

Dharma In Vedanta And The Dhammapada

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Abstract

This paper explores the parallel yet distinct journeys undertaken by Vedanta and the Dhammapada, two profound spiritual traditions rooted in the ancient wisdom of the Bhagavadgita. While their footsteps echo with similarities, a nuanced examination reveals a seemingly divergent trajectory that ultimately converges to crystallize a shared understanding of genuine truth. The Dhammapada, through its profound teachings, enriches the facets of truth, weaving a narrative that complements and strengthens the spiritual evolution outlined in Vedanta. The echoes of Vedantic principles resonate within the spiritual discourse of the Dhammapada, particularly emphasizing the non-dissipation of spiritual essence as expounded in the Bhagavadgita. Central to both traditions is the exploration of cosmopolitanism and the cultivation of nobility in action, untethered by attachments and desires. This exploration transcends the mundane, transforming the seeker from an earthly and material existence into a cosmic being. The thesis contends that, far from leading the seeker astray, this pathfinding virtue liberates one from the shackles of earthly tribulations, allowing the emergence of a broader perspective. The paper theorizes that the mesmerizing words from the Dhammapada and the Bhagavadgita jointly pave a transcendent path, enchanting humanity throughout time. This path, marked by the integration of diverse philosophical tenets, embodies an enduring quest for truth and unity, resonating as a timeless guide for navigating the complexities of human existence.

Keywords: Vedanta, Dhammapada, spiritual evolution, cosmic consciousness, interconnectedness

Introduction

The legacies of diverse thoughts delivered in the multiple phases of civilizations have adorned multiple philosophical traditions that have shaped cultures, societies, and individual lives at the various crossroads of intellectual tradition. Amid this vast spectrum, Vedanta and Buddhism emerge as two luminous constellations in the firmament of ancient wisdom. These philosophical systems have woven intricate narratives of reality, self-realization, and ethical conduct. At the heart of both Vedanta and Buddhism lies the concept of “Dharma,” a term that weaves together ethical principles, moral imperatives, and profound insights into the nature of existence. It implies the righteous path as well. Vedanta stands as the culmination of the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, encompassing various schools of thought that probe the nature of reality, the self, and the universe. In parallel, Buddhism, born of Siddhartha Gautama’s enlightenment, offers

an alternative path to understanding existence and transcending the cycle of suffering. These traditions share a geographical origin, yet they diverge in their metaphysical premises and approaches to spiritual liberation. The “dharma” of the Vedanta has been reverberated as the “dhamma” in Buddhist thoughts, notwithstanding some differences in its precepts. “Dharma” unfolds distinct facets within Vedanta and the Dhammapada, capturing the essence of ethical conduct and moral principles unique to each tradition. In Vedanta, Dharma is synonymous with “dharma,” encapsulating the cosmic order, righteous duty, and moral virtues that guide human behaviour. For the Dhammapada, Dhamma encapsulates the teachings of the Buddha, laying out the Eightfold Path as a transformative journey toward the cessation of suffering and the realization of enlightenment. Eknath Easwaran shows how the Vedas become the antecedents of Buddhism. He writes:

Born in freedom and stamped with the joy of self-realization, these early testaments of the Vedic sages are clear antecedents of the Buddha's voice. They contain no trace of world denial, no shadow of fear, no sense of diffidence about our place in universe. Far from deprecating physical existence, they teach that the Self-realization means health, vitality, long life and a harmonious balance of inward and outward activity. (p.17)

The above discussion clarifies that the themes of Self-realization and self-evolution that have been propounded in Vedic philosophy recur strongly in the Buddha's voice.

Understanding Dharma is akin to holding a compass that navigates the intricate terrain of human existence within both Vedanta and Buddhism. It serves as a moral lodestar, directing adherents toward ethical living, spiritual growth, and harmonious coexistence. Studying Dharma within these traditions offers profound insights into how individuals grapple with life's complexities while striving for inner transformation and self-realization.

The resonance between Vedanta and Buddhism extends beyond the surface. Engaging in a comparative analysis of Dharma in these traditions offers a bridge to connect their shared ideals and divergent pathways. It invites us to discern the universal principles that underlie ethical living and spiritual evolution, while also acknowledging the nuanced distinctions that arise from their differing philosophical premises. Such a comparative exploration unveils threads of interconnectedness, fostering interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural understanding in an era that values diversity and mutual enlightenment. Ramakrishnan Srinivasan explains

Buddhist philosophy and way of life is based on Hindu philosophy and way without rituals. There is practically no difference in the two as Nagarjuna has clearly observed in his philosophy of non-identity. . . . Spiritual living implies that we need to

be prepared for conscious dying. Dying is a process of living as one gets reborn again and again till one is fully enlightened. Hindu calls this *atmajnana* or *brahmanjnana* (Self Knowledge or knowledge of Brahman). (21)

The inclusion of Ramakrishnan Srinivasan's perspective adds another layer. According to him, Buddhist philosophy and way of life have their roots in Hindu philosophy and way, albeit without the emphasis on rituals. He underscores that there is virtually no significant distinction between the two, as indicated by Nagarjuna's philosophy of non-identity. This philosophy, as expressed by Nagarjuna, emphasizes the essential similarity between the two traditions, despite apparent disparities.

In this essence, there lies the significant incorporation and amalgamation between the two. They express the same truth providing two interpretations. The goal is the same, but the path differs. This research paper embarks on a journey of comparative exploration, delving into the multifaceted dimensions of Dharma within Vedanta and the Dhammapada. As the threads of these two philosophies are unravelled, the intention is to decipher the commonalities and distinctions beneath the surface, illuminating shared insights and distinctive approaches to ethical living and spiritual realization. Through a close examination of the philosophical foundations, ethical implications, practical applications, intersections, influences, and contemporary relevance of Dharma in both Vedanta and Buddhism, an effort is made to unearth the timeless wisdom that continues to shape the lives of adherents and seekers alike.

Showing how the strands and vibes of Vedanta encompass the Buddhist philosophy, Arthur Osborne writes:

The common use of the term 'Nirvana' by Western writers about Buddhism and of *Mokshya* or *Mukti* by writers about Hinduism has helped to foster the idea of some difference between the two conception,

but there is none. Both terms and others also are used for the supreme state in both religions(109).

Arthur Osborne's perspectives is that the similarities in terminology between the two traditions, such as the use of *Nirvana* in Buddhism and *Moksha* or *Mukti* in Hinduism, might lead to the misconception that there are substantial differences between their respective concepts. However, Osborne asserts that this is not the case; both terms, along with others, are employed to describe the supreme state of realization in both Buddhism and Hinduism.

If there is only a difference in the name and terms, but the goal is the same, this study is justifiable because it compass the aspects of *Mokshya* and *Nirvana*. In this crux, the great saying of Rig Veda helps to point out the unity in diversity as it says, "*Ekam sat viprahahudavadanti*," Truth is one, the wise call it by many names. (120) It radiates how both paths lead to the same destination spiritual illumination and bliss.

Fritjof Capra opines that Buddha transforms the Vedantic voice into the psychological one. He says, His doctrine, therefore, was not one of metaphysics, but one of psychotherapy. He pointed out the origin of human frustrations and the way to overcome them, taking up for this purpose the traditional Indian concepts of Maya, karma, nirvana, etc., and giving them a fresh, dynamic and directly relevant psychological interpretation (105).

Capra begins by emphasizing that Buddha's teachings were not primarily concerned with metaphysical discussions or abstract concepts, unlike traditional Vedantic thought. Instead, he sees Buddha's teachings as having a significant focus on psychotherapy, which means that Buddha aimed to address and alleviate human psychological suffering.

Capra then highlights that Buddha's teachings centered on understanding the origins of human frustrations and sufferings. Buddha's goal was to provide guidance on how to overcome these sources

of discontentment and find a path to liberation from suffering. In doing so, Buddha drew upon various traditional Indian concepts such as Maya (illusion), karma (actions and their consequences), and nirvana (liberation).

Importantly, Capra suggests that Buddha gave these concepts a fresh and dynamic psychological interpretation. This means that instead of viewing these concepts solely from a metaphysical or philosophical standpoint, Buddha's teachings were more concerned with their psychological implications and practical applications in helping individuals achieve mental and emotional well-being.

Literature Review

The exploration of "Dharma" within Vedanta and the Dhammapada necessitates a comprehensive review of primary texts, scholarly works, and commentaries that illuminate the intricate dimensions of this concept in both philosophical traditions. The following literature review provides an overview of the key sources that have contributed to the understanding and interpretation of Dharma in Vedanta and the Dhammapada.

Scholars and researchers have engaged in comparative studies that bridge the insights of Vedanta and Buddhism. Works such as *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* by T.R.V. Murti and *Vedanta and Buddhism: A Comparative Study* by Helmuth von Glasenapp explore the intersections and divergences between the two traditions' interpretations of Dharma. Comparative philosophy, interfaith dialogue, and cross-cultural studies have contributed to the cross-fertilization of ideas, revealing the shared ethical ideals and divergent metaphysical assumptions of Dharma in these traditions.

Works on ethics and moral philosophy within Vedanta and Buddhism, such as *Ethics in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism* by Damien Keown and *The Ethics of the Vedanta and its Metaphysical Presuppositions* by R. Balasubramanian delve into

the ethical implications of Dharma. These studies shed light on how Dharma guides ethical conduct, cultivates virtues, and contributes to the broader moral landscape of each tradition.

In the modern context, scholars like Swami Vivekananda, Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh have offered contemporary perspectives on Dharma in Vedanta and Buddhism. Their writings provide insights into how the teachings of Dharma remain relevant and applicable to the challenges of the present age.

The comprehensive literature review underscores the diverse array of sources that inform our understanding of Dharma in Vedanta and the Dhammapada. By drawing from primary texts, commentaries, comparative studies, and contemporary reflections, this research paper seeks to synthesize a holistic view of how Dharma shapes ethical, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions in these two ancient traditions.

Literary Methodology

This research paper employs a comparative analysis methodology to investigate the concept of “Dharma” as presented in Vedanta and the Dhammapada. This methodology involves a systematic examination of textual sources, philosophical ideas, ethical principles, and practical applications within both traditions. By juxtaposing and critically evaluating the similarities and differences between Vedanta and Buddhist Dharma, the methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of how these two traditions approach the concept of Dharma and its implications.

Theoretical Framework: Comparative Philosophy and Hermeneutics

This theoretical framework draws the field of comparative philosophy, which seeks to uncover commonalities and divergences between philosophical systems from different cultural contexts. By applying this framework, the research delves into the underlying philosophical assumptions, conceptual frameworks, and

metaphysical foundations of Dharma in both traditions that arise from distinct cultural backgrounds, yet can share fundamental insights into human existence and ethical conduct.

Hermeneutics: The research paper employs hermeneutical principles to interpret and analyze the texts of Vedanta and the Dhammapada. Hermeneutics provides a methodology for understanding the deeper meanings embedded in the texts, considering the historical context, linguistic nuances, and symbolic representations. This approach allows the researcher to uncover layers of interpretation within each tradition’s understanding of dharma and its implications for individuals and society.

Voice of Vedanta and the Dhammapada

The comparative study of ethical principles advocated by Vedanta and Buddhism reveals both shared values and distinct approaches to ethical living, duty, and personal growth. Through textual interpretations, we can delve deeper into principles and their significance within each tradition.

Both Vedanta and Buddhism emphasize non-attachment as a cornerstone of ethical conduct. In Vedanta, the Bhagavadgita’s verse, “Set thy heart upon thy works, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward; never cease to do thy work” (2:47; Mascaró trans 52) underscores the idea of performing actions without attachment to outcomes. This aligns with Buddhism’s emphasis on breaking free from attachment to alleviate suffering. The interpretation here is that ethical actions should be driven by duty or compassion, rather than personal gain or desire. The Dhammapada states:

If you want to reach the other shore of existence, give up what is before, behind, and in between. Set your mind free, and go beyond birth and death. If you want to reach the other shore, don’t let doubts passions, and cravings strengthen your fetters. Meditate deeply, discriminate between the pleasant. And the permanent, and break free the fetters of Mara. (24:15, 16; Easwaran trans 236)

Buddha's proclamation is to rise beyond the doubts and cravings, attachments that derive from desires. The moments one is freed of the desires, one is in the liberated trance where there are no grossly gross cons of mine and thine. One is in the abode of glory and bliss bestowed by spiritual evolution. In the Bhagavadgita, Sri Krishna also makes a similar postulation to rise beyond the chasm of birth and death:

The unreal never is: the Real never is not. This truth indeed has been seen by those who can see the true. The three Gunas of Nature are the world of the Vedas. Arise beyond the three Guanas, Arjuna! Be in Truth eternal, beyond earthly opposites. Beyond gains and possessions, possess thine own soul. (2: 16, 45; Mascaro trans 49, 52) Sri Krishna and Buddha have similar ideations. Both of them inspire the seeker to go beyond the ephemeral trappings and realize eternity beyond them. The gunas are the trappings as they create the play of this worldly affairs. That's why, Buddha precepts open the seeker to discard any doubts, fetters, and despair to attain the tarnquail mind. Both Sri Krishna and Buddha are integrated at this juncture. They are not speaking the different truth; rather they are enriching the same dimension of the truth and reality.

Vedanta places significant emphasis on performing one's duty (dharma) in alignment with the cosmic order. Bhagavadgitasays, "And do thy duty, even if it be humble, rather than another, even if it be great. To die in one's duty is life: To live in another's is death" (3:35; Mascaro trans 59) highlights the principle of fulfilling responsibilities selflessly. This can be seen as a reflection of cosmic harmony, where each individual's duty contributes to the greater whole. This interpretation resonated with the concept of ethical living for the betterment of society.

Buddhism, as reflected in the Dhammapada's verse, "Avoid all evil, cultivate the good, purify your mind: This sums up the teaching of the Buddhas" (14:183;

Easwaran trans 170) underscores the importance of mental transformation alongside virtuous conduct. This emphasizes that ethical conduct is not limited to mere external actions but involves purifying the mind from harmful thoughts and intentions. The interpretation here is that ethical behaviour stems from inner transformation, aligning with Buddhism's emphasis on mental awareness and the cultivation of virtues.

Both traditions highlight the comprehensive nature of ethical living. In Buddhism, the Dhammapada's advises against offending through speech, conduct, mind, or thoughts. It says, "One is not noble who injured living creatures. They are noble who hurt no one" (19:270, Easwaran trans. 201). This emphasizes the interconnectedness of thoughts, actions, and words in ethical conduct. Similarly, in Vedanta, the Bhagavad Gita's emphasis on performing duties for the sake of cosmic integrity envisions the precept of cosmopolitanism. Sri Krishna says, "And he is the greatest Yogi he whose vision is ever one: when the pleasure and pain of others is his own pleasure and pain" (6:32; Mascaro 72). Both Buddha and Sri Krishna speak to the holistic nature of ethical behaviour, encompassing both actions and intentions. Seeing others in oneself is perceiving the whole creation and its multifaceted aspects as one remains the supreme truth of the creation.

Vedanta's emphasis on duty and selfless action, as interpreted by Adi Shankaracharya, aligns with the concept of Karma Yoga. Shankaracharya's perspective highlights how ethical conduct is intertwined with self-realization and the recognition of the underlying unity of existence. On the other hand, Thich Nhat Hanh's perspective on mindfulness and compassion in Buddhism aligns with the emphasis on mental purification and interconnectedness in ethical behaviour.

The comparison of ethical principles in Vedanta and Buddhism reveals convergence in values such

Dharma in Vedanta and the Dhammapada-Antim Gurung as non-violence and selfless action. However, the approaches diverge in their focus- Vedanta's emphasis on fulfilling duties for cosmic harmony and Buddhism's focus on mental transformation for liberation from suffering. Despite these differences, both traditions share a fundamental commitment to ethical living as a means to personal growth and societal harmony.

Conclusion

Vedanta and the Dhammapada have similar footsteps with different paths, however; they seemingly diverge to converge to crystallize the genuine truth. The Dhammapada enriches the truth and the aspects of spiritual evolution do not dissipate from the voice of Vedanta as postulated in the Bhagavadgita but enrich and strengthen it. The dynamics of cosmopolitanism and the pathfinding virtues of nobility in action free of attachment and desire shed that they do not leave the seeker astray; rather they transform the earthly and material person into a cosmic one. When a person attains the broader perspective, the tribulations and tutelage of earthly affairs dissolve away and one perceives the glory and bliss in the happiness and satisfaction of others. One exists upon the existence of others.

This is the bond of humanity. This is the process of integrating and assimilating the whole creation and creatures to make a whole and a totality that creates an ideal state in this time of pain and cry. The mesmerising words from the Dhammapada and the Bhagavadgita pave the path that enchants humanity forever and ever.

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