



# Hindu Ethics

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# Hindu Ethics

***Ethics*** – moral principles that govern behaviour

***Dharma*** – Hindu term for ethics, includes: duties, rights, laws, conduct and virtues for right way of living

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***Ethics in Hindu Scriptures:***

***Vedas*** – (circa 6000 BCE)

***Gita*** – (circa 3000 BCE)

***Manusmriti*** – (circa 1250 BCE) and

***Patanjali Yoga Sutras*** - (circa 200 BCE)



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**Objective level** – Social ethics: (1) *Ashram dharma*, (2) *Varna dharma* and (3) *Sadharan dharma*

**(1) Ashram dharma** – framework to express one's personality, incorporated within *Purushartha* – the aims of life: *Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha*

**Dharma** – behaviour in accord with *ṛta* – includes right way of living

**Artha** – economic prosperity

**Kama** – desires, pleasure of senses

**Moksha** – liberation, self-realisation



**Vital debts** – to be paid before qualifies for **Moksha**

**Rishi ṛna** – debt to teacher paid thru study

**Pitr ṛna** – debt to ancestors thru begetting

**Deva ṛna** – debt to deities thru ritual performances

**Ashramas:**

**Brahmacharya** – (student stage): celibacy, respect for teachers, parents and elders

**Grihastha** – (householder): getting married, earning money, caring for family and society

**Vanaprastha** – (hermit): retired life, withdrawal from worldly life, contemplation, social work

**Sannyasa** – (renunciate): complete detachment, seeking god-realisation



***Varna Dharma*** – role based on natural tendencies

***Brahmin*** – teachers or priests; study of scriptures, conducting pujas, and religious ceremonies; prevalence of *Sattva guna*

***Kshatriya*** – rulers, administrators and warriors; maintaining law and order; prevalence of *Rajas*

***Vaishya*** – merchant class, traders, farmers; maintain the economy; prevalence of *Rajas* and *Tamas*

***Shudra*** – manual labour class, blue-collar workers; perform menial tasks; prevalence of *Tamas guna*

***Dalit*** – outcast or untouchables; perform cleaning toilets etc. Mahatma Gandhi called them *Harijan*



***Three Gunas* – tendencies, qualities or properties**

***Sattva* – quality of balance, harmony, purity**

***Rajas* – quality of passion, activity, egoism**

***Tamas* – quality of dullness, apathy, impurity**



## ***Sadharan Dharma*** – generic duties for all humans

These universal duties as per *Manusmriti* are:

***Dhairya*** (Steadfastness), ***Kṣamā*** (Foregiveness),  
***Damah*** (Control of senses), ***Chouryābhava*** (Non-appropriation), ***Śauca*** (Cleanliness), ***Indriya-nigraha*** (Repression of sensuous appetites), ***Dhi*** (Wisdom),  
***Vidyā*** (Learning), ***Satya*** (Truth), and  
***Akrodha*** (Restraint of anger)

Similar ethical precepts are set forth in ***Patanjali's Yoga Sutras***:

***Yama*** - the precepts of Social Discipline includes:

***Ahimsa*** (non-violence), ***Satya*** (truthfulness), ***Asteya*** (non-stealing), ***Brahmacharya*** (celibacy), and ***Aparigraha*** (abstention from greed).

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**Niyama** (the precepts of Individual Discipline) includes:  
**Śauca** (cleanliness), **Santosha** (contentment), **Tapas** (austerity), **Svadhyaya** (self-study), and **Isvara-Pranidhana** (surrender of the self to God).

Social ethical codes change with time and situation, e.g.  
Killing is a crime but is permissible in self-defence.

**Manusmriti** states:

*Satyam Bruyat Priyam Bruyat, Na Bruyat Satyam Apriyam  
Priyam Cha Na Anritam Bruyat, Yesha Dharma Sanatanah*

Speak the truth, speak what is pleasing; Do not speak the unpleasant truth;  
Do not speak untruth even if pleasant; This is the eternal law.





**Subjective level** – Personal ethics – purification of mind (*Chittasudhi*). Internalises morality: Duty to virtue

*Gita* (chapter 16<sup>th</sup>) lists the following personal qualities:

***Daivi Sampat*** (Noble Qualities) - need to possess:

*Abhayam* (Fearlessness), *Sattva Samśuddhiḥ* (Purity of heart and mind), *Jñāna yoga vyavasthitiḥ* (established in the pursuit of knowledge), *Dānam* (alms giving), *Damah* (control of senses), *Yajña* (sacrifice or worship),

*Svādhyāya* (self-study of scriptures), *Tapas* (austerities),

*Arjavam* (uprightness), *Ahimsa* (non-injury), *Satya*

(truthfulness), *Akrodha* (absence of anger), *Tyāga*

(renunciation), *Śāntiḥ* (Peace), *Apaiśunam* (absence of ill-  
feelings about others), *Daya* (compassion),

- continued



*Aloluptvam* (non-covetousness), *Mārdavam* (gentleness), *Hrīḥ* (modesty), *Acāplam* (absence of fickleness of mind), *Tejaḥ* (boldness), *Kṣamā* (forgiveness), *Dhṛiti* (steadfastness), *Śauca* (cleanliness), *Adrohah* (absence of hatred), and *Nātimānitā* (absence of pride) – (Gita 16.1-3)

***Asuri Sampat*** (Demonic Qualities): We need to shun: *Dambho* (ostentation or boastfulness), *Darpah atimānaḥ* (arrogance and ego), *Pārushyam* (harshness or rudeness in behavior), and *Ajñāna* (ignorance) - (Gita 16.4)  
*Kāmaḥ* (lust), *Krodhaḥ* (anger) and *Lobhaḥ* (greed) are gateway to hell - (Gita 16.21)

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***Transcendental Ethics*** - ultimate aim of life is ***Mokṣa***. Social and personal ethics are means to an end, not an end in themselves. It is the total transformation to the **ultimate bliss**, free from ***Maya*** - leading to the experience of the **one's true nature** – ***Sat*** (pure existence), ***Chit*** (pure consciousness) and, ***Ananda*** (pure bliss). That is the **enlightened state** – the **Buddha state**, when all the empirical contradictions are transcended – cold and heat, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, good and evil, right and wrong.

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**Ethics** is a big topic as it covers almost all aspects of our living. I would like to conclude this discussion here with quotations from two of our great Swamis:

**Swami Sivananda** of Divine Life Society in Rishikesh, who summarises the ethical behavior as

**“Be Good Do Good”**

And **Swami Vivekananda** provides a simple test for morality. He says,

**“That which is selfish is immoral and that which is unselfish is moral”.**



## References:

1. The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals by Professor S. Cromwell Crawford, University of Hawaii, Asian Studies Program 1982.
2. Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita by Swami Ranganathananda, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta.
3. Cambridge Studies of Religion, Stage 6, Third Edition  
Christopher Hartney and Jonathan Noble, Cambridge University Press

The next part of my presentation would include discussion on **Environmental Ethics**, an important social issue.