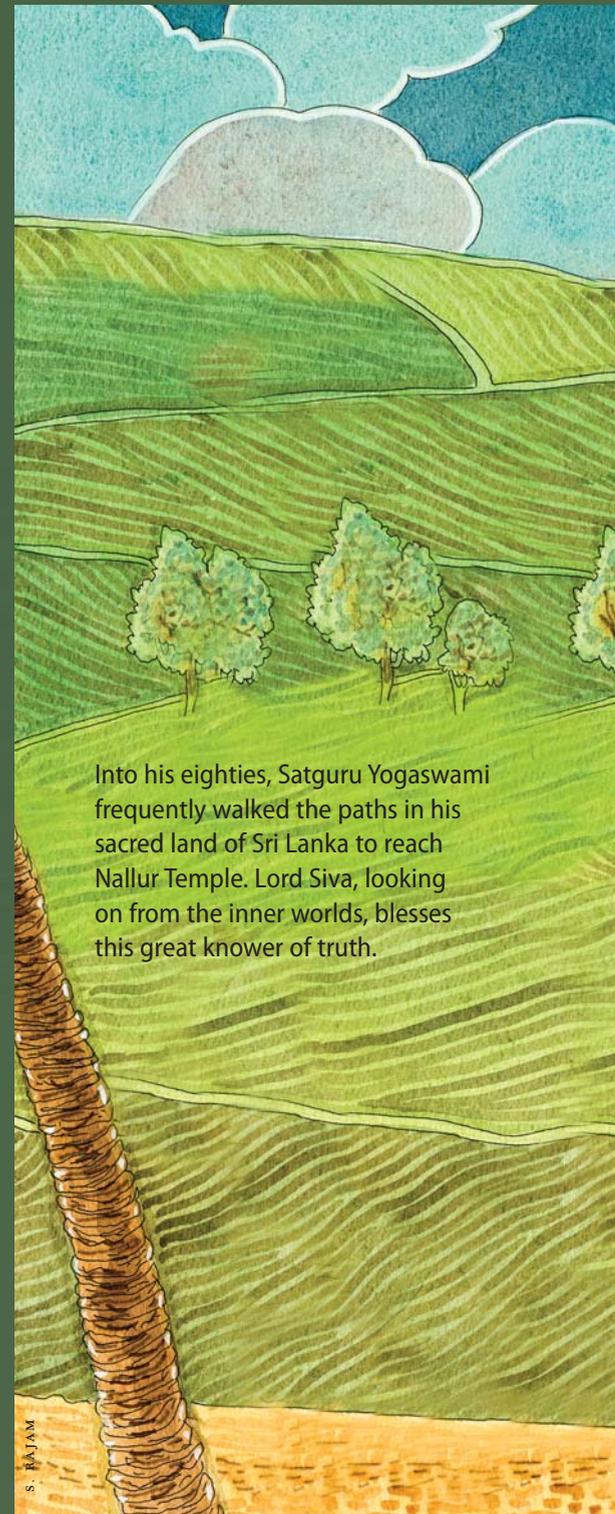


Path to Siva



A Catechism for Youth

WELCOME TO PATH TO SIVA, AN ILLUSTRATED CATECHISM for youth. We hope you enjoy these colorful lessons, all based on Dancing, Living and Merging with Siva, the Master Course Trilogy created by my Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. *Path to Siva* presents all of the important teachings of the Saivite religion. It is written with youth in mind, but is also ideal for anyone who wants a condensed version of the Master Course. ¶ All Hindus believe in a Supreme Being. To support this idea, often a verse from the *Rig Veda* is quoted: “Ekam Sat Vipra Bahuda Vadanti,” meaning, “Truth is one, sages express it variously.” As I half-jokingly say, Hindus all believe in a one Supreme Being. They just don’t agree on the name and nature of that Supreme Being. Fortunately, there are just four main approaches, as explained in lesson seven. “For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Saivites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Smartas, who are the most liberal Hindus, the choice of Deity is left to the devotee.” *Path to Siva* presents the teachings of the Saivite denomination of Hinduism, in which the Supreme Being is Lord Siva. ¶ Each lesson is short—just one or two pages—but packed with information. Here you can find answers to questions about God, Lord Ganesha, Lord Murugan and the devas—how they can help us in our lives and how to contact them through temple worship and home puja. You will find clear explanations of karma, dharma and reincarnation, and how to use japa, meditation and affirmations to make your life better. You will learn the best ways to live in order to achieve your most important goals. The lessons include insights on home life, getting along with others, religious tolerance, vegetarianism and caring for the environment. They cover difficult philosophical areas, like death and dying, sin and evil. These short essays will provide a clear understanding of Hindu practices, beliefs and philosophy and give you a deep comprehension of life that few people have. The book was designed as a tool for parents with youth, and can be used as a focus for exploring Hinduism’s various facets together. One lesson a week can keep the family conversation going for more than a year. ¶ This educational Insight contains twenty-eight of the book’s sixty-eight lessons. To read the complete book, which was published in October, 2016, you can download the free e-pub version (or buy a hardcover version) at www.himalayanacademy.com/view/path-to-siva.



Into his eighties, Satguru Yogaswami frequently walked the paths in his sacred land of Sri Lanka to reach Nallur Temple. Lord Siva, looking on from the inner worlds, blesses this great knower of truth.

Path to Siva

A Catechism for Youth



Twenty-eight lessons excerpted from our new book based on Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's Master Course Trilogy, exploring how to live life, know the Divine, honor all creation and see God everywhere, in everyone

By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

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1 Who Am I and Where Did I Come from?

A young woman reflects on one of life's most profound questions. The answer may take her an entire lifetime to find, but that answer is the most important discovery she or any of us will ever make.

to unravel the bonds. That begins the most wonderful process in the world as the seeker steps for the first time onto the spiritual path. Of course, the whole time, through all those births and lives and deaths, the soul was undergoing a spiritual evolution, but unconsciously. Now it seeks to know God consciously." Our soul was created by God Siva out of Himself, like sparks flying forth from a fire. Like the sparks and the fire, we are both the same and different from Siva, our source. We live within His boundless creation, this unthinkable vast cosmos which is filled with His divine presence. Siva is the life energy in the birds, in the fish and in the animals. His being flows through all we see and experience. Our Vedic rishis have assured us that "God is the Life of our life." We are all beautiful children of God Siva. Deep within, we are one with Him this very moment. We came from God, live in God and are evolving into complete unity with God. Siva created each of us in a perfect state, but we have to discover that perfection within us to be whole. By seeing the life energy in all creatures and in all people, we are seeing God Siva in action. By drawing close to God, we draw nearer to our immortal soul. Siva is all and within all.

ALL IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED



SEEKERS ASK: "WHO AM I AND WHERE DID I COME FROM?" THEY inwardly know they are more than just another person with a particular name who was born in a certain place. They sense that they are more than their body, mind and emotions. They want to understand, "Did I exist before I was born? Will I exist after death?" The answer given in Saivite Hinduism is that we are each a divine soul on a wondrous journey. We are an immortal body of light that has lived many lives, had many bodies and personalities. Gurudeva explained, "When the soul has had enough experience, it naturally seeks to be liberated,

GURUDEVA: When we realize that we have come from Siva, the way back to Siva is clearly defined. That is half the battle, to realize we came from Siva, live in Siva and are returning to Siva. Knowing only this much makes the path clear and impels us to return to Him, to our Source, to our Self.

2 Where Am I Going? What Is My Path?

A seeker stands in a field at day's end, arms held wide before the setting sun. His joy in that magical moment of beauty and appreciation is tiny when compared to the bliss of the inner light.

body is still maturing. We are like a tiny acorn growing into a mighty oak tree. We grow by learning to control our mind, body and emotions. The stronger we get, the more we sense our Sivaness. At first we learn from our suffering to avoid more suffering. We turn fear into fearlessness, anger into love and conflict into peace. We then learn to serve. Selfless service is the beginning of spiritual striving. Through our selfless service, we come into deep understanding and love of God. We can then see that the world we live in, the people we relate to and we ourselves are none other than Siva. Finally, we learn to meditate deeply, to quiet the mind, find peace and silence within ourselves, and watch ourselves going through all our experiences like watching an actor in a movie—knowing that our true identity is the soul, the watcher. That practice brings us to the realization of God within us. At the end of this evolutionary journey, we are fully one with God—no difference remains. We call this ancient path of spiritual striving San Marga, the "True Path." It is a path of service, worship, yoga and wisdom. Just as a train reaches its destination by following the tracks, we reach our innate perfection and freedom from rebirth by following the San Marga.

GURUDEVA: We are the undying consciousness and energy flowing through all things. Deep inside we are perfect this very moment, and we have only to discover and live up to this perfection to be whole.



LIFE HAS A PURPOSE. WE HAVE TAKEN THIS BIRTH IN A PHYSICAL body to mature into our divine potential. This life is one more chapter in a maturing process that has been occurring over many past lives. All souls are on this same journey. The deepest part of our soul, our essence, is and has always been one with Siva, but our soul

3 What Is the Ultimate Goal of Life?

A cyclist has peddled into the countryside beyond his known territory and stops to rest and get his bearings, to decide which fork to take. The Aum on his compass indicates that dharma is the way forward.



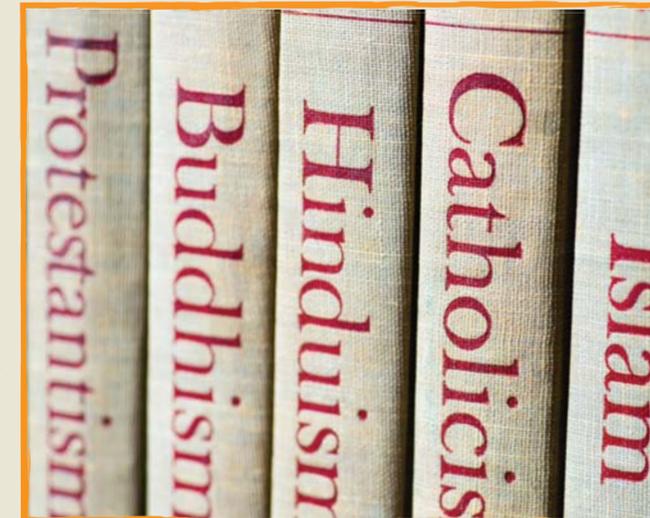
KNOWING GOD IS LIFE'S HIGHEST GOAL, REACHED BY MATURE souls following a spiritual path. Just as only the most highly disciplined climbers reach the summit of Mount Everest each year, only a few mature souls reach life's highest peak in this life. That is because souls were not created all at once. There are old souls and young souls. Older souls have matured over many lifetimes. They have enjoyed life's pleasures, suffered all the many sorrows and faced countless

challenges. This process has made them strong, like the mountaineers, and ready for the final ascent, ready to become one with God Siva. As we mature, we become kind, generous, understanding and truthful. Anger, fear and jealousy no longer control us as they once did. We become wise and loving. Reaching this maturity moves us toward life's true purpose. Eventually we no longer need the experiences of Earth, so we do not need to be reborn. Instead, we continue to evolve and serve humanity in the heavenly worlds in our subtle body. This graduation from the cycle of reincarnation is called moksha, which means freedom, release or liberation. But before we attain moksha, we must experience the highest goal of raja yoga—the realization of the Self, God. After Self Realization, you no longer see yourself as just someone from some place. Instead, when you look inward, you see Siva. When you look at other people, you see Siva. All souls will achieve moksha, but only a few will do so in this lifetime. Hindus know this and do not think that this life is the last. While seeking to perfect themselves through service, worship and yoga, they know there is also much progress to be made in fulfilling life's other three goals: righteousness, wealth and enjoyment. Even moksha is not the end of our path. After liberation from rebirth, the soul body continues to evolve in the inner worlds until it fully merges with God. Jiva (the soul) becomes Siva, a union called *vishvagrasa*. Being on an ancient path followed by countless souls gives the serene feeling that everything is all right as it is, that everything is perfect.

GURUDEVA: Each soul discovers its Sivaness, Absolute Reality, Parasiva—the timeless, formless, spaceless Self God.

4 What Is a Religion?

RELIGION IS A SYSTEM OF belief about God, soul and world. Throughout history, seekers around the world have tried to understand the nature of things. They struggled to unravel the mysteries of the mind, of ultimate reality and the purpose of life. They puzzled about the cause of suffering and the way to relieve it. They analyzed good and evil, virtue and vice. These quests for truth have produced various systems of thought. Those based on a belief in God or a holy presence are called religions or faiths. Today there are about a dozen major religions in the world and hundreds of smaller ones. Of Earth's 7.4 billion people, six billion are followers of a religion. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Chinese folk religion and Buddhism are the five largest. Many traditional cultures have ancient faiths. Most religions have sacred texts, called scriptures. Hinduism's primary scriptures are the Vedas. Buddhists have the Dhammapada, Christians look to the Bible and Muslims have the Koran. Scriptures, and the teachings of saints through history, define how life should be lived and what happens when we die. Each faith has its places of worship, priesthood and holy rites. Religions are not all the same. Their beliefs and practices differ, often greatly. Of Earth's



An encyclopedia of religion sits on the bookshelf, with a volume dedicated to each major religion. Exploring any of them will reveal great complexity concealed beneath the simple title.

major religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism are Eastern. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam are Western. There is a vast difference between Eastern and Western religions, with Eastern goals being unitive and introspective and Western goals being dualistic, extroverted. Eastern faiths tend to see God in all things, and everything as sacred. Western faiths tend not to believe that God pervades everything, and make a strong distinction between what is sacred and what is profane. While Eastern faiths hold to karma,

reincarnation and liberation, the Western postulate a single life for the soul, followed by reward or punishment.

GURUDEVA: Religion is the connection between the three worlds, and temple worship is how you can get your personal connection with the inner worlds.

5

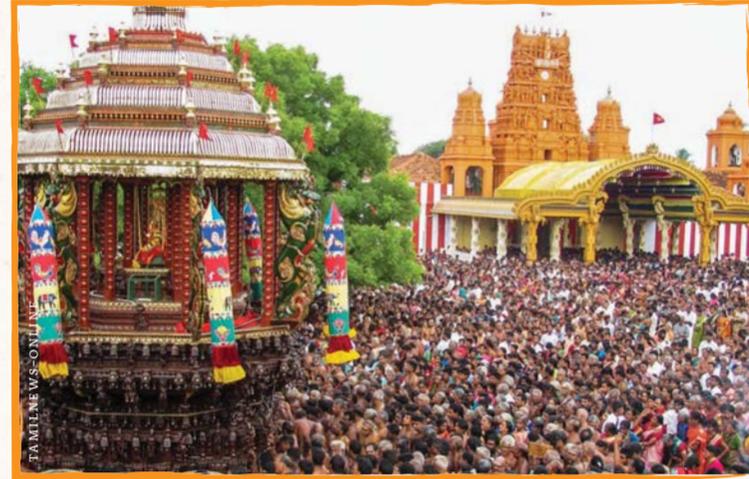
What Is Hinduism?

Hundreds of thousands of Muruga bhaktars crowd around the giant gold-plated chariot as it circles the famed Nallur Temple in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Such festivals are an essential part of Hinduism.

principle of dharma, which is divine order, righteousness and duty. Fourth, Hindus believe in reincarnation, the natural process of birth, death and rebirth. While these four convictions are essential, in Hinduism belief alone is not enough to propel us forward on the path. It is our actions and behavior that are the keys to spiritual progress. Hindus seek to experience God and their inner self through temple worship, meditation, yoga, pilgrimage and devotional singing. They enjoy a rich family life and ageless traditions of culture. They honor gurus, saints and sages. They worship many Gods, who are grand helpers to the Supreme Being. The three pillars of Sanatana Dharma are its scriptures, temples and gurus. Today Hinduism is like a great banyan tree, whose limbs represent the many variations of this ancient faith. The four main branches, or denominations, are Saivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Smartism. Each has a multitude of guru lineages, religious leaders, priesthoods, sacred literature, monastic communities, schools, pilgrimage centers

and tens of thousands of temples. Since Hinduism has no one central authority, these are like four independent religions sharing a vast common heritage of history, culture and belief.

GURUDEVA: Hinduism is a mystical religion, leading devotees to personally experience its eternal truths within themselves, finally reaching the pinnacle of consciousness where man and God are forever one.



HINDUISM IS THE ANCIENT RELIGION OF INDIA, PRACTICED TODAY by one billion people all over the world. With no founder and stretching back unknown thousands of years in India's earliest known civilizations, Hinduism is called Sanatana Dharma, the "eternal faith." It is based on the Vedas and other scriptures. Four beliefs are most central. First is belief in one Supreme God who created the universe, and who abides everywhere within it. He/She is all and in all. Second is belief in the law of karma, the principle of cause and effect, action and reaction. Third is belief that the cosmos is governed by the

6 What Are Hinduism's Main Denominations?

Four hands are locked in mutual support. They represent Hinduism's four main denominations. Different, but alike in many ways, they work together for dharma: Saivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Smartism.

they could not comprehend or describe it. What they didn't realize is that India's Sanatana Dharma, or eternal faith, is a family of religions with four principal denominations. For example, seeing so many Deities, scholars wrote incorrectly that Hindus have no Supreme God. In fact, Hindus all worship a one Supreme Being, though by different names. For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Saivites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Smartas, who are the most liberal Hindus, the choice of Deity is left to the devotee. These strains arose in different geographical and linguistic regions. Each has its own beliefs, scriptures, religious leaders and monastic traditions. Each has its own temples, festivals and ways of worship. Some are more focused on devotion and temple worship. Others stress yoga, mantra and scriptural study. Each has hundreds of millions of followers. All four accept the authority of the Vedas and the basic beliefs of karma, dharma and reincarnation. Much of their culture and tradition is the same. Most Hindus follow the same lineage as their parents and grandparents. As Saivites, we respect all Hindu paths and we may occasionally visit the temples of other Hindu groups. We join in their festivals and honor their religious leaders, but we hold firmly to our Saiva path.

GURUDEVA: Whatever our background, we can and we must maintain our sectarian roots and heritage, cultivate our differences and become strong within them.



HINDUISM'S PRIMARY DENOMINATIONS ARE SAIVISM, VAISHNAVISM, SHAKTISM AND SMARTISM. For two centuries Western scholars have struggled to understand India's faith. They found it so vast and varied in its beliefs, practices and ways of worship that

7

What Is Saivite Hinduism?



SAIVISM IS THE WORLD'S OLDEST RELIGION. WORSHIPING GOD SIVA, the compassionate One, it stresses potent disciplines, high philosophy, the guru's centrality and the path of bhakti and raja yoga, leading to oneness with Siva within. Saivism is ancient, truly ageless, for it has no beginning. It is the precursor of the many-faceted religion now termed Hinduism. Scholars trace the roots of Siva worship back more than 8,000 years to the advanced Indus Valley civilization.

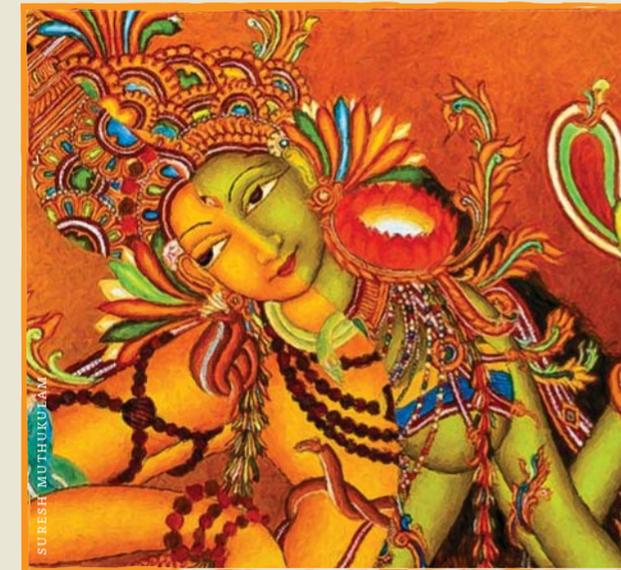
God Siva sits in the Himalayas. This form, called Sadasiva, has five faces and ten arms. These faces denote His five powers: creation, preservation, dissolution, concealment and revealing grace.

But sacred writings tell us there never was a time when Saivism did not exist. There are six schools of philosophy and tradition within Saivism: Saiva Siddhanta, Kashmir Saivism, Pashupata Saivism, Vira Saivism, Siva Advaita and Siddha Siddhanta. They differ in many ways, philosophically, historically, linguistically and geographically. Still, they share an overwhelming similarity of belief and practice. In addition to the Vedas, the Saiva Agamas are the shared scriptures of all six schools. All six identify Siva as the Supreme Lord, both immanent and transcendent, worshiped as the personal Lord and realized through meditation as the Absolute, Parasiva, beyond all form. All hold these principal Agamic doctrines: 1) the five powers of Siva (creation, preservation, destruction, concealing and revealing grace); 2) the three primary elements of existence, Pati, pashu and pasha (God, souls and bonds); 3) the three bonds, or malas (anava, karma and maya); 4) the threefold energy of Siva—iccha, kriya and jnana shakti (love, action and wisdom); 5) the thirty-six tattvas, or categories of existence; 6) the need for a satguru and initiation; 7) the power of mantra; and 8) the four padas or stages of spirituality, charya, kriya, yoga and jnana (service, devotion, union and wisdom).

GURUDEVA: Saivism is the greatest religion in the world, and we are all very fortunate and proud to be Saivites. It has the most ancient culture on the planet. It has scriptures that are utterly profound. It has sacred hymns that stir the soul. It has unparalleled disciplines of yoga and meditation. It has magnificent temples that are truly holy. It has devoted sages and holy men and women.

8

Who Is Siva?



This Kerala mural beautifully depicts Siva in the form of Ardhanarishvara, God who is half male and half female. Siva worshipers believe that Siva and Shakti are a one Divinity that cannot be separated.

God of love and never fear Him. He is the Self of ourself, closer than our breath. Gurudeva taught, "His nature is love, and if you worship Him with devotion you will know love and be loving toward others." Siva is the sun above us, the wind that cools the land, the five elements, the thought within our mind, the spark of light within our body, that which lives and that which is inert. Beyond knowing, beyond gender, He/She is the deathless Being who resides beyond the three worlds, yet stands in souls united.

GURUDEVA: To love God is to know God. To know God is to feel His love for you. Such a compassionate God—a being whose resplendent body may be seen in mystic vision—cares for the minutiae such as we and a universe such as ours.



PERFECTION IS THE WORD GURUDEVA USED TO DESCRIBE GOD Siva's three flawless aspects: Absolute Reality, the Divine Mind and the Primal Soul. Gurudeva described the One Being of Siva in this way to help devotees better understand the totality of His being and to tune into each perfection in worship and meditation. The three perfections also apply to each of us, as God Siva naturally creates souls in His image and likeness. The first perfection, Absolute Reality, Parasiva, is our inmost essence, the Self God. What is the Self God? Gurudeva explained, "It is That which is beyond the mind, beyond

Siva has three perfections, seen here as parts of a complete circle. The Sivalingam is His transcendence. Nataraja is His dance of creation & Parashakti is His awareness/energy flowing through all.

thought, feeling and emotion, beyond time, form and space." The second perfection, Siva's vast, Divine Mind, known as Sat-chidananda or Parashakti, is our own superconscious mind. It radiates as divine light, love, energy and knowing. When we touch into that level of our being, we become aware of the pure consciousness flowing through all things. Our sense of I-ness dissolves and we experience unlimited love and bliss. Siva's third perfection, the uncreated Primal Soul, Parameshvara, is the fullness of God, ruler of the universe, creator of our soul and all that exists. To love God is to know God. To know God is to feel His love for you. Parameshvara's resplendent body may be seen in mystic vision. It is the ultimate prototype of our own soul body, which is like the Primal Soul, but less brilliant, because it is not yet mature. The Primal Soul, God's personal aspect as Lord and Creator, is depicted in many forms: Nataraja by Saivites, Vishnu by Vaishnavites, Devi by Shaktas. To understand Siva's three perfections, think of a perfect mango. It has a skin, sweet fruit and a seed. Yet it is a one fruit. The skin is Siva's body, the fruit is His Divine Mind and the seed is His inmost essence and being.

GURUDEVA: The great God Siva has form and is formless. He is the immanent Pure Consciousness or pure form; He is the Personal Lord manifesting Himself as innumerable forms; and He is the impersonal, transcendent Absolute beyond all form. We know Siva in His three perfections, two of form and one formless.

SAIVISM TEACHES US THAT GOD Siva is knowable and we can experience Him right here and now. It is not just a matter of faith. Satguru Yogaswami declared, "See God in everything. You are in God. God is within you. God is in everyone. See Him there." It takes much meditation to find God Siva in all things, through all things. Gurudeva taught, "He is there as the Soul of each soul. You can open your inner eye and see Him in others, see Him in the world as the world." Perhaps the easiest place to start seeing God is in great religious teachers. We feel a spiritual aura about them that is uplifting. We see a light in their eyes that we do not see in others. The mere sound of their words encourages us to live a more spiritual life. Another way to see God is to look deeply into the eyes of another person. Look beyond the personality, go deeper than his or her intellect and see the pure life energy, which is God. This practice does not stop with people but can also include seeing the life energy in trees, birds and animals. Doing this, you discover that God is our life. God is the life in all beings. Becoming aware of this life energy in all that lives is becoming aware of God's presence. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* explains: "He who knows God as the Life of life, the Eye of the eye, the Ear of the ear,



Mystics and ordinary people have had visions of God, seeing Siva in their meditations, in their dreams, within the sanctum of a temple. It is the third eye, our mind's eye, that sees the non-physical reality.

the Mind of the mind, he indeed comprehends fully the Cause of all causes." A third place to look for God is in the Hindu temple. In powerful temples you can sense the Deity's presence in the enshrined murti, and even catch a glimpse of His divine form during the puja. This is done with your third eye, your inner eye of divine sight. Many people, not just saints and sages, have seen God in such mystical visions.

GURUDEVA: Smile when you feel unhappy with someone and say to yourself, "How nice to see you, Siva, in this form." Animals, beggars, princes, politicians, friends and enemies, holy men, saints and sages are all Siva to the soul that loves God. He smiles and thinks to himself, "How nice to see you, Siva, in this, another of your many forms."

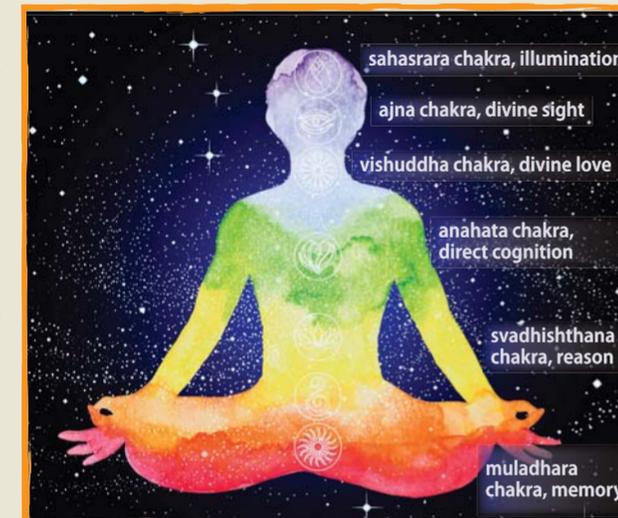


THERE ARE THREE WORLDS OF EXISTENCE. THE FIRST WORLD IS THE physical universe, the gross plane, called Bhuloka. This is the world we see with our eyes and touch with our hands. It is the material world, where we have our experiences, create karma and fulfill the desires and duties of life in a physical body. The Second World is the subtle or astral plane, the in-between realm called Antarloka. This world exists within the physical plane. As our thoughts and feelings are

Here the First World, material existence, is indicated by nature & animals. The Second World, or higher astral plane, is represented by a deva among the stars & moon. The Third World is Siva's abode.

part of that inner world, we are functioning in the astral world even while we are awake. During sleep, we leave our physical body and are aware in that inner world fully. Besides dreaming, we may also attend inner-plane classes held by our satguru. The Antarloka has many levels, spanning the spectrum of consciousness from the hellish Naraka regions, where the asuras, demonic beings, dwell, to the highest region of the Devaloka where the devas, or angels, live. When our physical body dies, we live fully in the Antarloka in our subtle body. The Third World is the causal plane, the world of light and blessedness, called Sivaloka. This highest plane is the home of God Siva and of the Gods who assist Him, such as Lord Ganesha and Lord Murugan. It is also the home of highly advanced souls who exist in their brilliant soul form. We experience the Sivaloka when we see the inner light or have a flash of intuition. We can worship God and the Gods anywhere. But the temple is the best place, because it is built as a special, sacred space where the three worlds meet as one. When we are awake, we normally don't see or sense the inner worlds. The temple enables us to feel the presence of God, Gods and devas, just as night-vision goggles allow us to see in the dark. In our form of worship, called puja, we chant, burn incense, ring bells and offer lights and flowers. This ritual brings us close to God and the great beings of our faith.

GURUDEVA: Siva's followers all believe that religion is the harmonious working together of the three worlds and that this harmony can be created through temple worship, wherein the beings of all three worlds can communicate.



We inhabit a body that was once star dust, but our soul is a body of light. The chakras are windows of consciousness. The primary chakras are along the spine. The lowest seven are in the legs and feet.

instinctive impulses, are located in the legs. The seven middle chakras are along the spine, and the highest seven, accessible only after Self Realization, are above the head. We also have an aura, radiating within and around us, whose colors change according to our thoughts and emotions. Once physical births have ceased, this soul body still continues to evolve in the heavenly worlds. We are not the physical body, mind or emotions. We are the eternal soul, atman—consisting of the radiant

soul body and its essence, Pure Consciousness and Absolute Reality.

GURUDEVA: Reverse your thinking about yourself. Feel that you come out of timelessness, causelessness, spacelessness. Visualize the pure radiant body of light, the being of the soul, the "I Am," the "Watcher."

13 Are Souls & World Essentially Good?



ALL SOULS ARE ESSENTIALLY GOOD, FOR THEIR INNER NATURE IS DIVINE. Each soul is created by God Siva from Himself. Siva's nature is pure love. So, goodness, compassion, understanding and joy are natural qualities of the soul. Wisdom and pure knowledge are the intrinsic nature of the soul. The world, too, is God's flawless creation. All is in perfect order and balance. Since God is everywhere and in all things, there can be no place for evil. Evil is often looked upon as a force against God. But we know that all forces are God's forces, even

Our blue planet sails through space, with the moon and Saturn in the background. Astronauts returning from space describe the "overview effect:" experiences of awe, beauty, purpose & perfect design.

mean, hurtful actions. This is sometimes difficult to understand when we see the pains and problems caused by people against each other. Looking deeper, we see that what is called evil has its own purpose in life. Yes, bad things do happen. Still, the wise never blame God, for they know such things are the return of our self-created karmas, tough lessons that help us learn and mature. The nature of the world is duality. It contains each thing and its opposite: joy and sorrow, goodness and evil, love and hate. Suffering cannot be totally avoided. It is a natural part of human life that causes much spiritual growth for the soul. Knowing this, the wise accept suffering from any source, be it hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, famine, wars, disease or personal tragedies. Suffering offers us the important realization that true happiness and freedom cannot be found in the world, for earthly joy is bound to sorrow. Having learned this, devotees seek a satguru who teaches them to overcome suffering through understanding and acceptance. The world is the bountiful creation of a benevolent God, who means for us to live positively in it, facing karma and fulfilling dharma. We must not despise or fear the world. Life is meant to be lived joyously.

GURUDEVA: This is my advice: gain the perspective first that it is a wonderful world, that there is nothing wrong in the world at all. ... All men and women on the Earth are doing exactly as they should and must do.

IN THE HIGHEST SENSE, THERE is no good or bad. God did not create evil as a force distinct from good. He granted to souls the divine laws of dharma and karma along with the freedom to act as they wish in the great ocean of experience. This is God's grace allowing us to learn and evolve. There is no eternal hell, nor is there a Satan. However, there are hellish states of mind and painful births for those who think and act wrongfully. Sin is related only to the lower, instinctive-intellectual nature as a transgression of dharma. Man's true nature is not sullied by sin, and no bad deed can cause the soul to be forever lost or damned. Still, wrongful actions are real and to be avoided, for they return to us as sorrow through the law of karma. Bad deeds can be atoned for with sadhana, worship and penance. As Saivites, we do not see a sharp contrast of good and evil in the world. Instead we understand that all people have a threefold nature: instinctive, intellectual and spiritual. The instinctive nature is the outer, lower or animal nature of I, me and mine. When it dominates, people become angry, fearful, greedy, jealous and hurtful. The intellectual nature is the soul's mental aspect. When it

14 What About Evil, Hell and Sin?



This fierce monkey guards the entrance to a temple in Bali, frightening away those who should not enter. He is fearsome, but like sin and evil, he is not feared by those who are pure in heart.

rules, people can become arrogant and prone to argument and conflict. The spiritual, or superconscious, nature of the soul is the source of compassion, insight, modesty, peace and understanding. The animal instincts of young souls are strong. Their intellect, which is needed to control the instincts, is yet to be developed. When we encounter meanness and wickedness in others, we recall this threefold nature and have compassion for those in the lower, instinctive states. We know they will continue to evolve, as they learn from their self-created karma. We also know there is no intrinsic evil.

GURUDEVA: Hinduism is such a joyous religion, freed of all the mental encumbrances that are prevalent in the various Western faiths. It is freed of the notion of a vengeful God. It is freed of the notion of eternal suffering. It is freed from the notion of original sin.

15 What Is Karma?



GOD SIVA CREATES THE COSMOS AND HE RESIDES WITHIN IT. HIS many special laws or systems are at work within our complex universe. The law that causes an object to fall to the Earth we call gravity. The law that governs the reaction of thoughts, words and deeds we call karma. It is an automatic system of divine justice. By this law, what we sow, we will reap. Actions and the fruit of action are both called karma. There are three kinds of karma: the karma of all deeds

Like a boomerang, our thoughts, words and deeds always return to us, in this or a future life, according to the universal law of karma. As people say today, "What goes around, comes around."

done in our past lives; the karmas we bring into this birth to experience; and the karmas we are making by our actions now. Good, helpful thoughts, words and deeds bring good karma to us in the future. Hurtful actions bring back to us painful karma. Doing bad is like planting poison ivy. Doing good is like planting delicious mangos. Understanding the law of karma gives us the power to act wisely and create a positive future. Gurudeva said, "You are the writer of your own destiny, the master of your ship through life." He meant that karma is not fate. It can be overcome. Through understanding the effect of their actions, individuals sooner or later learn to refrain from committing misdeeds. This is what we mean by saying, "Karma is our teacher." It teaches us to refine our behavior. Even difficult karma helps us grow, by teaching us the painful results of unwise actions. No matter how well we understand karma, facing it bravely is still a challenge. Our ego gets in the way. Our emotions are stirred and we react without thinking. Such weakness can be overcome by perfecting our character according to the yamas and niyamas. The effects of karma can be softened in several ways: by accepting and not reacting, by doing penance, by performing good deeds that balance the not-so-good we have done and by seeking the grace of God and guru. Karma applies not only to individuals but to groups, communities and nations.

GURUDEVA: Siva's devotees accept all experiences, however difficult, as their self-created karma, without cringing or complaining. Theirs is the power of surrender, accepting what is as it is and dealing with it courageously.

WHEN GOD CREATES THE universe, He/She endows it with order, with the laws to govern creation. Dharma is that divine law prevailing on every level of existence, from the sustaining cosmic order to religious and moral laws that bind us in harmony with that order. It is goodness, ethical practice and duty. It is the path which leads us to liberation. Dharma is at work on four levels of our existence: universal, human, social and personal. Universal dharma rules the natural world, from subatomic quantum to galactic clusters. Social dharma governs society. Human dharma guides life's four stages. Personal dharma is your own perfect pattern in life. It is determined by your past karmas and how the other three dharmas impact you. The key to discovering and understanding your personal dharma is to worship Lord Ganesha.

He knows our past lives and can clarify our right path in life. Gurudeva wrote: "When we follow this unique pattern—guided by guru, wise elders and the knowing voice of our soul—we are content and at peace with ourselves and the world." At every step in life, your main dharma is to follow the path of good conduct. As a youth, a big part of your dharma is to be a good student and a good daughter or son. It is your parents' dharma to care for you. It is your teacher's dharma to teach you.

16 What Is Dharma?



Dharma is one of the most beautiful and complex ideas in our faith. One of its meanings is shown here, our duty to serve and help others in need, as this hiker helps a friend to the top of the mountain.

It is the dharma of the police to protect you. As an adult, you may become a parent, and it will then be your dharma to raise and support your family. Later, as an elder, your dharma will be to guide the younger generations. Yogaswami said that dharma is like the tracks of a train, and like the train we must stay on the tracks to reach our destination. Dharma is so important that the Sanskrit name of Hinduism is Sanatana Dharma, the eternal path.

GURUDEVA: Dharma is a rich word which encompasses many meanings: the path to God Siva, piety, goodness, duty, obligation and more. ... By following the ancient path of dharma, we avoid all this suffering and mental pain and bring ourselves into positive, creative and productive states of consciousness, bringing us ever closer and closer to the holy feet of God Siva.

The soul cannot die. It moves from one body to another, a little like this butterfly, whose outer form changes from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to adult. The same creature lives in each new form.

inner worlds. After some time, we are born again as a baby in a new physical body, with a new mother and father, a new name and a new future. This return to the physical plane in a new body is called reincarnation. Memories of our previous lifetimes fade away during childhood, though some adults can remember them. We eventually die again, because of illness, old age or an accident. Again we step out of the physical body and go on living in our astral body. This happens repeatedly. Sometimes we are born as a boy, sometimes as a girl. The way we live in this life determines what our next life will be like. Reincarnation is like a great school, and each life is a classroom. Who is learning and growing in the school of life? You, your immortal soul. You have lived many lives. Each lifetime is but one stride on the great journey of your soul. When all the needed lessons have been learned, your soul has matured, all karmas have been resolved and you have realized God, you will not need to be born again. That is called liberation or moksha, the destiny of all souls, without exception.

GURUDEVA: Through the ages, reincarnation has been the great consoling element within Hinduism, eliminating the fear of death. We are not the body in which we live but the immortal soul which inhabits many bodies in its evolutionary journey through samsara. After death, we continue to exist in unseen worlds, enjoying or suffering the harvest of earthly deeds until it comes time for yet another physical birth.

At a lush ashram in Bali a seeker after truth has approached an enlightened guru, bringing offerings of fruits and flowers. The seeker knows the importance of having a spiritual guide.

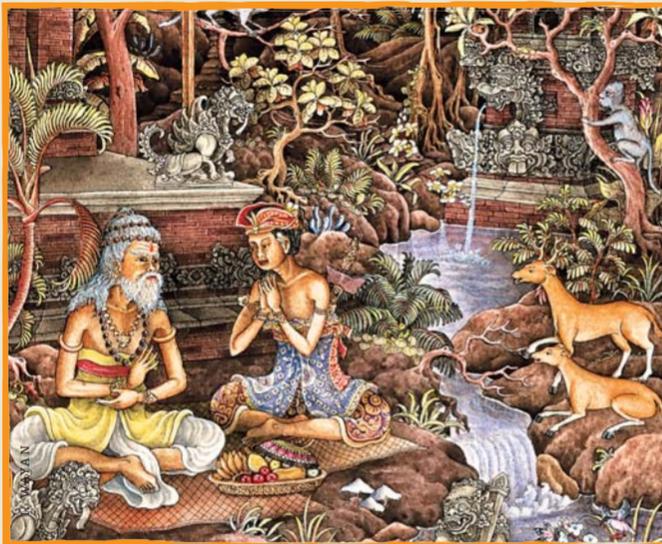
classroom teacher. A teacher is important in any area of study, because it is difficult for us to see our own weaknesses, but easy for a trained expert. Your mother and father are your first gurus. Many Hindus have a satguru, a teacher of sat, or truth. A satguru is a mature soul who has realized God and is able to lead others along the path. Siva is within each of us, shining out through our eyes. But Siva shines out from the satguru more brightly, because he or she is pure and enlightened. Thus, we worship the satguru as Siva Himself. The satguru is devoted full time to religious life, to upholding Saivism and helping his devotees. Just by living and being, he or she brings peace and blessings to the world. A satguru is always a sannyasin, one who is unmarried and has renounced all possessions, personal life, family and friends. A rare initiation from his guru empowered him with the highest spiritual knowledge and authority. This is Siva's revealing grace, anugraha shakti, in action. If your family has a satguru to guide it, you are indeed fortunate. He can wisely advise your parents and keep the family strong, harmonious and spiritually alive. Get to know him. Talk to him and ask questions. He will share his wisdom and help you draw close to God.

GURUDEVA: The satguru is the devotee's spiritual guide and preceptor, friend and companion on the path. Having become religion's consummation, the satguru can see where others are and know what their next step should be. A satguru is needed because the mind is so cunning and the ego is a self-perpetuating mechanism. It is he who inspires, assists, guides and impels the shishya toward the Self of himself.

REINCARNATION IS THE CYCLE OF BIRTH, DEATH AND REBIRTH. Each soul has many lifetimes on Earth. In each life, we drop off our physical body at death, but our inner self, or soul, never dies. We just leave our physical body and go on thinking, feeling and acting in our astral body. We also do this when we sleep, but we return to our body each time we wake up. At death we don't come back into our physical body. We leave the physical plane and remain conscious in the



18 Why Is the Satguru So Important?



ANYONE HOPING TO CLIMB MOUNT EVEREST WOULD BE WISE TO have a Sherpa by his side, a guide who has been where you want to go. Similarly, as we walk the spiritual path, we should not be without a satguru, an enlightened master who knows Truth and can take us there. The word *guru* means "teacher." Anyone you are studying with may be called a guru, such as a dance guru, music guru or a

Hinduism provides many practices to quiet the mind & guide our life. Here young women sit for meditation, holding their japa beads beneath their shawl as they chant the mantras given by their guru.



THERE ARE THREE DIMENSIONS TO OUR BEING: PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL/intellectual and spiritual. All three need attention for optimum health. Exercise strengthens our physical body. Learning and practicing self control expands and enhances our emotional/mental capacity. Through sadhana, spiritual practice, we exercise our spiritual nature by taking time to experience it. Most of the time we are so wrapped up in our outer nature that we are hardly aware of our

MEDITATION IS THE YOGA practice we use to quiet the mind, the body and the emotions and go deep within ourself. It is more than sitting down and thinking about things in an ordinary way. And it is not just closing the eyes and doing nothing. Meditation occurs when concentration is sustained. It is a quiet, alert, powerful state wherein new knowledge is awakened from within as you focus fully on an external object or an internal line of thought. The first goal is to sit still for a few minutes. Then sit longer, until you can remain perfectly still for ten or fifteen minutes. When you are able to sit for twenty minutes without moving even one finger, your divine mind can begin to express itself. It can even reprogram your subconscious and change bad habits. The second method is to breathe regularly, nine counts in and nine counts out, slowly. Our emotions and thinking are tied to our breathing. If we control breathing, we automatically quiet our emotions and thoughts. When our body is still and our mind and emotions are quiet, we can find peace and discover new knowledge inside ourself. We become aware of the spiritual power within us. We can use that power to understand our religion, to solve problems in our life and to



Eyes closed and seated on a yoga mat, this teenager seeks to quiet the mind through the age-old art of meditation. If successful, she will move beyond thought to discover a lasting peace of mind.

be a better person. Meditation is the study of awareness, which is therefore a study of yourself and the universe. With practice, meditation becomes a door to contemplation, where you experience the highest states of consciousness and see the clear white light of your soul. If you learn to meditate, your life will be more interesting and less stressful. You will be more alive and alert, more present and able to live in the eternal now. Your thinking will be clearer and your emotions more joyful.

GURUDEVA: Seeing the mind in its totality convinces the seeker that he is something else, he is the witness who observes the mind and cannot, therefore, be the mind itself. Then we realize that the mind in its superconsciousness is pure.

deep, glorious inner reality. This can go on life after life, as many people only begin to think of greater realities when nearing the point of death. We give time to our spiritual nature by performing religious activities, ideally as a daily vigil or spiritual exercise. During this quiet time alone we focus on life's inner purpose, which is to make spiritual progress. Puja, japa, scriptural study, hatha yoga and meditation are all forms of sadhana. Some sadhanas are yearly, such as going on pilgrimage. Some may be assigned by the guru as a one-time practice. A popular sadhana is chanting "AUM" 108 times each day. The ten-minute spiritual workout is becoming popular in today's busy world. These times of quiet retreat from life's hustle and bustle are underrated, their benefits overlooked. Sadhana builds willpower, faith and confidence in oneself and in God, Gods and guru. It harnesses our instinctive-intellectual nature, allowing unford into the superconscious-realizations and innate abilities of the soul. Gurudeva noted: "Through sadhana we learn to control the energies of the body and nerve system, and we experience that through the control of the breath the mind becomes peaceful. Sadhana is practiced in the home, in the forest, by a flowing river, under a favorite tree, in the temple, in gurukulas or wherever a pure, serene atmosphere can be found." Yogaswami directed his devotees to follow the sadhana marga, the path of religious effort, all through life.

GURUDEVA: For consistent progress, sadhana should be performed regularly, without fail, at the same time each day, preferably in the early hours before dawn.

At Pathmeda cow shelter in Rajasthan, India, a boy caresses a young cow as her mother watches from behind. Just as he would never harm this calf, we should never injure other creatures, including people.

inside they are all divine beings; they are experiencing a difficult part of their evolutionary path. The second belief behind ahimsa is the law of karma. We know that any hurt we cause others will one day return to us. Being aware of this basic principle, we wholeheartedly practice ahimsa—refraining not only from causing physical harm or violence, but also from hurting others with our words and our thoughts. Such gentleness gives rise to respect, courtesy and appreciation for others. Noninjury is the product of spiritual consciousness. Hurtfulness arises from lower, instinctive consciousness—fear, anger, greed, jealousy and hate. It is based in the mentality of separateness—of good and bad, mine and yours. We never retaliate. It is wiser to accept the hurt as self-created karma and respond with understanding and forgiveness; to retaliate would only perpetuate that karma. However, ahimsa does not mean pacifism. We may defend ourselves to protect our life or the life of another or turn to the police, who are authorized to use force. And we support our country's use of military force to safeguard its citizens. Ahimsa is also a powerful tool for changing and improving society and government. Gandhi proved this with his civil disobedience movement, which freed India without resorting to fights or force. Ahimsa is called the mahavrata, the great vow. Among all the yamas and niyamas, it is the most important virtue.

GURUDEVA: It is good to know that nonviolence speaks only to the most extreme forms of forceful wrongdoing, while ahimsa goes much deeper to prohibit even the subtle abuse and the simple hurt.



OUR BASIC BELIEFS AS SAIVITE HINDUS NATURALLY INSPIRE US TO practice ahimsa, or noninjury. Because we see God everywhere, we feel a deep closeness and affection for all beings. We would never want to hurt that which we love and revere. Knowing that God is in every person, every creature, every thing bestows an attitude of sublime tolerance and acceptance. We reject the idea that some people are evil and deserve to be treated badly. People do act in evil ways, but deep

PEOPLE ADOPT VEGETARIANISM for five main reasons: dharma, karma, consciousness, health and environment. First, dharma declares that we should not kill other creatures to feed ourselves. Second, those who eat meat are participating indirectly in violent acts against the animal kingdom. This creates negative karma, bringing to us suffering in the future. A third reason is the impact of eating meat on our consciousness. At the moment of death, the terror and torture of the animal is biochemically locked into the flesh. When we consume the meat, we take that animal's fear into our own body and it negatively affects our consciousness. The fourth reason is health. Eating meat has been linked to a variety of illnesses, including cancer. There is no nutritional reason humans have to eat meat. Modern research confirms that a vegetarian diet is a fundamentally healthy diet. Reason five, the huge industry that raises meat for human consumption is bad for the environment. It contributes to climate change, destruction of rain forests, loss of topsoil and the extinction of species. If the resources currently spent on raising beef, pigs and chickens were instead used to produce vegetarian food, hunger could be reduced worldwide and global warming largely allayed. Today vegetarianism is a global



Warm butter melts on a fresh roti, surrounded by spicy soup, chickpea curry, tofu and noodles and raw vegetables. Such a vegetarian meal is healthy not only for our body, but for our planet, too.

movement. There are vegetarians among all the religions as well as those who have no religion. Three percent of Americans are vegetarians, with eight percent among teens. In the UK, 15 percent of teens declare themselves vegetarians. India has the largest number of vegetarians in the world, more than 500 million, 30 percent of the population. Our saints proclaimed vegetarianism to be man's natural and noble diet. The very name of our religion in Tamil, *Saivam*, also means vegetarianism!

GURUDEVA: Vegetarianism is a natural and obvious way to live with a minimum of hurt to other beings. ... In my fifty years of ministry, it has become quite evident that vegetarian families have far fewer problems than those who are not vegetarian.

We look on the Earth, our beautiful planet, as our mother, the source of life, our never-failing sustainer & provider. We call Her Bhumi Devi, the Earth Goddess, and protect her in all ways.



THE HINDU TRADITION UNDERSTANDS THAT MAN IS NOT SEPARATE from nature, that we are linked by spiritual, psychological and physical bonds with the elements around us. Knowing that the Divine is present everywhere and in all things, Hindus hold a deep reverence for life. We hold an awareness that the great forces of nature—the earth, the water, the fire, the air and space—as well as all the various orders of life, including plants and trees, forests and animals, are

bound to each other within life's cosmic web. Our beloved Earth, so touchingly looked upon in our scriptures as Bhumi Devi, the Earth Goddess, has nurtured mankind through millions of years of growth and evolution. However, the Earth's large population, its industries, automobiles and lifestyle are causing significant damage to the environment. As one sixth of the human family, Hindus can have a tremendous impact. We should take the lead in Earth-friendly living, personal frugality, lower power consumption, alternative energy, sustainable food production and vegetarianism. All of Earth's diversity is to be cared for, from the soil, water and air to the plants and animals of every shape and kind. To achieve this, we practice restraint in the use of Earth's resources. We do not exploit its minerals, water, fuels or soil. We avoid polluting our blue planet. We work to protect the many endangered plants and animals. We do not buy or use products from exploited species, such as furs, ivory or reptile skin. We recycle paper, glass, metal and plastic and use efficient means of transportation that save on energy. We plant trees and do not waste food. In these ways we express the fundamental Hindu reverence for the Earth and all life upon it.

GURUDEVA: Hinduism offers a unified vision of man and nature in which there is reverence, not dominion or carelessness. Mother Earth, sustainer of life, is a key Vedic idea. ... All Hindus feel they are guests on the planet with responsibilities to nature, which when fulfilled balance its responsibilities to them. The physical body was gathered from nature and returns to it.



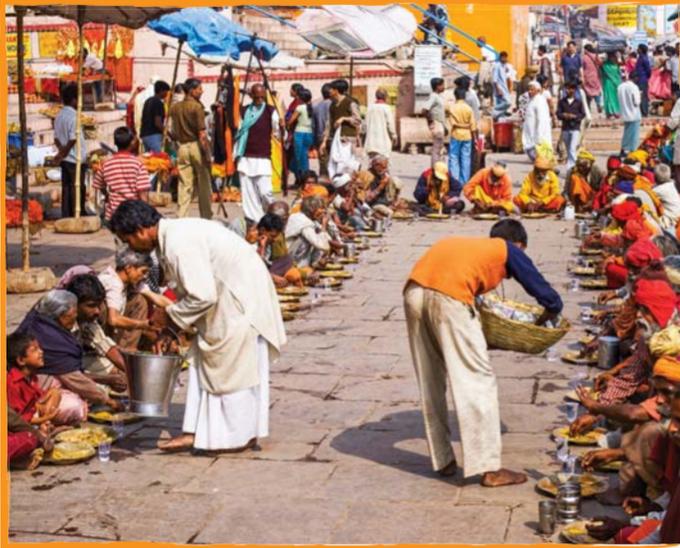
Five friends take a selfie to share online. Friends are important and worth cultivating. They encourage our ideals and goals in life. They provide fun & keep us safe from the world's negative forces.

two depend on the purity of a man's companions." Following our religious path is made easier when we are part of a satsang group with shared values and goals. Such companionship helps keep our sadhana strong, especially during difficult times in life. As Gurudeva often said, "The group helps the individual and the individual helps the group."

AS SAIVITE HINDUS, WE KNOW this life is precious and are thankful for it every moment of every day. Appreciating the gift of life makes us want to do the best we can, improve our character, serve others and live a spiritual life. Knowing life's purpose, we hold firmly to dharma. Like a marathon runner, we must stay on the course to finish the race. Having good, religious friends helps us stay on the path. If we mix with a worldly crowd, we may lose our way. The *Tirukural* tells us, "As water changes according to the soil through which it flows, so a man assimilates the character of his associates." Friends who are good Hindus will help you most of all. If you befriend a person who is dishonest or mean, his example will lead you into trouble. If you befriend someone who studies hard and is kind and helpful, their example will inspire and uplift you. Some people poke fun at religion or make mischief and resist authority. They do not know the real purpose of life. They waste their time and cause pain to others. Wise teachers advise us to be nice to everyone, but make close friends only with those who will help build good character and set positive patterns for the future. The *Tirukural* tells us, "Purity of mind and purity of conduct, these

GURUDEVA: Make friends with those who are on the path. Be with fine, positive people. Don't be with negative, complaining people who have no relationship to what you are doing on the inside, or who are criticizing you for what you are doing.

25 How Do We Practice Karma Yoga?



Two volunteers serve lunch to a group of sadhus and pilgrims in India. Back in the kitchen, others have spent the morning cooking. This is one form of karma yoga, selfless actions done to help others.

quietly and willingly helping others, without complaint and without expecting thanks. Such service reaps hidden blessings. In its broadest sense, karma yoga is spiritualized action. It is doing each and every task consciously, selflessly, excellently, as an offering to the Divine. Satguru Yogaswami advised devotees, "Whatever work you have to do, do it well. That in itself is yoga." Work done in this spirit is a form of worship. Doing our ordinary daily duties becomes a powerful sadhana that contributes to our spiritual progress. This yoga makes us more focused, effective and fulfilled. It eliminates the false separation of secular work from religious practice. Swami Vivekananda counseled, "When you are doing any work, do not think of anything beyond. Do it as worship, as the highest worship, and devote your whole life to it for the time being." Here are some keys to successfully turning work into worship: 1) Pray to Lord Ganesha before beginning your work. 2) Act selflessly, detached from the results. Focus on serving, helping, giving. 3) Work hard; overcome lethargy, fatigue, confusion and doubt. 4) Maintain harmony with others. 5) Enjoy the effort; don't feel rushed. 6) Make the work a worthy offering, completing it as perfectly as you can. Then stop, review what you have done and make it even better.

KARMA YOGA IS SELFLESS SERVICE, OR SEVA. IT OFTEN TAKES THE form of volunteer work at a temple—helping with the basic needs and events, like polishing the brass lamps, answering the phone, making garlands and preparing for pujas. This humble service helps establish good character. The effort to do good deeds can be extended into other areas as well, such as the workplace and the home,

GURUDEVA: Go out into the world this week and let your light shine through your kind thoughts, but let each thought manifest itself in a physical deed, of doing something for someone else. Lift their burdens just a little bit and, unknowingly perhaps, you may lift something that is burdening your mind. You erase and wipe clean the mirror of your own mind through helping another. We call this karma yoga

26 What Is Our Form of Prayer?



Following the final arati of a puja, the priest moves through the crowd of devotees holding the lamp. As he approaches, they eagerly reach out to "touch" the flames which carry the Deity's blessings.

gifts Siva has provided in our life. Most often, though, devotees pray for help. The Gods will respond. Most simply, they send a blessing to quiet your mind and clear your aura. Sometimes this is all that's needed. Suppose you pray to Lord Ganesha for help with your studies. After the blessing from the Mahadeva, the subject matter seems clear and interesting. You absorb it easily and do better on your tests. Answering some prayers may require assigning a deva to determine the best way to assist you. It is comforting to know that the Gods, their devas and your own guardian devas are ever ready to respond to your requests for help and guidance. You gain this boon by living a religious life and being consistent in your sadhana. Some temples, such as Kadavul Temple in Hawaii, accept written prayers from devotees. When burned, these are released to their astral form in the Devaloka for the devas to read and act upon. Before asking for help, we make every effort to use our own intelligence and strength. In our prayers we always remember that God and the Gods know the highest course for our life. They know better than we do the lessons and experiences we need to improve. Our prayers will be answered, and in wisdom we accept the answer—even if it is not what we had hoped for.

GOD SIVA AND THE GODS ARE ALWAYS WITH US, CLOSER THAN breathing, nearer than hands and feet. Praying is our way of communicating with them. To offer a prayer, visualize the face of God Siva or a God, concentrate and say your prayer mentally, sending it up through the top of your head. You can pray anywhere, but the inner-world beings can best hear you in a sacred temple or your home shrine. One of the greatest prayers of all is giving thanks for all the

GURUDEVA: Those who worship in Siva temples slowly gain acceptance into the devonic realms of the Gods, and one or two of the uncountable numbers of devonic intelligences often return with the devotee to his home. ...It is these guardian devas who are the first to receive the devotee's written prayers when they are transferred to the Devaloka through the sacred fire.

THE TEMPLE IS WHERE WE WORSHIP and commune with God and the Gods. Here, devotees are uplifted and receive the inner help they need to live a positive, fulfilling life. Temples are sacred for three reasons: they are constructed in a mystical manner, they are consecrated with special, complex rites, and thereafter continuous daily worship builds a holy force field. Our grand Saiva temples are like no other place on Earth. Some are more than 1,000 years old. Strict rules from the Agamas are followed to create such holy spaces where holiness, God, can reside. Devas, Gods and people work together to establish the temple and assure it will be used only for worship. Over the years, the power becomes strong, forming an invisible, glass-like bubble or shield around the temple. This keeps out gross vibrations and allows the heaven worlds to be strongly present. As you approach God's home, you can feel the spiritual energy, and as you go inside you are engulfed in peace. Here the devas and Gods can easily hear your prayers. Here the ancient scriptures are chanted, the traditional rites knowingly performed. Here joyous festivals are celebrated and arduous pilgrimages concluded. At the high point of puja, as bells ring loudly and conches blow, the Deity sends rays of

27 What Is the Purpose of Temples?



Pilgrims have reached a remote all-granite Siva temple in India. They look upon this as the home of God, and they are able to draw nearer to His divine love and light in such a holy place.

blessings through the enshrined image, or murti. Flooding your aura, this energy can erase worries, clear confusion and relieve sadness. Devotees leaving the temple feel inspired and lightened of burdens. Gurudeva explained that the stone or metal images are not mere symbols of the Gods. The image is the physical-plane form through which the God's love, power and blessings flood forth into this world. The image is like a temporary physical body the God uses during temple ceremonies. The temple, God's home, becomes a truly sacred place for us when we know that the Gods are real beings and the

purpose of going to the temple is to experience their blessings.

GURUDEVA: A Siva temple marks an agreement between God Siva and the people on the Earth as a meeting place where the three worlds can consciously commune.

HINDUISM IS CELEBRATORY by nature. Hindus miss no opportunity to set mundane matters aside and join with family, friends, neighbors and strangers alike to feast and have fun, to renew the home and the heart and, most importantly, draw nearer to God. Festivals are perhaps more impressive and varied in Hinduism than in any other religion. The devout Hindu knows these are times of profound mysticism, when God and the Gods touch our world, revitalize our souls, lighten karmas and bless our families. Yet, festivals do even more than this. They are essential to the perpetuation of religion, periodically reigniting the spark of zeal and devotion in the community. They provide the spiritual public square where Hindus engage with one another to affirm shared values and enjoy life's intersections. Before each celebration, vows are taken, scriptures are studied, pilgrimages are made and fasts observed in preparation. Such acts of intimate devotion bring the devotee closer to the Gods and keep him on the path to his inmost Self. As each festival begins, solitary worship becomes a collective ritual, with millions of people taking their places in a creative choreography. Every festival is special and unforgettable in its own way. Thus Hindus are reminded of their faith by the sounds, scents, colorful decorations and the wild

28 How Do We Celebrate Festivals?



A gleeful devotee has been showered with colored powders during the playful and joyous Holi festival. Such celebrations bring the community close and lift the spirit of all who participate.

medley of tastes laid out for the feast. Mind and emotions are saturated with Hinduism as sacred mantra prayers are intoned, the spiritual teachings are recounted by saints, and the Gods are praised in melodious bhajans. Each Indian village and each global community lends a little of its unique culture to how a festival is celebrated, creating almost endless variations. Recently, with the growing Hindu population outside of India, festivals have acquired an international dimension. What could be more entertaining, alive, vibrant and yet pious and rich in symbolism than a Hindu festival?

GURUDEVA: Festivals are special times of communion with God and Gods, of family and community sharing and sadhana... We strive to attend each major festival, when the shakti of the Deity is most powerful, and pilgrimage to a far-off temple annually.