

Gods and Goddesses: Additional Reading and Facts

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Textbooks on South Asian Art

Dehejia, Vidya. *Indian Art*. London: Phaidon Press, 1997.

Huntington, Susan. *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. New York: Weatherhill, 1985.

Other Readings on South Asian Religions and the Use of Images

Eck, Diana. *Darśan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Cambersburg: Anima Books, 1985.

Davis, Richard. *Lives of Indian Images*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

David Kinsley. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. [Kindle Edition]

Facts Regarding the Religions Discussed in *Gods and Goddesses*

Hinduism

—Vedic Period (ca. 1500–600 B.C.): The Aryans "invade" (1700–1200 B.C. [debated dates]) and bring the Vedas, which originally existed as an oral tradition. Probably starting around 1500 B.C. they were written in Sanskrit (an early Indo-European language).

—The Aryans, in association with the Vedic religion, introduce sacrificial ritual and the caste system.

—Hinduism coalesces out of Vedic and Brahmanic traditions, and sometime between the first century B.C. and first century A.D. the first sculptural representations of Hindu gods are produced.

—Look to Vedas as earliest texts (ca. 1500 B.C.)

—Upanishads (600 B.C.–200 A.D.) introduce the idea of rebirth (*samsara*) that is governed by one's actions (*karma*).

—Like Buddhism or Jainism, the goal in Hinduism is to break free from the cycle of rebirth and reach *moksha* (to be one with everything, to be one with god).

—The gods are "formless," in that they allow themselves to be manifest on earth for the benefit of the worshipper (thus many forms or aspects of the deities appear).

—Anthropomorphic forms are the most approachable for the worshipper, but symbolic or aniconic forms (the *Linga* for example) are in many ways more all-encompassing. All of the gods in a sense reveal different aspects of the divine.

Main Hindu Gods

Shiva

- His consort is Parvati, and his sons are Ganesha and Skanda
- He is a god that destroys corruption to clear the path for new beginnings
- His aniconic or multivalent symbol/image is the *Linga*, which sits in a *yonī*
- When depicted in human form he is a multiarmed deity who typically holds a trident (*trishula*) and a snake (among other things)
- He is an ascetic and often wears an antelope skin.
- His vehicle (*vahana*) is Nandi the Bull

Durga

- Durga is another form of Parvati, and hence is Shiva's wife and *sakti*
- She is a powerful destroyer of demons
- Typically she holds many weapons and often is shown standing on the slain buffalo demon Mahisha
- Her vehicle (*vahana*) is a lion

Vishnu

- His consort is Lakshmi
- After Shiva destroyed the world to clear a path for a pure new beginning, all that remains is Vishnu and his dreams
- His main attributes are a wheel (*charkā*), a club, and a conch
- He is typically dressed as a king and wears a tall miter crown
- His vehicle (*vahana*) is Garuda (half man and half bird)
- Vishnu appears on earth in each age in the form of an *avatar*
 1. Matsya (fish); saved humanity from a flood
 2. Kurma (turtle); helped in obtaining *amrita* (nectar of the gods)
 3. Varaha (boar); raised the earth out the water with his tusks
 4. Narasimha (half man and half lion); defeated a demon king
 5. Vamana (the dwarf); tricked and defeated another powerful demon
 6. Parasurama (the Brahmin); delivered the world from oppression of unjust rulers
 7. Rama (of the Ramayana); rescues his wife Sita from the demon Ravana
 8. Krishna
 9. Buddha
 10. Kalki (the horse); yet to come to earth

Basic Concepts of Buddhism

—The Buddha (the enlightened or awakened one) also known as Shakyamuni (the wise one of the Shakya clan), Gautama, or Siddhartha, and lived from 563 B.C. to 483 B.C. (others argue for 450–370 B.C. [dates debated]).

—Around 500 B.C. a body of texts (the *Upanishads*, written between 600 B.C. and 200 A.D.) introduced several new concepts that would prove to be fundamental for Buddhism as well as Hinduism. It is here that we find the concepts of *karma* and *samsara*:

1. *Karma*. Actions both good and bad. One can reach enlightenment only by somehow avoiding the accumulation of karma.
2. *Samsara*. Cycle of rebirth caused by *karma* or action

In other words, in Buddhism (and Hinduism) there is the belief that you are reborn over and over, and your *karma*, or past actions, determines your next rebirth. One can stop the cycle of rebirth by reaching enlightenment.

—The Buddha, after many lives, reached enlightenment. He then set out to teach the *Dharma* (the law or way) so that all sentient beings could reach enlightenment. According to the Buddha:

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by desire
3. One can reach enlightenment by overcoming desire (and hence attachment to this world)
4. Enlightenment can be reached by following the eight-fold path:
 - a. Right knowledge or understanding
 - b. Right purpose or resolve
 - c. Right speech
 - d. Right conduct or action
 - e. Right occupation or a livelihood conducive to salvation, preferably the monastic life
 - f. Right effort
 - g. Right awareness or self-mastery
 - h. Right meditation

—The three main Buddhist traditions:

1. *Nikaya* or *Hinayana* Buddhism; today this is the main form of Buddhism practiced in Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka
2. *Mahayana* Buddhism; a popular tradition across East Asia
3. *Vajrayana* Buddhism; an esoteric branch of Buddhism that is especially popular in the Himalayan areas of Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and Ladakh

Mandalas: Meaning and Function

The intricately painted mandalas of Nepal and Tibet are some of the most widely known examples of Buddhist art. Mandalas became increasingly complex in response to Tantric or esoteric ideas specific to Buddhist practice (*Vajrayana*). The mandala, meaning "circle" in Sanskrit, first appeared in ancient India during the Vedic period (ca. 1500–600 B.C.) as an enclosure for sacrificial fire altars used to maintain cosmic order and to bring prosperity.

The early mandala diagrams were drawn on the ground in ephemeral materials, which defined a sacred space for these altars. Because the complex rituals were intended to influence natural

phenomena such as the monsoon rains, it is not surprising that the enclosing mandala had to be an accurate and correct diagram of the universe. From the beginning, therefore, mandalas were understood as projections of the universe—having a cosmic axis at its center, and the various realms of existence radiating out in the cardinal directions. In this way, a ritual conducted at the core of a correctly made mandala helped to bring the practitioner in tune with the full complexity of the cosmic state of existence.

Envisioning the cosmos as a complex mandala was a South Asian idea that became fundamentally important for the Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain religious traditions. For these religions, the three-dimensional form of the mandala was most readily represented architecturally in the form of temples, because such structures provided a fixed, empowered, sacred space that was symbolically aligned with the cosmic axis of the universe. The practitioner could walk into the mandalic space and move, circumambulating, to the axis, where an image was often placed.

Although Nepal and Tibet have many temples based on this kind of mandala plan, small-scale painted cosmic diagrams became especially important. Unlike temples, the small two-dimensional mandalas could be more readily understood in their entirety, making them much more suited to the meditation practices of an individual. While mandalas were often painted in temples and on the walls of monasteries (a common location for the Wheel of Life), many came to be done on portable media such as *tangkas* (paintings on cotton that could be rolled up). Because such mandalas were ideally suited to the meditation-related visualizations of individuals or small groups, a complex vocabulary of iconography was developed between the twelfth and twentieth centuries.