

## CHAPTER 5

### *MOKSHA*

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*Moksha* means liberation. It is a common belief that by doing good deeds, we will find our reward in heaven after death. But *Moksha* is a more fundamental liberation that the Hindu scriptures guide us to. *Moksha* is liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth known as *samsara*.

*Samsara*, more broadly, is the world of change that we live in. Our fundamental experiences in life have to do with birth, death, aging and sickness. In our daily lives we oscillate between pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, success and failure, gain and loss, victory and defeat, honor and insult. In dealing with objects and other people, we classify them into those we like and those we don't. We seek out those we like and try to avoid those we do not like; and are happy when we succeed but unhappy when we fail. More often than not, we are unhappy with our circumstances and our lives are laden with regret about the past and anxiety about the future. That is why ancient sages characterized *samsara* as an ocean of sorrow. Crossing this ocean signifies *moksha*.

This ocean of *samsara* does not end with death. Although our physical bodies cease to exist at death, we live on in a subtle body and are reborn again and again until we achieve *moksha*. What drives this process of rebirth? It is the cycle that connects our bodies and minds with our actions<sup>10</sup>. The law of Karma requires that we experience the consequences of each action that we undertake. We need a body to experience life and a body inevitably engages in action. Thus our past actions are the cause of our present body; and our actions in this body are the cause of our future births in another body.<sup>11</sup> This cycle keeps us mired in *samsara* until we attain *moksha*.

But how is *moksha* to be attained? Hindu scriptures treat this topic in many different ways. For a start, they lead us beyond the simple belief that by doing good deeds we will find our reward in heaven after death. Scriptures have elaborate descriptions of *Svarga*, or heaven, but caution that heaven is a temporary sojourn after which we return to another birth in the world, in *samsara*. Our stay in heaven lasts only as long as is warranted by the stock of merit earned by our good actions.<sup>12</sup> The Upanishads declare that those who rely on good works, charity and austerity take the "path of smoke" after death to the divine realm of the *devas*; and, when their merit is

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<sup>10</sup> See *Brihadranyaka Upanishad* 3.2.13 and Shankaracharya's commentary. Having examined various causes of rebirth, the choice is the connection between the body and action.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the topic of *Karma* see the author's note: *Understanding Karma and Rebirth*.

<sup>12</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* 9.21

exhausted, they return to take birth on earth again.<sup>13</sup> While the promise of joys in heaven might make more tolerable the miseries of *samsara*, temporary relief cannot be counted as *moksha*.

Most Hindus see *moksha* as resulting from the grace of God who responds to our efforts to purify our minds and cultivate exclusive devotion to God. The scriptures present a variety of descriptions of this process. The Upanishads speak of the “path of fire” open to those who have purified their minds by the pursuit of knowledge and meditation on the Supreme Truth.<sup>14</sup> This path leads to *Brahmaloka*, the realm of Brahma, the Creator, where they dwell until the creation itself is dissolved into Pure Consciousness at the end of each cycle of creation. At that point they too are merged into Pure Consciousness, never to be born again. This process is known as *Krama Mukti*, or liberation by stages.

A more direct path to *moksha* is described in the Bhagavad Gita where Lord Krishna declares that those who attain His abode are not subject to rebirth.<sup>15</sup> This goal is achieved by those who have overcome attachments, and dedicate all their actions to God with an unwavering devotion.<sup>16</sup> Here *moksha* means living eternally in service to God in his realm.

A radically different view of *moksha* is found in Upanishadic texts: a person with the right understanding is liberated here and now, not having to wait until death and after-life. The understanding we need is that we are all, in essence, eternal and blissful. Our own nature, which the scriptures call *Atman*, is no different from *Brahman*, Pure Consciousness that pervades the whole universe. As *Atman*, we are complete, lacking nothing. But because we fail to realize this and identify instead with our bodies and minds, we think of ourselves as mortal, limited individuals and struggle to find happiness in the world outside rather than claim the happiness that is part of our own being. It is these struggles of ours that give rise to *samsara*, the ocean of sorrow. By constant awareness that we are *Atman*, by dropping our false identification with our mortal body, by overcoming our desires for worldly pleasures and developing a sense of equanimity in the face of hardship or loss, we achieve liberation from *samsara*. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad declares: “he, having been mortal, becomes immortal, and attains *Brahman* in this very body.”<sup>17</sup> Such a person is said to be a *jivanmukta*, liberated while living. The equivalent of a *jivanmukta* is portrayed in the Bhagavad Gita as one of steady wisdom;<sup>18</sup> a true devotee of God;<sup>19</sup> and one who has transcended the qualities that constitute bondage.<sup>20</sup>

Many scriptures contain vivid portraits of the *jivanmukta*. In summary:

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<sup>13</sup> *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 6.2.16; see also *Bhagavad Gita* 8.25.

<sup>14</sup> *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 6.2.15; and *Bhagavad Gita* 8.24.

<sup>15</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* 8.21; also 4.9, 8.16 and 14.20.

<sup>16</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* 9.34, 11.55.

<sup>17</sup> *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.4.7

<sup>18</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* 2.55-72;

<sup>19</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* 12.13-20;

<sup>20</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* 14.22-26

- The *jivanmukta* has a sense of completeness, identifying with the universal Consciousness; and therefore, has overcome all desires. Seeing the One in all diverse forms, he has no attachments to one form rather than the other. He sees beyond all divisions such as those based on race, creed, caste or gender. All his actions are for the wellbeing of all others.
- Since he has no special attachment to his own body or possessions, the *jivanmukta* is completely fearless, with no anxiety about the future. Seeing all happenings as the play of the universal Consciousness, he is ever unperturbed in the midst of extreme turbulence. He lives a life of complete freedom, free of pain and sorrow.
- Constantly aware that his own Self, the *Atman*, is no different from universal Pure Consciousness, *Brahman*, the *jivanmukta* is ever blissful, seeing joy in all aspects of God's creation.

Does liberation from *samsara* mean that a *jivanmukta* can no longer participate actively in life and is condemned to a passive existence? Not at all. Such a person sees the world as it is, not through the lens of petty likes, dislikes, ambitions, regrets and anxieties; and is better able to savor the joy in the wondrous diversity of this creation. A *jivanmukta* who chooses to be active has an intuitive understanding of what is best for the wellbeing of all and can bring undistracted energy to the task at hand.

Isn't the search for *moksha* a selfish endeavor? Should not the *jivanmukta* "reject" *moksha* as long as there are others who are still suffering in *samsara*? The *jivanmukta* knows that *moksha* is no more than our remembering our true nature and is available to all without exception. It is not something to be "attained", any more than we need to "acquire" a vast treasure buried in our own homes. *Moksha* is not something that can be "given" by one to another. The enlightened *jivanmukta* helps those still suffering in *samsara* in two ways: first, by his own example, the *jivanmukta* is living proof that *moksha* is available to all who truly desire it. Second, the *jivanmukta* can share his or her experience with those who are prepared to listen and guide those who are eager to change. The scriptures bemoan the fact that few actually listen and seek change.<sup>21</sup> Why? That is the puzzle that makes the world go round!

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<sup>21</sup> Yoga Vasishtha Sara Sangraha 6.11; condensed by Swami Tejomayananda, CCMT, Mumbai: