Common Foundational Concepts in the Dharma Traditions

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Introduction

Hindu Dharma Traditions have an ancient history. Most date to before the 2nd millennium BCE. Some have links to the traditions developed during the earliest human settlements in Asia, particularly the Indian subcontinent. Unlike other world religions, it is inaccurate to state, as outdated colonial narratives do, that all of the Hindu Dharmas are represented by or are rooted in one specific set of teachings, as there are wide variety of Hindu Dharma traditions including pan-regional theist Hindu Dharmas; pan-regional non-theist Hindu Dharmas; pan-regional atheist Hindu Dharmas, and regional-ancestral Hindu Dharmas. It is possible, as such, to talk accurately about those concepts, values, and practices which are common throughout most of the Hindu Dharma traditions.

One basic foundational concept of the vast majority of the Hindu Dharmas is saṃsāra - repetitive cycles of ups and downs: happiness-sadness, satisfaction-dissatisfaction, drive-aimlessness. These inevitable waves in life can be managed through another common foundational Hindu concept, karma, or actively making a change in one's approach or understanding. This requires a concerted, rationalized effort or sādhanā, a third concept shared by most Hindu Dharmas. Through this, one can manage how inevitable things affect us, and attain a kind of inner or even perpetual freedom or mokṣa, a fourth foundational concept. The goal of Hindu Dharmas, as such, is to manage or free ourselves from the repetitive cycles of dissatisfaction or sorrows that we are put into, or that we put ourselves into. Hindu philosophy promotes individual autonomy, spiritual freedom, and responsible action, not fatalism, and seeks to help individuals navigate situations realistically.

Words do not always refer to exactly the same thing, especially if the context of its usage is different. Most of the words used in Hindu Dharma traditions developed beyond a commonly accepted literal meaning to refer to deep philosophical concepts. Additionally, there are a swathe of languages used to convey Hindu Dharma traditions. Most practitioners are familiar with the process of learning that facilitates the apprehension of the multivalent nature of the meanings of these words, however when missionary and colonial scholars undertook translations, they often misinterpreted, or unrealistically narrowed down the meanings of the words, translating them in line with their preconceived narratives. This has led to a problem: colonial era scholars chose just one or two interpretations of words that were extremely context-sensitive and used in a variety of ways. Then, exclusivist colonial education systems were established globally and were able to gain prestigious status due to the fiscal support the colonial enterprise invested in them to further their worldviews. Finally, even

post-independence, many of these former colonies cannot provide new interpretations of words with ease, as most translations have been accepted for as long as these institutions have existed. Nevertheless, as more practitioners and those with interests begin to reexamine sources with a scientific, linguistic, and sociologically aware approach rather than relying on limited theological perspectives, we can provide a more reliable translation of words pertaining to extremely important and well-developed fundamental Hindu concepts.

Foundational Concepts of Dharmas traditions include:

- *saṃsāra* (common)
- *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa* (common)
- *karma* (common)
- *dharma* (common)
- *sādhanā* (common)
- *dhyāna* (common)
- *ātman* (absent in most Buddha Dharma traditions)
- *jagat* (common)
- Brahman (absent in Buddha and Jain Dharma)
- Īśvara (absent in Buddha Dharma)
- *siddhānta* & *saṃvāda* (common)

Saṃsāra refers to the repetitive cycles of ups and downs: happiness-sadness, satisfaction-dissatisfaction, drive-aimlessness, etc. *Saṃsāra* is also discussed as continuing from one form of a sentient being's existence to another, including in the sense of taking on a new body after death according to some, not all traditions.

Life's repetitive cycles are said to be due to three types of causes: *ādhyātmika*, *adhibhautika*, and *adhidaivika*. *Ādhyātmika* refers to an individual's own physical, emotional, mental, intellectual or spiritual causes. *Adhibhautika* refers to causes from other people or living beings (insects, animals, etc.), communities, societies, one's nation or other nations. *Adhidaivika* refers to environmental, global, or even cosmic changes. For all types, instead of praying that these problems suddenly solve themselves, the Dharma traditions encourage and empower each individual to either change the situation, or if not possible, manage their experience of the situation so as to mitigate extreme duress to the extent possible. For example, someone might experience repeated desires for the latest smartphone each time one is released, yet not have the financial means to buy one. Rather than becoming morose each time that happens, the Dharma traditions would help that person to understand the triggers, find a practice to manage them, and provide a long-term method to help that individual to modulate their emotions and reactions in such situations.

Mokṣa/Nirvāṇa: Though the multiple cycles are both repetitive and constant, there is a way of managing the effects an individual feels. If the body, mind, intellect and individual essence are in harmony, the Dharma traditions hold that individuals can find a way to maintain an equilibrium in a rational, sustainable and holistic manner. Such an equilibrium is characterized by a grounded blissful tranquility, equanimity, and measured responses to triggers. It is a kind of inner freedom, and a

person that strives to attain a constant, uninterrupted state of freedom is striving for *mokṣa*/nirvāṇa. *Mokṣa/nirvāṇa*, if attained, allows the individual to maintain equilibrium through *saṃsāra* while materially embodied, and perpetual freedom hereafter.

Karma: Most Dharma traditions teach that the inevitable waves in life can be managed through actively making a change in one's approach or understanding. *Karma* literally means action, but the concept refers to more than this. From a person's very initial thoughts, the preceding experiences and knowledge that give rise to a few possibilities, assessing the outcomes of each, discerning from among them a plan, the decision to enact it, the action itself, the immediate internal and external effects, and the longer-term internal and external effects – all are entailed in the theory of *karma*. *Karma* that is selfless and without motive is the ideal; however the Dharma traditions are rational and accept that actions may have self-serving motivations and that there are degrees of both selfishness and selflessness. *Karma* is not only a spiritual teaching. It is an observation that all beings are engaged in involuntary reactions, conscious decision-making, and conscious actions. Dharma traditions emphasize the importance of not reacting impulsively to emotional triggers, but learning to respond to them thoughtfully. *Karma* cannot be oversimplified into a predeterministic causality (fatalism) or some brand of universal justice. *Karma* is a deep, multifaceted process. The outcomes of an individual's actions are dependent on factors other than themselves, and cannot be the sole motivation of their actions.

Dharma: *dharma* does not have only one meaning; rather it is a particularly context-dependent word. The word derives from the Vedic Sanskrit *dharman*, from the verbal root √*dhṛ* - to sustain, support or hold. Cosmic balance, where every single thing is in functional harmony, is known as *ṛta*, and dharma is the specific inherent nature of each single thing that is part and parcel of the multiverse. Actions in accordance with one's *dharma* are in tune with *ṛta*, and do not create unproportionate or unmanageable fluctuations that can affect one's self or others. Hindu philosophers have taught many paths for remaining "in-sync" with the multiverse, the world and its ecology, one's community and society, and one's own body, mind, intellect and individual essence.

Five general ways in which the word *dharma* is used by Hindu philosophers are: the Dharmas (spiritual traditions), *sva-dharma*, *kula-dharma*, *yuga-dharma*, and *āpad-dharma*.

- The Dharmas, in the sense of spiritual traditions, are sometimes viewed as individual religious traditions. There are atheistic Hindu Dharmas: Cārvāka, Ajīvika, etc. There are monotheistic Hindu Dharmas: Śākta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Mīmāṃsa-Smārta-Sanātana, Kaumāram, and most regional/tribal Hindu Dharmas like Āgama Jawa, Sanamaha, etc. There are also nontheistic Hindu Dharmas: Vedic Dharma (specifically through the original philosophical traditions of Saṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta). And there are Dharmas that attained distinct world religions status, including Jain, Zoroastrian, Buddha, and Sikhī/Sikh Dharmas.

- *Sva-dharma* refers to a person's or thing's individual responsibilities or properties. It encompasses *manuṣya-dharma* (a person's nature and responsibilities), *jīva-dharma*

(characteristics and values for all living beings), *sāmānya-dharma* (basic ethical values), and *vastu/dravya-dharma* (the properties of objects and substances).

- *Kula-dharma* refers to values and practices specific to one's family, clan, or tribe.
- *Yuga-dharma* refers to the values, practices, and responsibilities of a given age that dawns after a significant paradigm shift.
- *Āpad-dharma* refers to the values, practices, and responsibilities of a person or community during times of calamity, rather than in normal circumstances.

Dharma can also take on different nuances in each of the Dharma traditions - for example in Buddha Dharma, the word Dharma means the body of the Buddha's teachings.

Sādhanā, which is focused effort and spiritual practice, comes in *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* varieties. *Pravṛtti* refers to a person's normal flows of life in any human society. Some Hindu traditions recognize four goals of human life in the *pravṛtti* mode: *dharma* (a sense of balance, purpose, and wellbeing grounded in ethical values), *artha* (a sense of security and prosperity), *kāma* (experience of mental and physical pleasure), and *mokṣa/nirvāṇa* (a sense of wholeness and liberation). Most people, having found satisfaction through this, stay in this *pravṛtti* frame of mind, content with life as it goes.

When the mind, for whatever reason, is not hyper-focused on daily life and achieving a comfortable standard of living for oneself and one's family, it can delve into thoughts about existence. Some people may decide to seek insight into the existential questions of: who am I, who are we, what are we doing here, what is the multiverse, what will happen when my life is completed, etc. Finding insights through the Hindu or other Dharma traditions, an individual may discern that seeking *mokṣa/nirvāṇa* is their goal, and so will undertake the learning and practice required to go deeper. This can be done as they live a conventional life (*pravṛtti*), as part-time practitioners, or as full-time practitioners, leaving behind their former life to undertake a purely spiritual life (*nivṛtti*). Buddha Dharma practitioners use the words *upāsaka*, and *śramaṇera* and *bhikkhu* to describe these modes of life. Spiritual practice is called *sādhanā* and each Dharma tradition has *sādhanā* methods and rationales for numerous types of practitioners in accordance with each person's own proclivities. Most practitioners will try to engage in some kind of *sādhanā* at least once, whether they follow a *pravṛtti* or *nivṛtti* path in life, not as a dogmatic duty, but as a natural desire to find out how to manage themselves better in life and even existentially.

Dhyāna: Many ancient teachers of philosophy and practice in the Dharma traditions agreed that meditation, or *dhyāna*, is the most effective spiritual practice. Some people meditate using non-theist principles, focusing totally on philosophical management of the mind and consciousness. Others, particularly in Hindu Dharma traditions, focus on the multiverse and our relationship to it without the need to focus on a Supreme Being, and so, through self-cultivation, they perceive Brahman, the totality of all things. Still others prefer a strong focal point, something that reaches beyond mere cerebral awareness to emotional connection.

The monotheist Hindu Dharma traditions – connected to the histories of the clan and tribal confederations – provided the idea of an underlying sentient direction of the multiverse, characterized as Īśvara. The Supreme Being, or Īśvara, is thus the best focus for such people and each of the monotheist Hindu Dharma traditions focuses on a specific personification that is discussed in that tradition's sources of knowledge. Some traditions focus on Īśvara only, while others focus on Īśvara as an embodiment of Brahman, Brahman as symbolized through Īśvara, or Brahman only (see below for discussions on Īśvara and Brahman). Because of this, Hindus can be described as either monotheist, non-theist, atheist, or a combination/spectrum. An individual may oscillate within the spectrum depending on how they are at a given point in their lives, all of which they may discuss with their spiritual teacher to ensure overall progress. Many Hindu Dharma traditions like Śākta, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva Dharma traditions, Zoroastrian tradition, named for Zarathuṣṭra (c. 7th-6th centuries BCE) and Sikhī/Sikh Dharma which developed after its original teacher Guru Nanak (1469-1539 CE), are monotheist, whereas Buddha Dharma, Jain Dharma and a number of Hindu Dharmas are non-theist.

Ātman means self. Hindu and Jain philosophers first developed the theory of self in a variety of ways, but for the majority, *ātman* refers to the 'individual essence' – what makes you, you. Some Hindu Dharma traditions teach that it is a principle, others as well as Jains that it is a type of distinct being, and yet others that it is an imagined reality. In all cases though, the concept of *ātman* is intended to help Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs to understand that the body, mind or intellect of all living beings are pervaded by *ātman*, but that their bodies, minds or intellects do not define who they are. *Ātman,* individual essence, is eternally part of existence no matter what the world throws at it. Hindu philosophers teach that meditation on the nature of one's individual essence, its connection to the multiverse (*jagat*) and its connection/unity/relationship with Brahman/Īśvara provides true insight, wisdom, self-realization, and ultimately freedom from the ups and downs of life (*saṃsāra*). Jains teach that one needs to burn off *karma* that adheres to the *ātman* through *samyak jñāna, samyak darśana* and *samyak caritra* (correct knowledge, correct perspective, correct conduct). Buddha Dharma traditions generally teach that there is no eternal principle of the *ātman*, but that everything is a coalescence of transient co-dependent phenomena (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

Jagat, the multiverse, literally means living and moving, from the verbal root √*gam*. *Jagat* contains all energy, matter, anti-matter, time, space, intelligence, consciousness, life, and their methods of interacting. It contains multiple universes (multiverse), dimensions, states of existence, types of living beings, etc. *Jagat* is eternal and cycles between expansion, wherein all above-mentioned facets evolve and exist, and dissolution, when all existing things return to their elemental and then potential/energy states. In Hindu Dharma traditions, meditating on the connection of the *ātman* with *jagat*, one is able to zoom out to manage the ups and downs of life.

Brahman, from the Vedic Sanskrit root √*bṛh*, is that which supports, evolves, and expands. In Hindu Dharma's Vedānta philosophical tradition, Brahman refers to that principle that is the sum total of all *ātman*, *jagat*, all potentialities, and that which is beyond. It is similar to the 'singularity' and 'totality' principles of modern physics. It is a non-theist principle in that Brahman is that from and within which all existence and potentiality is located. Vedānta suggests that meditation and realization of Brahman and its connection to the individual essence of the practitioner will allow for management of the ups

and downs of *saṃsāra*, and eventual freedom from these cycles. The monotheist Hindu Dharmas use Brahman as either an equivalent or facet of Īśvara. Due to this, Sikhī/Sikh Dharma tradition also references Brahman in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Īśvara: The monotheist Hindu Dharmas each have their own understanding and embodiment of the Supreme Being, Īśvara, meaning 'capable of doing' or 'possessor'. Śāktas see it as the Divine Feminine Power; Śaivas see it as Śiva the transcendent; Vaiṣṇavas see it as Vāsudeva, the all-pervasive; Kaumaram sees it as Murugan; Sauras as the Solar Divinity; Gāṇapatyas as Gaṇeśa, etc. Īśvara thus can be a Supreme Being, in some ways similar to the Abrahamic concept of God. In Patañjali's Yoga philosophy, however, Īśvara is simply a perfected being; other Dharma traditions use Īśvara as a designation of their founding teachers. The Nyāya philosophical tradition was one of the first to argue that Īśvara was the Creator in their dualistic approach, and this was adopted by or reflective of various traditions within the monotheist Hindu Dharmas, such as Śaiva Siddhānta. Vedānta sees Īśvara as the best symbol for humans to try and comprehend Brahman. Elements of these philosophical understandings are fused together in the monotheist Hindu Dharmas in various ways. When Sikhī developed in the fifteenth century, it, like many of the devotional Hindu monotheist traditions, focussed on Īśvara using a name that reflected their unique culture and teachings. In Jain tradition, Īśvara is a state of being of each liberated *ātman*; in other words, everyone can be an Īśvara.

***Siddhānta & Saṃvāda*:** The *Ṛgveda* (1.164.46) says *ekaṁ sadviprā bahudhā vadanti*, "Reality is One; inquisitive people discuss it in various ways." Hindu spiritual traditions were never about one select, chosen people, but always about all living beings, no matter who or what they were. These worldviews or philosophies are all rationalized according to standardized logic, and based on expert consensus (*siddhānta*). As humans have different natures, different groups arrive at different conclusions. This variety is natural, and the acceptance of natural diversity (*vaividhya, bahudhā*) is thus taught by Hindu Dharma traditions. Equitable discussions (*saṃvāda*) among knowledgeable and experienced experts of philosophy and practice is the origin of the variety of distinct traditions (*sampradāyas*) and practices (*sādhanās*) in the Hindu Dharma traditions in order to cater to the different natures of human beings. Learning to live with all of this diversity is one of the greatest teachings of the Hindu Dharmas. Buddhist, Jain, and other Dharma traditions of the ancient world engaged as equals with Hindu Dharma traditions through this effective method which ensured ancient Indian societies were pluralistic.

One of the most widespread and universally recognized Hindu Mantras is: *auṁ sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ sarve santu nirāmayāḥ | sarve bhadrāṇi paśyantu mā kaścid duḥkhabhāg bhavet || auṁ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ*॥ "May all sentient beings be at peace, may no one suffer from illness, may all see auspiciousness, and may no one suffer. Aum. May there be peace in the multiverse, peace in our societies, and peace within." In Buddhist traditions, there is a similar Mantra: *Bhavatu sabba-maṅgalaṁ rakkhantu sabba-devatā | sabba-dhammānubhāvena sadā sotthī bhavantu te ||* May all have auspiciousness, may the illumined ones protect you, through the teachings of Dharma, may you always be well. Similar aspirational verses can be seen throughout the Dharma traditions showing that while there is a uniqueness and distinct nature and history of the traditions, there is nevertheless common concepts that emerged from their foundational pluralistic values.