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Indian Philosophical Schools and Ethics: Vedanta, Buddhism, Jainism

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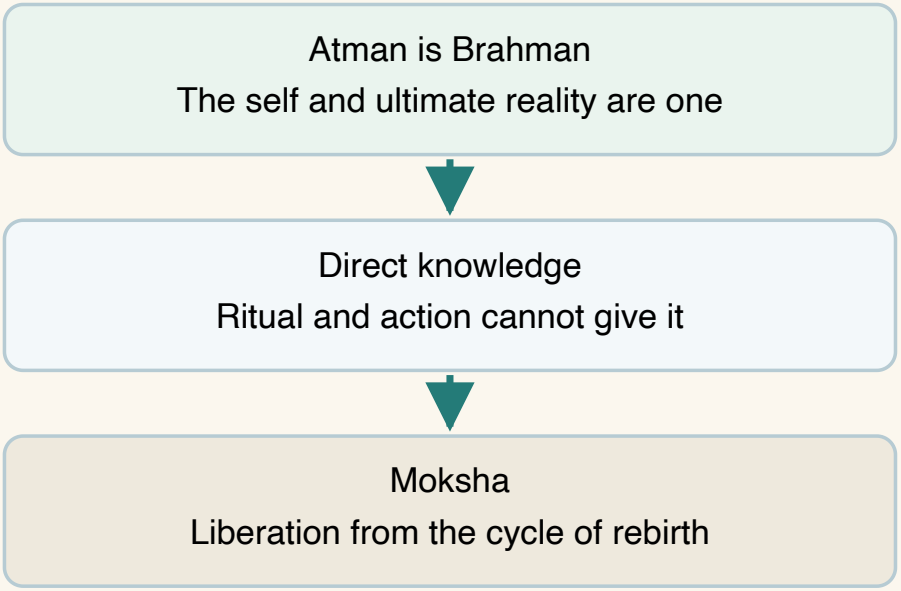
Indian thinkers asked a simple question: how should a person live? Each school gave its own answer, and exams test the differences.

1 What did Shankara's Advaita Vedanta teach about liberation?

Shankara was a philosopher who flourished in the eighth century CE. He is the best-known thinker of Advaita Vedanta. Advaita means non-dual, or “not two”.

What is the central claim?

Advaita says the essential core of every person, the atman, is Brahman. Brahman is the ultimate reality. So the self and Brahman are not two separate things.



Knowledge, not action, frees. Original explanatory diagram.

How is liberation reached?

Liberation is called moksha. In Advaita it comes from a direct recognition of non-duality. That recognition is knowledge, called jnana. It is not a ritual or a pilgrimage.

Why can action not do the job?

Action cannot give knowledge of non-duality. Ritual, austerity and travel are all actions. So they cannot be the final path. The final path is knowing what you already are.

What is the memory hook?

Advaita means atman equals Brahman. Moksha comes through jnana, not through action.

Quick check 1. Shankara taught that ritual action alone can give liberating knowledge of non-duality. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

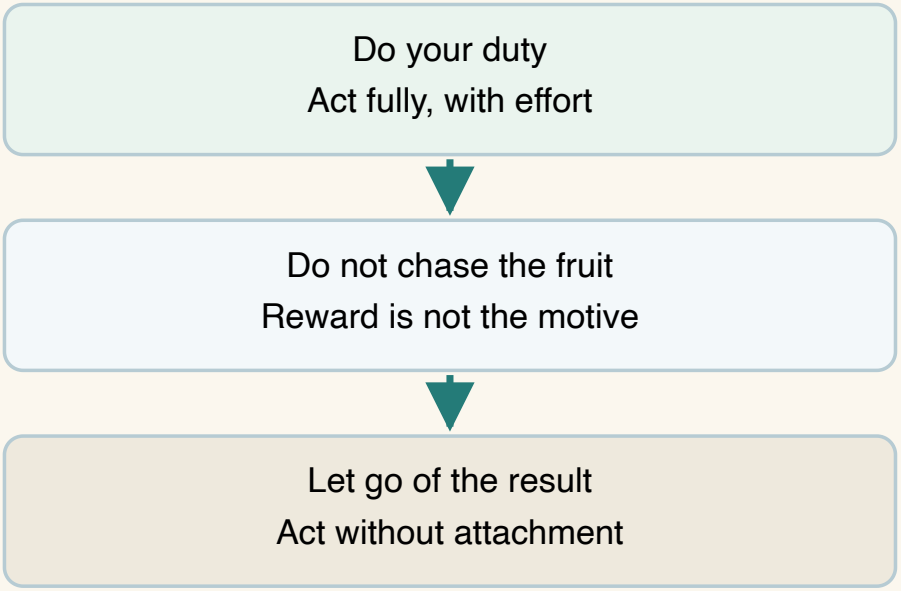
Sources: plato.stanford.edu

2 What does the Bhagavad Gita mean by nishkama karma?

The Gita is set on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. It records a conversation between Arjuna, the warrior, and Krishna, his charioteer. The talk begins with a moral crisis.

What was Arjuna's dilemma?

Arjuna looked at the opposing army. He saw his own kinsmen, grandsires, uncles, brothers and sons. He said "I will not fight!" and sank down on his chariot-seat. His bow and arrows fell from his hands.



Act fully, stay unattached. Original explanatory diagram.

What does Krishna answer?

Krishna tells Arjuna to rise and prepare for battle. He also tells him to act without clinging to results.

Verse 2.47 says: you have the right to work only, but never to its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction. Another translation adds: live in action, labour, and make your acts your piety.

What is nishkama karma?

Nishkama karma means action without desire for its fruit. Do your duty fully. Do not make the reward your reason. Do not collapse if the result is bad.

What are the wrong readings?

- It does not mean acting only for reward.
- It does not mean acting only when others are watching.
- It does not mean avoiding all action. Krishna answers Arjuna's refusal with "Arise" and "live in action".

What is the memory hook?

Work, but let go of the fruit.

> **Quick check 2.** Nishkama karma means doing nothing, because every action brings results. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gutenberg.org; mea.gov.in

3 What are the Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts in Buddhist ethics?

Buddhist ethics aims at freedom from suffering. It also asks for lovingkindness and compassion towards all beings. Two lists turn this aim into daily conduct.



A Buddha statue in the park near Dhamek Stupa, Sarnath. Photo: ProbuddhoG., CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

What is the Eightfold Path?

The Eightfold Path has eight factors. They are right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.



Eight factors, one path. Original explanatory diagram.

What are the Five Precepts?

The Five Precepts are rules for lay people. They refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and drunkenness.

What is wrong livelihood?

Hunting and fishing count as wrong livelihood.

What did UPSC ask about the Buddha?

A good answer links the Eightfold Path and compassion to modern problems. Examples are violence, dishonest earning and restless minds. Name the path, then give one modern use for each teaching.

What is the memory hook?

Eight factors make the path. Five rules guard a lay person's conduct.

> **Quick check 3.** The Five Precepts and the Eightfold Path are the same list. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

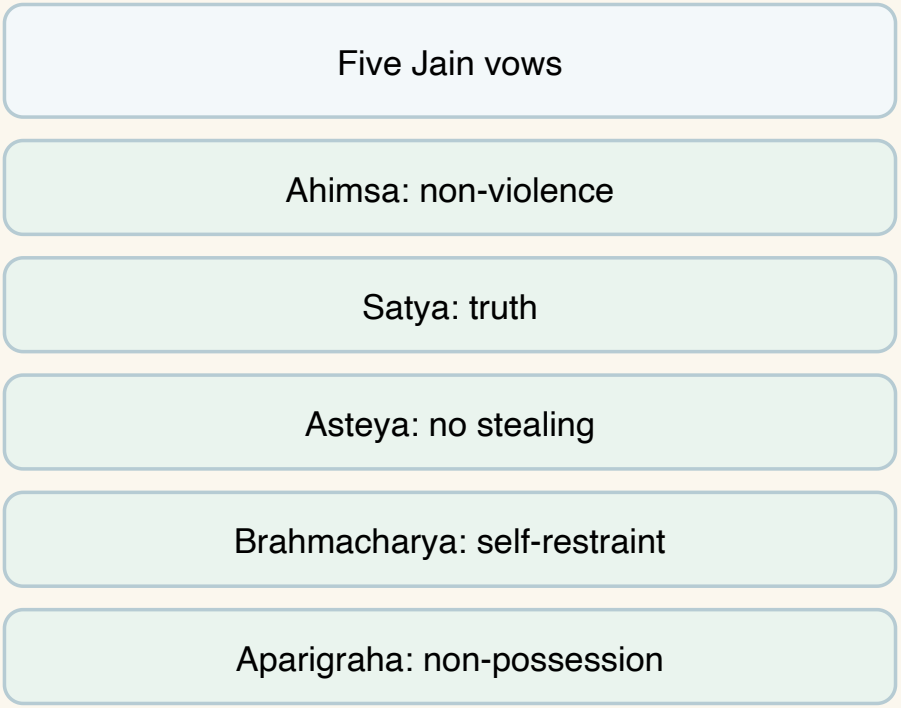
Sources: plato.stanford.edu; accesstoinsight.org

4 Why is ahimsa the first rule in Jain ethics?

Mahavira was a teacher of the sixth century BCE. He was a contemporary of the Buddha. Jain ethics is built around one rule above all others.

What is ahimsa?

Ahimsa means non-violence, or non-harming. It is the cardinal rule for dealing with every living being, called a jiva.



Five vows. Original explanatory diagram.

What are the five vows?

Jain monks follow five cardinal rules. They are called the five vows.

- Ahimsa: non-violence.
- Satya: truthfulness.
- Asteya: not taking what is not given.
- Brahmacharya: chastity.
- Aparigraha: detachment from possessions.

How far does ahimsa reach?

Jains are required to be vegetarians. Plants are counted as living beings too. They are one-sensed beings. So the idea of harm reaches far beyond humans.

What is the memory hook?

Five vows, and ahimsa leads the list.

> **Quick check 4.** In Jain ethics, ahimsa is one of the five vows that monks follow. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: iep.utm.edu

5 What are the Yamas and Niyamas of Patanjali's Yoga?

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali include a code of conduct. It has two parts, the Yamas and the Niyamas.

What are the Yamas?

The Yamas are five restraints.

- Ahimsa: non-violence.
- Satya: truthfulness.
- Asteya: refraining from stealing.
- Brahmacharya: celibacy.
- Aparigraha: renouncing unnecessary possessions.

These five are called the great vow. They are universal.

What are the Niyamas?

The Niyamas are observances.

- Shaucha: cleanliness.
- Santosha: contentment.
- Tapas: austerity.
- Svadhyaya: study of scripture.
- Ishvara-pranidhana: devotion to God.

Why do these lists look familiar?

The five Yamas carry the same names as the five Jain vows. That is a classic overlap.

What is the memory hook?

Yamas restrain. Niyamas observe. Yama starts with ahimsa, niyama starts with cleanliness.

Sources: iep.utm.edu

6 What are the main principles of Sikh ethics?

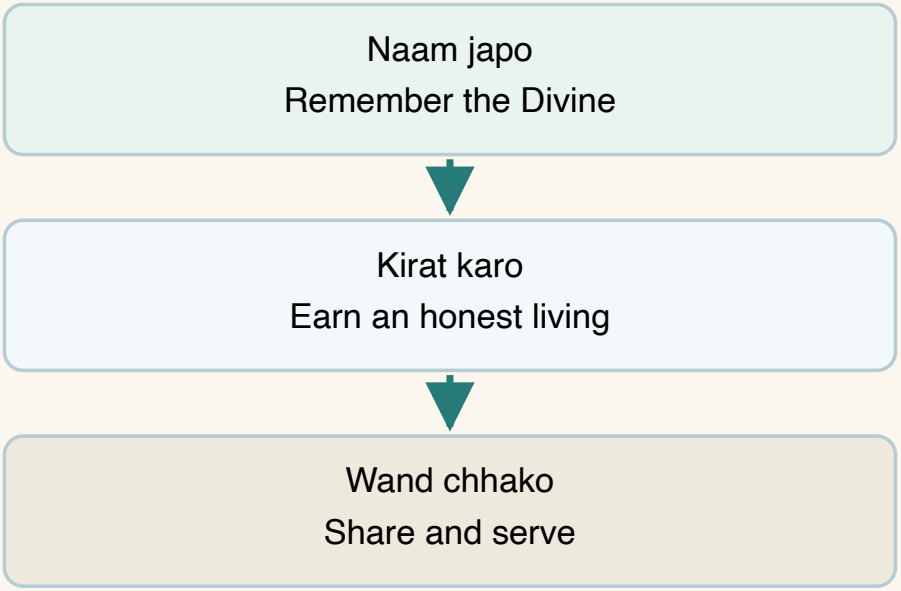
Guru Nanak lived from 1469 to 1539. He founded Sikhism. Its ethics rests on three connected duties.



A volunteer cleans the langar hall floor at the Golden Temple complex, Amritsar. Photo: Kritzolina, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

What are the three duties?

Guru Nanak’s teaching is summed up in three phrases.



Prayer, work, sharing. Original explanatory diagram.

- Naam japo: chant the name of God.
- Kirat karo: perform your duty with honesty and hard work.
- Wand chhako: share what you earn with the needy.

What does kirat karo mean?

Kirat karo means earning an honest living through your own labour. It ties ethics to how a person earns.

What is langar?

Langar is the Sikh community kitchen. Guru Nanak introduced it. Everyone eats together as equals, whatever their ethnicity, gender, caste, religion or social background. The meal is free and vegetarian. People eat sitting on the floor.

What is the memory hook?

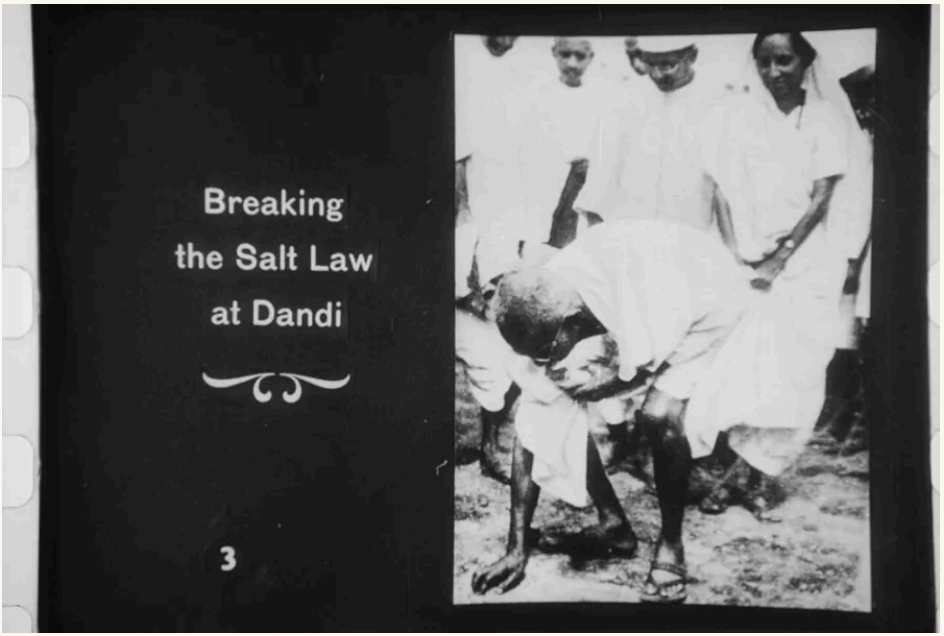
Remember, earn, share. Pray first, then work, then give.

> **Quick check 5.** Kirat karo means sharing food in a community kitchen. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: pib.gov.in; arunachalgovernor.gov.in; immigrantmuseet.dk

7 What did Gandhi mean by satyagraha and trusteeship?

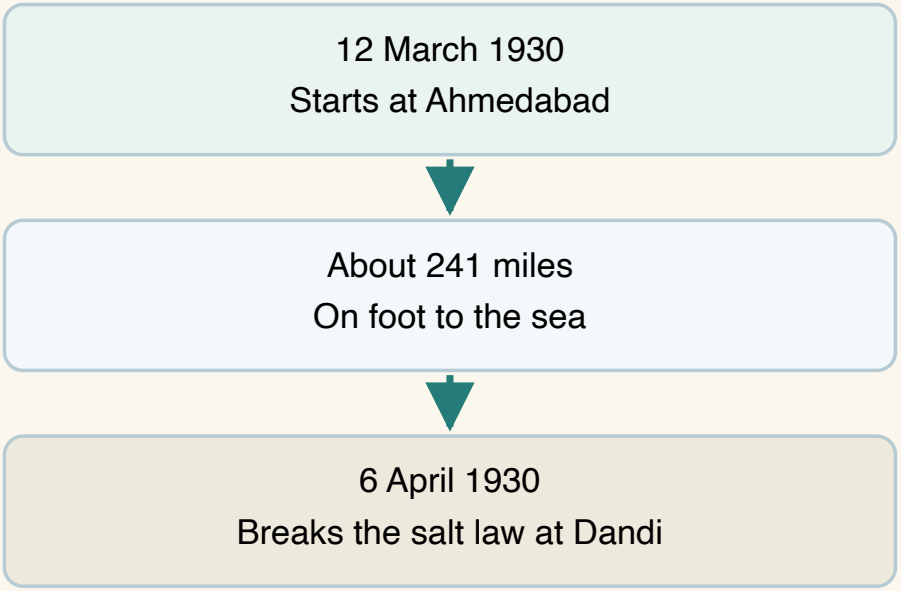
Gandhi turned ethics into public action. Two of his ideas appear again and again in exams: satyagraha and trusteeship.



Gandhi picks up natural salt at Dandi, April 1930. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

What does satyagraha mean?

Satyagraha joins two words: satya, meaning truth, and agraha, meaning firmness. So it is firmness in truth, or truth-force. It is active resistance to oppression. It is also non-violent.



A march to the sea. Original explanatory diagram.

When did it begin?

A movement was launched in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 11 September 1906. The movement was non-violent resistance to oppression.

What is the Salt March?

On 12 March 1930, Gandhi began his famous Dandi March from Ahmedabad. The march covered 241 miles. On 6 April 1930 he broke the Salt Law at Dandi.

What is trusteeship?

Gandhi wrote that wealth does not belong wholly to its owner. What belongs to the owner is the right to an honourable livelihood. The rest belongs to the community and must be used for its welfare.

- Talent should serve everyone, not personal aggrandizement.
- Trusteeship aims to move society from a capitalist order to an egalitarian one.
- A State-regulated form of trusteeship does not let an owner use wealth for selfish satisfaction.

What is the memory hook?

Satya plus agraha equals truth-force. Owner in name, trustee in duty.

> **Quick check 6.** Satyagraha is a form of armed resistance. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: rashtraparv.mod.gov.in; rajghat.gov.in; mkgandhi.org

8 What did the Charvaka school say, and how do the schools compare?

Charvaka is also called Lokayata. The word Lokayata means philosophy of the people. It is the materialist school of ancient India.

What did Charvaka teach?

Charvaka rejected an immaterial soul, God and the afterlife. It held that the good is tied to pleasure. It accepted perception alone as a reliable source of knowledge. It rejected inference and testimony.

Is Charvaka Astika or Nastika?

Charvaka is Nastika. Orthodox schools respected the authority of the Vedas. Charvaka, with Jainism and Buddhism, was counted as unorthodox. These schools taught that the Vedas had no authority. Charvaka is the school most often given the label.

How do the schools compare?

School or thinker	Key ethical idea
Advaita Vedanta	Liberation comes through knowledge of atman as Brahman
Bhagavad Gita	Act without attachment to the fruit
Buddhism	Eightfold Path and Five Precepts
Jainism	Five vows, led by ahimsa
Yoga	Yamas and Niyamas
Sikhism	Naam japo, kirat karo, wand chhako
Gandhi	Satyagraha and trusteeship
Charvaka	Perception alone gives knowledge; good tied to pleasure

What are the common traps?

- The Path has eight factors. The Five Precepts have five.
- The five Yamas match the five Jain vows. The Niyamas are a separate list.
- Kirat karo is honest earning. Sharing is wand chhako. The community kitchen is langar.
- Satyagraha is non-violent. It is not armed resistance.
- Trusteeship does not make the owner’s wealth absolute.

- Shankara’s path is jnana, not ritual action.

What is the memory hook?

Know it, act it, share it, restrain it. Charvaka trusts only the senses.

Sources: iep.utm.edu

Practice MCQs

1. Buddhist ethics centres on which set of guidelines covering right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration?

A. The Middle Way

B. The Eightfold Path

C. The Five Precepts

D. The Four Noble Truths

See answer ↓

2. Gandhi's concept of 'trusteeship' holds that the wealthy should regard their surplus wealth as what?

A. A reward for individual merit alone

B. Held in trust for society, not an absolute personal right

C. State property to be nationalised

D. An absolute personal right

See answer ↓

3. What does Gandhi's principle of satyagraha mean?

A. Silent prayer

B. Truth-force

C. Armed resistance

D. Economic boycott only

See answer ↓

4. Adi Shankaracharya, the influential 8th-century philosopher who systematised the Advaita (non-dualist) school of Vedanta, held that liberation (moksha) is ultimately achieved through which specific path?

A. Bhakti (devotional worship) exclusively

B. Karma (ritual action) exclusively

C. External pilgrimage and physical austerity alone

D. Jnana (knowledge/realisation of the self's identity with Brahman)

See answer ↓

5. The Charvaka (Lokayata) school, a significant materialist and sceptical philosophical tradition within ancient India, is particularly known for its famous rejection of an afterlife, captured in the aphorism advising people to 'live well, even by borrowing, for once cremated, there is no return'. This philosophy is generally classified as?

A. Nastika (rejecting Vedic authority)

B. Astika (accepting Vedic authority)

C. Neither Astika nor Nastika, as a unique third category

D. Both Astika and Nastika simultaneously

See answer ↓

6. In the Bhagavad Gita, what does nishkama karma ask of a person?

A. Act fully without attachment to the results

B. Act only for reward

C. Avoid all action

D. Act only when others are watching

See answer ↓

7. Which five restraints does Patanjali list as the Yamas?

A. Seva, kirat karo, vand chakko, naam japo and langar

B. Shaucha, santosha, tapas, svadhyaya and surrender

C. Ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya and aparigraha

D. Right view, intention, speech, action and livelihood

See answer ↓

8. In Sikh ethics, what does kirat karo mean?

A. Earning an honest living through one's own labour

B. Surrendering to a higher power

C. Avoiding all harm to living beings

D. Sharing food in a community kitchen

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The Eightfold Path is the answer. It lists eight factors: right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. The Five Precepts are five rules for lay followers, such as not killing and not lying. The Four Noble Truths explain suffering and its end, but they are not a list of eight guidelines. The Middle Way is the general idea of avoiding extremes. Memory hook: eight factors, one path. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** Gandhi saw surplus wealth as held in trust for society, not as an absolute personal right. The owner keeps what an honourable livelihood needs. The rest belongs to the community. Trusteeship denies an absolute right, so the first option is wrong. Gandhi tied talent to duty, not to private gain, so the reward-for-merit option is wrong. He wanted the wealthy to give up surplus willingly, so state nationalisation is wrong. Memory hook: owner in name, trustee in duty. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** Satyagraha means truth-force. The word joins satya (truth) and agraha (firmness). It is active but non-violent resistance. Gandhi launched the movement in Johannesburg on 11 September 1906. Armed resistance is wrong because satyagraha rejects violence. An economic boycott was only one tool among many. Silent prayer was never the whole method, since satyagrahis also marched and broke unjust laws. Memory hook: hold firm to truth, use no force. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** Shankara held that moksha comes through jnana, the knowledge that the self (atman) is Brahman. Knowledge removes ignorance. Action does not. Ritual, devotion and pilgrimage are all acts. So the karma-only, bhakti-only and austerity-only options are wrong. Memory hook: ignorance is cured by knowing, not by doing. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** Nastika is the correct label. Orthodox (astika) schools accept the authority of the Vedas. The Charvaka school denied that authority, so it is classed as nastika. Jainism and Buddhism are also counted as nastika. The astika option is wrong because Charvaka rejects the Vedas. A third category is not used for it. A school cannot be both, because the two labels are opposites. Memory hook: nastika means rejecting Vedic authority. ↑ Q5

6. **A.** Nishkama karma asks a person to act fully without attachment to the results. Gita 2.47 says you have the right to work only, never to its fruits. So duty is done with full effort, and the outcome is left alone. Acting only for reward is the opposite idea. Acting only when watched is vanity, not detachment. Avoiding all action is also rejected, since the Gita urges Arjuna to rise and fight. Memory hook: do the work, release the fruit. ↑ Q6
7. **C.** Patanjali lists the Yamas as ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya and aparigraha. They are non-violence, truth, non-stealing, self-restraint and non-possession. They match the five Jain vows. The list of cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study and surrender is the Niyamas, which are observances, not restraints. The Sikh list is a set of practices, not Patanjali's Yamas. The list of right view, intention, speech, action and livelihood belongs to the Buddhist Eightfold Path. Memory hook: Yamas restrain, Niyamas observe. ↑ Q7
8. **A.** Kirat karo means earning an honest living through one's own labour. Naam japo is remembering the Divine. Wand chhako is sharing with others. Sharing food in a community kitchen is langar, which puts wand chhako into practice. Avoiding harm to living beings is ahimsa, not a Sikh duty of this name. Surrender to a higher power describes devotion, not honest work. Memory hook: kirat is work, wand is sharing. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** Action cannot give knowledge of non-duality. Liberation comes from direct recognition of it. ↑ 1
2. **False.** It means acting fully without clinging to the results. ↑ 2
3. **False.** The Eightfold Path has eight factors. The Five Precepts are five rules for lay people. ↑ 3
4. **True.** Ahimsa heads the five vows. ↑ 4
5. **False.** Kirat karo is honest earning. The community kitchen is langar. ↑ 5
6. **False.** Satyagraha is active but non-violent resistance. ↑ 6

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