

Liberation

Hinduism, as a religious tradition, has many strands of faith that differ in nearly everything. Combined, these various strands form an illusion of a single, cohesive set of rituals, beliefs, and morals much like a cable made up of many smaller strands. While the various Hindu paths intertwine, agree in some areas, disagree in others similar to “family resemblance,” nearly all strands believe in the cycle of death and rebirth—*samsara*—as well as the escape from that cycle: *moksa*. In order to understand the concept of *moksa*—even in a general sense, one must understand its context within *samsara* as well as the concept of the self. These concepts, once understood, will provide clarification for understanding how Hindus understand and relate to *moksa*. We will be able to examine some of the early texts which give some definition to the concept of *moksa* as well as early philosophers who flesh out the concept. Through looking at the development of *moksa* and some of its related beliefs within the Advaita Vedanta school as well as the more recent Neo-Vedanta school, we will gain a better understanding of how *moksa* plays out in theology as well as society.

Before looking at *moksa*, we must first provide a contextual frame, preferably one that has been stable over time and similar across Hindu paths. Possibly the widest frame we can discuss is the concept of *samsara*. In early thought, Hindu thinkers posited a soul, the *atman*, that was in every

person. This soul is embedded in the world of experience and is entangled in an eternal cycle of death and rebirth: *samsara*. There are traces of *samsara* as far back as the *Rg Veda*, but it is not a firmly established belief until the Upanisads: “the subject, the 'performer of action which bears fruit,' wanders in the cycle of transmigration according to his actions (karma).”¹ At the level of ultimate reality is a singular soul, *Brahman*. As the concepts develop, it is agreed that Brahman, as the ultimate reality, must be equivalent with the multiplicity of *atmans* that are experienced phenomenally. In other words, we have a dichotomy between what is real and what is experienced; this can be labeled as dualism. It is through *maya* (or “illusion” in the sense of a false reality) that this singular soul “assumes...a body and becomes finite and individualized, but this individualization is neither final nor real.”² *Maya*, whether a goddess or not, brings about this dualism. It is through realizing that one *is* Brahman at the level of ultimate reality that one ceases to act with consequences and, consequently, attain release from the cycles of *samsara*.³ These notions begin to be developed in the Upanisads: “The one with understanding, mindful, ever pure, attains that place from which he is not born again.”⁴ By the time the *Bhagavad Gita* is written, this idea of escape is firmly planted

1 Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (London: Cambridge, 1996), 86.

2 Swami Nikhilananda, *Hinduism: Its Meaning for the Liberation of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 37.

3 Flood, 85.

4 Planet India, “Katha Upanisad 3:8,” Online Darshan, <http://onlinedarshan.com/upanisads/website/upnishad.asp?uid=8&cid=34>.

in Hindu thought. It is through this context of *samsara* that we should begin to look at the concept of self-identity in Hinduism in addition to looking at the concept of liberation in some of the key texts.

Classical Views

In the *Mahabharata*, we can see two separate views of the self that intertwine with each other in its subsection-made-into-a-separate-book the *Bhagavad Gita*. One of these views is of the individual that exists within *samsara* and continuously interacts with the phenomenal world. The other view is that of the eternal, unchanging, singular Soul that exists at the level of ultimate reality. In the *Gita*, these two intertwine and are seen as being the same. The *Mahabharata*, possibly the greatest epic story in Hindu literature, is a lengthy story centering on five brothers (the heroes) and their battle with their evil relatives. Behind this, though, is the backdrop of the gods battling along the same sides of good vs. evil. Yet there is the added “bonus” in that a single god (Vishnu) is the supreme Brahman who sees everything clearly. For instance, at one point in the story, we find Draupadi asking Krishna about her current situation and Krishna responds by saying

We are now on the wheel of life that turns and turns, we wander forever from one birth to another. Here we are kings, there we live out all our life on the tip of a blade of grass. But we always

*live. Nothing can stop that well. Nothing and no one will make us lose that life, whatever happens.*⁵

During the course of this conversation, Krishna does suggest that her current situation may not be real.⁶ By this suggestion, we can see some evidence of supporting the kind of dualism mentioned above.

Within the *Bhagavad Gita*, however, we get a glimpse of the view from ultimate reality, *sub specie aeternitas*. Approximately halfway-through, Krishna reveals to Arjuna his all-encompassing form, and Arjuna's response tells all: "Why should they not bow in homage to you, Great Soul,..., Shelter of All That Is, you are eternity."⁷ Arjuna continues in his praises interjecting suggestions, like above, that Krishna is the ultimate Soul as well as being the creator of all the multiplicities of the phenomenal world. Further into the *Gita*, Krishna declares while speaking of the two spirits of man that "Other is the supreme spirit of man, called the supreme self, the immutable lord who enters and sustains the three worlds" and that Krishna himself is "known as the supreme spirit of man."⁸ In other words, Krishna is equating himself—as the ultimate soul Brahman—with the soul of man at the level of ultimate reality. Furthermore, Krishna states that upon "realizing it, one has understanding and his purpose is fulfilled," a simple definition of *moksa*.⁹ Krishna does elaborate on how to attain this state, and that it is a

5 William Buck, *Mahabharata* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 106.

6 Buck, 107.

7 Barbara Stoler Miller, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 104.

8 Miller, 126.

9 Miller, 126.

long a difficult task that includes acting without attachment and becoming totally devoted to serving and worshipping Krishna.

The concept of liberation suggested in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Gita* is developed much more systematically around the beginning of the 9th century CE by the Indian philosopher Sankara. His view of the self reinforced what we can find only suggested in the earlier texts. Yet, Sankara also provided some additions to these: illusion and ignorance. Sankara finds an answer as to *why* the Soul thinks in multiplicities even though it is a singular entity. It is the power of illusion (*maya*) that fools the Soul by superimposing “what is not the self onto the self.”¹⁰ Illusion also gets help from the Soul through doubt once it has believed the illusion and has become ignorant about its true nature. It is through discernment, a quality lauded in texts such as the *Ramayana*, that one can discover ultimate reality.

However, Sankara also saw liberation as being possible while one is still living. This concept, called *jivanmukti*, was only a rough idea for Sankara that was developed later by his followers.¹¹ Later thinkers began to perceive liberation as a disembodiment or transcendence and not necessarily freedom from a physical *body*. Upon attainment, one would have perfect knowledge—even while still living. For these thinkers as well as Sankara, *jivanmukti* is not a “complete” liberation because it still awaits

¹⁰Flood, 241.

¹¹Andrew Fort and Patricia Mumme, eds, *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 21.

the final liberation which occurs at death.¹² What keeps one living is simply the residual karmic effects of one's life prior to reaching the stage of living liberation. Because of this, Sankara argues that only those who have achieved living liberation could truly teach it. This is similar to Buddhist thoughts on enlightenment in that it can only be transmitted by those who have experienced it and these buddhas are living out their lives on their residual karmic effects of previous actions.

In contradistinction to Sankara, *bhakti* devotion was also a prominent classical view. The literature of the *bhakti* movement was more often poetic and filled with emotion than a structured epic (e.g. *Mahabharata*) or philosophical writing (e.g. the Upanishads). As a result, it is more difficult to determine what theological beliefs the movement held to from its writings. Yet one thing is certain: the movement was based strongly on emotional devotionism. One of the earliest *bhakti* groups, the Alvars, can find its roots in some earlier "possession cults" in which the devotee would become possessed by the god and begin "weeping, dancing and singing."¹³ By devoting oneself entirely to the god believed to be the consummation of all things (e.g. Siva, Vishnu, etc), one can attain liberation. *Bhakti* is not contradictory to Sankara's view, but does typically personalize the divine, which places it, then, outside the gates of Sankara's ideal, attributeless absolute. In the *bhakti* path, the divine is seen more as a lover to pursue

¹² Fort and Mumme, 31.

¹³ Flood, 132.

until one can pursue no longer—a maddening love. And this is exactly how some (if not most) outsiders saw the earliest devotees on this path. Unlike other traditions (e.g., Christianity), all of these paths have survived in at least one form to the modern era.

Later Developments

In more recent expressions of Hinduism, there is a strand of thought that has reinterpreted the Advaita Vedanta ideas and has created a new school of thought labeled Neo-Vedanta. This particular school of thought has taken the Advaita Vedanta school started by Sankara and mixed it with “Western premises and categories.”¹⁴ This has become “the primary interpretive model in modern Indian scholarship on Advaita.”¹⁵ Some, like Ramana Maharshi, take Sankara's view to an extreme. According to Andrew Fort's analysis, Ramana's view can be reduced to an attributeless Self and ignorance. This is further amplified by his claim that there is “no bondage (or liberation), no 'doer' or *karma*.”¹⁶ For Ramana, *moksa* is simply removing ignorance, something we have in Sankara's thoughts but in a more condensed form. Additionally, Ramana rejects *bhakti* as a path towards *moksa* because, like Sankara before him believed, ascribing qualities to the divine Self is embedded in ignorance: the Self has no qualities or attributes. But in a vein similar to the *bhakti* view, knowledge

14 Andrew Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), 130.

15 Fort, 130.

16 Fort, 140.

alone is insufficient, yet it is not devotion to a personal God but experience of a transcendent God that leads one to liberation. Through living liberation, however, Ramana does believe that one exemplifies the characteristics of “impression (*vasana*) free devotion and detachment,” or devotion to the detached, attributeless Self.¹⁷

Unlike Ramana, other followers of Sankara have stayed closer to what they perceive as his original teachings; the best example being Candrasekharendra Sarasvati. Calling themselves *sankaracaryas*, these thinkers believe to be walking in the same path as their namesake Sankara. One of Candrasekharendra's primary concerns was differentiating between Hinduism as “religion” in the broad sense and Hinduism as a “social system” in the narrow sense. This allowed him to be open to ecumenical dialogs while also supporting conservative practices, such as supporting Brahmin and wives' submission to their husbands.¹⁸ But, his more “liberal” side supports *bhakti* as a beginning towards liberation even though he agrees with Ramana and Sankara that the ultimate Soul is without qualities. There is also agreement on defining *jivanmukti* as being disembodiment and not necessarily a lack of a physical body. Lastly, Candrasekharendra believes that the root cause of caste conflict is “when 'one cast consider[s] itself superior to another,' for which 'there is no justification.'”¹⁹ As we shall see below, this is a relatively rare position in the conflict.

17 Fort, 146.

18 Fort, 153.

19 Fort, 160.

With the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), there has been attempts to bridge together the two contrary positions noted above. The founder of ISKCON, Swami Bhaktivedanta, argues that knowledge alone (i.e. Sankara's suggestion) is not enough for liberation.²⁰ One must also have complete devotion, the supreme knowledge and practice, to gain *moksa*. This view can be seen in the way devotees worship and participate in religious services. While there is focus on studying texts like the *Gita*, there is more emphasis on devotion to Krishna. Devotees use the name of Krishna (and other incarnations of Vishnu) as their mantras. The most important part of this, however, is that Bhaktivedanta maintains that the universal soul (Krishna in this case) *is* personal and has qualities.

ISKCON is based on the work of Caitanya, the first to promote Krishna *bhakti*. Caitanya is regarded as an incarnation of both Krishna and Radha in one body! Caitanya did not create any kind of movement; his “legacy” was primarily a commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*. The Krishna *bhakti* movement that ensued and is present today in ISKCON pictures liberation as “the constant, ecstatic experience of the divine love-play (*lila*) between Radha and Krishna in a spiritual or perfected body.”²¹ Additionally, Krishna is not simply an incarnation (*avatara*) of Vishnu, but is the true supreme Lord.

²⁰Ronald W. Neufeldt, ed, *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments* (Albany: State University of New York, 1986), 294.

²¹Flood, 139.

Liberation and Society

With different views of liberation comes different views of identity in relation to liberation. Some paths of Hindu thought see the self as an illusion while others see it as being as much of a reality as the ultimate Self. These differing views also influence how one identifies with the caste system, society at large, and modernity.

The *bhakti* tradition imagined itself as a communal society and, more often than not, on the outskirts of “normal” society. With a stronger push towards allowing all castes, genders, etc into their fold, the *bhakti* devotees were the 13th century equivalent to 1960s hippies. They followed the path of renunciation that earlier ascetics tread; the *bhakti* devotees would create their communities in the forests, a place associated with the “wild” and nature. Many within the *bhakti* tradition identified themselves in terms of their personal God (e.g. Basavanna's Lord of the Meeting Rivers) as a devoted follower of such. All other types of identification were less important (if at all) for the devoted. As a result of this, we can see how Mahadevi was accepted into the *bhakti* community as a fellow saint and later as the most poetic of the saints there.²² Yet this “revolutionary” mindset dissipated and gave way to more institutional ways. The caste-less group returned to the caste system.²³ By the 18th century, *bhakti* groups adhered to the caste system by denying initiation to “unclean” groups or

²² A.K. Ramanujan, trans., *Speaking of Siva* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 113.

²³ Romila Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity,” *Modern Asian Studies* 23 (1989): 214.

restricting the privilege to become a *guru* to those of Brahmin birth.²⁴ In the West, however, ISKCON fell away from the caste system rather quickly as it was aimed at converted Westerners to the *bhakti* strand of Hinduism. As a result, it seems that *bhakti* devotees in the West escaped the caste system that has existed in Hinduism and India. This is not something that the Advaita Vedanta paths have been able to escape—even in the West.

According to the classical position of Advaita Vedanta, one should identify oneself with the ultimate. They also thought that identifying oneself with a body and phenomenal experience is “an adventitious superimposition that ceases upon Brahman-realization.”²⁵ Additionally, with their emphasis upon knowledge as a prerequisite to experiencing *moksa*, “those of non-twice-born birth (Shudras, untouchables and non-Hindu aliens or *mlecchas*) are automatically debarred from access to this 'salvic' knowledge.”²⁶ Identification with Advaita Vedanta thought, then, correlated with an upper class. In some ways, Advaita Vedanta was not for the common person. Neo-Vedanta thinkers downplay this class distinction, and some even argue that it was never used by classical Advaita Vedanta devotees.²⁷ For these newer thinkers, not only is class distinction wrong but it also goes against their beliefs on social service. Social service goes hand-in-hand with *jivanmukti*. Neo-Vedanta thinkers ignore Sankara's commentary on *sutra*

24 Bayly, 48.

25 Fort and Mumme, 22.

26 Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society, and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), 146.

27 Fort, 172-174.

38 referring to “texts indication a *sudra* hearing the Veda should have his ears filled with lead” and other such androcentric beliefs.²⁸ With this stress on social service, the Neo-Vedanta followers (especially the gurus and teachers) identified with the welfare of others. Swami Vivekananda once told his disciples, “Look upon Man as God. If your conception of God includes the idea that He is All-Pervasive, then why can't you see Him in all creatures?”²⁹

In contemporary India, caste identity, fueled in part by one's relation to *moksa*, reciprocates into national politics. Upper caste society has a tendency towards antagonism with regards to the lower caste. Yet the lower caste are not innocent either because they have been able to present themselves to state agencies as having a “history of injustice at the hands of Forward or high-caste 'oppressors.'”³⁰ In other words, each caste uses it to their advantage while claiming the other castes are abusing the system. There is also a more global scale in which Hindu identity is not as tied up in the caste system, national politics, and the “caste wars.” Instead of conflict, Hindus outside of India work together in their own subculture in which they identify with their host country's sociopolitical system while still holding to the caste system, yet in a less violent manner. For these people, *moksa* is still the goal, but they sometimes tend toward interreligious dialog and bringing others towards liberation as well.

28 Fort, 174.

29 Qtd. in Neufeldt, 78.

30 Bayly, 307.

Pleasant Release

The last aspect of liberation that is worth mentioning is its position as a goal. Is liberation “worth it”? Is it pleasant? As Vatsyayana wrote:

About liberation (the idea), that is indeed gruesome, consisting of a cessation of all activity. With such a liberation which divorces us from everything, so many good things of like would be finished. How, therefore, can any intelligent person find that sort of liberation characterized by absence of all the pleasures and even of consciousness at all palatable?³¹

What is it that makes liberation seem so different from this? The standard position adopted by Advaita Vedanta (and more likely most strands of Hinduism) is that “the soul really feels an intense, unrelieved, perpetual bliss in being liberated” because (depending on if one is a strong follower of Advaita or *bhakti*) one's veil of ignorance is removed or one is in the presence of one's personal Lord.³² This argument seems to win time and again because it speaks directly to one's particular path to liberation. In other words, liberation is the “finish line” for the race of life, something that *must* be better than remaining in the race.

The argument against liberation depends on one of two criteria being met: (1) *samsara* is not that bad or even good, or (2) *moksa* does not have

³¹ Qtd. in A. Chakrabarti, “Is Liberation (*moksa*) Pleasant?” in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Charles Taliaferro and Paul J. Griffiths (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 589.

³² Chakrabarti, 591.

any joy in it (and thus, not any better than *samsara*). Both of these must be discredited in order for there to be some benefit to liberation. The first point comes in two distinct versions: hedonism and avoiding suffering. The hedonistic version argues that *samsara* is good—that the pleasure easily outweighs the suffering. This version, however, fails to notice the amount of suffering that is part of the process towards any kind of pleasure. In other words, pleasure will always have suffering with it while the opposite (suffering always has pleasure) is not true. Because of this, it would seem likely that the pleasure does not, in fact, outweigh the suffering. The second version is simply the avoidance of suffering. Taking into consideration the argument against hedonism, it would seem likely that to avoid suffering completely, one should escape *samsara*. Hence, the first argument against liberation does not stand against typical Hindu belief.

The second argument, however, is a bit stronger. If liberation includes joy (or pleasure), then one may be seeking liberation for a reason other than escape from *samsara*. In other words, the desire for liberation when motivated by the desire for joy would be the very hindrance to achieving liberation. Therefore, the argument goes, liberation cannot have any kind of emotional quality to it regardless of how favorable it may be. This argument fails on a technicality: we cannot know with certainty whether or not complete liberation brings any level of joy. It may well do, but we have no way of being certain about it because one must experience

it, which places that one outside of *samsara*. There is no way of telling what may happen after this life in terms of liberation because it is outside the bounds of our human experience. As a consequence of this, it should not be taught to devotees that liberation has some kind of joy in so that they may pursue *moksa* for the sake of liberation.

Because the two arguments against liberation being worthwhile cannot stand with any amount of certainty, we can only conclude here that liberation is worthwhile because either it “feels like a sheer absence of any feeling of pain of any sort,” it “feels like a great positive state of boundless ecstatic joy,” or “the sheer absolute absence of suffering feels like the greatest joy possible.”³³ This only supports the idea that liberation is a central aspect of many Hindu paths. We have traced its development through some of the early Hindu texts, as well as in some of the more known thinkers of the past. We have seen how it has affected social identity in the caste system as well as in humanitarianism. Lastly, we briefly looked at why liberation is a worthwhile goal for the Hindu. While this was in no way exhaustive, it can serve as a basic primer on *moksa* and its influences on Hinduism as a religion and as a culture.

³³Chakrabarta, 598.

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