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| Atman | The eternal soul. A concept widely believed in at the time of the Buddha (but not by him), and a feature of most types of Hinduism |
| Brahman | God in the religion of India at the time of the Buddha. Sometimes Brahman would be described as the ‘universal soul’ and some people believed that atman and Brahman were essentially the same |
| Brahmins | The highest varna. Priests and scholars, and the most ritually pure. |
| Dalits | Literally ‘the oppressed’. Untouchables, considered extremely ritually impure. |
| Dharma | ‘Law’, ‘duty’,’ obligation’. Traditionally Indians believed that there was a universal law or cosmic order, and each individual must play their role in this by performing their own appropriate duties. |
| Jati | Occupational group |
| Karma | ‘Action’. People at the time of the Buddha believed that it was karma that determined the transmigration of the atman. Buddhists understand karma as resulting from a person’s ‘intentions’. It is karma that shapes personality. |
| Kshatriyas | The second highest varna. Warriors and rulers. The Buddha was born into the kshatriya varna. |
| Kumb Mele | A festival that happens in India every twelve years, at which Sadhu gather together to bathe in the Ganges and to perform austerities. |
| Ritual purity | This is the idea that some people are more pure than others. The person’s purity can be changed by the way they behave, or by people of objects with which they come into contact. For example the ritual purity of a Brahmin would be changed if he encountered a dead body, or if he had an affair, or if he ate food prepared by a dalit. Sometimes ritual purity is demonstrated by symbolic washing. For example, a statue of a god may be washed to show that it is ritually pure. Indians would wash before performing puja (worship) |
| Sadhu | An ascetic in the Hindu tradition. Someone who had given up family for the communit life and who performs austerities, as part of the quest for the liberation of the soul. |
| Sannyasin | Someone who gives up community and family towards the end of life, in order to prepare for death. |
| Sanskrit | The ancient language of India in which the Hindu scriptures are written. Many Mahayana Buddhist scriptures are also written in Sanskrit. |
| Shudra | The lowest varna. The labourers |
| Sramana | An ascetic from the time of the Buddha |
| Tat tvam asi | ‘You are that’ or that thou are’. A phrase that comes up again and again in the Upanishads, that refers to the idea that the atman is divine. |
| Upanishads | Important Hindu scriptures that explain beliefs about atman and Brahman. |
| Vaishyas | The third varna. The farmers and merchants. |
| Varna | Literally ‘colour’. The groupings of people according to ritual purity, in the ancient four level hierarchies |
| Vedas | The main body of Hindu scriptures. The Buddha rejected the authority of the Vedas in favour for the authority of experience. |