

## Hindu Beliefs and Practices

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world. However, unlike many other religions, Hinduism does not have one main founder, or leader. Indians call it *Sanatana Dharma*, the faith with no beginning and no end. It all began with the Aryans. The Aryans, who began moving into India around 1500<sub>BCE</sub>, practiced polytheism; or the worship of more than one god. They believed that different gods controlled different parts of the world, and they offered sacrifices to the gods in order to please them. The priests, who were responsible for rituals and sacrifices, were important members of the Aryan society. The Aryans tolerated the beliefs of the native Indus Valley people, and eventually, elements from both religions blended into a new religion: Hinduism.

Much of the information about the ancient Aryan religion and the origins of Hinduism comes from sacred Hindu texts, called **Vedas**. There were four different Vedas in all. The *Rig-Veda*, a series of hymns and poems recited by the early Hindu priests, is believed to have been written around 1300<sub>BCE</sub>. The different Vedas have special religious meanings to the Hindus, much like the Bible and Torah have special meaning to Christians and Jews.

Legends were also created to simplify the religion's philosophy for the common people. The *Puranas*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* are all stories that teach Hindu values. These legends discuss the pursuit of four goals: righteous living, wealth and prosperity, love and happiness, and an end to the cycle of the birth and death. Through these stories, and their worship services, called **Pujas**, Hindus learn the basics of their religion.

To someone like us, Hinduism can seem confusing because of their differences in rules. Instead of having rules that everyone follows, Hinduism reveals profound "truths" about life and suggests many different ways to live righteously. Each Hindu chooses the path that best fits his or her life, which gods to worship, and which rituals to follow. An emotional person is free to choose the path of love and devotion, while an intellectual might follow the path of mental discipline, and those who believe that "work is worship" may select the path of selfless service.

There are three beliefs that are central to Hinduism: reincarnation (being reborn), karma, and the law of *dharma*. Hindus believe that life is an endless cycle of events with no beginning and no end. Death and birth are simply parts of the cycle. Each person is reincarnated, or reborn, repeatedly, until he or she reaches the final supreme goal of Absolute, called **Moksha**, by overcoming all evils and all earthly desires. Only then is the soul released from the cycle, never to be reincarnated again.

This concept is tied to **karma**, the belief that everything a person does has a consequence. Both good and bad deeds have an effect on a person's happiness or misery in their present life, as well as in future lives. Whether one reappears in the next life as a plant, an animal, a wealthy nobleman, or a servant, depends on actions performed in the previous life.

The third main concept is that of **dharma**, or the belief that one is born into a particular station in life and it is his or her moral duty to live according to that station. Hindus feel that they should go about their daily lives without question or complaint, fulfilling their duties to society. If they do a good job, they will be rewarded by being reincarnated at a higher social level in their next life. However, if they do their jobs poorly, they will be punished with a lower social level in the next reincarnation.

# Hindu Beliefs and Practices Outline

- I. \_\_\_\_\_ is one of the oldest religions in the world
  - A. Indians call it \_\_\_\_\_, the faith with no beginning and no end
  - B. It all began with the \_\_\_\_\_
    - i. The Aryans practiced \_\_\_\_\_
    - ii. The \_\_\_\_\_ were important members of the Aryan society
  - C. Eventually, elements from different religions blended into a new religion: \_\_\_\_\_
- II. Much of the information about the origins of Hinduism comes from the sacred texts, called \_\_\_\_\_
  - A. There were four different \_\_\_\_\_ in all
  - B. The \_\_\_\_\_ is a series of hymns and poems recited by early Hindu priests
  - C. The different Vedas have special \_\_\_\_\_ meaning to the Hindus
- III. \_\_\_\_\_ were also created to simplify the religion's philosophy for the common people
  - A. The \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ are all stories that teach Hindu values
    - i. These legends discuss the pursuit of \_\_\_\_\_ goals:
      - a. \_\_\_\_\_
      - b. \_\_\_\_\_
      - c. \_\_\_\_\_
      - d. \_\_\_\_\_
- IV. Hinduism reveals profound \_\_\_\_\_ about life and suggests many different ways to live righteously
  - A. Each Hindu chooses the \_\_\_\_\_ that best fits his or her life
- V. There are \_\_\_\_\_ beliefs that are central to Hinduism
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_ (being reborn)
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. The law of \_\_\_\_\_
    - i. Life is an endless \_\_\_\_\_
      - a. \_\_\_\_\_ and birth are simply parts of the cycle
      - b. Each person is \_\_\_\_\_ repeatedly
      - c. The final supreme goal to reach is Absolute, called \_\_\_\_\_
      - d. Only when you reach Absolute is your \_\_\_\_\_ released from the cycle
- VI. \_\_\_\_\_, the belief that everything a person does has a consequence
  - A. Both good and \_\_\_\_\_ deeds have an effect on a person
  - B. Whatever you appear as in the next life depends on \_\_\_\_\_ performed in the previous life
- VII. The third concept is that of \_\_\_\_\_, the belief that it is your moral duty to accept what you are born into
  - A. If you do a good job, you will be reincarnated at a \_\_\_\_\_ social level
  - B. If you do your job poorly, you will be punished with a \_\_\_\_\_ social level