

Hinduism

WHO IS GOD?

Hindus consider Brahman or Isvara the ultimate reality. There are hundreds of gods and goddesses (devas and devis - meaning "divine manifestation of the supreme") in Hinduism, and each is seen as the personification of an aspect of Brahman. The three main gods representing the Hindu Trinity are Vishnu, the force for preservation; Brahma, the creator; and Siva the destructive force. And the main accompanying goddesses (consorts) of each are: Lakshmi (wealth and prosperity), Saraswati (knowledge), and Shakti or Durga (creative power), respectively.

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

All reality is an expression or manifestation of Brahman, the One that is All. There are several different accounts in Hindu sacred texts about how the universe was created. The main doctrine says that the Supreme Being, which is one and only one, wanted to be many and thus created this universe to have leela or play. Some Hindus believe that the universe and all in it have been destroyed and recreated several times, and will be again. There are cycles for both the universe and for individual lives. The cycle for individuals is samsara, or reincarnation. As manifestations of the One that is All, we will return to Brahman eventually.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

Hindus believe in karma- the law of action and effect, which states that what you do in this mundane life has either a positive or a negative consequence in the realm of ultimate reality, which in turn effects your earthly existence. Along with karma, Hindus believe in re-birth (reincarnation). The goal of life for a Hindu is to escape this worldly cycle of karma and rebirth by allowing his or her soul to become one with Brahman-the One that is All. Moksha is the term for this final emancipation (release) from mundane existence. Sometimes Hindus refer to this state as nirvana, but nirvana is in fact mainly a Buddhist term. Hindus believe that worldly objects distract and prevent a person from attaining oneness with Brahman. Moksha is Self-realization or Yoga (meaning connecting with or discovering the Self or the personal soul called Jiv-atma and thus communion the Param-atma or the Supreme Being). A deeper meaning of Moksha is to free oneself from all the human emotions (greed, anger, hatred etc.) and attachments, which are causes of pain and sufferings.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

The primary Hindu religious books are called the Vedas, which means knowledge in Sanskrit (the ancient language of the Hindus). Vedas are the oldest texts known to human kind. Hindus believe the Vedas contain universal truth. There are four basic Vedic books.

Rigveda is the most important and contains mantras (hymns to the gods) composed thousands of years ago which were memorized, chanted, and passed down orally from one generation to the next before being written down in Sanskrit. The other Vedic books are Yajur-veda, Sama-Veda, and Atharva-veda.

The Bhagavad-Gita (which means Song of the Lord) is also a very important book for Hindus. It outlines the three paths (marga) to final release from the mundane world: karma-marga (the path of action and duties) which outlines deeds such as selfless service, which ultimately frees oneself and also various religious and social rituals; jnana-marga (the path of knowledge) which encourages meditation, study, and yoga as a way to identify yourself with Brahman; and bhakti-marga (the path of devotion) which calls for the worship of a particular god.

There are literally hundreds of scriptures to be found in the Hindu tradition. The other main books are the Upanishads, the Puranas and the two of the world's greatest epic-spiritual-historical works in the world: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Bhagavad-Gita is a part of the Mahabharata.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?

Hindu people perform meditation, Yoga, sacrifices (mainly food), image worship, rituals, fasting, sacraments, and sing or chant personal devotionals (mantras, or hymns to the gods) to certain gods that have particular meaning for them. Practicing Hindus perform these duties either at a temple, or at a shrine in their homes or places of work. Adherence to these practices allows a Hindu peace in this life, and the purity of mind, body, and spirit required for communion (or contact) with the divine.

Tradition, order, and hierarchy are very important to the Hindu view of the world. Part of being a faithful Hindu means fulfilling the dharma (law and duty) of your particular social position, family, and profession. There are four major varnas (or professional classes) of Hindu society: Brahmins (people in the field of knowledge such as priests, teachers), Kshatriyas (people in the field of defense and administration such as kings, governance and army), Vaisyas (people in the field of trade and welfare) and Shudras (people in the field of service and labor). There are thousands of castes or a specific professional group in Hindu society. Fulfilling the dharma or duties of your particular position is a key way of ensuring stability and welfare of a person, a society and the entire creation in this life and the next.

WHAT'S GOING ON TODAY?

There are an estimated 746,797,000 Hindus in the world today (source: 1999 World Almanac). For detailed information about Hindus around the world visit <http://www.hindunet.org/world>. Hinduism is practiced around the world, but is focused in India, and Southeast Asia. Millions of people around the world, especially in the West, are practicing some aspects of the Hindu system, such as Yoga, Meditation, Vegetarianism and Ahimsa or non-violence. Many of these aspects are currently being researched and used in the fields of Health & Medicine, Management, Self-development, Environmental issues, Human and animal rights and Socio-Political issues (Ahimsa).

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE IT?

Hinduism is often represented by the Om (or Aum), the visual symbol of the syllable which is spoken at the beginning and end of all prayers, mantras, and meditation. The Om is comprised of three sounds, and thus represents the perfect harmony of the three realms of the universe: earth, sky, and heaven. It is the most sacred sounds of all which emerged first at the beginning of creation and is still vibrating in creation now.

The 411 on the founding of Hinduism

Who: One of the oldest religions in the world, Hinduism has no identifiable founder because it is a religion that evolved and developed through ages from the spiritual, religious and social practices of the people of Indian Sub-continent. Unlike most other religions in the world, Hindu tradition has no single founder and no specific book or even a path to follow. People are allowed to choose their own path for enlightenment, which suits a person most in terms of his/her current position, abilities and need, guided by a Guru or book or tradition or purely conscience.

What: The word "Hindu" comes from the Sanskrit name for the river Indus (Sindhu). Most likely the people from the Middle East used this term first to indicate the people who lived on the eastern side of the Indus river. The term India also has same root, however, this may have been coined by the Greeks. European colonists used Hinduism to indicate the spiritual and social practices of the people of India. Hindus use Sanatana Dharma, or the "eternal universal tradition of righteousness and duty" to describe their spiritual and social practices. In this sense all Indic traditions such as Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism - all are part of the greater Hindu or Indic heritage and civilization. Concepts such as Yoga, Karma and reincarnation, Ahimsa, Dharma, Mantra, Guru, Moksha, etc. are common for all these paths.

When: According to many, Hinduism in its recognizable form first appeared in about 1500 BCE (Before the Common Era, formerly BC, Before Christ), but Hindus and some other scholars believe that it is much older than that (according to some accounts it is between 5 to 10 thousand years old).

Where: Hinduism, commonly referred to as Hindu Dharma by the Indic traditions developed in the Indian Sub-continent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal) and today is mainly practiced in India, Nepal, parts of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Trinidad, Mauritius, Surinam, South Africa, Kenya, U.K., Canada and USA. Hinduism is, however, spreading throughout the world as the result of immigration, and as people in the west become increasingly interested in eastern religion and spirituality.

WHAT IF I WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For an overview of scholarly information about Hinduism, you can't beat:

- * Hindu Basics

For links to sites on advanced research into specific topics about Hinduism, you should go straight to:

- * Hindu Studies
- * Vedavid
- * Academic Info: Hinduism

For basic information about Hinduism with great graphics, don't miss these easy-to-navigate sites:

- * Hinduism for children
- * A Tribute to Hinduism

For discussions and chats, articles about current issues in Hinduism, information about upcoming festivals, and to contact active Hindu organizations around the world:

- * The Hindu Universe
- * Hinduism

Sources:

Britannica Online -- Hinduism section (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=108344>)

Himalayan Academy (<http://www.himalayanacademy.com>)

Kanchan Banerjee, Hindu Students Council

Dr. Keshagiri Rao, Encyclopedia of Hinduism, University of South Carolina