



Foundational Beliefs, Concepts, and Ideas

Time and Creation of the Universe

As indicated earlier, the Hindu concept of time (and the origins of the universe) is one that has no beginning and no end. This present universe was preceded by an infinite number of universes which will be followed by another infinite number of universes.

The majority of Hindus believe in one **supreme god** (*The Brahman*). Everything is a part of and a manifestation of *Brahman*, the ultimate reality; however, *Brahman's* qualities and powers may be represented by a great diversity of gods/deities all of which emanate from *The Brahman*. The concept of *Brahman* and the relationship of the Supreme Being with nature, individual souls, and *The Brahman's* various manifestations are the subject of many different Hindu schools of philosophy/belief.

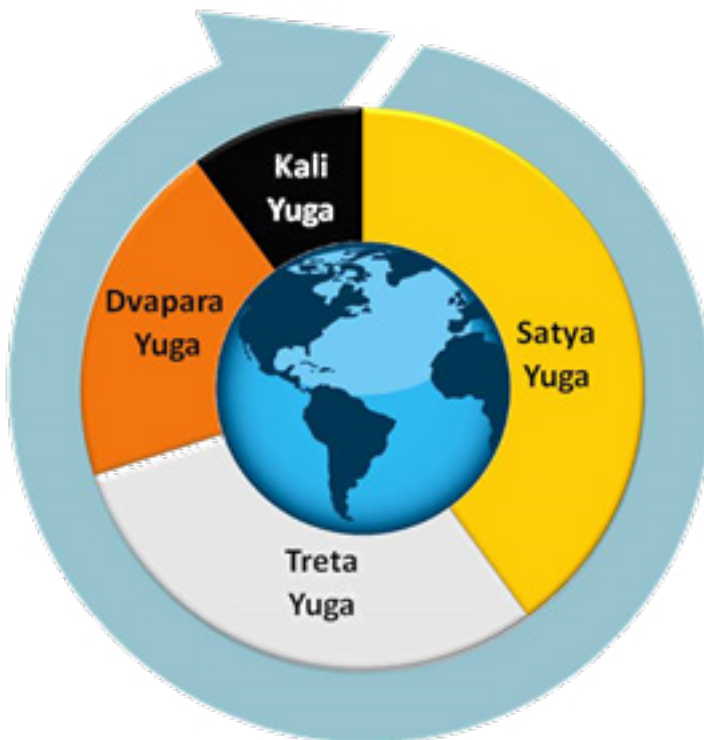


Figure 10: *Maha Yuga Cycle*

The universe, Earth, and all creatures were created by **Brahma**, **one of the many gods** that emanated from *The Brahman*.

The birth and dissolution of the present universe is directly connected to Brahma's life. Human time and that of the gods is different. The lifespan of Brahma (*maha kalpa* or *paradha*) is estimated by some to be over 300 trillion human years. One day and night in Brahma's space and time (*kalpa*) is believed to be over 8 billion human years. Each *kalpa* is further divided into two *artha kalpas* (one day and night), and each of these is further divided into 100 *maha yugas*. Each *maha yuga* consists of a series of four shorter *yugas*, or ages: *Satya Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, *Dvapara Yuga*, and *Kali Yuga*.

- *Satya Yuga* (Golden Age) is the first and best era. It is a time of truth and perfection. It is seen as a golden age because there is just one *dharma*—one religious path—and all humans are saintly. As a result, they are not required to perform religious ceremonies. During this *yuga*, humankind possesses many virtues: they are physically large and powerfully built, and they are honest, youthful, vigorous, erudite, and virtuous. The *Vedas* (most ancient of Hindu scriptures) are one. All humans can attain bliss. There is no need for agriculture or mining as Earth yields those riches on its own. The weather is pleasant and everyone is happy. There are no religious sects. There is no disease, decrepitude, or fear of anything.
- *Treta Yuga* (Silver Age) is considered to follow the *Satya* even though *Treta* means the third part or the collection of three. During this era, virtue begins to diminish. At the beginning of this past *yuga*, many kings and emperors rose to dominance and conquered the world. Conflict and wars were frequent and the weather began to have periods of extreme conditions. Oceans and deserts were formed. Humans began to diminish in physical and other aspects compared to their ancestors. Agriculture, labour, and mining began to meet the needs of humans. During *Treta Yuga*, humans' virtue declined by a quarter of what it was in the previous *yuga*.
- *Dvapara Yuga* (Bronze Age) is considered to be the third *yuga*. *Dvapara* means two pair or after two. In this era, people become tainted with negative qualities (pessimism, laziness, criminal tendencies, and doubt) and are weak in comparison to their ancestors. The *Vedas* are divided into four parts. During this era, diseases are rampant and humans are unhappy and fight each other.
- *Kali Yuga* (Iron Age) is the final era or stage (current era). It is a time of darkness and ignorance. Humans are sinners and lack virtue. They are slaves to their passions and are barely as powerful as their earliest ancestors in the *Satya Yuga*. Social cohesion and respect are lost and humans become liars and hypocrites. It is a time when knowledge is lost and scriptures diminished. Humans eat forbidden and unclean food. The environment is polluted, water and food become scarce. Wealth is heavily diminished. Families become non-existent. At the end of this stage, the world and all living things are destroyed and then a new *Satya Yuga* follows.

The Hindu notion of time is cyclical, the universe is considered to be continually flowing through these four periods of time. As time progresses from one *yuga* (era) to another, human society degrades or diminishes in moral, spiritual, and other qualities to a level lower than before. Eventually, the cycle culminates in the destruction of the existing order at the end of the *Kali Yuga*. After this, the golden era of *Satya Yuga* begins anew. (More recently, some Hindu's, based on new interpretations of scriptures, have come to believe that there is a descending and ascending order of the four *yugas*. In this case the order would be reversed moving from *Kali Yuga* to *Dvapara Yuga*, and so on.) Prevailing Hindu calculations and beliefs put us as currently living in the *Kali Yuga* stage.

One God with Many Manifestations

In any Hindu temple one is likely to find many divine images, or *murtis*, in the form of statues or prints. Even when the central image in the temple may be of one particular deity, surrounding this central sanctum or image there may be a dozen subsidiary shrines to various deities.



Figure 11: Hindu Deities

In Hinduism, the concept of god varies from one sect to another. Due to its historical development, Hinduism tends to be a regional religion rather than a single doctrinal religion. Some describe Hinduism as encompassing a broad range of perspectives on the nature of god including

- polytheism: The belief that there are several or many distinct gods.
- pantheism: The belief that all reality is identical with a creator or god, or that everything composes an all-encompassing, immanent god.
- monism: The view that attributes oneness or singleness to a concept.
- monotheism: The belief in the existence of a single god.

In Hinduism, god is one, but also many. This one ultimate reality, whether you refer to it as *The Brahman*, the Divine, or the Real, can be perceived in and through an infinite number of names and forms. The Hindu concept of god and deity varies from supreme god (known as Parameshwar or Paramatma) to a personal god such as in the *Yoga* school of Hindu philosophy to 33 Vedic deities, to hundreds of deities as described in the *Puranics*. For example, Ram and Krishna were reincarnated from the supreme god. So Hindus might worship *The Brahman*, Ram, and/or Krishna.

Hindus also believe that god permeates all things—animate or inanimate—and, as they enhance our well-being, intellect, and spirituality, one worships them. For example, the sun provides us with warmth and life, so we respect the Sun god; our parents protect us, feed us, guide us, and look after our well-being, so we respect our parents as gods.

Another way to think of the Hindu gods is to think of their different manifestations that relate to roles. For example, for a child and their siblings, the female parent is a mother; to the mother's siblings, she is a sister; and to her parents she is a daughter. She is also a granddaughter, an aunt, a friend, and a person. Although she is one, she takes on many different roles.

The philosophical system of *Advaita* or non-dualism (not-two) developed in the *Vedanta* school of Hindu philosophy is the belief that everything is part of one consciousness. Things can appear different without being separate. Just look at your hand for a moment. Your fingers are all different from each other, but are they really separate? They all arise from the same hand. Similarly, the objects, animals, plants, and people in the world are all different in their appearance and functioning; however, they are all connected at their source—they come from the same source. This one being that is behind all life has an infinite number of different expressions that we experience as different objects. *Advaita* is rooted in the *Upanishads* and was popularized by Adi Shankara in the 8th century. This perspective would become the basis of mainstream Hinduism as it developed in the medieval period. Non-dualism sees the identity of the Self or *Atman* with the Whole or *The Brahman*, and can be described as monism or pantheism.

Explicit monotheism is found in the sacred texts of the *Bhagavad Gita* and gave rise to several religious traditions.

- Explicit monotheism in the form of *bhakti* (emotional or ecstatic devotion) to a single, external, and personal deity (in the form of Shiva or Vishnu) became popular in South India in the early medieval period.
- Ecstatic devotion to Krishna, a form of Vishnu, gained popularity throughout India during the Middle Ages and gave rise to schools of *Vaishnavism*.
- Ecstatic devotion to the goddess Durga became popular in some parts of India in the later medieval and early modern ages and gave rise to schools of *Shaktism*.
- *Vaishnavism*, particularly *Krishnaism*, *Shaktism*, and some forms of *Shaivism* remain the most explicit forms of monotheistic worship of a personal god within Hinduism.

Other Hindus, such as many of those who practice *Shaivism*, tend to assume the existence of a singular god, but do not necessarily associate god with aspects of a personality. Rather, they envisage god as an impersonal Absolute (*Brahman*), who can be worshipped only in part in a human form.

The term *Ishvara* may refer to any of the monotheistic or monistic conceptions within Hinduism, depending on context.

While many Hindu deities have distinct and complex personalities, many adherents would insist that this diversity of expressions of god must be understood in relation to god's oneness. *Brahman* is the name of that one god that transcends all personal names. *Brahman* is one, though the "names and forms" of this one are many. This one god *Brahman* may be seen in and through an array of names and forms. Thus all the gods represented or present in a Hindu temple are different representations of the one Supreme Being—even though each has its own personality and attributes.

Thus, Hinduism may be considered a monotheistic religion as most Hindus believe in one supreme god whose qualities and forms may be represented by a multitude of deities, all which emanate from Him. Hindus believe that *The Brahman* is manifested as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. They comprise the Hindu Trinity, where Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu is the Preserver, and Shiva is the Dissolver.

Brahman also manifests as the world of multiplicity and plurality, and may assume divine physical forms (avatar) from time to time for the preservation of righteousness. Three prominent avatars are Rama, Krishna, and Buddha. The many Deities worshipped by numerous Hindus are considered various aspects of *The Brahman*, and not a substitute for the supreme impersonal *Brahman*.

Conceptual Foundations

There are many prominent concepts and tenets enshrined in Hinduism that have widespread relevance and applications. Some of these are as follows:

- The Immanency of Ishwara Avatara (Manifold incarnations of god—It is said in the Hindu scriptures that Lord Vishnu has already appeared in 9 avatars and the 10th avatara is to appear at the end of *Kali Yuga*.)
- The Law of Karma (Action and Reaction—When we choose happiness and success for others, the fruit of our *karma* is happiness and success.)
- The Theory of *Punarjanma*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, governed by *karma* (Reincarnation—After death of the physical body, the soul is reborn in a new form. The



Figure 12: Vishnu

soul transmigrates from one body to another. As we cast off worn out clothes and put on new ones, so the soul casts off a worn out body and enters a new one.)

- The Doctrine of *Maya* (The whole world is illusionary and the soul is the only reality: The mind is a limited, purely physical, and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled.)
- The Principle of *Gunatraya* (There are three *gunas* of nature: *Sattva*—light of conscious awareness; promotes life, energy, health, contentment, and increased spiritual understanding; *Rajas*—energy of change; promotes passion, desire, effort, pain, unsteadiness, agitation, and unhappiness, *Tamas*—conceals presence of consciousness, dullness, ignorance, obscureness, lethargy, procrastination, and sleep.)
- The Proclamation of *Varnashrama Dharma*:
 - *Chaturvarga*—Four Objectives of Life: *Dharma* (faith and devotion to god and living a life of righteousness), *Artha* (acquisition of knowledge, health, and wealth), *Kama* (sensual gratifications and desires), and *Moksha* (merging of the soul with the Supreme; liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth)
 - *Chaturashrama*—Four Stages in Life: *Brahmacharaya* (the student stage—period of intellectual growth and formal education, preparing for the future), *Grihastha* (married family life—earning a living, pursuit of wealth, and indulging in sensual pleasures), *Vanaprastha* (the spiritual stage—renouncing materialistic and sensual pleasures and retiring from social and professional life), *Sannyasa* (the renunciation—giving up desires, hopes, fears, duties, and responsibilities; solely concentrating on god to prepare for attaining *moksha*)
 - *Chaturvarna*—Four Caste Division:
 - *Brahmin*: the priest class (the learned, teachers, performers of rituals, spiritual masters to link human beings to the Divine)
 - *Kshatriya*: the protector class (military and others who protect the community from aggression)
 - *Vaishya*: business class (those that carry on business and trade)
 - *Shudra*: physical labour (referred to as untouchables or *dalit*, they perform labour such as cleaning, pottery, carpentry, etc.)
- The Practice of *Sadharana Dharma*: principles and forms of self-restraint which are considered to be common to all, or universal (for example, virtues, practices of cleanliness and purity, austerity, detachment, morality, truth, self-control, non-stealing, giving donations, and non-injury)
- The Observance of *Sadhana*:
 - *Karma Yoga*—yoga of selfless and righteous action

- *Bhakti Yoga*—yoga of loving devotion
- *Ashtanga/Raja Yoga*—yoga of physical exercise and meditation
- *Jnana/Gyan Yoga*—yoga of knowledge
- The three *gunas* (tendencies or qualities): These categories of qualities have been widely adopted by various schools of Hinduism for categorizing behaviour and natural phenomena. The following are the three qualities/*gunas*:
 - *Sattva*: balance, harmony, goodness, purity, universalizing, holistic, constructive, creative, building, positive, peaceful, virtuous
 - *Rajas*: passion, activity, neither good nor bad and sometimes either, self-centeredness, egoistic, individualizing, driven, moving, dynamic
 - *Tamas*: imbalance, disorder, chaos, anxiety, impure, destructive, delusion, negative, dull or inactive, apathy, inertia or lethargy, violent, vicious, ignorant

Hindu beliefs vary by region, school or sect, and historical period, as well as in a myriad of other ways. What follows are several important beliefs which might be said to characterize the understandings of many, if not all, contemporary Hindus.

The Brahman is understood as the ineffable, invisible, and transcendent all-pervasive reality underlying the world of sense perception. *The Brahman* is eternal and formless and amounts to the highest form of truth within Hinduism. Furthermore, because all things participate in *The Brahman*, the concept suggests an essential underlying unity to existence. Glimpsing, sharing in, understanding, or joining with *The Brahman* are the focus of many Hindu spiritual and religious devotions and practices. All things come from *The Brahman*. This is the basis for the concept of interdependence and interconnection between all things: *Vasudaiva Kutubakam*—the whole world is one family.

The Brahman is an impersonal reality; many Hindus worship particular manifestations of *The Brahman*, such as Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Krishna, Rama, Hanuman, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and others. In some sense, Hinduism appears as polytheistic; however, the various gods and goddesses are viewed strictly as embodiments of the Divine *Brahman*, and so the system is monotheistic.

Atman is the true inner self of the individual which carries on from one life to another. It is the soul or nature of all living things (not only humans). *Atman* refers to the way that individual existence is part of and intertwines in the Divine. Liberation from birth and rebirth (or death and re-death) consists in fully merging the *atman* with *The Brahman* or *Paramatma*.

Maya is often translated as “illusion” and refers to the transitory nature of daily, sensual experience. One aspect of *maya* is the common misperception

of things as separate; here, the deeper underlying truth is one of a pervasive interconnection.

Dharma indicates moral order, duty, and righteous conduct, and is related to the concept of *swadharma*—one's own duty as it relates to their role in their journey of life.

Karma is the belief that actions have both moral and pragmatic consequences. Each and every action, thought, and belief are thought to have consequences not only on one's current life, but on future lives. Thus the rebirth of an individual can take nearly unlimited forms and is dictated by one's accumulated *karma* in the present life and in previous lives.

Samsara is the wheel or cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. It is a cyclical process that continues until one reaches a state of enlightenment and freedom. Hindus believe that, upon death, one begins a process of rebirth into a new life. After death, the body is cremated to break the attachment of the soul to the physical body.

Moksha (also known as *nirvana*) is the term for liberation from the cycle of *samsara*. It is considered an honour to be born human, since only a human is capable of pursuing *moksha*. Typically, attaining *moksha* requires many birth-rebirth cycles and is a difficult, involved process.

Samadhi is union with the Divine brought about through meditative or ritual practice.