



VAIKUNTA EKADASHI

WHEN HEAVEN'S DOORS OPEN WIDE

To those with a pure heart, the gates of Vishnu's spiritual world are always open. But on a precious few days, it is said, that passage is open to all, allowing devotees to more easily reach Vaikunta, the abode of Lord

Vishnu, Supreme God to hundreds of millions of Hindus. This is the essence of Vaikunta Ekadashi, a festival marked by fasting, devotion and pilgrimage to famous temples, when devotees draw closer to God in a most personal way.

Who is Lord Vishnu?

In the Vaishnava sect of Hinduism Vishnu is the Supreme God, venerated as the all-pervading essence of all beings, the master of time, the One who supports, sustains and governs the universe and all elements within it. In the sacred *Puranas*, Vishnu is described as the color of dark blue clouds, having four arms, holding a lotus, mace, conch and a chakra. Through the ages, He manifests in several forms, or avatars, such as Sri Rama and Sri Krishna, to guide humans on the path of dharma. Vishnu's constant companion is the Goddess Lakshmi. He represents the potential and She the wealth of potential brought to fruition.

What is Vaikunta Ekadashi?

Ekadashi is the eleventh lunar day of every fortnight. Of the two dozen *ekadashis* in a year, Vaikunta



Ekadashi reigns supreme. It is known as *Mokshada*, "bestowing liberation." On this day, the doors to Vishnu's divine abode, called Vaikunta, are open wide to all who seek salvation, *moksha*. This occurs in the bright fortnight of December/January, the Hindu month of *Mrigashira*. According to mythology, *devas* and *demons* churned the Ocean of Milk for 1,000 years and, *amrita*, the nectar of immortality, appeared on this day.

What do Hindus do on Vaikunta Ekadashi?

Devotees maintain a total or partial fast and observe *mauna*, silence, while remembering Vishnu in prayer. While many Hindus fast on all *ekadashis*, Vaikunta Ekadashi is observed with utmost diligence and self-restraint. A common observance is to consume only water or milk.



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What are the temple observances?

Devotees flock to Vishnu shrines, especially famous ones such as the Venkateshwara temples in Tirupati and Pittsburg, and the Ranganathar temple in Srirangam. In Srirangam the festival spans 21 days divided into morning and night observances. Lord Vishnu, adorned in diamond-studded armor, is brought to a 1,000-pillared hall through the northern gate, called *swarga vaasal*, "heaven's entrance," which is opened only this one time each year.

What else is celebrated around this time?

In the northern hemisphere, winter solstice occurs in this month, heralding longer, warmer days and agrarian prosperity. This transition to the year's fortuitous half is celebrated with beautiful patterns, called *rangoli*, drawn with colored rice flour on the floor outside homes. Hindus believe that at this time the divine celestials are most attentive to the pleas of mankind. Devotees rise early, perform ablutions and, throughout the month, visit temples with prayers in heart and gifts in hand.



DREAMSTIME

DOES RELIGIOUS FASTING MAKE SENSE?

Fasting in Hinduism indicates the denial of the physical needs of the body for the sake of spiritual gains. According to scripture, fasting helps create an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. By fasting, the devout exercise control over their rioting senses and desires. It is a sacrifice made to the Self, by the self.

By turning within in meditation, they rein in the mind. Since the body is mostly composed of fluids, it is influenced by the phases of the moon, as is the mind. The rishis, ancient Hindu scientists, established these connections and recommended fasting and meditation based on the moon cycle, such as on ekadashi. This causes a natural slow down of the system and the opportunity to reconnect with one's deeper being.

Fasting breaks life's repetitious regimen and brings clarity, empowering the individual to resume normal activities with greater vigor and conviction.

TIDBITS ABOUT VAIKUNTA EKADASHI

What is the legend of Ekadashi? In an ancient story, Ekadashi is a *devi*, or angel, born of Vishnu's mind, a fierce defender of righteousness, a protectress of those in need. Strengthened by unflinching devotion to God Vishnu, she was feared by the forces of evil and ignorance. Vishnu offered her the boon of being rich, famous, powerful and beautiful in the world of mortals. But she declined, saying she wanted only to share her blessings with humans who fast and pray to Him on *ekadashi*. Vishnu granted her wish, decreeing that anyone worshipping Him by fasting on the eleventh day of the moon would be allowed access through the celestial gates. In the epic *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna relates Ekadashi's story to King Yudhishtira, praising her and recommending fasting as an ancient and effective spiritual practice.

How is the fast broken? The Ekadashi fast is normally broken the next lunar day, *dvadashi*, by partaking of fruit, herbs and milk. The Indian gooseberry, *amla*, known as a wonder food, is eulogized in the *Puranas* as the ideal nourishment to jump-start the system after a fast.

HINDUISM: FACT & FICTION

FACT: Science and mysticism have long blended in Hindu tradition. The ancient sages who wrote the scriptures also made observations on astronomy, time and mathematics. Long before Galileo, Copernicus and Newton, Hindus recorded knowledge of gravity, heliocentrism and other universal laws in treatises called *Siddhanta*. Hindu rishis further explored the connections between mind, body and the soul, evolving the sciences of yoga and ayurveda for a rewarding, beneficial life.

FICTION: Western scholars describe Hinduism as polytheistic. This is incorrect. While Hindu scriptures speak of many Gods—as many as 330 million—there is only one Supreme Being, which Hindus of various denominations and linguistic backgrounds worship by different names. The One Great God created lesser Divinities, suprahuman beings presiding over aspects of Creation, not unlike the archangels of Christianity. Hinduism is neither polytheistic nor pantheistic; its philosophy is rightly called panentheism, God in all things and yet beyond.