

How Do Hindus Worship?

Hindus practice their devotion in many different ways. There are no set practices that each Hindu must practice to call themselves a Hindu, or any set times at which a Hindu is obligated to pray. Instead, there are many practices that are outlined in Hindu texts that are meant to help them on their quest for *moksha* (liberation).

There are three main Hindu rituals:

- *Nitya* rituals take place every day and consist of offerings made at the home shrine and worshipping of family deities. One example of a *nitya* ritual is *puja*. This ritual is designed to use all the senses to focus the mind on God. The sense of smell is stimulated by the incense, camphor, and fragrant flowers; the eyes are bathed in the light as they focus on the murti; the ears absorb the sound of bells, cymbals, the chanting of Vedic mantras and singing of devotional songs; the sense of taste is satisfied by eating *prasada*, the food that has been ritually blessed by the deity; and the sense of touch is engaged in all of the activities of performing the ritual. Engaging all of the senses keeps the mind fully focused on the *puja* and enhances the worshipper's devotion.
- *Naimittika* rituals are important but only occur at special times during the year, such as festivals. There are special *pujas* and other rituals associated with *Diwali* and *Navratri*, for example.
- *Kamyas* rituals are optional, but also very important. An example of *Kamya* is pilgrimage. Pilgrimage places include rivers, temples, mountains, and other sacred sites in India where God is said to have appeared.



What Do Hindus Do In Temples?

Most temples, or *mandirs* in Sanskrit, are open to anyone who follows a few guidelines.

- Shoes - Everyone who enters a temple is asked to take off their shoes before entering. This is to help keep the temple clean. Often, the outside of a temple will be intricately carved and decorated, and the inside of the temple will be bare except for the murti, or sacred representation of the deity.
- Modesty - Both men and women are asked to cover up before entering a temple (i.e. shorts and bare arms should be avoided).
- Leather Products - Most temples ask their guests to avoid wearing leather products to temples out of respect for cows.
- Gifts - Many Hindus like to take an expression of gratitude with them when entering a temple. Most gifts are as simple as a piece of fruit or flowers, though money is accepted as well. Often once the fruit or flowers have been offered to the deity, they are returned with blessings to the individual who offered them.

Many temples have specific times in which the *murti*, or representation of the deity, is available to be seen. At these times, the screen will be pulled back, and the *murti*, decked in flower garlands, will be available for *darshan* (viewing). Often after *darshan*, the priest will sing a hymn while doing *aarti* (the ritual waving of lights, done by circling a brass plate filled with candles around the deity's face). The tray is then offered to each worshipper to waft the fire's blessings towards themselves. The worshippers may also be offered holy water, a *tilak* (mark on the forehead), and *prasad* (blessed item), usually some sweet or a handful of flowers.

Many Hindus have a shrine in their home, with pictures or small statues of their favorite incarnations of God. They worship these images much the same way that priests worship the deities in their temples.

Some Famous Hindu Sites and Temples

- Mount Kailas - This peak in present day Tibet was once considered the center of Hindu civilization by ancient Hindus. It is thought of as the home of Shiva and his wife Parvati. Because it is considered Shiva's sacred home, Hindu's do not think it is appropriate to climb. The peak is also considered holy by Buddhists, Jains, and the native Tibetan Bonpos.
- Benaras/Varanasi, also known as Kashi - There is some archeological evidence suggesting that Kashi is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. This "City of Light" is an intellectual capital (hosting four universities), and is considered Shiva's favorite city. Many Hindus believe that those who die in Kashi go directly to heaven. The Ganga river flows through Kashi, and there are often cremations taking place on its banks in this city.
- Prayag - The Kumbha Mela is a festival that takes place every three years, and alternates between four sites. The fourth is Prayag, and the Kumbha Mela there is the largest. In 2013, 100 million people visited the site over the course of 55 days. Hindus of every sect and denomination gather to worship in their own way, in an atmosphere of mutual respect.
- Tirupati - This is the most visited pilgrimage site in the world. About 30,000 devotees show up every day of the year, and the Sri Venkateshvara temple collects about \$6 million a day. Devotees walk up 10,000 steps for darshan of Venkateshvara, a form of Vishnu. Many Hindus believe that any wish made before this deity will come true, and tell many stories of miracles and healings that have taken place at this shrine.



Key Takeaways

- While there are no set practices that must be done to call oneself a Hindu, the scriptures do outline rituals that help individuals progress towards liberation.
- There are a few simple guidelines that should be followed at Hindu temples, or *mandirs*, including removing shoes and dressing modestly.

- There are many famous *mandirs* in India and across the world, but most Hindus keep a shrine in their homes for daily worship.