the *smriti* texts, the most important would be the Bhagavad Gita. In fact the importance of the text is succinctly captured in the *Gita Dhyanam* traditionally chanted before the study of the Gita: *sarvopanisado gavodogdha gopalanandanah, partho vatsah su-dhir bhoktadugdham gitamrtam mahat*. What it means is that: *All the Upanishads are like a cow, and the milker of the cow is Sri Krishna, the son of Nanda; Arjuna is the calf, the beautiful nectar of the Gita is the milk, and the fortunate devotees are the drinkers and enjoyers of that milk*. Bhagavad Gita stands out for its teachings which are practical and universal and these teachings do not reflect any particular cult, sect or creed.

## Organisation of Knowledge as per the Vedic Tradition

The Hindu Centre is mindful that appreciation of the scriptures does not come easy when one is lost in the maze of countless scriptures. Thus the centre believes that what is essential is not the study of the countless scriptures but what it aims to teach. All of the Hindu scriptures aim to teach only knowledge pertaining to *Dharma* and *Moksha*, which are not available in secular education. This knowledge is thus categorised in the following subjects:

- Ishvara - God
- Dharma – Right Duty
- Karma - Actions
- Moksha - Liberation
- Atman - Self
- Kriyas - Rituals
- Upasanas - Meditations
- Purushartha – Purpose of Life

With the above subjects in mind, the voluminous scriptural texts can be easily organised. Furthermore the different literature allows seekers to focus and direct their efforts to what they want to attain. In fact many may not be aware that the content of the scriptures is very highly organised within the Vedic texts to cater to the two distinct lifestyles. As mentioned by Lord Krishna in the Gita: *In this world I have stated a twofold path of spiritual discipline in the past. The path of Jnana Yoga for the contemplative ones, and the path of Karma Yoga for all others. (3.03)*. The scriptures aim to provide different knowledge to different types of seekers: *'There are two kinds of knowledge to be acquired – the higher and the lower'; this is what, as tradition runs, the knowers of the import of the Vedas*<sup>3</sup>. In fact, the two lifestyles are the bedrock on which the whole knowledge and teachings of Hinduism rest on. The attached appendix gives a diagrammatic representation of the way the Hindu scriptures are organised.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.4*

## **Conclusion**

The Hindu Centre strongly believes that the acquisition of knowledge or *Jnana* is fundamental for every Hindu who wants to achieve his goals during different phases of life. In line with the injunction in the Gita: *'Therefore, let the scripture be your authority in determining what should be done and what should not be done. You should perform your duty following the scriptural injunction'* (16.24), the teachings of the Hindu Centre are strongly based on the scriptures as its core philosophy. Taking advantage of the universal outlook of the Vedas, the Hindu Centre's teachers interpret the scriptures with the help of authoritative commentaries by renowned traditional teachers; to cater to the different interests of the Hindus who come from all walks of life to find solace in the teachings.