

# Who is liberated? : the notion of liberation while alive in some selected Indian texts

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen  
Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société  
Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **64 (2010)**

Heft 2

PDF erstellt am: **27.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147849>

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# WHO IS LIBERATED? THE NOTION OF LIBERATION WHILE ALIVE IN SOME SELECTED INDIAN TEXTS

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## *Abstract*<sup>1</sup>

This article looks at three texts — the Mānava Dharmaśāstra, the Bhagavadgītā, and a passage from the Mahābhārata that records a discussion between two self-proclaimed liberated persons — and tries to determine whether liberation in them is thought to be possible while alive. It turns out that the first two of these texts have rather hazy notions of liberation and use the terms liberation and liberated ambiguously. The third one is categorical that liberation while alive is possible, but specifies that it concerns liberation from features such as attachment. A further comparison with Jainism and Buddhism brings to light that liberation from rebirth typically is not possible while one is alive, but liberation from certain cumbersome features is.

In this paper I will consider the notion of liberation while alive in a few selected texts. The first one is the Mānava Dharmaśāstra.

Manu 6.44 reads:

*kapālaṃ vṛkṣamūlāni kuśelam asahāyatā /  
samatā caiva sarvasmīn etan muktasya lakṣaṇam //*

This might be translated:

A bowl, the foot of a tree, a ragged piece of cloth, a solitary life, and equanimity towards all—these are the marks of a liberated person.

Olivelle, in his recent edition-cum-translation of the Mānava Dharmaśāstra (2005:150), translates it differently:

1 This is the text of a paper read at a seminar “Erlöst leben – oder sterben, um befreit zu werden?” held at the University of Zurich in May 2008.

A bowl, the foot of a tree, a ragged piece of cloth, a solitary life, and equanimity towards all—these are the marks of a *renouncer*. (my emphasis, JB)

Olivelle tries to justify the translation “renouncer” for Sanskrit *mukta* in a note (p. 290):

*renouncer*: although the term *mukta* means literally “a liberated man”, it is used here in the same way as *mokṣa* (see 1.114 n.) to refer to a wandering ascetic. Bühler’s “one who has attained liberation” and Doniger’s “one who is Freed” are, I think, overly literal. The discussion here is about asceticism and ascetics, not about liberation and liberated individuals.

In the note referred to in this note, Olivelle states (p. 243):

the Sanskrit term *mokṣa* literally means liberation. Manu, however, attaches a technical meaning to the term, using it as a synonym of renunciation and the fourth order of life dedicated exclusively to the search after personal liberation. The term *mokṣa* has the same meaning when used in the common compound *mokṣadharmā*, which is a section of the MBh and a distinct topic in medieval legal digests (*nibandha*). Manu makes a clear distinction between this renunciatory asceticism and the life of the vedic retiree, which he designates as *saṃnyāsa* (see 6.86 n.). This term, which is the common word for renunciation in later literature, is never used by Manu with that meaning. Bühler’s “(manner of gaining) final emancipation and (of) renouncing the world”, and Doniger’s “Freedom, and renunciation” ignore the technical use of these two terms here and in ch. 6. For a more detailed study, see Olivelle 1981.

The more detailed study here referred to is an article that appeared in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* in 1981, and which bears the title “Contributions to the semantic history of *saṃnyāsa*”. True to its title, it says a lot of interesting things about *saṃnyāsa* and its cognates, but virtually nothing about *mokṣa*. All it says about this topic is found in the following laconic statement (p. 270): “Manu deals with the fourth *āśrama*, i.e. renunciation, which he calls *mokṣa* [...], at 6.33–85.” It follows that the translation “renouncer” for Sanskrit *mukta*, and similarly the translation “renunciation” for Sanskrit *mokṣa*, are based on Olivelle’s *fiat*, not on any arguments that are presented or referred to in his book.<sup>2</sup>

*A priori* I feel doubtful about this reinterpretation of words which have a literal meaning that is as clear as water to all users of Sanskrit. As a matter of

2 Olivelle (2008:xxi f.) thinks that Aśvaghōṣa, too, uses the term *mokṣa* in the technical meaning given to it by Manu, and uses this as one of several arguments to show that Aśvaghōṣa knew Manu’s text. This argument may need reconsideration.

fact, a few verses earlier in the same passage Manu uses almost the same word: *vimukta* rather than *mukta*. This earlier verse, 6.40, speaks about the same person and calls him *dehād vimukta*. This time Olivelle translates “freed from his body”, and we cannot but agree. The obvious conclusion would be that, if our *mukta* is freed from his body, there is no clear reason not to consider him “freed, liberated” rather than a mere “renouncer”.

Olivelle does not draw this conclusion. The whole verse in which *dehād vimukta* occurs (6.40) reads:

*yasmād aṅv api bhūtānāṃ dvijān notpadyate bhayaṃ /  
tasya dehād vimuktasya bhayaṃ nāsti kutaś cana //*

Olivelle translates this as follows:

Because that twice born has not been the cause of even the slightest fear to creatures, he has nothing to fear from anyone *after he is freed from his body*. (emphasis mine, JB)

The English *after he is freed from his body* is somewhat ambiguous, but it seems clear that Olivelle understands the verse to refer to the state after death. In order to arrive at that interpretation, he subtly adjusts the translation to this understanding. A more literal interpretation of the verse would be:

Because that twice born is not the cause of even the slightest fear to creatures, he, being freed from the body, has nothing to fear from anyone.

In this more natural interpretation of the verse, the expression “being freed from the body” would seem to qualify the living ascetic. We will return to this issue below.

Olivelle’s biased interpretation of the passage becomes especially clear in his translation of verse 6.78. This verse reads:

*nadikūlaṃ yathā vṛkṣo vṛkṣaṃ vā śakunir yathā /  
tathā tyajann imaṃ dehaṃ kṛcchrād grāhād vimucyate //*

Olivelle translates:

When a tree falls from a river bank, the bird leaves the tree; when he abandons this body in like manner, he escapes the alligator’s painful grasp.

This translation suggests that liberation “from the alligator’s painful grasp” occurs at death, when the person concerned abandons his body. However, this translation is highly problematic, as Olivelle himself indicates in an accompanying note. The note reads (p. 291):

I think commentators and translators alike have failed to understand this simile, which, I must admit, has been cast in turbid syntax. All take the tree falling from the bank and the bird leaving the tree as two independent similes. That is very unlikely, given that the first foot concludes with *vrkṣa* (“tree”), and the second foot begins with it, indicating that the latter picks up the theme of the former. Further, they take *grāha* (which I think means alligator rather than shark) only with the giving up of the body in the second half of the verse. I think the last foot is connected to both the simile and the ascetic giving up the body. The meaning then seems to be that a bird flying off before the fall of the tree escapes the alligator’s grasp in the river. Likewise, when an ascetic abandons the body before its natural fall at death (which is here compared to the fall of the tree), he escapes the grasp of the alligator, probably Yama (6.61). This fits in nicely with the theme of the preceding verse, namely, that an ascetic must abandon the body voluntarily.

With all respect to Olivelle’s attempts to make sense of this verse, one does have the feeling that his efforts were not necessary, for the syntax of this verse is far from turbid. It is turbid if one wishes to understand it in Olivelle’s manner, but if one does not, it can be translated without difficulty, as follows:

Just as a tree abandons the bank of a river, or a bird abandons a tree, abandoning in the same way this body he is liberated from the alligator’s painful grasp.

Here the person concerned is described as abandoning his body. As a result, we may assume, he is liberated from his body. The precise meaning of abandoning one’s body, and of being liberated from one’s body, is open to debate, but there is no compelling reason to believe that it is to be identified with death. Indeed, “abandoning the body”—the Sanskrit term used is *kāyotsarga*—is one of the six obligatory duties for members of the Jaina mendicant order while they are alive.<sup>3</sup>

It appears, then, that several of the problems mentioned by Olivelle turn out, at closer inspection, to be no problems at all. The words *mokṣa* and *mukta* are not used in a technical meaning in the Mānava Dharmaśāstra, the syntax of verse 6.78 is not turbid, and verse 6.40 can be interpreted more literally. However, the removal of these problems leads inescapably to the conclusion that Manu refers to living persons as being liberated. The marks of such a living

3 Jaini, 1979:189 f.

liberated person, moreover, are a bowl, the foot of a tree, a ragged piece of cloth, a solitary life, and equanimity towards all; he is not the cause of even the slightest fear to creatures, and he abandons his body, which probably means that he engages in ascetic practices of a certain sort.

It is yet understandable why Olivelle went a long way to prove that living liberated persons are not recognized by Manu. The way the presumably liberated person is described in the relevant section of the Mānava Dharmaśāstra (6.33–86), which is the section that deals with the fourth stage of life, is confusing or worse. Rather than describing a person who has reached his goal, it characterizes him as setting his mind on *mokṣa* (*mano mokṣe niveśayet*; Manu 6. 35, 36), as desiring *mokṣa* (*mokṣam icchan*; Manu 6. 37). This suggests that the liberated person is not completely liberated after all. The section is furthermore full of rules which the presumably liberated person must follow. Once again, one gains the impression that a state to be attained is talked about, rather than a state that has been attained. And to top it all, the section points out in verse 58 that “even an ascetic who has freed himself is shackled by what is received with a show of reverence” (cd: *abhipūjitalābhais tu yatir mukto 'pi badhyate*; tr. Olivelle). In other words, the liberation Manu talks about is relative, even confused. He calls “liberated” a person who strives for liberation, treats the liberated person as someone who must be told what to do, and specifies that being liberated is no guarantee against being shackled.<sup>4</sup>

This, I think, is the conclusion we have to draw from Manu’s references to liberation: Manu has a rather hazy, perhaps self-contradictory, notion of what liberation is. We can try to bring consistency into his statements by deciding that certain words are not used in their ordinary meanings, that certain verses must be interpreted in artificial ways. This will only hide from us that Manu’s verses do not present a clear and coherent notion of what liberation is.

Perhaps this should not surprise us. Manu himself does not believe in liberation. For him the state of householder (*gṛhastha*) is the best from among the four stages of life (6.89). He pronounces in favour of something he calls *vedasaṃnyāsa* which leads to the *paramā gati* (6.88, 93), the highest state, but there is no hint that this highest state is liberation. To this must be added that it is rather tricky for a lawgiver to accept the existence of living and yet irreversibly liberated people. Such people would obviously fall in a category totally different from everyone else. They would not have to follow rules, and law books would

4 This manner of speaking also occurs elsewhere in the text, in connection with death, for example; so Manu 7.143d: *mṛtaḥ sa na sa jīvati*.

have no advice to give them. It would have been more convenient for Manu if Olivelle had been right, if one could say that every liberated person is a dead person. Manu does not say so, as we have seen. He acknowledges the existence of living liberated people, but in a way takes their liberation away from them by subordinating them to his rules, and by pointing out that their state is not irreversible. This suggests that the belief in the existence of liberated people in Manu's time was wide-spread, too wide-spread to be simply ignored.

After the Mānava Dharmaśāstra, let us consider the Bhagavadgītā. Here we can follow the lead of Peter Schreiner, who brought out a study and translation of this text in 1991. In the introduction he states (p. 30):

Die Bhagavad-Gītā stellt sich [...] als ein Text dar, der den Übergang vom Ideal des *videhamukta* ("Entkörper-Erlösten") zum Ideal des "Lebend-Erlösten" (*jīvanmukta*) markiert.

Schreiner argues that the Yoga which the Bhagavadgītā modifies and replaces strove for liberation at the moment of death. He cites in this context one verse in particular, which refers to a specific Yogic state and then continues (Bhag 2.72cd):

He who abides therein also at the moment of death, he reaches the *brahmanirvāṇa* (*sthitvāsyām antakāle 'pi brahmanirvāṇam ṛcchati*).

According to Schreiner, this notion of liberation at death changes in the Bhagavadgītā: "der Erlösungsbegriff [konnte] umgedeutet werden zu einer rein geistigen, rein psychischen Angelegenheit, zu einer Haltung, die man auch im Leben und in der Welt verwirklichen konnte" (p. 30).

If I understand this passage correctly, Schreiner claims that the Bhagavadgītā accepts, at least in some of its passages, the ideal of the *jīvanmukta*, the person liberated while alive. He does not say that this term is actually used in the Bhagavadgītā, and indeed it is not. But if he is right, we would expect that the Bhagavadgītā uses the expression "liberated" or some similar term in connection with people who are still alive. Unfortunately Schreiner gives no concrete references to passages that do so; to my knowledge no unambiguous passages to that effect exist. Schreiner does speak about *bhakti* "teilhabende Hingabe an eine Gottheit" and the role that Kṛṣṇa plays in it, and then states (p. 33):



Die Teilhabe an Kṛṣṇa ahmt also einen Yoga-Weg nach, welcher vermutlich nicht mehr ausschliesslich als ein Weg völliger und endgültiger Entsagung (mit dem Ziel erlösenden Sterbens) angesehen wurde; mit dem Ideal der Bhakti setzt sich die Vorstellung der Erlösung bei Lebzeiten endgültig durch. Thesenhaft vereinfacht: Verkörpert der *yukta* (“Geeinte”) das Ideal jener Erlösungslehren, denen Erlösung nur nach dem Sterben denkbar war, so belegt der *bhakta* (“der hingebungsvoll Teilhabende”) den vollzogenen Übergang zur Lehre von der Erlösung bei Lebzeiten.

I am not sure why this passage should be applicable to the Bhagavadgītā. Recall, to begin with, Bhag 2.72, which we considered above, and which stated that he who abides in a specific Yogic state also at the moment of death reaches the *brahmanirvāṇa*. Schreiner cited this verse as being an illustration of the Yogic belief in liberation at death. However, the fulfilment of *bhakti* comes at death, too, judging by Bhag 8.5:

He who dies remembering only me at the moment of death, when abandoning his body, he will go to my state of being; there is no doubt about this.

*antakāle ca mām eva smaran muktvā kalevaram /  
yaḥ prayāti sa madbhāvaṃ yāti nāsty atra saṃśayaḥ //*

What is more, I have the impression that the Bhagavadgītā speaks about liberation and the liberated person in the same vague and somewhat inconsistent manner as the Mānava Dharmaśāstra. Consider Bhag 5.28:

The sage who controls his senses, mind and intellect, who is intent on liberation, who has no desire, fear or wrath, he is really eternally liberated.

*yatendriyamanobuddhir munir mokṣaparāyaṇaḥ /  
vigatecchābhayakrodho yaḥ sadā mukta eva saḥ //*

Here the person who is “intent on liberation” (*mokṣaparāyaṇaḥ*) is, in the very same breath, characterized as being “eternally liberated” (*sadā mukta eva*). The similarity with Manu’s characterization of the liberated person as “setting his mind on liberation” and as “desiring liberation” is striking.

The general presupposition in the Bhagavadgītā, however, would seem to be that liberation takes place at death. Consider Bhag 5.23:

He who can in this world, before he leaves his body, bear the impulse that arises from desire and wrath, he is controlled (*yukta*), he is a happy man.

*śaknotīhaiva yaḥ soḍhuṃ prāk śarīravimokṣaṇāt  
kāmakrodhodbhavaṃ vegaṃ sa yuktaḥ sa sukhī naraḥ*



Nothing would have been easier here than to read *muktaḥ* (“liberated”) for *yuktaḥ* (“controlled”). But this is not even recorded as a variant reading in the critical edition of the text. This suggests that life before death is not the time during which one can be liberated.<sup>5</sup>

There are many more passages that might have to be considered. I will not do so here. Let me simply state that I have found no indications in the Bhagavadgītā that compel us to believe that this text accepts the notion of liberation while alive. A number of passages suggest the opposite. Others betray a rather imprecise employment of the words *mukta* and *mokṣa*.

The two texts which we have considered so far—the Mānava Dharmaśāstra and the Bhagavadgītā—suggest that there was some imprecision in the use of the terms “liberation” and “liberated”, at least in Brahmanical circles, around the time when these texts were composed. This should not really surprise us. The Sanskrit verb *muc-* and its derivatives are very common and can be used in contexts that have nothing to do with high spiritual goals. One can be liberated from many things. The question “liberated from what?” was therefore as essential to the early Indians as it is for modern research. We are primarily interested in liberation from *saṃsāra*, from the cycle of renewed births. It is therefore legitimate to ask how one could possibly be alive *and* liberated from the cycle of rebirths. A living being is by definition in his cycle of rebirths. For some this may be their last birth, but this does not change the fact that it is one in their series of births and rebirths. Understood in this way, *liberation while alive* is a contradiction in terms.<sup>6</sup>

5 Nelson (1996:21) interprets Bhag 5.23 and 5.28 together: “*Bhagavad Gītā* 5.28 tells us that the ascetic who has controlled his senses and attained identity with Brahman is eternally liberated (*śadā mukta eva*). This is possible, we read at 5.23, ‘prior to release from the body (*prāk śarīra-vimokṣaṇāt*).’ This interpretation leaves out of consideration inconvenient elements.

6 This was already pointed out in the invitation to this meeting: “wenn Befreiung eine Befreiung vom immer wiederkehrenden Leben (*saṃsāra*) ist, dann dürfte es eine Befreiung im Leben (*jīvanmukti*) eigentlich nicht geben.” Cf. Sprockhoff, 1962:151: “Wenn das gegenwärtige Dasein in der Welt des Saṃsāra auf den Wirkungen des Karman beruht und als Genuss dieser Wirkungen, als ‘Vergeltung an dem Täter der Werke’ (*kriyā-kāraṇa-phala*) bezeichnet wird, wenn ferner die körperliche Existenz, die wir notwendig im Begriffe des ‘Lebens’ mitzudenken haben, ein ‘Komplex von Organen des Wirkens’ (*kārya-karaṇa-saṅghāta*) genannt wird – wie soll es dann eine ‘Erlösung bei Lebzeiten’ geben, wenn die Erlösung als eine ‘Befreiung’ vom Saṃsāra definiert wird, dem eben diese wichtigsten Faktoren des physischen Daseins unterliegen?”

This observation has to be qualified. It is conceivable that certain people are alive, but have undergone inner transformations which guarantee that they will never be born again. They are like the prisoner who knows that he will be freed soon. They are not liberated in the strict sense, but they are *as good as liberated*. If the transformations they have undergone are moreover irreversible, if nothing whatsoever could ever undo them, then the expression “liberated while alive” becomes understandable, though strictly speaking still metaphorical.<sup>7</sup>

However, the term “liberated” can also be used with regard to features that bind a person to this world. He can then be liberated from these features, and therefore presumably certain of liberation from this world after death, while yet living in this world. With this in mind I propose to consider a third passage, a conversation recorded in the Mahābhārata (12.308); it has recently been studied by James Fitzgerald (2003). This conversation calls itself, in Fitzgerald’s translation, “a conversation between a man who had gained Absolute Freedom in the midst of the royal parasol and such things and the woman who had gained Absolute Freedom with the triple staff of renunciation”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, it opposes two persons who are both convinced that they are, at the moment they confront each other, liberated.

The two participants in this conversation are King Janaka of Mithilā and a nun called Sulabhā. Both of them have serious doubts about the liberated state of the other. It is not our task to decide who of the two is “really” liberated; the epic appears to opt for Sulabhā. We are rather more interested in the notion of liberation that the two accept. It turns out, as a matter of fact, that the disagreement between the two does not concern the question what liberation is. They agree on the features *from which* a liberated person is believed to be freed.

There is a lot of talk of freedom and freed persons in this conversation, and it is not always clear what the protagonists are supposed to be free from. However, some passages are explicit in this regard. King Janaka describes himself as “freed from passion” (*muktarāga* (28)), “freed from attachments” (*muktasaṅgin* (31), *muktasaṅga* (37), *saṅgā[t]* [...] *mucyate* (44)). He is apparently also free

7 I cannot deal with the (primarily Advaita) notion according to which liberation is really beginningless and only needs to be realized. It is however to be noted that the expressions *jīvanmukta* and *jīvanmukti* flourished primarily, if not exclusively, in such intellectual surroundings.

8 Mhbh 12.308.19: *saṁvādaḥ* [...] *chattrādiṣu vimuktasya muktāyās ca tridaṇḍake*.

from the pairs of opposites, about which it is stated: “That transcends all the different stages and is Perfection.”<sup>9</sup>

Information about liberation can also be extracted from Sulabhā’s criticism of the king:<sup>10</sup>

Why, King of Mithilā, does someone who is Freed from the pairs of opposites (such as, “This is mine and this is not mine”) ask “Who are you, whose are you, and where do you come from?” O lord of the earth, what indication is there that one is Freed when he treats some as an enemy, others as allies, and others as neutrals in victory, in alliances, and in war? [...] What indication is there that one is Freed when he does not see the sameness in kindness and unkindness, in weakness and in strength? So you are not Freed, and the conceit you may have in believing you have Absolute Freedom should be suppressed by your friends, as medicines might be used for someone who is unconscious. O suppressor of your enemies, if one looks at these points of attachment here and those there and sees them within himself, what indication is there then that he is Freed?

The liberated person is here, once again, characterized as being free from the pairs of opposites, and free from attachments, as seeing the sameness in kindness and unkindness, in weakness and in strength (more literally perhaps: as having the same eye with regard to kindness and unkindness, with regard to weakness and strength). Sulabhā further points out that a king is always dependent upon others, suggesting that the liberated person is independent. Since the liberated person is the opposite of those who are bound by attachment and aversion (*abhi-śaṅgāvarodhābhyām baddhaḥ* (166)), he is not so bound. Among the further characteristics that we can cull from Sulabhā’s words, we find that liberated persons have no attachment to their own body (*svadehe nābhiśaṅga[ḥ]* (162)), that they are, once again, free from attachment (*muktasaṅga* (164)), and that they have overcome the bonds that fettered them (*pāsān ākrāmya* (164)).

It seems, then, that King Janaka and the nun Sulabhā agree on the main characteristics of a liberated person. Such a person is primarily and essentially

9 Mhbh 12.308.30cd: *mahad dvaṃdvapramokṣāya sā siddhir yā vayotigā.*

10 Mhbh 12.308.127b-132: *idaṃ me syād idaṃ neti dvaṃdvair muktasya maithila / kāsī kasya kuto veti vacane kiṃ prayojanam // ripau mitre 'tha madhyasthe vijaye saṃdhivigrahe / kṛtavān yo mahīpāla kiṃ tasmin muktalakṣaṇam // [...] // priye daivāpriye caiva durbale balavatya api / yasya nāsti samaṃ cakṣuḥ kiṃ tasmin muktalakṣaṇam // tad amuktasya te mokṣe yo 'bhimāno bhaven nṛpa / suhr̥dbhiḥ sa nivāryas te vicittasyeva bheṣajaiḥ // tāni tāny anusaṃdṛśya saṅgasthānāny ariṃdama / ātmanātmani saṃpaśyēt kiṃ tasmin muktalakṣaṇam //*

liberated from attachment, from the pairs of opposites, from aversion. The cycle of rebirths does not, or hardly,<sup>11</sup> enter into the picture.

Toward the end of her discourse, Sulabhā makes a remark that may be revealing. She says: “Someone who is already Freed does not become Free; someone who is already at peace does not become peaceful.”<sup>12</sup> This remark, I propose, is directed against the attitude that finds expression in Manu’s observation to the extent that the liberated person sets his mind on liberation or desires liberation, and in the statement of the Bhagavadgītā according to which the liberated person is intent on liberation. It appears to be directed against all those who confuse *striving for* liberation with *being* liberated. Sulabhā considers herself as *being* liberated and not as *striving for* liberation. She obviously considers herself liberated while alive. When she has to specify what she is liberated from, she stipulates that she is liberated from attachments and the like, not from the cycle of rebirths.

All the three texts we have considered so far are Brahmanical texts. I have argued elsewhere that Brahmanism borrowed the notion of liberation from religious currents that originated outside the realm where it held sway. It adopted this notion with all that came with it, adapting it to its own needs and requirements.<sup>13</sup> Since some of the currents that were originally independent of Brahmanism have survived, it will be interesting to see what position they, or at least one of them, take with regard to liberation and death.

One of these currents is Jainism. Its founder—or more correctly, its most recent “fordmaker” (*tīrthāṅkara*)—was sure that he would never be born again. He was, in that sense, sure of his forthcoming liberation. But was he liberated at the time of his last earthly existence, say from the time of his enlightenment onward?

The answer provided by the Jaina tradition is a clear *no*. This is how Paul Dundas explains the difference between liberation and enlightenment (2002: 104):

- 11 Mhbh 12.308.32 states that “people’s deeds produce their coming to be again” (*janayati* [...] *karma nṛṇām* [...] *punarbhavam*), which may hint at the effect of liberation on rebirth.
- 12 Mhbh 12.308.188: *mukto na mucyate yaś ca śānto yaś ca na śāmyati*.
- 13 Bronkhorst, 2007. In spite of claims to the contrary, the idea of liberation took time to settle in Brahmanism: “References to derivatives of the verb *muc* are surprisingly rare in the early Upaniṣads. They appear mostly in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka and Kaṭha, and many of the usages that exist do not suggest Advaitic liberation.” (Fort, 1998:30).

Spiritual deliverance (*mokṣa*) is defined in simple terms by Umāsvāti ([Tattvārtha Sūtra] 10.5)<sup>14</sup> as release from all karma. This should in its finality be clearly distinguished from the attainment of enlightenment which, after the cultivation of morally positive attitudes, the practice of austerity and the gradual suppression of negative discriminative mental processes, involves the uprooting of deluding karma which is then succeeded by the removal of the remaining three harming karmas, thus liberating the innate qualities, such as omniscience, of the *jīva*. Enlightenment, however, does not of itself entail death, for the operation of the four non-harming karmas is still unimpaired, with life and name karma guaranteeing the continuation of embodied existence and experience karma ensuring bodily sensations, although the latter point was a source of sectarian dispute for the Digambaras who denied that a *kevalin*'s feeling karma could bring about an effect such as hunger. The enlightened person, whether form-maker or *kevalin*, may therefore spend a considerable period after enlightenment engaging in mental and physical activities such as walking, preaching and meditation. However, no new karma is bound by these activities nor is it possible in this state to carry out acts of violence, even involuntarily.

It is clear from this passage that the enlightened Jaina sage, the *kevalin*, is alive but not liberated. The liberated Jaina sage is called *siddha*, but he is not embodied and is therefore dead from a physiological point of view: the *siddha* resides in the realm of the *siddhas* “at the top of the universe where it will exist perpetually without any further rebirth in a disembodied and genderless state of perfect joy, energy, consciousness and knowledge” (p. 105).

The Jaina tradition, as can be seen from the above, accepts the existence of two different but clearly defined and irreversible transitions: the moment of enlightenment and the moment of liberation. The second of these two coincides with physical death. If one is to follow this scheme, strictly speaking the only way to call people *liberated* even though they, or rather their bodies, are still alive, is by downplaying the importance of the second transition, death. This is what Advaita Vedānta in particular appears to have done. Śaṅkara on Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.6, for example, states: “For the knower who dies there is no change of condition—no state different from that experienced while living.”<sup>15</sup> I will not say more about Advaita, whose ideas about *jīvanmukti* have been studied by others,<sup>16</sup> but will very briefly touch upon the question how early Buddhism considered these two transitions: enlightenment and death.

This is not the occasion for an in-depth study of the notion of “liberation” in Buddhism, so that some impressions must suffice. The term “liberated”

14 This is 10.3 in Tatia's translation (1994).

15 *na hi viduṣo mṛtasya bhāvāntarāpattir jīvato 'nyo bhāv[ah]*; tr. Nelson, 1996:24.

16 E.g., Sprockhoff, 1964; Nelson, 1996; Fort, 1996; 1998.



(*vimutta*) is often used in the Pāli canon, very often in connection with the mind (*citta, cetā*).<sup>17</sup> It is most typically used with reference to people who are still alive, perhaps never with reference to people who have died. But the freedom referred to does not normally seem to concern rebirth, but rather the taints (*āsava*): The Buddha and the Arhats have been able to free themselves from those taints. This would allow us to say that the Buddha and the Arhats were liberated in life, but only if we specify what they were liberated from: the taints, or perhaps something else.

However, no overhasty conclusions should be drawn from this. The precise significance of the first transition, the one associated with enlightenment, was not altogether clear to the early Buddhists, because a debate took place whether the state of Arhat was really irreversible, whether an Arhat could still fall back into the ordinary state of being.<sup>18</sup> With this vital issue pending, it is not obvious that an Arhat is really and fully liberated from the cycle of rebirths. Some schools also maintained that the two transitions—enlightenment and death—coincided in the case of certain Arhats, the so-called “level-headed” (*samaśīrṣin*) Arhats.<sup>19</sup>

The precise significance of the second transition, the one at death, is not easy to determine either. The Buddha is believed to have refused to answer the question whether a Buddha (*tathāgata*) exists after death. This is the last of the four so-called “unexplained” (Pāli *avyākata*, Sanskrit *avyākṛta*) questions, to which the Buddha always reacts by remaining silent.<sup>20</sup> It is safe to claim that the Buddha, or any Arhat for that matter, was not believed to be reborn after the life in which he attained Arhatship, but this is a negative observation. The early Buddhist texts add no positive information to add to this.

It is common in scholarly literature to distinguish between *nirvāṇa* and *parinirvāṇa*. The Buddha is supposed to have reached the former while in his thirties, the second at death in his early eighties. Indeed, *parinirvāṇa* is often used to refer to the death of the Buddha. This does not, however, appear to be justified. The term *parinirvāṇa* is used, in early Buddhist literature and in certain Mahāyāna Sūtras, almost as a synonym of *nirvāṇa*.<sup>21</sup> More precisely perhaps, as

17 Note that “[i]n many [...] places in the Suttapiṭaka the verb *vi + muc* is attested as a textual variant for *adhi + muc*, and vice versa. In the places where the verbs are alternatives, they refer to a state of concentration rather than liberation.” (Wynne, 2007:79)

18 Bareau, 1957:244 f.

19 Bareau, 1957:248 f.

20 E.g. SN II p. 222 f. Cf. Oetke, 1994:88 f.

21 Thomas, 1947; Nattier, 2003:148–49 n. 26.

Thomas pointed out (1947:295), “*Nirvāṇa* expresses the state, *parinirvāṇa* the attaining of the state, or in Pāli, he *parinibbāyati*, attains the state, and then *nibbāyati*, he is in the state expressed by *nibbāna*.”

This is not the occasion to elaborate these observations, nor to comment on them. It is time to turn to the theme of this meeting: “Erlöst leben – oder sterben, um befreit zu werden?” Even our superficial discussion of a few texts and currents suggests that this formulation of the question is too broad to allow of a meaningful answer without additional specifications.

It is important to know, when the early texts speak of liberation, what the person concerned is supposed to be liberated from. If it is from the cycle of re-births, liberation is likely to coincide with death, for the simple reason that the person remains part of this cycle until then. Jainism takes this position, in spite of the fact that its sages may have entered long before their death stages from which there is no return and from which liberation is guaranteed.

Liberation can also be thought of as freedom from something else, say attachment. In such cases liberation in life becomes conceivable. It goes without saying that being liberated while alive, among those who believe in it, is an enviable qualification, which almost predictably led to competition between claimants and their followers. King Janaka and the nun Sulabhā illustrate this. Lawgivers, on the other hand, felt no doubt hesitant to admit the existence of people who do not fit into any legal category, and who are not bound by any rules. The early Buddhists had second thoughts about assigning the irrevocable title of Arhat to people still alive, and therefore considered the possibility that Arhats, too, might fall back. We have seen that Manu and the Bhagavadgītā, though not denying the possibility of liberation in life, reduce it in practice to the solemn pursuit of a high but distant aim.

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*Abbreviations:*

- Bhag Bhagavadgītā (ed. BORI, 1968)  
 BORI Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona  
 Manu Manusmṛti (ed. Olivelle)