

Hinduism

Hindus believe in a great soul or spirit called Brahman. Brahman cannot be seen but is present in everything. A Hindu story explaining this tells of a wise man who was teaching his son about Brahman. He sprinkled some salt in some water and told the boy to take the salt out again. This was impossible because the salt had dissolved in the water. The wise man told his son that the salt was like Brahman, invisible but everywhere.

Religious laws

There are many Hindu writings or scriptures, such as the Riga Veda. Hindus believe that when a person dies, his or her soul lives on and is born again or **reincarnated**. This happens over and over again. Eventually a soul can join Brahman but only when a person is good during life. A wrong action will take a person further away from Brahman. This is the law of karma.

Traditions

There are thousands of Hindu gods and goddesses. Each one shows a different aspect of Brahman's power. The three most important gods are Brahma the creator, Vishna the protector and Shiva the destroyer. Hindu customs and traditions are based on various stories connected with the gods and goddesses.

Diwali is the festival of lights which takes place in October or November. It is the most important of all the Hindu festivals. Diwali is a time for all Hindus to ask forgiveness for their wrongdoings and to think of others. The festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil.



A young Hindu girl dressed for Diwali.



Shiva, a god associated with the powers of reproduction and dissolution. In the Hindu religion Shiva is regarded by some as the supreme being and by others as forming a triad with Brahma and Vishnu.

For many Hindus, Diwali is connected with the story from their scriptures of Rama, who was sent away to the forests when he should have been king. After many battles, and helped by the monkey god Hanuman, Rama returns to become king. To guide him back from the forest and celebrate his return Hindu families cover their homes with lights.

On Diwali Hindus wear new clothes and exchange sweets and gifts with family and friends. It is a very pretty festival with hundreds of lights and fireworks.

Buddhism

About 2 500 years ago a man called Siddhartha Gautama began to teach people how to escape from the suffering and death that he saw in the world around him. He learned to **meditate** so that he could see things differently. From his experience he taught others to follow his beliefs and practise meditation. When you meditate, you have to concentrate very hard and focus your mind. It sometimes takes years to learn to meditate.

Gautama became known as Buddha (which means “enlightened one”) because he taught people that it was possible to overcome the suffering in the world and become enlightened if you followed the eightfold path:

The eight steps along the path to enlightenment

- 1 The right understanding – knowing and understanding the Buddha’s teaching
- 2 The right thought – thinking good, kind thoughts
- 3 The right speech – never telling lies or saying unkind things
- 4 The right actions – behaving thoughtfully and kindly towards others
- 5 The right work – doing a job that does not harm others or the environment
- 6 The right effort – trying hard to do good things
- 7 The right state of mind – thinking carefully before you act
- 8 The right concentration – using meditation to train your mind

Religious laws

Buddhists believe that if they follow Buddha’s teachings they can eventually leave all suffering behind and reach a state of peace and happiness which they call nirvana.

The path to nirvana is a difficult one. Buddhists believe that we die and become reborn many times either as humans or other animals before we can hope to achieve it.

The Buddha said that people should not look for happiness in money and possessions. They should live as simply as possible and get rid of greed and selfishness. The Buddha passed on his ideas to a group of monks. Monks still play an important role by carrying on the oral tradition of Buddhism. They teach people how to achieve nirvana in return for food and clothes.

Traditions

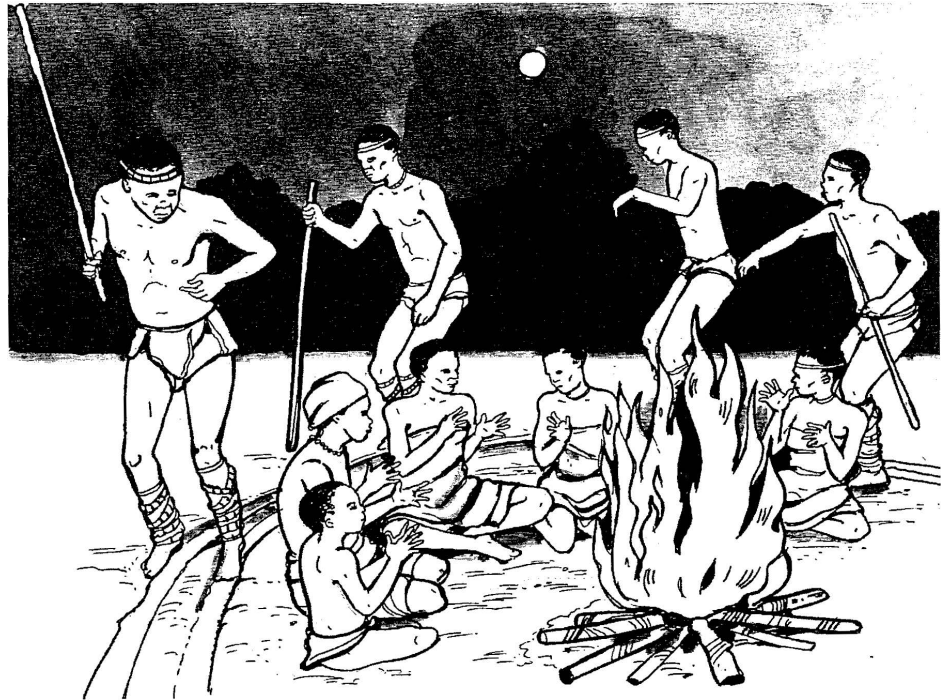
There are four holy days every month for Buddhists. They are called the *uposatha* days. On these days Buddhists go to a temple and give gifts to the monks. They recite Buddhist sayings and scriptures, offer flowers to an image of the Buddha and listen to a sermon preached by a monk. The *uposatha* days are when the moon is new, when it is full and the eighth day after the new moon and the full moon.

Indigenous belief systems

Some of the oldest belief systems in southern Africa are the traditional San beliefs. The San people used to live all over southern Africa but there are now very few groups of them left. They live in remote areas of Botswana and Namibia far from towns.

The San believe in a Great God who controls the weather, the environment and their daily life. People often prayed to the Great God through a healer or “shaman”.

One of their most important practices is the trance dance. Several family groups get together and clap and sing. The shaman leads the men in a dance and he goes into a **trance**. When he is in a trance he has healing powers. The purpose of the trance dance is to heal people or put right bad things that have happened to members of the community. Healing dances are still practised in South Africa. Some African Independent churches use healing dances to heal the sick or stamp out evil.



Artist's impression of San trance dance.

For many San, the sun and the moon were gods. The cycles of the moon were important times for their rituals. For example, they had ritual dances and prayers during the full moon each month.

Khoisan legends also refer to a “trickster” god, who could change himself into animal or human forms, and who could die and be reborn many times over.

The praying mantis, an insect with large eyes appears in San legends. San herd-boys still use praying mantises to help them to find lost animals.