

The 'Thread' of the God Dharma Woven into the *Mahābhārata*

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One of the principal threads stretching across almost the entire text of the *Mahābhārata* is a series of representations or appearances—often in some displaced form—of the God Dharma, another name of the Vedic God Yama. A portion of the God Dharma is incarnate as Vidura, a half-brother of Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and the God has another recurring presence in the epic through his son, Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava. Dharma turns up disguised to test Yudhiṣṭhira at critical junctures of the narrative—as a stork (*baka*) when the Pāṇḍavas are about to enter their incognito thirteenth year of exile, and as a dog, when the Pāṇḍavas are walking up to heaven, thirty-six years after the great war, at the end of the entire epic. And he appears undisguised at the very end of the tale. Beyond these appearances in the main epic narrative, the God Dharma shows up in many *upākhyānas* told within the epic—disguised as a brahmin or sage several times, in the form of an animal several times, and several times undisguised. Though various of these appearances of Dharma in the text have been noticed by scholars before (Biardeau, *Études de Mythologie Hindoue V*; Hildebeitel *The Cult of Draupadī 1 & 2*, Fitzgerald, *Making Yudhiṣṭhira the King, Ethical Significance of Living by Gleaning (uñchavṛtti) in the Mahābhārata*), no one has addressed the patterns that might recur in this trope nor examined it as a thread of the overall weave of the epic. My paper will initiate an effort to do both.