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# Dharma/Dhamma

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### DHARMA IN HINDUISM

Dharma is a central principle of the Hindu faith, a religion with more than a billion followers. Hindus believe that dharma was revealed in the Vedas. The term *dharma* comes from the Sanskrit word '*dhri*' meaning to uphold or to sustain and may be translated as 'religion', 'law', 'order', 'duty', or 'ethics'. It stands for all the principles and purposes, influences and institutions that shape the character of man both as an individual and as a member of the society. It is the law of right living, and its observance safeguards both happiness on earth and salvation. Dharma is a combination of ethics and religion, which regulates the life of a Hindu. The laws of dharma consider the fasts and feasts, social and family ties, personal habits and tastes.

Mahabharata, the great epic, contains a discussion on the topic of dharma. When asked by Yudhistir to explain the meaning and scope of dharma, Bhishma who has mastered the knowledge of dharma replies:

*It is most difficult to define Dharma. Dharma has been explained to be that which helps the uplifting of living beings. Therefore, that which ensures the welfare of living beings is surely Dharma. The learned rishis have declared that which sustains is Dharma.*

Mahabharata, Shanti Parva 109:9-11

Others explain dharma as that which is indicated by the Vedas as conducive to the highest good. There are four aspects of human life, dharma (duty); artha (profit); kama (pleasure); and moksha (liberation). Dharma controls the pursuit of both pleasure kama and artha. For those in whom dharma predominates are of sattvik (virtuous) nature while the wealth seekers are rajasik (passionate) and those of pleasure are tamasik (ignorant). Dharma therefore comprises of every type of righteous conduct covering every aspect of life that is essential to the welfare of an individual and the society. Those who observe the laws of dharma automatically attain moksha (eternal bliss). Therefore dharma, artha, kama, and moksha shape the ends of life.

Dharma comprises ritual action. A proper performance of rituals is important to the ordering of individual lives and the community. The Dharmashastras (religious manuals, the earliest source of Hindu law) details the different types of rituals. It is part of the dharma to name and bless a child, to initiate their education, to perform the last rites of parents. Rituals are acts that have a role in the ordering of the world, as it should be.

Different individuals have different obligations and duties according to their age,

gender, and social position. Even though dharma is universal, it is also particular and functions within concrete circumstances. Each person has his or her own dharma known as *sva-dharma*. Bhagwad Gita, a text set before the great battle of Mahabharata, illustrates the importance of *sva-dharma*. The epic depicts the warrior Arjuna riding his chariot questions his charioteer Krishna as to why he should fight a battle against his own relatives and teachers. Krishna assures him that the battle is righteous one and Arjuna must fight, as it was his *sva-dharma* as a warrior to fight the battle. He must fight with detachment from the results of his actions and within the rules of the warrior's dharma. Therefore not acting according to one's own dharma is wrong and called *adharm*. Krishna says in Bhagwad Gita that whenever *adharm* overshadow dharma, he will appear on earth to save the righteous and destroy the wicked.

*Dharma* is thus also the social order, one's duty as part of a division of the society, a *varna* (caste) or *jati* (birth group). The Rig Veda defines four *varnas* that emerge from parts of the body of the divine being that created the universe. These include the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaisyas (merchants), and the Sudras (servants). Each of the *varnas* serves God's creation in their own capacities. For example, priests by their spirituality, warriors by their heroism, merchants by their skills, and servants by their service. When the different *varnas* fulfill their respective duties, the society is considered to be just and in accordance with the dharma. Correct action in accordance to *dharma* is understood as a service to humanity as well as to God.

## DHARMA IN BUDDHISM

In Buddhism, dharma is the doctrine that is the universal truth common to all individuals at all times. Buddhists believe that human beings can free themselves from suffering by practicing meditation and cultivating a lifestyle prescribed by the Buddha. The teachings of Buddha, delivered in India some 2,500 years ago, are also referred to as the *Dharma*. He often said that he gave so many teachings in distinctive ways that every human being could hear them in the way that benefit them the most. This suggests that there is no one right way of understanding Buddhist teachings. Buddha provided vehicles to help provide different approaches to experience and awaken through the dharma teachings. These vehicles are referred to as the Three Baskets that can be referred to as, The Hinaya teachings including Sutras, Buddha's stories, and teachings such as The Dhammapada and other Theravadin lineage teachings. Several of these practices are still alive in Southeast Asia. Mahayana teachings including the Zen traditions are still alive in Asia (Japan, Korea, China, and Southeast Asia) whereas Vajrayana teachings developed mostly in Tibet, Mongolia, parts of Nepal, and other central Asian countries.

There is no hierarchy or competition between traditions and paths in Buddhism. Each individual is on a journey together with others and called the 'sangha' having a goal of offering support to one another in order to liberate from suffering. The wheel is an important symbol in Buddhism as it depicts the cycle of life and death. According to Buddhist thoughts, when one dies they are reborn into a new form that could be of a deity, human, animal, some lower form, or an inhabitant of hell. All positive actions cause good karma and direct one into being reborn in a higher form. One's bad karma

may result in rebirth in a lower form. As part of the Dharma, Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths that forms the basis of Buddhist thought.

1. Life is suffering
2. Suffering is caused by craving
3. Suffering can have an end
4. The Eight-fold path leads to the end of suffering.

Buddhists believe that suffering is due to the impermanence of life and the ultimate goal in Buddhism is to end the cycle of suffering. The achievement of this goal is called *nirvana*.

Buddha's ideas applied to people irrespective of their rank in life, and specified that individuals be in charge of their own destiny. These ideas were in contrast with the ideas of Brahmanism that dominated during Buddha's lifetime. Brahmanism encouraged the offering of gifts to priests for salvation. The society was divided into caste that determined one's duty or dharma. Buddhism differed as it did not believe in social distinctions between human beings and so was accessible to anyone. Buddha believed that compassion should be cultivated among all living beings.

With the spread of Buddhism to China by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. the new ideas of karma, reincarnation, hell, monks, and enlightenment were introduced. Later Buddhism was brought from China to other countries in Asia, such as Korea, Japan, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The Buddha Dharma was thus adopted and became an integral part of the society.

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- Ruchi Agarwal

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See also – Buddhism, Hinduism, Study of Religion.

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### **Further Reading:**

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