



When some people look at Hinduism, they very easily dismiss it as a religion where people worship statues. They see 1000's of Gods with confusing names and elaborate rituals. And they are at a loss to understand how such a seemingly superficial and complicated religion can have survived for so many 1000's of years!

Hinduism is not polytheistic - it is, in fact, monotheistic - believing that there is only one God - the supreme, formless, omnipotent, omnipresent Lord. The different Gods and Goddesses that you see in the Temple can be thought of as symbolic representations of particular characteristics or functions of that formless God. In fact, we can say that Hinduism embodies pluralism i.e. one God - many forms, as encapsulated in one of our most ancient of Hindu scriptures:

"Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti" - There is only one Reality. The sages call it by different names. [Rig Veda 1.164.46]

Whilst living in this world, our mind is never still. It is always in chaos because of our vasanas or desires. With such an agitated mind, we cannot concentrate, contemplate or meditate - the path that will lead us to realisation of the God within.

The founders of Hinduism, realising that our concentration was on worldly pursuits, therefore created gods and goddesses, rituals and festivals related to worldly events, so that holiness would become part of our everyday life.

When you look at a picture of Lord Ghanapathy, what do you see? You may see a charming, slightly comical elephant-headed God that you have been told to pray to first, before you start anything new. You may know that He is the remover of obstacles, and you may even know many of the puranic stories associated with Him. But look closer, and you will find a deeper meaning behind the symbols that are in front of you!



The rat, His vahana or vehicle, represents the lowest form of animal; His elephant-head represents the highest form of animal; having also the body of a man shows that He is Ganesha, the Lord of all beings. His large ears and head indicate that He has gained wisdom through listening and reflecting on the eternal truths of the vedas. His head and trunk are curved into the shape of the Om, our most sacred of symbols, representing the primeval sound of creation and our most powerful mantra in prayer and meditation. The importance of the elephant is also that it is a herbivore, eating Sathwic food - a calm and gentle animal that also has immense strength, which it uses only when needed.



The elephant's trunk is one of the few instruments in nature that can perform both gross and subtle actions - it can uproot a huge tree as well as pick up the tiniest of needles. It signifies the need for us to be able to develop our intellect, our powers of discrimination, in both the gross or material world and also in the subtle or spiritual world.



In His right hand He holds a hook or Ankusa and in His left hand He holds a noose or Paasa. These tools are used back home by elephant-trainers to tame wild elephants. Symbolically, the mind is like a wild elephant, running from here to there, in chaos. So we must use the Ankusa to tame and control our mind and then use the Paasa to tie it down and keep it close to us - only then can we concentrate, contemplate and meditate.

In another hand He holds a dish of Mothakham. This sweet, with its' hard outer shell, signifies the reward of the sweetness of knowledge that will give the spiritual seeker joy, satisfaction and contentment as he travels along the path of enlightenment.

It also indicates the importance of eating the correct Sathwic food, in order to progress spiritually.

Lord Ganesha's large belly is said to contain the whole universe - and is symbolic of the way we should live our lives. We must be able to accept and digest whatever experiences we go through - be they good or bad. Throughout our trials and tribulations, we must be equal-minded and realise that all experiences are learning experiences and will bring us closer to God.

Lord Ganesha sits with one leg folded up and the other leg resting on the ground.

The leg on the ground tells us that we can live in the world like anyone else. But the leg pointing upwards tells us that our concentration and meditation should be ever focussed on the godhead within. Rather like the lotus that He holds in His hand, which grows in stagnant water, but raises its flowers above the water line so that their purity will not be blemished by the polluted waters underneath, we can live in this world but remain unpolluted by the materialism and negative qualities of our surroundings.

At the feet of our Lord is often spread a huge array of different kinds of food. The food represents material wealth, power and prosperity and indicates that if you live a life of high ideals by principles, these material benefits will always be available for you, although you will not be attached to them and they will therefore not hinder your spiritual progress.

The little rat, or mooshikham, represents desire. Rats, by nature, are very greedy creatures, who will run here and there nibbling and hoarding far more than they need. If a man has desires, he can waste his whole life running here and there, fulfilling one desire, only to replace it with another. Instead, we should be like Lord Ganesha and keep our desires firmly under control, never allowing them to overwhelm us. According to the Vinayaka