

## Not Religion but Sanātana Dharma

Shrikumar Poddar

Someone once asked me, “Are you a Hindu?”

*I:* Do you have some time?

*He:* Why do you ask?

*I:* If you are in a hurry, I will say that I am a Hindu. But if you have some time then I will say that I am not a Hindu.

*He:* You are trying to confuse me!

*I:* You see, my friend, there is no religion called Hindu religion. But what the majority of the people of India believe in is called Hinduism by people of other faiths. In reality, we in India do not have any concept of religion. There is no word in our vocabulary for religion.

*He:* Then, what do you believe in?

*I:* We believe in the concept of Dharma. Dharma refers to the principles that uphold the universe and therefore apply to everyone. These principles are the same for everyone, regardless of religion or faith. They exist whether we have discovered them or not. For example, gravity existed before Newton discovered it.

These ultimate principles are called *Sanātana*, or Eternal, because they will exist forever, even if we forget them. So *Sanātana Dharma* refers to the eternal principles that uphold the universe.

*He:* Please go on and explain everything clearly.

*I:* You see, both of us believe in God. By God we mean the one who is Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent. There is no place where God is not. God is in everything. He permeates every cell of your body and mine. He is present in every atom of the universe. So the essential nature of everything is divine. You and I are both part of the same Divine.

*He:* What you say does make a lot of sense to me.

*I:* You see, we are all divine, but still there is a big difference between us and divine incarnations like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. What is the difference?

*He:* I'm not sure.

*I:* The answer is quite simple. Divine incarnations are infinitely great. They are aware of their divinity at every moment, whereas you and I are eternally small, so we forget our divine nature. We think of ourselves as the material body rather than as part of the Divine.

Our life here on earth is meant for developing the knowledge about the nature of Self. This can be achieved by our conscious effort for perfection.

*He:* Do you believe in Salvation?

*I:* Yes, we call it Mokṣa or liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. An individual soul is born again and again for millions of lifetimes until it attains Mokṣa.

*He:* Millions of lifetimes?

*I:* Yes, my friend, we can have instantaneous liberation in this very lifetime if we can develop mastery over our own Self. But for this we must give up all our desires and serve Lord Kṛṣṇa without any expectation of returns for ourselves.

*He:* You have given me a lot to think about.