What are the benefits of reading this long article?

It is customary in Indian philosophical works to state right in the beginning, information about who are the intended readers and the benefits of reading the work.

This article is intended for youth and their parents. This article clears many of the misconceptions about SanAtana Dharma (Hinduism). Hinduism is portrayed many times as ritualistic and having strange beliefs about caste and cows. This article points out that SanAtana Dharma has at its core philosophical inquiry that is highly logical and is among the best philosophical systems the world has produced. SanAtana Dharma (Hinduism) helps to answer the big questions of life, and helps practitioners to lead life in an ethical way. SanAtana Dharma (Hinduism) promotes the practice of SAdhana (spiritual practice) that takes a person on an evolutionary path towards highest levels of consciousness and spiritual realization. One of the unique strengths of SanAtana Dharma (Hinduism) is that it takes a person out of the realm of blind faith. Instead of blind faith, it offers thoroughly logical, open and diverse schools of thought. It has built-in mechanisms for adaptability since it is open, allows diverse schools of thought and mechanisms for introspection.

After reading the article, youth and parents will have an idea about strengths of SanAtana Dharma (Hinduism) and will be able to answer some of the questions about SanAtana Dharma that are asked by people outside the SanAtana Dharma.

This article is an introduction into the basic concepts of SanAtana Dharma. We hope that the youth and parents will be interested to learn lot of more about the philosophical inquiry in SanAtana Dharma after reading this article.

Introduction:

On the occasion of the Sri Venkateshwara Mahotsavam at Sri Siva Vishnu Temple (SSVT), this article is presented to youth in the community. SanAtana Dharma has given methods and processes that can take a human being from being a selfish person with animalistic tendencies, to a human with higher level emotions such as love and compassion and finally transforming the human being into a spiritual being who is full of divine qualities. The concept of Dharma as a tool for ethical principles of good living is something that can help all humans, nay all sentient beings.

SanAtana Dharma that is practised today consists of many rituals. The meaning behind the rituals and why these rituals should be done are not properly explained to youth. Youth raised in Western societies or raised with Western education in India, have scientific education that stresses logical thinking and a spirit of rational inquiry. This generation will question why certain rituals are being done. Explanation of SanAtana Dharma that shows that there is a rich and rigorous intellectual framework as the foundation of SanAtana Dharma will be very appealing to this group. Using this rigorous intellectual framework, answers can be obtained to many of the issues that have been misunderstood in the West such as the issue of polytheism, caste, sacredness of the cow etc. This framework helps in obtaining answers to many of these questions instead of mechanically accepting the practices that have been done by one’s parents.

There are two sections in this article. The first section talks about unique features of SanAtana Dharma. The second one talks about the philosophical inquiry framework that exists inside many of the traditions of SanAtana Dharma.

SECTION 1: UNIQUENESS OF SANATANA DHARMA

Meaning of Dharma:

Meaning of the SanAtana Dharma itself conveys the unique features of SanAtana Dharma. SanAtana means eternal or timeless. Dharma is a very complex word that does not easily lend itself to translation. An approximate translation will be righteous (ethical) behavior. This insistence on correct ethical behavior is at the foundation of SanAtana Dharma.

Foundations of SanAtana Dharma:

SanAtana Dharma says that it a path for all without limitations of time and space, nationality, color and race. Most other religions are history centric[Ref 5]. Each of these religions has a founder who lived in particular time and place. It has one book that the founder has given that is the authoritative text for the religion – usually considered to be a divine / revelatory text.

In the case of SanAtana Dharma, things are very different. There is no one founder and there is no sacred book. There are many sacred books called Vedas, Upanishads, Brahma sutras, PurANas and Sri Bhagavad Gita. Among them, Vedas and Upanishads are called revealed or unauthored texts. There were many rishis or sages to whom these sacred texts have been revealed – they saw these in deep meditation. PurANas and Sri Bhagavad Gita were written by sage Sri vedaYAsa who is highly regarded and is considered incarnation of Sri Narayana in some sampradAyAs.
Openness, Inclusive Nature and Diversity of Thought:
SanAtana Dharma has great variety of thought and spiritual principles within it including atheism. All schools of thought have been allowed to present their case to the scholarly community and get people to follow them. There were vigorous debates between the various schools and large number of books written to promote one point view and point out defects in others. These back-and-forth debates about different ideas and perspectives were done in a peaceful way without violence. There are only a few instances of violence between the various factions within SanAtana Dharma in India.

SanAtana Dharma has never sought to convert anybody by use of force. SanAtana Dharma spread to South East Asia by completely peaceful means.

There are six major philosophical schools of thought in SanAtana Dharma. These are nyAya, vaisheshika, samkhya, Yoga, mImAmsa and VedAnta. These schools of thought within SanAtana Dharma presented different ideas about the individual, God and the nature of the world. Details of these schools are presented little bit later in the paper. Apart from these six major schools of thought there have been many minor schools of thought that existed at one time. Some of the schools of thought did not survive the passage of time. This history of Inquiring, debating and discussing, while at the same time acknowledging and accepting different schools of thought in one of the hall marks of SanAtana Dharma.

To an outsider, and to those of the younger generation this difference and diversity in philosophy of thought may look confusing. There are many different schools of philosophy, styles and practices of worship. There are many regional differences in practice of pooja. In spite of these differences, there are core values and principles that all schools agree on.

This diversity of thought is one of the greatest contributions of Sanatana Dharma to the world. Sanatana Dharma has shown how different viewpoints about spirituality and religion can co-exist in peace, while at the same time competing in the market place of ideas in the public. There are very few places in the world until this century, where such a peaceful co-existence was possible. Sanatana Dharma has led the world in this area.

In most of other religions of the world, any deviation from the official doctrine of the religion is severely discouraged. There are many examples in history, where any deviation from the doctrine in other religions, have been punished with extreme violence and death. Violent campaigns and wars have been waged over small doctrinal differences. Diversity of thought, inclusive nature and openness of SanAtana Dharma are in sharp contrast to these practices.

Core Values of SanAtana Dharma:
Even though there are diversity of views in SanAtana Dharma, there are some core values that bind all the traditions. We will briefly state them here. Some of these require very detailed explanations.

- Acceptance of Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita as sacred texts. All the major branches of Hinduism accept these as sacred texts. Of these all major branches of sanAtana Dharma also accept the Vedas and Upanishads as authoritative revelatory texts.
- Acceptance of principle of rebirth: All Schools of thought accept the principle of rebirth and a soul having multiple births.
- Acceptance of principle of Karma. All schools of thought accept the concept of Karma and its effects over multiple births.

Transcending Religion:
We have seen that SanAtana Dharma accepts different schools of thought and different practices. In fact, SanAtana Dharma also recognizes and accepts schools of thought and religions from outside India as valid. SanAtana Dharma considers Christianity, Islam as valid schools of thought and never looks down on them. There is a famous saying in SanAtana Dharma “ekaM sat, vipra bahudhA vadanti” (Truth is one, but wise men call it by different names) that shows the catholicity and broad mindedness of SanAtana Dharma towards other paths.

At that same time, by allowing vast variety of different schools of thought under its fold, SanAtana Dharma can accept and integrate good values from all religions in its fold. This value of SanAtana Dharma enabled it to withstand the onslaught of Islamic rule for 500-600 years and British rule for a couple of hundred years.

By accepting and incorporating all different view points, SanAtana Dharma transcends the narrow viewpoints offered by most other religions. SanAtana Dharma is an universal umbrella that encompasses different view points of God, souls and the world. This allows people to live in peace, while at the same time exploring the truth and discussing the various view points in a harmonious way.

Importance of Ethics in SanAtana Dharma:
SanAtana Dharma places great importance on ethics. This is because the ethical living is the first step in the spiritual practices of SanAtana Dharma. Seventh Canto of Srimad BhAgavatha purANa says that the following are the ethical qualities that should be there in all human beings. Each of the qualities has many layered meanings and needs detailed explanation to really understand it. Here we will cover them in a brief fashion.

- SatyaM (Truth, Integrity)
- Daya (Compassion)
- tapaH (Austerity, Spiritual practices including meditation)
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- CarvAka system or materialism
- Jainism
- Buddhism: There are two major schools here.
  - YogAchArya Buddhism
  - Madhyamika Buddhism
- Orthodox systems or Vedic systems: These systems believe in the validity of the Vedas.
  - Nyaya
  - Vaisheshika
  - Samkhya
  - Yoga
  - MimAmsa
These five systems do not have any significant following today except for Yoga which is remaining as a practical method of sAdhana.

- Vedantic systems: All the three main Vedantic systems believe in the Validity of Vedas and Upanishads. Other two canonical texts apart from the upanishads are Brahma sutras (summary of Vedanta written using style of aphorisms (sutr@)) and Bhagavad Gita, both written by sage Sri ve-davyAsa. All three founding AchAryas of vedAntic systems have written commentaries on Upanishads, Brahma sutras and Bhagavad Gita. The three main systems are:
  - Advaita VedAnta (school of Idealism): This school founded by Sri ShankarAcharya (8th century CE) states that relationship between Brahman and individual Atman (soul) is advaita or non-dual.
  - VishisTa advaita vedAnta (school of qualified idealism): This school founded by Sri RamAnujAcharya (between 11th and 12th century CE) states that relationship between Brahman and individual Atman is one of VishisTa advaita (qualified non-dualism).
  - Dvaita vedAnta (school of Realism, also called tattva vAda): This school founded by Sri MadhvaAcharya (between 13th and 14th century CE) states that relationship between Brahman and individual Atman is dvaita or Dualistic.

This gives a brief history of the evolution of different schools of philosophy in India. These schools evolved from ones before them and interacted with others in a variety of ways. This shows the diversity of philosophical view points and peaceful interaction between them. The three vedantic schools mentioned above had vigorous debates promoting their viewpoint. This debate was always held at scholarly level with respect and dignity for all the participants. Even the structure of these debates was highly formal where a vedantic expert would be assisted by experts in logic and grammar on both sides. Many books have been written summarizing the dialectic argument between various schools. Some of these books such as “nyAyamrita” by Sri vyAsa teertha and “Advaita Siddhi” by Sri Madhusudhana saraswati are some of the seminal works of Indian Philosophy. This kind of philosophical debates involving religious schools is a testament to the diversity, tolerance, and respect for different view points that is unique to SantAtana Dharma.

Note: These are very brief description of these schools. Please

or deep thinking about a subject)
- Saucham (Purity of body and mind)
- Titiksha (Tolerance)
- ijya (pooja of the Lord)
- Shama (Control and tranquility of mind)
- Dama (Control of sense organs)
- ahimsa (Non-violence)
- Brahmacharya (focused on Brahman)
- tyagaH (renunciation, sacrifice)
- sAdhyAyaha (self-study)

These qualities listed above are the top ethical qualities that all human beings should have. This sets a high bar for ethical behavior for human beings. Focus on ethics is an important part of the practice (sAdhana) in sanAtana Dharma.

Practitioners should measure themselves at the end of the day on how their daily behavior stacks up to these qualities listed above. They should be asking them selves how they can improve their daily behavior comparing against each one of the attributes.

This kind of serious daily introspection allows a person to grow rapidly in spirituality.

Spiritual Psychology in SanAtana Dharma:

In SanAtana Dharma, mind is used as an instrument for spiritual elevation. Art of training the mind has been studied and enhanced from ancient times resulting a very high fine tuned method that can used by all human beings. Bhagavad Gita, kaThopanishad, svetAshvatAra upanishad and Patanjali Yoga sutras detail methods for controlling the mind and elevating a person’s consciousness to higher levels of spirituality. Bhagavad Gita is one of the first books on psychotherapy and Sri Krishna is one of the world’s first and perhaps the greatest psychotherapist!

SECTION 2: PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN SANATANA DHARMA

Evolution of Philosophical thought in India:

We have already seen how there were many philosophical thought systems in India. These philosophical systems underwent a steady evolution. Many new systems of thought were developed and other systems rose as challenge to previous systems. This kind of change, evolution and competition for ideas helped the Indian Philosophy develop to great heights over a period of time. These systems are enumerated in the chronological order [Ref 2] [Ref 3]

- Vedic religion and Philosophy. This represents the religion and philosophy in the VedAs and upanishads.
- Heterodox systems or non-Vedic systems: These systems do not believe in the authority of the Veda. Among them are:
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Philosophical Framework of Indian Philosophy and vedA الثانية:

Sage Sri VedavyAsa is a towering figure in SanAtana Dharma. He has played a pre-eminent part in consolidating the Vedas, composed Mahabhbarata and Sri Bhagavad Gita, wrote Sri Brahma sutra and eighteen mahA purANAs His contributions to the spiritual heritage of India are amazing. Sri VedavyAsa has written the sutras in the style of aphorisms or concise statements that can pack a great deal of meaning inside them. They are a great summary of all philosophical concepts found in upanishads.

Upanishads, Sri Bhagavad Gita and Sri Brahma sutra are considered “prasthAna traya”, a trio of source documents. To be considered an Acharya of a Vedantic school of thought, one must write commentaries on the prasthAna traya i.e. trio of upanishads, Sri Bhagavad Gita and Sri Brahma sutras. All three vedantic Acharyas, Sri ShankarAcharya, Sri RamAnujaChArya and Sri madhvaChArya have written commentaries on these three sacred texts.

Six fold method of analysis:

Study of Vedanta philosophy uses analysis of the six attributes to compare different schools of thought. This is called the six-fold method of analysis. These six attributes are:

- Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge - pramANa vichAra shAstra): This subject studies definition of how knowledge is obtained and what are the good sources of knowledge.
- Ontology (Theory of nature and relations of being - Tattva vichAra shastra): This subject studies the nature and relations between various sentient and non-sentient entities.
- Theology (Theory of God/gods - Isvara vichAra shAstra): This subject studies attributes of God/gods and their workings with respect to souls and matter.
- Cosmology (Theory of Space and Universe - Jagad vichAra shAshtra): This subject studies the concepts of time, space and nature of matter.
- Psychology (Theory of nature of Soul and mind -JIva vichAra shAstra): This subject studies the nature of soul, mind and its relation to other metaphysical entities.
- Soteriology (Theory of Salvation - Moksha vichAra shAs-tra): This subject studies the nature of Salvation, means of Salvation and nature of jivas in Salvation.

Here one can see that Indian Philosophy has a very formal framework that is used in studying different schools of thought. Detailed study of these frameworks is beyond the scope of this article. Various references will have the details.

Open logical inquiry can lead to ultimate truth:

Spirit of open logical inquiry is at the core of vedantic traditions. First Brahma sutra says “athAtho brahma jignAsa” or , “then, there afterward, let there be a Inquiry (study) of brahman”. Note that this sutra says to the aspirant to do Inquiry or deep study of Brahman. It does not tell the aspirant to believe in Brahman or even that Brahman exists. All the properties of Brahman including His existence have to be proved/realized by deep study into Brahman.

This kind of openness and logical inquiry into the deepest spiritual truths are very similar to scientific inquiry. It is based on set of axiomatic principles to start with. This is followed by very rigorous logical analysis to reach a specific set of conclusions.

This kind of logical analysis should appeal to youth raised in western scientific education. The spirit behind the philosophical inquiry is the same as the one in scientific inquiry. Only difference is that in the scientific inquiry we are studying material objects and their relationships. In the sanAtana Dharma's philosophical inquiry, we are studying non-material sentient objects and their relationships to other sentient and non-sentient objects.

Epistemology, foundation of Philosophical Inquiry:

We will give a brief introduction to the Epistemology or Theory of Knowledge here. There are differences between the various schools in this theory. In this simple introduction, we will introduce the most common elements of this theory.

Valid sources of Knowledge:

Correct knowledge (pramANa) can come from the following sources:

- Perception (pratyaksha): We get knowledge by correctly observing things around us. This is what we do in scientific inquiry as well.
- Inference (anumAna): We get knowledge by using logic to infer things. One example in Western logic is, if A implies B and B implies C, then A implies C. One example given in Indian Philosophy is “If one observes smoke in a mountain, then one can infer there is fire in the mountain”.
- Scriptural or Verbal testimony (Agama): For truth about non-material objects, we have to rely on revealed or non-authored (apaurusheya) texts. We can also rely on words or writings from Saints we highly admire because we rely on their experience and wisdom. In vedantic schools, we rely on vedas and upanishads as they are non-authored texts which have been revealed to highly qualified saints. We also trust Sri Bhagavad Gita, Sri Brahma sutras and PurANAs as they are composed by the venerable saint Sri vedavyAsa and the words in them have same meanings as vedas and upanishads.

If we can an analogy in the material world, medical student relies on the text book written by a well regarded professor when a student begins his/her study. Later on by actual practice and seeing patients, student verifies that what is written in the book is correct. In the same way, in the spiri-
What is good about SanAtana Dharma?

In the spiritual world, aspirant starts by trusting the revealed literature in the beginning. As the student becomes more proficient by his/her sAdhana or practice, then the student realizes that what is in the revealed literature as correct.

Now we will see how to answer some of the misconceptions about sanAtana Dharma using the tools of inquiry that we have developed here.

**Note:** What is presented here is a very basic introduction to philosophical inquiry. It requires many years of study to fully understand the subject. Books listed in the reference will help.

**Does SanAtana Dharma promote Polytheism?**

This is a common question posed by people who are not familiar with SanAtana Dharma. This is one of the misconceptions of sanAtana Dharma.

The answer will be brief given the space constraints. We briefly looked at the sources of knowledge given in the previous sections. VedAs talk about many gods at a first glance, but upanishads talk about only one supreme entity called Brahman. So, question is how do we resolve apparent contradictions in the different revealed literatures. Sri madhvAchArya has answered this by using the concept of samanvaya or the concept of connections. All the spiritual literature say the same truth. Some the literature have three levels of meanings, one meaning that appears at first glance, inner meaning and some meanings that have interpolations. If we apply this concept of samanvaya to the Rig veda, even though there appears to be many gods, the inner meaning of all the sholkas can be shown to be primarily refer to the One God or Brahman. References to multiple gods such as agni, varuna etc. are a secondary meaning.

So, by using inquiry we can definitely say that SanAtana Dharma has monotheism at its core. SanAtana Dharma worships many gods who are controlling various aspects of the universe beneath the One God or Brahman.

**Does SanAtana Dharma promote caste and discrimination?**

This is also a complex question. We will answer it briefly here. Word for caste in Sanskrit is called “Varna”. Real meaning of the word is inner nature of a person. In English language also we use similar interpretation. We say “Now we know the true colors of this person”, when an inner nature of a person has been revealed. Sri Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita that I have created the varNa system based on qualities of human beings. varNa system is a psychological classification system for all human beings in all places and countries. In the ancient days, people who used to teach students and spend time in searching for Brahman were called Brahmins. In modern days, people who are interested in teaching and education like College Professors, scientists are Brahmin in nature. People who are interested in Commerce are called Vaishyas. People who are interested in service and who work for others are called Shudras. With this classification, 90% of the people in the modern world, who work for others, will be classified as shudras.

You can see that VarNa system is a system psychological classification of human beings. In the days of mahAbhAratha, varNa system was not birth based. Sri VedavyAsa, one of the greatest saints of India, whom many people consider as an avatar of nArAyaNa, was born to a fisher woman. Over a period of time, the system changed to being birth based because for most people, it was not easy recognize the inner nature of a person.

Earlier in this paper, we looked at ethical qualities that all human beings should have. These qualities listed before are the finest ethical qualities a human being should have. In a system that promotes these greatest ethical qualities human being has ever cultivated, there is no place for discrimination. There is only love, compassion and tolerance for all sentient beings including human beings, plants and animals.

**Summary:**

This paper gives an introduction to the openness, diversity of thought, finest ethical principles humans have ever known, and very rigorous high quality philosophical framework that are unique characteristics of SanAtana Dharma. These qualities of sanAtana Dharma can be utilized by all human beings for their happiness, spiritual growth and elevation of all humanity. We have shown with some examples, how these philosophical inquiry can clear the misconceptions about sanAtana Dharma and lead us to the ultimate truth about God, soul and the universe.

Let us pray for blessings of Lord Venkateshwara to the whole world.

**OM shAntiH shAntiH shAnthiH**

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