

Moksha in Hinduism: Realizing Meaning and Purpose of Life

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Abstract

Moksha is unique to Indian tradition and it is rooted in the understanding that human beings have the inherent capability to transcend the limitations imposed by the nature and attain freedom in an absolute sense. Moksha is about getting off the wheel of samsara or the cycle of suffering caused by birth, death, and rebirth. Moksha is the union of the atma (individual soul) with the Brahman (world soul). This union, however, is not easy as the individual soul, filled with desire, incessantly reincarnates itself through rebirths. Even if residual desire remains, moksha is difficult to attain. As the soul finds unity with the Supreme Being and a person exits the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, self-realization occurs. In the process of achieving moksha, one loses the focus on the ego and the body and is able to focus on her or his own divine self. This research paper tries to examine the relevance of the concept of Moksha as an ultimate and supreme goal of human life. Also, the purpose of the paper is to establish a link between Western concepts such as Maslow's need hierarchy theory, character strengths and virtues and Eastern concepts of Hinduism such as Moksha.

Keywords: Moksha, Self actualization, Character strengths and virtues, Hinduism

Introduction

Kathaka Upanishad, a middle Upanishad dating back to 2500 years is one of the earliest books to have mentioned about terms such as *Samsara* and *Moksha*. Lots of debates and disagreements on the conceptual aspect of moksha in relation to its attainment in current and after lives went on for generations and the concept was put to acid test. Moksha can be defined as finding a place in heaven or getting close to the creator of this universe.

Moksha is one of the four “goals” of a Hindu life. The four goals are kama (desires), artha (wealth), dharma (duty) and moksha (liberation) as explained in the great epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Moksha is the ultimate goal of any Hindu's life, but it is not meant to be pursued until all the other goals have been achieved. This is because attaining moksha requires a great deal of time, effort and focus. For those that choose to work toward moksha, there is no single path. Each tradition in Hinduism has a different idea of how to achieve that final liberation, and there are many different paths to moksha to be found in each tradition. Many traditions emphasize the importance of the guru, a knowledgeable teacher who will help the Hindu seeking moksha make sense of the world and let go of their ego. This is central to almost all paths to moksha: letting go of desires and the ego. In some traditions, this means that when moksha is attained and a person dies, the person's entire self will be subsumed into the Divine. In other traditions, the person will keep a sense of self, but they will become part of a greater whole.

Apart from religious beliefs Moksha can also be understood as attaining purity and peace of mind, realizing the real value of self, finding oneness with the bigger cosmic creation, realizing the true meaning of brotherhood and humanity. Moksha is the sum effect of all decisions taken and deeds done followed by good reasoning, analysis and instinctive, inborn intelligence and while having alertness of mind. It comes in the form of a deep and subconscious bliss and a realization of being in balance and sync with creation.

Character Strengths & Virtues required for attaining Moksha

Peterson & Seligman (2004)

studied all major religions and philosophical traditions and found that the Six Virtues (i.e. Virtue of Wisdom and Knowledge, Virtue of Courage, Virtue of Humanity, Virtue of Justice, Virtue of Temperance and Virtue of Transcendence) are accompanied by twenty four character strengths. These virtues play an imperative role in achieving and realizing the ultimate meaning of life i.e. moksha. Positive psychology practitioners count on practical applications to help individuals identify their virtues

and strengths and use them to increase and maintain their levels of well-being. They also emphasize that these character strengths exist on a continuum; positive traits are regarded as individual differences that exist in degrees rather than all-or-nothing categories.

The field of positive psychology is founded upon belief in human goodness, and human desire to improve ourselves. The goal of positive psychology is to increase human flourishing (becoming the most successful and satisfied version of ourselves). Positive psychology rings a bell in the Indian psyche, of familiarity. *Character strengths and Virtues such as courage, forgiveness, gratitude, spirituality, transcendence, wisdom, and so on brings up to mind some eastern concepts such as sukha, samtosh, tripti, moksha. Also, all these strengths are associated with self-actualization according to humanistic psychologists.*

Virtue of Temperance means trait of being moderate, being forgiving, possessing self regulation and self control and trying to abstain from excess of each sort, this virtue adds a glorious charm to one's personality as well as provides a lot of strength to the character, thereby also furthermore strengthening individuals claim on moksha, the freedom of the noble soul from the painful cycle of births and deaths. *Virtue of Transcendence* implies never losing hope in humanity's potential, being spiritual or having a sense of purpose in one's life, expressing gratitude in daily routine such as counting blessings, inevitably creating a path for enlightenment and perfect happiness or bliss to achieve moksha. *Virtue of Wisdom* denotes love for learning and acquiring knowledge about the universe, as moksha also involves state of true knowledge and learning for self realization. Gaining full knowledge regarding others is known as wisdom whereas, gaining knowledge about oneself is enlightenment.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in relation to Moksha in Hinduism

Ancient Sanatan Dharma believed that motivation of human behavior was based on four important needs which are physical and bodily comforts, security needs through proper order and regulation of family as well as society, need for name and fame as well as recognition through thorough reading and knowledge of the scriptures as well as applying them in practical life, and last i.e. need to self actualize through meditation and living a spiritual life to gain salvation and join with the Divine forever. The ultimate Goal of human life is to attain moksha. It means salvation, Nirvana, freedom from the cycle of birth & death, the realization of inner spirituality of man. This concept written thousands of years ago is strikingly similar to the modern theory of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

There is a parallel between Maslow's need for self actualization (highest need in the pyramid) which means realizing one's full potential or the desire of self fulfillment with moksha (liberation). It can be understood that one should not live like an animal to satisfy the basic biological needs only, but live with good intentions and aim for liberation through self-actualization. The effort for liberation should not be motivated by any particular desire. However, in most cases it begins as a desire, but at some stage on the path, one has to renounce even that desire and live without intentions and expectations. In other words, in Hinduism desire is the basis of life, existence, creation, order and regularity of the worlds and beings, while its absence is the basis of transcendence, freedom, renunciation, equanimity, peace, happiness, freedom from birth and death, and final liberation. By transcending desires, one transcends mortality.

According to Hinduism, the goals of human life, and personality predispositions (gunas) is to cultivate one's attitudes, habits, and values; Salagame (2013). Salagame (2013) notes three gunas, sattva, rajas, and tamas, constitute the main principles of life force that gives rise to various mental and material occurrences, including consciousness. He explains that mental occurrences are dominated by sattva and material occurrences by tamas.

Maslow's view on self-actualization leads him to say 'What a man can be, he must be'. This is the stage where one needs to explore ones capabilities with all worldly needs met and become the person that you were destined to. Maslow had further refined his theory especially for Self-actualized people in order

to accommodate more qualities and called this as Metamotivation. Wholeness, simplicity, meaningfulness etc came to be associated with this. Man is essentially a creature endowed with a mind and possessed of a soul. He has one life and hence possesses the urge to maximize and exploit in each and every way. After fulfilling all his worldly desires and responsibilities a man still wants to know how he can suppress his inner restlessness and attain peace (Holdrege, 2004). Moksha which means the absence of moha encourages a man to find his own way where delusion is caused by the inter play of the three gunas (sattva, rajas, tamas). When a person overcomes these, he attains liberation or moksha.

What Maslow called “Self-Actualization” was the summit of his Hierarchy of Needs. This peak experience was called by the Rishis as “Moksha”. Moksha is the Ultimate Self-Actualization, in which the individual makes “Real” (Realization) his true identity which is “One-ness with the Divine”. The small self (ego) realizes the Great Truth, which is that it is one with the Big Self (Atma-Purusha). In that realization lays the ultimate sense of freedom (Moksha) and Bliss (Bhawuk, 2011)

Dharma and Moksha in accordance with The Ramayana and The Bhagavad Gita

It is important to note that, moksha needs dharma. Before enlightenment, an alignment of behaviour in harmony with the moral order can assist the aspirant in keeping the quest pure. Like two sides of a coin, moksha and dharma support and complete each other. A deep understanding of dharma quickens the journey towards moksha. And a genuine realization of moksha becomes the ultimate expression of dharma, with repercussions extending to the subtlest possible realms.

The Ramayana, explores the concepts of dharma and moksha. Throughout the many adventures of the Ramayana, Rama, one of the principal incarnations of Vishnu, follows a path of virtue, truthfulness, penance, forgiveness. Both he and his wife Sita serve as exemplary models of self-transcending action, upholding dharma in every choice they make. Rama chooses the virtuous path not from self-interest, but rather out of his vision of the Whole. If dharma signifies what is true or good or right or harmonious, it does so from the perspective of the Whole, and not the individual. Ramayana stands primarily as a treatise on the moral disciplines of dharma, still it favours wisdom as the ultimate goal of existence. Towards the end of the epic, this point becomes clear that Self-Realization (or moksha) emerges as the highest achievement, where action and the idea of a self cease together.

Further, from the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna reveals to Arjuna the fullness of reality where in the manifest realm the movement of the gunas creates an intricate web of karma that must play itself out (the unfolding of dharma) and where in the unmanifest realm (beyond time and space) everything has already happened and rests in a state of equilibrium and potential (dissolution in moksha). Arjuna can do nothing to change his karma which belongs to the Divine Order. Krishna shows Arjuna that his reluctance to act comes from ego-attachment, from clinging to the finite and impermanent. He teaches him to relinquish all attachment to the fruits of his action, renouncing not action, but attachment or self-interested thinking. Right action, the basis of karma yoga, means assuming the stance of Eternal Witness of all process. It means breaking through the illusion of an active subject and aligning oneself (and thus losing oneself) in the Transcendental Oneness. Self-transcending action requires not just non-attachment but also righteousness or virtue.

Final Remarks!

The Indian psyche and society are in a phase of rapid evolution guided by western thought. The pursuit of Artha and Kama has changed the structure of our society and left it at a crossroad. Prosperity has given rise to greed and corruption. Reminding oneself of such a virtuous past and understanding its essence can bring back the necessary balance for us to develop and evolve into mature beings. This would not only benefit Indian society but also the world at large. Moksha is the ultimate goal of a human life to attain salvation and oneness with the Divine. A stage of Nirvana and inner realization of the individual self and the universal connect we all have inside us in the form of the soul. It leads to selfless deeds then which helps the society/mankind as a whole. The interesting part is that the pursuit of Dharma begins when one

is initiated into studies at a young age, the pursuit of kama & Artha begins after one completes their studies and becomes a professional and householder. The pursuit of Moksha can begin at any time when one feels the pull.

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