

Hinduism

Introduction

Hinduism originated in the area now called India and is still practiced by 80% of its inhabitants. Hinduism is considered a major world religion because of its approximately 700 million believers and its influence on many other religions during its long history. Some authorities date it back to about 1500 BC and consider it the oldest religion in the world. This religion cannot be traced to a specific founder and does not have only one "holy book" as a spiritual guide. Unlike most other religions, Hinduism does not promote the worship of one particular deity. A Hindu may worship one or many different manifestations of the divine. They consider themselves successful Hindus when they reach the "*Ultimate Reality*" or *nirvana* in their lives.

Central Beliefs

According to Hindu beliefs, Brahman is the principle source of the universe. This divine intelligence exists in all beings. Thus all the Hindu gods and goddesses are manifestations of the one Brahman. Hinduism is based on the concept of reincarnation, in which all living beings, from plants to gods, live in a cycle of living and dying.

Life is determined by the law of karma. According to karma, the quality of rebirth is determined by the moral behavior displayed in the previous life. In this view, life on earth is regarded as temporary and a challenge. The goal of existence is to reach liberation from the cycle of rebirth and death and enter into an indescribable state called *moksha* (liberation). The ones who reach this state no longer struggle with the cycle of life and death.

Deities

Shiva is the Hindu god that represents both the destructive and creative forces of the universe. He is often depicted wearing a cobra around his neck and the Ganges River flowing from his head. Shiva is also the god of selflessness and meditation. Some Hindus worship Shiva as the supreme deity. Hindus also consider him as the god of salvation and destruction.

Kali, Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi and other forms of the Divine Mother, or Devi, are depicted as consorts of particular gods and major powers in their own right. Through the Divine Mother, all life comes to have form. Her power is often referred to as *shakti*.

Vishnu is the other major god of Hinduism. He is thought of as the preserver of the universe. Some writings refer to him as the eternal, almighty spirit that existed with primitive waters believed to have been present before the creation of the world. Vishnu, when in one of his mortal forms is shown sleeping on a great serpent and floating on water. While in his godly form, he is seen in either black or blue. He can be seen in various colors while in mortal form. Normally, in his godly form, he is seen with four arms: One hand holds a lotus; a second holds a conch; a third holds a discus, which always returns by itself after being thrown; and the fourth carries a mace.

Rama is a Hindu deity worshiped throughout Hinduism as the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. Rama is represented as the ideal hero of the Sanskrit epic poem the *Ramayana*. He was meant to be a secular hero in the epic, but he is seen in the first and sixth books as an incarnation of Vishnu. Rama comes to earth to kill the demon king Ravana.

Krishna is the eighth incarnation of the god Vishnu. According to legend, Vishnu appeared as Krishna to rid the world of a tyrannical king named Kamsa, a son of a demon. Many legends tell of Krishna's miracles and heroic exploits. He mostly appears in the epic poem *Mahabharata* in which

he helps the hero Arjuna. Right before a decisive battle, Krishna delivers a speech to Arjuna. This speech became the famous commentary on duty and life known as the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

Sacred Writings

Mahabharata, Sanskrit for Great Story, is one of the great epic poems of ancient India. Written between 300 BC and AD 300, it was meant to be a secular work. However, because of its many religious qualities, it has given many ideas for Hindus to live by. The *Mahabharata* focuses on a contest between two noble families for the possession of a kingdom in northern India. One segment of the poem, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, is a dialogue between Krishna and the hero Arjuna on the meaning of life. It has given insight for centuries to devout Hindu believers on the true meaning of life.

Ramayana is the shorter of the two great Sanskrit epics of ancient India. Rich in descriptions and poetic language, the *Ramayana* consists of seven books and 24,000 couplets. Written in 3rd century BC, the *Ramayana* tells the story of *Rama*, and his wife, Sita. Rama and Sita are generally seen as ideal examples of great manly heroism and wifely devotion. Reciting the *Ramayana* is considered a religious act, and scenes from the epic are portrayed throughout India and Southeast Asia.

Bhagavad-Gita

Bhagavad-Gita is a Sanskrit poem consisting of 700 verses divided into 18 chapters. Most Hindus regard it as their most important text and the essence of their belief.

Nirvana

Nirvana is the supreme state free from suffering and individual existence. It is a state often referred to as "self realization" or "God realization". It's the ultimate religious goal of all Hindus. The attainment of nirvana breaks the otherwise endless rebirth cycle of transmigration. Hindus call this nirvana "eternal bliss". However, no one can describe in words what nirvana is. It can only be experienced directly.

Transmigration

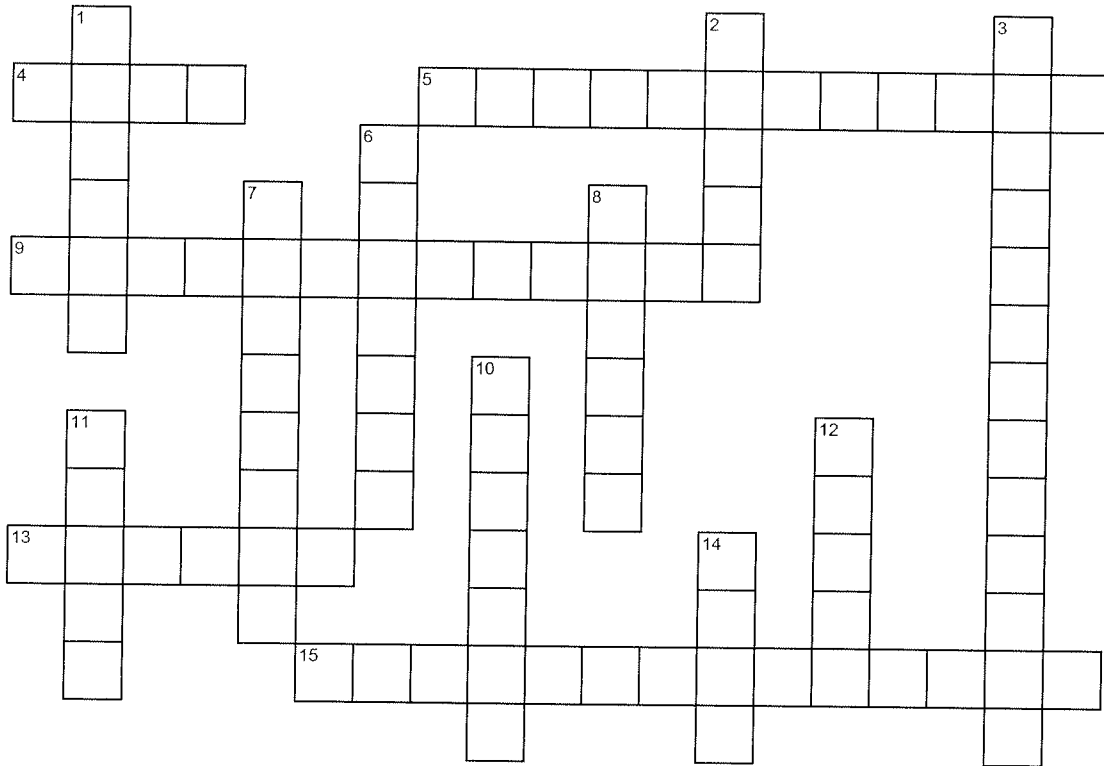
Transmigration is passing of the soul at death into a new body or new form of being. Transmigration and reincarnation, the soul's rebirth in a new body, are roughly the same. Transmigration occurs until a soul reaches the perfect state of nirvana, or God.

Yoga

Yoga is one of the six classic systems of Hindu philosophy that practices certain disciplines to achieve freedom from the limitations of the flesh and lead to the fulfillment of knowledge. The goal of Yoga is not to achieve peace within, channeling, or the working of miracles, but the acquirement of knowledge. In fact, the Yoga doctrine insists that physical and mental training should be used only as a means to spiritual needs.

Yoga practice forms a ladder to perfect knowledge through eight stages: self-control, religious observance, postures, regulation of the breath, restraint of the senses, steady of the mind, meditation, and profound contemplation.

Hinduism Crossword



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ACROSS

- 4 Vishnu has this many arms
- 5 Hinduism has _____ million followers
- 9 Krishna's famous speech to Arjuna
- 13 Preserver of the Universe
- 15 Passing of the soul at death into a new body or new being

DOWN

- 1 The goal of existence is to reach this
- 2 The Hindu god that represents destruction and creation
- 3 The souls rebirth into a new body
- 6 Principle source of the Universe
- 7 Reciting the _____ is considered a religious act
- 8 Hinduism is practiced by ____ % of India
- 10 "Self Realization"
- 11 The Hindu God that represents both destructive and creative forces
- 12 Moral Behavior displayed in previous life
- 14 A way to achieve freedom from limitations of the flesh