



Hindu Dharma

Note that the word 'Hinduism' is a European word for describing a diverse religious tradition that developed in what is now northern India. People within the tradition itself often call Hinduism 'Sanatan Dharma', which means 'Eternal Way' and describes a complete way of life rather than a set of beliefs.

Dharma

The key concept of *dharma* frames a Hindu's life. It describes Hindu social and moral duty. Hindus aim to live in conformity with their *dharma*, and aiming to maintain this will inform all or many aspects of their life. *Dharma* varies according to the personal path individual Hindus have taken and the circumstances of life.

Brahman

Brahman represents the concept of God in Hindu Dharma. Brahman is seen as the source of all life, the sum total of all souls in the Universe, present in every living thing and the 'place' or state of being that is *moksha*. Brahman is too infinite to be understood by the human intellect, but humans can come to Brahman, the Ultimate, through the many Hindu deities – gods and goddesses – all of whom represent an aspect of Brahman's character or being. Other deities through whom Brahman is worshipped are Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva, Lord Ganesh (or 'Ganpati'), Goddess Lakshmi, Goddess Parvati, Goddess Sarasvati and Durga Mata.

Atman

The *atman* refers to the 'eternal self', the 'essence' of a single being. When the body dies, the *atman* moves into a new body in the process known as *samsara*, or reincarnation. Hindus believe Brahman is present in the *atman*, which is in all living things, and the elements – earth, air, fire and water.

Karma

The *atman* returns to the Earth in another body according to the law of *karma*. This translates as 'action' or 'deed', but its wider meaning is 'cause and effect'. *Karma* refers to the sum of a Hindu's actions, which will determine his or her future existences. A life lived in accordance with one's *dharma* means future reincarnation in a body with more potential to reach Brahman/*moksha*.

Samsara

Samsara describes the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (reincarnation). The life one is born into depends on how the previous life has been lived, or how far the individual kept or performed his or her *dharma*. There is no personal judgement of the individual. Together, the laws of *karma* and *samsara* provide cosmic, but impersonal, balance.

Moksha

Moksha describes the ultimate goal of all Hindus: liberation from the cycle of *samsara* and the constant pain of rebirth. There are different ways to attain *moksha* and one path says that by following one's *dharma*, one slowly achieves more and more favourable births. *Moksha* is sometimes described as a drop of water meeting the ocean, as the *atman* is finally reunited with Brahman.