

Hinduism

Basic Facts and Beliefs

Hinduism is the religion followed by more than 650 million people in India and another 100 million in the rest of the world. Over the centuries this religious tradition has slowly evolved into a practice that encompasses a huge variety of beliefs and rituals. Although these religious beliefs may be understood in many different ways, they are not exclusive of one another and are accepted by Hindus as part of the wide body of the Hindu tradition.

Hinduism is not the name given to the religion by the people of India - It was actually a term given by foreigners to describe the religion of India. Hindus refer to their religion as *Sanatana Dharna*, which roughly means the “ancient religion of eternal truth.” The sacred symbol of the Hindu religion is actually a syllable called the “*Aum*”, which is spoken at the beginning of Hindu prayers and worship. Usually, these prayers are led by a Hindu holy man, known as a *Sadhu* or *Brahmin* (meaning priest), who would draw his sacred messages from the ancient Hindu text known as the *Vedas*. The four collections of scriptures that make up this ancient sacred text are called *the Rig Veda, the Upanishas, the Puranas, and the Ramayana*.

Hindu beliefs are centered around four primary points: *Dharma, Karma, Reincarnation, and Moksha*. The word *Dharma* is rich in meaning, but can be basically defined as laws, duties, and obligations. The word *Karma* deals with the belief that all actions in life produce effects in a person’s future. People who carry out their religious duties and obligations faithfully in life will be rewarded with a desirable rebirth. This rebirth is what is referred to as *Reincarnation*. Hindus that follow their *Dharma*, will receive good *Karma*, and be rewarded with a rebirth into a higher *Caste* within their society. Those who fail to follow their *Dharma*, will receive bad *Karma*, and thus be reborn into a lower *Caste*. Hindu’s ultimate goal is to continue living their lives fulfilling their *Dharma* with each new life until they finally attain *Moksha*. *Moksha* is their liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth and ultimately being free from suffering and worldly limitations (becoming one with their gods).

Hindus do believe that there is ultimately one supreme being or God. However, in Hinduism, there are *multiple deities*, or manifestations of God. In order to create and maintain the material (human) world, God assumes three primary forms: Vishnu the Preserver, Brahma the Creator, and Shiva the Destroyer. These deities, who are the male representations of God, have a female counterpart: Vishnu is accompanied by Lakshmi;

Brahma is joined by Sarasvati, and Shiva's consort is Parvati. Each of these deities will be represented in the Hindu temple by a shrine dedicated to them. Although the Hindu *temple* has no official name, the size and shape of these temples vary depending of the size of the community and the number of its Hindu followers.

Like in many other religions, Hinduism has several *Rights of Passage*. There are many rituals that surround each right of passage in Hinduism. These rituals are called *samskaras*, which begin before a child is born and continue until the cremation of the body after death. There are traditionally sixteen *samskaras* and eleven of them are connected with the first right of passage, which is birth. Hindu boys must undergo the rite of the *Sacred Thread* (another *samskara*) before they can marry because they must be able to study the *Sanskrit* prayers and represent their new family in worship. Hindu women, likewise, go through ritual prayers to the goddess Parvati before she joins her husband in marriage. The final *samskara* is carried out for the departed soul after death. Then the body is cremated, since it is only the person's soul (or *atman*) that is needed for the reincarnation.

Ultimately, Hindu thought and beliefs divide the human life of a man into four stages called *ashramas*. The first is the stage of the student, which begins with the sacred thread ritual. The second stage occurs at marriage and continues until all the children are grown. When all the children are grown and have families of their own, the man enters the third stage which places him within the communities group of elders. Finally, the final stage, which is optional, allows a man to give up his family and all his worldly possessions to wander the world as a nomadic holy man. In addition, Hinduism has four recognized religious paths or ways of living a faithful religious life called *yogas*. The four paths are called devotion, action, knowledge, and meditation. Finally, festivals and pilgrimages are also important parts of Hindu beliefs and devotion. Throughout India there are hundreds of pilgrimage sites and associated festivals. Pilgrimages are designed to provide the devoted Hindu's soul with blessings, prosperity, and positive *karma*. The two most sacred of pilgrimage sites are the Ganges River (the holiest river in the Hindu faith) and the Himalayas (the most sacred mountains in the Hindu world.)

Buddhism

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Buddha means “awakened” or “enlightened one” and is the title given to *Siddhartha Gautama*, the founder of Buddhism, who lived in northern India during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. The Buddha is a being who is the embodiment of perfect wisdom and perfect compassion. Brought up in his father’s palace, *Siddhartha Gautama* reflected on the poverty and sickness that was inflicting his father’s people. In order to find the cause and ultimately the solution to this suffering, he became a wandering nomad in search of answers. After several years of seeking the advice of spiritual leaders, he realized that the answer could be found by avoiding extremes and calming the mind through meditation and living the *Middle Way*.

four key beliefs in Buddhism are known as *Dharma*, *Karma*, *Reincarnation* and *Nirvana*. Buddhists believe that everything in the world exists under the laws of *Karma* (or the laws of cause and effect). In other words, positive actions build up good merits and negative actions detract from it. Buddhists strive to free themselves of negative *Karma* and to generate positive *Karma* by living a morally good life. Buddhists believe that the accumulation of *Karma* causes one to be reborn into the cycle of death and rebirth (or *Reincarnation*). Buddhists ultimately believe that the way to end their cycle of rebirth and suffering is by reaching *Nirvana*. *Nirvana* is the final release or liberation from wandering through the cycles of death and rebirth and the state of supreme happiness and peace that comes with reaching the highest levels of positive *Karma* that can be attained.

In addition to *Dharma*, *Karma*, *Nirvana*, and *Reincarnation*, Buddhists are strongly tied to two key teachings of Buddha. These are known as the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Path*. When Buddha first taught, he said that to find peace you must first understand the *Four Noble Truths*. The First Noble Truth – Suffering exists. The Second Noble Truth – There is a reason for suffering. The Third Noble Truth – There is a way to end suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth – The way to end suffering is through the *Eightfold Path*. The Buddha’s path to end suffering involved discipline of both thought and action. The eight parts of the Eightfold Path are:

1. Right Views – knowing and understanding the Four Noble truths.
2. Right Thoughts – Letting go of want and desire, and acting with kindness to avoid hurting anything.
3. Right Speech – Telling the truth, speaking kindly and wisely.
4. Right Action – Not stealing or cheating.

5. Right Livelihood – Earning a living that does not cause bloodshed or harm to others.
6. Right Effort – encouraging and developing positive thoughts in order to keep on the path.
7. Right Mindfulness – being aware of thoughts and action that affect the world now and into the future.
8. Right Concentration – To maintain a peaceful state of mind that arises through correct practice of the Eightfold Path.

In the Buddhist faith, there are several types of sacred texts that fall into two main groups: those that are based on the spoken word of Buddha and those written by Buddhist scholars and sages. The most well known of these are the *Theravada Scriptures, Pali Canons, and Mahayana Scriptures* (based on the actual teachings of Buddha), and the *Tibetan and Chinese Literatures* (based on the writings of Buddha's followers). However, even with all these sacred writings, the Buddhist religion does not have one central sacred text like most other religions of the world.

Buddhist aim to follow Buddha's teachings in everyday life in many different ways: through their diet, the trades they work in, through meditation, giving alms to the poor, and making offerings at shrines, temples, and monasteries. Daily prayer at a Buddhist Shrine is a common event. Buddhist usually begin an act of devotion at a shrine by reciting the three refuges: I take refuge in the *Buddha*; I take refuge in the *Dharma*; I take refuge in the *Sangha* (or the three jewels of the faith). *Meditation, Chanting, and Offerings* are all activities that can be seen taking place at *Buddhist temples and shrines*. Although Buddhist *Monks and Sages* are the holy men of their faith, they are not required to conduct daily services like other world religions. Chanting and meditation are individual methods of worship that may be done at home as well as at a temple, shrine, or monastery.

Practicing the path of Mindfulness and Compassion of essential parts of the Buddhist beliefs. *Dharma, Dana, and the Five Precepts* are all elements of the path to *Nirvana*. *Dharma* in Buddhism is the following of the true path and the true nature of all things: doing what is right and expected of all living things. *Dana* is the act of giving that produces merit and improves one's *Karma*. *The Five Precepts* are simply: *Refraining from - harming living beings; taking what is not given; misuse of the senses; false speech; self-intoxication due to alcoholic drink or drugs*. Finally, Buddhist also believe in the performance of specific rituals and pilgrimages. Early Buddhist scriptures identify four holy places in Nepal & India where pilgrimages occur: Lumbini Grove (Buddha's birthplace); Bodh Gaya (where he found enlightenment); Sarnath (where he preached his first sermon); and Kusingara (where he died).