


UNITED WISDOM

# Liberation, Salvation, and Enlightenment: Different Goals

Traditions and Worldviews

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

W-29-N03 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

# Liberation, Salvation, and Enlightenment: Different Goals

> *“Near to renunciation--very near-- Dwelleth Eternal Peace!”*
>
> *Bhagavad Gītā, XII.12, fragment from Edwin Arnold's poetic translation, The Song Celestial (1885). The Russian was translated by us from the English: text, chapter XII. The translator's poetic wording is not presented as a literal rendering of Sanskrit.*

Three people say they seek ultimate freedom. The first wants to leave the recurrence of existence. The second wants to restore a relationship with God. The third wants to stop taking changing experience for a firm support. One word creates a sense of agreement until the conversation reaches the question: freedom from what, and for what?

## About this article

Liberation, salvation, and enlightenment name the deepest goals of human life, but do not form a ready-made dictionary of interchangeable concepts. This article examines how a goal connects with an understanding of the initial problem, the person, knowledge, action, and the highest. We turn to specific passages of the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gītā, an early Buddhist instruction on the four truths, and a Catholic account of heavenly life. These examples do not represent every school of their traditions. They reveal several different answers to the question of a path's completion. We also examine the contemporary word “enlightenment,” the distinction between an intense experience and a lasting change, and the role of help and one's own efforts. The practical section offers clarification of one's goal without claiming a traditional status. Comparison helps us hear a real similarity in human aspirations while preserving disagreement about their ultimate content.

## I. A goal cannot be understood apart from the initial problem

“All traditions seek liberation” sounds broad and generous. Yet it leaves unanswered almost everything that makes a particular tradition recognizable. Freedom from what? Danger, error, sin, suffering, rebirth, dependence on results? And what counts as freedom: cessation of a process, restoration of a relationship, right knowledge, another way of existing?

To give comparison substance, consider a hypothetical map of four questions. How is the problem described? Why are ordinary ways of solving it insufficient? What change is needed? By what signs can achievement of the goal be discussed? This is an authorial reading scheme,



@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

rather than a single instruction found in all religions. Its merit is that it allows answers to be compared without inserting a favorite formula in advance.

Consider two people complaining of loneliness. One sees the problem as an absence of relationships, the other as an inability to remain calmly alone. Their experiences may be close, but their proposed solutions differ. Likewise, the language of spiritual freedom may hide different ideas about what needs correcting in the human situation at all. A shared weight of the question does not make its formulations identical.

A goal therefore should not be extracted from one inspiring sentence. It gains meaning within an argument, narrative, ritual, and community life. A phrase about peace may concern cessation of a particular cause of disturbance, final reconciliation, or a state of knowledge. Translation through a single Russian word does not remove these differences. It only creates a convenient point for the next question.

“Ultimate” itself requires care. For a reader it may mean “I feel good now.” For a text it may mean an event or state connected with a person's fate far beyond current well-being. If we shrink a religious goal to emotional relief in advance, comparison becomes translation of another teaching into the language of our familiar expectations. Such translation is possible as an authorial interpretation, but must be named plainly.

## II. Liberation and the question of what must be known

In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.1, Śvetaketu's father uses the example of a material and objects made from it. In VI.8 the conversation returns to the ground of what exists and a person's relationship to it. This is a particular line of instruction, rather than general proof that every religion teaches the same thing. The dialogue's opening and VI.8 need reading together with their question about knowledge.

Information and understanding must be distinguished here. Someone can memorize a statement about unity without changing what they consider their own “I.” If the goal is connected with overcoming a particular ignorance, repeating words does not mean its removal. The question shifts from how much new information has accumulated to how the relationship between oneself and existence's ground is understood.

This fork shows why spiritual knowledge cannot automatically be equated with encyclopedic awareness. Knowing a school's name and understanding its argument are different achievements. The reverse extreme is also dangerous: declaring every distinction unnecessary because “truth is experienced.” Textual instruction addresses an interlocutor and unfolds a thought. A feeling of depth alone cannot honestly replace it.

Several Upaniṣadic passages do not yield one finished theory of liberation for all Indian philosophy. Different interpretations of the relationship between ātman and the highest ground lead to different answers. An overview of concepts of God helps name a difference within Vedānta; the archived version is a guide, rather than an exhaustive history of schools.

For a contemporary reader, a limited but useful question follows: what exactly do I consider mistaken in my understanding of life? If the answer is only that I lack a comforting idea, this is not yet the same question as the philosophical instruction poses. Turning to it may begin inquiry, but does not award a certificate of attained freedom. Respect for a text includes the right to acknowledge that its task remains difficult and unfamiliar.

## III. Four truths require four different relationships

In the instruction on the beginning of turning the wheel of Dhamma, the initial problem is more than a bad mood. Birth, aging, illness, death, separation from what is desired, and encounter with what is unwanted enter the account of suffering. Its arising is connected with craving, its cessation with craving's removal, and the path with eight components, including view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta, §§5–8. The list joins understanding, conduct, and work with attention, rather than reducing the path to one calming procedure.

Why is learning four propositions insufficient? The sutta's subsequent sequence distinguishes recognition of a truth, the task concerning it, and fulfillment of that task: suffering must be understood, its arising removed, cessation realized, and the path developed. §§9–20, the same source. Knowing a problem does not do the work on its cause. A promise of change does not authenticate change already accomplished. This sequence makes “understanding” much more demanding than ordinary intellectual agreement.

Our analytical example: someone understands why they continually seek confirmation of their importance. This clarity does not yet show how they will speak with others, earn a living, direct attention, and respond to new disappointment. An observation can begin work, but does not replace every part of it. The example illustrates the difference between knowledge and realization; it does not declare an everyday habit the entire content of Buddhist craving.

The goal's scale matters especially here. If the final criterion becomes an absence of an unpleasant feeling at this moment, the question of a persistent source of dependence disappears. An intense pleasant emotion and clear understanding of causes are different results. The direction of the selected text can therefore be described as cessation of a particular recurring process, rather than accumulation of the most comfortable states. This is more precise than simply opposing happiness to unhappiness.

The 1881 translation contains some explanations and polemical comparisons by the translator. We do not treat them as the sutta's words. The distinction among problem, cause, cessation, and path is enough for our comparison. It shows why “enlightenment” cannot be wholly translated as “insight”: a new view is only one possible step, while the selected text links the goal with transformation of the whole structure of the relationship to suffering.

## IV. Salvation: healing from sin and participation in God's life

In Catholic self-description, salvation cannot be explained solely as the arrival of a happy feeling after death. The section on grace calls it God's undeserved help, participation in his life, and a gift healing from sin. It depends on God's initiative, beyond the capacities of human reason and will. Catechism, §§1996–1999. The initial problem thus has ethical and religious content: a relationship to God needs transformation that a person does not produce simply by increasing their own efficiency.

The section on heaven describes fulfillment as communion with the Trinity and preserves personal identity. §§1023–1029. This is a specific Catholic formulation, rather than the voice of every Christian confession. It links the ultimate goal with a relationship in which a person participates, rather than disappearance of every distinction between participants. “Communion” carries semantic weight here.

Compare two models of change of our own. In the first, a pupil has corrected an error and now solves a problem correctly. In the second, someone has restored a broken relationship with a person they wronged. Corrected understanding matters in both cases, but in the second the work cannot be considered complete simply because the wrongdoer learned to describe the problem clearly. The other participant, acknowledgment, and the possibility of response matter. This limited analogy helps hear the theme of relationship without exhausting grace through human reconciliation.

If a reader replaces this goal with “discovering one's true nature,” they must show what remains of gift, sin, and communion. If they replace it with “cessation of craving,” an equally precise answer is needed about the status of the relationship to God. A beautiful shared language of transformation does not settle these questions. It can begin comparison, but does not establish that the initial problems coincide.

The practical point of the distinction is not to measure another's spiritual maturity. It is to avoid requiring a religious interlocutor to abandon the object of their hope for a shared psychological vocabulary. Care, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and repair of consequences can be discussed together. A Catholic participant may nevertheless understand them within a horizon of gift and communion whose content does not automatically follow from our shared action.

## V. The Gītā responds to inability, rather than allocating types of people

In chapter XII, Arjuna asks about devotion to the manifest highest and address to the unmanifest. Krishna's answer recognizes both directions, notes the difficulty of the unmanifest for the embodied, and then addresses the ability of a particular acting person. If constant concentration is unavailable, practice is offered; if that also fails, action for the highest; relinquishment of fruits is then discussed. Bhagavad Gītā, XII, translation by Edwin Arnold. This is a sequence of instruction in a poetic version, rather than literally reconstructed Sanskrit terminology.

A recurring condition deserves notice: what should be done if the method already named is unavailable? The text does not stop at an accusation of insufficient resolve. It offers continuation of the relationship through another action. Yet this does not mean every activity someone chooses is declared an equal path. All alternatives remain within a particular orientation toward the highest. Remove the addressee, and the ground joining them changes.

Our contemporary example distinguishes means from goal. Someone cannot sustain attention for long, but can conscientiously complete a particular piece of work. Because that work becomes an accessible beginning, the ultimate goal has not shrunk to completion of a project. Nor do differences of accessibility mean people are permanently divided into emotional, intellectual, and active types. Difficulty at one stage describes a situation, rather than a participant's ultimate nature.

Arnold's translation itself uses comparative evaluations of knowledge, service, and renunciation. It would therefore be wrong to insist that the text does not rank means at all. Our conclusion is narrower: this order cannot automatically become a contemporary ladder of maturity for all religions. First we must understand what is compared within the chapter, to whom the answer is given, and what role the direction of action plays. We can then discuss how far the translation discloses those relationships.

Relinquishing fruits also needs particular reading. “I cannot guarantee a result” and “I do not care about the consequences” differ fundamentally. The first is compatible with attentive work; the second can destroy it. The selected instruction does not authorize replacing responsibility with passivity. Comparison with the Buddhist sutta and Catholic account needs to preserve the religious horizon of action: outwardly similar effort may answer different conceptions of an ultimate goal.

## VI. An experience is not a final attainment

An intense experience of unity, relief, or clarity can change a life. Yet describing an event and determining its spiritual status are different tasks. The first reports what someone experienced. The second places the experience within a system of concepts and criteria. Moving between them needs an argument; the same word “light” or “freedom” does not supply it.

A hypothetical contemporary example: after a difficult conversation, someone becomes unusually calm. They acknowledge their own mistake for the first time, stop defending themselves, and feel close to the other person. This is a significant event. Yet it does not automatically establish attainment of salvation, mokṣa, or nirvāṇa. These conclusions require much more definite content than an emotional change alone.

The reverse point is also needed. Limiting status does not devalue the experience. Someone need not declare themselves enlightened to acknowledge acting more honestly or seeing an important connection. A grand name sometimes even obstructs further work: if the goal seems already achieved, new errors become harder to notice, objections harder to hear, and understanding harder to revise.

Duration and consequences deserve separate discussion. How long did the experience last? What changed in actions? Which earlier habits remained? These questions can clarify a personal account, but do not create a universal measure of spiritual attainment. Traditions differ in names, but also in ways of discussing results, testimony, and authority.

Accounts can be compared at a limited level. For example, one can study how people describe the end of an inner conflict or a changed relationship to death. Yet similar descriptions do not establish identical metaphysical events. Room for several explanations matters especially here. A reader can recognize the experience as real for the narrator while withholding a confident judgment about its ultimate nature. Such care is a form of understanding, rather than a refusal of interest.

## VII. Effort, instruction, and gift: three forms of help

We can now answer the question commonly hidden behind “everything depends on you.” Nowhere in the selected texts is human activity simply described as buying a desired state with the right quantity of effort. Yet this does not make their answers identical. Compare help's role in substance, preserving the differences among goals already named.

In the sutta, instruction conveys a path that must be developed; in the Catholic section, God's initiative calls for a free human response, while preparation to accept grace is itself connected with grace; in chapter XII of the Gītā, the devotee receives Krishna's promise of help. Sutta, §§18–20; Catechism, §§2001–2002; Gītā, XII. Development of a path, participation in a gift, and

directed devotion stand together here. They cannot be reduced to the difference between an “active person” and a “passive person.”

What effort can produce differs philosophically. Learning can help a participant see a task and sustain work. A gift, by the word's meaning, does not become a result produced by a person. Relationship to an addressee presupposes a response not described solely as one's own technical achievement. This is our analysis of the concepts' functions. It shows why a shared demand for constancy yields no shared explanation of the final outcome.

Consider giving up a promise of success. In an ordinary project, checking conditions, means, and quality of execution is reasonable. In a religious horizon, someone may also discuss trust and dependence on what is not theirs. Yet if they begin to treat every instance of another's suffering as evidence of insufficient faith or effort, a new accusation appears. Neither a general idea of gift nor a call to develop a path establishes it alone. Such a conclusion requires separate arguments, rather than an adviser's confident tone.

Comparison gives a more precise statement of responsibility, rather than a universal recipe. What is a person asked to do? What do they not consider producible by their own powers? From whom or what do they expect help? The answers reveal a real divergence. The Buddhist path in the selected sutta does not become Catholic grace because both involve human participation. Catholic grace does not become inactivity because it is called a gift. A precise connection between help and action gives each position more substance.

## VIII. Shared ethical work does not remove differences of goal

People with different ideas of ultimate freedom can help loved ones together, sustain a fair conversation, and acknowledge responsibility. Such cooperation does not require proof that their teachings secretly coincide. A shared task may have sufficient grounds in the situation itself: someone needs help, an agreement was broken, a person is not heard.

The reverse is also false: different metaphysical goals do not make all agreement impossible. The conversation's level matters. One level concerns an act, another its place in religious life, a third an ultimate understanding of the world. Agreement on the first does not automatically pass to the others; disagreement on the third does not destroy the first.

Consider a hypothetical gathering of people who want to reconcile two sides of a conflict. One understands the work as service to God, another as reducing causes of suffering, a third as a human duty without religious grounds. They can agree on truthfulness and attention. This is a real result. It loses no value because participants continue answering the question of the ultimate goal differently.

The author of a comparative article needs to avoid appropriating their cooperation for one philosophy. Connections between actions and different explanations can be shown. A position of one's own on shared grounds can be offered. Yet one cannot speak for all participants as though a practical agreement already confirmed a single hidden teaching. That would be agreement created by an editor, rather than by people.

Preserving differences does not obstruct respect. Clear disagreement sometimes makes a relationship lasting: someone understands that their belief has been heard and will not quietly be rewritten. Comparative philosophy helps when it expands the ability to understand arguments. It loses that benefit when it becomes a contest for the right to give another's experience its final name. A methodological overview helps preserve the scale of conclusions.

## IX. The same repair of an act and different horizons

Consider a particular case: someone publicly humiliated a loved one, then acknowledged the act, apologized, and changed their manner of speaking. At the immediate level, the result is clear enough. The other person received acknowledgment, and the promise can be checked in later meetings. What place does this result have in the three horizons considered? Answering does not require declaring it attainment of the ultimate goal.

In the Buddhist comparison, the question concerns speech, intention, and the recurring desire to maintain a preferred image of oneself. In the Catholic comparison, it also concerns wrongdoing, response, and participation in a life understood as a gift. In comparison with the Gītā, it concerns the meaning directing action and what the person appropriates as its fruit. These are our analytical applications of distinctions from earlier sections, rather than historical accounts found about one case. They reveal questions that merely matching behavior has not answered.

Now change the condition. The person apologized solely to restore a good reputation. The immediate task may have been outwardly fulfilled, but the action's meaning changed. The other participant may notice that acknowledging an error became a means of obtaining a desired judgment. The direction of action is therefore more than an abstract addition: it changes our understanding of what has already been done. Yet neither this observation nor a more sincere apology gives us authority to authenticate nirvāṇa, mokṣa, or salvation.

Criteria available to shared conversation thus differ from criteria connected with a particular teaching. Keeping an agreement can be checked without a shared religious answer. A person explains the agreement's meaning in the ultimate horizon through their own position. Cooperation is possible here: one participant helps repair consequences, another asks about motives, a third supports the promise's durability. They need not first unify every idea about a person's ultimate fate.

Comparison also needs the reverse move. If knowledge of a teaching never changes a relationship to an act, one should ask what work it does in the reader's life. This is an open question, rather than a diagnosis of their faith. A lofty formula may deepen responsibility or cover a refusal to discuss a particular error. Actions, explanations, and the possibility of objection help distinguish the cases. The immediate task remains serious precisely because it is not presented as the whole path: it shows where meaning has already met life, and what remains to be understood.

## X. Why an ultimate goal cannot be chosen through a promise of comfort

A contemporary reader often asks which tradition will help them feel better faster. This is an intelligible question, but differs from the question of salvation or liberation. A tradition may offer reconsideration of expectations themselves, rather than merely better fulfillment of existing desires. An attractive promise therefore does not yet show that its content has been understood.

Another difficulty arises when a goal is chosen as a beautiful identity. “I am a person of awakening” sounds more expressive than “I am still studying a particular text.” Yet a name does not replace work. It may even make reading selective: everything supporting the new self-image is noticed, while inconvenient textual demands are discarded as outdated details.

Every reader cannot be required to belong to a tradition. Research interest, criticism, partial agreement, and an absence of a final decision are possible. Yet these positions should be distinguished. Someone can say they took one thought from a text for their own life. They need not prove that they have now traveled the whole path it describes.

A good result of comparative reading sometimes looks modest: it becomes clear why another word cannot simply be replaced with one's own. “Salvation” need not mean self-improvement; “liberation” need not mean independence from people; “enlightenment” need not mean pleasant clarity after reflection. These clarifications open a new conversation by removing ready answers too easily drawn from familiar language.

The three people with whom the article began may end their meeting without a shared formula. One will continue speaking of a relationship with God, another of removing ignorance, a third of ending suffering's cause. If each can now name their own question more precisely and hear the other's, an encounter has already occurred. Unity of conversation does not require unity of ultimate goal. It requires attention, honesty, and a willingness not to end understanding before the difference has actually been understood.

## What this means in practice

Choose one word you use for a desired change: freedom, salvation, clarity, peace. Record what exactly you want freedom from and what should appear instead. Try to be specific. “I want to stop returning to the same argument” conveys more than “I want to rise above everything.” This is an authorial means of clarifying speech, rather than a traditional practice of attaining the ultimate goal.

Then separate three questions. What am I experiencing now? What actions am I prepared to change? What do I believe about the person and the world? Answers may be connected, but need not coincide. Temporary relief does not establish a metaphysical position, and holding a belief does not guarantee corresponding behavior. This separation helps discuss change without exaggerating its scale.

If reading a religious text, find a particular passage naming the problem and goal. Identify the work, section, and translation. Check whether the explanation belongs to the translator's preface. Formulate an answer first in words close to the text, and only then offer your interpretation. The most useful distinction is often found between these steps.

In conversation with someone else, clarify their word's meaning before correcting them or agreeing. You can ask whether they mean knowledge, a changed relationship, cessation of a particular cause of suffering, or something else. There is no need to decide immediately whose ultimate goal is true. It is enough to see what question is actually being discussed.

Finally, choose one accessible action fitting the immediate task already clarified: keep a promise, read a difficult passage, acknowledge a mistake, ask for help. Do not call it a universal means of salvation. Its value lies in specific responsibility here and now. A final religious status should not be claimed through such a step's result. Yet you can honestly check whether the action was completed and whether your account of your goal became more precise.

## Key quotation

> *“the being free from, the harbouring no longer of this thirst”*

Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta, §7, the Buddha's speech within the sutta's narrative; fragment of the enumeration of the third truth. The Russian was translated by us from T. W. Rhys Davids's English, Buddhist Suttas, 1881: checkable passage. This is an abbreviated quotation; it does not mean a prohibition of every human desire.

## Connections between traditions

These are analytical comparisons of individual positions, rather than claims of established historical influence.

| Positions and sources | Actual similarity | Limit of comparison |
|---|---|---|
| Instruction on knowing the ground in Chāndogya, VI.1 and the causal formulation of the four truths, §§5–8 | Both require understanding the initial problem, rather than merely receiving comfort. | The object of knowledge and understanding of what must cease differ; this is not a single theory of liberation. |
| Bhagavad Gītā, XII and the Catholic account of heavenly life, §§1023–1029 | Relationship to the highest is essential to understanding the goal. | Devotion to Krishna and communion with the Trinity belong to different teachings; a relationship's function alone cannot identify them with each other. |
| Early Buddhist instruction, §§2–8 and Bhagavad Gītā, XII | The text connects a goal with a way of life and action, rather than solely information about it. | The path's structure, grounds of action, and account of the final result differ. |
| Chāndogya, VI.8 and Catechism, §1025 | The goal requires an answer about who a person is in relationship to the highest. | An instructional formula about the Self and preservation of personal identity in communion with God cannot be translated through one scheme of personhood disappearing. |
| The chariot dialogue in Questions of King Milinda, II.1.1 and the chariot image in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, I.3.3–9 | Both images clarify a conception of the person that matters for the path. | Conventional designation of a person and distinction among owner, intellect, and senses do different work; a similar metaphor does not establish an identical goal. |

## Primary sources

• Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.1 and VI.8; F. Max Müller, The Upanishads, 1879: VI.1, VI.8. Primary text through a historical translation; the specified passages were read, rather than the whole corpus.

• Bhagavad Gītā, XII; Edwin Arnold, The Song Celestial, 1885, available book edition 1900: text. Primary poetic translation; the chapter was read in full, and the preface is not accepted as contemporary history of the text.

• Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta, §§2–20; T. W. Rhys Davids, Buddhist Suttas, 1881: text. Primary translation; the introduction's old comparative remarks and the translator's insertions are separated from the sutta.

• Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1023–1029. Official Catholic self-description; the whole specified section was read, rather than the whole Catechism.

• Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1996–2002. Official section on grace; the specified paragraphs and context of §§2003–2005 were read; help, healing from sin, God's initiative, and free human response.

• Questions of King Milinda, II.1.1; T. W. Rhys Davids, 1890: dialogue. Primary translation for a comparison row; the chariot episode was read.

• Kaṭha Upaniṣad, I.3.3–9; Swami Paramananda, 1919: The Upanishads. Primary translation with separate commentary; the sequence of the chariot image was read.

• William Wainwright, Concepts of God, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2007 archive. Academic guide to internal differences within Vedānta; relevant passages were read, rather than a complete history of the tradition.

• Mikel Burley, Comparative Philosophy of Religion, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2025. Academic methodological source; the introduction and passages on the scale of comparisons were read.

## Tags

liberation, salvation, enlightenment, awakening, mokṣa, nirvāṇa, Christianity, Buddhism, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, Vedānta, ātman, personhood, knowledge, ignorance, suffering, craving, devotion, action, renunciation, ultimate goal, religious experience, Catechism, comparative philosophy, translation, tradition, responsibility, self-description, spiritual path, differences

## About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of the United Wisdom project. He researches inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how the principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.