

Hinduism 101: The Basics

Where Does Hinduism Come From?



Mohenjo-Daro is one of the excavation sites of the ancient Indus-Saraswati civilization where many artifacts and clues about the ancient Hindus lives can be found.

Hinduism, a collection of traditions, is one of few ancient religions to survive into modern times. It developed at least over 5000 years ago in the Indus Valley of India, the largest civilization in the ancient world. Hindus consider the Hindu tradition as having no identifiable beginning or end, and refer to it as *Sanatana Dharma* or the Eternal Way.

The [Vedas](#), one of Hinduism's primary religious texts, means "knowledge" in the Sanskrit language and were preserved through a rigorous oral tradition for thousands of years before being written down. They present key Hindu teachings through hymns on the divine forces of nature. Hindu philosophy was further developed in the [Upanishads](#); restated in story form in the

Puranas, the [Ramayana](#), and the [Mahabharata](#); and through countless life stories, devotional poetry, and commentaries by learned sages.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism are often referred to as the "Dharma traditions" or "Indic traditions." The Dharma traditions share many concepts such as *dharma*, *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksha* (see later), though each religion understands and interprets them differently. Over many centuries, Hinduism's pluralistic ethos was reflected through India's embrace of other religious groups such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians when they were persecuted elsewhere.



Symbols of the four religious traditions indigenous to India (starting at the top, clockwise) -- Hindu, Jain, Sikh, and Buddhist.

What are basic Hindu teachings?

The deepest spiritual truth gleaned through the Vedas is that [Brahman](#), or the Absolute (used interchangeably with "the Divine", "the Absolute," and "[God](#)") pervades the entire universe. This divine reality or its essential nature is present in all living beings, eternal, and full of bliss. Moreover, Brahman is understood as the cause of creation -- its creation, its preservation, and its dissolution. In Hindu lore, these three functions, of creation, sustenance, and dissolution, are often depicted to be the work of what is the commonly referred to as the Hindu trinity of [Brahma](#), [Vishnu](#), and [Shiva](#), respectively.



A picturization of the divine reality that is believed to be present in all beings.

Within Hinduism, there is a broad spectrum of understandings about the nature of Brahman. Some Hindus understand Brahman to be infinite and formless and can be worshiped as such or in [different forms](#). Other Hindus understand the Divine to be infinite and has a transcendental form. For example, some *Vaishnavas* worship the one supreme form as Krishna, while *Shaivites* understand this form as Shiva.

Most Hindus understand the soul, [atman](#), to be eternal. When this physical body dies, the soul is reborn in another body (*samsara*, or continuous cycle of life, death, and reincarnation). Rebirth is governed by the [Law of Karma](#): that every action has a result, like cause and effect. According to the Law of *Karma*, what an individual experiences in this life is the result of their past actions, either from this birth or previous births; and in the converse, how an individual acts today will impact the future, the effects of which will be experienced either in this and future births. How an individual deals with the problems he or she faces in this life determines whether they create good or bad *karma* for his or her present and future lives.

Human life is understood to have four goals:

1. [Dharma](#) - A mode of conduct most conducive to spiritual advancement
2. [Artha](#) - The material prosperity one pursues
3. [Kama](#) - Enjoyment of the material world
4. [Moksha](#) - Liberation from suffering caused by dependence on the material world and from the cycle of birth and rebirth

One of the most widely read Hindu scriptures is the Bhagavad Gita. It outlines three primary paths (though not mutually exclusive) to the experience of God's presence and joy, and to obtain the fourth goal of *moksha*. [The paths are:](#)

Karma Yoga - Performing one's duty selflessly

Jnana Yoga - Studying and contemplating on the scriptures

Bhakti Yoga - Loving God through devotion and service

Many texts expound upon a fourth path of *Raja* Yoga, also known as classical Yoga, which involves a preparing the body and mind for deep meditation and introspection to eventually overcome suffering caused by material attachments.

Because Hindus accept that Brahman can appear in form, they accept that there are a variety of ways in which all human beings connect with the Divine. In Hinduism, God is worshipped in [both male and female forms](#). The female form is known as *devi*, which is a manifestation of *shakti* and means energy. Other forms resemble animals or birds. Each of these forms of God has symbolic meaning. Hindus enjoy telling stories about the various forms to inspire love of God and instill ethical values.

Hindus pray to different forms of Brahman as individual manifestations who represent particular divine qualities or powers. For example, [Ganesh is the God of Wisdom](#) is honored by Hindus and followers of other Indian religions as the remover of obstacles. He is revered for his great wisdom and is invoked before any undertaking. Other commonly worshipped Hindu Gods include [Saraswati](#), who Hindus invoke as a manifestation of learning and wisdom. [Lakshmi is worshipped as the Goddess of Prosperity](#). God is understood to have taken the human form of [Rama](#) to show people how to live the path of *Dharma*. Krishna is said to have come to eradicate evil and protect good. Shiva is worshipped as the lord of time and change.



The Hindu Goddess Saraswati.

[The various forms of God are represented in consecrated images known as *murtis*](#). A *murti* can be made of wood, stone, or metals and offers Hindus a way to visualize and meditate upon Brahman, which due to its infinite nature is believed to be beyond the grasp of the human mind. *Murti* is often translated as “idol,” but a more accurate translation is “embodiment.” Hindu families conduct their daily worship at [home altars](#) and also [at temples](#) on special occasions. Many Hindus consult *gurus*, or spiritual guides, for advice or answers to spiritual questions.

Hinduism promotes respect for other religions and acknowledges the potential for truth in them. This philosophy leads to pluralism within Hinduism and outside of it. Accordingly, Hindus see the variety of religions and philosophies as different paths to God. The core philosophy of Hinduism is the search for truth, not the specific path taken. A quote from the Vedas that summarizes the Hindu perspective on God is “Truth is one. The wise call It by various names.”

Hinduism embraces science as one of the ways in which humans seek to understand the world we live in. Hindu scriptures describe the concept of planets in the solar system circling the sun, and the earth as round and rotating on its axis. Ancient Hindus also made noteworthy strides in astronomy, chemistry, [mathematics](#), metallurgy, [medicine \(ayurveda\)](#), and [surgery](#), including many findings upon which modern science, medicine, and technology are based.

Hinduism Around the World



Young Guyanese Hindu girls prepare to perform at a local Hindu gathering.

With more than a billion Hindus, [Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world](#). About 80 percent of India’s population is Hindu, and about 45 million Hindus live in neighboring countries in the Indian subcontinent. Since 1965, Hindus have migrated to the United States, and 2.5 million now live in North America; however, this number doesn’t include Hindus of non-Indian descent. Significant numbers of Hindus still live in various parts of South and Southeast Asia, [Africa](#), [the Caribbean](#), the Middle East, and the South Pacific. Many Hindus were sent to various colonies by the British as plantation laborers in the 19th and 20th century.

Evidence of Hindu influence historically is still seen all over South East Asia. Ancient Hindu temples were

built in Cambodia and Java, and about 4 million Hindus live in Indonesia. Stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata are very popular in Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The practice of [Yoga originated in Hinduism](#) and is now popular all over the world.

Key Terms, Places, and Concepts

Ahimsa	Atman	<i>Bhakti Yoga</i>	Brahma	Brahman	Dharma
Ganges River	<i>Gyana Yoga</i>	Karma	<i>Karma Yoga</i>	Mahabharata	<i>Moksha</i>
Murti	Namaste	<i>Raja Yoga</i>	Ramayan(a)	Samsara	Shakti
Shiva	Swastika	Tilak/Bindi	Upanishads	Vedas	Vishnu

Key Takeaways

- Hinduism is the world's most active major religion and third largest
- Hinduism emphasizes the need to live righteously or in accordance with dharma
- Hinduism preaches pluralism and the importance of experiencing truth