

ॐ Hinduism

"When you hear about the Self, meditate upon the Self, and finally realize the Self,
you come to understand everything in life."

--*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.5*



Overview of Hinduism

Hinduism is an ancient religion with no founder or known date of origin. The term "Hinduism" is simply related to the word "India" and refers to a wide variety of religious traditions and philosophies that have developed in India over thousands of years. Most Hindus worship one or more deities, believe in reincarnation, value the practice of meditation, and observe festive holidays like Diwali and Holi.

About 80 percent of India's population regard themselves as Hindus and 30 million more Hindus live outside of India. There are a total of 900 million Hindus worldwide, making Hinduism the third largest religion (after Christianity and Islam).

The term "Hinduism" includes numerous traditions, which are closely related and share common themes but do not constitute a unified set of beliefs or practices.

Hinduism is thought to have gotten its name from the Persian word *hindu*, meaning "river," used by outsiders to describe the people of the Indus River Valley. Hindus themselves refer to their religion as *sanatana dharma*, "eternal religion," and *varnasramadharm*, a word emphasizing the fulfillment of duties (*dharma*) appropriate to one's class (*varna*) and stage of life (*asrama*).

Hinduism has no founder or date of origin. The authors and dates of most Hindu sacred texts are unknown. Scholars describe modern Hinduism as the product of religious development in India that spans nearly four thousand years, making it the oldest surviving world religion. Indeed, as seen above, Hindus regard their religion as eternal (*sanatana*).

Hinduism is not a homogeneous, organized system. Many Hindus are devoted followers of Shiva or Vishnu, whom they regard as the only true God, while others look inward to the divine Self (*atman*). But most recognize the existence of Brahman, the unifying principle and Supreme Reality behind all that is.

Most Hindus respect the authority of the Vedas (a collection of ancient sacred texts) and the Brahmins (the priestly class), but some reject one or both of these authorities. Hindu religious life might take the form of devotion to God or gods, the duties of family life, or concentrated meditation. Given all this diversity, it is important to take care when generalizing about "Hinduism" or "Hindu beliefs."

The first sacred writings of Hinduism, which date to about 1200 BC, were primarily concerned with the ritual sacrifices associated with numerous gods who represented

forces of nature. A more philosophical focus began to develop around 700 BC, with the Upanishads and development of the Vedanta philosophy. Around 500 BC, several new belief systems sprouted from Hinduism, most significantly Buddhism and Jainism.

In the 20th century, Hinduism began to gain popularity in the West. Its different worldview and its tolerance for diversity in belief made it an attractive alternative to traditional Western religion. Although there are relatively few western converts to Hinduism, Hindu thought has influenced the West indirectly by way of religious movements like Hare Krishna and New Age, and even more so through the incorporation of Indian beliefs and practices (such as the chakra system and yoga) in books and seminars on health and spirituality.

Fast Facts on Hinduism

Meaning of name

Hinduism, from the Persian *hindu* (Sanskrit *sindhu*), literally "river." Means "of the Indus Valley" or simply "Indian." Hindus call their religion *sanatana dharma*, "eternal religion" or "eternal truth."

Date founded

Earliest forms date to 1500 BC or earlier

Place founded

India

Founder

None

Adherents

900 million

Size rank

Third largest in the world

Main location

India, also United Kingdom and United States

Major sects

Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism

Sacred texts

Vedas, Upanishads, Sutras, Bhagavad Gita

Original language

Sanskrit

Spiritual leader

Guru or sage

Place of worship

Temple or home shrine

Theism

Pantheism with polytheistic elements

Ultimate reality

Brahman

Human nature

In bondage to ignorance and illusion, but able to escape

Purpose of life

To attain liberation (moksa) from the cycle of reincarnation

How to live

Order life according to the dharma

Afterlife

If karma unresolved, soul is born into a new body; if karma resolved, attain moksa (liberation)

Major holidays

Mahasivaratri-February)

Holi (Spring)

Ramnavami (late March)

Dusserah (early November)

Diwali (mid-November)

Hinduism by the Numbers

Three paths:

- *karmamarga* - path of works and action
- *jnanamarga* - path of knowledge or philosophy
- *bhaktimarga* - path of devotion to God

Three debts:

- debt to God
- debt to sages and saints
- debt to ancestors

Four stages of life:

- *brahmacharya* - school years - grow and learn
- *grhastha* - marriage, family and career
- *vanaprastha* - turn attention to spiritual things
- *sanrgasu* - abandon world to seek spiritual things

Four purposes of life:

- *dharma* - fulfill moral, social and religious duties
- *artha* - attain financial and worldly success
- *kama* - satisfy desires and drives in moderation

- *moksha* - attain freedom from reincarnation

Seven sacred cities:

- Ayodhya
- Mathura
- Gaya (Bodhgaya)
- Kasi (Varanasi, Benares)
- Kanchi
- Avantika (Ujjain)
- Dvaraka

Ten commitments:

1. Ahimsa - do no harm
2. Satya - do not lie
3. Asteya - do not steal
4. Brahmacharya - do not overindulge
5. Aparigraha - do not be greedy
6. Saucha - be clean
7. Santosha - be content
8. Tapas - be self-disciplined
9. Svadhyaya - study
10. Ishvara Pranidhana - surrender to God

Timeline of Hinduism

Below is a timeline providing an overview of Hindu history.

2800-2000 BCE	Indus Valley civilization.
1200 BCE	Aryans migrate into southern Asia.
1200-900 BCE	Early Vedic Period - earliest Vedas are compiled.
900-600 BCE	Late Vedic period - Brahmanical religion develops, emphasizing ritual and social obligation.
800-300 BCE	The 11 major Upanishads are written, which include the ideas of reincarnation and karma.
500 BCE-1000 CE	Epics and Puranas are written, reflecting the rise of devotional movements dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and Devi.
5th cent. BCE	Buddhism and Jainism founded in India.
c. 320-185 BCE	Mauryan Dynasty founded by Chandragupta.
c. 320-500 CE	Gupta empire.
c. 500-650 CE	Gupta empire divides into several kingdoms.
c. 600-1600 CE	Rise of devotional movements, puja (worship) rituals, and idea of equality of devotees.
7th-11th cent.	Esoteric movements based on Tantras develop.
c. 870-1280	Cholas dynasty. Hinduism arises in the south.
1498	European presence in southern Asia begins with the arrival of Vasco de Gama.
1540s	Portuguese missionaries arrive in India.
17th-19th cent	Hindu Renaissance.
c. 1700	British East India Company formed.
1720	Collapse of the Mughal empire; British begin to take power.
1857	National War of Independence against the British is sparked by the British use of cow fat in guns.

- 1876 Queen Victoria becomes Empress of India.
- 1895 Vedanta Society founded by Vivekananda. Promotes Hinduism as a world religion and India as a single nation.
- 1915 Gandhi joins the nationalist movement.
- 1947 India regains independence, but its partitioning leads to conflicts between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs.
- 1948 Assassination of Gandhi.
- 1950 Constitution of the Republic of India.

Hindu Sacred Texts

Hindu sacred texts fall into one of two categories: *sruti* ("heard") or *smṛiti* ("remembered"). *Sruti* scriptures are considered divinely inspired and fully authoritative for belief and practice, while *smṛiti* are recognized as the products of the minds of the great sages.

However, *smṛiti* texts often carry almost as much authority as *sruti*, and the religion of the older *sruti* texts bears little resemblance to modern Hinduism and is largely unknown to the average Hindu. Nevertheless, the *sruti* are still held in very high regard and portions are still memorized for religious merit. The only texts regarded as *sruti* are the Vedas, which include both ancient sacrificial formulas and the more philosophical Upanishads.

Smṛiti texts help explain *sruti* scriptures and make them meaningful to the general population. Despite their lesser authority, they are generally the most recent, the most beloved by the Hindu population, and the most representative of actual Hindu beliefs and practices. *Smṛiti* texts include the Itihasas (History or Epics), Puranas (Mythology), Dharma Shastras (Law Codes), Agamas and Tantras (Sectarian Scriptures), and Darshanas (Manuals of Philosophy).

- **Vedas**
 - Samhitas
 - Brahmanas
 - Aranyakas
 - Upanishads

- **Itihasas**
 - Mahabharata
 - Ramayana
 - Puranas

- **Tantras**
- **Darshanas**

The Vedas

The most sacred scriptures of Hinduism are the **Vedas ("Books of Knowledge")**, a collection of texts written in Sanskrit from about 1200 BCE to 100 CE. As *sruti*, the Vedas are regarded as the absolute authority for religious knowledge and a test of Hindu orthodoxy (both Jains and Buddhists reject the Vedas). "For Hindus, the Veda is a symbol of unchallenged authority and tradition." Selections from the Vedas are still memorized and recited for religious merit today. Yet much of the religion presented in the Vedas is unknown today and plays little to no role in modern Hinduism.

As historical and religious literature often is, the text is written from the perspective of the most powerful groups, priests and warrior-kings. Scholars say it is therefore unlikely that it represents the totality of religious belief and practice in India in the first millennium BCE. This perspective is especially evident in the earlier parts of the Vedas, in which the primary concerns are war, rain, and dealing with the "slaves," or native inhabitants of India.

Initially, the Vedas consisted of four collections of mantras (**Samhitas**), each associated with a particular priest or aspect of ritual: **Rig Veda** (Wisdom of the Verses); **Sama Veda** (Wisdom of the Chants); **Yajur Veda** (Wisdom of the Sacrificial Formulas); and **Atharva Veda** (Wisdom of the Atharvan Priests).

Over the centuries, three kinds of additional literature were attached to each of the Samhitas: **Brahmanas** (discussions of the ritual); **Aranyakas** ("books studied in the forest"); and **Upanishads** (philosophical writings).

In these later texts, especially the Upanishads, the polytheism of the earlier Vedas has evolved into a pantheism focused on Brahman, the supreme reality of the universe. This concept remains a key feature of Hindu philosophy today.

Samhitas

As noted above, the Samhitas ("Collections") are the oldest components of the Vedas, and consist largely of hymns and mantras. There are four Samhitas (also called Vedas): Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda.

The Rig Veda

Composed as early as 1500 BC, the Rig Veda or Rg Veda ("Wisdom of the Verses") is the oldest of the four Vedic collections and one of the oldest surviving sacred texts in the world. The Rig Veda consists of 10,552 verses (collected into 10 books) of hymns and mantras used by the *hotri* priests.

The hymns of the Rig Veda focus on pleasing the principal gods Indra (war, wind and rain), Agni (the sacrificial fire), Surya (the sun) and Varuna (the cosmic order) through ritual sacrifices. Along with governing important matters of life such as rain, wind, fire and war, the Vedic gods also forgive wrongdoing (5.85.7) and mete out justice in the afterlife (1.97.1).

Deceased ancestors are able to influence the living (10.15.6), so they are also appeased with rituals (10.15.1-11). The afterlife of the Rig Veda is eternal conscious survival in the abode of Yama, the god of the dead (9.113.7-11). It is the gods, not karma, that are responsible for assuring justice in this life and the next (7.104).

Yajur Veda and Sama Veda

Both the Yajur Veda ("Wisdom of the Sacrificial Formulas") and the Sama Veda ("Wisdom of the Chants") are liturgical works consisting primarily of selections from the Rig Veda. The Yajur Veda was used by *udgatri* priests and contains brief prose to accompany ritual acts, many of which are addressed to the ritual instruments and offerings. The Sama Veda was chanted in fixed melodies by the *adhvaryu* priests. Each contains about 2,000 verses.

Atharva Veda

The Atharva Veda ("Wisdom of the Atharvan Priests") was added significantly later than the first three Samhitas, perhaps as late as 500 BC. It consists of 20 books of hymns and prose, many of which reflect the religious concerns of everyday life. This sets the Atharva Veda apart from the other Vedas, which focus on adoring the gods and performing the liturgy of sacrifice, and makes it an important source of information on the practical religion and magic of the time.

Books 1 through 8 of the Atharva Veda contain magical prayers for long life, prosperity, curses, kingship, love, and a variety of other specific purposes. Books 8 through 12 include cosmological hymns, marking a transition to the loftier philosophy of the Upanishads. The remainder of the books consists of magical and ritual formulas, including marriage and funeral practices.

Brahmanas

The mythology and significance behind the Vedic rituals of the Samhitas are explained in the Brahmanas. Although they include some detail as to the performance of rituals themselves, the Brahmanas are primarily concerned with the meaning of rituals. A worldview is presented in which sacrifice is central to human life, religious goals, and even the continuation of the cosmos.

Included in the Brahmanas are extensive rituals for royal consecration (*rajasuya*), which endow a king with great power and raise him to the status of a god (at least during the ceremony). Part of the ritual is the elaborate horse sacrifice (*asvamedha*), in which a single horse is set free, followed and protected by royal forces for a year, then ritually sacrificed at the royal capital.

Aranyakas ("Forest Books")

The Aranyakas contain similar material as the Brahmanas and discuss rites deemed not suitable for the village (thus the name "forest"). They also prominently feature the word *brahmana*, here meaning the creative power behind of the rituals, and by extension, the cosmic order.

Upanishads ("Sittings Near a Teacher")

The word "Upanishad" means "to sit down near," bringing to mind pupils gathering around their teacher for philosophical instruction. The Upanishads are philosophical works that introduce the now-central ideas of self-realization, yoga, meditation, karma and reincarnation.

The theme of the Upanishads is the escape from rebirth through knowledge of the underlying reality of the universe. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains how this change in perspective came about:

Throughout the later Vedic period, the idea that the world of heaven was not the end-and that even in heaven death was inevitable-had been growing. For Vedic thinkers, the fear of the impermanence of religious merit and its loss in the hereafter, as well as the fear-provoking anticipation of the transience of any form of existence after death, culminating in the much-feared repeated death (*punarmrtyu*), assumed the character of an obsession.

The older Upanishads are affixed to a particular Veda, but more recent ones are not. The most important Upanishads are generally considered to be the Brhadaranyaka ("Great Forest Text") and the Chandogya (pertaining to the Chandoga priests). Both record the traditions of sages (*rishis*) of the period, most notably Yajñavalkya, who was a pioneer of new religious ideas. Also significant are:

- Mandukya Upanishad
- Kena/Talavakara Upanishad
- Katha Upanishad
- Mundaka Upanishad
- Aitareya Upanishad
- Taittiriya Upanishad
- Prashna Upanishad
- Isha Upanishad
- Shvetashvatara Upanishad

Itihasas

The **Itihasas** (*itihasa* is Sanskrit for "history" or "thus verily happened") are narrative traditions composed during the period 500 BC to 1000 AD. They tell the stories of divine incarnations along with much philosophical and ethical reflection. The Itihasas reflect popular, non-Brahmanic interests and the rise of theistic Hinduism focused on Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti. The Itihasas include the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, two of the most beloved Hindu texts, as well as the Puranas.

Mahabharata

At more than 100,000 verses (seven times the length of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined), the Mahabharata may be the longest epic poem in the world. Authorship is traditionally attributed to the sage Vyasa; modern scholarship has established its development over several centuries ending in the first century AD. The central theme of the Mahabharata ("Great Tale of the Bharatas") is dharma, especially the dharma of kingship.

The Mahabharata is most well known for the **Bhagavad Gita**, the single most popular Hindu text. The Bhagavad Gita ("The Song of the Lord") tells the story of King Pandu and his five sons and features a memorable appearance by Krishna, the popular incarnation of Vishnu.

Ramayana

The Ramayana ("March of Rama") was composed around the 2nd century BCE, but likely drew on preexisting oral tradition. It tells the epic story of Rama, the 7th incarnation of the deity Vishnu. Written in high Sanskrit in the form of rhyming couplets, the Ramayana contains seven sections (*kandas*):

1. Bal Kanda - Rama's boyhood
2. Ayodhya Kanda - Rama's life in Ayodhya until his banishment
3. Aranya - Rama's life in the forest and his abduction by Ravana
4. Kishkinda - Rama's stay at Kishkinda, the capital of his monkey ally Sugriva
5. Sundara - Rama's journey to Sri Lanka

6. Yuddha (or Lanka) - Rama's battle with Ravana, the recovery of Sita and their return to Ayodhya
7. Uttara - Rama's life as king in Ayodhya, the birth of his two sons, Sita's test of innocence and return to her mother, and Rama's demise

Puranas

The Puranas are collections of mythology, hymns, ancient history, rules of life, rituals, instructions and knowledge, cosmology. Most attained their final written form around 500 AD. Today they are among the most commonly used scriptural texts. There are 18 Puranas, with six each dedicated to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. In all the Puranas the goddess Lakshmi is given a prominent place without any sectarian dispute.

The most important Puranas are:

- Vishnu Purana
- Bhagavata Purana (Krishna)
- Shiva Purana
- Markendeya Purana (to the Goddess)

The Tantras

The **Tantras** ("looms" or "weavings") are sectarian scriptures dealing with certain aspects of a god and rules for discipline for the worshipper.

Tantras are scriptures dedicated to each of the three major theological traditions of Hindu dharma: Vaishnavism, Shavism, Shaktism (Divine Mother). Each denomination adores its god as the Ultimate Reality.

Tantras are associated with "medieval India," having been written between 500 and 1800.

Each Tantra has four parts:

- Philosophical and spiritual truths
- Yoga and mental discipline
- Rules for constructing temples and carving statues of deities
- Rules on religious rituals and festivals

The Darshanas

The **Darshanas** are varying attempts to develop and systematize the Vedas, and they are thus considered manuals of philosophy. The six Darshana sutras are:

- Brahma Sutra - Vedanta philosophy of Sage Vyasa
- Mimamsa Sutra - Philosophy of rites and rituals of Sage Jaimini
- Nyaya Sutra - Logical analysis of Sage Gautama (not Buddha)
- Vaisheshika Sutra - Atomic philosophy of Sage Kanada
- Sankya Sutras - Sankya philosophy of Sage Kapila
- Yoga Sutras - Yoga philosophy of Sage Patanjali

Hindu Deities

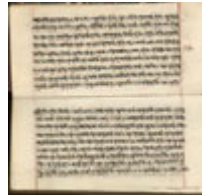
The **gods of modern Hinduism** are many, and include the chief gods Shiva, Vishnu and the Goddess Shakti as well as a myriad of local community gods.

Devotion to these various deities is based primarily on one's region and needs, and even when devotion is given to only one, the existence of others is acknowledged. Hindu worship virtually always involves sculptures and images, to which offerings are made and rituals are performed.



One God or Many?

Is Hinduism a polytheistic, pantheistic, or even monotheistic religion?



The Vedic Gods

The ancient *Vedas* describe a number of deities, most of whom are personified forces of nature.



Ganesha

The beloved elephant-faced deity known as Ganesh or Ganesha clears away life's obstacles.



Shiva

The "Destroyer" and one of the chief deities of Hinduism. His name means "Auspicious One."



Vishnu

Vishnu, the "All-Pervading," is the protector of the world and the restorer of moral order (*dharma*).



Devi: The Mother Goddess

Devi, the Divine Female, is better and universally known as the Mother Goddess.

The Vedic Gods

Hinduism incorporates a vast pantheon of deities, some of who are manifestations or combinations of others. Most of the deities mentioned in the Vedas are no longer worshipped; much of today's popular devotion centers on the major deities of Shiva, Vishnu, and the Goddess. The Vedas describe a number of deities, most of whom are personified forces of nature. The most oft mentioned are Indra, Agni, Soma, and Varuna.



Indra is the chief deity and the god of war and rain, the greatest concerns of the people at that time. He separated the heavens and the earth by defeating Vrtra, a snake-dragon representation of chaos and obstacles. Another Vedic myth describes his defeat of Vrtra using wind and a thunderbolt as his weapons, enabling the monsoon rains to end. Indra must be strengthened with the drink soma, provided by worshippers, to accomplish this task.

Agni is the fire of sacrifice, and thus a mediator between man and the gods, and **Soma** is the hallucinogenic drink of the sacrifice. The personalities of the latter two are left largely undeveloped.

Another significant Vedic deity is **Varuna**, who is associated primarily with issues of morality, guilt and forgiveness. Varuna is the god of the rita, a concept having to do with faithfulness to allegiances, both between humans and gods and humans and one another. Thus Varuna is the god petitioned for forgiveness, deliverance from evil, and protection.

Shiva

Shiva (or **Siva**) is one of the chief deities of Hinduism. His name means "Auspicious One." Devotees of Shiva are called "**Saivites**." Shiva is known by many other names, including Sambhu ("Benignant"), Samkara ("Beneficent"), Pasupati ("Lord of Beasts"), Mahesa ("Great Lord") and Mahadeva ("Great God").

Shiva is a paradoxical deity: "both the destroyer and the restorer, the great ascetic and the symbol of sensuality, the benevolent herdsman of souls and the wrathful avenger." In the most famous myth concerning Shiva, he saves humanity by holding in his throat the poison that churned up in the waters and threatened mankind. For this reason he is often depicted with a blue neck.

History of Shiva and Shiva-Worship



In the Vedas, *shiva* is an aspect of the god Rudra, not a separate god. However, a joint form Rudra-Shiva appears in early household rites, making Shiva one of the most ancient Hindu gods still worshipped today. By the 2nd century BCE, Rudra's significance began to wane and Shiva rose in popularity as a separate identity.

In the Ramayana, Shiva is a mighty and personal god, and in the Mahabharata he is the equal of Vishnu and worshipped by other gods. Shiva became associated with generation and destruction, sometimes fulfilling the role of Destroyer along with Vishnu (the Preserver) and Brahma (the Creator) and sometimes embodying all three roles within him.

In the Mahadeva image in the Elephanta caves (on an island off of Bombay), which dates to between the 5th and 7th centuries CE, Shiva is shown in his threefold form. This triple aspect of Shiva, which has become a dominant form, is rich with symbolism:

The two faces on either side represent (apparent) opposites - male and female (*ardhanari*); terrifying destroyer (*bhairava*) and active giver of repose; *mahayogi* and *grhasta* - while the third, serene and peaceful, reconciles the two, the Supreme as the One who transcends all contradictions.

The three horizontal lines Saivites mark on their foreheads represent this threefold aspect of Shiva.

Shiva's Family and Associations

Shiva's female consort is variously manifested as Uma, Sati, Parvati, Durga, Kali, and sometimes Shakti. Their sons are Skanda, the god of war, and the beloved elephant-headed Ganesh, remover of obstacles.

Shiva is especially associated with the Ganges River, which flows through his hair in images, and Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas.



Iconography and Symbolism of Shiva



Shiva's symbols are the **bull** and the **linga**. The latter symbol is historically associated with the phallus, but is not generally perceived as such by worshipers. Other depictions of Shiva have his hair in matted locks and piled atop his head like an **ascetic** and adorned with the **crescent moon** and the **Ganges River** (according to legend, he broke the Ganga's fall to earth by allowing her to trickle through his hair).

Shiva has a **third eye**, giving him the capability of inward vision but also burning destruction when focused outward. He is variously shown with two or four hands, which hold a deerskin, a trident, a small hand drum, or a club with a skull at the end.

One of the most popular representations of Shiva is as **Nataraj**, the cosmic dancer. He is also variously depicted as a naked ascetic, a beggar, a yogi, and the union of he and his female consort in one body.

Shiva as Nataraja: The Cosmic Dancer

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Shiva the Hindu god of destruction is also known as **Nataraja**, the Lord of Dancers (In Sanskrit, *Nata* means dance and *raja* means Lord). The visual image of Nataraja achieved canonical form in the bronzes cast under the Chola dynasty in the 10th century AD, and then continued to be reproduced in metal, stone and other substances right up to the present times. The Chola Nataraja is often said to be the supreme statement of Hindu art.



There is an interesting legend behind the conception of Shiva as Nataraja. In a dense forest in South India, there dwelt multitudes of heretical sages. Thither proceeded Shiva to confute them, accompanied by Vishnu disguised as a beautiful woman. The sages were at first led to violent dispute amongst themselves, but their anger was soon directed against Shiva, and they endeavored to destroy him by means of incantations. A fierce tiger was created in sacrificial fires, and rushed upon him; but smiling gently, he seized it and, with the nail of his little finger, stripped off its skin, and wrapped it about himself like a silken cloth. Undiscouraged by failure, the sages renewed their offerings, and produced a monstrous serpent, which however Shiva seized and wreathed about his neck like a garland. Then he began to dance; but there rushed upon him a last monster in the shape of a malignant dwarf. Upon him the god pressed the tip of his foot, and broke the creature's back, so that it writhed upon the ground; and so, his last foe prostrate, Shiva resumed the dance.



To understand the concept of Nataraja we have to understand the idea of dance itself. Like yoga, dance induces trance, ecstasy and the experience of the divine. In India consequently, dance has flourished side by side with the terrific austerities of the meditation grove (fasting, absolute introversion etc.). Shiva, therefore, the arch-yogi of the gods, is necessarily also the master of the dance.

Shiva Nataraja was first represented thus in a beautiful series of South Indian bronzes dating from the tenth and twelfth centuries A.D. In these images, Nataraja dances with his right foot supported by a crouching figure and his left foot elegantly raised. A cobra uncoils from his lower right forearm, and the crescent moon and a skull are on his crest.

He dances within an arch of flames. This dance is called the Dance of Bliss (anandatandava).

These iconographic details of Nataraja are to be read, according to the Hindu tradition, in terms of a complex pictorial allegory. The most common figures depict a four-armed Shiva. These multiple arms represent the four cardinal directions. Each hand either holds an object or makes a specific mudra (gesture).

The upper right hand holds an hourglass drum, which is a symbol of creation. It is beating the pulse of the universe. The drum also provides the music that accompanies Shiva's dance. It represents sound as the first element in an unfolding universe, for sound is the first and most pervasive of the elements. The story goes that when Shiva granted the boon of wisdom to the ignorant Panini (the great Sanskrit grammarian), the sound of the drum encapsulated the whole of Sanskrit grammar. The first verse of Panini's grammar is in fact called Shiva sutra.

The hourglass drum also represents the male and female vital principles; two triangles penetrate each other to form a hexagon. When they part, the universe also dissolves.

The opposite hand, the upper left, bears on its palm a tongue of flames. Fire is the element of destruction of the world. According to Hindu mythology at the end of the world, it will be fire that will be the instrument of annihilation. Thus in the balance of these two hands is illustrated a counterpoise of creation and destruction. Sound against flames, ceaselessness of production against an insatiate appetite of extermination.



The second right hand is held in the abhaya (literally "without fear") pose and so a gesture of protection, as an open palm is most likely to be interpreted. It depicts the god as a protector.

The left leg is raised towards the right leg and reaches across it; the lower left hand is stretched across the body and points to the upraised left foot which represents release from the cycle of birth and death. Interestingly, the hand pointing to the uplifted foot is held in a pose imitative of the outstretched trunk of an elephant. In Sanskrit this is known as the 'gaja-hasta-mudra' (the posture of the elephant trunk), and is symbolic of Ganesha, Shiva's son, the Remover of obstacles.

Shiva dances on the body of a dwarf apasmara-purusha (the man of forgetfulness) who embodies indifference, ignorance and laziness. Creation, indeed all creative energy is possible only when the weight of inertia (the tamasic darkness of the universe) is overcome and suppressed. The Nataraja image thus addresses each individual to overcome complacency and get his or her own act together.

The ring of fire and light, which circumscribes the entire image, identifies the field of the dance with the entire universe. The lotus pedestal on which the image rests locates this universe in the heart or consciousness of each person.

The Nataraja image is also eloquent of the paradox of Eternity and Time. It shows us that the reposeful ocean and the racing stream are not finally distinct. This wonderful lesson can be read in the significant contrast of the incessant, triumphant motion of the swaying limbs to the balance of and the immobility of the mask-like countenance. Shiva is Kala, meaning time, but he is also Maha Kala, meaning "Great Time" or eternity. As Nataraja, King of dancers, his gestures, wild and full of grace, precipitate the cosmic illusion; his flying arms and legs and the swaying of his torso produce the continuous creation-destruction of the universe, death exactly balancing birth. The choreography is the whirligig of time. History and its ruins, the explosion of suns, are flashes from the tireless swinging sequence of the gestures. In the beautiful cast metal figurines, not merely a single phase or movement, but the entirety of this cosmic dance is miraculously rendered. The cyclic rhythm, flowing on and on in the unstable, irreversible round of the Mahayugas, or Great Eons, is marked by the beating and stamping of the Master's heels. But the face remains, meanwhile in sovereign calm.

Steeped in quietude, the enigmatic mask resides above the whirl of the four resilient arms and cares nothing for the superb legs as they beat out the tempo of the world ages. Aloof, in sovereign silence, the mask of god's eternal essence remains unaffected by the tremendous display of his own energy, the world and its progress, the flow and the changes of time. This head, this face, this mask, abides in transcendental isolation, as a spectator unconcerned. Its smile, bent inward, filled with the bliss of self-absorption, subtly refutes, with a scarcely hidden irony, the meaningful gestures of the feet and hands. A tension exists between the marvel of the dance and the serene tranquility of this expressively inexpressive countenance, the tension, that is to say, of Eternity and Time. The two, invisible and visible, are quintessentially the same. Man with all the fibers of his native personality clings to the duality; nevertheless, actually and finally, there is no duality.

Another aspect of Nataraja rich in a similar symbolism is his lengthy and sensuous hair. The long tresses of his matted hair, usually piled up in a kind of pyramid, loosen during the triumphant, violent frenzy of his untiring dance. Expanding, they form two wings, to the right and left, a kind of halo, broadcasting, as it were, on their magic waves, the exuberance and sanctity of vegetative, sensuous life.

Supra-normal life-energy, amounting to the power of magic, resides in such a wildness of hair untouched by the scissors. The conceptualization here is similar to the legend of Samson who with naked hands tore asunder the jaws of a lion. His strength was said to reside in his hair.

Also central to understanding the symbolism behind Nataraja's hair is the realization that much of womanly charm, the sensual appeal of the Eternal Feminine, is in the fragrance, the flow and luster of beautiful hair. On the other hand, anyone renouncing the generative forces of the vegetable-animal realm, revolting against the procreative principle of life, sex, earth, and nature, and entering upon the spiritual path of absolute asceticism, has first to be shaved. He must simulate the sterility of an old man whose hairs have fallen and who no longer constitutes a link in the chain of generation. He must coldly sacrifice the foliage of the head.

The tonsure of the Christian priest and monk is a sign of this renunciation of the flesh. (Clergymen of denominations in which marriage is not considered incompatible with the saintly office do not wear a tonsure.) These "Worthy Ones", representing the victory of yoga-spirituality, have overcome all seduction by their taking of the monastic vows and following of the ascetic formula. With their voluntary baldness they have broken through to the peace beyond the seasons of growth and change.

Thus by donning long, luxurious hair, Shiva dispels the notion of the conventional ascetic and reiterates that the image of Nataraja assimilates and harmonizes within itself apparently contradictory and conflicting aspects.

Shiva is thus two opposite of things: archetypal ascetic and archetypal dancer. On the one hand he is total tranquility-inward calm absorbed in itself, absorbed in the void of the

Absolute, where all distinctions merge and dissolve, and all tensions are at rest. But on the other hand he is total activity- life's energy, frantic, aimless and playful.

The Nataraja image represents not simply some event in the mythic life of a local deity but a universal view in which the forces of nature and the aspirations and limitation of man confront each other and are blended together. The curator of the Indian collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art has rightly written that: "If one had to select a single icon to represent the extraordinarily rich and complex cultural heritage of India, the Shiva Nataraja might well be the most remunerative candidate."

Vishnu

"The world rests as the lotus in the palm of my hand, the cosmos revolves around my finger like a discus. I blow the music of life through my conch and wield my mace to protect all creatures."



Vishnu, whose name means "All-Pervading," is the protector of the world and the restorer of moral order (*dharma*). He is peaceful, merciful, and compassionate. To Vaisnavites, Vishnu is the Supreme Lord.

Vishnu is often pictured with his consort, Lakshmi (also called Sri), and usually has four arms. Each hand holds an emblem of his divinity: the conch, discus, club, and lotus. A curl of hair on his chest signifies his immortality, and he wears the jewel Kaustubha around his neck. He is usually depicted with a dark complexion, as are his incarnations. Vishnu is often shown reclining or asleep as he awaits the next annihilation and renewal of the world.

Vishnu is best known through his ten avatars (incarnations), which appear on earth when there is disorder in the world. Rama and Krishna, whose stories are told in the Epics and the Puranas, are the most popular incarnations of Vishnu by far. The ten incarnations of Vishnu are:

1. Matsya (fish)
2. Kurma (turtle)
3. Varaha (boar)
4. Narasimha (man-lion)
5. Vamana (dwarf)
6. Parashurama (warrior-priest)
7. Rama (prince)
8. Krishna (cow-herd)
9. Buddha (sage)
10. Kalki (horseman, who has not yet appeared)



Vishnu - A Symbolic Appreciation

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Curiously, the interpretative saga of Lord Vishnu begins with Lord Shiva. Once when man's wickedness overran all restraining boundaries, an infuriated Shiva transformed himself into a wrathful form known as Bhairava. Thus converted, Shiva began his rampage of destruction, killing, maiming, and ripping out hearts of humans and drinking blood, his menacing laughter thundering all around.

On behalf of humanity, Vishnu approached Bhairava and requested him to stop the slaughter. Bhairava said: "I will go on killing until my bowl is filled with enough blood to quench my thirst." It was common knowledge that Bhairava's bowl could never be filled and his thirst never quenched.

His heart filled with compassion, Vishnu addressed Shiva thus: "Let me give you all the blood you need. You don't have to bleed mankind." So saying, Vishnu struck his forehead with his sword and let his blood spurt into Bhairava's bowl. Ages passed, Vishnu kept pouring his blood into the bowl, while Bhairava kept drinking it.



Bhairava finally realized that Vishnu was sacrificing himself for the sake of the world. Moved by Vishnu's generosity, he declared, "So long as you preserve the world, I will not seek to quench my thirst. But when the world becomes so corrupt that even you cannot sustain it, I will raise my trident and squeeze every drop of blood from the heart of man."

In Hindu esoteric imagination, the supreme and ultimate reality is believed to reside in the Universal Soul, which is said to pervade the entire manifested cosmos. The cosmos itself is thought to have evolved from this abstract entity, which is formless and devoid of any qualitative attributes (Nirguna Brahman). It is neither male nor female, and is infinite, without beginning or end. It is both around us and inside us. The goal indeed of all spiritual practice is to unite with this Supreme Soul.

To the eternal credit of Indian creativity, abstract concepts such as the one above are made intelligible to ordinary mortals like you and me through the invention of various forms, which make comprehensible the ultimate, formless reality. Thus the Nirguna Brahmana (Nirguna - without quality) becomes Saguna Brahmana (Saguna - having qualities). This transformed entity is known in Sanskrit as Ishvara.

The entire universe, along with the dynamic processes underlying it, is said to stem from Ishvara. For example, when Ishvara creates the universe, he is called Brahma, when he protects, he is called Vishnu, and when he destroys, and he is Shiva. The three together constitute the trinity, which controls the universe and all its functions.

Thus, as exemplified in the above legend, Vishnu is the Preserver, the protector of all humanity. A deity who saves mankind from calamities, which result from its own foibles.

Vishnu finds his earliest mention in the *Rig Veda*, the most ancient book in the world. Here he appears as a solar deity. The Vishnu of the *Rig Veda* is a manifestation of light, whose head was, by a trick of the gods, severed from his body. This severed head is believed to have become the sun. Further in the *Veda*, Vishnu is a friend and associate of Indra, god of rain, thunder, and storm. Together, Vishnu the sun and Indra the rain, take on the demon Vritra, who personifies drought. Indra and Vishnu both are described as Vritrahan or the killer of Vritra. This potent combination forms an awesome ensemble of fertilizing powers.

The Vedic connotations of Vishnu are discernable also in the etymology of his name which is derived from the root '*vish*', which means to spread, or in other words all-pervading. Indeed in the *Vedas* he is the all-pervading sun, whose rays envelop the earth, as does Vishnu himself, in his role as protector of the world.

It is not surprising thus, observing Vishnu's popularity, that he has been a constant source of inspiration for artists down the ages. His visual presentations tend to depict in clearly perceptible terms, all the composite elements that make up this comprehensive deity.

Vishnu is usually depicted with four arms, though sometimes he may even have more than this number. The many arms of Hindu deities are symbolic of the god's manifold powers. Whereas we have limited abilities, a god's power is unlimited, signified by the many hands that hold a variety of attributes and perform myriad activities, often simultaneously. According to noted Ideologist Alain Danielou "the image of a deity is merely a group of symbols."

The significance of the Vishnu icon is explained in the *Puranas* and several minor *Upanishads*. The two most common representations show him sleeping above the causal ocean on the coils of a serpent, while the other shows him standing with four arms, each exhibiting a different attribute.

The symbolism underlying Vishnu's image is as follows.

The Four Arms

The four hands of Vishnu express dominion over the four directions of space. They also symbolize the four stages of human life, known as the four ashrams:



- 1) The quest for knowledge (*Brahamacharya*)
- 2) Family Life (*Grihastha*)
- 3) Retreat into the Forest (*Vana-Prastha*)
- 4) Renunciation (*Sannyasa*)

They further signify the four aims of life (*Purusharthas*), these are:

- a) Duty and Virtue (*Dharma*)
- b) Material Goods, Wealth, and Success (*Artha*)
- c) Pleasure, Sexuality, and Enjoyment (*Kama*)
- d) Liberation (*Moksha*)

Likewise the four arms represent the four castes and the four Vedas.

Further, Lord Vishnu holds the following implements in his hands:

- Conch shell
- Discus (Chakra)
- Lotus
- Mace

The Conch



This is one of the most important emblems of Vishnu. The blowing of the conch symbolizes the primordial creative voice and Indian mysticism links it to the sacred sound OM, which is said to be the breath of Vishnu, pervading all space.

Its convolutions are variously suggested as the rising and setting sun, hence further cementing Vishnu's solar associations.

The conch has the form of a multiple spiral evolving from one point into ever-increasing spheres. It thus denotes eternity, since it may go on forever.

The Discus (Chakra)

The ancient text *Vishnu Purana* identifies the chakra with the human mind whose 'thoughts, like the chakra, flow faster than even the mightiest wind.'

When used as a weapon, the distinguishing feature of the chakra is its ability to return to the hand of he who throws it. The only other weapon known to have this quality is the boomerang. Perhaps this is a pointer to the cyclic nature of existence. Indeed some scholars discern a parallel with the water wheel (in use since the earliest times), viewing the world as a constant and cyclic interplay of irreconcilable activities (duality). The water wheel both empties and fills its vessels, turning without end to bring up water and to disgorge it into forever-parched fields. So too, life fills and empties, due to forces innate in nature. This is the constant and rhythmic turning of the Wheel of Life.

The Lotus

When Vishnu contemplated the creation of mankind, a lotus sprang out of his navel. Seated on it was the four-headed Brahma, illuminating all the directions with his brightness. Vishnu is therefore also known as Padmanabha or the one with the lotus-navel.

This lotus lit up the sky with its effulgence and was identified with the sun. As it was the creative matrix from which all of the world eventually evolved, the lotus thereby became a symbol of creation and fertility. By rising from the depths of the ocean where are said to dwell impure creatures like demons and serpents, the lotus also expresses purity. Like wise does the individual soul, though rooted in an imperfect world, search for perfection.

The lotus in Vishnu's hand also denotes his better half and constant companion, the source from which he derives his powers, namely Goddess Lakshmi. Lakshmi is the goddess of prosperity who sits on a lotus and also holds stalks of the same flower in her hands.

Thus the lotus is also the feminine force that activates the creative power of Lord Vishnu, like Shakti does for her Shiva.



The lotus further signifies the well-known yogic ideal of detachment. This is because though this beautiful flower often grows in muddy waters, neither water nor dirt are ever seen sticking to its petals. Indeed Vishnu's message is amply reflected in the lotus, and informs us to partake of life's pleasures, without getting ensnared by them.

The Mace

There once lived a mighty demon named Gada who intoxicated with his prowess on the battlefield, continued to wreak havoc on all humanity. Finally it came upon Vishnu to provide succor to harassed mankind.

Famed universally for his valor, Gada was equally known for his charitable inclination. It was said that he wouldn't refuse a boon to any individual however unreasonable the demand may be.

Vishnu approached Gada as a Brahmin and addressed him thus: "If you are so generous can you give me your bones?" Gada immediately tore open his body and pulled out his bones. From these bones the celestial artists (Ribhus) fashioned out a mace for Vishnu. Thus striking two birds with a stone, Vishnu acquired for himself an invincible weapon while at the same time gaining respite for the world.

It is in honor of this demon that the mace is still referred to as 'gada,' in Sanskrit.

At the metaphysical level the mace represents the power of time. Just as nothing can conquer time, the mace too is unconquerable and destroys those who oppose it. According to Danielou "As such the mace is identified with the Goddess Kali, who is the power of time." This is supported by the Krishna Upanishad, which says: "The mace is Kali, the power of time. It destroys all that opposes it."

Thus does Vishnu describe himself: "The world rests as the lotus in the palm of my hand, the cosmos revolves around my finger like a discus. I blow the music of life through my conch and wield my mace to protect all creatures."

In visual imagery an upright Vishnu stands with each of his four arms holding a different symbolic attribute. He is straight as a post, for he is the firm center, and the axis of the universe, he is the sturdy pillar that joins the earth to the heavens. Indeed to his devotees, a formal, hieratic representation of Vishnu - their refuge and protector - standing like a mighty pillar is a deeply comforting

The other popular icon of Vishnu shows him in a dreamlike state reclining upon a mighty serpent and floating upon the primordial waters.

This image is Vishnu at his purest. This pure Vishnu principle is the source and plan of life. It is identified with the world of dream, where things are conceived as prototypes yet to be realized. The real, lasting creation is this mental creation. We create a machine when we conceive it. Once the plans are made in the abstract, realization in perishable materials is a secondary matter, which the inventor may leave to technicians. World planning is the work of Vishnu, who symbolizes the universal intellect.

The three states of mind (sleep, dream, and awareness) are the relative conditions corresponding to the Hindu trinity. Thus Shiva is experienced in the dreamless sleep, Vishnu in the vision of dreams, and Brahma in the state of awareness.

Vishnu in his dream state represents that gap in time when creation stands withdrawn and eternity awaits the birth of a new age. When creation is withdrawn it cannot entirely cease to be; there must remain in a subtle form the germ of all that has been and will be

so that the world may rise again. It is this remainder of destroyed universe, which is embodied in the serpent floating on the waters, known as Sheshanaga (Shesh-remainder).

At the physical plane it is parallel to the sperm floating in the germinating waters of the womb when creation can happen at any instant.

This measureless ocean is the pure consciousness on which wafts the divine spark of energy, which is the harbinger of the creative activity about to materialize. According to Deepak Chopra: *"The source of all creation is pure consciousness.. pure potentiality seeking expression from the un-manifest to the manifest."*

The same author brings to our notice that Vishnu resides inside each of us. He is present in the silent space, which exists between our two consecutive thoughts. The two consecutive thoughts of course represent the two sequential ages and the silence between them is the fathomless ocean of infinite possibilities. When we are able to inject in this space our intention to create (or achieve any specific goals) the result is the fulfillment of our desires in resonance with the creative rhythms of nature. It is this divine and fertilizing seed that Vishnu signifies.

Hindu Goddesses

In Hinduism, the Supreme Reality (Brahman) manifests itself in both male and female form. Every major god has a goddess counterpart (or consort), and many Hindus worship the Great Goddess exclusively. Although in the Chinese yin-yang duality, the feminine side is dark and passive, in Hinduism the feminine is highly active. In fact, the word for "goddess" in Hinduism is *shakti*, which also means "power" or "energy."

Followers of **Shakti** or **Devi, the Great Goddess**, are called Shaktas. Just as the masculine aspect of Brahman is manifested in several different gods, so does the feminine aspect of the divine take more than one forms. This article outlines the major Hindu goddesses, all of which are manifestations of Shakti.

Sarasvati: The Hindu Muse



Sarasvati (also spelled **Saraswati**) is perhaps the most ancient goddess that is still widely worshipped today. She is the Hindu muse: the inspiration for all music, poetry, drama and science. Musicians pray to her before performing and students ask for her help before taking a test. She is the wife or consort of Brahma, the creator god who is rarely worshipped anymore.

In statues and paintings, Sarasvati is fair-skinned and dressed in white to symbolize pure illumination. She rides a swan or a goose, and has four hands: in one she holds a book; in another she holds prayer beads (because she is the source of spiritual knowledge, too); her other two hands hold a veena, a sitar-like musical instrument.

Not surprisingly, Sarasvati is especially revered by students and teachers. At the beginning of spring (January-February), her image is taken out in a jubilant procession. She is also a popular goddess in Jain and Buddhist mythology.

Lakshmi: Gentle Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity



Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, so naturally she is quite popular. But she provides not only material wealth, but also good health and a joyful family life. She was born from the milky ocean seated on a lotus and holding a blossom in her hand. In Hindu art, she is full-breasted, broad-hipped and smiling kindly. She wears red sari and coins rain down from two of hands. In her other two hands she holds lotuses, representing the spiritual gifts she bestows. She is often shown seated on a lotus and being anointed by two elephants. Her vehicle is the white owl.

Lakshmi's husband is Vishnu, who metes out punishment, but Lakshmi is kind and always intercedes with Vishnu on behalf of her followers. According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu has manifested himself in human form 10 times. In each of his incarnations, his wife Lakshmi has accompanied him: she was Padma to Vamana, Sita to Rama, Rukmini to Krishna. The love stories of these divine couples are among the most beloved tales in Hinduism.

Lakshmi is worshipped by many modern Hindus, usually in the home every Friday and on festival days throughout the year. She is also highly revered in Jainism.

Parvati: Wife of Shiva, Mother of Ganesha

Parvati is the dark-skinned wife of Shiva and the mother of Ganesha and Skanda. According to Hindu tradition, Shiva was once married to Sati. Tragically, Sati committed suicide by jumping into a fire, and Shiva could not be consoled. The distraught widower never wanted to marry again. However, years later, a young woman named Parvati ("Daughter of the Mountain") committed herself to living an austere life of meditation to win over Shiva. She meditated in the Himalayas for years, not budging through driving rain, blistering heat, or elephant stampedes. But one day, she heard a child cry in suffering and



she immediately sprang up to help. But it was Shiva, testing her resolve. She had failed the test, but he was so touched that she would give up what she desired most to help someone in need that he took Parvati as his wife. By some accounts, Parvati was Sati in a former life.

Parvati is depicted in art as a mature and beautiful woman, usually with Shiva. The Tantras are written as a discussion between Parvati and Siva.

Durga: Warrior Goddess

Durga is a fierce warrior goddess. She is depicted in Hindu art as riding on a lion or a tiger, brandishing a variety of weapons and attacking the buffalo demon Mahisha. Her battles against evil are told in the popular Hindu text *Devi Mahatmyam* (Glory of the Goddess), and it is said that hearing the stories cleanses one from sin.

Kali: The Scary One

In Hindu myth, Kali sprang from the furrowed brow of Durga when the latter could not defeat the demon Raktabija. Every time Durga struck the demon, drops of blood would fall the ground and form another demon. Durga was getting frustrated, but Kali took care of it. She stuck out her tongue and caught all the drops of blood, then ate the demon right up.



Kali's name means "She who is black." She is generally depicted half-naked, with a garland of skulls, a belt of severed limbs and waving scary-looking

weapons with two of her 10 hands. She is often dancing on a prostrate Shiva, who looks up at her admiringly. Two of Kali's hands are empty and in the mudras (gestures) of protection and fearlessness. Her tongue is stuck out to swallow up evil and negative thoughts.



In mythology, iconography and devotion, Kali is associated with death, violence and, sometimes, motherly love. She was probably adopted from the tribal mountain cultures of South Asia, though never quite tamed. She continues to be an intriguing, paradoxical figure. She has sometimes been the object of devotion of violent cults, the most common modern Hindu perspective of her is largely symbolic. She is revered for her no-nonsense way of eradicating negative

thoughts and bad habits in the minds of her followers. In other words, she will lop off your inflated ego in no time if you ask her, and she offers no guarantees that the process will be painless.

Dasha Maha Vidgas: Ten Great Goddesses

In addition to the above goddesses, who are worshipped publicly and communally, there are ten goddesses who are worshipped privately by yogis and mystics.

Hindu Beliefs

Hinduism encompasses a great diversity of belief systems that can be initially confusing to westerners accustomed to creeds, confessions, and carefully worded belief statements. One can believe a wide variety of things about God, the universe and the path to liberation and still be considered a Hindu.

This attitude towards religious belief has made Hinduism one of the more open-minded religions when it comes to evaluating other faiths. Probably the most popular (and famous) Hindu saying about religion is, "Truth is one; sages call it by different names."

However, there are some beliefs common to nearly all forms of Hinduism that can be identified, and these basic beliefs are generally regarded as boundaries outside of which lies either heresy or non-Hindu religion. These fundamental Hindu beliefs include: the authority of the Vedas (the oldest Indian sacred texts) and the Brahmans (priests); the existence of an enduring soul that transmigrates from one body to another at death; and the law of *karma* that determines one's destiny both in this life and the next.

Note that a specific belief about God or gods is not considered one of the essentials, which is a major difference between Hinduism and strictly monotheistic religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Sikhism. Most Hindus are devoted followers of one of the principal gods Shiva, Vishnu or Shakti, and often others besides, yet all these are regarded as manifestations of a single Reality.

The ultimate goal of all Hindus is release (*moksha*) from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). For those of a devotional bent, this means being in God's presence, while those of a philosophical persuasion look forward to uniting with God as a drop of rain merges with the sea.

Hindu Theism: One God or Many?



Hinduism is a decidedly theistic religion; the difficulty lies in determining whether it is a polytheistic, pantheistic, or perhaps even monotheistic religion. It should be noted at the outset, however, that this is chiefly a western difficulty: the Indian mind is much more inclined to regard divergent views as complementary rather than competing.

Supporting a view of Hinduism as a polytheistic religion is the great pantheon of Hindu gods. The oldest and most sacred texts, the Vedas, are chiefly concerned with mythologies and rituals related to a number of deities, most of which are identified with aspects of the natural world. The gods of modern Hinduism include the chief gods Shiva, Vishnu and the Mother Goddess Shakti as well as a myriad of local community gods.

Devotion to these various deities is based primarily on one's region and needs, and even when devotion is given to only one, the existence of others is acknowledged. Hindu worship virtually always involves sculptures and images, to which offerings are made and rituals are performed.

Despite these polytheistic elements, however, many Hindus explain that the gods are various forms of a single Supreme Being (see quotes below). Similarly, the philosophical Hindu texts advocate a pantheistic view of ultimate reality. These texts, most notably the Upanishads, explain that there exists a single Supreme Reality, called Brahman. Brahman is often personified and presented as the One that must be sought, and can begin to sound like monotheism. Yet the ultimate revelation of the Upanishads is that the self (*atman*) is identical with Brahman. Life is therefore best spent not in rituals and offerings to the gods, but in deep meditation on the self until this truth is experienced firsthand.

So is Hinduism polytheistic, pantheistic, or monotheistic? Contributing to the difficulty of answering this question is the fact that Hindus are not nearly as concerned as are western thinkers with such labels and categories. After all, it is a favorite Hindu saying that "The Truth is One, but different sages call it by different names." But when Hindus do define their religion in these terms, usually for the benefit of curious westerners, they tend to do so in terms of monotheism and pantheism:

"Hinduism worships multiple forms of the one God." (OM, an American Hindu organization)

"According to the tenets of Hinduism, God is one as well as many."
(HinduWebsite.com)

"Hindus believe in monotheistic polytheism, rather than polytheism." (The Hindu Universe)

"Even though Hinduism is mistakenly regarded by many as a religion having many gods namely, polytheism, yet truly speaking Hinduism is a monotheistic religion." (Sri Swami Chidananda)

Taking all of the above into consideration, our Fast Facts on Hinduism page classifies Hinduism as "pantheism with polytheistic elements." Why not monotheism? Although "monotheism" literally means belief in the existence of one God, the term has come to denote belief in a God who created and is distinct from the universe. Pantheism is the view that God is essentially identical with the universe and totally immanent in the world: God is the universe and the universe is God. Thus pantheism seems to be the most accurate label for Hinduism. The "with polytheistic elements" qualifier is added because the Supreme Being of Hinduism is most often worshipped in the form of multiple deities.

However, it must be noted that this is a generalization that does not describe the beliefs of all Hindus. Some regard the universe as created by and essentially distinct from God, and are therefore "monotheistic" in the traditional sense.

Brahman: Ultimate Reality

*The cosmos comes forth from Brahman and moves in him.
With his power it reverberates, like thunder crashing in the sky. Those
who realize him pass beyond the sway of death.*

The last article explained that most Hindus venerate one or more deities, but regard these as manifestations of Ultimate Reality. So who, or what, is the Ultimate Reality that is behind the universe and all the gods?

In the *Rig Veda*, it is referred to as "the One." In the *Purushasukta*, it is given the name "Purusha," and in the *Upanishads* it is called "Brahman," "the One," and several other names.

Most modern Hindus refer to the Ultimate Reality as Brahman (not to be confused with Brahma, the minor creator god). The *Upanishads* describe Brahman as the eternal, conscious, irreducible, infinite, omnipresent, spiritual source of the universe of finiteness and change.

Brahman is generally viewed as impersonal and unknowable in itself, but Brahman can be known through the many gods and goddesses that are manifestations of Brahman.

The Purpose of Life in Hinduism

In Hinduism, there is not just one purpose of human life, but four:

1. **Dharma** - fulfilling one's purpose
2. **Artha** - prosperity
3. **Kama** - desire, sexuality, enjoyment
4. **Moksha** - enlightenment

Dharma

The Sanskrit word *dharma* means many things, including "law," "teaching" and "religion." In this context, it means one's destiny or purpose in life. In general, it refers to one's vocation or career, which is often defined by class and family. If a Hindu man's father is a tire maker, his dharma is probably to make tires, too. Traditionally, the dharma of most women has been to be a housewife and a mother.

Another aspect of dharma is paying the five debts. Hindus believe that they are born in debt to the gods and various humans, and they must repay those karmic debts during their lifetime. The debts are:

1. Debt to the gods for their blessings; paid by rituals and offerings.
2. Debt to parents and teachers; paid by supporting them, having children of one's own and passing along knowledge.
3. Debt to guests; repaid by treating them as if they were gods visiting one's home.
4. Debt to other human beings; repaid by treating them with respect.
5. Debt to all other living beings; repaid by offering good will, food or any other help that is appropriate.

Dharma also means righteousness, or living morally and ethically at all times.

Artha: Prosperity

Artha is prosperity or success in worldly pursuits. Although the ultimate goal of Hinduism is enlightenment, the pursuit of wealth and prosperity is regarded as an appropriate pursuit for the householder (the second of four life stages). It also ensures social order, for there would be no society if everyone renounced worldly life to meditate. But while Hindus are encouraged to make money, it must be within the bounds of dharma.

Kama: Pleasure

Kama (Sanskrit, "desire") primarily refers to romantic love and sexual pleasure, though it can refer to desire in general. Like artha, kama is seen as an appropriate pursuit of the householder. The *Kama Sutra*, a manual for erotic and other human pleasures (like flower-arranging), is attributed to the sage Vatsyayana.

Moksha: Enlightenment

The ultimate end of every Hindu's life is moksha, which can be understood in a variety of ways: liberation from rebirth, enlightenment, Self-realization, or union with God. This is considered to be the highest purpose of life, although very few can achieve it in a single lifetime and there are a variety of paths to attain it.

Hindu Sects and Schools

Modern Hinduism is divided into **four major devotional sects**: Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and Smrtism. Vaishnavism and Shaivism are generally regarded as monotheistic sects: each believes in one supreme God, who is identified as Vishnu in Vaishnavism and Shiva in Shaivism.

Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism are the most prevalent Hindu sects; among these, Vaishnavism is the largest. The devotional sects do not generally regard other sects as rivals, and each sect freely borrows beliefs and practices from others.

In addition to the four theistic sects, there are **six schools of Vedantic philosophy** within Hinduism. These schools tend to emphasize Ultimate Reality as Brahman, the great "Self" who must be realized to attain liberation.

The six Astika (orthodox; accepting the authority of the Vedas) schools of Hindu philosophy are Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa (also called just 'Mimamsa'), and Uttara Mimamsa (also called 'Vedanta'). Of these six, three continue to be influential in Hinduism: Purva Mimamsa, Yoga, and Vedanta.

Click on the links below for more information on each of these sects and schools of Hinduism.

Four Theistic/Devotional Sects of Hinduism

- Vaishnavism
- Shaivism
- Shaktism
- Smrtism

Six Philosophical Schools of Hinduism

- Yoga
- Purva Mimamsa (Mimamsa)
- Uttara Mimamsa (Vedanta)
- Nyaya
- Vaisheshika
- Samkhya

Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism is the branch of Hinduism in which Vishnu or one of his incarnations (usually Krishna or Rama) is worshipped as the supreme God. Members of Vaishnavism are called **Vaishnavites** or **Vaishnavas** (adjective: **Vaishnava**). Vaishnavism is the largest Hindu denomination and it has numerous subdivisions.

Vaishnava Texts

In addition to the Vedas, Vaishnavites especially revere the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Vishnu Samhita* and the *Gita Govinda*, among others. These texts focus especially on Vishnu or his incarnations Krishna and Rama.

Vaishnava Religious Beliefs

Vaishnavites, like Saivites, believe that there is only one Supreme God, who simultaneously permeates all creation and exists beyond it, being both immanent and transcendent. Like other Hindu denominations, Vaishnavism acknowledges the existence of many lower Gods under the Supreme One. These gods, like all of creation, are encompassed by Vishnu, either as manifestations of the Supreme Being or as powerful entities who are permeated by Him.

The distinctive religious belief of Vaishnavism is its emphasis on God as a personal being; i.e., someone you can know and have a relationship with. Vaishnavas often identify six qualities of God: all knowledge, all power, supreme majesty, supreme strength, unlimited energy and total self-sufficiency. One popular name for God among Vaishnavites is an ancient name from the Vedas: *Purushottama*, "the Supreme Person."

For most Vaishnavas, the divine Self within is Vishnu himself, but not all of Vishnu. In other words, Vishnu is more than the Self and more than the universe. Likewise, when a Vaishnavite merges into God upon liberation, his or her individual nature is not lost. Vaishnavites believe people are meant to be God's companions for all eternity.

Many Vaishnavas emphasize Vishnu's consort Lakshmi as much, if not more, than Vishnu. She is regarded not as another God, but as another aspect of the Supreme God. Many Vaishnavas call Lakshmi "Sri" (pronounced "shree"), which means "auspicious one."

Vaishnava Rituals and Practices



Vaisnavite boy

Vaishnavites can often be identified by certain sectarian marks on their foreheads and bodies. Vaishnava marks vary, but usually include a U, Y, or T shape drawn in white along with a red dot representing Lakshmi.

Like all religions influenced by the Indian religious worldview, Vaishnavites recognize the importance of meditation in religious practice. However, Vaishnavas generally emphasize religious devotion, religious feeling and morality over doctrine and contemplation; to put it another way, they focus on the heart, not the head.

Vaishnavas love to recount the love story between Rama or Sita or daydream about Krishna's attractive features and amorous antics. Religious ecstasy and feelings of companionship with Vishnu are the main goals of Vaishnava religious ritual.

Shaivism

Śaivism, also written **Shaivism** and **Saivism**, is the branch of Hinduism that worships Siva as the Supreme God. Followers of Śaivism are called Śaivas or Śaivites.

History of Shaivism

Originating in India, Śaivism has appeal all over India and is particularly strong among the Tamils of Southern India and Sri Lanka. Some traditions credit the spreading of Śaivism into southern India to the great sage, Agastya, who is said to have brought Vedic traditions along with the Tamil language.

Nayanars (or Nayanmars), saints from Southern India, were mostly responsible for development of Śaivism in the Middle Ages.

Beliefs and Practices

Śaivism is a form of nondual spiritual practice and philosophy originating in India. Śaivites believe that the entire creation is both an expression of conscious divinity and is non-different from that divinity which they call "Śiva". Because he is simultaneously the created and the creator, Śiva is both immanent and transcendent. This concept contrasts with many semitic religious traditions in which God is seen as fundamentally different from the creation and transcendent, or "higher" than the creation. As in all Hindu denominations, Śaivism acknowledges the existence of many other deities. These deities are expressions of the Supreme One. This type of spiritual view is called Monistic Theism: the cosmos is a "monad" or single consciousness that expresses itself dualistically, but is fundamentally one.

Śaivism is a very deep, devotional and mystical denomination of Hinduism. It is considered the oldest of the Hindu denominations, with a long lineage of sages and saints who have outlaid practices and paths aimed at self-realization and the ultimate goal of moksha, liberation. As a very broad religion, Śaivism encompasses philosophical systems, devotional rituals, legends, mysticism and varied yogic practices. It has both monistic and dualistic traditions. Major theological schools of Śaivism include Kashmir Śaivism, Śaiva Siddhanta and Virasaivism.

Śaivites believe God transcends form, and devotees often worship Śiva in the form of a lingam, symbolizing all universe. God Śiva is also revered in Śaivism as the anthropomorphic manifestation of Śiva Nataraja.

There are innumerable Śaivite temples and shrines, with many shrines accompanied as well by murtis dedicated to Ganesa, Lord of the Ganas, followers of Śiva, and son of Śiva

and Śakti. The twelve Jyotirling, or "golden lingam," shrines are among the most esteemed in Śaivism. Benares is considered the holiest city of all Hindus, but especially Śaivites. A very revered Śaivite temple is the ancient Chidambaram, in South India.

Texts

One of the most famous hymns to Śiva in the Vedas is Śri Rudram. The foremost Śaivite Vedic Mantra is Aum Namah Sivaya.