

Why is dharma
considered the most
important principle
philosophy essay



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Hinduism provides us with many insightful examples of Dharma (and how humans form part of a Divine Plan), and why it is so dharma is so important. The one that stands out is that of Rama in the Ramayana[1] whose father, King Dashratha wanted him to inherit the throne but as a result of the King owing a boon to one of his other wives, Kaikeyi, he is forced to exile Rama for 14 years and place Kaikeyi's son Bharata on the throne. Bharata begs Rama to come back but Rama refuses, and stays in exile out of duty, honour and respect for his father. Rama fights many battles, rescues his devoted wife from Ravana, and eventually becomes emperor and rules for 11, 000 years. Rama is the archetypal follower of Dharma, celebrated even up until today for his courage, respect for duty and dedication to religious values.

A. C Bhaktivedanta Swami said that Dharma is " that which one cannot give up" and " that which is inseparable from the self" and likened it to the warmth of a fire which is inseparable from the fire itself. There is no true English translation for Dharma[2] and it is best described as a " duty" or " religious duty".

According to SW the word Hinduism itself is referred to as Hindu Dharma or Sanatana Dharma; the eternal law and the right way of being a Hindu. This could lead one to believe that Hinduism is a way of life. This statement is substantiated in the Handbook of Living Religions[3] where it is said that Dharma is referred to as a " ritualization of daily life" and as previously mentioned " a way of life."

To better understand why this is such an important aspect of Hindu life it is worth investigating where the word comes from and delve a bit deeper into

its meaning. Dharma comes from the Sanskrit root “ dhri” which means “ to uphold” or “ sustain” and thus we can say that Dharma translates to us westerners as that which uphold and sustains the positive order or all things in the Cosmos referred to as Sanatana Dharma, the nation, a community, a family and the individual itself - svadharma.

Every Hindu has his or her own Dharma to follow according to his or her Varna (class) and stage of life (Ashrama) - Varnashrama Dharma[4]and following the Dharma is one of the three aims of life for a Hindu.[5]Varna determines one’s religious and social status and one is born into the Varna of one’s parents. It determines what a person can do for a job, what he eats, drinks, and whom he marries. What is an acceptable way of living and being for one caste is not acceptable for the other so Dharma here produces what SW refers to as a “ relative morality”. It is also important to note that if a member of caste within his or her community a breaks the caste’s purity rules the whole caste will suffer the consequences which can be quite severe. Dharma is handed down from generation to generation[6]We know that the Hindu ethic is stronger than what we experience in the West so the family Dharma is strictly adhered to becomes part of the Hindu from his or her earliest years. The act of following his or her Dharma and making the appropriate acts (i. e. pilgrimages) within ones Varna then for the Hindu is a very meritorious act and the Hindu generates merit, punya, and this merit is transferable to e. g. a departed family member.[7]Deviating from ones Dharma creates a deficit in one’s karma storage. Because Dharma is like a cosmic norm one can say that if the Hindu decides to go against this norm unfavorable karma will be the result.

Following one's Dharma meticulously will lead to a good storage of Karma in this lifetime for the Hindu and one cannot talk about dharma and not talk about its interrelatedness to karma, reincarnation and samsara for these three elements are interwoven. Dharma affects the future according to the karma accumulated. Therefore one's Dharmic path in the next life is the one necessary to bring to fruition all the results of past karma.

Eventually it will be the balance between merit generated (punya) and sin (papa) - The Law of Karma (Cause and Effect) - that will determine where and how the Hindu will be reborn in the next life which is most often used to explain the Hindu's current life circumstances. Dharma is in fact a way of life. What is preached is brought out in practice. The philosophy is linked with life and worldly affairs. It is full of social and ethical values and gives us a vivid idea of human relationship with its various spheres. Thus life and philosophy both are guided by spiritual considerations. Material welfare could not get the upper hand. The whole journey to eternity is based on reason and scientific precision with full freedom of enquiry and expression summed up beautifully in the Upanishad: " you are what your driving desire is, as your desire is, so is your will, as your will is, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny."

Logbook exercise 2. 6

Walley describes (pp. 199-203) two traditional Buddhist methods for dealing with self-obsession. What are these methods and do you think they could be applied by Western psychologists to their clients. Give reasons for your answers.

What does Buddhism have to offer those people who work with the dying?

In the 19th/20th century a pioneering psychoanalyst by the name of Sigmund Freud formulated a structural model of the human psyche and divided it in three parts namely the Ego, the Super Ego and the ID and one description of Ego states that it is that part of our personality that acts as the great mediator between what our id would want us to instinctively do, the superego and reality. Our ego essentially prevents us from acting on our basic urges (created by the id), but also works to achieve a balance with our moral and idealistic standards (created by the superego). While the ego operates in both the preconscious and conscious, it's strong ties to the id means that it also operates in the unconscious. It is said that our Ego is based on the Reality Principle: it satisfies what our id would want us to do in a rational and socially acceptable manner that will benefit us in the long run rather than bring us grief.

Buddhism teaches us that our egos, our perception of " I" or our personalities are a major cause of suffering as we view it as something " permanent, unchanging and existing self-sufficiently, independent of all other phenomena"[8]Lama Yeshe during his teaching says that " we have to loosen that tightness" and the tightness he referred to was the grasping of the Ego.[9]

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This grasping ego ends up laying the foundation for the self-cherishing ego to go and build its dysfunctional house and furnish it with a completely distorted view of reality, and later we wonder why we are mentally and physically ill and how, or if it can possibly be fixed. Hopefully in this life time.....

The two methods that Walley describes for treating the self-obsessed patient are^[10]are based upon Shantideva's " Guide to Bodhisattva's way of Life" and the Seven Point Thought Transformation by Geshe^[11]Chekawa. They are (1) " Six Causes and One Effect, and (2) " Exchanging self for Others". But those methods will not be useful if the patient does not develop an unbiased attitude towards all sentient beings; what Walley refers to as " equanimity".^[12]This is essentially the basis for the first cause which asked the patient to recognize the interconnectedness of all sentient beings. L. S Cousins's^[13]text on the Step-by-Step discourses, when talking about " sila" or precepts talks about all living creatures being linked in some way and that by doing harm to yourself your are also harming others. The patient has to recognize all sentient being as his or her mother. Walley does mention that this viewpoint will be easier to comprehend in cultures that believe in reincarnation and hold their mother in high esteem.

Being able to perceive and understand the First Cause will allow the patient to recognize and be mindful of the kindness that all sentient beings has provided him or her with, the Second Cause, and the Third Cause would be to repay this kindness and in the process generate Bodhicitta, the Sanskrit word meaning " The Awakening of the Mind". A Bodhisattva's main

motivation for all his or her actions is Bodhicitta. Once again back to the <https://assignbuster.com/why-is-dharma-considered-the-most-important-principle-philosophy-essay/>

original cornerstone of equanimity – kindness is felt not only towards those who you love but has to be felt towards all sentient beings.

The First three causes brings about what one could call a “ heart-warming” love, a deep affectionate love – the Fourth Cause; similar to what the Christian theologians refer to as “ Agape” – a thoughtful, unconditional love – as opposed to “ Eros” which is the attached, longing and sensual love and often a cause of great suffering.

Contemplating the great suffering of all sentient beings leads to great compassion – the Fifth Cause as the patient wants those he or she cares for to be free of their suffering. The arising of this deep felt compassion for all sentient beings generates a genuine commitment to act positively towards alleviating the pain and suffering of all sentient beings and within this state of mind there is no time, space or place for cherishing the self.

Exchanging Oneself with Others also known as Taking and Giving or Tonglen meditation is considered an essential and profound method for developing great compassion or Bodhichitta.

One has to ask how western psychologists perceive compassion and mindfulness since the Buddhist approach to investigation of the mind and its potential is most definitely ‘ unscientific’ as defined by Western science. In my opinion I think that the two methods discussed above can be integrated into Western Psychology for a variety of reasons. There is an emphasis on creating a positive image of oneself in both western and Buddhist psychology and contrary to popular believe this “ self love” is not an

egotistical endeavour as Walley indicated when he says that in Buddhist
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terms “ self love” is not self cherishing but in fact the antidote for it. Without the ability to care for one’s own wellbeing in a mindful way one cannot, in a mindful and compassionate way, even begin to contemplate the wellbeing of others. Essentially that is what both these methods are aiming for: the Buddha Nature and Bodhicitta in all of us. Western psychology seems to place a higher regard on treating the mental illness rather than spending time cultivating positive mental health. Buddhism in itself is considered to be the most psychological of all the religions[14]. Both these two methods try to identify the inner cause of suffering, the possibility of ending this suffering and as a result freedom from it. Buddhism is concerned here with the nature of the mind, the intensive exploration thereof, and both these two methods require the patient to meditate and explore their own minds and thus move away from the “ I”, the ego-grasping “ I”. A western psychologist can use these two methods to cultivate in their patients more meaningful priorities, better attitudes, a different perspective on life and on the self. Happiness that comes from this form of internal mental training and the process of generating the compassionate heart and mind will last longer than any other stimulus driven pleasure.

These two methods can assist western psychologists in helping their patients distinguish between authentic well being and that which are derived externally from sensory pleasures. Genuine well being, true compassion, empathic joy, equanimity and mindfulness comes from the development of mental balance, and that all forms of suffering, self grasping are due to an imbalanced mind. I would like to conclude with some examples of research that have been done (taken from B. Alan Wallace and Shauna L. Shapiro’s

paper on Mental Balance and Well-Being)[15]that will demonstrate how aspects of these two methods have contributed positively to people and how empathy - central to the experience of compassion and empathetic joy - can be developed through a systematical practice of meditation and gratitude.

“ A randomized controlled trial examined the effects of a seven-week mindfulness meditation on levels of empathy of medical student. Empathy was measured by a reliable and valid self-report measure (alpha-coefficient of . 89), the Empathy Construct Rating Scale (La Monica, 1981). Results indicated significantly increased empathy and decreased anxiety and depression in the meditation group compared with controls (S. L. Shapiro et al, 1981)”

“ In a randomized trial, adults who kept a daily journal and listed all of the things for which they were grateful reported significant increased feelings of happiness and increased health-promoting behaviours compared to controls (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).[16]&[17]

What does Buddhism have to offer those people who work with the dying?

Buddhism offers whole different perspective on dying. Contemplation and meditation on death and impermanence are regarded as very important in Buddhism for two reasons: (1) it is only by recognizing how precious and how short life is that we are most likely to make it meaningful and to live it fully and (2) by understanding the death process and familiarizing ourselves with it. As fearful as the western world is of death we want a peaceful and a gentle death and we want to die “ well”.

Being surrounded by death all the time could over time leave the caregiver numb towards death, distressed and burnt out. Buddhist Meditative and contemplative practices (based on Buddhist teachings) for care givers to the dying can promote a sense of calm and resilience, reduce stress and assist in creating mental balance. Cultivating this mental/mind/emotional stability can assist the care giver to respond to themselves and others with much more empathy and greater compassion. It can greatly assist the care giver to live “in the moment and be present”, be aware of their mental states and cultivate mindfulness. Being the moment is vitally important when working with the dying. Often being truly present with the dying patient and their families, and bearing witness to great suffering can indeed be a healing act in itself.

Buddhism can help care givers the lay a foundation upon which compassion can be built, where the care giver can experience the suffering and be urged to act upon the alleviation of the suffering without being caught up in the emotional turmoil that usually surrounds those who are dying.

Buddhism can greatly assist the care giver in dealing with grief. Often grief in the care-givers, nurses, doctors go unacknowledged and it is only lately that training programs are being offered to those who provide support and palliative care to the sick and dying[18].

I would like to conclude with the Buddha's last words: “ Behold, O monks, this is my last advice to you. All component things in the world are changeable. They are not lasting. Work hard to gain your own salvation.”

Buddhism offers just that, not just for the dying patient but for the care giver as well.