

Editor's Note on Geoff Bamford's Article on *dharma/dhamma*.

Part of the interest of this article lies in the context of its production. Geoff Bamford was invited to speak at a large conference in India. Below we reproduce the publicity for that conference. It announces that the conference is designed to show "the essential identity" between *dharma* and *dhamma*; in other words, to show that the Buddha's concept was the same as that found in brahminism/Hinduism. After the conference Geoff was pressed to send the text of his speech for publication; but when he had done so, he heard nothing more. The reason can easily be surmised: his paper takes issue with the basic premise of the conference. This conference was a piece of cultural politics, and Geoff found himself on the wrong side.

Dharma-Dhamma International Conference, Sept. 21-23, 2012, Sanchi/Bhopal

Hosts: 1. Center for Study of Religion and Society, New Delhi, India;
2. Mahabodhi Society, Sri Lanka

The central theme of the Conference is Dharma-Dhamma which has been *a pivotal and pervasive concept and overriding principle* in Indian culture commonly shared by all religious traditions of India. It has played a dominant and cardinal role in shaping Indian view and way of life. It has covered every facet of human existence and cosmic life in so far as it has been the

- ♦ sustaining (dharaka),
- ♦ regulating (niyamaka) and
- ♦ life-enhancing (sadhaka)

force in Indian cultural ethos. It has been the foundational tenet in Hinduism and Buddhism.

AIM

The Conference aims to focus on *the essential identity* between the Dharma-Dhamma view points. We find that these thoughts are as relevant today as they have been over millennia of Pilgrims' Progress, exemplified by the abiding *continuum of Hindu and Buddhist* Civilizations.

We aim through this conference, to facilitate the *cross-pollination* of ideas and foster *harmony* between the *two* ancient Civilizations, so that Dharma-Dhamma becomes a veritable celebration of freedom.

It is all the more essential in view of the forces released by Globalisation today, *to integrate the Orient through* the common factor of Dharma-Dhamma link provided by centuries of *cultural and civilisational inter-connectedness*.

SCOPE & THEME

This conference will explore the following subjects:

- ♦ Hindu Dharma – Bauddha Dhamma
as Philosophia Perennis and Universalis – Perennial and Universal Philosophies
- ♦ Expression of Hindu and Bauddham thoughts
in art and architecture
- ♦ Archaeological and Historical perspectives
- ♦ Sampradayas and patterns of worship in temples
- ♦ Renaissance in Hindu and Bauddham temples
- ♦ *Areas for cooperation*
between Hindu and Bauddham scholars and prominent citizens
- ♦ Socio-economic cooperation among the Indian Ocean Rim countries

INDICATIVE LIST OF THEMES OR TOPICS:

1. *Specific paradigms* of sanatana dharma and bauddha dhamma
2. Root cause of existence in dharma-dhamma
3. Dharma-dhamma in pursuit of a universal cause
4. Dharma-dhamma an inclusive growth (abhyudayam)
5. Dharma-dhamma as the strongest cultural foundation in the Orient
6. Dharma-dhamma as the ordering principle

7. Dharma-dhamma as universal ethos
8. Dharma-dhamma principle as the enduring metaphor, a cultural continuum
9. Dharma-dhamma in cosmic sense
10. Dharma-dhamma in social and ethical sense
11. Dharma-dhamma in forms of worship
12. Dharma-dhamma and ecological preservation
13. Dharma-dhamma as synthesis of social values
14. Phenomenology of dharma-dhamma in various systems of thought
15. Precepts of dharma-dhamma in canonical texts
16. Dharma-dhamma as the highest metaphysical principle
17. Dharma-dhamma and consciousness studies
18. Dharma-dhamma and svadharma
19. Dharma-dhamma and rajadharma, jurisprudence
20. Delineation of dhamma in Abhidhamma texts
21. Dharma-dhamma and meditative practices
22. Dharma-dhamma as a normative principle
23. Dhamma analysis in Abhidhamma
24. Dharma-dhamma and liberation (nihs'reyas)
25. Place of s'eela as causal factor in dharma-dhamma
26. Dharma in Upanishads
27. Dharma in epics
28. Dhamma in Jataka texts
29. Practice of dharma-dhamma as guarantor of peace in international relations
30. Dharma-dhamma in cosmogenic myths
31. Dharma-dhamma and existential world-views
32. Dharma-dhamma as aesthetic expressions in art and architecture
33. Dharma-dhamma as expressions in performing arts
34. Dharma-dhamma and archaeology
35. Specific contributions of scholars, for example, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, TRV Murty, Bhikku Bodhi
36. Geographical spread of dharma-dhamma from the Urals to the Setusamudram, from the Urals to the Mekong delta
37. Zen Buddhism and metaphysics

The Abstracts and Papers may be sent by email in word.doc unicode format to: dharmadhammaconference@gmail.com

Abstracts and Papers must be in English only (Participants interested in presenting Papers in languages other than English may contact the organisers at the contact details provided). Poster Sessions are also available.

Last Date for Submission of Abstracts: 30th June 2012

Last Date for Submission of Papers: 15th Aug. 2012

Contact details:

Dharma Dhamma Conference

CSRS, India Foundation

C-1, Jangpura Extension

New Delhi- 110092,

India

Phone: +91 11 43012351

+91 11 43012351 (10.30 A.M to 4.30 P.M on weekdays)

E-mail: dharmadhammaconference@gmail.com

On Careful Distinction between Usages of *Dharma/Dhamma*

Geoffrey Bamford

This paper briefly reviews the early history of the term *dharma/dhamma*, focusing primarily on Buddhist sources. Then it considers implications for the contemporary understanding of Buddhism, e.g. in relation to Hinduism.

It first establishes some basic assumptions about antique, polysemic terms like *dharma* and about Indic culture. After a quick glance at Vedic usage, it then maps the semantic field of *dhamma* in the Pali *sutta* material. Next, it considers how thereafter the *sāvakas* sought to systematise and package the notion of *dhamma*. After that, it reviews Asoka's innovations.

Moving on to Brahmanical sources, it mentions some recent research on the *Dharma-sūtras* & *-śāstras*, then looks rapidly at the Epic literature. On this evidence, it offers some preliminary generalisations about early Buddhist and Brahmanical thinking and practice, as revealed in ideas of *dharma/dhamma*.

These two cultural currents developed in a dialectical relationship, each seeking progressively to confute and/or co-opt the other. The Buddhist usage is grounded in a psychological and the Brahminical in a social vision; the Buddhist usage is primarily descriptive, the Brahmanical prescriptive.

Indian Buddhism emerges in a context conditioned by Brahmanism, just as later Hinduism is conditioned by Buddhism. So, one can usefully compare the two traditions, e.g. by analysing the various usages of *dharma/dhamma* in them. But such analysis hardly shows them to be 'essentially identical'. Attempts to de-emphasise what is distinctive about Buddhism seem counter-intuitive. They are also counter-productive, particularly in relation to India's cultural diplomacy.

Introduction

How to locate Buddhism in an Indian context? How does it relate to Hinduism? What does the history tell us? And what does this mean for Hindu-Buddhist relations? In particular, how can modern Indians connect with Buddhists worldwide?

For instance, how helpful is it to posit an essential identity between Hinduism and Buddhism? Can we usefully see both as based on a single ‘concept and overriding principle’, namely *dharma/dhamma*?

To explore these questions, let us briefly review the history of that term. Then let us consider contemporary Hindu-Buddhist relations in that light.

Context

First, we may establish one or two basic assumptions. These, I suggest, are widely shared across the world-wide community of those who study India’s heritage.

Antique Polysemic Terms

Old words, like *dharma*, remain in use. Old ideas may also retain some power. However, this is on the model of ‘my grandfather’s axe’:

This is my grandfather’s axe.
My father replaced the handle; I replaced the blade.¹

Abbreviations in this paper for citations from the Pali are those used in the PTS Dictionary.

¹This ontological paradox asks whether the axe is still the same as the one my grandfather used: perhaps, since form and function remain constant, it is the same; perhaps, since material and manufacture differ, it is not. The implicit response is that what we call by a certain name is bound to be variable, particularly over long periods of time. That must surely apply to the term *dharma/dhamma*. After all:

- to start with, language is a social phenomenon:
 - words are used, and work, in particular ways in particular situations for particular people; and
 - these usages relate to one another in ways that:
 - are coherent enough for people to coordinate thought and action and so
 - can indeed be analysed and understood, but nonetheless
 - defy simple explanation;
- and then, on top of that, like all social phenomena, language usage is subject to continual change. So, words that remain in use over long periods cannot be assumed to have constant meanings. Over millennia, meanings can shift to such an extent that a connection between original and contemporary usages can be established only with extreme difficulty.

That is: we can of course map the usages of an antique, polysemic term² like *dharma/dhamma*; this exercise, for which etymology is relevant, will be helpful in exploring the import of particular, ancient usages; but we cannot by this means establish some transcendent, immutable meaning that applies across all historical contexts.

Indic Culture: the Great Bifurcation

Indic culture was from the first expressed in a social order centred on a spiritual élite, whose status was separate from political or economic power. This pattern crystallised initially around a kinship group, the Brahmins.³ An alternative ‘vanguard group’ then emerged.

²Homophones are distinct words, with unconnected meanings, which happen to sound the same: e.g. “dear” and “deer”. Polysemy, by contrast, is when a word carries a range of meanings which, for users of the language, are linked semantically, so that each is naturally understood in relation to others. Consider the word “creep” as in “wage creep” (slow but steady increase) and “he’s a creep” (disconcerting). The contrast between polysemes and homophones is relative, not absolute. In the two senses of “beloved” and “over-priced”, the word “dear” may now be considered either way, (although a few hundred years ago the polysemic connection, via etymology, was clearer).

Our ancestors’ languages and thought-worlds differ from what we are familiar with today. Thus, the patterns of polysemy in old Indo-Aryan are unusual from a contemporary perspective. The word *vr̥ka*, for instance, can refer equally to a wolf and a plough; a closely related word is used for a handful of grass. [To understand this, we must imagine: the action of the hand twisting up a bunch of grass stems from the ground; the way a ploughshare raises the earth, twists it over and drops it away; and the action of the wolf on the prey animal’s neck...] When it comes to abstract terms, there is a consistent tendency for a word, or at least a set of closely connected forms, to be used in contexts that from today’s perspective would seem to be opposites — seeing and shining, for instance. [*Loka*, normally ‘the world’, has one attested usage in the sense of ‘the faculty of vision’, while *āloka* covers ‘looking/seeing’, ‘sight/vision/aspect’, ‘light/lustre/splendour’, ‘flattery’...] The moral of the story is that we must treat ancient words and texts with great care.

Suppose, for instance, that an ancient term like *dharma* has an etymologically identical homophone in a contemporary language. We can be sure that that the contemporary meaning does not correspond to the original: that would be possible only if all the other categories in that modern language, in relation to which the meaning of *dharma* emerges in use, had also been held constant for several thousand years.

³There is, however, some evidence that, in the very early Vedic period, a Brahmin was someone who behaved in a certain way — an inspired singer of sacred songs — rather than someone born into a certain type of family.

That was around the Buddha's time. There was a great bifurcation: Indian cultural history resolved itself into two distinct currents, the orthodox Brahmanical and the heterodox renunciate (or *śramaṇa*), which cross-fertilised.⁴

The Brahmanical order was about households and ritual. It preserved antique language-forms and ceremonies. It was particularist: the spiritual élite formed a quasi-ethnicity, and defined the rest of society in terms of quasi-ethnic groupings, each with its own character and norms; and cultural transmission fell under purview of a closed circle. This was a hierarchical, esoteric approach with strong magical overtones. It sought support among local, landed élites, which it in turn served.

The *śramaṇa* (particularly the early Buddhist) current was formed of people who had left the family to join an all-comers group of wandering meditators. Using vernacular language and wary of ritual, it offered an exoteric, universalist message. It deprecated identification with ethnic or quasi-ethnic groupings: all roles were in principle open to all population strata. Sceptical of authority, it defined itself in rational-empirical and ethical terms, and found support among the socially mobile and economically innovative.

The differences are clear. Indeed, they go further.

The Brahmanical vision is all about essences and identities. The essence of the person is identical with that of the universe. That is absolute reality. The aim is to understand it. Verbal formulae (from *tat tvam asi* to *saccidānda*) are felt to help. This is an idealist ontology, in which specific formulations of being, of 'what is' are powerful. And gods are important.

The Buddhist aim is to clear the mind of unhelpful habits and concepts. That involves being careful of language, which tends to confuse, and so not trying to define what *is*, as such. This approach discourages thoughts of essences and identities, suggesting instead close observation and analysis of how we experience life. It is a process philosophy: it teaches us to relate to our environment holistically, without reference to particular, enduring entities. And gods have limited scope.

Dharma/Dhamma Usage

Before the Buddha

That is the background. Then, what about *Dharma*?

⁴Bronkhorst 2007.

In the Veda, the word was relatively rare.⁵ It was associated with royal management of public affairs. Upaniṣadic references filled this out: a weaker man was supposed to make requests of a stronger by appealing to a standard of truth or fairness called *dharma*.⁶

But so far the term had a relatively limited usage within the literature. It was within the Buddhist tradition that it first assumed a central position.

Around the Buddha's Time

Particular patterns to universal truth: the semantic field of *dhamma*

Dhamma is all over the Pali *suttas*. Its usages are manifold.

Now, we can understand big, abstract ideas as extensions of small, practical ones. Thus, in the *suttas*:

1. The simplest and most casual usage of *dhamma* conveys the idea of “what it’s like” — ‘it’, here, being a phenomenon in experience. Each such phenomenon/experience is understood to have a characteristic quality, a pattern, nature or rule:

*yaṇ kiñci samudaya-dhammaṇ sabban tan nirodha-dhammaṇ*⁷
(‘if it’s the sort of thing that arises, then it’s necessarily the sort of thing that fades away.’)

2. And how do we recognise what phenomena are like? With the mind! So *dhamma* is what we experience via the sixth sense of mind:

*manasā dhammaṇ viññāya*⁸
(‘cognising the nature-of-the-phenomenon with the mind’)

From there, the usage is extended:

3. first to cover the totality of what is cognised, as in:

*diṭṭhe [va] dhamme*⁹
(‘in the phenomenal world’)

or

⁵ Olivelle, Leoshko & Ray 2012, p. 13.

⁶ *Brh. Upanishad*, 1.4.14.

⁷ D i. 110, 180; S iv. 47 & passim.

⁸ S iv. 185 etc.

⁹ S iv. 175, 205 etc.

*ye dhammā hetuppabhavā tesaṃ hetuṃ Tathāgato āha*¹⁰
(‘the Buddha has explained the causal basis of all causal phenomena’)

for, after all,

*manopubbāṅgamā dhammā*¹¹
(‘for phenomena to emerge in experience, the mind has to get busy first’);

4. then to express what the mind cognises when operating at its peak:

*samāhite citte dhammā pātubhavanti*¹²
(‘when you get your heart-and-mind together, insights-into-experience arise’)

5. and finally to describe the Buddha’s teaching:

*sammādhhammo*¹³
(‘the perfect quality of experience’ and
‘the perfect insight into experience, which yields such quality’ and
‘the perfect teaching, which crystallises such insight’)

So the *dhamma* semantic field looks like this:

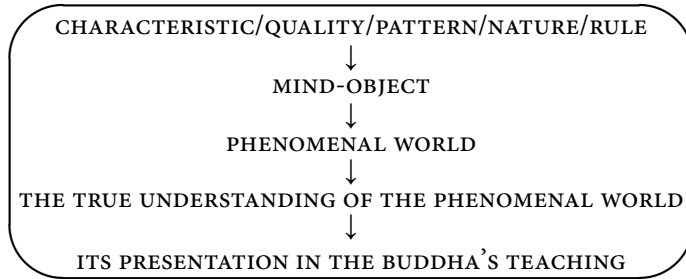


Figure 1: *dhamma* semantic field

¹⁰Vin i. 4. The term ‘causal’ will do here, though there are overtones of ‘conditional’ and also indeed of ‘motivational’.

¹¹DhP 1.

¹²S iv. 78.

¹³S i. 129.

In the *vinaya*, *dhamma* also means a rule. This is a specialised, peripheral usage. After all, the *sāsana* is often referred to as *dhamma-vinaya*, implying that *dhamma* is mainly seen as a category separate from the field of rule-making.

So, Buddhists used *dhamma* prescriptively as well as descriptively. But, they respected the distinction; and, descriptive usages predominate.¹⁴

Overall, the *dhamma* discourse offers an experiential description of the human condition, in which generalisations are grounded in precise particulars. It starts with momentary, personal insights and goes on to abiding truths about the human condition (and also to the forms¹⁵ in which those truths come down to us).

The doctor's medicine: *dhamma* as doctrine

The big picture described is the doctrine. The understanding embodied in the doctrine is the ultimate experience-pattern or mind-object.

It is the medicine that Doctor Buddha offers. You and I, patients, may choose to take it. Classically¹⁶ it is described¹⁷ thus:

1. *Svākkhāto* (“well formulated”)

Gotama's formulation is helpful: it helps people in their personal, moral and psycho-spiritual development.

2. *Sandiṭṭhiko* (“open to examination”)

It is about physical and above all cognitive behaviours that people can explore and cultivate so as to benefit themselves and those around them. Anyone who puts their heart into this will find it makes sense and works.

3. *Akālika* (“timeless, instantaneous”)

The approach does not vary. It is ever-fresh in experience. As one unders-

¹⁴Professor R.F. Gombrich has helpfully highlighted the importance of this point.

¹⁵*Dhamma*, in the singular, conveys the idea of The Teaching as a whole; *kusalā dhammā*, in the plural, refers to particular doctrinal categories of experience — cf. Cousins, 1996, pp. 144 ff. Cousins suggests that *kusala* has a sense somewhat like ‘skilful’. That would imply that these experiences which the doctrine highlights are open to those who ‘skilfully’ cultivate the practices leading to personal transformation. So *dhamma* here would mean ‘what is taught’ in the sense of ‘what types of experience a person is recommended to cultivate’.

¹⁶*Samyuttanikāyo Pañcamabhāge-dutiyo kaṇḍo Mahāvaggo* 11. *Sotāpatti samyuttaṃ* 4. *Puññā-bhisanda vaggo*.

¹⁷Here, I have adapted Buddhaghosa's explanations quite freely.

tands and internalises it, it starts to work — experience improves, in the instant.

4. *Ehipassiko* (“come-and-see”)

It is freely available for all to learn about and to try out. It is universally relevant and true: there are no special dispensations.

5. *Opanayiko* (“gets-you-there”)

It leads to personal transformation. That is why people cultivate it — out of a personal motivation, not to fulfil a social obligation. It does not disappoint.

6. *Paccattaṃ vedītabbo viññūhi* (“what those who develop their consciousness will come to terms with in personal experience”)

To apply it, you work on yourself. That work brings *dhamma* expertise.

The psychological basis of *dhamma*: a contemporary description

So, what unites *dhammas* in the sense of patterns or mind-objects with The *Dhamma* or Doctrine? Both usages refer to a process of personal understanding. The understanding in question, as Karunadasa suggests,¹⁸ was typically that of people for whom the practice of Buddhist meditation (*sati, samatha-vipassanā, bhāvanā*) was central.

Dhamma thinking starts with this process of psychological self-training. In the language of contemporary psychology, the assumption would be that:

- we can train our physical and above all cognitive behaviour to help us attend to our momentary experience closely and dispassionately; indeed,
- momentary experience is properly the primary object of people’s attention, thought and language-use; and
- its various qualities, mental or material, are to be understood on their own terms, that is:
 - it hardly matters what the experience is attributable to (‘out there’ or ‘inside’);

¹⁸Karunadasa, 1996, p. 1.

- what matters is that:
 - * heart-and-mind is always involved, and that
 - * problems arise when heart-and-mind gets carried away from the experience itself to thoughts and judgements about what it may be attributable to and why; so
- it is helpful instead simply to focus on the experience-quality itself, in the moment.

The suggestion is: “Don’t get carried away, focus on the experience: don’t think things, think *dhammas*.” So, an appropriate translation for *dhamma* is often just ‘thing’

*lokadhammā*¹⁹

(‘things of this world’)

*manopubbangamā dhammā*²⁰

(‘mind is the forerunner of all things’)

After the Buddha’s Time

Alas, the general public tends to be concerned with ‘things’ — with what *is* (real) and what not. And, alas, people’s default assumption is that reality is material, so that once dead it is as if we had never been; while the alternative assumption relates reality to ideal entities (God, fame, consciousness), so that we may in some sense live forever. So, how to suggest that there is no point in looking beyond experience, no need to assume (or deny) some independent, determinative reality?

We can say: reality isn’t the point — what matters is the quality of the experience-instant. We can say: “don’t think things *or ideas*, think *dhammas*.” We can say the *dhamma* approach is to steer by the middle (*majjhimā paṭipadā*).²¹ When in danger of falling for materialism (*ucchedavāda*), head back towards idealism (*sassatāvāda*); but not all the way; when you might be going too far, head back in the other direction; and so on.

We can say these things. Still, it is a hard sell.

¹⁹D iii. 260; Nd2 55

²⁰DhP 1. This is the standard translation — see also the alternative rendering given on @@@p. 5 above.

²¹Dhammacakka pavattana sutta SN 56:11.

People like ideals. Consider the development of Buddhist religiosity: as the Buddha became an object of worship, his *dhamma* acquired a quasi-magical patina.

Now, of course, the faculty of ‘putting the heart’ (*saddhā*) can counteract psychological blockages (*avijjā*). In that sense, devotion is good; not if it distracts people from working on themselves.²² So, *saddhā* must be channelled. Accordingly, we are told of the Buddha saying:

*Yo ... Dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati*²³
 (“If you want to see me, look at the Dhamma!”)

And he was represented as constantly drawing attention back to the need for exploration and understanding of one’s own psychological processes:

*Yo paṭiccasamuppādam passati, so Dhammaṃ passati.*²⁴
 (“If you want to see the Dhamma, look into the way experience develops out of underlying conditions!”)

Thus, if people want ideals, it is necessary to give them ideals. Or at least to give something that can be understood as an ideal but will actually focus the mind in a helpful way.

Similarly if people want reality there is no point in telling them they are wrong, so, there is nothing for it, *dhamma* must be identified with ‘reality’. But only provisionally, only conditionally!

The trouble is, to make sense of *dhamma* thinking, a person has to work with it for a while. So, how to present it to those who have not yet had a chance to do that? A certain creative ambiguity is inevitable.

That strategy must have worked particularly well in the charismatic, subversive phase of early Buddhism, when the only aim was to help individuals achieve a positive, transformative experience. Later, there were institutional structures to maintain. In this setting, *Dhamma* teaching was inevitably routinised,²⁵ so that

²² Cf. the Kālāma-sutta.

²³ The Vakkali Sutta is in the Saṃyutta Nikāya.

²⁴ Majjhima-nikaya I, Nal. 241, PTS 191.

²⁵ Weber suggests that the values — we might say *dhammas* — with which an organisation first develops are not sustainable in the next phase, when the organisation becomes established. An established institution cannot depend on the surge of spirit that characterises a start-up. The organisational processes must become routine. This will tend first to neutralise and then finally to destroy the original values. (Cf. Weber 1978:1121-1157).

concepts and experiences were less tightly fused.²⁶ Moreover, those concepts had to be defended against controversialists from competing traditions. So, gradually, from the *pudgala-vāda* through the *Sarvāstivāda* to the *tathāgatagarbha*, the deconstruction of individual self-hood was gently de-emphasised and a sort of quasi-ontology re-emerged. Even the purist Theravadins came to suggest that *dhammas* (in first sense: experience-qualities) are known in a real and ultimate way (*saccikattha ... paramattha*).²⁷

After all, the *dhamma* analysis was about understanding experience in a way not distorted by self-interest or emotion — a way that was detached, impartial, certain. And people do think of such understanding as ‘real’. So Buddhists could hardly avoid speaking of ‘reality’, as it were.

In the middle-Indo-Aryan cultural context, that tended to involve reference to *svabhāva*, ‘self-existence’. This term came to prominence in the Brahminical discourse,²⁸ but the Abhidhammikas clearly felt they could not reject it entirely; so, they found a use for it. *Dhammas*, they said, are indeed qualities or characteristics — but a *dhamma* does not qualify or characterise any (other) entity. No, *dhammas* just have their own nature (*saka-bhāva*). They do not emerge from or return to any other-nature (*para-bhāva*). So

*attano sabhāvaṃ dhārentī ti dhammā*²⁹

(“*dhammas* are so called because they bear their own nature”)

This sophisticated response sought to appropriate and redefine the opponents’ concept. But it was risky: the idea of a *dhamma* bearing its own nature was potentially misleading.

The danger was clearly recognised, for an alternative, subtler definition was then offered:

²⁶The monastic community came to recognise a split between two contrasting monkly career-paths (and value-systems). There were the proponents of book-learning, *granthadhura*, and those who undertook experiential enquiry, *vipassanādhura*.

²⁷Karunadasa, op. cit. p. 8.

²⁸Interestingly, the Brahminical literature came in time to use *svabhāva* in a sense similar to the first meaning of *dhamma* (‘quality’, cf. Figure 1 on p. 40). An example of this usage would be *prīṭisvabhāvātma kṛtāñjaliḥ* “with a heart full of joy, he folded his hands in prayer”. Bhagavata-purāṇa 3.21.12.

²⁹Cf. e.g. MhNdA 261; DhsA 126; VsmS V 6. We are close to the Zen *koan* about the sound of one hand clapping. But the Zen masters had it easier: confronted with Confucianism, they could formally erect the goal of exploding conceptual thought. Indian Buddhists, by contrast, were concerned to defend rationality against the mystificatory tendencies they saw in Brahmanical quarters.

*paccayehi dhāriyanti ti dhammā*³⁰

(“A *dhamma* is defined as that which is borne by its own conditions.”)

That is, a *dhamma* is what comes into experience when the conditions are right: an emergent system-characteristic, we may say. That does not seem too far from Nāgārjuna’s thinking, though he of course took a different line on *svabhāva*: in all of experience, (all *dharma*s), he saw *śūnyatā*, emptiness, i.e. the fact of being a mere reflection of causes and conditions — and this he identified specifically as the absence of *svabhāva*.³¹

Asoka

That is the rarefied end of the *dhamma* spectrum. Asoka, by contrast, was concerned with the other end — common-or-garden *dhamma*, so to say.

Asoka was a Buddhist layman (*upāsaka*)³² who studied canonical texts.³³ But he wanted to encourage *everyone* to behave well — or, *raison d’état* led his government to foster civic sentiments across the whole population — and some would doubtless not have taken kindly to too much detailed Buddhism. So, from the *suttas* aimed at lay-people³⁴ he distilled down a lowest-common-denominator *Dhamma*-for-all that no one could object to.

At the same time, he extended this basic ‘social *Dhamma*’ to cover e.g. relations between sects and the correct internal and external behaviour of states. A universal emperor (*cakkavattī*), he clearly felt he was in a position — as the Buddha, a renunciate, was not — to spell out the implications of Buddhist social doctrine.

One implication was to elevate the *kṣatriya* or governmental role. In the Brahmins’ view, kings had no freehold on divinity but instead depended on regular Brahmanical renewals of their lease: a king could hardly justify his position by an exclusive focus on promoting people’s moral or spiritual welfare. But that is just what Asoka sought to do. While forswearing personal divinity and de-emphasising ritual,³⁵ he claimed the role of spiritual preceptor to his people —

³⁰ Abhv 414; DhsA 63; PsmA 18; Mvn 6.

³¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nagarjuna/>

³² Minor RE 1

³³ Bhabra inscription.

³⁴ Thus RE IX echoes the Sigālovāda Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya §31).

³⁵ He condemns useless *maṅgala*, although it has been suggested, e.g. by Olivelle (in Olivelle, Leoshko & Ray Op. cit., p. 175), that:

and accordingly took the promotion of popular welfare, physical as well as moral and spiritual, to unparalleled heights.³⁶

His approach seems almost anachronistic. The purpose of government, he suggested, was to serve the people, and in the process to protect and promote a sort of ‘civil religion’,³⁷ something like what Rousseau³⁸ later spoke of, with:

- a transcendental dimension, reward for virtue, punishment for vice;

and above all

- exclusion of religious intolerance.

That last point is unique. Other ancient empires permitted diverse beliefs, but did any stoop to encourage mutual tolerance between subject peoples (not helpful for ‘divide and rule’)? How modern Asoka seems!

Today, we understand the promotion of tolerance to be central to any government-supported consensus-of-values. Accordingly, we expect such a consensus to be very loosely defined. As Robert Bellah says:

God [is] a word almost all Americans can accept but that means so many different things to so many different people that it is almost an empty sign.³⁹

In Asoka’s case, *dhamma* takes the place of ‘God’. People of various views could read their own priorities into his *Dhamma*, which he presented as defining a broad core common to every religious current.⁴⁰

The statements that through his [Aśoka’s] preaching of Dharma gods have mingled with humans (MRE 1), and that he has shown celestial chariots and elephants, fires of hell, and the like to the people (RE 4), ... show elements relating to religion and public religious displays.

³⁶Such a policy was of course foreshadowed in canonical Buddhist texts such as the Cakkavat-tīsihanādasutta and the Kūṭadantasutta.

³⁷Robert Bellah popularised the use of Rousseau’s expression in recent times, applying it to contemporary America. See Bellah 1967, pp. 1-21. For the analogy with Asoka cf. Olivelle, Leoshko & Ray op. cit. p. 173.

³⁸Chapter 8, Book 4 of The Social Contract (1762)

³⁹Bellah op. cit.

⁴⁰It is in this context that we can understand why, though Asoka doubtless subscribed to notions of rebirth and karmic reward, he makes no mention of them. After all, the Buddhist psychological understanding of *kamma* contradicted other sects’ core belief systems, so if Asoka had expressed his views on this he could have got people’s backs up.

Accordingly, like ‘God’, this *Dhamma* risked becoming a vacuous concept. Yes, by encompassing all affiliations, it could improve social relations — but, later, when imperial power waned, it could also be hi-jacked for other, different ends.

The term was already used in a loose sense to speak of what was proper to a particular group, e.g. the *Buddha-dhamma*. Asoka then associated it with being good in a general way. So, the inference could be drawn that a good person conformed to group standards. Stretching the point, Brahmanical opinion could define being good as filling the role appropriate to one’s birth.

Nothing could have been further from Asoka’s conception. He carefully avoids reference to *varṇa* or *jāti* and addresses all without distinction.⁴¹ He promotes an inclusive sense of citizenship.

He is intolerant only of exclusivism. This emerges from his opposition to certain ‘religious’ practices. RE 1 bans animal sacrifice using Brahmanical technical terms.⁴² Both it and RE 9 (condemning pointless rituals) were sited, physically, with a view to suppressing and replacing sacrificial ceremonies.⁴³ Thus, while respectful of Brahmins, Asoka nonetheless outlawed some Brahmanical practices.⁴⁴

He proposed new behaviours instead. The first illustration he offers for the ‘Celebration of Dharma’ is looking after the waged and unwaged members of your household.

*Ayaṃ tu mahāphale maṃgale ya dhammamamaṃgalaṃ. Tat etta: dāsabhatakamhi samyapratipattī. Gurūṇaṃ apaciti sadhu; pāṇesu sayamo sādhu; bamhaṇasamanānaṃ sādhu dānaṃ.*⁴⁵ (“This auspicious rite, however, produces great results, namely the Celebration of Dharma. That is this: proper regard toward slaves and servants. [Also], respect for elders is good; restraint with regard to living beings is good; giving to Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas is good.

Asoka’s *dhamma* is thus centrally concerned with mitigating inequalities. It is hardly surprising that he stood against extreme claims of Brahmanical privilege.

⁴¹ Cf. Olivelle (in Olivelle, Leoshko & Ray op. cit.) “Aśokan Dharma ... is a universal Dharma applicable to all, regardless of social station, economic status, gender, or nationality”.

⁴² *√ālabh* and *√prahu* for ritual slaughter and the offering of slaughtered animals.

⁴³ Falk 2006, pp. 56-7.

⁴⁴ If this stance had outraged most of the population, Asoka would not have found it politic. Moreover, its subsequent shift to strict vegetarianism shows how Brahmanical orthodoxy adapted to the same climate of opinion that had Asoka tapped into and shaped. [At the time of Patañjali, meat-eating was normal, for Brahmins as well as for other *Ārya* groups. So for instance, commenting on Pāṇini 1.1.1 (I: 5), Patañjali repeats the old dictum to the effect that *pañca pañcanakhā bhakṣyā* (“The five five-nailed animals can be eaten”).]

⁴⁵ RE 9: Gīrnār.

He was of course respectful of Brahmins. He just did not want socio-political Brahmanism to be normative: an entrenched hierarchy of purity was inconsistent with his development-oriented (and so presumably, to some degree, meritocratic) state. If some Brahmins wished to keep themselves to themselves, that was fine, but their ideas should not be imposed on others by the machinery of justice.

Indeed, Asoka makes no link between the spheres of law and of *dhamma*.⁴⁶ He approaches behaviour via motivation (in line with the Buddhist view of *kamma*).⁴⁷ Accordingly, he suggests that the goal of social progress depends on social harmony, which in turn reflects individuals' psychological equilibrium. The universal values and principles he evokes are psychological. His approach is thus distinctively Buddhist.

The *Dharmasūtras*/-*śāstras*

The *Dharmasūtras* and -*śāstras* stand in a sharp contrast. Here, *dharma* is intimately connected with enforceable rules.

Recent work⁴⁸ has suggested that this complex literature may reveal a developing set of Brahmanical responses to the emergence of heterodox currents,

⁴⁶Olivelle says (Olivelle, Leoshko & Ray op. cit. p 172): "Another significant point in ... the definition of Aśokan Dharma is its silence on social vices or crimes, such as theft, murder, adultery, and other sexual offenses. Clearly, these were of major concern to the state, as seen in all the legal literature of ancient India. Indeed, theft is often cited as the main reason for the very institution of kingship. It would have been an easy move for Aśoka to include prohibitions against such vices within his Dharma, just as he did in the case of killing animals. It appears, however, that Aśoka considered his Dharma to be something far more personal and 'religious'."

⁴⁷People exhibit behaviour consistent with their understanding. That includes those who understand existence in terms of the *Buddha-dhamma*. So, the term *Dhamma* can be correlated with certain typical behaviour — and from a description of such behaviour it is obviously possible to derive a prescription. Still, rather than evoking behaviour as such, the Buddhist *Dhamma* tends instead to be associated with cognitive and motivational factors that underlie behaviour.

That is to say that people who truly understand their existence (i.e. in terms of *dhammas*, and of the *Dhamma*) develop their experiential processes (through *bhāvanā*) in such a way that their motivations (*sankhārā*) become less complex and twisted, more straightforward and positive. Their karma, we may say, improves; so, they behave well. That behaviour, then, is in no way coerced. It springs from their living awareness of *dhammas*, and of the *Dhamma*, so it is spontaneous.

This strategy of approaching behaviour via motivation is central to the Buddhist understanding of *kammavipāka* and hence of morality. So Asoka's unwillingness to associate *dhamma* with law makes good Buddhist sense.

⁴⁸A good summary of the various scholars involved and of the arguments they have advanced is Olivelle's piece on the early history of the *Dharmaśāstra*, in Olivelle (2006), pp. 169 ff.

specifically Buddhism, and above all to the Asokan reforms.⁴⁹ It suggests there were two broad streams of Brahmanical opinion, ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ roughly:

1. One response was to accommodate and/or co-opt the *śramaṇa* tendency. Thus, the four *āśramas* were initially presented as alternate life-choices. A young Brahmin could opt for one of three permanent roles — as a scholar, a householder or a renunciate (e.g. a Buddhist monk).⁵⁰
2. The alternative response was to shore up support among conservative *ārya* local groups by validating and championing traditional patterns of social control: codifying behaviours that had previously not warranted literary attention:
 - first domestic rituals (*Gr̥hyasūtras*) and then
 - conventions of village-level social interaction (*Dharmasūtras/śāstras*)

At first, the ‘liberals’ set the tone:

- it was acknowledged that the new dharma-literature simply recorded established usage, so it could not command obedience by invoking the Veda;⁵¹
- the rules laid down were not too restrictive; and
- women and *śūdras*⁵² both had a modicum of status.

But over time, the ‘conservatives’ strengthened:

- the renunciate way of life became just an optional add-on to the standard *kulika-gr̥hastha* career; and
- the ‘lower orders’ were put firmly in their place: rules became tougher and were imposed more fiercely.

In short, the Buddhist impulse would seem initially to have stimulated some movement away from strict hierarchical norms. But then the trend was reversed, presumably once there was a realistic prospect of establishing or re-establishing Brahmanical hegemony.

⁴⁹Olivelle, Leoshko & Ray op. cit., p. 3: “[R]ecent scholarship ... has viewed much of post-Aśokan Indian literature, especially the epics and the legal texts, as responses to Aśokan reforms.”

⁵⁰Olivelle, op. cit., p. 179.

⁵¹Olivelle, op. cit., pp. 171–2.

⁵²*ĀpDh* 2.29.11. 15

The Epics and After

How did that prospect emerge? How did Brahmanical thinking adapt to the Buddhist efflorescence and seek to stem the tide? How, indeed, did Hinduism in something like the modern sense start to emerge?

Wezler⁵³ suggests that religiosity based on *dharma* rather than the élitist sacrifice led to a “democratization regarding the access to salvation.” That is: the Brahminical system had previously concerned itself only with the requirements of the *ārya*; now, it had to make provision for others.

Only, how to do so while maintaining formally consistency with existing positions? The solution was ‘separate development’.

The first stage was to highlight the division of society into distinct, kin-based groupings. Then one could posit a separate if compatible path for each group.

The *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* present this new idea of *dharma*. In a society based on cities, and an economy with a complex division of labour, it is held to be vital that different communities be clearly and permanently identified and distinguished. To this end, a model is presented. It is based on the two small groups at the ‘top’, Brahmins and kṣatriyas. The behaviour conventionally expected of these groups is understood to be fixed and codified, and observance of such group-specific codes is held to be the overriding, sacred duty of all concerned. The same pattern is then extended to other quasi-ethnic groupings.

Individual conduct is thus derived from an absolute and eternal social framework. This is then reinforced by deriving the social from the cosmic: to legitimate the sacralisation of these Brahmanical social norms, the epics link *dharma* to a hypostatized cosmic order. And to consolidate support among the populace, they evoke a new spirit of devotionism (*bhakti*).⁵⁴

The substance and the appeal of this literature lies in its casuistic elaboration of this new *dharma*. The approach differs in detail: straightforward *Rāma* favours a rigid formalism, subtle *Kṛṣṇa* sells a somewhat devious flexibility.⁵⁵ Still, in both cases the dramatic complexity draws the audience in to the *dharma* discourse, while the grandeur of the tale, reinforced by *bhakti*, elevates the notion of a cosmic ordering principle.

Some Buddhists felt obliged to respond in kind. The *Trikāya* doctrine hypostatizes a transcendent principle under the rubric *dharmakāya*, (also known a

⁵³Wezler 2004, 643.

⁵⁴Biardeau 1981, 78, n. 1 and Biardeau 1997, 81.

⁵⁵Cf. B.K. Matilal’s contribution to Ganeri 2001.

svabhāvikakāya). Still, that universal principle is hardly to be confused with any Brahmanical counterpart: it corresponds primarily to a dimension of experience, one whose description we can trace back to the Pali canon.⁵⁶

The Dynamic of Developing Usage

So we can see that Brahmanical opinion responded to Buddhist thinking and practice, and Buddhist ideas evolved in response to Brahmanical developments. This was a dialectical relationship.

Naturally enough, the overall pattern of *dharma/dhamma* usage differed sharply between Brahminical and Buddhist circles:

- The *type* of discourse it supported was different:
 - In the Brahmanical context, the term was primarily prescriptive.
 - In Buddhist literature, by contrast, it was mainly used descriptively.

Correspondingly:

- The Brahmanical usage tended to conflate the descriptive with the prescriptive, fact with value.
- The Buddhists, by contrast, were generally careful to differentiate descriptive from prescriptive, fact from value.
- That is perhaps understandable when we consider the *goal* of the discourse:
 - The Brahmanical usage aimed to inhibit undesirable social behaviour.
 - The Buddhist usage served to stimulate desirable cognitive behaviour.

So, Brahmanical authors propound absolute injunctions on how to behave yourself. Their Buddhist counterparts offer conditional advice on how to develop yourself. Asoka highlights the difference:⁵⁷

people's progress in dhamma is in two ways, by dhamma rules and by conviction. [But] rules count for little; most is by conviction.

⁵⁶Cf. the Pabbassara Sutta. It is interesting in this connection to note the Zen Koan “What is the Dharma-Body of the Buddha?” “Next step, next step!” In other words, despite the apparent hypostatization, the original remained.

⁵⁷In his last and longest inscription, PE VII.

- Inevitably, therefore, the specific content of the term *dharma/dhamma* differed widely between the two traditions, too:
 - The Buddhist usage is grounded in personal experience. The basic frame of reference is psychological. Reference to external reality, whether social, abstract-theoretical or cosmic, is secondary and carefully qualified.
 - The Brahminical usage is oriented out towards society and the cosmos. The whole idea is to align personal behaviour with social imperatives and thereby with some supernal reality.

Conclusion

This paper offers no more than a quick glance at the history. Still, it may be enough to throw some light on Hindu-Buddhist relations.

Buddhism and Brahmanism developed in reaction to one another. Of course there was common ground: for instance, Buddhists recognised Brahminical gods (although they had quite different ideas of what a god was). And of course adepts of both traditions may in some cases have attained a similar ‘non-dual’ quality of experience. Still, each tradition sought at every stage to co-opt and/or confute the other. The idea that they could be seen as ‘essentially identical’ seems quite odd, (particularly given the Buddhist take on essential identities).

Yet that idea has gained such a hold! There almost seems to be a wish that Buddhism should not really be a separate phenomenon: if it is not a part of contemporary Hinduism, then at least it cannot be understood without reference to Hinduism. This notion of ‘Hindu Bauddh’ is influential. That has implications within India, and implications for India’s external relations.

On the internal Indian context, I hesitate. Still, many across the world, who love India, look forward to the time when Dr Ambedkar’s concerns will be fully addressed, and weep at the suggestion that — in view of reservation and other policies, and of changing mores — such problems as may previously have been associated with caste and untouchability no longer arise, or no longer matter.

On Indian relations with non-Indian Buddhists, I speak with conviction. Suppose that you, an Indian Hindu, attend a conference on Hinduism, where a Lithuanian scholar suggests that Hinduism must be understood in terms of the Indo-European heritage — implies indeed that your understanding of Hinduism is

limited. How do you react? So, how do you imagine that delegates to an international Buddhist conference react when an Indian colleague makes a presentation coloured by the assumptions of the 'Hindu Bauddh'? Everyone is very polite, naturally, but....

The great Indic heritage has had more than one incarnation. The idea that this great culture might be strait-jacketed into some monolithic identity seems wholly out of keeping with the exuberant, individualistic, creative, contrary, free-flowing India that we all know and love.

Moreover, Buddhism long ago outgrew its Indian origins. It is not merely disrespectful of other Buddhists but also demonstrably inaccurate to suggest that:

- what is true of most Indian traditions must necessarily be true of Buddhism in all its forms; and that
- everything that has happened as the Buddhist tradition has developed across Asia and more widely must be reducible to some Indian original.

Above all, the prevalence of 'Hindu Bauddh' thinking incapacitates India's cultural diplomacy. The Buddhist heritage should facilitate collaboration between Indians and other Asians. Yet while the Chinese, to their credit, are playing the 'Buddhist card' with some success, India alas really is not. We all badly need that to change.

It can easily be done. All it will take is a frank recognition and acceptance of the difference between Buddhist and Hindu traditions.⁵⁸ That is the first step towards exploring what we may have in common.

⁵⁸This was recognised in the Bhopal conference on *dharma/dhamma* held in September 2012, for which this paper was prepared. While some contributors, following the line of preliminary materials issued by the conference organisers, spoke of Buddhism's 'essential identity' with Hinduism, Dr Arun Shourie was very clear about the implausibility of any such identity.

Bibliography

- Bellah, R. (1967). 'Religion in America.' *Dædalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*.
- Biardeau, M. (1981). *L'Hindouisme: Anthropologie d'une civilisation*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Biardeau, M. (1997). 'Nara et Nārāyaṇa.' *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, 75-108.
- Bronkhorst, J. (2007). *Greater Magadha - Studies in the Culture of Early India*. Leiden/ Boston: Brill.
- Cousins, L. A. (1996). 'Good or Skilful? Kusala in Canon and Commentary.' *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 136-164.
- Falk, H. (2006). *Aśoka Sites and Artefacts - A Source-book with Bibliography*. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.
- Ganeri, J. (2002). *Ethics and Epics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gombrich, R. (2009). *What the Buddha Thought*. Equinox.
- Hofstadter, D. *Analogy as the Core of Cognition*. <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/hofstadter/analogy.html>
- Karunadasa, Y. (1996). *The Dhamma Theory: Philosophical Cornerstone of the Abhidhamma*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society .
- Lakoff, G. (1990). *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leacock, C. *Polysemy: Theoretical and computational approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1955). *Tristes tropiques*. Paris: Plon.
- Olivelle, P. (ed.) (2006). *Between the Empires: Society in India from 300 BCE to 400 CE*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Olivelle, P., J. Leoshko and H.P. Ray (eds). (2012). *Reimagining Asoka*. New Delhi: OUP India.
- Segal, Z.V., J.M.G. Williams and J.D. Teasdale. (2002). *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society Volume Two*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wezler. (2004). 'Dharma In The Veda And The Dharmaśāstras.' *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 629-654.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.