18. Dharma and Karma: The Moral Imperatives of Indian Thought

Dr. T. M. Prashanth Kumar

Assistant Professor,
Department of Studies in Education,
Vijayanagara Sri Krishna Devaraya University,
Ballari, Karnataka.

Abstract:

This paper investigates the interpretation of the Hindu notions of karma and dharma in the modern Indian urban setting. There is a difference between dharma and karma in Hinduism. For one to attain moksha, both are necessary. Karma is the outcome of one's past, present, and future deeds, whereas dharma is the cosmic rule or moral principle that dictates one's behavior. Living dharma-abiding is crucial for achieving good karma, or ethical behavior. Hinduism therefore holds that it is morally required to fulfill one's destiny in accordance with the cosmic principle.

The idea of dharma is covered in this chapter. One of the most distinctive and fundamental features of Hinduism and Indian culture is the concept of dharma, which represents the tradition of the pursuit of moral ideals. Every man is affected by the idea of dharma, which is embodied in laws and organizations and depicted by well-known figures from epic tales, Puranic myths and legends, and folktales. This includes both the ignorant peasant and housewife and the scholarly minister and philosopher. We will talk about in this essay. The Moral Imperatives of Indian Thought: Dharma and Karma.

Keywords:

Dharma, Karma, Moral Imperatives, Thought, Hinduism, Moksha, Soul, Sanskrit, Dharma Shastra, Spiritual, Buddha's Exposition, Purushartha

18.1 Introduction:

A key tenet of Hinduism is reincarnation. According to Hinduism, the soul is immortal and assumes a new body after death, but the physical body will pass away. Samsara refers to the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Karma determines the circumstances of a person's rebirth. The term "karma" describes the good and negative deeds that people do throughout their lives.

Rebirth situations that are more pleasant are the outcome of good karma, whereas those that are less ideal are the result of negative karma. A man who cheats and lies, for instance, might have a snake for a rebirth. On the other hand, a good and honest man could become a prosperous king in a different life. Karma is thought to be the primary cause of the reincarnation cycle and a significant component in the explanation of life's events. [1]

Dharma:

The root term "Dhri," which means to act, is where the Sanskrit word "Dharma" originates. Dharma, also known as Dhamma, is Buddhism's concept of "one that holds." Dharma is a philosophy that encompasses both morality and ethics. It is the concept that living a life in accordance with one's Dharma leads to happiness and well-being. Truth, or dharma, is the way to emancipation. That is the cornerstone of a pious life. Its guiding concepts include a moral code and spiritual discipline. Everything that keeps religious societies together, averts chaos, and keeps people from engaging in undesirable or bad behavior is known as dharma. Among other things, dharma is a central idea in many Indian faiths. While some argue that the term "dharma" cannot be translated into English or any other European language, it usually refers to actions that uphold "order and custom"—also known as "virtue" or "religious and moral duties"—that support life. Adharma's opposite is called adharma. The historical Vedic religion (1500–500 BCE) used the notion of dharma, and throughout several millennia, its definition and conceptual reach have changed. Dharma, in Hinduism, refers to actions deemed to be in line with Ṛta, the "order and custom" that gives rise to the universe and life. A "right way of living" and obligations, rights, rules, behavior, and virtues are all included in this. One of the Puruṣārtha, dharma is thought to have a transtemporal validity. [2]

Dharma and law:

The ancient legal and religious texts of India contain references to dharma, which is defined as duty or propriety. Putra dharma, which refers to a person's responsibility as a son, pitri dharma, which refers to a person's duty as a parent, raj dharma, which refers to a person's duty as a king, and so on are typical examples of such use. According to Hindu philosophy, living according to dharma is necessary for justice, social harmony, and happiness. These precepts and regulations are documented in the Dharmashastra. Based on the evidence that is currently available, India is thought to have once had a sizable collection of dharma-related literature, or shastras. Of these, four sutras have survived and are now known as Dharmasutras. There are additional, parallel sets of laws, such as those of Narada and other ancient scholars, in addition to the laws of Manu as they are contained in the Dharmasutras. These disparate and contradictory legal texts do not supplant other Hindu legal texts or act as an exclusive source of dharma. [3]

Spirit of Dharma:

Vedic literature provides a very clear picture of the sages' worldviews and beliefs regarding the role of man in the universe, especially with regard to the Vedic understanding of ṛta as macrocosmic order. This then highlights the significance of the Vedas as a source of "law," or more accurately, dharma. In order to comprehend the developing legal system as a whole, it is imperative that they clarify the basic conceptual foundations of Vedic law. It seems that the main idea is that "law" is an impersonal force that is outside of human control. While it does exist, unlike a state legal system, it does not assert institutional loyalty. The sages and academics of the Vedas recognized the universal existence of rta, an unseen cosmic law that maintained the orderly structure of a multifaceted and flexible system at various stages, forms, and elevations of every entity and activity that made up the universe. [4]

Dharma is Moral Law of the World:

Hinduism defines dharma as the innate universal rules that, when followed, enable humanity to live comfortably and joyfully while simultaneously protecting itself from depravity and suffering. Dharma is the moral code that guides a person's life and is combined with spiritual discipline. Hindus believe that dharma is the fundamental basis of existence. It speaks of "something which holds" all of creation, including the people who live on this world. A "law of being" that is necessary for everything to exist is dharma. The term "dharma" describes the moral principles that Hindu gurus propagated in the texts of ancient India. Compassion is the foundation of dharma, according to Tulsidas, the author of the Ramcharitmanas. This idea was embraced by Lord Buddha in his enduring work of immense wisdom, the Dhammapada. Dharma is explained symbolically in the Atharva Veda as "this world is maintained by dharma," or Prithivim dharmana dhritam. The Pandavas in the epic poem Mahabharata stand for dharma, whereas the Kauravas are symbolic of adharma. [5]

Karma:

Karma is the root of action; it is an impression that both initiates and determines an action's outcome. Based on the temporal aspects of an activity, the morality of that conduct, and the karma of people, groups of beings, families, and nations, there are several kinds of karma. Karma can be positive or negative depending on your values. It is said that every deed that causes harm to oneself or others is bad or negative karma and will have a corresponding effect on one's soul. In a similar vein, doing good deeds for others repays you with good karma. Nonetheless, karma is said to be limited by time and can endure beyond a lifetime. For those who have not attained enlightenment, karma is actually thought to be the cause of birth and death.

The Hindu concept of evil and the concept of karma:

A consideration of the Hindu conception of evil facilitates a comprehension of the moral lessons included in the Bhagavad Gita, as demonstrated in the preceding section. Since the Hindu conception of evil differs from that of the Abrahamic religions, it is a topic of great interest in discussions of religious views on good and evil in religion studies. Hinduism does not pit right from wrong. According to Hindu mythology, evil was formed along with the rest of the cosmos. So, the idea that evil is unnatural and needs to be defeated or overcome does not exist. Actually, preserving a balance between chaos and order, dharma and adharma, is a central theme in much of Hindu theology. Hinduism nonetheless maintains that people should make an effort to live good lives as opposed to bad ones, even though it views evil primarily as a natural force of the cosmos.

Spiritual guide and founder of Art of Living Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar says, "Karma is always dynamic, in the sense that there is perception and action." Karma and dharma go hand in hand. Karma refers to the deed, its effects, and its outcome. There are three stages to it: the latent action, the action in progress, and the root, or cause, of the activity. All three statements are true. Understanding the peculiar methods of karma is facilitated by dharma awareness. [6]

Indian Perspectives on Morality: Karma and Dharma as Frames of Reference:

The frameworks of dharma and karma have not received much direct attention in studies on moral formation in India. The foundation of the Hindu worldview is the idea of dharma, or obligation, and the conviction that the cosmos is inherently ordered. For certain social groupings, the concept of karma also develops as a significant moral category (Misra & Gergen, 1993). Thus, it becomes essential to comprehend the religious-philosophical perspective that underpins these ideas.

Karma and Dharma: A religious-philosophical view:

Karma simply means action, and dharma simply implies righteousness. The terms "karma" and "dharma" have rhyme and reason, according to Sharma (2000). These terms signify ideas that are not meant to be understood in isolation since "karma" without "dharma" is blind and "dharma" without "karma" is lame. The significance of these two ideas in Hindu life is demonstrated by this statement. Hindu religious philosophy is based on them. Since most Indian philosophy is reflected in religion and places a great deal of emphasis on practical life, ethical issues and philosophy are inextricably linked.

Though attaining spiritual self-enlightenment is the ultimate aim of Hinduism, Hindu philosophers have outlined a useful framework for social life and its responsibilities in order to reach this objective. One must go from an attached existence (pravratti) to a detached life (nivritti) in order to comprehend the meaning of life. This road from a life of materialism to asceticism is aptly embodied by the ashrama notion of transitioning from Brahmacharya (a life of study and celibacy) to Vanaprastha (a detached old life in a forest).

The concept of "karma" is a set of natural consequences designed to instill moral values in humanity. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna exhorts Arjuna to fulfill his warrior's dharma by fighting in the battle (against his kin) and to leave the outcome in the hands of God. Thus, karma is an attempt to give activities a morally comprehensible appearance rather than merely describing the facts of human behavior. To comprehend natural causation, human actions are classified as "good," "bad," "right," or "wrong." The foundation of Hindu philosophical systems is the idea of karma. It is based on the idea of rita, or universal order, which is the cornerstone of dharma, and is based on the universal causality of activities (rules of cause and effect). Since all events are the result of causation, action is an inevitable byproduct of birth and existence. Man is forever bound by his karma since his mental processes and desires are alive regardless of whether he actively participates in social duties or has forsaken them. [7]

18.2 Review of Literature:

Individuals' social and moral thinking development is greatly impacted by their culture. Both overt and covert forms of behavior are influenced by moral principles and social norms. Psychologists should focus all psychological inquiry around culture, as highlighted by Misra and Gergen (1993), who highlight the importance of culture's psychological makeup. Culture thus becomes both a specific shape of growth as well as its setting.

The cognitive-developmental paradigm in psychology is the source of most studies on moral development. Our comprehension of the evolution of morality is expanded by alternative hypotheses derived from cultural psychology and anthropological viewpoints. [8]

The systemic feature of cosmic order is most briefly and clearly highlighted in the Īśa Upaniṣad. According to this, the Absolute Reality is both specific and universal. The universal maintains its integrity even when the particular is created from it. The idea of particularity and variation comes after the concept or characteristic of wholeness and integration. In the image of oneness, many become oneness.

That is whole, that is whole; if one part of the absolute whole is removed, the remaining portion of the absolute whole remains creative and integrated. In an integrated system of infinite entities, each unique entity must remain an integrated whole in order to preserve its uniqueness.

The cosmos' order and the universe's wholeness are based on the integrity or wholeness of each component, and the particular universe's wholeness is based on the cosmos' order. (Pages 565–578) in Radhakrishnan, 2019.

In the Vedic ethical and legal system, the ideas of rta and dharma are very important. One feature of Indian legal theory that sets it apart is the anticipation of the concept of karma. It is the universal law that all men and gods are obligated to abide by. Law, if any, has to sort itself out in the world.

In the unlikely event that its impacts are not felt here on Earth, they will need to manifest themselves in another place. Disorder and injustice are only temporary and partial where law is recognized. It is not always the case that the evil wins. There's no reason to give up hope when the good shipwrecks. [9]

Hinduism is a religious tradition that is misinterpreted by Hindus as well as by adherents of other faiths (Nallusamy 2007:399). Hinduism's misunderstandings have frequently prevented studies on the religion from accurately highlighting the significance and importance of particular ideas. The idea of morality is one of these ideas. [10]

18.3 Objectives:

- To Study of Dharma and Karma: The Moral Imperatives of Indian Thought
- The Hindu concept of evil and the concept of karma and Dharma
- A religious-philosophical view of Karma and Dharma

18.4 Research Methodology:

In order to achieve its goals, the study, which is primarily exploratory in character, utilizes secondary data sources. The study's primary source of secondary data was its extensive usage of earlier research, including books, journals, reports, magazines, and internet data sources.

18.5 Result and Discussion:

An ancient Indian notion known as "karma" describes the result or consequences of a job, deed, or action. The phrase more precisely alludes to an idea in Indian religions known as the principle of karma, which states that people's intentions and deeds (cause) have an impact on their future (effect):

While poor purpose and bad deeds lead to bad karma and worse rebirths, good intent and good deeds lead to good karma and happier rebirths. However, some texts deny any connection between karma and rebirth. Many times, karma is misinterpreted as fate, destiny, or predestination. [11]

Endless knot

Endless knot on Nepalese temple prayer wheel

Figure 18.1: Karma symbols such as the endless knot (above) are common cultural motifs in Asia. Endless knots symbolize interlinking of cause and effect, a karmic cycle that continues eternally. The endless knot is visible in the center of the prayer wheel.

The relation of Dharma to all ethical systems:

One could argue that Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings and Eastern philosophy are the sources of ethics in certain respects. Through philosophical thought, these finally made their way from India to Europe via trade routes to the Middle East, where they eventually flourished.

In Western ethics, the Vedic and early Buddhist teachings come first, as the infographics below illustrate. It follows that all other schools of ethics, including secular ethics, adhered to this point of view. All facets of ethical thought and behavior can be conceptually and epistemologically connected to the Buddha's explanation of the truth, or Dharma.

The Dharma teaches not just nonattachment, impermanence, and interconnection, but also that emotional impulses must be controlled by mental and bodily restraint. The ethics of Stoicism reflect these similar ideals, as students of early Western philosophy will see. [12]
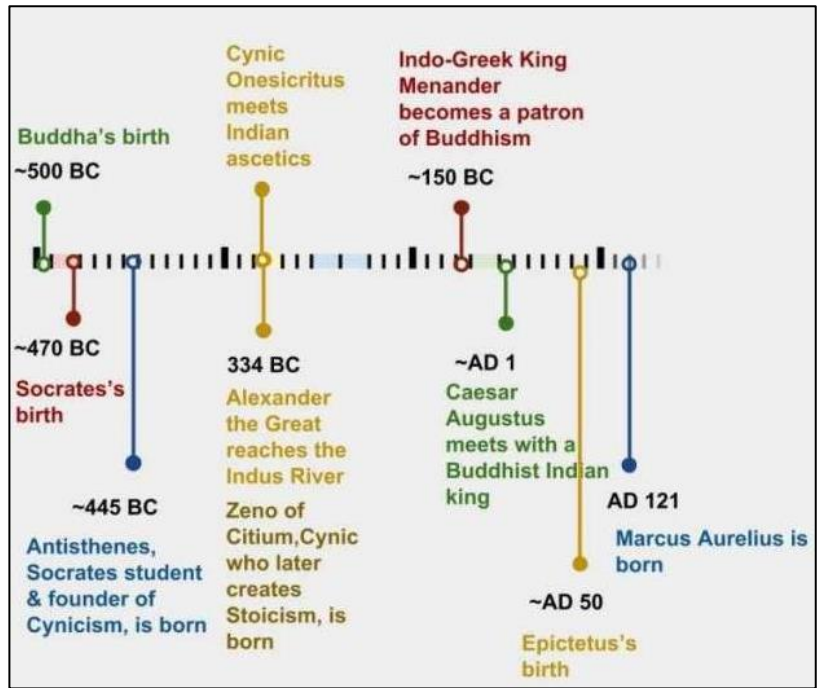

Figure 18.2: chronologically the Vedic and early Buddhist teachings precede classical ethics in the West
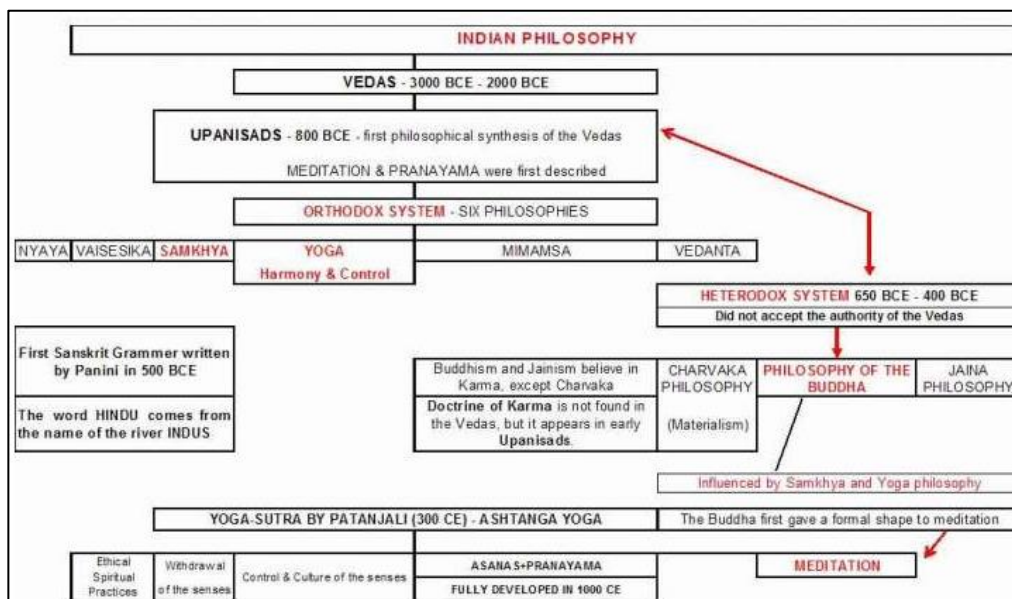

Figure 18.3: Indian Philosophy

Ethics and evolution:

From a Buddhist perspective, moral decisions and choices are meritorious and create favorable conditions for this life as well as subsequent rebirths. This is frequently explained as just "good karma." At the individual level, moral behavior could account for things like having a good, healthy physique from birth and having enough resources to accomplish one's objectives.

The fairly fantastical theory that there might be links between, instance, modifications to our DNA or any other physically observable manifestation and our ability to make moral decisions is not testable scientifically. But there are still unanswered concerns about how much our mental models and behavioral decisions have influenced our physical evolution. What, for instance, caused humans to acquire opposable thumbs when certain other primates did not? Similarly, how much does our biological and physical evolution affect our capacity for moral growth and moral decision-making? [13]

These kinds of questions have been motivating intriguing research directions, like the study of evolutionary ethics. This field was founded by Darwin and his contemporaries Herbert Spencer, who proposed that ethics develops from natural principles (Principles of Ethics, 1892). Since seeking pleasure and avoiding pain drove the evolution of biology and psychology, ethics is a natural principle.

Major traditions in ancient Indian thought:

There are two main streams of ancient Indian tradition. Buddhist and Hindu traditions.
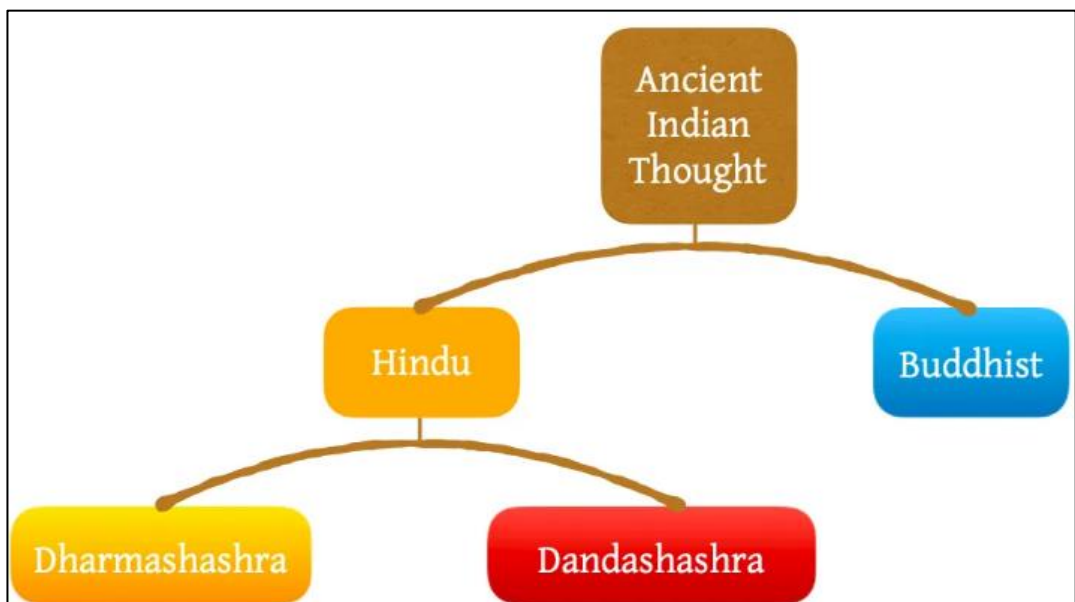
Figure 18.4: Hindu tradition and Buddhist tradition

Indian tradition shows continuity as opposed to shift. Therefore, there are no qualitative differences between Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Buddhism might be referred to as the "rebel child of Hinduism."

As a result, there are many parallels between the two traditions. Like Hinduism, Buddhism too holds to the notions of reincarnation and Karma. The primary distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism is that the latter upholds the dominance of Kshatriyas and Brahmins. Buddhism is a symbol of the Kshatriya and Vaishya dominion or partnership. [14]

Karma and Dharma:

According to Vedic theology, dharma refers to required activities, and karma refers to actions. Your mandatory duty (dharma) is everything that you are supposed to do as a human being, as a part of God, as a householder, as a family member, and as a member of your caste, community, society, and the world. It means that unless you decide to completely give up on the worldly life and undergo an even more grueling process of inner transformation, these are the acts that you simply cannot avoid without committing sin.

Obligatory activities generate only good karma and guarantee a better life both here and afterward, even though karma can have both positive and bad effects. They lead to emancipation for those who carry them out without hoping to reap the benefits, but they also cause rebirth for those who carry them out with the intention of living a happy life in this world. But those who disregard them or don't do them at all commit heinous sins and go into the lowest depths of hell.

Therefore, every human being on earth has an obligation to defend dharma, fulfill their role in life as expected and as a manifestation of God, and so maintain the regular order of the worlds and creatures.

In numerous writings discussing the Hindu way of life, Purushartha is mentioned as being composed of dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. On the other hand, only a few small Upanishads include the specific reference when looking for it in the Vedas or the Upanishads.

The four puruṣārthas (human endeavors) of life are discussed in our ancient literature as ways to have a fulfilled life that ultimately leads to liberation. The Sanskrit terms puruṣa and artha are combined to form the word puruṣārtha (पुरुषार्थ). Puruṣa is colloquially used to refer to a male. But in the context of Samkhya philosophy and yoga, it refers to the soul or pure awareness. Puruṣārtha can refer to the purpose of human life or the human quest in its original sense. The word could also imply "endeavor to attain final liberation" in its second meaning.

The four puruṣārthas that are described are moksha (मोक्ष), kama (काम), artha (अर्थ), and dharma (धर्म). [15]
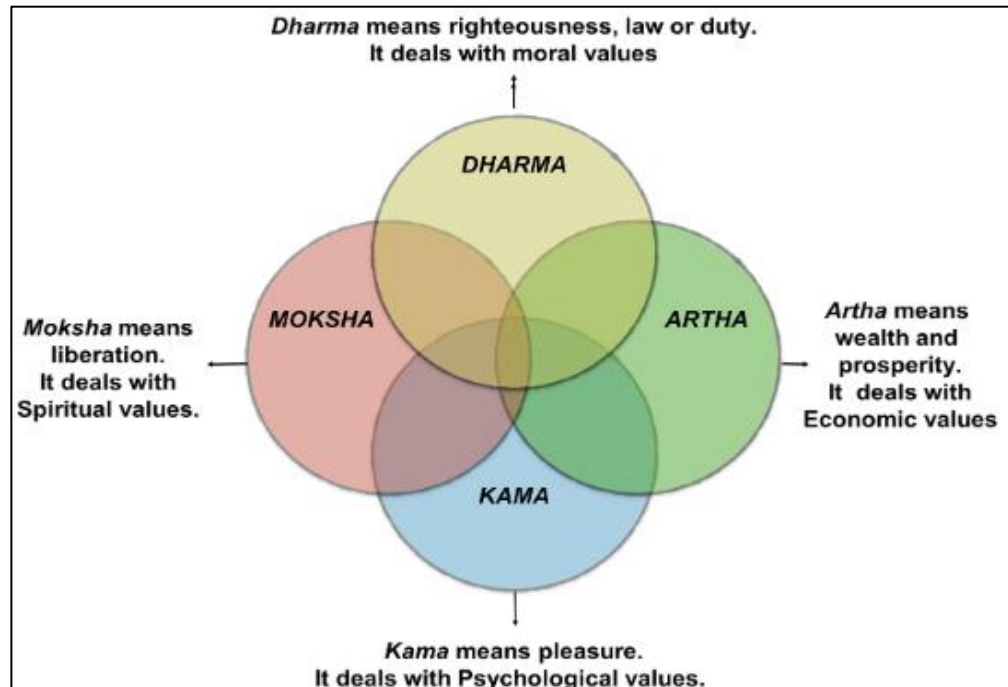
Figure 18.5: The four purusharthas (human pursuits)

18.6 Conclusion:

Based on their circumstances, aptitudes, and preferences, people select their careers. An opportunity to help people is a major reason given by many young medical students for choosing the medical field. The medical community has long been valued by society for its dedication to providing care and reducing suffering. It is clear that the goal of both dharma and medical science is to lessen suffering in order to increase human happiness. Thus, they may be considered complementary or even convergent.

18.7 References:

1. Carl Cappeller (1999), Monier-Williams: A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Etymological and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages, Asian Educational Services, ISBN 978-81-206-0369-1, pp. 510–512.
2. English translated version by Donald R. Davis: Paul Hacker, (2006) "Dharma in Hinduism", Journal of Indian Philosophy, Volume 34, Issue 5, pp. 479–496; Original peer reviewed publication in German: Paul Hacker, (1965) "Dharma im Hinduismus" Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft Volume 49, pp. 93–106.
3. Date VH. Vedanta explained: Sankara's commentary on the Brahmasutras. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal; 1973
4. Sarma D. "Hindu" bioethics? J Law Med Ethics. 2008 Spring;36(1):51–8.
5. Gambhirananda S. Translated by Swami. Eight Upanishads. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama; 1957. 952 p.

6. Joshi, Lakshmanshastri, Vaidik Sanskriti ka Vikas, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2017.
7. Sharma, A. (2000). Classical Indian thought. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
8. Misra, G., & Gergen, K. (1993). On the place of culture in psychological science. International Journal of Psychology, 28, 2, 235–243.
9. Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli. Indian Philosophy, Vol. 1. Delhi: Oxford, 2019.
10. Nallusamy, K., 2007, 'Hinduism, the misunderstood religion', in 38th ICANAS (International Congress of Asian and North African Studies), Ankara, Unpublished.
11. Khatibi, M. & Khormaei, F., 2016, 'Morality and ethics: A brief review', Journal of Life Science and Biomedicine 6(3), 66–70.
12. Wainryb, C., & Turiel, E. (1995). Diversity in social development: Between or within cultures? In M. Killen and D. Hart (Eds.), Morality in everyday life: Developmental perspectives. (pp.283–313). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
13. Shri A.S. Narayana Deekshitulu vs State Of Andhra Pradesh & Ors, 1996 AIR 1765, JT 1996 (3) 482.
14. Olivelle, Patrick (2012). "Karma". Encyclopædia Britannica. Archived from the original on 3 May 2015. Retrieved 23 June 2022.
15. Tsomo, K. L. 2012. "Compassion, ethics, and neuroscience: neuroethics through Buddhist eyes." Sci Eng Ethics. 18(3):529-37.