

Interfaith Vegan Coalition

HINDUISM: ADVAITA VEDANTIN ADVOCACY KIT



DEMONSTRATING THE HINDU IDEALS OF AHIMSA (HARMLESSNESS) AND UNIVERSAL LOVING KINDNESS

RESOURCES



Hinduism or “Sanatana Dharma” (the eternal way) is a vast compendium of shared stories, concepts, rituals, cosmology, textual resources and sacred sites, all subject to varied interpretations. There is no central authority interpreting the texts of Hinduism and as such, Hinduism is a religion with spiritual freedom at its core. Nevertheless, there is an unmistakable reverence for Nature and animals in the foundational stories and rituals of Hinduism, which makes Hinduism resonate with Veganism. Indeed, the 2015 Hindu Declaration on Climate Change is the first major religion declaration that calls for the worldwide adoption of a plant-based vegan diet!

In this kit, we consider the stories and rituals of Hinduism from an Advaita (non-dual) Vedantin perspective, in which our interpretations are all symbolic.



STORIES

THE COSMIC FIG

The Cosmic Fig Tree story is the foundational story that establishes a Hindu's relationship with Nature and animals. It is the exact equivalent of the Knowledge Tree story in the Bible in which Adam and Eve get banished from the Garden of Eden for having tasted the apple from that tree. As in most Hindu stories that use fantastic imagery to depict symbolic representations, the Knowledge tree of the Vedas is the upside down Cosmic fig tree with its roots in the sky and its fruits on the ground! In the story, a rich uncle plays the role of the serpent in the Bible and children play the role of Adam and Eve.

The story begins with some children playing with sticks, stones and rag dolls on the floor of their hut in the middle of the forest when the rich uncle comes to visit them. The uncle tells the children, "What are you doing playing with these trifles when the Cosmic Fig Tree is right outside your hut? Go out under the tree and wish for anything you want and it will give it to you. Then you can be playing with real toys instead of these trifles."

The children don't believe him. How can such a wish-fulfilling tree even exist? So they wait until the uncle leaves and then they rush out to the tree and start wishing.

They wish for sweets and lo and behold, they get them! But they gorge on the sweets and they get stomachaches. They wish for fancy toys and they get them. But they play with those toys and get bored. Fancier toys lead to greater boredom. This is because the tree always grants wishes in dualities: what was wished for, along with its exact opposite, for that's how the material universe is built, of dualities only. They had to accept both at the same time. But the children didn't know that. All they knew is that they couldn't stop wishing under the tree and the more they wished, the more miserable they were!

Then the children grow to become young adults and they still come to the tree and wish under it all the time. Now it is Sex, Fame, Money and Power, the four main fruits of the Cosmic Fig Tree that they want. As always, the tree grants them what they wish for, along with the built-in opposite. With sex comes jealousies, with fame comes isolation, with money comes worries and with power comes palace intrigues. And the net result is just more misery and suffering for the young adults. Now the wish-granting power of the tree has become widely known and there is quite a throng of people wishing under the tree. And they are all equally miserable and suffer throughout their lives as they wish and wish under the tree.

By and by, as they become old men and women, the children congregate under the tree to contemplate their spent lives. They are now in three main groups. The first group says, "This tree ruined our lives! We were so happy when we didn't know about this tree. It has all been a hoax and a farce."

They were fools, for they hadn't understood the tree.

The second group says, "We must have been wishing for all the wrong things throughout our lives. If we could go back and wish for different things, we would have lived much happier lives."

They were bigger fools, for they had understood less than nothing about the tree.

Those in the third group were the most foolish of the lot for they come under the tree and say, "We are so miserable we wish we were dead." And the obliging tree grants them their death wish, but they are immediately reborn underneath the same tree, for the tree always grants wishes in dualities.

Meanwhile a lame child has been watching all this from inside the window of the hut. He also wanted to go under the tree and wish for a good leg so that he could walk, but he was pushed away by the throngs of people crowding under the tree and he wasn't strong enough to get through. But as he watches from the window, he is awestruck by the spectacle of the wishing under the tree. He sees his friends wishing for sweets and clutching their stomachs with pain. He sees them grabbing their fancy toys and getting bored with them. He sees the adults wishing for sex, fame, money and power and suffering through their built-in opposites. As he witnesses the misery and suffering of the wishers, he begins to understand the true nature of the brilliant cosmic swindle that is being enacted under the tree. With that understanding, he feels a well of compassion rise up from within him, not only for the wishers but also for all those trying to get under the tree and for all the creatures that were affected by the wishing. Through that gratuitous, all-encompassing compassion, the lame child loses his desire to wish. He becomes detached from the tree and is the happiest of the lot.

Compassion plus detachment leads to the true pursuit of happiness.

In the Upanishads, which are commentaries on the Vedas, the Hindu sages tell us that the wishing child (Participant) and the watching child (Witness) are inside each one of us. This is the Witness-Participant duality within us, since we are flesh and blood and part of the material universe and made up of dualities as well. It is up to us to enable the Witness over the Participant and thus be in control of our own happiness. And in every meditation technique that is practiced in the East, the purpose is to elevate the Witness over the Participant within us.

But this seems to indicate that happiness comes from not participating in the Universe. Indeed, this is precisely the question that the chief protagonist in the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna, asks God in the form of Lord Krishna:

"Why should I fight the battle? Or rather, why should I wish under the Cosmic Fig tree? Why don't I simply meditate upon you, my Lord, and be happy?"

And Lord Krishna replied, "Life is about action and you must participate in the Universe." And then he taught Arjuna how to wish under the tree and remain happy while doing so.

You see, those fools who were wishing under the tree in the story were miserable because they were wishing for themselves. If they had been wishing for the benefit of all Life, while renouncing the fruits of the tree for themselves, then they would have been perfectly happy while fully participating in the Universe. It is altruism that leads to the true Pursuit of Happiness, not rank selfishness. As such, selflessness is the highest form of selfishness!

And from a species standpoint, we are the only species with access to the Knowledge tree of the Universe, whether it is the Apple tree of the Bible or the Cosmic Fig Tree of the Vedas. We must use this Knowledge tree to wish for the benefit of all Life, while renouncing the fruits of the wishing for ourselves, in order to overcome our environmental crises as well as our collective suffering. We are banished from Eden for tasting the fruit of the tree for ourselves rather than using the fruit for the benefit of all Life.

This is the moral transformation that we need for our times with respect to our treatment of animals: we are here to serve them, not to exploit them. Thus the foundational story of Hinduism (or for that matter, the Bible) contains an unmistakable call for Veganism.

THE STORIES OF LORD KRISHNA



The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the foundational epics of Hinduism. Both these epics contain curiously similar beginnings with immaculate conceptions for the main characters, thus allowing for symbolic interpretations. Like all the great epics of the ancient world, they reveal the Truth at many levels, both symbolic and factual. Between them, the Mahabharata is the more complex epic as it is set in more recent times. The Mahabharata is sung entirely in verse and it is seven times longer than the Iliad and the Odyssey put together. It contains the stories of Lord Krishna, who is well known for his affinity for dairy products. Indeed, most Hindus justify their consumption of dairy products because of the stories of Lord Krishna raised among cowherds. However, many of these stories of Lord Krishna are clearly symbolic and they should not be taken literally:

As a child, Lord Krishna lifted the Govardhan mountain with his little finger in order to shelter the people of Gokul from a thunderstorm. This symbolizes that Lord Krishna will shelter us from the trials and tribulations of daily life if we surrender to Him.

Lord Krishna danced on the hood of a seven-headed snake, Kaliya, and persuaded the snake to stop infesting Gokul. This symbolizes that our devotion to Lord Krishna will help us overcome the seven obstacles: fear, guilt, shame, grief, lies, delusions and attachments, and thus open our seven Chakras to attain enlightenment. Then Lord Krishna can play through each of us (the flute with the seven open holes) to create beautiful music.



Lord Krishna loved butter, which symbolizes the solid mind fixed on God. Milk is the fluid mind that has doubts about God. To milk, we add some curd, the thought of God, and let it curdle for a while. Then we churn this curdled milk to obtain butter, the solid mind fixed on God. When we clarify this butter, we get ghee, which is the clarified solid mind that is fixed on God. We light our diyas, the holy lamps, with ghee to signify enlightenment.

We, Hindus, don't lift mountains with our little fingers just because Lord Krishna did so. We don't dance on the hoods of seven-headed snakes to imitate Lord Krishna. Therefore, we don't have to eat butter just because Lord Krishna loved butter.

RITUALS, CEREMONIES



The puja in Hindu temples is symbolic of our surrender to God. The puja offerings contain some betel leaves to signify the body, fragrant flowers to signify the mind thinking of God, seedless fruits (e.g., bananas) to signify the eternal soul, and a coconut to signify the ego. Thus, we surrender our body, mind and soul to God and then shatter the coconut, our ego, to spill the coconut water, the fluid mind that has doubts about God. What is left is the coconut fruit, which is the solid mind fixed on God. When we refine this coconut fruit, we get coconut oil, which is the clarified solid mind fixed on God. Therefore, coconut oil can be a vegan substitute for ghee to light the lamps in our homes and temples, since it has the same significance as ghee.



On special occasions such as the death anniversary of ancestors, Hindus cook up a feast and offer it to animals and birds before partaking of the food themselves. A daily Hindu ritual is to draw a "kolam" on the front porch every morning - a form of painting that is drawn by using rice powder. In olden days, Kolams were drawn with coarse rice flour, so the ants would not have to walk too far or too long for a meal. The rice powder also invited birds and other small creatures to eat it, thus welcoming other beings into one's home and everyday life: a daily tribute to our harmonious co-existence with the world around us.



ARTICLES

Hindu Beliefs

The Hindu believes that God exists in each and every one of us. When we greet each other when we first meet, we say "Namaste" i.e. I honor the light within you. In that statement it seems obvious that God must exist in all of our fellow human beings. Extending that even further, God must also exist in all the plants, in the trees, in the birds and in the animals - because they are all God's creatures. Thus Hindus think it is important to treat all creatures with compassion and respect as if they are each a part of us.

The Upanishads say about God, "Thou art woman, Thou art man, Thou art the dark blue bee, and the green parrot with red eyes. Thou hast lightning as thy child, thou art the seasons and the seas."

Ahimsa and the Holy Cow

If you say that you would never deliberately hurt an innocent being unnecessarily, then by definition, you are Vegan. The act of deliberately hurting an innocent being unnecessarily is "Himsa" and its negation is "Ahimsa". Thus Veganism is Ahimsa, and it is the cornerstone of many Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Ahimsa is extolled in the Vedas and the Upanishads and it is the first of five parts of the first step (Pancha Yama) of the eight steps of Yoga in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra.

So how did Hindus who practiced Ahimsa justify the consumption of cow's milk over the years? The cow and the bull played special roles in ancient Hindu lives. They provided labor for plowing fields, manure for nourishing the soil and milk for the daily sustenance of the Hindus. Until a few decades ago, the daily diet of Hindus consisted mainly of locally grown fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and grains, with limited variety. This limitation necessitated the occasional consumption of dairy products to maintain the health of the Hindus. This is why even Mahatma Gandhi couldn't adopt a strictly plant-based vegan diet less than a century ago as he clearly stated in his Keynote address to the London Vegetarians Union in 1931. However, these days, we have access to an incredible variety of fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains and seeds in our supermarkets, which have allowed millions of people to adopt strictly plant-based diets even though they are not as disciplined or possess the self-control of a Mahatma Gandhi. The American Dietetic Association has now clearly stated that it is unnecessary to consume animal foods of any kind at any stage of our life cycle.

In olden days, as recognition for providing the necessary life-sustenance of ancient Hindus, they treated the cow with reverence, as their mother. However, this mother is now being abused tremendously in industrial farming facilities today. Unlike the ancient Hindus who took the excess milk for human consumption after the calf had finished drinking to his fill, industrial farms separate the calf from the mother within two days of birth in order to extract all of the milk for human consumption. Despite such extreme measures to maximize production, our domestic animals now consume FIVE times as much food as all human beings put together.

If the same dairy production were to be achieved using “Ahimsa Dairy” methods, then that would necessitate an order of magnitude increase in the global bovine population! The situation we face today is akin to that of a weigh-lifter, lifting five times his weight above his head, discovering that he is on quicksand and that he’s sinking. Knowing that his weight alone is too much for the quicksand to bear, what is the first thing that he should do?

DROP the weight, of course!

In other words, go Vegan!

BOOKS

Sailesh Rao, ***Carbon Dharma: The Occupation of Butterflies***, CreateSpace Publishing, 2011.

Sailesh Rao, ***Carbon Yoga: The Vegan Metamorphosis***, CreateSpace Publishing, 2016.

DOCUMENTARIES

The Human Experiment on Netflix

Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret on Netflix

What The Health on Netflix

HINDU VEGAN ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

- a) Jayesh Patel
- b) Rishi Patel
- c) Boe Devi
- d) Dolly Vyas-Ahuja
- e) Dina Ahern
- f) Darshana Mazumdar
- g) Shaswati Ganguly
- h) Amala Akinneni
- i) Sailesh Rao
- j) Sonit Nangia
- k) Ashutosh Nirvadyachari

Follow-Up Support for You
For ideas, support, advice, please email:

veganspirituality@idausa.org
activistsupport@idausa.org

