

An Investigation of *Moksha* in the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara and Gaudapada

Draft; do not cite

Final Version: *Asian Philosophy* 22(3): 275-287 (2012)

DOI: [10.1080/09552367.2012.709722](https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2012.709722)

Abstract: In this article I suggest that *moksha* (liberation or enlightenment) in Advaita Vedanta is best understood psychologically. A psychological understanding is not only consistent with the Advaita Vedanta articulated by Shankara¹ and Gaudapada, but avoids what will be called the problem of *jivan mukti*. This article will consist of three main parts. First, I will briefly discuss the metaphysics and ontology of Advaita Vedanta. Next, I will present the problem of *jivan mukti*, and the Advaitin response to the problem. The problem of *jivan mukti* will lead to the third portion of the article, which is a presentation of what *moksha* is. At no point in the article will I be arguing the truth of the Advaitin position. Instead, I will be meeting Advaita on its own terms in order to come to some understanding of *moksha*.

‘[E]nlightenment is intellectually incomprehensible; it cannot be understood or attained through conceptual knowledge, because it escapes all categories of thought’ (Loy, 1982, p. 65). That being said, it is hoped that this article can make this ‘incomprehensible’ subject matter somewhat more clear. In this article I suggest that *moksha*² (liberation or enlightenment) in Advaita Vedanta is best understood psychologically. A psychological understanding is not only consistent with the Advaita Vedanta articulated by Shankara³ and Gaudapada, but avoids what will be called the problem of *jivan mukti*. This article will consist of three main parts. First, I will briefly discuss the metaphysics and ontology of Advaita Vedanta. Next, I will present the problem of *jivan mukti*, and the Advaitin response to the problem. The problem of *jivan mukti* will lead to the third portion of the article, which is a presentation of what *moksha* is. At no point in the article will I be arguing the truth of the Advaitin position. Instead, I

will be meeting Advaita on its own terms in order to come to some understanding of *moksha*.

There are two main aspects of Advaita philosophy. On the one hand, there is the metaphysical/ontological aspect that tries rigorously to come to a clear and logical hierarchy of being. On the other hand, there is the psychological aspect that tries to guide one through experience to an understanding of reality. The metaphysical, in some sense, provides the context for the psychological. As Thomas Forsthoefel has rightly said: ‘experience is always profoundly informed by metaphysical formulations’ (Forsthoefel, 2002, p. 316). Forsthoefel adds that ‘the “experience” at the heart of liberation is preceded by radical changes in the consciousness, and this in turn requires antecedent cognitive training’ (p. 316). It is an understanding of the Advaitin metaphysics and ontology that provides the cognitive training, and prepares the mind for the insight into reality, which is enlightenment. Therefore, before beginning the discussion of *moksha*, it is appropriate to briefly give an overview of some key aspects of Advaitin ontology.

Advaita Vedanta: Metaphysics and ontology

While Advaita Vedanta does provide a rigorous and thorough going metaphysics, what is important for the purposes of this article is Advaitin ontology. More specifically, Advaita Vedanta outlines a hierarchy of Being. At the top of the hierarchy is Reality. Then there is appearance. Finally there is unreality. Integral to this hierarchy is the concept of subration. ‘Subration is a distinctive mental process whose distinguishing feature is a revision of judgment about something so that the former judgment is radically denied by a new judgment that is based on fresh insight or experience’ (Deutsch, 1973,

pp. 16-7). Subration is a tool that explains how one values or disvalues a particular judgment, experience, entity or content of consciousness.

At the top of the hierarchy of being is Reality. ‘*Reality* is that which cannot be *subrated* by any other experience. We are, by the conditioning of our mental being compelled to ascribe “Reality” to that which, in fact and in principle, cannot be disvalued, or contradicted by anything else’ (p. 18). Advaita Vedanta calls this unsubratable reality *Brahman*.

‘*Appearance* is that which can be *subrated* by other experience’ (p. 15). That which falls into the category of appearance is the phenomenal world of empirical experience and the world of dreams. An appearance can either be subrated—that is, disvalued—by another appearance, or by Reality.

‘*Unreality* is that which neither can nor cannot be *subrated* by other experience’ (p. 15). Unreality is not subratable by another experience precisely because unreality is itself unable to be experienced. Artificial concepts such as the son of a barren woman fall into the category of unreality.

It should be noted that Advaita Vedanta takes it for granted that there is ‘being.’ Its project, ontologically, is to clarify what this ‘being’ entails. By definition ‘being’ is not only that which cannot be subrated, but also cannot come into or go out of existence. Being always is. That is what *Brahman* is always existent, pure being. *Brahman* therefore, is unable to be disvalued by any other experience. On the other hand, ‘nothing in the phenomenal world is ontologically necessary’ (Sinari, 1972, p. 289). Therefore, the phenomenal world is able to be subrated, while *Brahman* is ontologically necessary and unsubratable.

To be clear, appearances are not unreal, they do have reality. So, it is not the case that the phenomenal world is unreal. However, ‘the world has no reality of its own apart from the reality of Brahman. [This] does not mean [...] that [one does] not experience the world or that the world is not there around us; [it] means only that, if [one views] it apart from the Brahman, the world can have no existence’ (Raju, 1971, p. 179). *Brahman* provides the being of the phenomenal world because it is the foundation upon which the world of phenomena is projected. Traditionally, Advaita Vedanta gives an analogy of this process of projection as a rope wrongly perceived as a snake.⁴ So, in dim light one mistakenly perceives an object that is a coiled rope as a snake. The snake is not unreal because it is affective, that is, it causes fear to arise in the percipient. However, the snakes ‘reality’ depends for its existence on the rope. Likewise, the phenomenal world is not unreal because it has, among other things, causal efficacy. It is just that the phenomenal world depends for its existence on *Brahman*.

At the end of the day, the only true reality is *Brahman*, because *Brahman* is pure being. All other existence depends on *Brahman* for its reality and being. However, and this cannot be forgotten, the phenomenal world is not unreal. It is just not ‘as real’ as *Brahman*, because it depends on *Brahman* for its being and reality. Finally, from an ultimate perspective there is just *Brahman*, pure being, and this *Brahman* is the same as the indwelling spirit of man, *Atman*. More accurately,

[t]he Self [*Atman*] is One, it is not different from Brahman. [This] means that man is essentially spiritual; that in the most profound dimension of his being he is no longer the ‘individual’ that he ordinarily takes himself to be, but that he is precisely Reality itself. The affirmation is based not on mere speculation, but upon experience supported by a phenomenological analysis of what we erroneously take to be our selves. [...] The knowledge of non-difference leads to freedom, to the realization of the potentialities of our human being (Deutsch, 1973, p. 65).

While, this analysis of Advaitin ontology has been brief, I believe that the important concepts have been sufficiently explained. The purpose of this portion of the article was to provide not only a context for the discussion of *moksha*, but to provide important touch points for that discussion.

The problem of *jivan mukti*

This portion of the article will present the problem of *jivan mukti*—liberation in this very life. It will then be shown that the problem arises for three specific reasons. First, the problem of *jivan mukti* arises from a false understanding of *samadhi*—an ecstatic trance state—particularly *nirvikalpasamadhi*. Second, the problem of *jivan mukti* arises because psychological and metaphysical issues are conflated. The third reason the problem of *jivan mukti* arises is because the primacy of the non-dual *Atman/Brahman* is not recognized.

One who presents the problem of *jivan mukti* believes that ‘[o]n the Advaitists’ showing, the knower of *Brahman* transcends the spatio-temporal order; in fact, he [the knower of *Brahman*] becomes identified with the undifferentiated one’ (Das, 1954, p. 117). One who presents the problem of *jivan mukti*, demands an explanation as to how ‘the Advaitist can explain the return from *nirvikalpasamadhi*’ (p. 116). The advocate of the problem of *jivan mukti* believes ‘[t]his state [*nirvikalpasamadhi*] is one of absolute identity. [Therefore,] the aspirant [*jivan mukta*] merges into *Brahman*; his ego or individuality is eliminated; all differentiation ceases; and he becomes *Brahman*’ (p. 113).

Simply put, the problem of *jivan mukti* suggests that in order to attain *moksha* one must go through various processes of learning and meditative practices that lead to contemplation of the *Atman/Brahman*. ‘Contemplation in the end culminates in *nirvikalpasamadhi*—the super conscious ecstatic state of trance in which [one] becomes merged with *Brahman*’ (p. 122). The merger with *Brahman* is taken to be not just a metaphysical but even a physical merger into an undifferentiated mass. Since one’s existence has been altered in this way, one can no longer “return” to the phenomenal world to teach Advaita doctrine.

The first reason that the problem of *jivan mukti* arises is because of a false understanding of *samadhi*, particularly *nirvikalpasamadhi*. While the one who presents the problem of *jivan mukti* believes that the attainment of *nirvikalpasamadhi* is the end and ultimate realization of Advaita Vedanta, this is, in fact, not true, at least in the case of Shankara—the founder of Advaita Vedanta.

As Michael Comans has argued: ‘Sankara does not set up *nirvikalpasamadhi* as a spiritual goal’ (Comans, 1993, p. 32). In fact, according to Comans, Sankara only used ‘the word *Samadhi* very sparingly, and when he used it, it was not always in an unambiguously favorable context’ (p. 32). So, ‘[c]ontemplation on the Self is obviously a part of Sankara’s teaching, but his contemplation is directed toward seeing the ever present Self as free from all conditionings rather than toward the attainment of *nirvikalpasamadhi*’ (p. 32).

Not only is Shankara dismissive of *samadhi*, but Gaudapada—the teacher of Shankara’s teacher, or the great-grandfather of Advaita Vedanta—does not speak highly of *samadhi*.

Samadhi is the last word of the Yoga mystics. According to Gaudapada this [*samadhi*] is an obstacle to the realization of truth. [...] It is because the Yogis look upon mind as separate from *Atman*, that they seek to control it in *samadhi*. But Gaudapada says that the mind is non-dual *Atman*. Therefore there does not arise any question of controlling it (Nikhilananda, 1995, p. xix).

Further, Gaudapada warns that the mind ‘should not be allowed to enjoy the bliss that arises out of the condition of *Samadhi*. It [the mind] should be freed from attachment to such happiness through the exercise of discrimination’ (p. 207). What is important in all this discussion is to point out the problem of *jivan mukti* depends on an understanding of *samadhi* that is not correct. In a sense, the problem of *jivan mukti* gives *samadhi* in general, and *nirvikalpasamadhi* in particular, a status and level of importance that is not present in Advaita Vedanta, at least in its earliest formulations. To be exact, one who brings up the problem of *jivan mukti* believes that *moksha* (liberation) is the same thing as the attaining the mystic-ecstatic state of *nirvikalpasamadhi*, and this is a view that is unwarranted based on the teachings of Shankara and Gaudapada.

The second reason the problem of *jivan mukti* arises is because metaphysical and psychological issues are confused. One who presents the problem of *jivan mukti* believes that a metaphysical and physical change occurs when one attains liberation. It is felt that, according to one who presents the problem of *jivan mukti*, when one attains *moksha* one’s being is changed. However, according to Shankara and Gaudapada, *moksha* is really a change in perspective, a change in one’s psychology, a change in how one views the world and how one acts in the world. Shankara describes this psychological change as follows:

When the mind becomes free from all ideas of perceiver and the perceived [...] it verily becomes one with the Supreme and non-dual Brahman.

Therefore the mind becomes free from all fear; for, in that state, the perception of duality, which is the cause of fear, is absent. Brahman is peace and fearlessness (p. 193).

What Shankara is describing is not a change in being, he is talking about liberation as a state that is ‘free from fear’ and claims that the ‘*perception*’ of duality is absent. It is not the case that one, in a sense, *becomes* non-dual, it is just that the *jivan mukta*—one who is liberated in this very life—perceives the world differently.

Swami Nikhilananda explains that it is not the case that the *jivan mukta* undergoes a metaphysical change, but instead undergoes a psychological change. The *jivan mukta* ‘can *see* the world of multiplicity and at the same time *know* it to be the non-dual Brahman’ (p. xxx). Nikhilananda goes on to say:

the knowledge of Truth [*moksha*] makes all the difference in [the *jivan mukta*’s] attitude toward the world. Where the ignorant person sees non-Brahman, the [*jivan mukta*] realizes Brahman alone. A [*jivan mukta*] just exercises his understanding, and then uses the same sense-organs in dealing with the same external objects. He sees everywhere the non-dual Brahman (p. xxxii).

The point that Nikhilananda is trying to emphasize is that it is not the case that the *jivan mukta* does not experience the phenomenal world. The *jivan mukta* still experiences the phenomenal world, that is what is meant by using the same sense-organs with the same external objects. It is just that the experience of the phenomenal world is altered by a deeper understanding of the way things truly are. As William Indich explains: ‘liberation is not realized by repressing the phenomenal world, but by seeing through it’ (Indich, 1980, p. 490).

What is important for the purposes of this article is to note that *moksha* does not mean a change in the ‘being’ of the *jivan mukta*. Advaita Vedanta is making the much more modest claim that *moksha* is psychological. It is a phenomenological shift in

perspective, not an ontological change in being. In other words, *moksha* alters how one experiences phenomena; it does not alter what or who one is.

The third issue that arises, relative to the problem of *jivan mukti*, is related to the previous issue discussed. Both issues arise because of a failure, on the part of the advocate of the problem of *jivan mukti*, to fully appreciate Advaitin metaphysics. Specifically, the advocate of the problem of *jivan mukti* does not recognize the primacy of the *Atman/Brahman* reality vis-à-vis the phenomenal world.

It appears that the problem of *jivan mukti* arises because the advocate believes that the phenomenal world is fundamentally different from the non-dual *Atman/Brahman*. In fact, the advocate seems to take the phenomenal world as the final arbiter of how the world truly is. Thus, a *jivan mukta* must be able to explain *Atman/Brahman* relative to the phenomenal world, and not explain the phenomenal world relative to *Atman/Brahman*.

According to Shankara, '[t]here is no duality (at any time)' (Nikhilananda, 1995, p. 120). 'Therefore it is established that duality is a mere illusion of the mind. Hence [...] the Ultimate reality is the absence of destruction' (p. 120). Further, 'Sankara's view of liberation is determined by the fact that for him there is always and everywhere *only* the [*Atman*]/*Brahman*' (Loy, 1988, p. 133). What all this means is that even before one attains *moksha* the way things are is *Atman/Brahman*. So, while one might assume that *moksha* entails a 'creation' of the non-dual *Atman/Brahman* which negates the phenomenal world, what is in fact the case is that the *jivan mukta* comes to an understanding of the world as it actually is and always has been.

An analogy is made in Advaita Vedanta that illustrates what happens when one attains *moksha*. '[L]iberation [*moksha*] is like what happens to the space inside a pot when it is opened or broken—*nothing happens*, for the space was never separate from the space outside' (p. 130). In order for someone to take seriously the problem of *jivan mukti*, one has to forget how the world actually is according to Advaita Vedanta. So, the problem of *jivan mukti* implies that the world of duality and multiplicity is something that one must return to after one attains to the world of the non-dual *Atman/Brahman*. However, 'in a significant sense the phenomenal world itself is Brahman' (Forsthoefel, 2002, p. 313). Therefore, there is no question of "returning" to anything from anywhere.

The purpose of this portion of the article was to critically evaluate an issue that could be potentially problematic for an understanding of *moksha* in Advaita Vedanta. What was shown is that the problem of *jivan mukti* is not really a problem at all. The problem of *jivan mukti* only arises when one fails to fully grasp particular aspects of Advaitin practice, psychology, and metaphysics. To be exact, one who advocates the problem of *jivan mukti* exaggerates the role of *samadhi* in Advaita Vedanta, confuses psychological and metaphysical issues, and does not fully appreciate the primacy of the non-dual *Atman/Brahman* reality in Advaitin metaphysics and ontology.

That being said, a discussion of *jivan mukti* was important for the overall purpose of this article. In order to come to any understanding of *moksha* in Advaita Vedanta, the possibility of *jivan mukti* cannot be forgotten. The fact that one can attain *moksha*, or liberation, in this very life and in this particular body, profoundly influences how one must think about what exactly *moksha* entails.

Moksha in Advaita Vedanta

Having first briefly outlined Advaitin metaphysics and ontology, and then discussing issues surrounding the concept of *jivan mukti*, I will now look into what *moksha* is for Advaita Vedanta. Any discussion of Ultimate Reality, and *moksha* is the ‘existential’ side of Ultimate Reality, must of necessity fall short of its goal. This is so because ‘[l]anguage is created and used by [...] human beings to express things and ideas experienced by their sense organs and their mind. A supramundane experience like [*moksha*] is not of such a category’ (Rahula, 1974, p. 35). Nevertheless, I do believe some understanding can be had, and an important concept in Advaita Vedanta can be given some clarity.

This portion of the article will begin with an analysis of the various names given to *moksha*. A particular description of *moksha* will then be analyzed. I will then conclude by explaining how best to understand *moksha* in light of all the previous discussion.

The liberative state in Advaita Vedanta is variously referred to as *moksha* (liberation), *mukti* (freedom), *brahmavidya* (seeing Brahman), *brahmajnana* (knowledge of Brahman), and *atmajnana* (knowledge of the self). While naming something may not, in and of itself, necessarily have explanatory value, I do believe it can be somewhat instructive. So, I can describe myself variously as a son, a brother, a philosophy student, et cetera. None of these names or titles, in and of themselves, are particularly illuminating. However, taken together, they can begin to give some idea of whom and what I am. In the same way, the various ‘names’ for the liberative state can be instructive for coming to some understanding of what the liberative state is.

The first thing that one recognizes is that three—viz. *brahmavidya*, *brahmajnana* and *atmajnana*—of the five names are explicitly psychological. *Moksha* and *mukti* appear more metaphysical, or ontological. *Prima facie*, liberation and freedom imply freedom from some particular state, and tacitly imply a change in being in the same way that being freed from prison changes someone from being a ‘prisoner’ to being a ‘free-person’. However, in light of the other three names, and the discussion above regarding the problem of *jivan mukti*, it seems that *moksha* and *mukti* should also be understood psychologically.

Understood psychologically, liberation (*moksha*) and freedom (*mukti*) would imply a ‘freedom to’. To be exact, *moksha* and *mukti* would mean free to see things the way they are. If one would prefer, one could also understand *moksha* or *mukti* as ‘freedom from’, just not in the ontological way rejected above. Psychologically, *moksha* and *mukti* would be freedom from ignorance, and freedom from false projections. Understood psychologically one can rightly say that ‘[*m*]oksha or *mukti* [...] is just [the] power of being and seeing that excludes nothing, that includes everything. Brahman is one. Everything has its being in Spirit; everything, in its true being is Brahman’ (Deutsch, 1973, p. 110).

Moksha, understood psychology, allows one to see that *Brahman* is one. On the other hand, if *moksha* is understood in a metaphysical/ontological way *moksha* would imply either *making* everything the one *Brahman* or *making* the *jivan mukta* one with *Brahman*. Further, interpreting *moksha* metaphysically/ontologically runs one into the problem of *jivan mukti*, and is completely against Gaudapada’s formulation of the way the world actually is: ‘There is no dissolution, no birth, none in bondage, none aspiring

for wisdom, no seeker of liberation and none liberated. This is the absolute truth' (Nikhilananda, 1995, p. 119). The point is that if one takes *moksha* metaphysically/ontologically, one is implying a sort of change in the being of the *jivan mukta*. Since, at the most basic level, the *jivan mukta* is completely identified with the *Atman* and the *Atman* is non-different from *Brahman*, a change in the *jivan mukta* would be a change in *Brahman*. But, '[t]his unborn (changeless, non-dual Brahman) appears to undergo modification on account of *Maya* (illusion) and not otherwise. For, if this modification were real, the Immortal (Brahman) would become mortal' (p. 169). Therefore, interpreting *moksha* metaphysically/ontologically requires *Brahman* to change, and any change in *Brahman* would require *Brahman* to be other than what it is. Further, to understand *moksha* metaphysically/ontologically is really just a result of illusion—i.e. seeing things wrongly. Thus, ultimately, a metaphysical/ontological understanding of *moksha* collapses back into the psychological understanding.

The purpose of analyzing the various 'names' for *moksha* or the liberative state was to underscore the point that *moksha* is best understood psychologically, and I will return to that point again. I will now turn to how *moksha* is described, that is, I will now analyze the quality and content of *moksha*.

Moksha, in the positive sense, means the attaining to a state of 'at-onement' with the depth and quiescence of Reality and with the power of its creative becoming. Spiritual freedom means the full realization of the potentialities of man as a spiritual being. It means the attaining of insight into oneself; it means self-knowledge and joy of being (Deutsch, 1973, p. 104).

There are three key aspects of the above description of *moksha*. First, *moksha* is knowledge. Second, *moksha* does not deny the phenomenal world. Third, *moksha* is a

state of being. The knowledge of *moksha* is immediate and is ‘absolutely indubitable’ (Sinari, 1972, p. 289). The content of this knowledge is a complete understanding of who and what one is, and how the world actually exists. ‘[M]oksa is realizing the true nature of the Self (*Atman*), which is identical with the ground of the universe (*Brahman*)’ (Loy, 1988, p. 129).

The second important aspect of the above description of *moksha* is that it does not deny the phenomenal world. While this might not be readily apparent, I believe that the reference to ‘the power of its creative becoming’ is an explicit acknowledgement of *Maya* and implicitly the phenomenal world which *Maya* creates. In fact, ‘[t]he world must be admitted to be real, and it must be conceived to be an *indispensable* medium for the self-manifestation of *Atman*. Our spatio-temporal life is only a means for the realization of the higher spiritual life’ (Devaraja, 1972, p. 34).

The third aspect of the above description suggests that with the knowledge of *moksha* how one exists is affected. To be clear, ‘in liberation there is no question of becoming something which does not already exist’ (Deussen, 1998, p. 401). But, ‘the knowledge of Truth makes all the difference in [one’s] attitude toward the world’ (Nikhilananda, 1995, p. xxxii). So, while one’s essential being is not affected, the knowledge of one’s essential being affects one’s being-in-the-world. ‘[L]iberation is that unconditioned and unconditionable moment when the mind becomes aware of itself as formless, qualityless, nongraspable consciousness, which is what it has always been’ (Loy, 1988, p. 131). This awareness has a profound effect on one’s being in the world. The most important effect of *moksha* is ‘the expansion of personality to infinity, [which breaks] the spell of limited existence’ (Shrivastava, 1957-8, p. 105). This expansion of

personality ‘leads to a concomitant identification with all sentient reality marked by compassion and service’ (Forsthoefer, 2002, p. 319). Thus, besides the knowledge attained in *moksha*, the *jivan mukta* is characterized as being compassionate and, Shankara adds, humble (Nikhilananda, 1995, p. 131).

Having laid the ground work, I will now put forth what I believe to be a way to understand *moksha* that is consistent with Advaita Vedanta, as advocated by Shankara and Gaudapada. From an ultimate perspective, *moksha* is either inexpressible or philosophically uninteresting. From the ultimate perspective, there are ‘none in bondage, none aspiring for wisdom, no seeker of liberation and none liberated’ (p. 119). Thus, from an ultimate perspective, in a sense, *moksha* is ‘nothing’. I will, therefore, be presenting a ‘phenomenological’ understanding of *moksha*.

It must not be forgotten that the concept of *jivan mukti* is essential for any understanding of *moksha*. The possibility of liberation in this very life has two consequences. First, *jivan mukti* confirms the existence of the phenomenal world. Thus, it is not the case that the phenomenal world is non-existent. The world has, for lack of a better term, ‘phenomenal’ reality. The second consequence of *jivan mukti* is that *moksha* is understood psychologically, not metaphysically or ontologically. As I have argued above, a psychological understanding of *moksha* is not only warranted, but to interpret *moksha* metaphysically or ontologically would cause unnecessary problems. In fact, a metaphysical/ontological understanding of *moksha* seems inconsistent with the rest of the Advaita Vedanta advocated by Shankara and Gaudapada.

‘Phenomenologically, [... *moksha* is] that fullness of being which enlightens and is joy’ (Deutsch, 1973, p. 10). This enlightening joy is the appropriation or realization of

knowledge that permanently affects one's perception of the world and one's being-in-the-world. To be sure 'attainment of the knowledge' is not the acquisition or creation of *new* knowledge since it is 'what has existed from all eternity' (p. 401). However, it is new in the sense of its effect. Perhaps, before *moksha*, one had some understanding of the way the world is, according to Advaita Vedanta, due to studying scripture. However, this pre-*moksha* knowledge does not have the permanent and lasting effect that *moksha* has. Likewise, experientially one could have the psychological sense of enlightened joy in advanced meditative states—viz. *nirvikalpasamadhi*—but it does not have a permanent and lasting effect on one's consciousness, which is why I believe Shankara and Gaudapada criticize *samadhi*.

Moksha affects how one perceives the world. Traditionally, analogies are given to explain the effect on perception. The most common analogy is the rope seen as a snake in poor light, as mentioned above. According to this analogy the rope stands for *Atman/Brahman* non-dual reality and the snake is the phenomenal world projected onto the rope. *Moksha* affects one's perception so that one rightly sees the rope as a rope—that is, one sees *Atman/Brahman* where one only saw the phenomenal world before.

The analogy breaks down, however. According to the rope-snake analogy, once the rope is rightly seen, one can no longer perceive the snake. Thus, once one perceives *Atman/Brahman*, one would no longer be able to perceive the phenomenal world. If that were the case, the problem of *jivan mukti* would arise. If, like the snake, the phenomenal world becomes non-perceptible for the *jivan mukta*, then the *jivan mukta* becomes, for all intents and purposes, useless. 'Vedanta teaches [one] to see Brahman everywhere even

in so-called illusion' (Nikhilananda, 1995, p. xxxi). Therefore, while one does see the non-dual reality one is still cognizant of the phenomenal reality as well.

I believe that another analogy can be made to demonstrate my point. There is a famous optical illusion referred to as 'the goblet and the two faces'—see figure 1. In it, one can see either a black goblet or two white faces. However, seeing either the faces or the goblet does not negate the possibility of seeing the other. One can alternately perceive the faces or the goblet, and perhaps one could see both at the same time. I believe that this analogy better illustrates *moksha's* effect on perception of the phenomenal world. Both the faces and the goblet are perceptible the one does not negate the other. The analogy can be extended further and made stronger. The entire optical illusion—faces and goblet—stand in for the phenomenal world, and the fact that the optical illusion is really just black ink on white paper is the *Atman/Brahman* non-dual nature of how the world *really* is.



fig. 1

The *Atman/Brahman*, or black ink and paper, are what provide for the reality and existence of the phenomenal world, or optical illusion. Seeing the ink and paper, or knowing that the optical illusion is made of ink and paper, does not negate the optical

illusion, in fact seeing, or knowing, the ink and paper allows one to fully appreciate the optical illusion itself. In the same way, *Atman/Brahman* does not negate the phenomenal world, and knowing *Atman/Brahman* allows one to fully appreciate the phenomenal world. This analogy makes sense of Swami Nikhilananda's statement that the *jivan mukta* 'can see the world of multiplicity and at the same time know it to be the non-dual Brahman' (p. xxx).⁵

To sum up the optical illusion analogy, the quality of *moksha*, phenomenologically, allows one to see both the reality of the way things are as fundamentally ink and paper—*Atman/Brahman*—and at the same to acknowledge the phenomenal reality of the optical illusion—the phenomenal world of experience. Seeing the *Atman/Brahman* does not negate the ability to experience the phenomenal world, and the optical illusion analogy illustrates this in a way the snake-rope analogy does not. Further, the optical illusion analogy demonstrates a key aspect of Advaitin metaphysics and ontology. The ink and paper—*Atman/Brahman*—are the foundation for the existence and being of the optical illusion—the phenomenal world. The optical illusion does exist, and is not a 'false' appearance, though the optical illusion is a projection onto the ink and paper. Further, optical illusions reality is totally dependent on the ink and paper. In the same way, the phenomenal world is a projection onto the non-dual *Atman/Brahman*, but this does not mean that the phenomenal world is a 'false' experience. Finally, the optical illusion analogy demonstrates the Advaitin notion of subration. By knowing *Atman/Brahman*, one's *judgment* of the phenomenal world is altered, but it is one's judgment and valuation that is altered not the phenomenal world per se.

I do not believe that *moksha* itself is an experience; it can more accurately be described as an affective state that changes *how* one experiences. This change in how one experiences, combined with the knowledge of one's non-difference with *Brahman*, in turn affects one's being-in-the-world. It must be remembered that '[f]or Advaita, "oneness" holds only on the level of Brahman-experience and must never be confounded with the world of multiplicity. [...] Any confusion between the two is precisely the basic characteristic of the false superimposition (*adhyasa*), which is ignorance (*avidya*)' (Deutsch, 1973, p. 95). Yet, the knowledge of 'oneness' has a profound effect on how one is, and what one does.

I mentioned above that *moksha* leads to a compassionate and humble attitude toward the world, manifested through service. Because *jivan mukti* is a real possibility for Advaita Vedanta 'it would seem [that there is] a disintegration [of the self—as opposed to the Self or *Atman*—] although not an annihilation; rather, the boundaries of [one's] ego-self, which distinguish [one] from others, would simply dissolve' (Loy, 1982, p. 73). This being the case, one's natural tendencies for self-protection, et cetera, would be extended to include the entire world. Morally, the *jivan mukta* is beyond good and evil and moral judgment.

[H]owever, this does not mean that [the *jivan mukta*] could *in fact* perform certain actions that, from the lower standpoint, would be judged immoral [...] because the performance of these actions presupposes egoism, a desire for self-enhancement and the like, on the part of the actor—an egoism that results from a false identification of the self with the body, senses, mind, and so forth. And if such egoism or ignorance were present, then the actor could not in fact be the realized sage (Deutsch, 1973, p. 102).

Key features of *moksha* were identified by analyzing the names given to *moksha*, a description of the content or quality of *moksha*, and various analogies. Taken together I

believe that one can develop a clearer understanding of *moksha*. The key features that were identified were: a) *moksha* is psychological, not metaphysical or ontological. b) *moksha* is knowledge. c) *moksha* does not deny the phenomenal world. d) *moksha* is a state of being. e) *moksha* is not properly an experience, but an affective state. Simply put, *moksha* is a psychological, affective state.

The psychological, affective state of *moksha* is based on a complete appropriation of the knowledge of the way the world *really* is that enlightens and is joyful. While *moksha* itself is not an experience, the complete appropriation of knowledge permanently alters one's consciousness in such a way that one's experiences of the phenomenal world are changed. The change in one's experience of the phenomenal world is important, because it affirms the relative or 'phenomenal' reality of the world. Further there must be some "change" between pre- and post-*moksha* states for the concept of *moksha* to be at all meaningful. The change in one's phenomenal reality is therefore important, since from an ultimate perspective there is no change, and in fact no *moksha*. Finally, the change in how one experiences the world coupled with the knowledge of the identity of *Atman*—one's spiritual self—with *Brahman*—the Ultimate Reality and ground of all being—leads one to be more compassionate, humble, and, from a relative perspective, completely moral.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to try to come to some understanding of *moksha* in the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara and Gaudapada. I began by giving a brief overview of some important aspects of Advaitin metaphysics and ontology. I then critically evaluated

the problem of *jivan mukti*. It was shown that the problem only arises due to not fully appreciating or misunderstanding various aspects of Advaita Vedanta. In fact, not only is *jivan mukti* not a problem for Advaita Vedanta, but any understanding of *moksha* which is consistent with Advaita Vedanta, must be informed by the real possibility of *jivan mukti*. I then put forth what, I feel, is the best way to understand *moksha*. Through an analysis of the various names for *moksha* and a description of the content of *moksha*, and various analogies, certain key features of *moksha* were identified. Taken together, these features provide one with a more clear understanding of *moksha* that is consistent with the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara and Gaudapada. Finally, this article tried to meet Advaita Vedanta on its own terms and come to a clear and consistent understanding of *moksha*; I was therefore unconcerned with the truth or falsity of Advaita Vedanta, itself, nor was I concerned with whether *jivan mukti* or *moksha* are actually realizable possibilities.

References

- Comans, M. (1993). The Question of the Importance of “Samadhi” in Modern and Classical Advaita Vedanta. *Philosophy East and West*, 43, 19-38.
- Das, A. C. (1954). Advaita Vedanta and Liberation in Bodily Existence. *Philosophy East and West*, 4, 113-124.
- Deussen, P. (1998). *The System of the Vedanta*. Delhi, India: Low Price Publications.
- Deutsch, E. (1973). *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Devaraja, N. K. (1972). *An Introduction to Sankara’s Theory of Knowledge*. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Forsthoefel, T. (2002). Retrieving the Vivekacudamani: The Poles of Religious Knowing. *Philosophy East and West*, 52, 311-325.

Indich, W. (1980). Can Vedanta Provide a Meaningful Definition? *Philosophy East and West*, 30, 481-494.

Loy, D. (1982). Enlightenment in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 22, 65-74.

Loy, D. (1988). The Path of No-Path: Sankara and Dogen on the Paradox of Practice. *Philosophy East and West*, 38, 127-146.

(Swami) Nikhilananda. (1995). *The Mandukya Upanisad with Gaudapada's Karika and Sankara's Commentary*. Calcutta, India: Advaita Ashrama.

Rahula, W. (1974). *What the Buddha Taught*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Raju, P. T. (1971). *The Philosophical Traditions of India*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Shrivastava, S. N. L. (1957-8). Samkara on God, Religion, and Morality. *Philosophy East and West*, 7, 91-106.

Sinari, R. (1972). The Phenomenological Attitude in Samkara Vedanta. *Philosophy East and West*, 22, 281-290.

¹ Shankara, Sankara, and Samkara are various transliterations of a Sanskrit name and will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

² *moksha* and *moksa* are among the various transliterations of a Sanskrit term and will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

³ Shankara, Sankara, and Samkara are various transliterations of a Sanskrit name and will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

⁴ See Nikhilananda (1995), p. 127.

⁵ Emphasis added