

## Moksa

The Hindu concept of *moksa* is that of complete liberation from suffering and death. Once *moksa* is attained, individuals are free from the cycle of *karma*, within which they must endure or reap the consequences of their actions, as well as *samsara* (the cycle of rebirth) or worldly existence (Shivkumar 77). *Moksa* is the last of the four Hindu goals of life and may be sought during the *samnyasin* (renouncer) stage of life (Prasad 5). [More about the four goals of life can be found in Rodrigues (2006)]. While it is scarcely mentioned in the other Vedas, the Upanisads declare the importance of liberation and the Advaita Vedanta school of philosophy formed by Sankara has emphasized it as the ultimate goal of life (Kumar 22). Advaita Vedanta teaches that *avidya* (ignorance) and *maya* (illusion) in this world keep people from the realization of the true self (*atman*) and Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*) (Shivkumar 30).

According to the Upanisads, Brahman is the creator of the universe, transcends the universe, and is the universe (Shivkumar 28). Atman is the very essence of the true self within each person and is also Ultimate Reality. Atman and Brahman are one entity and this realization, that one's true self is also Brahman, is what brings about *moksa*. This is illustrated in the Upanisads by the story of Svetaketu and his father Uddalaka (Arapura 73). Although Svetaketu has completed his formal education, his father must still teach him about the subtle essence of reality, which is the truth about Brahman and Atman, *tat tvam asi* (that thou art). In this way, Uddalaka shows his son that Atman and Brahman are one. This understanding is only possible once the two forms of ignorance, *nama* (name) and *rupa* (form), have been defeated (Shivkumar 149). Just as the name and form of a river disappears when it is united with the sea, one who achieves right outlook or wisdom

(*vidya*) becomes united with Brahman. Although there is debate over the characteristics of enlightenment after one achieves *moksa*, the Upanisads declare that this state of pure consciousness is filled with intense joy (Chakrabarti 7).

Vedanta philosophy asserts that an *adhikari* (eligible person) for the pursuit of *moksa* must undergo personal training through spiritual practices (Kumar 112). This training creates within *adhikaris* four main qualities that help them to attain liberation. The first, called *nityanityavastuviveka*, is the power to discriminate between permanent and impermanent. This is especially important since one must identify the transcendent essence of the universe. *Ihamutrarthabhogaviraga*, the second quality, is detachment from worldly and other-worldly objects. This can be cultivated during the *samnyasin* stage of life by renouncing one's possessions and migrating frequently from place to place (Rodrigues 2006:93). The third quality, *samadamasadhanasampat*, is the development of self-control through six properties: restraining the internal organ, controlling the external sense organs, abstaining from all but the pursuit of truth, practicing tolerance, focusing the mind, and having faith in spiritual teachings (Kumar 112). Finally, the *adhikari* must possess *mumuksutva*, which is a strong desire to be released from *samsara*. Even though the end of suffering may not be enough to fuel this desire, as it also entails giving up worldly pleasure, Advaita Vedanta enhances motivation by characterizing enlightenment as perpetual bliss (Chakrabarti 5).

Three main paths (*yogas*) to attaining *moksa* are emphasized in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is part of the famous epic the *Mahabharata* (Shivkumar 30). The first of these is *jnana* (transcendental knowledge), which is gained through contemplation and meditation on the true nature of the self (Raghavachar 266). One may also develop

knowledge by learning from a *guru* (spiritual teacher) or an individual who has already achieved enlightenment (Shivkumar 141). Study of the Vedas with close attention to Vedanta can also lead to the accumulation of knowledge required to bring about the realization of *moksa*. In addition, Patanjali's Raja Yoga, and other forms of yoga can also be used to pursue knowledge of Atman/Brahman because it leads to the silence of the mind so that one can see the truth (Ravindra 177). Although the *Bhagavad Gita* maintains that anyone, regardless of class (*varna*), can achieve *moksa*, it may be easier for individuals in certain *varnas* to pursue a specific path to liberation. Since intense study of spiritual matters is an asset in following *jnana*, the Brahmin priestly class who spend a great deal of time learning and reading Vedic texts may be exposed to an environment that is more facilitative to the attainment of *moksa* through *jnana* than individuals in other *varnas*.

The second main path to *moksa* is that of *karma* (action) (Shivkumar 145). The *Bhagavad Gita* teaches that action should be disciplined. In detaching themselves from this world, *adhikaris* should renounce all attachment from the fruits of their actions. For example, they should not perform deeds simply because these deeds will bring them success. However, this does not mean that a person seeking *moksa* should renounce all action and practice inaction. Rather, God (or Visnu) in the form of Krsna declares that the world would be destroyed if he did not perform actions. He concludes that people should dedicate all their actions to God. The philosopher Ramanuja further interprets this instruction as stating that followers should put themselves under the control of God and become God's tools (Raghavachar 266). As a result of this dedicated action, the cyclic law of *karma* falls away and gives rise to one's inner spirit or Atman/Brahman. Despite

this focus on action, there is some controversy over whether or not practicing *dharma* (righteousness/duty) is a valid way to attain *moksa* (Ingalls 3). This is very similar to the debate over the importance of good works versus faith in Protestant Christianity as a means for entering heaven. Regardless of Sankara's insistence that *dharma* is a worldly goal bound by *samsara*, many Hindus follow the *Bhagavad Gita's* view of righteous action as an essential part of the journey to attaining *moksa*.

*Bhakti* (loving devotion) is the third core path to *moksa*. This path, of which anyone is capable, requires full faith in God, an intense love for him and absolute surrender to him (Shivkumar 147). Ramanuja proclaims that *bhakti* must evolve from the disciplines of *karma* and *jnana* and that love emerges from the decision of the seeker to meditate on the nature of Brahman (Raghavachar 267). Devotion is the result of experience or knowledge of God, love of God cultivated by experience, and disciplined service to God. Despite these philosophical stipulations, this path is often seen as a simpler way of achieving *moksa* than both *karma* and *jnana*. *Bhakti* is believed to extend divine grace to seekers of Brahman/Atman because it can be followed by anyone regardless of caste, knowledge, opportunity for action or past deeds. Therefore, it is often spoken of as a universal and democratic way to enlightenment.

There are also other ways of attaining *moksa* than those accentuated in the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Prapatti* (self-surrender) is the humble offering of one's burden and responsibility as part of humanity over to God in order to attain enlightenment (Raghavachar 270). It is performed in a single act that is final, absolute and cannot be repeated. Seekers hand over their whole selves, along with the responsibility of attaining *moksa*, to God. In the Ramanujite tradition, the actual process of *prapatti* entails three

meditative *mantras* (sacred utterances), two self-offering sentences, and the recitation of the last verse of Kṛṣṇa's instruction to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

In contrast, Hindu Grammarians believe that words are both reflections of Brahman/Atman as well as the means through which he can be known (Coward 209). In both the *Vakyapadiya* and his commentary on Patanjali's *Mahabhasya*, Bhartrhari emphasizes that the study of grammar, through the correct use of words and the knowledge of their essence, can lead to *moksa*. The use of speech purified by grammar gives the speaker spiritual merit, which results in wellbeing and moral power. Conversely, speech that is tainted by the incorrect use of words confuses the mind and creates ignorance (*avidya*). Therefore, the Yoga of the Word as the practice of studying and abiding by grammar rules is another way to realize the true essence of Atman and Brahman.

The concept of *moksa* also exists in Jainism but the ideas that surround it are somewhat different. Jains believe that individuals are held in the bondage of *samsara* through karmic matter that clings to the self as a result of one's evil desires and predispositions (Shivkumar 84). *Moksa* is achieved through cutting off the self from any connection with karmic matter. The way to liberation is composed of the three jewels: right belief, right knowledge and right conduct. Once an individual has achieved *moksa* and becomes liberated, that person transcends *samsara* and remains forever at the apex of the universe (Jaini 223). Here, the liberated individual resides in a state of pure consciousness and supreme peace (Shivkumar 116).

Conversely, Buddhism holds the concept of *nirvana*, which is akin to *moksa* in that it is the end of all worldly suffering (Shivkumar 161). However, *nirvana* does not

involve connecting oneself to a god-like concept such as Brahman. It postulates that the self is impermanent and there is no Atman or greater self (Rodrigues 2004:174). Rather, *nirvana* is an understanding of Ultimate Reality as dynamic process that is continually changing and this realization leads to the extinction of desire, hatred and illusion.

*Nirvana* is achieved through adherence to the Noble Eightfold Path, which requires the individual to strive for right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Shivkumar 174).

*Moksa* is a goal that encompasses many common human desires: to find one's true self, to end ignorance and worldly suffering, and to connect oneself with a more meaningful and powerful whole. Such enlightenment does not come automatically to an individual; rather, it must be sought after. As a result, there are many different paths to *moksa* and many more interpretations of how to follow these paths (Kumar 49).

However, all Hindu interpretations consistently convey that a person must reach an understanding of Atman and Brahman as the true essence of reality in order to attain *moksa*.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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Atman

*Bhagavad Gita*

Advaita Vedanta

Sankara

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*Jnana*

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### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

<http://hinduism.iskcon.com/concepts/106.htm>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/beliefs/moksha.shtml>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moksa>

[http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h\\_enlighten.asp](http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_enlighten.asp)

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<http://www.geocities.com/advaitavedant/>

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