

Illusion Management 101: A Brief Course

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There is in the West a popular understanding of Hinduism as a religion that denies the existence of objects and regards the world as an illusion. This illusion includes all sense perceptions and thoughts but excludes the thought that all is an illusion, which is held to be somehow real. So Hinduism is seen to rest on an inherent contradiction, it is a creed that swallows its own head, like the skeptic's claim that nothing is true.

And while this caricature of Hinduism is more or less familiar to most people in the West, few know or ever inquire into how such a seemingly absurd view of life can have been held by so many millions of people through countless centuries nor how it manages to persist in our day, claiming a growing number of adherents in Europe and America. What makes it plausible, even convincing, not only for the multitudes in India, where people of high intelligence can be found, but for men and women reared in the supposedly enlightened materialism of Western nations?

To explore the question requires that we first dismiss the caricature and properly define what it means to say that sensory data and thoughts based upon them (as are all thoughts) are illusory. As illusion can only be understood in contradistinction to what is real, the first order of business is to say plainly what is real, for something must be real, if it is only the one who questions reality.

That is real which has the quality of permanence. Reality is generally defined in relation to time. The dissatisfaction that prompts reflective people to wonder about what is real is rooted in the impermanence of experience and the desire for something that lasts. Why should we so desire to know or to possess something that lasts? We can only say at this point in our inquiry that the desire arises from something fundamental in our nature and is rooted in the conviction that a lasting reality can be known, otherwise the quest would never be undertaken.

We become impatient with our thoughts and feelings, which are ever-changeable, and look for something solid outside our own minds. We look to the world of objects, which we assume to have an existence independent of our perception. Here we find things that endure for longer periods of time and thus appear to have a greater reality. We want to partake of that greater reality by possessing these things. But even if possession were possible, is this the reality that satisfies our desire for permanence?

If it were, religion would have never taken root in the human psyche. Failing to find anything in the world of objects that satisfies the hunger for permanence some human beings posit an eternal world of spirit that survives the death of the body. But there is no evidence for the existence of such a world, even though it helps many to endure the pains of the present life. The belief in such an eternal spirit world is also losing popular credibility and is increasingly regarded as imaginary.

Contemporary science talks about phenomena taking place over billions of years but these vast expanses of time also bring no comfort to the man in quest of the real. And this science of objects rests on a series of intricate calculations intelligible to a select few and taken as an article of faith by the many, some of whom may harbor

doubts about the certainty of science's claims, which they cannot investigate or confirm any more than they can the claims of an afterlife. For most people, the claims of science, along with the claims of religion, rest on the acceptance of authority.

And even were the arcana of the science of objects generally intelligible, would such notions satisfy us? For even if an object, say a planet or solar system, were to last 100 billion years it would still disappear eventually. And we instinctively doubt the value and the reality of that which will disappear. This is why we dismiss dreams as unreal: they vanish upon waking. All things that vanish, no matter how long they persist in the interim, partake of that same quality of unreality. Our poetry resonates with this thought and its consequent feeling: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

Shakespeare gives voice to the usually unspoken and unexamined suspicion that there is no substantial difference between dream and waking, and to the melancholy that arises from the knowledge that the seemingly solid stuff of life is, in the long run, no more than passing fancy. So Western man stands on his little planet, staring at the immensities of the cosmos, and asks, "Is there nothing here I can hold onto?"

The answer is: no. And with this great admission many people despair of finding any meaning in the phantasm of the so-called objective world. From this despair both the literature of existential angst and the crude sensuality of contemporary culture arise, along with a stoic but emotionally unsatisfying utilitarianism which hopes to make the best of things such as they are.

But this failure to find any permanence in objects is not the end of the quest. It is, rather, the beginning. It is from this starting point that Hinduism makes its claim that all we perceive is illusory and begins its investigation. It is not that we don't see objects, nor simply that these objects have no lasting reality, it is that we don't properly understand what is seen nor who the seer is.

Here it will be useful to sharpen our focus from Hinduism, which is too vast and varied to be of further service, and to concentrate on the logic of Vedanta, which is the wisdom tradition of that culture. Vedanta has a word for the seeming permanence of the impermanent world of objects: *maya*. And it poses two questions in respect to *maya*: what exactly is it, and what must we do about it?

To say that objects are illusory does not explain the illusion, which is an experience notwithstanding its provisional nature. In the twilight we may mistake a rope for a snake and later discover the snake to be illusory but the initial belief in the snake and the consequent fear it caused cannot be denied. When we expand the metaphor to include the entire realm of perceptible objects, which appear permanent but are in actuality impermanent, we cannot simply dismiss our perceptions as ultimately unreal. They will persist nevertheless and force us to deal with them, intellectually and emotionally.

So what is *maya*? To say that *maya* is an illusion begs the question: What is an illusion? It is that which appears to be real but is not. How can that which is unreal even appear in the first place? What is it that appears? Unreality? Nothingness? We may think we have found a way out of this perplexity by saying that *maya* manifests as objects that have only a temporary reality. But then we must define what we mean by temporary reality.

Vedanta observes that that which does not exist in the beginning and which ceases

to exist in the end cannot exist in the middle. Put simply, nothing comes from nothing. To attribute temporary reality to an object is to say that it arises from nothing and dissolves into nothing but somehow, and quite mysteriously, takes on real qualities in between. The notion is absurd. And we are then left with objects that cannot be real yet are observed as such. How? The mind perceives them. So we must turn to the mind and inquire about its nature. What is this mind that produces the illusion of an objective world?

The mind is what knows. So we must examine knowledge itself. We tend to think knowledge conforms to existing objects. But we have just seen that there are no such objects. They are, in a word, *maya*. So knowledge cannot be of existing objects. What is it then?

If there are no existing objects but only the illusions of *maya* then our senses are not doing what we think they are doing: gathering information about stuff out there. There is no stuff out there. And illusion cannot be known because it is unreal, so even *maya* has ultimately to be discarded. There is then nothing to be known yet we have the undeniable experience of knowing.

Vedanta demonstrates that that which does not exist in the beginning and ceases to exist in the end cannot exist in the middle. So objects that arise in perception, remain for a time, then disappear cannot be real. Is there anything that is there in the beginning and remains at the end and thus is real in between?

Before an object is known, the knower is present. When the knowledge of the object arises, the knower is present. When the knowledge of the object subsides, the knower is present. So there is something that exists in the beginning, in the middle and at the end: the knower. The knower is present even when the objects are absent.

And unlike objects the knower is not dependent on time. It does not come and go. So we have found something permanent. And this permanent knower is independent of the objects of perception.

Everyone will immediately give assent to the proposition that he or she is a conscious being, without reference to any object of consciousness. No one would say, "I am only a conscious being when I am looking at the table or thinking of my body or listening to a particular sound." That our awareness is independent of the objects that appear in it is self-evident. Vedanta calls this pure awareness *chit*.

Now pure awareness is not a quality of our being. We cannot say in truth, "I am aware," for that would imply that awareness inheres in something other than awareness, and we would then be left to define what it is that transcends, or exists outside, awareness. Nothing exists outside awareness. So awareness and existence are identical. Vedanta calls existence *sat*. Reality then is *sat-chit*, being/awareness.

Vedanta ascribes a third term to reality: *ananda*. This is sometimes translated as "bliss," sometimes as "endlessness." Both terms apply. Awareness is not a composite of objects, so it has no limits, no borders. It does not begin at point A and end at point B, nor can it suffer any interruption. All seeming objects appear in it but no object circumscribes it or divides it or contains it.

This endlessness is experienced as bliss. All suffering comes from limitation, from the fact that we identify our happiness with objects that come and go. If we in fact do not depend on objects for our happiness then our happiness is as endless as is

our being/awareness. St. Augustine, in answer to the skeptics of his day, said he could affirm three basic truths that cannot be doubted by anyone: I exist, I know that I exist, I am glad that I exist. Vedanta calls these three truths *sat-chit-ananda*.

So we are *sat-chit-ananda*. There is nothing else. This is the highest understanding of Vedanta. A few rare beings are able to rest steadily in this understanding. Most of us who appreciate this truth, however, have some difficulty becoming established in it, so powerful is the pull of *maya*. So Vedanta gives us some tools to help us along the way.

Understanding What We Are Not

People who want to know the ultimate truth invariably ask how the world began. The underlying assumption is that discovering the origins of matter will shed light on how we can manage it so as to arrive at a state of happiness. Much time is wasted on this futile quest.

For if Vedanta is correct, there is no such thing as matter, there is only awareness. And awareness did not begin in a Big Bang or expand in gaseous clouds of congealing particles. Still, we have a seeming world of objects on our hands and we wonder what we are to do with it.

Vedanta does not propose any cosmology, although it does offer explanations of how awareness came to be manifest as the seeming world of objects in which we appear to exist as individual body-minds. But such explanations should not be understood as facts but more as imaginative models to help us navigate our way through, and ultimately out of, *maya*.

In this imaginative model the ultimate reality is called *brahman*. It is indivisible and limitless, it is the *sat-chit-ananda* described above. *Brahman*, however, possesses a power called *maya*. This power allows *brahman* to appear limited, the explanation being that limitlessness requires such a power in order to be limitless. It is akin to saying that God can indeed make a rock so heavy he can't lift it, otherwise he would not be all-powerful.

Maya is sometimes equated with *Isvara*, the Vedantic counterpart of the Creator God, and sometimes presented as a power of *Isvara*. The option is yours. *Isvara*, however, is purely impersonal and should not be equated with Jehovah or Jesus or Allah. *Isvara* has no agenda involving salvation or damnation or judgment or worship.

In any event, *maya* manifests the world of objects. It does so in a progression of steps in which the subtle becomes increasingly gross and eventually appears as seemingly separate objects perceived by individual beings. We can spend a great deal of time studying the intricacies of these progressions, which are fascinating, at the risk of losing sight of the fact that they are imaginative, not real.

If the aim of our inquiry is to become established in *sat-chit-ananda* as *sat-chit-ananda*, however, it would be good to limit our interest in the devolution of *maya* to what is immediately relevant to our progress. This brings us rather quickly to the teaching of the *gunas*.

The *gunas* are three energies or qualities that make up the world, including our bodies, our thoughts and our feelings. We might think of all we perceive as the

gunas embracing one another in a dance that takes place in the light of awareness.

There are three *gunas*: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, usually identified as peace, activity and dullness. *Isvara* is said to be pure *sattva*, and as such, blameless for all the mischief in the world. Trouble begins when *rajas*, desire, and *tamas*, ignorance, enter the picture.

Sattva is said to act on *tamas* to create the five elements: space, air, fire, water and earth, with their corresponding senses of perception. But *tamas* hides *sattva* in its dense materiality, and the individual, called a *jiva*, then forgets it is pure awareness and identifies with its body. This veiling power of awareness is called *avarana shakti*.

Once *avarana* takes place the *jiva* looks outward, thinking that its happiness is in objects, and *rajas*, desire, begins to work. This projection of happiness into objects is called *vikshepa shakti*. Under its influence *rajas* drives the *jiva* to act in the world, chasing things such as money, power and sex. The *jiva*, deluded by these two *gunas*, tries to locate permanence in that which is impermanent, and misery results.

Sattva is not pure awareness but it reflects it, so that the *jiva* experiences peace and bliss when it rests in this reflection. Spiritual people can become very attached to this *sattvic* joy, mistaking it for awareness. But *sattva* is a state and as such it lacks understanding and is impermanent, as are all states, which are also objects.

In the *jiva*, as in the rest of the objects, the *gunas* are mixed. In fact *guna* means a "rope," with its interwoven strands. Each *guna* has its beneficial and harmful aspects. In sentient beings *sattva* is the most desirable *guna*, and should be cultivated, as it can help the *jiva* transcend *maya* and come to rest in its nature as pure awareness, *sat-chit-ananda*.

Tamas, manifest in the denser physical elements, earth and rocks, gives us stability but can lead to inertia when it is not curtailed. When we sleep too much, are dull and lethargic and have difficulty understanding subtle concepts, *tamas* is at work.

Rajas is desire. When we are active, restless, intent on pursuing a particular goal, this *guna* is predominant. We need *rajas* to accomplish anything, otherwise we would be immobilized by *tamas* or complacent in *sattva*. But it is the chief troublemaker of the trio.

Most of the sorrows of the world are the effects of unconscious and uncontrolled *rajas*. People lie, cheat, steal, rape, murder, torture others and themselves because they are consumed by desire. "I want" is the *mantra* of *rajas*, repeated endlessly and leading to ceaseless anguish.

We are not personally responsible for the *gunas* nor for how they influence us as individuals. But so long as we are unaware of their existence we are helplessly in their power.

When we come to understand how *rajas* presents itself we have the option of not giving it free rein to work its havoc in our lives. We can say no to *rajas* and make it go stand in the corner till it learns to be a good boy. The same is true of the other *gunas*.

As with all the teachings of Vedanta, knowledge is power. Sadly, many people try to control the *gunas* without understanding them. This can lead to a painful exercise in what is called will power. When we do things we recognize as harmful but don't

understand the mechanism at work we make resolutions, manhandling our psyche, so to speak. Sometimes these resolutions are kept, often they are broken. And we suffer accordingly.

As the *gunas* are *maya*, they are illusory. They draw us into the world of objects, including thoughts and feelings, and lead us to identify with these objects. The whole point of identifying the *gunas* and managing them is to transcend the *gunas*, not become attached to what is good in the *gunas*.

It is said that some beings who realize they are pure awareness are indifferent to the *gunas*, knowing them to be illusory. But so long as we are not consciously one of these beings we would do well to be keenly aware of how the *gunas* are operating in us.

There is another danger: becoming preoccupied with the *gunas*. We stated earlier that this description of *maya* is an imaginative model and should not be regarded as ultimately real. It is a tool to be used and discarded when it has done its job. This is true of all of Vedanta, which is a means of knowledge. One does not cling to the means when the end has been obtained. You step off the train when you get to where you were going.

Becoming preoccupied with the *gunas* can lead to the creation of yet another personal identity: "I am so *rajasic*" or "she is too *tamasic*." No one is *rajasic* or *tamasic*. These are not personal qualities but impersonal tendencies manifesting in *maya*. To identify with the *gunas* defeats the whole purpose of the *guna* teaching, which is to free us from such personal identities and the control they exert on human behavior.

The danger of working with descriptions of *maya* is that we can forget that *maya* is not real. The *gunas* merely describe the nature of the illusory world of objects. They tell us how that which does not exist in the beginning nor exist in the end tends to appear in the middle.

Dreams, though unreal from the waking standpoint, create their own world and fill that world with imaginary people and objects that behave according to certain laws. The *jiva*, the individual, appears in *Isvara's* dream, so to speak. And the *jiva* behaves according to the *gunas*. But from the standpoint of pure awareness there is no *Isvara*, no *jiva*, no *gunas*.

If we wish to be free to wake up from the dream of being a *jiva* we must take our stand in pure awareness as pure awareness, *sat-chit-ananda*. We may not be able to rest steadily in *sat-chit-ananda* at this stage of our understanding, but we should never lose sight of it as the ultimate and only reality.

So Hinduism's insistence that the world is an illusion is not the denial of common sense the uninformed take it to be but a conclusion based on a careful examination of human experience. An illusion can only be understood in the light of what is real. To assert that the world as we generally perceive it is an illusion is also to assert the existence of something real. Pure awareness is what is real. And we are that pure awareness.