

A Hindu Primer

A Code of Practices, Beliefs and Attitudes Common to All Hindus

LOVING HINDU PARENTS WORLDWIDE, OF VARIOUS LINEAGES, HAVE CALLED FOR A common religious code to teach their sons and daughters. They have asked, “What is the minimum I must do to dispatch my duty to my religion and my children?” In response, and to convey the basics of Hinduism for devotees and seekers of all ages, we assembled this chapter. It contains 1) an overview of Hinduism; 2) nine basic beliefs; 3) four facts; five essential precepts; 4) five corresponding observances; 5) Hinduism from A to Z. The modern Hindu child raised up with these principles and practices will be a fully functioning human being, one who is tolerant, devotional, fair, fearless, obedient, secure, happy, selfless, pure and traditional. We apologize that, in our brevity, we have inevitably blurred over subtleties in the rainbow of Hindu views.

A Bird’s-Eye View of a Family of Faiths

HINDUISM, ALSO KNOWN AS THE SANATANA DHARMA, or “Eternal Way,” is our planet’s original and oldest living religion, with no single founder. For as long as man has lived and roamed across Earth’s land and water masses, breathed its air and worshiped in awe its fire, it has been a guide of righteous life for evolving souls. Today Hinduism has four main denominations: Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism, each with hundreds of lineages. They represent a broad range of beliefs, *sadhanas* and mystic goals.

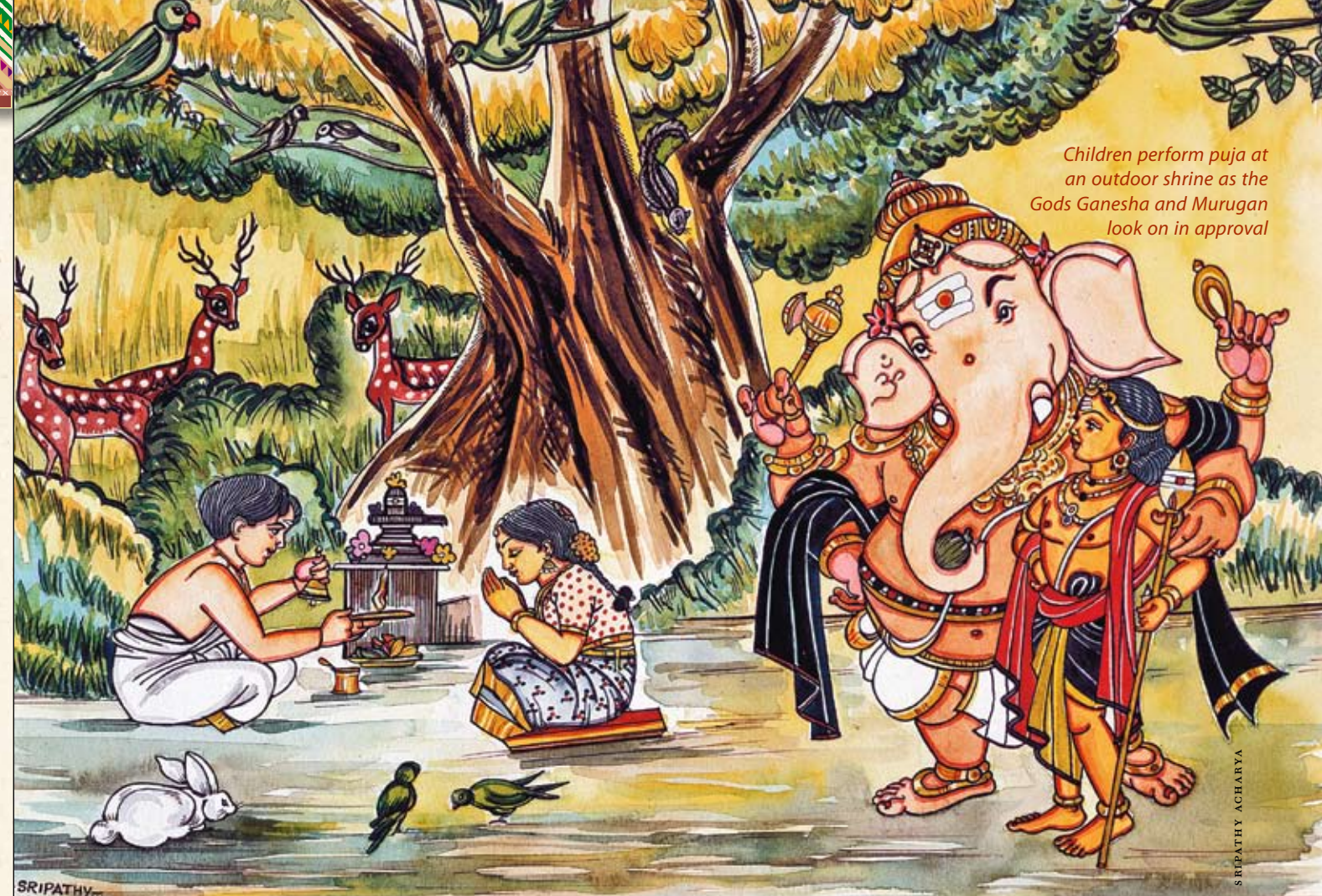
While Hindus believe many diverse and exotic things, there are several bedrock concepts on which virtually all concur. All Hindus worship one Supreme Reality, though they call it by many names, and teach that all souls will ultimately realize the truth of the *Vedas* and *Agamas*. Hindus believe that there is no eternal hell, no damnation. They concur that there is no intrinsic evil. All is good. All is God. In contrast, Western faiths postulate a living evil force, embodied in Satan, that directly opposes the will of God.

Hindus believe that the universe was created out of God and is permeated by Him—a Supreme Being who both is form and pervades form, who creates, sustains and destroys the universe only to recreate it again in unending cycles. Hindus accept all genuine spiritual paths. Each soul is free to find his own way, whether by devotion, austerity, meditation, yoga or selfless service (*seva*). Hinduism’s three pillars are temple worship, scripture and the guru-disciple tradi-

tion. Hinduism strongly declares the validity of the three worlds of existence—physical, astral and spiritual—and the myriad Gods and devas residing within them. Festivals, pilgrimage, chanting of holy hymns and home worship are dynamic practices. Family life is strong and precious. Love, nonviolence, good conduct and the law of dharma define the Hindu path. Hindus are generously tolerant of other faiths. Hinduism explains that the soul reincarnates until all karmas are resolved and God Realization is attained.

Hindus wear the sectarian marks, called *tilaka*, on their foreheads as sacred symbols, distinctive insignia of their heritage. This 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. They prefer cremation of the body upon death, rather than burial, believing that the soul lives on and will inhabit a new body on Earth.

While we have many sacred scriptures, all sects ascribe the highest authority to the *Vedas* and *Agamas*, though their *Agamas* differ somewhat. Hinduism’s nearly one billion adherents have tens of thousands of sacred temples and shrines, mostly in India, but now located around the world. Its spiritual core is its millions of holy men and women who have dedicated their lives to full-time service, devotion and God Realization, and to proclaiming the eternal truths of the Sanatana Dharma.



Children perform puja at an outdoor shrine as the Gods Ganesha and Murugan look on in approval

Nine Beliefs of Hinduism

- 1** Hindus believe in the divinity of the *Vedas*, the world’s most ancient scripture, and venerate the *Agamas* as equally revealed. These primordial hymns are God’s word and the bedrock of Sanatana Dharma, the eternal religion which has neither beginning nor end.
- 2** Hindus believe in a one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.
- 3** Hindus believe that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution.
- 4** Hindus believe in karma, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words and deeds.
- 5** Hindus believe that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved, and moksha, spiritual knowledge and

liberation from the cycle of rebirth, is attained. Not a single soul will be eternally deprived of this destiny.

6 Hindus believe that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments as well as personal devotionals create a communion with these devas and Gods.

7 Hindus believe that a spiritually awakened master, or *satguru*, is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, pilgrimage, self-inquiry and meditation.

8 Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice ahimsa, “noninjury.”

9 Hindus believe that no particular religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine religious paths are facets of God’s Pure Love and Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

Four Facts of Hinduism: Karma, Reincarnation, All-Pervasive Divinity, and Dharma

1. Karma

Karma literally means “deed” or “act” and more broadly names the universal principle of cause and effect, action and reaction which governs all life. Karma is a natural law of the mind, just as gravity is a law of matter. Karma is not fate, for man acts with free will, creating his own destiny. The Vedas tell us, if we sow goodness, we will reap goodness; if we sow evil, we will reap evil. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determines our future. It is the interplay between our experience and how we respond to it that makes karma devastating or helpfully invigorating. The conquest of karma lies in intelligent action and dispassionate reaction. Not all karmas rebound immediately. Some accumulate and return unexpectedly in this or other births.

According as one acts, so does he become. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action.

YAJUR VEDA, BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD 4.4.5



ART BY S. RAJAM

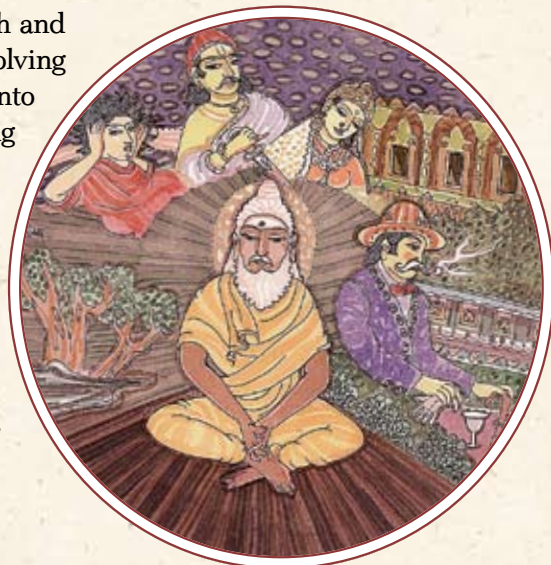
A devotee prays to a small image of Ganesha, who hovers nearby in His subtle body, blessing her life and guiding her karmas.

2. Reincarnation

Reincarnation, *punarjanma*, is the natural process of birth, death and rebirth. At death we drop off the physical body and continue evolving in the inner worlds in our subtle bodies, until we again enter into birth. 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. The actions set in motion in previous lives form the tendencies and conditions of the next. Reincarnation ceases when karma is resolved, God is realized and *moksha*, liberation, is attained.

After death, the soul goes to the next world, bearing in mind the subtle impressions of its deeds, and after reaping their harvest returns again to this world of action. Thus, he who has desires continues subject to rebirth.

YAJUR VEDA, BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD 4.4.6



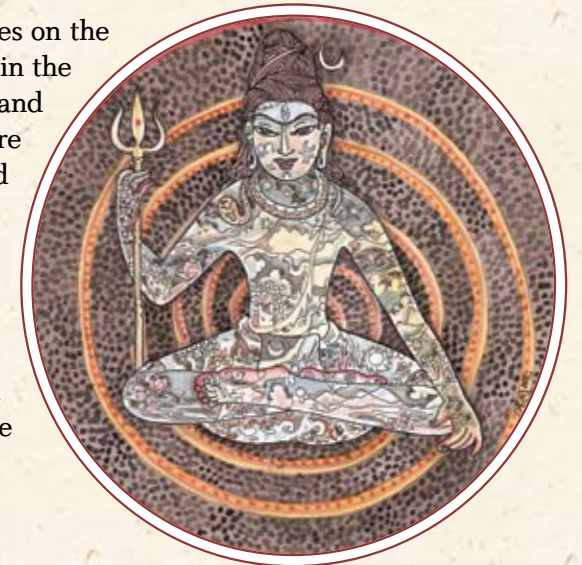
In the center, we see a yogi. Behind him are depictions of how he looked and dressed in four earlier incarnations.

3. All-pervasive Divinity

As a family of faiths, Hinduism upholds a wide array of perspectives on the Divine, yet all worship the one, all-pervasive Supreme Being hailed in the *Upanishads*. As Absolute Reality, God is unmanifest, unchanging and transcendent, the Self God, timeless, formless and spaceless. As Pure Consciousness, God is the manifest primal substance, pure love and light flowing through all form, existing everywhere in time and space as infinite intelligence and power. As Primal Soul, God is our personal Lord, source of all three worlds, our Father-Mother God who protects, nurtures and guides us. We beseech God’s grace in our lives while also knowing that He/She is the essence of our soul, the life of our life. Each denomination also venerates its own pantheon of Divinities, Mahadevas, or “great angels,” who were created by the Supreme Lord and who serve and adore Him.

He is the God of forms infinite in whose glory all things are—smaller than the smallest atom, and yet the Creator of all, ever living in the mystery of His creation. In the vision of this God of love there is everlasting peace. He is the Lord of all who, hidden in the heart of things, watches over the world of time.

KRISHNA YAJUR VEDA, SHVETASHVATARA UPANISHAD 4.14-15.



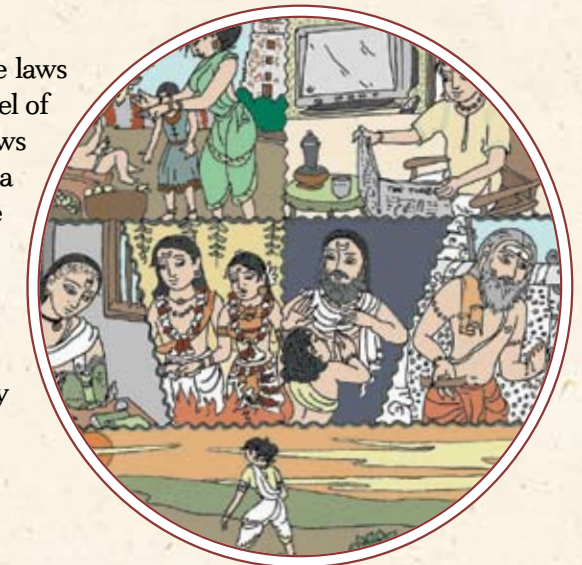
God’s all-pervasive, immanent nature is portrayed here. Shiva is seated against a backdrop of swirling shakti. His body is made up of the elements, galaxies, mountains, rivers, animals and manifestations of all kinds, thus depicting Him as inherent in His creation.

4. Dharma

When God created the universe, He endowed it with order, with the laws to govern creation. Dharma is God’s divine law prevailing on every level of existence, from the sustaining cosmic order to religious and moral laws which bind us in harmony with that order. Related to the soul, dharma is the mode of conduct most conducive to spiritual advancement, the right and righteous path. It is piety and ethical practice, duty and obligation. When we follow dharma, we are in conformity with the Truth that inheres and instructs the universe, and we naturally abide in closeness to God. Adharma is opposition to divine law. Dharma is to the individual what its normal development is to a seed—the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature and destiny.

Dharma yields Heaven’s honor and Earth’s wealth. What is there then that is more fruitful for a man? There is nothing more rewarding than dharma, nor anything more ruinous than its neglect.

TIRUKURAL 31-32



Dharma embraces one’s duties and obligations, and changes according to life’s four natural stages of life: student, householder, elder advisor and religious solitary, as show in this illustration.

Five Precepts

THE MINIMAL HINDU BELIEFS. BY TEACHING THESE TO SONS AND DAUGHTERS, PARENTS WORLDWIDE PASS ON THE SANATANA DHARMA TO THEIR CHILDREN



ART BY A. MANIVEL

1. God Is All in all

The dear children are taught of one Supreme Being, all-pervasive, transcendent, creator, preserver, destroyer, manifesting in various forms, worshiped in all religions by many names, the immortal Self in all. They learn to be tolerant, knowing the soul's Divinity and the unity of all mankind.

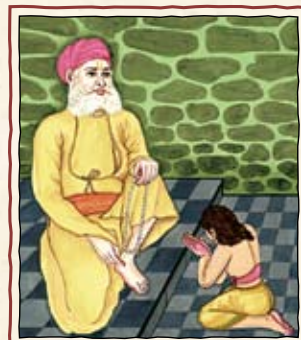
2. Holy Temples

The dear children are taught that God, other divine beings and highly evolved souls exist in unseen worlds. They learn to be devoted, knowing that temple worship, fire ceremonies, sacraments and devotionals open channels for loving blessings, help and guidance from these beings.



Samsara,
Moksha

संसार मोक्ष

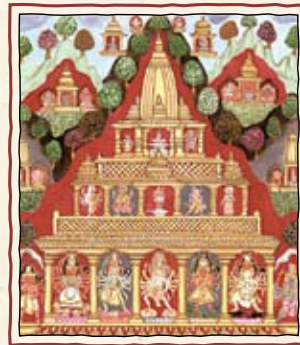


5. Scripture and Preceptor

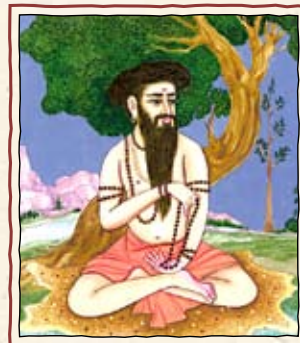
The dear children are taught that God revealed the *Vedas* and *Agamas*, which contain the eternal truths. They learn to be obedient, following the precepts of these sacred scriptures and awakened *satgurus*, whose guidance is absolutely essential for spiritual progress and enlightenment.

Pancha
Shraddha
पञ्चश्रद्धाः

Sarva
Brahman
सर्व ब्रह्मन्



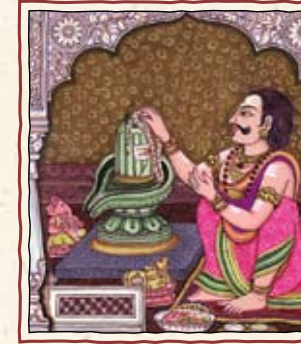
Karma
कर्म



Veda, Guru
वोद गुरु

Five Practices

THE MINIMAL PRACTICES (ALSO KNOWN AS PANCHA NITYA KARMAS) TO NURTURE FUTURE CITIZENS WHO ARE STRONG, RESPONSIBLE, TOLERANT AND TRADITIONAL



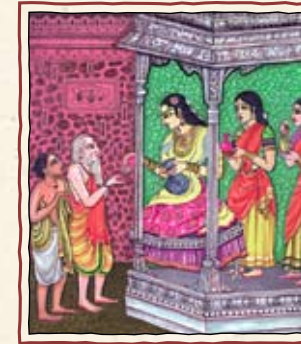
1. Worship

The dear children are taught daily worship in the family shrine room—rituals, disciplines, chants, yogas and religious study. They learn to be secure through devotion in home and temple, wearing traditional dress, bringing forth love of the Divine and preparing the mind for serene meditation.

2. Holy Days

The dear children are taught to participate in Hindu festivals and holy days in the home and temple. They learn to be happy through sweet communion with God at such auspicious celebrations. *Utsava* includes fasting and attending the temple on Monday or Friday and other holy days.

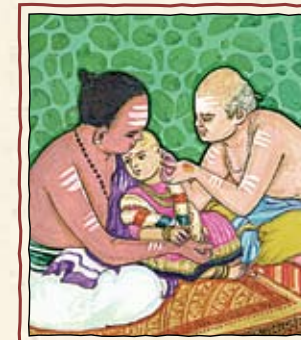
Utsava
उत्सव



3. Virtuous Living

The dear children are taught to live a life of duty and good conduct. They learn to be selfless by thinking of others first, being respectful of parents, elders and swamis, following divine law, especially ahimsa, mental, emotional and physical noninjury to all beings. Thus they resolve karmas.

Tirthayatra
तीर्थयात्रा

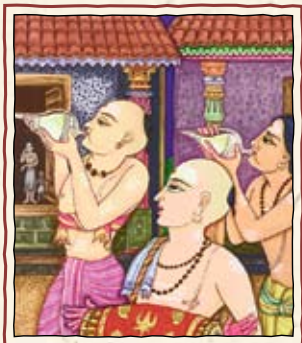


4. Pilgrimage

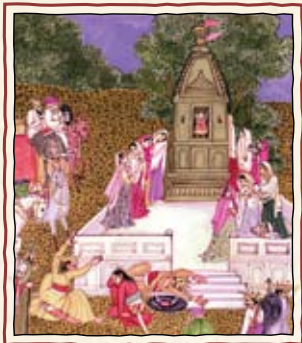
The dear children are taught the value of pilgrimage and are taken at least once a year for darshan of holy persons, temples and places, near or far. They learn to be detached by setting aside worldly affairs and making God, Gods and gurus life's singular focus during these journeys.

Pancha
Kriya
पञ्चक्रियाः

Upasana
उपासना



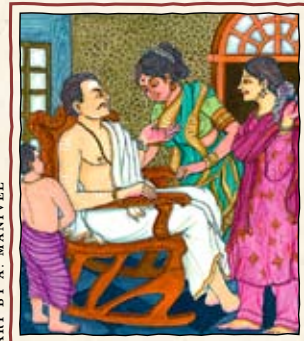
Dharma
धर्म



Samskara
संस्कार

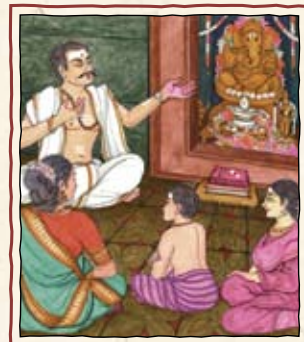
Five Parenting Guidelines

BEHAVIORAL PRINCIPLES TO LIVE BY TO NURTURE CHILDREN AND TEACH THEM, VERBALLY AND BY EXAMPLE, TO FOLLOW THE PATH OF DHARMA

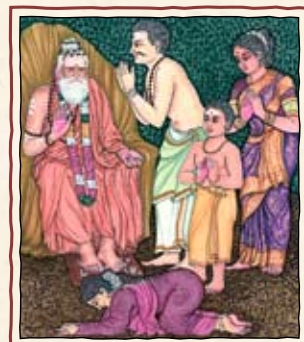


ART BY A. MANIVEL

Dharma
Svagriha
धर्मस्वगृह



Dharma
Svadhyaya
धर्मस्वाध्याय



1. Good Conduct

Loving fathers and mothers, knowing they are the greatest influence in a child's life, behave the way their dear children should when adults. They never anger or argue before young ones. Father in a dhoti, mother in a sari at home, all sing to God, Gods and guru.

2. Home Worship

Loving fathers and mothers establish a separate shrine room in the home for God, Gods and guardian devas of the family. Ideally it should be large enough for all the dear children. It is a sacred place for scriptural study, a refuge from the karmic storms of life.

3. Talking about Religion

Loving fathers and mothers speak Vedic precepts while driving, eating and playing. This helps dear children understand experiences in right perspective. Parents know many worldly voices are blaring, and their dharmic voice must be stronger.

4. Continuing Self-Study

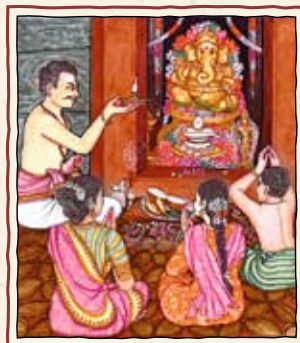
Loving fathers and mothers keep informed by studying the *Vedas*, *Agamas* and sacred literature, listening to swamis and pandits. Youth face a world they will one day own, thus parents prepare their dear children to guide their own future progeny.

5. Following a Spiritual Preceptor

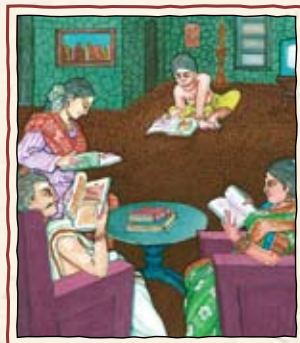
Loving fathers and mothers choose a preceptor, a traditional *satguru*, and lineage to follow. They support their lineage with all their heart, energy and service. He in turn provides them clear guidance for a successful life, material and religious.

Pancha Kutumba
Sadhana
पञ्च कुटुम्ब साधन

Dharmachara
धर्मचार



Dharma
Sambhashana
धर्मसम्भाषन



Dharma Sanga
धर्मसंग

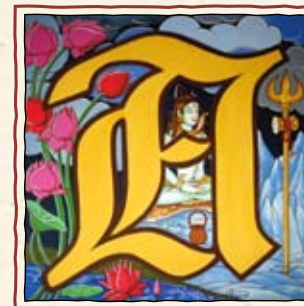


ROHINI KUMAR

Hinduism A to Z

A FUN, ILLUSTRATED ALPHABET DESIGNED AS TWENTY-SIX MINI-LESSONS ON HINDU THOUGHT AND CULTURE

Dharma
Varnamala
धर्मवर्णमाला



A is for Aum, the three-syllabled mantra that represents the Sacred Mystery in sound and vibration.

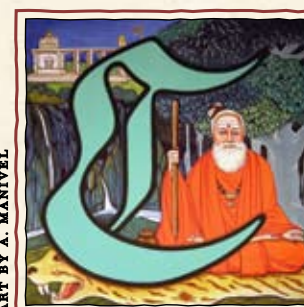


D is for dharma, which is righteousness, cosmic order and duty, leading us on the right path.

B is for bhakti, deep devotion and love for the Divine which softens even hearts of stone.



E is for Earth, our lovely blue planet, which we treat as sacred, protecting all its wonderful creatures.



ART BY A. MANIVEL

C is for culture, the beauty of Hindu music, fine arts, drama, dance, literature and architecture.



F is for family, the precious cornerstone of Hindu life, culture, service and tradition.



G is for guru, our enlightened master who, knowing Truth himself, can guide us there.



L is for lotus, the heart's inner shrine, where God dwells, ever serene, ever perfect.

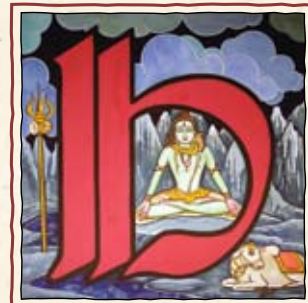


Q is for quest, seeking to know, "Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?"



V is for *Vedas*, our oldest and holiest book, the word of God recorded in 100,000 Sanskrit verses.

H is for hatha yoga, healthful physical science for vitality, energy-balancing and meditation.



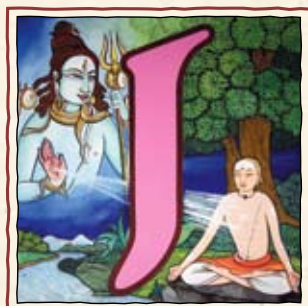
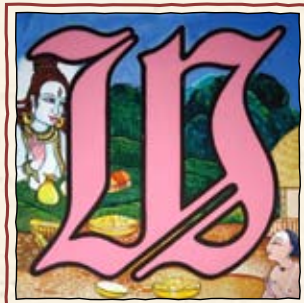
M is for *mauna*, not talking, the inner silence known when words, thoughts and actions are stilled.



R is for reincarnation, our immortal soul's journey from birth to rebirth. We do not fear death.



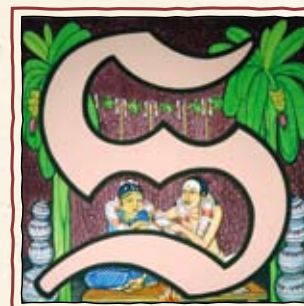
W is for wealth (*artha*), one of life's four goals, along with love, dharma and enlightenment.



I is for India, Bharata, Motherland to one-sixth of humanity, holy land for Hindus everywhere.



N is for non-attachment, the art of living the simple life, without too many needs or desires.



S is for *samskaras*, sacraments sanctifying life's passages: name-giving, marriage, death and more.



X is for xerophily, the ability of certain plants and animals to thrive in India's hot, arid plains.

J is for *japa*, repetitive, prayerful mantras which quiet emotion and empower the mind.



O is for open-mindedness, the Hindu's tolerant freedom of thought, inquiry and belief.



T is for *tilaka*, forehead marks worn in honor of our unique and varied lineages.



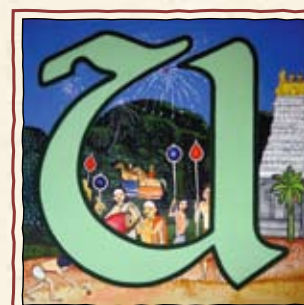
Y is for yoga, union of the soul with God which brings release from worldly bondage.



K is for karma, the law of cause and effect by which we determine our experience and destiny.



P is for puja, mystic worship of the Divine in our home shrine and holy temples and places.



U is for *utsava*, our many home and temple festivals, full of bhakti, fun, feasting and family sharing.



Z is for zeal, the fervor with which we perform service, go on pilgrimage and greet our holy religious leaders.