

5 minute guide

to

HINDUISM

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Introduction

Hinduism, one of the world's oldest living religions, has approximately 800 million followers, most of them in India.

Hinduism is an amalgamation of several faith traditions. It may be helpful to view Hinduism not so much as a single religion, but as a family of religions. Hindus themselves use various terms such as *sanatana-dharma* (loosely translated as "eternal religion") to describe their faith; the word "Hindu" is originally a geographic designation (those who live east of the Indus River) and is not found in any Hindu scriptures.

Hinduism has no single founder. While Hinduism may be a collection of faiths, one basic tenet of Hinduism is a belief in the difference between spirit (eternal) and matter (temporary).

With 400,000 followers, Hinduism is the fourth largest religion in the UK.

Scripture

The Vedas are the oldest Hindu scriptures and, as with most Hindu scriptures, are written in Sanskrit. The word Veda means knowledge.

The Vedas are divided into four books, each section dealing with different aspects of knowledge. These are: *Rig-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda* and *Atharva-veda*.

The Vedas were codified into *sutras* (aphorisms) in a scripture known as *Vedanta-sutra*. Much of Hindu philosophical writing stems from this and develops the ideas in *Vedanta-sutra* according to time, place and circumstance.

As well as the Vedas, other classes of scriptures include:

Itihasas: Histories, such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*

Brahmanas: Instructions for ritual worship

Puranas: Epic texts explaining Vedic teaching through historical and allegorical narrations

Upanishads: Philosophical texts, such as *Bhagavad-gita*

Of all these scriptures, *Bhagavad-gita* is probably the best known and most widely taught.

Reincarnation and Karma

One of the main teachings of Hindu scriptures (*sastra*) is that the living entity is caught in a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; this cycle is called *samsara*. The soul, as eternal spirit, is

caught in a world of temporary matter. This is an unnatural position, and escape means return to the spiritual world.

According to all Hindu traditions, one's next birth is decided by one's karma (work) and one's consciousness at the time of death. Karma is a principle of universal justice. Whatever action is performed, good or bad, there is a subsequent reaction, if not in this life then in the next. But ultimately the aim is to become free from repeated birth (and subsequent old age, disease and death) by engaging in spiritual activities.

According to *Bhagavad-gita*, there are three paths a Hindu can follow in order to break the cycle of birth and death:

Work (*karma yoga*): The performance of meritorious religious deeds including rituals, giving in charity, and performing pilgrimages.

Knowledge (*jnana-yoga*): Realisation of the true nature of matter and spirit.

Devotion (*bhakti-yoga*): Devoting one's life to developing a loving relationship with God.

God and Demigods

One of the fundamental differences of opinion within Hinduism is the identity of God. Some schools teach that God is impersonal, that he has no form or identity, and other schools teach that God is personal, that He is the supreme person. And within each of these schools are further sub-schools with different understandings of the nature and personality of God. These differences of understanding are the reason that Hinduism cannot really be viewed as one religion. Although these theological disputes exist, there is a tradition within Hinduism of accepting all valid religious traditions, Hindu or non-Hindu, as part of God's plan to teach people according to their abilities and inclinations.

The three main branches of Hinduism are Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism. The Vaishnavas worship Lord Vishnu as God, specifically in His forms of Krishna, Rama, and Narayana. Shaivites worship Lord Shiva and Shaktas worship Durga-devi, the Goddess in charge of material energy. Worship of the deity form (*murti*) of the Lord is considered to be an integral part of worship because all aspects of God — His name, forms (including the deity form), pastimes, and words — are considered to be equally part of God and equally worthy of worship.

As well as these main deities are the numerous demigods. These personalities, while not God, are of a higher level than humans and have specific roles to play within the functioning of the universe.

Guru

A central figure in Hinduism is that of the guru: the teacher who passes on the teachings of his or her lineage, without changing the essence but with consideration of changes in society. The lineage of the guru is known as *parampara* (disciplic succession) and orthodox Hindus will generally see their place in Hinduism in terms of their particular *parampara*.

Worship

There is no particular day of worship in Hinduism. To Hindus, every day is a day of worship.

Traditionally Hindus will have a shrine for worship at home and, depending on proximity, will visit the temple regularly as well.

The temple is a sacred focus for Hindus. However, respectful visitors are generally welcomed.

Worship consists of items such as *kirtan* (singing the names of God), *bhajan* (devotional songs), *puja* (offering items such as flowers, food, water and incense to God), *sastra* (reading from scriptures), *sanga* (associating with fellow devotees), and *prasadam* (sharing food offered to God). There are many cultural variations that determine which of these are performed and how they are performed.

There are many rites-of-passage within Hinduism. Again, these vary according to tradition but can include rituals to mark birth, babies' first hair-cutting, babies first grains, formal acceptance of a guru, sacred-thread (brahmin) initiation, marriage, death and many others.

Holy Days and Festivals

It has been said that in Hinduism there is a festival for each day of the year. This may be an underestimate!

In common with other faiths, Hindu festivals mostly fall into two broad categories: those that celebrate teachers and saints in the tradition and those that celebrate notable events from scripture.

Hindu festivals are an opportunity for devotees to refocus on their spiritual life and to increase their meditation on God and his pure followers. Most festivals include prayer and reading of scripture while some will include fasting for part or all of the day. Some festivals are immensely joyful, such as Holi where revellers throw coloured dyes and powders over each other. Other festivals are very attractive, such as Diwali, when houses and temples are lit up with candles.

Hindu holy days and festivals follow a lunisolar calendar, thus dates vary from year to year. A few of the most popular are:

- **Diwali.** Known as the festival of lights, this commemorates the return of Lord Rama from His exile in the forest. It is, for many traditions, a new-year celebration. It takes place between late October and the middle of November.
- **Dussehra.** A celebration of good conquering evil, this festival lasts ten days and takes place between late September and the middle of October.
- **Holi.** A spring festival to celebrate creation and renewal, linked with Lord Krishna.
- **Navaratri.** A nine-day festival which celebrates the triumph of good over evil.
- **Janmastami.** A celebration marking the appearance on earth of Lord Krishna.

Timeline

c. 3000 – 1500 B.C.E.	Indus Valley Civilization
c. 1600-1000 B.C.E.	Migration of Aryans
c. 2300-200 B.C.E.	Composition of the <i>Rig-veda</i> , <i>Yajur-veda</i> , <i>Sma-veda</i> , <i>Atharva-veda</i> , and the Upanisads .
c. 400 B.C.E. – 400 C.E.	Composition of the Mahabharata
c. 200 B.C.E. – 300 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Dharma-sastras</i> , laws of <i>Manu</i> , <i>Ramayana</i> , and <i>Bhagavad-gita</i> .
c.300-1700 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Puranas</i> and <i>early Tantras</i>
711-715 C.E.	Invasion of Muslims into Northwest India
c. 1200 C.E.	Muslim Capital established at Delhi
c. 1469-1539 C.E.	Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism
1498 C.E.	Vasco da Gama arrives on India's west coast.
1526-1707 C.E.	Mughal rule in India
1542-1605 C.E.	Akbar the Great
1757 C.E.	Bengali Muslim rulers defeated by the British.
1869-1948 C.E.	Mohandas K. Gandhi
1947 C.E.	Indian Independence and partition.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated 'To Ma and Da, with love.'