

## Hindu Concepts About God

Throughout their history, Hindus have pondered deeply about the nature of God. From interpretations of scriptures such as the Vedas and Upanishads, observation and reflection, and meditation and spiritual experiences, different philosophies emerged in this quest to know God. Many Hindus understand God to be Brahman or the Infinite. Brahman is believed to be ever-present, all-powerful, and beyond comprehension. Some Hindus believe that Brahman is formless and without attributes, but manifests in form. Other Hindus believe Brahman has a transcendent form and attributes. This supreme and transcendent form is Vishnu or Krishna for Vaishnavas and Shiva for Shaivites. The world is also seen as a manifestation of Brahman and regarded in some traditions as the body of God.



*Marble murtis of Shiva, Parvati, and Ganesha at the Detroit BAPS Shri Swaminaryan Temple in Detroit, MI.*

Hindu understandings of God range from non-dualistic (the universe and the Absolute are not two) to qualified non-dualism (that the universe is different from but dependent on God and inseparable from God) to dualistic (that the universe is both dependent and different from God).

These understandings also range from philosophies of pantheism (all of existence is the Absolute) to panentheism (all of existence is within the Absolute), to theism (the Absolute is external to all of existence). Hindu traditions emphasize that God is the cause of existence and God pervades everything. At the same time, God is beyond and not limited by the world.

The Divine or its essential nature can be seen:

- In oneself and all other human beings
- In all other beings, including plants and animals
- In the whole universe, including mountains, rivers, trees, and other planets

Brahman is an abstract concept, but is believed to become accessible in murtis. The word “*murti*” is typically translated into English as “image” or “idol,” but these definitions are limited. To Hindus, a *murti* is a powerful visual tool used for contemplating the nature of, as well as, communicating with God. It is also believed to be charged with the presence of God, thus Hindus may offer their prayers and devotion to a *murti*. While Hindus understand God to be present in a *murti*, they do not consider God to be limited to the *murti*. Thus the term “embodiment” would be more apt. God is understood as both immanent and transcendent.

God in Hinduism is understood as beyond gender although capable of taking on both masculine and feminine qualities and forms. Some examples of different manifestations include Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer. Female forms include Goddesses such as Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth; Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge; and Parvati, the Goddess of Strength. Each of these deities offers the Hindu worshipper a different quality or aspect of the divine to focus on. Other forms of God include Ganesh, the Remover of Obstacles, and Hanuman, the Embodiment of Strength and Perfect Devotion.



*Ganesha, Remover of Obstacles*

Because of Hinduism's fundamental reverence of the Divine or its essence in all things, animals are commonly depicted in representations of Brahman. For example, Ganesha is presented as having an elephant head, while Hanuman with some features of a monkey. Trees such as the Ashwattha (*Ficus religiosa*), plants such as tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*), and rivers such as the Ganges and Yamuna are also given Divine status in Hinduism.

Hindus believe that God can incarnate in human form, as an *avatar*. For example, God is understood to have taken human form on earth as Rama, the paragon of virtue, or as Krishna, a kingmaker, to eradicate evil from the world at different times in history and establish righteousness. Hindus may also pray to local deities, some of whom were once real people, both men and women, who are believed to have attained such a high level of enlightenment that they are seen as expressions of the divine. Consequently, they may also be seen to be manifestations of other major Gods and Goddesses.

Hinduism promotes respect for other religions and acknowledges truths in their teachings. This philosophy leads to pluralism within and outside of Hinduism. Accordingly, most Hindus see the variety of religions and philosophies as different paths to God. A quote from the Vedas that summarizes the Hindu perspective on God is "Truth is one. The wise call It by various names."

### **Key Takeaways**

- Hinduism affirms the unity and oneness of God which can be represented in a variety of forms
- God exists equally and identically in all beings and can be both male and female
- Hinduism promotes respect for other religion and also acknowledges the truths in their teachings