

Dharma in Buddhism

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The word Dharma is generally understood to have several meanings like morality, law, religion and tradition as well as the nature of individual members of the society. Dharma is defined differently by different scholars. In general Dharma is understood to be a central concept of morality, tradition and national identity. Ordinary understanding of this word is understood to be an individual's duty, towards the observance of custom or traditions or law.

The term Dharma (Dhamma in Pali) is used in almost all the philosophical and religious trends of India. This term first appears in the Vedas, the religious text of the Hindus, and different religions define it differently. Hinduism is one of the oldest of all the religions of the world. It is also called Sanatan Dharma, a religion that has come down to people through eternity.

Etymologically, the term dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ* which means to sustain or hold or support. Dharma signifies truth and is established and customary, responsibility, something that is ethical and that which is sanctioned by religious authority and thus can be termed as legal. According to Hinduism Dharma is a natural universal law and its observance enables the sentient beings to be contented and happy. Dharma is the ethical code of conduct with spiritual discipline ingrained in it as a mentor in our life. Therefore, for the Hindus, Dharma is the foundation of life.

In Jainism, Dharma can be described as the true nature of things, rationality of perception, knowledge and ethical conduct like forgiveness, humility, truthfulness, purity, self-restraint etc. Dharma in Jainism is also about promoting non-violence for the protection of all the sentient beings. In Jainism, non-violence is the greatest dharma.

According to Jain philosophy, Dharma is the real nature of an object. It is just like fire whose nature is to burn and while the nature of water is to produce a soothing effect. It is in the same way that the nature of our soul is to seek spiritual salvation and self-realization. In Sikhism, Dharma means the path of righteousness or in other words it may be termed as the seeking of the ultimate truth. Dharma according to Sikhism is about the path shown by the teachings of ten Gurus. In Sikhism it is believed that the divine light of its first Guru transmitted in the next nine Gurus. Dharma is a spiritual path for those who are looking for self-realisation. Sikh Dharma teaches to train our mind and all our senses to see the divinity within ourselves and also within the creation and to serve all other sentient beings. In the most common understanding, Dharma is the basic necessity of life as well as the foundation of human existence and everything.

According to Buddhism, Dharma is a universal truth that is common to all individuals at all times. Dharma (Dhamma) is one of the three jewels along with the Buddha and the Sangha where the Buddhists seek refuge. Buddhists believe that the Dharma is to follow the teachings of the Buddha, about our duty, law, doctrine, things, events and the natural order in both the physical and moral spheres.

After attaining enlightenment, Buddha went to the deer park at Isipatana (modern day Sarnath) near Varanasi. There he met the five ascetics who were his companions before attaining enlightenment. To them he delivered his first sermon, and propounded the Four Noble Truths. This is known as the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (Turning the Wheel of the Dhamma). Since the first sermon was delivered the Three Jewels were also established. After the Mahaparinirvana of Buddha when the first Buddhist council was held at Rajagṛha the Dhamma was compiled in the form of the Tripitaka. It consists of the teaching of the Buddha. The term Tripitaka means three baskets and consists of the Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

- i. Vinaya Piṭaka (basket of discipline)- It is a collection of texts related to the conduct of the monks, nuns and the lay followers. Vinaya-piṭaka also consists of the stories related to the reason behind each rule.
- ii. Sutta Piṭaka (basket of discourses) – It is a collection of the teachings of the Buddha and few of his disciples. This is divided in five collections in Pali: Dīgha-Nikaya, Majjhima-Nikaya, Samyutta-Nikaya, Anguttara-Nikaya and Khuddaka-Nikaya.
- iii. Abhidhamma Piṭaka (basket of profound discourses) – This is the collection of texts related to the profound teachings of the Buddha. It is also known as the basket of higher exposition. It consists of seven books namely- Dhammasaṅgani, Vibhanga, Kathavatthu, Puggalapannatti, Dhatukatha, Yamaka and Paṭṭhanna.

According to Mahanamasuttam of AnguttaraNikaya, Buddha has discussed about six qualities of Dharma, namely:

- i. Svakkhato -It means that which is well-preached. In this case the Dharma is a Universal Law that is found through enlightenment and is preached precisely. It is considered as Sila (moral principles) in the beginning, Samadhi (concentration) in the middle and Prajna(wisdom) in the end.
- ii. Sanditthika - It means visible. In this case the Dharma can be experienced through practice and therefore those who follow it will be able to see the result through his own experiences. According to the Visuddhimagga, Sanditthika can be divided into three parts, namely: that which is visible here and now, a proper view, and worthy of being seen.
- iii. Akaliko- It means immediate or without any delay. In this case the Dharma is able to get immediate results. It can be through any means and without waiting. Its effects can be experienced at each and every moment by the practitioner.
- iv. Ehipassiko- It means inviting everybody to come and see. Here the Dharma is open to investigation. Buddha has also advised his disciples not to blindly accept whatever he preaches and should always question until they are convinced of his teachings.
- v. Opanayiko- It means that which is conducive to lead to Nirvana. Here the Dharma is capable to lead the practitioner towards the realization of Nirvana. Therefore the practice of Dharma is highly rewarding, for cessation of all the sufferings.
- vi. PaccattamVeditabboVinnuhi-It means to experience through wisdom. Here the Dharma can be realized only by mature disciples who have who have realized Nirvana. It is also a matter of personal knowledge. A direct experience is the most important factor in attaining Nirvana.

Three Characteristics of Dharma (Trilaksana)

There are Three characteristics of Dharma in Buddhism which helps people attain Nirvana by removing all the sufferings. This principle differentiates Buddhism from all other religious systems. The three characteristics are:

- i. Anicca- Impermanence
- ii. Dukkha-Suffering
- iii. Anatta – No-self.

According to the Dhammapada, “All conditioned things are impermanent. When one sees this with insight one becomes weary of suffering. This is the Way to Purity. All conditioned things are painful. When one sees this with insight one becomes weary of suffering. This is the Way to Purity. All states (dharma) are without self. When one sees this with insight (prajñā) one becomes weary of suffering. This is the Way to Purity.”¹

The three characteristics of the Dharma: impermanence (Anitya), suffering (Dukkha) and no-self (Anatman) are the Buddha’s teaching that aims at eliminating desire, hatred and ignorance. This leads the sentient beings to remove all the false views and know the ultimate truth.

Dharma in the Buddhist Schools

In Buddhism there are two sects, namely: the Hinayana and the Mahayana. The Hinayana and the Mahayana are further sub-divided into two schools each and each of these schools has different views on the characteristics of the Dharma.

Dharma in the Theravada School

In the Theravada school, Dharma means “the things of existence”. The Dharma is used with reference to the things that arise and then vanishes. They are referred as Samskara and sometimes as Samskrta. It consists of both the physical as well as the psychological phenomena. The most common characteristics of these Dharma are to arise and then to disappear. Therefore, these Dharmas are Anitya or impermanent, Dukkha or suffering and Anatman or no-self. The Dharma of ultimate truth realized by the Buddha is reflected in the Four Noble Truths.

Dharma in the Sarvastivada School

In the Sarvastivada School all concepts of Dharmas, i.e. the present, past, and future are simultaneously present. The concept of Dharma is discussed in the Abhidharmakosa of Vasubandhu. Buddhist scholars like Ghosaka, Vasumitra, Buddhadeva, Vasubandhu and Sanghabhadra etc. have discussed about the Dharma.

¹Dhammapada, magga-vaggo, Verses 277, 278, 279.

The Sarvastivada emphasized on the identity of cause and effect. This doctrine of cause and effect was extended to all the phenomena of the world including the human beings. The followers of this school believed that the self-cause of Dharma remain in existence during present, past and future as well.

Dharma in Madhyamika School

Nagarjuna,² the founder of this school, sees the Dharma from an entirely different point of view. According to him, the theory of cause and effect (partiyasamutpada) denotes emptiness (Sunyata). According to Nagarjuna reality (Tattva) is non-conceptual (Nirvikalpa) and to prove this Nagarjuna tried to establish that there is no substance (Svabhava) and that all the conceptual thought process is empty (Sunya).

Dharma in Yogacara School

The Yogacara School is also known as Vijñānavāda. The founder of this school was Maitreya Bodhisattva in the 3rd century A.D. It was further made popular by Asanga and Vasubandhu in the 4th century A.D.

The Vijñānavāda was at its peak in India between the 4th to the 12th century A.D. The followers of this school believed that the world is nothing but consciousness or Cittamatra. The Vijñānavāda School upholds that all the Dharmas arise from the Vijnana or consciousness and the basis of all the functions of consciousness is the storehouse consciousness which is also called Alaya Vijnana.

Dharma and Abhidhamma

Understanding of the Abhidhamma

The Abhidhamma is one of the Tripitaka texts which discuss Dharma in detail. The term Abhidhamma has two meanings, namely:

- i. Supplementary doctrines and
- ii. Special or superior doctrines.

All these doctrines have been discussed in seven books and are together known as the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

i. The Dhammasaṅgāṇī (enumeration of dharma) – It discusses about all the factors of experience that are considered as the ultimate truth of the Dharmas. It consists of both the mental and physical awareness and Nirvana.

ii. The Vibhanga (the book of analysis) – This text enumerates the ultimate factors of experience into several categories and also discusses how those factors are defined in the teachings of the Buddha.

iii. The Dhatukatha (discourse on elements) – This text also discusses about the same topic as the first two texts but presents it in the form of questions and answers.

iv. The Puggalapañatti (description of human types) – This text defines and characterizes the types of human beings and especially discusses about those who have made some good progress on the path to realize Nirvana.

v. The Kathavatthu (points of controversy) – This text was composed during the reign of the Emperor Asoka and discusses about all the reasons of dispute among the schools of Buddhism that had evolved during the first two centuries after the formation of the Buddhist Sangha.

vi. The Yamaka (book of pair) – It has ten chapters. It classifies all the mental factors into the three categories namely: wholesome, unwholesome and neutral. It also enumerates about the five aggregates of the Dhamma that is the basis of our idea of our self, the four noble truths and Karma.

vii. Patthana (conditional relations) – This text discusses about the Buddhist theory of causality as contained in the doctrine of Dependent Origination⁶ (Patīccasamuppāda).

In addition to these texts there are two other important philosophical treatises of the Theravadins, namely: Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification) by Buddhaghosa⁷ and Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha (A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma) by Acariya Anuruddha; it is a commentary on the Abhidhamma of the Theravada tradition.

The Abhidhamma in Sanskrit Buddhist Literature

Another important school of the Hinayana Buddhism is Sarvastivada School. The earliest Sanskrit Abhidharma texts are said to have been composed around 3rd century B.C. The Abhidhamma in the Sarvastivada School is also similar to the abhidhamma in Theravada literature and consists of seven books namely: Jñānaprasthāna-Sāstra or source of Knowledge, The Saṅgītiparyāya (recitation together), The Prakāraṇa-Pāda (exposition), The Vijñānakāya (body group of consciousnesses), The Dhatukāya (body of elements), The Dharmasāṅgāṇī (collection or corporation of dharma) and The Prajñaptisāstra (Treatise on Designations of Dharma).

Other important texts of the Sarvastivada School are Abhidharmamahāvibhāsa Sāstra, Abhidharmahrdaya, Abhidharmakośa and Sphuṭārthābhidharmakośa Vyākhyā.

²Nagarjuna was born in South India in a Brahmin family in the 2nd century A.D. He propounded the Madhyamika school of Buddhist philosophy, which is also known as Sunyavada. Nagarjuna's great philosophical work, Mulamadhyamika-karika, consists of 400 karikas in 27 chapters and is the foundation of his philosophy.

In 1st century B.C, the Abhidharma in Sarvastivada was subdivided into two schools, namely- Vaibhasika and Sautrantika.

i. Vaibhasika School

The term Vibhasa has been derived from Mahavibhasa Sastra which is a commentary on the Buddhist canonical texts. Vaibhasika is a later division of the Sarvastivada School. Sarvastivada and Vaibhasika are two separate names for the same school.

ii. Sautrantika School

The term Sautrantika denotes those who depend on the Sutras. As the name suggests, the Buddhist philosophy associated with the Sutra and Sutrants is known as Sautrantika. The Sautrantikas are also called Darstantika since they teach all doctrines by means of examples. The Sautrantika accepts only the Sutta Piṭaka and Vinaya Piṭaka as the valid teachings of the Buddha.

The Sautrantika School rejects the existence of Dharma of the three time periods viz. past and future and believes that only the present Dharma exists in which it does all its activity and is absolutely instantaneous.

The teachings of the Buddha have been differently analyzed by different schools but all of them lead to the same goal of attaining Nirvana. Thus the Dharma in Buddhism is about following the path shown by the Buddha and the realization of the Ultimate Truth or Nirvana.

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