

# DANAM CONFERENCE 2004

## SESSION 4:

### **Theme: Constructive Theology and Philosophy in Dharma Studies**

*Rita DasGupta Sherma, Berghoffer Institute, & Binghamton University, Presiding*

## SUMMARY AND ABSTRACTS

### Summary of Session 4

The intent of this session is to provide intellectual space for the development of constructive, contemporary approaches to theologizing and philosophizing in Dharma traditions. While there have been a wide variety of constructive efforts—both lay and scholarly—in the Buddhist traditions, present day reconstructive endeavors are still nascent when it comes to Hindu systems of thought and praxis. The papers of this session will address some of the critical issues and problems that confront those attempting to apply constructive methodology to Dharma traditions, and also offer reinterpretations of theological and philosophical elements in Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

### Abstracts of Session 4:

**Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, Ph.D.**, Nassau Community College  
*Kali's 'Pregnant Nothingness': A Gynocentric Idea of Liberation*

I will discuss my recently published book titled *In the Beginning IS Desire: Tracing Kali's Footprints in Indian Literature* where I present 'my' Kali as 'pregnant nothingness.' Reading Kali from, what I call, a Gynocentric perspective can open a spiritually liberating space for women. Dualist thought everywhere associates materiality with the body and hence rejects the female that is especially marked as body, but non-dualist Tantric thought puts the body at the center of its meditation on reality. Yet androcentric misreadings of the Tantric tradition often portray women as sexual vessels of a primarily male preoccupation with transcendence. This presentation will show how a personal connection with Kali can lead us to challenge narrow religious identities, potentially leading to a radical idea of liberation that is philosophically satisfying to women's sense of self in relation to the world at large.

**Amod Lele**, Committee on the Study of Religion, Harvard University, Barker Center, Cambridge, MA  
*The Various Forms of Constructive Buddhist Studies*

This paper attempts to identify "constructive Buddhist studies" as a legitimate, though as yet unrecognized, subfield of academic Buddhist studies. It defines constructive Buddhist studies as academic studies of Buddhism in which researchers apply the Buddhist ideas being studied to themselves and their own contexts—learning from Buddhism and not merely learning about it. Constructive Buddhist studies, so defined, are broader than similar subfields that have previously been identified, such as "Buddhist theology." To illustrate this breadth within the subfield, the paper identifies diverse forms that constructive Buddhist studies can take—including, among others, work by non-Buddhists and work outside the fields of philosophy and theology. It provides examples of these forms from existing scholarly literature.

**Ramdas Lamb, Ph.D.**, University of Hawaii at Manoa  
*Beyond Anthropology: Towards a Global, Pluralist Perspective in Hindu Studies*

The academic study of religion in the west is a relatively new undertaking. Until the 1950s, the subject in institutes of higher education was taught primarily by theologians and Christian ministers, who often used

the forum to instruct their students on the superiority of their own tradition and the faults and follies of the others. With respect to Hinduism, the information often used was that which was written by British missionaries, government officials, and ethnographers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and it served their purposes well. Unfortunately, these writings have continued to show their influence in the contemporary Hindu studies. In addition to this, there has been negative press generated by many of the Hindu teachers and “gurus” who came to America in the latter half of the 20th century, and the result has often been a distorted view of both Hinduism and India. My paper will look at some of the early writings, as well as the reactions to the 20th century guru-influx in the construction of the current academic view of Hinduism. Finally, some suggestions will be offered for attempting to steer the field to more of an objective-oriented approach to Hindu studies.

**Nicholas F. Gier, Ph.D.**, University of Idaho  
*Toward a Hindu Virtue Ethics*

In previous work I have interpreted both Buddhist and Confucian morality as virtue ethics roughly similar to Aristotle and his doctrine of the mean. As far as I know, Hindu ethics has not been read in this way. Taking some leads from B. K. Matilal’s ‘Ethics and Epics’ (Oxford, 2002), I intend to start a discussion about the possibility of a Hindu virtue ethics. I will propose that the Hindu virtues are personal creations that are, as Aristotle maintains, “relative to us.” For example, Matilal describes Krishna an “imaginative poet” and “paradigmatic person . . . in the moral field,” who “becomes a perspectivist and understands the contingency of the human situation,” both necessary elements of virtue ethics. I will also use Matilal’s reference to Krishna as a poet to relate Hindu ethics to the aesthetics of virtue I find in Buddhism and Confucianism.

**Jeffery D. Long, Ph.D.**, Elizabethtown College  
*Constructive Philosophy in Hindu Studies*

The field of Hindu Studies has long been dominated by descriptive methodologies such as those practiced in the fields of anthropology and the history of religions. The scholarly stance taken in these fields is typically a distancing one which takes Hinduism as an object, an “other.” The scholar’s subjectivity, as well as that of the scholarly audience, is generally presumed not to be Hindu (though more theoretically sophisticated, postmodern studies have begun to problematize this distancing stance). Given this discursive context, this paper will argue for the legitimacy, and indeed, the necessity, of constructive approaches to Hindu studies that take Hindu positions and worldviews seriously on their own terms, rather than as objects of a distanced scholarly gaze. Furthermore, this paper will argue for the legitimacy and necessity of constructive projects undertaken from Hindu perspectives, for constructive Hindu studies as a legitimate academic discipline on a par with Christian theology.