

The Hindu mandir is a feast for the senses. The beauty of its carved walls and murtis can engross visitors for long periods of time. There are intricate rituals that combine offerings and prayer, rhythmic mantras, and multitudes of devotees gathered with the spirit of devotion and community. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many take a mandir for its face value. However, the sign of true appreciation of the mandir experience is an understanding of the philosophy that serves as the mandir's foundation. In order to truly understand a mandir, one must understand the core beliefs of Hinduism, or as it should be called, Sanatana Dharma.

Sanatana Dharma can be translated crudely as "Eternal Law", but this is a miscalculation of the true philosophical implications of Sanatana Dharma. The weight of the words "Sanatana Dharma" may be too great for English, the language of this essay, to bear. The eternity denoted by "Sanatana" is not a period of time, beginning with a fixed point of creation and stretching endlessly forward. "Sanatana" implies what has always been and what will always be. Similarly, "Dharma" cannot be eroded into "law", a simple set of parameters. Dharma is the essence of a being's purpose; without dharma, one's existence has no significance. It is Sanatana Dharma that propels us toward our ultimate goal.

What is this ultimate goal? At a superficial level, the human condition can be described as a desire for identity. From the perspective of Sanatana Dharma, every human's inherent desire is to know the Truth, whether we are conscious of this desire or not. Sanatana Dharma teaches that the soul, or atman, of every being is the same as its Source, the divine Paramatman. Most living beings are unaware of the Truth that their ultimate self is identical to the Universal Self; this ignorance is Maya. Our purpose is to realize this Truth, cast away Maya, and join our atman with the Paramatman.

The realization of the ultimate Truth cannot be attained through our limited human capacity. Any conceptualization that we try to make of this Truth is a futile effort. Our minds would be taking something infinitesimally complex and reducing it to fit the parameters of our own understanding. Therefore, as we journey toward the greater Truth, it is important to realize that we are all somewhat crippled. How, then, are we supposed to fulfill our most inherent desire and ultimate purpose if we lack the ability to do so? The answer lies in our veneration of deities, and what others may brand as "idol worship".

According to the Upanishads, the Supreme Being cannot be described in human context, for “There the eye goes not, speech goes not, nor mind; we know not, we understand not, how would one teach it.” We are not designed to accept a Supreme Being which can only be described with negatives; we crave for something with definition, something concrete. This desire for concrete form is expressed in the murti or archA. Although we have been created by God, we have created Him in forms from our own minds. Therefore, it is important to understand that these forms of God are symbols of the Truth, and not the Truth itself.

It is our creation and honoring of deities that gives us a connection to the Universal Self, the Paramatman. By reducing an incomprehensible Supreme Being into a more palatable form with concrete characteristics, man can recognize God without great difficulty. He can concentrate his efforts on a fixed point. He can understand that the divine manifests itself in a form of his creation through his own efforts. Most importantly, he can know that he is fulfilling his greatest inherent desire: the Truth can be found through his deity, the manifestation of Divinity.

The words “idol worship” are charged with condescension They are tossed into textbooks and occasionally surface in conversations by those who do not know better, or those who seek to distort the truth. What is this idol they speak of, and how is it worshipped? I am told that an idol is an artifice. The deities of Sanatana Dharma are definitely not idols. They are manifestations of something greater.

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