

Module 2 : Swami Vivekananda

Section 3 : Doctrine Of Maya

The concept of maya is a cardinal concept of the Vedanta. Vivekananda too uses this concept to answer the queries left behind by the essential nature of man. As Vivekananda vehemently urged that essentially man is divine, the Atman, which is none other than Brahman himself, it could be asked why then divinity is not known to man? If nothing but Brahman exists in the universe, only he being the only truth, how come that the reality of this Brahman remains unnoticed? Vedic thinkers had answered these queries that this unawareness is due to the veil that Maya has created. It is because of Maya that has concealed the reality and makes us take those things as real which are mere illusions. Later, Vedantists like Shankaracharya and Ramanuja had given the illusion of snake in rope to illustrate their point. A man sees a rope in dark and mistakes it to be snake. Only by inspecting a little closer that he realizes his mistake that it is not snake, but rope. Snake is superimposed on the rope and is only an illusion, and not reality. The world is similarly an illusion and Maya has created this illusion by concealing the true reality of the world which is none other than Brahman.

But, Vivekananda does not accept this denotation of Maya as illusion. He finds contradiction in admitting infinity and uniqueness of the ultimate reality on the one hand, and Maya's concealing the same. If ultimate reality or Brahman is the only truth of this universe having infinite knowledge and power – omniscience and omnipresent, which is the underlying principle of everything that is existent, then how come Maya is able to conceal its identity? Maya which is admitted to be creative power of the Brahman, should logically be then under its control. How is it possible that Maya goes out of its control and get itself superimposed upon it and produce the illusion of the world? That would make Maya more powerful than Brahman itself. This is logically and metaphysically impossible. If Brahman is the only single, unique reality, then Maya should have only relative existence, but subservient to it, not superimposed on it. Ignorance, caused by Maya, can veil only those things which are in the purview of knowledge, but as Vivekananda maintains, "Nothing can have worked on the Absolute. There was no cause. Not that we do not know, or that we are ignorant; but It is above knowledge, and cannot be brought down to the plane of knowledge."¹⁸ Absolute is something which is beyond our very capacities to know. If we take knowledge in the sense of like knowing facts of the world, then Absolute is really unknowable. We can have knowledge about X-Rays, but how would we define Absolute. That is why, Vivekananda says that Absolute or the ultimate reality is indescribable or indeterminate – that which cannot be described in determinate terms.

¹⁸ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 5, p. 276

Maya as delusion is the Vedic concept, which nourished in the hands of Buddhists, and came down to the later thinkers by way of legacy. Like old sages of Vedas, Buddhists too do not believe in the reality of external world. But since this world exist very much before our eyes, Vedic thinkers conceived Maya – the creative power of Brahman, which creates the world, but simultaneously conceals the Brahman so that ultimate reality does not come before us. Maya, for Vivekananda, is a, "simple statement of facts – what we are and what we see around us."¹⁹

This points needs a little elucidation. We see all the time making effort to achieve things, and yet in the end see ourselves trounced by unknown contingencies. Still, we are taught that only that achieves something in life, who makes effort. So, still despite our best efforts, why do we fail to achieve at times? Vivekananda says this is Maya. This is a simple fact of our life which we experience in our daily life – a fact which just exists but which does not have any reason. Maya is no delusionary force that conceals any reality; rather it is the name of all the contradictions that we see around. It is a simple statement of fact about this universe. This world which ancient thinkers called Maya in terms of delusion is not so according to Vivekananda. True, that many a times we come to realize the hallucinations in our real life like when we sleep, we take dreams to be reality. And upon waking, we realize the delusion of our dreams. Similarly, the enlightened souls at times doubt even this waking world as to what if even this waking world is a dream? This whole world may be a dream which we have taken for granted. We talk to each other, do a lot of feats in our dreams, and upon waking we realize, that was but a dream. Who knows that all this business in life that we go about doing day in and day out may turn out to be dream in the end? The fact is that we know nothing about this world; we just take it for granted. No one can prove that one is not dreaming right now, after all we do sleep-talking and even sleep-walking. In that context, they call this world a Maya – a delusion.

¹⁹ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 89

Vivekananda rejects this conception of world as delusion, and maintains that it has no absolute existence, which only Brahman has. The world exists only in relation to our minds and, "It has, therefore no real existence; it has no unchangeable, immovable, infinite existence. Nor can it be called non-existence, seeing that it exists, and we have to work in and through it. It is a mixture of existence and non-existence."²⁰ This apparently seems a contradiction, and Maya is nothing but how this contradiction is existing. Our whole lives are replete with contradictions. We have to die some day, yet we think that we will live here always. All our projects on earth appear to bear the stamp of eternity. We glorify good, but have to face evil at every step. We assume and preach the monist view of reality (i.e. only one reality), yet we see two realities as if existing simultaneously – good and evil both. We day and night want a place to live in where everything would be good, and nothing evil, and yet Vivekananda says, such a desire itself is full of contradiction. This is because, there would never be a world which is absolutely good or absolutely bad, because even this goodness and badness are relative to our tastes, time and place. A thing which appears good to me now, may appear bad to me some other time. The fire that burns the child, cooks food for the people. The same nerves carrying sensation of misery carry sensation of pleasure. How would good separated from evil exist? There can't be good without evil, pleasure without misery, life without death. We want and take ourselves to be as if we are here to stay on this earth forever, knowing well that this is not possible. This is the contradiction of our life, and this is called Maya by Vivekananda. The underlying thread running in all these contradictions is the optimist nature of a human being, which is highly dominant in childhood. Child has high hopes in things running according to his fancies.

²⁰ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 91

He can see trees waving to him, nature talking to him in host of voices, but as he grows young, he starts seeing realities. More grows the child, more the ideals of his childhood recede and then death stops all this business. The contradiction is that even though this happens to every child, past or future, still as we grow old, we don't cease to hope for good to happen to us. In this endless optimism, we plan our journeys. Many a times, our plans hopelessly fail, even though, our planning had been meticulous. The example of senseless failures of countless men may be before us, but still, we would press on to having our own experience. Vivekananda here gives an example of futility of sensual experiences which people are being taught for ages, but which we can't learn because not only we do not learn from others' experiences, but we don't learn from our own experiences as well. "Like moths hurling themselves against the flame, we are hurling ourselves again and again into sense-pleasures, hoping to find satisfaction there. We return again and again with freshened energy; thus we go on, till crippled and cheated we die. And this is Maya."²¹ This contradiction of life is called Maya by Vivekananda. Western man called it with the phrase – Man proposes, God disposes!

Maya is a trap of this contradictory life from which it is impossible for us to get out of. The world which is interplay of light and dark, good and evil, an interplay which has neither beginning nor end is a big Maya in which we live day in and day out. We live in this Maya, think in it, born and die in it. Our hopes, desires, thoughts, fears, feats and defeats are surrounded by this Maya. Nothing can be out of it.

²¹ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 119

Everything that can be named or have a form, *Nama-Rupa*, is essentially in Maya. Everything bound by time-space and causation is within Maya.²² Because, this contradictory co-existence of light and dark is the fact of life, a fact of this universe of which we cannot remain ignorant or skeptic for long. Thus, Maya is not something dreadful, but it is a plain fact of our lives which we should accept.

Not just our personal, but our social lives are replete with Maya. Vivekananda compares the social lives of Indian and western countries. In India, people get married early in their lives, their spouses chosen by their parents. Their marital misery is usually accounted for by their lack of liberty and decision in their marriages. But, Vivekananda asks, are western people better off than with the huge amount of liberty that they possess? Their social life is marked with frequent marriages, but equally frequent divorces. Indians are unhappy because of lack of freedom, westerns are also unhappy because they can choose and forego. So, what is the solution? Vivekananda says, there is no solution to this contradiction. Maya is not about explaining the causes of the world affairs; it is about stating the facts as they exist in it. It does not give causes, and hence no remedy is possible. It just states that that is how things are there.

²² Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 112

Though, we can't step out of Maya, surely we can know its existence. Vivekananda here gives hope of optimism and says that yes that is possible by *realization*. "When one realizes Brahman, for him Maya exists no longer, just as once the identity of the rope is found out, and the illusion of the serpent comes no more."²³ All the apparent changes that we see around are mere reflections of one unchanging substance called Brahman which is the sole reality of this universe. It can be asked if the ultimate reality is Brahman, which is unchanging, then how come we see changes in the universe which are happening day in and day out. Vivekananda explains this with the help of clouds and sun.²⁴ Clouds assemble over the sun and give the appearance of sun being moving behind their fleeting fleece. In reality, it is the clouds that are moving, not the sun. Like, while journeying in a train, we see various landscapes moving, but in reality, it is not the landscapes, but train which is moving. The moving landscapes are mere illusions. Similarly, all the changes are mere illusions, the underlying substratum is unchanging. The fact that both change and permanence are co-existing is Maya. Maya is the name of not illusions then, but all the contradictions that we see around.

²³ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 5, p. 317

²⁴ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 3, p. 23