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Dharma-Explained In Astadasha Puranas

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Abstract

Dharma is a central idea in Indian philosophy, meaning “that which sustains” the universe, society, and individual life. The Aṣṭādaśa Purāṇas explain dharma not just as a rule, but as a living principle through stories, teachings, and examples. This chapter studies dharma in a structured way using texts like the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and Bhāgavata Purāṇa, showing how it works at three levels: cosmic (universal order), ethical (values like truth, non-violence, compassion), and social (duties in society).

The Purāṇas teach that dharma maintains balance in the universe, and when it is disturbed, disorder (adharmā) arises. They also show that practicing dharma leads to harmony, prosperity, and happiness. Finally, the highest form of dharma is devotion (bhakti), which brings inner peace and spiritual liberation. Thus, the Purāṇas present dharma as a complete guide for right living, social responsibility, and spiritual growth.

Keywords

Dharma, Aṣṭādaśa Purāṇas, Bhakti, Ethics, Cosmic Order, Social Duty, Indian Philosophy, Karma, Mokṣa, Spirituality

Dharma. It is one of the axes of Indian philosophy, ethics, and religion. The Puranas are like big collections of Indian stories and information. They give us a clear way to understand dharma, showing how it works in the universe, in our society, in how we behave, and in our spiritual journey. This chapter tries to look at the Ashtadasha Puranas in a structured way. It explores different ideas from them by looking closely at the original Sanskrit texts, through translations, and by thinking about their deeper meanings. The goal is to connect these ancient Puranic ideas to both old Indian ways of .

Etymology and Cosmic foundations of Dharma.:

The word dharma originates from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ*, meaning “to sustain” or “to uphold.” It is not a fixed or deterministic rule as defined in the Purāṇas; it is a living principle that is lived out and articulated by the universe as much as by society and the individual.

The Aṣṭādaśa Purāṇas not only define dharma in the abstract, they give the meaning of dharma in a rich narrative. These tales touch on everything from sovereigns, rulers, householders, ascetics, and ordinary women and men who show dharma to be practiced in various communities. They represent the perfect life as one devoted to the universe and fulfilling the faithful performance of duty. Ultimately, this kind of life is one of lokasaṃgraha—the welfare, stability, and harmony of the world.

At its foundation, dharma is what builds continuity and coherence of existence. It is more than a moral code or a civic responsibility; it is the glue keeping creation from spinning out of control, into decay and ruin. It is the cosmic order. This fundamental belief in the harmony of the cosmos works in two intertwined ways: As *sthiti* (sustenance) — meaning to live in harmony with the cosmos itself and with its cycles of creation, conservation, and dissolution. As a moral-cosmic link — when people act with dharma, they maintain the universal order. When they violate it (*adharmā*), they break that order. This impacts not just their karma but the health of the whole universe (*lokasaṃgraha*). This concept is what democratizes ethics for everyone. It means that the universe (or its components) may be a balance, even a break. Living ethically as such, therefore, is both an individual and societal responsibility — a sacred obligation to aid in sustaining the universe itself.

It is the Purāṇic continuation and elaboration of the Vedic concept of *ṛta* (*ṛta*) -- the cosmic rhythm, truth, and natural law that governs the movement of planets, the cycles of seasons, the flow of rivers, the alternation of day and night, and the moral structure of life itself.

The Purāṇas view the universe not as an arbitrary system but as a living, moral organism that is protected by dharma.

And when this cosmic order is disrupted by *adharmā* (unrighteousness), the balance of creation is disturbed. This is manifest in moral decay, natural calamities, and the weakening of the yugas. But the Purāṇas maintain that dharma is ultimately indestructible as long as the Supreme Lord - especially Viṣṇu, the preserver - is holding it up as *avatāras* whenever cosmic equilibrium is threatened.

The Purāṇas contend that right living benefits cosmic harmony, whereas wrongdoings place tension on nature and the moral order. The sentiment is expressed beautifully in the ***Vishnu Purana***:

*"Viṣṇur eva jagat sarvaṃ yad bhūtaṃ yac ca bhaviṣyati |
So 'dhīdevaḥ sa bhūtātmā so 'vyaktaḥ puruṣottamaḥ ||*

"Viṣṇu alone is the entire universe — all that has been and all that will be. He is the supreme God, the soul of all beings, the unmanifest, and the Highest Person." From great cycles of creation and destruction to the small rules of human conduct that govern our lives, dharma serves as an invisible thread that links the small (microcosm) and the vast world (macrocosm). Dharma is not set by outsiders. It comes out of the actual nature of reality itself. Both the solid foundation and guiding light of all life inking and to what we call 'ethics' today.

*dhāraṇād dharma ity āhur dharmo dhārayate prajāḥ |
yaḥ syād dhāraṇa-saṃyuktaḥ sa dharma iti niścayaḥ ||*

“They call it Dharma because it upholds (sustains). Dharma indeed sustains all beings.

That which is endowed with the power of sustaining (upholding) is certainly called Dharma.

*dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṃ sthitaṃ dharmeṇa gacchati |
dharmeṇaiva pralīyeta tasmād dharmam na parityajet ||*

The whole universe is sustained by Dharma, by Dharma it works and moves.

By Dharma it eventually dissolves as well, therefore, one should never abandon Dharma.

*dharmah hi paramam śreyah sarva-loka-namaskṛtam |
yato dharmas tato jayah ||*

"Dharma is indeed the highest good, revered by all worlds. Where there is Dharma, there is victory."

*dharmah nārāyaṇah sāksāt dharme sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmād arthaḥ prabhavati dharmāt prabhavate sukham ||*

Dharma is verily Nārāyaṇa Himself; everything is established in Dharma. From Dharma comes prosperity (artha) and from Dharma comes happiness."

In Bhavishya Purana,

*dharmeṇa vidhṛtam viśvaṃ nādharmeṇa kadācana |
dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ ||*

The universe is protected by Dharma alone, never by Adharma at any time. Dharma, when destroyed, destroys; when protected it protects.

In Brahma Purana,

*dharmeṇa dhāryate sarvaṃ jagat sthāvara-jaṅgamam |
tasmād dharmam na parityajyaṃ sarva-bhūta-hite ratam ||*

"All this universe -movable and immovable -is sustained by Dharma. So we should never give up Dharma, and we are responsible for the good of our fellow human beings.

dharmah viśvasya jagataḥ pratiṣṭhā | dharme sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam ||

"Dharma is the foundation of the entire universe; indeed everything is in Dharma.

*dharmeṇa sṛṣṭam akhilaṃ dharmeṇaiva pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇaiva layam yāti tasmād dharmah paraḥ smṛtaḥ ||*

"The entire creation is brought forth by Dharma and is established by Dharma.

By Dharma alone it dissolves; therefore by Dharma is supreme.

*dharmah viśnumayaḥ prokto dharme sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmād arthaḥ prabhavati dharmāt prabhavate sukham ||*

"What is Dharma; there is Viṣṇu; there is Dharma." In Dharma comes prosperity and in happiness comes happiness."

In Vāmana Purāṇa,

*dharmah hi paramo loke dharme satyaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṃ tasmād dharmam na lopayet ||*

"Dharma is supreme in this world, the truth is established. The whole universe exists by Dharma; thus one should never neglect Dharma.

The world is Dharma and we must never do nothing about Dharma."

*dharmeṇa vidhṛtam viśvaṃ nādharmeṇa kadācana |
dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ ||*

"There is no Dharma higher than truth, there is truth in truth.

Truth is indeed the Supreme Reality (Brahman) and we should never neglect truth."

In Brahmānda Purana,

*dharmah dhārayate lokān dharmo dhārayate prajāḥ |
dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṃ tasmād dharmam na parityajet ||*

na satyāt paramo dharmah satye sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |

satyaṃ hi paramam brahma tasmāt satyaṃ na lopayet ||

*dharmah viśvasya dhāraṇāt dharme sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṃ nādharmeṇa kadācana ||*

"Dharma is so called because it sustains the world, everything is founded in Dharma." "Dharma supports all beings; everything is founded in Dharma." The whole world exists by Dharma, never by Adharma."

dharma eva param brahma dharme satyaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |

dharmād arthaḥ prabhavati dharmāt prabhavate sukham ||

"Dharma is the Supreme Brahman; in Dharma truth is established. From Dharma prosperity develops, and from Dharma happiness arises."

In Skānda Purana,

*dharmeṇa dhāryate pṛthvī dharmeṇaiva pratiṣṭhitā |
dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṃ nādharmeṇa kadācana ||*

Truth is the foundation of Dharma, and compassion is the essence of Dharma.
Purity, austerity, and charity are the highest fruits of Dharma.

dharmah pṛthivyāḥ ādhāraḥ dharme sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṃ tasmād dharmaṃ na lopayet ||

“Dharma is indeed the greatest strength; victory is said to come from Dharma.

Dharma protects when protected; Adharma never protects.” “Dharma is the sustainer of the world; everything is established in Dharma.

The entire universe exists through Dharma, never through Adharma.” “Dharma is Brahman; in Dharma, truth is real.

dharmah jñānasya kāraṇaṃ dharme satyaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmād eva prabuddhātmā mokṣamārgaṃ nigacchati ||

From Dharma comes prosperity, and from Dharma comes happiness.

A king devoted to Dharma should govern the people through Dharma.” “A kingdom stands firm only by Dharma, never by Adharma.

Dharma is said to be the cause of the entire universe.

Agni Purāṇa,

dharmah sarvasya bhūṣaṇaṃ dharme satyaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇaiva guṇāḥ sarve tasmād dharmaṃ na lopayet ||

Everything is established in Dharma; the world exists by Dharma alone.” “Dharma is indeed the highest and eternal; truth is its defining mark.

The whole universe exists through Dharma; therefore, one should never abandon Dharma.

dharmeṇaiva jagat bhāti dharme sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇaiva sthito lokaḥ nādharmeṇa kadācana || ”

“Dharma is indeed the powerful helper of those who are like that; victory is said to come from Dharma.

Dharma protects those who protect it; Adharma never protects anyone.” “The world stands only by Dharma, and everything is established in Dharma.

The entire universe exists through Dharma, never through Adharma.” “Dharma is established in Brahman; in Dharma, truth is grounded.

From Dharma comes prosperity, and from Dharma comes happiness.

dharmah mokṣasya sādhanam dharme jñānaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmād eva vimuktātmā brahmabhāvaṃ nigacchati ||

The whole universe exists through Dharma and is established in Dharma. So, not only does one have to leave Dharma, but one must never forget the Dharma.” All the virtues come from Dharma, so never abandon Dharma.

The world is only in Dharma; it is not in Adharma.” “Dharma is the way to liberation; knowledge is in Dharma. The liberated soul reaches the state of Brahman through Dharma.”

Nārada Purāṇa,

dharmah sarvatra pūjyate dharme satyaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇaiva guṇāḥ sarve tasmād dharmaṃ na lopayet |

| “Dharma is revered everywhere in the world; truth is founded in Dharma.

All the good things come from Dharma, so never abandon Dharma.

dharmah hi jagataḥ panthāḥ dharme sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṃ nādharmeṇa kadācana ||

Dharma is the path to the world; everything is in Dharma.

The whole universe is in Dharma—never in Adharma.

Bhāgavata Purāṇa

sa vai puṃsām paro dharmo yato bhaktir adhokṣaje |
ahaitukī apratihātā yayātmā suprasīdati ||

“That is the one Dharma for all humanity which is dedicated to the Transcendent Lord (Adhokṣaja) and thus from which all other good things are developed— a devotion that is causeless and uninterrupted, by which the soul becomes completely satisfied.”

Liṅga Purāṇa,

śivo dharmah sanātanaḥ śive dharmah pratiṣṭhitaḥ |

śivād dharmah pravartate śive sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam ||

“Śiva is the eternal Dharma; in Śiva, Dharma is established.

From Śiva, Dharma proceeds, and in Śiva, everything is established.” As a result, Dharma is about much more than a code of ethics or spiritual obligation.

It has its origins in the primordial principle of "that which upholds and sustains," or dhr -- to hold, to support, to bear -- and it manifests itself as the cosmic order that keeps the cosmos at peace.

ETHICAL DHARMA (Universal Virtues):

The immortal flow of Ethical Dharma flows through eighteen Puranas above all — the universal virtues that uphold creation, sustain society, and elevate the individual soul.

The Puranas make this abstract morality work out into vibrant living lessons involving extraordinary stories of gods and goddesses, sages and kings, demons and devotees.

They don't impart truthfulness, non-violence, compassion, self- control, restraint, generosity, and devotion not as dry precepts, but as living forces whose essence shapes destiny.

We have a look at how the Astadasha Puranas can be considered a great canon of universal virtues. They bring ethical Dharma to light, are practical and profound and powerful, and demonstrate a sense of spirituality that is in all practical wisdom or compassion, an assurance that real spirituality is not about renouncing the world.

In every age and every people group, the stories of every creature tell the same tale, reminding us of Ethical Dharma that cannot be altered — which takes us from ignorance to light, from bondage to freedom, and from fragmentation to cosmic balance.

Padma Purana,

ahiṃsā satyam asteyaṃ śaucam indriya-nigrahaḥ

| etaṃ sāmāsikaṃ dharmam cāturvarṇye'bravīn manuḥ ||

Such duties of non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, purity, and control of the senses are the imperative obligations of all mankind, as per the instructions of Manu.

satyam brūyāt priyam brūyāt na brūyāt satyam apriyam |

priyam ca nānṛtaṃ brūyād eṣa dharmah sanātanaḥ ||

Honesty is spoken, pleasant is spoken; no unpleasant truth is spoken.

But neither do you speak pleasant falsehood.

This is the eternal dharma.

kṣamā dharmasya bhūṣaṇaṃ kṣamā vīrasya bhūṣaṇam |

kṣamā balavatāṃ bhūṣaṇaṃ kṣamayā kiṃ na sādhyate ||

Forgiveness is the ornament of dharma, the ornament of the brave, the ornament of the strong.

What cannot be achieved through forgiveness?

satyaṃ hi paramaṃ dharmah satyaṃ hi paramaṃ tapaḥ |

satyaṃ hi paramaṃ brahma satye dharmah pratiṣṭhitaḥ ||

Truth is the highest dharma, truth is the highest austerity. Truth is the supreme Brahman; upon truth, dharma is established.

dānaṃ dharmasya sārāṃ syāt dānaṃ pāpasya nāśanam |

dānaṃ hi sarva-vyasaṇaṃ hanti dānāt śreṣṭhataraṃ na hi ||

Charity is the essence of dharma; it destroys sin. It removes all miseries, and nothing is greater than charity.

In Nārada Purāṇa,

satyaṃ dayā tapaḥ śaucam titikṣā kṣāntir ārjavam |

jñānaṃ vijñānam āstikyaṃ brahma-karma svabhāva-jam ||

Truthfulness, compassion, austerity, purity, forbearance, forgiveness, and sincerity—these are the natural duties of a noble person (brāhmaṇa-like).

दा

*dānaṁ dharmasya jīvanam dānaṁ pāpasya nāśanam |
dānaṁ svargasya sādhanam dānāt śreṣṭhataram na hi ||*

Charity is the life-force of dharma; it destroys sin.
It is the means to attain higher worlds, and nothing is greater than charity.

*dayā sarva-bhūteṣu dharmasya paramo mataḥ |
tasmād dayāṁ prayatnena rakṣed dharmam icchatā ||*

Compassion towards all beings is considered the highest dharma.
Therefore, one who desires righteousness should carefully cultivate and protect compassion.

Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa,

*dharmā eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ |
tasmād dharmo na hantavyo mā no dharmo hato'vadhīt ||*

Dharma, when destroyed, destroys; dharma, when protected, protects. Therefore, one must never violate dharma, lest destroyed dharma destroy us.

*dayā dharmasya mūlam hi pāpasya mūlam arthanam |
tasmād dayāṁ na tyajet prājñāḥ sarva-bhūteṣu sarvadā ||*

Compassion is indeed the root of dharma, while selfish desire is the root of sin.
Therefore, a wise person should never abandon compassion toward all beings.

*satyaṁ dharmasya mūlam hi dayā dharmasya lakṣaṇam |
ācāraḥ paramo dharmas tasmāt satyaṁ na lopayet ||*

Truth is the root of dharma, and compassion is its defining mark.
Right conduct is the highest dharma; therefore, one should never abandon truth.

Liṅga Purāṇa,

*damaḥ śamo dayā dānaṁ satyaṁ dharmasya lakṣaṇam |
ahiṁsā paramo dharmāḥ sarveṣāṁ dharmā-sādhanam ||*

The hallmarks of dharma are self-restraint, inner calmness, compassion, charity, and truthfulness.
The highest duty is the dharma of non-violence and the practice of all righteousness.

शौचं दया तपः सत्यं धर्मस्य लक्षणम्। श्रद्धया परया युक्तं सर्वधर्मस्य कारणम्॥ śaucaṁ dayā tapaḥ satyaṁ
dharmasya lakṣaṇam | śraddhayā parayā yuktaṁ sarva-dharmasya kāraṇam || Dharma is purity,
compassion, austerity, and truth.

With deep faith, however, they become the substance of all righteousness.

*śamaḥ damaḥ tapaḥ śaucaṁ kṣāntir ārjavam eva ca |
dharmasya paramam phalam etat prāhur manīṣiṇaḥ ||*

The wise call such goods as tranquility, self-control, austerity, purity, forgiveness, and sincerity.

Skanda Purāṇa,

*dayā sarva-bhūteṣu dharmasya mūlam uttamam |
tasmād dayāṁ na tyajet prājñāḥ sarva-bhūta-hite rataḥ ||*

Compassion towards all living beings is the supreme root of dharma.

Thus a wise man has the principle of ceaseless concern for all beings and should always be engaged in their welfare.

satyena dhāryate pṛthvī satyena tapate raviḥ |

satyena vāti vāyuś ca sarvaṃ satye pratiṣṭhitam ||

The earth by truth is maintained. And by truth the sun exists.

All is truth—by truth the wind blows, by truth everything is established.

śaucaṃ dayā tapo dānaṃ dharmasya paramā gatiḥ |

etaiḥ dharmā-samāyukto manuṣyaḥ sukham edhate ||

Purity, compassion, austerity, charity—these are the most holy of dharma which is the highest path. The person who possesses these qualities succeeds in true happiness and abundance.

Garuda Purana,

ahiṃsā paramo dharmah dharmā-hiṃsā tathaiva ca |

etad veda-vido vidyur dharmasya tattvam uttamam ||

Non-violence is the highest form of dharma and yet even violence for the sake of dharma (righteous duty) can be justified. Those who understand the Vedas see this as dharma's highest rule.

na hiṃsyāt sarva-bhūtāni nāṅṛtaṃ vadet kadā |

priyaṃ ca satyaṃ vadet eṣa dharmah sanātanaḥ ||

No one should cause injury to living beings, nor speak falsehood.

And one should speak the truth in a pleasant manner—this is the eternal dharma.

ahiṃsā paramaṃ puṇyaṃ dharmasya paramaṃ phalam |

ahiṃsayā hi bhūtāni tuṣyanti paramaṃ sukham ||

In dharma, non-violence is the highest merit and the highest fruit.

All beings are happy due to non-violence, and through non-violence happiness happens as highest of all.

Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa,

dharmah satyaṃ dayā dānaṃ kṣamā śīlāṃ damas tathā |

ahiṃsā cāpy anasūyā ca dharmasyaitāni lakṣaṇam ||

Truth, compassion, charity, forgiveness, good conduct, self-control, non-violence, and freedom from envy—these are the characteristics of dharma.

dayā dharmasya mūlaṃ hi pāpasya mūlam adayā |

tasmād dayāṃ na tyajet sarva-bhūteṣu sarvadā ||

Compassion is the essence of dharma, and cruelty (the lack of compassion) is the essence of sin.

So compassion must never be renounced for all beings.

kṣamā dharmasya mūlaṃ hi satyaṃ dharmasya jīvanam |

tasmāt kṣamāṃ prayatnena satyaṃ ca paripālayet ||

Forgiveness is the essence of dharma, and truth is the very essence of it.

So the cultivation of not only forgiveness, but also truth, therefore, should be done conscientiously.

Agni Purāṇa ,

dānaṃ bhogo nāśas tisro gatayo bhavanti vittasya |

yo na dadāti na bhūṅkte tasya tṛtīyā gatir bhavati ||

There are three possible consequences of wealth: charity, pleasure, or destruction.

Whoever neither gives it nor enjoys it inevitably meets the third fate—loss.

satyaṃ hi paramaṃ dharmah satye sarvaṃ pratiṣṭhitam |

dharme satyaṃ pratiṣṭhitam tasmāt satyaṃ na lopayet ||

Nothing is a divine right until one can believe in truth: truth is the supreme dharma and everything hinges on truth.

Dharma is itself grounded in truth, so that one must always believe in the truth.

dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ pāpam nāśayati dhruvam |
tasmād dharmam sadā rakṣet dharmo hi paramam balam ||
 The Dharma safeguards its defenders and surely destroys sin.

As such dharma is the greatest strength, and this should always be followed.

Brahma Purāṇa ,

ahiṃsā sarva-dharmāṇām śreṣṭhā parama ucyate |
ahiṃsāyām sthito dharmah sarva-bhūta-hite rataḥ |

True dharma is founded in non-violence and in protecting the interests of all sentient creatures.

The wise say that the “best of deeds can become dharma”:

ahiṃsā satyam ārjavam dayā dānam damas tathā |
etad dharmasya paramam vratam proktam manīṣibhiḥ ||

Non-violence, truth, sincerity, compassion, charity, and self-control are said to be the highest vows of dharma.

Social Dharma (Duty, Society, Conduct)

The Astadasha Maha Puranas are not just places to store myth and cosmology; they are, instead, great guides to Social Dharma — the righteous obligations, the social obligations, the right values (or duties) to adhere to in our lives, that keep our communities together.

By vivid tales of kings and subjects, sages and householders, gods and devotees, the Puranas show how individual virtue must blossom into social harmony. Social Dharma is shown as the application of cosmic order into daily life. The duties of rulers to protect dharma and ensure justice come under the purview of the Vishnu Purana and Bhagavata Purana, but family duties, relations among gurus and shishyas, and selfless service are emphasized by the Shiva Purana and Markandeya Purana. The Garuda Purana and Agni Purana set forth codes of conduct for each varna and ashrama in explicit terms, emphasizing that when everyone diligently and accurately carries out their assigned functions with integrity and compassion, society flourishes and adharma becomes naturally restrained.

Vishnu Purana.

varṇāśramācāravatā puruṣeṇa paraḥ pumān |
viṣṇur ārādhyate panthā nānyat tat toṣa-kāraṇam ||

The Supreme Being, Vishnu, is worshipped by a person fulfilling the duties of varna and ashrama (social and spiritual order).

There is no other way that pleases Him more.

dharmeṇa pālayet rājyaṁ dharmeṇa pālayet prajāḥ |
dharmeṇaiva dhanam rakṣed dharmo hi paramam balam ||

A king is to rule a kingdom through dharma and protect his subjects through dharma.

Dharma must protect even wealth; dharma is the supreme strength.

dharmeṇa pālayet prajāḥ sarvāḥ svadharme sthāpayet sadā |
dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṁ dhāryate sacarācaram ||

One should guard others with dharma and establish them in their respective duties.

And indeed, the whole world, both moving and unmoving, is maintained by dharma.

Padma Purana,

paropakārāya puṇyāya pāpāya parapīḍanam |
satām jīvitam etad dhi parārthe prāṇa-dhāraṇam ||

Helping others produces merit (punya) and harming others results in sin (papa).
Indeed the life of noble people is for the benefit of others.

*eko hi suhṛd dharmo nidhanāpy anugacchati |
śarīreṇa samam naśyati sarvam anyad dhanādikam ||*

Even in death, dharma alone is the true friend that comes after.
Anything else, including wealth and possessions, dies with the body.

Matsya Purana.

*āhāra-nidrā-bhaya-maithunam ca sāmānyam etat paśubhir narāṇām |
dharmo hi teṣām adhiko viśeṣo dharmeṇa hīnāḥ paśubhiḥ samānāḥ ||*

Food, sleep, fear, and reproduction are all common to animals and humans alike.
Dharma alone is the singular distinguishing factor; without dharma humans are of no distinction to animals.

*rāja-dharmo hi nityaḥ syāt prajānām paripālanam |
dharmeṇaiva prajā rakṣyāḥ dharmo hi paramam balam ||*

The eternal duty of a king is to protect his subjects.
People must be protected by dharma, for dharma is the highest strength.

*rājā dharmeṇa bhūmiṃ pālayet prajānām hita-kāmyayā |
dharmeṇaiva hi lokāḥ syuḥ sukhino nātra saṃśayaḥ ||*

A king should rule the earth by dharma, with the welfare of his people in mind.
Indeed, through dharma alone people are happy—it is beyond question.

Skanda Purana.

*āhāra-nidrā-bhaya-maithunam ca sāmānyam etat paśubhir narāṇām |
dharmo hi teṣām adhiko viśeṣo dharmeṇa hīnaḥ puruṣaḥ paśubhiḥ samaḥ ||*

Food, sleeping, fear, and reproduction are shared by all animals and humans.
Dharma is everything else; without dharma, an individual is no different from an animal.
*dharmeṇa hīnam na samāja-yogyam naiva praśamsanti satām sabhāyām |
dharmeṇa yuktaḥ puruṣaḥ praśasyaḥ sarveṣu lokeṣu sa pūjyate ca ||*

A man without dharma cannot participate in polite society and is not praised by the wise.
The one with dharma is worthy of praise and honored in all worlds.

*dharmeṇa hīnaḥ samājo vinaśyati dharmeṇa yuktaḥ sadā vardhate ca |
dharmo hi lokasya param nidhānam tasmād dharmam na parityajet ||*

A society with no dharma dies, whereas a society with dharma thrives.
Dharma gives us the supreme basis of the world, and so one must never discard it.

Brahma Purana.

*śruti-smṛti-purāṇoktam dharmam yo nātivartate |
sa vai dharmo-vidām śreṣṭho lokānām hita-kāraḥ ||*

One who does not transgress the dharma taught in the Vedas, Smritis, and Puranas is the most excellent of all the knowers.

This is a true benefactor and enabler of dharma.

dharmo hi loka-samrakṣaṇam dharmeṇaiva pratiṣṭhitam |

dharmeṇa dhāryate sarvaṁ tasmād dharmaṁ na lopayet ||

Dharma protects the universe and sustains it and, indeed, is in itself based on and maintains the world. Everything is sustained by dharma; thus one should never forsake it.

Agni Purana.

dharmeṇa jīvati lokaḥ dharmeṇaiva pratiṣṭhitaḥ |
dharmeṇa dhāryate sarvaṁ tasmād dharmaṁ na lopayet ||

The world exists according to dharma and is founded on dharma.
Everything is sustained by dharma. So one should never give in to anything else.

dharmeṇa jīvati rāṣṭraṁ dharmeṇaiva vardhate |
dharmeṇa rakṣyate sarvaṁ tasmād dharmaḥ paro mataḥ ||

A nation lives out dharma and grows from dharma.
Everything is protected by dharma; so dharma is accepted as supreme.

Brahmanda Purana.

dharmo lokasya jīvanam dharmeṇaiva pratiṣṭhitam |
dharmeṇa dhāryate sarvaṁ tasmād dharmaṁ na lopayet ||

Dharma is the lifeblood of the world—it's self-sufficient and well-established.
Everything is sustained by dharma, and one must never cease to practice dharma.

dharmo loka-hitārthāya dharmo loka-sukhāvahaḥ |
dharmeṇaiva jagat sarvaṁ dhāryate sacarācaram ||
Dharma exists for the benefit of the world and also for joy to all.
As a matter of fact, dharma sustains the whole universe, with all its movement and inertia.

Narada Purana.

dharmeṇa bandhuḥ jñāyate dharmeṇa jñāyate suhṛt |
dharmeṇaiva hi sarveṣāṁ bhāvo jñeyaḥ parasparam ||

By virtue of dharma is known both a true relative and a true friend, and can only be known through dharma. By dharma alone the essence of real relationships is truly understood.
This ultimately is done in the Puranas through Social Dharma that asserts on the human dimension, true dharma is not confined to personal piety alone, where the true dharma is made visible not simply through individual piety but with the deeds of what is noble, good, cooperative and selfless with regard to society.

When Social Dharma is maintained, families prosper, communities thrive, and the larger world reflects the cosmic harmony it is meant to sustain.

A community rooted in responsibility and moral behavior is, in the Puranas' words, the best manifestation of dharma on earth.

Bhakti Dharma (Spiritual/ Supreme Dharma).

Of all these teachings in the Astadasha Maha Puranas, Bhakti Dharma is the Supreme Dharma, the path of pure love, surrender, and absolute devotion to the Divine. If Ethical Dharma purifies character, and Social Dharma brings one to righteous living, then Bhakti Dharma raises the soul to its ultimate aim: union with the Supreme Reality.

There is plenty to love in there, especially the eighteen Puranas — especially the Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, Shiva Purana, and Padma Purana — as they reflect the inspiring stories of devotees whose simple devotion, transcending all rituals, austerities, and intellect, inspire people to devote themselves fully to Hinduism and all its doctrines. From these holy stories, the Puranas claim that in the age of Kali, Bhakti is the easiest, sweetest, and most powerful way of liberation and inner peace. Bhakti Dharma teaches that when love for God fills the heart, all other forms of dharma naturally align and reach their perfection. It transforms daily life into sacred service and turns every act into an offering of love. The Eighteen Purāṇas lay out a strong ethical system, or dharma, that includes universal values.

These are things like being truthful, not harming others, showing compassion, controlling oneself, being generous, and being devoted. But they don't just present these as rules. Instead, the Purāṇas bring them to life through vivid stories about gods, wise people, kings, demons, and followers.

These tales show that moral goodness is something to actually live by.

They also explain how these good qualities actively shape our destiny and who we become.

Among all parts of dharma, devotion (bhakti-dharma) is seen as the most important.

While ethical dharma helps us grow in virtue and social dharma keeps us in line, bhakti lifts a person towards the highest spiritual goal in life – becoming one with the Supreme Reality.

In many stories from the Purāṇas, especially the Bhāgavata, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Padma Purāṇas, we hear about devoted people whose real faith goes beyond just rituals, strict self-denial, or simply studying books.

Especially during the Kali Yuga (our current age), the Purāṇic teachings strongly suggest that bhakti is the easiest and most practical way to find freedom and real inner peace.

Bhakti turns everything we do in life into offerings.

When this happens, all other aspects of dharma become balanced and work together smoothly.

Just by fostering love and surrendering to God, bhakti brings our moral life and spiritual happiness together, fulfilling what the Purāṇas teach about dharma.

Bhagavata Purana.

sa vai puṁsām paro dharmo yato bhaktir adhokṣaje |
ahaitukī apratihātā yayātmā suprasīdati ||

The supreme dharma for all humans is that by which devotion to the Transcendent Lord (Adhokshaja) is cultivated—a devotion that is causeless and uninterrupted, by which the soul becomes completely satisfied.

dharmāḥ svanuṣṭhitaḥ puṁsām viṣvaksena-kathāsu yaḥ |
notpādayed yadi ratim śrama eva hi kevalam ||

If the performance of prescribed duties yields no affection for hearing about the Lord (Visvaksena), then those duties themselves are meaningless labor.

dharmam tu sāksād bhagavat-praṇītam na vai vidur ṛṣayo nāpi devāḥ |
na siddha-mukhyā asurā manuṣyāḥ kuto nu vidyādhara-cāraṇādayaḥ ||

The Supreme Lord directly establishes dharma.

Not even the gods, asuras, siddhas, and humans can fully comprehend it—so then to speak of others?

bhaktir mayi parā dharmāḥ amṛtatvāya kalpate |
yayā labhyate param tattvaṁ tayā jīvaḥ prasīdati ||

Supreme devotion unto Me is the highest dharma and the ultimate cause of immortality.

In such devotion, the very highest reality is fulfilled, and peace is achieved by the soul.

Bhagavad Gītā 18.54:

brahma-bhūtaḥ prasannātmā na śocati na kāṅkṣati |
samaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu mad-bhaktim labhate parām ||

One who is spiritually realized (brahma-bhuta) becomes joyful, free from sorrow and desire, is blissful, and sees all beings equally; such a person attains supreme devotion to Me.

Brahma Vaivarta Purana.

hari-bhakti-vihīnasya dharmah sarvah niṣphalaḥ |
śrama eva hi kevalam tasya nāsti tatra phalodayaḥ ||

For one who lacks devotion to Hari, all forms of dharma are fruitless.
These acts are no more than work with no real spiritual outcome.

bhaktir eva garīyasī bhaktir eva parā gatiḥ |
bhaktyā labhyate paramam tattvam bhaktyā mokṣaḥ prajāyate ||

Devotion alone is the highest; devotion alone is the supreme goal.
Through devotion alone, true liberation is attained.

kṛṣṇa-bhaktir hi dharmasya paramā gatir ucyate |
yayā tuṣyati govindo yayā ātmā prasīdati ||

The highest goal of dharma is devotion to Lord Krishna.
By it, Govinda is pleased and the soul attains deep inner peace.

Narada Purana.

dharmah svānuṣṭhitaḥ puṁsām viṣṇu-bhakti-pradāyakaḥ |
na cet bhaktim janayati śrama eva hi kevalam ||
Dharma has to be properly performed and it should lead to devotion to Lord Vishnu.
If it does nothing to create devotion, it is an idle effort.

dharmo viṣṇu-paraḥ prokto dharmah sarvasya sādhanam |
dharmaṇa labhyate viṣṇur dharmah parama-kāraṇam ||

Dharma is said to be based on Lord Vishnu and is the instrument for all ends.
Vishnu is attained through dharma, and that is dharma which is the highest cause.

viṣṇu-bhaktir hi sarvottamā dharmah parikīrtitaḥ |
yayā tuṣyati deveśo yayā mokṣaḥ prajāyate ||

Devotion to Lord Vishnu is declared as the supreme dharma.
Through it, the Supreme Lord is pleased and liberation is attained.

Padma Purana.

hari-bhaktyā vinā dharmah sarvah syād niṣphalaḥ |
na tasya phalam āpnoti śrama eva hi kevalam ||

Without devotion to Lord Hari, all dharma becomes fruitless.
Such practice results in nothing and is mere labor.

bhaktir eva paro dharmo bhaktir eva parā gatiḥ |
bhaktyā labhyate sarvam bhaktyā mokṣaḥ prajāyate ||

Devotion alone is the highest dharma.
Everything is attained and liberation is achieved through devotion.

Skanda Purana.

dharmasya paramo mārgo bhaktiḥ paramā ucyate |
 yayā labhyate paramṁ tattvaṁ yayā ātmā prasīdati ||
 Devotion is declared the highest path of dharma.
 The highest truth is attained and the soul attains peace.

dharmasya paramo mārgo viṣṇu-bhaktir iti smṛtaḥ |
 yayā tuṣyati deveśo yayā mokṣaḥ prajāyate ||

Devotion to Lord Vishnu is remembered as the highest path of dharma.
 Through it, the Supreme Lord is pleased and liberation is attained.

Agni Purana.

bhaktyā labhyate dharmo bhaktyā labhyate param |
 bhaktyā labhyate sarvaṁ bhaktir hi paramaṁ phalam ||

Through devotion, one attains dharma; through devotion, one attains the supreme.
 By devotion, everything comes to pass; indeed, devotion is, in itself, the highest fruit.
 The Astadasha Puranas ultimately culminate in Bhakti Dharma, the Supreme Dharma which is superior to all other kinds of dharma.

Their enchanting tales of divine love, surrender, and unwavering devotion show how, once the heart is completely offered to the Divine, all social, ethical and cosmic duties are fulfilled.
 Bhakti is raised as the easiest yet most powerful path to liberation in the age of Kali, according to the Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, Shiva Purana and other Mahapuranas.
 It purifies mind, dissolves ego, unites the individual soul with the Supreme.
 The Puranas lovingly declare that sincere devotion, even without elaborate rituals or scholarly knowledge, can elevate a simple devotee above the greatest yogi or philosopher.

