

## [HINDU ETHICS](#)

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# HINDU ETHICS

Universal Dharma:

Nature is the most efficient and exquisite designer. From the nautilus spiral of a sea shell to the twin hemispheres of the human brain to the glowing rings of Saturn, nature's works never cease to evoke human wonder. We usually see the surface of nature, yet the surface is always supported by an underlying structure: the cellulose framework of a leaf, the lipid membrane of a cell, the nuclear synthesis of the stars. Ethics is the supporting structure of Hinduism. Within its framework of good conduct lie the joys of spiritual living and the depths of God consciousness.

Hinduism sees nature as an energy-extension of God, a continuous crystallization of His omniscient Mind into the body of the physical cosmos. The universe's orderliness is part of an overarching divine pattern that the Hindu rishis called rita (pronounced ri as in rip, ta as in tub). The seers psychically saw that rita is the law of being, a universal presence that governs nature, human ethics, conduct and justice.

Rita, one of the most frequently used words in the 3,500-year-old Vedas, evolved into the watershed Hindu concept of dharma: "an ordered and purposeful pattern." This pervasive cosmic code extends into every facet of human endeavor. No activity or pursuit is outside of its realms-its only boundary is karma. Yet, karma itself belongs to rita.

The Vedas clearly state the connection between human conduct and the kindness or cruelty of nature. Virtuous living is rewarded by a more intense awareness of nature's beauty, by abundant harvests and benign climate. This profound relationship between ethical conduct-both personal and as a society-and nature

repeats itself over and over in the body of Hindu scripture. They warn how moral and religious lassitude would result in disaster, calamity and pestilence. This century's spate of disasters and rampant, exotic diseases are a vivid reflection of the state of our collective consciousness. The rishis counsel us that our thoughts and actions psychically contribute to the shaping of planetary nature, weather and geological activity. One Upanishadic seer even tied the explosive percussion of thunder into his ethics teaching to a pupil: A human, a deva and an asura (negative being) sought Brahman for advice on self-improvement. Brahman simply uttered dha, the first syllable in three Sanskrit words meaning self-control, charity and compassion. The kind-eyed rishi then said the thunder roll would ever remind humanity of "dha, dha, dha."

Without ethics, Hinduism would collapse under the gravity of instinctive action and selfish intellect. No Hindu could walk the path to nobility and Godness. Indeed, Hinduism does collapse for people who neglect or refute the codes of personal, societal and spiritual conduct our faith long ago recognized as part of the very fabric of the universe. Hinduism is not simply a religion one is born into, but a life pattern one constantly upholds, as Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, India's brilliant scholar-statesman, observed. The Rig Veda, mankind's oldest scripture, advises men to "think of wealth and strive to win it by rita and by worship." The mystic Atharva Veda tells newlyweds, "Enjoy good fortune by observing rita and always bear yourselves according to rita." When an individual chooses immorality over morality, he transgresses dharma. It is as if he or she has suspended or dropped out of dharma. Yet the laws that Hindus know as fact still function: karma returns in full measure what we have created by thought, word and deed. Only good conduct, grace and penance can soften the impact of our karmic creations.

It is easy and healthy to be nostalgic about the 35-centuries-old Vedic/Agamic period, when the earth was considered sacred and kept unpolluted, households were virtuous, commerce fair and war a last resort. The power of virtuous living was so ingrained in Hindu culture that when Alexander the Great stabbed into India with his Greek legions (twelve centuries after the Vedas), his generals recorded that the Hindu armies were impeccably honest. Not one act of licentiousness marred the Hindu bivouacs. This remarkable testimony only has one counterpart in today's world: the Hindus of Bali. So implicit is their faith in the virtues of the Ramayana and Mahabharata scriptures that crime among the Balinese is virtually non-existent.

How far did the virtues of rita and dharma extend? One Upanishad dialogue records a king answering a rishi's question on his kingdom's welfare, "In my

kingdom there is no thief, no miser, no drunkard, no man without an altar in his home, no ignorant person, no adulterer, much less an adulteress." The Hindu code of living includes civil, marital, spiritual and educational concerns-all the components of enlightened society.

### Our Human Duties:

Some people, who are unaware of our scriptural heritage, will say bereft of ethical guidelines. How erroneous this is may be seen by the Hindu ethical principle that one must not cheat or harm another, even in one's dreams. Denying ethics gives excuse to deceit and even lying to one's guru to advance in position and life. But a scan of Hindu scripture reveals that creeds of conduct exist in the historical canons of every Hindu sect. And every great Hindu thinker, from King Janaka to Sankara, Manikkavasagar and Jnanesvara to Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, offers primacy to ethics as the bedrock of social and spiritual progress.

Ethics begins with the keepers of the home and family. The Vedas list five primary duties of the householder: study of and teaching the Vedas; daily worship of the Gods through rituals; bestowing honor upon ancestors; being kind to domestic animals; extending hospitality to guests and the impoverished.

In the Taittiriya Upanishad is given one of the most eloquent and sweet-voiced creeds. It became the traditional farewell advice from guru to pupil: "Speak the truth. Practice dharma. Do not neglect the study of the Vedas. Do not neglect your duties to the Gods and ancestors. Treat your mother and father as God. Treat your teacher as God. Treat your guest as God."

Gradually an amalgam of all the counsel of the Vedas and Agamas coalesced into what became known as the Pancha Nitya Karmas, "five constant duties."

### Pancha Nitya Karmas

## Dharma (Virtuous Living)

Proper conduct follows the laws of dharma and includes the teaching of one's favorite moral scripture, remaining celibate until marriage, obeying sthree dharma for women and purusha dharma for men. It is goodness in thought, word and deed.

## Upasana (Worship)

Personal worship in the home shrine includes performance of puja, sadhana, japa and religious study. Regular devotions in the home and temple bring forth love of God and prepare the mind for the practices of meditation.

## Utsava (Holy Days)

The observance of Hindu festivals in the home and temple, including Guru Puja days, brings deep communion with God during highly spiritual times of the year. Utsava includes fasting and attending the temple on Fridays, the Hindu holy day.

## Tirthayatrai (Pilgrimage)

At least once each year every Hindu must make a pilgrimage to a holy place, near or far. This is a time when all worldly matters are set aside and God becomes the central and singular focus of life.

## Samskaras (Sacraments)

Sacraments are special ceremonies which mark our passages in life and sanctify

these cycles of experience. They include the rites of birth, learning, marriage, death, monastic vows for monks and more.

Perhaps the most pervasive of Hindu ethical obligations are the yamas and niyamas recorded in sage Patanjali's 2,200-year-old Yoga Sutras. Patanjali served as a codifier of yoga, not a discoverer. Therefore, the yamas and niyamas reflect moral do's and don'ts that are old beyond reckoning. And they are leavened through Hinduism like yeast through bread. They are found in the Kaula schools of Shaktism, the Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabhachariya and Chaitanya schools of Vaishnavism; Siddha Siddhanta, Pratyabhijna, Lingayat and Saiva Siddhanta of Saivism; and in the Smarta Sampradaya. As yama means "to rein" and niyama "to unleash," the yamas harness the base nature and the niyamas cultivate the high soul nature.

## Yamas/Niyamas

### Yamas

- 1.) Ahimsa: be non-violent in thought and action, restraining arrogance and anger.
- 2.) Satya: refrain from lying and betraying promises and confidences, avoiding injustice.
- 3.) Asteya: do not steal or covet.
- 4.) Brahmachariya: relinquish lust and all wrongdoing, forsake drunkenness and evil company.
- 5.) Aparigraha: discipline desire and greed.

## Niyamas

1.) Saucha: be pure in body, mind and speech.

2.) Santosha: seek contentment and serenity in life, loving your fellowman.

3.) Tapaha: perform occasional penance, tapas and sacrifice, remaining steadfast in hardship and forbearing with people.

4.) Svadhyaya: study with open mind the scriptures and books of wisdom.

5.) Isvarapranidhana: Cultivate devotion through daily worship and meditation, giving charitably without thought of reward.

## Ahimsa/Vegetarianism:

If the entirety of Hindu thought was stored in a computer and a data search was done for key concepts, one would surface that is primary among ethics: ahimsa, "non-violence." From ahimsa Hinduism imparted to the world the practice of vegetarianism. When Hinduism and Buddhism migrated out of India, much of Asia became vegetarian. The American Dietetic Association states, "Most of mankind for most of human history has lived on vegetarian or near-vegetarian diets."

Hindus are vegetarian because they revere all animal/fish bodies as vehicles for various astral and soul beings, and know that diet can either heighten or lower one's consciousness. Exposure to Christian schooling by many Hindus has distorted this paramount knowledge. Hindu scripture speaks clearly and forcefully on vegetarianism. In the ancient Rig Veda, we read: "O' vegetable, be succulent, wholesome, strengthening; and thus, body, be fully grown." The Yajur Veda summarily dictates: "Do not injure the beings living on the earth, in the air and in

the water." The beautiful Tirukural, a widely-read 2,000-year-old masterpiece of ethics, speaks of conscience: "When a man realizes that meat is the butchered flesh of another creature, he must abstain from eating it." The Manu Samhita advises: "Having well considered the origin of flesh and the cruelty of fettering and slaying of corporeal beings, let one entirely abstain from eating flesh," and "When the diet is pure, the mind and heart are pure." In the yoga-infused verses of the Tirumantiram, warning is given of how meat-eating holds the mind in gross, adharmic states: "The ignoble ones who eat flesh, death's agents bind them fast and push them quick into the fiery jaws of Narakaloka [lower consciousness]."

Vegetarianism today is practiced by nearly a billion people, including 10 million Americans and 1.6 million Britons. Many people become vegetarian by conscience. European geniuses-Leonardo Da Vinci, Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein-were vegetarian by conscience. As the health and ecological sciences have recently discovered, vegetarianism is man's best and natural diet.

**Physiology:** The intestinal length of carnivores (meat-eating animals) is three times the body length to allow for quick removal of flesh wastes that putrefy in the intestines. Man's intestine length, like other herbivores, is six times his body length and is designed for digesting vegetables, grains and fruits. Carnivores don't chew their food. Herbivores, including man, chew their food and have a similar pH value in their saliva. Our digestive system is closest to fruit-eating primates.

**Health:** The meat industry injects and feeds livestock with some 2,700 drugs to sustain and fatten them. Those drugs are passed to the meat-eater. Meat itself is directly linked to arterial and heart disease and cancer, man's major killers. Meat urea stiffens human joints. Powerful hormonal secretions are released by livestock at the moment of slaughter. These are absorbed by meat-eaters and directly affect their mental and emotional tranquility. Conversely, medical evidence demonstrates that a balanced vegetarian diet provides all the right kinds of protein, minerals, amino acids and nutrients that the body requires. In 1961, the prestigious Journal of the American Medical Association stated that 97% of heart disease can be prevented by vegetarianism. Current studies show the vegetarian diet as cancer-preventative, and that vegetable protein and fiber develop low cholesterol levels. Dr. Fischer of Yale University concluded that vegetarians perform 200% better than meat-eaters. Brussels University proved vegetarians perform physical tests 2-3 times longer than non-vegetarians and recover from fatigue five times faster.

**Protein:** The World Health Organization states that 45 grams of protein eaten per day is ideal for tissue regeneration. This is easily acquired through grains, legumes, vegetables and dairy products. Meat-eaters ingest over 100 grams, an unhealthy overdose. Meat protein is poor quality. The Max Planck Institute reported that vegetables, fruits, seeds, nuts and grains are excellent sources of complete proteins and are easier to metabolize.

**Earth Ecology:** One quarter of the world's vital rain forests have been destroyed to create pasture for beef cattle. Deforestation is changing global weather and could lead to polar melting, desertification of the major food-producing regions and oxygen reduction. Meat-eating is the engine behind this environmental destruction. The rain forests could be gone early in the 21st century. Further, beef cattle are consuming 85-90% of the Western world's grain. The average meat-eater uses five times the food resources of a vegetarian because cattle require fifteen pounds of vegetable protein for every pound of flesh protein. An acre of grain produces five times as much protein as that of beef pasture; legumes and leafy vegetables from ten to fifteen times as much. The world hunger problem would be vastly improved by converting all pasture land to farming use.

In conclusion, from the engulfing expanse of the cosmos to the ahimsa practice of vegetarianism, the Hindu sees rita/dharma everywhere. We are bound scripturally and by conscience to practice Hindu ethics.