

Becoming a Hindu or Devotee is Easy

By Stephen Knapp

Since Sanatana-dharma is a universal process and applicable to everyone, then naturally anyone can practice its principles. Anyone can and should be accepted to participate in the process. Furthermore, anyone who is looking for the ultimate spiritual Truth is already one who is following the path of Sanatana-dharma. So you could say that anyone who is sincerely looking for such Truth with an open mind is already on the spiritual path, at least on some level, and is thus also a Dharmist, a follower of Sanatana-dharma.

The point is that there is one and only one God and one Absolute Truth. The very first of the Vedic books named the *Rig-Veda* proclaims, *Ekam Sat, Viprah Bahudha Vadanti* (There is only one truth, only men describe it in different ways). So a Jew or a Christian or a Muslim who is in search of the Absolute Truth is automatically on the path of Sanatana-dharma. However, if they get stuck with accepting nothing more than their own local traditions, this may hamper their growth in understanding a broader range of the many aspects of the Supreme that are described in other scriptures, such as those of the Vedic literature. So a person's progress depends on how far he or she really wants to go in this lifetime, and how they approach various levels of knowledge to understand the Absolute Truth.

So those who may be accepted as followers of the Vedic tradition generally accept the following: A) The Vedic literature presents knowledge of the Absolute Truth and are the authority on the Vedic tradition; B) There are various ways to realize different aspects of this spiritual Truth; C) God can appear in different forms; D) We are given more than one life on this road of Self-realization; and E) That ultimately we are responsible for accepting the path we take and the progress we make.

To clarify this last statement, even if you accept the path of Christianity and believe that Jesus will save you, Jesus also said that faith alone is not enough. You must show your faith by your works, and your works will show the true state of your desires and consciousness. Otherwise, if by faith alone you go to heaven yet remain full of material or mundane desires for earthly things, do you think Jesus would force you to stay in heaven? No, he would let you go back to earth, to where your heart is, to try and satisfy all those desires because that is your true state of consciousness. So your spiritual advancement is up to you and is revealed by your own level of consciousness, which will take you to the stage of existence in which you are meant to be.

SHARING THE DHARMA

Since we are all eternal spirit souls, part of the Supreme Truth, we are always a part of Sanatana-dharma, or the eternal path to finding the ultimate spiritual Truth. We may call ourselves by whatever religious affiliation we like, but in essence we have a spiritual identity, which the path of Sanatana-dharma assists us in finding.

This spiritual identity is the essence of everyone, making us all similar in our spiritual quality and nature. Your soul is the same as the soul of everyone else. This is our similarity which we all share with every being. Therefore, sincere Hindus will share their philosophy and tradition to provide that assistance and goodwill to others who search for Truth and their higher Selves. It is a way of sharing peace and recognizing that we are all a part of a universal family. For within these bodies of ours exist our real and eternal identity, which is the same within everyone. So everyone can participate and share in the path of Sanatana-dharma.

Sanatana-dharma contains a wealth of spiritual philosophies and practices by which one can enter and experience one's own level of spiritual perception and Self-realization. Some of these may at first seem unusual to a beginner only because other religions do not always teach these systems. They are left out. But the Dharmic path includes many traditions that other religions have forgotten. So these can be helpful for anyone of any religious background. Generally, we find that those who understand the spiritual knowledge of the Vedic system begin to have a deeper understanding of the teachings of other religions as well. This is another aspect of the universality of the spiritual wisdom in the Vedic teachings. Thus, everyone should know this information that is provided within the Vedic path. The point is that the Vedic system provides knowledge for people at whatever level of understanding in which they may be situated.

In this way, the Vedic teachings include spiritual knowledge for the needs of people at all levels. Hinduism does not seek superiority over other religions, but only provides whatever level of knowledge people need. With its library of Vedic literature, it is thus one of the most comprehensive spiritual paths in the world. It only seeks and delivers the highest Truths known to man, and the methods by which a person can realize them for him or herself. Thus, the Vedic path encourages everyone to reawaken their connection with God and realization of the Absolute Truth for themselves, and not necessarily through an institution or organization. The highest Truth is for everyone. Anyone can understand the Vedic path with a little investigation.

However, there have been times when I have heard of individuals or even groups of people, after spending much time in research and discussion, who have decided to become Hindus or devotees. Thereafter, they have come to a Hindu temple and asked to be accepted into the Hindu fold. Then the priest, depending on what kind of temple it is, might say something like one does not need to become a Hindu, but simply go on as you are and become perfect in that way, whether it may be Christian, Muslim, or something else. Thus, the people are turned away with little else to do but continue on a path that they may find to be no longer suitable for them, or that does not fulfill their inner spiritual longings or quest for deeper spiritual knowledge and realizations. If a person finds that they are ready to move forward to a deeper spiritual path, then to deny them that right is

not proper, especially by one who may be considered to be a Hindu priest. He should allow them full facility to scan the depths of Vedic spiritual knowledge and to participate to the fullest that they may want in order to increase their devotion and connection with God through this means of expression. So, this confusion must be rectified.

In fact, to consider foreigners to be outside the Vedic purview by virtue of their origin or upbringing is inaccurate and against basic Vedic Shastra. As is stated in our *Hari-bhakti-vilaasa* 10.91, “*na me ‘bhaktash chaturvedee mad-bhaktah shvapachah priyah, tasmai deyam tato graahyam sa cha pujo yathaa hyaham*”, which means “A brahmin who is expert in the study of all four Vedas is not dear to Me (Bhagavan), but My devotee, even if he comes from a family of outcastes, is dear to Me. Whatever he touches becomes pure. That devotee, although born in a family of outcastes, is as worshipable as I am.”

Therefore, the goal of the Vedic system is to provide the means that anyone can use to raise their consciousness and know God. This point has been advocated by such prominent teachers as Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, and many others. In this way, for many years the Vedic path has been assimilating those who are willing to adopt the basic principles of Sanatana-dharma, even if they are foreigners. The Vedic temples and the Hindu community must open their doors to those who are seekers of higher Truths, which are abundantly found in Sanatana-dharma. The doors cannot be kept closed for such people who may be looking for the benefits of such spiritual knowledge. Thus, sharing Vedic Dharma with all others who are interested for their benefit has been encouraged by spiritual authorities and should be considered a Dharmic principle.

BECOMING A DHARMIST OR DEVOTEE IS EASY

Does one have to convert to be a Hindu, or undergo a change of names or outward identity? No. If one likes the Vedic philosophy, then one can easily adopt any portion that they find helpful for them. However, if one prefers to use the Vedic culture as a strong basis of one’s life and feels devotion toward the path, then there is also nothing wrong with undergoing the formality of a Shuddhi or purification ritual to formally become a Hindu or Sanatana-Dharmist. However, once we adopt the Vedic tradition, this does not mean that we lose our freedom or whatever other roots we had, nor do we need to disrespect whatever other religious tradition we had previously followed. It does not work like that, but this is up to one’s own preference. In this way, Sanatana-dharma is inclusive. It allows anyone to find and follow Truth wherever one finds it. Thus, one needs to merely live in a Dharmic lifestyle as outlined by the Vedic principles, which is meant to accelerate one’s spiritual advancement and purity in consciousness.

I have often heard that there is a little confusion about what a person should do when they decide to partake of the Hindu religion or become a devotee. This is especially the case if one is a westerner or born as a non-Hindu. Even when the priests at Hindu temples are

approached by someone who wants to become a Hindu who is not Indian born, they often do not know what to do. Sometimes it is thought that one must first undergo some kind of formality to make their dedication to their new spiritual path official, like partaking in a ritual or name change or something. A person can do that if one wishes but to merely accept the Vedic path does not require that. To be a Hindu does not require any formality. All it takes is to understand and begin following the Vedic principles to the degree to which one can do so. Of course, one may take initiation from a spiritual master later on, which then may require a formal ritual, depending on the decisions of the guru in this regard. But that is usually a later development.

Sometimes people say that to be a Hindu one has to be born a Hindu. But this is completely wrong. Nowhere in the Vedic *shastra* does it say such a thing. Also, merely being born in a Hindu family does not mean that such a person will have a natural proclivity toward spiritual truth. They may or may not be interested, depending on their level of awareness. Plus, a person may be born in a Hindu family and convert to some other religion. Besides, if Sanatana-Dharma is based on Universal Truth, and what is universal includes everyone, then how can anyone not be included within Sanatana-Dharma if they choose to do so? Thus, the only requirement for being a part of the Vedic path is to accept the basic principles and codes of conduct of Vedic Dharma, as has been outlined in this book. It does not depend on the circumstances of one's birth, such as family, ethnic group, cultural heritage or geographical location. Birth is not more important than one's conduct and character.

The point is that if we are all spirit souls, then the bodily consideration plays no part in the importance to regain the understanding and realization of our spiritual identity. In fact, the more spiritual we become, we find that the less emphasis there will be on the body. Thus, everyone should find and participate in that path which allows one to best rise above bodily identifications. Thus, it does not take a special ceremony or conversion rite to allow anyone to become a participant of the Vedic path. We are all spiritual beings. The human body is merely a machine and covering of the soul. That is the essence of the Vedic teachings. So how does the machine determine which spiritual path we can or cannot take? And as spiritual beings, we have a right and obligation to reach the highest spiritual knowledge and attain the clearest spiritual realizations that we can. If we find that the Vedic teachings can do this and assist us in living the path that allows us to enter such a lofty understanding, then it does not take any special ritual for us to begin the path. All we need to do is to start.

In this way, Sanatana-dharma, which essentially means the eternal nature of the spiritual being or soul, is the path for us to attain that realization of our true spiritual identity and the means to awaken to our real spiritual nature. As spiritual beings, everyone has the right to engage in that process. All one needs to do is add the various Vedic principles to one's life.

Therefore, it should be clear that as we are all spiritual beings in a material body, what difference does the body make in allowing one to participate in the Vedic spiritual process? Anyone can become a member of the Vedic community, and if one temple does

not recognize him or her due to their own limited conceptions of who can be a Hindu, then there are other temples wherein a person can be welcomed and participate to a fuller extent. So any interested person should find those temples. Otherwise, all that is required for one to be a Hindu or devotee is faith and practice. And as one progresses, he or she may take up particular forms of yoga, adopt a vegetarian diet, learn to chant certain uplifting prayers or mantras at home, and rise early to do meditation or worship. One may also make an altar at home so that his or her dwelling becomes a temple or has a shrine room. And, of course, one is always encouraged to read the various spiritual texts at home to increase his or her own understanding and awareness, and to focus one's consciousness on the higher purpose of life.

If one wants to make a significant event in which one marks his or her new dedication to the Vedic path, there are different ways in which to do that. There are simple ways, and those that are more formal. For example, a person may simply go to the temple and stand in front of the deity and say, "My dear Lord, from this day on I am Yours. Now kindly accept and guide me." One may even do that in front of a photo or picture of the deity. Then one's progress or entrance into the Vedic process is between you and God, which is the real case anyway. The Vedic texts say that once you surrender yourself to the Lord in this way, you now become His ward. He will give you protection and guidance to the degree to which you depend on Him and wish to serve Him and rekindle your relationship.

If, however, a person wants to increase his or her participation and join an ashrama, then of course there may be particular rules or regulations that one must follow, or adopt certain forms of dress to enhance one's spiritual consciousness, depending on the spiritual discipline involved. But this is not the case if one simply wants to live at home, practice the Vedic principles and be part of the temple congregation. At home, especially if one has a job or career, or a family, a person may accept those practices that best fit into one's life. But then as you progress, you can adjust your life accordingly to make it increasingly spiritual and to accommodate more of the practices that are suggested for your advancement.

There are, however, certain ceremonies one may undergo as a formality, such as the Shuddhi purification rite or the *namakarana samskara* in which one gets a Vedic name, or the initiation by a guru into a particular *sampradaya* or lineage in spiritual practice. Yet, merely adopting the Vedic customs is enough to be considered a follower of the Vedic Dharma. It is the heartfelt faith that is the most important, which is purely an individual prerogative. If someone chooses to be a follower of Vedic Dharma and acknowledges the basic tenets of the Hindu faith, then he is one. He or she does not need to first undergo the formalities to receive the higher spiritual insights in the Vedic practices, such as yoga, meditation, or the study of the Vedic teachings.

In any case, whether living at home or in a temple ashrama, if a person does later find that they would like to continue one's involvement in the Vedic path or join a particular *sampradaya*, or are attracted to take initiation from a particular spiritual master or guru, then they may undergo the initiatory process. Then, depending on the standards of the

guru, there may be an initiation ceremony. This is often when a person will get a spiritual name to indicate their new life or spiritual beginning. If one lives in an ashrama at the time, such an initiation ceremony may or may not include that one shave his head, or adopt a certain standard of clothes, and begin chanting a certain mantra in accordance with the process of that level of initiation.

In fact, in taking to the Vedic spiritual life, finding a proper teacher is one of the few injunctions that are presented in the Vedic texts, such as the *Bhagavad-gita*. Therein it relates that in order to make further progress on the path of spiritual realization, one should take instruction from a proper spiritual master. Lord Krishna says: “Just try to learn the truth by approaching a spiritual master. Inquire from him submissively and render service unto him. The self-realized soul can impart knowledge unto you because he has seen the truth.” (*Bg.4.34*)

You will notice that the verse does not say that the guru should only accept a person from a certain nationality, religion or culture. The person needs only to be sincere and respectful. The disciple also needs to make sure the guru is genuine and able to deliver the spiritual message of the Lord properly. Thus, it is a reciprocal relationship between the guru and the disciple. But anyone can approach a master for understanding the higher spiritual truths. Once the relationship between the guru and disciple is firmly established, then the guru may then give the initiation ceremony to the disciple for continued spiritual progress.

THE BASICS OF A DAILY ROUTINE

It is accepted that an ideal routine to practice while on the Vedic path is to rise early before sunrise. At that time one may first offer obeisances to your favorite deity. Then take a daily bath or shower and engage in personal worship and prayers to the deity of your choice. Perform meditation, prayers, recitation of sacred texts, sing devotional songs, and engage in *japa*, the chanting of the holy names of God in the form of mantra meditation. This is where a family shrine or temple room becomes most beneficial, unless of course one lives near a temple that can easily be visited at this time. One may also offer food as breakfast to the household deity and then take that food as your *prasada* breakfast, honoring or eating what had been offered to your deity as the remnants of the Lord. Then after one has performed their morning *sadhana* (spiritual practice) one may then engage in the normal activities of one’s profession, such as go off to one’s career or occupation. For a housewife or mother, she may spend her day engaged in household activities and the care of the children. A career should also be of the type wherein one does not act contrary to the principles of Dharma. Of course, if one is living in an ashrama or temple, then going off to work is generally not a consideration, but one stays in continued spiritual service within the environment of the ashrama or temple.

In the evening, after returning from one’s job, it is also beneficial to spend some time in reading sacred books, offering some prayers of appreciation to the deity, or doing some

additional meditation to recover from the day's activities and put them behind you, and to again focus on the spiritual goals of life.

Additionally, one should go to the local Vedic or Hindu temple on a regular basis, like once a week or more. It is also a nice idea to engage in service at the temple or to assist in its programs. At least one should also observe the important holidays and Dharmic festivals with reverence and faith at a nearby temple. Going on pilgrimage when it is possible to some of the holy places in India is also a plus for one's spiritual development.

THE FUTURE

As a result of this increasing search for Truth, humanity is increasingly approaching and exploring the older traditions again to view the deeper levels of spiritual understanding that they contain. As people of the world gain interest in the mystical, the spiritual, yogic and deeper sides of all religions, the movements that recognize these various teachings will grow. This is already happening with the new interest in such topics as yoga, Eastern philosophy, Buddhism, Native American traditions, Pagan practices, and other indigenous cultures. The Sanskrit jargon such as yoga, karma, mantras, chakras, and gurus are now commonplace and are utilized as the basis of new insights. This is a sign that the universality that is inherent in the Vedic traditions are especially becoming more apparent, as its name, Sanatana-dharma, the eternal tradition of Truth, makes so clear.

Sanatana-dharma remains the oldest and most dynamic of all the world's religions and living indigenous cultures. It also remains in the forefront of those paths that emphasize experiential spirituality and shows great freedom in its approach to personal spiritual life. Thus, Vedic culture is experiencing a revival and displays a growing influence all over the world. This is only one of the reasons why it has survived for many thousands of years, in spite of the pressure it and its followers have undergone in the attempt to end its existence by those religions that are more dogmatic and belief oriented.

The more people understand the openness of Sanatana-dharma, the more likely there could be an end to religious war and misunderstandings. In fact, the more likely religion as we know it will give way for the real and personal search for God and Truth, which are principles encapsulated by the Vedic tradition. Religion must be founded on eternal Truth and not merely on humanity's ever-changing opinion and conventions. Otherwise, it is not wholesome or progressive but is artificial and dictatorial and will lead to more religious conflicts in the battle over who is right and who is wrong, and the ways to eliminate all who believe differently than the dominating system. This does little but to preserve the chaos that we see so much of in society today. And the cure from this is what Sanatana-dharma can provide if we investigate it seriously.