

Hinduism

Hinduism, widely practiced in India, is a pantheistic religion based on a right behavior-oriented life (Dharma) that allows one to become one with the God force (Brahman) and escape the material realm (moksha).

History

Sanskrit is an ancient Indic language of India, in which the Hindu scriptures (*Vedas*) are written. *Shindu* is a Sanskrit word meaning “the Indus River.” The word *hindu* is a Persian word meaning “the people and culture of the Indus River region.”

A people group known as the Harappan civilization (named for one of its chief cities) lived along the Indus Valley. They are thought to have originated as early as 7000 BC and to have reached their height between 2300 to 2000 BC.

The Indus Valley culture began to decline around 1800 BC, due possibly to flooding or drought.

Between 2000 and 1500 BC, a migration of Indo-Aryan speakers from northern Asia came into India and began to assimilate with the native population. The beliefs of these two cultures began to mix and evolve into what we know as Hinduism.

Between 1900 and 700 BC, the people of India wrote down their beliefs, known as the Vedic writings, which became the basis for Hinduism.

The priests became known as Brahmins and controlled the culture and beliefs of the people.

In the 500s BC, the Brahmins established a rigid caste system known as *Varna* (“type,” “order,” or “class”). No one can move up or down in this caste system within their lifetime. Only reincarnation allows one to change his or her caste.

From highest to lowest:

- Brahmins (priests)
- Kshatriyas (nobles and warriors)
- Vaisyas (merchants and artists)
- Shudras (farmers)
- Outcast (the poor)

Today there are about 1 billion adherents to Hinduism, making Hinduism the world’s third-largest religion. About 80 percent of India’s population regard themselves as Hindus, while 30 million more Hindus live outside of India.

Writings

The Four *Vedas* (“knowledge” or “wisdom”) are the most holy writings and were written between 1500 and 500 BC. Hindus consider the Vedas revelations from the god force (Brahman) after intense meditation.

There are four Vedas:

- Rigveda
- Yajurveda
- Samaveda
- Atharvaveda

Each Veda has been subclassified into four major text types:

- Samhitas (mantras and benedictions)
- Aranyakas (rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices)
- Brahmanas (commentaries on rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices)
- Upanishads (discussions on meditation, philosophy, and spiritual knowledge)

The Itihasa (“history”) contains two epic poems of India’s history and culture.

- **Ramayana Epic** is an ancient Indian poem that narrates the struggle of the divine prince Rama to rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana.
- **Mahabharata Epic** is a legendary narrative of the Kurukshetra War and the fates of the Kaurava and the Pāṇḍava princes. It also contains philosophical and devotional material.
- **Bhagavad-Gita** (contained in the Mahabharata) is set in a narrative framework of a dialogue between Arjuna, a Pandava prince, and Lord Krishna.

Beliefs about God

There is only one supreme and absolute force, called Brahman. Brahman is an impersonal, unknowable, and indescribable force. Nothing can be truly said or thought of Brahman.

Brahman is all that exists. Brahman is everything, and everything is Brahman. However, Brahman does not have authority over the universe and therefore does not make moral demands.

There are 330 million avatars (“descent”), manifestations of Brahman. Following are the three major avatars that form the Trimurti (“three forms”).

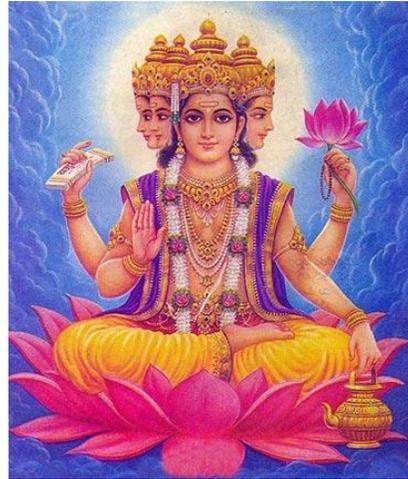
Vishnu is the preserver and sustainer of creation and is often seen as the same as Brahman.



Shiva is destroyer of evil and the transformer of creation.



Brahma is the four-faced creator of creation.



There are many other gods that have gained popularity in Hinduism.

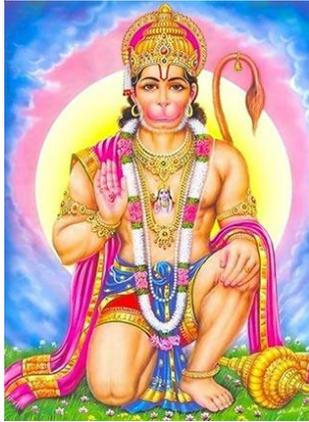
Krishna is the eighth and most powerful avatar of Vishnu. He is the god of compassion, tenderness, and love.



Ganesha is the son of Shiva and is the lord of success and knowledge and the remover of obstacles.



Hanuman is the symbol of physical strength, perseverance, and scholarly devotion.



Rama is the seventh avatar of Vishnu and the god of truth and virtue.



Lakshmi is the goddess of material and spiritual wealth and prosperity.



Durga is the protector of the righteous and the destroyer of evil.



Saraswati is the daughter of Shiva and is the goddess of knowledge, art, and music.



Kali is one of the wives of Shiva and is the goddess of death, the destroyer of evil.



Beliefs about the Material Realm

Brahman did not create the world; Brahman is the world.

The material realm is *maya* (“illusion”) and a prison that must be escaped.

Everything in the material realm is temporary, changing, and unreal, and one’s perceptions are misleading.

The material realm is not orderly or rational.

Beliefs about Humanity

Humanity is an extension of Brahman, and humanity is one with Brahman.

Humans are Brahman and are *in* Brahman.

All humans are thus the same being because everything is Brahman.

Since the material realm is an illusion, humans have only an eternal, uncreated, and spiritual being called the atman (“inner self or soul”).

The atman is the only true self and is divine, and ultimate reality is found within.

Beliefs about the Problem with the World and Humanity

Humans have the ignorant belief that they are individuals and not one with Brahman, the ultimate divine reality.

This ignorance on oneness results in bad karma, which is bad actions.

Karma (“action” or “deed”) is the unalterable consequences that are attached to every thought and action that results in merit or demerit that is attached to one’s atman.

Thus, the atman is repeatedly reincarnated into the material illusion in order to suffer because of their ignorance and bad karma.

Karma affects the kind of good life or suffering life into which a human is reincarnated.

The wheel of reincarnation is called samsara (“wandering”), which is a cycle of re-imprisonment in the illusion of the material realm of suffering.

If a person were to help someone suffering, it would only prolong the person’s suffering, and the person trying to help would have just earned bad karma.

Beliefs about the Solution to the Problem

Humans need to find enlightenment, the self-realization that they are one with Brahman.

One must fully accept that they are one with Brahman and intellectually and emotionally detach themselves from the material illusion.

Moksha (“to free”) is the liberation from the illusion and suffering and union with the Brahman.

One is reabsorbed into the Brahman and loses all individuality.

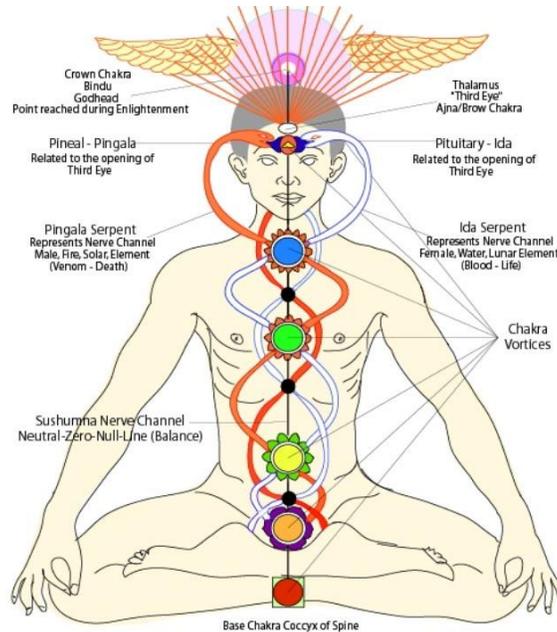
Hindus believe that it takes millions of reincarnations to achieve moksha.

Moksha is achieved on one’s own through Yoga meditation (“yoked or united with Brahman”).

Yoga is a stretching, breathing, meditation exercise performed to open one's chakras ("wheels") and to achieve moksha.

By balancing two streams, known as *ida* ("mental") and *pingala* ("bodily") currents, the *sushumna nadi* ("current of the Self") rises, opening, and passing through one's chakras. This is also known as awakening the kundalini ("serpent").

There are seven chakras, starting at the base of the spine and ending right above the head. The sixth chakra opens the third eye to all wisdom and the seventh chakra is the crown where one achieves Moksha.



There are three paths to moksha:

- **Inana** is the path of obtaining knowledge through yoga meditation. For men only.
- **Dharma** is the path of works based on the obligations of one's caste.
- **Bhakti** is the path of total passionate devotion to one of the gods through offerings and prayers. This is the most popular way.

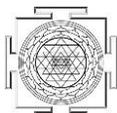
Symbols



The Om (or Aum) is the sacred sound symbol that represents the ultimate reality (Brahman). It is chanted during yoga meditation to help one focus and connect with Brahman.



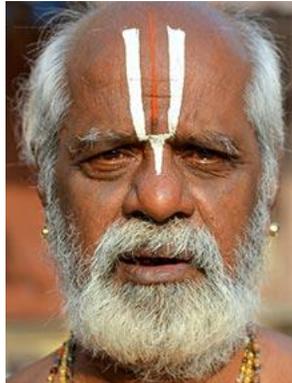
The swastika symbolizes good fortune, harmony, truth, and purity of soul. The four arms represent the four directions and the four Vedas.



The Sri Chakra Yantra is a mandala of nine interlocking triangles. The four upright triangles represent Shiva or the Masculine. The five downward triangles represent

Shakti, or the Feminine. Together they form a womb symbolic of creation and non-duality.

The tilaka is a mark worn on the forehead or other parts of the body as a sign of spiritual devotion.



The bindi is a dot worn on the forehead of a woman to denote marriage or a celebratory occasion.



Witnessing to Hindus

Pray for wisdom and pray for them.

Love them and listen to them.

Build a relationship with them.

Ask them what they believe.

Share your story with them.

Get them to think about how their worldview corresponds to reality.

Share with them how Jesus provides a better relationship, path, and future.