

Hindu Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Hindu Death Care Guidebook Overview

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Hinduism and is practiced diversely in the United States. Ways to care for and honor the dead depend on family traditions, individual religious beliefs, and situational circumstances. It is important that those who are practicing Hindu death care feel empowered to hold a funeral that reflects the wishes of the deceased and the family. Death care is highly personal and individualistic within Hinduism, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult a Hindu priest or religious chaplain who can help connect those close to death and their families to resources for Hindus experiencing loss. A religious professional or funeral director can also help the family determine what kinds of personal elements they would like to include or not include in a funeral.

This guide is intended to be an overview of potential options and resources to help Hindus prepare for death, care for the body, plan a funeral, and process their grief and mourning. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly. Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on how to hold an independent or home funeral, please visit the Home Funeral Alliance at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Hinduism and Beliefs Surrounding Death

Similarly to Buddhism and Sikhism, Hinduism teaches that death is a natural step in the cycle of life. Hinduism believes in reincarnation which follows the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Therefore, death is not seen as an end, but as a transition period into a different life. The kind of life someone will be reborn into is determined by the karmic merit accrued in one's previous life. Hindus believe that Brahma, the Hindu God, lives within each and every being, and that part of our goal in this lifetime is to recognize that. With each life and death, Hindus believe that they get a step closer to reuniting with Brahma. Hindus will eventually be liberated from the cycle of life by living rightly and learning to be a more compassionate being. This will liberate them from the cycle of saṃsāra and allow them to attain moksha - the freedom of the soul from cycles of reincarnation.

Hindus believe that the soul is called atman which translates to "one's true self". This idea of self is different from the body or physical self as well as the ego and mind. Atman is what continues on to be reincarnated to the next life and will eventually be reunited with Brahma. Meditating on the acceptance of death and the impermanence of one's innermost self are ways that Hindus approach the theology of death.

Resources For Hindu Theology on Death:

- <https://www.hinduamerican.org/blog/5-things-to-know-about-hindus-and-death>
- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-resources/spirituality-end-of-life-care/hinduism/>
- <https://www.britannica.com/science/death/Hinduism>

Preparing For Death

While there are no specific rituals for how Hindus should prepare for death, their religious beliefs can help inform best practices for dealing with the transition. When Hindus are facing death, they typically use it as an opportunity for reflection. Rather than expressing grief and sorrow, they will try to focus on the acceptance of death and their spiritual connection with Brahma. They may do this by reciting certain prayers, mantras, or studying specific teachings presented in Hindu scripture. They may also reflect on their lifetime and express wishes and hopes for their next life. Spending time with a person who is dying and providing comfort, empathy, and a listening ear are good ways to support them through the transition.

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Hindu and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-palliative-care-blog/2020/march/20/helping-people-to-connect-to-the-divine/>
- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-resources/spirituality-end-of-life-care/hinduism/>

Caring for the Body

Following the Death

When caring for Hindus who have died, families and religious professionals may perform rituals that are rooted in the qualities of simplicity, respect, and brevity. After the moment of death, a close family member may wish to close the eyes and mouth of the deceased. Hindu funeral rites take place promptly after the death, so the body typically remains in the home until then.

The family might perform a ritual cleansing of the body by washing it with ghee, honey, and yogurt before using soap and water. The cleansing is usually done by members of the same sex as the deceased and is done with the utmost care. After the cleaning, the body is then either dressed in nice clothes (a modern tradition) or wrapped in a white sheet to signify purity (traditional method). Someone may anoint the forehead of the deceased with essential oils. Typically, the big toes are tied together and the palms are placed in a prayer position. Marigolds or tulsi leaves might be placed around the body, or a lamp might be lit near the head. For more general information about how to care for the body in a private residence consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook which can be accessed at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Because Hindu funerals typically happen within 24 hours of the death, embalming is not necessary. In the period before the funeral, guests may wish to come to the home and offer their condolences to the family.

Hindu Cremations

While there is no rule against burying a Hindu person, cremation is the preferred choice. This is because the body holds no significance in the religion other than to house the soul. It is also believed that cremation is the quickest way to facilitate reincarnation. The person may wish for their ashes to be scattered somewhere meaningful in nature such as in a river. Cremations are prompt and usually take place immediately following the funeral service.

Environmentally Friendly Disposition

Because Hindus are not usually embalmed, they are able to choose a variety of environmentally friendly disposition options. Options like human composting and water cremation allow the body of the deceased to be converted into nutrient rich fertilizer. The fertilizer can then be used to grow trees, plants, and gardens or donated to conservation projects. Organ donation and the donation of a body to science are also meaningful ways for Hindus to give to humanist causes. For more information on how to hold Hindu funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on human composting and water cremation. Combining eco-friendly disposition practices with the Hindu faith can be a meaningful way to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature.

Resources on Body Care and Disposition Practices:

- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/hindu-funeral-rites-and-death-rituals/>
- <https://www.asianindianfuneralservice.com/blog/blog/why-cremation-is-preferred-in-hinduism-and-when-burial-is-chosen-instead>
- <https://www.asianindianfuneralservice.com/blog/blog/a-comprehensive-guide-to-hindu-funeral-traditions>
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
 - <https://recompose.life/our-model/>
 - <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-human-composting>
 - <https://www.cremationassociation.org/alkalinehydrolysis.html>
 - <https://us-funerals.com/aquamation-or-resomation/>

Hindu Funerals

Funeral Arrangements and Attire

Funerals are unique in Hinduism because they are normally held at a crematorium, although modern funerals are also held at chapels and family homes. They are also usually very simple and short. Sometimes, a vigil will be held between the time of death and the funeral, but not always. Hindu communities should reach out to a Hindu priest to help them determine what kind of funeral best suits their needs.

On the day of the funeral, the body will be transported to the crematorium, chapel, or wherever the funeral is to be held, followed by a procession of mourners. They might chant texts like Bhagavad Gita or hymns like Om Namah Sivaya. At the crematorium, the body is viewed by the mourners in a respectful manner, and offerings such as rice, ghee, flowers, and incense are sometimes made. After the offerings are made, a Hindu priest will lead the guests in a series of chants and mantras. The final ritual is called the mukhagni and is conducted by a close family member or a Hindu priest. The ceremony is a final chance to honor the deceased and wish them a peaceful transition after death.

Flowers may be sent ahead of time so the family can display them modestly during the ceremony. No flowers should be brought on the day of the funeral. Unless the family states otherwise, guests can expect to dress modestly in white. No head covering is typically required for funeral attire.

Resources on Hindu Funerals:

- <https://hollywoodforever.com/resources/what-to-expect-at-a-hindu-funeral-in-the-us/>
- <https://www.memorialplanning.com/resources/religious-funerals-guide/hindu-funerals-guide/>
- <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/memorial-services/funeral-traditions/hindu-funeral-traditions>

Hindu Mourning Period and Grief

Mourning practices for Hindu communities are incredibly diverse in the United States. Some may want to spend time surrounded by family and loved ones while others might prefer private meditation and spiritual reflection. While there is no right or wrong way for Hindus to mourn their dead, Hindu religion has some traditions that are intended to support the mourners in their time of grief.

A typical Hindu mourning period lasts anywhere from ten to thirty days. On the tenth day, a ceremony called the Shraddah is held. The ceremony is performed to help the soul transition from one life to the next and have a peaceful process of reincarnation. On this day, it is appropriate for guests to bring food, (specifically fruit), and other gifts of sympathy. Balls of rice called pindas are made on this day and offered to the souls of those who have died as nourishment. Sometimes the family will perform other acts of merit such as making meals for the Hindu priests.

On the first anniversary of the death, the family might hold a celebration in which they gather the community to pray, eat, and celebrate the life of their loved one. The Shraddha, is again, performed on this day.

To express condolences for the family, phone calls and visits are appropriate. Some families may wish to receive flowers while others will not, so checking before ordering flowers is a good idea. Empathic gestures, small acts of kindness, and a willingness to listen are all ways in which people can express support for a grieving family.

Resources on Hindu Grieving and Mourning:

- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/hindu-funeral-rites-and-death-rituals/>
- <https://www.asianindianfuneralservice.com/blog/blog/annual-death-anniversary-rituals-in-hindu-families>
- Resources on the Shraddha
 - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/shraddha>
 - <https://www.asianindianfuneralservice.com/blog/blog/understanding-shraadh-a-comprehensive-guide>

Complete List of Online Resources

National Home Funeral Alliance

- <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>
- State Laws:
 - <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/state-laws>

Resources For Hindu Theology on Death:

- <https://www.hinduamerican.org/blog/5-things-to-know-about-hindus-and-death>
- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-resources/spirituality-end-of-life-care/hinduism/>
- <https://www.britannica.com/science/death/Hinduism>

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Hindu and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

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Resources on Body Care and Disposition Practices:

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- <https://www.asianindianfuneralservice.com/blog/blog/why-cremation-is-preferred-in-hinduism-and-when-burial-is-chosen-instead>
- <https://www.asianindianfuneralservice.com/blog/blog/a-comprehensive-guide-to-hindu-funeral-traditions>
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
 - <https://recompose.life/our-model/>
 - <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-human-composting>
 - <https://www.cremationassociation.org/alkalinehydrolysis.html>
 - <https://us-funerals.com/aquamation-or-resomation/>

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- <https://hollywoodforever.com/resources/what-to-expect-at-a-hindu-funeral-in-the-us/>
- <https://www.memorialplanning.com/resources/religious-funerals-guide/hindu-funerals-guide/>
- <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/memorial-services/funeral-traditions/hindu-funeral-traditions>

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 - <https://www.asianindianfuneralservice.com/blog/blog/understanding-shraadh-a-comprehensive-guide>