



Dispassion as a Common State of Mind for Liberation in Buddhism and Hinduism

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Abstract

Dispassion (*Vairāgya/Virāga*) has been considered an essential notion in Hinduism and Buddhism for attaining a complete liberation from suffering. The main objective of the study, is to analyze how the practice of *Vairāgya/Virāga* leads one to liberation in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. The method of study chosen for conducting the research is qualitative comparative analysis of religious texts including but not limited to the Bhagavad Gītā and Upaniṣads along with texts in Pāli Canon. The study investigates the concept, practice, and significance of Dispassion in each philosophy through thematic analysis. Both religions have been found agreeing with attachment or craving as a source of *dukkha*. However, there are significant differences in their ideas on the metaphysical aspect of non-attachment. In Hinduism, *Vairāgya* is a spiritual practice which leads to the realization of the Ātman and its relation to Brahman. In Buddhism, *virāga* arises through the realization of the three characteristics of existence: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. This realization leads to the renunciation of worldly attachments that hinder a *Dhamma* practitioner from attaining *nirvāṇa*. Consequently, in spite of being identical from the standpoint of morality, there exists an ontological gap between both religions concerning non-attachment. Thus, it may be said that non-attachment is both the common with distinguishing feature of the two religious beliefs. Such knowledge helps us better understand the doctrine of the East and highlight the significance of non-attachment as a remedy for modern psychological disorders.

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Introduction

Vairāgya / *virāga* is the internal state of spiritual detachment, dispassion, or renunciation from worldly desires and material attachments. *virāga* is made up of suffix ‘vi’ added to ‘rāga’. ‘Vi’ stands for ‘without’ and *rāga* means ‘passion’. Hence, the meaning of *virāga* comes to be ‘with ought passion’. The dispassionate state of mind is taken crucial for the practitioner, both in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, on the path to liberation. Among many ideas related to freedom from pain and suffering, the concept of dispassion (*vairāgya* / *virāga*) deserves particular attention in the context of Hinduism and Buddhism. This state, known as *Vairāgya*, refers to an indifference toward sensory objects and a deep mental detachment from passion (*rāga*) or desire toward the world.

A Dhamma practitioner when ascends the spiritual summit of *Vairāgya* on the way to liberation, manages to purify his mind, clear mental fetters, and progresses a lot for achieving the goal of liberation. The practice of ‘dispassion’ which develops calmness and equanimity in mind has long been viewed as a crucial tool in transcending suffering (*Dukkha*) and achieving liberation (Easwaran 52–53; Radhakrishnan 503).

Vairāgya is interpreted differently in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. Each tradition provides distinct nature and goal of dispassion. Traditionally, Hindu philosophy, specifically the *Upaniṣads* and *Advaita Vedānta*, have emphasized that the practice of dispassion leads one to understanding one’s own eternal Self and its identity with *Brahman*, that is, reality itself (Olivelle 23–25). Conversely, according to Buddhist philosophy, dispassion (*virāga*) is based on the realization of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*) and results not in the revelation of the eternal self but in the ending of attachment through the realization of Non-self and achieving *nirvāṇa* (Bodhi 1843–45; Buddhārakkhita 277). Therefore, while both traditions regard craving and attachment as the main sources of human suffering, each offers its own unique metaphysical conception of liberation.

The divergent perspectives on *virāga* have been discussed by numerous scholars who provide different views on this subject. On the one hand, some specialists point to the parallels in both philosophies’ views on dispassion as a solution to human misery and a way out of the process of rebirth (Radhakrishnan 571; Gunaratana 41–43). At the same time, there are other scholars who highlight significant differences in terms of the two doctrines of Self and non-Self that influence each religion’s interpretation of liberation (Garfield 331–33; Bodhi 91–93). Therefore, an interesting philosophical question arises from these conflicting approaches: does dispassion result in the revelation of the eternal Self, or does it involve the destruction of all concepts of Self? Scholars have already widely studied dispassion from a single religion perspective concerning Hinduism and Buddhism. For instance, Hindu philosophers have analyzed the concept of *vairāgya* as far as it is used in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Upaniṣads*, *Yoga philosophy*, and *Advaita Vedānta* (Easwaran 52–55; Madhavananda 17–21; Vivekananda 41–43). Similarly, Buddhists scholars have looked into *virāga* by taking into account the concepts of dependent origination, impermanence, and non-self as an important step towards attaining *nirvāṇa* (Anālayo 29–34; Buddhaghosa 639–41; Bodhi 324–26). Moreover, comparative researches have pointed out that the problem of attachment is its nature to clamp human mind with the chain of greed, hatred and delusion

and pull him to suffering. Nonetheless, one obvious limitation of the current body of literature on *vairāgya* should be noted. While many academic works consider *vairāgya* in the context of a certain religion, others only emphasize the ethical commonalities between Hindu and Buddhist approaches toward dispassion. However, relatively few scholars analyze the impact of the distinct ontologies of *Ātman* and *Anattā* on the philosophy of dispassion. The topic in question thus calls for further exploration of how the same spiritual practice results in two utterly different conceptions of liberation.

The objective of this study is to compare the concepts of *vairāgya* and *virāga* in Hinduism and Buddhism and examine their role in liberation in relation to the doctrines of *Ātman* and *Anattā*. The research methodology used in this paper falls under the interpretivist paradigm of social sciences research. This approach implies that concepts, philosophical or religious in nature, gain their meaning only from interpretation and contextuality. This approach is especially relevant since the meaning of *vairāgya* in its metaphysical and soteriological context depends on interpretation.

Qualitative desk review design is used to generate data, which is done via textual and comparative philosophical analysis. The primary source of textual data is the canonical sources, which hold an important position in their respective traditions. Examples of these include Bhagavad Gītā, the major Upaniṣads, Yoga Sūtras, Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, and Aṣṭāvakra Gītā in the Hindu tradition, while the other includes several texts from the Pāli Canon like the Dhammapada, Majjhima Nikāya, Saṃyutta Nikāya, Sutta Nipāta, Itivuttaka, and Milinda Pañha in the Buddhist tradition. This approach is preferred for generating data because the sources had explicit references to dispassion, liberation, and cessation of suffering – key concepts that are discussed in this study (Easwaran; Olivelle; Bodhi; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi).

The textual data collected are, then, analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis. Firstly, excerpts that referred to attachment, dispassion, selfness, non-selfness, liberation, and spiritual practice are picked out and classified. Secondly, common themes like craving, renunciation, self-realization, impermanence, non-selfness, and liberation are selected.

Thirdly, an analytical approach based on comparison is used in order to compare the views regarding *vairāgya* in Hinduism and *virāga* in Buddhism. Special emphasis is applied on the connection between the concept of dispassion and the corresponding conceptions of *Ātman* and *Anattā*.

The central argument of this paper is that while both Hinduism and Buddhism focus on detaching from attachment through dispassion, the ontological basis underlying their understanding of *vairāgya* differs fundamentally. In the case of Hinduism, *vairāgya* represents the path toward recognizing one's eternal Self (*Ātman*), its connection with *Brahman*, while in Buddhism, *virāga* implies the process of disassembling attachments to any concept of self-hood. Hence, *vairāgya* becomes both the point of intersection and the locus of fundamental disagreement for these two religious systems.

Dispassion as a Common Soteriological Foundation

Comparative study of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies shows that the state of mind known as *vairāgya*, or “dispassion,” plays a crucial role in both philosophical systems as a prerequisite to liberation

from the cycle of suffering. Human suffering in both cases is invariably seen as a consequence of attachment, desires, and identification with transitory objects. Nevertheless, although there is a high degree of similarity between Hinduism and Buddhism when it comes to ethics and meditation practice, the analysis indicates that there is a profound difference in the interpretation of metaphysics and emancipation. According to Hindu philosophy, particularly the *Upaniṣads* and *Advaita Vedānta*, *vairāgya* is regarded as a mental state of a spiritual practitioner that is essential for humility and for the realization of the Self (*Ātman*) and its unity with Brahman.

On the other hand, according to Buddhist philosophy, *virāga* is a mental state of dispassion characterized by the absence of craving, lust, and passion, grounded in the philosophical principle of non-self (*anattā*), leading to humility, renunciation, equanimity and finally to *nirvāṇa* (Gethin; Harvey). Therefore, the central finding of this paper is that both Hinduism and Buddhism employ dispassion (*vairāgya/virāga*) as a common psychological state of dispassionate mind despite their radically different ontological foundations.

Craving and Attachment as Sources of Suffering

One of the significant convergences identified in this study is the shared view that attachment is a primary cause of suffering in both Buddhist and Hindu Philosophy. According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, bondage arises from craving and attachment to the fruits of one's actions, whereas liberation is attained through the performance of one's duty without attachment to its results and with devotion to Lord Krishna (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.47). Similarly, early Buddhist thought holds that craving (*taṇhā*) is the origin of suffering within the structure of dependent origination (*Samyutta Nikāya* 12.1). This is further confirmed by contemporary academic interpretations of the texts where both traditions are believed to regard the source of suffering as being internal cognitive/affective in nature rather than external objects (Bronkhorst; Harvey).

This fact becomes clear in life when one feels psychological pain not directly because of any event happening to him or her, but because of his or her attachment to expectations, identity, and outcome of the situation which is purely a psychological issue. Failure, for example, leads to distress only when people identify themselves with success. Neither system understands this kind of suffering as intrinsic, but as resulting from the psychological process.

From Nibbidā to Nirvāṇa in Buddhism

Nonetheless, the study shows that the way the concept of dispassion influences the process of enlightenment differs completely between both systems. In Buddhism, for example, the understanding of the fact of *anattā* (non-existence of the independent eternal Self) constitutes the key moment of knowledge for the process of enlightenment. The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* examines the five aggregates step by step in order to demonstrate their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and lack of controllability, thereby showing that they cannot be regarded as self (*Samyutta Nikāya* 22.59). From this insight arises *nibbidā* (disenchantment), which in turn gives rise to *virāga*, renunciation and Liberation in the long run (*Samyutta Nikāya* 12.23). Within this approach, *virāga* is a natural psychological process that follows

from the realization of impermanence and lack of self. The absence of craving leads to the breaking down of dependent origination and brings about *nirvāṇa*, which is seen as an ending to suffering and not the realization of some metaphysical entity (Harvey). This sequence forms a deconstructive model of liberation, where liberation involves the destruction of all conceptual structures of identity and possession.

From Discrimination to Self - Realization in Hinduism

However, *vairāgya* within Hindu philosophy takes place in an affirming metaphysical context of the eternal self. *Upaniṣads* stress the importance of discriminating between what is eternal and impermanent.

In the case of the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, renunciation is not viewed as renunciation of the world but rather as an experience of transformation in terms of perceiving the divine spirit present in everything (*Īśa Upaniṣad* 1). In the same manner, the distinction made between two different paths in the *Katha Upaniṣad* implies that freedom from ignorance can be gained only through following the path of eternity as opposed to temporality (*Katha Upaniṣad* 1.2.2). In *Advaita Vedānta*, this process is more systematically presented in terms of achieving discriminative wisdom and subsequently attaining dispassion and knowledge of the oneness of *Ātman* and *Brahman* (Deutsch). Dispassion in this perspective is not seen as negation of existence but elimination of ignorance regarding the true essence of the Self.

Divergent Metaphysical Foundations and Paths to Liberation

Hence, the causal process of liberation within the Hindu tradition is markedly different from that of the Buddhist path. The Buddhist path involves the process from realization of no-self to disenchantment, dispassion, renunciation, humility, equanimity of mind to cleansing of mental fetters and ultimately culminating in the cessation of suffering. In Hinduism, liberation involves moving from discriminating reality and illusion to dispassion, eliminating ignorance, and realizing one's true Self. The reason behind such divergent paths can be seen in the difference of philosophies underlying each path, where Buddhist philosophy takes the form of a process of deconstruction wherein all ontology of selfness is questioned, in contrast to a process of revelation that characterizes the philosophy of Hinduism. In other words, *virāga* in Buddhism refers to the mental state of dispassion arising from insight into impermanence, non-self, and emptiness, whereas *vairāgya* in Hinduism refers to the purification of consciousness through detachment from worldly objects and the realization of the true Self.

Although there is an ontological disparity between the two traditions, they come together at a very practical and experiential level. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, there is the belief that knowledge alone does not lead to *moksha* but that there must be a transformation in consciousness through certain methods. Hindu traditions maintain that liberation is approached through the discipline of Karma Yoga, in which actions are performed without attachment to their fruits (*niṣkāma karma*), as taught in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.47); this practice cultivates *vairāgya*, renunciation, mental clarity, equanimity, and ultimately Self-realization leading to *mokṣa*. The Buddhist tradition teaches that by engaging in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, which includes the cultivation of awareness of impermanence, suffering, and

non-self, one will realize Buddhahood (*Majjhima Nikāya* 10). Interpretations made by scholars have stated that in both traditions, meditation serves as a technique for the reconstitution of the consciousness wherein attachment is systematically undone (Collins, Gethin).

Further, the paper reveals that the concept of *vairāgya* continues to maintain its importance within modern psychological and ethical discourses. Indeed, contemporary society becomes marked by anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction due to consumerism, social comparison, and the culture of identity-related achievement. Within these environments, both Hindu and Buddhist paradigms allow to find means and ways to become psychologically resilient. Thus, the idea of *niṣkāma* karma suggests practicing action without being attached to results, hence avoiding anxiety related to success and failure. Additionally, Buddhist meditative practices teach how not to identify oneself with transient mental experiences, thus becoming less emotionally reactive and flexible (Kabat-Zinn). Practically speaking, both philosophies teach us how to overcome ego-centeredness and cognitive fixation on the expected results.

Overall, *vairāgya* is characterized serving as both convergent and divergent point between Hindu and Buddhist paradigms. Functionally, both traditions share their understanding of the problem and solutions. However, at the metaphysical level, these approaches differ substantially in terms of the ultimate goal of spiritual practice.

The final goal of Hindu philosophy is *mokṣa*, which is attained through understanding the Self as eternal, whereas for Buddhists, the ultimate goal is *nirvāṇa*, achieved through relinquishing craving and eliminating self-conscious thought processes. Thus, *vairāgya* should not be seen as a uniform theory but rather as a structural similarity with an incommensurable metaphysical base rooted in separate philosophical discourses.

Conclusion

The present research focuses on the nature of the concept of *vairāgya/virāga* in the process of liberation in Hinduism and Buddhism within the scope of a qualitative comparative analysis of primary canonical literature and selected scholarly works. As shown below, both religions view attachment, craving and desires as major sources of suffering and consider dispassion as a necessary precondition for liberation. Therefore, *vairāgya/virāga* should be understood as a common spiritual mental state of dispassion during the course of spiritual practices oriented towards liberation from the cycle of rebirths and elimination of sufferings.

Moreover, the metaphysical premises for dispassion prove to be absolutely distinct in Hinduism and Buddhism. In Hindu philosophy, especially *Upaniṣads* and *Advaita Vedānta*, *vairāgya* helps to eliminate ignorance and results in the realization of eternal Ātman as well as its identity with *Brahman*. In Buddhism, on the other hand, *virāga* occurs due to the realization of impermanence, suffering and non-selfhood, resulting in the cessation of craving and achieving *nirvāṇa*. Hence, while the structure of a transition from attachment to dispassion seems similar, the meaning of the goal of liberation proves to be entirely different in both philosophies.

The significance of the present study basically lies in its revelation that the notion of *vairāgya* cannot be seen as a negative, pessimistic, and life-negating idea, as it is viewed in the common communities. On the contrary, it represents dispassion, freedom, renunciation and non-attachment that help a spiritual practitioner achieve liberation. It is evident from the study that despite common practice of dispassion in both Hinduism and Buddhism, there is some difference between their soteriological aims: *vairāgya* helps achieve Self-realization (*Atman*) and *mokṣa* in Hinduism, while *virāga* leads to *nirvāṇa* in Buddhism. Thus, revealing this coincidence and divergence allows one to gain better insights into Hindu and Buddhist philosophies.

At the same time, the study is relevant from the contemporary perspective as well. In particular, it shows that the practices of non-attachment, mindfulness, and non-attachment in actions can be useful in modern discourse concerning stress, anxiety, identity, emotional reactivity, and psychological health. Thus, it is possible to conclude that dispassion in classical Hinduism and Buddhism remains relevant from both spiritual and ethical-psychological points of view.

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