

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.

Section Review:

1. What do Hindus prefer to call their religion?
2. Who or what is Brahman?
3. What is the relationship between Brahman and the Hindu gods Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu?
4. What is *Atman*?
5. Why do Hindus hold cows to be sacred?

Dharma, Karma, Samsara, and Moksha

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

karmā, *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 *ashramas*. 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 (*brahmacharya*), 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*—

Words to remember:

- dharma
- karma
- samsara
- moksha
- ashramas
- satsangs
- sadhus
- Karma yoga
- Jnana yoga
- Bhakti yoga
- Raja yoga

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.

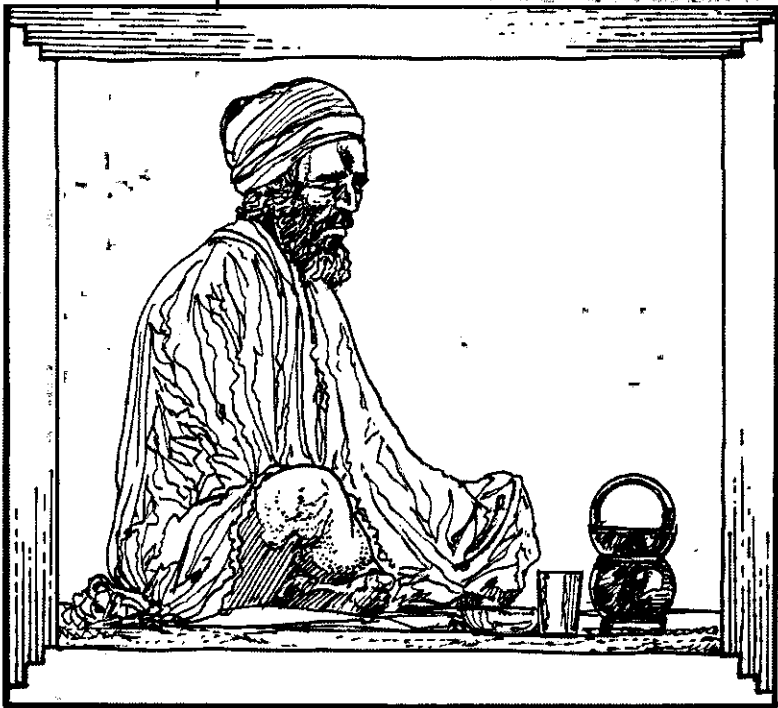
This is how Hindus believe karma works. If a person has led a good life and has not harmed anyone or anything, his or her soul might be reborn into a higher caste. It is even possible to jump to the Brahmin, or priestly caste. If, on the other hand, a person has been evil and thoughtless of others, he 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

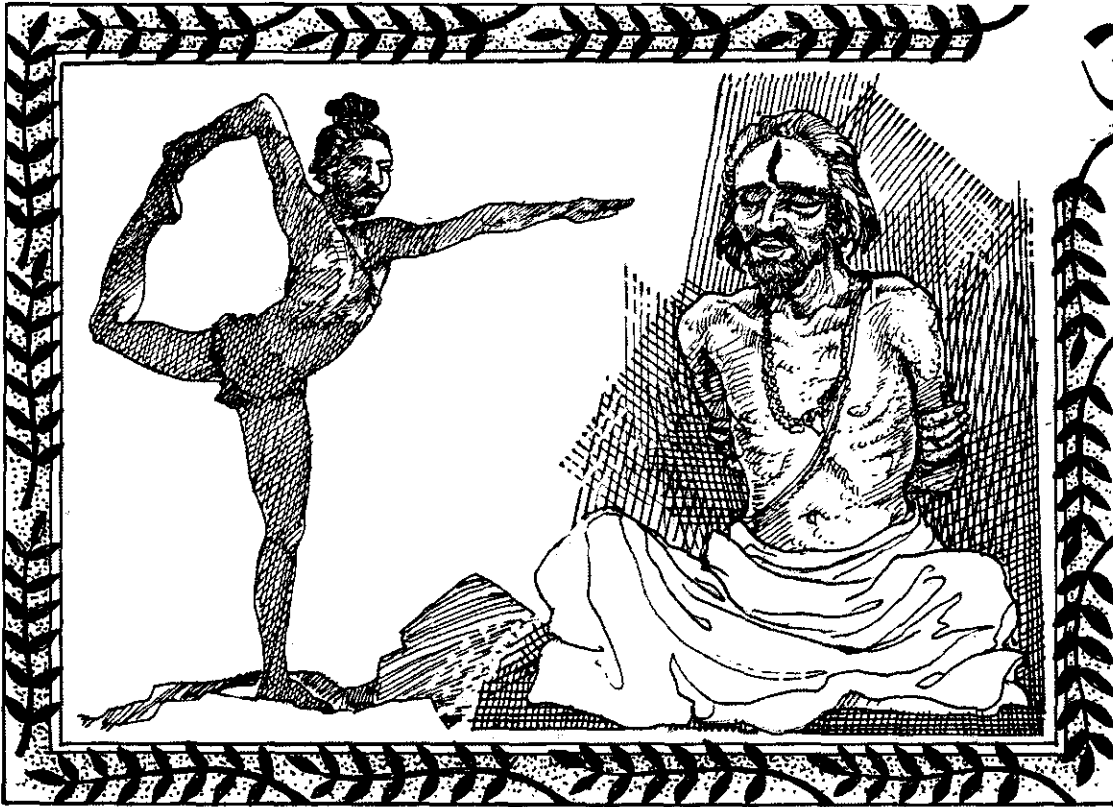


Few Hindus can fulfill *sannyasa* or the renunciation stage of life, which calls for the giving up of material things and a devotion to meditation.

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*.

Section Review:

1. What does each Hindu's *dharma* depend on?
2. What are *ashramas*?
3. Explain the renunciation stage of a Hindu's duty.
4. What is *karma*?
5. What is *samsara*? When does *samsara* come to an end?
6. How is *moksha* attained?
7. What is *Raja yoga*?

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.

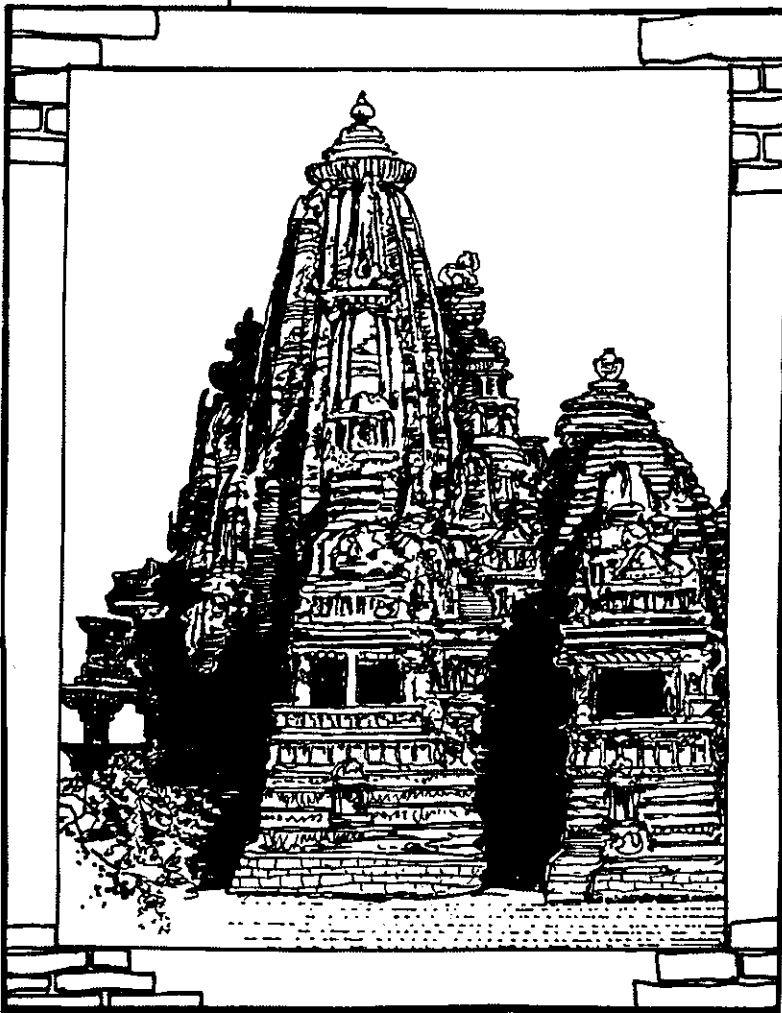
Hindus believe that certain gods and goddesses live in mandirs. Each *mandir* is dedicated to either Vishnu, Siva, or Shakti, the Mother Goddess. There is a *murti* (image or statue) of one of these deities in the main shrine room of the *mandir*. Some temples have *murtis* of all three. In addition, 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



Many larger mandirs are built near rivers or some other source of water. This is so worshippers can bathe before entering the temple. This is not



“worship”) has prepared the murti or image for worship. He does this in several steps. First he washes and dries the murti. Then he applies a paste of sandalwood to it. (Sandalwood comes from the heartwood of an Asian tree.) He also makes a *tilak* mark on the head of the murti, similar to the one on his own forehead. Finally, he dresses the murti in red and gold clothes and decorates it with flowers.

Before the worshippers see the murti, the pujari lights a lamp called an *arti lamp*. The lamp contains five flames, one for each of the five senses. A curtain that had concealed the murti from view is then drawn open. The light from the arti enables worshippers to see and “be seen” by the god. The arti is waved in front of the murti, and then it is passed around among the people in the mandir. The people hold their hands over the flame and then rub their hands over their foreheads and hair. They believe that by doing this they receive power and a blessing from the god.

There are no set days for Hindus to worship in a mandir. Some go everyday; others visit a mandir only at festival times. But in towns and cities with large temples, people may go there for other reasons. In the west, large mandirs often double as community centers. There are also halls for weddings and classrooms for children. In this respect, the mandir provides services similar to those of Christian churches and Jewish synagogues.

Hindus who worship in a mandir make the tilak mark on their heads. The mark is made from a mixture of powders and ashes. The mark indicates that they have been to worship. (Don't confuse the mark with the red dot that Hindu women wear in the middle of their foreheads to show they are married.) Upon leaving the mandir, people receive *prasad* from a *pandit*, or priest. *Prasad* is blessed food that has been offered to the god of the mandir. It may be fruit, nuts, or sweets.

When Hindus worship in public, they go to a temple called a *mandir*. Mandirs come in all shapes and sizes. Those in villages are small and simple. Those in towns and cities may be large with brightly decorated exteriors.

because they are considered dirty; it is to purify themselves before making offerings to the gods. When they arrive at the temple, they take off their shoes and leave them outside. This is to show respect for the murtis in the temple. As they enter the temple, worshippers ring a bell. This is like knocking on a door. It tells those inside the temple that someone has come to worship.

Once inside the mandir, people make offerings to the god to whom the temple is dedicated. These offerings consist of fruit, nuts, flowers, and sometimes coins. Long before this happens, however, a religious official called a *pujari* (from the Hindu word *puja*, which means

Section Review:

1. What is a Hindu temple called?
2. What is a *murti*?
3. Why do worshippers remove their shoes before entering a *mandir*?
4. How does a *pujari* prepare a *murti* for worship?
5. What is the significance of the *arti lamp*?
6. What is *prasad*?

Worship at Home

Hindu worship at home is similar to that in a *mandir*. Every home has a shrine where an image or statue (*murti*) of a god or goddess is kept. The shrine may be a simple shelf in a room. In a large home, the shrine might be a separate room set aside for worship.

Before home worship begins, the *murti* is washed, dried and daubed with a special powder or paste. It is then surrounded by flowers and perfume. The family makes offerings to the *murti* while reciting *mantras*, verses from the Hindu

holy book. To show respect for the particular god or goddess, family members remove their shoes and sit cross-legged in front of it. They might also kneel and touch the floor in front of the *murti* with their forehead.

Do you remember the ritual involving the *arti lamp* that takes place in the *mandir*? The same is true of worship in the home. The lamp is lit, and family members hold their hands over the flames. Then they wipe their hands on their head. In so doing, they receive the blessings of the god or goddess they are worshipping.

In addition to worshipping in the *mandir* and at home, Hindus sometimes worship at roadside shrines. Because they believe that Brahman is everywhere and is part of everything, where they worship is of little importance.

Section Review:

1. How do shrines in Hindu homes vary?
2. What are *mantras*?



Words to remember:

mantras



Every Hindu home has a shrine where an image or statue of a god or goddess is kept. The shrine may be as simple as a shelf in a room. In a large home, it may be a whole room set aside for worship.



Symbols

Our study of worship would not be complete without looking at Hindu symbols. One of these symbols you are familiar with, but for different reasons. That symbol is the *swastika*. The *swastika* is an ancient symbol that resembles a cross with bent arms. To the Hindus it is a sign of peace and good luck. Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, however, took the *swastika* as their emblem and turned it into a symbol of evil. So don't be confused when you look through a book about Hinduism and see such a sign. It has nothing to do with the Nazis.

In Sanskrit, the *swastika* means "bringing health." The arms represent paths to Brahman. They are bent because the way to Brahman is difficult. The arms come from a central point to show that everything in the universe comes from a single source. The *swastika* also represents the sun.

Another Hindu symbol is the sacred syllable *om* (sometimes spelled *oum* or *aum*). *Om* represents the sound of Brahman. Hindus utter the syllable when

they begin and end prayer. They also recite it when hymns are sung and mantras (holy verses) are chanted. *Om* is the symbol most used to stand for Hinduism. Just as the cross represents Christianity, the menorah Judaism, and the Eight Spoked Wheel Buddhism, *om* is the symbol of the Hindu religion.

A third symbol is the conch shell. Just as a ram's horn called a shofar is blown when a Jewish service begins, the blowing of a conch shell announces the start of worship in a Hindu mandir.

The bell is another symbol in Hinduism. As you read in the section entitled "Hindu Worship: The Mandir," people ring a bell when they enter the temple.

Section Review:

1. What is a *swastika*? What does it represent to Hindus?
2. How did Nazi Germany pervert the use of the *swastika*?
3. What is the origin of the sacred syllable *om*?
4. What role does *om* play in Hindu worship?

For Further Thought:

1. How is the concept of Brahman similar to the God envisioned by Jews, Christians, and Muslims? How is it different?
2. Tell why you agree or disagree with the concept of reincarnation.
3. Write a one-page report in response to the statement "Religions are more alike than they are different." Give reasons why you agree or disagree with this statement.
4. How is worship in a mandir different from that in your place of worship? How is it similar? Write a brief report pointing out such differences and similarities.
5. Explain in several paragraphs how *moksha* differs from the heaven of Christians and others.
6. Pretend you are of the Hindu faith. (If you are, this should be an easy assignment.) Write a letter to a friend of another faith explaining the basic beliefs of your religion.
7. Devout Hindus are vegetarians. Are there advantages to following a vegetarian diet? Are there drawbacks? How do you feel about vegetarianism in general?

Words to remember:

swastika
om