

What are the key beliefs, teachings, and practices of Hinduism?

Key facts

- The roots of Hinduism can be traced back to India more than 4000 years ago. Today, it has nearly one billion followers worldwide.
- Hinduism has no single founder and no particular leader or group of leaders. Its followers, known as Hindus, have many different beliefs.
- The main sacred texts in Hinduism are the four Vedas, which are believed to have been revealed by God.
- Brahman is the Supreme God as seen in the forms of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
- Hinduism is rich in symbolism. Objects such as the chakra (wheel), conch shell and lotus flower all have special meanings for Hindus.
- Hindus believe in reincarnation. What determines a person's next life is karma: whether a person performs good or bad deeds in this life.
- The journey of the soul through these reincarnations is called samsara. Hindus try to achieve a permanent release from samsara known as moksha. Moksha might be achieved through yoga and meditation or through worship and devotion.
- 'Dharma' is a universal law, meaning 'duty' or 'righteousness', which guides how Hindus live their lives. They try to show loyalty and respect and support charities to help those in need.
- Hindu worship is called puja, and it may be done at a shrine in the home or in a temple. The image of a deity in a shrine or temple is called a murti. Hindus 'see' or worship these in a special way called darshan.
- The caste system is a way of structuring the society in India. It divides society into four castes, which later developed into five, with the 'Untouchables' or 'Dalits' at the bottom.
- Hindus celebrate many festivals. They are often celebrated in many different ways. The two main festivals are Diwali (the festival of lights) and Holi (the festival of colour).

Key Vocabulary

- Ahimsa** – literally 'non-harming' or 'non-violence'.
- Ascetic** – Someone who lives a simple life away from society, usually to become closer to the Supreme being.
- Aum** – A sacred syllable or sound that is very important to Hindus and which they chant.
- Avatar** – A god who descends to earth as a human or other animal in order to fight evil and re-establish goodness.
- Brahman** – A supreme being in which most modern Hindus believe.
- Dharma** – The moral law that Hindus must follow; the word can be translated as 'duty' or 'righteousness'.
- Diwali** – The festival of lights, celebrated by nearly all Hindus.
- Karma** – The forces that influence people's fortune and future reincarnation.
- Mandir** – A Hindu term for temple.
- Moksha** – Escaping from samsara and never dying or becoming reincarnated again; the term literally means 'release'.
- Murti** – An image of a god or goddess.
- Puja** – The Sanskrit word for worship.
- Ramayana** – An epic story that is inspirational for Hindus.
- Reincarnated** – When a soul is reborn by passing into a new body.
- Samsara** – The continual process of death and reincarnation; also, the entire universe as we know it.
- Trimurti** – A term for the three main Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
- Upanayana** – A traditional Hindu ceremony that children undergo when they are ready to be educated about the Vedas and other sacred texts.

Key people

Brahma – One of the main three Hindu gods; the creator of the world.

Brahman – A supreme being in which most modern Hindus believe; the source of everything including the gods.

Gandhi – A Hindu who lived from 1869 to 1948 who opposed the caste based discrimination and led peaceful protests for Indian independence.

Ganga – A goddess who formed the River Ganges.

Rama – King in the Ramayana whose wife Sita is abducted by Ravana; he defeats Ravana.

Shiva – One of the main three Hindu gods; the destroyer of the world.

Sita – Wife of Rama in the Ramayana kidnapped by Ravana.

Vishnu – One of the main three Hindu gods; the preserver of the world.