

Hinduism

Hinduism, the major religion of India, is one of the oldest living religions in the world. The roots of Hinduism date to prehistoric times in India. Unlike most other religions, Hinduism has no founder and no single set of beliefs. Because Hinduism is as much a way of life as a set of religious teachings, a Hindu is free to worship only a single god, many gods, or no gods at all. Hinduism—unlike religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam—cannot be traced back to one founder with a single set of ideas.

Beliefs

Hinduism teaches that the soul never dies. When the body dies, the soul is reborn. This continuous process of rebirth is called *reincarnation*. The soul may be reborn in an animal or in a human being, but Hindu doctrine is not clear on this point. The law of *karma* states that every action influences how the soul will be born in the next reincarnation. If a person lives a good life, the soul will be born into a higher state. If a person leads an evil life, the soul will be born into a lower state, perhaps into the body of a worm. Karma influences specific life circumstances, such as the caste one is born into, one's state of health, wealth or poverty, and so on. A person's reincarnation continues until he or she achieves spiritual perfection. The soul then enters a new level of existence, called *moksha*, from which it never returns.

Divinities

Some Hindus came to believe that, though divinities appear in separate forms, these forms are part of one universal spirit called *Brahman*. These Hindus believe that many divinities make up Brahman. Hindus today are free to choose the deity they worship or to choose none at all. Most, however, follow a family tradition that may go back centuries.

According to Hindu doctrine, animals as well as human beings have souls. Hindus worship some gods in the form of animals. Cows are sacred, but Hindus also revere monkeys, snakes, and other animals.

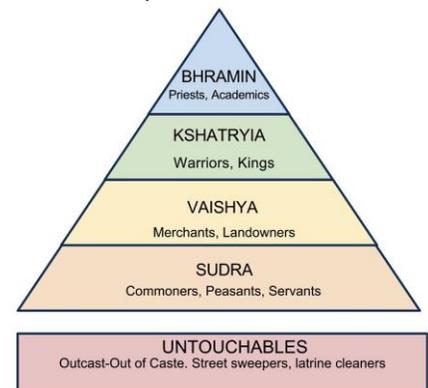
Hinduism considers temples as buildings dedicated to divinities. Its followers worship as individuals, not as congregations. Most Hindu temples have many shrines, each of which is devoted to a divinity.

Caste System

The caste system is India's strict system of social classes. The Hindu castes are grouped into four main categories.

For centuries, one large group, the *untouchables*, has existed outside the four groups and has ranked below the lowest caste. The Indian constitution of 1950 outlawed untouchability and gave the group full citizenship. But discrimination against untouchables has not been eliminated.

Hindu ideas about karma and reincarnation strengthened the caste system. If a person was born as an upper-caste male—a Brahmin, warrior, or merchant—his good fortune was said to come from good karma earned in a former life. However, a person who was born as a female, a laborer, or an untouchable might be getting the results of bad deeds in a former life. With some exceptions, only men of the top three caste groups could hope to achieve moksha in their present life.



Buddhism

The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama (sihd•DAHR•tuh GOW•tuh•muh), was born into a noble family that lived in Nepal. According to Buddhist legend, the baby exhibited the marks of a great man. A prophecy indicated that if the child stayed at home he was destined to become a world ruler. If the child left home, however, he would become a universal spiritual leader. To make sure the boy would be a great ruler, his father isolated him in his palace. He never ceased thinking about the world that lay outside, which he had never seen. When he was 29, he ventured outside the palace four times. First he saw an old man, next a sick man, then a corpse, and finally a wandering holy man who seemed at peace with himself. Siddhartha understood these events to mean that every living thing experiences old age, sickness and death and that only a religious life offers a refuge from this inevitable suffering. Siddhartha decided to spend his life searching for religious truth and an end to life's suffering. So he left the palace.

Siddhartha wandered through the forests of India for six years seeking enlightenment, or wisdom. He first debated with other religious seekers. Then he fasted, eating only six grains of rice a day. Yet none of these methods brought him to the truth, and he continued to suffer. Finally, he sat in meditation under a large fig tree. After 49 days of he achieved an understanding of the cause of suffering in this world. From then on, he was known as the Buddha, meaning "the enlightened one."

Beliefs

The Buddha preached his first sermon to five companions who had accompanied him on his wanderings. That first sermon became a landmark in the history of the world's religions. In it, he laid out in the Four Noble Truths.

The Eightfold Path, a guide to behavior, was like a staircase. For the Buddha, those who were seeking enlightenment had to master one step at a time. Most often, this mastery would occur over many lifetimes. By following the Eightfold Path, anyone could reach nirvana, the Buddha's word for release from selfishness and pain.

As in Hinduism, the Buddha accepted the idea of reincarnation. However, the Buddha rejected the many gods of Hinduism. Instead, he taught a way of enlightenment. The Buddha reacted against the privileges of the Brahmin priests, and thus he rejected the caste system. The final goals of both religions—moksha for Hindus and nirvana for Buddhists—are similar. Both involve a perfect state of understanding and a break from the chain of reincarnations.

Buddhism and Society

Because of his rejection of the caste system, many of the Buddha's early followers included laborers and craftspeople. Buddha reluctantly admitted women to religious orders. He feared, however, that women's presence would distract men from their religious duties. Monks and nuns took vows to live a life of poverty, to be nonviolent, and not to marry. They wandered throughout India spreading the Buddha's teachings.

Buddhism in India

During the centuries following the Buddha's death, missionaries were able to spread his faith over Asia. Buddhist missionaries went to Southeast Asia in the third century B.C. Buddhist ideas also traveled along Central Asian trade routes to China. However, Buddhism never gained a significant foothold in India.

The Four Noble Truths	
First Noble Truth	Life is filled with suffering and sorrow.
Second Noble Truth	The cause of all suffering is people's selfish desire for the temporary pleasures of this world.
Third Noble Truth	The way to end all suffering is to end all desires.
Fourth Noble Truth	The way to overcome such desires and attain enlightenment is to follow the Eightfold Path, which is called the Middle Way between desires and self-denial.