

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction

In the last essay we had seen in brief the two-fold methodology of *advaita vedānta*:

1. *adhyārōpa* or deliberate superimposition and
2. *apavāda* or the subsequent negation¹.

The student in his ignorance has already superimposed the world of names and forms on *Brahman*. The Guru in order to help him come out of this illusion of the existence of the world and to enable him to realise his true nature points out that *māyā* is the cause of the world of names and forms. In this essay we shall elaborate on the nature of *māyā* in *advaita vedānta*.

¹ For the definition of *adhyārōpa* and *apavāda*, the need for the same and other topics pertaining to the above, refer to the June 2003 issue of *Tapovan Prasas*.

Definition of *Māyā*

Tattva-Bodha, a basic text book of definitions on *vedānta* gives a very precise definition of *māyā*:

ब्रह्माश्रया सत्त्व-रजस्-तमो-गुणात्मिका

माया अस्ति ।

brahmāśrayā sattva-rajās-tamo-guṇātmikā-māyā asti.

Depending on *Brahman* for its existence is *māyā*, which is of the nature of the three *guṇas*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

Vedānta-Sāra an advanced text, naming this *māyā* as *ajñānam*, points out its other characteristics:

अज्ञानम् तु सद्-असद्भ्याम् अनिर्वचनीयम्

त्रिगुणात्मकं ज्ञानविरोधि भावरूपं

ajñānam tu sad-

asadbhyāmanirvacanīyaṃ

triguṇātmakaṃ jñānavirodhi

bhāvarūpaṃ...

Ignorance is that which cannot be described as being either existent or non-existent, of the nature of the three *guna*-s, antagonistic to knowledge, positive...

Now we can summarise the nature of *māyā* based on the above two definitions:

1. *Brahmāśrayā*: That which has *Brahman* as its substratum.
2. *Triguṇātmikā*: Made up of the three *guṇa*-s.
3. *Anirvacanīyā*: Indescribable.
4. *Jñāna-virodhi*: Antagonistic to knowledge, and
5. *Bhāvarūpā*: Positive.

Now we shall elaborate on each of the above descriptions of *māyā*. Many people think that *māyā* is not explained in *Vedānta*. That is not true. *Māyā* is explained in *Vedānta* and one of the explanations is that it is inexplicable!

1. *Brahmāśrayā* – that which has *Brahman* as its substratum. Every illusion has to have a substratum. The illusory snake has the rope as its substratum and the mirage waters have the desert sands as their substratum. *Māyā* has *Brahman* as its substratum. Certain texts on *vedānta* like *Saṅkṣēpa-Śārīraka* and *Vivaraṇa* describe *māyā* as

svāśraya svaviṣaya. The word 'sva' here refers to *Brahman*, *āśraya* means 'substratum' and *viṣaya* means 'object'. The above phrase *svāśraya svaviṣaya* means that *māyā* has *Brahman* as its substratum and object. To use a traditional example to explain this, just as the darkness in a house by staying in the house hides the objects in the house, so too *māyā*, having its substratum as the pure *Brahman*, hides it. Since *māyā* has *Brahman* as its substratum it is called *svāśraya*, and since it hides *Brahman* i.e., makes *Brahman*, so to say, an object of its hiding, it is called *svaviṣaya*.

Some *vedantins* agree only on the *svaviṣaya* aspect i.e. *māyā* hides *Brahman*, but disagree about *māyā* having *Brahman* as its substratum. They opine that *māyā* has the *jivā* as its substratum. They argue that in the experience of ignorance, 'I am ignorant and I don't know *Brahman*', the 'I' refers to the *jīva* only. Hence they assert that *māyā* has the *jīva* alone as its substratum. This conclusion is fallacious. The *jīva-bhāva* is an effect of *māyā*, and *māyā* being the cause of the *jīva-bhāva* has to exist anterior to it and therefore it can

only have the pure *Brahman* as its substratum. Again some *vedantins* opine that *māyā* has *īśvara* as its substratum. Here also the same fallacy creeps it – even *īśvara-bhāva* is an effect of *māyā* and hence, *māyā*, which creates the *īśvara-bhāva*, has to reside in pure *Brahman* to even create the *īśvara-bhāva*. Hence it is only appropriate to conclude that *māyā* hides *Brahman* having *Brahman* alone as its substratum.

An intelligent student is bound to ask a pertinent question – ‘Will not the pure *satyam-jñānam-anantam Brahman* become impure because of being the substratum of *māyā*?’ The *vedantin* gives an emphatic NO – ‘Will the desert sand become wet by the large and wavy mirage waters or the rope become poisoned by the illusory cobra?’ The substratum will ever be untouched by the superimposed illusion.

2. *Triguṇātmikā* – of the nature of three *guṇa-s*. The three *guṇa-s* are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The word ‘*guṇa*’, often translated as ‘quality’ into English, does not reflect exactly what the original Sanskrit word means in this context. The *guṇa-s* mentioned

here are not qualities like ‘bigness’ (size), ‘blueness’ (colour) and ‘sweet-smellingness’ (fragrance) as in the sentence ‘Here is a big, blue and sweet-smelling lotus’. They are rather more like substances (*dravya*) and they create their own effects (*kārya*). The word ‘*guṇa*’ in this context can be better translated as the ‘aspects’, ‘ingredients’ or ‘constituents’ of *māyā*. If they are substances (*dravya*), why at all call them ‘*guṇa*’? They are called ‘*guṇa*’ for they bind a person. ‘*Guṇa*’ in Sanskrit not only means ‘quality’ but also ‘binding’. Just as an animal is tethered and bound by a rope, so too the *jīva* is bound firmly to the world of objects, action and pleasures by these *guṇa-s*. He becomes extrovert and fails to recognise his real nature. *Sattva* binds by its quality of joy and knowledge, *rajas* by activity, and *tamas* binds a person to delusion.

3. *Anirvacanīyā* – The third description of *māyā* is that it is ‘*anirvacanīyā*’ or ‘indescribable’. Is this not interesting? It is described as ‘indescribable’! *Anirvacanīyā* or ‘indescribable’ is a technical word (*pāribhāṣika-śabda*) in Sanskrit. The word ‘indescribable’, in normal parlance,

means that which cannot be described at all. But in *vedānta*, 'anirvacanīyā' i.e., 'indefinable' or 'indescribable' means that which does not fall into the category of *sat* or *asat*. Apart from not being *sat* and *asat*, *māyā* does not fall under two other categories as well. We shall briefly explain the various categories under which *māyā* does not fall.

a. Sad-asadbhyām anyah – This phrase means that which is different from *sat* and *asat*. 'Sat' or 'real' is that which exists in all the three periods of time. 'Asat' or 'unreal' means that which is totally non-existent like the horns of a hare and the son of a barren woman. *Māyā* cannot be described as either *sat* or *asat* i.e., either real or unreal. It is not real like *Brahman*, which is always present. It is destroyed by the Knowledge of *Brahman* and therefore it is not real. But at the same time it is not unreal or totally non-existent for we certainly see its effects – the world of names and forms. No effect can come from a non-existent cause. If it is neither real nor unreal but different from both, why can't we describe it as being both real and unreal. That also is not possible. How

can something be real and unreal at the same time?!

b. Ehinna-Abhinnābhyām Anyah – Further, *māyā* cannot be described as being one with *Brahman* (*abhinnah*) or being different from *Brahman* (*abhinnah*). It cannot be different from *Brahman* for *Brahman* is non-dual and there is nothing apart from *Brahman*. But it cannot be said to be the same as *Brahman* for, to say that would be to posit something with mutually-contradictory-qualities like the 'bright-dark sun' or 'white-black-milk' or 'hot-cool-fire'. How can the inert *māyā* and *Brahman* which is Consciousness itself, be one?

c. Sāṅga-anaṅgābhyām anyah – Also *māyā* cannot be described as having parts (*sāṅgā*) or partless (*anaṅga*). Logically that which has parts has a beginning, for the coming together of parts is the creation of a thing. But *māyā* has no beginning. It is described as 'anādi' or 'beginningless'. Also we cannot say that *māyā* has no parts for it does come to an end like all objects which are made up of parts. Thus we cannot describe *māyā* as having parts or being 'partless'. Nor can we say it is

both with parts and without parts at the same time for that is again a logical contradiction.

So what is *māyā*? Is it real (*sat*)? No. Is it unreal (*asat*)? No. Is *māyā* different from *Brahman* (*bhinnah*)? No. Is it same as *Brahman* (*abhinnah*)? No. Does *māyā* have parts (*sāṅga*)? No. Then is it without parts (*anaṅga*)? No. Look at the nature of *māyā*! It defies any sort of categorisation. Therefore it is described as '*anirvacanīyā*' or '*indescribable*'.

Vivēkacūḍāmaṇi summarises this idea of '*anirvacanīyā*':

सन्नाप्यसन्नाप्युभयात्मिका नो
भिन्नाप्यभिन्नाप्युभयात्मिका नो ।
साङ्गाप्यनङ्गाप्युभयात्मिका नो
महाद्भुताऽनिर्वचनीय रूपा ॥

*sannāpyasannāpyubhayātmikā no
bhinnāpyabhinnāpyubhayātmikā no
Sāṅgāpyanaṅgāpyubhayātmikā no
mahādbhutaḥ nirvacanīya rūpā*

Maya is not real or unreal, nor both; not different or identical, nor both; not with parts or without parts, nor both. Most wonderful and indescribable is it!

Māyā is neither real or unreal, nor both; neither different or identical, nor both; neither with parts or without parts, nor

both. Most wonderful and indescribable it is.

4. *Jñāna-virōdhi* – Since *māyā* (also called *ajñānam*) is destroyed by the Knowledge of *Brahman* it is called '*jñāna-virōdhi*' or 'antagonistic to Knowledge'. *Māyā* can exist only as long as one has no Knowledge of *Brahman*. Darkness can exist only as long as the sun has not risen. Further it is called '*jñāna-virōdhi*' to specify very clearly that it is destroyed by Knowledge and Knowledge alone. All illusions are destroyed only by knowledge (and not by action or some other means) and *māyā* is no exception to this general rule. The illusory snake is destroyed not by running away from it or by running behind it with a stick in hand or by shouting at it. It is destroyed by clearly knowing that it is in truth only a rope.

5. *Bhāvarūpā* – This means 'positive'. This is a very fitting and decisive rejoinder to those who consider *māyā* or *ajñāna* as mere absence of Knowledge. Some consider it to be just the absence of Knowledge. They consider it as a non-entity. But this is not true. *Māyā* is not a mere absence. It is a presence.

It is the cause of the whole world of names and forms. Just as names and forms have an apparent, relative and transactional reality (*vyāvahārika sattā*), so too *māyā*, its cause, also has an apparent and transactional reality. To consider it as a mere absence (*abhāva*) like the Nyāya philosophers do, is fallacious. Nothing existent, however illusory it may be, is ever born from something non-existent. Has anyone ever made buttons from the horns of a hare? Does a barren woman's son have a grandson? A totally non-existent thing (funny it should be called a thing!) can have no effect whatsoever. But the world is an effect of *māyā* and hence *māyā* cannot be called a non-existent thing (*abhāva-vastu*).

Please note that *Vedānta* is not saying that *māyā* is as real as *Brahman*. What it is saying is that *māyā* is not absolutely absent. It has as much transactional or relative reality (*vyāvahārika sattā*) as the world has. *Brahman* has absolute reality (*pāramārthika sattā*). Unlike *Brahman* that can never be negated, *māyā* can be negated by knowledge. Even though it can be negated, it is not non-exis-

tent. The snake on the rope, which is negated by the knowledge of the rope, is of a different category from the horns of a hare which is absolutely non-existent. Thus there is a qualitative difference between the two. The snake on the rope is seen in ignorance, but the horns of the hare can never be seen in the three periods of time, either in knowledge or in ignorance.

Thus all that is meant by *bhāvarūpa - māyā* is that which is not absolute non-existence (*abhāva*) nor absolute existence (*pāramārthika sattā*) but is of the nature of relative existence (*vyāvahārika sattā*).

Māyā from three standpoints

With the background of the above understanding let us summarise *māyā* from three standpoints.

- a. Presence: From the standpoint of the world, *māyā* is the cause of the world. It has a relative existence.
- b. Indescribable: From *māyā*'s standpoint it is neither existence nor non-existence. Hence it is called *anirvacanīya* or indescribable.
- c. Absence: Though from the

standpoint of the world *māyā* is *bhāvarūpā*, it is *abhāva* or total non-existence from the standpoint of *Brahman*. Only when we give reality to the world, *māyā* is *bhāvarūpā*. When there is no world then there is no *māyā* also. From the standpoint of *Brahman* there is nothing, no world and no *māyā*. That is why *māyā* is defined sometimes as 'yā mā sā māyā – that which is not there is *māyā*'. But this definition is only from the standpoint of *Brahman*. To accept the world of names and forms and then to say that *māyā* does not exist, is highly illogical and meaningless.

Various names of māyā

Let us have a look at a few common names of *māyā* that we encounter in the Scriptures:

1. *Pradhāna*: This is the name for *māyā* when we talk of it being the very substance in which the world of names, forms, sounds etc. merges and stays in an undifferentiated form after *pralaya* (dissolution). There is equilibrium of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in *pradhāna*.

2. *Prakṛti*: This is the name for *māyā* just before the beginning of creation (*sr̥sti*). Herein the equilibrium of *sattva*, *rajas* and

tamas is broken by the preponderance of *tamas* and *māyā* is spoken of as being ready for creation.

3. *Ajñāna*: *Māyā* is called *ajñāna* or ignorance, because it hides our real nature and also because it is destroyed by the *jñāna* (knowledge) of *Brahman*.

4. *Avidyā*: Since it is destroyed by the knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahmavidyā*), it is called *avidyā*. Another etymology for *avidyā* is 'na vidyatē iti *avidyā*' i.e., 'that which is not there is *avidyā*'. This is the standpoint of *Brahman* where there is no world at all.

5. *Śakti*: The word *śakti* means 'power' or 'strength' in Sanskrit. Since *māyā* is the power which creates the world it is called *śakti*. Just as a person's strength does not stay apart from him but is dependent on and existent in him so too *māyā* is dependent on and existent in *Brahman*. *Brahman* having *māyā* as its apparent conditioning is called *īvara*.

Conclusion

Māyā is one of the most subtle topics in *Advaita Vedānta*. Understanding *māyā* is not an exercise of the brain. A certain amount of initial understanding

of the major concepts of *Vedānta* is also required to group it. In case *māyā* is unclear, please do not worry. As you study more and more of *Vedānta*, it is certain to become clear. But note that the very purpose of *Vedānta* is not to establish *māyā* but to cross over *māyā* and know one's real nature as one with *Brahman*. The Lord's grace and the Guru's

blessings are required for this. Bhagavan Śrī Kṛṣṇa warns and promises in the *Bhagavad Gētā*: *māmeva ye prapadyante māyāmetāṃ taranti te* – Only those who surrender to Me cross over *māyā*. May we fully surrender unto the Lord, cross over *māyā* and put an end to *samsāra* once and for all.

