

# annapurna: the goddess of food

Annapurna is the Hindu goddess of food and cooking. Anna means food and grains. Purna means full, complete and perfect. Annapurna is empowered with the ability to supply food to an unlimited amount of people.

Annapurna is an incarnation of the Hindu Goddess Parvati, the wife of Shiva. Temple art in India often depicts Lord Shiva with his begging bowl (skull), asking Annapurna to provide him food that gives the energy ([Shakti](#)) to achieve knowledge and enlightenment.

As such, Annapurna also symbolizes the divine aspect of nourishing care. The cook provides his guests with the energy to best follow their destiny. When food is cooked with a spirit of holiness, it becomes transformed. Images of Annapurna are also found in kitchens, near dinner tables and in restaurants. Annapurna has many names. She is variously described as:

- She who is full, complete and perfect with food and grains
- She who gives nourishment
- She who is the strength of Shiva
- She who is the grantor of knowledge
- She who takes away all fear
- She who is the Supreme welfare
- She who manifests truth and efficiency
- She who is beyond Maya
- She who is the cause of creation and dissolution



Physically, Annapurna is described as holding a golden ladle adorned with various kinds of jewels in her right hand and a vessel full of delicious porridge in her left. She is seated on a throne and in some depictions Lord Shiva is shown standing to her right with a begging bowl begging her for alms. It is said that she does not eat a morsel unless all her devotees have been fed in her temple.

# ganesha: lord of all existing beings



The Hindu god that is invoked at the start of every Hindu ritual

All Tantric and spiritual worship in the Hindu tradition begins with the prayer of Ganesha (or Ganesh), the elephant-headed god. Ganesha became the Lord (Isha) of all existing beings (Gana) after winning a contest from his brother.. When given the task to race around the universe, Ganesha did not start the race like his brother did, but simply walked around Shiva and Parvati, both his father and mother as the source of all existence.

Many stories describe how Ganesha (Ganesh) got the elephant head. One tells how Parvati (father) created Ganesha in absence of Shiva to guard her quarters. When Shiva wanted to see her, Ganesha forbid it, at which point Shiva cut of his head. Later Shiva restored Ganesha to life and provided him with the head of an elephant, because no other was available. In another story, Ganesha's head is burned to ashes when Saturn is forced by Parvati to

look at her child and bless him.

Ganesha (Ganesh) rides a rat that represents the demon of vanity and disrespect. The snakes represent control over the poisons of the passions and refer to Shiva, father of Ganesha. The hatchet cuts away the bondage of desires. The mudra grants fearlessness. Acceptance of the somewhat funny looking elephant man Ganesha (Ganesh) as the divine force stills the rational mind and its doubts, forcing one to look beyond outer appearances. Thus Ganesha creates the faith to remove all obstacles in ones life. Meditation on the Ganesha creates internal balance.

# garuda: king of the birds; messenger god

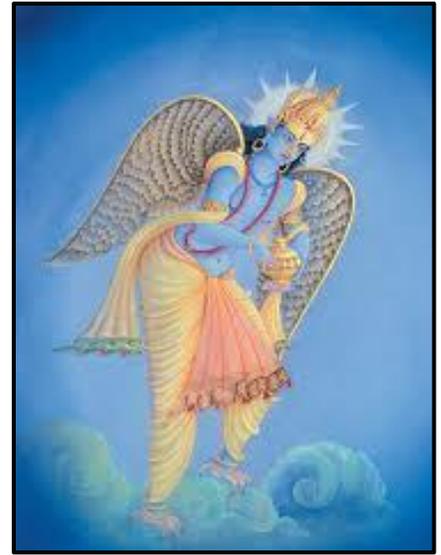
Garuda is the king of the birds and often acts as a messenger between the gods and men. Garuda has the head, wings, talons and beak of an eagle and the body and limbs of a man.

Garuda's mother was Vinata and his father Kasyapa, the law-minded grandfather of the world. When Garuda crawled out of his egg, he was very hungry. His mother sent Garuda to get advice from his father, who sent him to a place, where he could find food. Garuda could eat the natives living there, but he was advised to spare the Brahmin, who was living with the natives. However by accident, Garuda swallowed the Brahmin, who got stuck in his throat. The Brahmin said that he would give up his life, if Garuda would not let go all of his relatives. Out of fear to murder a Brahmin, Kasyapa ordered Garuda to spit out the natives with their Brahmin.

Still hungry, Garuda's father sent him to the ocean, where a giant elephant and a tortoise were fighting. He took them and flew to the sky. When Garuda perched on the branch of a tree it broke and again Garuda was full of fear of killing cows and Brahmins with the falling branch, so he caught it. Meanwhile Vishnu (God of Preserver) saw the bird and asked what Garuda was doing. The bird replied that no tree or mountain seemed able to support his weight. Vishnu offered his arm to sit on and did not tremble when Garuda took place on it.

Even after eating, Garuda was still hungry, so Vishnu offered the flesh of his arm. When Garuda ate from it, no wound showed. Garuda bowed his head to Vishnu, realizing his divine nature and was his heroic friend for all times. In many Indian stories, Garuda carries Vishnu.

Garuda is invoked as a symbol of impetuous violent force, of speed, and of martial prowess. Powerful warriors advancing rapidly on doomed foes are likened to Garuda swooping down on a serpent. Defeated warriors are like snakes beaten down by Garuda.



# vishnu: the preserver of the universe



In the basic Hindu Trinity (3 main gods) of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the Hindu god Vishnu is the preserver and protector of creation. Vishnu is the embodiment of mercy and goodness, the self-existent, all-pervading power that preserves the universe and maintains the cosmic order Dharma.

Vishnu is often represented resting on the coiled serpent Shesha, with Vishnu's companion Lakshmi massaging his feet. Vishnu never sleeps and is the deity of Shanti, the peaceful mood. Vishnu does not however tolerate Ego.

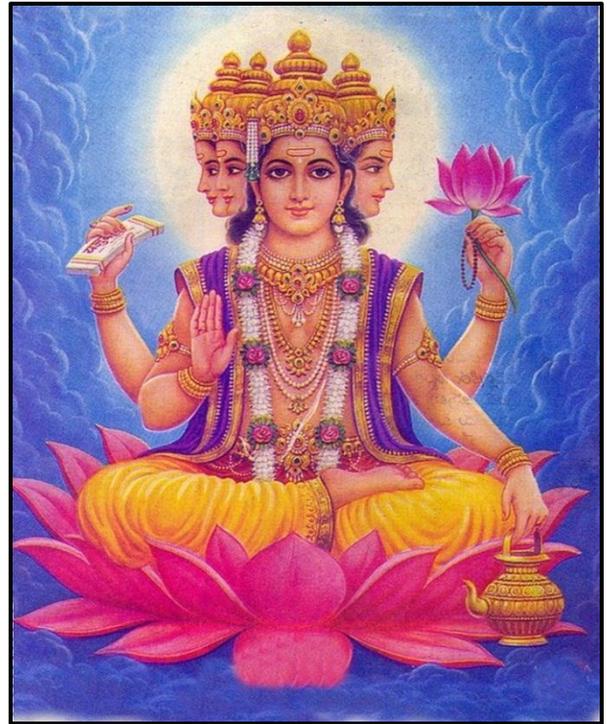
Most often, the Hindu god Vishnu is shown with four attributes or weapons. In one hand Vishnu holds the conch or Sankha.(shell) The second hand of Vishnu holds the disc or Vajra. The third hand of Vishnu holds the club and in the fourth hand Vishnu holds the lotus or Padma. Vishnu also has a bow called Sarnga and a sword called Nandaka.

Most of the time, good and evil forces are evenly matched in the world. But at times, the balance is destroyed and evil demons get the upper hand. Often in response to a request by the other gods, Vishnu then incarnates in a human form to set the balance right again.

He is to be depicted as a four-armed male-form: The four arms indicate his all-powerful and all-pervasive nature. The physical existence of Vishnu is represented by the two arms in the front while the two arms at the back represent his presence in the spiritual world. The color of his skin has to be new-cloud-like-blue: The blue color indicates his all-pervasive nature, blue being the color of the infinite space as well as the infinite ocean on which he resides. A crown should adorn his head: The crown symbolizes his supreme authority. He is to shown wearing two earrings: The earrings represent inherent opposites in creation — knowledge and ignorance; happiness and unhappiness; pleasure and pain. He rests on Ananta: the immortal and infinite snake

# brahma: the creator god

Lord Brahma symbolizes the aspect of the Supreme Reality that brings forth the creation. For this very reason, Hindus call Lord Brahma the Creator of the universe. He is the first member of the Hindu Trinity (3 main gods) that also includes Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva. His divine companion (wife) is Saraswati, the Goddess of learning and knowledge. Goddess Saraswati provides Lord Brahma with knowledge that is necessary for the process of creation.



Brahma is usually conceived of by Hindus as a bearded, four-faced, four-armed deity (god). In popular images, He carries a rosary in the upper right hand, a book in the upper left hand, a kamandalu (water pot) in the lower left hand, and bestows grace with His lower right hand. The four faces represent the sacred knowledge of the four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva), and this is the most prominent feature of any image of Brahma. The four faces, therefore, symbolize that Brahma is the source of all knowledge necessary for the creation of the universe. The four arms represent the four directions and thus represent the omnipresence and omnipotence of Lord Brahma.

The four hands represent the four aspects of human personality: mind (back right hand), intellect (back left hand), ego (front right hand), and the empirical self or conditioned consciousness (front left hand).

A book in the back hand (symbolizing the intellect) illustrates that right knowledge is important for any kind of creative work. A water pot (kamandalu) in the front left hand symbolizes the cosmic energy by which Brahma brings the universe into existence. The hand symbolizing ego (the front right hand) is shown in the pose of bestowing grace. This conveys the idea that the Lord bestows grace and protects all sincere devotees.

The color gold symbolizes activity and thus the golden face of Brahma indicates that the Lord is active when involved in the process of creation. The white beard denotes wisdom and the long beard conveys the idea that creation is an eternal process. The crown on the head of the Lord implies that the Lord has supreme power and authority over the process of creation.

The lotus symbolizes the Supreme Reality, the essence of all things and beings in the universe. Brahma sitting or standing on a lotus indicates that He represents the creative power of the Supreme Reality. The color white symbolizes purity. Thus Brahma wearing clothes that are off-white, represents the dual nature of creation, that is purity and impurity, happiness and unhappiness, vice and virtue, knowledge and ignorance, and so on.

Lord Brahma symbolizes the Universal Mind. From the standpoint of an individual, Brahma symbolizes one's own mind and intellect. Since an individual is naturally gifted with the mind and intellect, he or she may be said to have already realized Brahma. For this reason the worship of Brahma is not very popular among all Hindus. He is, however, worshipped by seekers of knowledge, such as students, teachers, scholars and scientists.

# shiva: god of destruction



Shiva is the destroyer of the world, following Brahma the creator and Vishnu the preserver, after which Brahma again creates the world and so on. Shiva is responsible for change both in the form of death and destruction and in the positive sense of the shedding of old habits.

Shiva is the god of the yogis, self-controlled and celibate, while at the same time a lover of his spouse (shakti). Shiva's first wife was Sati and his second wife was Parvati. His sons are Ganesha and Kartikeya. Shiva lives on Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas.

Shiva's main attributes are the trident that represents the three gunas and the snakes that show he is beyond the power of death and poison and also stand for the Kundalini energy.

The vehicle of Shiva is the white bull called Nandi (the joyful). He is often seated on a tiger skin or wears a tiger skin, with the tiger representing the mind.

Shiva's dance represents both the destruction and the creation of the universe and reveals the cycles of death, birth and rebirth. His Dance of Bliss is for the welfare of the world. In the pose of Nataraj, the King of Dance is giving darshan to his beloved devotees within the "Hall of Consciousness", which is the heart of man. Under his feet, Shiva crushes the demon of ignorance, caused by forgetfulness. One hand is stretched across his chest and points towards the uplifted foot, indicating the release from earthly bondage of the devotee. The fire represents the final destruction of creation, but the dance of the Nataraj is also an act of creation, which arouses dormant energies and scatters the ashes of the universe in a pattern that will be the design of the ensuing creation.

Shiva is conceived in his unborn, invisible form as the Lingam. It is always accompanied by the Yoni, which is the female principle, surrounding the base of the Lingam. The Lingam represents the male creative energy of Shiva.

When Ganga incarnated on Earth, Shiva captured her in his hair to avoid that she would flood all of Earth. Shiva worshippers are among India's most ascetic yogis, their body smeared with ashes, dressed in saffron colors.

# Saraswati: goddess of learning, knowledge, and wisdom

The Sanskrit word sara means "essence" and swa means "self." Thus Saraswati means "the essence of the self." Saraswati is represented in Hindu mythology as the divine companion of Lord Brahma, the Creator of the universe. Since knowledge is necessary for creation, Saraswati symbolizes the creative power of Brahma. Goddess Saraswati is worshipped by all persons interested in knowledge, especially students, teachers, scholars, and scientists.

In Her popular images and pictures, Goddess Saraswati is generally depicted with four arms (some pictures may show only two arms), wearing a white sari and seated on a white lotus. She holds a book and a rosary in Her rear two hands, while the front two hands are engaged in the playing of a lute (veena). Her right leg is shown slightly pushing against Her left leg. She uses a swan as Her vehicle. There is a peacock by Her side gazing at Her. This symbolism illustrates the following spiritual ideas:



- The lotus is a symbol of the Supreme Reality, and a white lotus also denotes supreme knowledge. By sitting on a lotus, Saraswati signifies that She is Herself rooted in the Supreme Reality, and symbolizes supreme knowledge. The white color symbolizes purity and knowledge. The white sari that the Goddess is wearing denotes that She is the embodiment of pure knowledge.
- The left side of the body symbolizes the qualities of the heart and the right side symbolizes activities of the mind and intellect. A book in the rear left hand signifies that knowledge acquired must be used with love and kindness to promote prosperity of mankind.
- The rosary signifies concentration, meditation, and contemplation, leading to samadhi, or union with God. A rosary in the rear right hand representing ego conveys that true knowledge acquired with love and devotion melts the ego and results in liberation (moksha) of the seeker from the bondage to the physical world.
- The Goddess is shown playing a musical instrument that is held in Her front hands, which denote mind and intellect. This symbol conveys that the seeker must tune his mind and intellect in order to live in perfect harmony with the world. Such harmonious living enables the individual to utilize acquired knowledge for the welfare of all mankind.
- Two swans are depicted on the left side of the Goddess. A swan is said to have a sensitive beak that enables it to distinguish pure milk from a mixture of milk and water. A swan, therefore, symbolizes the power of discrimination, or the ability to discriminate between right and wrong or good and bad. Saraswati uses the swan as Her carrier. This indicates that one must acquire and apply knowledge with discrimination for the good of mankind. Knowledge that is dominated by ego can destroy the world.
- A peacock is sitting next to Saraswati and is anxiously waiting to serve as Her vehicle. A peacock depicts unpredictable behavior as its moods can be influenced by the changes in the weather. Saraswati is using a swan as a vehicle and not the peacock. This signifies that one should overcome fear, indecision, and fickleness in order to acquire true knowledge.

Lakshmi: goddess of wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual.



The word "Lakshmi" is derived from the Sanskrit word Laksme, meaning "goal." Lakshmi, therefore, represents the goal of life, which includes worldly as well as spiritual prosperity. In Hindu mythology, Goddess Lakshmi, also called Shri, is the divine spouse of Lord Vishnu and provides Him with wealth for the maintenance and preservation of the creation. In Her images and pictures, Lakshmi is depicted in a female form with four arms and four hands. She wears red clothes with a golden lining and is standing on a lotus. She has golden coins and lotuses in her hands. Two elephants (some pictures show four) are shown next to the Goddess. This symbolism conveys the following spiritual theme:

- The four arms represent the four directions in space and thus symbolize omnipresence and omnipotence of the Goddess. The red color symbolizes activity. The golden lining (embroidery) on Her red dress denotes prosperity. The idea conveyed here is that the Goddess is always busy distributing wealth and prosperity to the devotees.
- The lotus seat, which Lakshmi is standing upon, signifies that while living in this world, one should enjoy its wealth, but not become obsessed

with it.

- 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 indicate the spiritual activities that lead to spiritual perfection.
- Since the right side of the body symbolizes activity, a lotus in the back right hand conveys the idea that one must perform all duties in the world in accordance with dharma. This leads to moksha (liberation), which is symbolized by a lotus in the back left hand of Lakshmi. The golden coins falling on the ground from the front left hand of Lakshmi illustrate that She provides wealth and prosperity to Her devotees. Her front right hand is shown bestowing blessings upon the devotees.
- The two elephants standing next to the Goddess symbolize the name and fame associated with worldly wealth. The idea conveyed here is that a true devotee should not earn wealth merely to acquire name and fame or only to satisfy his own material desires, but should share it with others in order to bring happiness to others in addition to himself.

Goddess Lakshmi is regularly worshipped in home shrines and temples by Her devotees. A special worship is offered to Her annually on the day of Diwali, with religious rituals and colorful ceremonies specifically devoted to Her.