

Maya Does Not Hide Awareness

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Ed: Dear James, I watched the *True Nature* seminar and got the explanation of the section of the *Guru Parampara*, which I now chant daily. My partner and I now study and meditate together daily; it is a wonderful thing. I am beginning to get a handle on the fears and desires, and as a result there is definitely more *sattva*. I have cut out caffeine and really cleaned up the eating habits, reading the *Bhagavad Gita* daily and getting into the stuff on the *gunas*. This morning after meditation and mindset practice, I read a *satsang* that said “by my power of *Maya*, I make the impossible possible.”

This instantly grabbed the mind. How does *Maya* work? What is it? I just sat and looked around. There was definitely the sense without effort of everything being just one big picture – no separate objects – and then by some subtle adjustment, things could become separate from the picture and take on a separate identity.

This I find fascinating. There is no effort involved in the “one picture,” but work has to go into the separation experience. One is an experience and the other, in a sense, is not. Both are seen from the same place. I wonder, what your thoughts are on this and how to see it clearly in the context of the teaching? Thank you for all the wonderful work you do.

~ In gratitude

James: I can tell from the way you talk about it that I don’t think you are ready to understand it yet, Ed. It is the most important teaching in Vedanta and requires a very subtle intellect. Here is the teaching. The commentaries are mine. Don’t worry if you don’t get it now. Just keep at your *sadhana* and one day it will be clear. And don’t think you have understood it, unless it sets you free, okay? I’m not trying to be a hard ass, Ed, but sometimes it takes years to figure *Maya* out.

Ed: PS: God willing, I will see you in Reigate next year!

James: Don’t leave it up to God, Ed. Make it happen!

The Nature of *Maya* (47-59)

So Vidyanaraya adds the following 12 verses on *Maya* since it is not possible to get the universe from pure consciousness without *Maya*, because pure consciousness cannot modify itself (this is what “makes the impossible possible” means).

47. As you cannot separate fire and its power to burn, there is a power, *Maya shakti*, in awareness, which is totally dependent on awareness and can be inferred by its effects. It cannot be known directly, but can be inferred.

Maya cannot be separated from awareness just as you cannot separate the power of fire to burn from its power to illumine. Because existence has no beginning, *Maya*

has no beginning. *Maya* and existence are one, but they are not the same. Because *Maya* is invisible, it cannot be seen. But it can be inferred by its effects, just as one can infer the existence of grandparents from the existence of parents.

49. One cannot say that *Maya* is “nothing,” because nothingness is an idea, an effect of *Maya*. An effect cannot be identical with its cause, because the cause is subtler than the effect. *Maya* is neither non-existence (*asat*) nor existence (*sat*, awareness), but something altogether different.

The verse is meant to address the doubt of materialists, who believe that unless something is perceivable, it does not exist. If there was a cause for nothingness, it would be different from its effect. But *Maya* cannot be nothing, because the effect, the world, exists. You can only get an existent something from an existent something, not from nothing. So *Maya* is something, but it is a something unlike anything else. It is unlike existence and it is unlike the world.

Reality is only non-dual consciousness, yet we experience a world. Consciousness can't cause the world, because it is not an agent. The world can't cause itself, because it is inert. So whatever causes it is different from both consciousness and the world.

A person's talents cannot be separated from the person, but the person is not his or her talents. *Maya*, the amazing power that creates the universe, is non-separate from existence, but it does not stand alone either. Whatever existence it enjoys is borrowed from awareness. It is an *upadhi*, apparently qualifying, modifying and concealing awareness. Existence does not borrow existence, because it already exists. And a non-existent thing cannot borrow existence, because it does not exist. So whatever borrows existence must be something else altogether.

50. The peculiar nature of *Maya* is mentioned in an *Upanishad*. It says that before Creation there was neither existence nor non-existence, but there was “darkness,” by which is meant *Maya*. This does not mean that *Maya* exists independently of the self but that it borrows whatever degree of reality it has from the self.

Maya is said to be “darkness” because it has the power to apparently obscure the self, limitless awareness. It is eternal because it depends on awareness and awareness is eternal. *Maya* does not exist (as objects exist). It does not exist in the self either. Nor is it non-existent (*asat*). It somehow exists because we experience its effects (the objects). It appears as *avidya* in *jiva*, but *avidya* is non-eternal because it ends with self-knowledge. In this verse, the word “existence” does not refer to awareness/consciousness but to the world because consciousness exists always and is prior to every event.

Real (Sat), Unreal (Asat), Apparent (Mithya) and Non-Existence

Is *Maya* non-existent? *Maya* is not non-existence (*shunyam*), because a non-existent thing cannot borrow existence from awareness. If you define *Maya* as the cause of the world, then you cannot define it as non-existence, because something that does not exist cannot cause something. *Shunyam* is unreal (*asat*), like the antlers of a butterfly.

Is *Maya* real? *Maya* is not real, because it does not stand alone. It depends on awareness. Even though it is eternal, it is not always manifest.

If it is not real or unreal, what is it? *Maya* is like a dream. It is neither real nor unreal. A dream is real when you are in it and unreal when you aren't. Every erroneous notion is neither real nor unreal, i.e. *mithya*. If it is real, it will never go away. If it is unreal, you will never experience it. But you do experience it, so it is *mithya*, neither real nor unreal. It is seemingly real (*sat-asat vilakshanam*). It is unique in every way. Every object is *mithya*. Whatever is experienced is *mithya*.

The *mithya* teaching is the essence of Vedanta and the key to *moksa*. As long as you don't know that consciousness is real and the world is seemingly real (*brahma satyam, jagan mithya*), there is no *moksa* for you. But when you understand *mithya*, you can relax and stop allowing experience to contaminate "you."

Maya is not identical with awareness. It is not different. It is not a part, because awareness is beyond time and space, i.e. partless. If space has no parts, how can its cause have parts? If *Maya* is part of awareness, it will affect awareness because what affects a part affects the whole. It is different from all three. So what is it? It is superimposed, just as the dream is superimposed on the waker. It seems to be a part of awareness.

51. Hence, like nothingness, *Maya* is not a stand-alone entity. In the apparent reality too, *jivas* are not considered to be different from their abilities.

Because *Maya* is *mithya*, reality is not considered to be a duality. This is why we say reality is not-two (*advaita*). If *Maya* is real, then reality is a duality. An unreal thing is like a non-existent thing, but it is not a non-existent thing, because it is experienciable. Unreal never means non-existent. In what way is an unreal thing similar to a non-existent thing? Non-existent money and counterfeit money are not identical, but they are similar in that you are money-less with both. Since *Maya* is the power (*shakti*) of awareness and cannot be separated from awareness, it can't be counted as a second principle, just as you do not think that an artist and his artistic talent are different. The biography of a person includes his or her talents, abilities, characteristics, etc.

52. Objector: How can you discount *shakti*? *Shakti* makes a difference in people's lives. A person with greater energy has a prosperous life.

Answer: Potential is wonderful but only when it is actualized. Money, for instance, is of no use until you spend it. Don't worship energy. Many spiritual people worship energy but live unsuccessful lives.

53. Objector: Actualized energy is real.

Answer: The *Upanishad* is talking about something that is prior to the creation of the world. In the world, energy is useful but it has no effect on you, awareness. Vedanta reveals what is not affected by energy, i.e. *Maya*.

Maya Does Not Hide Awareness

54. The power of the earth to produce pots does not apply everywhere but only to those places there is clay. *Maya* does not operate on the whole of the self but only on a small part of it.

Maya does not cover awareness. It only occupies a "small portion." This statement challenges the *yoga* idea that *Maya* covers the self and that to obtain *moksa* the

yogi must physically remove or transcend the *vasanas* that apparently veil it. But the belief that the self is hidden is only possible because the self is not hidden insofar as no belief and no *vasana* is possible outside the light of awareness. The self is apparently covered because the *jiva's* attention is riveted on its apparent clothing, i.e. the five sheaths, and not on its own nature, the observer of the sheaths.

55. The *Upanishad* says: "Creation is only a small fraction of the vast limitlessness of awareness. The remainder is self-revealing; it does not depend on *Maya* to reveal itself.

It says so in the *Purusha Suktam* and in the *Chandogya Upanishad* 3:12:5: the remainder is self-effulgent awareness.

56. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna, speaking as the self, says to Arjuna, "The world is sustained by a small part of me," indicating that the world is supported by only a small part of the self.

57. Another *Upanishad* verse confirms this view: "The self pervades the world on every side and extends ten fingers beyond." In the *sutras* too the self is declared to transcend the world of duality.

58. Although the self is a partless whole, the *Upanishad* speaks in terms of parts to make it easier to understand its non-dual nature to someone who is accused of thinking in dualistic terms.

We temporarily accept the idea of parts idea because location is such a deep part of our thinking that we need to explain the relationship between awareness and *Maya* in familiar language.

59. With awareness as its substrate, *Maya* creates the objects of the world, just as an artist draws many-colored pictures on a white canvas.