



# ‘Ethical Foundations of Ancient Indian Philosophy: From Vedic Cosmology to Classical Astika Systems.’

**Mary Hangshing**

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy

North Kamrup College Baghmara, Assam

## Abstract

The following analysis will probe the moral basis of ancient Indian philosophy and trace its development from Vedic times to the classical *astika* systems by about 500.BCE. The early Vedic theories established such ideals as *Rta* (the cosmic order), *Brahman* (God), *Atman* (soul, Self) and *Yajna* (sacrifice), and the primary forces with them form a universe where every action brings about certain consequences in an interconnected web of cause and effect. The Upanishads continued this investigation and de-emphasised the philosophical significance of outward ritual as instead probing the inner life of man, with passages on knowledge, which is primarily knowledge of the self, on ‘realisation’, on self-understanding, discipline and free ignition from ignorance. The emergence of *Sramanic* traditions challenged and transformed several Indian religious, philosophical, mystical, ethical and beliefs. Views on this trend are reacting with an early scepticism about the spiritual value of the Sramana" Movements. During the classical period, there arose six *astika* schools: *Nyaya* (logic), *Vaisesika* (metaphysics), *Samkhya* (enumeration), *Yoga* (ascetic), *Mimamsa* (reflection) and *Vedanta* (end of the Veda). These schools developed a fundamentally ethical model of ethics fundamentally ethical, because it is informed by metaphysics and logic and spiritual liberation. Dharma (duty), ahimsa (non-violence), *satyam* (truthfulness), karma and the *purusharthas* provided common moral foundations for life and practice that would lead to a shared ethic in these religions. Other common moral things include Hinduism’s *dharmastras* and Buddhist epics such as Ramayana, Mahabharata. These traditions all worked out a rich ethic of life in which personal honour, social harmony, and spiritual freedom reinforce each other. The study discovers that classical Indian thought formulates one of the most enduring and challenging ethical models in human history.

**Keywords:** Indian philosophy, Dharma, Ahimsa, Sramana traditions, Upanishads, Ethical thought.

## Introduction

Indian philosophy, or Bharatiya Darsana, is an ancient philosophical tradition in India. Its moral standards drew from an amalgam of sacred texts, social norms, spiritual concerns and rational philosophical arguments.

The Vedas were one of the earliest human philosophy traditions (c.1500–600 BCE) and a period of intense speculation on metaphysical issues such as how to explain birth, death, disease, old age and so on. Of these, the philosophical portions of the Vedas and the earliest Upanishads are among the most important sources. They contain no metaphysics or moral philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The notion of *rta*, the cosmic order believed to run the cosmos as well as human activity during this period, became increasingly significant.<sup>2</sup> This idea was the moral backbone of Vedic civilisation, telling people to follow a universal code. The Upanishads talked about Brahman, the ultimate and limitless reality, and Atman, the inner self, as people started to think more about themselves. The shocking discovery that Brahman and Atman are the same thing changed Indian philosophy for thousands of years.<sup>3</sup> Yajna, or sacrificial rites, were very important at this time because people thought they were needed to keep the universe stable and help society. People believed that it was not merely a religious duty. These rituals were performed to keep the universe in one piece by enabling the harmonious balance that *rta* saw.<sup>4</sup> Those participating in the Yajna assured their place in the cosmic order by subjecting themselves to human effort and divine order representation. This integration of spiritual wisdom, ritual operation and moral duty was the intellectual support of Indian traditions in the following centuries. The idea of *rta*, Brahman, Atman and Yajna formed a composite worldview which envisioned the cosmos as an ethically structured and spiritually woven universe. This is what has made ancient India a land of perennial philosophical wisdom.

## The Upanishadic Period (around 800–400 BCE)

The Upanishadic age represents a turning point in early Indian philosophy, for it gradually ended the elaborate synthesis of the Vedic ritual and began to inquire into the interior meaning of human life. Wisdom of the rishis ‘The sages of the Upanishads did not confine themselves to sacrifices offered to others; no, they looked within themselves, and enquired into what is reality, what is consciousness, and so on’. The focus of this inquiry was primarily on liberation (*moksa*), which it defined as freedom from ignorance and transmigration. The Upanishads affirm that emancipation comes through knowing the individual as identical to ultimate reality (Brahman), a realisation expressed in vivid metaphors of waking up and becoming enlightened,<sup>5</sup> and moral discipline was the basis of this spiritual pursuit. The lessons emphasise that you can’t get enlightened without cultivating your character. Self-restraint, truthfulness, non-injury and detachment are all exalted as desirable qualities for anyone who seeks to attain liberation.<sup>6</sup> These are not only human duties; they also lead to enhancing consciousness, making the mind relax and preparing it for experiential insight into the Self. It is in

---

<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan, S., & Moore, C. A. (1957). *A sourcebook in Indian philosophy*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Doniger, W. (2014). *The Hindus: An alternative history*. Penguin Books

<sup>3</sup> Olivelle, P. (1996). *Upanisads* (Translated by Patrick Olivelle). Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Flood, G. (1996). *An introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Olivelle, P. (1998). *The early Upanisads: Annotated text and translation*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). *The principal Upanisads*. Harper & Brothers.

this way that the Upanishads unite profound philosophy with simple ethics. They present the interior journey as a moral and metaphysical transformation that continues to inspire people today.

### **The Sramana movements (600–300 BCE)**

This movement became a powerful counter to the orthodox Vedic view, promoting brave new visions of spiritual life, morality, and human freedom. Persons such as Gautama Buddha and Mahavira had rejected the Vedic authority in matters of religion, by their doctrine of non-acceptance of the efficacy of sacrifices for securing liberation; they proclaimed that truth could be realised not through sacrificing for release but by direct personal austerity and moral excellence. Buddhism invoked the Middle Way between extremes, moral attentiveness and freedom through vision; Jainism advocated victorious non-violence (Ahimsa) and severity of ecstasy to achieve freedom from karmic bondage.<sup>7</sup> The other Sramana movements, including the Ajivika and materialist Carvaka, also denied that one can achieve liberation (moksha) from samsara. Some trusted the strict austerity of determinism, while others rejoiced in the logical scepticism and rejected any form of metaphysical investigation altogether (Bronkhorst 2007).<sup>8</sup>

### **Classical Philosophy and Ethics in Ancient India**

Ancient India's classical philosophical systems (approximately from the start of the Common Era, 1000 AD, six Astika orthodox schools were founded, each of which debated this idea: the Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. Each system came with its own moral rules grounded in the way it perceived the world. Nyaya emphasised that the right data leads to the accomplishment of duty. They were also clear that reason and valid cognition are essential to moral understanding.<sup>9</sup> Vaisheshika developed this further by stating that a moral order (rta) presides over a naturalistic explanation of the cosmos, and morality is grounded in a deeper cosmological structure.<sup>10</sup>

Samkhya advanced a dualistic system of consciousness and matter, asserting that the separation of awareness of them equates with liberation in a manner closely correlated to knowledge and dispassion.<sup>11</sup> These schools collectively emphasised that knowledge, virtue and liberty formed a triumvirate when pursuing the good life.<sup>12</sup> These were reduced to a practical discipline by the Yoga system. Patanjali's Yoga Sutra specifies an eightfold path, principally from moral restraints yama and observances niyama with the claim that ethical purification is necessary for reflective penetration.<sup>13</sup> The Yogi code of moral conduct involves non-violence, truthfulness, self-control and non-possessiveness. Mimamsa, meanwhile, projected ethics as expressing a duty, with

<sup>7</sup> Dundas, P. (2002). *The Jains* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Bronkhorst, J. (2007). *Greater Magadha: Studies in the culture of early India*. Brill.

<sup>9</sup> Matilal, B. K. (1990). *The word and the world: India's contribution to the study of language*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Bronkhorst, J. (2011). *Buddhism in the shadow of Brahmanism*. Brill.

<sup>11</sup> Larson, G. J. (1969). *Classical Samkhya: An interpretation of its history and meaning*. Motilal Banarsidass.

<sup>12</sup> Olivelle, P. (2004). *Dharmasutras: The law codes of ancient India*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Feuerstein, G. (2001). *The Yoga tradition: Its history, literature, philosophy and practice*. Lantern Books.

morality ordained in scriptures and that only through textual knowledge could dharma be known.<sup>14</sup> Vedanta formulated a more inward-looking morality by affirming that the highest morality derives from the realisation of atman (the self) as being synonymous with brahman (ultimate reality). Once the underlying unity is perceived, harming others is impossible since all are seen as expressions of the same basic reality.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, every darsana offered its own model of ethical life: Rationalistic, naturalistic, introspective, ritual-based or mystical.<sup>16</sup>

In all these traditions, Dharma is the term which are interchangeable with duty, morality, moral values, honesty and ethics in different contexts. Dharma appears in the Vedic literature, the Dhammapada of Buddhists and the Jainism genre of the ancient Dharmasastras (such as the Manusmṛti). It is considered both contextual and universal: contextual in that it varies by age, role, and situation but not between genders, and universal as it seeks to establish stability and purity. Dharma, to the thinker, is inherently relational, emphasising duties to family, society and the cosmos.<sup>17</sup> Indian ethics is not fixed; what is “right” depends on the context, but it should always work to keep social equilibrium and inner harmony.<sup>18</sup> Yet another significant ethical ideal of ancient India is ahimsa, or non-injury. Ahimsa was first categorised in Jainism, whose followers must be non-violent. It soon was integrated into Hindu and Buddhist morality, too.<sup>19</sup> For example, Jain monks injure not even the smallest forms of life, as every act of harm binds the soul. How everything is connected and compassion; that’s what makes Buddhism a non-violent religion. Hindus subsequently adopted ahimsa into the Yoga tradition; in particular, Ahimsa is the first of ten Yamas (Restraints) outlined by Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras.<sup>20</sup> Next to ahimsa is Satyam, or honesty. The Upanishads describe truth as the quote supreme dharma end quote (dharma mahatma), and the Yoga Sutras clarify that speech formed from truthful expression possesses a transformative power of transformative.<sup>21</sup> Truth is a common value in Indian cultures, to enable people to trust one another and remain spiritually clean.<sup>22</sup> Self-discipline and regulation of desire were also highly valued by ancient Indian philosophers. Traditions continually stress practices like tapas (austerity), brahmacharya (control of the senses) and meditation as necessary to cleanse our minds, putting an end to suffering.<sup>23</sup>

In Jainism, such practices are rigorous and constitute the essential part of monastic life.<sup>24</sup> Buddhism shows people how to systematically train their minds using mindfulness and concentration in order that they may

<sup>14</sup> Olivelle, 2004, *The law codes of ancient India*.

<sup>15</sup> Feuerstein, G. (2001). *The Yoga tradition: Its history, literature, philosophy and practice*. Lantern Books.

<sup>16</sup> Matilal, B. K. (1990). *The word and the world: India’s contribution to the study of language*. Oxford University press.

<sup>17</sup> Bronkhorst, J. (2011). *Buddhism in the shadow of Brahmanism*. Brill.

<sup>18</sup> Matilal, B. K. (1990). *The word and the world: India’s contribution to the study of language*. Oxford University press

<sup>19</sup> Dundas, P. (2002). *The Jains* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

<sup>20</sup> Feuerstein, G. (2001). *The Yoga tradition: Its history, literature, philosophy and practice*. Lantern Books.

<sup>21</sup> Larson, G. J. (1969). *Classical Sāṃkhya: An interpretation of its history and meaning*. Motilal Banarsidass.

<sup>22</sup> Matilal, B. K. (1990). *The word and the world: India’s contribution to the study of language*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Feuerstein, G. (2001). *The Yoga tradition: Its history, literature, philosophy and practice*. Lantern Books.

<sup>24</sup> Dundas, P. (2002). *The Jains* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

eliminate craving, the cause of suffering.<sup>25</sup> The Vedas placed the ideal within the system of asrama, where students, householders, forest dwellers and renouncers were expected to develop appropriate virtues.<sup>26</sup> In such systems, controlling one's desires is a means to rather than an end in suppression, or liberation for that matter.<sup>27</sup> Karma strives to reason that each thought, word, action or deed has ethical and spiritual consequences.<sup>28</sup> The concept of Karma explains both the present circumstances in which individuals find themselves, as well as a way to break free from the cycle of birth and rebirth through moral responsibility. The purusharthas, or four aims of life, are dharma (righteousness), artha (prosperity), kama (pleasure) and moksha (liberation). These goals work with karma. Indian ethics does not snub mundane objects, and it revalues them, indicating that artha and kama are worthy pursuits if pursued properly, according to dharma.<sup>29</sup> Moksha is still the primary goal because it implies spiritual freedom and self-discovery. This model does have a holistic perspective, recognising how multifaceted people are and promoting balanced development for us.<sup>30</sup>

The three major religions and philosophies, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, discuss this moral concept in contrasting yet interconnected perspectives. Duty (dharma), truth, purity, compassion and liberation by means of knowledge and righteous conduct are some of the emphases that hug Hindu philosophy.<sup>31</sup> A Buddhist doctrine, the Noble Eightfold Path, states that right speech, the right action, livelihood and mindfulness are the essential components of a good life to live. Jainism is the most morally demanding by virtue of its stressing of the five great vows: nonviolence, truthfulness, chastity, and non-possession.<sup>32</sup> All these traditions, though they're different, preach compassion, detachment from things that we have our love for them posing an affectionate relationship to them. Morality and suffering, and concern for all people. These moralistic codes of governance & behaviour have for aeons ruled Indian civilisation, law, devoutness, and tradition. Indian philosophy is not only philosophy, but also the main ethics. The values, dharma, ahimsa, satyam, self-control, karma, sympathy and the harmonious achievement of life's purusharthas are a beautiful framework that guides individuals to personal integrity, social order and spiritual freedom. These concepts still govern in the world, proving that to inspire virtue, through the growth of inner purity and universal compassion, Truth, by a sense of one's personal responsibilities toward all beings.

## Conclusion

The history of ethics in ancient India demonstrates a long progression of intellectual refinement during which moral thought evolved hand-in-hand with speculative philosophy. From ancient Vedic ideas of the cosmos and ritual obligation to the profound meditations of the Upanishads, Indian philosophers have invariably

---

<sup>25</sup> Bronkhorst, 2011, *Buddhism in the shadow of Brahmanism*.

<sup>26</sup> Olivelle, 2004, *Dharmastras: The law codes of ancient India*.

<sup>27</sup> Matilal, 1990, *The word and the world: India's contribution to the study of language*.

<sup>28</sup> Bronkhorst, 2011, *Buddhism in the shadow of Brahmanism*.

<sup>29</sup> Olivelle, 2004, *Dharmasūtras: The law codes of ancient India*.

<sup>30</sup> Larson, 1969, *Classical Sāṃkhya: An interpretation of its history and meaning*.

<sup>31</sup> Matilal, 1990, *The word and the world: India's contribution to the study of language*.

<sup>32</sup> Dundas, 2002, *The Jains* (2nd ed.).

woven living ethically together with understanding more about reality. The Sramana movements challenged and broke the Brahmanical traditions, questioning their concepts of transcendental reality and divine knowledge; they also derided, mocked, and refused to accept the Vedic scriptural authority in matters of belief. Together, these groups transformed the ethic from a matter of external obligation to one of internal transfiguration by insisting that moral purity is the natural reflection of spiritual progress. Their emphasis on renouncing possessions, not resorting to violence, telling the truth and controlling one's own mind generated new concepts in philosophy and provided people of all classes with fresh paradigms of ethical behaviour. This convergence of ideas created a raucous intellectual terrain in which diverse traditions could speak to one another, argue and change the terms of ethics in ways that lasted for centuries. In the classical period, each of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy developed a system of social and ethical conduct which was cast as a response to its specific understanding/experience/approach to knowledge (jnana), truth (satya) and moksha (liberation). Although their philosophical theologies varied, they all agreed that moral discipline was essential for gaining insight, balance and ultimately spiritual emancipation.

Concepts such as dharma, ahimsa, satyam, self-discipline (dama), karma, and the puruṣarthas offered both general rules of conduct and situational rules; they provided a framework that could accommodate the complexity of human life. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism spoke in their different ways but unitedly by concurrence agreed upon compassion and responsibility to feel clean inside, not to harm others. The most enduring legacy of ancient Indian ethical philosophy is its synthetic view of rightness or propriety, which regards morality as not a fixed collection of prescriptive norms but a dynamic and transformative process, guiding individuals towards their own worthiness and social peace. Ancient Indian philosophy is proof of the fact that leading an ethical life is a grounded, aware path guided by wisdom, self-awareness, and a deep commitment to the existence of all life forms. This is because it unites worldly aspiration and spiritual aim. Its results remain to inform the morality of humanity across cultural differences, and it bequeaths permanent concepts for addressing contemporary problems and for furthering human well-being.