

[Section 2. Hindu Beliefs and Scriptures](#)

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The Upanishads are the part of the Vedas that teach philosophy. The word upanishad means "sitting by devotedly, " as a student sits near his guru to learn. This excerpt is taken from the Kena Upanishad. It explains the nature of the Supreme God, called Brahman in Sanskrit.

Translated Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester

The king has passed a new law increasing the taxes on farmers. The farmers in your village have not had a good year. The harvest is smaller than usual. The new tax may mean people will go hungry. Some in the village want to attack the tax collectors. Others want to lie about the amount of harvest. Still others say a peaceful protest will cause the king to change his mind on the tax increase.

How would you respond to the tax increase? Why?

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Hindus believe in a one Supreme God and also many Gods and Goddesses.
2. Dharma, karma and reincarnation are central Hindu beliefs. There is a special emphasis on nonviolence.

3. Vedas are the primary Hindu scriptures. There are other important scriptures as well.

Building Background From its beginnings, Hinduism has been an open-minded religion. It is a basic Hindu belief that there are many ways to approach God. Hinduism does not dictate one way as the only way. Hindus believe "Truth is one, paths are many " and that every person eventually finds spiritual salvation.

The Big Idea

Hindus believe every soul will ultimately achieve God Realization.

Religion Permeates the Hindu's Daily Life

Hindus base their way of life upon their religion. The Hindu culture comes from Hindu beliefs. The key beliefs are in a one Supreme God, subordinate Gods and Goddesses, heaven worlds, the divinity of the soul, dharma, karma, reincarnation, God Realization and liberation from rebirth. God Realization means the direct and personal experience of the Divine within oneself. The original Sanskrit name for Hinduism is Sanatana Dharma, meaning "eternal religion."

Belief in God and the Gods and Goddesses

Hindus believe in and worship a one Supreme God. In the scriptures, the Supreme God is called Brahman or Bhagavan, worshiped as both male and female. Brahman is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving and present in all things. God created everything in the universe out of Himself. This creation is not separate from Him. He guides the evolution of everything over vast spans of time. Ultimately, He absorbs the universe back into Himself. This cycle of creation, preservation and absorption repeats without end.

The Supreme God is both transcendent and immanent. These are two key philosophical concepts. As transcendent, God exists beyond the physical universe. As immanent, His divine form pervades all nature and humanity.

In Hinduism, the soul is called atman. God exists within each soul. The Chandogya Upanishad explains it like this: "What you see when you look into another person's eyes, that is atman, immortal, beyond fear; that is God."

Hinduism has different branches with varying beliefs and practices. The four major branches are Saiva, Shakta, Vaishnava and Smarta. Saivas and Shaktas call the Supreme God Siva, though Shaktas worship the female aspect of God. Vaishnavas call Him Vishnu. Smartas may choose one of six Deities to worship as the Supreme. By whichever name or form, He is the same, one Supreme God. The Rig Veda says, "The seers call in many ways that which is One."

Hindus may also worship Gods and Goddesses, called devas, such as Ganesha and Sarasvati. In Sanskrit, deva means "shining one." In some ways, these divine beings who live in the heaven worlds are like the angels and archangels in Western religions. Some Hindus consider the Gods and Goddesses as alternative forms of the Supreme God, and not as individual divine beings.

Each God and Goddess has particular powers and areas of responsibility. For example, Ganesha is the Lord of Obstacles. Before beginning a new project, a Hindu may pray to Ganesha to remove any obstacles blocking his way.

In the Vaishnava tradition, Lord Vishnu appears on Earth as a divine personality, or avatar, from time to time to restore morally right living. Of Vishnu's ten avatars, Lord Rama and Lord Krishna are the most important. Rama and Krishna are not separate Gods. They are two forms of the one Supreme God.

In temples and shrines, the Supreme God and the Gods and Goddesses are worshiped in a ritual called puja. Puja is a ceremony in which the ringing of bells, passing of flames, chanting and presenting of flowers, incense and other offerings invoke the Divine beings, who then come to bless and help the devotees. During the

puja, through holy chants, gestures and sacred ritual, highly trained priests guide the worship. The priests treat the Deity with utmost care, attending to Him as the King of kings. The purpose of the puja is to create a high religious vibration and communicate with God or a deva through the murti, or consecrated statue, that is the focus of worship. Deity is the proper English word for murti. The word idol is often used, but it is incorrect.

Hindus also practice internal worship of God. Sitting quietly, they may repeat the name of God while counting on beads. Others may chant, sing or meditate upon God. In Hinduism, there are many ways to worship the Divine.

Dharma, Karma and Reincarnation

Dharma means righteousness, divine law, ethics, religion, duty, justice and truth. Dharma means the proper way one should live one's life. To follow dharma, one should be religious, truthful, kind, honest and generous. Dharma includes the practice of nonviolence, called ahimsa in Sanskrit. It is the ideal of not injuring others in thought, word or action.

Karma, a central Hindu belief, is the law of cause and effect. It means that anything you do will eventually return to you in this or future lives. If we do something selfish or hateful, we will in time experience the same pain and suffering we caused to others. If our acts are good and kind, we will receive goodness and kindness.

Reincarnation means literally to "re-enter the flesh." It is the belief that the soul, atman, is reborn in a new body, experiencing many lifetimes. The purpose of rebirth is to progressively achieve spiritual maturity and God Realization. Eventually each soul learns to live by religious principles and avoid creating negative karma. The process of reincarnation continues through many lives until the soul achieves liberation.

Hinduism's Sacred Scriptures

The four Vedas are the holiest scriptures for all Hindus. The Upanishads, an important part of the Vedas, explain the Hindu philosophy. The next most important scriptures, also in Sanskrit, are the Agamas. There are specific Agamas for each major tradition in Hinduism--Saiva, Shakta and Vaishnava. The Agamas explain philosophy, personal conduct, worship and temple construction. There are hundreds of other scriptural texts dealing with religious and secular law, government, social order, economics, ecology, health, architecture, science, music, astronomy and many other subjects. The Puranas are encyclopedic accounts of the forms and avatars of God, the many subordinate Gods and divine beings, creation, spiritual teachings, historical traditions, geography and culture. The Tirukural is a Tamil masterpiece on ethics and moral living. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali explore yoga and meditation.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata are two sacred epic histories of India. The Ramayana is the story of Lord Rama, who is the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu, and his divine wife Sita. This 24,000-verse poem describes Prince Rama's birth, His banishment to a forest for 14 years, the abduction of Sita by the demon Ravana and Rama's victory over Ravana. The Ramayana remains immensely popular to this day in India and Southeast Asia.

The Mahabharata, "Great India, " is a 78,000-verse story of a massive war that took place in ancient times between the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas, for the throne of a great kingdom. It also describes the nature of self and the world, karma, important family lineages of India, human loyalties, saints and sages, devotion to God and the ideals of dharma. Lord Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, is a key figure in the epic. A central episode called the Bhagavad Gita narrates Krishna's dialogue with the Pandava archer, Arjuna, on the day of the battle. It is one of the most popular and revered among Vaishnava and Smarta scriptures. Hindu sacred music, dance, drama and the arts draw heavily on the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the many Puranas.

Key Terms:

Sanatana Dharma, Brahman, deva, puja, karma, reincarnation

Hinduism Today's Teaching Standards

5. Explain the basic Hindu beliefs regarding God, the Gods and Goddesses, dharma, karma and reincarnation. Describe basic Hindu practices.

6. Discuss the Hindu principles of nonviolence and religious tolerance.

7. Describe the Vedas and their Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata (including the Bhagavad Gita) and other important Hindu scriptures.

A kalasha is a husked coconut set in a brass pot with mango leaves. It is used in worship to represent the Supreme God or any of the Gods or Goddesses.

Academic Vocabulary

subordinate - lower in rank, less important

pervade - to be present throughout, encompass, to surround and hold within

consecrated - made sacred through ceremony

invoke - summon a Deity; appeal to

secular - activities or things not related to religion

Ganesha is the God prayed to before beginning any task or worship. His elephant head makes Him easy to recognize.

In the Bhagavad Gita Lord Krishna shows Arjuna His universal form as the Supreme God encompassing all the other Gods

Linking to Today

Nonviolence

The Hindu principle of ahimsa, or nonviolence, is important today. Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, said, "Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man." By nonviolent means Gandhi largely won India's independence, using peaceful protests, boycotts, strikes and speeches. In the 1950s, Martin Luther King, Jr. studied Gandhi's methods and went to India to meet his followers. He learned how India's nonviolent movement worked and applied the same methods to fight for and win civil rights for America's black minority. Aung San Suu Kyi, a devout Buddhist, has campaigned without violence for years to win democracy for the people of her native Myanmar (Burma). In 1991 she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her peaceful struggle against the country's military dictatorship. Another example is Cesar Chavez, who won rights for California farm workers using nonviolent methods.

Analysis Skill - analyzing information

What are the advantages of nonviolence over violence in bringing about social change?

Section 2 Assessment

Reviewing Ideas, Terms and People

1.a. Define What is Sanatana Dharma?

b. Explain What is a deva?

c. Elaborate What are the two key terms used by Hindus to describe the Supreme God?

2. Categorize What are the four main branches of Hinduism?

3.a. Recall Why do Hindus pray first to Lord Ganesha?

b. Identify What are the two most popular incarnations of Lord Vishnu?

c. Explain What is the purpose of the Hindu puja?

4. a. Explain What is karma?

b. Illustrate What are some examples of following dharma?

c. Explain What is the purpose of reincarnation?

5. Summarize Make a list of Hindu scriptures, starting with the Vedas.

Critical Thinking

6. Evaluate

Why do Hindus believe that there are many ways to approach the Supreme God?

7. Understanding nonviolence

Write a paragraph explaining your way to deal with the tax increase example given on page six. Do you think a nonviolent approach would succeed?

From the Upanishads

Try to sum up the meaning of each sentence in your own words.

Once the Gods won a victory over the demons, and though they had done so only through the power of Brahman, they were exceedingly vain. They thought to themselves, "It was we who beat our enemies, and the glory is ours."

Brahman saw their vanity and appeared before them as a nature spirit. But they did not recognize Him.

Then the other Gods said to the God of fire, "Fire, find out for us who this mysterious nature spirit is."

"Yes, " said the God of fire, and approached the spirit. The spirit said to him: "Who are you?"

"I am the God of fire. As a matter of fact, I am very widely known."

"And what power do you wield?"

"I can burn anything on Earth."

"Burn this, " said the spirit, placing a straw before him. The God of fire fell upon it with all his might, but could not consume it. So he ran back to the other Gods and said, "I cannot discover who this mysterious spirit is."

Then said the other Gods to the God of wind: "Wind, can you find out for us who he is?"

"Yes, " said the God of wind, and approached the spirit. The spirit said to him: "Who are you?"

"I am the God of wind. As a matter of fact, I am very widely known. I fly swiftly through the heavens."

"And what power do you wield?"

"I can blow away anything on Earth."

"Blow this away, " said the spirit, placing a straw before him. The God of wind fell upon it with all his might, but was unable to move it. So he ran back to the other Gods and said, "I cannot discover who this mysterious spirit is."

Then said the other Gods to Indra, greatest of them all, "O respected one, find out for us, we pray you, who he is."

"Yes, " said Indra and humbly approached the spirit. But the spirit vanished, and in his place stood Goddess Uma, well adorned and of exceeding beauty. Beholding her, Indra asked:

"Who was the spirit that appeared to us?"

"That, " answered Uma, "was Brahman. Through Him it was, not of yourselves, that you attained your victory and your glory."

Thus did Indra, and the God of fire, and the God of wind, come to recognize Brahman, the Supreme God.