

## A Soul's Journey to Its Destination

### (a) The Cycle of Births and Deaths (*samsāra*)

In this world exist matter, energy, and conscious beings. We know that matter and energy do not come to an end but only convert from one form to another, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the same is true of conscious beings. Our scriptures, e.g. Bhagavad Gītā II.22, confirm the supposition that the individual soul (Jīva) survives the death of the physical body and continues to take on different bodies according to its past Karmas (actions). In other words, the soul's entanglement in *samsāra* means its association with a body-mind in repeated life spans here on earth or in other worlds, regulated by Karma that is of its own making.

In these repeated embodiments the Jīva passes through innumerable bodies of different species of beings. It might pass through the bodies of animal creations; it might find several embodiments among the humans and the celestials, all according to the nature of its Karma. It is in human life alone that it acquires good and bad Karmas. In other kinds of embodiments it undergoes enjoyments or sufferings to which it is eligible by its Karma. It is only in human birth that the Jīva gets an opportunity to acquire new Karma through good and bad actions, as also to overcome the bondage of Karma as a whole and attain *mokṣa* or liberation through devotion and knowledge (Bhakti and Jñāna).

So human life is of supreme importance. It is the only embodiment in which the Jīva can evolve into greater perfections as also acquire merits entitling it to heavenly enjoyments. Man is therefore exhorted to utilize his human birth in a proper manner helpful to his higher evolution. Having got human birth, if man utilizes the brief life-time for indulgence in sensual pleasures, which can be had even in animal bodies, and bestows no attention on Dharma and Mokṣa, he is like one committing suicide.

### (b) What Happens to the Soul in between Death and Rebirth?

There are heavens and hells in between death and rebirth. One can be born into any of these realms, depending upon one's actions. Life in all of these worlds is impermanent and one will eventually be reborn elsewhere. As Gītā IX.20-21 states, whatever good one has done on earth, one enjoys the fruit of it in heaven; then, after one has exhausted one's merits, one takes birth on earth again in a human womb. Likewise, if one has lived a sinful life, one may have to undergo sufferings in the hell realms to atone for one's sins; and when one has exhausted one's sinful Karma, one is born again as a human being. Rebirth occurs because *vāsanās* (latent tendencies to seek objects other than one's true being; these tendencies can be dealt with only in human life) remain even after *karmaphala* (fruit of one's Karmas) is exhausted in heaven or in hell. Only when *vāsanās* are eliminated by right understanding is liberation possible (see Gītā III.17).

### (c) The Ultimate End: Liberation

All Hindus view enlightenment or liberation (*mokṣa* or *mukṭi*) as consisting in release from the enjoyments and sufferings of repeated births and from entanglement in the

wheel of *samsāra*. Not a single soul will be eternally deprived of this destiny. Because in its essential nature the soul is always free and complete, this ultimate destiny is not salvation but freedom. In positive terms, it is the attainment of unity with the Supreme. The exact nature of this “unity” differs among the different schools of Hinduism, depending on their vision of the Supreme. Advaitins, the followers of Advaita Vedānta (monism), believe that the enlightened soul (Ātman or Jīvātman) merges with the Supreme (Brahman). Vaiṣṇavas, the followers of Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified monism), believe that the released souls attain to the nature of God but never to identity with Him; even in liberation, beings are still individuated by their very natures, but their human qualities are replaced by God’s great qualities.

Advaitins believe in an attributeless God. For them, the Ātman is identical with Brahman; and liberation consists not in going to heaven but in realizing one’s true nature as infinite Consciousness, ever blissful, which pervades the whole world. In life the soul is Consciousness circumscribed by the body-mind, and in liberation the soul becomes one with the Supreme Being, free of the limitation imposed by the body-mind. Two types of liberation are possible: liberation while one is still alive (*jīvanmukti*) and liberation after death (*videhamukti*, i.e. *mukti* without *deha* or body). A *jīvanmukta* is one who is free from body-consciousness even while dwelling in the body. He possesses, on the one hand, an unclouded experience of the reality of Brahman and of the identity of his own self with it, and, on the other, the consciousness of the relative character of all that is different from it, namely, the world, his own body, and the other associations (*upādhis*) of the soul.

The other two schools of Vedānta – Viśiṣṭādvaita or qualified monism and Dvaita or dualism – are heavily theistic. For them, the Supreme is not impersonal but a personality endowed with all the glorious qualities such as knowledge, power, and love. They regard the individual soul, *jīvātman*, as always serving the Supreme, *paramātman*. The *jīvātman* is a distinct entity, both in bondage and in liberation, a speck of self-conscious existence. In liberation, the *jīvātman* reaches Vaikuṅṭha or Kailāsa (the abode of Viṣṇu or Śiva, respectively) so as to be near God but does not merge into Him; it maintains a distinct identity and continues to serve Him with devotion. Bhakti, devotion, is both the means to liberation and the post-liberation state. Reaching the abode of Viṣṇu (Vaikuṅṭha) is the goal of a Vaiṣṇava, and in the abode of God, a Vaiṣṇava continues to express his/her devotion to the Lord by “beholding” the Lord (*darśana*) and serving the Lord (*seva*). Liberation is of five types: (a) *sālōkya-mukti*, residence in God’s abode; (b) *sārṣṭī-mukti*, attaining glory like that of God; (c) *sāmīpya-mukti*, nearness to God; (d) *sārūpya-mukti*, assumption of God’s form; and (e) *sāyujya-mukti*, attainment of the nature of God. Of these five types of liberation, the devotee gets the type that he desires. Souls, in the Vaiṣṇava view, are of three classes: *nitya*, souls that are eternally free and live with Viṣṇu in Vaikuṅṭha, such as Viṣṇu’s mount Garuḍa; *mukta*, souls that were once bound (i.e. subject to *samsāra*) but have now acquired liberation and live with God; and *baddha*, souls that are still in the meshes of *samsāra* and are striving to be saved.

In conclusion, *jīvanmukti* is the ultimate end of every individual’s life. Our scriptures do not merely point out the end but also provide a way of life to discover it, giving a direction and a purpose to one’s life.