

MAYA

A Compilation of Articles from The Mystic's Vision by Swami Abhayananda

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Maya: The Power of God

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In the final chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna says to Arjuna: “O Arjuna, the Lord dwells in the heart of all beings, while revolving them all on the wheel (of transmigration) by His mysterious power of *Maya*.”¹ This word, “Maya,” is one, which we hear quite often in discussions of Vedanta, and, because it is a word that is so often misinterpreted, I’d like to see if I can clear up any misunderstanding about it.

We may well understand that ‘Brahman’ is a name for the Godhead, the absolute Consciousness, the eternal Mind, which mystics throughout history have experienced as the transcendent Source of all creation. It is said by those who have known It to be pure Consciousness, Bliss, unmoving, unchanging, unqualified, beyond all form and beyond all activity. How then, the rational intellect questions, can such a quiescent Emptiness create a universe of myriad forms? The difficulty of explaining this satisfactorily is readily acknowledged even by those who have experienced It directly. The truth of the one Reality is “seen” clearly in the mystical “vision,” and yet to describe It is nearly impossible, because Its mode of existence is unique, and without parallel in the phenomenal world, and for that reason, there is nothing else with which It may be truly compared.

Those seers who do speak of It say that the one Reality has two distinct aspects: It is the absolutely pure Consciousness, which remains as the eternal Ground, the immovable Witness; and yet, at the same time, It possesses the power of projecting a manifold universe upon Its own Self. Frequently, the analogy is made of the human mind and its power of projecting thoughts or images upon itself. These two aspects of our own immediate experience help us to grasp a little of what these two cosmic principles: *Brahman* and *Maya*, are like.

“Maya” is just another name for God’s power of manifestation, His power of form-projection. However, the word, “Maya,” is also used to signify the form-projection itself. It is God’s Power of manifestation, which remains eternally with Him, whether there is a manifestation or not; and it is also the actual world of forms which results from that power. Maya, in other words, is both the cause and the effect, both the Creator (or Creatrix) and the creation.

This word, “Maya,” is synonymous with all the other words used to represent the manifestory Power of God, such as “*Shakti*,” “*Prakrti*,” “*Logos*,” etc. So many different words exist because every seer of every time and place has found it necessary to give a name to the Creative Power of God in order to distinguish the temporal from the eternal, the phenomenal appearance from the constant and unchanging Ground. “Maya,” like so many of the other names for this “Power,” is a noun of the feminine gender. Just as the absolute Godhead is referred to as the figurative “Father,” His Power of manifestation is commonly referred to as “Mother,” as in “Mother Nature.” Maya is the Creatrix, the divine Womb from which everything is born, sometimes called the Will, or the effulgent Glory, of God.

Understand that God’s Power is not something *other* than God—just as our own power of thought-production is not distinct from our minds to which that power belongs. However, we must bear in mind also that, just as the thoughts and images which are produced in our minds are mere ephemera which come and go, and once gone, have no claim to existence, so, likewise, the various forms in the universe, however alluring and seductive, or however frightening and dreadful, are mere ephemera which come and go, and are, by that standard, illusory, or unreal. The Power, Maya, exists eternally, being inherent in God; but the world-illusion, Maya, is transient, having a beginning and an end.

Those who have experienced God, through contemplation, have “seen” the creation of the world-illusion, its flourishing, and its dissolution, in a recurrent cycle. It is somewhat like the recurrent cycle of breath, which we, as creatures, experience. In something similar to an exhalation, the Lord manifests and plays out the drama of the universe; and, in something similar to an inhalation, He draws it all back into Himself once again. In just one breath, the whole universe is created, evolves, and is ultimately withdrawn again into its Source. From the perspective of God, it is but a fleeting breath; from our temporal perspective, it is an unimaginable immensity of time. Perhaps our own breath, which seems to us but momentary, is an eternity to certain sub-atomic particles, whose life span is

measured in millionths of a second. See how relative our concept of time and space is!

While Maya is the breath of God by which the universe of time and space is created, from our own temporal perspective, that breath manifests as ‘the Great Radiance’ or ‘Big Bang’ from which and by which all else is produced. That ‘Great Radiance’, last occurring fourteen billion years ago, is an immense burst of high frequency electromagnetic radiation that rapidly transforms into quantum wave/particles which, combining with other such wave/particles, produce the appearance of the various forms of matter which constitute this vast universe. The production of this ‘illusory’ universe of discreet material forms within an infinitely extended space also creates the illusion of time. Our experience of the passage of time, as Albert Einstein showed us, is relative to our positional perspective, so that years may seem to pass which, from another perspective, are but passing moments—just as in a dream. Let me tell you a story from the Vedantic tradition, which illustrates this phenomenon:

Once, the legendary sage, Narada, was out walking with Krishna, who is, of course, representative, in literature, of God. In the course of their conversation, Narada asked God to explain to him the mystery of His Maya. And the Lord said, “Alright—but before I do, since my throat is a little dry, please fetch me a drink of water.” So, Narada ran off to find some water for the Lord. In the course of his search, he came to a pleasant little hut, where he stopped to get directions to the nearest water, but when the door to the hut was opened, there stood a most beautiful young maiden with whom Narada was immediately smitten. As she invited him inside, Narada forgot all about his mission to fetch some water for his Lord; and, as the days passed very pleasantly, Narada fell more and more in love with his beautiful hostess, and soon they were wed.

Before long, the blissful couple had children, and Narada toiled in the field to grow food for his growing family. He was extremely happy with his new family and thought himself to be surely the most fortunate of men to have such a beautiful wife and such fine children. But, one day, a great monsoon rain fell; and for many days thereafter the rain continued. The riverbanks overflowed, and the little hut was filled with water. Narada climbed, with his family, to the top of the hut, clinging with one hand to the roof, and with the other to his wife and children. But the rains continued, and the hut began to collapse from the flooding waters. First one child, then another, was swept away in the raging torrent; and finally, Narada felt his darling wife slip away from his grasp as well. Then, he too was swept away in the flood, crying out in the darkness for his wife and children.

At last, nearly unconscious, and completely exhausted, Narada found himself washed up on a wreckage-strewn shore. And, as he lay there desperately lamenting the loss of his family, he suddenly looked up to see the feet of Krishna at his head. Quickly, he struggled to his feet, and Krishna, with an ironic smile, asked, “Where have you been, Narada? I sent you for water nearly ten minutes ago!” It was in this way that the Lord showed to Narada His power of Maya. Indeed, this life *is* much like a dream, in which we become entirely involved and embroiled, forgetful of our real purpose, only to wake to find that the people, things, and events we thought real were, in fact unreal—a mere play of thought.²

“All this [world],” said the insightful sage, Shankaracharya, “from the intellect to the gross physical body, is the effect of Maya. Understand that all these and Maya itself are not the absolute Self, and are therefore unreal, like a mirage in the desert.”³ “Real,” for Shankaracharya, meant “eternal,” That which always was and always will be. This phenomenal universe obviously does not fit this definition of “real,” and is therefore “unreal”—like a mirage. It is only God’s imagination—similar in some ways to a dream. Do you remember the following song?

Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily—
Life is but a dream.

That song conveys the idea of Maya. And this is a great understanding to have of the world. But, of much more significance is the understanding that the Dreamer of the dream, the divine Consciousness, is ultimately the only Reality, and is therefore, without doubt, our own ultimate Identity. And so, whatever apparently desirable conditions we become attracted to, and whatever nightmarish conditions manifest before us, if we are able to remain conscious of that eternal Identity, we will always remain fearless and unmoved, confident that we are above and beyond whatever conditions that may confront us in this dream-like world. The realization of God, the realization of our eternal Self, is an experience very similar to awaking from a dream in the sense that one who has awakened to the eternal Self is then able to re-experience the dream from a new perspective and enjoy the play fearlessly and with great enjoyment.

When I was a child, I remember I would sometimes have disturbing dreams in which some creature of my imagination would chase me and would be just at the point of gobbling me up, when I would pinch myself in the dream, and wake

myself, thus escaping the beast by withdrawing suddenly from the dream to my warm and safe bed. Once I discovered this handy trick, I would taunt the villains in my dreams, secure in the knowledge that, just at the critical moment, when they had me cornered with no apparent exit, I could pinch myself, and disappear from their clutches just like that.

The same kind of confidence belongs to the one who has realized the Self, through contemplation. Just as, when a dream-character awakes, he realizes he is, in fact, the dreamer, likewise, when we, who experience ourselves as manifestations of God's imagination, awake from this dream of a world, we realize that, in fact, we are the Imaginer, the pure Consciousness from whom all this imagined universe sprang. We realize that we are, and have always been, the one eternal Self of all; that we have always been safe and secure as the all-inclusive One.

Once we have awakened to the Self, then, when we find ourselves back in the dream, we can share our knowledge with everyone else in the dream. This is what the mystic does; he returns to the dream, the world, and tells everyone, "Hey! This is just a dream. Each of us is really that one Dreamer; He is the Self of all of us. And, if you really want to enjoy the dream in the best possible way, and at the same time know that you're free from the dream, then wake up and realize who you really are!"

This brings to my mind the parable told by Socrates, called "The Analogy of The Cave."⁴ Socrates, who was an enlightened man, attempted to illustrate his own state by asking his listeners to imagine a world in which there were some people chained in a cave far underground, with their backs to a fire before which some other people were parading back and forth. The people chained are facing toward a cave-wall on which the images of the people parading in front of the fire are cast as shadows. The images on the wall are all that they can see, and so they take that to be the reality. Then, one day, one man escapes from his chains. He discovers the fire and the figures marching in front of it and realizes how mistaken he had been in regarding only the shadows as the reality. Then, he discovers a way out of the cave, and he climbs up, out of the cave, into the sunlight, and discovers the real source of light in the world. He is overjoyed, and elated, and he returns to the cave, telling everyone, "Look, this is only shadows, illusions! Break your bonds; come up out of the cave and see the reality!" The problem, of course, is that no one believes him. They think him mad; they curse him and stone him and ostracize him from their company while remaining ensnared in their false shadow world.

That was the analogical story Socrates told as a way of explaining the idea of Maya. But, just as the unchained man in his story was brutally treated by his brothers when he attempted to lead them to freedom, so was Socrates brutally treated in his own life. When he tried to explain the Truth that he had seen to the people of Athens, they scorned him and condemned him to death, and eventually murdered him. Many year later, Jesus of Nazareth also experienced his eternal identity through God's grace, and, like Socrates, was persecuted and murdered for attempting to show people the way out of the cave, out of Maya's snare of illusion, so that they too could know the Truth and be free.

Just as the people living in the underground cave in Socrates' story were unaware that they were even bound by Maya, we also live in Maya's world of duality without even being aware of our ensnarement. In fact, it is only when God's grace reveals our true nature that the duality in which we had previously been living also becomes revealed. In the 7th chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna says, "The whole world is under the delusion of my Maya; for this Maya of mine is very difficult to penetrate. Only those who take refuge in Me go beyond it." ⁵ In other words, it is only by intense devotion and the grace of God that we are released from the delusive power of Maya. If we think of this release as the awakening from a dream, we can easily understand that it is not just the person within the dream who must awake, but the Dreamer must also deliberately reveal Himself. There must be a complicity, or grace, extending from the Dreamer to the dreamed. It's not as though one can awake from the cosmic dream simply by pinching oneself. But, through a strong desire for liberation, with a focused mind intent on God, with an all-consuming will and devotion, it is possible to draw that complicity, that grace, and bring about an "awakening." Then you will be free—even though you still live within Maya's cosmic dream.

Though everything in the world will remain the same after such an awakening, for you, all will be quite different; for your vision of the world will be very different. The clear, perfect nondual awareness shines without blemish, illuminating the mind with its light. But it is not permanent; one does not remain in that nondual state continually thereafter. Still, it is an experience that cannot be forgotten, and the radiant memory of its revelation permeates one's consciousness ever after. That divine awareness remains as the underlying content of one's mind, an ever-present certainty upon which one constantly dwells. From that moment on, you will carry with you the awareness of your eternal Self, and you will view all this dream-like world as your own glorious play. Maya will no longer bind you in any way, for you'll know that you are, in truth, the Lord of Maya. As the great Shankaracharya said, "Maya is destroyed by the realization of the One without a

second.” The revelation of your true nature destroys all previous limited notions of your identity, just as awaking from a dream destroys the illusory reality of the dream.

Swami Vidyanaraya, another of the great Vedantic sages, wrote, “Maya is called ‘the wish-fulfilling cow.’ It yields milk in the form of duality. Drink as much of it as you like; but the Truth is non-duality.”⁶ Final release from all duality—including life and death—is obtained only through the knowledge of the Self. One does not come to the end of dreaming until one awakes to that Self.

All the Self-realized sages agree: the knowledge of the Self is the only means to transcend the ignorance in which we are enmeshed due to the veiling power of Maya. Once a person has awakened from the dream-world of Maya, he may enter back into the dream, with the awareness of his eternal Identity, and he is never troubled by the occurrences within the dream-world again. He is aware that he *is* everything that appears before him, that everything that happens is a mere imagination, and that he can never be threatened or destroyed. All is himself; and, at the same time, he is quite free and safe, beyond the effects of all this temporal phantasmagoria of things and events. He knows within himself: “I am the Absolute; I am completely independent, ever-pure, eternal and free. I pervade everything; I am everlasting, undefiled, pure Existence, beyond Maya, without cause or limitation. I alone am. I am the one eternal Consciousness.”⁷

NOTES:

1. *Bhagavad Gita*, 18:61.
2. Who has not fallen at least once into the snare of Maya, just as Narada did? No one, I’d wager. Not even the greatest saint has managed to entirely escape Maya’s seductive spell of illusion.
3. Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*, III:7; Prabhavananda & Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel Of Discrimination*, Hollywood, Vedanta Press, 1978, pp. 51-52.
4. Plato, *Republic*, Book VII
5. *Bhagavad Gita*, 7:14
6. Vidyanaraya, *Panchadashi*, 6:236; H.P. Shastri (trans.), *Panchadashi by Vidyanaraya*; London, Shanti Sadan, 1965, p. 161.
7. It is because of Maya that the One appears to be two. The one eternal *I*, when seen through the dualistic perspective of Maya, becomes divided into an ‘I’ and a ‘Thou’ to whom it relates. Only when, by God’s grace, Maya is transcended, are we able to become aware of ourselves as the one eternal *I*. Without that grace, we remain confined to the perspective of Maya, dividing ourselves into an ‘I’ and a

‘Thou’. From that dualistic perspective, ‘Thou’ art the transcendent Lord, and ‘I’ am Thy servant, an individual soul among other souls. Most of our time on earth, therefore, is experienced from the perspective of Maya. The undivided Self is always the ultimate Reality, but only rarely are we granted the nondual vision of that one true Self.

The Appearance of Duality

It is well known that the Self of man and the ultimate transcendent Reality known as God are not two. This is the perennially acceptable view of “Nonduality”. But it must also be acknowledged that there is an *apparent* duality which has a certain phenomenal reality to it as well. For, during the “mystical experience” one experiences a noumenal and eternal ‘I’ who manifests this universe in which lives a phenomenal and temporal ‘I’. The ‘I’ is the same, yet different. The difference between the two ‘I’s is that the real ‘I,’ the eternal one, projected Himself as the temporal one into this world of time and space; the temporal one did not project himself into eternity.

So, God, by His very *projection* of this temporal universe, establishes an *apparent* duality for those living within this projection. This is not difficult to understand: If there is a dreamer and his dream, there *appears* to be two. But are there really two? The truth is that there is still only one; the other is only an imagination, and though the consciousness in the dream seems to be an ‘other,’ it is in fact the consciousness of the dreamer. But some would argue that “The other still *exists* as a phenomenon, and therefore constitutes a second. It is a question of perspective, is it not? At least we may be certain that, once the dreamer awakes and the dream is no more, then only one remains. The Nondualist would no doubt remark that there was *always* only one.

We dream-images enclosed within this illusory universe of time and space, are similarly “phenomena”, and therefore *appear* to exist. And so, as *images* of God (who is our *true* Self), we regard God as separate, ‘other’. For, while *we* are enclosed within the world of time and space which is His projection made of His Consciousness, *He* is the One in whom we and all else is contained. He is the eternal Mind that projects this space/time continuum, this form-filled world, as a construct of thought. He is indeed the Consciousness which animates us, and which lends us consciousness. He is our very Self; He is the one and *only* Reality. But it is not wrong to acknowledge the *apparent* duality which He brings to pass in the act of projecting this world of beings within Himself.

Ultimately, when we pass from space-time to the unlimited Reality, we shall recognize the eternally inseparable oneness of God and our Self; nonetheless, while living as separate beings within this worldly illusion, it is quite understandable if we call out to Him as though He were separate, or ‘other,’ just as dream figures might call out within themselves in an effort to contact the dreamer, who is indeed their own essence, a one who becomes an *apparent* two.

Some hold exclusively to the eternal truth of unity, declaring their single and only identity to be ‘the One’; these are the *jnanis* (or “knowers”). Others, acknowledging the *apparent* duality between themselves and God, worship the One as other than themselves, as the Exemplar of which they are mere images. These are the *bhaktas* (or “lovers”). And both are perfectly correct and valid pathways to the realization of God, the knowledge of the eternal Self. The *jnani* says, “I am That”; the *bhakta* says, “O Lord, Thou alone art!”. And within themselves both arrive at the selfsame realization of the Real.

‘And what of the apparent duality of body and spirit?’ we may wonder. We all know what Descartes thought about it. But I would ask, ‘Have you ever seen ice cubes floating in water? Are they two things or one?’ There seems to be two different substances, since each is clearly separate from the other; but no, it is one substance in two different states. When I was immersed in the unitive vision, I wondered “Where is the temple (of the body)? Which the imperishable, which the abode?” For there was to be seen no separate body-temple with an imperishable soul within! There was no division to be found at all. All is Consciousness-Energy in this dream-universe! And all of it is imperishable. It is only the various shapes that are so changeable, so very perishable; but the Essence is one.

Think of your own dream-creations! Is your dream-character divided into a consciousness and a body-form? No. It is one thing: the form and its limited self-consciousness are one projected creative mind-stuff. Likewise, for us here on earth. We live and move and have our being within the Mind-stuff of God. It is His drama, and He is the Self-consciousness of each of us. When we ultimately awake, we shall know the Source of all selves, the Source of all forms; we shall know that we were, are, and ever shall be, the One who lives in eternal bliss.

But what of the separation between the ‘soul’ and the body at death? It seems quite certain that consciousness withdraws from the body when the heart stops beating, that consciousness and the solidified energy that is our body then go their separate ways. And that seems to imply a real, absolute, duality. But it is just the

magic of the One. Think of what happens when you wake from a dream: Your own consciousness of Self remains even when the dream vanishes. Who you thought you were in the dream is seen to have been an illusory identity; but *You* remain. The dream scenery is vanished too. Where did it go? It never really was. It too was only your own consciousness, *appearing* as form. Likewise, in this universe, matter is consciousness appearing as energy, appearing as form.

The universe itself is occurring *as a whole* within the one Consciousness. It is an integral dream-like phenomenon. He is always One, even while projecting the universal dream with His Consciousness-Energy. When each of the dream-like images awakes, they awake to the One. Then, at the end of the universal ‘dream’, all forms revert to Energy, which ceases its transformations and becomes merely the potential Energy (Creative Power) of the one Consciousness. Consciousness ceases its play, resolving quietly into Itself. They were never two; they are merely twin aspects of His projective Power. The Supreme Consciousness will rest now, prior to projecting once again an apparent universe of conscious forms, another seeming duality upon His oneness.

Keeping in mind this unity-in-duality, or duality-in-unity, please reconsider the remarkable text from the Gnostic seer, Simon Magus (*fl. ca. 40 C.E.*), entitled *The Great Exposition*, which so ably explains the apparent duality within the Nondual reality:

The Great Exposition by Simon Magus

There are *two* aspects of the One: The first of these is the Higher, the Divine Mind of the universe, which governs all things, and is masculine. The other is the lower, the Thought (*epinoia*) which produces all things, and is feminine. As a pair united, they comprise all that exists.

The Divine Mind is the Father who sustains all things and nourishes all that begins and ends. He is the One who eternally stands, without beginning or end. He exists entirely alone; for, while the Thought arising from Unity, and coming forth from the Divine Mind, creates [the appearance of] duality, the Father remains a Unity. The Thought is in Himself, and so He is alone. Made manifest to Himself from Himself, He appears to be two. He becomes “Father” by virtue of being called so by His own Thought.

Since He, Himself, brought forward Himself, by means of Himself, manifesting to Himself His own Thought, it is not correct to attribute creation to the Thought alone. For She (the Thought) conceals the Father within Herself; the Divine Mind and the Thought are intertwined. Thus, though [they appear] to be a pair, one opposite the other, the Divine Mind is in no way different from the Thought, inasmuch as they are one.

Though there appears to be a Higher—the Mind, and a lower—the Thought, truly, It is a Unity, just as what is manifested from these two [i.e., the universe] is a unity, while appearing to be a duality. The Divine Mind and the Thought are discernible, one from the other, but they are one, though they appear to be two.

[Thus,] ... there is one Divine Reality, [apparently] divided as Higher and lower; generating Itself, nourishing Itself, seeking Itself, finding Itself, being mother of Itself, father of Itself, sister of Itself, spouse of Itself, daughter of Itself, son of Itself. It is both Mother and Father, a Unity, being the Root of the entire circle of existence. ¹

NOTES:

1. Simon Magus, *Apophysis Megale* (“The Great Exposition”), quoted by Hippolytus of Rome, in *Refutatio Omnium Heresium* (“The Refutation of All Heresies”), VI. 8; adapted from Roberts, Rev. A. & Donaldson, J. (eds), *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. VI; Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1892; pp. 208-210. This text was previously cited in Abhayananda, Swami, *History of Mysticism*, Olympia, Wash., Atma Books, 1987, 2000; p. 132.

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