

# Hinduism

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## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

**Required Daily Observances.** A Hindu is expected to pray three times daily. This is called *Sandhyopasana* – literally, “worship at the junction of time” – a prayer offered at the junction of night and morning, of forenoon and afternoon, and of evening and night. This can be accomplished privately. Daily congregative prayers are not required. In addition, each Hindu is expected to say his *mantra* 108 times daily.

**Required Weekly Observances.** Hindus are expected to come together regularly to worship. In Bureau institutions this can be accomplished through weekly meetings. The devotee prays to the Lord to grant him or her intense devotion and remove the veil of ignorance. Generally, a particular deity becomes the object of worship. Among the more popular Hindu deities are *Shiva*, *Parvati*, *Ganesha*, *Vishnu*, and one of his *avatara*, *Krishna*.

**Required Occasional Observances.** Up to 22 celebrations have been recorded per year. The following seven are among the more significant. In addition, many localities also observe

special days for local deities, as described in their particular *sthal* **Puranas**. Some observances may take place on different dates, depending on how the Hindu calendar is interpreted and how local customs affect the observances. The dates listed below can be used for planning purposes; exact dates change yearly because the celebrations are based on a lunar/solar calendar. These are not days of work proscription. The following website has the correct dates for occasional observances: [www.iskcon.org.uk/ies/festival.html](http://www.iskcon.org.uk/ies/festival.html)

- Mahashivaratri in March – a night festival dedicated to *Shiva*. The night before the feast, Hindus recite texts, sing, and tell stories in honor of this God, whose dynamic dance creates, preserves, destroys, and recreates the world.
- Holi in March – a colored-water Spring Festival. In some parts of India this festival is dedicated to *Kama*, the God of Pleasure, and in others to Krishna.
- Ramanavani in April – celebrates the birthday of Rama, the seventh incarnation of the God *Vishnu*. Hindus read the *Ramayana* during the previous eight days.
- Raksha Bandhana in August – Raksha Bandhana literally means “to tie protection on.” In this festival girls and women, both married and unmarried, tie amulets on the wrists of their brothers for protection against evil. The amulet stays on the wrist until it wears off. The amulet, which can be a string, is not an approved item. Bracelets are not permitted because of potential interference with handcuffs.

**Security note:** The amulet is not permitted in Bureau institutions.

- Janmashtami, in August most years, but occasionally in September – celebrates the birthday of *Krishna*, the eighth incarnation of *Vishnu*. Worship of *Krishna* is expressed in dance and song.

**Religious Holy Days.** Two holy days are days of work proscription. Their exact dates are found in the Operations Memorandum on Religious Holy Day Observances. They change yearly because the celebrations are based on a lunar/solar calendar.

- Dashera/Ramlila in October – celebrates the victory of good over evil: the victory of Lord Rama over the demon Ravan, and the victory of Goddess Durga over an *asura* (demon), described in the epic *Ramayana*.
- Diwali in October or early November – perhaps the most popular of all Hindu festivals. Also known as the Festival of Lights, it is dedicated to the Goddess *Kali* in Bengal and to *Lakshmi*, the Goddess of Wealth, in the rest of India. This holy day is also associated with stories of the destruction of evil by *Vishnu* in one of his many

manifestations (*avatara*).

## RELIGIOUS ITEMS

### Personal Religious Items

- A religious medallion and chain, often an image of the Hindu's favorite deity.
- Prayer beads (plastic), consisting of 108 beads. The beads are used in the recitation of the *mantras* as well as breathing exercises, which are part of the specific yoga followed by an individual.

**Security note:** Only plastic prayer beads are permitted in the institutions.

### Congregate Religious Items

- A statue of the deity, usually *Shiva* or *Vishnu*.
- Bell.
- Conch shell.
- Flowers – silk or artificial are acceptable substitutes.
- A mixture of camphor and red powder.
- Dry Rice (½ cup).
- Containers (small) for water and a small spoon or ladle.
- Incense.

**Searches.** While Hindu inmates may place great value in a sacred image of a deity and other religious items, these can be handled by other people. Staff are expected to show the same respect for such items as for religious articles for all traditions. Religious articles are not to be mishandled, thrown, placed on the floor or brought into the bathroom and placed on the toilet or basin.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR MEMBERSHIP

**Requirements.** A formal process takes place when a person joins a Hindu community. As an example, one community identifies six steps that must be taken in the conversion process:

- The devotee joins an established Hindu community, where attendance at *satsangas* and other functions takes place.
  - The devotee writes out a comparison of Hindu philosophy to that of the former religion to which the individual belonged. This demonstrates a thorough grasp of similarities and differences.
  - A formal severance with the existing religious organization takes place, including

why its vows no longer apply.

- The devotee has his or her name legally changed, and begins to use that name.
- The name-giving sacrament, the *Namakarana Samskar*, can take place at any Hindu temple. The devotee informs family and friends of the changes that have taken place and invites them to the name-changing ceremony. A certificate is prepared with the signature of the priest and three witnesses.
- An announcement is placed in the local newspaper for three days stating the name change. A copy should be kept for future reference.

**Total Membership.** About 800 million Hindus live on the Indian subcontinent; an additional 100 million practice Hinduism throughout the rest of the world.

## MEDICAL PROHIBITIONS

There are no medical restrictions.

## DIETARY STANDARDS

Because of the Hindu belief that all life contains an *atman*, strict vegetarianism is preferred but not generally required. Religious dietary needs can ordinarily best be met by self-selection from the mainline, which includes the no-flesh option.

## BURIAL RITUALS

There are no restrictions on autopsies. Cremation is preferred to interment. It is customary to read Chapter 12 of the *Bhagavad-Gita* as part of the burial ritual, especially if no Hindu priest is available.

## SACRED WRITINGS

The *sruti*, “what was heard [from the gods].”

- The *Vedas*: **Rig-Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda.**
- The **Brahmanas.**
- The **Upanishads.**

The *smriti*, “what was remembered.”

- The Epics: **Ramayana, Mahabharata.**
- **Puranas.**
- **Sutras.**
- **Laws of Manu.**

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

**Location of Headquarters.** No central headquarters is located in the U.S. Many Hindu temples, or as they are often called, Hindu Community and Cultural Centers, are located throughout the U.S. Several websites provide lists of Hindu organizations in the U.S.

**Contact Office/Person.** No single spokesperson exists for all the Hindu communities in the U.S. or in India due to the large variety of Hindu traditions. Chaplains will need to develop their own contacts with Hindu religious leaders. Contact the nearest Hindu Community and Cultural Center for information.

## HISTORY

Hinduism, the religion followed by 800 million people in India and 100 million in the rest of the world, encompasses a wide variety of beliefs and rituals. Over the centuries this religious tradition has slowly evolved to be practiced and understood in many different ways, but it is intricately woven into the land and culture of India. Although religious beliefs may vary, they do not exclude one another and are accepted as part of the variety of Hindu traditions.

Historically, Hinduism can be seen as unfolding in stages, but this is misleading, because some of its earliest forms persist to the present, relatively unaffected by later innovations. Hinduism is not the name that the people of India gave this spiritual tradition; it was given later by outsiders to describe the people who lived east of the river Indus (2500 B.C.E. - 1500 B.C.E.) in the more developed Dravidian culture (which persisted among the Taliails in southern India), and who followed the Vedic religion of the Aryans. The Aryans invaded northwest India about 1500 B.C.E. and adapted a religion based on an oral text known as the *Vedas* which are, for Hindus, eternal truths. The Aryans brought with them the language in which the sacred writings were recorded, namely Sanskrit.



*Malen enjo-demo, from the ancient Indian civilization*

The earliest, most ancient civilization in India was discovered during the excavations of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, predating the Aryan invasion by almost 1500 years. Although no writing remains, some artifacts were uncovered with characteristics similar to descriptions found in the *Vedas*, such as a three-faced prototype of *Shiva* seated in a yogic position, representations of the Linga, and a horned goddess associated with the pipal tree. Many seals with religious symbols were part of the ruins. A large pool was discovered as well, which may have been used for ritual purification – a significant ritual for Hindus today. This civilization was much more advanced than the one the Aryans brought with them.

Although Hinduism came to be the term used by foreigners to describe the religion of India,

Hindus refer to their religion as *Sanatana dharma*, the “eternal truth” or “ancient religion.” The word *dharma* is rich in meaning: it can refer to the natural, unchanging laws that sustain the universe and keep it in balance, or it can be translated as “law” or “social duty.”

Although primarily associated with religion, the caste system has also been an integral part of Hindu society. Essentially, the system consisted of four main castes, with membership determined by birth. The highest caste is that of the *Brahmins*, whose members have been priests, philosophers, and religious teachers. Next in importance were the *Kshatriyas*, rulers and soldiers. Then followed the *Vaishyas*, the traders and farmers; and finally the *Shudras*, menial workers and servants. The origin of the caste system is traced back to the **Rig-Veda**, where the hymn to *Purusa*, the “Supreme Person,” describes it in the following manner:

His mouth became the Brahmin;  
his arms were made into the Warrior;  
his thighs the People,  
and from his feet the Servants were born.

One of the tragic consequences of the caste system has been the development of the group known as *Untouchables*, those who have been expelled by their own castes for violating its rules and regulations. The caste system is still present in Indian society, even though the constitution forbids it. The government has tried to improve the often desperate plight of the outcasts, who perform the foulest and most menial tasks in society. Mohandas K. “Mahatma” Gandhi referred to the untouchables as “The Children of God.”

## THEOLOGY

**Introduction.** In many ways Hinduism is a unique religion. It has no founder, no uniform dogma, no hierarchical priesthood, no direct revelation, and no rigidly described moral code. As E.M. Forster states in his novel *A Passage to India*,

“Hinduism, so solid from a distance, is riven into sects and clans which redirect and join and change their names according to the aspects from which they are approached. Study it for years with the best of teachers and when you raise your head, nothing they have told you quite fits.”

Some Hindus today worship spirits and other deities, while others engage in the most profound philosophical speculation. Hinduism’s response to competing faiths has been to absorb them, rather than attack them. To an observer, Hinduism appears to flow in many directions at once, filled with mystery and seeming contradictions. To a Hindu, his/her faith is the means to the One Truth and only one among many equally valid ways. Each person chooses the avenue best suited for him or her. This is the underlying theme of all Hinduism and ultimately explains the complexities of achieving that One Truth. Other religions are merely different manifestations of the all-encompassing faith; all are but expressions of the

underlying concept of the One Truth. The **Rig-Veda** (1.64.46) explains the significance of the One Truth as follows: “Truth is one; the wise call it by many names.”

It has been aptly stated that receptivity and all-comprehensiveness are the main characteristics of Hinduism. Within Hinduism one finds a highly spiritual, mystical, and contemplative aspect, a concrete and practical aspect, and an aesthetic and ceremonial aspect. These correspond to three aspects found in most religions: philosophy, mythology, and ritual. Philosophy is the essence of religion; it sets forth its basic principles or tenets, its goal, and the means of attaining them. Mythology explains and illustrates philosophy by means of legendary lives of great individuals or deities. Ritual makes philosophy even more concrete, so that its adherents are able to understand the significance of the celebrations, ceremonies, and rites.

**Sacred Writings.** Hindu sacred writings are classified into two groups: *sruti*, meaning “what was heard by or revealed to” the seers, and *smriti*, “what was remembered.” Both were orally preserved for a long time before being written down. The first *sruti* writings are the most sacred and are considered the infallible words of divinity – the four *Vedas*, a body of ancient hymns and chants written in Sanskrit. The term *veda* means wisdom. The oldest is the **Rig-Veda**, composed of more than a thousand hymns and organized into ten mandalas or books. The **Sama Veda** consists mainly of the melodies or music for chants used at sacrificial ceremonies. Almost all of its written verses are found in the **Rig-Veda**. The **Sama Veda** helped to train musicians; as the sacrifices became more complex, so did the music. The **Yajur Veda** is made up of ritual instructions and formulas used by priests assisting at various rituals and rites. The latest *Veda*, the **Atharva Veda**, contains hymns, popular incantations, and folklore.

Attached to the *Vedas* are the **Brahmanas**, which contain commentaries to guide the practices of the sacrifices and explain the meaning of the Vedic prayers. The **Brahmanas** provide insight into the social customs of the period and serve as a transition between the *Vedas* and the **Upanishads**, which means literally “those who sit near.” There is a **Upanishad** for every *Veda* and every **Brahmana**. Various attempts were made to organize them, with the result that Hindu tradition recognizes the authority of 108 **Upanishads**, of which a dozen have special importance. The philosophy contained in the **Upanishads**, as later expressed by schools of interpretation, is called *Vedanta*, the “end or culmination” of the *Vedas*.

In addition to *sruti* writings, a second group called *smriti* was developed later, which includes the epics, of which the two most famous are the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**. The **Ramayana** recounts the exploits of Rama, a righteous prince unjustly banished from his kingdom. Through a series of adventures, he ultimately conquers the forces of evil. The **Ramayana** consists of 24,000 couplet verses.

The **Mahabharata**, at 100,000 couplet verses, is the longest epic and the longest poem

written in any language. It takes the form of an allegorical conflict between good and evil within the soul of a human being. Part of its timeless and universal appeal lies in its theme of individual conscience conflicting with the rules of society. As with the **Ramayana**, the forces of good finally win out over evil.

The best-known part of this epic is the **Bhagavad-Gita** (The Song of the Adorable One), which is revered by all Hindus. The **Bhagavad-Gita**, in its 18 chapters, opened a path of salvation that appealed to many Hindus – namely, that an intense devotion to a personal God is possible. The God Krishna is portrayed as a loving, compassionate deity who has a personal relationship with the hero, Prince Arjuna.

The epics single out certain deities for special attention and praise by Hindus. They also encourage good conduct even in the face of adversity, since good and bad fortune in this life are affected by the deeds and thoughts of the individual. This fate carries over into the afterlife and future lives.

Several other collections of sacred texts deserve mention. The *Sutras* are an attempt to codify, systematize, and interpret the **Upanishads**. The **Laws of Manu** lay down certain laws from social and religious life and help justify the caste system. The **Puranas**, or ancient tales, contain stories about creation, theories about the age of the world, and legends concerning the gods. No single text defines the faith, and Hindus are free to give attention to whichever sacred writings they find most appealing.

**Brahman.** *Brahman* is literally everything. It is night and day, heat and cold, goodness and evil, matter and spirit, life and death, being and non-being. Nothing exists of a material, physical, spiritual, or even conceptual nature that is beyond *Brahman*; all things come from and ultimately return to *Brahman*. The **Bhagavad-Gita** puts it this way:

Who sees his Lord  
Within every creature  
Deathlessly dwelling  
Amidst the mortal:  
That man sees truly....

Who sees the separate  
Lives of all creatures  
United in *Brahman*  
Brought forth from *Brahman*,  
Himself finds *Brahman*.

Ultimately, *Brahman* cannot be described. One sage finally admits that a person can only come close to describing *Brahman* by stating what it is not, because one cannot truly define eternity.

**Atman.** Hindus believe that every living thing has an essential core to its life – a soul, which is called an *atman*. The individual *atman*, however, is only a temporarily separated part of the cosmic or world soul, called *Paramatman*, which is a part of *Brahman*. The souls are without beginning and without end, and immortal by their very nature. The ultimate goal of the soul is freedom. As it goes repeatedly through the cycle of birth, life, and death, the soul will eventually reach all knowledge and manifest itself as perfection. When that state is reached, called *moksha*, also known as Nirvana, the cycle of birth, life, and death ceases. In one famous conversation between Uddalaka Aruni and his son Svetaketu, in the **Chandogya Upanishad**, the father asks the son to dissolve salt in water and says that *Brahman* and *atman* are united in a similar manner. The father ends his teaching with the dictum, “You are that” (“you” refers to *atman* and “that” refers to *Brahman*).

**Hindu Gods.** In the Hindu religion there are thousands upon thousands of deities. A person can believe in one or many – it does not really matter, since all are manifestations of *Brahman*, the underlying reality. Among the most popular of the gods are *Brahma* (not to be confused with *Brahman*), *Shiva*, and *Vishnu*. *Brahma* functions as the creator of universes, *Vishnu* protects and sustains them, and *Shiva* finally destroys them. As *Shiva* and *Vishnu*, and to a smaller degree *Brahma*, have been declared by their followers to be the greatest of the gods, a tendency to merge the three developed. The *trimurti* (three forms) is a synthesis of the three deities merged into a single concept.

*Shiva* is usually depicted with six arms, each with a different function. The manifold aspects of *Shiva*'s power are expressed in often contradictory roles: threatening but benevolent, creator but destroyer, exuberant dancer but austere yogi. Some Hindus imagine *Shiva* being in deep meditation high in the Himalayas where in the spring his frozen locks melt, releasing the waters of the sacred Ganges River. A bath in the Ganges is believed to wash away all sins of this earth; to achieve this is a cherished once-in-a-lifetime dream for millions of Hindus. The great goddess *Parvati* is often seen as a consort of *Shiva*. The most common symbol of *Shiva* is the *linga*, a cylindrical black stone set in a circular base. It is believed that the *linga* represents the completeness of the Hindu worldview.

*Vishnu*, the preserver, is understandably portrayed as a much more amiable and kindly deity. He loves, forgives, and tries to lead all towards salvation. He comes to earth in different incarnations, *avatara*, to rid the world of sin. There are 10 chief *avatara* of *Vishnu*. One of the earliest was a giant sea turtle who lifted the earth above a primal flood. The seventh and eighth *avatara* were Rama, the hero in the **Ramayana**, and Krishna, the deity in the **Baghavat-Gita**. Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was the ninth. The tenth, Kalkin, has been identified differently – sometimes with Jesus Christ, other times with Mahatma Gandhi; others believe he is yet to come. *Vishnu* is often accompanied by the goddess *Sri* or *Laksmi*.

A significant point about the *avatara* of *Vishnu* is that in these manifestations of *Brahman*, Hinduism has defended itself against and to some extent even absorbed other religions with

which it has come into contact. For example, the **Bhagavad-Gita**, with its heroes, Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna, came at a time when Hindu ritualism was pervasive and often perfunctory. An alternative opened up – an intense personal relationship with a god. At that time, Hinduism was confronted by the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, which also provided an alternative to Hindu ritualism.

*Parvati*, the great goddess, became prominent in Hindu tradition as the consort of *Shiva*. The essential idea is that of a mother goddess who takes on different forms. In *Parvati* rests the creative spark, but in fury she can emerge as *Durga*, the warrior goddess, or as *Kali*, a goddess with wild hair wearing a garland of skulls. *Kali* has a large following in some rural parts of India where villagers make sacrifices to avert her wrath.

Other deities are worshiped as well. Probably the most popular is *Ganesha*, the elephant-headed son of *Shiva* and *Parvati*. He is seen as a remover of obstacles and hindrances; no new project or activity begins without appeasing him with a coconut or at least a prayer. Each manifestation of a deity has a unique personality and history that links the deity with the location. The local myths or events around the deity are recorded in books called **Sthala Puranas** (*Puranas* means “about the place”). Local manifestations are extremely important in Hinduism, where every village has its own deity.

Hindus may be divided into three large groupings of traditions on the basis of the deity worshiped. The Vaishnavas worship the Lord as *Vishnu*, Saivas worship the Lord as *Shiva*, and Saktas worship the mother aspect of God. A significant group within the Vaishnavas worship Krishna as God, as one of the *avatara* of *Vishnu*.

**Nature of Human Beings.** One of the most fundamental ideas in Hindu thought is that human life has no ultimate significance. It is only a small part of the vast, unending cycle of life, death, and rebirth. As has been explained, every living thing has an *atman* that is an expression of the *Paramatman*. Each *atman* is growing and reaching upwards through countless cycles of time and successive rebirths to be reunited with the *Paramatman*, which is *Brahman*. Hindus believe in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls. How quickly the process of becoming free from this cycle occurs depends on the path individuals choose to achieve the goal and the earnestness with which it is followed. The form that any living thing assumes is determined by its *karma*, the accumulation of good and evil in its previous life. It follows, then, that each creature has its own *dharma* or religious duty. *Dharma* is what centers, upholds, and makes meaningful all activities, not just those done at certain times and places. This duty must be followed to gain merit and depends on one’s station in life, as defined by the caste system. As the **Bhagavad-Gita** explains,

As a man discards  
worn-out clothes  
to put on new  
and different ones,

so the embodied self  
discards its worn-out bodies  
to take other new ones.

The goals of human beings are many, but only one leads to salvation or true happiness. The first goal is to seek happiness. This is natural, but is soon seen for what it is – trivial and shallow. Success, fame, money, power, and social status are natural ways to find happiness, but one never has enough; ultimately these are selfish goals. Then, service to others is incorporated into the goals for life. Even this is not enough because works, however noble, are impermanent. In addition, Hindus are skeptical about the possibility of bringing about lasting change in the world or in human beings.

For a Hindu, life is essentially suffering, brought about both by ignorance and as consequences of behavior. Freedom from this cycle can only take place when the *atman* joins the *Paramatman*; only when this has taken place has *moksha* been achieved. Loss of individuality is the ultimate goal for the Hindu.

To achieve this goal, Hindus believe that four stages exist in life. First, one should be a student for 12 years from the time of initiation into the faith. Initiation into the first stage is considered to be the student's second or spiritual birth. At this time the student receives the sacred thread and sacred *mantra* to be chanted. The sacred thread is called *Yajnopavita*; it consists of three threads knotted together, symbolizing control over mind, speech, and body. Only students from the top three castes (*Brahmin*, *Kshatrya*, and *Vaishya*) could be twice-born. The first stage is characterized as a time of learning in the company of a *guru* or religious teacher.

The second stage is that of the householder, and begins with marriage. Here a person is occupied with a family and with success, however defined. Hopefully, the individual will begin to reach out to others.

The third stage begins at retirement. The wise person will have sensed the inadequacy of successes and goals up to that point and begins to withdraw from the world to meditate on the fundamental questions of life. This is the stage of the forest dweller.

The fourth stage begins when a person has achieved a breakthrough to *moksha*. This is the stage of the wandering ascetic. At that point there is no sense of personal identity, no further ambitions of any kind, and a total indifference to surroundings. To achieve this state, one must belong to the highest caste of Hindu, the Brahmins. This is the only class of people who traditionally lived long enough, who could “retire” from the daily grind of eking out a living, and whose intellect had the opportunity to develop and ask the necessary questions to meditate on the concept of Brahman.

**Hindu Worship.** A devout Hindu feels compelled to purify him- or herself with water before beginning worship. This devotion can take several forms. Frequently, the devotee offers food, flowers, or other items to the deity. These can be placed into a fire, which is blessed by a priest. To offer further signs of devotion, the ashes may be rubbed on the forehead.

Another form worship can take is to chant the name of a favorite deity or sacred phrases given by a guru. These phrases are known as *mantras*. The ancient symbol of *Om* or *Aum* is the most sacred *mantra* or syllable in the *Vedas*, and is frequently used in meditation and prayer.

Hindus may worship individually or in groups, at home or in temples. Every home has its own *puja* place, which includes a shelf for images of gods and incense burners. To worship properly, a Hindu must know the proper use of water, fire, flowers, and whatever else is used. In temple worship, the duty of the priest is to ensure that rituals are carried out properly. Priests do not act as intercessors between people and deities.

Hindus go on pilgrimages to the various temples that have survived over the centuries. The goal of other pilgrimages is the sacred River Ganges, whose purifying waters are believed to cure all maladies as well as washing away sins.

The *Kumbh Mela*, the Festival of Elixir, is a unique event that blends religious and social features. It takes place at the confluence of two of India's greatest rivers, the Ganges and Yamuna. Taking a dip in the river cleanses the souls of believers; if immortality takes effect, the souls are able to escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The *Kumbh Mela* takes place every three years at four sites: Allahabad, Haridwar, Nasik, and Ujjain. Each 12-year cycle includes the *Maha Khumb Mela*, the great festival, which is attended by millions of people. The planets are in a certain position only once every 144 years, which makes for a very special *Maha Khumb Mela*. The last year when this took place was 2001. On the last day, it was estimated that 1.5 million worshipers went into the river to have their sins washed away.

**Conclusion.** Hinduism has been the shaping force for the majority of people in the subcontinent of India almost from its recorded beginning. It has shaped mores, manners, and customs as well as many other aspects of Indian society. It has withstood the challenges of three major world religions: Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. As is recorded in the words of *Ramakrishna*:

“God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths....So common man in ignorance says, ‘My religion is the only one, my religion is the best.’ But when his heart is illuminated by true knowledge, he knows that above all these wars of sects and sectarians presides the one indivisible, eternal, all-knowing bliss....”

## Glossary of Hindu Terms

**Aryans:** Population that invaded northern India from the central Asia in the second millennium B.C.E., becoming rulers over the indigenous Dravidian people.

**ashrama:** Any one of the four traditional stages of life through which a person ideally is supposed to pass on the way toward realizing maturity: the student stage (*brahmacarya*), the householder stage (*grihastha*), the forest dweller or hermit stage (*vanaprastha*), and the renouncer or wandering ascetic stage (*sannyasa*).

**atman:** The inner self or soul of a person, which transmigrates from one life to another and which, upon realizing *moksha*, is said to be united in a fundamental sense with the ultimate, universal self, the *Paramatman*, of the whole cosmos.

**Aum:** see **Om**.

**avatar:** A “descent” or incarnation of a deity in earthly form. For example, Shiva is said to have 10 *avatara*.

**Bhagavad-Gita:** Literally, "The Song of the Adorable One." The most popular of Hindu scriptures, which occurs in the great epic known as the *Mahabharata*. It tells of the revelation and teaching of *Krishna* (one of the great *avatara* of *Vishnu*) to Prince Arjuna as the climactic battle of the *Mahabharata* is about to begin.

**bhakti yoga:** The way to atonement with ultimate reality through love and devotion, called The Way of Devotion. The discipline of becoming so devoted to God that self-centered attachments to this-worldly concerns are burned away. It addresses and appeals to the person victimized by his or her passions and who seeks a true, eternal object of affection. This is one of the four recognized paths to achieve the union of the *atman* to the *Paramatman*.

**Brahma:** One of the great deities of Hinduism, though not one around whom a significant worshiping community has formed. *Brahma* is usually associated with the creation of the cosmos.

**brahman:** Ultimate reality, as Hinduism speaks of it, the ground and source of all that is. Sometimes (particularly in the **Upanishads**) it is referred to as impersonal or transpersonal, beyond all name and form. But some Hindu traditions identify it as the transcendent Godhead that chose to manifest itself in a more personal form, such as *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, or the goddess *Parvati*.

**Brahmin:** A member of the highest caste (*varna*); traditionally identified as specialists concerned with relations to ultimate reality; custodians and teachers of the *Vedas* and other

Hindu sacred writings.

**Dharma:** The eternal natural law, moral as well as causal, that governs existence, human and non-human (including divine beings), and is thought to be built into the nature of things. Specifically, it refers to moral and spiritual duty in accord with cosmic law and order, especially duty as dictated by age, temperament, and social status.

*Dharma* is also said to be one of the four traditional goals of life recognized by Hinduism, and one of the two involving renunciation of the paths of egocentric desire. The moral consequences that follow from obeying or disobeying *dharma* are thought to be natural, not imposed by some external enforcer. *Dharma* is said to be subtle and almost impossible to know directly, requiring most persons to learn it from the Hindu scriptures. For many Hindus, especially those who follow *karma yoga*, the ultimate reality and *dharma* are virtually the same. The word used by Hindus for themselves is often *Sanatana-dharma* (“eternal dharma” or “eternal truth”).

**Dravidians:** Population with roots in the Indian subcontinent prior to the Aryan invasion more than 3,000 years ago. Tamil is one of the Dravidian languages.

**Ganga:** The sacred river Ganges begins in the Himalayas, where *Shiva* dwells. The river is reported to come from heaven, streams through the lock of the god and flows into the ocean. The river has healing qualities in case of illness; ritual cleansing is encouraged as well for believers.

**guru:** One’s teacher.

**henotheism:** A Western term denoting the type of theology found throughout Hinduism, namely the teaching that there is a single ultimate reality behind the many gods of devotional Hinduism, where each god represents one of many “faces” through which an ultimate reality is manifested and through which it may be worshiped.

**jnana yoga:** The way to atonement with ultimate reality through knowledge or life-transforming insight into ultimate reality, or the Way of Knowledge. The discipline of seeking and attaining perfect knowledge of ultimate reality through intuitive intellectual discernment, transforming one’s sense of selfhood. It addresses and appeals to the person who needs to have things make intellectual sense. This is one of the four recognized paths to achieve the union of the *atman* with the *Paramatman*.

**karma:** The law of moral cause and effect; also, a person’s moral merit or demerit according to one’s actions and the inner intentions or motives that accompany them in terms of their conformity or nonconformity with *dharma*. One’s *karma* is said to entail one’s rebirth for that *karma* to be realized or fulfilled, and to determine the circumstances of the subsequent life. Attainment of union with the *Paramatman* is thought to eliminate the production of *karma* (in

the second sense) altogether, and to bring to an end the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*).

**Karma yoga:** The way to atonement with ultimate reality through work or right action, or the Way of Action, fused in many ways with the Way of Sacred Rite. The discipline of doing one's own duty selflessly, for its own sake, without attachment to results, and with no thought that "I am the agent." It addresses and appeals to the person who feels that something must be done to set things right and ensure their proper functioning, or the person who would draw near to and invoke through appropriate rituals the sacred archetypes that give structure, meaning, and vitality to life. This is one of the four ways to achieve the union of the *atman* to the *Paramatman*.

**kshatriya:** A member of the warrior class in ancient Hindu society. The second caste of four.

**Krishna:** The most popular of *Vishnu's* many avatars (incarnations) to destroy evil and restore *dharma*. Many of *Krishna's* devotees consider him on a par with *Vishnu* himself and not a mere *avatar*. There are hundreds of stories of *Krishna*, which tell of him as divine infant, mischievous youth, lover, and mighty hero. He is the main figure in the **Bhagavad Gita**.

**Linga:** The most common symbol of Lord *Shiva*, it is a cylindrical black stone set in a circular base. The *linga* is often viewed as the completeness of the Hindu worldview.

**Mahabharata:** One of the two great epics of Indian literature, a small portion of which is the **Bhagavad Gita**. *Vishnu* and his incarnation as *Krishna* in particular figure prominently in the epic. Prince Arjuna is the human hero. This story is one of the first that emphasizes a personal relationship with a deity.

**mantra:** A sacred syllable, sequence of syllables, or sometimes a name, word, or phrase that is used in meditation. The *mantra* is usually assigned by one's *guru*, and believed to tune one into the divine ground of existence. One of the most well known is the sacred sound *Om* (or *Aum*).

**moksha:** The state that the *atman* is trying to achieve when it is finally able to join with the *Paramatman*, also known as *Nirvana*.

**Om:** *Om* is the most sacred symbol in Hindu dharma and is said to be the essence of all mantras, the essence of the *Vedas*, and representative of the *trimurti*, the manifestation of three Hindu Gods.

**Paramatman:** This is the cosmic or world soul and is part of *Brahman*. The eternal, individual soul or *atman* is trying to be united with the *Paramatman* and thus achieve ultimate unity.

**puja:** Ritual household worship of the deity, commonly involving oil lamps, incense, prayers,

and food offerings. The *puja* will also have an image of the deity. Almost all Hindu homes have a *puja place*.

**Puranas:** “Old tales,” stories about deities that became important after the Vedic period.

**Raja yoga:** The way of meditation, the most uniquely Hindu form of yoga, and the most difficult. The participant works on a total moving away from the self. This is one of the four paths to achieve the union of the *atman* with the *Paramatman*.

**Raksha Bandhana:** An amulet that girls and women tie to the wrists of their brothers for protection against evil. The literal meaning is “to tie protection on.”

**Ramayana:** One of the two great epics of Indian literature, telling the story of one of *Vishnu's* avatars, known as *Rama*. The **Ramayana** tells the story of *Rama* and his wife *Sita* (the ideal domestic couple), *Sita's* abduction by the demon *Ravana*, and her rescue with the help of the monkey king *Hanuman*, who is later made into a god, and his monkey army.

**Sacred Thread:** Students receive the sacred thread, called the *Yajnopavita*, at their spiritual birth. The sacred thread consists of three threads knotted together that symbolizes control over mind, speech, and body.

**samsara:** the cycle of rebirth, the human predicament of separation from ultimate reality, whose only escape is the attainment of *moksha*. *Samsara* is imagined as an ever-revolving wheel of wandering from existence to existence.

**Sanatana dharma:** Hindus refer to themselves by this name, rather than Hindu. It means “eternal truth” or “ancient religion.”

**Sandhyopasana:** The literal meaning is “worship at the junctions of time.” A Hindu devotee must pray three times daily, at the junction of night and morning, at the junction of forenoon and afternoon, and at the junction of evening and night.

**shudra:** A member of the lowest of the four major classes, with the status of “servant” after the Aryan invasion of the Indian subcontinent, but in some cases enjoying prosperity in more recent centuries.

**smriti:** “What is remembered,” a body of ancient Hindu literature including the epics, *Puranas*, and law codes formed after the *sruti* and passed down in written tradition.

**sruti:** “What is heard [from the gods],” the sacred literature of the Vedic and Upanishadic period, recited orally by *brahmin* priests for many centuries before being written down.

**Trimurti:** Manifestation of three of the most popular Hindu deities, *Brahma*, *Shiva*, and *Vishnu*; the synthesis of the three merged into a single concept.

**Twice-born:** The first stage in life, when a boy becomes a student to learn with a *guru*. This is his spiritual birth, which is the second birth. Only boys from the upper three castes become twice-born. At his spiritual birth he receives the sacred thread.

**Untouchables:** Those who have been expelled from their own castes for violating its rules and regulations. They could only perform the foulest and most menial of tasks in society. Although outlawed by the Indian Constitution, the group still exists today and faces much suffering. Mahatma Gandhi referred to the untouchables as “The Children of God.”

**Upanisads:** Literally, “those who sit near.” Philosophical texts, in the form of reported conversations, composed around the sixth century B.C.E. and reflecting on the theory of the Vedic ritual and the nature of knowledge.

**Vedanta:** Literally, “the end of the *Veda*.” The name for philosophical or theological views based on the teaching of the *Upanishads*.

**Vedas:** The most sacred and authoritative of the vast array of Hindu scriptures, composed of four strands: **Rig-Veda**, **Sama Veda**, **Yajur Veda**, and **Atharva Veda**, each of which is made up of *Samhitas* (hymns), *Brahmanas* (prose commentary), and *Upanishads* (philosophical speculation).

**yoga:** Any one of four paths of spiritual discipline intended to lead a person to deliverance from *samsara* and the realization of *moksha* – i.e., to atonement with ultimate reality. Specifically, it means a “yoking” of the self by spiritual discipline, a method of training designed to lead to union of the human spirit with ultimate reality and release from the limits of the individual ego. Normally, following a specific yoga involves apprenticeship to a *guru*, a spiritual teacher or guide.

## **Appendix: Yoga Meditation**

Roughly translated from the Sanskrit, *yoga* means discipline, or a method of training designed to achieve the union of one’s *atman* with the *Paramatman*. The yoga of a Hindu is, therefore, the path to salvation. A person who practices one of the four recognized paths to this goal is called a *yogin*.

**Jnana Yoga.** For persons of high intellect and a tendency to philosophical speculation, *Jnana Yoga*, The Way of Knowledge, is recommended. *Moksha* is attained through Knowledge of *Brahman*. The cause of bondage and suffering is ignorance. Release is achieved through realization of the identity of individual soul, *atman*, with the eternal soul, *Paramatman*. This person will follow the four-fold, idealized Hindu path described above.

**Karma Yoga.** An easier but lengthier way to salvation is The Way of Action. “Duty for Duty’s

Sake” is the motto; every work is turned into an offering to God. Through good works and good action, a person can build up positive *karma* that will cause the individual to re-enter life at a higher plane at the next reincarnation. Generally, a work brings as its effect either pleasure or pain. Each work brings another link to *Samsara* (the cycle of repeated births). This is the law of *karma*. In practicing *Karma Yoga*, the effects of *karma* can be wiped out. Instead of bringing yet another link to *Samsara*, it purifies the heart of the *yogin* and helps attain salvation.

***Bhakti Yoga***. Another of the easier paths to salvation is The Way of Devotion. “Love for Love’s Sake” is the motto, and the *yogin* will have to attain a level of love that is all-absorbing and ardent. The Hindu who loves God has neither wants nor sorrows. Hindus can earn salvation through total surrender of their own self-interest in favor of devotion to a particular god. This is a very popular way because it allows an individual to have a personal rather than an intellectual relationship with a deity. Different paths exist to express worship. The important point is the sincerity of the commitment rather than the path chosen.

***Raja Yoga***. The Way of Meditation is the most uniquely Hindu path to salvation, but also the least popular, due perhaps to the difficulty of practicing it. *Hatha Yoga* is a part of this form of meditation, but stresses only the physical aspects of *yoga*. There exists a physical discipline in *Hatha Yoga*, but in *Raja Yoga*, there exists a discipline of the mind. This form of *yoga* requires intense concentration, often on an object outside of the body, to the point where the mind ceases to think of itself. When this state is achieved, the person will experience the final absorption into Brahman.

## Other Expressions of Yoga

***Siddha Yoga***. Siddha Yoga recognizes that the goal of spiritual practice is union with the divine Godhead that is the source of, and indistinguishable from, all manifestations of creation. This goal is called self-realization or liberation. The Godhead dwells in each human being as one’s own inner self. The principal practices of Siddha Yoga are chanting the names of God, meditation on the divine inner self, and study of the scriptures that lead to divine awareness. The purpose of these practices is to equip the student to live a life of virtuous integrity and selfless service.

Siddha Yoga draws upon a wide range on Eastern philosophical and theological literature, as well as on the writings of Swami Muktananda and Swami Chidvilasananda, who are recognized as meditation masters and have written extensively on aspects of spiritual life and practice.

In prison, students are encouraged to read, study, and mediate daily on the Siddha Yoga Home Study course entitled “In Search of the Self,” a 12-year course of study designed to give the student a thorough understanding of Siddha Yoga teachings and practices. Individual practitioners are encouraged (not required) to have Mala (plastic rosary beads), a

Puja (a small altar and photos of meditation masters of the Siddha Yoga lineage), or representations of one's chosen deities. The puja is the focus for devotional practice, meditation, and prayer. The Asana (mat used for meditation) can be accommodated by using an institution blanket.

Siddha Yoga group expression is best accommodated under the umbrella of Eastern Religions. In a group meeting (a weekly or occasional program), participants chant, meditate, and study some aspect of Siddha Yoga. The following items are encouraged for these sessions: First, a Puja. Second, a Gadi (chair representing the lineage of meditation masters and God's grace; it also serves as a focal point for devotional practice, prayer, and meditation). Third, Padukas (slippers of the meditation master). They are treated with reverence as a source of spiritual energy and humility.

There are no medical prohibitions, dietary standards, or specific burial rituals enjoined by this tradition.

The sacred writings making up the foundation of Siddha Yoga are the scriptures of Kashmir Shaivism. Also considered sacred are the Vedanta, the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, and Pantanjali's Yoga Sutras. The writings of Swami Muktananda and Swami Chidvilasananda, available through the SYDA Foundation.