

WHAT DO HINDUS BELIEVE?

I Am Hindu—What Does That Mean?

by Swami Jyotirmayananda

I am grateful to God that I am a Hindu. As a Hindu I believe that God is One but He is worshipped in different ways by different religions of the world. I adore all religions because God is the same for Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and for all humanity.

God is the very source of my mind and soul. He is everywhere. He is all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Nothing is hidden from Him. He knows even my secret thoughts. When I pray to Him or repeat His Name, I feel peaceful. A new insight develops in me and I am able to overcome my difficulties by His Divine Grace.

I can worship God as the Father—as Vishnu or Shiva, Rama or Krishna—or as the Mother—Lakshmi or Saraswati, Durga or Shakti—or I can worship God in adoring Saints and Sages—Mahavira or Buddha—or I can meditate on God as the Truth beyond all names and forms.

The Hindu scriptures teach four great techniques for living a life of happiness, harmony, and success. Karma Yoga is to worship God through the performance of my duties. Bhakti Yoga is to love God and feel the sustaining presence of God within my heart. Dhyana Yoga is to practice meditation and develop the powers of the mind. Jñana Yoga is to make my intellect sharp and to understand that “I am not this physical body, I am the Immortal Soul, I am one with God.”

I believe in the law of Karma, which is the law of action and reaction. If I do good deeds, I will find happiness in my life. If I do evil deeds, I will have painful situations. I have passed through many incarnations. My present condition is due to my past deeds and thoughts. My future depends upon my thoughts and actions of my present life. With God in me, I have infinite possibilities. I am the architect of my destiny. The central goal of my life is to attain God-realization and become free of birth and death.

Life is a wonderful opportunity. I believe in disciplining my body and mind so that I will become a loving person as I grow. I will be loving to my family, friends, and relatives. I will educate myself so that I can offer the best of my services to my family, my society, my country, and my world. I seek good association and shun all evil company. I know God abides in everyone. Therefore, it is my aim not to hurt anyone, not to deceive anyone, not to do anything wrong to anyone. Real strength lies in controlling anger, greed, and hatred. Real beauty lies in developing virtuous qualities such as humility, cheerfulness, honesty, and devotion to God. Real victory lies in mastering the mind.

One of the important prayers from the Hindu scriptures is the Gayatri Mantra, which means, “O God, You pervade the three worlds. You are effulgent like the sun. May you enlighten my intellect. May you give me wisdom.”

As a Hindu, I not only pray for the good of myself and my family, but also for the good of all humanity. In fact, I pray for the good of all living beings—animals, birds, and small creatures as well. I am indeed blessed that I am a Hindu and I want to maintain the high ethical standard of being a Hindu.

HINDU SOCIETY: SCRIPTURE, CASTE, STAGES OF LIFE, THE YOGAS

Jeffery D. Long

Hindu Sacred Literature

The sacred literature, or scriptures, of Hinduism, where the structures of the Hindu way of life are set forth, is divided into two categories. The first, śrūti (meaning “that which is heard”) is regarded as the more sacred of the two. It is analogous with the concept in Western religions of divine revelation. Interestingly, however, most Hindus are relatively unfamiliar with the contents of these texts.

The second type of scripture, smṛti (meaning “that which is remembered”) is regarded as less sacred than the śrūti, on which it is based. But this literature is much better known among Hindus. It is also the far larger of the two collections.

Śrūti: ‘Heard’ Texts—Divine Revelation—The Vedas and the Upanishads

Śrūti consists of the literature just discussed: the Vedic body of literature, including the Saṃhitās (the Ṛg, Yājur, Sāma, and Athārva Vedas), the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas, and the Upaniṣads.

Smṛti: ‘Remembered’ Texts—Sacred Tradition—Epics, Pūrāṇas, and other Works

Two Great Epics: The Vedas and Upaniṣads have always been fairly esoteric texts. For centuries, only male Brahmins were even allowed to learn them. But even in periods like the present when they are no longer kept secret, they are difficult texts to interpret and to understand, requiring a living teacher to explain their spiritual meaning. Around 500 BCE, partly in response to the secretiveness of the Brahmanical tradition, new, popular traditions arose that did not keep their teachings secret from the masses. These included Buddhism and Jainism, which will be looking at in this course. Beginning around 400 BCE, and partially in reaction to the popularity of Buddhism and Jainism (which we will be studying shortly) Brahmanical philosophy began to be expressed in more popular story literature—literature all people could understand and appreciate. This was the beginning of the smṛti, or sacred tradition, remembered and passed down in the community from ancient times (in contrast to the directly heard, divinely revealed Vedas and Upaniṣads).

Itihāsa means literally ‘thus it was,’ or ‘history.’ There are two great Itihāsas, or historical Epics, in Hindu literature—the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*—This epic tells the story of Rāma, a prince of northern India who is an *avatār*, or incarnation, of the God Viṣṇu. Rāma’s wife, Sītā, is abducted by Rāvaṇa, the demonic king of Sri Lanka. Rāma rescues her and, with the help of an army of monkeys and other animals, defeats Rāvaṇa’s demons.

The *Mahābhārata*—This epic tells the story of a war for control of northern India between rival branches of a royal family, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kurus. One of the friends of the Pāṇḍavas is Krishna, who is also, like Rāma before him, an incarnation of Viṣṇu. His advice to the Pāṇḍava hero, Arjuna, on the eve of the battle is contained in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, or ‘Song of God,’ a philosophical portion of the *Mahābhārata* that, today, has the status of a Hindu ‘Bible.’ (Hindus in India even swear on it when taking oaths in court.)

Another important set of smṛti texts consists of the *Pūrāṇas*, or ‘ancient lore.’ There are eighteen major Pūrāṇas, each containing the mythology of a different Hindu deity—Viṣṇu, Śiva, Devī (the Mother Goddess), etc.

In addition to the Epics and the Pūrāṇas, a vast collection of other sacred texts, sūtras and śāstras, are considered smṛti. These include dharma śāstras, or law books, which outline the duties of all the members of traditional Hindu society; the artha śāstras, or works of political science—‘how to’ manuals for rulers and their advisors. They also include the sūtras of the various darśanas, or schools of philosophy; the āyur veda, or medical wisdom; and numerous other works on sacred art, drama, music, architecture, etc.

All the areas of human experience are explored in this vast literature—even the intimate details of human sexuality, as in the famous *Kāma Sūtra*. Finally, the smṛti also includes the sacred texts distinctive to the various sampradāyas, or denominations, of Hinduism. The major denominations are the Vaiṣṇavas, or worshipers of Viṣṇu as the supreme God, the Śaivas, or worshipers of Śiva; and the Śāktas, or worshipers of Śaktī, also known as Devī, Pārvatī, Durgā, or Kālī—the Mother Goddess.

Dharma: The Fourfold Social and Moral Order

Dharma: Dharma is duty, morality, social order, but also the cosmic order, the order of nature. Dharma is traditionally believed to manifest in society as the *varṇa* system, the rules of which are outlined in the *Dharma Śāstras*, or Law Books.

Varṇa: The “Caste” System

Traditional Hindu society is divided into four *varṇas* or *castes*. These are further sub-divided into numerous *jātis*—hereditary occupations. Brahmanical orthodoxy sees these castes as forming a vertical hierarchy of ritual purity and spiritual advancement—a notion that is rejected by Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs, as well as many Hindus.

According to the original Vedic ideal, at least as modern Hindu reformers understand it, caste was originally a division of labor in society, a recognition that people have different abilities and can make different contributions to the whole. Originally, it seems that one’s caste was a function of one’s individual talents and interests. By the time of the Buddha, however, around the 5th century BCE, this system had become more rigid and hereditary. This is still the case in rural India. But it is important to note that, at every point in the history of Hinduism, people have challenged the Brahmanical conception of this system as reflecting a spiritual hierarchy.

The four varṇas are the following:

Brahmins: priests, ritual experts, philosophers, teachers of scripture and tradition.

Kṣatriyas: warriors, kings, political rulers and administrators of law.

Vaiśyas: common people, artisans, farmers, merchants.

Śūdras: servants, doers of impure jobs. Called by Gandhi Harijans (people of God). Sometimes discriminated against as ‘untouchable’ (due to the perceived impurity of their work). Some call themselves Dālits (‘the oppressed’) and seek social equality in modern India. This movement can be compared to the American civil rights movement.

Āśrama: The Four Stages of Life

Āśrama: Stage of life. (Also a place of spiritual retreat, an ‘ashram.’) The division of society into castes is not the only fourfold division that Hinduism makes. If caste can be seen as a ‘vertical,’ hierarchical division of human beings, one can say that ‘horizontally,’ or temporally, the life of a single human being is divided into four stages as well, beginning with a ritual “second birth” and ending with death.

Brahmacārya: the celibate student stage. From age 12 to 24, a Brahmin male would traditionally live with his guru and study the Veda. For most Hindus today, this is mainly symbolic. It represents young adulthood, the phase of life when we leave our parents, but before we have started families of our own (kind of like being in college in modern American culture).

Gṛhasthya: the householder stage, from marriage to retirement. The phase of life when one has children and is an economically productive member of society.

Vanaprastha: the ‘forest-dweller’ stage. Retirement. Turning away from this-worldly concerns to think about the deeper meaning of life (in preparation for death).

Sannyāsa: renunciation. Undertaken by relatively few Hindus. Leaving society completely for the pursuit of liberation (moksha).

Puruṣārthas: The Four Goals of Human Life

Classical Hinduism also defines four puruṣārthas, or goals of life that it is appropriate for a person to pursue (depending upon one’s level of spiritual advancement). These are also arranged hierarchically, from least to most advanced (also least to most permanent).

Kāma: physical pleasure, the enjoyment of the senses.

Artha: wealth; the means for having physical pleasure, but also for doing good.

Dharma: morality, goodness. Living in harmony with others and the cosmos.

Mokṣa: liberation.

The pursuit of the puruṣārthas is, of course, governed by the principle of karma. It is wise, therefore, to be mindful of dharma when pursuing kāma or artha.

Yogas: The Four Spiritual Disciplines

A yoga is a path to liberation. According to classical Hindu philosophy, there are also four yogas that one can pursue, once one has made liberation one’s life goal. Each yoga is a valid path to liberation, suited to a different kind of person. The four yogas are:

Karma-yoga: The way of action. Living a virtuous life not in the hope of reaping a reward, but selflessly. Two interpretations of the virtuous life can be found in Hinduism. Traditional—to follow one’s *svadharma*, the duties to which one is born as a member of the varṇa, or caste, system. Modern—to serve all beings selflessly, for all are one in Brahman (this was Gandhi’s view, along with other modern Hindu reformers).

Jñāna-yoga: The way of knowledge. It involves studying and understanding the Hindu scriptures and Hindu philosophy. This is the path of the intellectual.

Bhakti-yoga: The way of devotion. Surrendering heart, mind and soul to the Supreme Being, or personal form of Brahman—God. This is by far the most popular yoga of Hinduism, and the point at which it is most similar to western monotheistic religions, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam (which Hindus regard as forms of bhakti-yoga).

Dhyāna or *Rājā-yoga*: The classical system of physical postures (*āsanas*) and forms of meditation and breath control designed to lead to the direct awareness of Brahman, a state called *samādhi*. The physical aspect of this yoga is termed *Haṭha-yoga* (which is what most Westerners have in mind when they use the word ‘yoga’).

HINDU DEITIES AND WORSHIP

Jeffery D. Long

Brahman—The Infinite, the ultimate Reality. Not God, but the impersonal ground of all existence. Not a being, but Being Itself. Defined in some writings as infinite ‘being, consciousness, and bliss’ (*sat-chit-ānanda*). Brahman is the Reality from which all things, including God, emerge, and to which they will eventually return. The realization that at the core of our being we are ‘That,’ we are Brahman, is what leads to *mokṣa*, or liberation from the beginningless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*). This rebirth cycle, in turn, is governed by the law of karma, the inevitable effect of action on the doer of action.

Brahman is the Infinite as it is in Itself, viewed from the perspective of eternity. Viewed from the perspective of time and space, Brahman appears as both God and the World.

Īśvara—God, the Supreme Being, the Paramātman or Supreme Self, Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer of the universe. God is Brahman made manifest as a personal being of infinite power and wisdom.

Monotheism or Polytheism? Neither: Theistic Polymorphism

As an infinite being, God has infinite forms in time and space. These forms of God are the ‘gods’ of Hinduism. According to the philosophy of bhakti, the spiritual discipline of devotion, to love a personal form of God with complete devotion is the quickest and surest path to liberation. These forms are numerous—potentially infinite—and include both male and female manifestations, ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’ (whereas Brahman in and of Itself is neither male nor female). From an historical perspective, these are the many gods and goddesses worshiped since ancient times in India, incorporated over the course of the millennia into the Hindu pantheon. The major gods and goddesses, or forms of God, are the following:

Brahmā—The Creator, God as the source of the universe, who created it out of His own body (not to be confused with Brahman, the impersonal ground of being itself). Though important in the Vedas, as the creator of the universe, Brahmā is not prominent in classical or contemporary Hinduism. There is only one temple to him in all of India.

Viṣṇu—The Preserver. God as the one who preserves the universe once it comes into being. Viṣṇu is one of the most popular of the Hindu gods. The chief way in which he preserves the universe is by appearing in the world from time to time as an avatār, or divine incarnation, to fight evil and preserve the cosmic order (dharma). Popular avatārs of Viṣṇu include Rāma, the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and Krishna, the teacher of the hero Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, as well as the Buddha, the historical founder of Buddhism. For Vaiṣṇavas (devotees of Vishnu), he is not only the Preserver, but also the Supreme Being. Viṣṇu is mentioned in the Vedas, but only infrequently.

Śiva—The Destroyer and Re-Creator. God as the one who brings the universe to an end, so it can be created again. As with Viṣṇu for Vaiṣṇavas, Śiva, for Śaivas (devotees of Śiva), is the Supreme God. He is also, therefore, known as Mahādeva, the ‘Great God,’ and also Nāṭarāja, the Lord of the Dance of creation, who both brings the universe into being and destroys it in an ongoing, cyclical dance that is the universe. Śiva, like Viṣṇu, is one of the most popular gods of contemporary Hinduism, though, again, like Viṣṇu, he is mentioned little in the Vedas. In the Vedas, he is called Rudra, a greatly feared storm god.

The paradoxical name Śiva, ‘the benevolent one,’ seems to come from prayers begging Rudra to be merciful and not send his storms. It also refers to the three great values of Hinduism: truth, goodness, and beauty (*satyam-śivam-sundaram*).

Goddesses

Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva make up the Trimūrti, or ‘Three Forms’ of God. But of equal importance are the female companions of these male manifestations of divinity. These feminine forms of God are typically depicted as the wives of the three high gods:

Saraswatī—Goddess of learning and the arts. She is traditionally depicted as riding upon a swan, and holding a musical instrument, a book, and a crystal or a bracelet of prayer beads in her four hands. Saraswatī, or Divine Wisdom, is the wife of Brahmā, the Creator—the thought that precedes the act of creation. Her festival is in February.

Lakṣmī—Goddess of material wealth and prosperity, and wife of Viṣṇu, the Preserver. When Viṣṇu appeared on earth as Rāma, Lakṣmī was his wife, Sītā. When Viṣṇu was Krishna, Lakṣmī was Rādhā, his beloved.

Śakti or Devī—Śakti means ‘power’ and Devī means ‘goddess.’ This goddess, who has many names and forms, is the wife of Śiva, but is also a powerful being in her own right. Her devotees are called Śāktas. She is no less popular than Viṣṇu or Śiva, and is viewed by the Śāktas as the Supreme Being, over all other gods. Some of her more prominent forms include:

Pārvatī—The Goddess in her domestic, maternal form, the gentle mother of Śiva’s sons, Gaṇeśa and Karttikeya. (Gaṇeśa, or ‘Ganesh,’ is the elephant-headed god who removes all obstacles, and is also tremendously popular. Karttikeya is a handsome god. He rides a peacock and is sometimes considered a god of war, representing the struggle with evil.)

Dūrgā—The Goddess as a slayer of demons. Dūrgā, who has (at least) ten arms, and who carries a weapon of war in each of her ten hands, is known for slaying the Mahīśāsura, or ‘Buffalo Demon.’ She rides on a lion and her festival is in mid to late October.

Kālī—The fierce form of the Goddess. Kālī is also a demon slayer. She has four arms and carries a weapon. She wears a garland made of the skulls of demons she has slain, and a loincloth made of their hands. She is a protector, and is an example of how imagery often associated in the West with evil is appropriated for good in Asian religions.

Local Variations: According to Hindu tradition, there are 330 million gods. If one visits India, one will find different, local gods and goddesses in every village and region. There are gods of trees, rivers, mountains, natural forces, diseases, seasons of the year, etc.

According to Hindu theology, however, all of these deities are manifestations of the One—of God, and ultimately, of Brahman (the two are not always clearly distinguished). Most of the local gods and goddesses are associated with one or more of the ‘high gods’ that I have listed here—usually Vishnu, Śiva, or the Goddess—as either manifestations, or avatārs, or offspring. Many seem to have once been actual people, deified either for their exceptional virtues, or due to miracles they are believed to have performed after death (rather like Catholic saints). In such cases, the gods are essentially considered people who so harmonized their will with the will of God as to become, in effect, extensions of God in time and space. Deification of some individuals also occurs because of some great misfortune that happened in their lives that led people to honor them in order to keep them from becoming unquiet, troublesome spirits, or ‘ghosts,’ in the afterlife. And there are also, of course, the old Vedic gods—Indra, Agni, Yama, etc.—who are still called upon from time to time, whenever the old Vedic ceremonies are held.

The point is, this is a mere outline or sketch of the highly complex religious reality of Hinduism with regard to the Hindu deities. But there is an order underlying the apparent chaos and variety of the Hindu deities.

Worship: Mūrtis and Pūjā

As Hinduism developed, the Vedic fire rituals became a less prominent part of regular practice (though they are still practiced, even today). The most common way to show devotion to the deities is through a ceremony of worship, or *pūjā*, usually involving a physical image, or *mūrti*, depicting the particular deity or deities to whom the *pūjā* is directed. The practice of *mūrtipūjā* has been misinterpreted by Muslims and Christians as “idolatry” or “idol worship,” causing much misunderstanding of Hinduism. The *mūrti* is not mistaken for God. It is used as a symbol and a focus of attention and devotion.