

Hindu Beliefs

In order to understand Hinduism, we must learn about a few basic beliefs which form the foundation of the religion. These beliefs are rooted in both *The Vedas* and *The Upanishads*. Some of these ideas may be new to you, although some have become quite popular, such as the idea of reincarnation. Besides defining a belief system, these ideas also carry into Hindu law and rites of passage.

Dharma = MORALS & DUTY

Dharma stands for the ultimate moral balance of all things. Dharma belongs to the universe and to the individual as well. So, just as there is a divine order of the natural and cosmic realms, there is the same order within a personal life. However, each one has the responsibility to balance his or her own dharma.

A Hindu's dharma is played out in all areas of life: religious, social, and familial. If a person makes a promise, the promise must be kept at all costs. Likewise, the faithful maintain their religious rituals while attending to their family's needs.

But what if an individual goes astray? This leads to the next major Hindu belief, karma.

Karma = CONSEQUENCES

Have you ever heard someone say, "What goes around comes around"? What about, "You reap what you sow"? Both of these sayings mirror the Hindu concept of *karma*.

Basically, karma stands for the belief that a person experiences the affects of his or her actions—that every act or thought has consequences. Living in a balanced universe, if an individual disturbs this order, he or she will suffer commensurately. But an ethical and moral life, with undisturbed dharma, will lead to happiness. How, then, can a Hindu hope to find redemption from wrongdoing? If the person does not lead a pure and stainless life, what hope is there for happiness? The answer lies in *samsara*.

Samsara = REINCARNATION

In the Western world, *samsara* is commonly known as reincarnation. *Samsara* represents the cycle of life, death, and rebirth in which a person carries his or her own karma. Each life cycle presents an opportunity for balance.

Therefore, an individual may experience effects from past lives, although the circumstances may be totally different. In fact, many Hindus believe that a person's worldly status depends upon actions in a past life. Likewise, good thoughts and actions can liberate a person. Some Hindus believe that certain people meet in more than one life in order to achieve karmic balance. Thus, every relationship and situation becomes meaningful.

What happens, then, when a person becomes purified? Is reincarnation an eternal process, or is there another realm? The answer lies in *moksha*.

Moksha = HEAVEN

Like heaven for the Christian, Hindus strive to reach *moksha*, or a state of changeless bliss. *Moksha* is achieved by living a life of religious devotion and moral integrity without any interest in worldly things. However, it may be many lifetimes within the wheel of life before *moksha* is achieved. The ultimate reward is release from *samsara* and union with God.