

Common Virtues in Our Various Wisdom Traditions Revised 2026 10 18

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Collectively, the twelve traditions named here touch, in some form, the lives of about four-fifths of humanity. Their influence on ethics reaches further still. These traditions differ greatly in their origins, their practices, and their understandings of ultimate reality. Yet across those differences, a common cluster of virtues emerges: Love, Justice, Truthfulness, Forgiveness, Generosity, and Nonviolence.

These virtues may constitute what Huston Smith called “the winnowed wisdom of the human race,” sifted from encounters with the sacred and from the work of living as kin.

1. Christianity (~2.3 billion)

Love: Agape (unconditional love) is the heart of Jesus’s teaching, directed first to God and extended to neighbor, stranger, and enemy alike.

Justice: Dikaioσύne names both righteousness before God and justice toward neighbor, inherited together from the Hebrew prophets (“let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”) and sounded in Jesus’s announcement of the good news to the poor. The two senses are held inseparable, the vertical and the horizontal of a single uprightness.

Truthfulness: Christians are urged to reject falsehood and to speak “the truth in love,” with humility and a reconciling aim.

Forgiveness: Central to the gospel, demonstrated in Jesus’s own life and death and enjoined again and again (“seventy times seven”). Those forgiven by God are in turn to forgive.

Generosity: Patterned on divine grace, care extended to the deserving and undeserving, the near and the far.

Nonviolence: Taught and lived by Jesus, who returned no harm for harm, and carried forward in pacifist strands. Where Christians have countenanced force, their teaching has required justice to govern it.

2. Islam (~2.0 billion)

Love: Expressed as *mahabbah* (love), flowing between God and the believer, and extending outward as compassion for all creation. Among God’s ninety-nine names are *Al-Wadud* (the Loving) and *Al-Rahman* (the Compassionate).

Justice: Adl (justice) is commanded insistently in the Quran. Believers are to stand firm even against themselves and their own kin, and fairness is owed to all, friend and foe alike.

Truthfulness: *Sidq* (sincerity as well as truthfulness) is a defining moral trait, the alignment of speech, intention, and action, which grounds trust and justice.

Forgiveness: Modeled on divine mercy (God is *Al-Ghaffar*, the Ever-Forgiving) and tied to the hope of being forgiven oneself.

Generosity: Anchored in *zakat* (obligatory almsgiving and one of the Five Pillars) and deepened through *sadaqah*, virtuous giving beyond what is required.

Nonviolence: Life is sacred. To take one life unjustly is, in the Quran’s words, as if to slay all humanity. *Jihad*, in a strand of teaching with roots in the Prophet’s sayings, refers first to the inward struggle against one’s lower self.

3. Hinduism (~1.2 billion, often blended with folk practices)

Love: Expressed as *bhakti* (loving devotion to the Divine) and as friendship and compassion toward all beings.

Justice: Carried within *dharma*: the cosmic and social order, and the duty each person owes within it. Dharma means far more than justice, yet dharma does justice’s work. The ruler’s dharma includes protecting the weak from predation and providing for those who have no one.

Truthfulness: *Satya* is both a moral virtue and a principle of reality, traditionally joined with *ahimsa* (nonviolence), a union Gandhi put to work as *satyagraha* (truth-force).

Forgiveness: Valued as *kshama* (patience and forgiveness), a sign of spiritual maturity and self-mastery.

Generosity: *Dana* (giving) is a duty, one that supports social order and spiritual growth, and that, rightly practiced, cultivates the virtue of the giver. In the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, turning no one away from one’s door is a vow.

Nonviolence: Ahimsa guides intention, speech, and action alike; the *Mahabharata* calls it the highest dharma.

4. Buddhism (~320 million formal / ~500 million with folk practice)

Love: Metta (loving-kindness) is cultivated as boundless goodwill. The *Metta Sutta* likens it to a mother's readiness to give her life for her only child, and extends it to all beings.

Justice: Classical teaching approaches justice through *karma* (moral causality) and the ideal of the righteous ruler, who gives to the destitute lest poverty breed crime. Modern engaged Buddhism extends compassion into the reform of institutions.

Truthfulness: Right Speech asks for words that are true and beneficial, and for abstaining from falsehood and deception.

Forgiveness: Flows from insight into impermanence and non-self. The one who harmed and the one who was harmed can both be transformed.

Generosity: Dana (giving) is a primary practice, cultivated not merely for the benefit of others but as a means of loosening the grip of attachment, one of the roots of suffering.

Nonviolence: Ahimsa expresses compassion and restraint toward all sentient beings; the first of the five precepts is to refrain from taking life.

5. Indigenous/Earth-based Traditions (diverse traditions among the world's ~480 million Indigenous people, with elements practiced by many more)

Love: Expressed as kinship, reciprocity, and care for community and land. In many traditions the circle of kin reaches beyond the living and the human, counting ancestors, animals, and rivers as relatives.

Justice: Understood as repair before retribution. When harm is done, the work is to mend what was broken and to restore balance among all the kin affected.

Truthfulness: Words carry sacred power; truthful speech sustains the human community and the broader web of living relations: plant, animal, and spirit.

Forgiveness: Communal healing and the restoration of balance depend on it. The wrongdoer, where not cast out, is brought back into right relation, often through councils or circles guided by elders.

Generosity: Sharing is essential to social cohesion and often to survival. Among many peoples, honor follows giving: ceremonial giveaways redistribute wealth, and standing belongs to those through whose hands much passes.

Nonviolence: Expressed as deep respect for life and as restraint from harm. Where hunting sustains life, many traditions receive the animal as a gift, not a taking: permission is asked, thanks are returned, and nothing is wasted.

6. Contemporary Synthesis Movements, e.g., New Age, Integral (~100+ million loosely affiliated, often as a secondary identity)

Love: Understood as a force that binds all things, and as the transcending of the separate self, practiced inwardly and expressed as compassion for all beings.

Justice: Inner transformation carried outward into institutions, a turn without which transformation is commonly held incomplete, and pursued through social and ecological engagement. That turn is still uneven, for these movements have long focused inward.

Truthfulness: Authenticity and integrity, with the refusal of self-deception as the foundation for honesty with others and the world.

Forgiveness: Understood as emotional release and spiritual healing, and as a necessary clearing, since unresolved grievance is held to block the inward work these movements pursue.

Generosity: Encouraged through service, philanthropy, and mutual care.

Nonviolence: Widely affirmed and applied to oneself, to relationships, and to the world.

7. African/Afro-Diasporic Traditions (~100+ million, often blended with Christianity or Islam)

Love: Expressed through communal belonging, mutual aid, and reverence for ancestors, all resting on a conviction given voice in Southern Africa as *ubuntu*: a person is a person through other persons.

Justice: Moral order among the living and right standing with the ancestors, restored when the community names wrongs openly and addresses them, often through the counsel of elders.

Truthfulness: Truth-telling supports trust within the community and fidelity to ancestral obligations; speech carries moral weight and consequence.

Forgiveness: Sought as the repair of communal bonds. In the spirit of ubuntu, South Africa's truth and reconciliation process offered public truth-telling as a road back into community.

Generosity: Sharing and hospitality are central to social and spiritual life, a value given voice in Senegal as *teranga*: the honor of a household is measured by its welcome.

Nonviolence: Expressed as restraint and the restoration of harmony, protecting the community and all living worlds, seen and unseen.

8. Sikhism (~30 million, primarily in Punjab and diaspora)

Love: Expressed as *bhagti* (loving devotion) to the Creator, extended outward in the conviction that all people are equal in the divine sight.

Justice: Central to Sikh vocation. The community is called to resist oppression and defend the vulnerable, an ideal embodied in the *sant-sipahi* (saint-soldier). *Dharam yudh* (righteous war) is the last resort of that vocation.

Truthfulness: *Sat/sach* (divine truth) anchors the tradition; Sikhs are called to truthful living, integrity in speech and conduct aligned with what is ultimately real.

Forgiveness: *Khima* is named in Sikh scripture as itself a form of devotion. It is cultivated by surrendering *haumai*, the ego that Sikh teaching identifies as the root of resentment.

Generosity: Enacted through *seva* (selfless service) and *langar*, the free kitchen open to all, where strangers of every caste and creed sit side by side and eat as equals.

Nonviolence: *Nirvair* (without enmity) names the Divine in the opening words of Sikh scripture, and the Sikh is called to mirror it, taking up the sword only when the vulnerable must be defended and all peaceful means have failed. Even then, the Sikh is to bear malice toward none.

9. Judaism (~15 million, with influence on ethics far beyond its numbers)

Love: *Chesed* (steadfast, covenantal love) expressed through loyalty to God and love of neighbor.

Justice: *Tzedek* (justice) is a covenantal imperative ("Justice, justice shall you pursue") that governs courts, commerce, and the treatment of the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. The prophets measure the nation by it.

Truthfulness: *Emet* governs speech and judgment; truthfulness is inseparable from justice and from fidelity to the covenant.

Forgiveness: Linked to repentance (*teshuvah*) and repair of harm. For wrongs against persons, the tradition teaches, even the Day of Atonement does not atone until the wrongdoer has appeased the one harmed.

Generosity: *Tzedakah* (giving) takes its very name from the root of justice (*tzedek*). It is understood not as optional kindness but as the rectifying of an imbalance, grounded in the conviction that what we have is not entirely our own.

Nonviolence: *Pikuach nefesh* (the preservation of life) outweighs nearly every other obligation; even where force is permitted, restraint and proportionality govern it.

10. Taoism (~10 million formal / ~400 million folk, mostly in East Asia and diaspora)

Love: *Ci* (compassion) is the first of Laozi's three treasures, a tender, nurturing care that flows naturally from alignment with the Tao.

Justice: Distrusted as imposed rectitude, yet affirmed as nature's own balancing, a leveling the sage serves without forcing, for the way of heaven takes from what has too much and gives to what has not enough.

Truthfulness: Understood not chiefly as a rule but as a natural consequence of alignment with the Tao. When one lives without artifice, truth emerges.

Forgiveness: Follows from non-contention, and repays injury with goodness.

Generosity: Flows from simplicity and non-attachment. The *Tao Te Ching*'s final chapter offers a paradox: the sage does not hoard, and the more he gives to others, the more he has.

Nonviolence: Expressed as restraint and non-contention. Force disrupts the natural order, and even a victory in arms is to be received with mourning for the slain, not triumph.

11. Confucianism (~8 million formal, shaping cultures across East Asia)

Love: *Ren* (humaneness or benevolence) is the highest Confucian virtue, from which the others flow, expressing compassion and care that begin with those near and extend outward toward all humanity.

Justice: Approached through *yi* (rightness), as when the exemplary person, facing gain, asks first what is right. *Yi* is broader than justice, yet in governance it does justice's work. Humane government, Mencius taught, gives precedence to the most in need — the widow, the widower, the orphan, and the old without children.

Truthfulness: *Xin* (trustworthiness) and *cheng* (sincerity) ground reliable speech and the alignment of inner intention with outward expression.

Forgiveness: Approached through *shu*, Confucius's own answer when asked for a single principle to govern a lifetime: do not impose on others what you yourself would not wish to bear. Often rendered "reciprocity," the word came in time to mean pardon itself.

Generosity: Expressed through the proper fulfillment of one's roles, caring for those one is bound to and serving the wider good.

Nonviolence: Moral example moves people more surely than coercion. In the *Analects*, asked whether the unprincipled should be put to death for the sake of the principled, Confucius answered that governing needs no killing at all: let the ruler desire the good, and the people will be good.

12. Bahá'í Faith (~8 million)

Love: The animating force of Bahá'í life, love of God expressed outward as love for all humanity, grounded in the belief that the whole human race is one.

Justice: In the voice of God, Bahá'u'lláh writes, "The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice"; it is the faculty in each soul that distinguishes truth from falsehood, and the ordering principle of a unified world.

Truthfulness: The virtue on which all others rest, paired with the duty to seek truth for oneself rather than defer blindly to tradition or authority.

Forgiveness: Understood as essential to the unity that is the Faith's animating goal. The person wronged is called to pardon, while the community must still uphold justice; forgiveness is the individual's part, never a license for harm to continue.

Generosity: An attribute of God to be mirrored in human life, expressed through service and through giving that aims, beyond charity, at the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty.

Nonviolence: Harm to any person diminishes the whole. Bahá'u'lláh abolished holy war, and the Faith works for the end of war, not by renouncing force but by binding it to justice: aggression is to be met by the united response of all nations.

Reflections

The six virtues highlighted here are, in the language of moral philosophy, "other-regarding," directed outward, constituting a social ethic. Of them, justice is the most various: the rendering of what is owed, the repair of what was broken, the rightness that conforms to a wider order, the world's own balancing of excess and lack. That a single word should hold so much shows how widely, and how differently, the traditions map the moral world; even so, one conviction recurs: the weak must be protected.

Beneath these outward virtues lie inward foundations: mindfulness (the steadying of attention in the present), discernment (the wisdom that fits each virtue to its moment), restraint (the strength not to act), fortitude (the strength of inner resolve), and humility (the quieting of the ego). Humility, followed to its end, leads to *kenosis* in Christianity, *fana* in Sufi Islam, the realization of *anatta* in Buddhism, and *bittul* in Hasidic Judaism. Discernment bears particular weight, for any virtue can be misapplied: love into possessiveness, forgiveness into enabling, justice into vengeance. The traditions treat discernment of the fitting act, time, and measure as a capacity to be developed, not assumed.

These inward and outward virtues may be animated by reverence, awe, or wonder: at the fact of existence, at the complexity and fragility of life, at the bonds between beings. For many, this orientation takes the form of devotion to

the Divine. Peace (*shalom, salaam, shanti*) names the harvest: the condition, within persons and among them, that these virtues practiced together yield.

Increasingly, traditions affirm that the reach of these virtues extends beyond the human. For instance, Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'* bound care for "our common home" to Catholic teaching. That August, a coalition of Muslim scholars and institutions meeting in Istanbul issued a kindred declaration, grounded in Quranic stewardship and equilibrium. In 2018, the Parliament of the World's Religions extended its *Global Ethic* to include a "Commitment to a Culture of Sustainability and Care for the Earth."

Were the reach of these virtues unbounded, little of the world's needless suffering would go unanswered. None of these traditions holds the taking of even one human life lightly, and still, violence has run to millions. That so much suffering persists owes less to the absence of the virtues than to the narrowing of their scope by boundaries such as tribe, caste, color, sex, or creed. Outside these boundaries, those who suffer are treated as though the virtues need not extend to them. Yet such boundaries have often been softened and sometimes dissolved from within, by those who took their tradition at its word and asked why its love stopped where it did.

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Notes

Placing **Truthfulness** in bold is an editorial choice made for this moment in time.

Adherent figures are rough composites, drawn mainly from the Pew Research Center and the World Religion Database. Where traditions blend, a person may be counted under more than one heading. Some numbers include folk practice beyond formal affiliation. Traditions are ordered approximately by reach, as the drafters assess it.

Two headings, Indigenous/Earth-based and African/Afro-Diasporic, each gather the traditions of many distinct peoples. Their entries describe recurring patterns, not the teaching of any single people.

The six virtues were selected as a minimal covering set: in the drafters' judgment, each is needed, and together they connect with nearly all the other-regarding virtues that the traditions themselves name.

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