Living Liberation in Opposing Theologies: The End Shapes the Means

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ABSTRACT

Questions concerning spiritual liberation have animated religious thinkers across generations. While the idea of post-mortem salvation is prevalent amongst many religions, the notion of being liberated whilst living is less common though still very theologically profound. This essay aims to critically compare and contrast the views on jīvan-mukti, the concept of pre-mortem liberation, of two towering figures in Hindu theology, Śaṅkara and Svāminārāyaṇa, in relation to their beliefs on praxis. I will undertake this comparative study through a textual analysis of their (Sanskrit and Gujarati) primary works. It provides a way into a complex conversation on how soteriology, particularly one’s position on the nature of jīvan-mukti, can shape the praxis of a religious tradition.

Keywords: Hinduism, Living-Liberation / Jīvan-Mukti, Soteriology, Praxis / Sādhanā, Connectional Theology, Śaṅkara, Svāminārāyaṇa / Swaminarayan
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INTRODUCTION

The quest for immortality has been a vital and pervasive feature of human life throughout history, from the dark recesses of humanity’s earliest cultures, to modern society with all its technologically advanced trappings. The notion of ‘liberation’ and ‘salvation’ has, unsurprisingly then, occupied the heart of theological enquiry for millennia. Religious traditions, ranging from Christianity to Buddhism, Islam to Hinduism, have been intrigued and gripped by the possibility of transcending the finite to reach the infinite.

My enquiry is based on the idea of being able to experience the infinite and attain liberation whilst alive. Within Hinduism, this is called jīvan-mukti, meaning ‘living liberation’, which stands in contrast to the idea of videha-mukti, literally meaning ‘liberation devoid of a body.’ In order to carry out this study on jīvan-mukti,’ I will call upon two thinkers of Hinduism’s Vedānta tradition: 1) Śaṅkara, the prolific eighth-century theologian who established the Advaita (non-dualism) school of thought; and 2) Svāminārāyaṇa, an early-nineteenth-century theologian, revered as God by his followers, who founded the eponymous Svāminārāyaṇa tradition.

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Śankara’s theology is radically different to that of Svāminārāyaṇa’s. Despite this polarity in their theologies and doctrinal beliefs, Śankara and Svāminārāyaṇa both agree on the existence of the āhāv-mukti state as a part of their soteriologies, albeit with different conceptualizations of it. This paper shall explore how these variations in the doctrine of āhāv-mukti in two opposing theologies lead to significant differences in sādhanā. Sādhanā, otherwise known as praxis, is the full gamut of means by which one can rise above or break through bondage in order to achieve mukti (liberation). The enquiry thus focuses on how the end shapes the means, and how theory dictates practice.

**TERMINOLOGY: SALVATION OR LIBERATION?**

First, very briefly, it is important for us to distinguish between ‘liberation’ and ‘salvation.’ While the notion of salvation in Christian theology is the comparative concept to liberation in Hindu theology, there is an important difference in the meaning and implications of the two terms. The former implies being ‘saved,’ whereas the latter implies being ‘freed.’ Although the difference is subtle, this difference in the terms reflects fundamental doctrinal differences in the points of departure within each theology. Within Christianity, all humans are bound in original sin. Irenaeus of Lyon summarizes the human condition for Christian theology by stating, “For we were tied and bound in sin, we were born in sin, and we live under the dominion of death.” In contrast, within Hinduism, the soul is innately pure and eternal, therefore rather than being saved from ‘damnation’ it is being freed from a perpetual cycle of life and death. This discussion of comparative theology would require another study in itself. For the purposes of this study, however, I will be using the term ‘liberation’ as a translation for mukti or mokṣa, but will continue using the word ‘soteriology’ when looking at the field of ‘liberation.’

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SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

Let us now justify the significance of this essay for Religious Studies, which is firstly based on the importance of the concept of mukti and, more specifically, jīvan-mukti. The idea of mokṣa or mukti is present in most Hindu traditions, however, there is no consensus on the conceptualization of liberation. Nonetheless, across these traditions, the notion of mukti certainly holds a significant position. Deussen, in describing Indian philosophy writes, “No people on earth took religion so seriously, none toiled on the way to salvation as they did,” whilst Dasgupta has declared it as “the pivot on which all systems of Indian philosophy revolve.”

Within Hindu soteriology, and perhaps in theological discussion more generally, the doctrine of jīvan-mukti is one of even greater theological and religious significance because it suggests that a human can have one foot in time and one foot in eternity. The prospect itself is gripping. Who would not be captivated by the idea of experiencing the infinite within the borders of the finite? In addition to the inherent attraction of the concept, because the doctrine of jīvan-mukti has deep roots within foundational Hindu texts such as the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-gītā, and Brahma-sūtras, it provides us with a fascinating topic of theological discussion to further understand Hindu thought.

The selection of the two figures, although based around our key thesis question, also adds considerably to the theological merit of this study. Śaṅkara has written extensively on jīvan-mukti, consequently the Advaita view on it has dominated the discussion within modern scholarship. Svāminārāyaṇa’s conception of jīvan-mukti, provides an interesting comparison because his theology is significantly different to that of

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4 Surdendranath Dasgupta, Yoga Philosophy in Relation to Other Systems of Indian Thought (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1930), 316.
Śankara’s Advaita, whilst he is in agreement with Śankara on the existence of *jīvan-mukti*. Since no such specific study has been conducted on Svāminārāyaṇa’s position on *jīvan-mukti* this work can serve as a fresh contribution to this field within the wider Hindu religious discourse.

In her chapter on “Living Liberation in Comparative Perspective,” Patricia Mumme provides a typology of strong, medium, and weak *jīvan-mukti* positions within different Hindu traditions. She concludes her chapter by writing, “Modern Hindu philosophers and recent devotional movements started by contemporary Gurus would also be fertile ground to test the extensibility of the body of theory presented here.” Thus, through this study I respond to her call for further scholarship. The Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya is a popular and rapidly growing Hindu tradition in both India and the diaspora, with large, traditional stone temples in Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Robbinsville, and London. Rachel Dwyer describes it as the “dominant form of British Hinduism.” This study will thus also help make sense of this new popular religious tradition and its less-known theological system by situating it amidst and comparing it to another popular traditional school of Hinduism.

**SOURCES OF STUDY**

To conduct this study, I shall be drawing upon the primary works of our two thinkers. For Śankara, I will use his commentaries on the *Prasthānātrayī*. The *Prasthānātrayī* are the canonical texts of the Vedanta school, namely the *Brahma-sūtras, Upaniṣads, and Bhagavad-gītā*. Svāminārāyaṇa himself did not write a commentary on the *Prasthānātrayī*, but in his discourses and letters he extensively refers to

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and provides his own interpretations of several of the canonical texts’ verses. The principal text I shall use to understand Svāminārāyaṇa’s theology is the Vacanāmrut, a collection of Svāminārāyaṇa’s discourses compiled by his senior contemporary disciples. Sadhu Paramtattvadas explains, “the Vacanāmrut is the principal theologico-philosophical text of the Vedāntic tradition he propounded, and, in effect, constitutes a natural, albeit indirect, commentary on the [Prasthānatrayī] triad.” Whilst the study of Svāminārāyaṇa’s theology presented here is principally based on Svāminārāyaṇa’s primary works, there is debate amongst several denominations over how his texts are to be understood. The interpretations of his works in this essay will be based on the BAPS understanding of his texts.8

**STRUCTURE**

Having examined the theological significance of the project, it would be of value to briefly introduce the forthcoming three sections as a roadmap for the reader. In general, it splits the fundamental thesis question into three premises:

- Section 1 will focus on theology. It will substantiate the first premise of the fundamental thesis question: “Śaṅkara’s theology is radically different to that of Svāminārāyaṇa’s” and will provide a context for the forthcoming discussion on liberation.

- Section 2 will explore our second premise: “Despite such a polarity in their theologies, Śaṅkara and Svāminārāyaṇa agree on the notion of jīvan-mukti, albeit with different conceptualizations of it.”

- Section 3 is where the study reaches its climax, asking the key question of how the different conceptions of living liberation impact the way sādhanā (praxis) is crafted in the two theologies. In other

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8 Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (commonly abbreviated to BAPS), is a denomination within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition that propounds the ‘Aksara-Puruṣottama’ theology.
words, how does the end craft the means? This final section will aim to unearth the deeper conceptual continuities.

Having thus built the foundation of our study and clarified the issues at stake, we can now begin our study in earnest.

1) JUXTAPOSING DOCTRINES

We begin with our first topic, theology. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the theologies of the two thinkers under study and display how they oppose each other. Considering the enormity of their theological thought, emphasis will be placed on the elements that will prove to be most relevant to our forthcoming discussion of jīvan-mukti and praxis.

Śaṅkara

Śaṅkara propounds the ‘Advaita’ system, an ultimate ontological non-duality. His theology can be epitomized in the famous statement from the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, “Brahma satyam jagat mithyā,” meaning “Brahman is truth, the world is unreal.” Brahman refers to the ultimate reality. It is the most appropriate analogue to the word God, as it encompasses the full gamut of study on the ultimate existential reality. Śaṅkara asserts the existence of only one singular entity, Brahman. As he writes in the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, Brahman is “one without a second.” This Brahman is nirguṇa, meaning it possesses no attributes or form. As Śaṅkara states, Brahman “is devoid of all form, colour and so on, and does not in any way possess form.” It is an absolute, non-dual reality that transcends space and time.

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11 Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya 3.2.14, in Rangaswami, Roots of Vedanta, 120.
Such a belief in the ultimate non-dual reality of Brahman means Śāṅkara is not a realist. He plainly declares, “this universe is unreal.”\textsuperscript{12} The multiplicity of individual selves is simply an illusion. He writes, “unity alone is the highest truth and all that multiplicity is conjured by false ignorance.”\textsuperscript{13} Śāṅkara holds that the objective of the \textit{Upaniṣads} is to show the identity of the ātman (the individual soul) as Brahman. Śāṅkara writes, the \textit{Upaniṣads} reveal “the supreme self [Brahman] as non-separate from the [individual] soul.”\textsuperscript{14} He prioritizes verses such as “That you art” \textit{[tat tvam asi]} in his reading of the Vedānta canon. For Śāṅkara, the ātman is not ‘like’ Brahman, nor is it a ‘reflection’ of Brahman, and nor is it ‘one’ with Brahman; it simply is Brahman.

If Śāṅkara takes such an anti-realist stance in not according the world or the individual souls any ontological existence, it raises the question as to why we experience such a multiplicity and plurality. The answer lies in Śāṅkara’s explanation of ‘superimposition’ and \textit{avidyā} (ignorance). He gives an example of someone mistakenly perceiving a rope to be a snake. Because of ignorance, the snake has erroneously been ‘superimposed’ on to the rope.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, the world is unreal; it has been superimposed on to Brahman. Śāṅkara writes that people “owing to the false notion in their minds, superimpose the ideas of existence, non-existence, etc. on the Self [Brahman], which is not Itself superimposed and is... without a second.”\textsuperscript{16}

We have mistaken temporal elements for Brahman. The cause of such a superimposition is \textit{avidyā}, primordial ignorance. \textit{Avidyā} is not simply a lack of knowledge; rather, it is possessing erroneous knowledge. Śāṅkara explains, “the nature of ignorance proves to be this: it represents that

\textsuperscript{12} Upadeśa-sahasrī 17.13-21, in Rangaswami, \textit{Roots of Vedanta}, 259.
\textsuperscript{14} Śāṅkara, \textit{Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya} 4.4.4, 898.
\textsuperscript{15} Śāṅkara, \textit{Vivekacūdāmani} 197, 77.
which is infinite as finite; presents things other than the Self that are non-existent; and makes the Self appear as limited.”

Svāminārāyaṇa

Svāminārāyaṇa posits five eternal entities. He plainly states, “From the Vedas, the Purāṇas, the Itihāsa and the Smṛtis, I have formed the principle that jīva [the soul/ātman], māyā, iśvara, [Aksara]Brahman and Parabrahman are all eternal.” Svāminārāyaṇa asserts his position as a realist by writing, “The jīva is real, māyā is real, iśvara is real, Brahman is real, Parabrahman is real.” This realism proves that Svāminārāyaṇa’s theological system is diametrically opposed to Śaṅkara’s non-dualistic theology.

Parabrahman is the term for God in Svāminārāyaṇa’s theology. In contrast to Śaṅkara’s nirguṇa Brahman, Svāminārāyaṇa posits a personal, theistic conception of God with divine attributes. Svāminārāyaṇa states, “Shankarāchārya has propounded that God is formless, whereas Rāmānujāchārya and other āchāryas have propounded that God has a form,” before going on to say that he agrees with the view that God has a form.

Svāminārāyaṇa introduces an ontological entity called “Aksarabrahman,” which is distinct from Parabrahman. He uses the term Brahman interchangeably with Aksarabrahman throughout his texts, but when he refers to God he uses the term Parabrahman, literally meaning ‘higher or superior Brahman.’ Aksarabrahman is a feature of Svāminārāyaṇa’s

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17 Brhadārānyaka Upanisad-Bhāṣya 4.3.20, in Rangaswami, Roots of Vedanta, 87.
18 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut, trans. BAPS Sadhus (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2010), Gadhadā 3.10 (henceforth referred to as ‘Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut’; all translations are from this edition, unless otherwise stated).
19 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vedarasa (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 1978), 1770
20 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 1.71.
metaphysical structure that does not have an analogue in Śaṅkara’s theology. Explaining the distinction between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa writes, “Transcending that [Akṣara]Brahman is Parabrahman, Purushottam Nārāyan, who is distinct from Brahman, and is the cause, the supporter and the inspirer of Brahman.”

Only Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman transcend māyā, and therefore are the only two entities capable of granting liberation. Māyā, for Svāminārāyaṇa, is the force of Parabrahman that keeps all jīvas in bondage.

Svāminārāyaṇa writes that Parabrahman “is greater than even Akṣhar, which is greater than everything.” ‘Everything’ is to be understood as the three entities of jīva, iśvara and māyā. Therefore, the Akṣarabrahman entity is part of the divine reality because it transcends māyā, although it is still subordinate to Parabrahman. Akṣarabrahman is considered to have four forms, of which two are relevant for this essay.

The first form of Akṣarabrahman is Akṣaradhāma, the divine abode of Parabrahman wherein all liberated souls reside for eternity. The second form is the human form as the Guru who is presently manifest on the earth. The Guru is Akṣarabrahman. Currently, the Akṣarabrahman Guru is accepted by believers of the tradition to be a sadhu named ‘Mahant Swami Maharaj.’

In summation, from the above theological outlines we have been able to grasp the basic positions of the two thinkers. This brief doctrinal overview has also shown that Śaṅkara’s and Svāminārāyaṇa’s theological systems are radically different. Yet, as we shall see next, Svāminārāyaṇa and Śaṅkara agree in their acceptance of jīvan-mukti.

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21 Ibid., Gaḍhadā 2.3.
22 Ibid., Gaḍhadā 1.12.
23 Ibid., Gaḍhadā 1.64.
25 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut Pancālā 1.
2) JĪVAN-MUKTI – THE END

We now move to soteriology. More specifically, in this section, we shall exposit Śankara’s and Svāminārāyaṇa’s views on jīvan-mukti.

Before delving into their specific understandings of jīvan-mukti, it is essential we understand the soteriological environment surrounding their beliefs on jīvan-mukti and thus gain a conceptual handle on their beliefs on mukti in general.

NATURE OF MUKTI

Śankara

In Śankara’s soteriology, liberation is 1) nitya (eternal), 2) nityāpta (eternally attained), 3) anārabhya (beginning-less), and 4) nitya-siddha (eternally accomplished).26 The spiritual ātman [soul] is always liberated, therefore talking of liberation is only an epistemological awareness, because ontologically it is always liberated. Śankara writes, “Liberation comes to be considered as a fruit merely from the point of view of the cessation of bondage, and not from the standpoint of production of any fresh result.”27 Mokṣa is thus recognizing one’s true nature as Brahman; it is not an ‘attainment’, but rather a change in perception. Liberation is to be absorbed in Brahman, like the river merges into the ocean,28 extinguishing all individuality. “Having [thus] attained identity with the supreme immortality, they discard individuality; like a lamp blown out.”29 Simply put, for Śankara, “Liberation is the same as Brahman.”30

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27 Śankara, Brahma-Sūtra-Bhaṣya 4.4.4, 897.
28 Ibid.
29 Śankara, Mundaka Upanisad-Bhaṣya 3.2.6-9, in Rangaswami, Roots of Vedanta, 435.
30 Śankara, Brahma-Sūtra-Bhaṣya 1.1.4, 8.
conceptualization of liberation is a clear corollary of his theological understanding of the non-dual, nirguna Brahman.

_Svāminārāyaṇa_

For Svāminārāyaṇa, upon death, liberated souls will “go to Akshardhām [Parabrahman’s divine abode] to forever remain in the service of God.”31 As seen in section one, Aksaradhāma is a form of the Aksarabrahman entity. It is the divine abode in which Parabrahman eternally resides with other liberated souls. Svāminārāyaṇa states, “God, who possesses a definite form, is always present in His abode.”32 For liberation to occur, a jīva must become brahmarūpa. What does it mean to be brahmarūpa? Svāminārāyaṇa explains: “When the jīva attains a likeness to that [Aksara]Brahman..., then that jīva can also be said to be brahmarūpa.”33 As learned in section one, Svāminārāyaṇa uses the term Brahman interchangeably with Aksarabrahman throughout his texts. To become brahmarūpa is for the jīva to receive the qualities of the Aksarabrahman guru and thus become like Aksarabrahman. Therefore, liberation within Svāminārāyaṇa theology is more than just a return to the original state of the soul; it is conceived as the attainment of the highest spiritual state.34 Bhakti and communion with God are crucial to Svāminārāyaṇa’s concept of liberation. Liberation, both in Aksaradhāma [Parabrahman’s divine abode] and on earth, is attended by unconditional, pure, selfless bhakti.

Through this brief analysis, we are able to catch a conceptual glimpse of our thinkers’ core beliefs on mukti. We can now begin to understand their positions more specifically on jīvan-mukti, which forms the thrust of this essay.

31 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 1.21.
32 Ibid., Gaḍhadā 3.7.
33 Ibid., Gaḍhadā 2.20.
ŚANKARA’S JĪVAN-MUKTI

Śaṅkara’s chief role is that of an exegete, and at numerous instances in his works he displays his belief in jīvan-mukti. Verse 5.23 of the Bhagavad-gītā states: “He who is able to endure verily here [iha eva], before liberation from the body, the agitation that arises from desire and anger, is disciplined [yukta]; he is a happy man.” The key words here are ‘iha eva,’ which mean ‘verily here.’ Śaṅkara, in his Bhagavad-gītā Bhaṣya (his commentary on the Bhagavad-gītā), takes this to literally mean “here whilst living.” He writes that the jīva is liberated “before the body falls.” He further clarifies his acceptance of jīvan-mukti by using the word ‘āmaraṇānta.’ The ‘ā’ prefixing ‘maraṇānta’ signifies that death is the limit, but is not included, therefore one becomes a ‘yukta’ before death. Śaṅkara interprets ‘yukta’ to mean one who is a yogi, who is accomplished, who is liberated, and not just a practitioner of yoga (spiritual discipline).

The essential question that arises when discussing jīvan-mukti is the continued existence of the body; if mukti has been realized, why does the body remain? The primary reason, which Svāminārāyaṇa also cites, is prārabdha karma (karma that has already manifested). This form of karma is the stock of past karmas that have been initiated. Prārabdha karma is responsible for the form and sustenance of the body. Once these karmas are exhausted, the individual dies. Śaṅkara explains, only saṅcita karmas (accumulated stock of past karmas that are yet to manifest) are extinguished for the jīvan-mukta. The prārabdha karmas are already in motion, therefore cannot be halted. Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad-gītā says: “The

35 Bhagavad Gītā, 5.23, translation adapted from Sargeant Winthrop (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 265.
fire of knowledge reduces all actions (karmas) to ashes.”  
Śankara in interpreting this statement clarifies his belief in jīvan-mukti. He writes:

Since the result of actions owing to which the present body has been born has already become effective, therefore it gets exhausted only through experiencing it. Hence, Knowledge reduces to ashes only all those actions that were done [in this life] prior to the rise of Knowledge and that have not become effective....

Śankara clarifies that knowledge is unable to eradicate prārabdha karma. Several analogies are employed to explain this idea. First, Śankara gives the example of a potter’s wheel. He writes that once a potter ceases to push the wheel, it continues spinning due to the momentum. Similarly, when an archer releases an arrow from its bow, the arrow continues to fly until its momentum is terminated. Through these illustrations Śankara is explaining that prārabdha karma must run its course, which is why the physical body persists.

However, does the existence of the body and the effect of prārabdha karma lead to any limitation on the jīvan-mukta’s part? Is videha-mukti (post-mortem liberation) a soteriological advance for Śankara? There does not seem be a clear answer. Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.14.2 states: “There is a delay for me here only until I am freed; but then I will arrive!” Śankara commentating on the verse explains that this ‘delay’ is caused by prārabdha karma. The implication is that liberation is not truly attained whilst prārabdha karma remains. Śankara comments, “[The delay is] in attaining the essence of the Self which is Being.... Until the fall of the body caused by the exhaustion of the karma by which the body is commenced, this is the meaning. At that very time, he attains Being.” In contrast, he emphatically states, “This knower is Brahman in this very life, though he

37 Bhagavad-gītā, verse 4.37, 237.
39 Śankara, Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 4.1.15, 840.
appears to have a body.” There is an evident contradiction. On the one hand, he seems to say jīvan-mukti is a stage prior to videha-mukti, and on the other hand he suggests jīvan-mukti as the ultimate mukti. Having said this, Śaṅkara firmly states there are no stages or grades in mukti. He writes, “the state of liberation is determined to be uniform in nature, the state of liberation being nothing but Brahman Itself.... [I]n liberation there can be no superiority.” Therefore, while it is unclear as to whether videha-mukti is a soteriological advance, we can assert from Śaṅkara’s writing and general beliefs that there is no qualitative difference between the jīvan-mukta and the videha-mukta. Another way to harmonize the two poles could be to concede that the ultimate experience of the mukta (liberated person) in post-mortem and living liberation is the same; the notions of prārabdha karma and the intellectual debates on it are merely to satisfy the external onlooker. As the famous Advaita mystic Ramana Maharshi puts it, “For those who ask it is said that a Realized Man with a body is a jīvan-mukta and that he attains videha-mukti when he sheds the body, but this difference exists only for the onlooker, not for him. His state is the same before shedding the body and after.”

This leads us to explore what the experience of a jīvan-mukta is for Śaṅkara. The primary feature of a jīvan-mukta is the extinguishing of any identification with his/her body and mind. Śaṅkara, alluding to an analogy in the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, writes that the jīvan-mukta “rests discarding the body, like snake its slough.” A jīvan-mukta “lives unmoved in the body like a witness, free from mental oscillations.” The jīvan-mukta continues to observe and live in the world even though he or

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44 Śaṅkara, Brahma-Sūtra-Bhaṣya verse 3.4.52, 810-11.
46 Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.7.
47 Śaṅkara, Vivekacūḍāmani 549, 204.
48 Śaṅkara, Vivekacūḍāmani 551, 205.
she knows that it is mithyā (unreal) and rooted in avidyā. As Nelson effectively puts it, for a jīvan-mukta, empirical existence is “a magical phantom at best, but one that is ontologically hollow, exhausted, a mere husk or shadow.”

Whilst the above addresses the bodily existence of a jīvan-mukti, Jacqueline Suthren-Hirst raises an interesting question with regard to the ‘mental experiences’ of a jīvan-mukta. She argues that aversion and attachment can still be observed in jīvan-muktas. In her thought-provoking article, she writes that Śaṅkara believes that such ‘worldly attributes’ being seen in the mental makeup of a jīvan-mukta is “simply the result of memory traces, which did themselves originate in false cognitions prior to realisation, but are now conserved as saṃskāras, or impressions, in the [subtle] body which continues to operate until its momentum is exhausted.” Hirst states that such ‘impressions’ and ‘traces’ are a vehicle for the prārabdha karma and “part of the mechanism through which these already initiated results are being worked out.” Ultimately, however, such ‘impressions’ also have no effect on the jīvan-mukta. Hirst writes, “They no longer cause grief or delusion; the realisation of the knower remains uncompromised, for all misconception about their nature has ceased.” Therefore, although the gross body remains due to the prārabdha karma, and some ‘impressions’ remain in the subtle body, the jīvan-mukta is influenced by neither.

In summary, Śaṅkara lays out a detailed and robust conception of jīvan-mukti. The answer to whether videha-mukti is a soteriological advance to jīvan-mukti remains unclear. However, from Śaṅkara’s writings, it can be

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
Vedanta has deduced that although he does not fully substantiate it, he does believe that the core experience in *jīvan-mukti* is the same as in *videha-mukti*.

**SVĀMINĀRĀYĀNA’S JĪVAN-MUKTI**

Svāminārāyaṇa has a clear and strong position on *jīvan-mukti* that holds a significant place in his overall theology. He unequivocally states his belief in *jīvan-mukti* several times in the *Vacanāmrut*. For example, in Gaḍhadā 3.2, he clearly states that it is possible to attain “the highest state of enlightenment, or liberation, while in this body.”

Elsewhere, Svāminārāyaṇa states: “If one practices satsaṅga with absolute sincerity... one will become *brahmarūpa* while in this body.” The key word in this phrase for our purposes is ‘*brahmarūpa*.’ As seen above, to become *brahmarūpa* is for the *jīva* to become like the Akṣarabrahman Guru, by receiving and imbibing the qualities of Akṣarabrahman. It is this *brahmarūpa* state that distinguishes a *siddha* (accomplished) from a *sādhaka* (spiritual practitioner), or a *jīvan-mukta* from an ordinary *jīva.*

To be *brahmarūpa* is to transcend *māyā* (bondage) and attain liberation. Svāminārāyaṇa writes: “becoming *aksharrup [brahmarūpa]* and serving Shri Purushottam Nārayan is in itself liberation.” As we read earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa asserts that offering *bhakti* is integral to liberation. To become *brahmarūpa* is essential for this. Svāminārāyaṇa states: “Only one who is *brahmarup* has the right to offer *bhakti* to Purushottam [God].”

To attain *videha-mukti* and go to Akṣaradhāma (Parabrahman’s divine abode) once the body has fallen, one must be *brahmarūpa*, and to attain

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53 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 3.2. (Author’s translation).
54 Literal meaning is ‘associating with the truth,’ but refers more generally to practicing within the religious fellowship.
55 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut Sārangpur 9.
56 Svāminārāyaṇa, Ashlali.
57 Svāminārāyaṇa, Loya 7.
jīvan-mukti, one must also be brahmarūpa. This is the pre-eminent brahmic state for Svāminārāyaṇa.\textsuperscript{58}

As mentioned earlier, mukti is “not only for personal spiritual fulfilment and safety... but also to be able to fully devote oneself to Parabrahman.”\textsuperscript{59}

Explaining the centrality of bhakti to jīvan-mukti, Svāminārāyaṇa writes, “When the devotee has kept his mind at the holy feet of God in this manner, he does not have to die to attain the abode of God; he has attained it while still alive.”\textsuperscript{60}

Having gained an understanding of the theoretical basis of Svāminārāyaṇa’s jīvan-mukti, we can briefly survey the features of a jīvan-mukta for Svāminārāyaṇa. He describes a jīvan-mukta as one characterised by equanimity amid all dualities (Vacanāmrut Loyā.16), and independence from the body, senses, faculties and all other māyic or karmic influences (Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 1.62). Most importantly, it is a state of complete self- and God-realization, wherein the jīvan-mukta has a direct experience of Parabrahman in all his resplendent glory (Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 1.20), both within his/her own soul (Vacanāmrut Sārangpur 10) and wherever he/she turns (Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 1.26), as if Parabrahman or his abode are not even an atom away (Vacanāmrut Sārangpur 10). The mukta’s senses and mind are now totally engrossed in Parabrahman (Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 1.51). Nothing else remains noticeable (Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 1.24); he/she experiences God in everyone and in everything (Vacanāmrut Kāryani 7).\textsuperscript{61}

As mentioned in the introduction, we can now see where Svāminārāyaṇa fits into Patricia Mumme’s typology of strong, medium, and weak jīvan-

\textsuperscript{58} Paramtattvadas, An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology, 275.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 3.7.
\textsuperscript{61} Paramtattvadas, An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology, 283.
mukti positions. She puts Śankara in the strong category. Where would Svāminārāyaṇa fit in? Mumme states that a ‘strong’ jīvan-mukti position entails several features: 1) the state of living liberation is shown to be a clearly defined and discrete state, stressing its difference from previous states;\(^{62}\) 2) the jīvan-mukti state is shown to have virtual equivalence to post-mortem liberation; and 3) the jīvan-mukta state is demarcated by a threshold experience.\(^{63}\) Svāminārāyaṇa fulfils the first two of these criteria. The brahmāruṇa state is a clearly defined and discrete state and Svāminārāyaṇa on numerous occasions equates it with post-mortem liberation. However, he does not talk of a clear ‘threshold experience;’ sādhanā is a gradual process which culminates in jīvan-mukti.

**A COMPARISON OF ŚANKARA’S AND SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA’S CONCEPTIONS OF JĪVAN-MUKTI**

Both Śankara and Svāminārāyaṇa hold strong, clearly defined positions on jīvan-mukti. But how do they compare to each other?

**a) Similarities**
Śankara and Svāminārāyaṇa both agree that prārabdha karma is the fundamental reason behind the liberated ātman still occupying a corporeal body, both the gross and subtle elements of it. Furthermore, they both agree that in the state of jīvan-mukti, the body and mind hold no sway whatsoever over the mukta. In a similar fashion to Śankara’s analogies we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the soul is distinctly separate from within the body, like a sword in its scabbard or a seed within a dried mango.\(^{64}\) Therefore, there is clear agreement on what I perceive to be some foundational and theoretical beliefs behind the notion of jīvan-mukti.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 250.
\(^{64}\) Svāminārāyaṇa, Vedarasa, 149.
b) Differences
Although the theoretical foundations are the same for Śaṅkara and Svāminārāyaṇa, as seen above, the way they craft their respective jīvan-mukti doctrines are considerably different. We return here to the brahmarūpa state mentioned by Svāminārāyaṇa. We must make a clear distinction here between ‘becoming like Brahman’ (becoming brahmarūpa) and ‘becoming Brahman.’ The former is the belief of Svāminārāyaṇa, and the latter the belief of Śaṅkara. For Śaṅkara, the soul is Brahman; they are one and the same. However, for Svāminārāyaṇa, the brahmarūpa state is “not a substantial union but a qualitative similarity with Aksarabrahman.” Unlike in Śaṅkara’s system, the jīva (soul) always remains ontologically distinct from Aksarabrahman and Parabrahman.

In summary, the jīvan-mukti state for Śaṅkara is a change of perspective whereby the soul identifies itself with Brahman, whereas the Svāminārāyaṇa conception of jīvan-mukti involves devotion with a sense of servitude in an exalted spiritual state of being brahmarūpa. Thus, while there are basic similarities in their approaches, there are important distinctions between their conceptualizations of jīvan-mukti.

3) SĀDHANĀ – THE PRACTICE, THE MEANS

Sādhanā, otherwise known as praxis, is the means by which one endeavours to overcome bondage to attain liberation. It can take various forms and includes the full gamut of theological praxis. Śaṅkara and Svāminārāyaṇa have written extensively on sādhanā and provided their own elaborate interpretations and views on the means to liberation. We shall limit ourselves to exploring the facets in their explanations of

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65 Paramatttvadas, An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology, 277.
sādhanā which prove to be relevant to our investigation on how their conception of living liberation shapes their views on praxis.

Śankara

For Śankara, avidyā (erroneous knowledge) is the source of bondage and the state of being freed from this bondage is conceptualized as a matter of awareness. Therefore, we can see conceptual continuity in Śankara’s placing jñāna (knowledge) at the heart of his sādhanā. For Śankara, “Brahma-jñāna, the knowledge of Brahman... this right knowledge alone forms the direct means of attaining mokṣa.”

Thus, it is only through Brahma-jñāna that one can attain liberation. Such knowledge sublates the superimposition and erroneous view of reality with the true non-dual vision of reality. Śankara writes, “When this (false) notion that the embodied soul is the real Self is removed, all those activities become sublated which are based on that assumption, which are created by ignorance.”

The liberated soul veiled by avidyā needs true knowledge for the sublation of the false superimposition to occur and for it to realize its true identity as Brahman. His belief in jñāna as the sole component of practice thus follows from his theory on jīvan-mukti.

Commenting on verse 2.1.10 from the Mundaka Upaniṣad, Śankara writes that through ‘vijñāna’ (knowledge), all of one’s knots of ignorance are destroyed. He adds that this happens ‘jīvan eva’ (whilst living), with the ‘eva’ providing additional emphasis, meaning ‘assuredly,’ to indicate that ignorance is indeed certainly eradicated whilst alive. To further consolidate his position on knowledge leading to the attainment of jīvan-mukti, he includes the converse ‘na mṛtaḥ san,’ literally, ‘not while dead.’

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67 Śankara, Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.1.14, 328.
Śāṅkara’s commentary on the Brhadaṛanyaka Upaniṣad is particularly enlightening in this respect. He explains that a particular phenomenon can be destroyed only by its opposite. For instance, only light can dispel darkness. In the same way, only knowledge can remove ignorance, and because ignorance is the key condition for bondage, once ignorance is removed with knowledge, then even if prārabdha karma remains, one is a jīvan-mukta. In order to further explicate the connection between Śāṅkara’s sādhana and his position on jīvan-mukti, we can allude to an analogy used by Śāṅkara about ten people crossing a river and counting nine in the headcount. They felt they were missing an individual until a woodcutter nearby told the person counting that he had failed to count himself. When the woodcutter told the leader this, the result was instant; the ‘lost’ tenth person was immediately ‘found.’ Rambachan writes, “Knowledge was direct and the results were immediate.” Śāṅkara, explaining the instantaneous nature of liberation on the experience of jñāna, writes, “at that time, one becomes identified with Brahman.” In other words, as soon as one realizes one’s true identity as Brahman from Brahma-jñāna (knowledge of Brahman), ignorance is overcome, and one is liberated, here and now. Therefore, his conception of the state of jīvan-mukti can be seen to have conceptual continuity with his belief in knowledge being the key and only part of praxis that leads to living liberation.

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69 *Brhadaṛanyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10.
72 Ibid.
Svāminārāyaṇa

As seen in section two, mukti – both pre- and post-mortem – is twofold for Svāminārāyaṇa: 1) to become brahmarūpa, i.e. to become like Akṣarabrahman; and 2) to offer devotion to Parabrahaman. In this section, I shall explore how Svāminārāyaṇa’s belief in jīvan-mukti shapes his process of sādhanā. As seen in section one, Svāminārāyaṇa adds the entity of Akṣarabrahman to his metaphysical system, which is fundamental to both Svāminārāyaṇa’s sādhanā and mukti. The living guru on earth is a form of Akṣarabrahman, and Svāminārāyaṇa considers this individual to be the granter of mokṣa. Svāminārāyaṇa emphatically states the main principle of liberation to be that “the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes as being the only grantors of liberation.” The key words here, for our purposes, are ‘manifest form... before the eyes.’ The gateway to liberation is always here and now through either God or the Sant (Akṣarabrahman Guru), therefore, mukti is also available here and now.

Next, we consider the process of becoming brahmarūpa, the state of being liberated in Svāminārāyaṇa soteriology. We saw in section two that becoming brahmarūpa is literally becoming like the Akṣarabrahman Guru, to imbibe his virtues. How is this possible? Svāminārāyaṇa explains, “If one associates with Brahman through continuous contemplation in this manner, the jīva acquires the virtues of that Brahman.” As we have seen in section one, Svāminārāyaṇa often uses the term Brahman to mean Akṣarabrahman. Association with the living Akṣarabrahman Guru is therefore indispensable for one who aspires to become brahmarūpa, i.e a jīvan-mukta. The importance of the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru for jīvan-mukti can be seen when Svāminārāyaṇa states: “If one has the association of God and the Bhakta of God (Akṣarabrahman Guru), and

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74 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 2.21.
75 Ibid., Gaḍhadā 2.31.
God is pleased upon him, then even though he is in on earth, he is still in the abode of God.” In section two, we had seen that Svāminārāyaṇa states that by practicing satsaṅga one can become brahmarūpa ‘here.’

What is satsaṅga? Paramtattvadas explains, “While the literal meaning of ‘satsaṅga’ is simply ‘association with the truth or real’, it is a richly complex term to define. It invokes the full gamut of theological belief and praxis practised within the religious community of devotees and, most essentially, under the guidance of the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru.” A primary feature of Svāminārāyaṇa’s sādhanā to attain jīvan-mukti is to have ‘ātmābuddhi’ (literally ‘self-perception’) with the manifest Akṣarabrahman guru. This is to say, because of intense love and association, one perceives the guru to be one’s self. Svāminārāyaṇa in a letter to his disciples writes, “One should develop ātmābuddhi with him [Akṣarabrahman Guru], and with that thought, become a jīvan-mukta.”

Therefore, it can be seen from the above explanations of sādhanā by Svāminārāyaṇa that jīvan-mukti is a real possibility through ‘oneness’ with and ‘association’ of the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru. Thus, we can assert that the Akṣarabrahman Guru plays a hugely significant role in achieving jīvan-mukti.

However, this only covers the first half of mukti, i.e. becoming brahmarūpa, leaving the second element of ‘worshipping’ Parabrahman left to be explored. Svāminārāyaṇa establishes that through the Akṣarabrahman Guru one has attained Parabrahman himself. He writes, “when he [the jīva] attains the association of such a Sant [the Akṣarabrahman Guru], he has, while still alive, attained he who was to be attained after death [i.e. Parabrahman]. That is to say, he has attained that...

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76 Ibid., Gaḍhadā 2.28. (Author’s translation).
77 Ibid., Sārāṅgpur 9.
78 Paramtattvadas, An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology, 281.
79 Svāminārāyaṇa, Vedarasa, 166.
which is called the highest state of enlightenment, or liberation, while in this very body.”\(^{80}\) Having attained Parabrahman on this earth in the form of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs his devotees to worship him. Svāminārāyaṇa states, “Those who are eager to secure their liberation should thus serve such a Sant .... Why? Because... such a Sant should not be thought to be like a human nor should he be thought to be like even a deva... Such a Sant, even though he is human [in form], is worthy of being served like God.”\(^{81}\) Here, Svāminārāyaṇa states that serving the guru is equivalent to serving God. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs his devotees to serve the guru “like God.”\(^{82}\) Raymond Williams also writes, the “Guru/disciple relationship is heightened because it is placed in a new context in which the Guru is thought to be the body of Parabrahman through whom he reveals all his powers for the salvation of individuals.”\(^{83}\) Therefore, worshipping the guru is equivalent to worshipping Parabrahman, not because they are ontologically identical, but because the Guru is considered to be the form or vessel of God, holding him in every part of his body. A holistic textual study of the Vacanāmrut text shows that key references to the term ‘Bhakta’ or ‘Sant’ are referring to the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

Thus, from my aforementioned analysis of Svāminārāyaṇa’s sādhanā, it is apparent that the presently manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru plays a significant soteriological role in Svāminārāyaṇa’s acceptance of jīvan-mukti. The Akṣarabrahman Guru is considered to be the gateway to liberation, the crux of the sādhanā, and also the medium through which to offer bhakti to Parabrahman whilst in the jīvan-mukti state. Furthermore, Akṣaradhāma (Parabrahman’s divine abode for videha-mukti) and the

\(^{80}\) Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmrut Gaḍhadā 3.2. (Author’s translation).

\(^{81}\) Ibid., Gaḍhadā 3.26.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., Vartāl 5.

manifest guru are one and the same entity, Akṣarabrahman. Videha-mukti is residing within the Akṣarabrahman abode, and jīvan-mukti is becoming one with the Akṣarabrahman living Guru. Therefore, in Svāminārāyaṇa theology, the Akṣarabrahman entity is central to the theory of living liberation. The sādhanā is centred around the Akṣarabrahman Guru, as he is the means here, and the end here. Thus, the praxis outlined above is a clear corollary of Svāminārāyaṇa’s conception of jīvan-mukti: in order to become like Akṣarabrahman (brahmarūpa) and worship Parabrahman, which is the characteristic of mukti, one has to develop oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru, who beholds Parabrahman.

CONCLUSION

JĪVAN-MUKTI

This study, whilst analysing the doctrinal base of jīvan-mukti, has shed light on the specific beliefs of jīvan-mukti of Śaṅkara and Svāminārāyaṇa. Taking a step back from our individual thinkers, jīvan-mukti has proved to be a fascinating topic of study. The fact that it is not accepted by many Hindu schools, and that its conceptualizations are so different, shows that it is indeed a radical and complex idea. I have simply considered two theologians of one specific strand of Hindu thought, Vedānta. If the study were to expand to include other schools, the arguments would certainly multiply. My research and analysis on jīvan-mukti has been focused on the theological and doctrinal aspects of the subject, however, it is certainly not a topic that is confined to theory or ‘orthodoxy.’ The traditions we have talked about are lived traditions, and jīvan-mukti plays a profoundly practical role in those that accept it. Jīvan-mukti is a meeting point between time and eternity, between humanity and divinity, and between ‘theories’ of religion and lived religion. It places the abstract concept of moksa (liberation) into a tangible reality. For millions of adherents of religious traditions who believe in jīvan-mukti, the purpose of their
spiritual praxis no longer remains a distant and abstract concept; it is transferred into the here and now, invigorating one’s daily praxis – indeed, one’s whole lifestyle – and intensifying one’s religious convictions.

The notion of jīvan-mukti also reveals the potential of a human and therefore touches on theological anthropology. Svāminārāyaṇa’s and Śāṅkara’s belief in jīvan-mukti implies that in the modern world, such a spiritually exalted state is possible within human cognition and in an actionable sense. The existence of such jīvan-muktas in these traditions means that there are supposedly infallible, divine figures roaming this earth today. On a practical level, this can also lead to religious hierarchies within such traditions determined by the spiritual state of an individual. While this study has explored the doctrinal and theological foundations of the notion of jīvan-mukti in relation to praxis, a fruitful outcome of this essay would be to pursue ethnographic research on jīvan-mukti within the Advaita and Svāminārāyaṇa traditions to see how this plays out practically.

**CONNECTIONAL THEOLOGY**

Through this exploration of the doctrine of jīvan-mukti and the corresponding praxis to achieve such a state, we have been able to uncover the diverse, coherent, and connectional nature of theology. Although both theologians propound a belief in jīvan-mukti, both have diverse conceptions of this state. These differences arguably lie in their fundamental differences in theology and belief in God. Śāṅkara believes in a nirguṇa Brahman as a singular, all-pervading ontological category, whereas Svāminārāyaṇa posits a personal, theistic Parabrahman and another divine entity called Aksarabrahman who serves as the cornerstone of Svāminārāyaṇa’s conception of liberation. The way Śāṅkara and Svāminārāyaṇa conceptualize their theory of jīvan-mukti, and their belief
about the ‘end,’ can be seen to be coherent with their beliefs on praxis, the ‘means.’ Śāṅkara’s knowledge-based epistemological state of living liberation leads to a praxis solely based on attaining sublating knowledge. Svāminārāyaṇa’s conception of jīvan-mukti as becoming ‘brahmārūpa’ and worshipping Parabrahman means that his praxis centres around attaining oneness with the living Akṣarabrahman guru.

Finally, from a macro perspective, this coherence between the end and the means reflects a key theme of the very nature of theology and religion. My study has been, in a sense, an exercise in Hindu systematic theology; an attempt to systematically understand the notion of jīvan-mukti in relation to the theology, doctrines, and praxis of the two theologians. Systematic theology is connectional theology. Theology and Religion cannot be perceived as a stack of isolated doctrines, like separate draws of a cupboard. Rather, it is like an interconnected web of doctrines and beliefs, interlocked both directly and indirectly. My study has shown the way in which multiple doctrines engage with and shape one another. With the respective views of Brahmā at the base, the ideas of bondage, the self, and sādhanā all tug at and jostle against one another, feeding off each other to provide coherence between the end and the means, the theory and the practice.

This exploration could be compared to cutting a cake. The cake represents the entire spectrum of theological and doctrinal thought. By slicing at the point of jīvan-mukti, one can see all the underlying layers of doctrine and theology that underpin it. In doing so, this study has revealed the clear interconnectedness of doctrine, like cogs in a machine. Wolfhart Pannenberg explains that we can only see history in all its totality from its end point; we can only understand the historical process when viewed
from the culmination. In the same way, jīvan-mukti has served as an end point, as the culmination of theology. Through it, we have been able to look back and explore the theological process, engage with the multiple doctrines of our two thinkers, and ultimately deepen our understanding of their theologies, conceptualizations of jīvan-mukti, and indeed their beliefs on daily striving towards it.

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