

What Is Dharma?

Dharma is often described as one's duty. However, a more accurate way of explaining *dharmā* is as a mode of conduct and being that helps spiritual advancement.

Hindus believe that *dharmā* is both the guide and foundation for all aspects of life. There are several categories of *dharmā*:

- *Sanātana Dharmā*, or Eternal Law, encompasses the inherent laws of nature and the Divine
- *Sāmānya Dharmā* includes general laws that govern all forms and functions, including one's duty to strive towards and achieve contentment; forgiveness; self-restraint; non-stealing; purity; control of senses; discrimination between right and wrong; spiritual knowledge; truthfulness; and absence of anger. Many of these values have been codified as ethical guidelines in various scriptures and referred to as *yamas* (disciplines) and *niyamas* (restraints).
- *Visheshā Dharmā*, or special duties, expound upon social law or the laws defining an individual's responsibilities within the nation, society, community and family; law according to life stage or the laws governing age-appropriate duties related to the natural process of maturing from childhood to old age; and personal law or the individualized application of *dharmā* according to an individual's sum of past karma, intelligence, aptitudes, tendencies, physical characteristics, and community.



The dharmachakra or kalachakra is an ancient Hindu symbol for Cosmic order, the cycles of existence, and the cyclical nature of time. Buddhists and Jains also consider this symbol sacred and have with it their own unique understandings of dharma.

Dharma can also be seen as defining an individual's essential nature. Just as sugar is sweet by nature and fire is hot, the essential nature of every individual is divinity or goodness, and thus their duty to always act in accordance with our essential nature.

How Does an Individual Know What Their Dharma Is?

Understanding an individual's *dharmā* can be a difficult task, but the scriptures, stories, and epics of Hinduism are meant to guide each individual toward that discernment. These stories highlight three guiding principles of *dharmā*:

- *Ahimsa* (non-injury): Avoiding harmful actions, harsh words, and malicious thoughts. Violence or harm has its roots in ignorance, intolerance, jealousy, greed, anger, and fear. Overcoming such negative emotions and cultivating an all-encompassing love and forgiveness is the goal and the means of practicing *ahimsa*.
- *Satya* (truthfulness): Being truthful to oneself and to others in thought, word, and deed. Speaking only when necessary and adhering to promises are aspects of this practice. *Satya* is seen as the judicious and discretionary use of language, a recognition that words are powerful.
- *Brahmacharya* (self-restraint): Abstaining from any excess that depletes vital energy. The key to living a meaningful life involves disciplining an individual's senses to minimize the harm caused by material over-indulgence to the earth, others, and themselves; and redirecting vital energy towards spiritual endeavors.



Another Way to Approach Dharma

A relatively simple approach to *dharma* is to consider the need to eliminate material or worldly debts. Hindu scriptures identify five categories of debt owed by all humans and fulfilling these obligations can be seen as a basic requirement of a *dharmic* life.

1. Debt to God: This debt is cleared by maintaining an awareness of God through prayer and worship and ensuring that the individual acts in harmony with the forces sustaining the universe.
2. Debt to the sages: Since Hindus believe that sages have preserved ancient wisdom and their teachings guide individuals in every aspect of their lives, the study and practice of the scriptures is how this debt is cleared.
3. Debt to parents and ancestors who have cared for each individual: Respecting parents, preserving their memory, and bringing up children to be good human beings is an individual's obligation to them.
4. Debt to humanity: Caring for fellow human beings, engaging in community service, and supporting community infrastructure are some of the ways in which this fourth obligation can be met.

5. Debt to nature: Treating all of creation as an extension of God. Because Hinduism stresses the divineness of all living beings, this debt is repaid by providing for and taking care of animals, birds, and other creatures, including insects.

Dharma Is an Approach to Right Action

Dharma does not classify an action as right or wrong independent of the circumstances. For example, lying is not categorically wrong - it is right or wrong depending on the circumstances. It might be wrong to lie to avoid punishment, but it might not be wrong to lie to protect state secrets (hence protecting harmony of the nation), or someone's life. Essentially, if the action sustains harmony, it is *dharmaic*; if the action disrupts harmony, it is not *dharmaic*.

The Bhagavad Gita, a part of the epic Mahabharata, and a popular text among Hindus, is dedicated to helping Arjuna, a warrior prince, decide whether it is *dharmaic* or not to fight in a war when his family and teachers stand on the other side of the battle field. Krishna, mentioned above, shows Arjuna why it is *dharmaic* for him to pick up arms in this situation, and fight the force that is disrupting peace for citizens all over India. Though fighting goes against the idea of *ahimsa*, Arjuna is a prince, and his *dharma* is to use his skills to make his kingdom a safe and just place for all of his citizens. Texts like the Bhagavad Gita help individuals understand what their *dharma* is in challenging situations, especially when the answer isn't black or white.



Krishna is believed to be God incarnate as was the charioteer of Arjuna.

Key Takeaways

- Dharma is the ethical foundation for all aspects of life
- Dharma is an approach to right action
- Dharma does not classify an action as right or wrong because each action depends on its surrounding circumstance