

Brahman, Atman, and Moksha: The Supreme Spirit, the True Self, and Liberation

Brahman-the Supreme Spirit

Many people think of God as being ‘up there’ in heaven. We are down here in our world and God is elsewhere. Others believe that God is also ‘down here’, surrounding everything and keeping us company. Hindus go a step further than this; they don’t just believe that God is here, surrounding us. They believe that God IS everything: everything that exists and appears IS God, taking shape as different forms. In the epic Hindu poem, the Mahabarata, it says,

“I am the taste in the water, the rays of the sun and moon. I am the sweet fragrance of the earth, the brilliance of fire. I am the life in all beings”.

Hindus call this God, **Brahman**, which Westerners translate as ‘the Supreme Spirit’ and, this Supreme Spirit is believed to make up everything that exists. Hence, the Upanishads say, *“This whole universe is Brahman”*.

Atman-the True Self

Because Brahman is everywhere and in all things, it also lies within each individual’s heart. Hindus call this Supreme Spirit that dwells within all beings the **Atman**, or ‘True Self’. Thus the Upanishads state, *“This Atman within my heart is that Brahman”*.

Sometimes, when people write about the Atman, they simply refer to it as ‘the Self’ (with a big ‘S’). They do this to show that is bigger than our ordinary ‘self’ (with a small ‘s’), the person we believe we are most of the time.

Moksha-Liberation

It is this Atman or ‘True Self’ which passes from life to life until the process of reincarnation is brought to an end. In the Upanishads it says,

“As the embodied Atman passes in this body, from boyhood to youth and to old age, it also passes into another body at death”.

The final goal of Hindu religious practice is to dissolve the Atman into the Brahman and break the cycle of reincarnation or ‘samsara’. Because this dissolving of the Atman into the Brahman frees or ‘liberates’ individuals from ‘samsara’, this dissolving is called ‘**Moksha**’ or ‘**Liberation**’.

How does it feel When You Dissolve the Atman into the Brahman?

In order to dissolve the Atman into Brahman and achieve Moksha, Hindus need to do two things:

- 1) Recognize that everything that makes up their world is Brahman.
- 2) See beyond the 'self' and recognize the True Self or Atman.

1) Recognizing the world as Brahman

Recognizing that everything is Brahman is similar to seeing everything as being made up of atoms or particles; if you do this for long enough, the appearance of individual 'things' disappears. Try this for two or three minutes and see how it makes you feel.

2) Seeing beyond the 'self' and recognizing the Atman

If you keep looking 'underneath' your thoughts, into the space that thoughts come from, a sense of spaciousness arises. Now try this for two or three minutes and see how that feels.

Finally, for a couple of minutes, mix the two experiences. When the mind hangs onto thoughts about external forms and people, remember they are all merely particles; when it is simply filled with thoughts, look underneath them at the space in the mind. When it feels a bit spacey, just let go! (Remember to stay awake though!)

Tasks

What is Brahman?

What is Atman?

What is Moksha and how is it achieved?

How do you think the Hindu beliefs in Brahman and Atman affect the way they see things?

Hindus believe that the Atman is eternal, while the ordinary, everyday 'self' is subject to change. What parts of you change and what parts stay the same?

How did you feel when you did the meditation exercise?

Do you believe that there is a deeper part to you that you haven't really experienced yet, somewhere beyond your thoughts? Why/why not?

Some Western writers have translated Atman as 'Soul'? What do you think the soul is? Is it the same as the Atman?

Design a small poster (1 page) entitled 'The Outer World, The Inner World'.

How Does Brahman Manifest (1)? The Hindu Trimurti: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva

The fact that the Supreme Spirit, Brahman, is everywhere and makes up all things is both comforting and problematic for Hindus: on the one hand, it means that Hindus can feel close to their god at all times and in all situations. On the other hand, being everywhere and all things makes it very difficult to think about or conceive of. And, when you can't think of something as an actual 'thing' it makes it very difficult to feel that you can communicate with it. (Of course, if Brahman makes up all things, then even a table is actually god. But most Hindus would feel pretty silly if they were seen praying to a table!)

In order to make communication with Brahman easier for Hindus and in order for it to be able to carry out different tasks and responsibilities, the Supreme Spirit takes on the form of the various gods and goddesses of the Hindu **pantheon**: a pantheon is the collection of gods or deities that belong to a religion. While there are said to be tens of millions of gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, there are three that are considered to be most important. These three, **Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva**, are sometimes referred to as the Hindu **trimurti**: the word trimurti means '3 forms' and is used to demonstrate the fact that, among all the millions of different gods, these three are considered to perform the most important functions, namely: creation, preservation and destruction. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are believed to have worked together in an 'eternal loop' of universal creation, preservation and destruction since beginningless time.

The Hindu Trimurti: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva-Creator, Preserver and Destroyer

a) Brahma: the Creator God

Brahma is the god who is responsible for creating universes. He is usually shown as a royal figure with four faces and four arms: the four faces which look out in the four directions show that he sees or 'knows' all things (or is **omniscient**) and the four arms show that he has power over all things, (or is **omnipotent**). Each of his four hands holds a different article. One holds a water pot called a **kamandalu**: water is very important in the process of creation and is also used in Hindu worship rituals. Another hand holds a ritual spoon or ladle: this is Brahma's royal sceptre and again is an important ritual tool. Another hand holds a rosary or **mala**, prayer beads used by Hindus when reciting god's names or **mantra**. (Mantra are sacred 'power-words' that can be used to for different purposes. Probably the nearest things we have to mantra in English are words like 'abracadabra'). The final hand holds a copy of the ancient Hindu holy writings, the **Vedas**. Brahma holds these so that when he is recreating universes he can use them like an instruction manual.

b) Vishnu: the Preserver God

Vishnu is the god who preserves universes: he maintains their harmony and protects things from decay. He is usually shown standing on a lotus flower, a symbol of purity because the lotus is so beautiful and yet it grows in mud. Vishnu's body is blue to show that he is infinite like the sky. On his forehead are three vertical lines,

symbolizing the Trimurti. He has four hands, each holding something different. One holds a mace, which acts as both a weapon and a symbol of royalty; Vishnu uses the mace to protect the world from evil. Another hand holds a discus or '**chakra**' (wheel/circle). While this can act as another weapon for fighting evil, the fact that the chakra is spinning on Vishnu's finger shows how he maintains balance in the universe. Another hand holds a lotus flower. The final one holds a conch shell. In ancient times the conch was blown to announce victory in battle. It is also an important ritual instrument.

Vishnu is said to have appeared in nine different forms on earth. When gods take on forms and come to earth like this, they are known as **avatars**. Vishnu's two most important avatars are Krishna and Rama.

c) Shiva: the Destroyer God

While Shiva is responsible for destroying universes, it is important that he is also deeply involved in the process of creation. This is so because, for example, it is necessary to clear a space before you can build something in it.

Shiva, who appears in several different forms, is often shown as **Nataraja, Lord of the Dance**. As Lord of the Dance, he stands on a dwarf that represents ignorance or the belief in a false self. His four hands represent his control over life and death, good and evil. One hand holds flames showing his destructive power. Another hand holds a **damru**, a hand drum shaped like an hour glass. One hand points down towards the dwarf, showing how he has overcome ignorance. The other is held palm outwards in the mudra of giving protection.

Do Hindus Worship One God or Many?

While there are said to be tens of millions of Hindu gods, these are all believed to be the Supreme Spirit, Brahman, taking shape in different forms to carry out different functions. Therefore, the correct answer to the above question is 'Hindus worship one god (Brahman) in many different forms'.

Tasks

- ❖ What is the Trimurti?
- ❖ Explain the roles of the three different gods
- ❖ What is an avatar?
- ❖ What is a pantheon?
- ❖ What do we mean when we say that Hindus worship one god in many forms?
- ❖ Why do you think these gods have so many arms?
- ❖ Shiva destroys the world when he sees that it is no longer a spiritually healthy place. Some Hindus say we have now reached that point. Can you think which things they might be talking about? Give some examples of how our world is no longer 'spiritually healthy'.
- ❖ What is the difference between the Western view of the creation and destruction of the universe and the Hindu one?
- ❖ Draw and label one of the Trimurti.

How Does Brahman Manifest (2)? Shakti, Feminine Energy: The Goddess as Power

The fact that the trimurti is made up of three male gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, can give the impression that the Hindu **pantheon** of deities is male dominated. In reality, Hindus believe that these male gods would be unable to carry out their roles of creating, preserving and destroying without the aid of their female counterparts, the goddesses or '**shakti**'.

Shakti means 'power' or 'energy'; it is the creative force in the universe. Because, in life, it is generally the female that gives birth, shakti is shown or depicted as the female goddess, because shakti is the feminine power that 'gives birth' to everything in the universe. Each of the gods of the **trimurti** has a corresponding wife or 'consort' who is referred to as their shakti.

1) Brahma's Shakti: Saraswati-The Goddess of Knowledge, Learning and the Arts

Brahma's shakti, the goddess Saraswati has one face, four arms, and is seated on a lotus flower. Her upper right hand holds a **mala** or rosary; her lower left hand holds a copy of the Vedas. With the other two arms she plays a **vina**, a stringed instrument similar to a lute. Hindus would pray to Saraswati when they needed to develop knowledge and understanding. This could be either 'spiritual' or 'worldly' knowledge. So, a Hindu might pray to her if they wanted to develop their understanding of their religious philosophy or simply to help them pass their exams!

2) Vishnu's Shakti: Lakshmi-The Goddess of Beauty, Wealth and Good Fortune

Vishnu's shakti, Lakshmi has one face and four arms and stands on a pink lotus flower- Hindus associate the colour pink with the quality of kindness. Her hands can hold various objects but usually, the upper two hold lotus flowers while golden coins pour from one of her lower hands. This shows that one of her main functions is to grant wealth to those who pray to her.

The worship of Lakshmi is particularly popular at the end of the festival of **Diwali**, at the beginning of the Hindu New Year (This is around October-November time). At this time she is prayed to in the home, as well as by business owners. She is also reputed to visit the homes of well behaved children, bearing gifts. The story of Diwali is the story of **Princess Sita** and **Prince Rama** from the **Ramayana**. Just as Rama is considered to be a human manifestation, or 'avatar' of the god Vishnu, his wife Sita is believed to be the goddess Lakshmi appearing in human form.

3) Shiva's Shakti -Parvati, Durga & Kali

Shiva the Destroyer has many wives but three are particularly popular objects of Hindu worship, namely Parvati, Durga & Kali.

a) Parvati

The shakti Parvati is usually shown alongside Shiva and accompanied by their son, the elephant-headed god **Ganesha** (see 'Popular Gods and Goddesses'). Seeing the god and goddess together reminds Hindus that the **Supreme Spirit** or **Brahman** is both feminine and masculine. While Parvati can appear in a number of different forms, many of them show her as having a kind and peaceful appearance, embracing her husband Shiva. This shows her qualities of loyalty and devotion. Hindu women who wish to preserve a happy relationship

with their husbands or simply to find one often pray to Parvati, particularly during the festival of **Mahashivaratri**.

b) Durga

The warrior goddess Durga rides on the back of a tiger and, in her eight hands, carries a number of weapons including a mace, a discus, a sword, a trident, and a bow. Her appearance and the things she carries give us a clue as to her function, which is to destroy evil and the belief in a false self which Hindus believe holds them in **samsara**.

Durga is worshipped in a nine day festival called **Navaratri**-in West Bengal, the festival is often called **Durga Puja**. Durga Puja remembers a story where the goddess defeated a buffalo demon who threatened heaven and earth. For nine days, devotees worship an image of the goddess and then, on the tenth day after the beginning of the festival, the statue is taken to a river and placed in the water. As the statue is washed, Hindus believe all their misfortune is removed and all of their life's difficulties are taken away. The tenth day is called the festival of **Dussehra**.

c) Kali

Probably the most terrifying looking of all Shiva's shaktis is the goddess of destruction, Kali. Kali, who is usually black, stands on the corpse of a demon with her bloody tongue hanging out. Around her waist is a skirt made from severed arms and around her neck is a garland of human skulls. Two of her four hands hold a severed head and a sickle, dripping with blood. Kali's principle function is the swift and wrathful destruction of evil, either within or around oneself.

Tasks

- ❖ Who or what is 'shakti'?
- ❖ Describe one shakti of each of the trimurti and explain their function.
- ❖ Draw one of the goddesses. Label the drawing and underneath write a short explanation of what the deity does.
- ❖ The goddesses Kali and Durga are particularly popular. Why do you think that is?
- ❖ Why do you think the goddess appears in so many different forms?
- ❖ With a partner, make a list of the qualities of a good mother. Then highlight or underline which of these qualities could be used for talking about god.
- ❖ Sometimes the goddess has a calm and serene appearance, at other times she appears fierce and wrathful. However, in either form, she is seen as doing good for the sake of mankind. Can you think of a situation where a mother might appear to be very angry but it is actually for the good of her child-try to think of an example from your own experience.
- ❖ The pink colour of the lotus flower on which Lakshmi stands is said to show her kindness. Can you think of any other colours that are associated with particular emotions or characteristics? List them.
- ❖ Do you think we need a partner to bring out the best in us? Why/why not?

How does Brahman Manifest(3)? Popular Gods and Goddesses

While the gods of the trimurti, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, are responsible for the formidable tasks of creating, preserving and destroying universes, there are other gods that Hindus pray to for making things happen in their lives. It is as if the trimurti are responsible for making the universe possible, while others are responsible for making things happen in it at a more day-to-day level. We have already seen how the goddesses Sarasvati and Lakshmi can help Hindus increase their intelligence and wealth, for instance.

Because these gods and goddesses are widely and frequently worshipped throughout the Hindu world, we can refer to them as the popular gods and goddesses. Amongst these different deities there are two that are perhaps more popular than any others: the elephant-headed god Ganesha, and the monkey god Hanuman.

Ganesha-The Elephant Headed Remover of Obstacles

Ganesha is considered to be the son of Shiva and Parvati and appears in several different forms. Common to all of these is an elephant's head. Ganesha was originally a young man who Parvati had moulded from clay to stand guard at her door while she bathed. When Shiva came to her door but was refused entry, the god of destruction became furious and chopped off his head. This so distressed Parvati that Lord Shiva sent someone to find a replacement, telling them to bring back the head of the first creature they came across that was lying down and facing north. The first creature Shiva's envoy came across who was asleep with his head facing northwards was the king of the elephants. So, he lopped off the head and carried it back to Shiva, who quickly attached it to the body of the boy and breathed life into it.

Ganesha is frequently shown with four arms holding a lotus flower (a symbol of purity), an axe (which represents his ability to destroy obstacles) an open palm facing upwards and outwards (a gesture or '**mudra**' which signifies granting blessings) and a bowl of sweet food (which symbolizes the sweetness of the results of pursuing spiritual wisdom).

The elephant god's principal function is the destruction of obstacles. This is not surprising when one considers the formidable strength of the elephant and the fact that, in ancient times, it was considered to be one of the most powerful weapons to have on the battlefield. Hindu worship is often preceded by a short praise of Ganesha to ensure that the prayer is successful, and whenever Hindus start out on a new business venture they will perform Ganesha **puja**.

Hanuman-The Monkey God

Hanuman is the monkey god who helps Rama find Sita after she has been kidnapped in the epic poem, the Ramayana. He represents the qualities of devotion, strength and service to others. He is usually depicted carrying a mace, which acts as both a weapon and a symbol of status, and a mountain. The mountain reminds us of the episode in the Ramayana where Rama's brother is badly wounded and, in order to heal him,

Hanuman carries a mountain strewn with medicinal herbs across the southern ocean. This action demonstrates all three of the qualities outlined above.

Hindus pray to Hanuman for courage and confidence and protection against evil; they believe Hanuman is able to protect them from evil because spirits fear him because of the power of his devotion.

Tasks

- ❖ The gods of the trimurti are responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe. What are the popular gods and goddesses responsible for?
- ❖ Why do Hindus pray to: a] Ganesha b] Hanuman?
- ❖ Why do you think Ganesha and Hanuman are so popular?
- ❖ How did Ganesha come to have an elephant's head?
- ❖ How does Hanuman's carrying of the mountain demonstrate the qualities of loyalty and service to others?
- ❖ Draw a picture of Ganesha, labelling each of the things he holds and explaining what they symbolize.
- ❖ There are many stories about the gods and goddesses of Hinduism. Why do you think stories are used to explain religious ideas so much?
- ❖ Imagine you are a Hindu starting out a new business with a non-religious partner. Write a short letter to him or her, explaining why you feel it is so important that you perform Ganesha puja.
- ❖ Design your own god or symbol to represent the ideas of compassion and kindness to others.

Samsara and Karma; the Cycle of Birth, Death and Rebirth and the Law of Action and Result

Nowadays, lots of people in the Western world believe that death is final; after death there is nothing, just a kind of black void. Followers of the Indian religions think differently. For them, death is the first step on a journey that leads on to another life, then another, then another.

This means that Hindus (like the followers of Buddhism and Sikhism) don't just believe in life after death; they also believe that we were alive before this present life! They think this because they believe the alternative possibility, that we suddenly appear from nowhere, makes no sense at all.

Hindus believe that this process of dying and being reborn has been happening since time without beginning, and that individual souls will continue to be reborn until they achieve some sort of perfection. Once souls achieve this state of perfection they are freed from the beginningless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Reincarnation

Western people call this idea of a soul taking birth into one body after another '**reincarnation**'. 'Re' means 'again'; 'in' means 'in' (!); 'carn' means 'flesh' or 'meat'. So the whole word means 'again in flesh'. If you look the word up in a dictionary, it usually says something like 'to be embodied repeatedly'.

Samsara-‘The Cycle’

The word Hindus use for this process of going from one rebirth to another is '**samsara**'. Samsara means 'to cycle or go round'.

Karma-‘Action’: The Law of Action and Result

There are lots of different types of rebirth in samsara. You can come back as a human or a pig; as a god or a ghost; in heaven or in hell-some Hindus believe you can even come back as a flower!

What decides where you come back and what you come back as is your actions. If your actions are good you will get a good rebirth into pleasant circumstances; if they are bad you will get a bad one. The word Hindus use for 'action' is '**karma**'. They believe that karma is like a law that causes everything, like the law of gravity causes everything to fall to earth. Westerners call the Hindu belief in the law of karma, belief in ***the law of action in result*** because, when you believe in the law of karma, you believe that actions have results.

Two Different Goals of Hindu Religious Practice

While a few Hindus practice their religion so that they can completely escape samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, many Hindus believe that it is too difficult to live an ordinary life and do this and so, instead, they just concentrate on following the law of karma so that they can get a good rebirth *within* samsara.

Tasks

- ❖ Explain reincarnation.
- ❖ What is 'samsara'?
- ❖ What is 'karma'?
- ❖ Explain the different goals of Hindu religious practice.
- ❖ What would be the worst thing you could be reborn as and why?
- ❖ If you could, what would you choose to be reborn as and why?
- ❖ If you thought that this life was only one of many, do you think it would make life less important or more important? Why?
- ❖ How do you think a belief that they will live again affects Hindu's attitudes and actions?
- ❖ What about the belief that they have lived before? How would this affect the way Hindus viewed the good things and bad things that happened to them in life?
- ❖ Where do you believe you go when you die? Why do you think that?
- ❖ Where do you think you came from? Why do you think that?
- ❖ What about the ideas that you don't believe? Why don't you believe them?
- ❖ Draw a diagram to illustrate the idea of reincarnation.