

CHAPTER 19

FAITH AND BELIEF IN HINDUISM¹

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There is confusion among observers on the role of faith and belief in Hinduism. Some refer to Hinduism as a “belief system” where faith has a minor role. It is also referred to as a “faith” in common with other world religions. Both these statements are problematic to practicing Hindus. The reality is more nuanced and understanding it is a prerequisite for understanding what Hinduism is all about.

Belief: If “belief” refers to uncritical acceptance of the veracity of a proposition, there is no specific belief that Hindus are required to subscribe to in order to be accepted as Hindus. There is no creed or dogma or doctrine that is central to Hinduism as a whole, although subgroups of Hindus may define themselves by belief in certain propositions. Examples of such beliefs would be the primacy of a particular form of God or the divinity of their leader. But these very beliefs may or may not be shared by other Hindus. There are also some beliefs that are so widely held among Hindus as to qualify as “consensus.” Examples of such beliefs are laws of karma and rebirth, that the Vedas are revealed scripture, or the importance of adherence to dharma. Unlikely as it may seem, even these beliefs are rejected in some philosophical treatises that are highly revered by Hindus⁸⁶. At the highest levels in Hindu philosophy, freedom from uncritical belief is a cherished value. To describe Hinduism as “a belief system” is to miss its essence: it is a *seeking* of the Truth by transforming the mind so that one becomes aware of the Divine presence everywhere, at all times, in the whole of creation.

Faith: In Hinduism, the concept closest to faith is *shraddha*. *Shraddha* is broader than faith: it signifies a commitment, trust, and understanding that inspire a sense of reverence. The reverence is for something that cannot be directly observed or proven, which is what makes this the province of faith. Thus, *shraddha* is a term that includes faith – specifically in the validity of scripture and in the teachings of a Guru who is learned in the scriptures and has a well-established experiential understanding of them. In his commentary on Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*⁸⁷ the sage Vyasa points out that for a yogi, *shraddha* is like a mother who protects and nourishes her child.

Shraddha is vital to all of the various paths in Hindu spiritual practice because the end goal is devotion to and direct experience of a Higher Consciousness that lies at the core of all

⁸⁵ A version of this note was first presented for discussion at the Woodstock Interreligious Dialogue on Education in Georgetown University, Washington D.C. The topic was inspired by the book *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them* by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 1979.

⁸⁶ For instance, Gaudapada’s *Mandukya Karika* rejects the concepts of cause and effect inherent in the concept of karma and rebirth; and the *Asthavakra Gita* points out that a Realized person who has dropped the ego is not bound by conventional tenets of *dharma*.

⁸⁷ See Sutra 1.20 of *Yoga Sutras* composed by the Sage Patanjali in approximately 200 BCE.

beings, while also transcending the world as we know it. In the Hindu path of devotion, where the spiritual aspirant surrenders wholly to God and performs all actions as a service to God, *shraddha* is of paramount⁸⁸ importance. In the path of knowledge too, *shraddha* has a foundational role in spiritual practice.⁸⁹

Some spiritual aspirants are not comfortable with being called to accept a claim solely on scriptural authority. But no such authority is dictated in Hinduism. *Shraddha* is to be understood as a conviction that is based on our understanding and experience rather than as blind faith. Indeed, Hindu philosophical scriptures require the spiritual aspirant to subject the teachings to the test of reason. The scriptures, commentaries, and explanatory texts in Vedanta go to great lengths to explain and defend the propositions they make; they provide illustrations, and they pose and rebut arguments that cast doubt on specific teachings. By reflecting on such argumentation, the aspirant gains a bulwark against the doubts and develops greater faith in the scriptures.

Those trained in the physical sciences and its methods are reassured that the scriptures are not in conflict with science and reason. As science has progressed in understanding physical phenomena, its findings are coming closer to the depictions in the ancient scriptures of time and space, matter and energy, and the cosmos.⁹⁰ For some, this convergence has served to strengthen their faith in the Hindu scriptures. Thus, emphasis on reasonableness, rather than an appeal to faith alone, has made it easier for Hindus to accept the Vedas.

But more important than reason, the scriptural teaching must be supported by one's own experience -- not necessarily a mystical experience that is available only to a few, but experience consistent with simple realities that are widely recognized. Hindu scriptures themselves declare unambiguously that direct experience of the Divine has greater authority than the scriptures.⁹¹ Scrutiny and reflection on our own life-experiences confirm the validity of scriptural injunctions that call on us to be equipoised, fearless, and ever-focused on God. Strengthened by these disciplines, direct experience of the Divine is available to all, regardless of religious affiliation.

Shraddha's place in Hindu spiritual practice is well illustrated by the sage Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras*. In Sutra 1.20, *shraddha* is the first of five requirements for spiritual progress. *Shraddha* is the foundation for other requirements, the second of which is *virya*: the ability and enthusiasm to face hardship and put forth the effort needed to overcome obstacles on the spiritual path. Next, the aspirant needs *smriti*: the ability to retain what he or she has learnt and remember always how we relate to God. All this leads to the fourth requirement, *samadhi*: complete absorption in the object of one's meditation, a one-pointed contemplation on the source of all life and all joy.

⁸⁸ "In the beginning one must have *shraddha*": Rupa Goswami's *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* 1.4.15

⁸⁹ "The one who has *shraddha*... obtains knowledge": *Bhagavad Gita* 4.39

⁹⁰ For examples, see *Pride of India, A Glimpse into India's Scientific Heritage*, Samskrita Bharati, 2006

⁹¹ See *Mundaka Upanishad* 1.1.5

The culmination of this process is *prajna*, the light of discriminative knowledge by which the practitioner realizes the true nature of all things, the Ultimate Truth. The key point here is that while *shraddha* is the first requirement mentioned by Patanjali, there are many more steps to achieve the fruit of spiritual practice.

Similarly, in Vedanta, the path of philosophical enquiry, *shraddha* is one of six qualities referred to collectively as the “wealth” of a spiritual aspirant.⁹²

Thus, *shraddha* is a broader concept than implied by the English word “faith.” The scriptures themselves do not encourage reliance on *shraddha* alone, but insist on consistency with reason and human experience. The foundation of Hindu spiritual practice is *shraddha* in the existence of the Divine and, hence, in the scriptures and in the teachings of the Guru. Together with other prerequisites for spiritual growth, *shraddha* carries us on our own journey to the transcendental reality.

⁹² The six qualities are: calmness, self-control, withdrawal, endurance, *shraddha*, and tranquility. Vivekachudamani 22-26 by Shankaracharya.