

*The Tolerance
of
Hinduism*

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Authors' Notes:

“The Tolerance of Hinduism” has been uniquely emphasized in a fictional story surrounding many of the sacred teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita, commonly called the Song of God. When I first learned that great thinkers such as Albert Einstein, Thoreau, T.S. Eliot, Charles Wilkins, Emerson, Albert Schweitzer, and Mahatma Gandhi had contemplated and deliberated over the divine words of Krishna (incarnate God), I was easily drawn to think that the Gita must be something thoughtful and highly inspirational to attract the attention of such great men. It was not until I read a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita fifteen years ago, translated by Christopher Isherwood and Prabhavananda, that I concluded that the knowledge revealed was enlightening and worthy of appreciation. Having gained a fair amount of knowledge from a comparative study of religion, I sincerely felt it was my duty to share some of it with people from all walks of life. To emphasize some of the teachings from the Bhagavad-Gita in this book, a number of verses have been grouped together at various parts of the story. Many are going to find that by occasionally reading some of these sacred verses, it will help to strengthen them mentally to cope with many of their sorrowful experiences.

The Tolerance of Hinduism

Herman Schneider was only thirty-two years of age when he was diagnosed as having the AIDS virus. He was one of many doctors who had volunteered to go to a village in India to tend to a number of people with AIDS. How Herman contracted the deadly disease left many of his co-workers guessing, as well as why Herman no longer showed up for work, and was not willing to share any information about how he got infected. Some nurses who knew Herman well seemed to think that he had gotten the virus from tainted blood. They claimed that for quite some time, Herman had been taking samples of blood from his patients to do private studies in hope that he could find a cure for the disease.

By now the disease was in its final stages and Herman, disheartened by what had happened, feared that he would eventually die from the deadly virus, since no one at the time had come up with any medication to counteract the disease. In a melancholy mood, he began to think that he would no longer be able to tend to his patients, and how greatly distressed his parents in Germany would become when they found out that he only had a few months or perhaps a year to live.

One day while Herman was sitting alone at home thinking about the sorrows of life, a nurse named Sunita who was part of Herman's medical team came to visit him. Seeing Sunita dressed in a white sari, and knowing that she was a Hindu by faith, Herman gently clasped his hands as in prayer to greet her. He then offered her a chair, but Sunita politely refused, saying that her visit would be a short one, as she had only come to offer him a gift. She then carefully unwrapped a red cloth to reveal a white marble statue of Jesus Christ, and gently handed it to Herman saying, "I

believe you are a Christian. I hope this humble gift will remind you of your faith in this worrisome period of your life.” Herman, surprised by the gift, carefully examined it before commenting to Sunita that her gift must be an expensive one. In good spirits, Sunita affectionately told him not to worry about the price, since a Hindu priest had given it to her free of charge.

Even though Herman was a Christian, he had little time to reflect on his faith, since he had spent most of his time first studying to become a doctor and later tending to people who were very ill. Though he was brought up in a Christian home, he was not the religious type who frequently attended church or prayed to God.

Herman noticed that Sunita had a small wooden crucifix around her neck. He was puzzled when he saw this, and wondered how Sunita could be a Hindu when she wore a crucifix. Curious to find out if she was embracing two different religions, Herman asked her what faith she belonged to. Sunita replied that she was a Hindu. Brooding over this, Herman concluded that Sunita was open-minded, as judging from the gift she gave him, it seemed that though she was a Hindu, she wanted to make him a better Christian but not to uproot him from his faith.

Herman, not knowing anything about Hinduism, politely asked Sunita to explain what a Hindu was. Surprisingly, Sunita said that she could not answer his question with certainty; however, if he would like to know, she could take him to meet a Hindu sage who lived about two miles away. Sunita claimed that this sage was a wise man who had statues of many deities, including Jesus Christ. Herman began to think that there must be a reason why the sage kept so many idols. Thinking that the wise man might be a follower of Christ, and that it was also an opportunity for him to learn something about the Hindu faith, he politely asked Sunita to take him to meet the sage.

About two hours later when Herman and Sunita arrived at the sage's home, Herman was a bit surprised when he discovered that the holy man lived in a mid-sized house made of logs, the roof of which was formed from the tightly knit branches of a tree. As Herman walked cautiously around the house, looking at the way it was made, Sunita entered the home of the sage to tell him that a visitor had come to see him. A minute later, the sage in a pleasant mood hurriedly came out of his home to greet Herman. With a broad smile, he introduced himself as Sudama, and then expressed how happy he felt when Sunita told him that Herman was a medical doctor. While they greeted each other, Sunita intervened to tell the sage about some of the voluntary work Herman had done in India, tending to many who were seriously ill. Sunita then courteously said that she was leaving to return home because she had to attend work later that day.

After Sunita departed, Sudama took the opportunity to tell Herman that he had been suffering from pains in his lower back for over ten years and was hopeful that doctors would one day find a cure for his complaint. Having said this, the sage noticed that Herman had a worried look. Concerned that he might have said something that offended him, he quickly asked Herman what was his reason for coming to see him. With a disheartened look, Herman replied, "My heart is filled with sadness, since I only have a short time to live because of a deadly disease I was diagnosed with. I am not here to ask that you pray for me, but all I ask of you is to tell me about your Hindu faith so that I could learn why it is so tolerant." The sage, astonished to hear that Herman was not well, became concerned, and quickly told him to come into his house where there was a bed for him to sit or lie on.

Upon entering the home of the sage, Herman was somewhat surprised to see that with the exception of the bed he had mentioned, there was no other furniture. As he

cautiously walked around, he saw that the floor of the house was covered with sheets of cloth, and there was an altar which had statues of many gods and goddesses. Among these deities, Herman was astonished to see a white marble statue of Jesus Christ and a small wooden crucifix. Baffled, he politely asked Sudama, “Why do Hindus worship so many gods?” Sudama replied that Hindus only worship one God, and all the statues of numerous deities he saw represented various attributes of God. Gently, Sudama picked up the marble statue of Jesus Christ and kissed it. He then said to Herman that this statue reminded him a great deal about the sacrifice one has to make to accomplish peace on Earth, and about God’s love for humanity. Gently, Sudama put down the statue of Christ and then picked up the statue of a Hindu goddess he referred to as Lakshmi, saying that this goddess reminded him that God is the Divine mother of all and the bringer of good fortune. Sudama then picked up another statue of a pot-bellied man with an elephant head called Ganesha. Holding it carefully with both hands, he said to Herman that this deity reminded him that God is the bestower of knowledge and the remover of all obstacles. Reaching out once more, Sudama picked up the statue of a monkey-like deity whom he referred to as Hanuman that reminded him of moral values such as loyalty, friendship, trust and devotion. Lastly, Sudama picked up the statue of a deity he referred to as Lord Krishna, the one he claimed to be incarnate God. He said that the divine words of Krishna are reported in a holy book titled the Bhagavad-Gita, commonly called the Song of God. Sudama affectionately said to Herman that just as the way Christians treat a crucifix of Christ with reverence or a statue of mother Mary with sanctity, so too millions of Hindus show reverence for what reminds them of certain attributes of God. He politely told Herman that the list of deities he had mentioned were various names of one God.

Trying to give Herman a better understanding of his faith, Sudama said that each week he held a prayer service at his home which was attended by a few families in the neighborhood. Apart from this weekly service, there were special days during the year, when his fellow worshippers would come together to observe a specific religious or feast day. He said that paying special homage to God on days such as **Janam Ashtmi** (which celebrates the coming of Lord Krishna), **Deepavali/Diwali** (Festival of Lights, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil) and **Phagwah/Holi** (Spring Festival) reminds Hindus about their faith and tradition.

While listening to the sage, Herman appeared a bit confused, as practically everything he heard was new to him. Hearing the names of so many deities, he affectionately asked Sudama to tell him, what did Hindus call the one Supreme God they believe in? Sudama politely replied, Brahman, and then referred to God as That One which is infinite, all-pervading, unborn, undying, and has no gender. The sage said that Brahman (God) is the single source of everything, and has two attributes, commonly referred to as the *impersonal* and the *personal*.

When one hears the term **Nirguna** Brahman it means that God is the eternal unmanifest without description, form or qualities. He explained that the universe in its entirety is the infinite womb of Brahman, and we all exist in Brahman. Here, the sage made it clear that this does not mean that one should worship every aspect of nature, for seeking the path of knowledge through the discipline of understanding is more important. Sudama went on to say that everything originates from Brahman, which has the power to create, absorb and re-create again. Brahman quickens all beings to life and sets everything in motion, flowing through everything everywhere. He added that Brahman is birthless, limitless, immeasurable and

everlasting, and to think of the infinite diversity of Brahman is to reflect on what Lord Krishna said:

“O Arjuna! Nothing is higher than Me. All that exists hangs on Me, like clusters of pearls on a string.

I am the taste in water, Arjuna, the light of the moon and sun, the syllable AUM in all the Vedas, the sound in space, and the courage in men.

I am the pure scent in earth, the heat in fire, the life in all beings, and the penance in ascetics.

The entire universe is pervaded by My eternal form, all creatures exist in Me, but I do not exist within them.

Behold My divine mystery, these creatures are not in Me (physically), Myself brings them into existence, and sustains them without being in them.

I am the source of all and everything proceeds from Me; wise ones who understand this are devoted to Me.

Just as the mighty wind, blowing always, constantly remains in space, so all beings exist in Me, know it to be so.

One who knows Me as unborn, beginningless, and the Supreme Lord of all the worlds is freed from delusion and all sins.”

The sage then went on to say that when the term **Saguna** Brahman is used, it means God with attributes as having a form - a personal and loving God being called by

various names and so forth. This personal aspect of God reminded him of what Lord Krishna said:

“O Arjuna! Whenever righteousness decays and chaos prevails, I manifest Myself.

To protect the good and destroy evildoers, as well as to establish sacred duty, I appear age after age.

One knowing Me as the enjoyer of sacrifices and penances, the Supreme Lord of all worlds, and the friend of all beings, one attains peace.

Love and adore Me with all your heart; always worship Me, bow to Me, and you shall come to Me, I promise this, because you are dear to Me.”

He pointed out that in the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna is the human form in which the impersonal God, Brahman, becomes the personal as a beloved friend of Arjuna. After explaining this, the sage said to Herman that the word Brahman should not be confused with the word Brahma (Creator deity) or the word Brahmin/Brāhman (priestly) since their meanings and pronunciations are different.

Sudama said that in Hinduism there are many paths to the Almighty and people are free to choose their own path. He said that Hinduism is partly based on the original religion of light-skinned nomadic tribes called the Aryans who settled in India approximately 3,500 years ago. The language used by the Aryans in India was an early form of Sanskrit, similar to other Indo-European languages, and the hymns from the Rig Veda, mainly praising the Aryan Gods, were from their own religion. When the Aryans first came to India, they met people called the Dravidians who already lived there. The Aryans did not like the Dravidians who were dark-skinned and considered inferior, but in the course of

time, the cultures of the two fused. With this, the Dravidians learned the language of the Aryans, and unto this day Sanskrit hymns are still recited during Hindu religious ceremonies.

The sage explained that amid the fusion of the light-skinned Aryans and the dark-skinned Dravidians, a caste system evolved as the Aryans tried to integrate the natives into their social structure. Not elaborating on this, he went on to say that Hinduism has no single founder, and is made up of various beliefs, ancient myths, philosophy, prayers, hymns and rituals which are expounded in religious books such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita, Puranas and so forth.

Sudama, continuing to talk about his faith, pointed out that in primeval times people of various nations worshipped many Gods. In ancient Greece a significant portion of the masses worshiped deities such as Zeus, Aphrodite, Dionysus, Demeter and Apollo. In ancient Egypt many worshipped Gods such as Osiris, Hathor, Horus and Amun. In ancient Rome, a sizeable portion of the masses worshipped deities such as Mithra, Mars, Venus, and Diana. Sudama said that these were only a few examples, and numerous stories about people and their gods can be found in ancient mythology. He did not take many ancient stories literally, since these tales — about gods that were married and had children, as well as their occasional disputes, with happy or sad endings — were aimed to teach moral lessons. Sudama then went on to say that with the coming of Christianity and later Islam, a significant portion of the masses was either converted, forced to relinquish their faith, or of their own accord became followers of a new religion. However, in Hinduism, the worship of ancient deities such as Shiva, Devi, Vishnu and many others never faded away, and to this day, their names are still uttered in hymns and prayers during religious ceremonies. The sage said that with hundreds of millions to this day still paying adoration in

worship to such primeval deities, Hinduism is generally considered to be the oldest of the major living religions. He added that ancient stories about the good deeds of many of these deities became various attributes of God.

Having listened attentively to the sage, Herman came to understand that Hindus only worship one God and the statues of various deities he saw on the altar represent certain attributes of the Almighty.

As Herman continued to examine some of the things displayed around the altar, he saw a metal pot which seemed to be used for lighting a small fire, as there was a box of matches and a jar of clarified butter beside it. Next to this, he saw a bowl containing the leaves of a plant, some fruits and a bunch of flowers. Adjacent to the bowl was an earthen lamp and a number of small utensils containing various spices in powdered form. Seeing it all, Herman asked the sage what was the reason for displaying them. Sudama replied that on Sundays he performed a short ritual with his followers which lasted about twenty minutes. After this, he gave a brief talk on the scriptures and sang a few religious songs with his fellow worshippers.

Herman was somewhat surprised when the sage also said that during the ritual, he recited prayers in the oldest Indo-Aryan language called Sanskrit, which still exists today for traditional learning. Herman was also surprised when Sudama indicated that the majority of his followers did not understand what he recited in Sanskrit, since the language was mainly used by Hindu priests during religious ceremonies, and by people who have a special interest in learning it. The sage said that to help others understand what he recited during the ritual, he occasionally paused for a few minutes during the ceremony to explain it. He went on to say that it pleased him a great deal while performing this ancient ritual to see the tolerance shown by devotees when they came together to worship God. He said that even though many devotees had a favorite or personal deity that they worshipped, it was pleasing to hear them sing

praises and glorify the name of the favorite deity of the other person seated next to them. Sudama said that this is truly “unity in diversity.”

The sage, in emphasizing tolerance among Hindus, went on to say that it is common in India and various nations around the globe to find Hindus making their own personal choice pertaining to observances of certain religious days or performing certain sacraments in memory of their ancestors. He said that while some Hindus might be less interested in austerities, some sacraments and lengthy rituals, it is common to find other devotees choosing to practice meditation or performing selfless actions for the betterment of humanity. The sage said that in spite of the varying choices devotees make, the vast majority of Hindus remain united, respectful and supportive of one another, since they have a common belief in Karma (action) and in Dharma (righteousness).

Herman, wanting to gather more knowledge about the teachings of Hinduism, politely asked the sage if he could tell him in brief what the holy book titled the Bhagavad-Gita was all about. Sudama explained that the sacred book is a philosophical dialogue between a warrior named Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna (incarnate God). The Bhagavad-Gita commences with the armies of two sets of cousins and their companions arrayed for battle. On one section of the battlefield was the army of the Kauravas, who were considered evil because of their unlawful and sinister deeds. On the other side of the battlefield were the Pandavas, one of whom was the famous warrior Arjuna. For many years, the Pandavas were unfairly treated by the Kauravas. The sage said that this great battle was recounted in one of the longest epics in the world known as the Mahabharata, containing about one hundred thousand verses, and the Bhagavad-Gita was an integral part of it.

Sudama explained that during the events leading up to the famous battle, all forms of dialogue to avert war by

peaceful means had failed because the Kauravas were uncompromising. With the two armies gathered on a battlefield in preparation for combat, the warrior Arjuna suddenly fell into despair while surveying the enemy when he saw that the men he was about to fight against were his own relatives and friends. Overwhelmed with compassion when thinking how little he would benefit from killing them, he told his charioteer Krishna that he would not fight. The incarnate God Krishna, seeing the warrior Arjuna so despondent, began to encourage him to rise up and fight, saying that if he relinquished his duty, evil would certainly triumph. He explained to Arjuna that if he did not fight, sin would be his reward, and if he gave up his duty, people would speak ill of him. Krishna further said to Arjuna that for someone like him, with such a noble reputation, to abandon his duty, shame was worse than death. While Arjuna stood dejected, Krishna, after telling him why it was so important to uphold righteousness, affectionately said to him that everyone gathered here on the battlefield, including Him and Arjuna, had lived before, and never in the future would they cease to exist. Krishna went on to say that just as the Supreme Soul, also referred to as Brahman, is unborn and undying, so too the human soul is imperishable, and it is only one's physical body which suffers death.

In the early part of their conversation, Lord Krishna said:

“Our physical bodies are perishable, but the embodied soul is eternal, indestructible, and immeasurable; therefore fight, O Arjuna!

Neither he who thinks this soul a killer nor he who thinks it is killed, know the truth; it neither kills, nor is it killed.

For anyone born death is certain, and for the dead birth is certain, therefore, you have no reason to grieve over the inevitable.”

As their conversation continued, Krishna explained to Arjuna the concepts of dharma (sacred duty), karma (action), atman (soul), the gunas (nature-born qualities), prakriti (nature), bhakti (devotion) and the cycle of birth and death. Towards the latter half of their dialogue, Krishna said to Arjuna:

“One who is free of egoism and whose understanding is not tainted, even if he slays these men, he does not kill and is not bound by his actions.

Your resolve is useless if a feeling of egoism makes you think, “I shall not fight”; your nature will compel you to fight.

Arjuna, one should not abandon action he is born to, even though it is flawed; all actions have some flaw, just as fire is clouded by smoke.

One’s righteous duty not perfectly done is better than another’s perfectly done; by performing action inherent to one’s own nature, one avoids sin.”

In the end, Krishna was able to convince the warrior to fight, ending with the Pandavas defeating the evil forces of the Kauravas, thus upholding righteousness.

Herman, having listened attentively to what the sage explained, seemed a bit unclear about some of it, as he politely asked Sudama if this Supreme Soul he had mentioned earlier and the human soul are the same. In reply, Sudama said no, that if this were so, people might want to worship or pray to their own soul. The sage said that in the war between the

Kauravas and the Pandavas it was only God who determined who would live and who would die, not the human soul. In emphasizing this, he pointed out that Lord Krishna, in trying to convince the warrior to fight, said that He had already killed the enemy and Arjuna is just His tool to destroy them. Upon hearing this, Herman asked the sage, "How could the warrior Arjuna perform his sacred duty without committing the sin of having to kill men who were notoriously evil?" The sage replied that doing one's duty without any desire for reward or success should be the motive behind such an act. He added that performing acts of goodness with the sole motive of going to heaven would not liberate one from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth or bring one in unity with God. The sage said that one must relinquish their desire and surrender all actions to God with sincere love and devotion.

Herman, still not too clear about other matters relating to Hinduism, left the sage somewhat surprised when he asked him if the ritual he performed each week was the only form of worship Hindus practiced. Replying no, Sudama indicated that to gain some knowledge about Hinduism he must understand the question, "What is a Hindu?" Herman was very pleased when he heard this for it was the very question he had once asked Sunita.

Sudama said that in one of the simplest of terms, a Hindu is one who believes in the doctrine of Reincarnation and in Dharma (sacred duty), and who follows any of the four major spiritual paths: Bhakti Yoga (the path of love and devotion), Karma Yoga (the path of selfless action), Jnana Yoga (the path of knowledge), Raja Yoga (the path of self-discipline). The sage said that all of these teachings are an integral part of what is known as Sanatan Dharma (eternal truths), which in the course of time has been called Hinduism.

Having said this, Sudama began to explain the meaning of each of these teachings. He first spoke of **Reincarnation**, saying that after the death of one's physical

body, one's soul (atman) enters a new human body in a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The sage mentioned that in the sacred teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita, Lord Krishna said:

“The soul is not born, nor does it die, for weapons cannot cut it, fire cannot burn it, water cannot drench it and it does not wither.

Just as a man casts off old clothes to put on new ones, so too the embodied Self discards its worn-out body to enter new ones.”

The sage said to Herman that the embodied Self, also referred to as the soul is a spark of the Almighty that dwells within all beings and sustains them in life. The soul is the inner divinity of a mortal being, and it is an inconceivable part of Brahman that is not sinful or corrupt. Sudama then pointed out that the soul should not be confused with the egotistic, or personality self which is perishable, and where one habitually values things only in reference to one's personal interest. He said that when we strive to control our desires or turbulent minds through quiet contemplation, it is our egotistic self that we are seeking to improve. The sage mentioned that Lord Krishna said:

“One should uplift oneself by one's own will, not lower oneself, for the self is one's own friend and one's worst enemy.”

Sudama indicated that to better oneself, one should seek to control the mind through the path of knowledge and self-discipline, so as to destroy the egotistic self that is one's own enemy in the form of desire.

The sage, emphasizing some of what was mentioned in the scriptures, went on to say that contacts with matter cause us to feel pleasure and pain, heat and cold, hence it is our physical body which feels pain, but not the soul. Sudama said that as a Hindu, he and his followers had absolutely no interest in hell, nor believed that they would be tortured by God and His angels, since his faith taught that nothing could harm or destroy the soul. He claimed that the merit of one's actions on Earth determines how a "silent justice" is served after the death of one's physical body. Herman interrupted the sage by asking how justice is given when people who performed wicked deeds in their previous life cannot remember their past wrongdoings. The sage said to Herman that one cannot remember their past life because our world could become chaotic if people were to accuse one another of the wrong they had done in their previous life. Sudama then indicated to Herman that his understanding of what he termed the "silent justice" is based on his assessment of what Lord Krishna said:

“One’s inner being is set in nature, enjoying the qualities born of nature. Attachment to the qualities is the cause of births in the wombs of good and evil.”

Sudama explained that people have certain nature-born qualities (gunas) which have their origins in nature (prakriti). These qualities are referred to as sattva, rajas and tamas. People with the inherent qualities of being compassionate, humble, patient, honest, charitable and non-violent are referred to as sattva (goodness). Those with the inherent qualities of being lazy, arrogant, violent and dishonest are referred to as tamas (dark inertia). The qualities of greed or craving for the fruits of one's actions are inherent to people referred to as rajas (passion or desire). The sage said that the ideal thing for the rajas and tamas to do was to strive beyond the stage of sattva, and seek union with the divine Self within.

Sudama believed that with reincarnation, people are given a series of chances through the cycle of birth and death to improve themselves. He pointed out that by striving to uphold righteousness, and performing good deeds without seeking the fruits of our actions, one could liberate oneself from the cycle of birth and death.

Herman, after paying close attention to what the sage said, asked if a person's current status in life - being either rich or poor, healthy or sick - was determined by the accumulation of their good or bad deeds in their past life. Sudama replied no and said that in terms of one's conduct, a beggar or a disabled person could have more noble qualities than one who is rich or seems to be saintly. The sage told Herman that to get a better understanding of Karma and the consequences of one's actions, he had to reflect on people's inherent qualities (gunas), and the need for them to elevate themselves morally.

The sage said that his Karma (action) in this present life would determine what his nature-born qualities would be in the next. He said that he was not perfect, but by doing his utmost to live a righteous life, he was hopeful that in his next life he would be reborn in a home of righteous or peaceful people, so that he could continue to strive for the liberation of his soul. Sudama said that his desire was to free himself from the cycle of birth and death, so that his soul could merge with Brahman, the Supreme Soul, to dwell in the pure calmness of infinity.

Having listened attentively to what Sudama said, Herman interrupted him once more by asking, with reference to the current population on Earth, why it was that there were more births than deaths? Sudama replied that no one knew what was the human population on Earth or any other planet millions of years ago, and the answer to this question was a matter of what one believed in. He said that his belief in reincarnation was strengthened by the words of Lord Krishna:

“O Arjuna, I know all that existed before, I know all things that exist, I know all yet to come, but no one knows Me.

You and I have passed through many births, I remember them all, but you do not, Arjuna.”

Herman, pondered over this as well as what the sage had said about Brahman (God) being immeasurable and all-pervading. He made the sage think deeply when he asked, “What are your views on creation?” Sudama, after pausing to think, replied that there was no need for one to spend a great deal of time speculating on how the universe was created, for Brahman (God) is ageless, unborn and undying. He said that for Herman to gather some insight about the Divine mystery of what appeared to be cycles of creation or the cyclical nature of the universe, he should reflect on what Lord Krishna said:

O Arjuna, in Brahma’s (Creator) cosmic abode, all worlds are subject to the incessant cycle of birth and death, but one who attains Me do not take birth again.

Those who know that a day of Brahma lasts a thousand eons, and night ends in a thousand eons, they understand day and night.

At the coming of Brahma’s day, all living beings come out from the unmanifest state, and at night they all vanish into the unmanifest state.

Yet there is another unmanifest state that is eternal and higher, and does not perish when all beings perish.

It is called the eternal unmanifest, which is said to be the ultimate goal. Those who attain it do not return, this is My supreme realm.

After listening to what the sage mentioned about creation, Herman made him think deeply again when he asked, “Can someone be reborn in a lower form of life such as a bird or animal?” The sage, somewhat surprised, replied no. He then said that people who promote such beliefs do not fully comprehend the teaching of the scriptures, and unable to explain certain things, they come up with beliefs or interpretations of their own. The sage said that even a few lines from the scriptures with a simple meaning could be made into a long philosophical story by many who are not satisfied with the little that was said. He claimed that speculation is good, but when people speculate to the point where it becomes too difficult for themselves or others to understand, then it is fruitless. The idea of one being reborn in a lower form of life was an attempt by some religious men to tell of a serious consequence for doing wrong. The idea of driving fear into people’s minds is also present in other faiths which tell frightening stories about hell. Sudama said that rebirth could only occur in a human form, since human beings are the only species of its kind that is blessed with the capacity to reason and attain high levels of knowledge, and it is only in a human form that they could perform their righteous duty to liberate themselves from the cycle of birth and death.

Sudama next began to talk about **Dharma** (sacred duty). He started by saying that dharma is the perpetual work of God which sustains all of creation. In earthly affairs dharma pertains to one’s duty to uphold righteousness, the law, religion, customs, and the harmony of things. The sage said that dharma is also about sustaining fairness, and following what one’s conscience tells them is right and meaningful. By practicing dharma one could live in unity and peace with

others. Sudama told Herman that the way to gather some insight about dharma was to think about his own duty. He said to Herman that he was happy to hear from Sunita about the good works he had done as a medical doctor, and was also happy that Herman had never sought any reward for his actions. The mere fact that Herman cared for his patients showed that dharma resided in his heart, for dharma is the righteousness within us that makes us want to perform acts of goodness.

Next, Sudama began to talk about the four spiritual paths commencing with **Karma Yoga** (discipline of action) which pertains to the law of cause and effect. The sage said that this ancient philosophy emphasizes the performance of selfless actions where good deeds lead to the liberation of one's soul (atman) from the cycle of birth and death while unrighteous acts prevent it from being liberated. Sudama said that all beings are driven to perform action by their nature-born qualities and each person is held accountable for their own evil deeds. He said that no one could exist without performing action, for even to sustain our own bodies we have to perform action. To gather some insight about the necessity of action even at the highest level, think about what Lord Krishna said:

If I did not perform action these worlds would perish; I would create confusion, and all living entities would be destroyed.

Sudama then went on to say that when acts of devotion, sacrifice and charity are performed one should not seek the fruits of their actions. He pointed out that Lord Krishna said:

“You have the privilege to work, but never to the fruits of action; never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor be attached to inaction.” In short, the good

things we do in life should be done with pureness of the heart, and one should not crave a reward for doing good.

Having explained Karma Yoga in brief, the sage spoke of another spiritual path called **Jnana Yoga**, the path of knowledge. He indicated that through meditation one seeks to develop balanced judgment and sustain righteous thoughts amid their determined effort to realize that the soul is the true Self. Many who practiced this type of yoga seek to control their desires, and to slowly disengage themselves from earthly attachments. Because the mind harbors evil desires, knowledge gets obscured, thus ruining one's judgment to know the true Self. Spiritual knowledge means humbleness, honesty, patience, non-violence, self-discipline, and showing respect for one's parents and teachers.

Following this, the sage began to talk about **Bhakti Yoga**, saying that this is the path of love and devotion, meaning the various ways people show or express their love for God. Sudama said that this type of yoga teaches us to serve the Lord with affection, and to be truthful, humble, tolerant and respectful. He pointed out that for some people who find some of the philosophical teachings of Hinduism too difficult to comprehend, this path is simple. Sudama said that whenever he got together with his followers to worship God, it was pleasing to see many devotees chant the name of the Lord and to listen to him tell stories about the goodness of God.

Besides praying with sincere devotion, many bow down to the statue of a deity as an act of humility. Sudama said that while some might consider this idolatry, this is not the case, for it is the sincere feeling in people's hearts that counts, and not the criticism that comes from those who think that it is idolatry or believe that their faith is better. The sage pointed out that the Supreme Lord said:

“Devoted people who sacrifice to other gods with faith, they sacrifice to Me, Arjuna, though it is not the right approach.

Always glorifying Me, and striving to attain Me, bowing down to Me with devotion, they worship Me always in discipline.”

Sudama went on to say that the path of love and devotion uplifts humanity, and educates people about love, truthfulness and the right conduct. He indicated that the ritual he performed each week gave meaning to the lives of many of his fellow worshippers who got a feeling of fulfillment and gratification when listening to him call God by various names, seeking atonement, and uttering words of adoration and thanks.

After discussing the path of love and devotion, Sudama began to talk about **Raja Yoga**, saying that this yoga is about the discipline of mind, speech and body. It emphasizes truthfulness and contentment, equanimity of mind, cleanliness and non-violence. Sudama said that to assist one in controlling the mind through meditation, several abstentions and techniques with regard to one's posture, breathing practices and concentration are used.

Herman, after listening to Sudama's brief talk about the four spiritual paths, said that he was most impressed with Karma Yoga (the path of selfless action) since it appeared simple and was similar to what he personally believed in. Sudama told Herman that he was happy to hear that he liked the path of Karma Yoga. He then pointed out that one does not have to perform excessive rituals, wild sacrifices, obscene rites, or piercing their bodies with sharp objects to gain blessings from God. Striving to achieve the discipline of understanding, truthfulness and performing acts of goodness was more important. Sudama indicated that Lord Krishna said:

“Worshippers of the gods go to the gods, ancestor-worshippers go to the ancestor, worshippers of the ghosts and spirits go to them, and those who worship Me come to Me.

Those who practice severe penances not recommended in the scriptures, perform them out of hypocrisy and egoism, driven by the feelings of desire.

Senselessly, they torment the elements forming their bodies, as well as Me dwelling within them; know them to be demonic in their resolve.”

The sage advised Herman not to be led astray by those who misconstrue religious teachings and make up their own rules and forms of worship which lack sense and significance. He reminded Herman that he should always follow what his conscience told him was right and meaningful.

After this, Herman looked once more at the altar and saw a bowl of fresh fruits and a variety of sweets. He left the sage momentarily puzzled when he asked him if all of his followers were vegetarians. Sudama replied no, and then explained that an hour before Herman came to visit him, one of his followers brought the fresh fruits and sweets to share with fellow devotees. Sudama said that whenever he performed his weekly rituals, many devotees brought fruits, flowers and sweets as offerings to be blessed and shared with others. He also said that amid uttering prayers and words of thanks to God during the rituals he performed, humble offering were made, and by eating the foods offered in sacrifice one is blessed, for Lord Krishna said:

“A leaf, a flower, a fruit or water one offers Me with devotion, I accept that offering from one of self-discipline.

O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you take, whatever you offer, whatever you give, whatever penances you perform, do it all as an offering to Me.”

Sudama further explained to Herman that Hindus are free to choose the type of foods they eat. From a religious point of view, the human body should be treated with respect, since it is the tool one uses to perform acts of goodness. Many, he said, are selective of the types of foods they eat so as to increase their chances of living a healthier or better quality of life. Sudama said that he shared the same view as others, that it is not what goes into one's mouth that makes them corrupt, but it is the treacherous or obscene language that comes out of their mouths that makes them corrupt. Here, the sage took the opportunity to mention to Herman that a visitor once asked him why the poor Hindu farmer who lived next to him treated the cow he owned as if it were a God, and why so many Hindus prefer not to eat the meat of the cow? Sudama explained that for thousands of years, the cow to many Hindus was seen as a "giver." With the animal being used to till the land, to transport goods, and to provide us with butter, milk and cheese, many whose livelihood depended on the cow sincerely felt that the animal should be treated with a degree of sacredness. Sudama said that those who assume that the poor farmer worships the cow lack knowledge, for they cannot comprehend that this is his way of showing his appreciation for the essential things he gets from the animal that he considers a "giver."

Sudama then went on to say that this farmer who dwelled close to him was very helpful, for apart from harvesting and selling his crops to support his family, he was a humble man who came once a week to clean the place of worship, and to bring fresh fruits to be blessed and shared with others. Sudama said that what he greatly admired about the farmer was that apart from the selfless actions he performed, he was a peaceful man who loved his neighbors and treated them equally. The sage said that such qualities, which reflect equanimity of one's mind, often reminded him what Lord Krishna said:

“I am impartial to all existences, no one is hated or dear to Me, yet those who worship Me with love and devotion are in Me, and I am also in them.

Wise men see with an equal eye a learned and dignified priest, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and even an outcaste.”

Now that Herman had a better understanding of the Hindu faith, he asked the sage, “Can anyone become a Hindu?” Sudama replied yes, and then affectionately told Herman that religious knowledge was something to be shared with people from all walks of life, and it was a sin to prohibit anyone from seeking the path of righteousness. He said that what encouraged him to perform acts of goodness and to talk about the teachings from the Bhagavad-Gita was supported by what Lord Krishna said:

“Whatever standards a great man sets, ordinary people will follow. He sets the standard for the world to emulate.

When one shares this supreme secret (Bhagavad-Gita) with those devoted to Me, one will come to Me certainly without a doubt.”

Sudama stated that a wise man once said that hoarding knowledge is worse than hoarding money. He said to Herman that in Hinduism people make their own choices pertaining to what path to God they would like to follow. He added that Hinduism is a religion which does not seek to convert or uproot people from their faith, instead it encourages a Christian to become a better Christian, and a Muslim to become a better Muslim. The sage then said to Herman that Christ is a way to

God, and he need not change his faith, since Herman was already familiar with that spiritual path.

After listening to Sudama's reply, Herman said to the sage that he had one final question, and that was what were his views about the Hindu caste system in India. In response, Sudama said that he did not support the caste system which in terms of unfairness is similar to racism in many Western nations. He said that in primeval times the Hindu society was mainly divided into four groups, where the priestly group was meant to foster religion, customs and traditions, and emphasize the importance of moral values. He said that the second group, the Kshatriyas, was given the duty of administration and military affairs. Thirdly, the Vaisyas were mainly the traders or business people who were to further economic growth. Fourthly, the Sudras were the ordinary people who tilled the land and performed menial work. Sudama said that this was similar to division of labor, and to remove one group would certainly leave room for chaos or cause a society to collapse. In short, all of us cannot be doctors. The sage said that the caste system became unfair when selfish men tried to make it hereditary, so for example a carpenter and his generations to come must carry on the same trade. Sudama indicated that today, the caste system was rapidly fading away because of the efforts by governments to create equal opportunity for people. He added that the offspring of millions who dwelled at the subsistence level now held key positions in business, law enforcement, the medical field, and in government. Today racism remains a bigger issue than the caste system, since it is an international problem. One should not assume that the hereditary aspect of the caste system stems from the Hindu faith, since it was created by those who exploited religion to gain a certain status in life, and tried to make it hereditary so that they could command respect from others whom they considered inferior.

Herman commented that he had always believed that his faith was the only way to God and was happy to learn of other paths to the Almighty. He said to the sage that though he believed in God, he rarely attended church or prayed to the Lord, hence many might think of him as not a true believer in God. Sudama told Herman not to worry about what others thought, since judging from the charitable work Herman had done in India, he would be remembered as someone who performed selfless actions. Hearing this, Herman felt a bit down-spirited, thinking that he could no longer help others who were ill, since he had to relinquish his duty as a doctor because of his illness. The sage, seeing Herman with a gloomy look, said to him that one day he too would become sickly; however, knowing that all that are born must die, he had learned through the path of knowledge that he must rise above his own weaknesses, illness and sorrow. He said that amid the joy and sorrow he experienced in life, he occasionally offered a silent prayer to Lord Krishna so that he would remain firm in his belief in God and not swerve from his faith. Sudama then affectionately said to Herman that it was not too late for him to seek knowledge about God.

After thinking deeply about what the sage said, Herman asked Sudama, what would become of someone like him who had performed selfless actions but seldom thought about God. The sage said to Herman that it was unfortunate that he only had a short time to live; however, while he still had a little strength, he should take some time to reflect on his Christian faith. Sudama said that though they had different beliefs, they both worshipped the same God. The sage added that by choosing to follow the path of righteousness, even the most evil sinner could change for the better, for Lord Krishna said:

“Even if a very evil man turns solely to Me with devotion, he should be considered saintly, for his resolve is right.

At the time of death, he who dies remembering Me, attains My being when departing from his body, there is no doubt about this.

Reaching Me great souls do not undergo rebirth in the transient world of suffering; they attain the highest perfection.”

Having said this, Sudama took from his altar a small wooden crucifix and gently placed it around Herman’s neck, saying that whenever he looked at the crucifix it would remind him of his Christian faith. As Herman expressed his gratitude, he saw that the sage had a small necklace with a figure and the letters AUM on it. Seeing this, Herman asked the sage what was the meaning of the symbol. The sage replied that AUM (OM) is a primeval sound meaning God, and the necklace he wore reminded him of his Hindu faith and to avoid doing wrong. Sudama added that AUM was said to be the source of prayer, usually uttered in acts of devotion, benevolence and penance. It is often used in meditation and at the beginning of a prayer or prayers to help devotees focus their thoughts on God. The sage, with a pleasant smile, politely said to Herman that he was going to recite two ancient hymns to give Herman an idea about the use of the primeval sound AUM. Sudama then sang two popular hymns:

**Aum bhur bhuvah svah tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi dhiyo yonah prachodayat.**

O Supreme Lord of the Earth, the Sky and the Heavens. The adorable glory of God, we meditate, may the Lord inspire our intellect.

**Tvameva Mata cha Pita tvameva Tvameva
bandhus cha sakha tvameva Tvameva vidya dravinam
tvameva Tvameva sarvam mama deva deva.
Aum Shanti Shanti Shanti**

*O Lord, You are thy mother and father, You are thy friend, kith and kin. You are the bestower of knowledge and prosperity. You are the Supreme Lord of all beings.
Aum peace peace peace.*

After listening to the ancient hymns, Herman appeared somewhat emotional, as a few drops of tears fell from his eyes. Thinking about the fragility of life, he told Sudama that life on Earth appeared to be an experience of both joy and sorrow, and that everything in this world seems to be an illusion. The sage affectionately said to Herman that this did not make rational sense, for if all the things we experience, see or do were believed to be an illusion, then people might think that it is useless to perform acts of goodness or to reflect on what had happened in the past. Sudama said that our understanding sometimes get clouded by what is called **maya** (illusion). Many often get tricked by the appearance of some things, causing them to think that they are real or good to own. Becoming trapped by their own ego and selfish desires, many fail to overcome those obstacles which cloud their minds from discerning right from wrong and truth from untruth. The sage said that those with such deluded minds fail to recognize God as unborn and imperishable, and having the mysterious power to create and absorb things through a magical mystery.

Herman, having listened to everything the sage discussed, gently wiped his eyes and thanked him for sharing

knowledge about his faith. He said to Sudama that after listening to what seemed like a sermon, he no longer felt overly saddened by the thought that he was going to die, since the additional knowledge of Hinduism had strengthened his belief in God.

Returning home an hour later, Herman sat down to write a letter to his parents in Germany to tell them about the dreadful disease he had contracted. He told them that he had only a short time to live, and would like his parents to come to India to see him.

Having mailed the letter, Herman traveled to the hospital that he had worked at before. He told his friends who were part of the medical staff to provide him with a bed in the hospital, as it was the place he had chosen to spend the remaining days of his life.

When Herman's parents heard the distressing news about their only son, they instantly became stricken with grief. Amid their sorrow, they were willing to do what Herman had requested, for days later they traveled to India to meet him.

When Herman's parents saw him in hospital, they immediately pleaded with him to return to Germany to see if the doctors there could treat him. Sadly, Herman replied that at this point in time there was no cure for the disease he had, and that it was his wish to spend the remaining days of his life in the hospital with other patients who were also diagnosed with AIDS.

Sadly, two months later Herman became gravely ill and as he lay in hospital, he occasionally glanced at other patients who were seriously ill. Seeing them, he was drawn to think that life was a sorrowful experience, and reflecting on this, he began to reminisce on some of the things the sage had said about his Hindu faith. Contemplating on such terms as Brahman, Atman, Karma, Dharma, the Gunas and the doctrine of Reincarnation, he realized that speculating on them made him think about God amid the feeling that he

would die at any moment. Reaching out to touch the crucifix of Christ that he wore around his neck, he came to think that all faiths led to one God whom we all worship, and seeking the additional knowledge about the Hindu faith had strengthened his belief in God. As he lay dying, he remembered what the sage told him Lord Krishna had said, **“At the time of death, he who dies remembering Me attains My being when departing from his body, there is no doubt about this.”** It was while harboring such thoughts in his mind that Herman closed his eyes and quietly passed away.

Summary of Beliefs

One God – Hindus believe in one Supreme God (Brahman) that is immeasurable, all-pervading, unborn, undying and that has no gender. The Almighty is affectionately called by various names such as Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, Lakshmi, etc.

Reincarnation – The soul is a spark of the Almighty that is not sinful or corrupt and never ceases to exist. Upon the death of one's physical body, the soul takes on another new human body in a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. When we strive to uplift ourselves, it is our egotistic, or personality self that we are seeking to improve, not the soul which is sinless. The goal is to free the soul from the cycle of birth and death, thus enabling it to merge with Brahman.

Karma – The law of cause and effect. Emphasis is placed on the performance of selfless actions, in that good deeds lead to the liberation of one's soul while unrighteousness prevents it from being liberated.

Dharma – One's sacred duty to uphold righteousness. One must be truthful, be compassionate and maintain a belief in fairness so as to sustain the harmony of things.

Many Paths to One God – Hindus believe that there are many paths to one God.

J.R Singh's recent book titled **Pandora's Heartaches** was among the finalists in the "**Best Books 2006 Awards**" in the U.S.A.

Upcoming books by J. R. Singh:

"Adventures of the Homeless"

"Strange Misfortunes"