

Concept of *Moksha* in Hinduism and Buddhism

Section - 4

Concept of *Moksha* in Hinduism

In every religion, the concept of moksha, nirvana or liberation is very importantly mentioned. All religions have a basic concept of liberation. But the notion of liberation is different in different religions. In Hinduism, the present life is considered to be the result of many lifetimes of past desires, *karmas* and the results of those *karmas*. The results of these previous karmas are unfolding at every moment. Some *karma* is mature and bearing fruit at the present moment, other *karmas* are laying as "seed" waiting to mature at a future time. All that we have done in the past creates who we are in the present and all that we do in the present is creating who we will be in the future. In this way, there is great cycle of desire, action (*karma*) and reaction that drives the wheel of life. As a result, all beings are forced to remain within this world in order to experience the fruit of their desires and actions (*karmas*).

Desire and actions (*karmas*) are said to be the source of reincarnation. Beings continue to "rotate" through endless lifetimes in this physical world. Sometimes in heaven (nice places), sometimes in the middle regions (medium places) and sometimes in hellish realms. This rotation through endless lifetimes is the process of reincarnation called *samsara* in Sanskrit. The ultimate goal of life in Hinduism is to break this cycle of reincarnation, to escape *samsara*. Breaking this cycle is done through the process of yoga, and freedom or liberation from the cycle of rebirth is called moksha.

From spiritual point of view, real achievement of life is not money, nor material luxury. Neither is it sexual nor eating pleasure. It is neither intellectual, business nor political power, nor any other of the instinctive, nor intellectual needs. These are natural pursuits in human life, to be sure, but our divine aim on this earth must be to personally realize our identity in and with God. Identifying ourselves with God is called enlightenment, *Self-Realization*, *God-Realization* and *Nirvikalpa Samadhi*. After many lifetimes of wisely controlling the creation of *karma* and resolving past *karmas*, the soul is fully matured in the knowledge of these divine laws and then there is the highest use of them. Through the practice of *yoga*, the Hindu bursts into God's superconscious Mind, the experience of bliss, all-knowingness, perfect silence. His intellect is transmuted, and he

soars into the Absolute Reality of God. He is a *jnani*, a knower of the Known. When the *jnani* is stable in repeating his realization of the Absolute, there is no longer a need for physical birth, because all lessons have been learned, all *karmas* fulfilled and Godness is his natural mind state.

That individual soul is then naturally liberated, freed from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth in the earth. After *moksha*, our soul continues its evolution in the inner worlds, eventually to merge back into its origin and that origin is God, the Primal Soul. In Hinduism, the terms *moksha*, *nirvana* and *mukti* (liberation) are used synonymously to describe release or freedom from the cycles of birth and death (*samsara*). *Moksha* is a process and not a state of being. In the Hindu definition, *moksha* is not something to be experienced or realized, but rather attained upon God-realization. The liberated soul or *atman* finally enters the abode of God, the kingdom of God. The ultimate goal of every life, for all human beings, is to reach the stage of *moksha* (salvation).

Every Hindu hopes to attain *moksha*. But he or she knows well that it will not necessarily come in this present life. Hindus know this and do not delude themselves that this life is the last. Seeking and attaining profound spiritual realizations, they nevertheless know that there is much to be accomplished on earth and that only mature, God-Realized, souls attain *moksha*.

God may seem distant and remote as the experience of our self-created *karmas* cloud our mind. Yet, in reality, the Supreme Being is always closer to us than the beat of our heart. His mind pervades the totality of our karmic experience in lifetimes. As karma is God's cosmic law of cause and effect, *dharma* is God's law of Being, including the pattern of Hindu religiousness. Through following *dharma* and controlling thought, word and deed, *karma* is harnessed and wisely created. We become the master, the knowing creator, not a helpless victim. Through being consistent in our religiousness, following the *yamas* and *niyamas* (Hindu restraints and observances), performing the *pancha nitya karmas* (five constant duties), seeing God everywhere and in everyone, our past *karma* will soften. We may experience the *karma* indirectly through seeing someone else going through a situation that we intuitively know was a *karma* we also were to face. But because of devout religiousness, we may experience it vicariously or in lesser intensity. For example, a physical *karma* may manifest as a mental experience or a realistic dream. An emotional *karmic* storm may just barely touch our mind before dying out.

According to the scriptures, the discipline of unattached action (*Nishkama Karma*) can lead to salvation of the soul. So they recommend that one should remain detached while carrying out his duties in life. As Lord Krishna said in the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "To the man thinking about the objects (of the senses) arises attachment towards them; from attachment, arises longing; and from longing arises anger. From anger comes delusion; and from delusion loss of memory; from loss of memory, the ruin of discrimination; and on the ruin of discrimination, he perishes".

Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives (*samsara*) and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived (*karma*). In a lifetime people build up karma, both good and bad, based on their actions within that lifetime. This *karma* affects their future lives and existences. People must take responsibility for their actions either within this life time or the next. Death is a key part of this cycle and is treated with specific importance. Death is the last *samsara* (cycle of life) referred to as the 'last sacrifice'.

Moksha is the end of the death and rebirth cycle. It is classed as the fourth and ultimate artha (goal) of life. It is the transcendence of all *arthas*. It is achieved by overcoming ignorance and desires. It is a paradox in the sense that overcoming desires also includes overcoming the desire for *moksha* itself. It can be achieved both in this life and after death. In simple words, *moksha* or *Nirvana* is deliverance in Hinduism from the cycle of birth and death with the intervening periods of stay in heaven and hell according to a person's good and bad deeds. This happens when the person has no bad deeds in his/her account. Hindus believe that all people are governed by this rule, Hindus as well as those who are not. Acting according to 'dharma' adds to the good deeds and cancels bad deeds. 'Dharma' is fulfillment of one's duties and responsibilities and engaging in righteous action.

Hinduism discusses various states and types of *moksha* attained by various means like bhakti, yoga etc. Especially eight stages or types of *moksha* are defined in various texts.

1. *Salokya Mukti*

In *salokya-mukti*, the departed soul goes to ishta-loka (the abode of the Personal God, such as the abode of *Vishnu*), and stays there blissfully enjoying His presence. A person who has gone through rigorous ethical and moral disciplines followed by right

knowledge, right action, non-attachment, and devotional meditation on the Personal God (*Vishnu*), becomes fit for release or moksha through Ishwara's loving grace.

2. *Samipya or Sannidhya Mukti*

In *samipya* or *sannidhya-mukti* the departed soul enjoys the bliss of extreme proximity to the Personal God. A person who has gone through rigorous ethical and moral disciplines followed by right knowledge, right action, non-attachment, and devotional meditation on the Personal God (*Vishnu*), becomes fit for release or moksha through Ishwara's loving grace.

3. *Sarupya Mukti*

In *sarupya-mukti* the departed soul acquires the form of the Personal God and enjoys intense bliss.

4. *Sayujya Mukti*

In *sayujya-mukti*, the departed soul becomes blissfully absorbed in the Personal God. A person who has gone through rigorous ethical and moral disciplines followed by right knowledge, right action, non-attachment, and devotional meditation on the Personal God (*Vishnu*), becomes fit for release or moksha through Ishwara's loving grace. *Sayujya Mukti* is of two kinds as described in *Shri Chaitanya Charitamrita*:

- (i) *Brahma Sayujya* – One is to merge in the *Brahman* or *Brahmajyoti* which is the spiritual effulgence from the body of the Lord. Here the soul exists simply as a spiritual spark experiencing *brahmananda* that is freedom from the material cycle of birth and death.
- (ii) *Ishvara Sayujya* – One is to merge into the body of the Lord directly like *Shishupala's* soul and is considered even more ghastly by the devotees. Because when we merge in the impersonal effulgence of the Lord, some great devotees can come there and save us and make us qualified to go to the *Vaikuntha* planets to directly serve the Lord. But when the soul merges in the body of the Lord, the soul is doomed to never achieve direct devotional service to the Lord.

5. *Krama mukti or Avantara Mukti*

Krama mukti or *avantara mukti* means liberation through stages. A person who has intensely meditated on *Saguna Brahman* using the sacred sound symbol *Aum* or other prescribed methods of meditation goes to *Brahma-loka* after death. There he attains the knowledge of *Nirguna Brahman*. When the entire universe is dissolved at the end of the kalpa, he becomes one with *Brahman* and is not born again. This is called *krama-mukti* or *avantara-mukti*.

6. *Vishishtadvaita Moksha*

Those who believe in this school believe that moksha means living blissfully in *vaikuntha*, which is the realm of the Personal God after the death of the devotee. A person who has attained *moksha* lives blissfully in *vaikuntha* in a spiritual body in the presence of God. He/she acquires many divine powers such as omniscience, etc., but unlike God he/she cannot create, sustain or dissolve the world. In spite of the exalted state, the devotee has to remain subservient to God. They also believe that *Karma Yoga* and *Jnana Yoga* are only aids to *Bhakti Yoga*. One can be liberated from the bondage of *samsara* only through God's grace. They suggest that *Bhakti Yoga* practices are the only means of obtaining divine grace.

7. *Purva- Mimamsa Mukti*

Devotees achieve moksha through the right performance of rituals as prescribed by the Vedas. Some suggest that the liberated soul goes to heaven (after death) and enjoys heavenly bliss forever. Others suggest that *moksha* is a state devoid of the possibility of rebirth. You are free from pain and suffering. They do not consider *moksha* as a state of heavenly bliss.

8. *Apavarga Mukti*

Liberation or *Apavarga* is a separation from all qualities. Liberation is a state beyond pleasure, happiness, pain, or any experience whatsoever. It is achieved by cultivating ethical virtues and acquiring the right knowledge of reality. After liberation, there is no rebirth.

Moksha is described in the following ways in various schools of Hinduism:

1. *Jivan Mukti/ Videha Mukti in Advaita School*

Some Hindus, especially those who follow the *Advaita* School of Philosophy, believe that one can have liberation from samsara even when alive. According to them, a spiritual aspirant has to first go through various moral and ethical practices, worship (upasana) of the Personal God, etc. These observances gradually purify his mind and make it ready for intense meditation on the Impersonal Divine Reality (*Nirguna Brahman*).

The intense meditation enables the devotees to attain a condition known as *atmajnana* or the knowledge of inner Divine Self. *Atmajnana* destroys the ignorance (*avidya*) that covers the knowledge of the reality. As soon as his ignorance is annihilated, the person will be released and becomes a *jivanmukta* (one who has had *jivanmukti*).

After attaining *jivanmukti* a person can no longer think of himself or herself as an embodied being. The body and the rest of the world appears illusory to a *jivanmukta*. The illusory body will continue to exist as long as the *prarabdha karma* lasts. When the *prarabdha* is exhausted and the illusory body dies, the *jivanmukta* attains his disembodied release called *videha-mukti*.

2. *Sadyomukti*

Sadyomukti means "immediate release." *Sadyomukti* is another way of getting *moksha* for those who believe in *jivanmukti*. According to this view, a *jivanmukta* may totally lose interest in his illusory body immediately after attaining *jivanmukti*. As a result, his body drops off in a matter of days causing his *sadyomukti*.

It is also possible that after attaining *atmajnana*, these liberated souls can no longer identify with their bodies, which along with the rest of the world have become illusory and unreal. So for them, their bodies are not really there and thus they attain *sadyomukti*.

3. *Kaivalya Moksha in Sankhya School*

This form of *moksha* is suggested by the Sankhya School of Philosophy of Hinduism. They suggest that the soul or the spirit is *purusha* (pure consciousness), and the body-mind complex is an evolved form of unconscious primordial matter known as *prakriti*. *Prakriti* functions by borrowing consciousness from *purusha*.

Purusha gets tied down or bonded by *aviveka* - *purusha's* false identification with *prakriti* and its evolved products like mind, body, etc. Such false identification is caused by *purusha's* ignorance. While in bondage, *purusha* suffers mental and physical pain because of its false identification with the mind-body complex.

In order to get rid of the false identification and consequent pain and suffering, *purusha* must acquire the knowledge known as *viveka-jnana*. When *purusha* learns *viveka-jnana*, it realizes that as spirit it is completely different and distinct from *prakriti* and the associated mind-body system. When this happens, the devotees will experience the complete cessation of suffering and pain. Thus *viveka-jnana* causes *purusha's* *moksha* by disentangling *purusha* from *prakriti*.

There are five kinds of *mukti* or liberation described in the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*:

*salokya-sarshiti-samipyā-sarupyaikatvam apy uta
diyamanam na grihnanti vina mat-sevanam janah¹*

Srimad-Bhagavatam

Sri Kapiladeva said, *O My dear Mother! Despite being offered the five types of liberation known as salokya, samipyā, sarupya, sarshiti, and ekatva, My pure devotees don't accept them. They only accept My transcendental loving service.*²

Advaita school of *Vedanta* literally means 'not two' or 'not dual', and whose major thinker was *Shankara*. The group of texts discussed in most detail is the *Upanishads*, and the varied ways in which that text deals with the links between *brahman* and the individual soul, and the former's links with the universe. The term 'non-dual' is based on the idea that reality is one and not to be differentiated. This reality is *brahman*, divine power, knowledge of which leads to *moksha* or liberation. The crucial notion here is of a hierarchy of levels of viewing reality. *Brahman* is available to a degree at each level of reality, but really it exists without any attributes at all. The common idea that we are separated from reality is due to human ignorance, *maya* or *avidya*, the illusions that persist as a result of our apparent individuality. One of the ways of cementing us in this ignorance is by trying to escape from it, since such effort means action, and action implies the acquisition of karmic traces (*karma*) and merely deepens bondage.

One view offered by *Advaita* was that *brahman* is both identical and different from the individual soul and the world. In itself it is entirely one, but within that unity resides the ability to comprehend an infinite variety. This is plausible if one sees creation

as not the production of entirely new things, but rather the instantiation of aspects that already exist within the *brahman*. One of the interesting implications of this view is that it suggests a dual strategy to liberation, which is going to be neither entirely through following one's moral and religious obligations, nor through acquiring knowledge, but in some combination of the two. The former strategy helps to bring about detachment from the influences of the world, while the latter encourages acknowledgement of the oneness of reality, and so leads to the ending of ignorance.

The progress of this attempted solution was brought to an end by Shankara, who argued that all it does is to restate the original problem without contributing to its solution. How can one thing encompass both similarity and dissimilarity? These are contradictory concepts and claiming that they both characterize the same subject is to involve oneself in self-contradiction. Shankara agrees that whatever the Upanishads say must be true, but that the references made to the diversity of reality are not an account of what is deeper reality. All diversity is in itself an illusion. On the other hand, it does not follow that the world itself is unreal, since it constitutes a stream of appearances which do depend on a principle of reality.

We need to distinguish between two sorts of unreality, one where an object is mistaken for something that it is not, and this is different from the case where we take ordinary experience to be ultimate reality, which it is not when compared with the one principle of reality, *Brahman*, itself. The individual self is not illusory in the first sense, since it is *Brahman* appearing to us in a particular way, in the only way that would make sense to us given our physical and mental constitution. Seeing *Brahman* in this way leads to errors about its real nature, but none the less it gives us a glimpse of that real nature. What we need to do is to work from where we are to gain a deeper idea of where the self genuinely originates. We have to make a distinction between the status of the self and the world, for while the latter may be illusory, the former is not similarly illusory, since if it were, there would be no prospect of the liberation of the self.³

The doctrine then is that *Brahman* is the one reality which manifests itself in two ways, one as the world and another as the individual self. The former manifestation is an illusory aspect of *Brahman*, while the latter is *brahman* itself, although under the distorting aspect of the illusory universe. We should not see this link between *Brahman* and the world as causal, since causal relations only obtain between empirical phenomena. Physical

change means that one thing becomes part of something else, but is not entirely destroyed, nor is the new thing entirely new, since it came about through the causal efficacy of something else, which remains part of the new thing. Although the universe is *maya* and so unreal, it is not incomprehensible. By contrast with the Sankhya-Yoga metaphysics, the principle of the material is not real. It is not unreal either, since it is influenced by reality, and there is no point in looking to matter itself as the ground of the physical universe. On the other hand, it obviously has a part to play in such an explanation, but not an ultimate role. The ultimate ground is of course Brahman. When we deny the reality of the world, all that we are doing is denying its reality apart from its origins in brahma. The latter in itself does not change, but without it there would be no experience of physical change. The position is even more complicated than might immediately appear to be the case in that *Brahman* is really neither simple nor diverse, but is entirely without features.⁴

Sankara identified the consciousness with *Brahman*, reality. What we normally think of as consciousness is merely an effect of it, though, and the 'I' that lies at the basis of experience is in itself beyond apprehension. On the *Advaita* approach, this brahman or *atman* is the basic self of everything, and is the same for everything. As a result of ignorance, we tend to identify the self with objects in the world of matter, and we do not appreciate how distinct the real self is. It is easy for us to think that the empirical self which we can observe through and in our experience is the real self, but this is an error. We can appreciate the nature of the error by considering that the empirical self cannot understand itself, since there is always an aspect of self that remains outside the object of knowledge. This transcendental self is immediate, since if it were to be an object of consciousness itself an infinite regress would be created. Consciousness in itself is there all the time, and is not in the objects of that consciousness. Consciousness is completely independent, and does not need another consciousness to function, nor does its operation require the object of consciousness.

The analogy of consciousness with light was often drawn, since light is not dependent on the objects illuminated by it, as compared with those objects themselves. Objects can only be noticed if they are lit up, as it were, while light itself requires nothing to light it up, since it is itself the basis for illumination. The Advaita and Vishishtadvaita schools both accept that the self manifests itself at the source of our knowledge, but they differ on its precise nature. According to the former, the transcendental self is equivalent to

consciousness, while for the latter the self is an immortal and individual knowing subject. *Vishishtadvaita* argues that the self cannot just be consciousness, since consciousness requires something to be conscious. Consciousness also has to have an object it can be directed at, and this is a lower form of consciousness that exists at the level of karma. Once we achieve liberation, this sort of consciousness disappears into the transcendental consciousness and we are left with a soul that knows itself and is concerned with nothing else.⁵

In the Vedas, idea about *Moksa* is hardly clear. Heaven, a place of eternal pleasure and rejoice, is the highest good of life. It is in the Upanisads that we first get an idea about *Moksa*. Here sometimes *Moksa* is understood as an identity of self with the *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, and sometimes as likeness of the self with God. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* describes the state of *Moksa* thus: "As a man in the embrace of his beloved wife knows nothing without or within, so the person when in the embrace of the Intelligent self knows nothing without or within. That, verily, is his form in which his desire is fulfilled, in which the self is his desire, in which he is without desire, free from any sorrow." Gaudapada in his *Karika on Mandukya Upanisad* 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." But the *Mandukya* itself says at another place that by liberation the soul attains likeness with the Divine.⁶

Concept of *Moksha* in Buddhism

Regarding to *Moksa* as the ultimate destiny, Buddhism is generally recognised as having a negative concept of *Moksa*. Buddhism terms liberation as *Nirvana* which literally means 'cooling down' or 'blowing out'. The meaning itself shows that *Nirvana* is basically a negative concept. The blowing out (or cooling down) means here the blowing out (or cooling down) of the fire of passions. 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. With the cooling down of passions, actions cease bearing fruits and consequently the cycle of birth and death stops. And that is really the complete cessation of suffering, which is the true nature of *Nirvana*. But according to some, *Nirvana* is not merely a negative state. They point out that when the fire of passions cools down, it is quite natural that a state of perfect peace and equanimity will be achieved and this is a

positive achievement. Not only that, some quite unambiguously believe that *Nirvana* brings positive bliss. *Nibbanam paramam sukham*, says the *Dhammapada*. This state of happiness is unique, which cannot be described in words.⁷

Nirvana is a compound of the prefix ni[r]- (ni, nis, nih) which means "out, away from, without", and the root va[na] (in Pali vati) which can be translated as "blowing" as in "blowing of the wind".⁸ *Nirvana* is the state of being free from suffering. It is blowing out the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. The Lord Buddha says that ignorance (*avijja*) is the main cause of suffering. It is by cutting *avijja* by the sword of wisdom a person truly attains *Nibbana*. The Buddha said—

*When you have learned this, to be freed from the bond of existence you must cut down ignorance with all your efforts, for it is the root of pain. Then, set free from the bonds of the prison-house of existence, you will possess as Arhats natures perfectly pure. You shall attain Nirvana.*⁹

Nirvana is perhaps the most mysterious concept in Buddhism. The Lord Buddha himself has denied the positive definition of *Nirvana* as it is impossible to put in the words. No senses can feel or comprehend it. The only way to understand *Nirvana* is insight meditation. Ven. Dhammapiya correctly says, "No single expression in any language can fully cover the true meaning of *Nibbanic* experience without practice. The mere interpretations sometimes mislead readers to absorb different meanings." Trying to explain nirvana is somewhat like trying to explain the taste of sugar to one who has never tasted it, or trying to explain a color to one who is and was born blind. It is difficult, if not impossible. *Nirvana* is beyond words, logic and reasoning. It is easier and safer to speak of what *Nirvana* is not. It isn't nothingness or annihilation of self, because the dharma teaches there is no self to be annihilated.

What is that motivates a person for *moksha*? The final reason why worldly success cannot satisfy us completely is that its achievements are ephemeral. Wealth, fame, and power do not survive bodily death—"You can't take it with you," as we routinely say. And since we cannot, this keeps these things from satisfying us wholly, for we are creatures who can envision eternity and must instinctively rue by contrast the brief purchase on time that worldly success commands. Life holds other possibilities. To see what these are we must return to the question of what people want. Thus far, Hinduism and Buddhism both would say, we have been answering this question too superficially.

Pleasure, success, and duty are never humanity's ultimate goals. At best they are means that we assume will take us in the direction of what we really want. What we really want are things that lie at a deeper level. Only the ultimate salvation could be the answer.

In our attempt to explain it, we use words which have limited meanings. It isn't heaven; it isn't purgatory, and it isn't the end. Nirvana is the Absolute Reality, which is realized through the highest mental training and wisdom. It is beyond the reach of the spoken or written word.

Immediately after the realization of Nirvana and Buddhahood, the Buddha explains to his five disciples in these words—

It occurred to me, monks that this dhamma I have realized is deep, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, beyond mere reasoning, subtle and intelligible to the wise. . . Hard, too, is it to see this calming of all conditioned things, the giving up of all substance of becoming, the extinction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana. And if I were to teach the dhamma and others were not to understand me that would be weariness, a vexation for me."

The Buddha described *Nirvana* as the perfect peace of the state of mind that is free from craving, anger and other afflictive states (*kilesas*). The subject is at peace with the world, has compassion for all and gives up obsessions and fixations. This peace is achieved when the existing volitional formations (*samskaras*) are pacified, and the conditions for the production of new ones are eradicated. In *Nibbana* the root causes of craving and aversion has been extinguished such that one is no longer subject to human suffering (*dukkha*) or further states of rebirths in *samsara*. In simple words, *Nirvana* in Buddhism means "state beyond sorrows," or a "state of freedom from cyclic existence."

Nirvana in Buddhism is a state of living in which mind is free from any wrong thoughts as anger, lust or worldly desires. Thus, *Nirvana* is a mode of living in which mind and soul are found in complete peace and solitude. In Buddhism, *Nirvana* is described as 'deathless'. *Nirvana* is not a state of physical or worldly happiness; rather it is spiritual happiness which is consistent and immortal.

By the means of meditation, the Buddha realized the wisdom that accompanies enlightenment. Traditionally, he is said to have realized enlightenment through the cultivation of the Four Trances and the Threefold Studies Enlightenment, however, is not equivalent to the Four Trances or Stages of Meditation. The definition of Buddhist

enlightenment as “seeing things as they actually are” suggests the dynamic nature of Buddhist meditation. The mind was considered to have an innate wisdom. Because its basic nature involved thought, when the mind was quieted and focused and concentration strengthened, then superior form of wisdom would naturally be manifested. Both Buddhist meditation and yoga were means of producing wisdom, but since they employed different methods of concentration, the resultant wisdom probably differed. The wisdom produced from Enlightenment which was realized through Buddhist meditation was described as ‘seeing the *Dharma*.’

The Buddha had his progress through more profound meditative states as he passed through the Four Trances. These were probably the natural results of his many years of training. This temperament seems to have been suited to meditation from the time he was young, and the training he received from his early teachers *Arada* and *Udraka*. The term *dhyana* has been used since the early *Upanisads* with the meaning of meditation¹⁰, but the Four Trances should probably be regarded as a new meditation system developed by the Buddhists. The four trances were as a whole a dynamic way of concentrating the mind. The wisdom received through the trances was not a mystical form of intuition. Rather, it allowed a person to see things as they actually were (are) in a rational and free manner. With that wisdom, the practitioner could know truth and firmly adhere to that truth. When he could not be shaken or moved from that truth, be bear, pain, or passions, he would realize enlightenment. Because the mind was free from the fetters of defilements and passions, this state was called ‘emancipation’ or ‘salvation’ (*vimoksha*, *vimukti*). Some scholars have described salvation as freedom of the mind from afflictions and nirvana as peace.

The teaching of the four stages of enlightenment is a central factor in the early Buddhist schools, and also in the surviving *Theravada* school of Buddhism. An ordinary person, or *puthujjana* (both *Pali* and *Sanskrit*: *prithujana*), is trapped in the endless changes of samsara. Doing good or evil as influenced by his desires and aversions, an ordinary person is born in higher or lower states of being (heavens or hells) according to their karmas (actions). One who follows the Buddhist path and experiences the truth to the extent of cutting of a number of the ten mental fetters (*Pali*: *samyojana*), becomes an *ariya puggala*, a "noble person" who will surely become an *Arahant* in the near future (within seven lives).

The four stages of enlightenment in Buddhism are the four degrees of approaching to full enlightenment as an *Arahant* which a person can attain in this life. The four stages are:

i. *Sotapanna*

The first stage is that of *Sotapanna* (Pali and Sanskrit: *Srotapanna*). Literally it means "one who enters (*apadyate*) the stream (*sotas*)." The stream is the Noble Eightfold Path regarded as the highest *Dharma*. The stream-enterer is also said to have "opened the eye of the Dharma" (*dhammacakkhu*, Sanskrit: *dharmacaksus*). A stream-enterer is guaranteed enlightenment after no more than seven successive rebirths, and possibly in fewer. The stream-enterer can also be sure that he will not be reborn in any of the unhappy states or rebirths (an animal, a *preta*, or in hell). He will only be reborn as a human being, or in a heaven. The stream-enterer must have an intuitive grasp of Buddhist doctrine (*sammaditthi*, "right view"), has complete confidence or *Saddha* in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dhamma, and *Sangha*, and has good moral behaviour (*Sila*).

ii. *Sakadagami*

The second stage is that of the *Sakadaagami*. Literally it means "one who once comes (*agacchati*)". The once-returner will return to the human world only one more time. He will get nirvana in that life.

iii. *Anagami*

The third stage is that of the *Anagami*. Literally it means "one who does not (an-) come (*agacchati*)". The non-returner does not come back into human existence, or any lower world, after death. Instead, he is reborn in one of the worlds of the *Rupadhatu* called the *Shuddhavasa* worlds, or "Pure Abodes". Here he will attain *Nirvana* (Pali: *Nibbana*). Some of them are reborn a second time in a higher world of the Pure Abodes, but in no case are born into a lower state. An *Anagami* abandons the five lower fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth. An *Anagami* is thus partially enlightened. He is on the way to perfect and complete Enlightenment.

iv. *Arahant*

The fourth stage is that of *Arahant*. The person is a fully enlightened human being who has abandoned all fetters. The person, upon decease (Sanskrit: *Parinirvana*,

Pali: Parinibbana), will not be reborn in any world because he has wholly abandoned *samsara*.

The *Pali* Canon of Buddhism contains many perspectives on *nirvana*. For one, it is linked to seeing the empty nature of phenomena. It is also presented as a radical reordering of consciousness and unleashing of awareness. Scholar Herbert Guenther states that with *nirvana* "the ideal personality, the true human being" becomes reality.¹¹

Various *Mahayana* schools differ much in the interpretation of *Nirvana* from *Theravada*. *Mahayanists* believed that the '*parinibbana*' of the Buddha did not result in the total extinction of his '*samsara*'. Rather he entered the '*apratisthita-nirvana*' in which he continued to work for the salvation of all beings who were suffering in '*samsara*'. This means the Buddha would have retained one or more of the '*skandas*' after '*parinibbana*'. The assumption that the Buddha could continue to exist after '*parinibbana*' in an existence that consists of the '*skandas*' is contradicted from the traditional teachings of the Buddha who said that suffering resides in '*skandas*'. There cannot be any suffering after getting *Nirvana*. This envisages the total extinction of '*samsaric skandas*'.

That's why *Theravada* Buddhists do not accept the *Mahayana* theory of *Nirvana*. This *Mahayana* theory of *Nirvana* is linked to their '*Sunyata*' (emptiness) theory which is not acceptable to *Theravada* Buddhists. The word '*sunya*' is used in *Theravada* Buddhism with a different meaning to that of *Mahayana*, particularly the viewpoint of the *Madyamikas*. The *Chula-sunyata Sutra* of the *Majjima Nikaya* deals with the significance of the term '*sunya*' and its connection with the notion of '*Nirvana*'. In this *sutra*, the Buddha teaches that the cessation of suffering depends on the cessation of being and becoming. There is a passage in this *sutra* which describes emptiness ('*sunyata*') with an analogy of the forest. It is clear that the world is empty of self or what belongs to a self. For the *Theravada* Buddhists, this did not mean that the world itself was unreal or literally void, but that there is no self or soul in a person or sentient being. This is the '*sunyata*' theory in *Theravada* and this is totally different from that of '*Mahayana*'.

The *Mahayanists* rejected this interpretation of emptiness ('*sunya*') or to be precise that it did not go far enough. According to their thoughts, even the constituent elements known as '*Dhammas*' are unreal and void. As mentioned above, this idea could be traced back to the very early *Mahayana* texts like '*Asta-sahasrika-prajna-paramita*' which states that all *Dhammas* are unoriginated and non-existent. Although the notion of

emptiness is significant in most versions of Buddhism, it is crucial to Mahayana Buddhism. The argument goes that everything is without a nature, and so is empty. *Nirvana* or enlightenment is also empty, since it is realized through the acquisition of an empty consciousness. If everything is empty, both the material world and the perfect world, then we are also empty from an essential point of view, and we each share in this quality of being *sunya* or empty.

The Mahayana uses this as an argument that the Buddha nature is in everyone, because everyone shares emptiness. If the Buddha nature is empty, it is the same sort of emptiness in everyone. How can we attain an understanding of emptiness, especially when we are to engage in a process that in itself is far from empty, but involves a great deal of theory and argument which is designed to help us to appreciate the emptiness of everything? The answer is that the words of the teaching are distinct from the teaching itself, and the words can lead us close to the point where we have to rely on ourselves and our experiences alone, to blend with the emptiness of the essence of the world which is the source of our own emptiness.

The *Madhyamaka* school emphasized the emptiness of the key ideas of philosophy, such as the self, causality, motion, time, *karma*, and even *nirvana* and the Buddha. It seems likely that the stress on emptiness was designed to oppose the views of the *Abhidharma* school which often implies that there is some reality in the basic categories of the universe, and of course it might be used to counter all the 'orthodox' Hindu notions of what essentially exists. *Nagarjuna* and his followers thought that compromising on the notion of reality was going against the principles of Buddhism. After all, they argue that to appreciate the emptiness of everything is the same as absolute knowledge, and the objective of religion itself. As one might expect, the doctrine of emptiness came in for a lot of criticism, which *Nagarjuna* tries to rebut in his works. For example, it was argued that if everything is empty, then the thesis that everything is empty is itself empty, and so has no force. On the other hand, if the thesis is not empty, then it is not the case that everything is empty. If everything can be negated, then so can the thesis presented by *Nagarjuna*. Many similar objections are directed against him, some linked to the problems of self-referentiality and others questioning the accuracy with which the thesis fits in with Buddhist principles. His general reply is that it is important to distinguish

between relative and absolute reality. Everything, he argues, is absolutely empty, but relatively real, since we have evidence for the latter from our experience.

Nagarjuna accepts that in absolute terms all arguments are empty, but on the relative level it is acceptable to use them to show that one cannot stay at that level if one is going to make progress. There is a nice medical analogy which points out that if medicine is used to cure an illness, the medicine itself must also leave the system after having carried out its restorative function. The doctrine of emptiness-- should be used to cure ourselves of belief in the absolute reality of what we experience, and then it also should be expunged from our conceptual system, in just the same way that the Buddha after enlightenment was reluctant to speak and teach any more. The paradoxical strategy of claiming that everything is empty is none the less impossible to state, since it is self-refuting. But its supporters have a point in arguing that, although the argument cannot be proposed, it could still be valid, although not once stated. In any case, one could always hold the emptiness doctrine as applying to the nature of reality, but not as describing our experience of the material world.

According to the *Mahayana* tradition, we should distinguish between the form of *nirvana* achieved by someone like a monk, and the form of enlightenment available to everyone as shown by the Buddha and the *bodhisattvas*. There is a general *Mahayana* confidence that enlightenment is widely available, and can be achieved within one person's lifetime. This is often accompanied by a theory that all beings have the Buddha nature, or even are *Buddhas*. This approach was taken to its logical conclusion in China by Chan (Zen), who argued that we are all Buddhas and all can achieve enlightenment suddenly. That is, we all have the Buddha nature, and we can use it to adopt the correct attitude to the nature of reality, and once we do this we can break with samsara and immediately become enlightened.

According to *Yogachara* Buddhism, enlightenment can be achieved if we transfer unenlightened mental impulses away from ourselves through the following of religious practices. There are various approaches to how enlightenment may be realized; some arguing that what is required is gradual progress through many lives, while Zen thinkers are in favour of sudden enlightenment, since only the present really exists. But their theory was more complex than this, and they also emphasized the importance for enlightenment of appropriate deeds. The point that Zen masters made was that everyone had the Buddha

nature in the sense that everyone had it potentially. Everyone may at one time be the slave of illusion, but since they all innately possess the Buddha nature, they can in principle and in practice throw off this ignorance and acquire enlightenment.

The *Madhyamaka* school interprets enlightenment slightly differently, in that it tries to wean us away from our attachment to concepts, which it sees as a form of craving or desire. Of course, the route to doing away with concepts is through the use of concepts, and so this form of Buddhism is fond of self-subversive riddles and stories. Concepts only work at one level, and at a higher level of truth we have to transcend concepts if we are to achieve enlightenment. This form of enlightenment can never be expressed in language, which means that language can only take one part of the way to enlightenment. The final step has to be something that one does after receiving hints, in the form of paradoxical slogans and possibly even jokes.

The key advantage *Vajrayana* Buddhism claims to provide is an accelerated path to enlightenment. *Nirvana* is sometimes described as complete and perfect sanity. In *Vajrayana* this is achieved through use of tantra techniques, which are practical aids to spiritual development, and esoteric transmission. Earlier schools might provide insight meditation as ways to achieve *nirvana*. For the *Vajrayaists*, the technique of meditation is slow and only helpful in achieving to the stage of *Arahatship* and not to become the Buddha. So they call it the lower wheel (*Hinayana*). *Vajrayana* techniques make full enlightenment or Buddhahood possible in a much shorter timeframe, perhaps in a single lifetime. *Vajrayana* Buddhists do not claim that *Theravada* or *Mahayana* practices are in any way invalid, only that they represent slower paths. It should also be noted that the goal of the *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* is the attainment of Buddhahood, whereas the goal for *Theravada* practice is liberation from the cycle of rebirth in *Nirvana*. *Vajrayana* relies on various tantric techniques for the realization of *Nirvana* which is different from the *Theravadins* spiritual insight practice of *Vipassana*.

Critical Comparison regarding the concepts of *Moksha* in Hinduism and Buddhism

Notion of Death in Hinduism and Buddhism

While discussing the concept of *moksha* in Hinduism and Buddhism, obviously, it is very important to understand the notion of death in these two religions. In Hindu

philosophy, death is described in a number of different ways. According to *the Bhagavad-Gita*, those selves that have managed to free themselves join *Krishna*, yet remain distinct from him. Selves that are not freed are reborn repeatedly, until liberation is finally achieved, although there is a self that is not touched by this involvement in *samsara*, the cycle of birth and rebirth. There are two ways of looking at the self, *atman* or the self that is in contact with *brahman*, absolute reality, and *jiva*, or the temporal aspect of this unchangeable self. Death is really of little consequence, it is going to take place many times within the cycle of change, and the more that the person can disregard it the more likely he or she is to transcend the cycle eventually and attain moksha or escape. Of course, the materialists such as the *Lokayata* have few problems in discussing death, which is merely a rearrangement of the material parts of the human being, leading to the dissolution of the person.¹²

There are many differences; one of the main differences between the role of death in Buddhist philosophy and that in Hinduism is that in the former there is no eternal self that continues through many changes of the material aspect of the person. On the other hand, Buddhist thinkers certainly do not want to argue that nothing remains after death. What lasts is *karma*, the consequences of our actions and the actions of others, and what we should do to try to escape from this process is to abandon our trust in the reality of the world and the existence of a real single self. We seem to remember aspects of our past lives, but these are not really aspects of our past lives, but combinations of moments that took place to something linked loosely with whom we are now. Death is not very significant in that it is going to lead to the dissolution of the particular combinations of impulses and motives and replace these with another combination within a new form. If enlightenment is achieved, then death is a significant event, since it stops the whole process of rebirth. Death is always a significant event in the round of rebirth, since it is the point of transition from one body to another, but it has no importance in itself. The Buddha compares the body and the mind to a clay pot and the oil in it. When it is thrown into a pool of water, the pot breaks up and disintegrates, but the oil rises to the surface. The body is only the container of the chitta or mind, and the fact that we die is merely a reflection of the truth that everything that is created will come to an end.

Buddha says that, in every moment of our life, we are dying. The I of that moment dies, never to be reborn. Yet despite the fact that in this sense my life consists of nothing

but funerals, I do not conceive of myself as dying each moment, for I do not equate myself with my individual moments. I endure through them—experiencing them, without being identical with any of them in its singularity. Hinduism carries this notion a step further. It posits an extensive self that lives successive lives in the way a single life lives successive moments.

A story from the life of *Sankara* is very much illustrative in explaining the *advaita* philosophy of *Sankara*. According to tradition, *Sankara* met his guru *Govinda* at the ‘tender age’ of eight and under the following circumstances. As the child knocked at the door of the great master [the reply from inside was], ‘Who art thou?’ Little Shankar replied, ‘Thou!’ The teacher recognized the disciple and opened the door.

This traditional story is illustrative of the main thrust of *Sankara’s advaita*: non-difference (*avaitavada*), or stated in the positive, identity. To the question ‘Who are you?’ *Sankara’s* answer is the simple but devastating, ‘I am you’. Here, the aspirant’s question once again must be ‘How can that be?’ The non-dual statement of identity proclaimed by the young *Sankara* is consistent with the *Upanisadic* insistence on the unity of reality (*brahman*) and the identity of self (*atman*) with reality. In the mature *Sankara* teaching this powerful identification becomes absolute and serves to form the cornerstone of his non-dualist *Vedanta*.¹³

Reality (*brahman*) is by nature non-originated and undifferentiated, ‘One without a second’. *Atman*, by its very nature, is, according to *Advaita* teachings, identical with *brahman*: ‘This *brahman* is the self’. This identity is not produced by any change in the nature of *brahman* or *atman*, for a thing cannot change its nature; hence, to be identical, the nature of reality (*brahman*) and the nature of *atman* must always be the same. (Perhaps it is better to say that there is only one nature to things, that of *brahman*.)¹⁴

Rejection of Moksha in Charvaka School

The *charvakas*, also called *Lokayata*, or the materialists in Hindu philosophy, rejected any notion of valid knowledge, so that philosophy, which “according to the common Indian view ought to be a discipline of life, ceases here to be even a discipline of the mind”.¹⁵ The *charvaka* doctrine is summed by *Krishna Mishra* in his allegory *Prabodha-chandrodaya*—“*Lokayata* is always the only *sastra*; in it only perceptual evidence is authority; the elements are earth, water, fire, and air; wealth and enjoyment are

the objects of human existence. Matter can think. There is no other world. Death is the end of all.”¹⁶

The charvakas outrightly rejects any concept of enlightenment or moksha. Since, there remains nothing of a being after death, it is futile to talk of *mukti*. It is not only useless, but totally a wrong way of living the only life a being enjoys. For them there is no sufficient proof for the existence of any valid knowledge and hence enlightenment thereof. Nor is internal perception the means, since you cannot establish that the mind has any power to act independently towards an external object since all allow that it is dependent on the external senses...Nor can inference be the means of the knowledge of the universal proposition, since in the case of this inference we should also require another reference to establish it, and so on, and hence would arise the fallacy of an ad infinitum retrogression.¹⁷

The only contradiction in *Charvaka* is the rejection of all sorts of knowledge. Moksha is the rejection itself that requires a ground or some sort of inference without which one cannot deny or reject. So, *Charvaka* doctrine is paradoxical because it cannot provide any kind of proof for its rejection. The philosophy of non-duality of *Advaita Vedanta* has occupied the dominant position in Indian philosophy from the time of *Sankara* (c. 7th–8th centuries) to the present day. The *Upanisads* represent the culmination of a great shift in Vedic thought from the external, ritualistic worship of *brahman* to an internal, subjective quest for and subsequent inner identification with *brahman*. According to *Upanisadic* definitions, *brahman* admits of no distinctions or divisions (‘One without a second’); is both being (One) and knowing (intelligence) and is identical with the self, in both the objective sense (‘This *brahman* is the self’) and the subjective sense (‘I am *brahman*’). Hence, we can know *brahman* by the realization that That, i.e., *brahman*, is what we are.

Although the two religions talk differently regarding the ultimate liberation, but the essence is the same. This is made clear in *Gita* by *Krishna*—

Then his soul is a lamp whose light is steady, for it burns in a shelter where no winds come.

When the mind is resting in the stillness of the prayer of Yoga, and by the grace of the spirit sees the spirit and therein finds fulfillment.

*Then the seeker knows the joys of eternity: a vision seen by reason far beyond what senses can see. He abides therein and moves not from truth.*¹⁸

Because his mind does not become restless with desires and also because he does work without an eye on the result, all his *karmas*/actions are like offerings to *Krishna* who is infinite (i.e. with no end). The soul of such a man is like a steady flame sheltered in the grace of *Krishna*. This verse is highly poetic and expresses excellence of devotion. The Lord Buddha also defined *Nirvana* as extinguishing of the energy, burning away of all the *samskaras*.

The two traditions of *Advaita Vedanta* of Hindu sage *Sankara* and Zen Buddhist philosophy have many similar aspects. According to *Advaita* and *Zen* philosophies, reality is fundamentally unconditioned and non-dual in nature, and that realization of this ‘true nature’ of things is the aim and goal of human life. As a corollary to this, both traditions claim that our ordinary dualistic way of experiencing the world does not give us true or direct knowledge of ‘the nature of things’, as our experience of reality is somehow distorted or filtered by conditions and structures that we falsely identify with reality itself.¹⁹

Both *Advaita* and *Zen* claim that spiritual awakening does not involve ‘adding anything new’ to the practitioner’s experience. Both philosophies claim that there is nothing to be gained from spiritual practice. Nevertheless, both traditions claim that there is a fundamental non-dual realization as to the ‘nature of things’, *dhamma*. In this context, the *Advaita* and *Zen* experiential spiritual quests can be said to be similarly framed. In the non-dual practice traditions of *Advaita Vedanta* and *Zen Buddhism*, engagement with a spiritual practice represents an ongoing process of applying oneself to a form of inquiry. In this form of inquiry, fundamental dimensions of what it is to be a human being are claimed to be revealed. Deconstructive spiritual inquiry in both traditions targets the primary dualisms of subject and object, cause and effect, and linear conceptions of space and time.

The *Advaitin* believe that ‘nothing ever happens’. For them, *brahman* cannot be experienced by merging with one polarization of a dichotomous relationship. As the beginningless and endless non-dual emanation that is the substratum ‘between thought’, *brahman* admits of no shadings or aspects of differentiated oppositions. That is, *atman-brahman*-identity is not a realization of identity as opposed to difference, nor is it a merging with reality as opposed to appearance. For *Advaita*, *atman-brahman*-identity is ever present and ‘just is’.²⁰

Brahman is all-being with no relationship to the dichotomy of being and non-being. *Sunyata* of *Mahayana* Buddhism is empty non-being that is not dependent on the dichotomy of non-being and being. Both ‘ultimates’ are pointed out to students in the practice situation as being neither this nor that and both this and that. That is, *Brahman* and *sunyata* are not to be dualistically objectified as attainable. Zen practitioners report the ‘emptiness’ of things and *Advaita* practitioners report the ‘fullness’ of things; however, the experiential point that these insights reveal is that reality has no substantial existence. That is, reality cannot be reduced to any form of ontological objectification. The paradoxical ‘empty fullness’ of *brahman* or the ‘full emptiness’ of *sunyata* is experienced without contradiction. Deconstructive spiritual inquiry in both *Zen* and *Advaita* experientially ‘moves’ practitioners into this ‘space’ wherein the boundaries and barriers of conceptual thought and personal dualistic experiencing are felt to be lessened or undone and an already-present non-dual sense of ‘knowing’ is disclosed in the actual experiencing of the practitioner.

It is the aim of religion to lift us from our momentary meaningless existence to the significance and status of the eternal, to transform the chaos and confusion of life to that pure and immortal essence which is its ideal possibility. If the human mind so changes itself as to be perpetually in the glory of the divine light, if the human emotions transform themselves into the measure and movement of the divine bliss, if human action partakes of the creativity of the divine life, if the human life shares the purity of the divine essence, if only we can support this higher life, the long labour of the cosmic process will receive its crowning justification and the evolution of centuries unfold its profound significance. The divinizing of the life of man in the individual and the race is the dream of the great religions. It is the *moksha* of the Hindus, the nirvana of the Buddhists, the kingdom of heaven of the Christians.

Moksha is a spiritual realization. The Hindu *Dharma* says, Man does not live by bread alone, nor by his work, capital, ambition or power or relation to external nature. He lives or must live by his life of spirit. Moksha is self-emancipation, the fulfilment of the spirit in us in the heart of the eternal. This is what gives ultimate satisfaction, and all other activities are directed to the realization of this end.

Moksha can be apprehended through the practice of *yoga*. The practice of any one of the four *yogas* or disciplines, namely the *karma yoga*, *jnana yoga*, *raja yoga* and the

Bhakti yoga, can help us to realize moksha. Both *Advaita Vedanta* and *Bhakti* traditions emphasize the principle of non-duality (non- separation of individual and reality) and personified worship (god as love) respectively. One can overcome karma by realizing the self through a *nirvikalpa samadhi* and attain *mukti* (freedom) from rebirth. It is also possible to attain moksha through *bhakti* or love of the manifestations of *Shiva*, *Vishnu* or *Brahma*. If a person can attain *moksha* he can liberate himself from worldly sorrow and enjoy a state of high consciousness or supreme bliss. In this state he can transcend earthly phenomena and understand empirical reality such as the concept of time, space, matter, energy or *karma*. He can then see all these concepts as *maya* or illusion. The state of supreme bliss also leads to a state of *nirvana* where it is possible to destroy the ego or *nama-rupa* and reveal one's true identity. *Moksha* is therefore not a soteriological goal and cannot be equated to the concept of salvation as represented in Greek myths or Christian theology, but dissolution of the ego where even the final goal is annihilated. *Moksha* in Buddhism and Hinduism is not just a belief or a concept but a way of life.

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