



The Development of the Idea of Embodied Liberation before Śaṅkara: The Early Upaniṣads, the Brahmasūtras, Gauḍapāda, and the Bhagavad-Gītā

The notion of liberation while living found in Advaita Vedanta developed slowly over many centuries, and did not become a formal doctrine until after the time of Śaṅkara. Still, the basic elements of the Advaitic conception of *jīvanmukti* can be traced back to the earliest *Upaniṣads*. There we find both the idea that one (or one's essential being) gains immortality (eternal life) in a heavenly realm only after leaving the body and the rudiments of a conception of liberation (and immortality) while living by knowing *ātman/ brahman* identity.¹ This liberation (*mukti, mokṣa*) by nondual knowledge takes one beyond both the life-and-death cycle of *saṃsāra* and any "physical" or material heavenly realm.²

Many scholars have noted that early Indian religious texts generally describe liberation not as knowing the self but as reaching a heavenly realm (*brahma* or *svarga loka*), that is, "going somewhere" in time and space. In some early *Upaniṣads*, two paths (*yāna*) are described that require the performance of sacrificial acts or faith and asceticism; one is the path of the fathers (*pitṛ*), which goes via the moon and leads to rebirth, the other is the path of the gods (*deva*), which is associated with the sun, heaven, and eventually knowledge.³ Even when one attains the realm of the gods, liberation and immortality are tied to a place, albeit a heavenly and blissful place that lacks the sorrow and frustration of our human realm. This view also implies that one gains liberation and immortality only after death, since only then does one reach heavenly realms. The notion that one goes to another realm

by the path of the gods is called by later Advaitins “liberation by stages” (*kramamukti*).⁴

As the ideas of *karma* and rebirth take hold, however, it becomes apparent that for most beings even a heaven is temporary, and one must eventually (and repeatedly) return to this realm of suffering and desire. *Upaniṣadic* thinking now begins to focus on the idea of liberation from all death and rebirth through desire-ending knowledge, and immortality is linked with knowing one’s identity with *brahman*, rather than with going to a heavenly realm. One no longer fulfills one’s desires (in heaven), one discontinues desiring (human pleasures, but not the self); this ceasing of desire and concomitant liberating knowledge can (or must) happen while living. This shift in focus takes place over an extended period, and the ideas of immortality as the attainment of a blissful eternal abode and as desire-ending knowledge of *brahman* often are found in close proximity. In some cases, one can gain liberating knowledge in a body, but one does not reach immortality or heaven before death. This position presages the extended Advaita debate about whether one can truly be fully liberated while living.

Immortality in the Early Upaniṣads

A look at the concept of immortality in the *Upaniṣads* clearly illustrates the slow and equivocal development of the idea of liberation while living. The term *immortal[ity]* (*amṛta[tva]*) appears many times in the early or “major” *Upaniṣads*.⁵ Its exact meaning varies among and even within various *Upaniṣads* (illustrating their nonsystematic nature), and certain usages are ambiguous, as I shall soon show. In these texts, immortality can refer to eternal life in a heavenly realm after the body falls, but it also can mean knowing the highest truth, even while embodied. We shall see that later Advaitins did have warrant to refer back to the *Upaniṣads* for passages that indicate knowledge of *ātman /brahman* as final “immortal” liberation, yet these writers also could have found other passages describing immortality as a state a person reaches only in a heavenly realm. While there is no simple chronological development in meanings of immortality, one can perhaps discern a “direction” in *Upaniṣadic* passages mentioning *amṛta(tva)* from “going” (to a heaven) to “knowing” and “being” (*ātman/brahman*). Most *Upaniṣadic* texts referring to immortality are “in the middle” of this shift, so can seem ambiguous or “unclear,” especially since “going” or “attaining” can be read figuratively or literally.

Before turning to the texts, I should point out that throughout the *Upaniṣads*, *immortal(ity)* is often used as one among many modifiers for our true essence or being, which is generally termed *ātman* or *brahman*. *Brahman*

and *ātman* are certainly immortal,⁶ and the three terms are used together in *ChU* VIII. 14. 1 and *BāU* IV. 4. 25. Two other entities found in the *Upaniṣads* that often refer to our true essence or being are regularly called immortal: the person (*puruṣa*) and the vital breath[s] (*prāṇa[s]*).⁷ The vital breath is said to be immortal in *BāU* I. 5. 7, I. 6. 3, II. 3. 5, and IV. 4. 7 (where it is identified with *brahman*), as well as *Praśna* II. 5 and III. 11–2 (which says that the wise one, knowing the *prāṇa*, becomes immortal). According to *Kauṣītaki* III. 2, *prāṇa* as *prajñātma* is immortal, and with this *prāṇa*, one obtains immortality in this world.⁸ The *puruṣa* is termed immortal in *ChU* IV. 15. 1, *BāU* II. 3. 5, IV. 3. 12, *Muṇḍaka* I. 2. 11, *Praśna* VI. 5, and *Taittirīya* I. 6. 1. The *Kāṭha* explicitly says the immortal *puruṣa* is *brahman* (V. 8, VI. 1) and *ātman* (VI. 17). An extensive parallelism is made in *BāU* II. 5. 1 ff., where the immortal *puruṣa* in the earth and body and so on is termed the self, *brahman*, and all.



Now we may look at specific references to immortality in the early *Upaniṣads*. First, while virtually all relevant *Upaniṣadic* passages say knowledge is central to liberation, some seem to indicate that one becomes immortal only when one reaches another realm. *Aitareya* IV. 6 states that the bodiless knower obtains all desires in heaven (*svarga*) and then becomes immortal, and *Kauṣītaki* II. 14 holds that one who knows the vital breath (*prāṇa*) leaves the body, goes to where the gods (*deva*) are, and becomes immortal like them.⁹ *Kena* I. 2 says that the wise become immortal upon departure from this world.

There are a number of other passages, especially in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, which also seem to indicate that one “goes to” immortality, but goes by knowing. For example, *Muṇḍaka* I. 2. 11 claims that knower–renouncers, practicing austerity (*tapas*) and faith (*śraddha*), depart to where the immortal *puruṣa* dwells, and II. 2. 5 states that knowing (*brahman*) as the self is the bridge (*setu*) to immortality.¹⁰ Two other passages mention knowing the immortal (*brahman*) without indicating any “going”: *Muṇḍaka* II. 2. 2 simply says the imperishable and immortal *brahman* is to be known, while II. 2. 8 states that the wise see the blissful immortal shine. The most important, and ambiguous, *Muṇḍaka* passages linking immortality and liberation (while living) by knowledge are III. 2. 6 and 9. Verse 6 states that Vedanta-knowing ascetics are immortal and liberated at the end of time among the *brahma*-worlds. Verse 9 also combines the idea of knowing *brahman* with “crossing over” (sorrow and evil) to immortality. (These texts will be looked at more closely later in this chapter.)

Other *Upaniṣads* also have passages that say that after knowing *brahman* one “goes to” (*gam*) immortality. *Kāṭha* VI. 8 states that when knowing the pure partless *puruṣa*, one is liberated and goes to immortality, and *ChU* II. 23. 1 holds that one established in *brahman* goes to immortality.

If one understands “go” in these passages to be figurative, then the texts are saying that when one knows *brahman*, one becomes immortal—indicating immortality is a state reached here rather than in a heaven reached after death.

This very view can be seen in the largest number of references to immortality in the *Upaniṣads*, which indicate that immortality arises from knowing, without any mention of “going.” These passages lead us most directly to the Advaitic idea of liberation as a state of knowing *brahman* while living. The idea that one becomes immortal by knowing *ātman* or *brahman* appears as early as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. In the Yājñavalkya-Maitreyī dialogues (II. 4. 2–3 and IV. 5. 3–6), one is said to become immortal by knowing the self. *BāU* IV. 4. 14 states that those who know (*ātman/brahman*) become immortal, and others go to sorrow.¹¹ *BāU* IV. 4. 17 holds that knowing immortal *brahman*, one is immortal. Other *Upaniṣads* make similar claims. *Kena* II. 4 states that one gains immortality by *vidyā* (of *brahman*). *Īśa* 11 says that the knower of *vidyā* and *avidyā* together gains immortality by *vidyā*. According to *Kaṭha* IV. 1–2, the wise one, desiring immortality, turned inward and saw the self; knowing immortality, the wise seek what is stable (the self). Finally, there are the important *BāU* IV. 4. 7 and *Kaṭha* VI. 14–5 passages explicitly stating that when desires cease, the mortal becomes immortal, and one attains *brahman* here (more on these soon). Before expanding on this text, let us return to passages that link “knowing” and “going” but do not mention immortality.

These linkages are made in a number of *ChU* passages that suggest that after knowing *brahman* (here), one can roam heavenly realms. *ChU* VII. 25. 2 states that one who knows the self is all this (world) has the delight and bliss of the self, and can roam all the worlds (*loka*). *ChU* VIII. 1. 6 claims that those who depart here not knowing the self do not move freely among the worlds, but those who depart knowing the self do move freely in all worlds.¹²

It remains unsaid whether the Self-knower keeps or drops the physical body before moving among other worlds. In the same way, few *Upaniṣadic* texts explicitly state the *brahman*-knower is fully liberated (or immortal) while here—though this is certainly a possible reading. For example, *BāU* I. 4. 10 claims that gods awakened to “I am *brahman*” become *brahman*—as do *ṛṣis* (such as Vāmadeva) and men (*manuṣya*), and *BāU* III. 5. 1 states that *brahman* is the self of all, and a Brahmin who knows the self (beyond illusion, old age, and death) goes beyond desires for sons, wealth, or the world. According to *BāU* III. 9. 28. 7, *brahman*, which is knowledge and bliss, is the final goal, and the knower of it is not born again. This could suggest, but does not say, that the knower may overcome ignorance while here in this birth.

Three Key Upaniṣadic References to Liberation While Living

We now turn to the relatively few *Upaniṣadic* passages that explicitly speak of attaining or becoming *brahman* here. These texts are, of course, central to the development of the conception of living liberation in later Advaita. The first of these passages is *BāU* IV. 4. 6–7 (and 22–3).¹³ *BāU* IV. 4. 3–4 state that the self throws off this body and takes rebirth in a new one (which it creates); verse 5 claims that as one acts and desires (in earlier births), so does one become: good by good actions, evil by evil actions. *BāU* IV. 4. 6 then holds that one with *karma*-bearing desires must return to this world to perform action, but one who is free from desire, or who has satisfied the desire for the self, gains identity with *brahman*. Then one's vital breath (*prāṇa*), that is, transmigrating self, does not pass away (*utkram*) and thus one no longer suffers rebirth. This verse closes: "Being *brahman* indeed, one goes to (or merges with) *brahman*" (*brahmaiva san brahmāpyeti*).¹⁴ This passage suggests both "knowing" and "going," that is, it seems to indicate that when one *is brahman* (by desirelessness and knowledge), one *goes to brahman* (a state or place).¹⁵ *BāU* IV. 4. 7 then indicates that being *brahman* (by freedom from desire) is the essential, transformative aspect: "When all desires fixed in the heart are released, then a mortal becomes immortal, (and) one attains *brahman* here."¹⁶ The *brahman*-being is immortal while the body remains, but this body is now to him like a sloughed off snake skin is to the snake. This bodiless, immortal being is indeed *brahman* (*ayam āsarīro 'mṛtaḥ prāṇo brahmaiva*). This passage contains an idea absolutely central to *jīvanmukti*: one who exists, but is already dead to desire, can be said to be "bodiless" while embodied.¹⁷ These verses put a particular emphasis on desirelessness: becoming desireless brings immortality, bodilessness, and being *brahman* itself.

This passage continues with another clear linking of "knowing" and "going:" *BāU* IV. 4. 8–10 state that wise *brahman*-knowers, being freed (*vimukta*), go to a heavenly realm (*svarga loka*) by the ancient path. While the *brahman*-knower goes by this bright path, the ignorant proceed into darkness. However, later verses continue to make evident that one can gain knowledge of the self while alive, and such knowledge is the highest goal. According to *BāU* IV. 4. 14, we can know this (self) while here (*iha*), but if we lack self-knowledge, our ignorance is great destruction: knowers become immortal, all others go to sorrow. *BāU* IV. 4. 22–3 state that after knowing the eternal and limitless self, all desires (such as those for sons and wealth) cease, and all karmic activity is overcome. The serene and self-controlled *brahman*-knower is now free from any taint of evil and can wander freely in the world.¹⁸ Thus, *BāU* IV. 4 contains a particularly clear example of passages that use the terminology of going *from* embodiment and suffering *to* a higher, "immortal"

state (or place), while at the same time indicating that knowledge of *brahman* (linked with desirelessness) is the central element of liberation and that one can truly be liberated even while living (and not just after going to a heavenly world).¹⁹ It is worth briefly mentioning here a similar mixing of “knowing” and “going” (while adding that purification by renunciation is a crucial first step) found in *Muṇḍaka* III. 2. 5–6. Verse 5 states that having attained *brahman*, seers (*rṣi*) are desireless, serene, full of knowledge, and yoked to the self, so they enter the all (*sarva*). As mentioned earlier, verse 6 claims that when purified by renunciation, Vedānta-knowing ascetics (*yati*) are immortal and liberated (*parimuc*) at the end of time among the *brahma*-worlds.



The second crucial early *Upaniṣadic* text is *ChU* VI. 14. 2, which contains the idea that the embodied self is “blindfolded” by ignorance and can find its way home (to liberating *brahman*-knowledge) only with the help of a teacher.²⁰ This passage is part of the famous instruction to Śvetaketu about his true nature as *ātman/brahman* (*tat tvam asi*: you are that), a nature that is omnipresent but unseen (the prior verses refer to a seed’s invisible essence generating a tree and unperceived salt pervading water). *ChU* VI. 14. 1 tells of a blindfolded man who desires directions after being abandoned. In verse 2, the man is said to find his way by someone removing the blindfold and directing him home. The text claims that in just this way an ignorant (“blindfolded”) person here (i.e., embodied in *samsāra*) who “gains direction” from a teacher (*ācārya*) comes to know, “I will remain here just as long as I am not released (*vimuc*), then I will attain (release[?]).”²¹

This *śruti* text, which can be read in a number of ways, is central to the Advaitic concept of *jīvanmukti*, for it raises an issue that will continue to bedevil much later Advaitins: What is the relationship between embodiment and full, final liberation? Put another way, if, although liberated, one remains here still in a body (inevitably tied to desire and suffering), is one even more liberated (or immortal) after death?²² The precise meaning of the last part of this passage is uncertain in part because exactly what one is released from or what one then attains is unstated. “Release” and “attainment” can indicate both “knowing” and “going,” and the text leaves their referents unspecified. The passage may simply suggest that one remains embodied here until released from ignorance, and then one immediately attains the final (bodiless) end—immortality and/or identity with *brahman*. Thus, release from ignorance (“knowing”) brings simultaneous release from the body (“going”). Alternatively, it can suggest that although a Self-knower, one still remains until released from a body, and only then does one attain final liberation. In this reading, the knower, since still embodied, has not yet attained the highest goal (perfect *brahman* identity), so one liberated (by knowledge) while living

becomes “more” liberated at death (meaning no full knowing until after going). A related, but not identical, interpretation is to suggest that the knower remains embodied here having attained *brahman* (which is, by definition, liberation) but not the final end (heaven or immortality), that is, full knowing can precede going. In this case, one remains not due to any lack of perfected knowledge, but due merely to the workings of a remnant of *karma* that causes the body to continue for a short time. We shall see that this is the preferred answer in later Advaita.



Finally, we can look at a group of related passages in the *Kaṭha* and *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣads* that are the most suggestive of living liberation in all the early *Upaniṣads*. These passages (some of which refer back to *BāU* IV. 4. 7)²³ seem to indicate clearly the idea of liberation while living by knowledge of *brahman*, yet still contain imagery of freedom from embodiment bringing immortality (eternal life). The aforementioned *Muṇḍaka* III. 2. 6 illustrates this point; it states that Vedānta knowing ascetics, purified by *saṃnyāsa*, at their final end are immortal among *brahma*-worlds and all liberated (*parimuc*). *Kaṭha* VI. 4 seems to claim that if one knows (*brahman*) here before the body ceases, one is liberated; otherwise there is (re)embodiment among created worlds (*sarga loka*).

Yet perhaps the clearest statement of living liberation in all the “major” *Upaniṣads*, integrating language of immortality with attaining *brahman* here, lies in *Kaṭha* VI. 14–5. *Kaṭha* VI. 14 quotes from *BāU* IV. 4. 7: “When all desires fixed in the heart are released, then a mortal becomes immortal (and) here attains *brahman*.” *Kaṭha* VI. 15 introduces the graphic, physical image of cutting knots in the heart to gain freedom; it says, “When all the knots in the heart are cut here, then a mortal becomes immortal—such is the teaching.”²⁴ *Muṇḍaka* II. 1. 10, while echoing this, makes the central role of knowledge clearer: “One who knows this (*brahman*), hidden in the heart (*guhā*), cuts the knots of ignorance here” (*etad yo veda nihitam guhāyām so’vidyāgranthim vikratīha*). Finally, *Muṇḍaka* III. 2. 9 ties together a number of earlier ideas by claiming, “One who knows that supreme *brahman* becomes *brahman* itself, no one in his family lacks *brahman*-knowing; (the knower) crosses over sorrow and evil, (and) freed from knots in the heart, becomes immortal.”²⁵ Again, we see knowing *brahman* (Advaitic liberation) mixed with body-based language (knots in the heart), and “crossing over” to immortality through freedom from knots/desires. We also see the close connection between knowing and becoming or attaining (i.e., “going to”) *brahman*.

The early *Upaniṣads* go no further in developing the idea of liberation while living. The notion of liberation or immortality does seem increasingly to shift from a “going” to a blissful heaven after death to a desireless “knowing”

of *ātman/brahman*. Yet while most passages focus on *brahman*-knowledge, none is completely free of the spatially oriented language of “going to” or “attaining” liberation. As *ChU* VI. 14. 2 makes especially evident, we also cannot find any clear statement about whether one must leave the body for full liberation or whether the liberated being will take rebirth to assist others (such as by teaching). Finally, nowhere is there a formal distinction made between living (*jīvan*) and bodiless (*videha*) *mukti*. These issues will appear repeatedly in later Advaita. Still, it is not difficult to understand why Śāṅkara and other later Advaitins used these *Upaniṣadic* passages as proof texts for their views on *jīvanmukti*.

Jīvanmukti and the Brahmasūtras

Bādarāyaṇa’s *Brahmasūtras* (*BS*) are a group of brief aphorisms intended, in part by systematizing *Upaniṣadic* ideas, to illuminate the nature of reality (which is *brahman*), the ways to know it, and the fruits of that knowledge; the text takes into account both remarks by other early Vedantic thinkers and those of members of other schools of thought. Bādarāyaṇa’s ideas are interesting in their own right, but have become even more important (and contested) because of the commentaries that Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, and other Vedantins wrote on the *sūtras*. Since certain aphorisms in the *Brahmasūtras* have been interpreted as supporting the notion of *jīvanmukti*, we may pause briefly to consider them. The meaning of the relevant *sūtras*, when looked at in isolation, is not by any means clear. To the degree one can understand them independently of commentary, one seems to find that the realm of liberation (*brahma-loka*) is reached only after death.²⁶ Even the most likely references to the idea of *jīvanmukti* are quite ambiguous and opaque without a number of parenthetical additions. The extent of interpolation needed is exemplified by *BS* III. 4. 51; it speaks of living liberation if it is read to say “(liberation arises) even in this realm/life (*api aihika*), if there is no obstruction (*pratibandha*) in the subject discussed (i.e., liberation) due to seeing that (according to scripture).”²⁷ *BS* III. 4. 52 adds, “thus there is no rule concerning the fruit of liberation (i.e., that it occurs only after death) due to ascertaining that state (i.e., *jīvanmukti*).”²⁸

BS IV. 1. 13ff. can also be read a number of ways, one being an argument for the continuity of a special form of *karma* after liberation. *Sūtra* 13 can be read to claim “when that (*brahman*) is realized, there is destruction of and disconnection (*aśleṣa*) from all earlier and later evil acts (*agha*).” *BS* IV. 1. 14 then adds “so also with the other (i.e., good acts), there is no connection (with *karma*) when (the body) falls.”²⁹ For one favoring *jīvanmukti*, IV. 1. 15 then introduces a crucial distinction in types of

karma: “But only those effects which have not commenced acting (*anārabdha kārya*) (are destroyed) due to the limit (*avadhi*, i.e., death) of that.”³⁰ This of course suggests the notion central to later Advaita of a special (limited in duration) *karma*, called currently manifesting (*prārabdha*) *karma*, which allows for liberation while still embodied. Following this, *BS* IV. 1. 19 concludes that “finishing off the other two (currently manifesting good and evil *karma*) by experiencing (*bhoga*), one attains (*sampad*) (*brahman*).”³¹ Of course, one could read the above *sūtras* very differently, perhaps as referring to sacrificial ritual (IV. 1. 16 even refers to the *agnihotra*), for most of the key words are left implicit.

BS III. 3. 32 supports *jīvanmukti* if it is read to say that (bodily) existence (*avasthiti*) (continues even after liberation) for those with a commission (*adhikāra*) as long as the commission exists.³² *BS* IV. 2–4 focus on the nature of the self being released, the paths it goes on, and the realms it goes to. Nowhere here is *jīvanmukti* clearly asserted. *BS* IV. 4. 15–17 seem to claim that the self can enter and animate various bodies, while *sūtra* 22 states that there is no return (*anāvṛtti*)—but of what and to what is uncertain. Thus, while the *sūtras* may refer to *jīvanmukti*, they also may be far from such a notion. Again, we will revisit these texts when we look at Śaṅkara, his followers, and, for a differing view, Rāmānuja.

Gauḍapāda and Living Liberation

While considering possible early influences on later Advaitic conceptions of *jīvanmukti*, it is appropriate to look at a figure named Gauḍapāda who, according to tradition, authored a group of stanzas (*kārikā*) that ostensibly comment and elaborate upon the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. Gauḍapāda is often held to be the teacher of Śaṅkara’s teacher, and his *kārikās* (*GK*), the first writing of the Advaita school. Our examination can be brief, for Gauḍapāda never directly addresses living liberation, or uses the term *jīvanmukti*. However, he does have a number of references to a knower or advanced *yogin*; these verses implicitly suggest the existence of a being who is liberated while living. We shall look at two passages in particular, beginning with the end of the second chapter (*prakaraṇa*).³³ Although *GK* II. 32 says that there is neither seeker of liberation (*mumuṅṣu*) or liberated being (*mukta*), II. 34–38 speak of the (living) knower or sage. There are references to truth-knowers (*tattva-vid*) (II. 34), sages (*muni*) free from anger, fear, and passion (II. 35), the knower who has realized nonduality (II. 36), the homeless ascetic (*yati*) who does as he pleases (II. 37), and one who, having seen reality (*tattva*) inside and out, enjoys it and becomes it (II. 38).³⁴ All of these apparently liberated beings are of course found here while living.

The third chapter closes by describing the *yoga* of no-touch (*asparśa*) and alludes to a state of perfect mental control while living. *GK* III. 32 states that by realizing the truth of the self (*ātma-satya*), one goes to “mindlessness” (*amanastā*). The mind of the wise is controlled (*nighrīta*) and without fluctuation (*nirvikalpa*), unlike in sleep (III. 34). Now one achieves fearless all-knowing *brahman* (III. 35). In serene and unmoving *samādhi*, no thought arises or is grasped, and knowledge is established in the self (III. 37–38). While this *yoga* of no touch is hard for all *yogins* to realize, their awakening, peace, and cessation of sorrow depend on this mental control (III. 39–40). The following verses continue to urge controlling distractions and desires, and keeping the mind detached, tranquil, and in equilibrium. When the mind (*citta*) is neither dissolved (in sleep) nor distracted, it remains motionless and imageless, and then attains *brahman* (III. 46),³⁵ self-established, serene, unborn, and all-knowing (III. 47). These verses use predominantly yogic language, yet speak of the mind attaining *brahman* here, implicitly acknowledging the possibility of liberation while living.³⁶ While these ideas are suggestive of *jīvanmukti*, Gauḍapāda’s particular terminology here is not influential in later Advaita, and he is rarely mentioned by later writers in the *jīvanmukti* context.

The Bhagavad-Gītā and Jīvanmukti

The *Bhagavad-Gītā*, on the other hand, is clearly important for later Advaitins, particularly those whom I will call “Yogic Advaitins,” such as the authors of the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* and the *Jīvanmuktiviveka*. As is well-known, the *Gītā* describes a variety of *yogas*, and the liberated being here is generally seen as a master *yogin*, not an Advaitic *jīvanmukta*. Even when nondual knowledge is praised, one reaches such knowledge by a yogic path. Still, the status of the text made an Advaita commentary necessary, probably by Śaṅkara himself, and other, later, Advaitins refer to the *Gītā* for scriptural support on occasion. The most important description of a liberated being for our purposes (in part because of the significant role it plays in the *Jīvanmuktiviveka*) is that of the one with firm wisdom, the *sthita-prajña*, found in *Gītā* II. 54 ff.³⁷

The one with firm wisdom abandons all desires and is satisfied with the Self (55), is neither distressed by sorrow nor longing for joy, is without anger, fear, or passion (56), is all ways unattached, and neither desires or hates when obtaining good or evil (57). Such detachment and renunciation of desires are shared goals of both Advaitins and followers of *yoga*. The next verses focus more on liberation through (yogic) pacification of mind and senses, however. The *sthita-prajña* withdraws senses from their objects (58) and restrains them, sitting yoked and intent on Krishna; one whose senses are controlled is established in wisdom (61). The roiling senses carry away the

mind (60) and dwelling on sense objects causes attachment, desire, anger, delusion, and finally utter destruction (62–63). However, when one is self-controlled, all sorrows cease and one attains serenity and wisdom (64–65). The focus on sense control and yogic restraint (*saṁyama*) continues to the chapter's conclusion. Detachment, serenity, and renunciation of desire are compatible with Advaitic *jīvanmukti*, but the *Gītā* is clearly describing the master *yogin*, not the liberated being of Advaita.

Similar descriptions are found in later chapters. *Gītā* IV. 19–23 describe a sage who acts without desire or attachment, is satisfied with whatever is obtained, and is equipped in success or failure, with a mind established in knowledge (*jñāna*). *Jñāna* is a central term in mainstream Advaita, where it means immediate realization of *ātman/brahman* identity. *Gītā* IV. 24 ff. describe a form of sacrifice that brings one to *brahman*, and verse 34 states “by (devotees’) submission, questioning, and service, knowers (*jñānin*) seeing the truth will teach you their knowledge,”³⁸ and verse 37 claims that the fire of knowledge turns all *karma* to ashes.³⁹ All this could be consistent with Advaita, suggesting that the sage/knower above is a *jīvanmukta*, but verses 38–39 point to the necessity of *yoga*. According to 38, purifying knowledge is eventually seen in the self by perfecting *yoga*, and verse 39 asserts that one focused on knowledge *with* controlled senses obtains knowledge and soon reaches the highest peace (*parāṁ sāntim*).⁴⁰

Gītā V. 23–24 make clear that the model of living liberation is the well-disciplined *yogin*. According to *Gītā* V. 23, the one who is able here, before liberation from the body, to withstand the agitation (*vega*) rising from anger and desire—is disciplined (*yukta*) and happy.⁴¹ He has inner happiness, joy, and radiance; this *yogin* becomes *brahman* and reaches *brahma-nirvāṇa* (24). The following verses describe the route to achieving *brahma-nirvāṇa*,⁴² again emphasizing mastering the mind and emotions, and knowing the self. With such yogic control, one is liberated forever (28). Chapter VI continues to describe the detached master *yogin* at length. It concludes by addressing the question of what happens at the death of the not-quite-liberated being (the “almost *jīvanmukta*”). Krishna teaches that no meritorious effort in this (or any) birth is wasted (40–46). The *yogin* who fails to attain liberation in this life will be reborn with strong mental discipline in a wise or wealthy family, and will, after intense effort, go to the supreme goal. This *yogin* then surpasses renunciants (*tapasvin*), those who perform ritual action, and even knowers (*jñānin*); mainstream Advaita would of course not concur with this view. Still, this passage will resonate through the later strand of thought I call “Yogic Advaita.”

The *Gītā* also provides other characterizations of living liberated beings that use terms quite similar to the master *yogin*, including descriptions of the devotee (*bhakta*) of the lord (which particularly emphasizes equanimity) (XII.

13.9), and the one beyond all qualities (*gunātīta*), also stressing equipoise and detachment (XIV. 22–26).⁴³ The *Jīvanmuktiviveka* will expand on many of the aforementioned passages, an indication both of the importance of the *Gītā* and of the *JMV*'s concern to integrate perspectives of both *yoga* and Advaita. On the other hand, the *Gītā*'s extensive descriptions of the apparently liberated while living *yogin* are not central to the later mainstream Advaitic conception of *jīvanmukti*. To expand on this point, let us now turn to the founder of mainstream Advaita, Śāṅkara.

A Note on Mukti in the Upaniṣads

References to derivatives of the verb “*muc*” are surprisingly rare in the early *Upaniṣads*. They appear mostly in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Kaṭha*, and many of the usages that exist do not suggest Advaitic liberation. *BāU* I. 5. 17 says a son frees his father from all faults, and *BāU* III.1. 3–5 describe how a sacrificer frees himself from death, day and night, and the waxing and waning lunar fortnights, respectively. Verse 6 says the sacrificer ascends to *svarga loka* by Brahmin, mind, and moon, which is *mukti* and extreme (*ati*) *mukti*. In *BāU* IV. 2. 1, Yājñavalkya begins to tell Janaka where he will go when liberated (*vimukta*), and in IV. 3. 14, Janaka asks for further instruction about liberation. *BāU* IV. 3. 36 states that a person frees (*pramuc*) himself from his limbs as a fruit frees itself from a stalk (when ripe). These passages generally suggest liberation entails going to a new place or condition.

In *Kaṭha* I. 11, Yama says he will free (*pramuc*) Śvetaketu from the face (*mukha*) of death and III. 15 holds that this freeing comes from knowing the self. *Kaṭha* V. 1 claims that by ruling oneself, having been freed (*vimukta*), one is freed (perhaps following *BāU* IV. 4. 6) and V. 4 asks what remains when the self is released (*vimuc*) from the body (the answer is *ātman/brahman*). *Kaṭha* VI. 8 states that one knowing the supreme person (*puruṣa*) is liberated (*muc*) and goes to immortality. *Muṇḍaka* III. 2. 8 claims the knower reaches the supreme *puruṣa* when freed (*vimuc*) from name and form. These passages emphasize that knowing brings liberation more than do those of the *BāU*. (Incidentally, the later theistic *Śvetāśvatara* I. 8 claims that by knowing the lord, one is liberated from all bonds, and VI. 16 says the lord rules *saṃsāra* and *mokṣa*.)

Forms of *muc* appear in the important (and related) *BāU* IV. 4. 7–8, *Kaṭha* VI. 14, and *Muṇḍaka* III. 2. 9 texts (which speak of releasing desires or knots in the heart), discussed at some length in the body of the chapter, as are the usages in *ChU* VI. 14. 2 (see page 24). While all of these passages are certainly significant, the relative rarity of *Upaniṣadic* usages is surprising, given how often Indian thought is claimed to be focused upon liberation.