

Suicide – The Hindu Perspective

In 2009, to further the progress of faith communities in preventing suicide, the national Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) convened an Interfaith Suicide Prevention Dialogue, which was supported by the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Participants included representatives of the five largest faith groups in the United States: Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu. The final report of this meeting can be found at: http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/faith_dialogue.pdf

Representing the Hindu faith at this meeting were Dr. Jeffery Long, Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania, and Arun Gandhi, Founder and President of the Gandhi Worldwide Education Institute.

You must not use your God-given body for killing God's creatures, whether they are human, animal or whatever.

~Yajur Veda, chapter 12, verse 32

Nonviolence is the highest duty. Ahimsa paramo dharmaha.

~Mahabharata, Anushasana Parva, chapter 115, verse 1

Hinduism is not really a “religion.” It is not formalized or organized like Islam, Judaism, or Christianity. There is not even a single authoritative scripture. While the Vedas are universally revered among Hindus, they are very rarely read, and even less frequently understood. Portions of them are typically chanted during ceremonial events. They have traditionally been the preserve of the priests. Unlike scriptures in Western religious traditions, it is not expected that most Hindus will read daily from the Vedas.

Whenever one speaks of the “Hindu scriptures,” therefore, one is referring to a vast body of literature, including, but not limited to, the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and numerous legal and philosophical texts, such as the Manusmriti and the Yoga Sutra. Some Hindus regard particular portions of this literature as more sacred than others, while other Hindus focus on other portions of it, with the Vedas being more universal in their appeal (with the qualifications already noted).

Despite the lack of formalization, Hindus do have duties to perform and rituals to practice during a lifetime. The role of Hindu priests is to carry out the rituals; they are not pastoral. In times of crisis, some people turn to their families and communities, while others turn to their spiritual leaders or gurus, not to Hindu priests. Hindus believe that the divine reality can be approached in a variety of ways: as an impersonal principle, or as a personal deity which takes numerous forms.

With regard to suicide in the Hindu faith, Hindu scriptures say little regarding suicide or the spiritual consequences of suicide. The Isha Upanishad contains the following controversial verse: “All who kill the self-go after death to demonic worlds that are cloaked in blind darkness.” (Isha Upanishad, verse 3) It appears to be a straightforward condemnation of suicide, asserting that the next rebirth of one who commits suicide will be in an unpleasant, hellish state. But the phrase “kill the self” has been taken by most of the commentators to refer to the eternal self, the atman, which, of course, is divine and cannot be killed. So “kill the self” is taken to refer to denial of the reality of the atman. The verse thus becomes more of a condemnation of atheism than of suicide.

Other Hindu writings make a distinction between a “dishonorable” suicide and an “honorable” giving up of one’s life. On the one hand, suicide undertaken out of passion (due to despair, anger, and so on) is condemned in passages from the Laws of Manu such as, “No ritual of libation should be poured out for those who...have taken their own lives.” (Manusmriti, chapter 5, verse 89) On the other hand, the same text commends giving up of one’s life when one has reached a high spiritual state: “When he has gradually abandoned all attachments in this way and is freed from all duality, he is absorbed directly into the ultimate reality.” (Ibid, chapter 6, verse 81) Examples of “honorable” suicides would be when an elderly person with an incurable disease or an ascetic who has dedicated himself to a monastic life stop eating and drinking and “let nature take its course.” Such people are admired for being calm as they die, knowing they have fulfilled the purpose of their lives.

Let him not desire to die, let him not desire to live; let him wait for his appointed time, as a servant waits for the payment of his wages.
Manusmriti, chapter 6, verse 45

There are about two million Hindus in America. As with many Jews and Muslims, American Hindus tend to believe that suicide is a very sad tragedy and a terrible loss for the community. They grieve, extend sympathy to the family, and do activities to honor the person and acknowledge the loss, but there is not really a sense of shame surrounding a suicide. The Mahabharata states, “Nonviolence in thought, word, and deed toward all creatures, compassion, and generosity constitute praiseworthy behavior.” (Mahabharata, Shantiparva, chapter 124, verse 65) These are the three main virtues in the Hindu tradition. Nonviolence is the basis for the Hindu rejection of suicide, and compassion is the basis for the non-condemnation of the person who commits it.

Hindus would agree that suicide is preventable. In India, many suicides have been linked to economic difficulties. It is estimated that two to three farmers take their lives each day because they can no longer make a living. In the United States, suicides among Hindus are more often socially and/or psychologically driven. For example, suicides among Indian students in the States are often linked to intense pressures to excel.

Hindus in America believe that we must tackle the compulsions and eliminate the hate, negativity, prejudice, and exploitations that may cause the suicides. We believe that there are so many walls, labels, and barriers that prevent us from treating one another as human beings. We need to work harder to achieve a harmonious society and break down the walls we have created around us.