

Primary Teaching Guide 3.2

Hindu Symbols

Hindu symbols can be usefully explored through drawing and painting, and other artistic exercises. The following is some information that may be useful. Consult also page 95 of the Teachers Book.

Symbol	Significance
Om	The sound at the time of creation. Often used as the symbol of Hinduism. It is said to represent many 'sets of threes', looks like a figure 3, and is made of three sounds – A, U and M. You can hear Om being chanted on the Audio-CD, Section One.
Hands in prayer	Submission and humility – with dignity; the self and God, both within the heart; connected to prayer, darshan and greeting others. This symbol is not confined to Hinduism, and is almost universal. Hence, it represents the common identity of all living beings under the same one Supreme.
Diva	Light and darkness; good and evil; connect with Diwali and the arti ceremony; the light of knowledge, which helps us see our way through the world. Light also represent the eternal soul; there are a number of shrines and temples where a diva has been kept continuously alight for many, many years.
Cow	Purity, contentment, nourishment; the quality of goodness (sattva guna). The mother, as she provides milk; mother earth (often personified as a cow; ahimsa (non-violence); culture (represented by protection of cows and brahmins); the bull represents dharma (duty that sustains).
Lotus Flower	Purity and transcendence. Being in the world but not of the world (on the water but not in the water). Purity and beauty may grow out of darkness and suffering, as the lotus grows out of mud (another name for lotus is pankaja – 'born out of mud'). The lotus is also a metaphor for beauty – hence, we hear of lotus eyes (i.e. shaped like the lotus leaf), lotus feet, etc. The lotus is associated with many deities but especially Lakshmi. Sanskrit words for lotus include 'padma', 'kamala', and 'pankaja'.
Swastika	A sign of auspiciousness; it has been associated with the sun deity; it was unfortunately usurped by the Nazis. For this reason it may be familiar to many pupils and may warrant careful explanation.
Trident	Associated with Shiva, it represents protection. It is also connected with Durga; the three prongs represent the three types of misery – (1) those due to the body and mind (2) those due to other living beings (3) those due to the natural disasters.
Conch Shell	Often blown before and after the arti ceremony. It is considered pure, unlike other objects made of bone. Some conchs are thought to be the residence of Goddess Lakshmi. It is one of the four symbols of Vishnu – the others are the lotus, the club and the discus.