Hinduism in Nutshell:

Some people think that Hinduism or Vedic philosophy is difficult to understand, and, thus, hard to explain. But if you look at it succinctly, it is not very difficult at all. All you have to do is know what to say. So this little article presents the essential principles in a concise way that everyone can learn and repeat when necessary. Hinduism is also more correctly called by its Sanskrit name: **Sanatana-Dharma**. This, essentially, means to follow one’s eternal duty, which is to search for and understand our spiritual identity, and then to learn to live according to those eternal and spiritual characteristics, especially by one’s own spiritual realizations. This is also the purpose and mission of the Vedic philosophy and culture, and our ultimate duty in human life.

The Vedic philosophy, or that which is based on the ancient Vedas and its supporting literature of India, is to help humanity understand who we really are, and the purpose of life. It is like the manual you get when you buy an appliance and need to understand exactly how it works. The Vedic literature is there to help all of us.

The essence of it comes down to 10 basic principles. These are the ones most accepted by the majority of people who follow Sanatana-dharma, and are also referenced in the Vedic texts. Beyond these, there are various schools of thought, which have further developments in their own outlook and philosophy, such as the Shaivites, Vaishnavas, Shaktas, Brahmanandis, Tantrics, and so on. These we can discuss at another time or you can read more about them in my books for further information.

**In any case, here are the principles:**

**(1)** There is one Supreme Being, Bhagavan or God, with no beginning or end, the all in all, the unlimited Absolute Truth, who can expand into many forms. In this regard, the RigVeda (1:164:45) says: Ekam Sat Viprah Bahudha Vadanti. Though sages may call Him by different names (such as Krishna, Rama, Vishnu, etc.) there is but one Absolute Truth, or one source and foundation of everything. God is considered Sat-chit-ananda vigraha, the form of eternal knowledge and bliss. He is supreme, full of beauty, knowledge, is all-powerful and all-pervading. He is also known by His three main features: namely Brahman, the all-pervading, impersonal spiritual force or effulgence; the Paramatma, the localized expansion known as the Supersoul which accompanies every individual soul in the heart of everyone; and then Bhagavan, the Supreme Personality and form of God.

**(2)**The Vedas are Divine knowledge and the basis or foundation of the Vedic philosophy. Some of these texts have been given or spoken by God, and others were composed by sages in their deepest super conscious state in which they were able to give revelations of Universal Truths while in meditation on the Supreme. This Vedic literature, including, among other texts, the Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva Vedas, the Upa-Vedas, Vedangas, Shadarshanas, Upanishads, the Vedanta-Sutras, Yoga Sutras, Agamas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Bhagavad-gita, and all Puranic literature and the practices congruent with them, contain the basis of the Vedic or Sanatana-dharma spiritual culture.

**(3)** God can and has appeared throughout history in the form of personal appearances (avataras) within the realm of matter, and even in the sound vibration of scriptures (the Vedic literature). There are ten basic avataras of God, with numerous other expansions.

**(4)** Our real identity is being a spirit soul, or jiva.

**(5)** The soul undergoes it’s own karma, the law of cause and effect, by which each person must experience the results or consequences of his activities and creates his own destiny based on his thought, words and deeds.

**(6)** There is also rebirth or reincarnation, wherein our next birth is directed by our karma. The soul incarnates through different forms until, by its own spiritual development, it reaches liberation (moksha) from the repetition of birth and death, when it attains its natural position in the spiritual domain.

**(7)** We can elevate ourselves spiritually by also engaging in worship of the Divine, such as in His forms as deities in the temple.

**(8)**We can receive proper instruction on how to follow the teachings of the Vedic philosophy from an authorized guru who is in line with a genuine parampara, or line of gurus.

**(9)** We should also follow particular principles for our spiritual development, such as ahimsa or non-violence.

**(10)** In our life there are four main goals, as indicated by the four ashramas of life, such as brahmacharya (the student’s life), the grihasta or the householder stage of life, the vanaprastha or retired stage of life in which we take our spiritual goals more seriously, and then the renounced or sannyasa stage of life in which our spiritual purpose is the main focus. Amongst these stages we focus first on Dharma, which is to develop ourselves morally and spiritually; then Artha, which is to develop a career or trade and prosper materially; then Kama, to enjoy and work out our basic material desires as is appropriate for our particular stage of life; and then retire from all that and focus on Moksha, or attaining Self-realization and freedom from any further rounds of birth and death in material existence.

**These ten principles expand to include several other additional points:**

**A.** The Vedic Tradition is more than a religion, but a way of life, a complete philosophy for the foundation and direction for one’s existence.

**B.** It is based on Universal Spiritual Truths that can be applied by anyone at anytime.

**C.** The Vedic tradition recognizes that the individual soul is eternal, beyond the limitations of the body, and that one soul is no different than another.

**D.** All living entities, both human and otherwise, are the same in their essential and divine spiritual being. All of them are parts of the eternal truth, and have appeared in this world to express their nature and also to gather experience in the realms of matter.

**E.** For this reason, Vedic followers accept the premise of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, that all living beings in the universe comprise one family, and that as such all beings are spiritually equal and should be respected as members within that family of the Supreme.

**F.** The ultimate purpose of human life is to shed all attachments to matter and attain moksha (liberation from material existence) and return to the transcendental realm which is not only our true nature but also our real home.

**G.** Every person’s capacity to progress spiritually depends upon their personal qualities, choices and abilities, and is not limited by the circumstances of one’s color, caste, class, or any other circumstance of birth or temporary material limitations or designations.

**H.**The Vedic path is based on regaining our natural spiritual identity. To pursue this goal, all human beings have the eternal right to choose their personal form of spiritual practice, as well as the right to reject any form of religious activity, and that coercion, forced conversion, or commercial inducement to adopt one religion over another should never be used or tolerated to present, propagate, or enforce one’s spiritual beliefs on others.

**I.** The Vedic path offers personal freedom for one to make his or her own choice of how he or she wants to pursue their spiritual approach, and what level of the Absolute Truth he or she wishes to understand. This is the height of spiritual democracy and freedom from tyranny.

**J.** Recognizing the value and sanctity of all forms of life, as well as the Eternal Divine Being that is their true Self, the Vedic principle is that we should therefore strive in every possible way to peacefully co-exist with all other species of living entities.

**K.** The Vedic path consists of ten general rules of moral conduct. There are five for inner purity, called the yamas—which include satya or truthfulness, ahimsa or non-injury to others and treating all beings with respect, asteya or no cheating or stealing, brahmacharya or celibacy, and aparighara or no unnecessarily selfish accumulation of resources for one’s own purpose. The five rules of conduct for external purification are the niyamas—such as shaucha or cleanliness and purity of mind and body, tapas or austerity and perseverance, swadhyaya or study of the Vedas and self-analysis, and santosh or contentment, as well as Ishwara–pranidhana, or acceptance of the Supreme.

**L.** There are also ten qualities that are the basis of dharmic (righteous) life. These are dhriti (firmness or fortitude), kshama (forgiveness), dama (self-control), asteya (refraining from stealing or dishonesty), shauch (purity), indriya nigraha (control over the senses), dhih (intellect), vidya (knowledge), satyam (truth) and akrodhah (absence of anger).

These principles are part of the eternal, universal truths that apply equally to all living entities who can use them for progress regardless of class, caste, nationality, gender, or any other temporary qualifications. These basic principles, as we can see, are not so difficult to understand and are the basis of the Vedic spiritual life.

There are also four basic yoga paths for the spiritual development of the individual. These include the following:

***Karma***yoga, which is the path of right action, detachment from the fruits of one’s labor, and dedicating our activities for a higher and spiritual purpose, especially to God. This is not merely to acquire good karma, but to become free from it altogether to attain moksha.

***Jnana***yoga (pronounced gyana), the path of intellectual development and understanding of what is real and what is not. On a deeper level, jnana yoga is the process of discriminating between truth and non-truth, or reality and illusion (maya), and understanding what is the Divine. This is the knowledge of the soul and God, and the relationship between them. Therefore, the acquirement of jnana or spiritual knowledge is one of the first steps in spiritual development.

***Raja***or dhyana yoga, known as the royal (raja) way, also called astanga yoga, is the eightfold path leading to liberation. From either hatha yoga, karma yoga, or jnana yoga, a person may go on to practice raja yoga. It is one of the most popular systems of yoga today. The process involves calming all mental agitation, which gradually helps the meditator to fuse with the objects of meditation by supraconscious concentration. Patanajali defined in the Yoga Sutras the eight steps of this path, consisting of the first two steps as following the ***yamas***and ***niyamas***, or the essential moral commandments, which was briefly explained in item K above.

The third step is ***asana***, which means a seat or postures for meditation that are often used in hatha yoga. The fourth step is ***pranayama***, breath control for fixing the mind in concentration. Prana means life or energy, and also can mean spirit. Ayama indicates the length and retention of breath between inhalation and exhalation, and control of the prana within the body. The fifth step is ***pratyahara***, control of the senses and checking the mind’s attraction to external objects. The sixth step is ***dharana***, concentrating on the object of meditation. The seventh step is ***dhyana***, when the mind is in a state of undisturbed flowing meditation. This leads to the eighth step which is ***samadhi***, in which, according to the eightfold path, the yogi becomes one with the Supreme, or fully engaged in thought of the Supreme. This ultimately reaches to moksha if performed diligently and steadily. However, this is an arduous path and much more explanation is required.

***Bhakti***yoga is the final form of spiritual realization and attainment of the spiritual world. It is the process of simply developing loving devotional service to the Lord. It is by far the easiest of all the yoga processes and has fewer requirements for the practitioners than any other process. Bhakti is the yoga that begins, continues, and ends with love and devotion to the Supreme. There is no stronger binding mechanism than love, and spiritual love is the natural sentiment that emanates from God and connects all living beings. Thus, it is said that attaining this sentiment of devotion to God holds the sum and substance of all other yoga processes and religions. It is the strength of this connection that can deliver one to the spiritual realm or God’s domain.

A formal process of conversion to Sanatana-dharma is not necessary because the principles, as outlined above, can be practiced by anyone at any time, or to any degree one wishes. Thus, anyone can be on the path of Sanatana-dharma merely by adopting this way of life. It is not an institution that you need to join that makes you a follower, but it is the acceptance of it in your heart and the practices that you adopt. However, you can approach a guru of your choice who inspires you and can guide you and then ask for diksha, or initiation, by which you may then accept a formal ritual as a qualified follower of the Vedic path in the school of thought or parampara that your guru represents. Then you may receive a spiritual name, indicating your dedication and change of spiritual orientation, or even further take an initiation as a priest or brahmana.