

5-1-2005

## On why the traditional Advaitic resolution of jivanmukti is superior to the neo-Vedantic resolution

Sakkapohl Vachatimanont

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil>

---

### Recommended Citation

Vachatimanont, Sakkapohl (2005) "On why the traditional Advaitic resolution of jivanmukti is superior to the neo-Vedantic resolution," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil/vol14/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester Journal of Philosophy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

# **On why the traditional Advaitic resolution of *jivanmukti* is superior to the neo-Vedantic resolution**

**Sakkapol Vachatimanont**

The predicament of human existence and its resultant sufferings is one of the central issues in Indian philosophies. Further, one could say that Indian philosophies seeks to describe a metaphysics and a practice that would allow the individual to become liberated from the sufferings of normal human existence (known as *moksa*). A question that results when pondering the nature of liberation is that of whether liberation is possible whilst still embodied in this life. Indian philosophies comprises numerous schools of thought, so some schools would certainly find this notion of liberation whilst still embodied to be rather atrocious. One school which upholds this idea, known as *jivanmukti*, to be possible is that of the *Advaita Vedanta* school. One can further divide the *Advaita Vedanta* school into either those who espouse the traditional *Advaitic* stance or those who subscribe to the views of the Western influenced neo-*Vedantas*. This subdivision is agreed upon by most scholars as no real other third way present. Regardless, the concept of *jivanmukti* raises philosophical problems which need to be addressed. Chiefly, if liberated, why is one still in a body? The paper will commence with a discussion of the resolutions provided to answer the above problem as offered by the traditional *Vedantas* and from the neo-*Vedanta*. It shall be seen that although the traditional *Vedantic* response is without its difficulties, it is still superior to the neo-*Vedantic* response, which causes the traditional *Vedantic jivanmukti* to fall into a pseudo-egoism. This type of view espoused by the author of the

paper can be contrasted to most commentators, as they are usually full of praise for the accomplishments of the *neo-Vedantas*.

It is of the interest to the reader that a basic introduction to and explanation of the basic tenets of the *Advaita Vedanta* school is provided before a thorough discussion of the issue can commence. *Vedanta* literally translates to "the end of the *Veda*." The work itself refers to both the teaching of the *Upanishads*, the last treatise of the *Vedas*, and to the knowledge of the ultimate meanings. These ultimate meanings concern man's relationship to the existence of *brahman* [the unchanging, infinite, immanent and transcendent reality that is the Divine Ground of all being] with the world and to his own inner self. In this school of thought, liberation (*moksa*, *mukti*) is release from bondage to the cycle of transmigratory existence (*samsara*). The reason why embodied beings experience this world of phenomenal appearances is because of ignorance (*avidya*) of their true nature. *Avidya* causes desire-filled actions (*karma*) which continually binds people to *samsara*. The only way one can gain release is through achieving immediate knowledge (*vidya jnana*) of the indivisible, pervasive, unchanging and self-luminous reality called *brahman*. One will also understand that *brahman* is one's true self (*atman*) and this self is not tied to the body or intellect. It is free from all limitations and sorrows. This type of knowledge arises not through devotions or works but through proper understanding of sacred texts.

It has already been noted there are present philosophical problems resulting from the *jivanmukti* concept, but it has not yet been formally explicated. The problems can be divided into two general categories. Those falling under Problem (a) can be viewed as thus: The notion of liberation as absence of suffering and sorrow (and thus embodiment) raises the

question of “If liberated, why is one still in a body ?”. Problem (b) is a bit longer and is thus: To *Advaitins*, the body is a result of prior activity (*karma*), which is part of ignorance (*avidya*). Gaining knowledge of non-dual *brahman* is said to destroy ignorance, and it should therefore bring immediate liberation (*sadyomukti*), annihilating all *karma*, including the body. Since the body does not cease when knowledge rises, ignorance of some form must remain. Thus, how can there be *avidya* post-*avidya*? This problem is rather serious because *Advaitins* largely accept that there is total opposition, rather than degrees of difference, between knowledge and ignorance. The analogy often exploited by the *Advaitins* is that of the opposition between darkness and light.

Utilizing one person to be representative of a particular viewpoint can often times be problematic. Nevertheless, this paper will be using the views of *Sankara* as representative of the traditional view of *Advaita*. The time of *Sankara*'s existence was around 509-477 BCE. *Sankara* believes that ignorance (*avidya*) is caused by seeing *atman* [the self] where self is not. It is necessary for discrimination to be developed in order to distinguish knowledge (*jnana*) from ignorance (*avidya*). The importance of *Sankara* cannot be underestimated. During *Sankara*'s lifetime, Hinduism was in decline due to the influence of Buddhism and Jainism. As Eliot Deutsch notes:

The existence of *Vedic Dharma* in India today is due to *Sankara*. The forces opposed to *Vedic* religion were more numerous and powerful at the time of *Sankara* than they are today. Still, single-handed, within a very short time, *Sankara* overpowered them all and restored the *Vedic Dharma* and *Advaita Vedanta* to its pristine purity in the land. The

weapon he used was pure knowledge and spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

*Sankara* proposes a separate solution to each of the two respective problems produced by the *jivanmukti* concept. In response to problem (a), concerning “if liberated, why is one still in a body”, *Sankara* asserts that one is “bodiless” while embodied, when one knows the self is not the body. In his commentary on the *Brahmasutras I* (of *Badarayana*) section 1.4, *Sankara* states that embodiment (*sasarirtatva*) is caused by ignorance, that is, identifying body and self. Thus, knowing that the eternal self is not and never was embodied shows that one is by nature eternally bodiless (*asarira*) and so the knower is in a sense *asarira* whilst living (in other words, “bodiless” while embodied). Bodilessness is complete detachment, not that of lacking a physical body. Evidence of these sentiments can be found in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad IV* section 4.7, which states that the body is to a *brahman*-knower like a cast-off skin is to a snake. In other terms, the body “disappears” for the knower (as in sleep or swoon), although the knower’s body doesn’t disappear. This appears to be a sound resolution, although there are some criticisms that can be put forth. What *Sankara* seems to be engaging in is that of trying to solve an ontological problem by giving a non-ontological answer. That is, his response is to treat the terms “embodied” and “bodiless” in a metaphorical manner which one can view as avoidance rather than a solution to the problem. Furthermore, the response appears to be retroactive. That is, it resolves the current issue by creating something that was not present earlier by seeing the problem in a psychological rather than treating it as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Elliot Deutsch, *The essential Vedanta: a new source book of Advaita Vedanta* (Bloomington, Ind: World Wisdom), p.

metaphysical problem. Defenders of *Sankara* might concede that if one is looking for a “real” solution, one might justifiably be disappointed. However, those defenders of *Sankara* can put forth the idea that answers to questions should be judged in terms of how helpful they might be to the individual in terms of assisting the individual to seek liberation.

In response to the problem of how the *karma*-based body can continue after *brahman* is known (in which all *karma* and ignorance is supposedly destroyed), *Sankara* posits three kinds of *karma*. Of the three kinds of *karma*, only two are removed by knowledge. The first is *samcita karma*, the accumulated mass of past *karma*. The second is *agami karma*, *karma* to be obtained in this life that would bear fruit in the future. After *brahman* knowledge, this *karma* will not bind, since this false notion of agency has disappeared (so it seems that “backsliding” is not possible). The third type is that of currently manifesting or *prarabdha karma*. Such *karma*, which produced the current body, is not destroyed by knowledge and must bear fruit before the fall of the body. If it is not yet clear, the difference between *samcita karma* and *prarabdha karma* is that *samcita karma* is the effects of *karma* or actions that have not yet borne fruit [and can thus be expiated by our current actions such as penance, yoga, etc.] *Parabdha karma* are those that are already bearing fruit and being enjoyed by us now [such as our sex, parentage, etc.] and those *karma* or actions that we are committing now, which will bear fruit in future births.

Yet, the problem remains: how can knowledge destroy some, but not all, *karma* (and why the inexperienced rather than the partially experienced *karma*)? Furthermore, if the immediate state of being bodiless does not occur, why would it occur eventually? If a little delay in liberation occurs, then why would not a lot of delay then?

*Sankara's* interpretation of *Chandogya Upanisad VI*. Section 14.2 provides an answer. The text in the *Chandogya Upanisad* itself states that “the delay in final release is only as long as one is not free<sup>2</sup>”. Andrew Fort explains that “*Sankara* asserts that this means there is delay in attaining the self as long as an ignorant embodied person enjoys the (already commenced) fruits of *karma*. Then, utilizing the *Chandogya Upanisad* terminology, he makes a crucial distinction, between ‘knowing *Brahman*’, which is immediate and happens in the body, and ‘attaining *Brahman*’, which is simultaneous with release from the body (but delayed as long as *parabdha karma* manifests)<sup>3</sup>”. Therefore, *Sankara* argues that final release (as opposed to mere liberation) happens at the time the body drops away, not when knowledge rises. The analogy most commonly employed to explain the continuance of the *mukta's* body due to *prarabdha karma* is that of the continued whirling of a potter's wheel (even after the potter has left) or the continued flight of an arrow after the initial impetus of the shot. The body, wheel and arrow continue for a time due to their momentum, but gradually and inevitably they will come to rest. Nonetheless, one can find a number of problems with the analogies. The most serious objection is that the bow and arrow and the rotating potter's wheel are, in the examples, real things in a real world. However, it is the case that after one gains knowledge, one realizes that the body (and arrow and wheel) are illusions and were never really connected with the Self. A real thing cannot be analogous to an unreal imagining.

---

<sup>2</sup> Max Muller, trans., *The Upanisads* (New York: Dover Publications, 1964) p. 98

<sup>3</sup> Andrew O. Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transormation: Embodied Liberation in Adaita and Neo-Vedanta*. (Albany: State Univesity of New York Press, 1998) p. 67

One can still object that the embodied person's *parabdha karma*, even if only a trace of *avidya*, is still ignorance and one possessing ignorance cannot be completely liberated. Furthermore, one can ask: How can knowledge have two natures simultaneously -both destroying and not destroying ignorance? The primary response that *Sankara* gives is that ignorance itself (in the form of *parabdha karma*) does not remain, only *samskara* (a memory) of ignorance abides. This impression alone causes the body to remain, even after all *karma* is destroyed. The analogy most often used to explain this is that of the trembling (equivalent to *samskara*) that continues even after the cessation of fear (equivalent to *avidya*), generated by mistaking a rope for a snake. When one is aware of the truth, fear (which is the cause of the trembling) ceases, but trembling (which is a mere effect) continues for a little while. It is inevitable and will gradually lessen over time. Analogously, when one gains the highest truth, ignorance (which is the cause of the body) ceases but the body (a mere effect) continues for a short while and then inevitably falls.

The commentator *Vimuktatman* disagrees with this analogy, as it is his opinion that there are no *samskaras* without *avidya*. He felt that while both the impressions and ignorance (their locus) form the body (the essential nature) of ignorance, fear and trembling are not the body of the snake/rope and so it is not a good example. That is, the appearance of the snake is based on ignorance itself (and not a *samskara*) and when ignorance ceases, the rope-based illusion of the snake will never rise again. There are also quite a few (too much to cover in this paper) other attempts to clarify and resolve the issue. Nevertheless, the consensus is that those adhering to the traditional Advaita school are left with the following quandary: either *samskaras* are *avidya* (thus the embodied one is



not a perfect knower) or they are not (thus should not cause the ignorance-based body to continue).

Despite there not being a staunch resolution provided by the traditional *Advaitins*, it will still be argued that it is superior to the *Neo-Vedanta* resolution. This is because, as the author of this paper will subsequently show, the *Neo-Vedanta* resolution introduces an unwanted element of egoism into the traditional view of the *jivanmukti*. Before defining the Neo-Vedantas, it is necessary to first understand the importance of the correspondence between India and the West. This is of importance because of the impact and influence of the interaction with the West has had on the *Neo-Vedantas*. In the book *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* by Wilhelm Halbfass, it is stated that “the modern encounter of India and Europe was initiated and sustained by the West, and that India had no choice but to respond to this unprecedented, pervasive penetration<sup>4</sup>”. As a result of colonialism by the British, many Indian thinkers felt a need to respond to Western critiques that the Indian civilization was “backwards”. Mr. Halbfass further believes that western thought has become so influential in India that even when challenged, it is often presupposed. Nevertheless, Mr. Halbfass also believes that the modern West’s “overcoming” of India does not necessarily entail the superseding of Indian thought.

Indeed, those who write about and see themselves as part of *Sankara’s Advaita* tradition have certainly felt the impact of the West. These thinkers/scholars are referred to as the “*Neo-Vedantas*” and they are “..part of a tradition based on the *Upanisads* and *Sankra’s* nondualist interpretation thereof, and that these figures are participating in and

---

<sup>4</sup> William Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) p.78

contributing to a new understanding of this *Vedanta* tradition, one influenced by Western premises and categories (imposed and chosen), which include humanistic globalism, the importance of egalitarian ethics, and a focus on psychological experience<sup>5</sup>“.

As was the case with employing *Sankara* to represent the traditional *Advaitic* view, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) will be considered representative of the *neo-Vedanta* view. As Mr. Fort notes: “The modern thinker who has greatly influenced all later members of the *neo-Vedanta* lineage on a wide range of topics is Swami Vivekanada”. Like many later *neo-Vedantins*, he was trained in English speaking missionary schools, read widely in Western literature and philosophy (and read many “Hindu” texts first in translation), and traveled extensively in the West. He made quite the groundbreaking appearance in 1893 in Chicago at the World Parliament of Religion. It was noted that Swami Vivekanada addressed the assembly of seven thousand people starting with the words: "Sisters and Brothers of America...", and the whole audience went into inexplicable rapture with standing ovation and clapping that lasted for more than three minutes. He also endorsed Western values such as rationalism, tolerance, and social progress. Of course, it would be wrong to say that he was simply “Western”. He was familiar with and claimed as authoritative, *Vedantic* texts and Indian philosophical thought in Sanskrit. Indeed, he was critical of Western individualism and materialism, and hoped to conquer the world with *Vedantic* “spirituality”.

The *neo-Vedantic* resolution to the problems generated by the *jivanmukti* focuses on a more practical point. They explain that *jivanmukti* exist so that so that one can learn from enlightened teachers, who

---

<sup>5</sup> Fort, p. 130

compassionately remain in a body to assist ignorant humans. It should be noted that *Sankara* also highlighted this point, though not giving it the impetus and emphasis that the *neo-Vedanta* do. All of this makes sense given that one could not know about (or reach) liberation unless enlightened teachers existed. The general problem of how to reconcile the utter transcendence of enlightenment with the need to give the enlightened being a role in society has been present for a long time in Indian (specifically Hindu and Buddhist) thought. It is important to recognize that this philosophical tension was understood by the philosophers of the tradition, and that it was driven by sociological as well as philosophical considerations. It should also be considered that the teacher (*guru*) has always maintained a utmost important role in Indian philosophical thought. Furthermore, it can be said that these teachers could not exist if the body falls immediately after knowledge. If one were to subscribe to the all or nothing view of *vidya*, then this would be the case.

However, everyday experience tends to provide examples of teachers without perfect knowledge helping those with even less knowledge. The modern *neo-Vedantins* make much of the role of enlightened teachers and qualify a further rationale for the *jivanmukti*'s continued existence: to provide selfless social service to the suffering. Indeed, Vivekananda often asserted that *Vedanta* and social service are completely compatible. In his opinion, spiritual and social reform should happen simultaneously. Manomohan Ganguly notes about Vivekananda: "Reacting in part to criticism of Hindu caste boundedness (and general 'lack of ethics') by Christian missionaries, he argued strenuously for 'spiritual harmony', tolerance, and universal brotherhood, and held that such ideas were *Vedantic* because *Vedanta*

teaches the ‘oneness of all’ and that ‘you are your brother’<sup>6</sup>“. Vivekenanda further claimed that when one feels oneness in human nature and with the universe, one will then “rush forth to express it... This expression of oneness is what we call love and sympathy, and it is the basis of all our ethics and morality<sup>7</sup>”. Vivekenanda believes this is summed up in the Vedanta philosophy by the celebrated aphorism *Tat Tvam Asi* (which translates into That Thou Art). This means ones soul and body are one with all others, and in “hurting anyone you hurt yourself; in loving anyone you love yourself<sup>8</sup>”. Serving others therefore becomes a form of both spiritual training and love of self.

One could take issue with the *neo-Vedanta* resolution by arguing that such a resolution loses the emphasis on devaluation of everyday existence (*vyavahara*) in *Advaita* thought. If the liberated being realizes the world of duality lacks ultimate reality, this being would not necessarily show any concern for others in this realm (even by teaching them). It is of note to see the counter-argument here: from the perspective of those not enlightened, the world seems to be real and such individuals consequently suffer. However, the scholar R.C. Pandeya argues that *Advaitic* views on non-duality lead to a transcendence of Western-style social ethics. Mr. Pandeya makes the case that while the body and the social realm persist for a *jivanmukti*, they know they are not the highest truth. In this view, liberation brings a thorough detachment from everyday existence, with no mandatory duties. Looking out for the welfare of others implies that one must attend to the world of duality and the “others” there to care for. Not only is concern for others

---

<sup>6</sup> Manomohan Ganguly, *The Swami Vivekananda: a study* (Calcutta: Contemporary Publishers, 1962) p. 98

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99

ultimately based on delusion, but concern can itself become an attachment.

But, that is not the gravest issue to result from the resolution proposed. One can make a strong argument that the *neo-Vedanta* resolution entails that *jivanmukti* in the traditional *Advaitic* view is an egoist. Egoism makes the basic claim that the individual self is the motivating moral force and the end of moral action. This is because creating a rationale for *jivanmukti* to perform social service implies *jivanmukti* in the traditional view do not show concern for others. That is, the quest to be a *mutki* (and the subsequent actions of the *mukti*) in the traditional *Advaita* could certainly be viewed as wholly self-centered and self-motivated as a result of the *neo-Vedantic* resolution.

One could certainly make the argument that *jivanmukti* in the traditional *Vedanta* conception was always an egoist, and that the *neo-Vedanta* resolution has rightly brought this point to the foreground. However, this argument is flawed as there is an important distinction that has to be made. The *neo-Vedantins* are engaging in western constructions while the traditional *Vedantins* stay within the framework of Indian philosophies. It is not fair for terms such as “egoist” to be applied in the traditional *Vedanta* framework. If one wishes to engage in constructions within the traditional framework, one must be respectful and use only those constructions available within the framework. As the *neo-Vedantins* engage in Western constructions, one can say it is fair for them to be accountable for the implications of what their constructions entail. That is, western constructions can only be justly applied to the traditional *Advaitic* framework through the implications of another framework using western constructions.

The traditional *Vedantic* resolution, despite being somewhat flawed and incomplete, is still superior

to the neo-Vedantic resolution, which causes *jivamukti* in the traditional *Advaita* conception to fall into egoism. Building on the previous statement, a grander sentiment that can be derived is that of trying to oppose the positive remarks most commentators have lavished upon the *neo-Vedantas*. The author of this paper most certainly appreciates that all religious traditions – whether broad groupings like “Christian” and “Hindu” or narrower ones like “Episcopalian” and “*Advaita*”- are products of a never-ending process of assimilation and integration of concepts from a variety of sources. There is much to be appreciated about *neo-Vedantins* such as Swami Vivekanada who are at the forefront of syncretizing and harmonizing past and present, east and west. Mr. Fort notes correctly that “they are undertaking two difficult and important tasks: that of self-definition and identity forging and that of meditating between and trying to integrate two (at least) very different cultures. One could fairly say that reinterpreting and fining new meaning in one’s tradition is not only a right, but a duty<sup>9</sup>”. It is not the case that those who engage in these types of enterprises should be condemned, but rather caution should be given to those who are disrespectful to the tradition they claim to be a part of. That, as this paper has claimed, is what the *neo-Vedantas* have accomplished. But perhaps more importantly, this paper introduces to the reader not familiar with Indian philosophies to the sort of tensions that have long been present in Indian philosophies.

---

<sup>9</sup> Fort, p. 132