

Mentoring for Ministry in Hinduism

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Hinduism is a way of spiritual life. It is called *Sanatan Dharma*, meaning dharma (religion) of truth. There are five basic principles of Hinduism.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF HINDUISM

One God: Hindus believe in one supreme power. There are many different manifestations of the same God. Some common names of these manifestations are Ram and Sita, Krishna and Radha, Shiva and Parvathi. Hindus believe in all religions and spiritualities. It is a very diverse and open-minded religion. There is no conversion from another religion to Hinduism since Hindus believe in all religions. This approach to other religions exemplifies the fact that Hindus believe in the concept of coexistence and respect for people of all faiths.

Human Betterment: A goal in the life of a Hindu is to become a better person in this lifetime. A successful life is one in which a person is better at their death than they were at birth. Basically, Hinduism is about learning to be a kind, compassionate, and giving person. One Supreme God is a combination of male and female traits together. The Hindu Divine is a combination of the male and the female together. There is a concept of *Ardha Nari Esvera*, meaning half male and half female Divine, such as Shiva and Shakthi. This is why Hindus worship female goddesses as well as male gods, each worshiped in their unique way and with some differences in rituals. For example, Ram and Sita are always worshiped together. It is believed that no Hindu ritual is complete if performed by a man or woman alone; they have to be performed as a couple, respecting both genders equally. Hinduism professes respect for males and females as they perform their duties and roles in a family as well as in the community setting. So, it is a religion of gender equality.

There is no other human between an individual and God: Hindus have a direct line to the Divine. They don't need to go through anyone else to get to God. It is a very flat organizational structure. All living beings report directly to God. To further explain this concept, the divine power or God is represented by an ocean, and all humans are part of that ocean. So, we each have the same qualities as the Divine and the same capabilities to change ourselves to become godlike. The concept is that everyone has the same qualities as the divine power, and those same qualities are part of all humans. So, this

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concept dictates that all humans are equal no matter their race, color of their skin, or their belief system. Diversity is the cornerstone of the Hindu religion.

Karma theory: Karma theory is fairly well known and is very similar to the biblical principle “As you sow, so shall you reap.” Whichever way a person spends their energy, its rewards will come back to them. The concept is similar to the scientific principle “Energy is neither created nor destroyed.” So, whatever human beings do, whether well or poorly, the reward will come back to them the same way. Of course, it is not quite that simple; how the reward comes back gets a bit complicated. Intention plays a big part in this concept. Even thoughts play a big role in this theory. So, if a person simply thinks of harming or helping another human being, they have already performed the karma, even if they have not actually acted upon that thought. Although the consequences are not as severe as if they had actually carried their intentions out, the karma is registered in the karma log. There are variations of the karma, with a lot of details, but the principles remain the same.

Reincarnation: Hindus believe in reincarnation, which means they believe that they are reborn in another body after they die. Human beings take all their karmas with them when they are reborn in another life. In our daily lives, most humans change their clothes but remain in the same body. Similarly, the soul carries their karmas but “wears” a different body after rebirth. This reincarnation concept takes the pressure off the Hindu; they don’t have to get *moksha* (salvation) in this lifetime; they will have a few other lifetimes to accomplish their life goal of *moksha*. This gives a person free will and the responsibility to act according to their wishes. If they want a good life, then they need to act accordingly in this life, but if they don’t, they will have a life in their next life that is based on their actions in their current life. So, Hinduism is a religion of free will. God does not play a part in giving one a good or bad life but provides human beings with support and helps them make better choices. Remorse, forgiveness, and praying also play large roles, which are detailed in the oldest scriptures, the Vedas.

HINDU GURUS AND PUNDITS

Vedas are the original scriptures of *Sanatan Dharma*, or Hinduism. They were written more than six thousand years ago. Hindus understand that the Vedas are the spiritual texts originally dictated by God, the “Brahman” Himself. The Vedic concept is that it is not the body that is having a spiritual experience but the soul that is having a human experience in the body.² “The mind, the charioteer of the soul, realizes the joy of salvation, dispels fear secure through the exertion of the body, the chariot of the soul. God equips the learned person with an exalted soul. “O learned person, grant me

²NOTES

Madhu Vedak Sharma, *Dharmic Advisor: A Modern Way* (Cary, NC: Bharat Vedak, 2016), 57.

spiritual knowledge.”³ This Vedic scripture discusses that only through the spiritual knowledge can one attain *moksha*, or salvation. This knowledge is passed through a learned person, who is also known as a guru or dharmic advisor.

Hindu pundits are educated in a Vedic school, where they learn to understand and memorize the ritual mantras to perform various rituals. Gurus, on the other hand, learn more of the spiritual wisdom and then teach their disciples about how to live a life of fullness in order to achieve *moksha*. There are no Vedic schools in the United States, but there is the Hindu University of America, where I am currently working on my PhD. Almost all the priests in Hindu temples in the United States come from India due to the lack of any schools in the country. They work in the temples and help devotees perform rituals according to the scriptures.

I grew up in a family of Hindu priests and gurus in India. My father became a Hindu priest in Raleigh, North Carolina, since there was no one else at the time in the area who knew the rituals and prayers. My mother was also very much involved in the temple since both my parents, along with others, established the Hindu Society of North Carolina in the 1970s. This temple now serves over 20,000 families in the area. My parents have been working to serve the Hindu community as volunteers for over forty years. So, I have been in training since my teenage years. I also helped perform rituals at the temple when my parents needed help. Now there are three full-time Hindu priests at the Hindu Society of North Carolina temple. Today, there are several other Hindu temples in the Raleigh-Durham area, meeting the needs of the Hindu population, which has grown tremendously.

DHARMIC ADVISOR

A dharmic advisor has a different role in the society. Their role is more about teaching Hinduism and helping the community with their spiritual needs; it is not so much about performing rituals. At Duke University, I served as the Hindu chaplain or dharmic advisor. My responsibilities were to connect with the Hindu students on campus and to provide them with primarily spiritual guidance, and I performed some religious rituals during Hindu festivals. I also volunteered as dharmic advisor at the University of North Carolina. This has become my passion as there is a great need to help younger generations with their spiritual needs but a lack of dharmic advisors across the country. I am an executive coach, with an engineering background and a master’s degree in social work. So, I have a mental health background, which helped me in guiding students in their spiritual journey. Another major responsibility of a dharmic advisor is to represent the Hindu faith across campuses as well as in the community at large. Dharmic advisors

³ Devi Chand, *The Atharvaveda: Sanskrit Text with English Translation* (New Delhi: Munshiram, 1997), 512.

also represent their faith in interfaith activities across the board since Hinduism is an interfaith religion. Hinduism professes everyone as equal. It respects other religions and their belief systems and accepts them with grace.

Vedic teachings focus on self-care and on spiritual growth. They profess that the body is not having a spiritual experience but that the soul is having a human experience in the body. So, emphasizing the alignment of body, mind, and soul is a key principle of Hinduism. Spirituality makes a person. Spiritual practices need to be integrated in everything a person does in their life.

As discussed earlier, Hinduism is a way of spiritual life, and it is about becoming a better and better human as one gets older. Mentoring others is one part of that journey. There is a clear example of mentoring in the Hindu spiritual text the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna mentored Arjuna during an epic war by clearly describing the benefits of fighting the war and also by highlighting the negatives of not fighting the war. He did not tell Arjuna what to do but gave him all the information he needed and then let him make his own decision. He walked him through the decision process and provided him support and love along the way. Bhagavad Gita verse 2.47 is probably the most famous verse in Hinduism: “You have the right to perform your duties but you don’t have the right to the outcome of those actions. Do not consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your actions, and never think about not doing your duty.”

In the above passage, Krishna advised Arjuna that, first of all, he could not be inactive and could not quit his duties at any time in his life; he must continue to do his best at all times. He advised that one must continue to do one’s work at all times with enthusiasm. One should do their duties the best possible way at all times and stay focused on their responsibilities. One also should not work for the results as a reward for doing one’s duty. Simply put, do the work, but do not seek a reward from that work.

The mentoring process can be confusing at times for a Hindu person because goal-setting is a norm in Western contexts, while Krishna in Bhagavad Gita says that one should always do their duty but should not look for a reward from their work. In Hindu traditions, a good life consists in attention to multiple responsibilities—to social life, work, and relationships with others as well as to one’s own well-being, including one’s spiritual development, all while focusing on right action rather than good results. Doing the right things in life is not always easy, but that should not deter a person from continuing to do the right things and having the faith that things will work out for the best.

Mentoring is essential for one’s spiritual growth, and it should be provided with care, love, and compassion, not by forcing one’s views on the mentee. It should be a process of growth by slow and steady learning. It is better understood by examples for the mentee, not just based on teachings from a book. So, mentors should live an exemplary life, thereby leading their mentees by example.

A measure of success in mentoring is the passing of one's passion for ministry on to the mentee. This passion makes ministry a source of joy and the fulfillment of one's life's goal, which is promoting good karma.

TOOLS FOR MENTORING

Some of the tools that I have used as a Hindu chaplain and dharmic advisor at Duke University are:

- Organizing and performing religious ceremonies on campus. During these events, I engage students and explain the underlying principles of the ceremonies.
- Leading weekly Gita and general life discussions.
- Having one-on-one discussions with students during the semester.
- Inviting speakers who represent Hinduism and Indian culture.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do Hindu communities in the United States need to focus on providing spiritual growth for the younger generation and perhaps change the way religion and spirituality are practiced in India instead of adapting their practice based on the culture of the country?

How can communities provide more opportunities for Hindu chaplaincy education and certification in the United States?

How can Hindu chaplaincy be expanded to hospitals and universities as well as in Hindu temples?