

# FIVE FUNDAMENTALS: 5 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HINDU DHARMA

## 1

*Dharma*: as fundamental as it is difficult to define! There's no word for it in English because no other tradition has such a concept. It has come to mean universal law, religion, morality, duty, path of righteousness, order, virtue and more. It is that which sustains us all. This fluid concept gives everything and everyone a *Dharma* such that we all have a responsibility to ourselves, each other and the world around us. Through *Dharma* we can lead lives of meaning and harmony.

## 2

God: It has long been argued that Hindus have a polytheistic (many Gods) or monotheistic (One God) belief system. In fact, this is a gross oversimplification that cannot be applied to Eastern philosophies. Hindu schools of thought embrace diversity and they could not differ more than when it comes to the topic of the nature of God. For some there is One, for some many, and for other Hindus there is simply no God at all. The ultimate nature of God is often said to be of truth, consciousness and joy. It is formless and without any attributes. This we call *Brahman*. Rather than being a poly- or monotheistic tradition, Hindu Dharma is a pluralistic tradition: one which accepts many paths to one divinity.

## 3

Women: There is often much debate about the role of women in a Hindu society. The *Vedas* themselves exalt great women and the tradition has given some of the highest social and spiritual responsibilities to women both in its mythology and history. Women are embodiments of *Shakti* – the universal power that keeps the atoms and the galaxies in existence. This led to many beautiful traditions worshipping God as our mother and the belief in a Goddess rather than a male Almighty God, making the Hindu culture the only major living culture to do so.



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# 4

*Veda*: these ancient texts literally mean “knowledge”. There are four in number, and they are the basis of all Hindu thought, scripture and society; they contain verses on medicine, sociology, ritual, law, biology, mathematics, philosophy, metaphysics and more. Vedic knowledge was first experienced through sound by holy seers (Rishis) who then passed on their divine knowledge in the same way. Thus *Veda*, even now, is learnt by hearing and reciting, and was never intended to be written down. Oldest written records date several thousand years; before then, how many generations have kindled the flame of the Veda in their voice, it is impossible to know.

# 5

Caste: A Portuguese word in origin, caste and caste based discrimination has become one of India’s biggest social evils. Being born into a higher or lower caste is as alien and unacceptable to Hindu scriptures as it is to modern societies. Instead, the scriptures teach of a way of dividing people not by their class or their wealth, but into four equal *varnas* by their personal traits. There is no “higher” or “lower”: the *Brahmins* are studious people in the pursuit of knowledge, *Kshatriyas* are courageous and bold people who protect the weak, *Vaishyas* are insightful and resourceful and *Shudras* are hardworking, generous and diligent. Vocation or family have no bearing on *varna*; it’s all dependent on you as a person and which aspects of your character are most prominent or defining. *Varna* is how you can contribute to society: through your knowledge, your leadership, your resources or your effort. When these are all equal, we extinguish social inequality, we work efficiently as a unit, and each member of our society is self-conscious and respectful of those around them.



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