



## **India: Diwali**

### **Post-visit Activity: Enrichment Reading**

#### Hinduism and the goddess Lakshmi

Hinduism is considered to be one of the major world religions. It originated on the Indian subcontinent and is comprised of several varied systems of beliefs and rituals. Most scholars agree that the Indus Valley Civilization was the earliest source of the texts and practices associated with Hinduism, which means that Hinduism is the oldest living religion on earth. However, because the religion has no specific founder, it is difficult to trace its origins and history.

Some basic Hindu concepts include:

- Hinduism embraces many religious ideas. For this reason, it's sometimes referred to as a "way of life" or a "family of religions," as opposed to a single, organized religion.
- Most forms of Hinduism are henotheistic, which means they worship a single deity, known as "Brahman," but still recognize other gods and goddesses. Followers believe there are multiple paths to reaching their god.
- Hindus believe in the doctrines of samsara (the continuous cycle of life, death, and reincarnation) and karma (the universal law of cause and effect).
- One of the key thoughts of Hinduism is "atman," or the belief in soul. This philosophy holds that living creatures have a soul, and they're all part of the supreme soul. The goal is to achieve "moksha," or salvation, which ends the cycle of rebirths to become part of the absolute soul.
- One fundamental principle of the religion is the idea that people's actions and thoughts directly determine their current life and future lives.
- Hindus strive to achieve dharma, which is a code of living that emphasizes good conduct and morality.
- The Om and Swastika are symbols of Hinduism. The Swastika, which represents good luck, later became associated with evil when Germany's Nazi Party made it their symbol in 1920.
- Hindus revere all living creatures and consider the cow a sacred animal.

Sources: Britannica.com; history.com



One of the most compelling stories in Hindu mythology is that of the Churning of the Milky Ocean. It is the story of the gods versus the demons and their fight to gain immortality. It also tells of the rebirth of Lakshmi.

Indra, the warrior god, was given the responsibility of protecting the world against the demons. He had protected it successfully for many years, and the goddess Lakshmi's presence had made him sure of success.

One day, a wise sage offered Indra a garland of sacred flowers. In his arrogance, Indra threw the flowers to the floor. According to Hindu belief, this display of arrogance upset Lakshmi, who left the world of the gods and entered into the Milky Ocean.

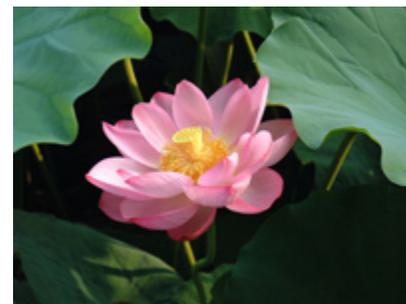
Without her, the gods were no longer blessed with success or fortune.

The world became darker, people became greedy, and no offerings were made to the gods. The gods began to lose their power and the asuras (demons) took control.

Indra asked Vishnu what should be done. He told Indra that the gods would need to churn the Milky Ocean to regain Lakshmi and her blessings. He then told them the Ocean held other treasures which would also help them. This included the elixir of life, a potion bestowing immortality, which would enable them to defeat the demons.

The story of the Churning of the Ocean tells of how the gods worked together to churn the ocean. They churned for many years, but it was 1,000 years before anything rose to the surface.

Finally, the treasures began to rise to the surface. Among them, a beautiful woman standing on a lotus flower. This was Lakshmi, who had returned to the world. With her presence, the gods eventually defeated the demons and chased them out of the world.



The sacred lotus flower representing Lakshmi.

This story highlights the good fortune and success that Lakshmi bestows upon those who work hard and seek help sincerely. It also demonstrates that during



times of success, one must never become complacent or arrogant, as success has a way of getting away from people.

## Worshipping Lakshmi

Hindus believe that anybody who worships Lakshmi sincerely, and not in greed, will be blessed with fortune and success. It is said that Lakshmi resides in places of hard work, virtue and bravery, but leaves whenever these qualities are not apparent any more.

Lakshmi is particularly worshipped during the festival of Diwali. This festival commemorates the epic story, Ramayana. Ramayana is the legend of Lord Rama's battle with the demon Ravana, in which Lakshmi features.

In the story of Ramayana, Sita is married to Lord Rama. Hindus believe Sita is an incarnation of Lakshmi. The story tells us that Rama had been cast out of his rightful kingdom, and had gone to live in a forest with his wife and brother.

The battle between Rama and the demon Ravana begins when Ravana abducts Sita from the forest. The epic follows the story of Rama defeating the demon, and his eventual return to his kingdom.

As the three heroes, Rama, his brother Lakshman and Sita, returned home, people lit candles to guide their way in the dark. In honour of this, on the second day of Diwali people light candles in their homes to guide Lakshmi, in the hope that she will bestow good fortune on their home for the coming year.

Lakshmi is usually depicted as a beautiful woman of golden complexion, with four hands, sitting or standing on a full-bloomed lotus and holding a lotus bud, which stands for beauty, purity, and fertility. Her four hands represent the four ends of human life: [\*dharm\*](#) or righteousness, *kama* or desires, *artha* or wealth, and *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

Cascades of gold coins are often seen flowing from her hands, suggesting that those who worship her will gain wealth. She always wears gold embroidered red clothes. Red symbolizes activity, and the golden lining indicates prosperity

Two elephants are often shown standing next to the goddess and spraying water. This denotes that ceaseless effort when practiced in accordance with one's dharma and governed by wisdom and purity, leads to both material and spiritual prosperity.



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### Post-visit Activity: Enrichment Reading Assessment

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Identify and explain the significance of each symbol found in the image of Lakshmi. Describe its relationship to the celebration of Diwali and to Indian daily-life.





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### Post-visit Activity: Enrichment Reading Assessment **KEY**

- The four arms represent four directions in space symbolizing omnipresence/omnipotence of the goddess Lakshmi.
- The four hands represent the four ends of human life: dharma/righteousness, kama/genuine desires, artha/wealth, and moksha/liberation from birth and death. The front hands represent the activity in the physical world and the back hands represent the spiritual activities that lead to spiritual fulfillment.
- Elephants represent worldly wealth. The idea is that someone who is devoted to their faith should not focus on material things, but should share their wealth with others which helps people and brings personal happiness and fulfillment.
- The spraying of water and movement of hands indicates activity. Doing things in service to others is important for fulfillment. Continuous self-effort, in accordance to one's beliefs/faith, will lead to both material and spiritual prosperity.
- The golden vessels denote wisdom and purity.
- The lotus flower symbolizes being in this world, but not of this world. Enjoying life and achievements, but not becoming obsessed with it. Just as the lotus flower is in the water, but not soaked by it.