

Basics of Hinduism <https://sites.google.com/site/worldreligionsforkids/home/hinduism>

Hinduism is considered to be the oldest “living” religion in the world, since it began at least four thousand years ago and people still follow it today. What we call Hinduism is a huge collection of belief systems that have been influenced and changed over history. Unlike most other major religions, Hinduism has no single founder like Jesus or Mohammad or a central leader like the Pope—because of this, people worship in VERY different ways. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world, with about 1 billion followers world-wide, most of whom live in India. Hinduism provided the belief structure for all other South Asian religions that followed such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. Just as Judaism provided the structure for Christianity and Islam.

Ancient writings teach the Hindu religion. The Vedas (holy books) are the most ancient Hindu holy books. For hundreds of year, the Veda teachings were never written down—they were only spoken or sang. The Upanishads are another collection of holy writings. The Upanishads were written down maybe 500 to 1000 years after the Vedas and contain most of the ideas about Hinduism and how to practice the religion.

Most Hindus believe in one supreme spirit called Brahman. Hindus believe God is all things in the world—not just a spirit in the sky. Brahman does not just exist; it IS existence. Brahman can be worshiped in many forms, such as other “gods” such as Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesh or Krishna, so many people think Hindus worship many gods, but actually all other gods represent Brahman in different forms. This is similar to Christianity. Christians worship Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. They call this the Holy Trinity in Christianity—not three different gods, but three forms of the same God.

Another major part of Hinduism and life in South Asia is the caste system. The Indian caste system is an unfair way to organize society into classes of people. Everyone falls into one of 4 or 5 major castes. Later, major castes were divided into over 3,000 sub-castes. Different castes didn’t marry, work together, or socialize. People were permanently locked into their caste. Castes were usually linked to a certain job. The Brahmins were the highest caste; they were priests and scholars. Kshatriyas were kings or warriors. Vaishyas were merchants, trader, or farmers. Shudras were peasants who worked the land. Another group of people existed who were looked at as being so low, they were outside the caste system—the Dalits or “untouchables”. Hindus believed if there karma was good, they would move up in caste when they were reincarnated. Today, the caste system is illegal, but still followed in some places, especially rural areas.

A major difference from Abrahamic religions is the view of life and death. Most Hindus believe in reincarnation (rebirth of the soul)—the belief that when the body dies, the spirit is reincarnated (reborn) into a new form. The soul may be reborn in many different forms such as another human or an insect. What they are reborn as depends on their karma. Karma is the belief that everything that people do in life determines what will happen to them in the future. If a person follows the dharma, he or she can expect to be reincarnated into a higher form in their next life, or have good luck in the future. Dharma is a life path of truth, duty, religion and good behavior. If a person lives the dharma they will have good karma and be reincarnated into a higher form.

The ultimate goal for Hindus is to end their reincarnation cycle and reach Moksha. Moksha is a “one-ness” with God. When Hindus are finally reborn as Brahmins, the highest class of the Indian Caste System, and if they live a life of perfection, they will finally end their birth, death, and rebirth cycle and become part of the spirit of Brahman (reaching Moksha). One way Hindus work toward spiritual Moksha is through yoga. In Hinduism there are 5 types of yoga. Yoga is a combination of breathing exercises, physical postures, and meditation that try to discipline the mind. Today, yoga has become a form of physical and mental exercise around the world. All South Asian religions practice some form of yoga.

Water is the most important resource on our planet regardless of religion. However, to followers of Hinduism some water is sacred. The river Ganges in northern India is Hinduism's most holy river. Hindu's personify the Ganges River with the goddess Gaṅgā. They believe that bathing in the Ganges helps to wash away sin and move toward Moksha. When most Hindu's die, they cremate (burn) the body. Sometimes the ashes are put into the Ganges.

Buddhism

<https://sites.google.com/site/worldreligionsforkids/home/hinduism>

Buddhism focuses on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama who was born around 563 BCE. With as many as 500 million followers, Buddhism is the 4th largest religion in the world. Siddhartha was born a Hindu, but had a difficult time believing the teachings because of all of the suffering he saw in the world. He also rejected the Hindu caste system. Siddhartha was born a wealthy prince, but gave up everything to find a true understanding of the world. He tried many different types of Hindu beliefs, but eventually he formed his own belief system and taught many others. He was called “The Buddha”, or the enlightened one. Many of Siddhartha teachings or what is called his “dharma” come from Hinduism. His teachings were written in Buddhist holy books called Tripitaka or Sutras.

Buddhism is a religion that is not based on the idea of God—it’s more of a way of life, so it is actually a philosophy, but most people still call Buddhism a religion. Siddhartha believed in a powerful spirit force, but not a god. A “Buddha” is a person who discovers the true understanding of life through years of spiritual investigation and studying using meditation. There have been several Buddhas, but Siddhartha was THE Buddha. Buddhists respect all life and encourage nonviolence and kindness. Buddhism encourages its followers to reach enlightenment—understanding the true meaning of life and truth about the world.

Buddhists do not require a special building to worship, although there are two main types of Buddhist temples: pagodas and stupas. A stupa (left) is a mound-like structure that often has a Buddhist relic buried underneath. A pagoda (right) is a temple usually found in China and Japan with several tiers or levels. Buddhist worship is called puja. It involves meditation, bowing, chanting, or making offerings--depending on the region.

During his time, Siddhartha viewed life as a time of great suffering. He basically said, 'life is suffering... but there is a path to end the suffering". His "path" became his dharma, or lifestyle. He said we must detach from the world around us. The aim of Buddhist life is to put an end to the sorrow of life. When someone understands the world’s reality (enlightenment), all of his or her suffering will end. If a person can end the sorrow of life they will reach Nirvana. Nirvana is the end of all desire, ignorance, and sorrow. The spirit is freed from all possessions; it is the realization that all human desires are pointless. Nirvana is the end of reincarnation, so it is similar to heaven. Buddhists also believe in reincarnation and karma.

Today, there are two main types of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada is more traditional--they accept fewer historical people as true Buddhas and include fewer local adaptations/changes. Mahayana history was built along the Silk Road, adapting new ideas, people, and cultures changes. All Buddhists, especially Theravada wish to achieve the end of suffering (Nirvana). To do this, Buddhists must train and purify their mind by following the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1—Life is suffering

2—Suffering is due to attachment to things

3—Attachment can be overcome

4—There is a life path to accomplish all of this

The "path" mentioned in the 4th Noble Truth is called the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path is often represented as a wheel with eight spokes. It is meant to focus the mind and behavior of Buddhists and help them reach Nirvana. The correct view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration is the Buddhist idea of how to avoid the sorrow of life and eventually reach Nirvana.