



Moksha in the Mahabharata: A Philosophical and Spiritual Study

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Moksha holds a significant place in Indian philosophical thought as the ultimate aim of human existence. Among the four Purusharthas—Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha—liberation is regarded as the highest goal because it transcends worldly pursuits and leads the individual toward spiritual freedom and eternal peace. The *Mahabharata*, one of the most comprehensive epics of Indian civilization, offers a profound exploration of this idea. Beyond being a narrative of the Kurukshetra war, the epic functions as a rich philosophical text that examines the nature of human life, duty, and spiritual realization. In several sections of the epic, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Shanti Parva*, and *Anushasana Parva*, the doctrine of Moksha is discussed in depth. According to the epic, human beings remain trapped in the cycle of birth and death due to ignorance, attachment, and desire. Liberation is achieved when one realizes the true nature of the Self (Atman) and its unity with the ultimate reality, Brahman. The *Mahabharata* suggests multiple spiritual paths—Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga—through which individuals can attain liberation. By integrating ethical conduct, spiritual knowledge, and devotion, the epic presents Moksha not merely as a metaphysical ideal but as a practical path to inner peace and self-realization.



Introduction

The quest for ultimate truth and liberation has always been a central concern of Indian philosophical traditions. From the earliest Vedic hymns to the elaborate philosophical systems of the Upanishads and later texts, the idea of **Moksha** has been regarded as the highest aspiration of human life. Indian philosophy explains human existence through the framework of the **Purusharthas**, the four fundamental goals of life: **Dharma** (righteousness), **Artha** (wealth), **Kama** (desire), and **Moksha** (liberation). While Dharma regulates moral duty, Artha refers to material prosperity, and Kama denotes emotional and sensory fulfillment, Moksha transcends these worldly pursuits and represents the ultimate spiritual liberation.

The first three goals—Dharma, Artha, and Kama—are collectively known as the **Trivarga** because they relate primarily to worldly life and social order. They guide human beings in fulfilling their responsibilities and achieving prosperity and happiness within society. However, these goals remain confined within the limitations of worldly existence. Moksha, the fourth Purushartha, goes beyond these limitations and represents the ultimate freedom of the soul from the cycle of birth and death.

The word **Moksha** originates from the Sanskrit root *much*, meaning “to release,” “to free,” or “to liberate.” Therefore, Moksha literally means liberation from bondage. This bondage refers to the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth known as **Samsara**. According to Indian philosophical thought, this cycle continues because of **Karma**, the law of cause and effect governing all human actions. Every action produces consequences that shape future experiences and determine subsequent births. As long as ignorance (*Avidya*) and attachment persist, the soul remains bound to Samsara.

Among the many texts that discuss this idea, the **Mahabharata** occupies a unique position. It is not merely a historical narrative of the Kurukshetra war but also a vast philosophical and ethical text addressing the complexities of human life. Containing more than one hundred thousand verses, the epic discusses subjects such as ethics, governance, social order, spirituality, and metaphysics. Within this vast narrative, the concept of Moksha receives significant attention, particularly in sections such as the **Shanti Parva**, **Anushasana Parva**, and the **Bhagavad Gita**. Through dialogues between sages, kings, and divine figures such as Krishna, the epic presents a comprehensive understanding of liberation and its spiritual significance.



Concept of Moksha in Vedic and Upanishadic Literature

The philosophical roots of Moksha can be traced back to the earliest layers of Indian religious literature. Although the **Vedas** primarily emphasize rituals, sacrifices, and hymns dedicated to various deities, they also contain expressions of humanity's longing for immortality and transcendence.

One of the most famous Vedic prayers appears in the **Rigveda (7.59.12)**:

“Urvarukamiva bandhanan
Mrityor mukshiya ma amritat.”

This prayer expresses the desire for liberation from mortality and the attainment of immortality. The imagery of a ripe fruit separating naturally from the vine symbolizes the soul's release from the bondage of death (Rigveda 7.59.12).

The **Upanishads** further develop this idea by presenting a deeper philosophical interpretation of liberation. Rather than emphasizing ritual practices alone, the Upanishadic thinkers focus on **self-knowledge (Atma-jnana)** as the key to liberation. According to this philosophy, the individual soul (*Atman*) is fundamentally identical with the universal reality (*Brahman*).

The **Katha Upanishad (2.3.10)** states:

“When the five senses become still, together with the mind, and the intellect ceases to function, that state is the highest.”

This verse describes the spiritual state in which the mind becomes completely tranquil and the individual realizes the true nature of the Self. Such realization leads to liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

Thus, the Upanishadic tradition identifies Moksha not merely as freedom from suffering but as the ultimate realization of the unity between the individual soul and the cosmic reality.

Moksha in Jain and Other Indian Philosophical Traditions

The concept of liberation is not limited to Hindu philosophy alone. It is a central theme across several Indian philosophical traditions, including **Jainism** and **Buddhism**.

In Jain philosophy, liberation is achieved through the purification of the soul from karmic impurities. The **Tattvartha Sutra (1.1)** describes the path to liberation in the following words:



“Samyag-darshana-jnana-charitrani moksha-margah.”

This statement means that **right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct constitute the path to liberation** (Tattvartha Sutra 1.1).

Similarly, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes **Nirvana** as the ultimate liberation from suffering and ignorance. According to Buddhist teachings, liberation is attained when desire, attachment, and ignorance are eliminated.

Although these traditions differ in their metaphysical assumptions, they share a common understanding that liberation involves freedom from suffering and the transcendence of worldly attachments.

Moksha in the Mahabharata

The **Mahabharata** provides one of the most elaborate discussions of Moksha in Indian literature. The epic emphasizes that worldly life is transient and filled with suffering. Birth, old age, disease, and death are inevitable aspects of human existence. Therefore, wise individuals seek liberation from this cycle.

A particularly important section discussing liberation is the **Shanti Parva**, where the great warrior **Bhishma**, lying on a bed of arrows after the Kurukshetra war, instructs King **Yudhishtira** on the principles of Dharma and Moksha. Bhishma explains that true liberation arises from understanding the nature of the Self and practicing detachment from worldly desires.

The epic frequently emphasizes the unity of the individual soul and the supreme reality. According to the teachings of the Mahabharata, when a person realizes this unity, the illusion of individuality disappears, leading to liberation.

The text illustrates this concept through the metaphor of rivers merging into the ocean. Just as rivers lose their separate identity when they merge into the ocean, the individual soul ultimately merges with the supreme reality upon attaining Moksha (Mahabharata, Shanti Parva 206.31).

Paths to Moksha in the Mahabharata

One of the most significant contributions of the Mahabharata is its recognition of **multiple paths to liberation**. Rather than prescribing a single method, the epic presents several spiritual approaches that accommodate different human temperaments.



These paths are explained most clearly in the **Bhagavad Gita**, where Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna during the battlefield dialogue.

Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga emphasizes the performance of one's duties without attachment to the results. Krishna advises Arjuna to act selflessly and dedicate all actions to the divine. Such action purifies the mind and gradually leads to spiritual realization.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, attachment to the fruits of action creates bondage, whereas selfless action leads to liberation.

Bhakti Yoga

Bhakti Yoga emphasizes devotion and surrender to God. Through love, faith, and complete dedication to the divine, the individual transcends ego and worldly attachment.

Krishna expresses this principle in one of the most famous verses of the Bhagavad Gita:

“Sarva-dharman parityajya
Mam ekam sharanam vraja
Aham tva sarva papebhyo
Mokshayishyami ma shucah.”

Meaning:

“Abandon all duties and take refuge in Me alone. I shall liberate you from all sins; do not grieve”
(Bhagavad Gita 18.66).

This verse highlights the transformative power of divine grace and complete surrender.

Jnana Yoga

Jnana Yoga focuses on the path of knowledge and philosophical inquiry. According to this approach, ignorance (*Avidya*) is the root cause of bondage. When true knowledge arises, illusion disappears and the individual realizes the unity of the Self and the Supreme Reality.

The Mahabharata frequently emphasizes that wisdom and self-awareness are essential for liberation.



Nature of Moksha

The Mahabharata describes several characteristics of Moksha. Liberation involves the following spiritual conditions:

- Freedom from the cycle of birth and death
- Complete control over the senses
- Absence of desire and attachment
- Realization of the true Self
- Union with the ultimate reality (Brahman)

The epic also explains that liberation brings freedom from three forms of suffering:

1. **Adhyatmika** – suffering caused by internal factors such as mental distress
2. **Adhibhautika** – suffering caused by external physical factors
3. **Adhidaivika** – suffering caused by cosmic or supernatural forces

When these forms of suffering are transcended, the soul experiences eternal peace and bliss.

Philosophical Interpretation

Different philosophical schools within Indian thought interpret Moksha in distinct ways. The **Advaita Vedanta** tradition, for example, describes liberation as the realization of the non-dual nature of reality.

According to the Advaita philosopher **Adi Shankaracharya**, the ultimate truth can be expressed in the famous statement:

“Brahman alone is real; the world is illusory.”

In this perspective, liberation occurs when the individual recognizes that the apparent distinction between the self and the ultimate reality is merely an illusion.

The Mahabharata does not strictly adhere to a single philosophical doctrine. Instead, it integrates different approaches and presents a balanced synthesis of knowledge, devotion, and action. This inclusive approach reflects the epic’s broader philosophical vision.

Relevance of Moksha in Modern Life

Despite tremendous technological progress in the modern world, human beings continue to struggle with anxiety, dissatisfaction, and moral confusion. Material prosperity alone cannot guarantee happiness or inner peace.



The teachings of the Mahabharata remain highly relevant because they emphasize ethical living, self-discipline, and spiritual reflection. The concept of Moksha encourages individuals to cultivate detachment from excessive materialism while maintaining responsibility toward society.

By promoting inner harmony, self-awareness, and spiritual discipline, the philosophy of Moksha offers valuable guidance for addressing contemporary challenges such as stress, alienation, and ethical dilemmas.

Conclusion

Moksha represents the highest goal of human life in Indian philosophical traditions. While Dharma, Artha, and Kama regulate worldly existence, Moksha transcends these pursuits and leads to ultimate spiritual liberation.

The Mahabharata provides one of the most comprehensive explorations of this concept. Through its philosophical teachings, dialogues, and spiritual insights, the epic presents liberation as the realization of the unity between the individual soul and the supreme reality.

By integrating the paths of **Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga**, the Mahabharata offers a universal and inclusive vision of spiritual freedom. Even in the modern age, its teachings continue to inspire individuals seeking inner peace, ethical living, and spiritual fulfillment.

Thus, the doctrine of Moksha remains one of the most profound contributions of Indian civilization to global philosophical thought.

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