

ॐ CHAPTER TWO

Beliefs and Worship

The word *Hindu* comes from the name of the river where civilization developed in India—the Indus. At first the word was used to refer to the people who lived beyond the Indus. In time, it was used to denote all the people of India, but in a truer sense, it refers to the religion of that country. Hinduism is actually a western term. Hindus themselves refer to their religion as *Sanatan dharma*, which means “the eternal religion” or “eternal law.”

Unlike some other religions, there are no set rules for being a Hindu. Yet, Hindus share certain beliefs and practices. In this chapter, you will learn what these beliefs and practices involve.

Brahman and Atman

All Hindus believe in *Brahman*. Brahman is not a god; it is the Supreme Spirit that is everywhere. Everyone and everything is united spiritually because Brahman is a part of everything that exists. The land, the oceans, and the sky have Brahman in them. So do all living things, be they human, animal, or vegetable.

(You should not confuse Brahman, the Supreme Spirit, with Brahman, or Brahmin, a member of the Hindu priestly caste. Nor should you think “Brahman” and “Brahma” are the same. *Brahma* is a chief Hindu god, one of the many forms

Depicted at right is Brahma, the supreme god of the Brahmin priest caste. He is here shown having four heads and four hands, each head standing for one of the four holy Vedas. He holds in his hands the ritual objects of a priest: a Veda manuscript, a vessel containing holy water, a sacrificial spoon, and a sling.



in which Brahman appears.)

Brahman is neither male or female. It does not have human form, because to have human characteristics would make it imperfect. It therefore cannot be described. Because it has no form, Hindus have created thousands of gods and goddesses which are believed to be different manifestations of Brahman. Chief among these are *Brahma*, the Creator, *Siva*, the Destroyer, and *Vishnu*, the Preserver or Renewer. These gods and others are discussed in detail in Chapter Three, "Gods and Goddesses."

Hindus believe that all living things have a spirit, or soul. This soul is *Atman*. *Atman* comes from Brahman. Since it represents the spirit of Brahman, *Atman* is found in animals as well as humans. Cows have a soul. Monkeys have a soul. Even worms have souls. This is why Hindus believe it is wrong to hurt or kill any animal. They especially hold the cow to be sacred. The cow throughout history has always been an important part of Indian life and culture. It has served as a means of transportation, has provided nourishing milk, and has pulled the plow that has tilled the soil.

In the next section, you will better see the connection between Brahman and the the *Atman* in humans.

Dharma, Karma, Samsara, and Moksha

An understanding of four terms are necessary if one is to grasp the essence of Hinduism. These terms are *dharma*,

karma, *samsara*, and *moksha*. Each is explained below.

Dharma

Dharma is a word from the Sanskrit language meaning "to sustain." *Dharma* is "truth, righteousness, law, justice, and duty." Above all, it is duty. Hindus believe that life is concerned with a series of duties. These duties call for every Hindu



to be honest and good, to be a good worker, and not to hurt other people and animals. *Dharma* is different for every person. It depends on one's family background, means of livelihood, plus other factors.

Hindus believe life consists of four stages called *asbramas*. The stages are: the student stage, the householder stage, the retirement stage, and the renunciation stage. While it is not possible for every Hindu to progress through each of these stages, they do serve as guidelines for the ideal Hindu life.

In the student stage (*brahamcharya*), Hindus attempt to learn the scriptures and to attain as much education as they can. In the householder stage (*grihastha*), they are expected to take on the roles of married couples and parents,

To show their devotion to God, Hindu worshippers have a marking called a *tilak* mark, which is made of powders and ashes, placed on their foreheads as they enter a temple to pray

Words to remember:

Sanatan dharma
Brahman
Brahma
Siva
Vishnu
Atman



and to become a vital part of community life. These stages are relatively easy to attain. Beginning with the retirement stage (*vanaprastha*), however, what the Hindu scriptures recommend becomes more difficult to meet. At this stage, a person is expected to spend more time at a temple and attend more *satsangs*—meetings often held in Hindu homes where scriptures, stories, and songs are recited.

Few Hindus can fulfill the renunciation stage of life (*sannyasa*). This calls for a person to give up the material things of the world and become a wandering monk. The holy scriptures point out that this gives the person more time to meditate and to attain *moksha*—

actions and behavior. Hindus believe that one's actions in this life determine how he or she will be reborn in the next life. They believe that life is a continuous cycle of death and rebirth. (Buddhists also believe this.) This is called *samsara*, or *reincarnation*. It is also referred to as the *transmigration of the soul*, because Hindus believe that the soul after death moves from one person (or thing) to another.

This is how Hindus believe karma works. If a person has led a good life and has not harmed anyone or anything, his or her soul might be reborn into a higher caste. It is even possible to jump to the Brahmin, or priestly caste. If, on the other hand, a person has been evil and thoughtless of others, he or she might be reborn into a lower caste. If they are particularly bad, their soul can be reborn into an animal, even a lowly worm. In such cases, the soul has to attempt to work its way back up the ladder in a series of rebirths.

Moksha

The goal of every Hindu is to attain *moksha*. This is similar to *enlightenment* in Buddhism. Moksha is not a place the soul goes to when it has overcome all evil and desire. It is not like heaven. It is when Atman, or the soul or spirit, merges or reunites with Brahman. When this occurs, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth ends. Hindus liken this to a river flowing into a sea. Moksha can only be attained when the soul becomes completely pure and has detached itself from everything on earth.

Hindu scriptures point out that there are four paths or ways that lead to moksha. These are the paths of good works, knowledge, devotion, and meditation. Some Hindus choose to follow more than one path in their efforts to unite with Brahman.

The path of good works is called *Karma yoga*. It centers around people doing their dharma, or duty, as their

- Words to remember:**
- dharma
 - karma
 - samsara
 - moksha
 - ashramas
 - satsangs
 - sadhus
 - Karma yoga
 - Jnana yoga
 - Bhakti yoga
 - Raja yoga

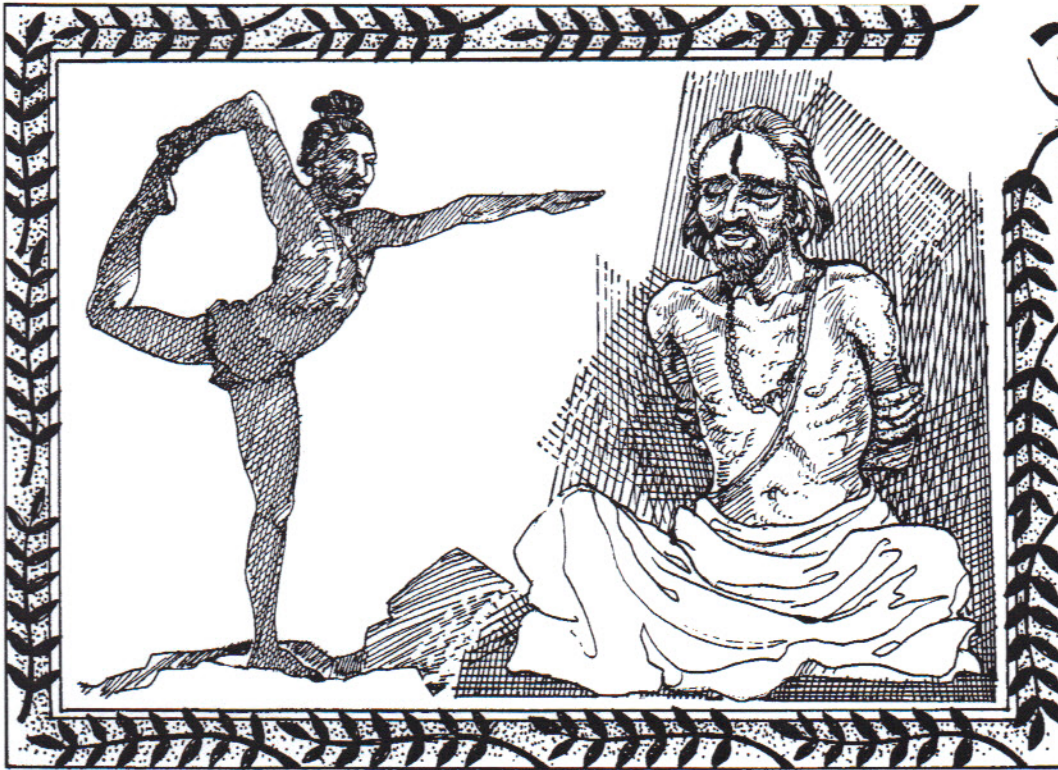


Few Hindus can fulfill *sannyasa* or the renunciation stage of life, which calls for the giving up of material things and a devotion to meditation.

release from the cycle of rebirth. Those who do and are able to give up their homes and possessions become holy men known as *sadhus*. They are supported by other Hindus who give them food and money.

Karma and Samsara

If Hindus fulfill their dharma to the best of their abilities, this will result in good *karma*. Karma has to do with



The path of meditation is called *Raja yoga*. It involves postures and breathing exercises designed to rid the mind of all thoughts except the attainment of *moksha*.

particular social group calls for it. The path of knowledge is known as *Jnana yoga*. It has to do with people attaining as much spiritual knowledge as they can. The path of devotion is *Bhakti yoga*. Hindus who follow this path choose a particular deity and worship him or her during their entire lifetime. The path of meditation is called *Raja yoga*. This is the path that people outside of Hinduism see as simply *yoga*. It involves positions and breathing exercises designed to rid the mind of all thoughts except the attainment of *moksha*.

Hindu Worship: The Mandir

When Hindus worship in public, they go to a temple called a *mandir*. Like the places of worship of other religions, mandirs come in all shapes and sizes. Those in villages are small and quite simple. Those in towns and cities may be large and brightly decorated on the exterior.

Hindus believe that certain gods and goddesses live in mandirs. Each *mandir* is dedicated to either Vishnu, Siva, or Shakti, the Mother Goddess. There is a *murti* (image or statue) of one of these deities in the main shrine room of the *mandir*. Some temples have *murtis* of all three. In addition, there may be *murtis* of the gods Ganesha and Hanuman. Though you don't realize it, you may be familiar with Ganesha. He is the god who is depicted with the body of a man and the head of an elephant. The elephant's head represents his power to remove obstacles. As with other deities, Ganesha is discussed further in Chapter Three.

Words to remember:

mandir
murti
pujari
tilak
arti lamp
prasad
pandit