

CHAPTER 7

VALUES²⁹

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The most fundamental value in Hinduism is to be constantly aware of the Divinity in all beings, including ourselves, and in the entire universe.³⁰ Several important principles follow from this core value:

First, it implies that the whole universe is inter-connected in all its aspects; harming the planet is an affront to its divine nature. Second, all persons are seen as innately good: recognizing the innate goodness of my own nature and the innate goodness of all persons is profoundly healing; it overcomes self-doubt and infuses all our interactions with love. Third, the aim of spiritual practice is to experience the universal by seeing myself in all others and seeing all others in me.³¹ From this follows the golden rule: “This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”³² Fourth, discriminating amongst all beings is contrary to this value. Fifth, the spiritual aspirant seeks to rest his/her mind in God and perform all actions as a service to God.³³ Finally, any spiritual practice that helps one see the Divine in everything around us is encouraged.³⁴ Since the capacity to see this varies widely from one person to another, Hinduism embraces a very wide range of spiritual practices.

Living these values is not possible without cleansing the mind and heart of contrary tendencies and emotions such as desire, anger and greed.³⁵ The scriptures present several lists of values that a spiritual seeker must cultivate.³⁶ One of the better known of these lists is found in the Yoga Sutras composed by the sage Patanjali around 200 BCE.³⁷ They constitute the foundation for the practice of Yoga, broadly defined as spiritual practice. Known as the 5 Yamas and 5 Niyamas, they are briefly described here.

YAMAS

1. **ahimsa, non-injury:** avoiding violent actions, harsh words and malicious thoughts. Violence 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*.

²⁹ Previously published by InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington [www.ifcmw.org]

³⁰ Isha Upanishad 1

³¹ Bhagavad Gita chp 6 verse 29,30

³² The Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, Section CXIII, verse 8; the Mahabharata, tr. kisari mohan ganguli, munshiram manoharlalpublishers, 1993; vol IV pg 235

³³ Bhagavad Gita chp 8 verse 8, 10

³⁴ Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana Bk 7. chp 1 verse 31

³⁵ Bhagavad Gita chp 16 verse 21 cites desire, anger and greed as the three gates to hell.

³⁶ See for example Bhagavad Gita chp.12 verse 13-19; chp13 verse 7-11; and chp16 verse 1-3; and Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.1-

³⁷ Yoga Sutras, by Patanjali, chp 2 sutras 30, 32.

2. **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.
3. **asteya, non-stealing:** learning not to covet or take what is not rightly mine.
4. **brahmacharya, non-indulgence:** abstaining from sensual excess that dissipates vital energy. A common translation, celibacy, is too narrow an interpretation. All forms of sensual indulgence drain energy that could otherwise be used for one's spiritual awakening. Disciplining one's senses is therefore an essential element in living a meaningful life.
5. **aparigraha, non-possessiveness:** not being attached to one's possessions and learning that one's happiness does not lie in acquiring material objects that are necessarily transitory. It is the opposite of greed. Practicing *aparigraha* involves a habit of sharing one's possessions with others and generosity in helping the needy.

NIYAMAS

1. **shaucha, purity:** for the physical body, this means cleanliness; for the mind it means overcoming polluting thoughts such as thoughts of hate and violence, and maintaining an attitude of mindfulness. At a deeper level, it means not being distracted from awareness of our own divine nature and the divinity we share with all others.
2. **santoshā, contentment:** learning to be happy and content without a greedy scramble for more; finding joy in life as it is; not making selfish demands on others.
3. **tapas, austerity:** practicing self-discipline that generates intense energy internally and increases spiritual fervor. Recognizing that achieving a significant goal requires sacrificing lesser pleasures and putting forward more concentrated effort.
4. **swadhyaya, self-study:** making time to study, reflect and meditate in a consistent effort to seek the Truth; knowing ourselves at all levels.
5. **ishwara-pranidhana, surrender to God:** engaging in action as an offering to God; accepting what we receive as an expression of God's grace; and resting one's mind in God.

While the above values are important all through our adult lives, the scriptures point out that some values are more important than others in certain stages of life. Beyond childhood, the scriptures prescribe duties for each of the four stages of a person's life: student, householder, retiree and renunciate.³⁸ Adapting the scriptural descriptions to match contemporary realities, we gain useful insights into the changing values that we should focus on as we progress through life.

³⁸ Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana Bk 7. chp 12.

A student is expected to devote all his/her energy primarily to learning and to serve with respect the teachers and all sources of knowledge. Excessive attention to personal comfort, entertainment and sense pleasures are harmful distractions.

In the second stage of life, the householder must raise, support and protect a family and be a good citizen of society. Fulfilling obligations to family and society are the primary concern even at the cost of personal hardship.

In the third stage, the householder retires from family and societal obligations while remaining available to advise and counsel younger members of family and community. In this stage of life, one should turn his/her attention to meditation and spiritual study with a view to gaining Self-knowledge. Personal needs are reduced to a minimum and the emphasis is on spiritual practice rather than seeking out new experiences.

The fourth and final stage is renunciation i.e. giving up all self-serving actions³⁹ and setting aside worldly attachments, making a total commitment to serving others and seeking the Truth.

³⁹ Bhagavad Gita chp 18 verse 2