



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY**  
OF THE UNITED STATES



## Hinduism and the Ethical Treatment of Animals

*By The Hindu American Foundation for The Humane Society of the United States*

### General Information

Hinduism, the world's oldest living religion, is a rich collection of hundreds of spiritual and philosophical traditions followed throughout Asia for more than 5,000 years. Followers of Hinduism believe that the Divine (*Brahman*), the infinite reality or Truth, is beyond the comprehension of undisciplined minds and thus, is understood and worshiped by individuals in various ways. This is reflected not only in the diversity of practice, perspective and paths in Hinduism, but also in the fundamental belief that no one path can claim exclusivity or a monopoly over the ways of knowing the Truth. The Rig Veda, one of Hinduism's earliest and most revered scriptures, articulates this pluralist ethos well: *Ekam sat, viprah bahudha vadanti* or "Truth is one, the wise call It by many names."

Most Hindus believe in one, all-pervasive supreme Divine, though the Divine may manifest and be worshiped in different forms, both male and female, by different names and in different ways. As such, categories of either monotheistic or polytheistic are inadequate in describing Hinduism's complex understanding of the Divine. Also known as *Sanatana Dharma* (the Eternal Natural Law), Hinduism encompasses a broad spectrum of philosophies ranging from panentheism to pantheism or absolute monism to pluralistic theism -- that the Divine's presence is in all of existence to all of existence is the Divine.

Another basic belief in Hinduism is that the soul does not die but is reborn into other life forms when the physical body dies. According to Hinduism's law of *karma*, every act and thought affects how the soul will be reborn. Reincarnation or the cycle of birth and rebirth, continues until the soul achieves spiritual perfection and is united with the Divine, or *moksha*. Hindus believe that the Divine exists equally in all living beings, both human and non-human.

## Governing Body

Hinduism has no identifiable beginning in history, single founder, central religious establishment or sole authoritative scripture. However, every individual, especially ascetics, monks, swamis, sadhus and gurus who are respected for their personal discipline and spiritual knowledge, is considered essential to the preservation and passing on of Hindu traditions. Lay Hindus look to ascetics, monks, swamis, sadhus and gurus for spiritual guidance and as interpreters of Hinduism's sacred scriptures, which include, the Vedas and Agamas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, the Epics, such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, the Puranas, lawbooks and many other philosophical and sectarian texts. Thus, ancient truths and wisdom are passed on from generation to generation and reinterpreted by living seers (wise people) and individual spiritual seekers.

**Number worldwide: 1 billion**

**Number in the United States: 2 million**

## Official Statements on Animals

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and the vast majority of Hinduism's leading *sampradayas* (traditions) regard the ethical treatment of animals as fundamental to the core Hindu belief that the Divine exists in all living beings, both human and non-human, and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the whole world is one family. Animals and plants are not regarded as mere objects for wanton human use and consumption in the Hindu tradition. Rather, they are equally embodied with the existence of the Divine and are fully deserving of respect and human compassion. Therefore, the concept of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, which was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance movement in India, is central to Hindu thought and applies not only to how humans interact with each other, but also to how they interact with all living beings.

In the Hindu epic *Mahabharat*, Lord Krishna, who chastises his cousin for carelessly chopping down a tree to release pent up anger, states, "Humans should take from this planet only that which is necessary for our survival." He continues to explain that when societies begin to violate this principle, all of humanity will be forced to face the repercussions because all life, despite differences in intelligence and ability, is interconnected and serves its unique purpose in the world.

Fundamental to Krishna's explanation is Hinduism's law of *karma*, the basic principle of cause and effect that states that an individual's every action and thought produces an appropriate outcome for her which may be experienced immediately or extended beyond the individual's current lifespan and into future births. According to the Hindu principle of reincarnation, the *atman*, or soul, is everlasting and does not die with the physical body. Instead, the atman continues its journey, carrying forward unfulfilled karmic outcomes from previous lives, and takes on new physical life forms until it attains *moksha*, or spiritual perfection that provides freedom from the cycle of reincarnation.

All life, from the smallest plant to largest animal, must go through this process. Ultimately, there are serious karmic repercussions for taking an innocent life, causing unnecessary suffering and/or pain to another life form, as well as idly supporting such suffering and pain in some form. Accordingly, it is not only the man who kills the cow at a slaughterhouse who reaps some degree of negative karma, but also those involved in every step of the process, including the final consumers of the beef (please see

*Vegetarianism and Hinduism* for a more detailed explanation).

The cow, in particular, enjoys special status amongst animals in Hinduism. The cow is seen as a symbol of motherhood, selflessly providing during her lifetime life-sustaining milk, service in the labor of tilling land or transport and even fuel made from cow dung. The cow also continues to give after death by way of its leather and hide. But Hindus also believe that the Divine has manifested in the form of many other animals several times to save all of humanity. In fact, some of the more widely worshiped forms of the Divine have animal aspects to them. For example, Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles, is depicted with an elephant head that symbolizes wisdom, as elephants are recognized to be among the wisest of animals. Hanuman as a monkey symbolizes the fickleness of the human mind which tends to constantly jump from one thing to the next. Worshipped as the perfect devotee of the Divine, Hanuman represents the ability to gain complete control over our ever racing mind.

## **Vegetarianism and Hinduism**

Vegetarianism is a common practice among many followers of Hinduism, and Hindus make up the largest percentage of vegetarians in the world today. While not all Hindus are vegetarian, those who choose to refrain from meat do so in order to refrain from taking part in violence against animals. Lay Hindus are given more leniency in their diets, however spiritual leaders, such as swamis, sadhus, and gurus, are almost always strictly vegetarian, and most Hindu temples do not allow meat products on their premises.

The Hindu advocacy of vegetarianism stems from a variety of reasons such as environmental concerns, health, but most of all from the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence). In the U.S., most animals raised for meat consumption are not only killed, but are treated inhumanely throughout their ill-fated lives. Animals are regarded as simply food which, in turn, allows one to handle the animals as objects, rather than living beings with divine souls. Objectifying animals thus leads to justification of treating animals disrespectfully because they are objects “owned” by humans. As such, both the inhumane treatment of animals being raised for consumption as well as the actual slaughter of the animal would be considered violations of *ahimsa* and *dharma*. Additionally, negative *karma* is incurred on a variety of levels beyond just the actual slaughter of the animal. While vegetarianism is not required of all Hindus, some branches of Hinduism consider vegetarianism a core virtue. In general, abstaining from meat consumption is widely encouraged.

In fact, *ahimsa* is also an essential theme in the Hindu spiritual practice of yoga, which in recent years many non-Hindus have embraced. Patanjali's famous Yoga Sutras assert that *ahimsa* is a key element of one's journey to enlightenment because it calls for the yogi to overcome ego and focus on the effect his behavior has on all of his surroundings. Moreover, without the practice of *ahimsa*, the benefits of yoga will be diminished and enlightenment cannot be attained.

## **Sacred Sacrifice**

Ancient Hindu ritual and scripture in some instances call for sacrifice. For a marginal minority of Hindu sects, this translates into the practice of animal sacrifice. While this has occurred throughout history, and continues to be practiced by a rare few today, the vast majority of Hindus do not partake in, nor do they condone, animal sacrificing rituals. Most Hindus carry out their sacrifice to the Divine using foods like fruit, grains and clarified butter, and through austerity measures such as fasting.

## Scriptural Basis for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

Several ancient Hindu texts contain messages of a necessary, peaceful coexistence with animals and other elements of nature, and ask humans to show kindness to animals and refrain from injuring or killing them.

"He who does not seek to cause the sufferings of bonds and death to living creatures, (but) desires the good of all (beings), obtains endless bliss. He who does not injure any (creature) attains without an effort what he thinks of, what he undertakes, and what he fixes his mind on." (*Manu-samhita 5.46-47*)

"By not killing any living being, one becomes fit for salvation." (*Manu-samhita 6.60*)

"Deer, camel, donkey, monkey, rats, creeping animals, birds and flies - one should consider them like one's own children, and not differentiate between one's children and these creatures." (*Bhagavata Purana 7.14.9*)

"He should not satiate his hunger and thirst without first giving water and grains to his animals." (*Vishnu Dharma Sutra 63.18*)

"The ascetic should live the life of a bee, accepting little alms from several homes, so that he does not burden any particular home too much, and take only that much which fulfills his hunger. A clever man takes the essence from multiple sources and scriptures, just as the bee extracts nectar from several flowers." (*Bhagavata Purana 11.8.9-10*)

"The ascetic calls these animals as his teachers." (*Bhagavata Purana 11.9.24*)

"He who kills harmless and non-violent creatures for his own pleasure will never get true happiness, whether in this life, or after he dies." (*Manu Smriti 5.45 - Vishnu Dharma Sutra 51.68*)

"He who does not seek to kill, cause pain or tie up living creatures and desires the good of all attains everlasting joy." (*Manu Smriti 5.46 - Vishnu Dharma Sutra 51.69*)

"Meat can never be obtained without injury to living creatures, and injury to sentient beings is detrimental to the attainment of heavenly bliss; let him therefore shun the use of meat." (*Manu Smriti 5.48 - Vishnu Dharma Sutra 51.71*)

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For more information about **The Hindu American Foundation**, visit <http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/>