

Discourses/Articles

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THE COSMIC MYSTERY

Is there a world? We know it is, by means of sensations from outside, which are converted later into perceptions and concepts. But is it really a world that we perceive? We receive sensations and have ideas formulated according to what we think is a logical way of dealing with things. And when we have a visual, auditory or tactile sensation, we feel we are in contact with an object. But have we any contact with what is not a sensation? We have every right to assert that we have real sensations and real experience. But of what? Of sensible qualities. Science has taught us today that the sensed properties point to a *something* of an indeterminable nature, observable as radiant energy, force, etc. We are told that the mass of a body is variable. It appears to be fixed in low rates of motion, but it cannot be perceived in states of high velocity. Objects are fields of force, which appear as substances due to our channelising the consciousness through sensory moulds. Pure force cannot be confined to space or time, and the shape, position and time of location of an object have different significations in different perspectives or frameworks of perception. We see a world, because we do not see ourselves properly as essential elements in all experience. The student who studies the world goes with the world, and in vain does he attempt to know it, because he himself is involved in it. He merely sees the laws and limitations which no one can overstep. The universe turns out to be a body of a collective interpretation by its individual contents, and that all men see the same world does not mean that it is independent of the observational perspective. The world is an interrelated process envisaged by an all-inclusive consciousness. There are no bodies visible or tangible, but there is a tremendous mystery that ever recedes from our world which has been reduced to mere frames of reference to a witnessing consciousness. Where is the world of experience? It has shrivelled into conditions of feeling and sensation, modes of the observation of a universal *'Observer of Himself'*. Our dear world is at stake. Reality is something different.

The way in which reality presents itself as appearance is, to the mind of man, inexplicable. Those who witness a legerdemain conjured up by a magician cannot but take it for reality, as long as they see it. But the magician himself is fully aware that it is an illusion created by him. No amount of intellectual analysis and understanding to the effect that the juggleries are unreal will prevent one from taking those phenomena as real, instinctively, and without thought. The world passes for reality to those to whom it becomes a content of experience. Only the magician behind these appearances can know what their essential nature is. We cannot say that our experiences are unreal as long as our consciousness is associated with them and gets identified with their formulations. Our trouble is that we are never conscious of what is altogether non-existent. We glibly talk of a real universe, even as we get excited when we see silver in nacre. Our reflective consciousness may resent acquiescing in the ultimate validity of the reports of our senses, but we cannot help being immured in them and delighting in their deceitful

music. We understand that the world can only be an appearance, but we are forced to feel that it is real. We accept it with submission. We seem to be bound; we do not know why. There seems to be a world; we do not know how. We are in the realm of Maya.

The principle of appearance is not an entity second to the Absolute, designated by us as Brahman, but constitutes the great wonder of the One becoming the many. It is not real, for it is contradicted in Brahmanubhava or Truth-Experience. It is not unreal, for we perceive and feel the diversity of life. It cannot be said to be both real and unreal, because such a proposition is unintelligible to us. It is not *also* neither real nor unreal – such a thing cannot even be imagined. The term 'Maya' is used in different senses, it denotes (1) the inadequacy and the incompetency of the world to explain itself without reference to Reality; (2) the inexplicability of the relation of appearance to Reality; (3) the dependence of the world on Reality or Brahman; (4) the energy that is inseparable from Isvara, from which, as the material cause, the manifestation of the world becomes possible; (5) and the dreamlike character of the world when compared with the transcendent Brahman. It is a term suggesting a mystery, which cannot be taken for reality, and yet cannot be denied altogether. We have to admit it as some Power that somehow brings about these strange phenomena of a world-existence in which we find ourselves. It is real to those who are in it, indescribable to those who try to understand it, and non-existent to those who have gone beyond it. Those who are not endowed with spiritual intuition speculate over it, but cannot solve the riddle, for the mechanism of individualistic knowledge is the psychological organ, a modification of *Maya* itself. As darkness cannot destroy darkness, the mind cannot know *Maya*.

Two powers are said to be ever busy: the Avarana-Sakti or the veiling power, and the Vikshepa-Sakti or the projecting power. The latter becomes the cause of the creation of the universe from the subtle elements of the gross cosmos. It is this power that, in its cosmic and individual aspects, becomes the medium for the manifestation of Isvara (God) and Jiva (individual), respectively. The Avarana-Sakti veils the difference between the seer and the seen inside, and the difference between Brahman and the universe outside. It is this Sakti that is the cause of Samsara. Empirically, consciousness and its object are different from each other, and the non-perception of this difference is the seed of pain. Metaphysically, the two are one, and the non-perception of this essential identity, is, again, Samsara. The empirical self appears due to a false superimposition arisen in the Witness-Self. This is the work of the projecting power. When the difference between the perceiver and the perceived becomes vivid, as soon as the veiling power is overcome, Jivahood also vanishes along with it. And likewise, as in the case of the witness and the object, Brahman appears as a modification, as it were, on account of the veiling power Of Maya that hides the distinction between the real nature of Brahman and the phenomenal universe. When this veiling power disappears through Brahmabhyasa (continuous meditation on Brahman), the nature of Brahman and the world becomes clear.

There are different degrees in the manifestation of Maya in the world. Its workings correspond to and are felt in its further miniatures in the planes of greater ignorance, where they get more and more separated from one another, until on the earth-plane entities are completely cut off as independent bodies. The power of disfiguring reality is not of the same intensity everywhere. Maya is more manifest and works more vehemently in inanimate beings than animate, more in brute natures than in refined,

more in Tamas and Rajas than in Sattva, more in man than in the celestial, more in an aspirant than in a saint, more in the sleeping and the dreaming states of the Jiva than in the waking, more in gross forms than in subtle ones. Maya is manifest on a progressive evolutionary basis on the one hand and as a steady concealing of reality on the other. It pervades every quarter and cranny; there is nothing on earth or heaven that is not under its sway. The impetuosity of universal change drags with it the entire brood of creatures, and every individual is compelled to modify and adjust itself accordingly. Maya is another name for the energy of the cosmos, animated by Isvara, the vehemance with which the formed individuality asserts its independence over the universe.

Maya is supreme Isvara-Sakti. "Maya is not-That. It is not Brahman, the solid reality that is at the back of this seeming universe." "Maya is the material cause of the world, and the possessor of Maya is the great Lord." "Maya has two Avasthas or states viz. Guna-Samyak-Avastha and Vaishamyak-Avastha. The first one is a state wherein the three Gunas-Sattva, Rajas and Tamas-exist in a state of equilibrium. This occurs in cosmic dissolution (Pralaya). The innumerable Jivas remain in a subtle state with their Samskaras and Adrishta (unseen power of Karma or the fruit-giving power of Karma that is hidden in Karma). When the period of Pralaya is over, Spanda or vibration takes place in this equilibrium, because the hidden Jivas want to enjoy the fruits of their actions. This is Vaishamyak-Avastha," "Vidya, Para-Sakti, Prakriti, Mula-Prakriti, Avyakta, Adi-Sakti, Adi-Maya are all names synonymous with Maya. Vishnu-Sakti (Lakshmi), Siva-Sakti (Parvati) and Brahma-Sakti (Sarasvati) are all manifestations of the One Supreme Sakti." "Chaitanya associated with Sattva-predominating Maya is Vishnu, the preservative aspect of Brahman, Chaitanya associated with Rajas-predominating Maya is Brahma, the creative aspect of Brahman. Chaitanya associated with Tamas-predominating Maya is Siva, the destructive aspect of Brahman" Swami Sivananda: (*Philosophy and Teachings*, pp. 58-60).

The mystery of Maya has to be accepted as superlogical. "The why of Maya can be understood only when one attains knowledge of Brahman." "The 'why' itself is a logical absurdity. We can have a 'why' only for worldly matters where the Buddhi (intellect) functions. There can be no 'why' for questions of the transcendental plane where the gross and finite intellect conditioned by time and space cannot reach. Everyone who endeavoured to account for the empirical world has been confronted by ignorance at every step, and has been obliged to confess that human wit could go only so far and no further" (Ibid. p. 60). "The world somehow exists, and its relation to Brahman is indescribable. The illusion vanishes by attainment of knowledge of Brahman. It is in this sense, in the sense that it vanishes when Atma-Jnana (Self-knowledge) arises that this phenomenal universe is said to be unreal." "If we know the nature of Brahman, all names and forms and limits will melt away." "A man whose clothes are caught by fire will immediately run towards water. He will never enquire at that moment, when he is in acute distress, how the fire came, or how his clothes were burnt up" (Ibid., p. 62). When the play of the mind is stopped by conscious effort in Yoga, when the seed of thought is burnt by spiritual wisdom, the tree of Samsara ceases to exist.

Does Maya really exist or not? This inscrutable, indescribable Maya cannot be said either to exist or not to exist. It is a strange phenomenon which cannot be accounted for by law of Nature. Maya is Anirvachaniya (inexpressible). It is neither real like Brahman

nor unreal like a barren woman's son, or the horn of a hare, or a lotus-flower in the sky. The phenomena produced by a magician do not really exist.... But we cannot say that they do not exist, because we are conscious of the phenomena, though only for a short time. We are never conscious of a thing which, although it is non-existent, is like a lotus-flower in the sky. Similar is the phenomenon called the universe, which is imagined to be distinct from Brahman. It is like the silver for which the mother-of-pearl is mistaken." "We call it Maya or illusion" (Ibid., p. 61). "Maya is that illusive power of Brahman which makes the Anitya (impermanent) appear as Nitya (permanent), Asuchi (impure) as Suchi (pure), Duhkha (pain) as Sukha (pleasure) and Anatman (not-self) as Atman (Self)." "The world of names and forms vanishes entirely from the vision of a sage. It is an illusion that can be removed only by true knowledge. It is the illusory notion of the serpent that is removed when the rope which is mistaken for the serpent is recognised. Therefore, it must be clearly admitted that the universe which is removed by knowledge of the Self is also an illusion" (Ibid., pp. 62-63). The illusion, however, is no illusion to those who directly experience it. We have to recall here our investigations of the nature of truth in dream and in waking, and add that the world is relatively real and transcendently ideal. It has Vyavaharika-Satta or practical reality, while Brahman is Paramarthika-Satta or absolute reality.

It is necessary to dispel certain misconceptions regarding the nature of Maya, for it is held by many that the principle, instead of establishing the oneness of Brahman, creates a dichotomy in existence by its presence. As it was observed before, the term is used in different senses, to suggest the absoluteness of Brahman and the inscrutability of phenomena. Maya is not altogether non-existent (Sunya), for a void, cannot become an object of consciousness; but Maya has a capacity to appear in manifold forms. It does not also signify a self-contradictory assumption like that of a barren woman's son or a round square, for such fancied things as these cannot even be conceived. But the effects of Maya not only present themselves before the individual but exert a control over it. The Jiva is a part of the world of Maya, and is not the cause of it. The acceptance of Maya does not annul the existence of a world external to consciousness. The theory is not analogous to the Vijñānavāda school of Buddhism, as it is generally understood, according to which the world is an objectification of subjective cognitions or a perception of the externalisation of the series of the flow of individual consciousness which is of a momentary nature. It is not to be supposed that the introduction of the principle of Maya to account for the world can in anyway lead to the untenable position of subjective idealism. The theory of knowledge, proposed by Mayavāda, accepts Anirvachaniyakhyati (indescribability), and not Asatkhyati (non-existence) or Atmakhyati (subjectivity). The object of knowledge is neither a nihil nor a projection of the internal cognitions. The object is held to be an indescribable appearance, as it cannot be considered either as object or as unreal. There cannot even be an appearance of externality if there were no substratum for such an appearance. When we perceive a table or a cloth, we do not regard it as forms of our own thoughts or feelings but as things independent of us as perceivers. Though, the objects cannot claim to have an ontological status of their own, they have an empirical existence and psychological independence which points to a real though unperceived basis behind them. When we regard the world as Maya, what we mean is that it has no validity of its own as absolute truth and not that it never appears to us, or that it is real enough to vitiate the Infinite.

It has been regarded that the theory of *Maya* creates an unnecessary difference between Saguna-Brahman and Nirguna-Brahman, while, in fact the two have to be brought together and reconciled. The criticism is really without a basis, for the alleged dualism is never intended. Brahman is either Nirguna, or Saguna, or both, or neither. If it is Nirguna essentially, its Saguna aspect must be accidental, brought about by causes extraneous to it. This would mean that Brahman is not really Saguna but Nirguna. But if Brahman is really Saguna, its Nirguna aspect should be alien to its essential nature. To suppose, then, that Brahman is also Nirguna would be to imagine it in a state not its own. And whatever does not belong to it cannot be considered to be eternal. Thus the Nirguna aspect would be non-eternal. If, on the other hand, Brahman is to be regarded as both Nirguna and Saguna, we would be speaking what we are not able to defend for one thing cannot be two things at one and the same time. If, again, it is said that Brahman, on account of its infinite power, can assume both forms, though unintelligible to us, it means that the real nature of Brahman is neither Nirguna nor Saguna, but beyond both. Thus, again, we are led to the non-dualist position, where the question of the reconciliation of the Saguna and the Nirguna aspects of Brahman does not arise. And if it is neither of these, it must be something different, which, again, would mean that it is one without a second.

It is argued that the world is a real Self-manifestation of Brahman, a creation of its consciousness-force, and that it is not unreal in any sense. If Brahman has really become the world, it has undergone a modification in its essence, and thus has ceased to be what it is. We are driven here to the difficult position of the doctrine of Parinamavada (real transformation). There would be no Brahman left to be realised by souls if it has already become the world by self-transformation. But if it has not really modified itself into the world, the world is other than Brahman, and thereby loses its being – it becomes an appearance. That which does not belong to Brahman, but yet seems to exist, is what is designated by the term *Maya*. It cannot be said that the world, as we know it, is in Brahman, or belongs to Brahman, for the mortal nature of the former can in no way be extended to the immortal. The world is not also something existing unrelated to Brahman, for, then, it would limit Brahman, and consequently deny it. Even supposing that Brahman has become the world in a manner transcending our logic, we have to admit that Brahman alone is, for the reason that consciousness does not admit of divisions in it. The consciousness of division has to be divisionless.

It is said, again, that just as there is continuity in the perceptions of the imagined snake and the rope, a real relation between the world and Brahman cannot be denied. It is evident that the supposed continuity between the states of the snake and the rope is not in the perceptions, but in a substratum common to both. The Adhishtana or the support of the snake and the rope is one, and it is on account of this fact that one is able to perceive the two in one and the same locus, at different times. There is no continuity between the forms of the perception of the snake and the rope, for the former are negated in the latter, and the suggested relation is only due to the consciousness present as the *substrate* of both the forms of perception. The world and Brahman, therefore, are one in the sense that the essence of both is consciousness, but it does not mean that the perception of the world by itself has any relation to the realisation of Brahman.

It is asked: How can Maya have a beginningless appearance if it stands eternally cancelled in Brahman? We see that the snake seen in a rope stands eternally cancelled, for a rope never becomes a snake nor is a snake ever transformed into a rope. Yet the perception of a snake in the rope becomes possible, as testified by common experience, and there is no beginning for the possibility of such an appearance. Suresvara describes Maya as Sarva-nyaya virodhini, the contradiction of every type of reasoning or logic.

The absolute cannot become what it is not; if it does not there is no world. But there is one seen. It must not be, therefore, different from the Absolute. This, again, means that there is no world but only the Absolute. But we do not see the Absolute; we see only the world!

The doctrine of Maya is not a theory of reality, but a symbolic representation of a phenomenon to be transcended, like an 'x' in a mathematical equation. When we take a symbol for truth, difficulties are bound to arise, for we assume here the reality of what was declared in the beginning itself to be something meant to be abandoned later on, as a means of explanation and not anything real. And it is not true that the useful should always be real, ultimately. Maya is not a truth eternal but the baffling mystery of the descent of the One into the many. Maya cannot be known, for the one who aspires to know it is the Jiva whose very fibre is soaked in Maya. And the knowledge of Maya would mean a transcendence of individuality. Darkness cannot be seen with the help of a light.

The critics of the doctrine of Maya commit the initial error of taking it for granted that Maya is something real, and then complain that the introduction of this principle in an explanation of the world in relation to Brahman brings about a duality between the two. It should be reiterated that Maya does not mean any existence or being that would limit the infinitude of Brahman but denotes the inscrutable character of Brahman, by which a multifarious world becomes somehow possible in its unattached plenitude. The sages declare that Brahman alone is real, that the world is not different from Brahman in essence and that Brahman is verily the Atman. Other than this knowledge there is no way of overcoming the influence which Maya seems to have over us. Knowledge is the means to Moksha – in fact, it is Moksha, liberation.

It is objected that even if an appearance is not ultimately real in the sense of Brahman, it cannot but create a duality, for even appearance is, as long as it is experienced. In as much as appearances are facts felt and known, they have to be accredited with a certain amount of reality. And it will be clear that in the perception of a snake in a rope, the snake that is observed is real to its observer, and the rope-snake is not absolutely non-existent. It is experienced, and so has some amount of reality. But does this snake that is perceived cause any duality in the real? The supposed duality would be the one that might subsist between the snake that is seen and the rope which is its substratum. But we all know that what kind of duality there exists between this percept and its substratum. There is no duality at all, for there is only the rope. Even granting a kind of reality to the appearance of the snake, we find no duality that divides the snake from the rope. The being of the snake is at once the being of the rope. The world is a superimposition on Brahman, and the reality of the world is Brahman itself. Thus the principle of Maya does not introduce any duality between the world and Brahman. If the world were absolutely real, a real creation or manifestation of Brahman,

it would have been impossible for anyone to escape from limitation, pain and death. That freedom eternal is somehow possible shows that bondage is in the end, unreal, and the changing universe has no reality of its own. This is why it is said that the universe is relative; it cannot contradict The Absolute, which alone is, and can be.