

# India (Hinduism)

## Practices

It is important to note that many Hindus do not consider their religion to be pagan in nature. I include Hinduism here because many Neo-Pagans have been influenced by its beliefs and may want to incorporate some of its practices.

For most Hindus, cremation is the ideal method for dealing with the dead, although many groups practice burial instead; infants are buried rather than cremated. Preparation of the body usually entails bathing, anointing with a mixture of water and sandalwood and daubing with turmeric powder and water.<sup>1</sup> Puffed rice is also offered to the deceased by the women of the family. The body is displayed in an open casket and everyone is expected to quietly view it. Cremation is done after the funeral itself. The closest relative of the deceased (usually the eldest son) takes charge of the final rites.<sup>2</sup> If a body is cremated the ashes are collected and are dispersed in a sacred body of water or other place of importance to the deceased.

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As mentioned the actual cremation of the body is traditionally performed by the eldest son and only males attend this rite. During the cremation the mourners walk counter-clockwise to show that all is backwards. Prior to the body being cremated puffed rice is again offered to it by the males symbolizing giving strength for the soul's journey.

When the funeral is over the family returns home and bathes then cleans the house.<sup>3</sup> Then an eleven-day rite to ensure the passage during its voyage to the Otherworld is performed. Shradha consists of daily offerings of rice balls, called pindas, which provide a symbolic, transitional body for the dead.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of this eleven-day mourning period, during which the family is considered unclean and does not leave the house (though others may come to visit them), a meal is held with close family.

## Deities and Important Concepts

- Brahma  
The ultimate force. The All. G-d.
- Vishnu  
The supreme being of the Vaishnava sect. The God of gods.
- Devi  
The mother Goddess. See <http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/deities/devi.htm>.
- Yama  
The first human to die. He is called King Yama and welcomes the soul to a kind of paradise or a place of suffering depending on its deeds.
- Agni  
Fire god invoked to carry the spirit to the realm of Yama.
- Pitrs  
Benefic beings including the deceased relatives of the living often worshiped during the dark times (in the afternoon, during nighttime, during dark moon, during an eclipse, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hindu Funeral Traditions <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/01/world/hindu-funeral-traditions-hindu-belief-reincarnation-provides-basis-for-its.html>

<sup>2</sup> Hindu Rites & Rituals : Death & Funeral [http://hinduism.about.com/od/basics/a/rites\\_rituals\\_5.htm](http://hinduism.about.com/od/basics/a/rites_rituals_5.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Hindu Death Rituals and Beliefs <http://mailerindia.com/hindu/veda/index.php?death>

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- Atman  
The innermost essence of each individual.
- Reincarnation  
The belief that the soul of a person is immortal and will come back in another life until it reaches the understanding that it is one with the divine, at which time it will become one with Brahma.
- Believe that there is no way of transmitting conscious memory from one life to another, because its domain belongs to the world of illusions and dissolves at death.
- Hindu scriptures encourage viewing death as a joyous release and discourage excessive lamentation. A true Hindu is encouraged to love death as he loves this life.
- Offerings of water and rice were given to the deceased by placing them in a fire. Ritual offerings to the dead were made from the remains of the food offered to Vishnu.

### **Modern Adaptations**

- Place body wrapped in white on a cot. Cover in flowers making sure that the head is not covered. Have the body cremated after the funeral.
- Walk around the body in a counter-clockwise fashion. Talking about how death reverses everything.
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- Talk about how the deceased will become a Pitrs helping those who are still on this plane and in their time reincarnate.
- Talk about the wish that the deceased will become one with the all obtaining the end of their soul's journey.
- Place a lit lantern by the head of the deceased while saying the "Prayer for the dead".
- Follow the funeral with a meal at the house of the relatives of the deceased where guest bring offerings of fruit.
- Sprinkle attendants of the funeral as they leave. Sprinkle the hands, feet and head to cleanse them.

Traditionally this was done as everything associated with death and dying is considered ritually polluting. It can be interpreted as cleansing the person so that they may start the healing process of grief.

Say something like:

"May you be cleansed so you may properly mourn and in time heal."

### **Sample Readings**

#### ***Passage on death from the Riga Veda***

When he goes on the path that lead away the breath of life.  
Then he will be led by the will of the gods  
May your eye go to the sun, you life's breath to the wind  
Go to the sky or the earth, as is your nature

#### ***Mann, vi. 76-8.***

As a tree leaves the bank of a river, when it falls in, or as a bird leaves the branch of a tree at his pleasure, thus he, who leaves his body by necessity or by legal choice, is delivered from the ravening shark, or crocodile, of the world.

#### ***Prayer for the dead***

O Supreme light, lead us from untruth to truth, from darkness to light and from death to immortality.

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<sup>5</sup> Hindu Funeral Rites and Ancestor Worship [http://www.finaljourneyseminars.com/?page\\_id=438](http://www.finaljourneyseminars.com/?page_id=438)

### ***Conversation between a father and son in The Vedas***

(Note: Use to talk about the portion of the person that never dies. That the body is like the banyan tree but that the Atman is never destroyed.)

"Fetch me a fruit of the banyan tree."

"Here is one, sir."

"Break it."

"I have broken it, sir."

"What do you see?"

"Very tiny seeds, sir."

"Break one."

"I have broken it, sir."

"Now what do you see?"

"Nothing sir."

"My son," the father said, "what you do not perceive is essence, and in that essence the mighty banyan tree exists. Believe me, my son, in that essence is the self of all that is. That is the True, that is the Self. And you are that Self, ... "

### **Resources**

- Hindu Death Rituals and Beliefs  
<http://mailerindia.com/hindu/veda/index.php?death>
- Hindu Funeral Rites and Ancestor Worship  
[http://www.finaljourneyseminars.com/?page\\_id=438](http://www.finaljourneyseminars.com/?page_id=438)
- Hindu Funerals, Cremation and Varanasi  
<http://factsanddetails.com/world.php?itemid=1343&catid=55&subcatid=354>
- The Garuda Purana

Considered the authoritative text on funeral rites for Hindus. The text was written after the advent of Christianity which might account for the imagery of both heaven like and hell like afterlife between rebirths.

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/gpu/gpu00.htm>