

## INTRODUCTION TO HINDUISM

Hinduism is widely regarded as the oldest living religion. It has no single founder, but is the result of the religious experience gathered over several thousand years by countless men and women in their search for the meaning and purpose of life. The roots of Hinduism that weave together Aryan, Dravidian and ancient tribal cultures native to India can be traced back to before 3000 BCE.

### BELIEFS and SYMBOLS

The central belief of Hinduism is that God can be experienced as a reality in our life here and now. God is the infinite, eternal essence of all that is. In reality that divine Being alone exists, and the purpose of life is to draw close to God and to experience God's reality directly within ourselves. Human beings, in order to feel close to God, like to approach the Divinity in a personal way. Historically in Hinduism, many forms of God have been worshiped, but they are always seen as the various facets of the One, called Brahman.

### SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

The ancient sages' experiences were originally handed down orally from teacher to student and not actually written down until comparatively recent times. The teachings discovered by these sages in their introspection are called the *Vedas*. They are a vast compilation containing instructions for worship and hymns, as well as deep philosophy. They consist of more than 50 separate works. Hindus understand the *Vedas* as "heard" Divine Revelation, and not of human origin, although human beings were the means through which the Divine wisdom was revealed. The last part of the *Vedas*, called the *Upanishads*, teach that oneness with the supreme Reality (Brahman) is the ultimate goal of human beings, and that salvation or liberation is achieved through life experience.

In modern times, it is mostly the concluding portion, the philosophy, which is given importance. This is called the *Vedanta* or end (*anta*) of the *Vedas*.

The religious literature of Hinduism also contains a vast body of auxiliary scriptures that act like commentaries on the *Vedas*. Examples include the *Smritis*, or writings about Hindu law, and the two epics: the *Râmâyâna* and the *Mahabharata* (which includes the *Bhagavad Gita*). These scriptures contain spiritual instructions as well as histories of dynasties, and also stories of the lives of saints and sages, both men and women, describing their experiences of God and of spiritual truths.

### KARMA and REINCARNATION

Karma is the moral law of cause and effect that maintains that our present situation is the result of our past actions. The law of karma implies that human beings create their own future destiny (individually and

collectively) by accepting responsibility and accountability for their thoughts and actions now.

In order to account for the vast differences in the condition and experience of people in this life, in order to try to explain why some are born to apparently undeserved misery and suffering, while others are born to happiness, it is proposed that this is the fruit of the actions of a previous life. This is the theory of reincarnation. As one grows morally and spiritually, and as one becomes more devoted to God, the fruits of these actions, and therefore reincarnation, will not affect us so much. Thus gradually one attains freedom from the need to reincarnate.

### YOGA

To attain this freedom ("*moksha*") one practices one or more of the four main spiritual paths, collectively termed *yoga*. These four paths are meant for the four main personality types found among human beings. Those who are mainly of an intellectual and philosophical bent of mind can use the path of *jnana yoga*. In this path one analyzes all facets of one's experience, trying to reach the reality of God by renouncing what is unreal and untrue, and earnestly striving to find the real, the true, the eternal. Those people who are of a more emotional nature may follow the path of *bhakti yoga*. In this path one worships God with devotion and love, offering one's whole being in His service, making him the beloved of their hearts. For those of active temperament, there is the path of *karma yoga*, which emphasizes total selflessness and an active dedication to the welfare of all beings. Then there is the path of mental control and psychology, known as *raja yoga*. After the requisite disciplines of mental and physical purification have been undergone, one strives through mental control and meditation to still the restlessness of the mind. *Raja yoga* is the path out of which western physical yoga practice emerges. Most people, being of mixed temperaments, like to undertake a combination of several of these yogas. It is always recommended that those who want to undertake these spiritual practices avail themselves of the guidance of an experienced person who can point out the difficulties along the way and give proper guidance.

### GOALS and STAGES OF LIFE

Hinduism recognizes that all the various goals of human beings can be divided into four broad categories: 1) the fulfillment of legitimate desires, 2) the attainment of success in this world, 3) the yearning for righteousness and morality, and 4) the attainment of the spiritual goal of salvation or enlightenment. These goals are part of a holistic view of human experience and all can be practiced together. The practice of righteousness, however, must pervade them all. It is the foundation on which they all stand.

To enable people to pursue these four goals, Hinduism recognizes four stages of a person's life. The first stage is that of the student, where one learns to lead a disciplined, pure life, devoted to the acquisition of knowledge, to prepare one for bearing the responsibilities associated with the next stage. Stage two is the householder whose labor supports all the other stages. In this stage, along with the responsibility of taking care of his own family as well as his larger family, namely the whole society, the householder can pursue the first three goals of life. When, however, his children have grown up and have children of their own, then the householder should prepare himself to turn his mind away from involvement with mundane things, and direct it to the fourth goal of life, spiritual realization. To do this he enters the third stage of life: He and his wife withdraw to a retreat to begin a life of contemplation and meditation. When, after many years, they have both become established in this new life and accustomed to it, then they separately enter the monastic life (*sannyasa*), stage four, devoting their whole time to the practice of *yoga* for the realization of God. In this way, in their final years on earth they will be engrossed in the search for spiritual fulfillment and joy.

#### **DEITIES and INCARNATIONS OF GOD**

All the manifestations of power in this universe can be resolved into three: 1) creation, 2) preservation, and 3) destruction. Brahman, or God, is the only reality. So one should be able to perceive God in all three manifestations of power. This is described in a personal way by associating creation, preservation, and destruction each with a particular aspect of the Godhead. The creative power is called *Brahma*. The sustaining power is called *Vishnu*, and the destructive power is called *Shiva*. Each of these, however, as well as all the other deities to be mentioned below, is actually the totality of God, personalized and limited as it were, but not limited in actuality. As an example of this, *Shiva* is often pictured as the *Nataraja*, the king of dancers, whose dance brings worlds into being and also dissolves them, all in one graceful movement.

The totality of the Divine power can also be associated with the idea of motherhood, involving birth and nourishment, forgiveness, help and protection. God as the Divine Mother, or *Shakti*, is worshiped as the ultimate refuge in all situations of life. All beings are Her children.

From time to time, as righteousness declines and irreligion prevails, a human being is born who contains within himself such a superabundance of beneficent power for the uplift of humanity, that people begin to worship him as a veritable embodiment of divinity, as an incarnation of God. Krishna and Râma are two such incarnations in the history of Hinduism. In these days, also Sri Ramakrishna, the great nineteenth century mystic is thought of in a similar light.

#### **RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS**

The central Hindu ritual is meditation. It is a process of calming and concentrating the mind. In an utterly calm and concentrated mind, the Divine reality of God is

directly perceived. The process of meditation can take many forms, but the general tendency in Hinduism is for the worshiper to adopt an aspect of the Divinity that appeals to him or her, and to visualize it in their heart as living and radiant, and to concentrate on it with the help of certain words which are symbols of the divinity. A qualified teacher or guide is highly recommended for the successful practice of meditation.

Other rituals include worship of God by offering of perfume, flowers, incense, light, and food, as well as other items. God is here treated as an honored guest who is thought to have just arrived in the home. Worship is also done in temples, but that is secondary in importance to what is done in the home. Other religious rites include pilgrimages to holy shrines, and festivals associated with different aspects of Divinity, as well as rituals associated with the life-cycle: birth, first taking of solid food, adulthood, marriage, etc. Thousands of these festivals are celebrated throughout India, but the most widely celebrated worldwide are listed below:

**Dassehra** (Dusserah) The festival that lasts "ten days." This may be the most popular festival, celebrated for ten days in September/October. The Goddess Durgâ is worshipped during the first nine days of the festival, and the 10<sup>th</sup> day is a celebration of the victory of Râma, the hero of the Râmâyana, over the demon king of Srî Lanka, Râvana.

**Dîpâvali** (Dîwâlî). This is the festival of lamps, and honors the Goddess Lakshmî, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. The festival lasts five days in September/October or October/November. It also commemorates Râma's victory over Râvana and his return to the city of Ayodhyâ.

**Srî Râmakrishna Jayanti**. This celebration, which occurs in February, marks the birthday of Srî Ramakrishna, the great nineteenth-century mystic.

**Shivarâtri** (Night of Shiva). This celebration in February/March marks the time when Shiva manifests himself in the form of the flaming linga, or phallus, showering his devotees with his grace. Hindus of all castes and classes celebrate it across India.

**Holî**. This two-day spring festival, celebrated in February/March, marks the end of winter, and is one of the most popular Hindu festivals.

**Râma-navamî**. This is a celebration of the birth of Râma, and comes in March/April.

**Srî-Krishna-Jayantî**. Celebrated in July/August or August/September, this day commemorates the birthday of Krishna.

#### **WOMEN'S ROLES IN HINDUISM**

From the most ancient times, women have played a prominent role in the development of the Hindu religion. In the Vedic period the ceremonies could not be performed unless both husband and wife were actively present. Throughout Indian history down to the present day, a galaxy of women saints and sages played a prominent role, as spiritual teachers and as leaders in every walk of life, even at times as prime ministers and leaders of armies. ☞