

WHAT IS MAYA?

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Appearance and Reality

Often we are confronted with this term Māyā and more often than not has it been misconstrued and misinterpreted. It has been translated as illusion in English and this has given rise to all the confusion. But, for an impartial observer and thinker all this need not necessarily be so. He sees almost a parallel between the scientific theories of today and Māyā.

Take for instance the first proposition of the doctrine of Māyā: viz. that appearance is not reality. It appears real because something else which forms its substratum is real. This is also what science tells us. Let us take some concrete examples instead of beating about the bush in a maze of words. What revolutionary changes have not the common conceptions, regarding ordinary phenomena, undergone! A thousand years ago people accepted the world as a flat piece of surface and there were very queer ideas regarding how it was held in position. Do we believe in such stuff now? If anyone does he will be considered as coming from the neolithic age, though modern science is not so old as that. It was only when Columbus, who said that he could reach India going round the world, if the other route was not available and when he did succeed to a certain extent, that there was some sort of belief in the statement that the world was round.

Again, we say the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Even now this phraseology has not changed, but does the sun go round the earth as it appears to the ordinary eye. No, says the scientist. It is the earth that is moving round the sun, as also on its own axis. This latter rotation produces the night and the day, whereas the former movement the seasons. Another wonderful theory or fact, whatever you may like to call it, of science is that our earth is moving at a tremendous velocity on its own axis - the rate is approximately 17.5 miles per minute. Yet we do not feel the impact of such a speed. For us the earth seems to be stationary. Then there are many other things than these which very powerful telescopes and a practised eye at that alone could find out. For instance it was recently discovered by 'Soviet and American astronomers simultaneously and independently that one of the most distant visible galaxies, 3C-273, is changing in brilliance.'

'The spectrum of 3C-273 shows that it is receding from us at about 30,000 miles a second — hundreds of times faster than any stars in our

own galaxy could possibly be moving — hence its identification as a galaxy.

“Hitherto variable radiation has been observed only in stars and no one has even suspected that galaxies, too, can change their brilliance.”

‘The mass of this mysterious space colossus must be millions of times greater than the mass of our Sun.

‘The very existence of such superstars was regarded as impossible until very recently.’¹

We can go on piling up evidence to prove that what people fondly believed once about the world had to be discarded and new faiths, formulated according to scientific theories, were to be cultivated. But our purport being to show that the world cannot be taken as it appears even from the standpoint of science, these few illustrations must suffice. The doctrine of Māyā does not demand any more than this recognition: that appearance has a conditional existence and when the condition varies the existence also undergoes a change, in short, it is not eternally real.

Māyā as Ignorance

Before going into the nature of Māyā let us see how it has been generally construed. Māyā is described by one of the Upanisads, as *prakṛti* and the wielder of Māyā as Iswara.² It is also called ignorance. Ignorance need not necessarily always mean the absence of worldly wisdom or of material sciences. One may be ignorant of all these, yet aware of his true nature which is the real wisdom. Whereas another may have known many sciences yet be ignorant of what he really is. The latter wisdom leads to material welfare and the former to spiritual emancipation, which is everlasting and endowing peace.

Here we face some knotty questions. Whose is this ignorance? Whence does it come? How can the effulgent One, the Ātman, be covered by this ignorance? Is not then Maya more powerful than the Ātman? Let us take these questions one by one. The ignorance, says the Vedantist, is of two types, one is the *primaeval* Māyā having recourse to which Iswara projects this world; and the other, which controlling *jiva* binds him to the world. So there is Māyā in Iswara, which is His own power, and ignorance in the *jiva*. This ignorance is therefore of the *jiva*. We now come to the second question: From where does this ignorance come if the Atman is self-effulgent consciousness or Knowledge Absolute? The Vedantist’s proposition that appeals to reason is: that this ignorance is without beginning. Or as Swamiji says: ‘Truth never dreams . . . Illusion arises from illusion alone.’ No satisfactory answer can be obtained to this question so long as one is in the realm of Māyā. This is true not only of Māyā but of the world as well, which again according to the Vedantist is nothing but Māyā. One does not know wherefrom this universe came into being and in what it is sustained. This statement may seem absurd to many, as so much has been discovered about it by the scientists. But we

forget that science deals only with things which have already come into being, of perceivable objects, or to tell it briefly, objects which come under the purview of the senses. They cannot say what was there before creation, may be billions of years ago. Yet again scientists cannot think of a time when there was no creation. That is, they work in time, in space and in terms of causality. When they can go beyond these then only can they come to know from whence this creation came into being. Swami Vivekananda pertinently and categorically sets down, 'No amount of knowledge of the external world could solve the problem (of the mystery of the universe). "But," says the scientist, "we are just beginning to know a little. Wait a few thousand years and we shall get the solution." "No," says the Vedantist, for he has proved beyond all doubt that the mind is limited, that it cannot go beyond certain limits —beyond time, space and causation. As no man can jump out of his own self, so no man can go beyond the limits that have been put upon him by the laws of time and space. Every attempt to solve the laws of causation, time and space, would be futile because the very attempt would have to be made by taking for granted the existence of these three.' These modes of thought according to time, space and causation is what the Vedantin calls Māyā.

Sri Ramakrishna on Māyā

Sri Ramakrishna in his inimitable simple way described Māyā as 'lust and lucre'. Let us see how far this statement goes along with the traditional view of Māyā and how far it agrees in the practical field of life. The Vedantist says that Māyā binds the jiva to the world, and that is exactly the work of lust — lust for power, for enjoyment and for wealth. That this is so has been proved over and over again. That is why all teachers of mankind enjoined upon a true spiritual aspirant to renounce these, if he wanted release from this bondage. Analyse the motives behind any action of any individual placed anywhere in the world. Is there anyone, — except, of course, those who have gone beyond worldly attachment — whose motive cannot be classified under these divisions. If we probe into the motive of an individual who murders, robs or cheats, or a nation which trespasses, overrides or overruns its neighbouring states we will surely find that it falls under one of these categories. Religion, however, is not in exercising our power to enjoy but to overcome the strong urge to do so. This simple definition of Sri Ramakrishna is so apt, and at the same time so completely clears the cobwebs of confusion that had gathered round this word Māyā that it looks too simple to be true. But as Swamiji remarks, 'Truths of life are most simple,' but we cannot understand them at once because of their simplicity. Again, this definition does not contradict in the least the Vedantic meaning of Māyā, viz. power to veil the real and present the unreal as the real. For is it not infatuation of the unreal that drags man into the whirlpool of this world? This will be clear if we quote Sri Ramakrishna again where he says, 'Attachment to

one's relatives is Māyā.' The whole world knows how powerful this pull is.

Swami Vivekananda on Māyā

Swamiji further illustrates this same idea of Sri Ramakrishna when he says, 'Māyā is a simple statement of facts — what we are and what we see around us.' He does not merely peremptorily remark and ask us to believe or leave the rest to our imagination. He substantiates this statement with illustrations. He takes the tremendous fact of death and remarks: 'The whole world is going towards death; everything dies. All our progress, our vanities, our reforms, our luxuries, our wealth, our knowledge, have that one end — death. That is all that is certain. Cities come and go, empires rise and fall, planets break into pieces and crumble into dust, to be blown about by the atmospheres of other planets. Thus it has been going on from time without beginning. Death is the end of everything. Death is the end of life, of beauty, of wealth, of power, of virtue, too. Saints die and sinners die, kings die and beggars die. They are all going to death, and yet this tremendous clinging on to life exists. Somehow, we do not know why, we cling to life; we cannot give it up. And this is Māyā.' Further he points out how, 'the least amount of material prosperity that we enjoy is elsewhere causing the same amount of misery.'

Swamiji then goes on to depict forcefully the fact of the universe: How though like a seesaw, alternating between misery and happiness, it enchants man and holds him down in its grip. 'This,' he says, 'is Māyā.' For a bit of happiness a load of misery is suffered patiently. Nature makes us work like an ox attached to the grinding mill. With a wisp of straw dangling in front and attached to the yoke the ox is tempted and it moves on and on but never reaches the coveted straw. So too are we employed to plough the nature's fields and grind the nature's mill and still think that we will one day overcome this nature. This is Māyā.

Another fallacious argument which man is always prone to is: that he is progressing towards good, and that a time will come when it will be all good and no evil. If that were so, why are there an increasing number of law-courts and ever increasing number of law-suits? Why are there so many police posses, so many anti-corruption squads, and then again the security police, the plain-clothes men and so on? Is this the sign of lessening of evil? No doubt, man of the present age compared with the man of the forest has considerably improved towards good, as also in his power to do good. But from the above it is also clear that in that very proportion evil too has increased. Still we do not believe it and this is Māyā.

This world is a place of contradictions. It is at best Tantalus's hell, and yet we do not recognise it as such, for when we know it we would like to get out of it. We cannot add a drop more to the happiness of the world without adding misery to it in the same proportion. We may be asked

here whether it is wrong to do good. No one will say that. But we have to remember that all this doing good is only for one's own edification. We must do good, for that is the way to avoid evil; only let us not do so with the idea that we will be able to wipe out all the misery from this world. For as Swami Vivekananda says, 'It is like chronic rheumatism. Drive it out from the legs, it will go to the head.' We have thus seen, how Swamiji's idea on Māyā, far from being contradictory to his Master's, explains it more fully and therefore is at the same time in no way a deviation from the traditional meaning. He has only cleared the labyrinth and put it in plain language so that even an ordinary man, not brought up in the tradition, can also understand and assimilate it.

Is Māyā endless?

When the Vedantist says that Māyā is without beginning, does it not, as a natural corollary, follow that it will have no end? Vedanta does not leave these doubts in the lurk: It says, 'No, Māyā can be ended.' This position of Vedanta will be clear when we discuss the nature of Māyā. For the present let us accept it as a working hypothesis. If this statement of Vedanta is accepted then liberation which is the goal of human life becomes an assured fact. Māyā ceases to have influence on the individual when he sees himself in his own true form, that of Sat-Cit-Ananda. And this seeing is liberation according to any known concept, though a little modified here or mended there in conformity with the individuals' leanings. What if we maintain that Māyā being without beginning must also be endless? Then there is no point in striving for liberation: in that case the individual soul cannot go beyond Māyā, which is the criterion of liberation.

How does Māyā or Ignorance cover the Self-Effulgent Ātman?

This brings us to the third question: If the Ātman is said to be Knowledge Absolute how can ignorance cloud it? We shall answer this by a familiar example. Let us take the sun, which is a luminous body. It is obscured by the presence of clouds in the atmosphere and according as the density of the clouds is thick or thin the sun is partially seen or totally unseen. It may be, we may not be able to see it for days together. How do we account for it? The clouds are after all not so vast as the sun, yet they do cover it in a particular area. It may be here objected, that the simile is out of place and not a proper comparison, on the ground that the sun is far away and the clouds are very near compared to the distance of the sun whereas it is not the case with the Ātman. The Ātman is one's own being. Yes, says the Vedantist, though it is near it appears very far being tainted by the clouds of attachment to things, like the body, other than the Ātman. That is why the Upanisads say, 'It is far; It is the inmost;

It is inside everything as well as outside of all these.’³ So it is not a fancy nor a groundless, parallelless argument to say that ignorance clouds the self-effulgent One. Now, when the above answers have been thoroughly grasped, it is easy to know what to expect for the fourth one. If Māyā or ignorance can be ended, how can it be more powerful than the Ātman? We have let ourselves be tarnished and are weeping, or as Swamiji says: ‘We put our hands before our eyes and weep that it is dark. Take the hands away and there is light; the light exists always for us, the self-effulgent nature of the human soul.’

Māyā as Name and Form

We spoke of Māyā as ignorance. What is meant by this is explained by an Upanisadic passage. ‘All the forms and names are only play of words, the clay (the substance) alone is real.’⁴ Our ignorance is about this substance. We take the name and form to be real. And this is what deludes us. The Upanisad gives us three instances: of clay, of gold and of iron. The Upanisad says that whatever the forms that a substance has been changed into or by whatever the names they are called, they have no existence apart from the substance. Pots, pans and pitchers which are made of clay can have no existence except in and through clay, the substance. The necklaces, bangles and rings of gold can have no existence separate from gold. ‘We can never see name, form or causes standing by themselves. This phenomenon is Māyā,’ says Swamiji. As it is in the world of matter so also it is with the universe — whether man, beast, sun, moon or stars, it is all name and form while the true substance is only One. When the names and forms are destroyed what remains is only that Eternal Spirit, Ātman, Brahman. This name and form brings in duality and thus creates delusion. It is the ignorance of the substance, of which the universe is only a distorted vision, that brings in all delusion. Now the question is how does the infinite Spirit become finite. We dealt with this question earlier in a different context but it bears repetition here. Vedanta says this duality is only an appearance, in reality it is Non-dual.⁵ When we look through Māyā, through time, space and causation, the Infinite appears to have become the finite. And as long as one remains in this field of time and space one cannot but see many and be deluded. This is a statement of fact and we see how beautifully Swamiji’s definition of Māyā, as a statement of facts, fits in here.

Again, for all practical purposes we see nature acting. It produces the day and the night, the greenery and the desert, the turmoils in man’s mind and the upheavals in the galaxies. This is a tremendous force and we feel the impact of it every day of our life. Yet, says the Vedantist, the way for liberation, freedom is not with nature but against it. Our very life is a fight against nature. Swamiji observes: ‘We are not born as helpers of nature, but competitors with nature. We are its bond-masters, but we bind ourselves down. Why is this house here? Nature did not build it.

Nature says go and live in the forest. Man says I will build a house and fight with nature, and he does so. The whole history of humanity is a continuous fight against the so-called laws of nature, and man gains in the end.' This is so even in the internal world. 'Man,' continues Swamiji, 'as it were, cuts his way out of nature to freedom.' This nature, which is a statement of facts has been described in Vedanta as Māyā. Now we see that it matters little by what name it is called, ignorance, nature or Māyā, the power is the same. We are in it; we do not know how we came into it but we live in it. All our thinking and all our action are in it.

Nature of Māyā

What is the nature of this Māyā which is so powerful a force? And what is the way out of it? Māyā, also called *avyakta* is the Lord's power. It is without beginning; is made up of the three *gunas* — sattva, rajas and tamas, and is superior to the effects. It can be inferred by the wise only by the effect it produces. And it is this Māyā that projects the world, says Sri Sankara in his *Vivekachudamani*.⁶ Continuing he describes its nature thus: 'It is neither existent nor non-existent nor of the characteristic of both.'⁷ It is not existent as it can be destroyed by the Knowledge of Brahman, just as the rope in the snake seen in the dark is no more existent when light flashes upon it and the rope becomes known. It is not non-existent because it projects all the differences, and can be inferred from the effects it produces. It cannot be of both characteristics because such a thing is an incongruity. By the play of its *gunas* Māyā throws a veil, as it were, on the Real substance and apparently distorts It to look like divergent things. There is a beautiful parable of Sri Ramakrishna which explains the nature of Māyā: 'A priest was once going to the village of a disciple of his. He had no servant with him. Seeing a cobbler on the way, he asked him to accompany him. The cobbler hesitated thinking that he would be a misfit, but the priest assured him that no one will know about his identity if he but kept silent. The cobbler agreed. At twilight, while the priest was sitting at prayers in the house of his disciple, another brahmana came and asked the priest's servant, to bring his shoes. True to the behest of his master, he made no response though the brahmana repeated his orders. At last, getting annoyed, the brahmana angrily said: "Sirrah, why don't you speak? Are you indeed a cobbler?" The cobbler hearing this, began to tremble with fear, and looking piteously at the priest, said: "O, venerable sir, I am found out. I dare not stay here any longer." So saying he took to his heels. Just so, as soon as Māyā is recognized, she flies away.'

Māyā is powerful no doubt but it can be overcome, says the Vedantist, by those who take recourse to Brahman. Sri Krishna says in the Gitā, 'This My divine Māyā composed of the gunas is very difficult to be crossed. Those who take refuge in Me alone can go beyond it.'⁸ Christ too said the same thing, 'Come unto Me, ye that labour and are heavy

laden and I will give you rest.’ Māyā, therefore, can be transcended only by realizing the Lord, or Brahman, the true Reality. Until then whatever we may think or do we are still in Māyā and simple denying it would not help matters.

¹ Quoted from the Soviet Weekly, August 1, 1963. Published from 3, Rosary Gardens, London, S.W.7.

² Svetasvataropaniṣad, 4.10.

³ Isa Up. 5.

⁴ Chandogya, 6.1.4.

⁵ Mandukyakarika, 1.17.

⁶ Verse 108.

⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁸ B. Gita, 7.14.