

What is Dharma?

Dharma is the individual's natural, selfless duty, a responsibility towards self, parents, family, society, community, environment, and humanity. **There is no equivalent English translation for the Ancient Sanskrit word 'Dharma'**. Dharma is pronounced as Dh-r-m.

Dharma is divine in origin and deals with universal natural principles. The connotations are spiritual and metaphysical. Mahabharata (12-31-7) described Dharma as follows:

"That conduct which sustains, protects, harmonizes all human beings including family, society, nation, nature, and the cosmos".

While visiting Jakarta, Indonesia, I saw many English sign-boards stating "Dharmo-Vanita". I asked a taxi driver the meaning, and the driver replied: "Dharma means to help others, and Vanita means women. It is a sign-board of a government department that deals with helping women, you may call it women's welfare!" Furthermore I asked him: "What is your religion?" He replied "Muslim". According to this Indonesian Muslim taxi driver his religion is Muslim, but, to him, Dharma means the duty to help others.

An individual who goes out of the way to help others is said to have undertaken Dharma. Kanad Rishi in Vaisesika Darsan describes Dharma as follows:

"Dharma is that righteous conduct which elevates a human being to a higher level of interaction; thereby, one attains selflessness and is free from selfishness."

Dharma is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Dharana,' the root word, Dhr. 'Dharana', means 'to uphold,' or to sustain. One who upholds these destined natural duties is said to have undertaken Dharma. For example, the Dharma of the sun is to shine. The Dharma of the earth is to rotate, and a learned person should guide others in the righteous direction.

The great lawgiver sage, Manu, described ten characteristics of Dharma as follows:

"The ten characteristics of a person who upholds Dharma are contentment, forgiveness, maintenance of purity, thought, action, emotional, and sensual discipline, iratelessness, truthfulness, abstinence from stealing, acquisition of knowledge, and wisdom."

The tenth Sikh Guru Sri Govind Singh in Ugradanti Chhake Chhand Vani under the description of "Chandi Ki Var" stated:

*"Sakala jagata me khalsa pantha gaje,
Jage dharam hindu sakal bhanda bhaje"*

Chhake Chhanda 39

"Let Khalsa Pantha be victorious all over the world to awaken Hindu Dharma, so all falsehood or ignorance may be removed."

Sikh Guru Sri Govind Singh further stated in Ugradani Saveya Chhake Chhanda (40):

*"Sakala jaga me khalsa pantha gaje,
Jage dharam Hinduka turk dunde bhaje"*

Ugradanti Saveya Chhake Chhanda Chhaka 1 line 40.

The use of the word “Hinduka” in the above Chhand by Guru Sri Govind Singh reveals that the word Hinduka was in vogue at that time.

In essence Dharma means “natural righteous, conducts, and duties that help one to rise higher to become a better person.”

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What is Religion?

Religion is an artificial and human created path which helps one to lead a noble life and bring one closer to God. In English, religion is the closest word that may be substituted for “Dharma”. For ordinary purposes the term Dharma may be interchangeable with religion.

Humans designed “Religion”; whereas, Dharma represents natural principles, duties, and responsibilities.

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