Readers, here are many of the terms I am going to use in this book on dharma, in Sanskrit and their Pāli variants (Sanskrit and Pāli are two of the major Indo-Aryan languages of classical South Asia). Starting with their Sanskrit forms, we have dharma itself, meaning that which “holds,” or “upholds.” The classical term dharma also has a precursor in older Vedic Sanskrit, where you will find the form dhárman. Dhárman can be translated as “foundation,” in that a foundation is something that “holds.” Both derive from the verbal root √dhṛ, “to hold.” Among other Sanskrit terms you will meet are nirvāṇa and mokṣa, both of which describe the goal of liberation. Liberation usually has to do not with “holding” but with “letting go.” In that dharma is concerned with things that “hold,” you can expect that it has to do with things that are worth holding to, even if they must ultimately be “let go” if one is to attain nirvāṇa or mokṣa.

Here you will meet a linguistic feature of dharma that has to do with the way it is used to speak of things worth holding to in what is known as saṃsāra, the “world in flux.” You might think of saṃsāra’s hold, and thus dharma’s, too, as “the ties that bind.” This linguistic feature is that dharma is prominently used in compounds with other words. When it appears as the first member, it can refer to something being “virtuous,” “lawful,” “just,” or “righteous,” as with dharma-yuddha, a “just war,” or dharma-rāja, a “righteous king.” When it appears as the second member, it can refer to the “law” or “duty” that pertains to the person or group mentioned before it, as with sva-dharma, “one’s own duty,” or vara-dharma, “the laws of class” or “caste.” You will also hear of “the laws of life-stages,” called āśramas. Be forewarned, however, that in the second position dharma can also refer to the “nature,”
“quality,” or “property” of something, as, for instance, when you hear that the self “has an indestructible nature.” You can see that the notion of the self emerges. The term here is usually ātman.

Hindus consider that there are three spiritual “disciplines,” or yogas, by which one can seek to find the right balance between “holding” to what is worth holding to, that is, dharma, and “letting go.” These three “disciplines,” sometimes also called “paths,” are karma, or “action,” by which is meant disinterested action; knowledge; and bhakti, or “devotion.” These disciplines have to do with seeking liberation either through knowing that one’s self, or ātman, is identical with the absolute, called Brahman, or through devoting oneself to God.

Pāli is the language of Theravāda Buddhism; by name, the “School of the Elders.” Most of the terms mentioned have Pāli counterparts. You will find in parentheses the Pāli counterpart of the Sanskrit term on its first occurrence in the book—for example, dharma (dhamma), nirvāṇa (nibbāna). Pāli will be cited only when discussing Theravāda materials. All other Buddhist schools use Sanskrit, including the “Great Vehicle” (Mahāyāna), which introduced new teachings around the turn of the millennium.

You can also see that the terminology of caste will be important. Hinduism holds that society should have four castes, or classes: Brahmins are the priests and cognoscenti; Kṣatriyas supply the armed stratum of warriors, from which should come the stock of kings; Vaiśyas are farmers, herders, and tradesmen; and Śūdras are your lowly servants. As you can see, the question will arise as to whether discourse on dharma—not only Hindu but Buddhist—is necessarily elitist. In the same vein, even where we find usages in related languages, is it inescapably Sanskritic?

A glossary of frequently used terms can be found at the back of the book.

Two Spiritualities

The important point to begin with is that Buddhists tend to use such common terms differently from Hindus. For instance, the first meaning of dharma for Buddhists, one obviously not acknowledged by Hindus, is the Buddha’s “teaching.” But the two traditions also use such terms as part of a shared and nuanced conversation. I hold that
dharma is the primary term through which they are having this conversation; to be sure, the conversation is more often than not among themselves, but also, in ways that are not always made explicit, with each other. The best way to understand the concept in its major guises, and among different schools of thought, is to comparatively trace its early evolution in authoritative, mostly “sacred,” texts, of which I will concentrate on ten that give the term a spiritual centrality.

Broadly speaking, these two traditions are two incredibly rich and deep spiritualities. To seek to bring their conversations back to life in a series on Asian spiritualities is thus a felicitous challenge to author and reader alike. Yet we had best start on some common ground. I would like to encourage four ways to get into this book.

First, it will be about dharma in South Asian spirituality. South Asia takes in India; Sri Lanka, home to Theravāda Buddhism and the formation of the Pāli canon; Nepal, the Buddha’s birthplace; and Pakistan and Afghanistan, homes to pre-Islamic traditions of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddhism has very different conversations when it interacts with the spiritual traditions of East Asia. Whereas the South Asian conversation was couched in India’s analytical spirit, with its methodical and uncompromising quest for a definitive liberation that would master or empty out all traces of illusion, East Asian conversations, beginning in China, with the encounter of Buddhism with Confucianism and Daoism, were couched in more practical terms, with an emphasis on the expression and enactment of enlightenment in this-worldly idioms.

A story about the eastward transmission of the Buddhist dharma provides a good example. One of the most repeated stock questions in the anecdotal literature of Chan (or Zen) Buddhism asks, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the west?” “The west” here is India or Central Asia, and the question is about the first Chan patriarch, whose name, in Sanskrit, means “Enlightenment Teaching.” The question receives Chinese answers such as, “Ask that post over there!” and “If you find any meaning, you will not save even yourself.” One Japanese answer is “The cypress tree in the garden.” The question is not only about the enigmatic south Indian monk credited with having brought Chan to China in the late fifth or early sixth century CE, but about the dharma he bears in his name, which
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is often shortened when he is called just “Dharma.” To paraphrase, these answers seem to be saying, “Don’t look east or west or think about meaning.” Enlightened dharma, the Buddha’s teaching, is right before your eyes. Bodhidharma is said to have made a founding Chan distinction between dharma that depends on words and letters and dharma that points to the soul of man. You won’t find such brevity from anyone representing dharma in South Asia.

Second, this book will be about dharma as a South Asian spirituality. Along with yoga and karma, dharma is one of a few terms that have come to emblematize Indian spirituality not only in the West but throughout Asia. In our new global context, yoga and karma are probably the more common of the three terms, and probably also better understood, even in their New Age manifestations. Whatever its complexities, yoga is something eminently practical and susceptible to easy visible representation. Whatever its nuances, karma, at least insofar as it has to do with reincarnation, is an easily grasped idea, with cross-cultural explanatory power. As in our East Asian anecdote, dharma seems to hint at something more multiform and elusive. In the global marketplace of ideas, dharma, more than these or any other originally Indic terms, has come to denote South Asian spirituality as a marker of identity, of transplantable values, of Indianness itself, whether at home or abroad. Moreover, “spirituality” seems to have the right tone to bring attention to the way the concept of dharma has served to bridge religious and civilizational discourses on South Asia. On the one hand, dharma, in one of its many facets, can sometimes be translated as “religion,” at least when used by Buddhists and Hindus (Jains do this, too, but seem to have first used the term in a quite different sense, as an ontological category of “motion”). On the other hand, it has also become the term of choice to characterize a distinctive South Asian civilizational worldview. As such, dharma has been repeatedly taken up by apologists and critics, “insiders” and “outsiders,” practitioners and scholars, historians and philosophers, ethicists and lawyers, and traditionalists, modernists, and postmodernists when they seek to “represent” and “explain” the religious and civilizational values of South Asia.

Third, this book will be about dharma as a South Asian spirituality in history. What has not been sufficiently recognized is that dharma
itself has a history, and its usages are constructs. This is important for thinking about how dharma comes to denote South Asian spirituality, for if the chapters of this book can trace its movement toward such a contemporary meaning, it will be through its association with varied South Asian spiritualities of other times. Chapters 2 to 4 will be concerned with the transformations dharma underwent from its earliest usages to its adoption by the Buddha and his followers. Here, questions of spirituality will emerge mainly with reference to the early semantics of the term dharma, and to the sacrificial ethos, ethical reflections, and meditative practices that came to be associated with it. Chapters 5 to 7 will address the components of Brahmanical spirituality that shape the socio-political institutions of classical Brahmanism or Hinduism. Here, where in some circles dharma comes to mean primarily law, we have the good old question of the spirit of the law. But we will also notice that Brahmanical narratives enrich reflection on dharma in tales about the justice of kings and the nuanced spiritualities of women. Chapters 8 to 10 will then take up questions raised about the ethics, politics, and interfaith implications of dharma in Hindu and Buddhist contexts that address its spiritual meanings directly. Chapter 11 can then ask, what do dharma’s earlier spiritualities bring into the twenty-first century?

Fourth, in some of the stories told by both traditions, life is breathed into dharma through memorable characters. I have sought energetically to keep their number to a minimum and to introduce them carefully, but there is no getting around the following point. One of the mainstays and potential delights of Indian spirituality is to relax when you meet a new literary character. You can be sure he or she will soon have something fine to tell you.

Classical Dharma Texts

In recognizing that dharma has a history, a book on the topic must offer a textual chronology, however provisional it may be. The term dharma can be found in many South Asian texts, including classical works on statecraft and ritual theory. But in the present work, you will be invited to engage mainly with writings that we can call “dharma texts”: ones in which dharma is a, if not the, central concept under consideration. From circa 1500 BCE to 300 BCE, from
the early hymns of the *Rigveda* through the philosophical speculations of the Upaniṣads, no text is predominantly about *dharma*. For “dharma texts,” our working chronology will take you into a “post-Vedic” “classical” period. The classical period as a whole can be said to run from the fourth century BCE to the fifth century CE, but our ten “dharma texts” can be ascribed to the first six centuries of this period. I use the term “dharma texts” to cover both individual texts and text collections, such as those of the Buddha’s teachings and the edicts promulgated by the emperor Aśoka. While nine of our ten such dharma texts take on some kind of canonical and thus “sacred” status in either Buddhism or Hinduism, the edicts of Aśoka, even though he converted to Buddhism, would have to be called secular. Aśoka was the third emperor of the Mauryan dynasty, which ruled from northeastern India from 325 BCE to 185 BCE. This book treats none of these ten dharma texts as pre-Mauryan.

It will help to think of six of these ten texts in two temporal clusters. Since the earliest Buddhist literature probably reflects quite early Mauryan conditions, since Aśoka’s dharma campaign went on for nearly forty years after his conversion to Buddhism, and since the earliest Hindu dharma treatise or dharmasūtra may come from such times, it is best to cluster our earliest dharma texts together, leaving their relative chronology only suggested by their numbering. It is also best to cluster the two Hindu epics (the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*) and *The Laws of Manu*, with their sequence only suggested. During an interval from 185 BCE to 50 BCE, stopgap dynasties, ruled nominally by Brahmins reacting against non-Brahmin movements and foreign incursions, allowed for a resurgence of local and regional Hindu kingdoms. This period has long had its attractions for dating the epics and *The Laws of Manu*, which seem to present intractable inter-referential problems. There is broad agreement that Aśvaghoṣa’s *Adventure of the Buddha* (*Buddhacarita*) was composed in the first or second century CE, when northern India was reunified, to be ruled by clans originally from Central Asia known as the Kushanas, who, like Aśoka, showed an imperial preference for Buddhism. Adding a relative chronology of the four surviving dharmasūtras, this book offers the following working timetable:
Cluster A
Early Mauryan period (texts and text-groups 1–3):
1. Early Buddhist texts
2. Āpastamba Dharmasūtra
3. Aśokan Edicts
Mid- or Late Mauryan period:
4. Gautama Dharmasūtra
5. Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra

Cluster B
185–50 BCE (texts 6–8):
6. Mahābhārata
7. and 8. Rāmāyaṇa and The Laws of Manu
Of uncertain date, but probably later than the above:
9. Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra
Kushana period:
10. Aśvaghoṣa’s Adventure of the Buddha

Our discussion will begin with Aśoka’s edicts (chapter 2), posed as a kind of watershed toward the beginning of the classical period. We then take an excursion back in time through the Vedic canon (chapter 3). Although Vedic texts do not make dharma a central concept, they do introduce it. The Vedic canon includes not only the early Rigveda hymnal (ca. 1500–1100 BCE) and the later Upaniṣads, but other Vedas and texts, known as Brāhmaṇas, in which dharma appears. Tracing dharma through the Vedic canon returns us to the classical period. Resuming there with early Buddhist texts (chapter 4), we arrive at the treatises that represent the classical Brahmanical “legal tradition” (chapter 5). Some of these may likewise be from around Aśokan times: the three earliest dharmasūtras of Āpastamba, Gautama, and Baudhāyana. Along with the later one of Vasiṣṭha, they will be your entrée to the first great synthesis of the legal tradition, known as The Laws of Manu, which will lead us into the great narratives that introduce dharma as the key term in envisioning the heroic Hindu or Buddhist life. We thus turn to stories of the kings and queens of two Sanskrit epics, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa (chapters 6 and 7); to the Bhagavad Gītā, which concerns the spiritual crisis of the
Mahābhārata’s exemplary warrior-prince (chapter 8); and finally, after a wrap-up on dharma and divinity in the epics (chapter 9) and our look at The Adventure of the Buddha (chapter 10), a glance at dharma in the world today.

Since the two epics, The Laws of Manu and The Adventure of the Buddha, can be called major dharma texts by the criteria of size, literary complexity as poems, and interpretative challenges, it is worth briefly summarizing their treatments of dharma.

The vast Mahābhārata, said to have a hundred thousand verses, features dharma in three ways: in didactic sections, in substories listened to by heroes and heroines, and in its main story. The main story concerns a dynastic crisis in which two sets of cousins, the more noble Pāṇḍavas and the more wicked Kauravas, go to war over their divided kingdom, both sides committing dharmic and adharmic acts. Dharma is repeatedly said to be “subtle,” and the characters are delineated through the dilemmas they face in puzzling their way to righteous solutions. The Pāṇḍavas are helped in this, and ultimately helped to victory, by Kṛṣṇa, who speaks authoritatively on dharma throughout, and especially in the Bhagavad Gītā, “The Song of the Lord,” considered by many to be this epic’s centerpiece. Kṛṣṇa is said to be a divine incarnation. (If only one text is read before or in conjunction with this book, it should probably be the Gītā.)

The Rāmāyaṇa, of nearly twenty-thousand verses, has much less didactic material and fewer substories for prominent characters to learn from. It focuses on dharma primarily through the adventures of King Rāma and his wife Sītā, who are presented as paragons of dharma—though not without episodes that raise questions of their meeting its expectations and demands. Rāma exemplifies dharma to perfection in all relations with his father and brothers, and that is what motivates him to undertake fourteen years of exile to the forest, where Sītā is abducted by the demon king Rāvaṇa. Like Kṛṣṇa, Rāma is a divine incarnation. But unlike Kṛṣṇa, he thinks he is only human.

The Laws of Manu, 2,675 verses long, features only two named characters and a host of anonymous sages. The sages ask Manu, who is also known as a primal sage and king in both epics, to instruct them in dharma. After Manu tells them about the creation of the world up to the emergence of humans and their organization into castes, he then
asks his pupil, the sage Bhṛgu, to continue on his behalf and present Manu’s teachings, which then proceed from the sources of dharma to all variety of implementations.

Finally, The Adventure of the Buddha has more than two thousand verses, of which only about the first half survive in Sanskrit, and is the only one of these four works to have been written by a historically identifiable poet. It tells the story of the Buddha’s life from his conception, through his great departure from his father’s royal city, to his enlightenment, the founding of his order, and his final nirvāṇa.

If one wants to get into the spiritual substance of these four major texts, the first answer for a book on dharma is to track the way the first three Brahmanical ones depict dharma as allegiance to the Veda, which they do with different accents. By looking at the ways the epics and law books reinvigorate Vedic social relations of cordiality, chapter 9 will seek to map out the relation between dharma and bhakti, or “devotion,” across this large textual terrain, and chapter 10 will be about how a Buddhist poet remaps it. While drawing on earlier sources on the Buddha’s life, Aśvaghoṣa was familiar with both epics and, like them, cites Manu, and probably his Laws. Aśvaghoṣa uses his familiarity with the two epics to critique Brahmanical dharma in the name of the Buddhist “true dharma.”

Opening Tensions and Basic Questions

The notion of a “true dharma” serves notice that you will find tensions running through our ten classical dharma texts. From the beginning, Aśoka’s written edicts and the Veda will present a striking divide between written and oral texts. In the Brahmanical case, we have both types of texts, but not much is said about dharma until we get to the written ones. The earliest aphoristic dharmasūtras may draw on oral precursors, but they almost certainly came to be written down early in the classical period. The Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa were probably first given extensive written form in the closing centuries before the common era. In the Buddhist case we have only the tradition that the Buddha’s oral teachings were committed to memory as the dharma (in the sense of the Buddha’s teaching) and Vinaya (the Buddha’s instructions on monastic life) just after his death, and with this, the claim that they are faithfully preserved as two of the “three
baskets” of early Buddhist schools. Our access to the Buddha’s oral teachings comes only through these clearly literary texts.

Once dharma has become a flourishing literary topic, another divide opens between texts that treat dharma primarily as a legal matter, and ones that treat it mainly through narrative. This divide applies not only to the “legal tradition” and the epics, but also to Buddhist literatures. Vinaya rules are broadly legislative; the Buddha’s dialogues, Jātakas (“birth stories” of his previous lives), and Avadānas (“legends”) are mainly narrative. The legislative/narrative divide is then bifurcated into a division between texts that emphasize dharma’s ambiguity and profundity, and ones that assert or at least attempt to work out its clarity, order, and perfection. Moreover, single texts can be expected to hold these tensions within themselves and cannot be expected to have just one view of dharma.

By juxtaposing normative and narrative texts within one concentrated classical period, I hope to open up other intertextual paths and conversations. One finding, however, deserves introductory mention because it came to me as something of a surprise and became part of the plan of this book. While teaching The Adventure of the Buddha in a fall 2004 course on South Asian Buddhism, I recognized for the first time that Aśvaghoṣa treats dharma not only as a central topic, but as a Buddhist discourse frequently and insistently couched in Brahmanical terms. Moreover, he deploys numerous new Brahmanical usages about dharma that cannot be traced to anything earlier than the Brahmanical dharma texts of our classical period. This opened the idea that Aśvaghoṣa was not only telling how and why the Buddha searched to discover the “true dharma” but was putting dharma to use as a term of civil discourse with his Brahmanical counterparts (both people and texts).

This model can raise some engaging questions. To what might such discourse compare in other civilizations? I hope it will be fruitful for readers to further open up this South Asian model, which, to put it most simply, is not only about ethics and law but also about inner wisdom concerning unseen things, to compare it with how similar issues are tackled in other civilizations—for instance, in China, where classical conversations seem to focus mainly on what it means to be human; and in the West, where traditional discourses on family and
national values turn so frequently on notions of God’s word as law. As I will try to show, *dharma* has been put into service to provide common grounds for talking about both what it means to be human and what God, among other gods, might have to say about it. Granted, when talking across religions and civilizations, it matters what one is talking about. But how one talks about it might matter just as much, or more.

And what of recent and contemporary usages? Mohandas K. Gandhi invoked *dharma* to challenge the British and “Western civilization.” And Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, the Mahar (or “scheduled caste” “Untouchable”) lawyer who chaired the committee that drafted India’s constitution, did the same to challenge Gandhi on matters of caste, converted to Buddhism just before he died, and left a book titled *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957). “*Dharma*” remains a live operative model, along with Muslim law, for what is called “traditional law” in contemporary Indian law courts.

But back to our classical period. It turns out that Aśvaghoṣa’s usage could be traced back through other Buddhist ones. However, Buddhists were not the only ones to take up *dharma* as a term of civil discourse. The intertextuality of our ten classical *dharma* texts can itself be viewed under this rubric, as can the debates mentioned within them. In narrative texts particularly, women characters make *dharma* a means to promote civil discourse about their status and treatment. But our watershed figure in putting *dharma* to work as civil discourse will be the emperor Aśoka; there is no evidence before Aśoka that *dharma* could be projected as a civilizational or universal value to challenge persons and groups across the spectrum of society to engage in spiritual and ethical reflection. Before we move on to canonical works of sacred literature, Aśoka’s rock and pillar edicts allow us to start with *dharma* on the ground.