



Theory of Liberation: A Comparison between the Advaita Vedānta and the Sāṃkhya

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Abstract

According to the Advaita Vedānta, liberation (*mokṣa*) is the realization of blissful Brahman and the complete cessation of suffering. This view is supported by the Upaniṣadic declarations, such as in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (3.2.9), which states that the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman itself, and the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (7.2.3), which affirms that the knower of the Self transcends grief. In contrast, the Sāṃkhya system attributes bondage to *avivekajñāna*, or the failure to discriminate between *Puruṣa* (consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (matter). Liberation is thus attained through *vivekajñāna*, the discriminative knowledge of these two ultimate realities.

Sāṃkhya further holds that embodiment is the source of threefold suffering, making worldly existence synonymous with bondage. Liberation becomes possible only through the permanent cessation of such suffering, achieved by knowledge of *vyākta*, *avyākta*, and *jñā*. While Advaita posits a single ultimate reality—Brahman—Sāṃkhya accepts dual realities in *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. Both systems agree that liberation is not attained through action but through knowledge, and both recognize *jīvanmukti* and *videhamukti*. Moreover, while *sakāma karma* binds the individual, *niṣkāma karma* is compatible with liberating knowledge. This paper critically examines the internal inconsistencies within the Sāṃkhya theory in light of these doctrines.

Original Article

Open Access



Received: 16.02.2026

Accepted: 18.02.2026

Publication Date: January- March 2026

Volume: 2

Issue: 1

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.65842/nbpa.v2.i1.001>

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Published by: North Bengal Philosophers Association

Website: <https://nbpajournal.com/>
<https://nbpa.org.in/>

Key Words: Brahman • *Puruṣa* • *Prakṛti* •
knowledge • *vivekajñāna* • *mokṣa*.

According to the Advaita Vedāntins, liberation is the attainment of blissful Brahman and the total cessation of suffering. It is supported by the *śruti* texts, such as “He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman Itself.” (*Mund.* 3.2.9)¹ and “The knower of the self transcends grief” (*Chā.* 7.2.3)². Attainment of heaven, etc., is not liberation, since those worlds, like the one in which we live, are also transitory. All worlds achieved by performance of actions, this-worldly or other-worldly, are impermanent. Heaven is attained by righteous actions. The merit of such actions gets diminished by enjoyment, etc., and when the merit is exhausted, one has to come back from heaven into this world of suffering. *Śruti* says so: As in this world the comforts gained through one’s labors are exhausted, so in the other world, the happiness achieved through one’s good deeds comes to an end” (*Chā.* 8.1.6)³. But one who attains liberation “does not return to this world again” (*Chā.* 8.15.1 adapted)⁴.

Liberation is eternal in nature. The term ‘eternal’ is used in various senses. There are certain things that undergo changes; nevertheless, they are regarded as eternal, the reason being that we do not lose the sense of identity in their case. On the other hand, in the Sāṃkhya system, bondage is said to arise out of *avivekajñāna*, i.e., non-discriminative knowledge of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. So, liberation can be attained through *vivekajñāna* or discriminative knowledge of them. There are two causes of bondage and liberation in Sāṃkhya philosophy. According to the Sāṃkhya philosophers, our bodily frame is the cause of our threefold sufferings. So, bondage is due to the continuation of suffering in earthly existence. So long as we enter into *samsāra* and continue to suffer, we are in chains. Liberation can come only out of the cessation of suffering forever. So, there are two types of causes: bondage and liberation.

We find that in the Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is eternal, pure consciousness, and to realize Brahman is liberation. In the Sāṃkhya also, *Puruṣa* is eternal and consciousness. *Puruṣa* is also eternal (*nitya*). It is *Kuṭastha nitya* because it does not undergo any change. Brahman, like *Puruṣa*, is *tutastha nitya*. *Prakṛti* also is *nitya*, but it is *parināmi nitya* because change is possible in it. The Advaita Vedānta admits one ultimate reality, Brahman, but the Sāṃkhya admits two ultimate realities, *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*.

¹ *Mund.* 3.2.9

² *Chā.* 7.2.3

³ *Chā.* 8.1.6

⁴ *Chā.* 8.15.1 adapted.

The Advaita holds that *mokṣa* is disembodied existence, which can never be attained by any kind of action. Bodilessness or *mokṣa* is the eternal nature of the self.⁵ It is clearly stated in the Upaniṣad (*Kath.* 1.2.22)⁶ that the self is without any body.

According to the Sāṃkhya also, liberation is disembodied existence. According to the Advaita Vedānta, Liberation is without a beginning or end, as it is identical with Brahman, which is eternal. For if it had a beginning, it would be a product and would have an end, as everything that has a beginning has an end also. But in that case, one who is liberated would have to lose the blessed state sometime and return to this world. This is absurd, as it is at variance with scriptural sayings. An opponent might, however, say that if *mokṣa* is without a beginning, there cannot be any desire for it or any inclination for hearing, thinking, and meditation for attaining salvation, as it is already achieved. In response to this, the Advaitin argues that though liberation, which is identical with Brahman, is ever attained, one can feel an inclination to attain it through a mistaken notion about it, as if it has not been achieved. The cessation of suffering, which is identical with Brahman, is also a thing already achieved. Liberation is nothing but the attainment of the attained and the avoidance of the avoided.⁷ For instance, a man may be searching for his spectacles, thinking that they are lost, while they are actually on his eyes, and he realizes his mistake when someone points out the fact. This is a case of finding what was all along in one's possession and had not been lost at all.

Similarly, a man may mistake a garland twining round one's leg for a snake. He becomes free from the mistake when another person points out that it is not a snake but a garland. There was an absence of the snake, but the particular individual was not aware of the absence. In like manner, the attainment of bliss, though it is already attained, or the avoidance of misery, though it is already avoided, is, as it were, attained or avoided afresh when ignorance is removed.

According to the Sāṃkhya also, liberation is already attained, but *mithyājñāna* of *Puruṣa* creates an obstacle in the path of liberation. When *Kartrtvā* of *Prakṛti* is reflected on *Puruṣa*, the latter falsely supposes that it (*Puruṣa*) is not mukta, i.e., forgets its eternal nature because of *kartrtvābhimānadoṣa*. Again, it may be stated that the second instance in Advaita also may be appropriate because actually there is no suffering or fear in *Puruṣa*

⁵ Śaṅkarabhāṣya on Brahmansūtra, 1.1.4 (2nd Varṇaka); Vedāntadarśanam, Ed. Swami Vishwarupananda, p. 156

⁶ *Kath.* 1.2.22

when we can attain the knowledge of *vyākta*, *avyākta*, and *jñā*, our suffering and fear will vanish.

Liberation is not the result of *dharma* (merit) but of scriptural knowledge. But the latter is nothing but knowledge of Brahman itself. Such liberation is a matter of realization. It is not the religious activities, for example, worship, contemplation of God (Upāsanā), etc. Śruti says, It is not production, modification, obtaining, purification, etc. “He (*Janaka*) knows Brahman in the form “I am Braman and therefore, he became the essence of all things”. (*Br. 1.4.10*)⁷. Then the Knower of Brahman transcends delusion and grief” (*Īśa. 6*).⁸.

According to the Sāṃkhya also, liberation is nothing but *vikekajñāna* or discriminative knowledge between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. And when the knowledge of *vyākta*, *avyākta*, and *jñā* is attained, the cessation of all types of sufferings is possible. The basic point is that there is no scope for action whatever in respect of attaining *mokṣa*, but the highest knowledge is necessary and sufficient for it. But one question may arise here: Isn't knowledge a mental act? The answer is in the negative. There is a fundamental distinction between an act, even when it is mental, and knowledge. An act depends entirely on man's will or choice. For example, one may be asked to think of or meditate on a particular god to whom some offering is to be made. Here, thinking or meditating is entirely dependent on man's will. One can do it or not do it according to one's will. Knowledge, on the other hand, depends on some evidence or some means of valid knowledge and not on anybody's sweet will. Knowledge is determined by the nature of the thing to be known. When the proper condition is fulfilled, knowledge arises. It is dependent on our choice. So, it is concluded that knowledge cannot be obtained through any injunction or through any mental act. This act is entirely subjective, whereas knowledge is always objective. The knowledge of the *Jīva* as Brahman is also objective and does not depend on man's will.

In Advaita, two types of liberation have been distinguished. These are *Jīvanmukti* and *videhamukti*. Liberation in the embodied state and disembodied liberation. When ignorance is dispelled by knowledge of Brahman, merit, demerit, doubt, delusion, etc., are removed. But with the dawn of such supreme knowledge, the body is not immediately dissolved, but may continue for a while. A person who has achieved the liberating knowledge, yet continues in the body, is called *Jīvanmukta*. As liberated, he lives on in the world. *Br. Up. 4.4.7* says that he (*Jīvanmukta*) attains Brahman here. If Brahman is not known here in this life, the greatest is

⁷ *Br. Up. 1.4.10*

⁸ *Īśa. 6*

the loss.⁹ Śruti says, “Although the *Jīvanmukta* has eyes, ears, mind, and life, he is, as if, without eyes, without ears, without mind, and without life¹⁰.

The Sāṃkhya philosophers also admit both *Jīvanmukti* and *Videhamukti*. The moment the discriminative knowledge between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* dawns, a *Puruṣa* becomes liberated here and now. But his bodily existence may still continue on account of the momentum of the past deeds, i.e., *prārabdha karma*. As the liberated *Puruṣa*, though embodied, feels no association with the body owing to *vivekajñāna*, it does not reap any further fruit of *karma* henceforth. The *videhamukti* or final emancipation, however, arises as an outcome of death when the body gets completely dissociated from the spirit. The body is the effect of *avidyā* or action, but liberation, as the knowledge of Brahman, is bodilessness. Ignorance should be dispelled with all its effects when *Brahmajñāna* has dawned.

In response, perhaps both the systems of Advaita Vedānta and Sāṃkhya will say that action as such is not ignorance and the cause of bondage. The action which binds man is *sakāma karma*. *Niskāma karma* is quite compatible with the manifestation of knowledge. The cause of bondage and embodiment is *kāma*, not *karma*. Many Śruti passages, too, accept the activity of the liberated.¹² Hence, we may conclude that it is the desire for result or attachment thereto which is the root-cause of bondage, not the mere performance of action.

Our intense investigation will show that there are many inconsistencies in the Sāṃkhya theory. We find that *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* are completely heterogeneous and diverse realities or tattvas; there is no link between them. They are both eternal, absolute, and independent realities. If *Prakṛti* does not depend on other or does not require any assistance from *Puruṣa*, then the cycle of creation (*srsti*) and destruction (*Pralaya*) would have remained unexplained. For the difference in effect cannot be found, in the same cause, because according to the Sāṃkhya, cause and effect are identical.

To the Sāṃkhya, *Prakṛti* is the real material cause, and *Puruṣa* does nothing except help the manifestation of that which is already present in the material cause. We can say that if manifestation does not take place without the assistance of somebody, then that somebody should be regarded as one of the causes. Otherwise, creation would not be possible. To point out that manifestation is spontaneous, like the flowing of milk from the udder of the cow, is to overlook the fact that the cow is a conscious agent and the flowing of milk is conditioned by

⁹ Br. Up. 4.4.7

¹⁰ Vedāntasāra of Sadānanda Yogindra, tr. by Kālivara Vedāntavāgiśa, p. 211.

the motherly affection and love towards its offspring. But *Prakṛti* is fully unconscious, and so its spontaneous changes are cancelled.

If such spontaneous movement is at all admitted, then it remains to be interpreted how and why *Prakṛti* evolves the world in one case and destroys it in another. That is to say, the equipoise or *sāmyābasthā* of *Prakṛti* required to be disturbed for the evolution of the world by the presence of *Puruṣa*, *whether that presence is real, apparent, or mere proximity*, is not so much important. An important fact is that there must be some contact between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* so that equilibrium gets disturbed and the subsequent preponderance of one *guṇa* over the rest becomes possible, resulting in evolution. How then can *Prakṛti* be absolute or independent? It can be pointed out again that if both *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* are eternal (*nitya*) and all-pervading (*bibhu*), their contact must also be regarded as eternal. Consequently, evolution will continue without any break, having no end. Therefore, evolution cannot be explained in the case of *Prakṛti* alone. For that, we require a contact (contact or mere proximity) with *Puruṣa*. This makes us understand that *Prakṛti* is not absolute (*nirapekṣa*) or independent (*svādhina*). Further, we should consider why and how an absolute or independent *Prakṛti* can subserve the purpose of *Puruṣa*. If somebody cares to serve the purpose of another, as a maid-servant for her master, then she becomes subservient to the other. This cancels the independence of *Prakṛti* for which the Sāṃkhya Philosophers advocate.

To say that *Prakṛti* serves the interest of *Puruṣa* in a spirit of detachment without minding its own interest or receiving acknowledgement from *Puruṣa* is not to explain how such *Prakṛti* can be called blind. It is true that a blind person cannot execute perfectly what he plans. But the fact that *Prakṛti* is able to make plans goes against its unconscious nature. As a matter of fact, both a lame man and a blind man are conscious agents, and both are capable of doing certain activities. The lame man may not walk, but certainly makes verbal utterances to guide the blind man. And these utterances are undoubtedly his activities. Besides, the lame man is capable of making movements through his hands and other organs, and of course, to a certain extent, through his feet. He is capable of seeing, which is no doubt an activity. So, to compare a lame man with *Puruṣa*, who is utterly inactive, and to compare a blind man with *Prakṛti*, who is utterly unconscious, is not suitable here. Again, if *Prakṛti* is viewed as blind and non-intelligent, evolution should have been mechanical and devoid of purpose. But the world which *Prakṛti* evolves is full of harmony, design, order, and purpose.

On the other hand, *Puruṣa* is looked upon as pure consciousness (*viśuddha caitanya*) and is untouched by bondage or liberation. Yet the Sāṃkhya Philosophers speak of plurality of *Puruṣa* on the flimsy ground of birth, death, and activity. Influenced by causal connection, we can feel that birth, etc., cannot affect consciousness as such, which is *nitya* and *niṣkṛya*. Thus, birth, etc., may be regarded as the qualifications of the phenomenal Ego or *Jīvātmā*, who is a product of the reflection of *Puruṣa* on *Buddhi*. *Puruṣa* is transcendental to all these. Yet the Sāṃkhya Philosophers never make a distinction between these two kinds of self. *Puruṣa* proper and *Jīva*. If we look closely at the arguments advanced for the existence of *Puruṣa*, we will be more convinced that all of them prove the existence of *Jīvas* and none of them *Puruṣa* Proper. It is beyond one's comprehension why the Sāṃkhyas fail to reduce the many *Jīvas* into one absolute *Puruṣa* in the manner of the manifold material entities being reduced into one primal matter called *Prakṛti*.

Sāṃkhya Philosophers declare that *Puruṣa* is not really bound or liberated. It is *Prakṛti* which really binds itself, liberates itself (and migrates itself). The so-called bondage of *Puruṣa* is simply secondary or falsely attributed (*aupacārika*) because of the close association of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. These two accounts are not in keeping with each other, and the Sāṃkhya Philosophers are making a mess out of them. If activity belongs to *Prakṛti* and enjoyment to *Puruṣa*, then the moral law of *Karma* is overthrown altogether.

Prakṛti performs action, and *Puruṣa* has to reap their fruits. Again, *Prakṛti* brings about different enjoyable objects without being able to enjoy them. This brings the charge of vicarious liability. We can also consider the fact of how enjoyment on the part of *Puruṣa* is possible at all. *Puruṣa* is passive, inactive, and indifferent. It is formless. How then can enjoyment be possible? Enjoyment (*bhoga*) certainly needs some activity (*Kriyā*) and some form (*ākāra*) on the part of the enjoyer. *Puruṣa*, having none, is not truly the enjoyer.

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