

“In the Beginning”



Creation Myths (or Stories)
Early Indus Valley

Hinduism & Buddhism

NOTE TO STUDENTS

One reason I like to start with Creation Stories is because they remind us all of an aspect of our tendency as humans—we make meaning.

The other reason is to serve as a reminder that histories are a construct.

As students of history, it's most important to realize histories are told by a particular group for a particular purpose—the winners tell the story. **It has only been recently that we recognize our prejudice in looking at cultures outside our own and attempt to look at the histories from more than one side.**

“Until the lion has historians, the stories are told by the hunter”.

African proverb

NOTE TO STUDENTS

So, while every attempt is made to present this subject with objectivity based on research, we are looking at cultures outside our own.

You will be exposed to the lecture, your book, web links and other information to frame your understanding of the images and ideas.

All writing must be based on research. If you see something in the work that is outside our research, feel free to mention it. However, if it is a naive comment, based on 'opinion' as opposed to understanding or observation, it's not okay. It's not academically valid.

What you think,
you become.

What you feel,
you attract.

What you imagine,
you create.

-BUDDHA

There is nothing noble about
being superior to some other
man. The true nobility is in
being superior to your
previous self.

- Hindu Proverb

BACKGROUND

The creation of the world and the origin of mankind are the themes of many myths.

They can be traced back to the earliest civilizations around the globe.

In general there are two kinds of Creation myths:

1. Myths about the beginning of things– the world and human beings.
2. Ritual myths connected to ceremonies designed to ensure the well-being or continuation of the world.



Creation of the World, Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel, Rome.

Depiction of the creation story from the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament of the Christian Bible.

The notion of the world even having a beginning arose most likely as Paleolithic people witnessed the beginning of human life through birth.

In fact, the earliest creation myths use the imagery of biological birth.

Common themes across cultures are:

1. Birth and growth
2. Decay and death
3. Resurrection of all life, animal, vegetable and human.

This little statue to the right is one of the earliest sculptures. Many similar ones have been found and archaeologists believe they relate to fertility.



The Venus of Willendorf, 28,000-22,000 BCE, limestone. 4.4" tall. Natural History Museum, Vienna.

There is evidence of stone tools made by humans as early as 2.5 million years ago. This is called the Paleolithic era.

Early Homo sapiens appear around 200,000 BCE and with this group we find evidence of what we might call ART.

The first evidence is in burial rites. The way people buried their dead showed evidence that people believe in something. How bodies were arranged, what kind of jewelry were added, what objects were placed in the graves— all point to conscious thought.

We don't know exactly why they did these things but Archeologists infer meaning.

Some of the earliest date to 60,000 BCE.



Many early burial sites show individuals buried with shell jewelry, with pottery and in a fetal or 'sleeping' position.

Human beings were nomadic for thousands of years before they began settling down, creating what we call, 'civilizations.'

The time period for the development of cities begins between about the 8th and 4th centuries *BCE (Before the Common Era)*.

They are farming and raising animals. Written language emerges along with large and small scale images that support beliefs.

Evidence exists to suggest the first wars of conquest began at this time.

Many images use a form of **Anthropomorphism**, the tendency to picture the divine in human form. Also, the use of a kind of **Zoomorphism**, combining human and animal elements.

It is extremely widespread.



Inanna/Ishtar, Sumer, Mesopotamia, Larsa period, c. 2000BCE.
Terracotta relief, 1' 8"

HISTORY

Some of the earliest civilizations are these:

The Ancient Near East (Anatolia and Mesopotamia)– in the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys in what is present day Iran, Iraq and Syria. From about 4500 BCE to the 7th century CE.

Egypt– in the Nile River Valley, Egypt. From about 3200 BCE to 330 BCE (when the country fell under Macedonian, Greek, rule)

China– along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, from about 6000 BCE to 220 CE.

Indus Valley – Indus River, Northern India, about 2600-1900 BCE.



Most of you are familiar with the Ancient Egyptian Civilization in Africa. The Eastern civilizations of China and the Indus Valley may be less familiar.

We are most concerned here with the Indus Valley– the early Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro cultures.



Egypt— in the Nile River Valley, Egypt.

The Ancient Near East (Anatolia and Mesopotamia)— in the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys in what is present day Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Indus Valley — Indus River, Northern India, about 2600-1900 BCE.

China— along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, from about 6000 BCE to 220 CE.

Trade Routes— Long-distance trade played a major role in the cultural, religious, and artistic exchanges that took place between the major centers of civilization in Europe and Asia during antiquity.

The trade routes were the communications highways of the ancient world. New inventions, religious beliefs, artistic styles, languages, and social customs, as well as goods and raw materials, were transmitted by people moving from one place to another to conduct business.

From the Met Museum website. See link below.

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/trade/hd_trade.htm



This really simple map shows early trade routes between the East in China and through all the early civilizations to Rome in the West.

Most notable are the Silk and Spice trading routes from about 202 BCE to 220 CE.

However, trade and exchange took place for thousands of years accounting for many of the similarities we will see in beliefs and ideas.

Indus Valley – Indus River, Northern India, about 2600-1900 BCE.

One of the world's earliest urban civilizations and the one that influences later Hindu and even Buddhist images.

The roots of our own civilization can be seen in these early ones, especially Mesopotamia and Indus Valley. We see evidence these civilizations interacted with each other allowing for cross-cultural connections.



This simple map shows the outline of present day India. The Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro cultures left some artwork we can discuss.

To the left is a seal from Harappa. On the left side is the original Stamp seal and on the right is the impression made in clay.

Indus Valley – sculptures from about 3000 and 2000 BCE.

One of the world's earliest and most advanced urban civilizations. Generally, at this time period we see female figures, known as goddess figures and seals that predate the development of the

Hindu Religion (Proto-Hindu..

Indus Valley people worshiped a Mother or Fertility goddess.



Proto-Hindu
mother goddesses,
Mohenjo Daro,
2000 BCE



Proto-Hindu mother goddesses,
Mohenjo Daro, 3000 BCE

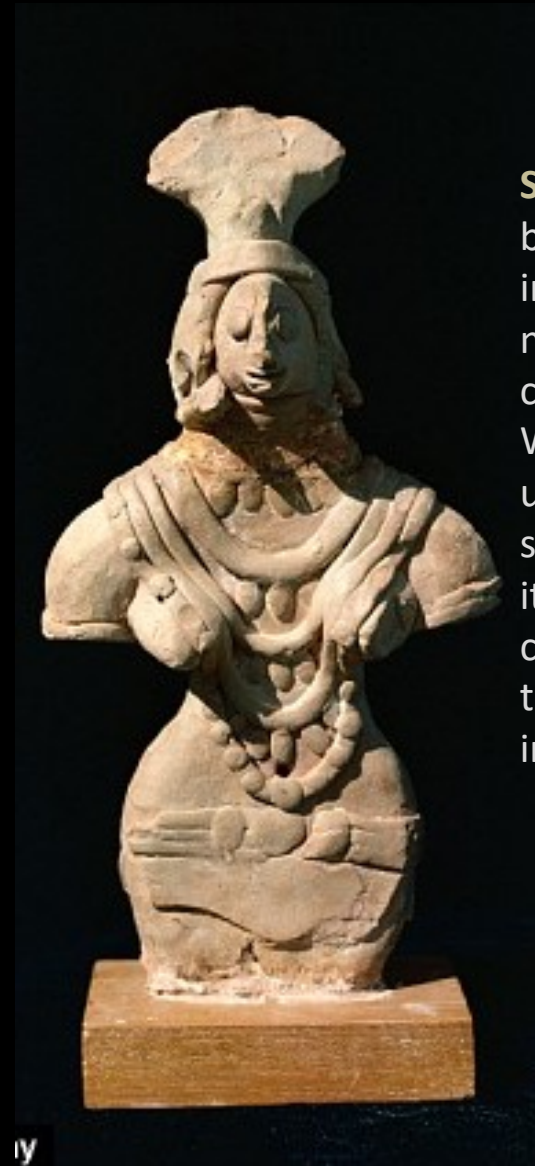
Indus Valley –

Notice on both these sculptures we see similar elements. In each case the female is wearing an elaborate headdress, jewelry and the body is simple and stylized.

One figure appears to be holding her breasts in each hand. The other figure's arms have broken off so we don't know exactly what they were doing.



Proto-Hindu
mother goddesses,
Mohenjo Daro,
2000 BCE



Proto-Hindu mother goddesses,
Mohenjo Daro, 3000 BCE

Stylized means – being represented in a non-naturalistic and conventional way. While stylization usually involves some abstraction, it usually refers to a cultural convention to represent figures in a particular way.

Many so called 'fertility goddess' statues have been found in the Indus Valley as in other early civilizations as well.

The *Dancing Girl*, is unusual in that she is not thought to be a goddess or devotional figure. Much attention has been given to her pose, attitude, jewelry and triangle shape at the pubic area. This early figure provides another stylistic source for later art.



This group is from Harappa.



Dancing Girl, Mohenjo Daro, 2500 BCE

The Indus Valley Civilization seems to have had a high regard for nature and the environment. Many animals are seen in the seals excavated from this time.

Seals were pieces of clay with text and image stamped into them.



This one is called Pashupatinath (or Lord of the Animals) from 2500 BCE. The figure here is thought to be the early prototype for the later Hindu god Shiva.



Here are some other seals from the Indus Valley. Notice many have animals. We also see seals with this yogi figure.

More about both things later.

This early civilization provides us with the seeds of image and idea that later form the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Similarly to other civilizations we've looked at, a core need of human life is fertility.



Brama, the creator god of the Hindu pantheon seated in a similar yogic pose as the earlier seal.



Lotus Headed Fertility Goddess such as these were first found in Indus Valley Seals. But the ones here are from much later, 1-3rd Century.

CREATION MYTHS/STORIES

Not only are belief systems, like religions, based on Creation Stories, many of the images we see in art are from these narratives as well.

Let's look at the creation stories for Hinduism and Buddhism to start.

You got a little of the history of the Early Indus Valley Civilization. Here we look at the creation texts of Hinduism.

In the second millennium BCE (2000 BCE) Indus valley cities disappeared. The Aryan people from central Asia brought the Sanskrit language and the Vedas. (Sanskrit is the language of Hindu scriptures).



While the Indus Valley Civilization is in what we now call India, Afghanistan and Iran, the Aryan people came from the Middle East, from the Mesopotamian civilization

CREATION MYTHS/STORIES

The Aryans composed a set of works known as the *Vedas*, or *Books of Knowledge*, in which they describe an elaborate pantheon of gods and the devotional rites to honor them.

While these Vedic divinities and practices only partly coincide with later traditions, they are regarded as the ultimate literary source of Hinduism.

The Vedas were first composed around 1500-1000 BCE and were transmitted orally for many generations before being written down.

In the course of the first Millennium BCE the **Vedas** were succeeded by the philosophically based Upanishads and the more practically concerned **Brahmans**— all written texts.



Vedic literature is religious as it reflects worldview, spiritual preoccupation, and social attitudes of the Brahmins or priestly class of ancient India.

Text and illustrations of the Rig Veda on palm leaves.

CREATION MYTHS/STORIES

The Vedas present a multitude of gods, most of them related to natural forces such as storms, fire, and wind.

As part of its mythology, Vedic texts contain multiple creation stories, most of them inconsistent with each other. Sometimes the Vedas refer to a particular god as the greatest god of all, and later another god will be regarded as the greatest god of all.

Prior to Vedic times, the oldest religions of India were animistic and totemic, worshiping spirits dwelling in stones, animals, trees, rivers, mountains and stars. Traces of this religion are present in the Vedas as well.



Even though there were many gods, some get more attention in the Vedas than others.

Indra, the storm god or sky god (also known as the god of war) is very popular.

In this relief sculpture at the Keshava Temple, he is shown riding his elephant mount.

CREATION MYTHS/STORIES

In the Vedas, the sacred hymns (1500-900 BCE) , creation is not the concern.

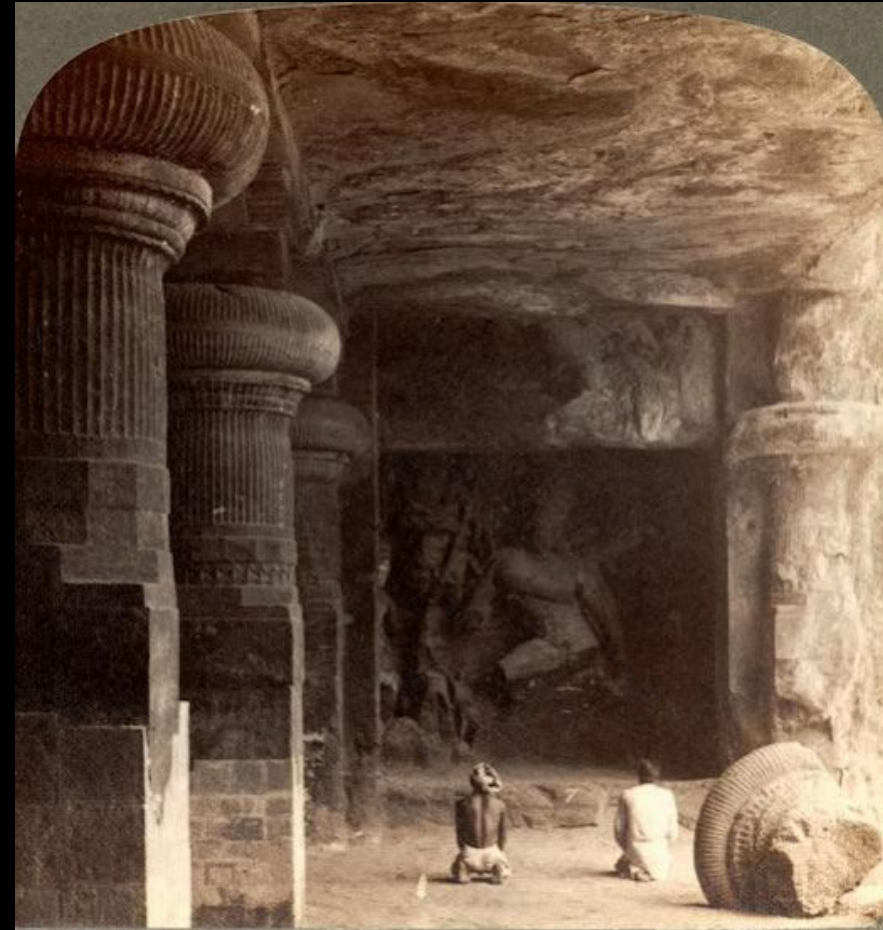
Rather it is man's awe before it.
Gods were the 'shining ones'.

People worshiped the light of the world, the blinding splendor of all things

Worshippers went to see the image of the deity.

Eyes are important because the worshiper sees the deity and the deity can see back.

For the Hindus, seeing was a form of touching.



So, once statues were created, people viewed the statue as a stand-in for the deity.

REINCARNATION

The Rig-Veda offers myths of the beginning. There were several.

In one, a primeval man, Prajapati, the Lord of Beings, was sacrificed. Sacrifice was important in early Hindu rituals as it repeats the mystery of creation.

There are many Hindu creation stories but the one given here helps to explain one of the major Hindu beliefs - reincarnation.

This is not the first world, nor is it the first universe.

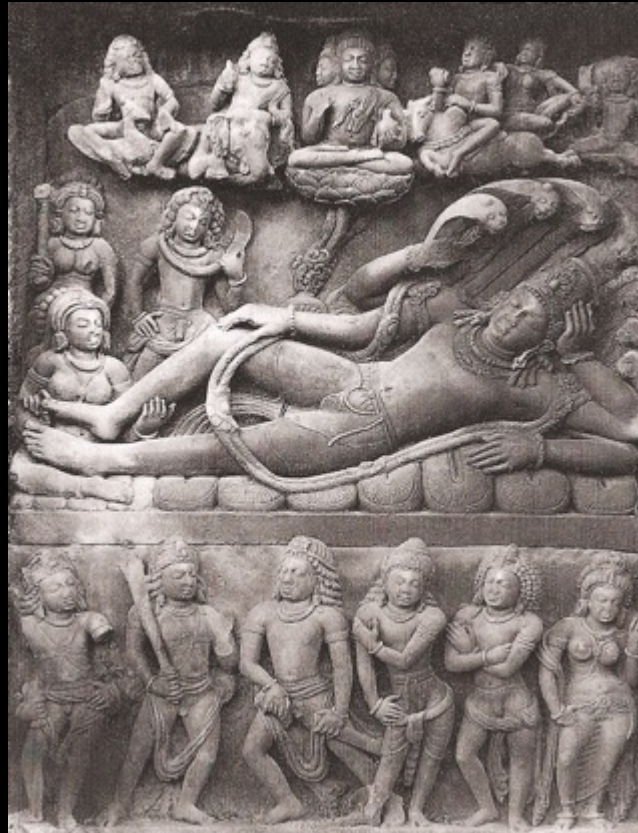
Creation and destruction are part of the eternal cycle. Both are important.

While Prajapati was a god in the ancient Vedic period in India, he later became identified with Brahma.

NOT ONE GOD BUT MANY



The universes are made
by Lord Brahma the
Creator



maintained by Lord Vishnu the
Preserver



destroyed by Lord Shiva.

ALL THREE GODS ARE FORMS OF THE
SUPREME ONE and part of the
SUPREME ONE

The Supreme One is behind and beyond all.
After each old universe is destroyed nothing
is left but a vast ocean.



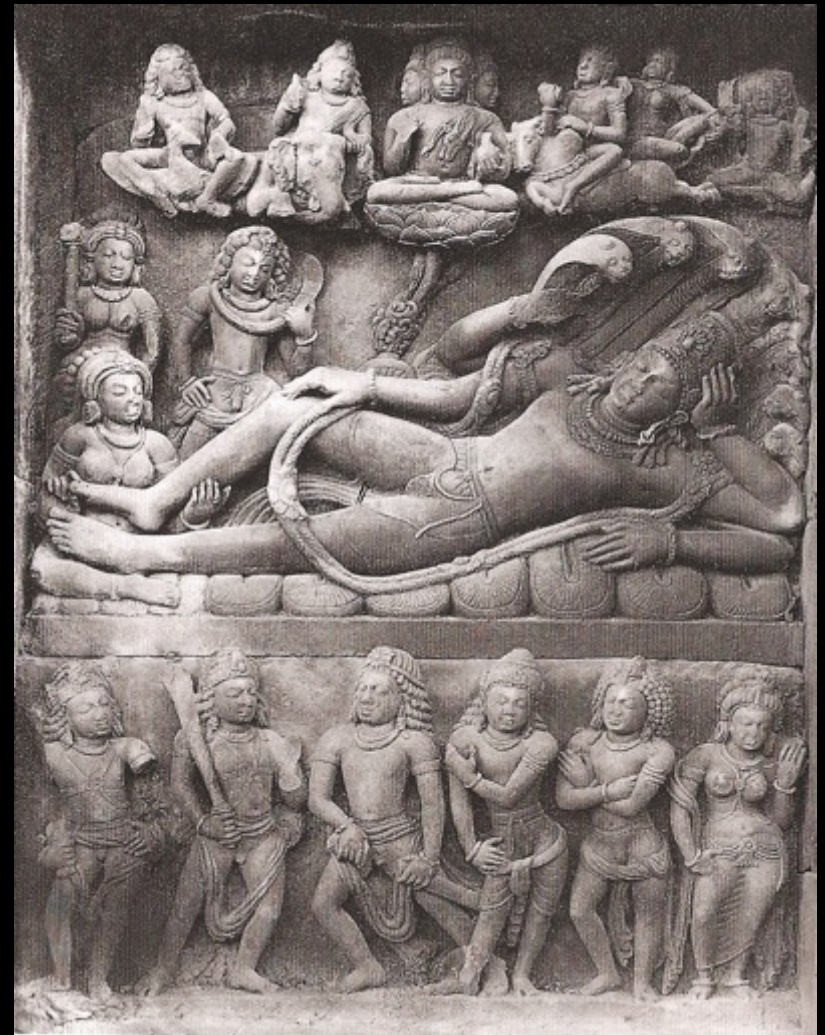
Water themes abound.

ALL THREE GODS ARE FORMS OF THE SUPREME ONE and part of the SUPREME ONE

The Supreme One is behind and beyond all.
After each old universe is destroyed nothing
is left but a vast ocean.

Floating on this ocean, resting on the great
snake Ananta, is Lord Vishnu.

Some say that a lotus flower springs from his
navel and from this comes Lord Brahma.
And it is from Lord Brahma that all creation
comes.



As we will learn later, two of the three
main gods in the Hindu pantheon appear
in different forms. Here Vishnu appears as
Narayana, the creator of the creator,
Brahma.



Brahma is usually depicted with four heads ---the number of the four cardinal directions, and four arms which refer to the four Vedas and the four aims of the householder's life: duty, success, refinement and liberation.



Shiva dancing as Nataraja—The Cosmic Dancer. *Shiva—(from the Sanskrit “Auspicious One”) is worshiped as the destroyer & has many incarnations (or avatars): An ascetic Yogi; an ordinary man who lives with his wife, Parvati and 2 children; the Cosmic Dancer; Ardhanarishvara (male and female); the Lingam; and he’s often depicted slaying demons*

IT'S COMPLICATED: NOT BLACK AND WHITE

The Hindus saw many possibilities.

Creation was not bringing into being the wonder of the world.

It was the fragmenting of the unity of nature into countless imperfect forms what were already there.

The cycles of birth and death have perpetuated that disintegrating force of creation.

The object is to 'get off the wheel'.

To escape the cycle and merge with the One.



Many gods and goddesses responsible for different (and sometimes overlapping) aspects of creation and life.

THE SILENCE OF THE BUDDHA

The Buddha had no answer to the riddle of creation.

The Buddhist aim was not to know the world or to improve it (as in the West) but to escape it's suffering.

The whole concern is salvation.

Inquiry, as in the Western tradition, had no place in Buddhism.

Buddha actually offered an explanation as to how ideas of a single Creator got started and it had to do with the establishment of power.



Meditating Buddha, from Gandhara, Pakistan, second century CE. Gray schist, 3' 7 1/2" high. Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh.

ONE OF MANY: A BUDDHA

The story of the Historic Buddha—Siddhartha Gautama Buddha started his life as as Prince Siddhartha (c.561 BCE). This is where we start.

However, the word 'buddha' is not his name but a word that means to awaken or to know.

Gautama is not the first. Not the last. One in a series.

Because the early Buddhists believed that religious knowledge was too sacred to be written down, facts and legends about the Buddha were preserved only in the memories of monks for 400 years after his death.

The story of the life of Gautama became the source for representations to come.

Important note: we will see many statues in the class with missing parts. In this statue, the head is missing. It is not that the sculpture was made this way, over time, things get broken. In this instance, the head has broken off.



The fasting Siddhartha depicts a scene from the life of the historic Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama.

LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

Here several episodes of the life of the Buddha are represented in one stele.

At the bottom--The birth of Buddha--depicts him emerging from his mother's side.

In the center is the moment of enlightenment with the forces of his temptation. His right hand reaches down to touch the earth to signify his moment of triumph.

Above that, his first sermon at Sarnath, showing him making the gesture of teaching (which often includes the wheel of the law).

The top figure is reclining...this is his final triumph...his death.



AFTER ENLIGHTENMENT— HE BEGAN TO PREACH

1.The Holy Eightfold Path: right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

2.Four Holy Truths: all existence is suffering, all suffering and rebirth are caused by man's selfish craving. Nirvana, freedom from suffering, comes from cessation of all craving, and fourth, the stopping of all ill and craving comes only from following the Eight Fold Path.

These are the way of the Buddha, the way of Enlightenment.



BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY

Even though the Buddha didn't address the origins of the world, there is a Buddhist Cosmology. It came later.

According to this view, the center of the universe is a mountain, Meru, from the top of which rise various levels of heaven.

Numbers are important in Buddhist Cosmology and belief. We will see many instances where we are told the number of things.

Watch this for more about the historic Buddha.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXrnxfOT7w>

PBS documentary– The Story of the Buddha
2 hours 47 minutes



This Tibetan mandala depicts the Buddhist cosmology.

Meru, the mountain, is surrounded by 7 mountain chains separated by 7 oceans. Beyond this is a great ocean with four islands...humans occupy one.

The universe is surrounded by a huge rock wall.

On Mount Meru reside the four guardians of the four quarters (four cardinal points), and 33 principle gods (principle Hindu gods) and celestial Buddha at the peak. Above this is sky.

REVIEW

This week I addressed the issue of Creation Stories and why we might want to look at them.

We can see how a religion, faith or belief system might be framed by the myths, even as these stories are framed by their context.

I gave you an introduction to the three main Hindu gods and the roles they play in the cycles of creation and destruction.

We also looked at the way Buddhism deals with the notion of Creation. Even as the historic Buddha had no desire to consider this issue, over time, a complex cosmology was developed.

Next week we will look at the early history of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Even though Hinduism has a much longer history than Buddhism, Buddhist images are developed earlier than specifically Hindu ones.

We'll talk more about that next week.