

Dharma in Jainism

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Abstract

The concepts of Dharma and morality are closely related, especially in Jainism, where morality is considered a key part of spiritual life. However, they are different, with Jainism viewing Dharma as a spiritual system that goes beyond everyday morality. This paper explores the idea of Dharma in Jain philosophy, looking at its impact on ethical living, spirituality, and the path to liberation. The aim of this study is to distinguish between Dharma and morality, examine the principles of Dharma in Jainism, and understand its role in guiding human life and spiritual practice. It also addresses the larger question of what makes up the universal core of religion, comparing Jainism's approach to theology with other religious views. The research shows that Jainism presents Dharma not as a set of rules but as the true nature of the soul, focused on non-violence (Ahimsa), self-control, and the pursuit of spiritual growth. Dharma, as explained in Jainism, is more than personal or social ethics; it connects to the deeper aspects of human life. Dharma is a complete spiritual path that blends moral and ethical living with the ultimate goal of liberation (Moksha). This study emphasizes the importance of understanding Dharma not just as a moral code but as a higher principle guiding the soul toward freedom.

Introduction

Dharma, often seen as religion or morality, holds a central place in philosophical discussions. Yet, these terms are interrelated but not synonymous. Jainism teaches that while religion (dharma) includes morality, it extends far beyond it. A religious person is naturally moral, but a moral person is not necessarily religious. It encourages individuals to look beyond basic morality to explore the spiritual essence of life. The concept of dharma in Jainism is multifaceted. It is the soul's true nature (svabhāva), the practice of ten virtues like forgiveness and humility, and the path of right belief, knowledge, and conduct (Ratnatraya). It teaches that living with compassion and reducing harm to all living beings is the essence of dharma. Jainism does not depend on worship or belief in a deity but focuses on the attributes of soul - knowledge, perception, energy, and bliss. This unique view establishes Jainism as both a spiritual philosophy and a practical guide for ethical living. The primary research problem explored in this paper is the question of how Jain Dharma, as a spiritual and mystical experience, can be differentiated from conventional religious morality. Furthermore, it seeks

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to answer how Jain principles such as Ahimsa, the Karma doctrine, and the pursuit of Samyagdarśana (right perception) provide a framework for ethical and spiritual living that is distinct from modern theological interpretations of religion.

Morality

Dharma and morality are deeply interconnected, yet they are often

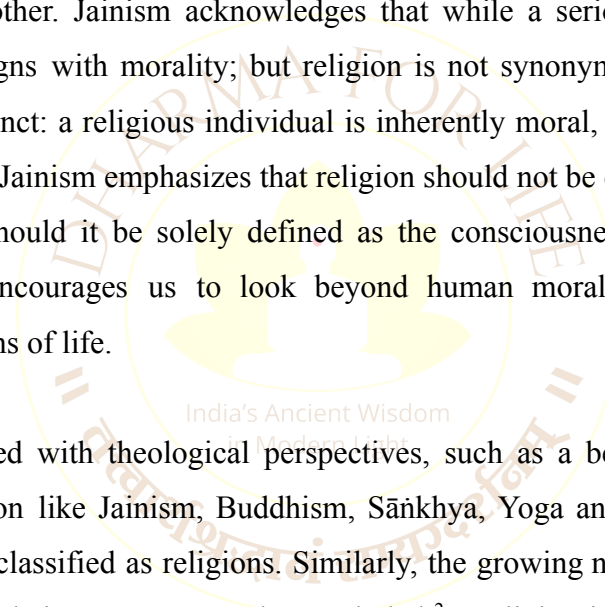
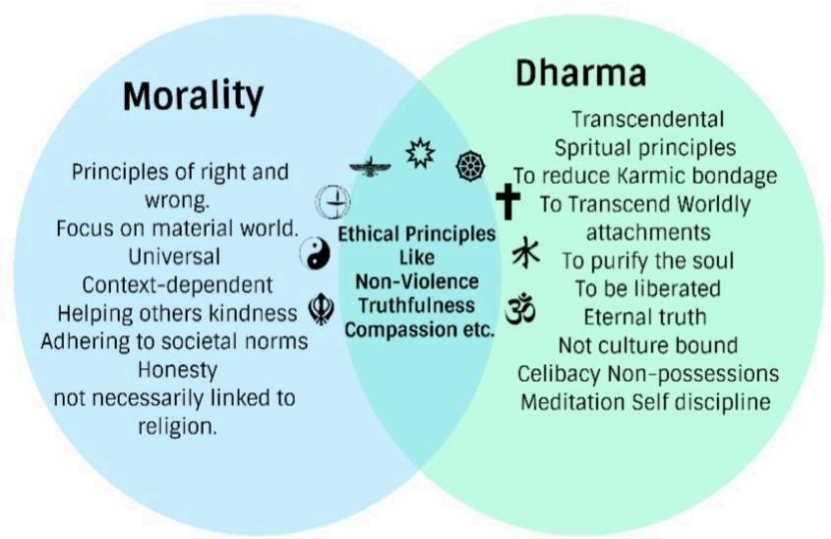
mistaken for one another. Jainism acknowledges that while a serious and rational aim of religion (dharma) aligns with morality; but religion is not synonymous with morality. The two concepts are distinct: a religious individual is inherently moral, a moral individual is not necessarily religious. Jainism emphasizes that religion should not be equated with personal or societal ethics, nor should it be solely defined as the consciousness of the highest social values. Instead, it encourages us to look beyond human morality and to explore the transcendental horizons of life.

Theology

If religion is identified with theological perspectives, such as a belief in a creator of the universe, then tradition like Jainism, Buddhism, Sāṅkhya, Yoga and Mīmāṃsā are unjustly excluded from being classified as religions. Similarly, the growing number of Non-Believers are often labelled as atheists. As Pratt aptly concluded ² “Religion is less about theology and more about how we live - it is meant to be experienced, not just intellectually debated.” This raises a critical question: What constitutes the universal core of religion?

Dharma in Jainism

Jainism has a humanistic approach and spiritualistic in its depth. It considers religion as a mystical experience that is permanent, universal, trans-subjective, blissful, intuitive, super sensuous, infinite, incommunicable and ineffable. The state of Siddha is the abstract realm of existence



² *Religious Consciousness*, 7

where all differentiations disappear. The essence of Jain dharma is reflected in several dimensions:

1. The Nature of the Self and the Purpose of Human Pursuit.
2. The Principles of the Karma Doctrine: A detailed understanding of the workings of karma, its impact on the soul, and its role in shaping the cycle of birth and rebirth.
3. The Core of Spiritual Enlightenment (Samyagdarśana): An analysis of true perception, its significance in attaining liberation, and its transformative influence on an individual's spiritual journey.
4. The Motivation Behind the Spiritual Path .
5. The Stages of Spiritual Progress (Gūṇasthānas): A systematic breakdown of the 14 stages of spiritual evolution, detailing the path from ignorance to liberation.
6. The Philosophy of Ahimsa and the Practice of Vows: A discourse on non-violence, its centrality in Jain ethics, and the commitment to vows such as Aṇūvrata (minor vows) and Mahāvratā (major vows) as guiding principles for ethical living.
7. The Practice of Sallekhanā: A Spiritual Embrace of Death.

We shall now review the meaning of Dharma in Jainism -

धम्मो वत्थुसहावो, खमादिभावो य दसविहो धम्मो।

रयणत्तयं चर धम्मो, जीवाणं रक्खणं धम्मो ॥³

Meaning: The nature of a substance is its dharma or tenfold spiritual principles like forgiveness etc. Dharma is also defined by right belief, right knowledge, and right conduct. Furthermore, safeguarding the living beings is an essential aspect of dharma. To me, this gāthā represents the true nature of dharma from various perspectives, as discussed below:

Nature or svabhāva (धम्मो वत्थुसहावो) refers to always being happy with bliss (the four infinites: vision, knowledge, energy and bliss). Ten

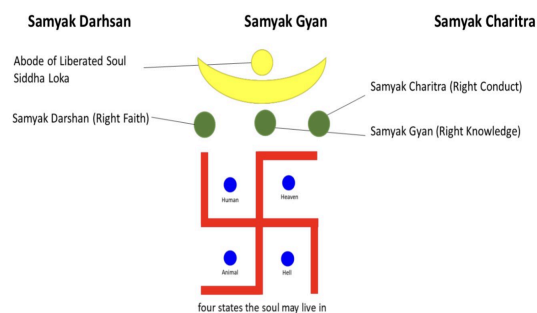
virtues are described as follows -

खमादिभावो य दसविहो धम्मो।

उत्तमक्षमामार्दवार्जवशौचसत्यसंयमतपस्त्यागाकिश्चन्य
ब्रह्मचर्याणि धर्मः⁴॥

Meaning: The tenfold spiritual principles - such as Supreme forgiveness, humility, straightforwardness, contentment, truthfulness, self-restraint, austerity, renunciation, non-attachment and celibacy- define

Three Jewels of Jainism



³ Kartikeyanupreksa, 476

⁴ Tattvartha Sutra, 9.6

Dharma. The term "supreme" signifies perfection, and these ten perfect virtues are attributes of the pure soul. While we try to practice these as much as possible to bring happiness and guide us toward both worldly and spiritual progress. The worldly benefits of practicing these virtues are minimising anger, ego/arrogance, deceitfulness and greed for the first four respectively; the next two helps in minimising bondage of new painful karmas by avoiding falsehood, restraining wandering nature of senses and mind, donating material possessions and reducing acquisitiveness, the next two helping in shedding bonded karmas and minimizing new bondage of painful karmas as well. The last two virtues form the core of the path that leads to a state of bliss.



Dharma includes the threefold path: right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct, which together form the path to liberation.

रयणत्तयं चर धम्मो ५॥

सम्यग्दर्शनज्ञानचारित्राणि मोक्षमार्गः ॥ ६

- Right belief: Faith in the existence and attributes of the soul, along with other fundamental truths.
- Right knowledge: Knowledge without doubt, opposition and indecisiveness.
- Right conduct: Practice as per the moral and spiritual ethics.

जीवाणं रक्खणं धम्मो ॥

Meaning: Protecting living beings and practicing ahimsa (nonviolence) are the essence of dharma. Jain literature offers several additional definitions of Dharma, including:

चारित्तं खलु धम्मो ७

Conduct (lifestyle) is dharma, again supporting the first definition (nature of the soul is dharma). The types of conduct that constitute dharma are described as follows-

धम्मो मंगलमुक्किट्ठं, अहिंसा संजमो तवो।

देवा वि तं नमंसंति जस्स धम्मो सया मणो ॥ ८

⁵ *Kartikeyanupreksa*, 476

⁶ *Tattvartha Sutra*, 1.1

⁷ *Pravachan Saar*, 117

⁸ *Saman Suttam* 82

Non-Violence, self-restraint and austerity are the essence of Dharma (Spiritual Values). By practicing these values, one attains the highest spiritual beneficence. Even the gods pay homage to those whose minds are deeply absorbed in these spiritual values.

Dharma as substance (Dravya)- Dharma is one of the six fundamental substances (Dravya) characterised by its role to support the motion of living beings and matter (pudgal).

Conclusion

In Jainism, Dharma primarily refers to the nature of soul and the constituent factors that sustain it in that state. Thus, our way of life as indicated in Jain texts to minimize violence through strenuous self-effort while observing self-restraint on wandering inclinations of the five senses and mind is Dharma in Life.

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