

Voices from Hindu Worldview Traditions

Over the last few years we have collated responses to questions about religion and worldviews from different perspectives. This resource provides personal answers to questions from lived experience and were written directly by believers.

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1. What is the Hindu concept of God? How many Gods are there?

For practicing Hindus, 'God' is a flexible word for any deity dear to 'a believer', across ALL religions and all deities. This is often misrepresented as polytheism by 'monotheists', but it is actually what gives Hinduism its pluralism and a unique respect for other religions and their right to sacred relationship with their own deity. Brahman, on the other hand transcends deity, as it is not deity, but rather an ontological presence, in any space. When I am teaching children or training Teachers about Brahman, I describe it as: "when you remove *everything* that you can see, touch, taste, smell, hear, imagine or create, what is left?" Brahman just IS. This is the key to understanding the Hindu notion of Deity.

Hindus don't think of 'God' in the same way as Christians, as having a particular personality. Hindus think everyone should have the right to have their own way of thinking and feeling for God. For some this might be as a Father, for some as a mother, for others as the natural world, in trees, rivers and mountains, whilst others feel God, deep inside their own heart. Hindus also think that these different ways of thinking and feeling for God have been happening in every country and every language. So, they do not try to count 'Gods', but rather feel that God can take any form at any time as needed to offer loving support to anyone that seeks it. So, my answer to that is how would you answer the question 'how many raindrops are there? Or clouds in the sky?' It would depend on who was looking and where and when, each would give a different answer every time. So, Hindus don't worry about how many 'Gods' as there would be as many 'Gods' as there are people who are trying to imagine and speak to God, but it is always the same loving something beyond our ability to imagine, that replies.

2. What do you believe about how the world began?

Hindu philosophy has surprising things to say about the beginnings of the world. Ancient Indian philosophers would go into deep meditation allowing them to expand their ability to imagine, visualise and make sense of things. Their ideas were scrutinised, explored and eventually recorded in the Vedas and accepted as Holy Books of guiding knowledge for Hindus and anyone else who wishes to study them.

According to Hindu philosophy, the world we are living in is neither the first, last or only. Hindus believe there is a self-organising, self-knowing intelligence (Brahman) that in accordance with its own universal laws, converts energy into physical material and in time back into energy, over and over again.

To help people understand such vast and complicated philosophy, the Vedas contain a number of 'creation stories' with names and symbolic images assigned for the principles involved, explaining different aspects of the forces (not people) at play. Thus, Hindus have many creation stories and versions. They tend to be very relaxed about this, as it is the principles that matter to them.

In looking at particular Hindu stories you may come across the name Brahma as this is the special Hindu name for the creative principle. This is often translated as Creator 'God' in English but Brahma 'Dev', the Indian word is more accurate and maybe less misleading.

The principle behind the stories has some similarities to modern scientists idea of 'the big bang', the idea of time, space and universal cause/effect laws all suddenly starting (Hindu stories also depict this event as a spontaneous moment: 'Brahma' waking up). One difference is that Hindus would say that this wasn't THE big bang just 'our' big bang and in fact there have been many before and will be many after. Thus 'creation' happens on an infinite, regular basis. We could think of each world's creation and ending happening as regularly as breathing in and out except on an enormous scale!

You can find one example of a Hindu 'creation story' on the RE:ONLINE website. Here is another: <http://bbc.in/1yJfpbm>. Remember the story is designed to help you deeply question and think about the range of forces that might have made/caused the universe, as well as how and why.

3. What do you think of the afterlife? What is your view on the afterlife?

People of Indian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism think that we continue to be reborn again and again until we merge in God (or find our true self as spirit). We do not agree that if you make small mistakes you end up in hell for ever. For example, would all Hindus who do not believe in Christ automatically go to hell? That sounds unfair. The Hindu idea is you are born again and again and continue to make spiritual progress until you realise that you are one with God.

I am extremely comfortable with not knowing the nuts and bolts of what happens to sentient beings when the body dies. Not knowing is a very respected position within Hindu Philosophy! In fact, it is considered a crucial quality in any 'Truth Seeker' - and Hindu Philosophy encourages us to see and respect all human beings as truth-seekers, consciously or otherwise!

That said, I do have a worldview and a work-in-progress model of how things might work which is consistent with some of the teachings from the Vedas. (Remember we are not required to 'Believe' in the Vedas to be Hindu or be Hindu to learn & benefit from the Vedas. All Hindu scriptures say test the knowledge for yourself and learn from your own experience. I do believe that humans (and animals) are mass-energy systems within the interconnected mass-energy system that is the world. As such they have physical and non-physical energy signatures that can be sensed. Therefore, at the time of death, by the law of conservation of energy, the energy that was the 'person', (including their emotions, memories, etc.) might not disappear, but rather change form. As a keen lover of physics, chemistry and maths as well as biology, it is fabulous to find all these subjects sit so comfortably within a Hindu Philosophical Worldview.

4. What is the most important teaching or way of living according to your tradition? 'Is it possible to forgive everyone or everything?'

The primary concept for me is 'Dharma'. This sets a very high bar - of living in a way that supports universal thriving - irrespective of nationality, race, religion. In addition, Dharma is not found in a rulebook. It has to be lived every day, with awareness and responsiveness and consequences.

It might be helpful to look at Forgiveness across the three contexts you mention: first key beliefs (I would say key concepts since Hindu 'theory' is more of a philosophical rather than belief-based model), then inspiring role-models & thirdly individual interpretation.

Forgiveness as a religious response to 'sin' or a personal one to wrongdoing towards ourselves, does not quite fit into a Hindu ethical framework. By the Hindu law of Karma, any act (including speech or even thought), generates an energetic change and will therefore have a consequence or impact. The extent of impact on us is considered to be determined by our previous Karma and evolving capabilities. In such a model, the focus of the individual is therefore placed ideally on their **own** ongoing behaviour, even when being impacted by others.

According to the ancient Upanishads, there are up to 20 recommended guidelines (the 10 Yamas and 10 Niyamas) for living ethically and well. The 5th Yama is 'Kshama', which is often translated from Sanskrit (and Hindi) as 'Forgiveness'. Interestingly a more literal translation would be 'Forbearance' or 'Patience'. In other words, it is more about how the 'forgiver' deals internally with the impact of the behaviour, and regains their own equilibrium, that is key rather than how they 'judge' the act of transgression or transgressor.

Regarding the notion of being 'Forgiven by God', a useful quote from the Bhagavad-Gita, often seen on the walls of Hindu Homes is: **Karmanye Vadhikaraste, Ma phaleshou kada chana, Ma Karma Phala Hetur Bhurmatey Sangostva Akarmani**. In the Bhagavad-Gita, on the Battlefield, when Arjuna doesn't want to fight and kill his enemies, Krishna (an Avatar) persuades him to do so including stating this famous quote, which loosely translates as 'Do the work as guided, surrender the outcome (or fruits) to Me'. This exemplifies the Hindu idea that 'God' neither judges nor forgives us, but rather offers the free choice to act from divine guidance / intuition and learn from the consequences of our choices.

The most well-known role-model is probably Mahatma Gandhi. His choice and ability to practice Kshama allowed him to maintain the personal equilibrium needed to lead the non-violent movement (using Ahimsa, another, in fact the first of the 10 Yamas) for India's independence.

On a personal note, I think it's important to say that this is a wonderful ideal, and something to aspire to. However as ever with Hindu principles, what 'Kshama' might look like may vary in different situations appropriate to their context. In the news, we occasionally here about parents of victims of violence, rejecting revenge or 'instant justice', appealing instead for peace and bearing no ill-will to the perpetrators. Yet Arjuna in my Gita example above, had to put aside his own sentiments for conciliation BUT without anger or rancour, calmly engage in deadly war against an evil and predatory enemy. The key in dealing with a transgressor in Hinduism is neither prescribed as making peace nor exacting punishment but seems to be to master one's own emotions first, to gain the clarity to then pick whichever response serves **the most good**.

5. What would you like children in schools to be taught about your tradition?

I would like them to understand the key distinctions between Religion and Dharma, since misunderstanding this has caused many religious groups to mistreat Hindus over the course of History. Dharma does not have a truth claim, it reveres the unfolding universe and each person's unique but interconnected experience of it. I would like children to understand that Hinduism is not Polytheistic, but rather Pluralistic, as all Deities of all religions are believed to be from the same source. A key principle is the freedom to pray to whichever Deity calls to the heart of the believer - or indeed the right to not pray to any Deity. I would like children to see that for Hindus there is no 'them and us', Hindus believe that we are all equally nurtured by the divine intelligence that IS the fabric of reality. For Hindus God does not care which shape building a person prays in, or which language or name for God, they use. The key is to have a loving heart that sees the same humanity in all but expressed in diversity.

Hinduism teachers that we are meant to be different to each other and care for each other anyway!

6. What do Hindus think about the environment?

Theistic Hinduism (like other monotheistic religions) would say that as the universe and all its beings are created by an Almighty God it becomes an obligation on all of us to take care of it. This would be the best way to pay tribute to God - by looking after his creation. The world that we live in has been created for us to live in and to use for spiritual advancement. We must make use of all that has been provided for us in a judicious manner. Judicious use of the environment requires us to be extra vigilant. We should not only take from the world, but we should return something back to it. Mankind with its power of intellect has the ability to enhance the world we live in.

Non-theistic Hinduism (Esoteric Hinduism) offers a different view on the issue of care for the environment. Non-theistic Hinduism links man, God and the universe in a more direct manner. It does not recognise them as separate entities. It simply says that the underpinning to everything we see and experience including ourselves is essentially non-material described as the 'Spirit'. It is this spirit that manifests (or appears) as the gross world we see around us as the universe and all the galaxies. It is the same spirit showing itself more clearly and appears as all living things and it is the same spirit that becomes most transparent as men and women. What theistic religions describe as God in the heavens is very much here and now. It is God alone who appears as the whole universe and all the living things. Mankind is at the apex of this creation and hence the clearest manifestation of God. So, it becomes necessary for man to recognise the special role he has to play. He is the guardian and protector of the universe. He does not have to look after the world and other beings because there is a God watching over his shoulder but because he is directly and intimately linked with the whole creation and all living things. The reason we should not hurt or harm or damage the environment is because that amounts to harming ourselves. Looking after the environment because a creator God demands it is viewed as an indirect way of promoting reverence for everything, while this is considered to be a more direct reason why everything deserves special care.

7. How does worship impact on your day to day life? How do you feel when you worship?

Most Hindus believe that all creation is divine in nature, so a range of ways of connecting in deep appreciation of sacred relationship with it, are all types of 'worship' depending on lifestyle and disposition. One such is through focusing deep awareness. The Hindu word for this is 'Dhyana' (the more well-known Japanese term Zen is derived from this concept). This is the meditational form of worship that I am most inclined towards. I walk barefoot in my garden in the morning, breathing in the fresh air, feeling the rich moist earth beneath my feet, my mind clears and my heart opens. To answer your second question, I feel a gladness of being and a deep reverence and appreciation for the abundance around me.

Hinduism offers other forms of worship which express devotion in different ways. The one most similar to Christian worship might be 'Puja'. This is often (but not always) a more ritualised form of worship, often (but not always!) with other family members. It includes lighting a sacred flame and chanting/singing specific mantras (rather like prayers) as well as possibly addressing specific Deities (rather like hymns) in terms of adoration and praise (Bhakti) as well as reminding worshipers of encoded wisdom and guidance. Many Hindus perform Puja twice a day (morning & evening). The impact on me this morning was it made me stop rushing on to the next thing, and pause, reflect and feel peaceful about the day's challenges.

The third form is another special one for me called 'Sewa'. This is linked to seeing the divine in other living beings and being of service from selfless love. Sewa can be performed for plants, animals, humans, family, community or a deity if that is a person's disposition. The key thing is for it to be 'Love in Action'. Hindu philosophy teaches that Sewa performed in this spirit even for the humblest of living creatures is serving the Divine and so is one of the most honoured forms of worship. This impacts me on a daily basis most when I work in schools with children and teachers, or more materially when I prepare all the ingredients for my family's evening meal! In both cases I feel energised, *joie de vivre* and purposefulness!

The key thing with all these forms of worship in Hinduism, is a teaching that Divinity is everywhere, in everyone and everything. Hindu philosophy puts the responsibility on each of us to find our own way to connect to it and contribute to it manifesting in the world.

8. How do British Hindus and/or Hindus across the world, practise their key beliefs in day to day life?

Thank you for your question. Some deep concepts so a challenge to answer it briefly! To get you started, the easiest way to approach these might be to realise that for Hindus, these ideas are not 'conceptual' or even 'Beliefs', rather they are deeply encoded in the culture and way of being, doing & speaking about things. I will go through each one and try to pick out ways they may be exemplified in life and so communicable to children.

Samsara:

In lay terms, Hindus use this word to mean the 'World' of worldliness. The 'stage' on which the Play of life is experienced. Hindus are encouraged to develop a witness-consciousness. To have a sense that whilst there is a part of them that is trapped in living in worldliness there is also another part that is 'free', divine and observing. Any activity that calms the trapped part such as yoga, meditation, puja, helps bring clarity to this way of experiencing things beyond our emotions.

Karma:

This word is probably best understood as 'Consequences'. A deep sense that *Everything* you do, say and even think is 'Karmic' and will have an impact and consequence both for you and others. This puts the burden of choice squarely on each of us to be aware of whether our behaviour is adding to positiveness and well-being or its opposite. It says we are all connected but need to do our share. Cultural practices such as family-duties, vegetarianism, non-violence, Nature-reverence all encode living with this sense of wider responsibility.

Dharma:

In brief simplistic terms absolutely everything is believed to have a Dharma, an Inherent nature or intrinsic way of being as part of an interconnected Divine design. Thus, it is Fire's Dharma to burn, it is a healer's Dharma to heal. In living/being terms, it actually philosophically underpins all the other terms you have asked about!

Seva:

In cultural terms, this is a hugely honoured and privileged state of being. It speaks of Keeping a gentleness in your heart, respect for elders, protection for children & the vulnerable. Essentially it expresses a desire to serve (either people or land) as a means of serving the divine.

9. What are the main ways that following your religion affects your daily life?

As a Hindu, the word 'religion' as it is usually used does not quite fit my daily life as a practitioner of a Hindu path. The Hindu Dharma focusses on practising Dharmic principles rather than 'following a belief system'. In fact, the aim of the Hindu path is to challenge whatever one believes, and to keep paying closer and closer attention to oneself and the world, with the aim of getting closer and closer to the real truth of why I am here and how I can best contribute to the time and place I find myself in.

This affects my daily life from the minute I wake up. Hindu dharma incorporates a range of disciplines to help me stay connected to reality. Puja, Yoga and meditation in the morning are all ways of priming the brain and body to be as alert, kind and creative as possible as I go about my working day, as well as how I interact with family members, work colleagues and friends.

My meals are vegetarian and as fresh as possible, in accordance with the ancient Hindu science of Ayurveda, which recommends that the more in harmony with and friendly to nature, my food is, the healthier it and I am likely to be.

Other dharmic principles that affect my daily life are respect for the elderly, care for the vulnerable (of all species), wherever and whenever I encounter them, gratitude and reverence for nature, especially for the earth and a deep sense of connection for the other elements of Air, Water, Fire and Spirit as being the ingredients that make up not only me but every other particle of the universe! To do harm to anything else, is therefore also doing harm to myself. This is sometimes called 'oneness' or interconnectivity and is one of the hallmarks of a Dharmic path.

Another key principle is Diversity. Linked to Ahimsa (non-harming), this is the principle that everything and everyone has their own sacred design and must be honoured as such. Thus, it is wrong to try to change or suppress another person's religion, personality or sexuality. Instead, we must support them in being the kindest and most successful version of themselves.

10. Why are Murtis important to Hindus and how do they connect with how you live your life?

Thousands of years ago in ancient India special wise people called 'Rishis' went away into woods, caves and mountains where they could sit quietly and think hard about God and Human Beings. All the ideas that came to them were gathered into a lot of special books. These books describe how they heard and felt God's power all around them, in all the different plants and animals, in the rivers and mountains, even in the air, helping to support life. They recorded all the different ways that this power loves and supports all life and living things.

They described how sometimes this power helps in different times, by being born as different special people and, sometimes, in special invisible forms known as Deities, that only a few people have ever seen. They were able to draw pictures that explained how these different forms of power can help Hindus think about God.

Over thousands of years, these Rishis (wise people) collected the stories of when the "Deities" (note to Teacher: Deities is less confusing than 'Gods and Goddesses') appeared, and helped human beings with their problems, in different places all over India. Many of those places are now Hindu pilgrimage sites.

Indian people know and respect that people from other parts of the world and other religions might also have special traditional stories of when they believe God stepped in to help in other countries too.

The 'statues' you might see in Hindu places of worship are called 'Murtis' and show these deities as they have been drawn and sculpted for thousands of years. Each Murti has wise messages in the carefully drawn details to help Hindus remember the wisdom in the special stories of the Deities and the teachings from the Rishis. These stories and messages help Hindus find answers to their worries and questions on how to live a good and happy life.