

Ancient Hindu Wisdoms for a Connected World*

by

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Introduction:

Ever since the 9/11 tragedy, we have witnessed the cruel hand of man cause death and destruction in several regions, across our country and abroad, from the Middle East to Europe to Mumbai to Myanmar. To add to these tragedies we most recently suffered and continue to suffer the fury of Mother Nature in the form of wind, water, fire and earthquake damages in Texas, Florida, Mexico, the Caribbean, Los Angeles, Anaheim; and the cruel hand of man struck again only 2 nights ago in Las Vegas. While debates to identify the causes and consequences continue, the Hindu approach has always been, not unlike that of people of faith everywhere, to seek divine protection and guidance. In so doing ancient Hindu spiritual leaders developed a series of guidelines for human behavior and defined boundaries within which one can lead a life which is enjoyable, peaceful, productive, and meaningful. The resulting set of wisdoms is what I wish to share with you tonight.

1. These Hindu wisdoms constitute a value system, some of which are universal values that have the potential to bring us together as a family – a world family. The authoritative basis for these wisdoms is rooted in several ancient Hindu scriptures – all of them in Sanskrit, of course. These are: the 4 Vedas, the major Upanishads, the two major epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the Puranas or ancient story books. The earliest of these, the Rg Veda, begins with hymns praising fire, earth, wind, water, etc., followed by the other three Vedas with elaborate instructions on how to plan and perform rituals to worship a variety of gods and goddesses. The end product of all these intellectual pursuits is known as the Upanishads which simply declare that none of this is necessary! Clearly we are not people of a One book!

These wisdoms are buried in different parts of these scriptures and are not readily available in the shape of a concise set of statements like, for example, the Ten Commandments. And that makes it hard even for Hindus to study, contemplate and absorb the depth of meaning implied in these scriptures.

Even if you can access these documents with relative ease these days via, for example, a search engine, you may find it hard to interpret translations of the cryptic verses in Sanskrit. Because translating Sanskrit into English requires expertise beyond the languages and includes knowledge of the philosophy in context. That is the reason for a teacher, a guru, who can guide you –through the basic principles and interpretation with narrative examples in the epics and Puranas. Finding such a guru is not easy in modern times. And even when you do find one, a Hindu guru's normal practice is to let you figure it out, an attitude which certainly weeds out the casual and the curious. This puts an enormous burden on individuals.

2. The way we Hindus learn these wisdoms has always been and will continue to be through spectacular sights and sounds and daily practice. Daily household prayers and temple rituals echo the words and hymns of the Vedas. Endless festivals fill the Hindu calendar, celebrating phases

of the moon and other astral events, divine births and events from stories told in the puranas illustrating ancient victories over evil.

3. And thousands of stories –intriguing, exciting, humorous, paradoxical and enjoyable – learned on the laps of grandparents or in front of a temple. This is a way of indirectly learning implied subtleties which then become ingrained in our thinking. A great example is the concept of Dharma which every Hindu simply “knows” even if he or she is a person who cleans your home or cooks your food and who may or may not be literate. And that basic understanding may not be that much different from that of a Swami even though they may not be able to articulate it the way a scholar might. More about this concept a little later.

4. My goal tonight is to present these concepts in as simple a manner as possible to help you understand and appreciate the basics and hopefully create a thirst in you to study further this most intriguing view of life through the lens of the oldest religion known as Hinduism.

The wisdoms

Let me begin with the most fundamental and often ignored wisdom and continue.

- एकमेव अद्वितीयं *ekameva advitiyam* (There is but One without a second), Chandogya Upanishad 6:2:1
- एकं सत् विप्राः बहुधा वदन्ति *ekam sat vipra: bahuda vadanti* (Truth is One but the wise express it in a variety of ways), Rg Veda 1:164:46
- आनो भद्राः कृतवो यन्तु विश्वतः *ānō bhadrā: krtavō yantu viśvata:* (Let noble thoughts come to me from every direction) Rg. Veda I-89-1
- वसुधैव कुटुम्बकं *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (The world is one family), Mahopanishad: VI-71-73
- धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः *dharmo rakshati rakhita:* (Dharma protects those who protect it) A Hindu Primer: Yaksha Prashna by A.V. Srinivasan; page 72
- अयं लोकः प्रियमतः *ayam loka: priyamata:* (This world is to be loved) - Atharva Veda: 30.17
- यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः *yatra nāryastu puhyante ramante tatra devatā:* (Where women are honored, there the gods delight) Manu Smṛti 3-56
- कर्मण्येव अधिकारस्ते *karmaneyeva adhikāraste ...* (You have but one right and that is to do your duty), Bhagavad Gita II-47)
- न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं *na hi jñānena sadrsham* (There is nothing superior to knowledge), Bhagavad Gita IV-38
- आत्मानं विधि, *ātmānam vidhhi:* (Know thyself), Katha Upanishad (1.3.3)

I will deal with each of these wisdoms and consider at the same time the role they play in the life of Hindus.

1. *ekameva advitiyam* (There is but One without a second)

How this fundamental idea ended up only as an ideal while we continue partaking in elaborate rituals worshipping a multitude of gods and goddesses is a fascinating story in itself that needs a separate discussion. Suffice it to say that this basic principle, while intact, was considered too abstract to many and therefore attempts to visualize something more tangible came about. Personifying and deifying components of this universe became a Hindu specialty. Everything is sacred to us. We worship trees, rivers, mountains, animals and all of god's creations. When we step on the earth after waking up in the morning, we beg forgiveness from goddess Mother Earth for stepping on her. We chant our salutations to the divinities in the seven sacred rivers as we bathe. We salute *Prana*, the sacred breath of life when we partake food. The Upanishads warn us to be aware of the fundamentals and not be distracted by mere rituals. Rituals and worships and ceremonies are meant to be just a first step towards realization. But in practice we tend to remain at this step, most of us, anyway.

Sir Monier Monier Williams explains this development as follows:

“It is a creed based on an original, simple, pantheistic doctrine, but branching out into an endless variety of polytheistic superstitions. Like the sacred fig-tree of India, which from a single stem sends out numerous branches destined to send roots to the ground and become trees themselves, till the parent stock is lost in a dense forest of its own offshoots, so has this pantheistic creed rooted itself firmly in the Hindu mind, and spread its ramifications so luxuriantly that the simplicity of its root-dogma is lost in an exuberant outgrowth of monstrous mythology.”

True. But that is the price to pay when individual preferences towards a goal are respected! The choice is yours, the Hindu says, to worship God in any form or not worship at all. And all this as a mere step towards that sophisticated focus inwards which mandated nothing – except for shedding dogmas, biases and attachment. So the “root-dogma” is not quite lost because how else can we explain the simple prayer offered during worship by Hindus irrespective of what god or goddess is the object of worship?

*You alone are our mother and father
You alone are our sibling and friend
You alone are our knowledge and prosperity
You alone are everything to us*

2. *ekam sat vipra: bahudha vadanti*

Truth is One even though it may be expressed by the learned in different ways. This wisdom is totally ingrained in the Hindu mind. We are comfortable with you following your belief system as we are certain our paths will meet at the end of our journey. Hindus feel at home in any religious setting. They do not fear other views of the almighty. The secular India of today is the result of a 2000 years history of tolerance which has resulted in a multitude of religious institutions flourishing on Indian soil. I wrote a book called *Padayatra* (walking tour) as a guide for visitors to the Hindu temple in Middletown. When you go to the temple there, you can ask to see a copy of the book. At the end of that book on page 51, I said “We sincerely hope and pray that as you complete the tour, you will go home with the faith in your own faith reinforced”. That is not just my hope and I dare say it is the attitude of most Hindus everywhere.

3. *ānō bhadrā: krtavo yantu viśvata:* (Let noble thoughts come to me from every direction)

A good example of this sentiment is Mahatma Gandhi's admiration of the Christian hymn "Abide with me" which he first heard at the Mysore palace in 1927 as the band played it when greeting him. He loved it and learned it and would ask some of his western disciples to sing it during his prayer meetings.

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide!
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Incidentally this hymn was also the favorite of King George V –which explains why the Mysore Palace band included the hymn in their repertoire!

4. *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (The world is one family)

We now know what this means - and not just at the cellular level. A very touching demonstration of this Hindu wisdom pertaining to connectivity came about in Chicago, way, way back on September 11, 1893. A young Hindu monk, Swami Vivekananda, my spiritual hero, was addressing the Parliament of Religions. He was nervous as all the others on the platform were experienced religious leaders from around the world. Other speakers may have addressed the audience as "Ladies and Gentlemen" or "Dear Friends, or Dear Delegates," etc. But Swami Vivekananda rose and addressed them as "Sisters and Brothers of America" – which delivered such a pleasant shock to the delegates that they rose and gave him a thunderous applause. This great Hindu saint, in one phrase, in one sacred moment, unleashed the very core belief of Hindus वसुधैव कुटुंबकं, the whole world is a family.

What are the practical lasting effects of Swami Vivekananda's visit to America in 1893? Huge and everlasting! Consider, for example, the Hindu Temple movement alone. Less than a century later Hindus in America began to plan, organize and build Hindu shrines beginning with the Ganesha temple at Queens, New York. Today there are close to a thousand of them scattered throughout the country with more than one or two temples in each state. In addition the popularity of yoga, the many ashrams providing guidance to hundreds of thousands of Americans are currently evident.

5. *dharmo rakshati rakshita:*

The most central and core concept in Hindu philosophy is dharma. As I said before every Hindu knows what that means and in fact you can almost use it as a test of being a Hindu. All other principles and values flow from this beautiful fountain of dharma. The word dharma is formed from the root *dhr* and literally means to hold, sustain and maintain a thing in its being. There is no accurate translation of the word into English but we may have a glimpse of its vast scope by translating dharma as right action, right conduct, virtue, moral law, etc. Every form of life, every group of people has its dharma, which is the law of its being. Dharma or virtue is conformity with the truth of things; adharma or vice is opposition to it. Hindu ancestors mandated that we follow dharmic values. With no hesitation whatsoever they declared, धर्मेण हीनः पशुभिः समानः *dharmeṇa hīnaha pashubhih samānaha* i.e. The one devoid of dharma is an animal!

The popular Hindu dictum धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः: *dharmo rakshati rakshitaha* (dharma protects those who protect it) has two implications in its statement. The first one is easier to understand: *dharmo rakshati*, meaning that dharma offers protection. If we choose to live a life guided by the principles of dharma, then we are assured of protection by dharma. This understanding is ingrained in our thinking from childhood as one grows up in India.

How convenient it would have been if the phrase contained only the first part: *dharmo rakshati*. It would be a simple statement analogous to saying parents love children. It would be a clear one-way street. But it is not so because the other part of the phrase is: *rakshitaha*. This part brings us into the action. Why was this coined? That we human beings need protection is understandable. But *rakshitaha* implies that the concept itself needs protection too. This is interesting as it conveys the need to protect the very concept whose protection we are seeking. Dharma will protect *you* if you protect *it*. Now it is an equation. Thus, long ago it appears there was this recognition that we cannot simply take it for granted that dharma will reign supreme always and that there is no danger to it. Therefore a duty is imposed on those who seek such protection from dharma, and that duty is to take care that this wonderful governing concept of life is not in any jeopardy. Thus dharma is the very core of the Hindu code of behavior and the Hindu view of life which according to Dr. Radhakrishnan is "an attempt to discover the ideal possibilities of human life".

6. *ayam loka: priyamata:* (This world is to be loved)

Love of life, contrary to popular belief, is also ingrained in Hindu Thought. The Vedas declared *adyeha* (Here and Now!). Their thinking was the hereafter will take care of itself if we paid meticulous attention to the here - this life and enjoy it to the fullest extent by adhering to what we Hindus call *chaturvidha phala purushartha*, meaning four aspects of life known as dharma, artha, kama and moksha. We have just discussed dharma, artha defines financial aspects of life, kama, the aesthetic aspects of life (love, art, culture, ...). So the mandate: Live a full life within the framework of dharma to reach the ultimate release known as moksha, even as we enjoy life on this earth.

7. *yatra nāryastu pujoyante ramante tatra devatā:* (Where women are honored, there the gods delight)

The ancients recognized the most fundamental role women play in societies. After thousands of years we still have not learned that lesson fully everywhere. For Hindus this is a given and it is driven deep into our psyche through the two great epics. In the Ramayana, the kidnapping of Sita, wife of the hero Rama, by the demon king Ravana led to a terrible war. Similarly shaming of princess Draupathi in the epic Mahabharata led to a great war that nearly destroyed the race. That is the reason why these epics are popular in India and that is also the reason that motivated the British playwright Peter Brooks to produce a fantastic nine hour drama on that epic. I urge you to read the epic and/or watch Peter Brook's production to understand the Hindu mind.

8. *karmaneyeva adhikraste ...* (You have but one right and that is to do your duty)

The same scripture also mandated that you have a right and that right is to perform your duty with extraordinary passion reaching extraordinary heights through constant education, training, experimentation to perfect the techniques to contribute your very best to society. The focus was the society, the community, the world at large. In fulfilling these duties you were warned that while performing the very best you should never focus on the benefits of those actions to you as an individual. You just do it! Because your dharma requires to do so. Your dharma also requires that you constantly upgrade your skills so you are the best there is. This system would be what I may call a dream of corporate management everywhere.

9. *na hi jnanena sadrsham* (There is nothing superior to knowledge)

It is hard to believe the extent of emphasis my ancestors placed on knowledge. The knowledge implied here is higher knowledge – knowledge leading to the realization of the self which leads to the last ancient Hindu wisdom I discuss here tonight.

10. *ātmānam vidhdhi*: (Know thyself)

You may have heard a story which goes like this: Someone saw God and asked: Who are you? God said: You! The non-dual or advaita philosophy asserts this dictum which leads to the phrase: Tat-Tvamasi i.e. Thou art That. Self awareness is very difficult to realize. If/when we do know who we really are, then according to Ramana Maharshi, a great saint, “Find out who you are and then will be an end to all your doubts”.

According to the Hindu, the supreme spirit is identified as Brahman, a universal spirit that is always referred to as “It” and not as a He or a She; Thou art That then means “You are verily Brahman.” Brahman was understood to be the only thing real in the universe. All else is therefore unreal, false or illusory and untrue. Brahman sounds like an abstract entity, but is entirely real and in every sense the Supreme Soul, Supreme Being, Creator, the One and Only Reality. And if some wanted to call it God, so be it.

In a sense this also explains the connectivity I referred to earlier. Joseph Campbell, an American author known for his work on comparative mythology in his book *Thou art That* wonders about a question the German philosopher Schopenhauer posed: How is it possible, that suffering that is neither my own nor of my concern should immediately affect me as though it were my own, and with such force that it moves me to action? Campbell says “This is something really mysterious, something for which Reason can provide no explanation, Schopenhauer’s response, which apparently delighted Campbell was “that the immediate reaction and response represented the breakthrough of a metaphysical realization best rendered as “thou art that.” Paraphrasing Schopenhauer I might add this identification with someone, not yourself, is a penetration of the barrier between persons so that the other was no longer perceived as an indifferent stranger but as person “in whom I suffer, in spite of the fact that his skin does not enfold my nerves.”

*ayam bandhurayam neti laghuchtasām
udāra caritānām tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*

“This is my relative and that is a stranger is what small minded persons think, but for the magnanimous the whole world is a family.”

Therefore when I see you as audience, I notice you do not all look alike, of course, but you are indeed alike when I identify you as those “free, unbounded, holy, pure, and perfect” souls.

I opened this discussion referring to Hindus who began worshipping a variety of gods and goddesses based on the Vedas and ended with the Upanishads concluding that none of this is necessary to achieve the Hindu’s ultimate goal of salvation. To illustrate that let me conclude with a parable I made up and wrote in my book *Hinduism for Dummies* (page 156):

A parable

You’re climbing some rock-cut steps to an ancient temple on a hill. But this temple is not to a deity. It has no priests. It has no bells to ring, and you do not bring any offerings beyond your self in body and spirit. As you climb, at each step, one after another, you discard a dogma. You reject ritualistic approaches. You sweat through the futility of pride and vanity and settle for humility. You seek satisfaction beyond pleasure of the senses -- something deeper. As you climb higher and higher, you recognize that ignorance of your real nature is the source of all problems, so your goal is to destroy ignorance. Another step up and you realize that you do not need to abandon anything but simply remain detached! As the ancient Hindus said, real knowledge and infinite joy are yours, and they didn’t mince words. And with the next step, you realize that simply believing is not enough; you must experience it yourself. Yourself. One more step, and you rise above mere intellect and stand on the threshold of a mystic experience with your heart and intuition tuned to that experience. Experience and only experience counts here on this hill.

The sanctum sanctorum—the holiest of holy places—at this temple contains Bliss. Yes, bliss. That is what the ancient Hindus considered worth living (dying?) for. Bliss is your birth right, proclaims the Upanishads. Your interest is nothing but spiritual illumination. You have entered the temple of the Upanishads. You have reached the source of joy. Now you can begin your earnest inquiry into the ultimate Truth.

Before I conclude, let me share with you an extraordinary and very practical wisdom that occurs in an episode in the second epic, the Mahabharata in which the hero, prince Yudhishtira was asked a question. This was a high stakes Q&A session where the life of his brothers was involved. The details are in my book *Yaksha Prashna*.

The question was: Who is happy? And this was his answer: *That person who is free of debt, not in constant travel, and who eats a frugal, satisfying hot meal in his own home every evening. That person is happy!*

Swami Tyagananda in his book *Walking the Walk: A Manual of Karma Yoga* says “It is, in fact, simple to be happy, but is difficult to be simple!” Isn’t that the truth!

* Lecture delivered at the South Church in South Glastonbury at 7 PM on October 3, 2017

**Dr. Srinivasan is the author of many publications including award winning books *Vedic Wedding: Origins, Tradition and Practice* (The National Best Books 2007 Awards), *A Hindu Primer: Yaksha Prashna* (2016 Benjamin Franklin Award) and *Hinduism for Dummies* (see the amazing reviews posted on Amazon.com shown on my site www.avsrinivasan.com)