

RESOURCE 5.7

Six million meals in the name of love

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**Go
Dharmic**

Hanuman Dass is Chair and Founder of Go Dharmic, a social movement of volunteers working in the UK, India and worldwide to create positive change in lives and communities. He is also the joint author, with Nicolas Sutton, of *The Power of Dharma: The Universal Moral Principle* (GlobalBeak 2013) and *Pearls of Wisdom from Hinduism* (Go Dharmic 2015).

Why and how did you start Go Dharmic?

I created Go Dharmic in 2011 when I was 27 years old. I was working as a trader in London. I had reached a stage in life where I was looking beyond the material. I came across the music of Krishna Das and from this to the teachings of Neem Karoli Baba [an Indian teacher and guru who died in 1973, known by many devotees as Maharaj-ji]. His teaching of the world as one family moved me and I felt called to do something – I felt driven to implement dharmic change in the twenty-first century.

My first campaign was linked to organic farming. I had become vegetarian primarily because of growing awareness of the impact of the dairy industry on the welfare of animals, and the wider problems of modern industrial farming. Arising from this, I sought to raise awareness of the compassionate principles behind organic farming and to encourage people to buy organic.

Your vision is ‘Love all, feed all, serve all. Inspire compassion in action and selfless service around the world.’ Where does this vision come from?

I have been hugely inspired by Neem Karoli Baba. His message was ‘We are all one family.’ Once he was asked by a follower, ‘How can I raise my *kundalini* (Yogic wisdom)?’ Maharaj-ji replied, ‘Love everyone, feed the poor, remember God.’ By this he meant, don’t focus on yourself; feed the poor, think about others and you will increase your sense of oneness and

realise yourself with God and the world. It’s a profound and simple message, but not easy. This vision inspires everything we do.

What is distinctive about Go Dharmic and its approach?

When asked by one of our trustees, Janaka, what the one word which summarises Go Dharmic was, I responded, ‘It is “love.”’ Go Dharmic is not a faith-based charity, nor is it a cause-based charity; it is a *principle*-based charity. Our starting point is that everyone is equal; we don’t differentiate. The Go in the name is because we aspire to be active. We see suffering in the world, we act now! There is an urgency and a requirement to act immediately to reduce suffering.

The principles of sanatana dharma are applicable for everyone; regardless of creed, background or belief. It is a call for us to be better human beings. Underpinning our vision are eight principles, each linked to dharma, based on Sanskrit words that speak to all we do. Go Dharmic has grown organically. It is completely reliant on volunteers who give up their time to love all, and reduce suffering as much as they can.

What do you do to try to be a force for good?

From beginning with the original campaign to promote organic food, Go Dharmic has drawn people in who wish to serve. We now have over 170 WhatsApp groups of volunteers! In the UK we have at least two feeding projects

each week – in places such as Luton, London and Glasgow, where volunteers will collect food and offer it to those who need it. Since we began, Go Dharmic has distributed over six million meals!

Every Sunday at the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Harrow, volunteers run a Go Dharmic food distribution. Earlier in the week they buy the food, then they come in and sort it before giving it out to those in need in the Queensbury area. The whole operation has been planned and led by them spontaneously responding to the call to ‘love all, feed all, serve all’. Earlier in 2021, a group of 40 sadhus and monks came from a mandir in India and presented a cheque for £14,000 to Go Dharmic to continue to carry out our work!

Go Dharmic also works in India on a variety of issues. The pandemic has created acute oxygen shortages across the country. This has created a huge issue of equality as those who cannot afford to pay often cannot access services. Go Dharmic volunteers have worked to source oxygen cylinders to give to the poorest. Another campaign has been about low literacy rates in some rural areas. By 2021, Go Dharmic had opened 100 libraries in villages to help the poorest people access books.

We are aiming to open 200 more! Go Dharmic responds dynamically to situations across Indian states as they arise; from helping with the aftermath of typhoons to distributing food and warm clothes.

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Six million meals in the name of love (continued)



In your book *The Power of Dharma* you say, ‘dharma is a natural reflection of the spirit of universal compassion and good will to all’. What does ‘dharma’ mean? Is the concept specific to sanatana dharma (Hinduism) or broader?

For me, dharma is like gravity. Just as the sun gives warmth to the planet, sanatana dharma is within each and every one of us. It begins with the sense that we are all divine, all equal and all part of one family. Establishing dharma in our lives and the world is the most important thing we can do. For our environment, it means causing less harm to nature; for those living in poverty, it means creating a more equitable world; for those who are suffering, it means giving love.

In the Mahabharata, Savitri speaks to Yama (Lord of Death) as he is carrying away the spirit of Satyavan, her beloved husband, to the afterlife. She says, ‘Showing no malice towards any living being through actions, thoughts or words, showing kindness to all and giving in charity – this is sanatana dharma.’

Another passage in the Mahabharata is very powerful to me and I am writing a children’s book using this story. King Yudhisthira at the end of the epic meets Indra, the King of Heaven, who offers him a place in heaven. All of Yudhisthira’s companions have fallen, leaving him with only a stray dog. Indra commands him to abandon the dog in order to take his place. Yudhisthira refuses and says, ‘I shall never turn away from those who need my help until I have breathed my last breath.’ In India, at that time, dogs were considered the dirtiest of animals, and so the point being made here is that compassion is the very essence of dharma.

You write that ‘the ideology (of modernity) is a false one and a shallow concept reflected in the shallowness of the world it creates’. Do you think dharmic living could be relevant to young people today?

I actually think many young people today express sanatana dharma in action better than many older people who have been part of a generation that has destroyed nature and created our current environment of overproduction and consumption! Young people are living sanatana dharma through environmental protest, through highlighting social injustice – such as the Black Lives Matter movement and speaking out about gender and violence.

In the *Katha Upanishad* it talks about choosing what is good (*sreyas*) rather than what is easy or pleasurable (*preyas*). So, for example, during [the COVID-19 pandemic], staying home and watching Netflix, or going out and contacting people who might be isolated. This kind of choice is dharma in action. Many young people today are seeing through a wider lens and are really conscious of their actions.

In some worldviews, acting ethically is inspired by texts – the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount. How does dharma offer a different lens for acting ethically?

According to dharma, we are already divine. We have nothing to feel bad about as humans; we have access to true knowledge and awareness. This is the starting point. Sanatana dharma is an iterative approach; in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says to Arjuna, ‘Consider deeply, and then do what you see fit.’ In other words, think about suffering and consequences and then choose your action. Elsewhere in the Bhagavad Gita it says, ‘The wise say dharma is whatever is based on love for all beings. This distinguishes dharma from adharma.’ Dharma is not a list of rules, but something based on the actions we take in the world.

I believe serving others with love is the highest expression of human living. What we do should be motivated by that. If our actions create suffering or attack others it is not in line with dharma. We should all do as much as we can in the moment we have.

What gets you out of bed in the morning?

Neem Karoli Baba was once asked by a devotee, ‘How do I get to heaven?’ He replied, ‘Why do you want to get to heaven? Our job is to make here a heaven for everybody.’ I know that when I act from *Prema* (unconditional love) I am in the presence of Maharaj-ji. When I am living with love and compassion, I am living my dharma. There is a bliss from acting with love in the world to make a difference. That’s what life is about.

Interview by Adam Robertson, RE Today adviser

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