

Hindu God Vishnu, the Preserver

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Vishnu is part of the holy trinity of gods in Hinduism along with Brahma and Shiva. Image from Wikimedia.

Along with Brahma and Shiva, Vishnu is one of the three most important gods in the Hindu religion.

In some stories, Brahma was born from a lotus flower which grew from Vishnu's belly button. Vishnu is the Preserver of Earth, which means he protects dharma, the order of things.

Vishnu has 10 forms on Earth. He can be Buddha or the heroes Krishna, Rama and Parashurama. He can also be Nara-Simha or Narasimba (the man-lion), Vamana (the dwarf), Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise) and Varaha (the boar). When the world ends, Vishnu will be Kalki, and will ride a white horse and announce the start of a new golden age.

Many colorful stories about Vishnu tell about his role as the protector of order.

Churning the ocean

In the Baghavata-Purana, a collection of stories, it is said that Vishnu helped give the gods everlasting life. To do this, the gods needed to churn up, or mix, an ocean of milk. This would create a nectar, and anyone who drank the nectar would live forever.

To mix the ocean, they decided to use the holy Mount Mandara, and turned the giant serpent Vasuki into a rope. They used the rope to pull on the mountain and churn the ocean. One end was pulled by Demons, and the other by the gods.

Neither group could handle such a weight, so they called for Vishnu to help. Vishnu took the form of Kurma, the giant tortoise, and was able to support the mountain on his shell.

Finally, the nectar was created from the foaming sea, but the Demons tried to steal it. Vishnu swooped in, taking the form of the beautiful Maya. She was able to distract the Demons and take the nectar, which Vishnu graciously gave to the gods.

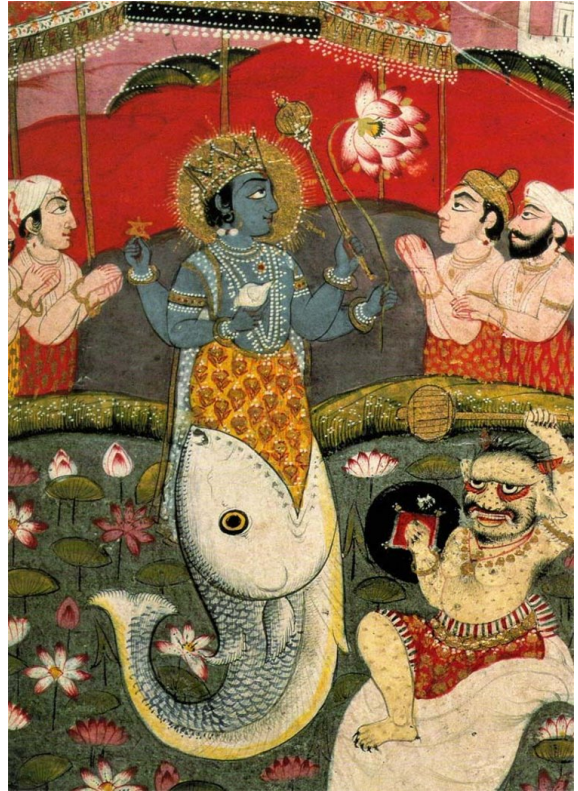
The fish Matsya

Another story tells of a great flood. Manu, the wise sage, was washing in a river one day when a small fish suddenly jumped into his hand. He kept the fish in a small bowl, but the fish kept growing bigger. It reached such a huge size that Manu was forced to put it into the sea.



The fish then told him that, in seven days, there would be a great flood. It said that Manu didn't have to worry, as the fish would send him a large boat so that he would escape unharmed. The fish told Manu to fill the boat with pairs of all the creatures of the world and seeds of all the plants. During the flood, Manu was to tie his boat to the fish by using a giant snake - Vasuki.

After some time, just as the fish had predicted, the ocean slowly rose up and flooded the world. Vishnu then reappeared on the scene as the gigantic fish, this time with golden scales and a single horn. He was carrying a ship, and Manu quickly hopped on board with all his animals. By surviving the flood, Manu became the founder of the human race.



The Legend of the Three Steps

One of the more famous stories involving Vishnu is known as the Legend of the Three Steps. In the battle between gods and giants for control of the world, the giants were winning. The gods asked Vishnu to help fight the giant warrior Bali. So Vishnu took the form of a dwarf Brahman, or priest, called Vamana.

Vishnu offered to make a deal: if the fighting stopped, the gods would settle for a small territory as big as three of Vamana's steps. Meanwhile, the giants could have the rest of the universe. Since the dwarf had small legs, this seemed like a good bargain for the giants, and so Bali agreed.

The giants didn't know that the dwarf was a great god. With his first step, he cleared the sky, with the second the Earth and, with his final step, he took the Underworld, leaving nothing for the poor giants. Since Vishnu is associated with the sun, this story may also represent the three movements of the sun: when it rises, when it reaches its peak or zenith, and when it sets.

The hero Krishna

In a later story, Vishnu appeared as Krishna, a great hero. Krishna, or the "Black Prince," often showed his holy powers by killing many demons. One day, Krishna's mother cursed her son for not having joined a great battle between two warring families, the Kurus and Pandus. Krishna actually did join the great battle, but his mother had not seen him.

While Krishna was meditating peacefully, a hunter struck him with an arrow by mistake. The arrow hit Krishna's heel, his one weak spot, and killed him. Vishnu's death was so sad that even the sun itself died with him.

Portrayal in art

In Hindu art, Vishnu is portrayed differently depending on the culture. But he is most often shown colored blue and sometimes rides Garuda, a gigantic half-man, half-bird creature which eats snakes. Sometimes, Vishnu sleeps on the giant snake Sesha.

Vishnu's weapon is the Sudarsanacakra, a round disc with a thousand rods. It could be a symbol of the wheel of time, or the sun. Vishnu usually has four hands, and often holds various objects in them, like a shell trumpet. He might also hold a sword, which represents strength, and a lotus flower, which represents freedom and the beauty of life.



Quiz

- 1 Read the conclusion below.

Vishnu has been very effective in his role as preserver of Earth and guardian of the order of things.

Which selection from the article provides the BEST support for the statement above?

- (A) Along with Brahma and Shiva, Vishnu is one of the three most important gods in the Hindu religion.
- (B) Many colorful stories about Vishnu tell about his role as the protector of order.
- (C) They used the rope to pull on the mountain and churn the ocean.
- (D) Vishnu then reappeared on the scene as the gigantic fish, this time with golden scales and a single horn.

- 2 Which section of the article BEST highlights Vishnu's intelligence?

- (A) "Churning the ocean"
- (B) "The fish Matsya"
- (C) "The Legend of the Three Steps"
- (D) "The hero Krishna"

- 3 Read the section "The hero Krishna."

What does this section show that other sections do NOT?

- (A) It shows Vishnu's bravery.
- (B) It shows Vishnu's ferocity.
- (C) It shows Vishnu's dedication.
- (D) It shows Vishnu's vulnerability.

- 4 Read the following selection from the section "The fish Matsya."

Vishnu then reappeared on the scene as the gigantic fish, this time with golden scales and a single horn. He was carrying a ship, and Manu quickly hopped on board with all his animals.

HOW does this selection contribute to the entire article?

- (A) It proves that there are many stories written about Vishnu.
- (B) It provides an example of how Vishnu protects the order of things.
- (C) It shows how Vishnu is depicted by people in Hindu art.
- (D) It illustrates how people in the Hindu religion have a lot of respect for Vishnu.