

'DHARMA' IN THE BUDDHIST AND JAINA FRAMES

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Abstract

It is understood that in the very popular understanding of the term 'dharma', it designates a 'religion' or a religious sect'. That is in common parlance, 'dharma' is found to be used in the sense of the institutionalized religions. For example, Hindu dharma (having alternative names like: Aarya dharma/ Sanatana dharma), Jaina dharma, Bouddha dharma, etc. But every religious sect or dharma has its own understanding of the concept of dharma in a specific manner. That is, some standards are accepted in an institutionalized religion to be treated as dharma. Those are prescribed in the form of certain codes and conducts aiming at an ideal living. This article aims at attempting the exposition of an understanding of the concept of dharma as found in the above-mentioned two religious sects to show that the primary aim of these religious sects is to enforce dharma to act as a guide to the moral living of its followers. Their aim of emphasizing on dharma is not from religious perspectives, but rather from moral perspectives.

Keywords

Dhamma, 'Three Refuges', Pratitya samutpaada, pravrtti dharma, nivrtti dharma, Tri-ratna, mahaavrata, anuvrata.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 05.09.2022

Approved: 21.09.2022

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Article No.39

RJPSS Apr.-Sept. 2022,

Vol. XLVII No. 2,

pp. 354-360

Similarity Check: 2%

Online available at:

<https://anubooks.com/rjpss-2022-vol-xlvii-no-2/>

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2022.v47i02.039)

[rjpss.2022.v47i02.039](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2022.v47i02.039)

It is understood that in the very popular understanding of the term 'dharma', designates a 'religion' or a religious sect'. That is in common parlance, 'dharma' is found to be used in the sense of the institutionalized religions. For example, Hindu dharma (having alternative names like: Arya dharma/ Sanatana dharma), Jaina dharma, Bouddha dharma, etc. These are institutionalized religions. Here the use of the term 'dharma' is found in its generic sense. But every religious sect or dharma has its own understanding of the concept of dharma in a specific manner. That is, some standards are accepted in an institutionalized religion to be treated as dharma failing which it is treated as *dharma*. Those are prescribed in the form of certain codes and conducts aiming at an ideal living. This article aims at attempting the exposition of an understanding of the concept of dharma as found in the above-mentioned two religious sects to show that the primary aim of these religious sects is to enforce dharma to act as a guide to the moral living of its followers. Their aim of emphasizing on dharma is not from religious perspectives, but rather from moral perspectives.

The Buddhist Concept of Dharma

Buddhism is one of the major religions in the world. This religion begins with the teachings of Gautama Buddha in the sixth century B.C. leading to a non-orthodox system of thought which has both religious and philosophical importance. The concept of dharma also occupies a significant place in this system of thought. In the early literatures of this religion, the term has been found in the Pali language as *Dhâmma* and subsequently, it has been used in the Sanskrit language as Dharma. The *Dhamma* stands for the 'Three Refuges' of Buddhism. These are namely, Buddha (the teachings of Buddha), the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha*. In another way, dharma happens to be one of the key principles to be followed by every Buddhist. The fundamental guideline for a Buddhist is that a Buddhist must ascribe to 'The Three Principles', namely, i) an acknowledgment of the Buddha, ii) an acceptance of the Dharma and iii) commitment to the *Sangha*.

The same understanding has been mentioned in various ways. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has viewed the *dhamma* as three levels of meaning. These are namely, the teachings of Buddha, the practice of the teachings of Buddha and enlightenment. So *dhamma* is not merely a doctrine; rather teaching plus practice plus enlightenment.

The fundamentals of the teachings of Buddha are that everywhere there is *dukkha*, life is full of suffering and for the end of the suffering, one has to proceed on the right path and obtain the right knowledge. In the Buddhist frame, the knowledge of *pretty samtpada* constitutes the right knowledge. The Buddhist concept of 'dhamma' includes the knowledge of *pretty samutpaada*. So *dhamma* is very important for overcoming the suffering, which is known as *dukkha*.

About the Buddhist concept of dharma in the Oxford Bibliographies, it has been mentioned by John Powers that

“One indication of its importance for Buddhists is the fact that dharma is one of the “three refuges” (*triæaraGa*) or “three jewels” (*Triratna*) (along with the Buddha and the monastic community) on which Buddhists resolve to rely as part of the standard initiation into the faith. Every tradition of Buddhism has its own perspective on what constitutes the dharma, and there is considerable disagreement among Buddhists regarding what is the Buddha’s definitive thought (*nîtârtha*) and what are merely provisional teachings of interpretable meaning (*neyârtha*) given in response to circumstances or for beings of inferior capacities.”

There are differences of opinion among the different groups of Buddhists regarding the follow-up of dharma. In early Buddhist literatures, it is believed that the follow-up of Buddhist doctrines like *Chatwari Arya satyani*, *Madhyamaka pratipat*, *Astanga marga*, *Pratitya Samut pada*, *Kanika vada*, or *ksanabhanga vada*, *Anatmya vada*, etc. is dharma. Sharma, as scholar on Buddhist philosophy writes that

“He (Buddha) also identifies it with the Dharma, the Law: ‘He who sees the *Pratitya samutpaada* sees the Dharma, and he who sees the Dharma sees the *Pratitya samutpaada*’. Failure to grasp it is the cause of misery. Its knowledge leads to the cessation of misery.”¹

But Mahayana Buddhists have attached to the attainment of nirvana which is the real cessation of sufferings and the cycle of birth and rebirth. They believed that dharma constitutes in seeking nirvana, which is the final goal. A Theravadin Buddhist monk has written that

“*There is no term in Buddhist terminology wider than dhamma. It includes not only the conditioned things and states, but also the non-conditioned, the Absolute Nirvana. There is nothing in the universe or outside, good or bad, conditioned or non-conditioned, relative or absolute, which is not included in this term.*”²

The seeking of the state of nirvana is not a simple process. It involves many factors. In the Buddhist literatures, it is strictly maintained that if a higher goal like liberation or *Nibbana* is aimed then it is necessary to obtain the right knowledge or wisdom or *prajna* along with following a disciplined moral life undergoing the stages of *Sila* and *Samadhi*. Thus, dharma involves the essential requisites like, *Pancasila*, *Samadhi* and *Prajna* which have to be crossed stage by stage respectively.

One more important consideration about the Buddhist notion of dharma is that very much like the Hindu understanding of the term dharma based on its root word that is to ‘sustain’ or uphold, as mentioned earlier, in the Buddhist frame also

Dhamma is understood as ‘to uphold’. But for them it is not for the sustenance of the being or the earth, rather it is essential to ‘holds up the religion.

The Buddhist emperor Asoka (258 BC) has said that dharma happens to be a key consideration in Buddhism. He understood my dharma to be the right action, sound moral conduct and the duty towards the human community, etc. A Buddhist text maintains that “What is the duty of a Noble emperor? Depending on the *dharma*, honoring it, revering, cherishing it, one should establish guard, ward and protection according to *dharma* for one’s own household, troops, nobles and vassals, for Brahmins and householders, town and country folk, ascetics and religious, for beasts and birds. Let no crime prevail in your kingdom, and to those who are in need, give property.”³ We find many parables in the Buddhist texts regarding the kings who have exceeded the bounds of *dharma*, and it has resulted in bringing suffering to the people. So the important guideline for the kings was to be just or follow justice. Safeguarding justice is also one of the understandings in the Buddhist frame.

The view of Thai ascetic philosopher Buddhadasa Bhikku is very spectacular that according to him there has been a resemblance between the Vedic line of thinking with the Buddhist approach to *dharma/dhamma*. He has said that *dhamma* has a four-fold meaning. “*Dhamma* incorporates the phenomenal world as it is; the law of nature; the duties to be performed in accordance with the law of nature; and the results of fulfilling such duties. This aligns with the way *dharma/dhamma* was understood in the Vedas.” He also said that *dhamma* has six attributes. i) taught by Buddha ii) one can realize *dhamma* by own effort, iii) it is timeless and present everywhere iv) it is not merely a faith but open to verification v) entering to nirvana is possible through this and vi) the personal intuitive insight is the only way to get knowledge about it.⁴

Thus it can very well be realized that the Buddhist concept of ‘dharma’ is essentially linked with the life-guiding principles. It can be presumed that the aim of emphasizing on dharma is not there from religious perspectives, but rather from moral perspectives.

The Jaina Concept of Dharma

Jaina religious sect has left a long and remarkable tradition on the Indian soil. In this tradition ‘dharma’ has been found to have both metaphysical and moral implications leading to their religious goal. If we concentrate on the features of their concept of dharma the following features are significant.

- i) It is not merely a moral virtue but is treated to constitute moral duties. This feature is very significant from the standpoint of self-purification and moral transformation of human beings.

- ii) It refers to the teachings of a *Jina* (Tirthankara) of the sect. There are ten virtues recommended by Tirthankaras known as ten dharmas (*das-dharma*)⁵. Those are forgiveness, humility, straightforwardness, contentment, truth, sensual restraint, austerities, charity, non-possessiveness and celibacy.
- iii) The practice of non-violence as the highest virtue (*ahimsa paramo dharma*) has been recommended in their religious texts.
- iv) It is an eternal substance (*dravya*). As a substance, it acts as the medium that allows beings to move. The motion would be functionless without this substance.

The above features of dharma show that the first three are linked with the moral foundation of dharma whereas the last one is linked to the metaphysical foundation of it. No other system of thought is seen to consider dharma to be a substance as it is there in Jainism. Let us see how they have treated it to be a substance.

Jaina's Concept of substance

The most spectacular view has been developed in the Jaina framework that *dharmas* and *adharma* do not refer to qualities; rather are substances and can remain on their own without any substratum. The Jaina text *Acarangasutra* mentions that there are six types of substances or *dravyas*, namely, the eternal self (*jiva*), principles of motion (*dharmas*) and rest (*adharma*), atoms (*pudgala*), space (*akasha*) and time (*kaala*). Excluding *jiva* and the rest five substances including *dharmas* and *adharma* are devoid of consciousness. *Jiva*, *pudgala* and *kaala* are innumerable whereas *dharmas*, *adharma* and *akasha* are single in number. From the standpoint of modification, origination from external and internal inducement that makes possible the traversing from one point of space to another *dharmas* and *adharma* is motionless and inactive yet immanent in the entire space like the permeation of oil in the seed.⁶ The conception of *dharmas* includes the notions of 'renunciation' and 'liberation' within its fold through the notions of *pravrtti* (activity) and *nivrtti* (non-activity). Haribhadra⁷ mentions *dharmas* in terms of two antithetical yet interconnected formulations with the help of two important concepts, namely, *pravrtti* and *Olivetti*. The *pravrtti* leads to merit (*Punya*) and enjoyment (*bhoga*) and *nivrtti* guides to liberation (*Mukti*). Olle writes that

"In terms of *pravrtti dharmas* one was enjoined to cultivate *Punya* or *shubha* (e.g., non-violence, tolerance and kindness) and refrain from *papa* or *Kashuba* (e.g., anger, pride and greed). *Nivrtti dharmas* on other hand involved, among other things, the practice of austerity and the cultivation of higher knowledge leading to detachment."⁸

The concept of dharma from the ontological perspective refers to a substance that is omnipresent in the *lokaakaasha*. But from a moral perspective, the role of dharma is quite different and very much in tune with the Jaina philosophy of *Triratna* (three jewels). For Jaina thinkers, the *Triratna* constitutes Right faith (*Samyang darsana*), Right knowledge (*Samyang jnana*) and Right conduct (*Samyang caritra*).

In their frame maximum emphasis has been attached to right conduct that aims at a disciplined life by observing the certain practices and vows. The following practices are recommended for all irrespective of monks or house-holders.

- (i) One must be extremely careful in his talking, walking, receiving alms, answering questions, etc.
- (ii) To become restrained in respect of thought speech and bodily movements.
- (iii) The ten virtues or the *dharmic* practices mentioned above are to be followed meticulously.
- (iv) To conquer over the pains that arise out of hunger, thirst, heat, cold, etc.
- (v) Attain equanimity, purity, and greed-less-ness.

For the monks, very strong vows have been recommended, called *mahaa vratas* and for householders, mild vows have been recommended, called *anuvratas*. The vows cannot be followed properly unless the following measures are observed.

These five vows (*maha vratas*) have formed the foundation of Jaina ethics. These are namely, non-harming (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*Satya*), honesty (*asteya*), celibacy (*brahmacharya*) and propertylessness (*aparigraha*).

In the medieval period, Jaina philosophers also accepted dharma to be the universal or cosmic order like that of the Upanisadic tradition where *Satya* and dharma as *Rta* have been treated as the universal or cosmic order. But there has been a great deal of difference between the two in the sense one cosmic order embraces the ontological dimension of dharma (as a *dravya*) along with its moral dimension whereas in the *Brahmanical* tradition a single underlying principle has been emphasized.

Here at the end of the discussion on the Jaina concept of dharma while thinking about the contemporary view it is felt necessary to take note of Prof. Bijayananda Kar's view which appears to be quite remarkable one. He has viewed Jainism from two angles: 'as dharma' and 'as *darœana*'. As dharma he has attached importance to their cardinal principles like self-effort (*âtma cestâ*), adherence to truth (*Satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsâ*). In respect of their philosophy, he has emphasized on their relativistic epistemology and ontology. In his analysis, he has pointed out that though Jaina dharma is out and out anti-theistic or explicitly atheistic but it is out of the track of the traditional consideration of dharma. He writes that

“Though in an ordinary popular sense dharma seems to have stood for offering devotion to some supernatural agency, Jainism has built up a tradition since antiquity according to which man is independent, with a sense of self-control, and he does not feel the need of acknowledging any outer agent in determining his destiny. No God, or any such mystical transcendental power, has been conceived within the framework of this dharma to whom one is to surrender to seek for His grace. This, therefore, is termed *adhyatma* or *Tamika dharma* in which independence and freedom to the individual are fully guaranteed.”⁹

In his opinion, their notion of dharma is not other-worldly and also does not ‘support materialistic this-worldliness. Even though it is spiritualistic, because of advocating for *moksa* but does not subscribe to supernatural speculations at the cost of human welfare in the social setting’. He considers that

“Perhaps that is the reason why Jaina dharma is very conspicuous in advancing an elaborate ethical code of conduct which is to be followed by men belonging to any section of society. ... From the above considerations, it seems fairly clear that Jaina dharma is not spiritualistic in a dehumanized sense of the term. Its strict moral code aims, not at social disruption, but at social solidarity.”¹⁰

Thus it can very well be realized that the Jaina concept of ‘dharma’ is also essentially linked with the life-guiding principles. Here too the aim of dharma is not to view it from a religious perspective, rather it should be viewed from a moral perspective.

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