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# CONCEPTS OF HINDUISM

## *What is Mysticism?*

Mysticism is the belief that there is more to life than just empirical reality. Mystics look for a 'Higher Reality' that lies beyond the senses. Realisation of this 'Higher Reality' (God) is said to liberate man from 'Mundane Reality' (Samsara).

Submission to divine will (Bhakti yoga), physical mortification (Hatha yoga), detachment from results (karma yoga) and intellectual rationalisation (Jnana yoga) are some of the ways by which the mind can be disciplined in the path of God realisation.

## *What is Paganism?*

Paganism is the worship of Nature based on ancient animistic, fetishist and totemic beliefs. Hinduism has not rejected these practices. These have been adapted, adopted and assimilated to supplement mainstream religion. Hindus thus worship plants (Banyan, Tulsi), animals (cows, serpents), mountains (Govardhan, Kailasa), rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari), stones (shalagrama, pinda, linga) and ancestors (pitrs). Through these practices, the Hindu acknowledges the sacredness of the universe and the divinity of all animate and inanimate beings.

## *What is Occultism & Tantra?*

Occultism is the exploration and exploitation of the mysteries of the cosmos. Tantra represents the occult side of Hinduism. It exerts great influence on popular rituals and practices. While Vedanta considers the universe to be maya or illusory, Tantra considers it to be shakti, energy, that can be harnessed and used for material and spiritual benefit. The occult tools to harness the powers of Nature and unlock the mysteries of the universe include:

- Yantras, ritual diagrams that capture universal energies.
- Mantras, ritual chants that evokes divine spirits.
- Mudra, ritual postures that arouse neural networks.

## *What are the stages of life?*

According to Hindu thinking the aim of life is to find God. In order to achieve this, life is subdivided into four stages called **Ashramas**. This practice has been abandoned since the Middle Ages, but some of the values it portrays are relevant even today.

**Brahmacharya:** - This marks the first stage of life. It begins at the age of about 8 when the child is ready to begin his studies. He stays with the teacher, learning the scriptures as well as other skills. The importance of discipline and respect for the elders and teachers are stressed. The values to be learnt from this stage that are still relevant are, concepts of celibacy, self-restraint, concentration in studies and respect for elders/teachers.

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**Grihasta:** - This second stage of life begins with marriage. One enters the householder stage and starts a family. One earns a righteous living. One looks after all family members including the elderly, guests and children. One is supposed to work for the good of the society as a whole (Dharma-Aram). This stage allows one to acquire wealth (Porul) and fulfil legitimate desires (Inbam). This stage in life is the key stage, as it acts as the financial support for the other three stages of life. It has relevance today in teaching values of righteous living, carrying out one's duties, not just looking after one's own family but also doing good work for society as a whole.

**Vanaprastha:** - This is the third stage of life. The scriptures say 'when the skin becomes wrinkled' one begins this stage. It literally means - 'the stage of the forest dweller.' It encourages withdrawal from family duties. It is a stage of retirement. One acts as the advisor in the family and passes on the duties of running the household to the younger members of the family. One withdraws from worldly desires in order to attend to one's spiritual needs. Normally one continues to live with the family but spends time in contemplation and meditation.

**Sannyas:** - This is the final stage in life. According to the scriptures, this stage can begin at any time one feels a strong urge to find God. Sannyas literally means renunciation. It is often misunderstood to mean giving up everything. In fact it really means giving up the minor things in order to achieve the major thing (God). It is also misunderstood to mean giving up the family. It really means that you make the whole world your family. The aim of Sannyas is twofold. One is to find God (some call this liberation or Moksha) and the other is to work for the good of mankind. It does not mean renunciation of action, but it is renunciation in action.

He moves away from his family and lives the life of a monk. He spends time in meditation, worship, going on pilgrimages and doing whatever he sees fit to find God. The values that can be learnt from this ashram are the values of renunciation. Without renunciation, how can we expect to achieve the highest? At some stage in life we have to develop dispassion for the worldly things in order to make spiritual progress.

### ***What are the concepts of sin and virtue?***

The concepts of Punniyam (good, virtue, merit) and Paavam (bad, evil, sin), exist practically in all religions. There is an often quoted saying that defines Punniyam as doing good to others and Paavam as harming others. Sin is acquired when one does prohibited actions or forsakes the ordained duties. This retards one's spiritual progress and positively harms the society as well. For instance: The injunction goes that one should never tell lies, but speak the truth always. Sin is accumulated if one gives up truth and tells lies. Similarly, Performing one's duties and actions ordained by the Sastras would earn one, Punniyam or merit.

Hindu scriptures do give universal moral and ethical principles applicable to all sections of society. Designated as Samanya Dharma - common virtues, the list comprises

- Ahimsa (non violence),
- Satya (speaking the truth),
- Asteya (non stealing),
- Daya (compassion),
- Dhana (giving gifts),
- Titiksha (forbearance),
- Vinaya (humility),
- Indriyanigraha (restraining the senses),
- Shanti (keeping the mind at peace),
- Saucha (purity of body),
- Tapas (austerity) and
- Bhakti (devotion to God).

If every one sincerely tries to cultivate these virtues in his personal life, there is no doubt that the whole society will be uplifted to greater levels of peace and joy.

### ***What is the status accorded to women in Hindu Society?***

Hinduism has looked at the status and position of a woman from two standpoints. As a soul in bondage, the goal of her life also, like man's, is Moksha. Hence all the moral and spiritual disciplines like purity of mind, self-control, devotion to God and austerities, prescribed as a means thereof, apply to her too. Thus, in this respect she enjoys equal freedom with man.

However, the fact that she differs from man both biologically and psychologically has not been overlooked. Accordingly, she has been entrusted with certain special duties and responsibilities and given some privileges. Her role as the chief guiding force in running the family and in the internal management of the home has amply been recognized. The perfect housewife is the ideal presented before the Hindu woman. She is the personification of the ideal wife, friend and mother, all rolled into one. Thus, she complements man. But, at home, she plays the major role.

During the period of the Vedas and the two epics, women enjoyed equal freedom with men. They had equal opportunities in the religious and spiritual fields. They could undergo Upanayana, study the Vedas and even take to monastic life. There are literary evidence in the participation of women in the form of Andal, Auvayar, Karaikal Ammiyar, and Meerbhai. But when the Hindu society was subjected to unprecedented pressures due to foreign invasions by alien hordes, this freedom became curtailed. Now, after political independence, enough opportunities have been afforded to them to uplift themselves. However, it should be acknowledged by all concerned that man and woman are not competitors but complementary in the field of life.

**(Compiled by: Mr. Kokiladevan)**