

GAṆĒŚHA



Gaṇeśha was born with a human head and body but had his head cut off by Śhiva when the child came between him and Pārvathi. Śhiva then replaced Gaṇeśha's head with that of an elephant's.

Śhiva appointed him the lord of his gaṇas.

The word Gaṇeśha is made up of '*gaṇa*' (followers of Śhiva) and '*iśha*' (lord).

Role: Gaṇeśha, the son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Pārvathi, is considered the remover of all obstacles. He is worshipped as the god of knowledge, wisdom, education and wealth.

Gaṇeśha is also referred to as 'Vighneśhvara', 'Gaṇapathi', 'Ekadhantha' and 'Vināyaka'.

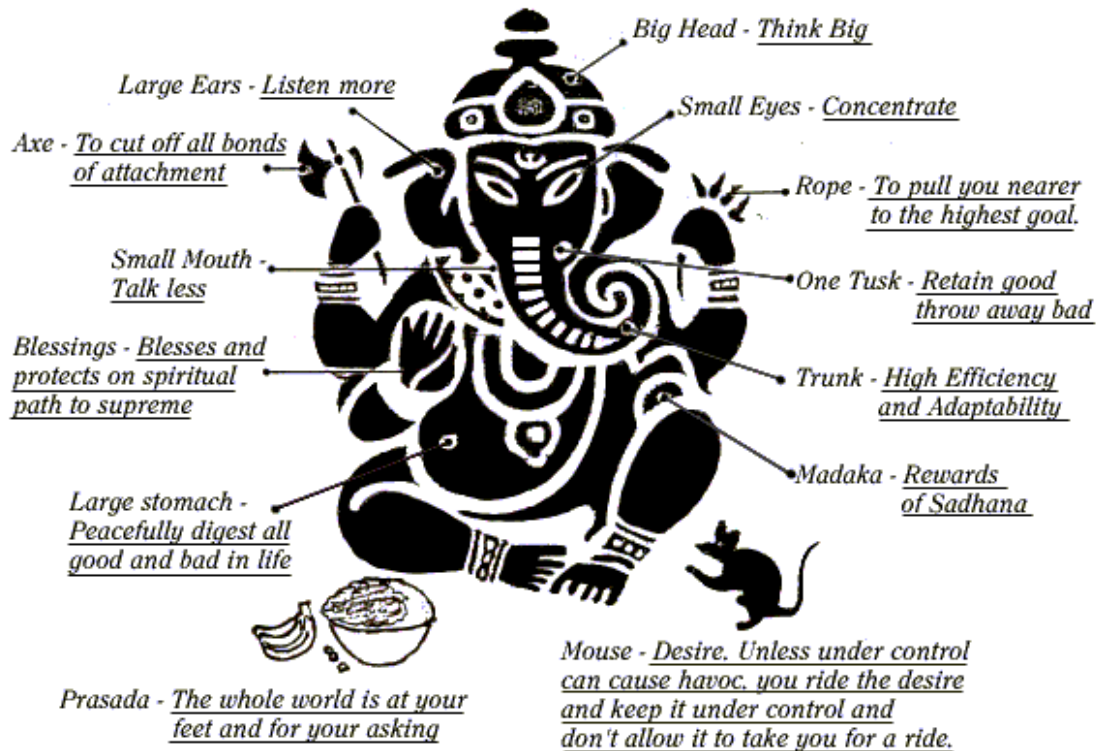


Iconography

Gaṇeśha is usually depicted either as a pictograph or as an idol with the body of a man and the head of an elephant, having only one tusk, the other tusk appearing broken. Another distinguishing feature, besides the elephant head, is the large belly practically falling over his lower garment. On his chest, across his left shoulder, is his sacred thread, often in the form of a snake. The vehicle of Gaṇeśha is the mouse, often seen paying obeisance to his lord.

Elephant head: The most striking feature of Gaṇeśha is his elephant head, symbolic of auspiciousness, strength and intellectual prowess. All the qualities of the elephant are contained in the form of Gaṇapathi. The elephant is the largest and strongest of the forest animals yet he is gentle and, amazingly, a vegetarian. Hence, he does not kill to eat. He is affectionate and loyal to his keeper and is greatly swayed if love and kindness are extended to him. Gaṇeśha, though a powerful deity, is similarly loving and forgiving and moved by the affection of his devotees. However, at the same time, the elephant can destroy a whole forest and is a one-man army when provoked. Gaṇeśha is extremely powerful and can be ruthless when containing evil.

Single tusk: Legend states that Gaṇeśha broke one of his tusks to use as a pen to write the Mahābhāratha. The broken tusk of Gaṇeśha stands primarily for his ability to overcome or "break through" the illusions of duality.



Ear: The wide ears denote wisdom - ability to listen to people who seek help and to reflect on spiritual truths. They signify the importance of listening in order to assimilate ideas. Ears are used to gain knowledge. The large ears indicate that when God is known, all knowledge is known; Gaṇeśha's large ears, like the winnow, sift the bad from the good. Although they hear everything, they retain only that which is good.

Trunk: the curved trunk indicates the intellectual potentials which manifest themselves in the faculty of discrimination between real and unreal. The curved trunk also suggests the writing of the sound AUM (=OM). Thus, it's also a representation of Ōmkāra or Praṇava. In fact, either in Sanskrit or in Thamizh, the writing of OM remembers the elephant trunk or the side face of this animal. On the forehead, the Thriśhūla (weapon of Śhiva, similar to Trident) is depicted, symbolizing time (past, present and future) and Gaṇeśha's mastery over it.

Pot belly: Ganesha's pot belly represents the infinite universes. It signifies the bounty of nature and equanimity, the ability of Gaṇeśha to swallow the sorrows of the Universe and protect the world. The Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa says that he has the name 'Lambodhara' because all the universes of the past, present, and future are in him.

Leg position: The position of his legs (one resting on the ground and one raised) indicate the importance of living and participating in the material world as well as in the spiritual world, the ability to live in the world without being of the world.

Arms: The four arms of Gaṇeśha represent the four inner attributes of the body namely the mind (Manas), intellect (Buddhi), ego (Ahamkāra), and conditioned conscience (Chittha). Lord Gaṇeśha represents the pure consciousness - the Āthman - which enables these four attributes to function in us.

Axe: The hand waving an axe is a symbol of the retrenchment of all desires, bearers of pain and suffering. Gaṇeśha uses the axe to both strike and repel obstacles. The axe is also to prod man to the path of righteousness and truth

Whip: The second hand holds a whip, a symbol of the force that ties the devout person to the eternal beatitude of God. The whip conveys that worldly attachments and desires should be rid of.

Abhaya: The third hand, turned towards the devotee, is in a pose of blessing, refuge and protection (abhaya).

Lotus: The fourth hand holds a lotus flower (padhma), which symbolizes the highest goal of human evolution - the sweetness of the realized inner self. The lotus signifies that in order to attain spiritual perfection, one should conquer emotions enabling one to live in the world without being affected by earthly temptations, just as a lotus remains in water but is not affected by it.

Modhaka or laḍḍu: Sweet balls that Gaṇeśha holds in one of his hands are symbolic of wisdom, or of that which gives liberation. The word modhaka is derived from the Sanskrit root, mudh (joy, delight). The self is said to be of the nature of existence (sath), consciousness (chith), bliss (ānandha). The modhaka is also the joyful reward of the truth seeker getting progress on the spiritual path.

Obtaining what one likes seemingly brings joy. Thus Gaṇeśha holds out the incentive and enticement of “giving one what one wants, so that ultimately, one will want what he has to give.” The modhaka is a symbol of ānandha (bliss), of the joys of spiritual practice that Gaṇeśha gives to his devotees. The modhaka is literally a sweet made of wheat or rice ball, which is invariably found in Gaṇeśha’s trunk, hand and/or a bowl nearby.

Snake: The snake that runs around his waist represents energy in all forms.

Sugarcane: Sugarcane possesses an attractive color. Everyone knows that beneath its hard outer layer, there is nectarine juice. However the juice cannot be had as it is. It calls for much effort. Similarly, to obtain the knowledge of the 'self', hidden inside us, we have to labour hard and break away the hard coverings concealing it, just as we have to remove the hard coating of the sugarcane to get the juice. By merely removing the hard, outer covering you will not get juice. The inner white stem will have to be squeezed hard to yield the juice. Similarly, the ego in us is to be squeezed out fully to

obtain the self, which pervades our entire personality just as juice pervades the entire sugarcane in a subtle way. The drinking of the sugarcane juice is the attainment of the self, and that inexplicable and limitless experience is what ancient scriptures call 'Āthmānandha'.

Sacred thread: The strands represent purity in thought, word and deed. It may also mean one who bestows health, happiness and prosperity.

Dhūrvā Grass: The word Dhūrvā is derived from the words 'dhuhu' and 'avam'. 'Dhuhu-avam' means that which is far away and which brings one closer. This grass which grows in great multitudes also strengthens ones memory. Dhūrvā grass is widely used in medicines meant to cure indigestion and other stomach ailments.

Vehicle: Gaṇeśha is often shown riding on or attended by a mouse. The mouse or mūṣhikam represents wisdom, talent and intelligence. It symbolizes the minute investigation of a cryptic subject. A mouse leads a clandestine life below the ground. Thus, it is also a symbol of ignorance that is dominant in darkness and fears light and knowledge. As the vehicle of Lord Gaṇeśha, a mouse teaches us to remain alert and illuminate our inner-self with the light of knowledge.

Another interpretation says that the mouse (Mūṣhika **or Akhu**) represents the ego, the mind with all of its desires, and the pride of the individual. Gaṇeśha, riding atop the mouse, becomes the master of these tendencies, indicating the power that the intellect and the discriminative faculties have over the mind. Moreover, the mouse (extremely voracious by nature) is often depicted next to a plate of sweets with his eyes turned toward Gaṇeśha while he tightly holds on to a morsel of food between his paws, as if expecting an order from Gaṇeśha. This represents the mind which has been completely subordinated to the superior faculty of the intellect. The mind under strict supervision, does not approach the food unless it has permission.

Colour: The colour associated with Gaṇeśha is usually red. It is said that Śhiva granted Gaṇeśha a boon that before anything auspicious was begun, his name would be invoked. Therefore, Gaṇeśha also represents the beginning of anything good.

Consorts: Buddhhi and Siddhhi are best identified as his consorts in the Śhiva Purāṇa, where Gaṇeśha cleverly wins the two desirable daughters of Prajāpathi. It also means that when Gaṇeśha is present, siddhhi 'success' and buddhhi 'wisdom' are not far behind.