

# What are the 'big ideas' in Hinduism?

Hinduism is an ancient and very diverse series of beliefs originating in India.

The Supreme Being is **Brahman**. He is found everywhere and is known in many forms, each of which helps followers to understand more about him. Principle forms are the Trimurti:

**Brahma**, the creator  
**Vishnu**, the preserver  
**Shiva**, the destroyer

Sometimes a god will appear on the earth in living form. The most important of these avatars is **Krishna**.

The sacred symbol and sound of **Aum** is the creative sound of the universe and focuses people on god.



Sacred texts including the **Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads**.

The Hindu way of life aims to reach **moksha**. Every action has an effect and there is a cause for everything. This is the law of **Karma**.

Life is a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The next life is dependent on how the previous was lived. By living a life of duty and good conduct Hindus learn to think of others first, be respectful of parents and elders, follow divine law, especially **ahimsa**; emotional and physical non-injury to all beings. In this way they can work towards a good karma.

Hindus meet to worship called **puja** in a **mandir**, or worship in the home. The focus is often one or more **murti**, images of the gods.

# What do I need to know about Hinduism?



Hinduism is the world's oldest major faith, dating back over five thousand years. Other belief systems such as Buddhism and Jainism developed from it. It is the third largest world religion with about a billion Hindus worldwide, about 600,000 of them in UK. In the 20th century, Hinduism began to gain popularity in the West, influencing movements such as Hare Krishna, New Age and yoga. Its different worldview and acceptance of diversity made it an attractive alternative. Hindus believe that no one religion teaches the way to salvation above all others, but that all religious paths are aspects of God's love and light, and so deserve tolerance and understanding.

Hinduism is made up of a variety of different but related religious beliefs and practices which originated near the river Indus in India. The name 'Hindu' comes from the word Indus. Hinduism is not a homogeneous, organized system. Most Hindus respect the authority of the Vedas (the oldest sacred texts) and the Brahmins (the priestly class), but some reject one or both of these authorities. Hindu religious life might take the form of devotion to gods, the duties of family life, or concentrated meditation. Given this diversity, it is important to take care when generalizing about "Hinduism" or "Hindu beliefs." However, most followers share a belief in one true God, the Supreme Spirit, called Brahman.

## What do Hindus believe?

Brahman is present in every person as the eternal spirit or soul, called the atman. Brahman contains everything: creation and destruction, male and female, good and evil, movement and stillness. Brahman is symbolised by and can be found through the sound of the sacred syllable Aum (or Om). Brahman takes many forms, each of which help followers to understand more about the Supreme Being, how he should be worshipped and how life should be led. There are three main aspects of Brahman. The Trimurti, meaning "having three forms", refers to the three main Hindu gods. The Trimurti represents all aspects of Brahman and is depicted as a single-bodied, three-headed man.

The Trimurti consists of Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer.

Hindus believe that sometimes a god will appear on the earth in living form. Such an appearance is called an avatar. God has the ability to take any form and will descend to earth at times when there has been a decline in goodness, and evil is influencing human actions. The principal avatars are those of Vishnu, of which there will be ten. The last, Kalki, has not yet appeared. Krishna is recognised as the most important avatar although beliefs about Vishnu and Krishna vary widely. For many believers Vishnu or another form fully represents Brahman. Other important forms of Brahman include the goddess Shakti, Rama; Hanuman, the monkey warrior; Lakshmi: the goddess of wealth and fortune; Saraswati: the goddess of learning and the arts; Ganesh, remover of obstacles; Skanda and Surya



Many Hindus are devoted followers of Shiva or Vishnu, whom they regard as the only true God, while others look inward to the divine Self (atman).

## What are sacred writings for Hindus?

The authors and dates of most Hindu sacred texts are unknown, although the oldest text is estimated to date from as early as 1500 BCE. These are the Vedas (collections of hymns of praise). Veda means knowledge. They are written in an old form of Sanskrit. Other texts regarded as sacred include the Ramayana,

Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, the Puranas and the Upanishads. Many venerate these believing that these writings help humans connect to the divine.

## What do Hindus believe about life and death?

Hindus believe that every action has an effect and there is a cause for everything. This is called the law of Karma. Life is a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, governed by Karma. The soul passes through a cycle of lives and that the next life is dependent on how the previous life was lived. The cycle of rebirth is called samsara, and under the influence of karma, the soul moves upwards and downwards on the wheel of rebirth. Karma is the Sanskrit word for action. Actions are important because they bring reactions. Hindus believe every experience, pleasant or unpleasant, is linked to past actions, in this lifetime or in some previous lifetime. This does not rule out free choice, because by practicing yoga, or spiritual discipline, one can change one's actions and so change one's future. Belief in karma teaches people to accept responsibility for their behaviour, and learn from their mistakes.



Hinduism teaches that the ultimate solution to life's basic problems is to be released from karma and gain freedom from this cycle of rebirth by attaining Moksha. Many Hindus believe that all existence comes from Brahman. The purpose of life is to understand this truth and to understand one's eternal identity as the atman, or soul. The soul passes through many kinds of life, but only human life offers the chance of learning this truth. Therefore Hindus believe it is important to use the opportunity of a human birth to understand oneself and God.

Reincarnation is the belief that the soul lives for many lifetimes, in one body after another. The soul is sometimes born in a human body, sometimes in an animal body and sometimes in a plant body, such as that of a tree. Therefore all forms of life contain a soul, and all souls have the chance to experience life in different forms. This means that it is a religion that puts great value on all living things and respects the need to care for the environment. The cow is seen as a symbol of life, giving milk to sustain life. Many Hindus are vegetarian. They also adopt Ahimsa the belief in non-violence; adopting mental, emotional and physical no injury to all beings.

Hindus believe that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution. To express their faith Hindus worldwide are often involved in environmental action. This is especially important in the care of the Ganges River which Hindus consider most sacred yet is sadly seriously polluted. The city of Varanasi (Benares) on its banks is a most important pilgrimage centre. It is said to be the home of Lord Shiva. A Hindu who dies there and has their ashes scattered on the Ganges is said to have experienced the best death possible.

## How do Hindus live out their faith?

There are five obligations of belief for many committed Hindus. These are:

**Upasana: Worship** - Daily puja worship in the family shrine. Family and home life are important to many Hindus.

**Utsava: Holy days** – Participation in festivals fasting and attendance in the mandir for special celebrations. Holy days, include Diwali (the festival of lights), Holi, Navaratri (celebrating fertility and harvest), Raksha Bandhan (celebrating the bond between brother and sister) and Janmashtami (Krishna's birthday)

**Dharma: Virtuous living** - A selfless life of duty and good conduct in which they think of others first, being respectful to parents and elders, follow ahimsa, and working towards a good karma.

**Samskara: Rites of passage** - the rites of birth, name-giving, head-shaving, first feeding, ear-piercing, first learning, coming of age, sacred thread ceremony, marriage and death.

**Tirthayatra: Pilgrimage** – taking time to detach themselves from normal life and focussing on a spiritual journey. Pilgrimage is an important aspect of Hinduism. It's an undertaking to see and be seen by the deity.

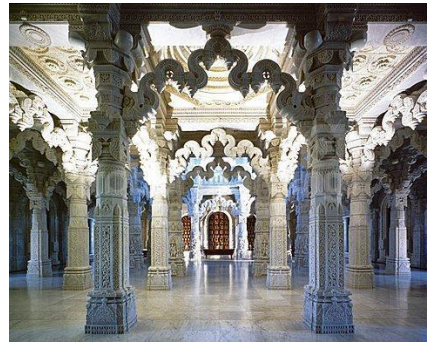
Popular pilgrimage places are rivers, but temples, mountains, and other sacred sites in India are also destinations for pilgrimages, as sites where the gods may have appeared or become manifest in the world.

**Kumbh Mela** only happens once every twelve years. Many millions gather to bathe at the confluence of the Ganges and Jumna at Allahabad, believing that their sins will be washed away. The bathing is followed by spiritual purification and a ceremony which secures the blessings of the deity.

## What happens in a mandir? What is puja?

Hindu worship, or puja, involves using murtis (images of the gods), saying prayers (mantras) and sometimes yoga or studying diagrams of the universe (yantras). All five senses are involved to ensure full involvement.

Puja can take place in the home or at the mandir. Many have a special shrine to particular gods in their homes. A shrine can be anything: a room, a small altar or simply pictures or statues of the deity. Hindu worship is primarily an individual act rather than a communal one, as it involves making personal offerings to the deity. Family members often worship together. Rituals should ideally be performed three times a day. Some Hindus worship wearing the sacred thread (over the left shoulder and hanging to the right hip).



Mandir means gladdening, and refers to a place where Hindus go to worship God in the form of various deities. Murtis help them to do this. The murtis are marble images ceremonially infused with the divine presence of god. Mandirs vary in size from small village shrines to large buildings. People can also visit the Mandir at any time to pray and participate in the bhajans (religious songs). Worshippers repeat the names of their favourite gods and goddesses, and repeat mantras. Water, fruit, flowers, milk and incense are offered to god. In the mandir a Brahmin (priest) may read, or more usually recite, the Vedas to the assembled worshippers, but any committed Hindu can perform the reading of prayers and mantras

Music and dance also take an important place in worship.

## Useful resources and websites for teachers and classrooms:

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/hinduism/>
- <http://hinduismfacts.org/>
- <http://www.reonline.org.uk/knowning/what-re/hinduism/>
- <https://sites.google.com/site/worldreligionsforkids/home/hinduism>
- <http://www.primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk/religion/hinduism.htm>
- <https://www.everyschool.co.uk/r-e-key-stage-2-hinduism.html>
- <http://www.primaryresources.co.uk/re> (go to Hinduism section for lots of PowerPoints and PDF files)
- Folens photo pack on Hinduism; pictures of Gurus
- BBC Video 'Pathways of Belief'
- Seeking Religion Series: The Hindu Experience

- Beliefs, Values & Traditions: Hinduism by Ann Lovelace & Joy White
- Discovering Religions: Hinduism by Sue Penny
- Hinduism in words and pictures by Sarah Thorley