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Category : [January/February 2001](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2001

INSIGHT

Free at Last!

Birth, death, rebirth...it may seem an endless cycle. But rest assured, there is a graduation from our classroom called Earth. It is

Having lived many lives, each soul eventually seeks release from mortality, experiences the Divine directly through Self Realization and ultimately attains liberation from the round of births and deaths. All Hindus know this to be their eventual goal, but the means of attainment and understanding of the ultimate state varies greatly. The point in evolution at which the individual earns release and exactly what happens afterwards is described differently in each of the Hindu denominations. Even within each sect there are distinct schools of thought. These are the subtle, profound and compelling perspectives we explore below.

The Hindu View of Liberation

The dawn of freedom from the cycle of reincarnation is called moksha (liberation), and one who has attained the state of liberation is called a jivanmukta (liberated soul). While some schools of Hinduism teach that liberation comes only upon death, most recognize the condition of jivanmukti, a state of liberation in which the spiritually advanced being continues to unfold its inherent perfection while in the embodied state. It is said of such a great one that "he died before he died,"

indicating the totally real, not merely symbolic, demise of the ego, or limited self-sense. Some schools hold the view that liberated beings may voluntarily return to the physical universe in order to help those who are as yet unliberated.

The Sanskrit word moksha derives from the root muk, which has many connotations: to loosen, to free, release, let loose, let go and thus also to spare, to let live, to allow to depart, to dispatch, to dismiss and even to relax, to spend, bestow, give away and to open. Philosophically, moksha means "release from worldly existence or transmigration; final or eternal emancipation." But moksha is not a state of extinction of the conscious being. Nor is it mere unconsciousness. Rather it is perfect freedom, an indescribable state of nondifferentiation, a proximity to, or a oneness with, the Divine. Moksha marks an end to the earthly sojourn, but it may also be understood as a beginning, not unlike graduation from university. Apavarga and kaivalya are other apt terms for this ineffable condition of perfect detachment, freedom and oneness.

Hinduism is a pluralistic tradition. On any given subject it offers a variety of views that reflect different human temperaments and different levels of emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual development. So, too, on the subject of liberation, various learned opinions exist. Since liberation involves transcending time and space, and yet is a state that can be achieved while in a body, it defies precise definition. For this reason, some have argued that different views of liberation simply reflect the built-in limitations of language and reason.

Many Paths

The Vedas themselves present a number of approaches to liberation. Some of these are agnostic; others involve various monistic and theistic views. The main classical text on Self Realization within the Vedanta tradition, the Brahma Sutra of Badarayana, mentions a number of then current views: that upon liberation the soul (jiva) attains nondifference from Brahman (IV.4.4); that it gains the attributes of Brahman (IV.4.5); that it exists only as pure consciousness (IV.4.6); that even though it is pure consciousness from the relative standpoint, it can still gain the attributes of Brahman (IV.4.7); that through pure will alone it can gain whatever it wishes (IV.4.8); that it transcends any body or mind (IV.4.10); that it possesses a divine body and mind (IV.4.11); and that it attains all powers except creatorship, which belongs to Ishvara alone (IV.4.17). Generally, the view that the soul attains the Absolute only is more represented by the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, while the Chandogya Upanishad mentions liberation along with the attainment of lordly powers. Most later ideas of moksha are variations on these same Vedic views.

At one end of this metaphysical spectrum are the jnanis who follow the yoga of knowledge and who ascribe to the view that the Ultimate Reality is formless and unqualified (nirguna). At the other end are the bhaktas who follow the yoga of devotion and commonly believe that the individual being (jiva) remains in communion with its beloved (Bhagavan). Thus, devotees believe that they will come to inhabit the divine realm, or loka, of their chosen Deity, Siva, Vishnu, Kali, etc. Each metaphysical view has given rise to a distinct practical approach to reaching Oneness and Liberation.

Later Advaita Vedantins, such as Shankaracharya, spoke of two types of liberation. The first is complete or direct liberation, which they regarded as the highest state. The second is a gradual liberation that occurs wherein the individual being goes, after death, first to the heaven of Brahma and then gains liberation from there without having to return to the physical world.

Ramana Maharshi, the great sage of South India, observed that three types of liberation are mentioned in Hinduism: without form, with form, and both with and without form. He considered true liberation as transcending all such concepts (Saddarsana 42).

All schools are agreed that liberation is the ultimate fulfilment of human life, whose purpose is spiritual growth, not mere worldly enjoyment (bhoga). Having lived many lives and having learned many lessons, each conscious being seeks release from mortality, which then leads to glimpses of our divine origin and finally Self Realization. This consists in discovering our true nature, beyond body and mind, our identity in the incomprehensibly vast ultimate Being. Upon this discovery, we are released from the round of births and deaths and realize eternal freedom, untold bliss and supreme consciousness.

A Natha Saivite View of Realization and Liberation

To attain liberation while living, the realization of the Self has to be brought through into every aspect of life, every atom of one's body. This occurs after many experiences of nirvikalpa samadhi. Through harnessing the power of sadhana and tapas,

the adept advances his or her evolution. Only great tapasvins achieve jivanmukti, for one must be proficient in brahmacharya, yoga, pranayama and the varied sadhanas. It is a grace made possible by guidance of a living satguru and attained by single-minded and strong-willed discipline, worship, detachment and purification.

Thus, it is possible to realize the Self--as in nirvikalpa samadhi--and still not reach the emancipated state. If this happens, the being reincarnates in the physical world after death and in his new body has the opportunity to build upon past virtues and realizations until finally becoming a jivanmukta in that or a future birth.

What distinguishes the mukta from the nonliberated individual is his total freedom from all selfishness and attachments, his permanent abidance in the all-pervading Divine Presence, his lucid, witnessing consciousness and his wisdom (jnana), revealed in spontaneous utterances.

Even after attaining perfect liberation, a being may, after passing into the inner worlds, consciously choose to be reborn to help others on the path. Such a one is called an upadeshi--exemplified by the benevolent satguru--as distinguished from a nirvani, or silent ascetic who abides at the pinnacle of consciousness, whether in this world or the next, shunning all worldly involvement.

The Nature of Soul and God

The concept of moksha for every Hindu school of thought

is informed and modified by its understanding of the individual and its relationship to God. Most Hindus believe that after release from birth and death the innermost being will exist in the higher regions of the subtle worlds, where the Deities and spiritually mature beings abide. Some schools contend that the soul continues to evolve in these realms until it attains perfect union and merger with God. Others teach that the highest end is to abide eternally and separately in God's glorious presence. Four distinct views, reflected in the primary Hindu denominations, are explored below.

Smarta Hinduism

Smartism (the teaching following smriti, or tradition) is an ancient brahmanical tradition reformed by Adi Shankara in the ninth century. This liberal Hindu path, which revolves around the worship of six fundamental forms of the Divine, is monistic, nonsectarian, meditative and philosophical. Ishvara and the human being are in reality the singular absolute Brahman. Within maya, the soul and Ishvara appear as two. Jnana, spiritual wisdom, dispels that illusion.

Most Smartas believe that moksha is achieved through jnana yoga alone. This approach is defined as an intellectual and meditative but non-kundalini yoga path. Yet, many Advaitins also recognize the kundalini as the power of consciousness. Ramana Maharshi and Swami Shivananda of Rishikesh did, and Shankara wrote on tantra and kundalini as in the Saundarya-Lahiri. Guided by a realized guru and avowed to the unreality of the world, the initiate meditates on himself as Brahman to break through the illusion of maya. The ultimate goal of Smartas is to realize oneself as Brahman, the Absolute and only Reality. For this, one must conquer the state of

avidya, ignorance, which causes the world to appear as real.

For the realized being, jivanmukta, all illusion has vanished, even as he lives out life in the physical body. If the sun were cold or the moon hot or fire burned downward, he would show no wonder. The jivanmukta teaches, blesses and sets an example for the welfare of the world. At death, his inner and outer bodies are extinguished. Brahman alone exists and he is That forever, all in All.

For Smartism, liberation depends on spiritual insight (jnana). It does not come from recitation of hymns, sacrificial worship or a hundred fasts. The human being is liberated not by effort, not by yogic practices, not by any self-transformation, but only by the knowledge gained from scripture and self-reflection that at its core the being is in fact Brahman. However, all such practices do help purify the body and mind and create the aptitude (adhikara) without which jnana remains mere theory or fantasy. Jnana yoga's progressive stages are scriptural study (shravana), reflection (manana) and sustained meditation (nididhyasana or dhyana). Practitioners may also choose from three other nonsuccessive paths in order to cultivate devotion, accrue good karma, and purify the mind. These are bhakti yoga, karma yoga and raja yoga, which some believe can also bring enlightenment, as they lead to jnana.

Scripture teaches that "for the great-souled, the surest way to liberation is the conviction that 'I am Brahman' " (Shukla Yajur Veda, Paingala Upanishad 4.19). Sri Jayendra Saraswati of Kanchi Peedam, Tamil Nadu, India, affirms, "That state where one transcends all feelings is liberation. Nothing affects this

state of being. You may call it transcendental bliss, purified intuition that enables one to see the Supreme as one's own Self. One attains to Brahman, utterly liberated."

Vaishnava Hinduism

The primary goal of Vaishnavites is videhamukti, disembodied liberation, attainable only after death when the "small self" realizes union with God Vishnu's infinite body as a part of Him, yet maintains its pure individual personality. God's transcendental Being is a celestial form residing in the city of Vaikuntha, the home of all eternal values and perfection, where the inner being joins Him when liberated. Beings, however, do not share in God's all-pervasiveness or power to create.

Most Vaishnavites believe that dharma is the performance of various devotional disciplines (bhakti sadhanas), and that the human being can communicate with and receive the grace of Lord Vishnu, who manifests through the temple Deity, or icon. The paths of karma yoga and jnana yoga are thought to lead to bhakti yoga. Through total self-surrender, called prapatti, to Lord Vishnu, one attains liberation from the world of change (samsara). Vaishnavites consider the moksha of the Advaita philosophies a lesser attainment, extolling instead the bliss of eternal devotion. There are differing categories of souls that attain to four different levels of permanent release: salokya, or "sharing the world" of God; samipya, or "nearness" to God; sarupya, or "likeness" to God; and sayujya, or "union" with God. Jivanmukti exists only in the case of great souls who leave their place in the divine abode to take a human birth for the benefit of others and return to God as soon as their task is done.

There is one school of Vaishnavism, founded by Vallabhacharya, which takes an entirely different view of moksha. It teaches that upon liberation the soul, through its insight into truth revealed by virtue of perfect devotion, recovers divine qualities suppressed previously and becomes one with God, in identical essence, though the soul remains a part, and God the whole. This relationship is described by the analogy of sparks issuing from a fire.

Swami Prakashanand Saraswati of the International Society of Divine Love, Texas, offers a Vaishnava view, "Liberation from maya and the karmas is only possible after the divine vision of God. Thus, sincere longing for His vision is the only way to receive His grace and liberation."

Shakta Hinduism

Shaktas believe that the soul is one with the Divine. Emphasis is given to the feminine aspect of the ultimate reality--Shakti. The Divine Mother or Goddess Power, Shakti, is the mediatrix bestowing this advaitic moksha on those who worship Her. Moksha is complete identification with the transcendental Divine, which is achieved when the kundalini shakti--the individuated form of the divine power--is raised through the sushumna current of the spine to the top of the head where it merges with Siva.

The spiritual practices in Shaktism, which is also known as tantra or tantrism, are similar to those in Saivism, though there is more emphasis in Shaktism on God's power as opposed to mere Being or Consciousness. Shakta practices include visualization and rituals involving mantras, hand gestures

(mudras), and geometric designs (yantras). The body is viewed as a temple of the Divine, and thus there are also numerous prescribed techniques for purifying and transforming the body. Philosophically, Shaktism's yogic world view embraces all opposites: male-female, absolute-relative, pleasure-pain, cause-effect, mind-body. Shamanistic Shaktism employs magic, trance mediumship, firewalking and animal sacrifice for healing, fertility, prophecy and power. In "left-hand" tantric circles an antinomianism is evident, which seeks to transcend traditional moral codes.

The state of jivanmukti in Shaktism is called kulachara or "the divine way of life," which is attained through sadhana and grace. The liberated soul is known as a kaula-siddha, to whom wood and gold, life and death are the same. The kaula-siddha can move about in the world at will, even returning to earthly duties such as kingship, yet remaining liberated from rebirth, as his actions can no longer bind him.

The Goddess, Devi, gives both mukti and bhukti--liberation and worldly enjoyment. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan explained, "The jiva under the influence of maya looks upon itself as an independent agent and enjoyer until release is gained. Knowledge of Shakti is the road to salvation, which is dissolution in the bliss effulgence of the Supreme." Shri Shri Shivaratnapuri Swami of Kailas Ashram, Bangalore, India, declares, "My message to mankind is right thought, right living and unremitting devotion to the Divine Mother. Faith is the most important thing that you should cultivate. By faith does one obtain knowledge."

Saiva Hinduism

The path for Saivites is divided into four progressive stages of belief and practice called charya, kriya, yoga and jnana. The soul evolves through karma and reincarnation from the instinctive-intellectual sphere into virtuous and moral living, then into temple worship and devotion, followed by internalized worship or yoga and its meditative disciplines. Union with God, Siva, comes through the grace of the satguru and culminates in the soul's maturity in the state of jnana, or wisdom. Saivism values both bhakti and yoga, devotional and contemplative sadhanas.

Moksha is defined differently in Saivism's six schools. 1) Pashupata Saivism emphasizes Siva as supreme cause and personal ruler of the soul and world. It teaches that the liberated soul retains its individuality in a state of complete union with Siva. 2) Vira Saivism holds that after liberation the soul experiences a true union and identity of Siva and soul, called Linga and anga. The soul ultimately merges in a state of Shunya, or Nothingness, which is not an empty void. 3) Kashmir Shaivism teaches that liberation comes through a sustained recognition, called pratyabhijna, of one's true Self as nothing but Siva. After liberation, the soul has no merger in God, as God and soul are eternally nondifferent. 4) In Gorakhnath Saivism, or Siddha Siddhanta, moksha leads to a complete sameness of Siva and soul, described as "bubbles arising and returning to water." 5) In Siva Advaita, liberation leads to the "akasha within the heart." Upon death, the soul goes to Siva along the path of the Gods, continuing to exist on the spiritual plane, enjoying the bliss of knowing all as Siva, and attaining all powers except creation. This is a similar view to the Upanishads like the Chandogya and the Brahma Sutras.

The sixth, Saiva Siddhanta, has two subsects. Meykandar's pluralistic realism teaches that God, soul and world are eternally coexistent. Liberation leads to a state of oneness with Siva in which the soul retains its individuality, like salt added to water.

Tirumular's monistic theism, or Advaita Ishvaravada, the older of the two schools, holds that evolution continues after earthly births until jiva becomes Siva; the soul merges in perfect oneness with God, like a drop of water returning to the sea. Scriptures teach, "Having realized the Self, the rishis, perfected souls, satisfied with their knowledge, passion-free, tranquil--those wise beings, having attained the Omnipresent on all sides--enter into the All itself (Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.5)." The primary goal of this form of monistic Saiva Siddhanta is realizing one's identity with God Siva, in perfect union and nondifferentiation. This is termed nirvikalpa samadhi, Self Realization, and may be attained in this life, granting moksha, permanent liberation from the cycles of birth and death. A secondary goal is savikalpa samadhi, the realization of Satchidananda, a unitive experience within superconsciousness in which perfect Truth, Consciousness and Bliss are known.

Conclusion, from the Monistic Saiva View

According to the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy of South India, to reach emancipation, beyond all pleasure and pain, all difference and decay, the being must successively remove the three fetters: karma, "the power of cause and effect, action and reaction;" maya, "the power of manifestation;" and anava, "the power of egoity or veil of duality." Once freed by God's grace from these bonds (which do not cease to exist

altogether, but no longer have the power to bind), the being is in the permanent state of sahaja samadhi, or "natural, spontaneous ecstasy," the living illumination called jivanmukti. This is the realization of the timeless, spaceless and formless Reality beyond all change or diversity. Simultaneously it is the realization that all forms, whether internal or external, are also aspects of this Ultimate Reality.

Moksha does not mean death, as some misunderstand it. It means freedom from rebirth, before or at the point of death, after which souls continue evolving in the inner worlds, the Antarloka and Sivaloka, and finally merge with Lord Siva as does river water when returning to the ocean. Moksha comes when all earthly karmas have been fully resolved. Finally, at the end of each soul's evolution comes vishvagrasi, total absorption in Siva. The Vedas promise, "If here one is able to realize Him before the death of the body, he will be liberated from the bondage of the world."

All embodied souls--whatever be their faith or convictions, Hindu or not--are destined to achieve moksha, but not necessarily in this life. Hindus know this and do not delude themselves that this life is the last. Old souls renounce worldly ambitions and take up sannyasa, renunciation, in quest of Self Realization even at a young age. Younger souls desire to seek lessons from the experiences of worldly life, which is rewarded by many, many births on Earth. In between, souls seek to fulfil their dharma while resolving karma and accruing merit through good deeds. After moksha has been attained--and it is an attainment resulting from much sadhana, self-reflection and realization--subtle karmas are made and swiftly resolved, like writing on water. "The Self cannot be attained by the weak, nor

by the careless, nor through aimless disciplines. But if one who knows strives by right means, his soul enters the abode of God (Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.4)."

Adapted from Merging With Siva, Hinduism's
Contemporary Metaphysics by Himalayan Academy
Publications,

107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii 96746 USA

tel: (usa only) 800.890.1008;

tel: (outside usa) 808.240.3107;

fax: 808.822.3152;

e-mail: books@hindu.org;

website: www.himalayanacademy.com/books/