

Living Liberation in Opposing Theologies: The End Shapes the Means

Tilak Parekh
University of Oxford

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, Śankara 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 / *Sādhana*, Connectional Theology, Śankara, Svāminārāyaṇa / Swaminarayan

Living Liberation in Opposing Theologies: The End Shapes the Means

By Tilak Parekh¹
University of Oxford

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) Śankara, 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.

¹ Tilak Parekh graduated from the University of Oxford with a BA in Theology and Religion. He is currently completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Sanskrit, Gujarati and Hindu Studies in India. In October 2018 Tilak will begin an MPhil in Theology, Religion and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Cambridge. Tilak's research interests include Hindu theology, Hinduism in the diaspora, leadership in religion, and comparative theology. This paper was adapted from his BA thesis.

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 *jīvan-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 *jīvan-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."² 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.'

² Alister E. McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 332.

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,”³ whilst Dasgupta has declared it as “the pivot on which all systems of Indian philosophy revolve.”⁴

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. Śankara 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

³ Paul Deussen, *The Systems of Vedānta* (Chicago: KB Classics, 2015), 49.

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."⁵ 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."⁶ 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 *Prasthānatrayī*. The *Prasthānatrayī* are the canonical texts of the Vedānta school, namely the *Brahma-sūtras*, *Upaniṣads*, and *Bhagavad-gītā*. Svāminārāyaṇa himself did not write a commentary on the *Prasthānatrayī*, but in his discourses and letters he extensively refers to

⁵ Patricia Y. Mumme, "Living Liberation in Comparative Perspective," in *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, eds. Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 268.

⁶ Rachel Dwyer, "The Swaminarayan Movement," in *South Asians in the Diaspora: Histories and Religious Traditions*, eds. K.A. Jacobsen and P. Kumar (Boston: Brill, 2003), 180.

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."⁷ 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: "Śankara'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, Śankara 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

⁷ Swami Paramtattvadas, *The Ontological Distinction between Brahman and Parabrahman in the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta Tradition* (Master's diss., University of Oxford, 2007), 27.

⁸ Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (commonly abbreviated to BAPS), is a denomination within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition that propounds the 'Akṣara-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.

Śankara

Śankara propounds the ‘Advaita’ system, an ultimate ontological non-duality. His theology can be epitomized in the famous statement from the *Vivekacūdāmaṇi*, “*Brahma satyam jagat mithyā*,” meaning “Brahman is truth, the world is unreal.”⁹ 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. Śankara asserts the existence of only one singular entity, Brahman. As he writes in the *Vivekacūdāmaṇi*, Brahman is “one without a second.”¹⁰ This Brahman is *nirguṇa*, meaning it possesses no attributes or form. As Śankara states, Brahman “is devoid of all form, colour and so on, and does not in any way possess form.”¹¹ It is an absolute, non-dual reality that transcends space and time.

⁹ Śankara, *Vivekacūdāmaṇi* 20, trans. Swāmi Mādhavānanda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000), 7.

¹⁰ Śankara, *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* 19.13-24, quoted in Sudhakshina Rangaswami, *The Roots of Vedanta: Selections from Sankara's Writings* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012), 257.

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 Śankara is not a realist. He plainly declares, “this universe is unreal.”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.”¹³ Śankara holds that the objective of the *Upaniṣads* is to show the identity of the *ātman* (the individual soul) as Brahman. Śankara writes, the *Upaniṣads* reveal “the supreme self [Brahman] as non-separate from the [individual] soul.”¹⁴ He prioritizes verses such as “That you art” [*tat tvam asi*] in his reading of the Vedānta canon. For Śankara, 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 Śankara 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 Śankara’s explanation of ‘superimposition’ and *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.¹⁵ Similarly, the world is unreal; it has been superimposed on to Brahman. Śankara 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.”¹⁶ We have mistaken temporal elements for Brahman. The cause of such a superimposition is *avidyā*, primordial ignorance. *Avidyā* is not simply a lack of knowledge; rather, it is possessing erroneous knowledge. Śankara explains, “the nature of ignorance proves to be this: it represents that

¹² Upadeśa-sāhasrī 17.13-21, in Rangaswami, *Roots of Vedanta*, 259.

¹³ Śankara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śankarācārya* 2.1.14, translated by Swami Gambhirananda, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000), 329.

¹⁴ Śankara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 4.4.4, 898.

¹⁵ Śankara, *Vivekacūdāmani* 197, 77.

¹⁶ Upadeśa-sāhasrī 19.13-24, in Rangaswami, *Roots of Vedanta*, 257.

which is infinite as finite; presents things other than the Self that are non-existent; and makes the Self appear as limited.”¹⁷

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*, *īśvara*, [Akṣara]Brahman and Parabrahman are all eternal.”¹⁸ Svāminārāyaṇa asserts his position as a realist by writing, “The *jīva* is real, *māyā* is real, *īśvara* is real, Brahman is real, Parabrahman is real.”¹⁹ This realism proves that Svāminārāyaṇa’s theological system is diametrically opposed to Śankara’s non-dualistic theology.

Parabrahman is the term for God in Svāminārāyaṇa’s theology. In contrast to Śankara’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.²⁰

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

¹⁷ Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya 4.3.20, in Rangaswami, *Roots of Vedanta*, 87.

¹⁸ Svāminārāyaṇa, *Vacanāmṛut*, trans. BAPS Sadhus (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2010), Gaḍhadā 3.10 (henceforth referred to as ‘Svāminārāyaṇa, *Vacanāmṛut*’; all translations are from this edition, unless otherwise stated).

¹⁹ Svāminārāyaṇa, *Vedarasa* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 1978), 1770

²⁰ Svāminārāyaṇa, *Vacanāmṛut* Gaḍhadā 1.71.

metaphysical structure that does not have an analogue in Śankara'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."²¹ 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.²² Svāminārāyaṇa writes that Parabrahman "is greater than even *Akshar*, which is greater than everything."²³ 'Everything' is to be understood as the three entities of *jīva*, *īśvara* 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.²⁴ The first form of Akṣarabrahman is Akṣaradhāma, the divine abode of Parabrahman wherein all liberated souls reside for eternity.²⁵ 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 Śankara's and Svāminārāyaṇa's theological systems are radically different. Yet, as we shall see next, Svāminārāyaṇa and Śankara agree in their acceptance of *jīvan-mukti*.

²¹ Ibid., Gaḍhadā 2.3.

²² Ibid., Gaḍhadā 1.12.

²³ Ibid., Gaḍhadā 1.64.

²⁴ Smit Gadhia, "Akshara and Its Four Forms in Svāminārāyaṇa's Doctrine," in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation and Identity*, eds. Raymond Brady Williams and Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 156-71.

²⁵ Svāminārāyaṇa, *Vacanāmṛt Pañcālā* 1.

2) JĪVAN-MUKTI – THE END

We now move to soteriology. More specifically, in this section, we shall exposit Śāṅkara'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

Śāṅkara

In Śāṅkara'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. Śāṅkara 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 Śāṅkara, "Liberation is the same as Brahman."³⁰ This

²⁶ Lance E. Nelson, "Living Liberation in Śāṅkara's and Classical Advaita: Sharing the Holy Waiting of God," in *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, eds. Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 19.

²⁷ Śāṅkara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 4.4.4, 897.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Śāṅkara, *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya* 3.2.6-9, in Rangaswami, *Roots of Vedanta*, 435.

³⁰ Śāṅkara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 1.1.4, 8.

conceptualization of liberation is a clear corollary of his theological understanding of the non-dual, *nirguṇa* 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, Akṣaradhāma is a form of the Akṣarabrahman 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 [Akṣara]Brahman..., then that *jīva* can also be said to be *brahmarūpa*.”³³ As learned in section one, Svāminārāyaṇa uses the term Brahman interchangeably with Akṣarabrahman throughout his texts. To become *brahmarūpa* is for the *jīva* to receive the qualities of the Akṣarabrahman guru and thus become like Akṣarabrahman. 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 Akṣaradhāma [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.

³⁴ Swami Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 275.

ŚANKARA'S JĪVAN-MUKTI

Śankara'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."³⁵ The key words here are '*iha eva*,' which mean 'verily here.' Śankara, in his *Bhagavad-gītā Bhāṣya* (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 '*āmarañānta*.' The 'ā' prefixing '*marañānta*' signifies that death is the limit, but is not included, therefore one becomes a '*yukta*' before death. Śankara interprets '*yukta*' to mean one who is a yogi, who is accomplished, who is liberated, and not just a practitioner of yoga (spiritual discipline).³⁶

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. Śankara explains, only *sañcita 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.

³⁶ Śankara, *Bhagavad-gītā-bhāṣya* 5.23, in *Complete Works of Sri Sankaracharya in the Original Sanskrit*, Vol. 6 (Chennai: Samata Books, 1999), 172-73. (Author's translation).

fire of knowledge reduces all actions (*karmas*) to ashes.”³⁷ 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....³⁸

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.³⁹ 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 to 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!”⁴⁰ Śankara commenting 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.”⁴¹ In contrast, he emphatically states, “This knower is Brahman in this very life, though he

³⁷ *Bhagavad-gītā*, verse 4.37, 237.

³⁸ Śankara, *Bhagavad-gītā Bhāṣya* 4.37, translation by Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1991), 226.

³⁹ Śankara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 4.1.15, 840.

⁴⁰ Patrick Ollivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads*, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* verse 6.14.2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 257.

⁴¹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya* 6.14.2, quoted in Nelson, “Living Liberation,” 29.

appears to have a body.”⁴² 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*.⁴³ Having said this, Śankara 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.”⁴⁴ Therefore, while it is unclear as to whether *videha-mukti* is a soteriological advance, we can assert from Śankara’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.”⁴⁵

This leads us to explore what the experience of a *jīvan-mukta* is for Śankara. The primary feature of a *jīvan-mukta* is the extinguishing of any identification with his/her body and mind. Śankara, alluding to an analogy in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*,⁴⁶ writes that the *jīvan-mukta* “rests discarding the body, like snake its slough.”⁴⁷ A *jīvan-mukta* “lives unmoved in the body like a witness, free from mental oscillations.”⁴⁸ The *jīvan-mukta* continues to observe and live in the world even though he or

⁴² *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya* 4.4.6, quoted in Nelson, “Living Liberation,” 29.

⁴³ Nelson, “Living Liberation in Śankara’s and Classical Advaita,” 29.

⁴⁴ Śankara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* verse 3.4.52, 810-11.

⁴⁵ Arthur Osborne, *The Teachings of Bhagavan Shri Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978), 192.

⁴⁶ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.7.

⁴⁷ Śankara, *Vivekacūdāmani* 549, 204.

⁴⁸ Śankara, *Vivekacūdāmani* 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.”⁴⁹

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 Śankara 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.”⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹ 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.”⁵² 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, Śankara 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 Śankara’s writings, it can be

⁴⁹ Nelson, “Living Liberation in Śankara’s and Classical Advaita,” 46.

⁵⁰ Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, “When the Body Does Not Fall: Śankara, Sureśvara and Ānandagiri on Living While Liberated,” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 9, no.1 (2016): 14.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

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*.

SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA'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 *Vacanāmṛut*. 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.”⁵³

Elsewhere, Svāminārāyaṇa states: “If one practices satsaṅga⁵⁴ with absolute sincerity... one will become *brahmarup* while in this body.”⁵⁵ 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 Nārāyaṇ is in itself liberation.”⁵⁶ 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].”⁵⁷ To attain *videha-mukti* and go to Akṣaradhāma (Parabrahman’s divine abode) once the body has fallen, one must be *brahmarūpa*, and to attain

⁵³ Svāminārāyaṇa, *Vacanāmṛut* 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, *Vacanāmṛut* 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.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.”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.”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 (Vacanāmṛt Loyā.16), and independence from the body, senses, faculties and all other *māyic* or *karmic* influences (Vacanāmṛt 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 (Vacanāmṛt Gaḍhadā 1.20), both within his/her own soul (Vacanāmṛt Sārangpur 10) and wherever he/she turns (Vacanāmṛt Gaḍhadā 1.26), as if Parabrahman or his abode are not even an atom away (Vacanāmṛt Sārangpur 10). The *mukta*’s senses and mind are now totally engrossed in Parabrahman (Vacanāmṛt Gaḍhadā 1.51). Nothing else remains noticeable (Vacanāmṛt Gaḍhadā 1.24); he/she experiences God in everyone and in everything (Vacanāmṛt Kāryani 7).⁶¹

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

⁵⁸ Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology*, 275.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Svāminārāyaṇa, Vacanāmṛt Gaḍhadā 3.7.

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 *brahmarūpa* 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;’ *sādhana* 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*.

⁶² Mumme, “Living Liberation in Comparative Perspective,” 248.

⁶³ Ibid., 250.

⁶⁴ Svāminārāyaṇa, *Vedarasa*, 149.

b) Differences

Although the theoretical foundations are the same for Śankara 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 Śankara. For Śankara, 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 Akṣarabrahman.”⁶⁵ Unlike in Śankara’s system, the *jīva* (soul) always remains ontologically distinct from Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

In summary, the *jīvan-mukti* state for Śankara 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

Sādhana, 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. Śankara and Svāminārāyaṇa have written extensively on *sādhana* 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

⁶⁵ Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology*, 277.

sādhana 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 *sādhana*. For Śankara, "Brahma-*jñāna*, the knowledge of Brahman... this right knowledge alone forms the direct means of attaining *mokṣa*."⁶⁶ 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."⁶⁷ 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 *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, Śankara writes that through '*viñāna*' (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.'⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Bhagavad-gītā-bhāṣya verse 9.1-3, in Rangaswami, *Roots of Vedanta*, 355.

⁶⁷ Śankara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 2.1.14, 328.

⁶⁸ Śankara, *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya*, *Complete Works of Sri Sankaracharya in the original Sanskrit*, Vol. 8 (Chennai: Samata Books, 1999), 350-51. (Author's translation).

Śankara's commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is particularly enlightening in this respect.⁶⁹ He explains that a particular phenomenon can be destroyed only by its opposite.⁷⁰ 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 Śankara's *sādhanā* and his position on *jīvan-mukti*, we can allude to an analogy used by Śankara 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.'⁷¹ Rambachan writes, "Knowledge was direct and the results were immediate."⁷² Śankara, explaining the instantaneous nature of liberation on the experience of *jñāna*, writes, "at that time, one becomes identified with Brahman."⁷³ 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.

⁶⁹ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10.

⁷⁰ Kim Skoog, "Is the Jīvanmukti State Possible? Rāmānuja's Perspective," in *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, eds. Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 73.

⁷¹ Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 51.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Śankara, *Bhagavad-gītā Bhaṣya* 13.30, 562.

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 Parabrahman. In this section, I shall explore how Svāminārāyaṇa’s belief in *jīvan-mukti* shapes his process of *sādhana*. As seen in section one, Svāminārāyaṇa adds the entity of Akṣarabrahman to his metaphysical system, which is fundamental to both Svāminārāyaṇa’s *sādhana* 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.”⁷⁴ 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.”⁷⁵ 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

⁷⁴ Svāminārāyaṇa, *Vacanāmṛt 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.”⁷⁶ In section two, we had seen that Svāminārāyaṇa states that by practicing *satsaṅga* one can become *brahmarūpa* ‘here.’⁷⁷ 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 Brahmasvarūpa Guru.”⁷⁸ A primary feature of Svāminārāyaṇa’s *sāadhanā* 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*.”⁷⁹

Therefore, it can be seen from the above explanations of *sāadhanā* 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

⁷⁶ Ibid., Gaḍhadā 2.28. (Author’s translation).

⁷⁷ Ibid., Sārangpur 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 *Vacanāmṛt* 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 *sādhana*, 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 *sādhana*, 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, *Vacanāmṛt Gaḍhadā* 3.2. (Author’s translation).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, *Gaḍhadā* 3.26.

⁸² *Ibid.*, *Vartāl* 5.

⁸³ Raymond B. Williams, “The Holy Man as the Abode of God in the Swaminarayan Religion,” in *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*, eds. Joanne Punzo Waghorne, Norman Cutler, Vasudha Narayanan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 153.

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 *sādhana* 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 Śankara 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 *mokṣa* (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 Śankara'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. Śankara believes in a *nirguṇa* Brahman as a singular, all-pervading ontological category, whereas Svāminārāyaṇa posits a personal, theistic Parabrahman and another divine entity called Akṣarabrahman who serves as the cornerstone of Svāminārāyaṇa's conception of liberation. The way Śankara 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.’ Śankara’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 ‘*brahmarup*’ 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 Brahman at the base, the ideas of bondage, the self, and *sādhana* 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.⁸⁴ 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bhagavad Gītā*. translated by Winthrop Sargeant. Albany: State University of New York, 2009.
- Dasgupta, Surendranath. *Yoga Philosophy in Relation to Other Systems of Indian Thought*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1930.
- Deussen, Paul. *The Systems of Vedānta*. Chicago: KB Classics, 2015.
- Dwyer, Rachel, “The Swaminarayan Movement.” In *South Asians in the Diaspora: Histories and Religious Traditions*, edited by K.A. Jacobsen and P. Kumar, 180-199. Albany: Brill, 2003.
- Gadhia, Smit. “Akshara and Its Four Forms in Swaminarayan’s Doctrine.” In *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaption and Identity*, edited by Raymond Brady Williams and Yogi Trivedi, 156-172. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Hirst, Jacqueline Suthren. “When the Body Does Not Fall: Śankara, Sureśvara and Ānandagiri on Living While Liberated.” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 9, no.1 (2016): 1-28.
- McGrath, Alister. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2011.
- McGrath, Alister. *Studies in Doctrine*. Michigan: Zondervan, 1997.
- Nelson, Lance. “Living Liberation in Śankara’s and Classical Advaita: Sharing the Holy Waiting of God.” In *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, edited by Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme, 17-50. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

⁸⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology, An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 312.

- Olivelle, Patrick. *The Early Upaniṣads*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Osborne, Arthur. *The Teachings of Bhagavan Shri Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978.
- Paramtattvadas Swami. *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Paramtattvadas, Swami. “*The Ontological Distinction between Brahman and Parabrahman in the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta Tradition.*” Master’s diss., University of Oxford, 2007.
- Patricia Y. Mumme, “Living Liberation in Comparative Perspective.” In *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, edited by Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme, 247-268. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Rambachan, Anantanand. *The Advaita Worldview, God, World, and Humanity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- Rangaswami, Sudhakrishna. *The Roots of Vedānta: Selections from Sankara’s Writings*. New Delhi: Penguin Classics, 2012.
- Śankara, *Bhagavad gītā Bhāṣya*. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda. Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1991.
- Śankara, *Bhagavad-gītā-Bhāṣya*, in *Complete Works of Sri Sankaracharya in the Original Sanskrit*, Vol 6. Chennai: Samata Books, 1999.
- Śankarā, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śankarācārya*. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000.
- Śankara, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya, in *Complete Works of Sri Sankaracharya in the original Sanskrit*, Vol.8. Chennai: Samata Books, 1999.
- Śankara, *Vivekacūdāmani of Śrī Śankarācārya*, Translated by Swāmi Mādhavānanda. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000.
- Skoog, Kim “Is the Jīvanmukti State Possible? Rāmānuja’s Perspective.” In *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, edited by Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme, 63-85. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Svāminārāyaṇa. *Vachanamrut*. Translated by BAPS Sadhus. Ahmedabad: Svāminārāyaṇa Aksharpith, 2010.

Svāminārāyaṇa. *Vedarasa*. Ahmedabad, Svāminārāyaṇa Aksharpith, 1978.

Williams, Raymond B. "The Holy Man as the Abode of God in the Swaminarayan Religion." In *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*, edited by Joanne Punzo Waghorne, Norman Cutler, Vasudha Narayanan, 143-159. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.