

# Hindu Basics



# Hinduism's Four Denominations

Hinduism Is  
A Splendrous  
Lotus with  
Four Superb  
Petals

## Saivism

Saivite Hindus worship the Supreme God as Siva, the Compassionate One. Saivites esteem self discipline and philosophy and follow a *satguru*. They worship in the temple and practice yoga, striving to be one with Siva within.

## Shaktism

Shaktas worship the Supreme as the Divine Mother, Shakti or Devi. She has many forms. Some are gentle, some are fierce. Shaktas use chants, real magic, holy diagrams, yoga and rituals to call forth cosmic forces and awaken the great kundalini power within the spine.

## Vaishnavism

Vaishnavites worship the Supreme as Lord Vishnu and His incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama. Vaishnavites are mainly dualistic. They are deeply devotional. Their religion is rich in saints, temples and scriptures.

## Smartism

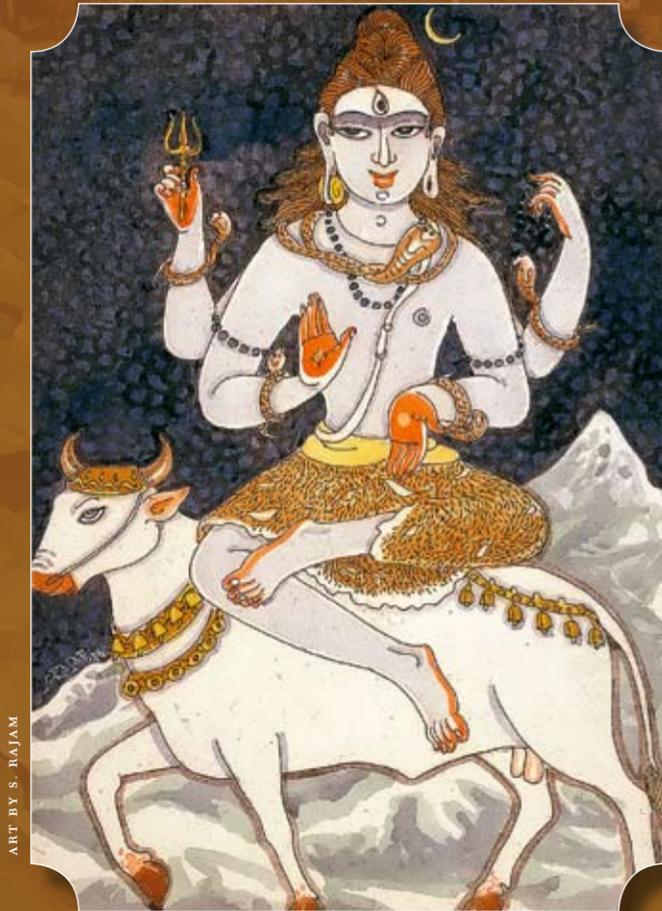
Smartas worship the Supreme in one of six forms: Ganesha, Siva, Sakti, Vishnu, Surya and Skanda. Because they accept all the major Hindu Gods, they are known as liberal or nonsectarian. They follow a philosophical, meditative path, emphasizing man's oneness with God through understanding.

For over 200 years, Western scholars have struggled to understand Hinduism, a faith whose followers seemed (to outsiders) to arbitrarily worship any one of a dozen Gods as the Supreme, a religion vastly diverse in its beliefs, practices and ways of worship. Some Indologists labeled the Hinduism they encountered polytheistic; others even coined new terms, like *henotheism*, to describe this baffling array of spiritual traditions. Few, however, have realized, and fewer still have written, that India's Sanatana Dharma, or "eternal faith," known today as Hinduism and comprising nearly a billion followers, is a family of religions with four principal denominations—Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. This single perception is essential for understanding Hinduism and explaining it accurately to others. Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, Hindus all worship a one Supreme Being, though by different names. For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Saivites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Smartas, liberal Hindus, the choice of Deity is left to the devotee. Each has a multitude of **guru** lineages, religious leaders, priesthoods, sacred literature, monastic communities, schools, pilgrimage centers and tens of thousands of temples. They possess a wealth of art and architecture, philosophy and scholarship. These four sects hold such divergent beliefs that each is a complete and independent religion. Yet, they share a vast heritage of culture and belief—karma, dharma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity, temple worship, sacraments, manifold Deities, the guru-disciple tradition and the *Vedas* as scriptural authority. In this eight-page Insight, drawn from Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's *Dancing with Siva*, we offer a synopsis of these four denominations, followed by a point-by-point comparison.

Each of Hinduism's philosophies, schools and lineages shares a common purpose: to further the soul's unfoldment to its divine destiny. Nowhere is this process better represented than in the growth of the renowned lotus, which, seeking the sun, arises from the mud to become a magnificent flower. Its blossom is a promise of purity and perfection.

## What Is the Deeply Mystical Saiva Sect?

Saivism is the world's oldest religion. Worshiping God Siva, the compassionate One, it stresses potent disciplines, high philosophy, the guru's centrality and bhakti-*raja-siddha* yoga leading to oneness with Siva within. Aum.

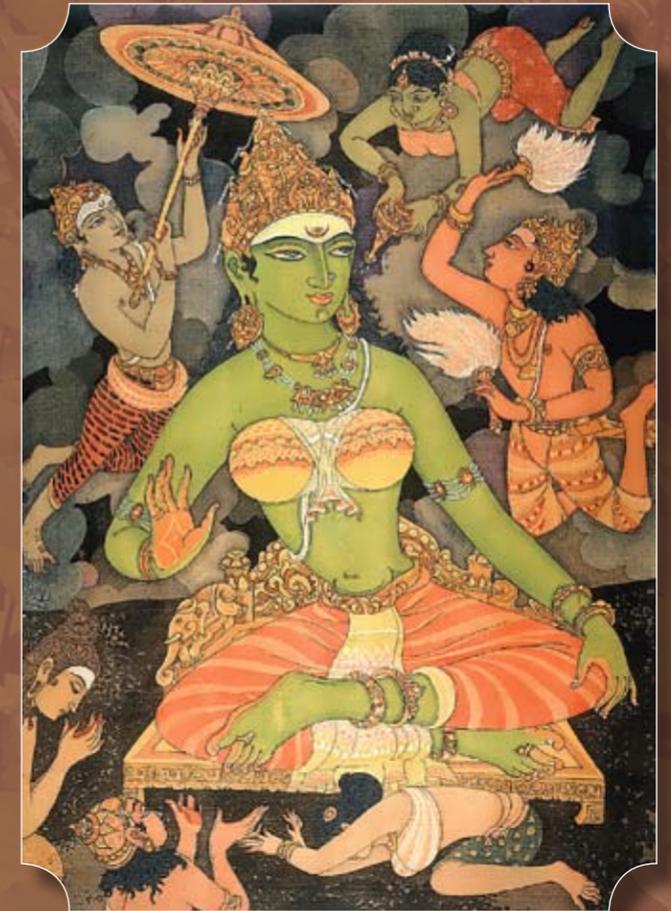


ART BY S. RAJAM

Seated on Nandi, his bull mount, the perfect devotee, Lord Siva holds japa beads and the trident, symbol of love-wisdom-action, and offers blessings of protection and fearlessness. Mount Kailas, His sacred Himalayan abode, represents the pinnacle of consciousness.

## What Is the Magic and Power Of Shaktism?

Shaktism reveres the Supreme as the Divine Mother, Shakti or Devi, in Her many forms, both gentle and fierce. Shaktas use mantra, tantra, yantra, yoga and puja to invoke cosmic forces and awaken the kundalini power. Aum.



Shakti, depicted in Her green form, radiates beauty, energy, compassion and protection for followers. Wearing the *tilaka* of the Shakta sect on Her forehead, She blesses devotees, who shower rosewater, hold an umbrella and prostrate at Her feet.

**S**AIVISM IS ANCIENT, TRULY AGELESS, FOR it has no beginning. It is the precursor of the many-faceted religion now termed Hinduism. Scholars trace the roots of Siva worship back more than 8,000 years to the advanced Indus Valley civilization. But sacred writings tell us there never was a time when Saivism did not exist. Modern history records six main schools: Saiva Siddhanta, Pashupatism, Kashmir Saivism, Vira Saivism, Siddha Siddhanta and Siva Advaita. Saivism's grandeur and beauty are found in a practical culture, an enlightened view of man's place in the universe and

a profound system of temple mysticism and siddha yoga. It provides knowledge of man's evolution from God and back to God, of the soul's unfoldment and awakening guided by enlightened sages. Like all the sects, its majority are devout families, headed by hundreds of orders of swamis and sadhus who follow the fiery, world-renouncing path to *moksha*. The *Vedas* state, "By knowing Siva, the Auspicious One who is hidden in all things, exceedingly fine, like film arising from clarified butter, the One embracer of the universe—by realizing God, one is released from all fetters." Aum Namah Sivaya.

**W**HILE WORSHIP OF THE DIVINE MOTHER extends beyond the pale of history, Shakta Hinduism arose as an organized sect in India around the fifth century. Today it has four expressions—devotional, folk-shamanic, yogic and universalist—all invoking the fierce power of Kali or Durga, or the benign grace of Parvati or Ambika. Shakta devotionalists use puja rites, especially to the Shri Chakra yantra, to establish intimacy with the Goddess. Shamanic Shaktism employs magic, trance mediumship, firewalking and animal sacrifice for healing, fertility, prophecy

and power. Shakta yogis seek to awaken the sleeping Goddess Kundalini and unite her with Siva in the *sahasrara* chakra. Shakta universalists follow the reformed Vedantic tradition exemplified by Sri Ramakrishna. "Left-hand" tantric rites transcend traditional ethical codes. Shaktism is chiefly advaitic, defining the soul's destiny as complete identity with the Unmanifest, Siva. Central scriptures are the *Vedas*, *Shakta Agamas* and *Puranas*. The *Devi Gita* extols, "We bow down to the universal soul of all. Above and below and in all four directions, Mother of the universe, we bow." Aum Chandikayai Namah.

## What Is the Devotional Vaishnava Sect?

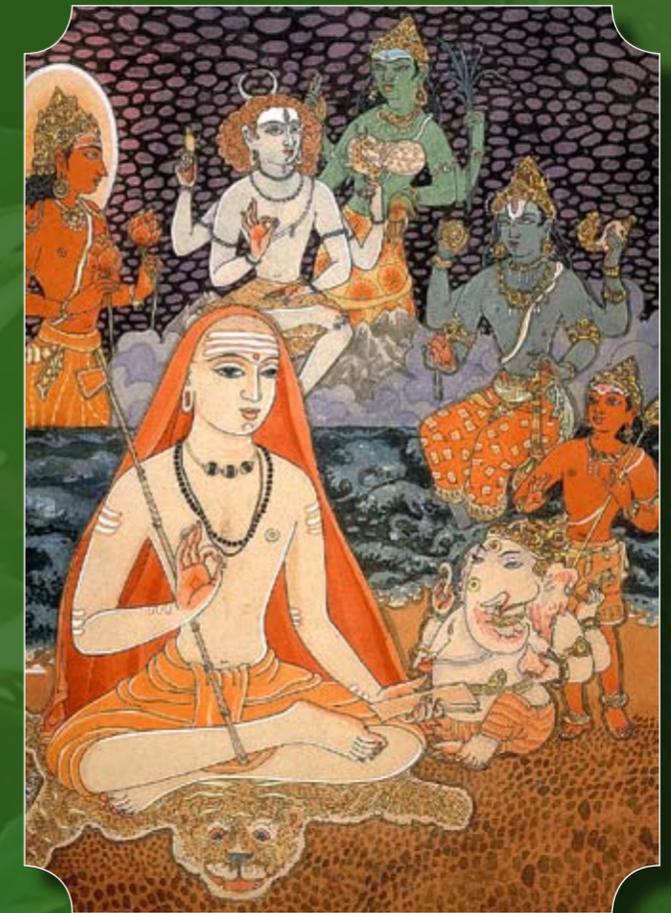
Vaishnavism is an ancient Hindu sect centering on the worship of Lord Vishnu and His incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama. Largely dualistic, profoundly devotional, it is rich in saints, temples and scriptures. Aum.



Vishnu is the infinite ocean from which the world emerges. He stands on waves, surrounded by the many-headed Sesha-naga, who represents agelessness and is regarded as an extension of divine energy and an incarnation of Balarama, Lord Krishna's brother.

## What Is the Universalistic Smarta Sect?

Smartism is an ancient brahminical tradition reformed by Shankara in the ninth century. Worshiping six forms of God, this liberal Hindu path is monistic, nonsectarian, meditative and philosophical. Aum.



Adi Shankara lived from 788 to 820 CE, a mere 32 years, yet he gave Hinduism a new liberal denomination—Smartism. Here, wearing sacred marks, he holds his writings and is flanked by the six Deities of the Smarta altar: Surya the Sun, Siva, Shakti, Vishnu, Kumaran and Ganesha.

**T**HE WORSHIP OF VISHNU, MEANING “PER-vader,” dates back to Vedic times. The Pancharatra and Bhagavata sects were popular prior to 300 bce. Today’s five Vaishnava schools emerged in the middle ages, founded by Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya. Vaishnavism stresses *prapatti*, single-pointed surrender to Vishnu, or His ten or more incarnations, called avatars. Japa is a key devotional sannyasin, as is ecstatic chanting and dancing, called *kirtana*. Temple worship and festivals are elaborately observed. Philosophically, Vaishnavism ranges from Madh-

va’s pure dualism to Ramanuja’s qualified nondualism to Vallabha’s nearly monistic vision. God and soul are everlastingly distinct. The soul’s destiny, through God’s grace, is to eternally worship and enjoy Him. While generally nonascetic, advocating bhakti as the highest path, Vaishnavism has a strong monastic community. Central scriptures are the *Vedas*, *Vaishnava Agamas*, *Itihasas* and *Puranas*. The *Bhagavad Gita* states, “On those who meditate on Me and worship with undivided heart, I confer attainment of what they have not, and preserve what they have.” Aum Namō Narayanaya.

**S**MARTA MEANS A FOLLOWER OF CLASSICAL smṛiti, particularly the *Dharma Shastras*, *Puranas* and *Itihasas*. Smartas revere the *Vedas* and honor the *Agamas*. Today this faith is synonymous with the teachings of Adi Shankara, the monk-philosopher known as Shanmata Sthapanacharya, “founder of the six-sect system.” He campaigned India-wide to consolidate the Hindu faiths of his time under the banner of Advaita Vedanta. To unify the worship, he popularized the ancient Smarta five-Deity altar—Ganapati, Surya, Vishnu, Siva and Shakti—and added Kumara. From these,

devotees may choose their “preferred Deity,” or Ish-ta Devata. Each God is but a reflection of the one Saguna Brahman. Shankara organized hundreds of monasteries into a ten-order, *dashanami* system, which now has five pontifical centers. He wrote profuse commentaries on the *Upanishads*, *Brahma Sutras* and *Bhagavad Gita*. Shankara proclaimed, “It is the one Reality which appears to our ignorance as a manifold universe of names and forms and changes. Like the gold of which many ornaments are made, it remains in itself unchanged. Such is Brahman, and That art Thou.” Aum Namah Sivaya.

# Comparing the Four Major Denominations

**A**S JUST SEEN, THE SPECTRUM of Hindu religiousness is found within four major sects or denominations: Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. Among these four streams, there are certainly more similarities than differences. All four believe in karma and reincarnation and in a Supreme Being who both is form and pervades form, who creates, sustains and destroys the universe only to create it again in unending cycles. They strongly declare the validity and importance of temple worship, the three worlds of existence and the myriad Gods and *devas* residing in them. They concur that there is no intrinsic evil, that the cosmos is created out of God and is permeated by Him. They each believe in *maya* (though their definitions differ somewhat), and in the liberation of the soul from rebirth, called *moksha*, as the goal of human existence. They believe in *dharma* and in *ahimsa*, non-injury, and in the need for a *satguru* to lead the soul toward Self Realization. They wear the sacred marks, *tilaka*, on their foreheads as sacred symbols, though each wears a distinct mark. Finally, they prefer cremation of the body upon death, believing that the soul will inhabit another body in the next life. While Hinduism has many sacred scriptures, all sects ascribe the highest authority to the *Vedas* and *Agamas*, though their *Agamas* differ somewhat. Here, now, is a brief comparison of these four denominations.

## On the Personal God/Goddess

**SAIVISM:** Personal God and temple Deity is Siva, neither male nor female. Lords Ganesha and Karttikeya are also worshiped.

**SHAKTISM:** Personal Goddess and temple Deity is Shri Devi or Shakti, female, worshiped as Rajarajeshvari, Parvati, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Kali, Amman, etc.—the Divine Mother.

**VAISHNAVISM:** Personal God and temple Deity is Vishnu, male. His incarnations as Rama and Krishna are also worshiped, as well as His divine consort, Radharani.

**SMARTISM:** Personal God and temple Deity is Ishvara, male or female, worshiped as Vishnu, Siva, Shakti, Ganesha and Surya or another Deity of devotee's choice, e.g., Kumara or Krishna.

## On the Nature of Shakti

**SAIVISM:** Shakti is God Siva's inseparable power and manifest will, energy or mind.

**SHAKTISM:** Shakti is an active, immanent Being, separate from a quiescent and remote Siva.

**VAISHNAVISM:** No special importance is given to Shakti. However, there are parallels wherein the divine consorts are conceived as the inseparable powers of Vishnu and His incarnations: e.g., Krishna's Radharani and Rama's Sita.

**SMARTISM:** Shakti is a divine form of Ishvara. It is God's manifesting power.

## On the Nature of Personal God

**SAIVISM:** God Siva is pure love and compassion, immanent and transcendent, pleased by our purity and *sadhana*.

**SHAKTISM:** The Goddess Shakti is both compassionate and terrifying, pleasing and wrathful, assuaged by sacrifice and submission.

**VAISHNAVISM:** God Vishnu is loving and beautiful, the object of man's devotion, pleased by our service and surrender.

**SMARTISM:** Ishvara appears as a human-like Deity according to devotees' loving worship, which is sometimes considered a rudimentary, self-purifying practice.

## On the Doctrine of Avatara

**SAIVISM:** There are no divine earthly incarnations of the Supreme Being.

**SHAKTISM:** The Divine Mother does incarnate in this world.

**VAISHNAVISM:** Vishnu has ten or more incarnations.

**SMARTISM:** All Deities may assume earthly incarnations.

## On the Soul and God

**SAIVISM:** God Siva is one with the soul. The soul must realize this advaitic (monistic)

Truth by God Siva's grace.

**SHAKTISM:** The Divine Mother, Shakti, is mediatrix, bestowing advaitic *moksha* on those who worship Her.

**VAISHNAVISM:** God and soul are eternally distinct. Through Lord Vishnu's grace, the soul's destiny is to worship and enjoy God.

**SMARTISM:** Ishvara and man are in reality Absolute Brahman. Within *maya*, the soul and Ishvara appear as two. *Jnana* (wisdom) dispels the illusion.

## Spiritual Practice

**SAIVISM:** With *bhakti* as a base, emphasis is placed on *tapas* (austerity) and yoga. Ascetic.

**SHAKTISM:** Emphasis is on *bhakti* and tantra, sometimes occult, practices. Ascetic-occult.

**VAISHNAVISM:** Emphasis is on supreme *bhakti* or surrender, called *prapatti*. Generally devotional and nonascetic.

**SMARTISM:** Preparatory *sadhanas* are *bhakti*, karma, raja yoga. The highest path is through knowledge, leading to *jnana*.

## Major Scriptures

**SAIVISM:** *Vedas*, *Saiva Agamas* and *Saiva Puranas*.

**SHAKTISM:** *Vedas*, *Shakta Agamas (Tantras)* and *Puranas*.

**VAISHNAVISM:** *Vedas*, *Vaishnava Agamas*, *Puranas* and the *Itihasas (Ramayana and Mahabharata)*, especially the *Bhagavad Gita*.

**SMARTISM:** *Vedas*, *Agamas* and classical *smriti*—*Puranas*, *Itihasas*, especially the *Bhagavad Gita*, etc.

## Regions of Influence

**SAIVISM:** Strongest in South and North India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

**SHAKTISM:** Most prominent in Northeast India, especially Bengal and Assam.

**VAISHNAVISM:** Strong throughout India, North and South.

**SMARTISM:** Most prominent in North and South India.



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## Paths of Attainment

**SAIVISM:** The path for Saivites is divided into four progressive stages of belief and practice called *charya*, *kriya*, yoga and *jnana*. The soul evolves through karma and reincarnation from the instinctive-intellectual sphere into virtuous and moral living, then into temple worship and devotion, followed by internalized worship, or yoga, and its meditative disciplines. Union with God Siva comes through the grace of the *satguru* and culminates in the soul's maturity in the state of *jnana*, or wisdom. Saivism values both *bhakti* and yoga, devotional and contemplative *sadhanas*, or disciplines.

**SHAKTISM:** The spiritual practices in Shaktism are similar to those in Saivism, though there is more emphasis in Shaktism on God's Power as opposed to Being, on mantras and yantras, and on embracing apparent opposites: male-female, absolute-relative, pleasure-pain, cause-effect, mind-body. Certain sects within Shaktism undertake "left-hand" tantric rites, consciously using the world of form to transmute and eventually transcend that world. The "left-hand" approach is somewhat occult in nature; it is considered a path for the few, not the many. The "right-hand" path is more conservative in nature.

Artwork: *The Divine is reflected in four pots, representing Hinduism's four main denominations, their common source being the radiant Aum, the sacred mystic syllable and symbol of Sanatana Dharma.*

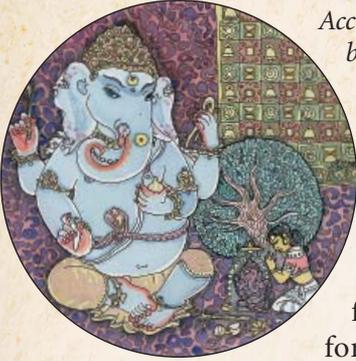
**VAISHNAVISM:** Most Vaishnavites believe that religion is the performance of *bhakti sadhanas*, devotional disciplines, and that man can communicate with and receive the grace of the Gods and Goddesses through the *darshan* (sight) of their icons. The paths of karma yoga and *jnana* yoga lead to *bhakti* yoga. Among the foremost practices of Vaishnavites is chanting the holy names of the Avatars, Vishnu's incarnations, especially Rama and Krishna. Through total self-surrender, *prapatti*, to Vishnu, to Krishna or to His beloved consort Radharani, liberation from *samsara* (the cycle of reincarnation) is attained.

**SMARTISM:** Smartas, the most eclectic of Hindus, believe that *moksha* is achieved through *jnana* yoga alone—defined as an intellectual and meditative but non-kundalini-yoga path. *Jnana* yoga's progressive stages are scriptural study (*shravana*), reflection (*manana*) and sustained meditation (*dhyana*). Guided by a realized guru and avowed to the unreality of the world, the initiate meditates on himself as Brahman, Absolute Reality, to break through the illusion of *maya*. Devotees may also choose from three other non-successive paths to cultivate devotion, accrue good karma and purify the mind. These are *bhakti* yoga, karma yoga and raja yoga, which certain Smartas teach can also bring enlightenment.

# FOUR FACTS OF HINDUISM

**KARMA, REINCARNATION, GOD'S ALL-PERVASIVENESS AND DHARMA ARE THE ESSENCE OF THE FOUR VEDAS AND THE FABRIC OF HINDUISM. LIVE THEM, ENJOY THEM AND TEACH THEM TO ALL WHO WILL LISTEN.**

## KARMA



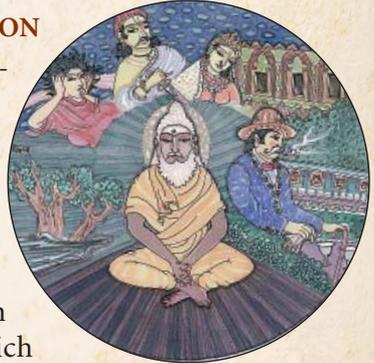
*According as one acts, so does he become. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action. —Yajur Veda, Br. Upanishad 4.4.5*

God's cosmic law of *karma* governs all our experiences through cause and effect. Through *karma*, our thoughts, emotions and deeds—whether good, bad or mixed—return to us. *Karma* is not fate. We have free will. No God or external force is controlling our life. By applying the wisdom of the sages to the experiences encountered in life, we resolve our *karma* rather than create new *karma*. To be responsible for our *karma* is strength. To blame others is weakness. Therefore, remember God's great law of *karma* and act wisely. Life is the classroom. *Karma* is the teacher. God Ganeśa is the Lord of *karma*.

## REINCARNATION

*After death, the soul goes to the next world, bearing in mind the subtle impressions of its deeds, and after reaping their harvest returns again to this world of action. Thus, he who has desires continues subject to rebirth.*

*—Yajur Veda, Br. Upanishad 4.4.6*

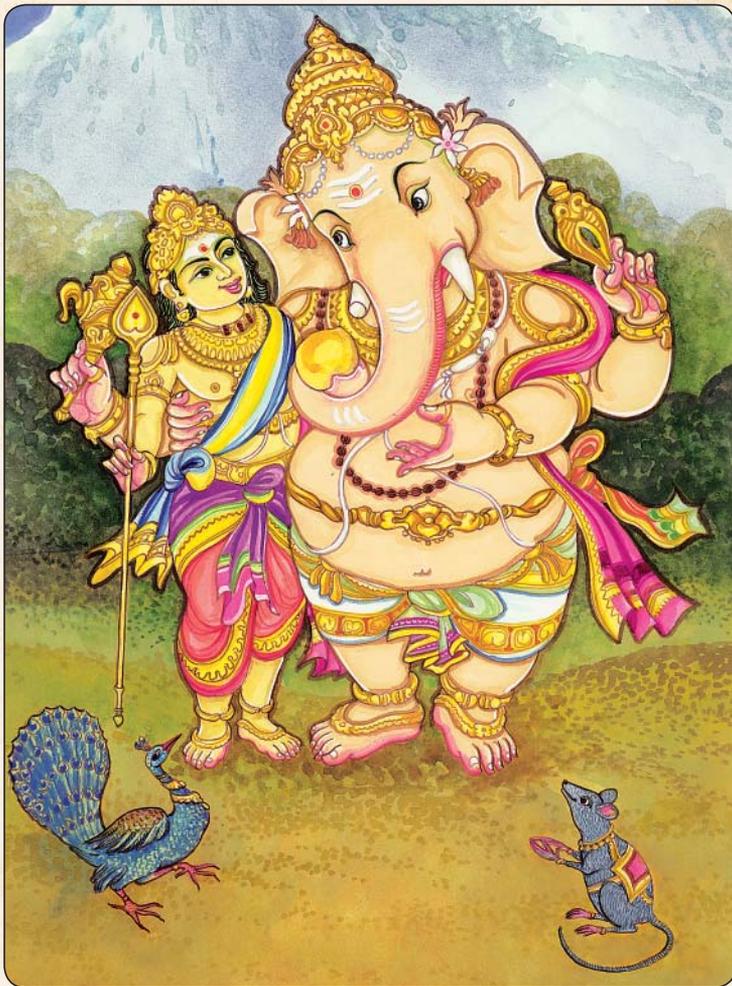


Reincarnation is the natural cycle of birth, death and rebirth. We are not the body in which we live, but the immortal soul which inhabits one body after another on the Earth during its evolutionary journey. Like the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly, physical death is a most natural transition for the soul, never to be feared. We are now the sum total of all our past lives. The actions and reactions we set in motion in our last life form the tendencies in the next. Reincarnation ceases when all *karmas* have been resolved, *dharma* has been well performed and God fully realized. This is known as *moksha*, or liberation from rebirth.



## NINE BELIEFS OF HINDUISM

Our beliefs determine our thoughts and attitudes about life, which in turn direct our actions. By our actions, we create our destiny. Beliefs about sacred matters—God, soul and cosmos—are essential to one's approach to life. Hindus believe many diverse things, but there are a few bedrock concepts on which most Hindus concur. The following nine beliefs, though not exhaustive, offer a simple summary of Hindu spirituality.



## NINE HINDU BELIEFS



1. Hindus believe in a one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.
2. Hindus believe in the divinity of the four *Vedas*, the world's most ancient scripture, and venerate the *Āgamas* as equally revealed. These primordial hymns are God's word and the bedrock of Sanātana Dharma, the eternal religion.
3. Hindus believe that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution.
4. Hindus believe in *karma*, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words and deeds.
5. Hindus believe that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all *karmas* have been resolved, and *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, is attained. Not a single soul will be deprived of this destiny.
6. Hindus believe that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments and personal devotionals create a communion with these *devas* and Gods.
7. Hindus believe that an enlightened master, or *satguru*, is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, pilgrimage, self-inquiry, meditation and surrender in God.
8. Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice *ahimsā*, noninjury, in thought, word and deed.
9. Hindus believe that no religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine paths are facets of God's Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

FROM THE SACRED TEACHINGS OF SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI



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