

**UNITY AND DIFFERENCE IN LIBERATION: NYĀYA, VAIŚEṢIKA, AND
ADVAITA ON MUKTI***** Suresh Mandal****<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21078189>****Abstract:**

In this paper, the idea of *mukti* (liberation) is compared in terms of philosophy from the purview of three main schools of ancient Indian systems—Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika and Advaita Vedānta. All these three schools agree with the view that freedom is the most important in order to achieve the *puruṣārtha*-s, but they have very different ideas about what reality is, how we know what we know, and the ways how to find salvation. Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika see *mukti* as the end of all suffering that comes from knowing the truth about *padārthas*. In *mukti*, the self (*ātman*) stays separate forever, without joy or pain, and free from karmic bonds. In these realist systems, liberation protects ontological diversity and stresses the importance of moral work and discipline in knowing the truth. Advaita Vedānta, on the other hand, describes *mukti* as the direct understanding of the non-duality of *Ātman* and Brahman, where there is no longer any ignorance (*avidyā*) and there are no longer any differences between the knower, the known, and knowledge. The paper makes the case that Indian philosophical discourse on liberation can support both pluralistic and non-dual visions of freedom by closely looking at what is the same and what is different in these different accounts. This study of similarities and differences not only helps to clarify disagreements within Indian philosophy, but it also adds to larger conversations about freedom, identity, and ultimate truth in different philosophical traditions.

Keywords: Mukti; Nyāya; Vaiśeṣika; Advaita Vedānta; Indian Philosophy; Liberation*** Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Berhampore College**

Introduction:

In classical Indian philosophy, liberation (*mukti* or *mokṣa*) is the most important and unifying idea. It is seen as the greatest human goal (*puruṣārtha*), and all other philosophical, moral, and intellectual pursuits are aimed at it. There is a shared teleological orientation, but Indian philosophical systems have very different ideas about what freedom means. This is because they have very different ontological commitments and theories of knowledge. Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Advaita Vedānta offer a wide range of ideas that can help us to understand these different schools of thought, from strong metaphysical pluralism to radical non-dualism. When you look at these faiths side by side, you can see that unity and difference are not just metaphysical concepts, but also basic ideas that shape different views on salvation. In the realist schools of Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, liberation is mostly thought of as ending all suffering (*duḥkha-nivṛtti*) by having the right understanding (*tattva-jñāna*) of reality. The Nyāya Sūtra makes it clear that liberation comes from getting rid of false knowledge, faults, action, rebirth, and suffering, all the way up to being

completely free from pain (Nyāya Sūtra 1.1.2). In his Nyāya Bhāṣya, Vātsyāyana makes it clear that liberation is not the state of bliss but of pure consciousness that is free of pleasure and pain and where the self-lives in its true nature (*svarūpa*) (Vātsyāyana, trans. 1997, p. 45). This idea keeps the self's permanent uniqueness, proving that there are fundamental differences even in the freed state. In the same way, the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra says that freedom comes from separating the self from the body and its qualities, which means there are no more experiential characteristics (Vaiśeṣika Sūtra 5.2.18). The liberated soul is a substance that exists in itself, without any of the qualities of happiness or pain, as Dasgupta points out for both Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika (Dasgupta, 1932, p. 312).

On the other hand, Advaita Vedānta has a very different view of freedom based on the idea that there are no two realities. Liberation is more than just not having to suffer. It is also directly realizing who *Ātman* and Brahman are. The Bhahadāranyaka Upaniṣad says, "He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman" (4.4.6), which Śaṅkara sees as the end of all ontological differences that come from not knowing (*avidyā*). In his commentary on the

Brahma Sūtra, Śaṅkara says that freedom is not a thing that happens or something that is produced. Instead, it is the removal of ignorance that shows the ever-liberated nature of the self (Śaṅkara, trans. Thibaut, 1890, p. 34). Advaita, unlike Nyāya and Vaisesika, says that plurality is not really there. Instead, it says that individuality is just something that is added on top of the non-dual awareness that is really there. This difference creates a deep philosophical tension between how people understand freedom and how they understand unity and difference. Advaita Vedānta says that all differences are merged into one unbreakable absolute, while Nyāya and Vaisesika believe in pluralistic realism, which says that selves are still numerically separate even after freedom. This difference is well explained by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who says, "Realism holds fast to difference even in release, while Advaita sees difference as a mark of bondage itself" (Radhakrishnan, 1951, p. 78). Even though they are different, all three systems agree that ignorance is what holds people back and that knowledge is the only way to be free, even though they have very different ideas about what knowledge is and how it works. It is philosophically important to compare

these faiths not only to find differences in their teachings, but also to see how different metaphysical visions lead to different moral and existential values. Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika stress disciplined thinking, moral behaviour, and epistemic vigilance as ways to achieve freedom, which is in line with their realistic view of the world. On the other hand, Advaita turns the search for freedom inward, toward a transforming self-knowledge that goes beyond differences in the real world. Matilal says that these arguments show that Indian philosophy is not a single thing, but rather "a sustained argument about the nature of reality, selfhood, and freedom" (Matilal, 1986, p. 112). Putting Nyāya, Vaisesika, and Advaita Vedānta all in one comparison framework helps this study show how unity and difference work as opposing but still logical ways to reach freedom. This kind of research not only helps us learn more about classical Indian soteriology, but it also adds to larger philosophical conversations about freedom, identity, and ultimate truth, which makes Indian philosophical thought even more relevant around the world.

Mukti as a Philosophical Problem:

In ancient Indian philosophy, *mukti* (liberation) is not just a religious goal; it is

also a deep philosophical problem that involves basic questions about what it means to be human, what truth is, what knowledge is, and how suffering can end for good. Existentialism says that life is full of bonds (*bandha*) that are caused by ignorance (*avidyā*), karma, and rebirth. This is where the problem of *mukti* comes from. However, there is still a lot of disagreement about what this bondage is and what it means for it to end. Because of this, *mukti* is a very important place to test philosophical theories and show their most clear metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments. Nyāya philosophy talks about the problem of *mukti* in terms of what is real and what we know. Bondage is seen as a chain of events that starts with false thinking and ends with defects (*doṣa*), action (*pravṛtti*), rebirth, and pain. The Nyāya Sūtra says that freedom is when “absolutely ceasing of pain” (*atyantaduḥkha-nivṛtti*) is reached by getting rid of ignorance (Nyāya Sūtra 1.1.2). Vātsyāyana says that liberation is not experiencing bliss but rather the absence of all experiential states. He says this by saying, “Both pleasure and pain are qualities produced by the body and senses working together” (Vātsyāyana, trans. 1997, p. 46). This brings up an important

philosophical question: can a state without any consciousness-content really be called liberation? Nyāya says “yes,” putting freedom from suffering above positive fulfilment. This changes the meaning of liberation to be completely negative. Vaiśeṣika comes up with a similar but more precise way to explain *mukti* in terms of what it is. In Kaṇāda’s theory, the self (*ātman*) is seen as an eternal substance that is linked to qualities like thought, pleasure, and pain. The Vaiśeṣika Sūtra says that liberation is when the self is completely separated from all of these qualities once all karmic marks are gone (Vaiśeṣika Sūtra 5.2.18). “The self remains in its own nature, devoid of all attributes” (Praśastapāda, trans. 1961, p. 305), which makes it clear what he means. This point of view makes the philosophical problem even more complicated by saying that awareness is not necessary for the self. This has led to long-lasting arguments about whether liberation means a kind of metaphysical isolation instead of fulfilment.

Advaita Vedānta takes the problem of *mukti* to a whole new level by rejecting the very ontological structure that Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika are based on. Advaita says that bondage is not a real state but

something that is put on top of the always-free self. Śaṅkara famously says, “Liberation is not something to be produced; it is the removal of ignorance” (Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 1.1.4; translated by Thibaut, 1890, p. 38). So, the problem of *mukti* changes from getting to a future state to fixing a basic mistake in the way we think about reality. Since Ātman and Brahman are the same thing, liberation comes from having non-dual understanding (*jñāna*) that breaks down the illusion of separateness. This brings up a different philosophical question: how can freedom have anything to do with human striving, moral effort, and spiritual discipline if it is timeless and already complete? In all of these cultures, *mukti* comes up as a philosophical problem because it makes people think about what it means to be free, aware, and real. Dasgupta says that in Indian philosophy, arguments about freedom are “in fact arguments about the ultimate structure of reality itself” (Dasgupta, 1932, p. 310). Whether thought of as cessation, isolation, or realization, *mukti* shows the most basic ideas behind each system. This makes it a core idea for understanding how Indian philosophical thought is both the same and different.

Nyāya on Mukti: Liberation as Absolute Freedom from Pain

Nyāya philosophy defines *mukti* as the complete and permanent end of suffering (*atyantaduḥkha-nivṛtti*). Liberation is not talked about as a mystical union, a state of blissful satisfaction, or a transcendental experience. Instead, it is seen as a permanent state in which all causes of pain are gone, including ignorance, desire, action, karma, and rebirth. This idea comes from Nyāya’s realist view on how we know things and his study of how bonds work, where wrong thinking (*mithyājñāna*) sets off a chain of moral and existential events. The Nyāya Sūtra makes this structure clear by saying, “Knowledge of the true nature of things leads to the end of faults, activity, rebirth, and suffering” (Nyāya Sūtra 1.1.2; translated by Jha, 1913, p. 3). As a result, liberation is not a huge metaphysical change, but the logical conclusion of having the right information. The most reliable traditional explanation of this view can be found in Vātsyāyana’s Nyāya Bhāṣya. He makes it clear that the freed self does not feel either pleasure (*sukha*) or pain (*duḥkha*). This is because both are temporary feelings that come from the self-joining with the body, senses, and mind.

Pain and joy are effects of contact with the body, and when this contact is broken, neither pleasure nor pain can happen (Vātsyāyana, trans. 1997, p. 46). In liberation, the self (ātman) stays a permanent, unique substance that is free of all extraneous traits and rests in its inherent nature (svarūpa). Nyāya is very different from non-dualist faiths because it insists on the persistence of individuality. It also says that there are ontological differences even in the freest state.

Nyāya's explanation of *mukti* brings up important philosophical questions about what freedom means and how valuable it is. Can liberation, which means the end of all experiences, including awareness as we normally understand it, be seen as a desirable goal? Nyāya reacts by putting the freedom from suffering ahead of having fun. Uddyotakara supports this view by saying that pain is inherently bad, while pleasure is temporary and not necessary for the self (Uddyotakara, Nyāya Vārttika, trans. Potter, 1977, p. 289). From this point of view, liberation is important because it promises complete freedom from pain, not because it promises happiness in the present. Modern critics have pointed out how morally and philosophically sound this view is. Dasgupta

says Nyāya's idea of freedom is based on a "severely logical ideal of salvation" (Dasgupta, 1932, p. 307). In this ideal, freedom is seen negatively as being protected from all suffering. Nyāya does not talk about transcendental bliss; instead, it gives a model of freedom that fits with its focus on rational research, causal explanation, and epistemic discipline. The only way to be free is to have correct knowledge (*tattvajñāna*) that you can get through good ways of knowing (*pramāṇa*). This shows that in Nyāya thought, epistemology and soteriology are connected. Nyāya sees *mukti* as a very strict philosophical ideal that makes sense on a deep level. It is a state of being completely free from pain that can only be reached by eradicating ignorance and the effects of karma. Nyāya supports difference even in liberation by preserving the uniqueness of the self and rejecting metaphysical absorption or blissful union. He adds a unique and well-thought-out voice to Indian discussions about freedom and ultimate human satisfaction.

Vaiśeṣika on Mukti: Liberation within Ontological Pluralism

Vaiśeṣika philosophy talks about *mukti* in terms of a strictly pluralistic

ontology that says there are many real, irreducible things (*dravya*), such as individual selves (*ātman*). To put it another way, liberation is not becoming one with an absolute, but freeing oneself from all the traits and conditions that make bondage possible. In Kaṇāda's Vaiśeṣika Sūtra 5.2.18, the liberative culmination is described as the end of all connections between the self and the body, which means there is no more thought, happiness, or pain. This way of putting it puts *mukti* right in the middle of ontological realism: the self stays eternally different, has many parts, and is real even in freedom. The most organized traditional explanation of this view can be found in Praśastapāda's Padārthadharmasāgraha. He says that bondage happens when the self and internal parts come together in a way that is conditioned by karma and creates mental and emotional states. When all the karma is used up and no more karma can be made, a person is free. In this state, "the self-abides in its own nature, devoid of qualities" (Praśastapāda, trans. Jha, 1961, p. 305). It is important to note that in Vaiśeṣika, cognition (*jñāna*) is seen as an accidental part of the self that goes away when one is freed. This makes it very different from traditions that see

consciousness as a necessary part of being human. This brings up a key philosophical question: can a self that does not know anything really be said to exist or be free? Vaiśeṣika gives a positive answer by stating that selfhood is based on substance instead of consciousness. In his Nyāyakandalī, Śrīdhara says that the self is known to be the foundation of mental qualities, but that does not mean that those qualities have to be present all the time for the self to exist (Śrīdhara, trans. Potter, 1977, p. 412). Because of this, liberation is not experiencing happiness, but being free from all relationships that cause pain.

In terms of ethics and salvation, Vaiśeṣika is very similar to Nyāya in that they both stress that knowing the truth is the key to freedom. Knowing the categories (*padārtha*), especially the difference between self and non-self, gets rid of misunderstanding and stops more karma from building up. However, Vaiśeṣika's unique addition is that it is very clear about what reality is. It keeps difference as a permanent part of reality by keeping an irreducible plurality of things even in the freed state. In Vaiśeṣika, Dasgupta says, "liberation is the state in which the soul remains alone in its own being, without any

psychical or physical determination” (Dasgupta, 1932, p. 320). It is not seen as a lack of anything, but as the greatest level of freedom, because all bonds can be traced back to relational entanglement. Modern researchers have pointed out that Vaisesika’s definition of *mukti* is a unique example of a realist view on salvation, in which freedom is not seen as happiness or unity but as the absence of all things that are. Potter calls this a “metaphysics of release without transcendence.” The goal is not to go beyond plurality, but to be fully present in it without pain (Potter, 1977, p. 95). Vaisesika, on the other hand, is a unified view of freedom that recognizes differences at all levels, including the self, the material, and reality. It brings an important pluralist viewpoint to Indian discussions about what ultimate freedom really means.

Advaita Vedānta on Mukti: Liberation as Non-Dual Unity

By basing freedom on the idea that there are no two things, Advaita Vedānta gives the most radical and philosophically transformative account of *mukti* in traditional Indian thought. Advaita says that bondage is a mistake in thinking that comes from ignorance (*avidyā*), while Nyāya and

Vaisesika say that the self stays unique even after liberation. Advaita says that freedom is just realizing that *Ātman* and Brahman are one and the same thing. The central spiritual idea of Advaita is the Upanishad “*tat tvam asi*” (That thou art), which says that the true self is not separate from the ultimate truth (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7). Śaṅkara says that this knowledge does not make you free; instead, it shows you a truth that is already free but was hidden by ignorance (Śaṅkara, *Upadeśasāhasrī*, trans. Mayeda, 1992, p. 38). Advaita’s theory of knowledge is tied to the metaphysical question of *mukti* in a way that cannot be separated. Bondage (*saṃsāra*) happens when the body, mind, and personality traits are mistakenly put onto the self. This is called superimposition (*adhyāsa*). Śaṅkara famously says that *adhyāsa* is “the apparent presentation to consciousness of something previously experienced in another thing” (Śaṅkara, trans. Thibaut, 1890, p. 7). This is found at the beginning of his book called *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*. Liberation happens when this layer is lifted by right knowledge (*brahmajñāna*), showing the self as pure awareness (*cit*) that is not split up or limited.

Advaita strongly disagrees with the idea of freedom as a state or event that will happen in the future. “Freedom is not something that can be made, because Brahman is always free,” says Śaṅkara (Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 1.1.4; translated by Thibaut, 1890, p. 38). The main difference between Advaita and realist schools is this: Advaita sees causality as something that belongs in the world of ignorance, while Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika see liberation as the result of causes that lead to the end of suffering. Mukti lasts forever (nitya), and the goal of human striving is not to achieve liberation but to get rid of ignorance through disciplined questioning (*śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana*). In Advaitic thought, ānanda is often used to describe the experience part of liberation. However, this happiness is not an experience in the usual sense; it is the nature of Brahman itself. According to the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Brahman is “existence, consciousness, bliss” (*satyam jñānam ānandam brahma*, 2.1.1). Śaṅkara thinks this phrase means Brahman’s non-dual essence rather than its qualities (Śaṅkara, trans. Gambhirananda, 1997, p. 292). There is no longer a difference between the knower, the known, and knowledge in freedom. This means that

there is no longer a subject-object split in awareness.

Modern experts stress that Advaita’s idea of *mukti* goes against common ideas of moral agency and individuality. Radhakrishnan says, “Freedom in Advaita is not freedom of the individual, but freedom from individuality itself” (Radhakrishnan, 1951, p. 84). However, the end of difference does not mean that there is no longer any morality. Instead, it means that morality is now based on spontaneous compassion and not on dual knowledge. Advaita says that difference is real in the empirical world (*vyāvahārika*) and that only unity is real in the ultimate sense (*pāramārthika*). According to Advaita Vedānta, *mukti* is a state of non-dual unity, which means that all differences are hidden, but they still show up in the real world. In a bigger picture, Advaita stands for unity compared to Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika’s diversity. It offers a way of thinking about freedom that is not freedom from the world but freedom from misinterpreting the nature of reality itself.

Comparative Analysis: Unity and Difference in Liberation

By looking at Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Advaita Vedānta side by side, we can see that the idea of *mukti* is a central

philosophical lens in ancient Indian thought that helps us understand the problem of unity and difference. All three systems agree that ignorance is what holds people back and that information is essential for freedom. However, they are very different in how they define reality and how they see individuality in a free state. These differences are not just about doctrine; they also show deeply different ideas about reality, self, and final freedom. Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika both believe in a realist and pluralistic ontology, which says that selves (*ātman*) are forever separate things. Liberation is seen negatively in both systems as the end of all pain rather than the realization of unity. Liberation is defined as the “complete cessation of pain” that comes from having true knowledge (Nyāya Sūtra 1.1.2), and Vātsyāyana says that in liberation “there is no experience of pleasure or pain” (Vātsyāyana, trans. 1997, p. 46). Vaiśeṣika supports this view by saying that even cognition is a temporary quality that goes away in freedom, leaving the self alone with its own nature (Vaiśeṣika Sūtra 5.2.18). Dasgupta says that in both systems, “the freed soul remains a unique being, eternally separate from other souls” (Dasgupta, 1932, p. 319). In this case, difference is not a sign

of being tied down; it is a constant part of reality that stays the same even in the most liberated state.

Advaita Vedānta is very different because it says that freedom is realizing that there is only one reality, not two. According to the Advaitic view, plurality is part of the world of ignorance (*avidyā*), and the only way to be free is to know that *Ātman* and Brahman are the same thing. “Liberation is not something new that is made, but the removal of ignorance,” says Śaṅkara (Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 1.1.4; translated by Thibaut, 1890, p. 38). The Upanishad saying “*tat tvam asi*” (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7) is at the heart of this view. It breaks down the wall between the individual self and ultimate truth. In this view, difference is not just gotten rid of; it is shown to be truly unreal (*mithyā*) and only true at the empirical level (*vyāvahārika*). The tension between these views comes from two different philosophical ideas: one sees freedom as safe individuality without pain, while the other sees individuality as the strongest form of bondage. “Realism seeks freedom for the self, while Advaita seeks freedom from the self as an individual” (Radhakrishnan, 1951, p. 82) is a good way to explain this difference. Nyāya-

Vaiśeṣika support a metaphysics of difference based on causal explanation and epistemic realism, while Advaita supports a metaphysics of unity based on the idea that there is only one awareness. Still, this resistance should not be boiled down to simple incompatibility. All three systems agree on one thing: freedom does not just come from doing rituals or receiving spiritual grace. It comes from a complete shift in how we think about things. When looked at side by side, these different ideas of *mukti* show how diverse Indian thought is. Unity and difference are not just vague metaphysical terms; they also form different moral, intellectual, and existential ideals. In a world with many different religions, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika defend the worth of morality and rational inquiry. But Advaita, on the other hand, questions the very basis of diversity in the name of ultimate unity. They show that Indian philosophical thought on freedom includes both ontological diversity and non-dual transcendence. This means that it offers a wide range of answers to the age-old question of what it means to be truly free.

Conclusion:

By looking at Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Advaita Vedānta side by side, we can see

that freedom (*mukti*) is both a goal that brings all three together and a place where their philosophical ideas are very different. Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika talk about *mukti* in a realist and pluralistic way, focusing on the end of pain while preserving the self as a unique substance that will never change. In these systems, freedom comes from having the right knowledge, following the rules of morality, and being free from the effects of past lives. This shows a strict but negative view of freedom. Advaita Vedānta, on the other hand, sees freedom as realizing non-dual unity, which means that the apparent differences between self, world, and awareness are no longer there. Bondage is seen as a mistake in thinking, and freedom does not come from reaching a new state. Instead, it comes from getting rid of ignorance, which shows that *Ātman*-Brahman is always free. The results of this study show that unity and difference in freedom are not just vague ideas; they are basic ideas that shape ethics, epistemology, and soteriology. Advaita stresses that there is only one mind, while Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika support ontological plurality. Together, these beliefs show how philosophically rich Indian thought is by giving different views on freedom, identity, and the ultimate truth.

They all stress that liberation, whether seen as separate or whole, involves a deep change in what we know, how we see things, and how we are.

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