Dharma: The Guiding Principle for Harmonious Existence: A Comparative Philosophical Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the concept of Dharma as a fundamental guiding principle for harmonious existence across diverse philosophical traditions, emphasizing its multifaceted nature and profound influence on human life and society. It undertakes a comprehensive comparative inquiry into the various interpretations and applications of Dharma within key cultural and religious frameworks, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other philosophical systems, thereby highlighting the rich diversity and commonalities that define this concept. The study critically examines Dharma's pivotal role in shaping ethical behavior, social order, and individual purpose, illustrating how it serves as both a personal and collective moral compass.By analyzing classical texts, such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Buddhist Sutras, alongside contemporary philosophical perspectives, this research elucidates how Dharma functions as a dynamic principle that balances personal duties with universal values. This balance fosters coexistence, social harmony, and spiritual fulfillment, offering a framework that integrates individual responsibilities with broader societal and cosmic laws. This study further explores how Dharma adapts to contextual changes while maintaining its core essence, thereby addressing the evolving ethical and existential challenges faced by individuals and communities.The findings reveal significant convergences in the understanding of Dharma across traditions, such as its emphasis on righteousness, duty, and pursuit of truth, while also uncovering distinctive interpretations that reflect unique cultural and doctrinal nuances. These insights contribute to a deeper appreciation of Dharma's enduring relevance in contemporary discourse, particularly in its potential to inform modern ethical decision-making and promote global harmony amidst cultural pluralism and moral complexity. By examining Dharma alongside Confucian Ren and Yi, Taoist principles, Stoic ethics, Ubuntu, and Māori Kaitiakitanga, this study reveals ethical convergence across civilizations. Although expressions differ, all seek harmony between self, society, and nature. In today's fragmented world of ecological stress, the Dharmic worldview offers a holistic ethic integrating inner growth, environmental care, and social responsibility, serving as a philosophical framework for sustainable living. This study aims to investigate Dharma as a universal ethical principle that links individual behavior with cosmic order, explore its origins in Hindu traditions, and examine its role in embodying moral equilibrium and sustainability. This research seeks to position Dharma not only as a historical or religious concept but as a dynamic, universal principle that continues to inspire and guide humanity toward a balanced and harmonious existence.

Keywords: Dharma; Comparative Philosophy; Cultural Pluralism; Spiritual Fulfilment; Confucianism; Taoism; Stoicism

INTRODUCTION

Aithal and Ramanathan (2025) assert that Dharma represents one of the most profound and multifaceted concepts in philosophical discourse. Derived from the Sanskrit root dhṛ, which signifies "to sustain" or "to uphold," Dharma encompasses notions of righteousness, moral order, duty, and harmony. It functions as both a metaphysical and moral principle that governs the universe and guides human conduct. Although its origins lie in Bharat, the concept of Dharma resonates with ethical systems across various nations and cultures that emphasize balance, virtue, and collective well-being. Mohanty and Dalai (2025) observe that in classical Bharatiya Darshan, Dharma embodies the moral structure of the cosmos, providing the foundation for law, ethics, and adhyatma. From the Vedas and Upanishads to the Bhagavad Gītā, Dharma operates as both a divine ordinance and a practical guide for life. It is not merely prescriptive but ontological—an inherent order of being that sustains reality. The contemporary world, characterized by moral ambiguity, ecological crisis, and cultural fragmentation, underscores the pressing need to revisit the guiding principles of Dharma. As Gaur (2025) notes, integrating Dharmic wisdom into modern environmental and ethical paradigms could illuminate pathways toward sustainability, compassion, and peace.Davis (2007) elucidates the role of Dharma as a foundational legal and moral principle within Hinduism. He contends that Dharma serves not only as a religious doctrine but also as a comprehensive legal tradition that influences social order and ethical conduct. Dharmaśāstra texts, in particular, encapsulate this intertwined relationship between law and morality, offering paradigms that govern individual duty and societal harmony. Harvey and Siderits (2004) provide a foundational overview of Buddhist ethics, underscoring Dharma as central to Buddhist moral philosophy. They emphasize Dharma's role in guiding individual moral behavior and social ethics through principles such as non-harming, compassion, and interdependence, which collectively fosters societal well-being and spiritual development. Muniapan and Satpathy (2013) examine Dharma in the Bhagavad-Gita, particularly its applications in contemporary corporate social responsibility (CSR). They find that Dharma, in conjunction with Karma, underscores individual and corporate ethical responsibilities, promoting self-awareness of duty that extends from personal obligations to global social accountability, thereby contributing to ethical leadership and social harmony. Srinivasan and Aithal (2023) explore the eternal principles of Sanatana Dharma, emphasizing its ethical and spiritual dimensions that guide harmonious living. Their study reveals how Dharma functions as a dynamic, integrative framework that balances individual duties with universal values, emphasizing righteousness, truth, and compassion as enduring elements fostering personal and social harmony.This study employs a comparative philosophical methodology to position Dharma within the context of global ethical traditions and emphasize its continued significance.

Historical Context: Dharma in the Bharatiya Intellectual Tradition:

Vedic and Upanishadic Foundations

The earliest references to Dharma appear in the Ṛigveda (circa 1500 BCE), where it denotes the sustaining order of the cosmos (ṛta). This order later evolved into moral and social duty, shaping the ethical fabric of Vedic civilization. The Upanishads deepened this conception, linking Dharma to self-realization (ātma-vidyā) and the pursuit of truth (satya). The Chāndogya Upanishad and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad portray Dharma as the essence of all virtue, the foundation upon which both the individual and cosmos rest. Aithal and S. (2024) assert that Sanathana Dharma, grounded in ancient Indian philosophy, offers a scientific, non-religious framework for an ideal society aimed at sustaining humanity. This presents Dharma as a universal principle essential to social order and ethical living. Chandra and Ranjan (2022) used AI-driven topic modeling to analyze the connections between Hindu scriptures, demonstrating how Dharma relates to philosophical inquiry and moral duties in the Vedic tradition. Srinivasan and Aithal (2023) investigated the principles of Sanatana Dharma from Vedic teachings, identifying it as a core concept integrating cosmic order with ethical responsibility in the Bharatiya worldview. Srinivasan and Aithal (2025a) analyzed Upanishadic influence on Western philosophers, showing how Dharma as universal law has transcended cultural boundaries. Srinivasan and Aithal (2025b) compared Upanishadic teachings with Stoic philosophy, emphasizing Dharma's focus on wisdom and ethical conduct, situating it as a philosophical principle in the Vedic tradition.

The Bhagavad Gītā and the Ethics of Svadharma

Aithal and Ramanathan (2025) examine the reinterpretation of Dharma within the Bhagavad Gītā, particularly in the context of moral conflict. In this text, Krishna advises Arjuna to adhere to his svadharma or personal duty, even amidst ethical ambiguity. This instruction harmonizes

action (karma) and wisdom (jñāna) in the pursuit of a higher order. Consequently, the Gītā redefines dharma from a mere social obligation to a metaphysical commitment to truth and righteousness, independent of external rewards or consequences.

The Ten Virtues of Dharma in Manusmṛti

Gaur (2025) elucidates that the Manusmṛti (6.92) delineates ten universal virtues: Dhrti (steadfastness), Kṣamā (forgiveness), Dama (self-control), Asteya (non-stealing), Śauca (purity), Indriya-nigraha (sense restraint), Dhī (wisdom), Vidyā (knowledge), Satya (truth), and Akrodha (non-anger). Collectively, these virtues form the moral framework of Dharma, which directs individual behavior and upholds social harmony.

Dharma in Jainism and Buddhism

Paul and Tiwari (2025) discuss the concept of Dharma within Jain Darshana, where it is embodied as Dharma Tattva, the principle of righteousness manifested through Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), and Aparigraha (non-attachment). Jain ethics are centered around the "three jewels": right faith, knowledge, and conduct. Davis (2018) examines the notion of Dharma in Buddh Darshana, where it signifies both the cosmic law and the teachings of the Buddha. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path serve as practical expressions of Dharma, facilitating liberation from suffering. Despite its non-theistic nature, Buddhist Darshana maintains a moral and ontological foundation aimed at sustaining harmony and balance.

Comparative Philosophy of Dharma

The Dharmic vision resonates across civilizations, revealing a shared human concern for moral order, social duty, and cosmic harmony. This section explores the parallels between Dharma and analogous concepts in Confucianism, Taoism, Stoicism, African philosophy, and Māori ethics.

Dharma and Confucian Ethics (China)

Panda (2025) discusses Confucianism, a philosophical system rooted in the teachings of Confucius (551–479 BCE), which underscores the importance of moral development, social harmony, and benevolent governance. Its core virtues—Ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), and Li (ritual propriety)—reflect the Dharmic principles of compassion, justice, and duty.The Confucian *Junzi* (noble person) parallels the Dharmic *Sthitaprajña* (person of steady wisdom) in the *Gītā*. Both represent moral exemplars who act ethically not for reward but out of intrinsic alignment with universal order. Moreover, *Filial piety* in Confucianism resembles *Pitṛ Ṛṇa* (debt to ancestors) in Hindu ethics, underscoring intergenerational duty and social coherence.Norden (2007) examined the interplay between virtue ethics and consequentialism in early Chinese philosophy, focusing particularly on Confucian ethics. The study highlights that Confucianism centers on cultivating moral virtues to achieve social harmony and individual moral development while also engaging with consequentialist ideas concerning outcomes and societal welfare.While Confucianism is human-centred and Dharma often Cosmo centric, both traditions converge in their advocacy of moral self-cultivation and the maintenance of social harmony.

Dharma and Taoism (China and East Asia)

Davis (2018) discusses Taoism, which is rooted in the Tao Te Ching of Laozi and posits the Tao as the ineffable principle underlying all existence. The spontaneous order of the Tao mirrors the Dharmic notion of Ṛta, the cosmic law that sustains balance. The Taoist concept of Wu Wei, or "non-action," which signifies effortless alignment with the natural flow, parallels the Gītā's principle of detached action (Nishkāma Karma). Both philosophies advocate for harmony with nature, humility, and the dissolution of ego. As Dhand (2002) notes, both Dharma and Tao articulate an ecological and spiritual ethic grounded in natural law and inner balance.

Kaltenmark (1969) examines Taoism through the teachings of Lao Tzu, emphasizing the tradition's focus on naturalness, simplicity, and harmony with the Tao. This perspective contrasts with, yet complements, Dharmic principles by emphasizing the flow of life and effortless action.Kohn (1992) addresses early Chinese mysticism, positioning Taoism as a spiritual tradition that shares with Dharmic systems an emphasis on inner transformation and harmony with cosmic forces, highlighting the mystical and esoteric aspects of Taoist practice.Lin, Swanson, and Rogge (2024) explore the cross-cultural connections between Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism in relation to mental health, demonstrating how Taoist concepts of balance and flow contribute to psychological well-being, paralleling Dharmic notions of compassion and duty in fostering mental health resilience.Mollier (2008) compares Buddhism and Taoism, illustrating their interactions in East Asia and how Taoism's naturalistic worldview complements Dharmic ethical frameworks, particularly in promoting harmony between humans and nature.Strickmann (2002) investigates Chinese magical medicine, where Taoist ritual and cosmology intersect with Dharmic ideas of cosmic order and healing, reflecting a syncretic medical tradition that integrates spirituality and physical health.Wang and Stringer (2000) analyze the influence of Taoism on Chinese leisure culture, demonstrating how Taoist values of spontaneity and harmony shape social behaviors, aligning with Dharmic virtues of duty and righteousness in forming ethical leisure practices.Wang and Wang (2021) propose ternary Taiji models centered on Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist cultures, illustrating how Taoism's concepts of dynamic balance integrate with Dharmic principles of compassion and justice to form a holistic traditional Chinese self-conception.

Dharma and Stoic Virtue Ethics (Greece and Rome)

Dhand (2002) discusses Stoicism, a philosophical school founded by Zeno of Citium, which advocates for living "in accordance with nature." The four cardinal virtues of Stoicism—wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance—closely align with Dharmic values. In both traditions, moral integrity is derived from self-mastery and rational alignment with the cosmic order. Marcus Aurelius' Meditations exemplifies a Stoic interpretation of Dharma, emphasizing that one's duty is to act justly, irrespective of external outcomes. Similarly, Krishna's exhortation to act without attachment resonates with the Stoic concept of apatheia, which is the freedom from passion through reason. The Stoic notion of Logos, the rational principle that permeates the universe, parallels the metaphysical dimension of Dharma, which upholds the unity between cosmic order and moral law.

Anna (2007) examines Stoic ethics as a rational philosophy that prioritizes virtue as the ultimate good, whereby living by nature and reason equals moral excellence. Bowden (2012) applies Stoic principles to management, showing how virtues, such as wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance, guide ethical decision-making. Inwood (2000) addresses rules and reasoning in Stoic ethics, emphasizing logical coherence in virtue ethics. Inwood and Donini (1999) provide an overview of Stoic ethics, highlighting virtue as necessary for happiness and harmony with nature. Kourtoglou, Vavouras, and Sariannidis (2024) analyze Stoicism as a tool for organizational ethics and corporate responsibility. Long (2003) examines the development of Stoicism, noting its focus on virtue and moral character. Massimo (2024) presents Stoic moral psychology, focusing on managing anxiety through virtue. Rodriguez-Nikl (2021) links Stoic ethics to technology issues, suggesting that it guides a good life amid modern challenges. Sherman (1997) emphasizes virtue as practical necessity for human flourishing. Strange (2004) details Stoicism's doctrine that virtue is the sole good for ethical living.

Dharma and African Ethics: Ubuntu and Maat

Tripathi (2025) discussed African philosophical systems, though diverse, share with Dharma an emphasis on interconnectedness and moral reciprocity. The Zulu concept of *Ubuntu* ("I am because we are") expresses the idea that personal identity and moral worth arise through communal relationships. This interdependence mirrors Dharma's social dimension, emphasizing duty toward others and collective welfare.

Ayibo (2021) analyzes Western and African ethics, examining guilt and shame concepts within these cultural paradigms. Beidelman and Gbadegesin (1993) investigate Yoruba philosophy in contemporary African contexts, emphasizing its relevance. Chigangaidze, Matanga, and

Katsuro (2021) present Ubuntu philosophy as a framework addressing COVID-19 through community solidarity. Davis (2007) explores the principles of Hinduism as a legal tradition in religious and societal contexts. Mugumbate et al. (2023) examine Ubuntu's role in global social work education, highlighting culturally relevant practices. Muhammad-Lawal et al. (2022) show Ubuntu philosophy's application in holistic nursing through South African students' perspectives. Shapira (2025) reinterprets Old Kingdom Egyptian autobiographies, focusing on 'Priests of Maat.' Van Breda (2019) develops Ubuntu as an African theoretical framework for social work. West (2013) discusses integrating Ubuntu philosophy into business ethics, addressing its potential in corporate contexts.

In ancient Egyptian thought, *Maat* represented truth, balance, and justice—the cosmic and moral order sustaining creation. As with Dharma, adherence to *Maat* ensured harmony between individual actions and universal stability. Both doctrines promote truth (*satya*), justice, and ecological balance as sacred duties.

Dharma and Māori Ethics: Kaitiakitanga

Paul and Tiwari (2025) articulate that within Māori philosophy, Kaitiakitanga represents the spiritual obligation of guardianship over the natural environment. This philosophy embodies a worldview in which humans serve as custodians of land, water, and life for the benefit of future generations. This concept is analogous to the Dharmic commitment to ecological stewardship, as exemplified by the principle of ahimsa and the reverence for all living beings. Both traditions associate moral action with environmental balance, framing sustainability as a sacred duty rather than merely a policy directive.

Convergence and Divergence: Philosophical Dimensions

Across traditions, several philosophical parallels emerge:

- *Ontological Order:* Dharma, Tao, and *Logos* represent the inherent structure of reality an order that governs both nature and morality.
- *Ethical Universality:* Despite cultural variations, each system envisions moral principles as objective and universal.
- *Self-Cultivation:* Moral development through discipline and knowledge forms the path to harmony across traditions.
- *Non-Anthropocentric Ethics:* Dharma, Taoism, and Māori thought recognize humanity's embeddedness within nature, rejecting human domination over it.
- *Social Harmony:* Confucianism, Ubuntu, and Dharma converge on the importance of relational ethics and community welfare.

However, key divergences also exist. Dharma integrates metaphysics, ritual, and spirituality in a more holistic manner, while Stoicism and Confucianism prioritize rational or social ethics. Moreover, Buddhist and Jain reinterpretations of Dharma shift its focus from ritual obligation to ethical liberation.

Dharma and Modern Ethical Relevance

Dharma as Moral Framework for Global Ethics

Gaur (2025) posits that in contemporary society, moral relativism and ethical fragmentation frequently erode social trust and justice. The integrative framework of Dharma offers a universal moral compass that surpasses sectarian divisions. By anchoring morality in cosmic order and interdependence, Dharma presents a non-dogmatic yet profoundly principled approach to ethics. Mehrotra (2025) asserts that its holistic nature accommodates pluralism without compromising moral coherence, a feature increasingly crucial in multicultural societies and global governance.

Dunford (2017) underscores the need for a decolonial global ethics beyond Western-centric frameworks, advocating for pluralistic and culturally grounded approaches. This aligns with Dharma as a universal yet context-sensitive moral principle capable of bridging diverse ethical traditions. Gauthier, Pettifor, and Ferrero (2010) propose a culture-sensitive model for ethical codes, emphasizing respect for cultural diversity while establishing universal principles. Dharma's flexibility as a moral framework facilitates a balance between universal values and cultural specificity. Schwartz (2005) identifies universal moral values in corporate ethics, such as justice and honesty, which correspond with Dharma's emphasis on righteous conduct. Wines and Napier (1992) developed a model for cross-cultural ethics, highlighting the integration of diverse moral perspectives, with Dharma exemplifying a non-Western tradition that contributes to this understanding.

Dharma and Environmental Ethics

Dharma's ecological consciousness, as encapsulated in the Vedic concept of Ṛta and the Jain ethic of Ahimsa, offers a philosophical basis for sustainability. As noted by Ravikanth (2021), the Dharmic worldview inherently advocates environmental stewardship by acknowledging the sanctity of all life. Similarly, Mehrotra (2025) and contemporary environmental philosophers contend that a Dharmic understanding of duty and restraint could effectively address climate crises by transforming humanity's relationship with nature from exploitation to reverence.

Dharma and Intercultural Dialogue

Panda (2025) argues that within the field of global philosophy, comparative frameworks frequently uncover shared ethical intuitions obscured by linguistic and cultural disparities. The concept of Dharma, with its focus on interconnectedness, promotes intercultural dialogue by aligning Eastern and Western moral vocabularies.

In this respect, Dharma operates as a *philosophical bridge* between metaphysical and pragmatic ethics uniting rational, spiritual, and ecological dimensions under a single ethical vision.

Dharma, Human Flourishing, and Well-Being

Aithal and Ramanathan (2025) propose that the Dharmic approach to human flourishing surpasses individualistic paradigms by integrating personal virtue with social responsibility and cosmic awareness. Contemporary well-being research corroborates that such integrative frameworks, which balance self-discipline, compassion, and purpose, enhance psychological resilience and foster collective harmony. Hsu, W.-C., Huang, N.-C., Li, C.-L., and Hu, S. C. (2024) analyzed networks among Taiwanese retirees, examining personal, social, and environmental determinants of flourishing. They emphasized character, meaning, and relationships in well-being, aligning with Dharma's focus on ethical living. Sirgy, M. J., and Uysal, M. (2016) studied eudaimonia in tourism, viewing it as living according to one's nature, similar to Dharma. Vanderweele, T. J. (2017a) examined flourishing strategies through meaning, character, and social relationships, positioning Dharma as an ethical framework supporting well-being. Vanderweele, T. J. (2017b) studied religious communities' role in flourishing, showing how participation fosters meaning, character, and social ties. Węziak-Białowolska, D., Mcneely, E., and Vanderweele, T. J. (2019) provided cross-cultural evidence that flourishing includes meaning, character, and relationships, confirming Dharma-related values' universal role in well-being.

By promoting self-realization (*ātma-jñāna*) alongside social justice, Dharma harmonizes personal and communal dimensions of moral life.

Conclusion

The concept of Dharma represents an enduring principle that connects diverse civilizations in a collective moral pursuit. From Vedic sages to Confucius, and from Stoic philosophers to African elders, humanity has consistently sought a universal order that integrates ethics, nature, and society. The Dharmic paradigm, rooted in cosmic harmony and moral obligation, presents a comprehensive ethical framework for the contemporary era.

Its alignment with Confucian Ren, Taoist Wu Wei, Stoic virtue, Ubuntu, and Maat illustrates that the human aspiration for righteousness and equilibrium is universal. By re-engaging with Dharma not as a sectarian doctrine but as a global ethic of sustainability, compassion, and justice,

contemporary philosophy can rediscover a pathway toward harmonious existence in which the moral, ecological, and spiritual dimensions converge.

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