

# Understanding Moksa: Perspective on Liberation in Indian Philosophy

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**Abstract:** *With the exception of Charvaka which is the lone materialistic system of Indian Philosophical tradition, almost everyone knows in the world of religion that moksa is the summumbonum of life i.e. the highest good of life. It is of course sometimes been named as Nirvana, Kaivalya, Aparigraha etc. Moksa is a non - moral value symbolizing a status free from all worldly limitations. It is freedom from time, birth, death and thus from all consequent suffering of worldly existence. These are some general points about the nature of Moksa to which all the systems agree, but they differ significantly about other details of its nature. A brief survey of the concept of Moksa with reference to the Indian systems may pave the way for a fuller idea as to what is understood to be the highest good of life in the Indian tradition.*

**Keywords:** Dharma, Moksa, Brahma, Upanishad, Mandukya Upanishad, Brahma Sutra S. Radhakrishnan, Research Methods

The research methods employed in this article show how the ideas of Moksa and Dharma have been clearly shown in the Indian philosophical system besides the Vedas and the Upanishads.

## The Vedas, The Upanishads and Bhagwat Gita

In the Vedas, idea of Moksa is hardly clear. Heaven, a place of eternal pleasure and rejoice, is the highest good of life. It is in the Upanishads that we first get an idea of Moksa. Here sometimes Moksa is understood as an identity of self with the Brahman, the ultimate reality, and sometimes as likeness of the self and God. The Brhadarankya Upanishad describes the state of Moksa. "As a man in the embrace of his beloved wife knows nothing without or within so when in the embrace of the intelligent self knows nothing without or within. That verily, is the form in which his desire is fulfilled, in which the self is the desire, in which he is without desire, free from any sorrow".<sup>1</sup> Gaudapada in his Karika on Mandukya Upanishad gives an account of Moksa which is more thoroughly a state of absorption into the universal nature of Brahman. "As on the destruction of the jar etc. The ether enclosed in the jar etc merges with the akasa, even so the individual merges into the universal spirit".<sup>2</sup> But the Mandukya itself says at another place that by liberation the soul attains likeness with the Divine.<sup>3</sup> It is due to these two trends present in the Upanishads that sankara and Ramanuja interpret Moksa differently, the former as identity of self with Brahman and the latter as communion with God. However, the Gita describes Moksa variously at state, as the highest rest, as the entering into God, as contact with God, as rest in Brahman as transformation into the Divine existence, as transmutation into God head and so on.

## The Nyaya – Vaisesika

The systems also differ among themselves as to the detailed nature of Moksa. The Nyaya - Vaisesika takes it as a purely negative state in which the soul becomes completely free from all the klesas (raga dvesh and moha), from all the merits and demerits from the continuous cycle of birth and death, from all experience of pleasure and pain and as a matter of fact, from all consciousness too. Consciousness is not the inherent quality of soul according to the Nyaya - Vaisesika. It is brought through its contact with the mind the sense - organs. And as such a contact is absent in the state of

Moksa, so the soul in this state has absolutely no experience, no consciousness. "Release is the absolute deliverance from pain says the Nyaya - Sutra (tadat yanta vimoksaha apavargah)".<sup>4</sup> Hence, nothing positive is attained in the state of liberation. It is a state of pure negation, negation of all sufferings.

## The Samkhya

According to the Samkhya also Moksa is complete freedom from all sufferings. Samkhya recognizes three kinds of suffering (trividha dukha and it is complete freedom from these three kinds of suffering called Moksa trividha - dukhatyanta – nivrttijanta – purusartha.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Nyaya–vaisesika, however, the Samkhya takes consciousness as the very essence of soul and therefore by attaining Moksa the soul attains its pure conscious nature.

## The Mimamsa

The Mimamsa conception of Moksa is a bit ambiguous and imprecise. Opinions differ as to the exact nature of Moksa as understood and depicted in the Mimamsa. According to one view, the Mimamsa like the Nyaya - Vaisesika, professes purely negative view of Moksa in which the soul after attaining liberation simply gets rid of its accumulated merit - demerit, pleasure pain etc. Attainment of Moksa is not attaining any state of bliss for, liberation consists in the experience of bliss then it will be of the nature of heaven which is something transient, and not eternal. But liberation is something eternal, and therefore it cannot be of the nature of pleasure or bliss. The above view of Moksa is often attributed to the Kumarila School of Mimamsa. Such a view is expressed by Parthasarathi Mishra in his Sastradipika. Prabhakara more or less falls in the like with Kumarila in his conception of Moksa. He takes Moksa as the final riddance from future births brought in by the extinction of both dharma and adharma.<sup>6</sup>

## The Vedanta (Samkara and Ramanuja)

Samkara and Ramanuja take a positive view of Moksa. That is according to them, Moksa is not only getting rid of the cycle and death and consequently of all sufferings, but also attainment of a positive state of bliss. The soul in the liberated state attains its true nature which is pure consciousness and bliss. However, despite this general agreement, Samkara and Ramanuja differ significantly

between themselves regarding the nature of Moksa. The difference is mainly due to their differences in view regarding the nature of soul itself in relation to Brahman, the ultimate reality. According to Shankara the soul in its true nature is identical with Brahman while according to Ramanuja the former is only a part or a mode of Brahman. According to both of them liberation means the realization of the soul of its true nature. According to Samkara, this realization consists in soul's experience of its identity with Brahman, while Ramanuja holds it is the realization by the soul of its being a real mode or expression of Brahman. According to Samkara, the soul becomes liberation, but according to Ramanuja the soul maintains separate identity even after liberation, becomes it becomes similar to Brahman and not Brahman himself.

### Buddhism

Of the two non - orthodox schools of Indian thought they do not believe in Moksa as the ultimate destiny. Buddhism is generally recognized as having a negative concept of Moksa (although the point is controversial) while Jainism a fairly positive one. Buddhism terms liberation as Nirvana which liberally means 'cooling down' or 'blowing out'. It is well - known that according to Buddhism it is the passions which are the root cause of bondage or suffering. So, when the passions are blown out, liberation is attained.

### Jainism

The Jaina conception of Moksa is positive consequence of the jaina conception of soul Jainism believes that the soul in its inherent nature possesses four infinities (ananta catusatya) infinite bliss, infinite power, infinite faith and infinite knowledge. It is only due to its association with the matter that the soul loses its inherent nature and falls in bondage. So naturally by attaining Moksa, the soul is not only free from the chain of birth and rebirth and from consequent suffering, but it also attains its inherent nature consist of the above four infinities.

### Abstract / Observation

We have made a passing survey of the various concepts of Moksa present in the Indian tradition. Differences notwithstanding, there is an essential agreement about the negative attainment of the state of Moksa. All the systems agree at least in the fact that Moksa is complete radiance from all sufferings, from the cycle of birth and death and from all sorts of passions and desires. In one sense, there is a general agreement on some positive attainment also. Every system admits in its own way that by attaining liberation, the soul attains its original inherent nature. Moksa is atma swarupa labha. The Bhagwata seemingly represents the spirit of the whole of Indian tradition when it describes the whole of Moksa as the attainment of individuals natural state by relinquishing its imposed state (muktir hitbanyatharupam vyavasthithic) Radhakrishnan also shares the same view when he says after considering the various conception of Moksa "All views agree that eternal life is an absolute fulfillment of what we are, the final affirmation of our progressive - self finding.<sup>7</sup>

Again, Moksa as the highest ideal of life is a non - moral or rather a supra - moral state, about which no judgment of rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness is to be passed.

By attaining this man becomes completely free from all bonds of empirical life, including the moral bound. He rises above the fetters of duty and obligation. The point assumes real significance in face of the concept of Jiwan Mukti. Systems like Sankhya, Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism believe in this kind of Mukti. As the name indicates, Jiwan Mukti means attaining Moksa in this very life. According to this view annihilation of physical body is not necessary for liberation. What is necessary is the removal of passions and ignorance. For Samkhya the moment one has the discriminative knowledge of the quality of purusa and prakriti he is liberated. Similarly, according to Advaita Vedanta, the moment one attains the knowledge of the identity between the self and Brahman he is liberated for liberation, the end of the present life is not necessary. According to Buddhism, again Nirvana is not the cessation of physical life, it is the cessation of passions (trsna) alone. So that moment one becomes free from the fire of trsna, he is liberated. Those who attain Videh Mukti i.e. Moksa after the end of physical life, question of activity does not at all rise. It is thus for the Jiva muktas that it is said that even in spite of rising above the fetters of duty and obligation, they are not necessarily taking to in action nor do they get license to do even immoral acts. Their being free from any moral binding simple means that they now attain such an unstained status free from all egoistic passions and dogmas that it is impossible for them to perform evil actions.

## 1. Summary

### Role of Dharma in Moksa

The concept of Moksa with reference to the different systems thus stated, let us know what role dharma has to play in leading us to our ultimate goal of Moksa. Generally speaking, it may be said that bondage is the result of ignorance, so liberation will result out of knowledge. Therefore, dharma perhaps cannot have any role in leading us to the path of liberation. Moreover, dharma consists of virtues and duties which involve actions. Actions, right and wrong, bind. So, how can dharma be a means to liberation? Perhaps it is due to this fact that hardly any Indian system believes that dharma directly (or by itself) leads to Moksa. But then this does not mean that dharma has no role or that it has only a very significant and negligible role in getting us liberated. Dharma has its role and, in some systems, it has major role to a let us see the position in each system.

(a) The Vedas and Upanishads (b) The Bhagwat Gita (c) The Nyaya Visesika (d) The Samkhya (e) The Mimamsa (f) The Samkara Vedanta (g) The Ramanuja Vedanta (h) Buddhism (i) Jainism- all the systems taken together along with all the religions of the world be it orthodox or heterodox – all have cried in one tone that Moksa is the summum bonnum of life and everyone wants to be free from the shackles of troubles and worries of life and attain Moksa be it in their own way. This is in a nut shell what Moksa had to say.

## 2. Conclusion

A brief survey of the concept of Moksa and the role of dharma (morality) in its attainment in the Indian tradition brings out the role of dharma as a pathway to Moksa. The main emphasis is however, on Jnana. The performance of

dharmas consists, it is said in the performance of certain actions. Since actions of any kind bind, dharmas cannot in any way lead to Moksha. But such narrow interpretation does not convey the true spirit of the Indian tradition. Karmas no doubt bind, but only those done with egoistic passions. Karmas done with a sense of duty do not bind. So, all systems advise doing unconditional Karmas. Again, actions prescribed for one's asrama also cleanse the evil passions to a great extent and make the path to knowledge easier. Perhaps Sankhya is the only system which does not at all recognize the role of these Karmas. But again, Sankhya also recognizes the role of purer virtues of individual morality. Mimamsa lays utmost emphasis on the performance of these dharmas. No system ignores or minimizes the importance of ethical virtues of both individual and social import. Since bondage arises from ignorance, emphasis on Jnana is natural in Indian tradition. But the role of morality or dharmas has not been ignored either. The role of virtues relating to individual morality has naturally received more emphasis. For the attainment of the virtues of individual purity, self-discipline, renunciation is more relevant and greater emphasis is laid upon their acquisition. Due place has been given to the elements of social morality also, especially Nyaya - Vaisheshika, Ramanuja Vedanta Buddhism and Jainism. Also, the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagwat Gita duly recognize the role of social morality in our attainment of the highest goal. It is a different matter that no conceptual or logical relationship exists between Indian canons of social morality and the highest end Moksha. But their role is recognized. The contemporary Indian thought rather makes a greater and more logical scope for the elements of social morality to be conducive to Moksha.

#### **List of references provided at the End**

The list of references is well supported by documents that directly support the claims and discussions as provided in the foregoing paragraphs.

#### **References**

- [1] Brihad Aranyake Upanishad VI 3.21
- [2] Mandukya Upanishad III 1.40
- [3] Mandukya Upanishad III 1.3
- [4] Nyaya Sutra 1.1.22
- [5] S. Radhakrishnan Brahma Sutra, P/86
- [6] Sastrapika (Baroda Oriental Institute) P, 187
- [7] S. Radhakrishnan (after considering the various conceptions of Moksha).