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The Pursuit of Perfection

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The Pursuit of Perfection

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Both Hinduism and Buddhism contain a specific characteristic that sets them apart from each other, but at the same time ties them together. Buddhism was born out of Hinduism and contains many of the same aspects, but where they differ most comes through how each religion defines dharma. Dharma can be applied to almost any religion in some way, most in similar forms, but how it is represented in these two religions is what makes it especially intriguing and intricate."

Cover Page Footnote

Selected for the Essays on Religion prize.



Jacob Perry

***** The Pursuit of Perfection**

Introduction

Both Hinduism and Buddhism contain a specific characteristic that sets them apart from each other, but at the same time ties them together. Buddhism was born out of Hinduism and contains many of the same aspects, but where they differ most comes through how each religion defines dharma. Dharma can be applied to almost any religion in some way, most in similar forms, but how it is represented in these two religions is what makes it especially intriguing and intricate.

Dharma in Hinduism

Dharma in **Hinduism** is the religious and moral law that governs the conduct of an individual and is one of the four ends of life. Dharma constitutes the subject matter of the **Dharma-sutras**, or the religious manuals, that were the earliest source of Hindu law. Over the course of time, it has been extended into a lengthy compilation of laws known as the **Dharma-Shastra**. It is an organizing principle that applies to human beings that are in solitude, with respect to their interactions with other people and nature, along with inanimate objects, to all of

cosmos and its parts, too. According to Paul Hacker, “Dharma is qualified religiously not only because the specifically religious tradition belongs to it, but above all because it has a connection to salvation” (pg. 483). Dharma refers to the order and the customs that make life and the universe possible. These include behaviors, rituals, rules that govern society, and ethics.

Hindu dharma includes the religious duties and the moral rights of an individual, and present the social order, the right conduct, and those that are virtuous in their life. Dharma, is that all beings must accept and respect each other in order to sustain harmony throughout the world. It is neither the act nor the result, but the natural laws that guide the act and create the result to prevent chaos in the world. According to Van Buitenen, “Dharma, in Hinduism, is the cosmically or ‘religiously’ determined activity of all existing beings to maintain the normal order in the world” (pg. 36). This means that it is our innate characteristics that make us what we are and help in the pursuit and the execution of one’s nature and true calling by playing one’s part in the cosmic concert that is known as life. In Hinduism, it is the dharma of the bee to make honey, of the cow to give milk, of the sun to radiate sunshine, and of the river to flow. For humans, this means that dharma is the need for the essence of service and the interconnectedness of all life.

The notion of Dharma as duty can be found in India's ancient legal and religious texts. In Hindu philosophy, people are required to live their dharma through justice, social harmony, and happiness. The *Dharma Shastra* is the record of all these guidelines and rules. The evidence that is available suggests that India once had a large collection of dharma-related literature. Only four of these sutras survived and are now referred to as the Dharma sutras. These Dharma sutras include the instructions on how to educate the young, their rites of passage and customs, religious rites and rituals, their marital rights and obligations, death and ancestral rites, laws and the administration of justice, crimes and respective punishments, the duties of a king.

Hinduism accepts the concept of reincarnation, and that which determines the state of an individual in the next existence. This refers to **karma**, which is the actions that are undertaken by the body and the mind throughout a person's life. In order to achieve **good karma** one must live life according to dharma, or what is right. Nandan states in an article,

Dharma is the ultimate balance of all living things; it belongs to everything, including the universe. Every soul is responsible for balancing their own dharma, the areas of dharma to balance are religious, social and within the family. They must keep their promises and remain faithful to religious rituals, while also taking care of their family. If a soul is unbalanced, then it will affect their karma. To some dharma is considered a tradition, duty and custom, but to Hindu it is spiritually more than that (pg. 28).

This means doing what is right for the individual, the family, the caste and for the universe itself. Dharma is referred to as a cosmic norm; if one goes against this norm, it can backfire and result in bad karma for the individual. Therefore, dharma can affect the future, since karma is accumulated throughout one's life. So, one's dharmic path in the next life is what brings to fruition all the results of past karma, good or bad.

Manusmriti, which was written by the ancient sage Manu, describes ten essential rules in order to observe dharma. These include patience, honesty, sanctity, control of senses, forgiveness, reason, knowledge or learning, piety or self-control, truthfulness and absence of anger. Manu also wrote of non-violence, truth, non-coveting, purity of body and mind, control of senses. These were set forth in order to capture the true essence of dharma. Therefore, the dharmic laws of Hinduism govern not only the individual being but society as a whole.

Dharma in Buddhism

In **Buddhism**, dharma is the doctrine, or the universal truth that is common to every individual at all times as proclaimed by the **Buddha**. The Buddha, meaning the mind's pursuit of perfect enlightenment, Dharma, meaning the teachings and the knowledge of the Buddha and the **sangha**, meaning the monastic community which provides guidance and support to the

followers of the Buddha, make up the **Triratna**, or the Three Jewels. These three jewels are where Buddhists go for refuge. To better understand the Three Jewels, one can look at Dharma as being the medicine that prevents suffering, the Buddha is the doctor who prescribes each of us this medicine, and the sangha are the nurses that assist us.

In Buddhist metaphysics, the term in the plural is used in order to describe the interrelatedness of the elements that make up the empirical world. Agrawal says it best in his article: “[We] are told in unambiguous words that dharma is moral code of conduct comprising virtues of life which are universally accepted as ideals to be followed” (pg. 120). Therefore, dharma in Buddhism can be interpreted as a doctrine by which one should live one’s life. Dharma also means the cosmic law and order in Buddhism while being applied to the teachings of the Buddha. To practice Dharma means to apply the Buddha’s teachings in one’s daily life. The purpose of this is to enable one to attain the permanent liberation from a lower rebirth. Until a deeper understanding of the realization of refuge, one must take a lower rebirth again and again in countless future lives.

For practicing Buddhists, the references to dharma as "the Dharma", generally refers to the teachings of the Buddha, which is commonly known throughout the Eastern world as Buddha-Dharma. The Buddha-Dharma includes the discourses on the fundamental principles as opposed to the parables and the poems. Such fundamental principles include the **Four Noble Truths** and the Eight-Fold Path as described by the Buddha.

The status of Dharma is regarded as variable by different Buddhist traditions, or sects. Some of these traditions regard Dharma as the ultimate truth, or as the fount of all things that lie beyond the **three realms** and the wheel of becoming. Other traditions that regard the Buddha as simply an enlightened person, see the Dharma as the **essence** of the 84,000 different aspects of

the teachings that the Buddha gave throughout his life to a variety of people. This essence of his teachings was based upon the individual propensities and capabilities of his followers as human beings.

Dharma not only refers to the teachings of the Buddha but also to the later traditions of interpretation and additions that the various sects of Buddhism have developed in order to help them better explain and expand upon the Buddha's teachings. However, some still see the Dharma as the truth, or the ultimate reality of how things are aligned in one's life and how they are actually observed.

Mahayana Buddhism usually uses the word dharma to refer to both the teachings of the Buddha and the realization of perfect enlightenment. In **Mahayana Buddhism**, the **Dharmakaya** is one of the three bodies of the Buddha. The Dharmakaya is what unifies all things and beings in this world, or beyond existence in this world and even non-existence. As stated by Raju, "The highest reality, according to the Buddhists, is the Dharma or Law of the universe, which is identified with the Dharmakaya of Buddha" (pg. 192). This body of dharma can be interpreted in many ways but in reality, it is a gift from the Buddha and can therefore be seen as a gift of dharma. This is best explained by Ohnuma when he states, "Since the dharma may be spoken of as a body of dharma, the gift of dharma thus constitutes a gift of the body on the part of the Buddha" (pg. 355). This is especially powerful because it ties the Buddha directly to dharma itself through the body.

In most cases, the word takes on both meanings at the same time. In **Theravada Buddhism** the Buddha, or an enlightened person, is understood to be the living embodiment of dharma. However, this does not mean that the Buddha's physical body is the same thing as

dharma itself. It's more appropriate to say that the dharma becomes visible or tangible when expressed through the Buddha.

Conclusion

The thought of dharma resonates throughout almost everything that we as human beings do in one way or another. This resonance, I believe, is what gives people hope throughout their lives, especially when times are at their worst because it is human nature to see the good in all things. It is also human nature to know that where there is evil, good is present to keep the universe in balance. It is this power struggle between good and evil that strengthens our ties to the cosmic powers, whatever they may be.

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