

An Introduction to Hinduism

A Definition of Hinduism

Hinduism is an all-encompassing way of life with a complex system that comprises beliefs and traditions, an advanced system of ethics, meaningful rituals, philosophy, and theology.



Hinduism is characterized by:

- A belief in reincarnation called Samsara;
- One absolute being with multiple manifestations and related deities;
- The law of cause and effect called Karma;
- A call to follow the path of righteousness by engaging in spiritual practices (yogas) and prayers (bhakti); and
- The desire for liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth.
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Origins

Hinduism cannot be traced to any one individual. The earliest of the Hindu scriptures, the Rig Veda, was composed well before 6500 B.C., and the roots can be traced as far back as 10,000 B.C. It is believed to originate from the people living across the River Indus or Sindhu, in the north of India. Modern Hinduism grew from the ancient texts called Vedas, and bore many similarities to other Indo-European religions like Zoroastrianism, incorporating various gods and their worship. Vedic Hinduism had spread all over the Indian subcontinent by the 4th century BC, assimilating elements of all local religious beliefs and practices. Over the next 10 centuries, it evolved further and also absorbed tenets of Buddhism and Jainism, which included the doctrine of non-violence and an emphasis on vegetarianism.

Basic Tenets

At its core, Hinduism teaches four Purusarthas, or goals of human life:

- Dharma (ethics and duties)
- Artha (work and prosperity)
- Kama (passion and desires)
- Moksha (liberation from the cycle of samsara)

Of these beliefs, Dharma is most important in day-to-day life because it is what will lead to Moksha and the end. If Dharma is neglected in favour of the more material pursuits of Artha and Kama, then life becomes chaotic and Moksha cannot be attained.

Key Scriptures

The basic scriptures of Hinduism, which are collectively referred to as Shastras, are essentially a collection of spiritual laws discovered by different saints and sages at different points in its long history. Two types of sacred writings comprise the Hindu scriptures: Shruti (heard) and Smriti (memorized). They were passed on from generation to generation orally for centuries before they were written down, mostly in the Sanskrit language. The major and most popular Hindu texts include the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Major Deities

Adherents to Hinduism believe that there is only one supreme Absolute, called Brahman. However, Hinduism does not advocate the worship of any one particular deity. The gods and goddesses of Hinduism number in the thousands or even millions, all representing the many aspects of Brahman. Therefore, this faith is characterized by the multiplicity of deities. The most fundamental of Hindu deities is the divine trinity of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer). Hindus also worship spirits, trees, animals, and planets.

Hindu Festivals

The Hindu calendar is lunisolar, based on the cycles of the sun and moon.

Like the Gregorian calendar, there are 12 months in the Hindu year, and a number of festivals and holidays are associated with the faith throughout the year. Many of these holy days celebrate the many Hindu deities, such as Maha Shivaratri, which honours Shiva and the triumph of wisdom over ignorance. Other festivals celebrate aspects of life that are important to Hindus, such as family bonds. One of the most auspicious events is Raksha Bandhan when brothers and sisters celebrate their relationship as siblings.

Practicing Hinduism

Being a Hindu means following the Purusarthas, and conducting one's life in accordance with the faith's philosophies through compassion, honesty, prayer, and self-restraint. The goal of life is to realize non-duality and to lead a life that leads to this realisation and thereby reaches Moksha (liberation or freedom).