



The Sambodh Society, Inc.

A Non-Profit Organization for the Teaching of Vedanta and Meditation
and the

Sambodh Center for Human Excellence

Under the Spiritual Guidance of

His Holiness Swami Bodhananda Saraswati

Spiritual Director and Founder

ANNOUNCE A SEMINAR ON



Hindu Dharma for the 21st-Century October 1-4, 2009 (Thursday - Sunday)

at the

Sambodh Center for Human Excellence (SCHE)

6363 North 24th Street, Kalamazoo MI 49004

Website: www.sambodh.us Phone: (269) 492-0544

Background

Our Hindu children and grandchildren are growing up in America without the benefit of intrinsic knowledge of their parents and ancestors' Indian culture, its traditions and belief systems. As a result many grow up without strong roots in their religious tradition, suffer low self-esteem as members of a religious minority in the land of their birth, lack strong identity with the Indo-American community, and falter in their commitment to abiding Hindu values. These conditions inhibit second- and third-generation Indo-Americans from realizing their full potential and from contributing significantly to the countries that nurture them. Everyone becomes a loser in the process.

One reason, among many, for our children's "uprootedness" and alienation from their mother-culture is due to Indo-American parents' individual and collective inability to articulate and communicate those cherished values and religious practices which they themselves hold. American Hindu children grow up in a cultural environment with religious beliefs, social customs and family values radically different from what they experience in their homes. The dichotomy between our native traditional culture and that of our adopted country causes Hindu parents and their offspring enormous strain, conflict and distraction. These second- and third-

generation Indo-American children question the sanity and rationale of Hindu beliefs and practices: our praying to a diverse array of Gods; our offering prostrations to and propitiating deities; and our elaborate, time-consuming, and expensive rituals. They argue about the “greed” of religious leaders, criticize India’s caste system, decry arranged marriages, shun vegetarianism, scoff at frugality, and forego the traditional practices of showing respect to their elders and teachers. Hindu parents have no ready or studied answers to such questioning. Our children have limited or no access to learned, practicing scholar-saints to whom they can direct their questions and clear their doubts. Soon frustrated, they become indifferent, scornful, or outright rebels. The “generation gap” between immigrant Indo-Americans and their progeny becomes an unbridgeable culture gap, and we lose a generation. Is it too late? We think not: it is time for action – a collective community response.

In the United States the Indian community has tried to address religious and cultural continuity by building Hindu temples. Over 800 or more such temples exist today in this country with virtually one temple being built each week. Predominantly offering traditional ritualistic services replicating the manner and methods of India, our temples are doing little to address the challenges that we have enumerated above. To address these issues, The Sambodh Society, Inc. sees the need for a seminar which we now propose here:

“Hindu Dharma for the 21st-Century”

Apart from our own ignorance, another problem in communicating our practices and cultural values to our Hindu children is the scholars and Hindu leaders’ inability to interpret those beliefs and values to the needs of the times and to communicate them in a contemporary idiom. This task of interpretation cannot be the work of one individual. It must be a collective effort of many inspired practitioners, community and religious leaders, swamis, saints and scholars. Ultimately, such efforts will initiate an education for our Hindu temples in America and Indo-American parents. The results will be a leadership capable of addressing the needs of our youth and future generations.

Action Plan

The Sambodh Society Inc. and the Sambodh Center for Human Excellence are planning a four-day seminar and workshop on the topic of *Hindu Dharma for the 21st-Century*. The seminar will hold eight one-hour presentations on eight foundational pillars of Hinduism identified by His Holiness Swami Bodhananda Saraswati on the basis of his observations and discussions with Hindu scholars, parents, grandparents,

and youth living in America. A two-hour panel discussion will follow each presentation.

The Sambodh Society, Inc. is inviting eminent scholars and innovative thinkers, **such as yourself**, to present papers and lead panel discussions on the following themes: 1) *Sanatana Dharma*; 2) *Varnashrama Dharma*; 3) *Karma Siddhanta* and Reincarnation; 4) Hindu Rituals and Temple Worship in the Modern Era; 5) *Gurus*, Teachings and *Ashtams*; 6) Scriptures and their Interpretations; 7) Caste Conflict and Coalition in Hindu Society amidst the Specter of Conversion; 8) A Hindu-Framework for Interfaith and Science-Spirituality Dialogues.

This seminar is proposed as a discussion among scholars and seminar participants with regard to these eight pillars of Hinduism, during which speakers will provide a comprehensive view of contemporary Hinduism, presenting relevant data from both India and America and articulating how various shifting circumstances and the problems outlined above impinge upon Hindu families residing in America and subsequent generations of Hindus. Seminar speakers will receive a set of prepared questions based upon the pillars of Hinduism identified in this document for the purpose of preparing for the panel discussions. We request that you submit your responses to these questions in advance of the seminar.

Following the seminar, The Sambodh Society, Inc. will publish both a CD of the lectures and a book incorporating all of the presentations and panel discussions. We see the seminar and the book as an important first step in interpreting and disseminating Hindu beliefs and practices to our Indo-American community which reflect their unique circumstances, enable the living expression of these timeless values, and thereby convey these values to the world. Finally, as a result of this effort, we are hopeful that the scholarly presentations and discussions will provide both a framework and serve as an impetus for future seminars at SCHE focused upon related themes and their practical application.

Just as the European Renaissance of the 14th-century began with the reinterpretation of ancient Greek and Roman culture, so, too, will a global renaissance begin with the interpretation of the deeply spiritual Hindu culture and tradition. We believe that the Vedantic tradition of Hindus will become a beacon for the 21st-century and that American Hindus will play a leading role in the cultural and spiritual global renaissance.

Topics for Presentation and the Panel Discussion

- (i) ***Sanatana Dharma***: This session will be devoted to the discussion of the eternal universal values taught in the *Vedas, Smritis, Puranas, and Darshanas* by the enlightened masters of India. In all ages, these values have been transmitted and sustained as Hindu culture. They have been interpreted in the light of modern science and social theories, and they reflect the egalitarian and practical aspirations of individual Hindus as well as their community. Included is the Vedantic relational understanding of God, the world, and the individual, which leads to a meaningful life and purposeful action. What application does this knowledge have to our everyday lives? How does the philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta*, the bedrock of Hindu *dharma*, reach our Indo-American population over the generations? How is *Sanatana Dharma* sustained by Indo-Americans without the broad-base support of the surrounding culture? How can *Sanatana Dharma* add value, depth and perspective to contemporary American culture? These ideas and questions will comprise the focus of this session.
- (ii) ***Varnashrama Dharma***: Apart from the awareness of Hindu beliefs and universal human and spiritual values, individuals and communities also have to know how to apply those beliefs and values in an ever-changing landscape of events and outcomes. Their application must also accord with one's temperament, training, and age, as well as incorporate the needs of the community and a culture's stage of technological development. How are we to apply *dharma* in our personal day-to-day practice? How are Hindu practices affected by the Western lifestyle? And how do they remain relevant and alive for Indo-American Hindus and their children? These are the challenges that will be addressed in this session.
- (iii) ***Karma Siddhanta and Reincarnation***: These two ideas have been part of Hindu beliefs and have been burnt into the Hindu DNA since time immemorial, though later Hindu reformers, like Basavanna and Guru Nanak, rejected those theories. Buddhists and Jains also accept these two theories. Presently, *karma-siddhanta* and the theory of reincarnation are part of popular Western imagination and the frequent subject of their psychological and scientific investigations. What do these theories mean? What are their implications for life, a changing worldview, and a deepening awareness that enhances life's quality? What are their implications for Hindus residing in the West, whose ideas are being discovered, adapted, adopted, and, alternately, denounced by a predominately Christian culture? These themes and questions will be examined in this session.

- (iv) **Hindu Rituals and Temple Worship in the Modern Era:** Hindus invoke God's presence in *murtis* or idols, and we offer our service to these spiritually-charged icons installed in our Hindu homes and temples. This practice has become the central theme of modern Hinduism. An elaborate science and tradition has evolved around and supports the construction of temples, carving images from stone, metals and wood, installing those images with *mantra* and rituals, and offering daily and occasional ceremonial *pujas*. Although, over the ages, the worship of “many Gods” has been greatly misunderstood India’s varieties of deities have also been of great fascination to non-Hindus. The ordinary devotee, the curious onlooker, and even the indifferent or neutral participant, regardless of their degree of interest, would like to understand the meaning and purpose of deity worship. Some venture to explore the effectiveness of these Hindu practices. This session will focus first upon Hindu praxis, identifying those rituals which modern Hindus see as basic: as individuals, for families, and for their communities. Then, how do Hindus understand their practice of idol worship, its meaning, and its relevance to their lives? Having examined these two areas, it is possible to identify ways in which parents might respond to their children’s questions about the practice of idol worship as well as to those who have little understanding or limited exposure to these ancient and viable religious practices. This session will grapple with the basic questions Hindu parents seek most to answer: Why idol worship, and, what (if any) is its relevance to modern life?
- (v) **Gurus, Teachings and Ashrams:** Another tradition which is central to Hinduism is the institution of *gurus* and *ashrams* and the unbroken flow of their role in teaching the ultimate value of life. During the Muslim and British rules, when Hinduism was under tremendous pressure and all visible structures of Hindu culture were wantonly destroyed, it was the *ashrams* and wandering *gurus* who kept the Hindu faith aflame among the common folk in the villages and cities. They not only lived religion but also taught and inspired others by their practices. But for these heroic, selfless *gurus* and wandering ascetics, Hinduism would have been forever lost to us. This session will look at the historical as well as the contemporary significance of the *guru* and the *ashram* in the preservation and propagation of Hindu culture. How can and does this pillar of Hinduism effectively incorporate into a culture where *ashrams* are scarce, where *gurus* tailor themselves for Western seekers, and immigrant Hindus seek to insulate themselves from Western influence? What other challenges do *ashrams* and *gurus* in the West

face? How might *gurus* and *ashtams* be of greater help to Hindu parents and families living in America and assist in sustaining a Hindu way of life?

(vi) **Scriptures and their Interpretations:** A revealed scripture is the heart of any religion or faith. The adherents intuitively connect with the revelations of the scripture, intellectually interpret, and emotionally imbibe those teachings, and modify their individual and collective behavior accordingly. Without this rock foundation, life becomes a ship tossed in the storm of unpredictable events. Faith is the anchor, and values are the compass for this ship of life. But a literal interpretation of scripture is dangerous and potentially leads to blind faith and sectarian violence. Scriptures ought to be studied by people of balanced and pure minds. Scriptures are to be lived both personally and as a community. From that wisdom gained in practical living, scriptures are to be interpreted according to the needs of the times, and, this kind of interpretation is one of the most important tasks for a dynamic community. Great scriptural interpreters arose in India, like Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and others. This session will focus upon several interrelated questions of import, considering both Hindus in India as well as their counterparts abroad: What scriptures are foundational to Hinduism in modern times? How do we (and *how* are we to) interpret scripture for our times? Finally, what are the parameters of interpretation that are to assist us in facing modern challenges, including those challenges that Hindus confront living in the West?

(vii) **Caste Conflict and Coalition in the Hindu Society, and the Specter of Conversion:** The prevalence of caste divisions based upon accident of birth and caste discrimination are relics from the deep and long past of the Hindu society. Caste divisions are slow to dissolve, and they continue, in some form. So, too, the resultant caste-based conflicts for power and wealth. In a multi-caste society like the Hindu society, we can expect dynamic shifts and rainbow-caste coalitions, as in the recent trend whereby high-caste Hindus have joined hands with Dalits for class/caste-based reservations on economic considerations, squeezing the middle class. Caste-based social divisions also affect Indians living in the United States. Western stereotypical perspectives of caste as the hallmark of Indian culture embarrass Indo-American youth, negatively affecting their cultural identities. Evangelical, monotheistic religions that convert Hindus have exploited the caste division in Hindu society causing a drastic and traumatic rupture in a people's sense of history and self. What special problems has this system created for Hindu parents raising children in America? For inter-

religious marriages and conversions that occur as a consequence of marriage? This presentation will take a critical look at this age-old intractable problem, as it was, as well as the current state of affairs, including the effect upon Indo-American parents, their families, their identity, and their faith, along with a diagnosis and prognosis.

(viii) **A Hindu Framework for Interfaith and Science-Spirituality Dialogues:**

In the modern global village, we find people of different faiths, languages, traditions and customs mingling in common spaces: in families, the work arena, leisure-time facilities, on every street, and in every suburb of developed societies. Our Hindu children are exposed to all cultures and faiths of the world. During this age of global integration, the time for conflict, extermination, and/or forced conversion is waning. Ours is the age of conversation versus conversion, consensus versus conflict, and global initiatives versus isolation and retreat. *Hindu Dharma*, and its capstone, *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy, provide an inclusive worldview, an all-embracing culture of coexistence amidst (and, in spite of) difference and dissent. We believe that Hindus of all generations, living in India or abroad, have a significant role to play in the unfolding of this global drama because this Hindu worldview will be more effective for creating interfaith conversation and even for integrating modern science with spirituality. Preserving our Hindu heritage and responding to the changing circumstances of increasing globalism is of significant import. How can Hindus draw upon their philosophy and tradition of non-violent coexistence to create a framework and regime for dialogue and global conversation? Can we help the world in discovering a common ground for collective action to protect both the planet and human civilization? Are there special problems or boons to this discovery process associated with such a diverse culture, religious, racial and global amalgam as is the United States of America? These challenges will be the inspirational theme of the final session.