

LIBERATION AND ULTIMATE REALITY: COMPARATIVE SOTERIOLOGICAL VISIONS IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract:

This study compares and contrasts the relationship between ultimate truth and the concept of freedom (*mukti* or *mokṣa*) as presented by Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Advaita Vedānta. Although all of these systems hold that emancipation is the highest aspiration for human beings, their metaphysics, epistemology, and thereby the ways of salvation vary greatly. In their pluralistic ontology, Naiyāyikas and Vaiśeṣikas view freedom as the end of suffering that is attained by acquiring correct knowledge and practicing moral discipline. On the other hand, for the Advaita Vedānta, freedom is achieved when one realizes that they are neither *Ātman* nor Brahman, and that all differences and limits imposed by the material world are overcome. This research delves into the ways in which these ideas interact with one another, shedding light on how Indian philosophical thought makes room for non-dual metaphysical vision and ontological diversity. This study also examines the ethical and epistemological approaches to achieving freedom and what they mean for comprehending ultimate reality by examining original texts and classical commentary. From pluralist realism to extreme non-dualism, there is a spectrum of soteriological perspectives in Indian philosophy, as shown by the comparative framework. Each of these approaches has deep philosophical and existential implications.

Keywords: Mukti; *Mokṣa*; *Nyāya*; *Vaiśeṣika*; Advaita *Vedānta*; Indian Philosophy; Ultimate Reality; Soteriology; Non-Dualism; Pluralism

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Introduction:

In Indian philosophy, the search for freedom (*mukti* or *mokṣa*) has always been important, serving as both the pinnacle of philosophical investigation and the endpoint of human existence. Liberation is understood as the cessation of suffering, the discovery of truth, or the direct experience of ultimate reality across various systems. Although all Indian philosophical traditions acknowledge freedom as the highest human goal, there is a great deal of disagreement among them on ontology, epistemology, and there by the ways of salvation. These differences create room for comparison, which in turn shows how the discourse on ultimate freedom relies on the ideas of unity and difference. The interdependence between self, knowledge, and ultimate truth is emphasized in each of these three Vedic systems as this paper compares and contrasts the notions of freedom in Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Advaita Vedānta. The Nyāya philosophy places liberation in the realist and pluralistic framework. The root cause of bondage, for the Naiyāyikas, emerged out of erroneous thinking, which in turn leads to immorality, karmic repercussions, and physical pain. By removing ignorance and cultivating proper knowledge (*tattvajñāna*),

one can attain liberation i.e., the achievement of the absolute cessation of suffering (*atyantaduḥkha-nivṛtti*) (Nyāya Sūtra 1.1.2; trans. Jha, 1913, p. 3). According to Vātsyāyana, the absence of all contingent qualities resulting from the union of the self with the body and mind, rather than experiencing pleasure, is what defines liberation. He states, “pleasure and pain alike are qualities produced by contact with body and senses” (Vātsyāyana, trans. 1997, p. 46). According to this view, even at the highest form of liberation, one’s unique identity is preserved, which is reflective of a pluralistic ontology.

The philosophical framework of the Naiyāyikas in order to support emancipation is further considered by the Vaiśeṣika thought, which is in harmony with Nyāya. In their descriptions of the self (*ātman*), Kaṇāda and Praśastapāda state that it is an everlasting essence that achieves liberation by separating from all adversity, including knowledge, pleasure, and suffering (Vaiśeṣika Sūtra 5.2.18; Praśastapāda, trans. Jha, 1961, p. 305). So, rather than experiencing completion, liberation involves being alone with one’s thoughts (*kaivalya*). “The self-abides in its own nature, devoid of all qualities, yet eternally existent as a

distinct entity,” noted by Śrīdhara (Śrīdhara, trans. Potter, 1977, p. 412). Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika share an emphasis on the importance of moral behaviour and epistemic discipline in attaining liberation, highlighting how knowledge and ethical practice are interdependent on each other. The freed soul in these systems, according to Dasgupta, “is an individual entity whose freedom consists in immunity from suffering, not in mystical union with an ultimate reality” (Dasgupta, 1932, p. 319). On the other hand, Advaita Vedānta presents a whole new perspective, recasting freedom as the attainment of non-duality. The root cause of bondage is *avidyā*, which is ignorance, that causes the true self (*Ātman*) to be obscured by the worldly and personal distinctions. The realisation that one’s inherent freedom is one with Brahman’s is the path to liberation, not the attainment of some other state. Śaṅkara states in *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* 1.1.4 (trans. Thibaut, 1890, p. 38) that “liberation is not something newly produced; it is the removal of ignorance” (*na mokṣaḥ kāryaḥ*). The non-dual perspective is summed up in the Upaniṣadic adage “*tat tvam asi*” (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7), which shows that both the world’s seeming diversity and individuality are

ultimately illusions (*mithyā*). An important point made by Radhakrishnan is that “freedom in Advaita is not freedom for the individual self but freedom from the very notion of individuality” (Radhakrishnan, 1951, p. 82). Freeing oneself from ignorance and coming to terms with unity as the ultimate truth are both epistemic and ontological aspects of this paradigm.

This study shows that Indian philosophy is open to non-dualist and pluralist ideas of freedom through comparing these traditions. Advaita stresses the ultimate unity and the subjection of difference, whereas Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika embrace individuality and difference and place freedom in the end of suffering and moral perfection. “Indian philosophy is a sustained argument about the nature of reality, selfhood, and freedom, where plurality and unity are explored as interdependent dimensions of ultimate truth” (Motilal, 1986, p. 112). According to Matilal, these discussions showcase the depth of Indian philosophical pursuits. In order to shed light on the varied conceptions of freedom and ultimate reality in Indian thinking, this paper will examine the philosophical underpinnings, epistemic tactics, and soteriological aims of these

three systems. By gaining an appreciation for the commonalities and differences among these views, we can better understand the reasoning behind classical Indian philosophy and advance philosophical conversations about individual agency, collective consciousness, and the truth.

Liberation in Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika:

Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika are two distinct but interrelated schools of thought in Indian philosophy. They both provide rational explanations of *mukti* (liberation) based on principles of ethics, metaphysics, and knowledge. The *ātman*, or self, is an eternal and numerically unique substance, according to both schools, which are pluralistic realists. The soteriological frameworks they adhere to place an emphasis on liberation as the end of suffering (*duḥkha-nivṛtti*) and the elimination of ignorance (*avidyā*), which is achieved by the acquisition of correct knowledge (*tattvajñāna*), ethical behaviour, and the eradication of karmic influences. Despite these commonalities, the two schools of thought show the complexity and diversity of traditional Indian philosophy through subtle differences in their understanding of emancipation. The term

“liberation” is used in Nyāya philosophy to describe the state of being free from all forms of suffering, including physical pain, mental illusions, and karmic bonds. According to the Nyāya Sūtra, which was translated by Jha in 1913, line 3, “the cessation of faults, activity, rebirth, and suffering follows the knowledge of the true nature of things” (Nyāya Sūtra 1.1.2). This theory of knowing (*pramāṇa*) identifies perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*), and verbal testimony (*śabda*) as viable ways of cognition, and the focus on epistemic discipline reflects this underlying commitment. “The absence of both pleasure and pain, which are qualities produced by contact with the body and senses, is characterized by liberation,” says Vātsyāyana in his authoritative commentary. He explains that when this contact is destroyed, neither pleasure nor pain arises (Vātsyāyana, trans. 1997, p. 46). Instead of viewing freedom as a subjective experience, this pessimistic view of emancipation highlights its status as an ontological and epistemological condition. Integral to the Nyāya understanding of emancipation are moral and ethical considerations. Ignorance and the buildup of

karma from deliberate deeds both contribute to the maintenance of bondage. By eradicating ignorance, correct understanding stops future karma accumulation, which in turn ends rebirth. According to Uddyotakara, which is cited in Potter's 1977 translation of Nyāya Vārttika, "suffering is intrinsically undesirable, and liberation is valuable because it guarantees freedom from it, not because it promises experiential pleasure" (p. 289). This is how emancipation connects human actions to complete freedom; it is an ethical and scientific endeavour all rolled into one.

By offering a more comprehensive ontological description of the freed self, Vaiśeṣika enhances and broadens the Nyāya framework. According to Vaiśeṣika Sūtra 5.2.18 in Kaṇāda's Vaiśeṣika Sūtra, freedom is defined as the total separation of the self from all transient qualities (*guṇa*), which include cognition, pleasure, and misery. In his translation of Praśastapāda, Jha states that after one achieves liberation, the ego "abides in its own nature, devoid of all qualities" (Praśastapāda, 1961, p. 305). As an ontologically pure state that highlights the autonomy of the self as an independent substance, liberation in this context entails more than just the absence of pain.

According to Śrīdhara, who is translated by Potter (1977, p. 412), the self is understood as the foundation of mental qualities, but it is not necessary for these qualities to be constantly manifested for the self to exist. The ontological rigor of Vaiśeṣika sets it apart from other Indian systems that mix selfhood with awareness or subjective experiences.

Knowledge and ethical endeavour, not divine intervention or mystical experience, are the means by which emancipation can be attained, according to both Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika. "The freed soul in Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika is an individual entity whose freedom consists in immunity from pain rather than mystical union with an ultimate reality," remarks Dasgupta (1932, p. 319).

These systems lay out a logical and systematic way to freedom by establishing it on the principles of reason, ethical activity, and the improvement of one's understanding of the world. This view of emancipation places human agency front and centre in soteriology from an ethical standpoint. In a dynamic interaction between ontology, ethics, and epistemology, the self is liberated via disciplined inquiry, adherence to moral

obligations, and the production of knowledge. While Vaiśeṣika places an emphasis on ontological independence and Nyāya on epistemic accuracy, both frameworks agree that emancipation protects the self-identity and that difference is an essential part of reality. Ultimately, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika provide supplementary explanations of emancipation that combine realist ontological principles, scientific rigor, and moral conduct. The end of suffering and the discovery of one's own autonomous, essential essence are the two main components of emancipation, rather than mystical connection or sensory happiness. A pluralistic image of freedom is illuminated by these systems, which together show the specific rigor of classical Indian thinking by preserving individuality and rational effort as important characteristics of soteriological inquiry.

Liberation in Sāṅkhya and Yoga:

Yoga and Sāṅkhya both deal with classical Indian philosophy and offer ideas about freedom (*kaivalya* or *mukti*) that are similar yet separate. Liberation, according to Sāṅkhya, one of the earliest systematic schools, is achieved when the individual fully separates themselves from their material nature (*prakṛti*) and recognizes

their unchanging, eternal nature, unencumbered by the three *guṇas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*). Thus, liberation is both cognitive and ontological; it is attained by means of discriminative knowledge (*viveka*), which separates the self from the phenomenal world that is constantly changing. "The soul attains liberation and the bondage of pain ceases" (Īśvarakṛṣṇa, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 22) according to the Sāṅkhya Kārikā. Misidentification with matter is the root cause of pain, not the self itself, as this illustrates. Yoga, especially in its traditional form as described by Patañjali, enhances Sāṅkhya by offering a realistic approach to achieving emancipation. Kaivalya is described by Yoga as the end of mental fluctuations, or *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, and the direct realization by the practitioner of the separation of *puruṣa* from *prakṛti* (Yoga Sūtra 1.2; trans. Bryant, 2009, p. 12). The primary focus of Sāṅkhya is theory, while Yoga highlights the importance of disciplined practice (*abhyāsa*) and ethical observances (*yama* and *niyama*) in mind purification and the development of discriminative knowledge. "When the mind is completely stilled, the self-rests in its own true nature" (Yoga Sūtra 1.17; trans. Bryant, 2009, p. 20), according to Patanjali, who

emphasizes that liberation is both experienced and ontological.

Both Sāṅkhya and Yoga uphold a dualist ontology from a philosophical standpoint: even after achieving liberation, the self (*puruṣa*) is still separate from matter (*prakṛti*). They are distinct from non-dualist traditions like Advaita Vedānta because of this. The definition of freedom according to Radhakrishnan is “the cessation of all identification with the transient, material world, and the recognition of the self’s distinct and immutable nature” (Sāṅkhya and Yoga, 1953, p. 143). To achieve liberation, one must have both knowledge and detachment, and Yoga is the means by which Sāṅkhya’s philosophical understanding can be realized. From a soteriological perspective, the Sāṅkhya-Yoga framework highlights the importance of cultivating ethics, practicing in a discipline way, and gaining meditative insight as integral to achieving freedom. Being free is both an epistemological insight and a transformational experience because knowledge and practice are interdependent. This leads to *kaivalya*, or ultimate independence, when the self exists apart from *prakṛti* but without suffering or desire. “Yoga envisions liberation as the

experiential realization of *puruṣa*’s distinctness, culminating in perfect stillness, freedom, and bliss” (Feuerstein, 1990, p. 158), as Feuerstein points out.

So, Sāṅkhya and Yoga present a unified dualist theory of freedom, which is the knowledge-based separation of the individual from material existence, achieved via dedicated practice, ethical edification, and contemplative immersion. In contrast to non-dualist Advaita, which eliminates difference, and realist schools like Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, which maintain individuality within a pluralist ontology, Sāṅkhya-Yoga portrays liberation as the acknowledgment and stabilization of difference, resulting in metaphysical and transformative freedom.

Liberation in Advaita Vedānta:

Advaita Vedānta presents a conceptual framework for liberation (*mokṣa*) that is deeply philosophical, describing it as the attainment of non-duality between the particular self (*Ātman*) and Brahman (the ultimate reality). Unlike schools that hold dualist or pluralist views, like Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, or Sāṅkhya, Advaita views bondage (*saṃsāra*) as *mainly a cognitive error*—a basic lack of knowledge that imposes multiple realities and empirical constraints on an inherently

undifferentiated truth. “*Na mokṣaḥ kāryaḥ*” refers to the act of shedding ignorance that hides one’s actual essence, as stated by Śaṅkara in his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* (Śaṅkara, trans. Thibaut, 1890, p. 38). This way of looking at knowledge emphasizes that freedom is not some abstract concept but rather the recognition of a free and eternal reality. The statement “*tat tvam asi*” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7) from the *Upaniṣads* exemplifies the liberationist view of Advaita, stressing that the individual self is inseparable from the ultimate truth. The process of liberation encompasses both the ontological and experiential aspects. It involves letting go of the mistaken notion of self-identification with the body, mind, and world, and instead seeing oneself as non-duality, bliss, existence, and pure awareness. “Freedom in Advaita is not freedom for the individual; it is freedom from individuality itself, the realization that the self is never other than Brahman” (Radhakrishnan, 1951, p. 84), said Radhakrishnan.

The threefold method of Śaṅkara’s soteriological methodology—meditative assimilation, listening to scriptures (*śravaṇa*), and reflective reasoning (*manana*)—are used to eliminate ignorance.

The aspirant learns to distinguish between what is real and what is unreal through these practices, and in the end, they realize that all distinctions are part of the empirical world, and that non-duality is the only ultimate reality. Śaṅkara states that after *avidyā* is eliminated, the self becomes fixed in its inherent nature, free from conditioning and limitations (Śaṅkara, trans. Mayeda, 1992, p. 38). From an existential and ethical perspective, Advaita describes freedom as the act of spontaneously acting in a compassionate and moral manner, brought about by the cessation of all attachments, wants, and egoistic identifications. As Motilal points out, “the Advaitin, upon realizing non-duality, no longer acts out of personal desire or fear but in accordance with the natural order of reality, embodying both wisdom and compassion” (Motilal, 1986, p. 112). Liberation is presented as the absolute unity of awareness in Advaita, which eliminates duality in contrast to realist systems that maintain diversity and pluralistic individuality. Ultimately, according to Advaita Vedānta, freedom is seen as the attainment of non-dual union through both the mind and the body. Achieved via diligent study of scripture, reflective

reasoning, and meditation practice, it is a freedom not from outside forces but from the idea of separation. With its non-dual framework, Advaita's soteriology stands out as a distinctively revolutionary vision in Indian philosophy, reshaping both knowledge and existence. It positions freedom as an ever-present reality that is discovered, not achieved.

Comparative Analysis:

The soteriological perspectives of several classical Indian philosophical systems, including Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, and Advaita Vedānta, on liberation (*mokṣa* or *mukti*), show both similarities and significant differences. Although they disagree significantly on many ontological assumptions, epistemological tactics, and definitions of freedom, all of these schools acknowledge emancipation as the pinnacle of human existence. The realist and pluralist metaphysics of Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika state that liberation is the end of suffering with the preservation of the unique identity of the self (*ātman*). "The cessation of faults, activity, rebirth, and suffering follows the knowledge of the true nature of things" (Nyāya Sūtra 1.1.2; trans. Jha, 1913, p. 3), according to the Nyāya Sūtra. In the same

way, Vaiśeṣika stresses the importance of detaching the self from all other attributes, leading to a cleansed and autonomous being (Vaiśeṣika Sūtra 5.2.18; Praśastapāda, trans. Jha, 1961, p. 305). What Dasgupta calls "the liberated soul remains an individual entity, whose freedom consists in immunity from pain rather than mystical union with an ultimate reality" is what these schools teach, according to Dasgupta (1932, p. 319). The dualist ontology of Sāṅkhya and Yoga is centred around the idea of liberation as the separation of the self (*puruṣa*) from material nature (*prakṛti*). This separation is both conceptual and practical; Sāṅkhya emphasizes discriminative knowledge (*viveka*), while Yoga offers disciplined practices (*abhyāsa, niyama, dhyāna*) to calm the mind and put this knowledge into practice (Yoga Sūtra 1.2; trans. Bryant, 2009, p. 12). "The experiential realization of *puruṣa's* distinctness, culminating in perfect stillness, freedom, and bliss" is how Yoga visions liberation, according to Feuerstein (Feuerstein, 1990, p. 158). In contrast to non-dualist frameworks, both schools maintain the distinction between the self and matter.

On the other hand, Advaita Vedānta views freedom as the realization of non-duality, which eliminates all differentiation

between one's self, the world, and ultimate truth. "The Upaniṣadic phrase "*tat tvam asi*" (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7) supports the oneness of *Ātman* and Brahman, but Śaṅkara states that "freedom is not anything newly produced; it is the eradication of ignorance" (*na mokṣaḥ kāryaḥ*) (Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 1.1.4; trans. Thibaut, 1890, p. 38). In his work "Freedom in Advaita is not freedom for the individual self but freedom from the very notion of individuality" (Radhakrishnan, 1951, p. 84), Radhakrishnan stresses the importance of this concept. In this view, the attainment of freedom is both ontologically and epistemologically immediate, and it is made possible by means of contemplation, meditation, and the study of scripture. Looking at things from different angles reveals a range of methods: Advaita transcends difference and emphasizes non-dual consciousness as the source of liberation; Sāṅkhya-Yoga maintains dualist difference while integrating meditative praxis; Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika preserves individuality and stresses epistemic and ethical discipline. "Unity and difference are not mutually exclusive but interdependent dimensions in understanding ultimate freedom," Motilal notes, citing "Indian philosophical discourse" (Motilal, 1986, p.

112). These three ends of the spectrum represent several approaches to salvation in Indian philosophy, demonstrating that freedom can be achieved by non-dual union, disentanglement from matter, or the perfection of individual selfhood. With different ontological, epistemological, and ethical ramifications, the many Indian philosophical traditions provide pluralistic, dualist, and non-dualist frameworks for comprehending freedom. While all three systems hold freedom to be the pinnacle of human achievement, the comparative analysis shows that they arrive to ultimate reality in distinct ways: via knowledge, practice, or self-realization.

Unity and Difference in Liberation:

In Indian philosophy, the idea of liberation, known as *mokṣa* or *mukti*, embodies both the sameness and the diversity of salvation philosophies, as well as the subtle metaphysical assumptions that underpin them. Although all schools of Vedānta—Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, and Advaita Vedānta—agree that liberation is the pinnacle of human achievement, there is a wide range of interpretations about the ontological and epistemic aspects of this goal, from pluralist individuation to radical non-duality. The importance of preserving

one's individual identity is highlighted by Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, who define liberation as the absence of suffering (*duḥkha-nivṛtti*) with the preservation of the everlastingly separate self (*ātman*). "The liberated self, being free from these conditions, remains individual yet unaffected," claims Vātsyāyana, who states that "pleasure and pain are qualities contingent on body and senses" (Vātsyāyana, trans. 1997, p. 46). Likewise, according to Praśastapāda, the self in Vaiśeṣika achieves kaivalya when it separates from all illusory attributes while keeping its essential nature (Vaiśeṣika Sūtra 5.2.18; trans. Jha, 1961, p. 30-5). Although both Sāṅkhya and Yoga are dualist, they express a practical unity in achieving liberation by distinguishing between the "self" (*puruṣa*) and "matter" (*prakṛti*). Radhakrishnan, states that "the bondage of pain ceases and the soul attains liberation" when the *puruṣa* is clearly differentiated from *prakṛti*. The goal of yoga, as stated in Yoga Sūtra 1.2 (trans. Bryant, 2009, p. 12), is to achieve a stilled mind, or *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, via regular practice and meditation. An integrative soteriological framework is provided by the experience unity of self and trained consciousness, while difference is ontologically retained.

Liberation is defined by Advaita Vedānta as the realization of the non-dual nature of *Ātman* and Brahman, whereas in contrast, distinction is completely subordinated. "Removal of ignorance that veils the self's true nature" is what Śaṅkara stresses, according to Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 1.1.4 (trans. Thibaut, 1890, p. 38). An example of this perspective is the Upaniṣadic phrase "*tat tvam asi*" (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7), which shows how all entities and events are fundamentally one. Instead of pluralist realization, liberation in Advaita entails unity in ontology and epistemology, as Radhakrishnan notes, "freedom is not for the individual self but freedom from individuality itself" (Radhakrishnan, 1951, p. 84). Thus, a distinguishing feature of Indian soteriology is the interaction of similarity and diversity. Advaita completely dissolves difference, revealing non-dual awareness as the ultimate reality; Sāṅkhya and Yoga integrate experience oneness while preserving difference as a metaphysical constant; and Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika keep difference as a metaphysical constant. "Unity and difference are not mutually exclusive; rather, they operate as complementary dimensions in the pursuit of

liberation,” Motilal says, quoting Indian philosophy (Motilal, 1986, p. 112). Comprehending these contrasting viewpoints enables a comprehensive understanding of Indian philosophy, demonstrating that freedom can be pursued through the attainment of complete oneness or the perfection of one’s own identity.

Conclusion:

A diverse array of soteriological perspectives, showcasing deep and complementary ways of unity and difference, is shown by comparing the study of liberation across several Indian philosophical traditions, including Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, and Advaita Vedānta. Sāṅkhya and Yoga promote the separation of mind and body by combining reflective knowledge with meditative practice, but Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika uphold uniqueness and describe freedom as the end of suffering achieved through ethical discipline and clear thinking. On the other hand, Advaita Vedānta goes beyond plurality and views liberation as the attainment of non-dual unity between Ātman and Brahman, where all material differences vanish when one becomes conscious of ultimate truth. Despite their differences, all systems have a common philosophical

thread: freedom is a radical change to one’s understanding of reality, one’s sense of self, and the nature of knowledge itself, not just a fleeting sense of joy or independence. “Unity and difference are interdependent dimensions in the pursuit of liberation” (Motilal, 1986, p. 112), as Motilal astutely puts it, according to Indian philosophy. This study shows how Indian soteriology is conceptually sophisticated by exhibiting how liberation can be regarded as individual perfection, ontological disentanglement, or the realization of absolute non-duality, by stressing both convergence and divergence. In the end, these viewpoints shed light on the Indian philosophical concept of freedom as an all-encompassing, life-altering, and globally important aim.

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