
UNIT 7 DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO MOKṢA*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, you are expected to know the essential concepts regarding *Mokṣa* and different approaches to it, such as:

- The meaning of the term ‘*Mokṣa*’ and its place in Indian Philosophy
- The teleological basis of *Mokṣa* in Indian Philosophy
- The Law of *Karma* and Rebirth
- Different views of Indian philosophical schools on *Mokṣa*
- The traditional ways of *Mokṣa*- *Jñāna*, *Karma*, *Bhakti*, and *Rāja Yoga*

* Mr. Ajay Jaiswal, Ph D Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This unit is taken from BPYC-131 (Unit 6, Block 2).

- *Mokṣa* as the ethical basis of Indian Thought.
- *Samanvaya yoga*

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian philosophical tradition consists of two parallel streams, Vedic and non-Vedic, also known as *āstikas* and *nāstikas* system respectively. Although they disagree on many metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical issues, yet axiologically, all of them (except Cārvāka) aim at some idea of emancipation, liberation, or freedom. We can call it *Mokṣa*- the *Summum Bonum* or the Ultimate Good of human life as the final *Puruṣārtha* (the duties of human).

Etymologically, *Mokṣa* comes from the Sanskrit root ‘much’ which means ‘to set free’. It appears in *Upaniṣads* in the form of ‘*mucyate*’ or ‘*vimuktaye*’. Freedom here can be understood in at least three different ways, which are complementary and supplementary to each other. Aesthetically, *Mokṣa* means freedom from suffering (*dukha*); epistemologically, it is freedom from transcendental ignorance (*avidyā*); and in the eschatological sense, it denotes freedom from the cycle of the law of *Karma* and rebirth. In Indian philosophical parlance, there are other concepts also for *Mokṣa* (albeit slight variations) such as *vimukti* (*sadeha and videha*), *mukti*, *apavarga*, *niḥsreyasa*, *parama gati*, *brahmānubhava*, *nirvāna*, *arhatva*, etc. Various philosophical schools have interpreted them differently and assigned various approaches to it. In this unit, our aim is to understand these interpretations and various approaches to *Mokṣa* along with its philosophical presuppositions.

7.2 AN OVERVIEW

Indian philosophy has a soteriological basis. Each individual is impelled for actions with a purpose. Even fools do not engage in any action without any purpose. Hence, be it noble, ignoble, or even God, they all have some teleological aim. That ultimate aim is *sukha* or *ānanda*. Negatively, it denotes cessation of suffering. Now, Cārvākas held that only *sukha* is possible, i.e., transient pleasure and often mixed with pain. There is no possibility of everlasting pleasure or cessation of suffering until one is alive. However, other schools conceived this possibility. Brahmanic thought declared it to be *Mokṣa* where there is realization of Brahman. Brahman itself is of the nature of *sat chit and ānanda*, i.e., everlasting

conscious bliss. Whereas Buddhist thought considers the Ultimate state to be as devoid of all suffering and ignorance. They termed this teleological goal as Nirvana.

Again, we can observe that Indian philosophical schools have a positive approach towards life. They might begin with pessimism, yet they ultimately end with a beatific ideal like *Mokṣa*. Even *Cārvāka*, the Indian materialist school, aims at deriving more and more pleasure out of life and that itself (*kāma*) is *Mokṣa* (the final aim) for them. However, they postulate no rebirth; hence they present an egoistic or individualistic hedonism- the view that aims at maximizing individual pleasures. Some Philosophical schools think that this kind of approach leaves morality in danger; hence, other Indian philosophical schools considered *Mokṣa* not as individual centric hedonism but as ultimate state or blissful experience, where there is a room for the law of *Karma* and subsequent morality. Nevertheless, *Mokṣa* enjoys the status of the final goal of human life, i.e., it serves as the teleological foundation of Indian ethics and philosophy. This teleology (i.e., final aim) of *Mokṣa* is universally acknowledged in Indian philosophy (except *Cārvāka*) either positively where there is presence of infinite bliss or negatively, the cessation of all suffering. Hence, spiritual teleology and blissful experience is the foundation of the concept of *Mokṣa*.

Another key presupposition of the concept of *Mokṣa* is the Law of *Karma*. Again, in an eschatological sense, *Mokṣa* means liberation from the cycle of rebirth and the law of *Karma*. It signifies total shredding of karmic impressions on an individual self. Further, the law of *Karma*, in a nutshell, implies the law of causation in the sphere of human conduct or morality. Good actions produce good results; and bad ones produce evil results. The *Karmas* are of three types-

- 1- Sañchita *Karma*- Actions which are stored and yet not fructified.
- 2- Prārabdha *Karma*- Past actions which have started giving their fruits.
- 3- Sañchiyamana *Karma*- Present actions which will have their fruits either immediately or in future.

These *Karmas* may produce ephemeral pleasures. But they are often mixed with pain and suffering. Again, there are three kinds of sufferings-

- 1- Ādhyatmika – physical and mental suffering generated by oneself.
- 2- Ādhibhautika – suffering given by other living beings.

3- Ādhidaivika – suffering given by natural forces, such as during an earthquake.

An individual is caught up in the chain of *Karmas* and rebirth and thus suffers extensively. All the schools of Indian philosophy, both *āstikass* and *nāstikas*, except *Cārvāka*, unanimously agreed on the idea of Law of *Karma* and rebirth as the source of human suffering and *Mokṣa* as the antidote to this suffering.

Check Your Progress I

Note - a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What is *Mokṣa*?

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2. What is the philosophical background of the concept of *Mokṣa*?

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7.3 Reflections on the Core Issues/Concepts

Once we understand the teleological and blissful experiential basis of *Mokṣa*, the next important challenge a student of philosophy has to face is to comprehend the various interpretations of the concept of *Mokṣa* and its allied concepts given by Indian philosophical schools and then to frame a picture showing the major approaches to *Mokṣa*. In this section, we shall try to comprehend this core philosophical issue under the two broad headings- vedic and non-vedic approaches to define the concept of *Mokṣa* as follows-

A) Vedic Approaches to define Mokṣa-

Vedas, the eternal and divine source of Knowledge, come in four parts- Mantra, Brahman, Aranyaka, and *Upaniṣads*. Generally, it begins with naturalistic hymns of prayer and culminates in the philosophical speculation of *Upaniṣads*. The concept of *Mokṣa* is also scattered in entire *Vedas*, however, it acquired its philosophical basis in *Upaniṣads* only. *Upaniṣads* are full of abstract esoteric principles and beyond the comprehension of laymen. Therefore, there are six upangas (limbs) of *Vedas* in the form of six Darśanas or Indian philosophical schools. They claim to present the best possible synoptic view of *Vedas* in their different contexts. Yet, all of them point towards the Vedic ideal of *Mokṣa*. Let us understand their views as follows-

1. Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika

Sage Gautama's *Nyāya Sūtra*, the main text of Nyāya Darśana, termed the ideal of *Mokṣa* as *niḥśreyasa* and *apavarga*. The text claims in its first aphorism that the knowledge of sixteen categories (concepts) propounded by Nyāya can result in *niḥśreyasa*. Hence, the philosophical ignorance is the cause of bondage. From ignorance comes bad *Karma*, which in turn results in pain and rebirth. The reverse of this order with the help of right knowledge (*tattva Jñāna*) leads to *apavarga*.

Sage Kaṇāda's *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*, the main text of Vaiśeṣika Darśana, also accepts *niḥśreyasa* as *Mokṣa* where there is a cessation of all suffering by virtue of right knowledge. Furthermore, Kaṇāda situated *niḥśreyasa* as the *Puruṣārtha* under the scheme of *abhyudaya* and *niḥśreyasa*. He calls it *dharma* which is defined as- that which leads to *abhyudaya* and *niḥśreyasa*. *Abhyudaya* is the material and social progress; and *niḥśreyasa* is the spiritual growth or *Mokṣa*. Here two points require mention. First is regarding the right order- as the vedic contention is that without proper material and social uplift it is useless to think about *Mokṣa*. Second is regarding the limitation- as one must not completely engage in material welfare, which may involve immoral means. Immoral or excessive material wealth will not lead to *niḥśreyasa*. Hence, both are complementary and supplementary to each other and they together constitute *Dharma*.

2- Sāṅkhya- Yoga

Sāṅkhya Sūtra of Sage Kapila describes *Mokṣa* negatively as the permanent cessation of *trividha dukha* (*Ādhyatmika*, *Ādhibhautika*, *Ādhidaivika*). Other means have the potential to reduce suffering temporarily. It is only *Mokṣa* which can guarantee permanent freedom from

the three types of sufferings. Again, the root cause of bondage is ignorance. Here, ignorance is explained as misapprehension, not being able to separate consciousness (puruṣa) from the unconscious principle (*prakṛiti*) of the Universe. When Puruṣa is discriminated from *Prakṛiti* in its entirety, *Mokṣa* is attained. Therefore, it is also called *Kaivalya* (being alone).

Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali improves on the psychological aspect of attaining *Mokṣa*. Accordingly, it provides a method of training mind and body to attain tranquility and *Kaivalya*. *Yoga* describes five kinds of scattered mental states towards objects as *citta vṛitti*. When these *vṛitti* are controlled by the eightfold path of *yoga*, it leads to Samadhi or the supreme *yoga*. Hence, *yoga* is the cessation of mental modifications (*citta vṛitti*); and in its purified stages, *Kaivalya* is attained.

3- Mīmāṃsā

The Mīmāṃsā School (founded by Mahariṣi Jaimini) did not recognize *Mokṣa* as an ultimate goal of life until the arrival of Kumāril. In fact, Mīmāṃsā focused on the ritualistic aspects of *Vedas* (mainly Mantras and Brāhmaṇa). *Jaimini Sūtra* stated that Vedic injunctions (yajña) are the hallmark of Dharma. Vedic rituals can guarantee the bliss of heavenly states which is regarded as *Mokṣa*.

4- Vedānta

The term Vedānta has at least three interrelated interpretations. First, it denotes the teachings of *Upaniṣads* which come at the end (anta) of *Vedas*, therefore Vedānta. Second, *Upaniṣads* contain the essence of Vedic teachings, hence Vedānta. Third, in the climax *Upaniṣadic* teachings, there is an end (anta) of knowing (vid) hence Vedānta. The concept of *Mokṣa* has been widely debated between two Vedāntin namely; Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Following is the essence of their views-

Śaṅkara

Śaṅkara propounded the theory of Advaita (non-duality) which, in a nutshell, states Ultimate Truth to be subject-object less state where there is unity of Ātmān and Brahman. His motto was - *Brahma satyam, jagat mithyā, jivo bramaiva napaṛḥ*, i.e., Brahman is the only real Being; the world is unreal (ephemeral) as it passes constantly into becoming; and at the Ultimate level there is no distinction between *jīva* and Brahman. This realization of unreality of individual ego (*jīva*) and its complete merging in the Absolute Brahman is the realization

of *Mokṣa*. This (mukti) can happen within the body (sadeha) or after death (videha). The realization is ultimately a product of mystical knowledge (*Jñāna*) where there is dissolution of the knower and the known. Hence, the state of *Mokṣa* is devoid of any empirical attribute and distinctions. Positively, there can be only Sat Cit Ananda i.e., a mystical eternal state of bliss.

Rāmānuja

Rāmānuja and other thinkers like Madhva and Vallabha opined that the reality of the world and the distinction of Brahman and *jīva* have to be accepted in some form otherwise the question of bondage and liberation becomes futile. Rāmānuja, hence, propounded viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-duality) and his conception of *Mokṣa* is eternal companionship with the Lord Vishnu- the saḡuṇa form of Brahman. The complete Nirguṇa Brahman is philosophically unimaginable. Although there are different stages in *Mokṣa*, yet *jīva* does not become identical with Brahman or Viṣṇu. There essentially remains a gap between the two so that there is a possibility of eternal divine play.

B) Non-Vedic Approachs to define Mokṣa-

The concept of *Mokṣa* has also been explained greatly even by non-vedic (*nāstikas*) schools of Indian philosophy. The view of Buddhism and Jainism can be synoptically presented as –

1- Buddhism

Buddhist philosophy can be encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths preached by Buddha as follows-

- i) Dukkha- There is suffering in the world.
- ii) Dukkha Samudāya- There is a cause of suffering.
- iii) Dukkha Nirodha Mārga- There is a way for cessation of suffering (when the cause is removed).
- iv) Nirodha- There is a state devoid of all suffering- the state of Nirvana.

Contrary to a general allegation of pessimism against Buddhism, we can see that though Buddhism begins with pessimism yet it ends with the hope of Nirvana. The state of Nirvāna

is negatively described as the cessation or extinction of all feelings. It is the complete dissolution of individual ātmā (*nairātmyavāda*). Although, Buddha did not render any positive descriptions regarding Nirvāna, as he remained silent; yet in the latter phases of Buddhism (especially in *Vijñānavada*) we find some positive descriptions also in terms of mystical Consciousness.

2- Jainism

The view of Jainism is that an individual ātman remains in suffering because of karmic bonds. The soul's intrinsic nature of infinite bliss (*ananta sukha*) is veiled by wrong knowledge and wrong conduct. Hence, *Mokṣa* is the state where all the *Karmas* are destroyed and the soul shines in its pristine purity. The state is also called *jinatva* or *arhatva*. Jaina texts have mentioned three-fold path of liberation as follows-

- i) *Samyaka Darśana*- Right View
- ii) *Samyaka Jñāna*- Right Knowledge
- iii) *Samyaka Caritra*- Right Conduct

The Approaches to attain Mokṣa

According to the scriptures, generally there are four ways/approaches to attain *Mokṣa* as follows-

1- Karma Marga

This is the path of right actions which unfolds the possibility of *Mokṣa* for any aspirant. Mīmāṃsakas were the staunch proponents of *Karma mārga* based on the Vedic injunctions (*yajña*). Apart from Mimamsakas, the path of right action acquired great significance in *Gīta*, Buddhist and Jainist thoughts also. For *Gīta*, right action means action without desire of its fruits (*Niṣkāma Karma*). Desire for fruits leads a person to bondage. Renunciation of desire for fruits leads to eternal peace, the *Mokṣa*. Therefore, *Gīta* asks a *Karmayogin* to be detached from the consequences of any performed action and ought to perform his/her duty for duty's sake.

2- Bhakti Mārga

It is the path of devotion. It projects the Ultimate Reality as a benevolent and merciful God and surrenders to that Absolute principle with utmost love that can guarantee *Mokṣa*. *Bhakti mārḡa* involves total surrender, selfless action, sense of service and worshipping God. Schools like Vaiṣṇavism are the pioneer of *Bhakti mārḡa*.

3- Jñāna Mārḡa

It is the path of Knowledge. Knowledge here means the mystical knowledge of the union of individual self and the Absolute Self (*Aham Brahmāsmi*). Here, this particular knowledge becomes the instrumental cause of liberation. Śāṅkara and Śāṅkhya are the major proponents of *Jñāna Mārḡa*.

4- Rāja Yoga

It is the path of meditation, where the mind with its various modifications or fluctuations are controlled and finally merged in the Absolute state of Samādhi. *Yoga* philosophy's *aṣṭāṅga mārḡa* is a great compendium of the path of mediation. Apart from that we also find the immense importance of mediation for *Mokṣa* in Buddhism and Jainism. In the modern Indian era, it was reinterpreted by saints like Vivekananda and Ramaṇa Maharṣi.

7.4 PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE

Philosophical challenges and responses to the concept of *Mokṣa* can be comprehended in three different ways. The first is regarding the possibility of *Mokṣa*. The general human predicament is that of suffering and grief mixed with transient pleasures; and it ends in death. The moot question is – is there any possibility of immortality with the complete cessation of suffering or positively with abundance of bliss? In other words, is there any possibility of *Mokṣa*? The Cārvākas' response is that there is no possibility of *Mokṣa*. Permanent cessation of suffering or permanent presence of bliss is an illusion. On the other hand, non-Cārvāka philosophers (vedic and non-vedic) both accepted the possibility of *Mokṣa* either negatively or positively.

The second problem is regarding the various interpretations and nature of *Mokṣa*. Unanimously, it has been grounded in the law of *Karma* and liberation from the cycle of rebirth. However, schools differ regarding the nature of *Mokṣa*, the role of God and terminologies used for *Mokṣa*.

Thirdly, it is a great challenge to comprehend the ways or approaches to attain *Mokṣa*. We have already noted the four general ways of approaching *Mokṣa*. Each of them emphasize on a particular aspect of human psychology. Yet, one is required to bring a synthesis of the various approaches. Such an approach can be termed as *Samanvaya yoga* which was advocated by *Bhagavad Gīta*. *Samanvaya Yoga* emphasizes that right knowledge, right action, and right devotion- they all are vital along with mindfulness to attain *Mokṣa*.

Check Your Progress

Note - a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. Summarize the various concepts of *Mokṣa* advocated in Vaidic Schools.

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2. Write a short note on various approaches/ways of *Mokṣa*.

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7.5 LET US SUM UP

To sum up, we can derive the following philosophical points from our discussion above of the concept and approaches to *Mokṣa*-

1- The idea of *Mokṣa* has a teleological and hedonist basis- as a hedonistic teleology human psychology is aimed to maximize happiness and minimize pain.

2- The moot question is – is there any possibility of *Mokṣa* i.e. permanent cessation of suffering or eternal presence of bliss? The response comes in two ways- *Cārvāka* denies the possibility of *Mokṣa* and non-*Cārvākas* accept the possibility of such a state of *Mokṣa*.

3- There are many interpretations of the term *Mokṣa* along with shared terminologies such as *mukti*, *vimukti*, *kaivalya*, *nirvāna*, *arahatva*, etc. However, all of them describe *Mokṣa* either positively or negatively.

4- Finally, there are generally four ways or approaches of *Mokṣa*- *Karma*, *Bhakti*, *Jñāna*, and *Rāja yoga*. They all emphasize the vitality of various aspects (causes) of *Mokṣa*. Yet, many have considered all of them to be complementary and supplementary to each other, and hence present a synthesized approach to *Mokṣa*, i.e., *Samanvaya Yoga*.

7.6 KEY WORDS

Abhyudaya : The worldly upliftment.

Āstika : Believing in the authority of *Vedas*. Conversely, *nāstikas* do not believe in the authority of *Vedas*.

Avidyā : The transcendental ignorance or the prime cause of bondage.

Hedonism : The ethical view that aims at maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.

Mokṣa: The state of psychological, epistemological, and eschatological freedom from sufferings, the metaphysical ignorance, and the cycle of *Karma* and rebirth.

Niḥśreyasa : The final *Puruṣārtha*, i.e., *Mokṣa*

Nirguṇa Brahman : It denotes attributeless or formless aspects of Ultimate Reality. It can be contrasted with the creative aspect of Brahman which is saguna Brahman.

Puruṣārtha : The four aims of human life- *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *Mokṣa*.

Sadeha Mukti : The state of *Mokṣa* within the body. Conversely, *Videha Mukti* denotes *Mokṣa* after death.

Teleology : The view that everything is driven by a final purpose.

Vedānta : It represents the teaching based on prasthantrayi, the three great sources (texts), namely, *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagvada Gīta*, and *Brahmasūtra*.

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7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1) The term *Mokṣa* is derived from the root word- ‘muc’ or ‘mucyate’ which means to set free or liberate. It appears first in *Upaniṣads*, e.g., *sā vidyā yā vimuktaye* (knowledge is that which liberates). Epistemologically, it means freedom from ignorance; and eschatologically, it means the liberation from the cycle of birth and death and the law of *Karma*. In Indian philosophy, there are other similar terms denoting the state of *Mokṣa* such as *mukti*, *vimukti*, *apvarga*, *niḥśreyasa*, *nirvāṇa*, *paramānanda*, etc.

2) The concept of *Mokṣa* is grounded on teleology and the possibility of blissful experience or cessation of all kinds of pain. From the term teleology, we understand that everything is purpose (telos) driven. Further, one can ask what could be that one final purpose (final good)? The answers are given by Indian sages in terms of ‘happiness’ or ‘blissful experience’. The moot question regarding *Mokṣa* is that is there any possibility of attaining eternal happiness (*ānanda*) or a permanent cessation of suffering? Indian philosophy philosophical schools (except *Cārvāka*) have positively responded to this question and thus, we have different concepts and approaches to the ideal of *Mokṣa*.

Check Your Progress II

1) Vedic philosophical schools are known as *āstikas* systems. They are six in number- *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mīmāṃsā*, and *Vedānta*. They all conceive of a state similar to *Mokṣa*. For Nyaya-Vaisheshika it is embedded as the fourth and final *Puruṣārtha* (the goals of human life). For them, it depends on the right knowledge of certain metaphysical categories (*padārtha*). For Sāṅkhya, *Mokṣa* is the state of *Kaivalya*, i.e., the aloneness of Puruṣa (Consciousness) from *Prakṛiti* (non-consciousness) elements of the Universe. The Yogic approach to *Mokṣa* is also centered on the realization of Puruṣa as *Kaivalya*, but it follows a rigorous training of mind and body control along with strict moral constraints. For Mīmāṃsakas, *Mokṣa* is granted by Dharma, i.e., following the Vedic rituals. For them the attainment of Svarga through yajña should be the criterion of Dharma. For Vedānta philosophers like Śaṅkara, the absolute realization of non-duality of Ātman and Brahman is the state of *Mokṣa*. For theistic Vedantists, like Rāmānujuna, devotion and selfless surrender to a Saguṇa Brahman (personified God) is the key to attain *Mokṣa*. Further, for them, *Mokṣa* is not the absolute merging of *jīva* with Brahman. There always remains a gap making room for beatific sensations with the Divine.

2) There are various approaches depicted by Indian philosophical schools. Generally, they can be classified in four categories. First is *Karma* marga, which says that right/moral actions play a crucial role in attaining *Mokṣa*. Further, *Gīta* also advocated the selfless performance of duties (*niṣkāma Karma*) to attain *Mokṣa*. Second is the *Bhakti* marga, which emphasizes the powerful role of divine grace (*kripa*) and help rendered by a personal God (e.g., Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa). This grace is attained when a bhakta completely surrenders (*prapatti*) to God. Thirdly, *Jñāna* marga, emphasizes on the role of Knowledge as the key factor in attaining *Mokṣa*. It is ignorance which is the cause of bondage; hence the right antidote can be Knowledge only. Śaṅkara and Sāṅkhya were the major proponents of *Jñāna* marga. Fourth is the path of mediation, i.e., *Rāja yoga*. It was meticulously articulated in *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali. It laid emphasis on the powers of a controlled mind (*citta vṛitti*). *Yoga* or *Samadhi* is defined as the cessation of mental modifications. In the higher stages of *Samadhi*, one can envision the state of *Mokṣa*.

All these approaches shed light on some unique aspects of attainment of *Mokṣa*. Yet, various texts and scholars have attempted to synthesize these approaches. *Bhagvad Gīta* is an excellent example of such a synthesis which beautifully depicts the role of *Karma*, *Jñāna* and *Bhakti* in any person's material and spiritual upliftment. This approach is called *samanvaya yoga*.