

A Complete Master List of Virtues from the Ancient Traditions

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What is Virtue?

Virtues are ideal qualities and attributes considered beneficial for every individual within society.

In the context of virtues, what is considered "beneficial" is morally good or desirable for *every* human being. That is, virtues hold a *universal value* of what's morally good. Virtues are essential for psychological development and self-cultivation. (More on the deeper meaning of virtues in the commentary below the master list.)

Values versus Virtues

Values and virtues both represent ideals and standards.

Values are standards of behavior. They represent what's important *to an individual*. Values are aspirational in nature. That is, values are *personal*. If you take any group of people, while everyone may have a few shared values, most individuals will have different values that are meaningful to them.

Virtues, in contrast, are universal ideal standards and qualities of behavior and being. They are considered to be *good for all*. All virtues have high moral values. They represent "the highest good." However, not all values are considered morally desirable (see the examples below).

Values are internally derived. We *determine* our [personal values](#) based on our individual experiences. That is, values are more *subjective*.

Virtues are internal as well, but they are also universally accepted as morally desirable. In the latter sense, they are external and *objective* (and *inter-subjective*).

Virtue Examples

To further drill down the difference between values and virtues, let's look at some examples.

If we examine Western society as a whole, what are its collective values?

- Image (good looks; attractiveness; sexuality)
- Money/wealth
- Material possessions (big house; luxury cars; luxury brands)
- Success or achievement
- Comfort
- Competitiveness
- High self-esteem
- Assertiveness (being a "go-getter")

It's not that any of us *consciously* selected these values. Instead, we were born into a culture that valued these things. From a very young age, we get conditioned to value the same things by observing and watching others around us.

Yet, none of the above "values" are found in *any* list of virtues. In fact, virtue examples like prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice are the *antithesis* of the abovementioned values.

Put another way, the default values in today's society tend to subconsciously drive individuals *away* from cultivating a strong moral character (something we'll also address below).

How Many Virtues Are There?

Because values are individualized, there are *many* of them. For example, [here's a list of over 200 core values](#).

Virtues, being focused on cultivating a strong moral character and universally applied to all, are significantly fewer in number. As we'll see below, a valid list of virtues will range from 4 to 15.

The virtues are meant to be actualized and lived experiences within an individual's life. Having a list of even 15 virtues is arguably *way too* many.

Most traditions have between 4 and 7, which is far more realistic and actionable.

So if you see a list of virtues with 50 or 100 attributes, most likely the author is confusing virtues with values.

A List of Virtues from Various Cultures, Religions, and Philosophers

Now, let's review various virtues lists from different cultures and periods. (I tried to list them chronologically as best I could.)

Confucius's List of Virtues

In *The Analects* (written between 475 - 221 BCE), Confucius highlights the five constant virtues:

1. Benevolence (Ren or Jen)
2. Honesty / Uprightness (Yi)
3. Knowledge / Wisdom (Zhi)
4. Faithfulness / Integrity (Xin)
5. Politeness / Propriety / Good Manners (Li)

Taoist Virtues

Virtues are a central feature of Taoist philosophy. In the classic *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi (written around 400 BCE), *Te* approximately translates to virtue. A translation of *Tao Te Ching* in English is "The Book of the Way and Its Virtues."

The "Three Treasures" in Taoism (different than the one in Buddhism) can be translated as:

1. Benevolence (Compassion; Mercy)
2. Moderation (Frugality; Restraint)
3. Humility ("don't dare to be first")

However, a more complete list of virtues is found in the Taoist classic *Understanding Reality*:

1. Benevolence
2. Justice
3. Courtesy
4. Knowledge
5. Truthfulness

Truthfulness is considered the fulcrum or center of the other four virtues in the Taoist system.

The Platonic Cardinal Virtues List

In Plato's *The Republic* (around 375 BCE), Socrates outlines four cardinal virtues in his discussion of an ideal society. Cardinal is from the Latin *cardo* meaning hinge. So the cardinal virtues are the primary virtues upon which all other virtues hinge.

What are Socrates' Four Cardinal Virtues?

1. Prudence (wisdom; knowing the appropriate course of action)
2. Fortitude (strength; endurance; courage to face fears)
3. Justice (fairness; righteousness)
4. Temperance (restraint; moderation; self-control)

The Four Stoic Virtues List

The Stoics of the same era recognized the same list of virtues:

1. Wisdom (prudence)
2. Courage (fortitude)
3. Justice
4. Temperance

Aristotle's List of Virtues

In *Nicomachean Ethics* (around 335 BCE), Aristotle highlights the "science of the good for human life" in what he called Virtue Ethics. Aristotle differentiated between

two categories of virtues: moral virtues and intellectual virtues. (In a modern sense, his intellectual virtues are now considered moral as well.) It isn't easy to pinpoint a definitive list of virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics*. You'll find lists of about 12 to 20 virtues.

His 12 moral virtues are:

1. Courage (in the face of one's fear)
2. Temperance (with respect to pleasure and pain)
3. Liberality (with one's possessions)
4. Magnificence (with wealth and possessions)
5. Magnanimity (with great honors)
6. Proper Ambition (with normal honors)
7. Patience (good temper)
8. Truthfulness
9. Wit (in dialogue with others)
10. Friendliness (in one's social conduct)
11. Modesty (in the face of shame/shamelessness)
12. Righteous Indignation (in the face of injury)

Then, we come to his intellectual virtues:

1. Intelligence (to apprehend truths)
2. Reasoning
3. Theoretical Wisdom

Virtues List from Buddhism

The Four Brahmaviharas in Buddhism, also known as the Four Immeasurables, are attributed to Nagarjuna in the 2nd century BCE.

The Four Brahmaviharas are:

1. Benevolence (mettā)
2. Compassion (karuṇā)
3. Empathetic joy (muditā)
4. Equanimity (upekkhā)

These four virtues represent four practices for one's mental development.

Cardinal Virtues in Judaism

The *Book of Wisdom* (mid-first century BCE) lists four virtues that arise from wisdom:

1. Moderation
2. Prudence
3. Righteousness
4. Fortitude

Once again, we see the same cardinal virtues expressed in ancient Greece (Socrates).

The Seven Heavenly Virtues of Christianity and Catholicism

The "seven heavenly virtues" combine the four cardinal virtues from ancient Greece with three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity.

Taken together, the seven heavenly virtues:

1. Prudence
2. Temperance
3. Fortitude
4. Justice
5. Faith
6. Hope
7. Charity

Various Christian philosophers modified the list of the seven heavenly virtues. For example, in the fifth century, Prudentius listed the "seven capital virtues" as:

1. Chastity
2. Faith
3. Good works
4. Concord
5. Sobriety
6. Patience

7. Humility

Then, in 590 AD, Pope Gregory I created a new list of capital virtues:

1. Chastity
2. Temperance
3. Charity
4. Diligence
5. Kindness
6. Patience
7. Humility

Finally, in his *Summa Theologiae* (1274), Saint Thomas Aquinas returned to the classic list of cardinal virtues:

1. Prudence
2. Justice
3. Courage
4. Temperance

Virtues in the Qur'an

I found it challenging to pin down a clear set of virtues from the Islamic faith. The Qur'an was written between 601-632 CE. The virtues of Imam Ali are discussed in detail, however, there are around 450 virtues mentioned, which is not functional for our discussion here. What is important is that the four cardinal virtues listed above are represented in Muslim philosophy as well.

Sikhism's Virtues List

The Guru Granth Sahib (originally compiled between 1564 to 1606) highlights five essential virtues:

1. Truthfulness (Sat)
2. Compassion (Daya)
3. Contentment (freedom from ambition) (Santokh)
4. Humility / Benevolence (Nimrata)
5. Love (for God) (Pyaar)

Bushido (The Samurai Code)

Translated as "the way of the warrior," Bushido is a moral code of conduct for how the samurai was meant to live. Bushido was formerly developed between the 16th and 20th centuries.

Bushido's Eight Virtues (according to Nitobe Inazo):

1. Justice
2. Courage
3. Benevolence
4. Politeness
5. Honesty / Sincerity
6. Honor
7. Loyalty
8. Character / Self-Control

Benjamin Franklin's Necessary Virtues

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin highlights what Franklin (1706 - 1790) believed were "necessary or desirable" virtues:

1. Temperance
2. Silence
3. Order
4. Resolution
5. Frugality
6. Industry
7. Sincerity
8. Justice
9. Moderation
10. Cleanliness
11. Tranquility
12. Chastity
13. Humility

Arguably, some of these virtues may be more closely related to Franklin's personal values.

Character Strengths from Positive Psychology

Bringing it to the present day, psychologist Martin Seligman and his team scoured the classic literature to unearth universal virtues.

As Seligman explains in his book *Authentic Happiness*, they discovered that virtually all of the traditions endorse six primary virtues:

1. Wisdom and Knowledge
2. Courage
3. Love and Humanity
4. Justice
5. Temperance
6. Spirituality and Transcendence

From this list of six virtues, they develop a master list of 24 [character strengths](#).

A Master List of Virtues

From all of the virtues listed above, I've attempted to synthesize them into a single list. Clearly, there's a lot of overlap so there's subjective interpretation on my part.

Wherever possible, I've grouped related virtues into a single string. For example, temperance and moderation pretty much mean the same thing. The same goes for courage and fortitude.

Primary List of Virtues:

The virtues that reveal themselves the most often throughout the traditions are:

1. Benevolence / Compassion / Kindness / Charity / Liberality / Love / Magnanimity
2. Temperance / Moderation / Patience / Frugality
3. Truthfulness / Honesty / Integrity / Sincerity
4. Prudence / Wisdom / Knowledge / Intelligence

5. Courage / Fortitude
6. Justice / Righteousness / Honor
7. Friendliness / Politeness / Courtesy
8. Modesty / Humility
9. Equanimity / Tranquility / Contentment

Secondary List of Virtues:

The following virtues are "secondary" in the sense that they occur less frequently in the above lists. (Most of them only occur once in the above lists.)

1. Faith/Hope
2. Diligence
3. Wit
4. Cleanliness / Order
5. Proper Ambition
6. Magnificence
7. Chastity
8. Loyalty

So, in total, we're left with 9 primary virtues and approximately 17 virtues in total.

Virtues are Universal

Virtues play a central role in *every* Wisdom Tradition. In this sense, virtues truly are *universal* in that they appear in both Western and Eastern systems consistently over the last three thousand years.

Philosophers like Socrates used virtues to articulate how we can all live the "good life." In *The Republic*, Socrates tried to outline how to build a thriving society instead of eventually falling into ruins. Cultivating virtues was an essential component of Socrates' thesis.

Religions used virtues as a pathway to heaven and to realize God.

The Archetype of Virtue

An [archetype](#) is a set pattern of behavior that exists within the psyche. Psychiatrist Carl Jung defined archetypes as "the living system of reactions and aptitudes that determine the individual's life in invisible ways."

It's not a coincidence that virtues have been the domain of philosophers and sages since antiquity. [The Sage archetype](#), or what Jung often referred to as the Wise Old Man, is the archetype responsible for moral refinement. In the [Hero's Journey](#) outlined by Joseph Campbell, the hero always meets a sage-like character who provides guidance and direction.

Without moral refinement and wise guidance, the hero never returns home. Instead, the hero gets consumed by chaos and the forces of darkness. It is the role of this vital archetype to guide each of us back home to ourselves. It is by adopting these virtues that we move toward the Center within us.

What Happens When We Live Without Virtues?

We each have both a lower soul and a higher soul. The lower soul is driven by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain and discomfort. In the Buddhist Wheel of Life, three animals are in the center of the wheel: a snake, a pig, and a rooster.

These three animals represent what's called the "three poisons":

1. Greed, sensual pleasure, or attraction
2. Anger, hate, or aversion
3. Ignorance, confusion, or delusion.

It is these three poisons that keep the Wheel of Samsara (suffering) turning.

Without cultivating virtues, we are more prone to struggle with [impulse control issues](#), addictive tendencies, mental illness, and overall suffering. That is, without actively cultivating virtues, we're more likely to stay in the lower soul and be consumed by endless suffering. (And yes, the pursuit of pleasure is part of this suffering according to the Traditions.) Said another way, the lower soul drives us toward *vices*; the higher soul guides us toward *virtues*.

Virtue is Our Natural State

We are born with fundamental goodness. That is, a very young child's mind is the basic state of virtue. However, *very quickly*, the conditioning of the world begins. With this conditioning comes repeated trauma that triggers the shadow archetypes that begin to influence our attitudes, thoughts, and behavior.

Returning to virtues in adulthood is often challenging because we've accumulated a lifetime of vices, poor habits, and unsupportive conditioning. The process of returning to our natural state requires self-observation and self-examination.

Without this careful self-examination, our attempts at virtuosity are always *contrived*. That is, we might "act out" certain virtues when other people are around, but they are forced and not natural.

Self-honesty and truthfulness are needed to [get to know the shadow](#) *first*. This internal process helps us bring to consciousness all of the attitudes and behaviors that don't serve us, yet are still within us. Coming to see and accept all of our prior conditioning is part of the process of returning to our natural state of virtue—what Jung and many Eastern traditions refer to as the Self (Atman).

Virtues are Highly Actionable

The topic of virtues can easily fall into a form of intellectualism. In a game of mental gymnastics, it's easy to theorize about the "best virtues" without ever applying them to our behavior. This form of intellectualism is a ruse; it's a game of [self-deception](#) for the ego that doesn't want to engage in virtuous behavior. However, virtues are both *practical* and *actionable*. They are meant to be *lived* through us. They require us to make decisions and take conscious action each day.

Virtues in the Internal Cultivation Arts

To illustrate just how actionable virtues are, it is worth noting how they are represented in Chinese Qigong. As mentioned earlier, the *Tao Te Ching* translates to "The Book of the Way and Its Virtues."

Virtues don't just play a philosophical, intellectual, or societal role in Taoism, they are used as an advanced technique. As Qigong Master Dr. Yan Xin explains in *Secrets and Benefits of Internal Qigong Cultivation*:

In the cultivation and application of qigong, virtue always plays a technical role that is uniquely central, pivotal, and sustaining. The source of the qi of qigong contains substances and energies based on highly unified matter and spirit. Virtue determines our ability to access this source.

According to Dr. Xin, virtues represent 70% of one's Qigong energy cultivation.

Virtues as a Path for Self-Cultivation

Essentially, the more we express our lower souls—mainly seeking pleasure and society's values as a primary focus—the more we leak our internal energy.

"Vices" don't just cause us to lose control and suffer, they also damage our life force energy (thereby shortening our lives). So the virtues listed above aren't just designed to keep society together or control people's behavior.

Yes, they were a means of keeping people and society from falling into chaos and destruction. On a higher level, however, virtues like prudence, fortitude, justice, benevolence, truthfulness, and moderation are designed to guide us to our higher souls. This is the primary focus of Jung's [individuation process](#) as well.

The virtues are a means of restoring oneself to their Original Nature—to become more fully human. Or, as the Taoists put it, "to become companions of Heaven and Earth."