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REVISITING LIBERATION: ANALYZING ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Liberation, or Moksha, has long been regarded as the highest Purushartha (human goal) in Indian philosophy, representing a metaphysical concept integral to human existence. Despite its central role, Moksha is often overlooked in daily life. Indian philosophical traditions propose various paths to Moksha, with distinct interpretations across different schools of thought, such as Jnana Marga, Karma Marga, and Bhakti Marga. Common to all paths is the rejection of all the desires of individual self and focusing instead on the connection with the Supreme Soul, Brahman, or the Absolute. Moksha is perceived as the ultimate state of freedom, free from the suffering of the mundane world, representing the true nature of the human soul. However, in contemporary society, there is a noticeable shift towards the pursuit of empirical pleasure derived from sensory experiences, in contrast to the path leading to Moksha. This raises critical questions: Is there a lack of awareness regarding the concept of liberation, or is there a decline in faith in Indian philosophical systems? The pursuit of worldly pleasure may trap individuals in the cycle of bondage, while liberation signifies freedom from the cycle of birth and death. The modern generation's disconnection from the importance of Moksha could be attributed to factors such as Avidya (ignorance), which prevents individuals from engaging in Niskama Karma, a self-realization path. This paper seeks to explore the reasons for this neglect and aims to advocate for the acceptance and practice of Moksha as the highest Purushartha in the present era, calling attention to its relevance in contemporary spiritual life.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of this paper is to underscore the significance of attaining Moksha, engaging with various philosophical systems to both agree and challenge their interpretations. The concept of liberation is central to Indian philosophy, offering individuals a profound understanding of the ultimate purpose of life. Without a clear aim of Moksha, one's life may be seen as lacking purpose. Every Indian philosophical tradition, whether positively or negatively, addresses the idea of Moksha or liberation. Moksha is regarded as the highest goal within Hindu religious beliefs and practices, often conceptualized as a form of Salvation. It is a fundamental element in all Indian-origin faith traditions. In these traditions, the soul of the individual is called *Atman*, while the soul of the supreme being is *Paramatman*. Moksha is understood as liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—known as *Samsara*. As the ultimate goal of Hindu religious practice, Moksha is attained through self-realization. The core idea is that knowledge is the key to liberation, as bondage arises from ignorance, which can only be dispelled by wisdom. The *Jiva* (individual soul) must realize its true nature as pure soul by discerning the distinction between the soul and the non-soul.ⁱ Wilson states: "Annihilation, then, as regards individuals is as

much the ultimate destiny of the soul as it is of the body, and 'Not to be' is the melancholy result of the religion and philosophy of the Hindus."ⁱⁱ For over two millennia, liberation has been cherished as the highest good within many Hindu traditions, making it a core aspect of Hindu self-understanding, both in medieval and modern times. This paper will focus on two central questions, using insights from various philosophical systems:

(a) Do present-day individuals regard Moksha as the final goal of life? (b) Do the efforts to attain Moksha hold moral value? The main aim of this paper is to explore the non-materialistic approach to Moksha and examine how it resonates with the contemporary intentions and aspirations of today's society.

Context and Significance of the Topic: Now, it is crucial to explore how the concept of liberation has come to occupy the position of the highest goal in Indian philosophy. In our society, we often encounter individuals who, despite leading religious lives free from ego and characterized by self-sacrifice, experience suffering throughout their existence. They renounce valuable worldly possessions for the sake of God. In contrast, some people seem to live in constant happiness, enjoying pleasure at every moment, even though they are

primarily self-centred, pursuing their own desires. This leads to a fundamental question: what could explain these disparities in human experience? One concept that provides insight is *Dharma*. While the meaning of *Dharma* may vary depending on the individual or the philosophical system, a common understanding persists across all schools of Indian thought: *Dharma* refers to the moral principles and guidelines that direct us to live rightly. According to Indian philosophy, those who follow *Dharma* will experience true pleasure, as *Dharma* is the source of happiness. Conversely, those who act in opposition to *Dharma*, indulging in selfish or immoral actions, will inevitably face suffering and sorrow as the consequences of their actions. However, in practice, we often witness scenarios that seem to contradict this principle. Why, then, do some individuals seem to thrive despite not following *Dharma*, while others who strive to live morally continue to endure suffering?

Indian thinkers and philosophers have offered explanations for this apparent paradox. They argue that those who appear to enjoy happiness in the present, despite their self-centred actions, are reaping the consequences of their past karma. In other words, the pleasures they enjoy now are the fruits of their past good actions. However, the self-centred actions they undertake in the present will eventually lead to pain and suffering—either in this life or the next. On the other hand, those who endure pain and suffering in this life may be experiencing the results of their previous negative actions. Thus, the apparent contradictions we observe in life can be understood through the law of karma, where the consequences of past actions shape an individual's current reality, and the actions of the present will ultimately determine their future. In their present life, those who strive to detach from individualistic desires in their actions are believed to experience happiness or pleasure, either in this life or in the life after death.

In this regard, the *Vedantasara* provides a similar perspective, asserting that transmigration is a necessary explanation for the unequal distribution of happiness and suffering in the world. It suggests that the suffering of an infant is the result of significant sins committed in a past life, while the prosperity of a wicked person is considered a reward for meritorious actions from a previous existence.ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, the attainment of Moksha, or liberation, is understood as freedom from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This cycle is perpetuated by the inextricable link between karma and its fruits, which constitutes the primary cause of human bondage. The goal of liberation is to permanently eliminate pain from our lives. However, before achieving this, it is essential to free ourselves from the cycle of rebirths. At this juncture, the concept of Moksha becomes pivotal within Indian traditions, as it offers the only path to permanent freedom from this cycle.

The concept of Liberation in Indian context:

The nature of Moksha varies significantly across different philosophical systems, but it is commonly understood as the attainment of self-perfection. Some traditions assert that Moksha can be achieved within this lifetime, a state known as *Jivanmukti*, while others argue that Moksha is only realized after death, referred to as *Videhamukti*. This distinction highlights the belief that Moksha can be attained either during one's life or in the afterlife, illustrating the diversity of thought surrounding this concept. Broadly, there are two main approaches to the concept of liberation in Indian philosophy:

(1) The materialistic conception of Moksha, as seen in the Charvaka school, and (2) The non-materialistic conception, which can be further divided into (a) Positive conceptions, such as those in Vedanta and Jainism, and (b) Negative conceptions, as found in the Mimamsa and Nyaya schools. Our focus here will be on the non-materialistic approach to Moksha, which emphasizes the liberation of the soul from worldly desires and the attainment of spiritual freedom through self-realization, moral conduct, and knowledge. This path prioritizes the transcendence of the ego and material existence, aiming for the ultimate realization of the self as one with the divine or the absolute truth.

The Non-Materialistic Conceptions of Moksha: I will begin by discussing the negative approach to Moksha as presented in the Nyaya school of thought. Like many other philosophical traditions, Nyaya philosophers argue that ignorance is the root cause of human bondage. Both the Nyaya and Vaishesika traditions assert that Moksha entails the removal of all qualities of the self, including cognition, sensation, and desire, ultimately leading to liberation. The accounts of liberation articulated in the Nyaya, Vaishesika, and Mahabharata texts are part of a broader, polycentric discourse within what is often referred to as polycentric Hinduism. This discourse emerged through engagement with Buddhist and Jain traditions, influencing the development of ideas about the cosmos and Moksha.^{iv} In Nyaya philosophy, the soul is considered the central focus of right knowledge. According to Nyaya thinkers, the soul, body, senses, sense objects, intellect, mind, actions, faults, transmigration, fruit, pain, and release are all subjects of right knowledge. However, the self, as defined by Nyaya, cannot be directly perceived through sensory experience. It can only be perceived indirectly through its qualities, such as cognition, feeling, and willing.^v Nyaya posits that knowledge of reality—or *realities*—is the path to the highest good, *Summum bonum*, which is liberation or *Mukti*. According to this tradition, liberation is a state of complete negation—specifically, the negation of all pain and suffering. *Apavarga* (liberation) is described as a state free from the bondage of the body and senses. Nyaya philosophers assert that as long as the soul remains attached to the body and senses, it will be impossible for it to achieve this pain-free state. Therefore, they contend that in liberation, the soul must be freed from the shackles of the body and senses. In this liberated state, the self is understood to exist as a pure substance, free from pain, pleasure, cognition, and even consciousness.^{vi} Liberation, according to Nyaya, is achieved when the karmic chain, or the karmic matter, ceases to affect the self. It is a state where the soul is entirely detached from the body and sense organs. In Nyaya philosophy, this ultimate state of liberation is referred to as *Nihsvveasa*. Nyaya presents a vision of liberation that focuses on the negation of worldly attachments and the cessation of suffering, wherein the soul exists in its purest, unencumbered form.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that individuals remain in bondage due to their own actions. They place greater value on their individual selves than on anything else, which leads them further away from moral responsibility. It is through universalistic approaches, rather than individualistic ones, that people can fulfil their moral duties. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, when individuals become deeply involved in their sense of individuality, they engage in *Svakam karma* (actions driven by attachment). As people strive to satisfy their personal desires and accumulate more than what is necessary,

they create obstacles in the path of their moral obligations. Consequently, this self-centred pursuit erodes both their morality and their connection to universalism.

Vaishesika: The Vaishesika school also views bondage as resulting from ignorance and liberation as attainable through knowledge. According to Vaishesika, the soul, driven by ignorance, performs actions, which subsequently lead to the accumulation of merits or demerits. Liberation is achieved through knowledge, when actions cease, preventing the accumulation of new merits and demerits, while the effects of past actions gradually fade. Therefore, in the liberated state, these qualities cease to exist because the soul is no longer connected with the mind (*manas*) or the body. Liberation is described as the cessation of all life, consciousness, bliss, pain, and qualities. It represents the qualityless, indeterminate, pure nature of the individual soul—a pure substance devoid of all attributes. In this state, the liberated soul retains its own inherent individuality and particularity, existing as it is—knowing nothing, feeling nothing, and doing nothing.^{vii} As described in the Vaishesika texts, "The Vaishesika is a Moksha Sastra; it teaches the doctrine of release, release from the cycle of mortality." According to Kanada, the founder of the Vaishesika school, an individual must work out their own salvation. By controlling the sensory and motor organs and eliminating superficial psychic states, the mind becomes steady in the soul. Self-knowledge, or *Atma-saksatkara* (Self-realization), is considered the only means of attaining Moksha. This realization involves the recognition of the freedom of will—the free Self—which ultimately makes one the master of time and space. In this liberated state, distinctions between past, present, and future, or between here, there, and elsewhere, cease to exist.

Kanada's fundamental teaching can be encapsulated in the phrase, "*tattva-jnanat nihsreyasam*", meaning that the supreme good arises from the knowledge of the truth about the soul. This is a translation of the Vedic text, "*Tarati sokam Atma-vit*", which translates to, "The knower of the Self overcomes evil."^{viii} In this state of liberation, the individual acquires freedom from pain, pleasure, and suffering. Thus, the liberated soul exists as a substance devoid of all qualities, including consciousness. In this sense, the liberated soul is unconditioned and transcendent, beyond the limitations of material existence. A person can lack morality when they interpret Kanada's teaching—that man must work out his own salvation—as an individualistic pursuit, free from any ethical responsibility. However, the reality is that without a selfless initiative, working out one's salvation becomes impossible. While it is true that individuals should strive for their own Moksha, whatever actions they undertake to achieve it must be devoid of personal desires. Addressing potential objections, I would argue that although man must indeed work on his own salvation, the key to attaining it lies in the removal of self-centred wants. When individuals let go of their personal desires, they are naturally guided toward fulfilling their moral duties.

Mimamsaka: Jaimini and Sāvarasvāmī, unlike other philosophical schools, do not accept Moksha as the ultimate goal. They argue that the primary aim of human beings is to attain Heaven. However, later developments in Mimamsa philosophy saw the emergence of two schools: (a) Kumarila Bhatta and (b) Prabhakar Mimamsa. Both Kumarila and Prabhakar accepted Moksha as the highest human value. While

earlier Mimamsa thought identified Dharma, Artha, and Karma as the three Purusharthas (human goals), both Kumarila and Prabhakar argued that the highest Purushartha is Moksha. Kumarila Bhatta elaborates on his understanding of liberation, stating that "The cessation of many sorts of actions is as important for the attainment of liberation as the performance of some other sorts of action." He also argues that if liberation is a state that has a beginning, it must also have an end, but since liberation is defined as something that does not end, it cannot be the effect of anything. Kumarila answers obliquely: liberation is not bondage. Bondage refers to the continued presence of the self in a world of suffering, where the self is repeatedly engaged in embodied existence—this cycle of birth and death. As long as there is bondage, there is no liberation, and thus, bondage must cease. This is what Kumarila means by saying that freedom is *absentia* in nature: it is defined purely in terms of the absence of bondage.^{ix}

Prabhakar Mimamsa takes a slightly different approach, stating that liberation is the complete disappearance of both Dharma and Adharma. It is defined as "the complete cessation of body, caused by the disappearance of Dharma and Adharma." Prabhakar also believes that *Avidya* (ignorance) is the cause of bondage, and mere knowledge is insufficient to lead to absolute freedom. According to Prabhakar, liberation can only be attained by the exhaustion of action. He further asserts that liberation is the complete cessation of both pleasure and pain. It is not a state of bliss, as the attribute-less soul cannot experience bliss. Liberation, for Prabhakar, is the natural form of the soul. According to Kumarila, Moksha is the state of the *Atman* in itself, free from all pain. However, Kumarila regards Moksha as a positive state—the realization of the *Atman*. He believes that knowledge alone is not enough for liberation; liberation can be achieved through the combination of *Karma* and *Jnana* (action and knowledge).^x Both Kumarila and Prabhakar agree on the plurality of individual souls and regard the self as an eternal (*nitya*), omnipresent (*sarvagata*), ubiquitous (*vibhu*), and infinite (*vyapaka*) substance (*dravya*) that is the substratum (*ashraya*) of consciousness. The self is a real knower (*jnata*), enjoyer (*bhokta*), and agent (*karta*). The self is distinct from the body, senses, mind, and understanding. The self is the enjoyer (*bhokta*), the body is the vehicle of enjoyment (*bhogyatana*), the senses are the instruments of enjoyment (*bhogasadhana*), and both internal feelings and external things are the objects of enjoyment.^{xi} This school holds a negative conception of Moksha. The soul is naturally free from the cycle of birth and death, but due to its attachment to the body, it becomes limited. The distinction, or separateness, of body and soul is the essence of Moksha. Prabhakar asserts that the destruction of all pain is the state of Moksha. According to him, *Dharma* and *Adharma* are the causes of pleasure and pain, and thus Moksha is impossible as long as both remain active. He further clarifies that liberation is not a state of bliss, since the liberated soul is quality-less. Finally, Prabhakar states that mere knowledge of the true nature of the soul is not enough to achieve liberation; action is also necessary. In this section, we observe that the Mimamsakas assert that the soul is inherently free from pain and pleasure. The source of temporary pain and pleasure is attributed to the body and sense organs. This insight helps us understand that when we experience difficulties or pain, it is often because we are trying to satisfy the desires of our body and senses. Looking at the current state of the world, we see widespread pain, sorrow, and suffering, which suggests that people are not actively working toward or practicing the

pursuit of Moksha in their lives. This observation is further supported by the concepts of Dharma and Adharma. According to Mimamsa philosophy, Dharma and Adharma are the causes of pleasure and pain. However, many people today interpret Dharma narrowly, equating it only with religion, and this limited understanding leads to negative consequences, such as pain and suffering in their lives. This situation strengthens the idea that people are not recognizing Moksha as the highest human value in today's world.

Vedanta: According to Vedanta, the Jiva (individual soul) is inherently Sat-Chit-Ananda (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss), and is identical with Brahman. However, due to the influence of ignorance, the Jiva mistakenly identifies itself with the Knower, the Known, and the Doer. Shankaracharya, in his Advaita Vedanta, advocates unqualified monism, asserting that the distinction between subject and object, soul and matter, self and God is a creation of Maya (illusion). He states that Brahman is the only true reality, and the Jiva is fundamentally identical with Brahman. Although the human being is a combination of body and soul, the body, which is perceptible, is merely an illusory appearance. The soul perceives itself as finite due to its attachment to the body, which is caused by ignorance. In its true nature, the self is free from all objects. Liberation (Moksha) is not a new state nor the purification of an old one, but rather an inherent state that has always existed. Liberation is the realization of the identity between the self and Brahman, which was previously unrecognized. It is not a state of freedom from all suffering caused by the distinction between self and Brahman, but rather a state of positive bliss. According to Advaita Vedanta, the path to liberation is through the knowledge of reality (Jnana Marg).^{xii}

Many believe that liberation is an illusion, but in truth, there is no distinction — only one being, Brahman, the Atman. Vedanta holds that true knowledge (Atma Jnana) is the means to liberation. Therefore, the knowledge of the Self is considered the highest goal of human life. However, this knowledge is not merely a means to liberation; it is liberation itself. Once one attains this knowledge, they continue to live but are no longer deluded by the temptations of life. Upon death, the liberated soul is absorbed into Brahman. As stated in the Upanishads:

“As rivers run and in the deep,
Lose name and form and disappear, So goes, from name
and form released,
The wise man to the deity.”^{xiii}

Before delving deeper into Vedanta's perspective on liberation, it is important to highlight a distinctive feature of the system: the two types of liberation — Jivanmukti and Videhamukti. In the Brahma Sutras, we see a description of Jivanmukti. Opponents argue that liberation is attained after experiencing the consequences of past sins. However, the Sutra clarifies that upon realizing Brahman, past sins are destroyed and future sins do not accumulate. The realization of Brahman leads to the cessation of agency, as the individual no longer identifies with actions or the results of actions. As the scriptures assert, “Just as cotton growing on reeds is burnt when thrown into fire, even so are burnt the sins of who knowing this offers Agnihotra.”^{xiv} The Moksopaya elaborates on the path to Jivanmukti, which involves three decisive steps: Vicara (reflection), Jnana (valid knowledge or true understanding), and Vairagya (detachment). As a result of these steps, the individual enters a state of

unshakeable certainty about their freedom from bondage. In Vedantasara, it is said that the Jivanmukta is "liberated while yet living," freed from all bonds through the removal of ignorance and its effects. This liberation results in the realization of Brahman as indivisible and pure. However, according to the Yoga system, the meditation style called Asamprajnata (meditation without an object) is considered superior to knowledge, as it is believed to destroy residual attachments and facilitate liberation. On the other hand, Videhamukti refers to liberation after death.^{xv} Many Indian philosophers believe that this form of liberation is the only true liberation. The Sutra asserts that the knower of Brahman transcends the dualities of virtue and vice and is unaffected by the consequences of actions. "He overcomes both," and upon death, liberation is inevitable. There is no succession in knowledge — once knowledge dawns, it removes all ignorance and bondage permanently. Thus, liberation is the removal of ignorance through knowledge. The Shruti states, "Just as a slough cast off by a snake lies on an ant-hill, similarly does this body lie," indicating the state of Jivanmukti. Videhamukti occurs when the body dies, and the liberated soul is no longer bound by physical existence.^{xvi}

In Vedanta, it is stated that if the significance of Moksha were the destruction of the world, the entire world would cease to exist when the first person attains liberation. However, the realization of truth does not imply the dissolution of the world but only the removal of the sense of plurality. Upon attaining liberation, the world remains unchanged, but the individual's perception of it alters. The root cause of pain is ignorance, and liberation from ignorance brings freedom from suffering. Therefore, Moksha is not the dissolution of the world but the disappearance of false perceptions. Though Jnana Marg (the path of knowledge) is considered the most suitable way to attain Moksha, it does not imply that other paths cannot also lead to liberation. This is evident in Ramanuja's philosophy of Bhakti Marg (the path of devotion). According to Ramanuja, the soul is bound by ignorance and karma, and through devotion (Bhakti), one purifies the soul and removes the karmic impurities.

In Ramanuja's view, the relation between the soul and God is beginningless. The soul is associated with a particular body, senses, and life due to past karma. Purification occurs through a combination of action (karma) and knowledge (jnana). Ramanuja emphasizes that devotion (Bhakti) is the means to liberation, achieved through constant remembrance of God and surrendering to His mercy. This type of Bhakti culminates in Prapatti, a form of surrender to God, and Upasana, the practice of devotion. Ramanuja argues that the soul, after liberation, attains the nature of God but does not become identical with Him. The liberated soul is akin to God in essence but remains finite and distinct from Him in certain respects. The soul does not share God's omnipotent qualities, such as being the creator, preserver, or destroyer of the universe.^{xvii} In Ramanuja's system, Bhakti and Moksha are intimately connected. Bhakti is regarded as salvation in progress. At every stage of Bhakti, the practitioner is refining themselves. Bhakti is an ongoing process of becoming one with God, leading to ultimate liberation. The liberated soul, though similar to God, remains distinct and enjoys infinite bliss and perfect love, free from ignorance and bondage. In Vedanta, liberation is understood as an expansion of consciousness from the individual to the universal level. This insight reveals that liberation is the de-individualization of consciousness — the

individual realizes their connection to the universal consciousness. This realization removes the illusion of individuality and restores the soul to its true, undifferentiated existence as universal consciousness.^{xviii} The connection between efforts towards Moksha and moral responsibility has already been explored in previous sections. Now, it is time to address the first question regarding the belief in and practice of Moksha as the highest aim by people in the present day. This section encourages readers to look beyond material authenticity and consider the actions of people and the motivations behind them in their surrounding environment. Based on my own observations, I argue that people today are more focused on fulfilling their individual desires rather than engaging in actions for universal purposes.

As we have seen in various philosophical systems and scriptures, Moksha is recognized as difficult to attain, especially for ordinary individuals. However, this does not imply that it is unattainable. In the modern world, people are deeply entangled in the illusion of family life, often driven by the desire to make their own families happy. Presently, individuals are continuously striving to earn more than they need, which contributes to societal inequality. This phenomenon clearly indicates that when inequality persists, both the morality of individuals and the practice of Moksha come into question. One might argue that a few people are still on the path of liberation, and this is indeed true. However, liberation is not meant for just a few; when only a handful of individuals sacrifice their desires to attain Moksha, while others do not, it becomes evident that people are drifting further away from the belief in Moksha as the highest aim of human life. If liberation were truly the ultimate goal for all, it must be pursued by all individuals. However, in the current scenario, there is a noticeable lack of concern for Moksha, as people are preoccupied with accumulating material wealth—such as money, power, and property. Thus, both questions—whether people are truly following the path of Moksha and whether Moksha is regarded as the highest human aim—have found their place in this analysis.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion we can draw from the above discussion is that, while liberation (moksha) is the ultimate aim in various Indian philosophical traditions, it seems that, in the current age, the predominant focus for many individuals is the pursuit of sensual pleasure and material enjoyment. This is evident in our daily lives, where we often prioritize pleasure and the avoidance of pain, much like the Charvaka school of thought, which emphasizes sensory gratification. However, the true liberation that Indian philosophy advocates transcend these mundane pleasures and lies beyond the realm of sensory perception, requiring a deeper, spiritual realization. Indian philosophy points to this transcendence, indicating that the ultimate aim is not simply philosophical knowledge, but a realization that is beyond the philosophy itself. This realization, however, is not easy to achieve in practice. While all the philosophical systems stress that liberation is the goal, none provide a straightforward path for achieving it in the contemporary world, especially given the distractions and struggles of modern life. Today, much of the human struggle centres around securing respect and material success in society, with respect often being closely tied to material wealth and possessions. While some might argue against this view by

presenting alternative scenarios, it's clear that, in the modern context, materialism heavily influences social standing. Given that most people rely on sensory information as the primary source of knowledge, it's understandable that attachment to the material world becomes a natural outcome. The attachment to material things, while not inherently wrong, makes the path to moksha challenging, especially for ordinary individuals. This widespread attachment to the material world explains why many are far removed from the path of liberation. To return to the right track and strive for moksha, individuals must need the guidance of Indian philosophy, which provides a framework for living a life that balances worldly duties with the pursuit of spiritual growth. Though difficult, following this path is the key to overcoming the distractions of the material world and ultimately realizing liberation. In conclusion, while the practical challenges of attaining moksha in the modern world are significant, Indian philosophy offers the essential teachings and guidance that can help individuals realign their lives toward spiritual realization and liberation, transcending the cycle of sensory pleasures and material attachments.

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