

# **SHARING WISDOM**

## **A HINDU PERSPECTIVE**

ANANTANAND RAMBACHAN

### **What is Wisdom?**

In the Ramacaritamanasa, a sixteenth century Hindi vernacular poetic reworking of the story of Rama by Tulasidasa, Lakshmana, the brother of Rama, in the familiar Hindu style of a disciple questioning a teacher, respectfully asks a number of questions.<sup>1</sup> Among his many questions is a request for an explanation of the nature of wisdom (jnana). Rama's characterization of the nature of wisdom wastes no words and goes to the heart of the Hindu teaching.

Wisdom is freedom from self-centeredness; it is seeing God present equally in all.<sup>2</sup>

Rama's distillation of the meaning of wisdom reverberates throughout the Hindu tradition and is articulated similarly in various sacred texts. The Bhagavadgita (13:27), for example, identifies the discernment of the divine with true seeing or wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

One who sees the Supreme God existing equally in all beings, the Imperishable in the perishable, truly sees.<sup>4</sup>

These texts, and countless others, make two significant wisdom disclosures, both of which are logical and consistent with the Hindu understanding of the nature of God.<sup>5</sup> The first is the disclosure that God is present in all beings. With respect to the presence of God, all beings must be equally regarded. No one can be excluded and no qualifications can be

introduced. Wisdom does not limit the divine presence to the human species. Other life forms must also be within the reach of our concern and compassion. The second wisdom disclosure is the emphasis on the equality of divine presence. This presence does not admit of any variation. It rules out any argument that attempts to justify inequality and injustice on the basis of an unequal divine presence. Wisdom is the ability to see everything in a new light. The ordinary becomes extra-ordinary when seen as infused with divinity.

*Question 1:*

*what are the possible social implications of the wisdom that the divine exists equally and identically in all beings and things?*

Although wisdom is identified in the Hindu tradition with “seeing” the inclusivity and equality of God, such seeing, it must be emphasized, is more than verbal knowledge. The Bhagavadgita (2:42), speaks critically of those who delight merely in the words of the sacred text (vedavadaratah). The same text, in a series of verses (55-72), characterizes wisdom as an integrated mode of being. Wisdom is present when knowing and being coincides. Wisdom is identified with freedom from greed and with delight and contentment in God. It is equated with liberation from fear and anger. Most importantly, wisdom is the ability to identify with others in happiness and in suffering. The Bhagavadgita (6:32) praises this empathetic way of being as the culmination of Yoga and commends the wise person (5:25; 12:4) as one who rejoices in the well-being of all (sarvabhutahite ratah). The wise is “One who hates no one, who is friendly and compassionate, non-possessive and unselfish, balanced in suffering and pleasure and forgiving.”

## Why Share Wisdom?

“ I believe in the truth of all religions of the world. And since my youth upward, it has been a humble but persistent effort on my part to understand the truth of all the religions of the world, and adopt and assimilate in my own thought, word, and deed all that I have found to be best in those religions. The faith that I profess not only permits me to do so but renders it obligatory for me to take the best from whatever source it may come.” Mahatma Gandhi [(1868-1948) M. K. Gandhi, *The Voice of Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1969), pp.264-265].

The often-cited Rg Veda (1.89.1) text, “ Let noble truths come to us from all sides,” expresses the deep and ancient Hindu value for sharing and receiving wisdom. At the conclusion of the Bhagavadgita (18:67-71) the teacher Krishna commends the sharing of his teachings. He characterizes the sharing of wisdom as the dearest form of service and the teacher as dearest to him among human beings (18: 69). This unmistakable value for wisdom in the Hindu tradition has to been seen in the context of the widely shared understanding of the fundamental human problem as one of ignorance (avidya).

As already noted, wisdom is equated with the discernment of God in all and all in God. This is expressed in similes and metaphors. One of the most striking of these in the Bhagavadgita (7:7) likens God to the string in a necklace of jewels. “On Me,” says Krishna, “all this universe is strung like pearls on a string.” Elsewhere in the Bhagavadgita (9:6), all beings are described as abiding and moving in God: “As the mighty wind, going everywhere, dwells always in space, so all beings dwell in Me.” The human problem therefore, in relation to God, is not one of overcoming a spatial or temporal separation between oneself and God. The impossibility of any form of separation from God leads to a

characterization of the human problem as one of ignorance (avidya). Ignorance is likened to a form of blindness that prevents us from seeing what is just before our eyes. Overcoming ignorance, which is the attainment of liberation (moksha) is akin to the regaining of sight and wisdom is described as earth's highest purifier (Bhagavadgita 3:38). The indispensability of wisdom for liberation, in other words, adds significance to the necessity and value for sharing.

Although the infinite God is the true end of all human longing, the fullness of being that all seek, the tradition has admitted consistently that God transcends all limited human efforts at definition and description. The Taittiriya Upanishad (2.9.1) speaks of the Infinite as "that from which all words, along with the mind, turn back, having failed to grasp."<sup>6</sup> The Kena Upanishad (2:3) expresses the impossibility of comprehending the infinite as one does a limited object by delighting in the language of paradox:

It is known to him to whom It is unknown; he does not know It to whom It is Known. It is unknown to those who know well, and known to those who do not know.

The point of such texts is not to demean human language or to negate its value, but to remind us of its limits and of our limits in relation to God. It is a central Hindu conviction that our words are inadequate and that the One is always more than we could define, describe or understand with our finite minds. A God whose nature and essence could be fully revealed in our words or who could be contained within the boundaries of our minds would not be the One proclaimed in our traditions. This recognition of the intrinsic human limitation in attaining or formulating a complete knowledge of God means that no intellectual, theological or iconic representation is ever full and final. Each struggles to grasp and express that which is ultimately inexpressible and each attempt reflects and is influenced by the cultural and historical conditions under which it occurs.<sup>7</sup> Our traditions are darshanas, ways of seeing and understanding, but in relation to the limitlessness of the One, we cannot claim fullness of knowledge.

*Question 2:*

*Is there consensus among religious traditions that no intellectual, theological or iconic representation of the absolute can be full and final? What may be the implications of such a consensus for relationships among religions?*

If it is impossible to confine the One within the boundaries of our religion or to represent it entirely through the language of our theologies, we must be open to the possibility of meaningful insights from others that may open our hearts and minds to the inexhaustible and multifaceted nature of the divine. Our confession of the limits of human understanding and language provide a powerful justification for relationships of mutual sharing and humility with people of other faiths and no faith.

"I hold it the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty." [M.K. Gandhi, *The Voice of Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1969), p.267].

Having highlighted the Hindu value for wisdom and for the mutual sharing of wisdom, it is important to acknowledge that certain orthodox groups have prescribed boundaries that are intended to limit access to the study of sacred texts, especially the Vedas. Eligibility for the study of the Vedas was limited to male members of the first three castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas). Women and persons belonging to the fourth caste (Shudras) were excluded, as

well as untouchables who were without caste. The entitlement to Vedic study required investiture with the sacred thread (upanayanam) and this ritual was available only to male members of the upper castes. Although this exclusion has been challenged and contested by various Hindu reform movements, orthodox groups still limit the sacred thread ceremony to upper caste males and the study of sacred texts is still largely in the hands of male Brahmins.

### **How do we Share?**

Although there is a need, today, for a formal and explicit rejection of the eligibility for wisdom that is based on caste and gender considerations, the Hindu tradition has identified other universal considerations that define the appropriate context and methods for sharing wisdom. These are clearly articulated in a famous Mundaka Upanishad text (1.2.12-13).

A reflective person, after examining worldly gains achieved through action, understands that the uncreated cannot be created by finite action, and becomes detached.

To understand that (the uncreated), he should go, with sacrificial twigs in hand, to a teacher who knows the Vedas and who is established in the infinite (brahman).

To that student who approaches in the proper manner, whose mind is calm and who is endowed with self-control, the wise teacher should fully impart the knowledge of brahman, through which one knows the true and imperishable Person.<sup>8</sup>

**First**, wisdom is meaningful in the context of a specific understanding and definition of the human problem. Wisdom speaks relevantly to the reflective person who has examined life's experiences and discovered that finite or created ends such as wealth, power, fame or pleasure leave us unfulfilled. The finite fails to satisfy, not merely because it is finite and hence subject to time and change, but also because underlying every finite quest is a longing for the uncreated

infinite. This grasp of the limits of human action causes what the text refers to as an attitude of detachment.

The awakening to this human problem is itself a mark of wisdom. Although such an awakening is likely to cause despair, it is a moment of opportunity. The wisdom teachings of the tradition will not speak meaningfully to the person who has not existentially reflected upon the limits of finite accomplishments. Such a person alone is a ready for the gift of wisdom (vidya dana) and this is signified by the initiative that he takes to approach a teacher.

**Second**, wisdom is properly transmitted in a specific relationship. The relationship here is between teacher and student. The qualified teacher of wisdom is one who knows the sacred texts and teaching methods and whose life's vision is centered on the infinite. A teacher who is well versed in the scripture, but has not grasped the immediacy of brahman, will transmit merely words. One who is centered in the infinite, but is not versed in the scriptural tradition will not be familiar with the methods necessary for effective teaching. Wisdom is fruitful when shared by a qualified teacher to a receptive student. Hindus, regard teachers of wisdom, as well as parents and guests, with profound respect and students are enjoined to honor them in ways that are similar to the honor accorded to the divine (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.3). A teacher shares the gift of wisdom without any expectation of personal reward in accord with the scriptural commendation of the gift "which is made to one from whom no return is expected, with the feeling that it is one's duty to give and which is given in proper time and place and to a worthy person."<sup>9</sup> Inferior gifts are made with the hope of return, reluctantly, contemptuously and to unworthy persons.

**Third**, wisdom is liberative and fruitful in a heart and mind that are sensitive to ethical values and enjoy a certain mental and emotional disposition. The verse above from the Mundaka Upanishad describes the student as calm in mind and endowed with self-control. "The knower of brahman," as Mundaka Upanishad (3.2.9) states it, "becomes brahman." In the matter of knowing

brahman, knowing is synonymous with being. One shares the nature of that which one seeks to know and so the instrument of knowledge, the mind, must conform to the object of knowledge. A seeker of wisdom must restrain the extrovert tendency of the mind and turn its attention inward. The divine is the self of all and the consequence of such an understanding, as the Bhagavadgita (6:29) puts it, is to see "the self present in all beings and all beings in the self." One grows to regard to the sufferings and joys of others as one's own and becomes active in promoting the well-being of others. A life of virtue is both the means as well as the expression of wisdom. As the Katha Upanishad (2:24) puts it, "One who has not abstained from evil conduct, whose senses are not controlled and whose mind is not concentrated and calm cannot gain the Self through wisdom."<sup>10</sup>

## **Responsible Sharing**

Specifying the appropriate context and methods and sharing wisdom implies that the Hindu tradition has also noted inappropriate and irresponsible ways of sharing. One of the central concerns of the Bhagavadgita is that inappropriate sharing and, just as important, inappropriate personal example, results in a spirituality of inaction and world-withdrawal. It enjoins the one who is sharing to avoid diligently this danger.

As the unwise act from selfish attachment to action, O Bharata, so should the wise act without selfish attachment intent on the good of the world.

Let not the wise person confuse the unwise who are attached to selfish action; by devotion to action, the wise should inspire others to act.<sup>11</sup>

The concern of the Bhagavadgita is that since spiritual wisdom implies a certain critique of self-centered activity in the world, this critique must be offered skillfully so that the result is not world-negation and renunciation of action, but an awakening to a higher and more profound motivation centered on the

wellbeing of the world. An inactive teacher, intensely denouncing selfish action in the world may be perceived easily to be negativizing the world and advocating the indifference to action. One teaches as much, or even more, by one's actions as by one's words.

The final chapter of the Bhagavadgita (18) concludes with specific instructions on appropriate and inappropriate sharing,

This teaching is not to be shared by you with anyone who is without discipline or devotion, who has no desire to listen and who denounces Me.

The implication, of course, is that discipline, devotion, interest and openness to God are necessary for appropriate sharing.

*From Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)*

"I pity the Hindu who does not see the beauty in Jesus Christ's character. I pity the Christian who does not reverence the Hindu Christ. The more a man sees of himself, the less he sees of his neighbors."

*Note:* Vivekananda was the first Hindu teacher to journey to the West and participated at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893. He was a disciple of the famous Bengali teacher, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886). This excerpt is from a lecture delivered by Vivekananda on "Christianity in India," in Detroit, on March 11, 1894. *Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.,8, p. 219.

The Hindu understanding of appropriate sharing as a dialogical relationship in which respect for the other is indispensable has become prominent in contemporary debates about mission and conversion. Concerns about inappropriate sharing have resulted in the implementation of legislation by several Indian states to prohibit conversions through coercion, allurement and fraud. In the words of the Rajasthan Anti-Conversion Bill (2006), "No person

shall convert or attempt to convert either directly or otherwise any person from one religion to another by the use of force, or by allurement or by any fraudulent means nor shall any person abet such conversion.” Hindu traditions are not unfamiliar with the religious motive of sharing one’s conviction and persuading others about its validity. To claim otherwise is not be faithful to important strands of Hinduism. At the same time the traditions of India evolved a certain ethos, largely unwritten, that guided the nature of their relationships and sharing with each other. The absence of institutionalization and centralization meant that there were no organized and systematic efforts to supplant different viewpoints. Discussions among the traditions that shared significant common elements and a common culture were, on the whole, dialogical and would even result in conversion to the other’s viewpoint. Even so, persons with different religious commitments belonged to the same larger religio/cultural community where boundaries were flexible and permeable. There was no inherent negativization of the fact of religious diversity and the latter was seen as a natural reflection of the diversity of human nature and experience. A widely shared understanding of the limits of human reason and symbols resulted in the understanding that truth always exceeded the comprehension and description of any one tradition and justified relationships of theological humility.

*From Swami Vivekananda*

“Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid. The seed is put into the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant. Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to this own law of growth.”

The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, VOL.1 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 13<sup>th</sup> ed., 1970), p.13.

*Question 3:*

*Is the intent to convert another to one's own faith opposed to mutual sharing of wisdom?*

As already noted, Hindus can understand well the impetus to share one's religious convictions and experiences with others since a similar impulse is commended in Hinduism. What particularly disturbs the Hindu is the evidence in some religions of what seems to be an obsession with converting the entire world, a suspicion that this is the most fundamental motive underlying all words and actions. We can all agree that meaningful faith is not awakened and nurtured thorough aggressive proselytizing or exploitation of the vulnerability of others in conditions of tragedy and need. Meaningful sharing can only occur in a

context where we recognize the fact that the other is also a person of living, faith with a tradition that speaks profoundly of God, and with whom one can enter into a mutually enriching relationship of learning and enrichment. Sharing, as the Bhagavadgita instructs, should be a response to the interest of the other and with openness to his witness. The sharing of faiths cannot be done in ways that are arrogant, militant and monological. Perhaps Gandhi describes better than any other the sharing of a faith claim in his famous analogy:

“A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon. If it had human understanding and if it could engage a number of preachers, the preachers would not be able to sell more roses than the fragrance itself could. The fragrance of religious and spiritual life is much finer and subtler than that of a rose.”

### **Specific Wisdoms – What Does My Tradition Have to Share and Receive?**

As a consequence of the antiquity and interaction among India's diverse religious and cultural traditions, Hinduism has developed approaches and insights that are pluralistic in character and may be of value in communities where religious diversity is now a fact of life and a source of tension.

The different Hindu religious systems, as already noted above, are referred to as darshanas (literally, ways of seeing). These different ways of seeing express diverse temporal, spatial, and cultural locations as well as diverse identities, individually, and as members of groups. Diversity, in other words, is a natural and inevitable expression of the human condition and needs to be accepted as such. The classic metaphor of the five blind men who touched

various parts of an elephant and described it differently articulates well this human reality. One touched the tail and described the elephant as a giant broom, while another touched the leg and described the elephant as a pillar, and so on. Each advanced a reasonable description of the elephant, but each was limited by the partiality and specificity of his own window of experience.

Along with arguments for the acceptance of religious diversity rooted in the diversity of human nature and experiences, Hindu traditions have also called attention to the limits of human language. God is always more than can be defined, described or understood with finite human mind: descriptions will, of necessity, be diverse. This is the point of the often-quoted Rg Veda (1.64.46) text: "The One Being the wise call by many names." The text is a comment on the finitude of all human language in relation to the absolute. In trying to describe it, language will be diverse, since the absolute exceeds all descriptions. Each word, each symbol is inadequate and reflects the historical and cultural conditions under which it occurs. The consequence is an epistemological and philosophical humility expressing itself in a theology of pluralism that can accommodate different views about God. Hinduism reminds us that our discourse about God should not be absolutized and our symbols must not be confused with the reality to which these point.

This Hindu relativization of human language and symbols in relation to an unlimited divine is a good example, I believe, of an insight that can be shared or "nuggetized" without embracing an entire Hindu worldview. Although religious traditions, on the whole, affirm the infinity of the divine, the implications of this in relation to human limits are not always prominent in discussion. Other significant teachings of the Hindu tradition may not be so easily "exportable." Examples may include the Hindu understanding of the human religious problem to be one of avidya (ignorance), and its emphasis on divine immanence and on the equal and identical existence of God in all beings.

As far as learning from other traditions is concerned, Hinduism can be challenged and enriched by the efforts of other traditions to relate religious insights and teachings to the conditions of existence in human society and be inspired by efforts to transform structures of oppression and injustice. Many influential interpretations of the relationship between God and the world in the Hindu tradition result in a devaluation of the world and the meaning of life within it. The world is sometimes likened to a sense-illusion that we conjure and experience because of our ignorance of God. It is equated with *maya*, a term that has historical overtones of illusion, deceptivity, and untruth. The denial of reality to the world is closely connected to disclaiming its value and meaning. When the reality and value of the world is in doubt, the significance of issues within it, such as justice and equality, do not become important.

*Question 4:*

*How can we reconcile better the differences that exist between spiritual ideals and unjust and oppressive social structures?*

Some of the clearest examples of oppressive and unjust structures in Hindu society are those related to caste and gender. In spite of various legal measures enacted by the Indian government to prevent caste discrimination and to provide better opportunities for those who are victims, the phenomenon of untouchability persists in contemporary India and Hindus continue to define the meaning of Hindu identity over and against those who are deemed unequal and, for this reason, marginalized. The sharp distinctions between self and other, the boundaries of the pure and impure, are still drawn sharply in Indian villages, where the character of human and economic relationships are still governed by the hierarchies of caste and where reports of violence against persons of lower castes are common.

Hinduism, like other world religions that developed in patriarchal culture reflects assumptions about male gender supremacy that have been oppressive to Hindu women. Gender injustice manifests itself in the fact that a disproportionate percentage of the illiterate in India are women, the abortion of female fetuses because of a preference for male offspring, the stigmatization of widows, and the custom of dowry that depletes the economic resources of families into which girls are born and that makes them feel guilty for being women.

In highlighting and employing the liberative resources of Hinduism to struggle against oppression, Hinduism can learn from movements in other traditions, such as Engaged Buddhism and Christian Liberation Theology, that see justice and spirituality as inseparable. These movements emphasize that the interior life of holiness and piety must find outward expression in a passion for justice. These two dimensions of authentic spirituality mutually nourish and are incomplete without each other. Without the concern for justice, personal piety becomes obsessively self-centered. At the same time, attentiveness to and cultivation of the interior spiritual life nourish and provide the motivation for the work of justice. Mutual religious sharing on these issues can be immensely beneficial.

## **ON FORGIVENESS AND LOVE**

One of the central insights of the Hinduism, as noted above, consistently proclaimed by its diverse traditions, is the unity of all existence in God. God is envisioned as the common and unifying reality in all created beings. The Hindu tradition understands God to be the one truth in each one of us, uniting us with each other and with all things.

The non-dual tradition of Hinduism (Advaita) articulates the most radical doctrine of the unity of existence in its denial of any ontological dualism and in its view that reality is not two. Brahman, the infinite, constitutes the essential nature of all that exists and is present in all beings as the very ground of selfhood (atman). The discerning person therefore, sees herself in all and all in herself. This Advaita teaching may be thought of as the spiritual parallel to the belief of science that life, in its totality, descended from a single cell. The cells of all living things share a basic similarity, including the same DNA code and similar amino acids. Science suggests a common origin and nature for the countless expressions of life.

The significance that Hinduism grants to the truth of life's unity may be appreciated from the fact that its discernment is considered to the hallmark of wisdom and liberation. We are invited to recognize the equality and identity of the divine in ourselves and in all beings. The Bhagavadgita (18:20) commends the knowledge that enables a person to see, "one imperishable Being in all beings, undivided in separate beings." A false and inferior way of seeing reality is to regard existing things as isolated, separate and independent of each other and to see in all beings "separate entities of various kinds (18:21)." We are not to deny the uniqueness of individuals, communities and cultures, but affirm the fundamental unity that underlies all. This Hindu understanding of life's unity is the justification of its regard for the entire world as a single family (vasudhaiva kutumbakam). It is also the source of its core values such as ahimsa (non-

injury), daya (compassion) and dana (generosity). Compassion is an integral expression of the vision of life's unity and fundamental interrelatedness.

The Hindu understanding of life's unity is all-inclusive. No one can be excluded, since the divine, who constitutes the unifying truth, does not exclude anyone and anything. "God," as the Bhagavadgita 13:28, puts it, "abides equally in all beings." This is the Hindu antidote to our human tendency to deny the personhood, worth and dignity of the other. It is from the perspective of life's unity that we question exploitative and unjust human relationships, which foster conflict, and divisiveness and it is the same perspective, which urges us to cross boundaries and work for forgiveness and reconciliation. If our world is indeed a single family (vasudhaiva kutumbakam), both spiritually and biologically, the quality of our relationships should reflect the moral and ethical implications of this truth. Isa Upanishad (6) reminds us that the wise person who beholds all beings in the self and the self in all beings is liberated from hate. From the profundity of the Hindu understanding of the nature of life's unity, estrangement from another is estrangement from one's own self and the hate of the other is the hate of one's self. To be in conflict with another is also to be in conflict with one's self. To inflict suffering on another is to violate one's own self.

The Hindu tradition assumes that a person who is truly grasped by the truth of life's unity in God will find delight in unselfishly striving for the well being of others. Ignorance of life's unity, on the other hand, expresses itself in greed, ego-centeredness, and the readiness to inflict suffering on others through reckless exploitation. This is the reason why the traditions of Hinduism have almost uniformly described the fundamental human problem to be one of ignorance or, in Sanskrit, avidya. Human conflict and suffering are rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of reality. Ignorance can be overcome and when it is and when we are awakened to the truth of life's unity in the divine, there will be a corresponding transformation in the quality of our relationships.

The view that the human problem at its most fundamental level is one of ignorance and that this ignorance expresses itself in our failure to discern the unity of all existence is central to the development of a Hindu approach to forgiveness, and reconciliation. It enables us to see the other, the one with whom we disagree and with whom we may be locked in struggle, as a fellow human being. We cannot dehumanize the one in whom we see ourselves or long for his or her humiliation. This approach was at the heart of the Gandhian philosophy and practice of non-violent resistance (satyagraha). Even in the midst of the strongest disagreements, Gandhi never sought to win support for his case by demonizing his opponent. He understood clearly that when a conflict is constructed sharply in terms of we and they, victory and defeat, the doors to reconciliation and a transformed community are shut. One is left with an enemy, a defeated enemy perhaps, and the next round of the conflict is only postponed. Gandhi included the opponent in the circle of his identity.

In restraining a disciple from a desire for revenge and violence, the saintly Hindu teacher, Ramana Maharishi, asked a provocative question. "If your teeth suddenly bite your tongue, do you knock them out in consequence?" Ramana's question implies the truth of life's unity as well as the reality of ignorance. The teeth and tongue are part of the same body and the biting, however, painful, is more in the nature of an error. The consequence is a disposition to understanding and compassion, without which reconciliation is impossible.

*Question 5:*

*Does the Hindu understanding of a shared identity enhance the possibility for forgiveness and reconciliation?*

Belief in ignorance as the source of suffering disposes one to an attitude of forgiveness since it orients one to look beyond the immediate action to its underlying causes. We are more likely to respond with hate when we believe that those who hurt us have done so because of intentional malevolence. If we see the action as rooted in ignorance and a flawed understanding of reality, our attitude to the other will be compassionate. We are liberated from hate, bitterness and the desire to inflict pain on the other and we are open to reconciliation.

“The conduct of the good to the wicked is similar to that of the sandal tree to the axe, - for the fragrant sandal gives its perfume to the axe that cuts it. For this reason, sandal-wood is loved and desired by all and enjoys the honor of being applied on the heads of divine icons.”

Sri Ramacharitamanasa, trans. R.C.Prasad (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991). My translation.

*Note:* These are the opening words of Rama , in the Ramacharitamanasa of Tulasidasa, in response to a question asking him to clarify the differences between the virtuous and evil human beings.

One of the finest examples of the practice of such an approach occurs in the Ramayana of Valmiki. After the defeat of Ravana, Hanuman sought the permission of Sita to destroy the female servants of Ravana who had guarded and taunted her during her imprisonment. Sita, however, saw them as victims like her and offered the superior ideal of forgiveness and reconciliation. "Who would be angry," asks Sita, "with women who are dependent on a monarch who is their superior and who act on other's advice as mere servants or slaves? I wish in compassion to protect the slaves of Ravana." Forgiveness and compassion are attributes of the divine in Hinduism.

"A superior being does not render evil for evil, this is a maxim one should observe; the ornament of virtuous persons is their conduct. One should never harm the wicked or the good or even criminals meriting death. A noble soul will ever exercise compassion towards even those who enjoy injuring others or those of cruel deeds when they are actually committing them – for who is without fault?

The Ramayana of Valmiki, trans., Hari Prasad Shastri, 3. Vols (London: Shanti Sadan, 1959), Vol. 3, pp.331-332.

*Note:* These words were spoken by Sita, in the Ramayana, in response to Hanuman who wanted to slay the servants of Ravana who imprisoned and tortured her in Lanka.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **The Hindu Temple of Maple Grove, Minnesota**

In April 5, 2006, just months before it was scheduled for a grand opening, the new Hindu Temple in Maple Grove, Minnesota was viciously attacked. In the stillness and obscurity of darkness, vandals broke into the building, bashed walls and windows and, most painfully for the Hindu community, smashed sacred icons (murtis) that were awaiting ritual installation on the altar. The scene was one of devastation and brought tears to heart and eyes of who visited the temple during the days following the destruction. The new temple was over thirty years in the making and a source of pride to all. The damage was estimated to be over \$200,000.

After a persistent police investigation and the offer of a monetary reward by the Hindu Temple, two young men, ages 19 and 20 were arrested for the crime. They quickly confessed and a date was set for sentencing. On the day of sentencing, a Hindu Temple representative, Dr. Shashikant Sane, appeared and spoke on behalf of the young men. Speaking against the ethic of "an eye for an eye," Dr. Sane, pleaded for a light sentence and the opportunity for the young men to become good and productive citizens and not hardened criminals in the prison system. In the view of the Hindu community, the problem of the young men as one of ignorance and not one of evil. Hennepin County District Judge, Kevin Burke agreed. Burke confessed that he had been inclined to give a 60-day jail sentence to both men, but, on account of the plea from the Hindu community, he sentenced them to serve 30 days in prison and to pay restitution of \$96,454.

*Question 6:*

*What is the significance of justice in relation to love and forgiveness? Can we conceive of forgiveness without justice?*

On August 27, 2006, prior to their sentencing, the two youths returned to the temple to seek the forgiveness of the Hindu community. They were welcomed and greeted with hugs, a meal, and teachings about basic Hindu values such as self-control and non-violence. The purpose of their visit to the temple, representatives explained, was not to shame or humiliate them. Hindus acknowledged that the young men were also suffering as a consequence of what they had done and that the purpose of the visit was to help healing on both sides. Speaking to the young men during their visit to the temple, Dr. Sane said, "Karma is the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny. We divide between evil and evildoers. Your actions were inappropriate, and you're responsible for those actions. That, I cannot stop. But as human beings, you are nothing but divine. You can make the right choices and achieve the potential that God has bestowed upon you."

## **Further Reading**

Diana Eck, Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras

Stephen P. Huyler, Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion

S. Radhakrishnan, The Hindu Way of Life

Anantanand Rambachan, The Advaita Worldview: God, World and Humanity

Arvind Sharma, A Guide to Hindu Spirituality

Mark Tully. India's Unending Journey.

## Notes:

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- 1 See *Ramacaritamanasa*, trans. R.C. Prasad (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), pp.478-479. Rama is identified by Tulasidasa with God and presented as a divine incarnation (*avatara*).
- 2 My translation.
- 3 *The Bhagavadgita*, trans. S. Radhakrishnan (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
- 4 My translation.
- 5 See also *Bhagavadgita* 10:20 and 18:61.
- 6 See *Upanishads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- 7 Although the limits of human understanding in relation to divine are noted in Hindu sacred texts, the implication of this insight for learning from others is not always articulated.
- 8 My translation.
- 9 *Bhagavadgita* 17: 20.
- 10 My translation.
- 11 *Bhagavadgita* 3:25-26. My translation.