

# What Is *Maya*?

Ram (James Swartz)

2011-12-14

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/1017>

If consciousness is everything that is and consciousness is formless and without qualities, how do we explain our experience of a world of forms and qualities? Verses 21 to 23 of Shankara's *Vivekachoodamani: The Crown Jewel of Discrimination* explains.

Verse 21: "A power called *maya* resides in limitless consciousness. It is known as the Unmanifest (*avyakta*) and it gives birth to the world. It is beginningless ignorance and is of the nature of the three *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) and beyond their effects. It is inferred from its effects by anyone with a clear mind."

As inquirers we are interested in freedom and we know that consciousness is free of everything because it has no form and no qualities. So we want to discover our identity as consciousness. Consciousness is like space in that it is uncontaminated by the objects appearing in it. But we find ourselves affected by the qualities of our minds and bodies and we are attached to various worldly circumstances. So how do we account for the fact that even though we are actually free we are caught up in the world?

How does limitless formless consciousness become the world? If it becomes the world like milk becomes cheese then it is not possible for us to get free because the process is not reversible. Try as you might you cannot take a brick of cheese and turn it into a gallon of milk. So how does it become the world?

The verse says that *maya*, the Creator, is "beginningless ignorance." This means that consciousness does not become the world. It appears as the world. If this is true, then freedom is readily available. The world and the objects in it do not actually stand in the way of our nature as consciousness. That we believe we are tied down to this world means that we have been duped by *maya*, ignorance. In other words, there is no actual barrier, there is a wall of ignorance separating us from our nature. If ignorance is the problem there is hope because knowledge is available and knowledge removes ignorance. So we need only seek knowledge. This is why freedom is only a matter of inquiry since the fruit of inquiry is knowledge.

The next verse is going to tell us that *maya* cannot be rationally explained. Yet the text sets out to help us understand it. If you stick with consciousness, you do not have to contend with the world because there is no world from its point of view. This is why enlightened people are not bothered by what happens. They exist as consciousness prior to the world. Consciousness is the cause and the world is the effect. The effect does not affect the cause.

Paradoxically, even though ultimately consciousness is the cause it does not cause the world because it is not a creator, a doer. Creation happens when it illumines ignorance. Because consciousness is conscious, ignorance is not stupid or unintelligent. In association with ignorance it projects this intelligently-designed universe. As seekers we do not have to worry about *maya*. We have only to worry about *avidya*. *Avidya* is our personal ignorance of our nature as consciousness. It is removed with self-knowledge. When *avidya* goes, *maya* remains. But *maya* does not condition you when your *avidya* is removed – because you are awareness. *Maya*

does condition the individual, the subtle body, the person you once believed yourself to be, but that is not a problem for you when you know you are awareness. That part of you will always be conditioned by something.

This *maya* is a power in consciousness. If consciousness did not have this power it would not be limitless. It would be limited by its inability to appear as something other than what it is. This power has no beginning because consciousness has no beginning. It is always present but it cannot be seen. This is why it is called the Unmanifest. You can't see it but you can infer it from its effects. It so happens that inference is a valid means of knowledge so we need not doubt its existence.

We experience the effects of *maya*. The effects or qualities are threefold: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. We see objects. We observe change and we understand things. All objects have these three qualities. Without them nothing we experience, including our bodies and minds, exists. *Tamas* is the substance of which things are made. It is consciousness appearing as matter. Matter is inert. However, it changes. It changes because of *rajas*. *Rajas* is the power to make things change. Finally, all objects in the creation are intelligently designed. They make sense. They relate to each other in very predictable conscious ways because of the power of *sattva* or knowledge. Consciousness using the *maya*'s three energies creates the world.

It is not a "real" creation, meaning it is never the same from one moment to the next. It is a seeming creation. It seems to be real but when you think about it with, as the text says, a "clear mind," you cannot put your finger on it and come up with clear knowledge of the nature of any object. *Maya* is a kind of twilight zone in which it is impossible to tell what is actually happening. It is like a mountain in a movie. If you don't look at it too closely it looks like a solid, unmoving object but when you slow down the projector you see it is made up of one image flashing on and off many times each second. Everything in *maya* looks like it is real: the body, like a projector, gives it a sense of dimension but when you slow down the projector and investigate the image, you can easily see that there is nothing substantial. It is just flickering images.

It is commonly stated in the modern spiritual world that the world does not exist. This is not true. It is not real, but it definitely exists. You cannot experience something that does not exist. But what kind of existence does this world, including our bodies and minds, enjoy? It enjoys a dependent existence. You cannot say that a cup made of Silly Putty does not exist even though it is only putty. You cannot drink from putty until it appears in the form of a cup. Is the cup real? No, because without any loss to the putty you can make it into a plate. The putty is real and the plate is apparently real. Similarly, the world of names and forms functions in a beautiful, conscious way but at bottom it is just ever-changing names and forms superimposed on consciousness, its substrate. The essence of enlightenment – freedom – is grasping the relationship of your body and mind and the world to yourself, consciousness. Your body and mind and the world are apparently real (*mithya*) and you consciousness, are real. You precede the appearance of every experience, you observe the experience as it plays out and you survive it without undergoing any change whatsoever.

This is not how it feels, however. It feels as if you are the experiencer, as if you are going through changes. It feels this way because your intellect is under the spell of *maya*. You are taking what is apparently real to be actually real. You think you are the cup when you are actually the putty. The putty, consciousness, takes the form of one experience after another but never changes. This is the meaning of freedom. You, as consciousness, are free of experience.

Every spiritual person wants to know how this world came about. It is the most natural question. But left to your own devices, you would never come up with this explanation of creation. You might even swallow the six-day explanation proffered by religion: five thousand years ago a bearded old man in the sky worked hard for six days so he could have Sunday off – etc. As clear-minded people we can reason back to the beginning using inference but we cannot reason beyond the beginning to come up with a reason that makes good sense. So we are forced to rely on scripture since it is a means of knowledge whose scope includes consciousness.

How is this explanation different from the bearded-old-man-in-the-sky explanation? It is different because Vedanta provides a method for removing *maya* and the effects of *maya* and reveals the self to be limitless, ever-free consciousness, whereas religion has no such method. If you accept religion's idea, salvation therefore is never actual, it is always theoretical. You need to believe that at a certain point in time you will be saved from life in this ever-changing matrix, but this option never happens because you have to die to enjoy it. But inquiry can set you free here and now because the creation is apparent, not real.

From the discussion so far it may seem as if reality is a duality: consciousness on one hand and *maya*, the creation, on the other. But scripture and some kinds of epiphanies – assuming we have had them – tell us reality is non-dual. So we have to resolve the ontological status of *maya*. Therefore we have another verse.

Verse 22: "This power is a great wonder and cannot be rationally explained because it is neither real nor non-existent nor a combination of the two. It is not separate or non-separate from consciousness nor is it made up of parts."

*Maya* is not real because it does not stand alone. Only consciousness stands alone. It requires nothing to support it. This is why it is real. *Maya* is also not non-existent. If it did not exist we would not see the world. Is it a combination of the two? No, because two opposing objects (awareness and ignorance) cannot share the same location, like light and darkness, for example. When the light is on there is no darkness.

An existent thing cannot co-exist with a non-existent thing. *Maya* is not separate from consciousness just as the cup is not separate from the putty. It is not a part or quality of consciousness because consciousness has no parts or qualities. The cup is not a quality of the putty because the putty exists independently of the cup. Nor can the creation be both part of consciousness and separate from it at the same time.

This is a strange relationship. You cannot say that *maya* has parts or limbs. It would have to be born to have limbs. But it is unborn, uncreated, "beginningless" is the word used in Verse 21. On the other hand, you cannot say that it does not have limbs or parts because the world is nothing but a vast array of parts that have come from it. It cannot be with and without limbs at the same time. Also, you can't say that it exists when you view it from consciousness' point of view, nor can you say that it does not exist when you look at it from the world's point of view. How can you get your mind around it?

This apparent paradox affects everything in the creation. Therefore you cannot determine the nature of any object. All you can say is that an object exists but what it actually is – as an object – can never be known. If you find yourself making definitive statements about anything in reality, you are under the spell of *maya*. You feel the need to make sense of something that is inexplicable so you put a label on it and take the label to be the object. Most of us live exclusively

in a world of labels.

Verse 23: “The Unmanifest appears as the three *gunas* and is the causal body (*karana sarira*) of awareness. Sleep, the state in which activities of the senses and the mind are resolved, is its subtlest state.”

This *maya* is called the causal body of awareness. It is made up of the three energies and is the cause of every movement in the cosmos and of what each individual subtle body thinks and feels. If you feel compassion and experience beauty, *sattva* is in play. If you feel desire, anger, greed and pain, *rajas* is dominating your mind. If you feel slothful and lazy *tamas* is predominate.

When you are ignorant of your nature as consciousness, you feel incomplete and inadequate. You do not like this feeling because it is contrary to your nature as whole and complete consciousness. You wrongly assume that you can remove this feeling by obtaining experiences in the world. You chase various things and when you get what you want or avoid what you don't, you feel momentarily whole. In this way you get attached to certain experiences and you suffer because all experiences are the effects of *maya*, which is not real. Therefore ignorance is the cause of bondage.

*Maya* is called a body of awareness because like all bodies it is subject to destruction. Because it is ignorance it is destroyed with the dawn of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the hard and fast understanding “I am consciousness.” Although *maya* continues to apparently operate in someone with this understanding, it produces no binding effects. And when the body of an enlightened person dies, all three bodies are resolved back into consciousness.

And how do we as consciousness experience the causal body? When we sleep. We do not experience it as the person we think we are in the waking state because that person is not there in deep sleep.