

Hinduism

From [Hinduism For Dummies](#) by Amrutur V. Srinivasan

The Hindu religion originated in India thousands of years ago. To people raised in other faiths, Hinduism may seem very complex, but the core beliefs of Hinduism are actually quite simple to understand. For example, Hindus believe there is only one Supreme Being, Brahman; they pursue knowledge of Truth and Reality; they strive for moral order and right action; and they promote tolerance. Many Westerners also know that Hindus worship a variety of gods and goddesses who personify aspects of Brahman; take pilgrimages to holy sites; celebrate festivals throughout the year; and believe that time is cyclical. These aspects of the religion introduce some of the complexities that are fascinating to study.

Yet a common thread among all these variations is belief in a Supreme Being and adherence to certain concepts such as Truth, dharma, and karma. And belief in the authority of the Vedas (sacred scriptures) serves, to a large extent, as the very definition of a Hindu, even though how the Vedas are interpreted may vary greatly.

Here are some of the key beliefs shared among Hindus:

- **Truth is eternal.**
Hindus pursue knowledge and understanding of the Truth: the very essence of the universe and the only Reality. According to the Vedas, Truth is One, but the wise express it in a variety of ways.
- **Brahman is Truth and Reality.**
Hindus believe in Brahman as the one true God who is formless, limitless, all-inclusive, and eternal. Brahman is not an abstract concept; it is a real entity that encompasses everything (seen and unseen) in the universe.
- **The Vedas are the ultimate authority.**
The Vedas are Hindu scriptures that contain revelations received by ancient saints and sages. Hindus believe that the Vedas are without beginning and without end; when everything else in the universe is destroyed (at the end of a cycle of time), the Vedas remain.
- **Everyone should strive to achieve dharma.**
Understanding the concept of dharma helps you understand the Hindu faith. Unfortunately, no single English word adequately covers its meaning. Dharma can be described as right conduct, righteousness, moral law, and duty. Anyone who makes dharma central to one's life strives to do the right thing, according to one's duty and abilities, at all times.
- **Individual souls are immortal.**
A Hindu believes that the individual soul (*atman*) is neither created nor destroyed; it has been, it is, and it will be. Actions of the soul while residing in a body require that it reap the consequences of those actions in the next life — the same soul in a different body.
The process of movement of the atman from one body to another is known as *transmigration*. The kind of body the soul inhabits next is determined by *karma* (actions accumulated in previous lives).
- **The goal of the individual soul is moksha.**
Moksha is liberation: the soul's release from the cycle of death and rebirth. It occurs when the soul unites with Brahman by realizing its true nature. Several paths can lead to this realization and unity: the path of duty, the path of knowledge, and the path of devotion (unconditional surrender to God).

The Caste System in India

All societies have some sort of social class system in which people are classified based on education, culture, and income levels. In ancient India, such a system was inspired by Hindu scriptures and implemented as a way to create a society in which all essential functions were addressed and all people assumed vital roles based on their abilities.

Centuries later, the classification was dubbed the *caste* system. While the caste system in practice became seriously flawed, its concept was based on this ideal division:

- **Brahmin: The priestly/intellectual class**
- **Kshatriyas: The warrior class**
- **Vaishyas: The trade/commerce class**
- **Shudras: The agricultural/labor class**

Hindu Gods and Goddesses

Hindus acknowledge that, at the most fundamental level, God is the One without a second — the absolute, formless, and only Reality known as Brahman, the Supreme, Universal Soul. Brahman is the universe and everything in it. Brahman has no form and no limits; it is Reality and Truth.

Thus Hinduism is a *pantheistic* religion: It equates God with the universe. Yet Hindu religion is also *polytheistic*: populated with myriad gods and goddesses who personify aspects of the one true God, allowing individuals an infinite number of ways to worship based on family tradition, community and regional practices, and other considerations.

Here are just some of the many Hindu gods and goddesses:

- **Brahma, the Creator**
- **Vishnu, the Preserver**
- **Shiva, the Destroyer**
- **Ganapati, the Remover of Obstacles**
- **Avatars of Vishnu**
 - Rama
 - Krishna
- **Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning**
- **Lakshmi**
- **Durga Devi**
- **Indra, the King of Heaven and lord of the gods**
- **Surya, the sun**
- **Agni, the fire god**
- **Hanuman, the monkey king and devoted servant**