

Ten Commandments

= *The DOs & DON'Ts of Hinduism* =

= *A one-year project* =

by

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Sādhakas or spiritual seekers attend lectures, read books, and use other means such as participation in study groups to acquire spiritual knowledge. After some time, a stage is reached when many aspirants feel they have studied a lot and have a reasonably good understanding of the scriptures but are not able to implement the knowledge gained. They have the “theory” but are unable to put it to “practice”. sādhakas who face this problem can take up the following programme. Even others who do not have this problem can use this programme to reinforce the scriptural teaching.

This programme is a one-year project that can be renewed every year. The programme can be practiced as it is or modified to suit the needs or convenience of the individual. Since the project consists of 12 components with each component taking a month, the New Year is a good time to start this programme. This programme is essentially the practice of “ten commandments” of Hinduism – fivefold abstention (called ‘*yama*’) and fivefold discipline (‘*niyama*’). These are the DOs and DON'Ts of Hinduism.¹

The programme is presented in two parts. First, the *yamas* (DON'Ts) and *niyamas* (DOs) are defined and explained from the standpoint of practicing them. Of the two

¹ I.e. steps 1 & 2 (*Yoga Sūtras* 2.30. 2.32,) of the well-known 8 steps Maharishi Patañjali mentions in the *Yoga Sūtras*, his user-manual on concentration.

groups, our scriptures consider *yamas* to be more important than the *niyamas* and so the former is discussed first. Secondly, a method of implementation of the *yamas* and *niyamas* is presented.

The five *yamas* — (Abstentions)

The five *yamas* are *ahimsā*, *satyam*, *asteyam*, *brahmachāryam*, and *aparigraha*. (Yoga Sutra 2.30)

1) *Ahimsā* (non-violence)

Ahimsā is the avoidance of violence and injury. *Ahimsā* has several aspects. The grossest form of *himsā* is physical violence. Physical violence is not confined to beating people but includes actions such as throwing or banging things. When we begin practice on this programme, we must first pay attention to physical violence. If we feel we are already free from the weakness, we can concentrate on verbal violence – shouting or using abusive or indecent language.

2) *Satyam* (truthfulness)

Satyam is primarily a verbal discipline. We maintain harmony between knowledge, motives, and words. Our words must not hide our knowledge or motives. There must be harmony between thought and word. *Satyam* is a positive attribute and yet it is listed as a *yama*. So we have to redefine *satyam* as something to be given; that is the avoidance of a *satyam*. We must emphasize more on eschewing a *satyam*, by not telling lies or speaking untruths.

3) *Asteyam* (non-stealing)

Asteyam (non-stealing) literally means non-stealing. We may wonder whether this value is required for us because we are not thieves. *Steyam* is not just breaking into a house and stealing. Any unfair transaction through which we derive some benefit is *steyam*. Not paying a person his due is a form of stealing because we keep what legitimately belongs to another person.

4) *Brahmachāryam* (chastity)

Brahmachāryam means having the right attitude towards members of the opposite sex. Men must have a decent and appropriate attitude towards women and similarly women must have a decent and appropriate attitude towards men. Like *satyam*, *brahmachāryam* is a positive characteristic and yet finds a place among the *yamas*. So we must understand *brahmachāryam* as giving up all indecent and inappropriate attitudes towards the opposite sex.

5) *Aparigraha* (non-possessiveness)

Aparigraha is the fifth *yama*. *Parigraha* means possession. *Aparigraha* is literally non-possession and must be understood as leading a simple life. There are two aspects to *aparigraha* – owning less and having the right attitude towards what little we own. We

give up luxury, pomp, and show. We draw a line and limit our possessions to what is necessary. A simple living is suitable for high thinking.

We should not develop possessiveness towards the limited possessions we have. This is even more important than owning less. We should remind ourselves that what we have belongs to the Lord and is given to us temporarily for us to grow. We use our possessions with gratitude to the Lord who may claim them at any time without giving advance notice or not.

The five *niyamas* — (Disciplines)

The five *niyamas* are *śaucham*, *santoshā*, *tapas*, *swādhyāya*, and *Īshwara pranidhānam*. (Yoga Sutra 2.32)

6) *Śaucham* (purity)

Śaucham means cleanliness or purity. We must first focus on gross or physical purity and later concentrate on subtle or inner purity. *Śaucham* can be understood as keeping ourselves and everything around us clean. This includes our body, clothes, possessions and house. *Śaucham* is not only cleanliness but also orderliness. Our house may be very clean but due to disorderliness we may have to search for anything and everything. A good maxim to follow is ‘a place for everything and everything in its place.’

7) *Santoshā* (contentment)

Santoshā means contentment or satisfaction. *Santoshā* has to be developed at two levels because life is twofold pursuit – earning and owning. Initially we aspire to earn a lot of wealth and also own many possessions. The first stage of contentment is at the level of owning. We are satisfied with our possessions and stop earning for more. Earning continues but spending decreases. Such a person produces more, consumes less and creates wealth for the community, society and nation and is called a karma yogi.

The second stage of contentment focuses on earning. We stop craving for more and more. Such a person is *jnana yogi*. Contentment at both levels of earning and owning is called *santoshā* or *tripti* and should be practiced as a *niyama*, meaning with a positive attitude. We think of what we have rather than what we do not have and give up beggarliness of the mind. We tell our mind that we have plenty. This is the principle of abundance.

A contented person will readily share his wealth with others. Without *santoshā*, *dhanam* (charity) cannot take place. Contentment is a prerequisite for a charitable disposition.

8) *Tapas* (austerity)

Tapas means austerity and like *ahimsā* and *santoshā* has many dimensions. The grossest form of *tapas* pertains to physical activity. Activity is important not only from the religious and spiritual angle but also from the aspect of health. In the olden days the very lifestyle ensured that people were physically fit. Today we can consider some form

of exercise. An ideal exercise is the *surya namaskar*. It is common to hear people say that they do not have time for exercise. Those who cannot spare a few minutes a day for maintaining their health today may have to spend many months later for recovering (lost) health due to sickness.

9) *Swādhyāya* (spiritual study)

Swādhyāya is the study of our scriptures and is a very important commandment. Many years ago *swādhyāya* was done by every person. It was a daily ritual (one of five) known as *Brahma yajña*. Today people do not give much importance to spiritual study. May think it is for intellectuals and those who want to take to monastic life. At the minimum we must study a few verses of the *Bhagavad Gita* everyday and reflect upon the teaching.

10) *Ishwara Pranidhānam* (surrender to God)

Ishwara Pranidhānam is looking upon every experience in our lives, favourable or unfavourable, as God's will because every experience we undergo is the result of our past actions. This is called *karma phalam* [fruit of *karma*] and can be pleasure or pain. Behind every *karma phalam* is the law of *karma* and behind the law of *karma* is the Lord. The Lord is invisible, the law of *karma* is invisible but when the Lord and the law of *karma* function, the result is a tangible experience. So we accept every experience without resistance. And the mind is free of negative emotions and thoughts. This acceptance is called *Ishwara Pranidhānam* or *sarangati*. An inability or unwillingness to do so will produce unhealthy thoughts in the mind and lead to bitterness, anger, frustration, hatred, etc.

A five-fold strategy for the 10 months practice

The ten *yamas* and *niyamas* should be practiced by all the *sādhakas*. We have no choice in the matter. Without these attributes, the study of Vedanta will neither be meaningful nor beneficial.

How can a *sādhaka* practice the ten commandments? Aspirants may consider the following method of implementation that is designed as a one-year project. Every month we should focus on one commandment beginning with the first and proceed in order. Each commandment is important and should be given attention. Practicing the *yamas* and *niyamas* can be made effective by following a five-fold strategy: *sankalpa*, *avadhanam*, *samyama*, *simha-avalokanam*, and *vichāra*.

1) *Sankalpa* (resolve)

means making a resolve every day. We begin the day with a resolve that we will practice the commandment chosen for the month. During the “*ahimsā*” month; we will resolve firmly: “Today I will practice *ahimsā*. I will not shout at my family members, subordinates etc.” We must maintain a notebook and soon after getting up we must write, ‘I will practice *ahimsā* today’ 24 times. We should write with a full heart, sincerity, and commitment.

2) *Avadhanam* (precaution)

is especially important. The scriptures say that for a spiritual seeker, negligence is destruction. Many railway accidents occur due to negligence of simple precautionary measures. Precaution is within our capacity. We must be alert and avoid the contributory factors that make us violate the commandment. This applies even to our health. Maintaining health requires adherence to a few simple rules neglecting which we may have to face the consequences for a lifetime.

3) *Samyama* (restraint)

comes into play when *avadhanam* fails. Violations (of the commandments) will occur, especially in the initial stages and we display the negative behavior we have been trying to avoid. The moment we realize we are using abusive language, we must strive to control ourselves. We practice restraint before the situation gets out of hand.

4) *Simha-avalokanam* (introspection)

is the fourth strategy and should be done every day. At the end of the day, we look at our behaviours and determine to what extent we fulfilled our resolve to follow the chosen commandment. For every violation we must take out our notebook and write, ‘*om sri gurubhyo namah*’ 24 times. There are three benefits in doing so. First, it serves as a *prayaschitham* or repentance for violating the commandment. Secondly, we invoke the grace of the *guru*. *Guru* includes god because HE is the *adi-guru*; the first *guru* is Bhagavan. Thirdly, by the grace of the *guru*, the circumstances or occasions that make us violate the commandment will become lesser and lesser.

Also there will be a change in our attitude. Presently we are likely to think that our violations are necessary and dictated by the circumstances. We consider them a necessary evil. But as we progress, by the grace of the *guru*, we will find that we do not violate the commandments even in situations where we once thought it was necessary. Thus by the grace of *guru* the number of occasions that are likely to provoke us becomes lesser and lesser. We no longer violate as before thus making real progress.

The above four strategies should be practiced every day.

5) *Vichāra* (study)

is a powerful and the most important strategy and this involves the study of the significance of each of the commandments. It is seeing the ‘value of a value’. Each month we must focus on the commandment chosen for the month. During the “*ahimsā*” month we must collect as much information as possible on this commandment and study the literature for at least an hour a week and try to understand its significance. ‘Why is *moksha* not possible without giving up *himsā*?’ ‘Why do we resort to violence – physical or verbal?’ ‘What precautionary measures can we take to avoid *himsā*?’ Our analysis will reveal that our violent behavior is

always preceded by anger. We can further analyze: ‘Why do we get angry? Is it because of certain people?’ ‘How can we change our behaviour (rather than expect others to change theirs) to avoid or minimize getting provoked?’

Vichāra can be done individually or collectively by forming and participating in study groups. Study groups meet periodically and members of the group get an opportunity to share with the other members as to how they are handling the commandments in their daily life. There can be discussions and healthy exchange of ideas that is beneficial to all the group members. Study groups inculcate seriousness and a sense of commitment towards practicing the commandments. Participation in study groups is highly efficacious and strongly recommended.

Vichāra will reveal that each commandment has a gross aspect and a subtle aspect or many other dimensions. In the first year, *sādhakas* can focus on the grossest aspect of each commandment and in subsequent years turn their attention to the subtler aspects.

11th month: give up a bad habit —

12th month: cultivate a good habit

Since the ten commandments consume ten months, the question arises: what should a *sādhaka* do during the remaining two months of the year?

In the **eleventh month**, the aspirant must strive to give up one bad habit – be it smoking or losing one’s temper. Again, we can start from gross, physical habits and proceed to subtle weaknesses.

In the **last month** of the year, the *sādhaka* must cultivate one good habit that the aspirant would like to have. If we have the habit of criticizing others, we may want to develop the practice of giving praise where it is due.

In case we have a doubt regarding what habits or attributes to focus on the last two months of the programme, we can study the sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita wherein Sri Krishna discusses demoniacal traits (called *asuri sampad*) or negative qualities and divine traits (*daivi sampad*) or positive attributes.

I wish you a happy new year and a year where you practice these ten commandments and become a better person.



Posted by A.Sathyanarayanan at 7:37 PM
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