

Understanding Maya in Vivekananda's Philosophy

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The foundation of Vivekananda thought lay primarily in Vedanta. But Vivekananda was not simply re-interpreting Vedanta. He got himself acquainted with the wisdom contained in Shankara system of knowledge , in Upanisads, in Gita , in Buddha and other. Endowed with logical and rational way of looking at the world, he developed an outlook for world society which combined the best in all system of thought.

Swami Vivekananda devoted three whole lecture on Maya in his series of talks on Jnanayoga in London . Vivekananda spoke about maya in refreshing new way or direct way. To understand his approach to maya one must first take a look at the classical approach to Maya.

Maya is an ancient word and it is accepted by all the schools of Indian Philosophy. But the way the non-dualist Advaitins talk about maya that is unique, different from the other school. In general the schools of Hinduism the Tantra, the Vaishnavas they all accept maya as the power of God . The power of God to create and it is a real power and God creation with maya is a real creation. This is the way that understood the other schools. But the approach to maya in Advaita Vedanta is unique.

The unique approach to maya in Advaita Vedanta is encapsulated in the central teaching of Advaita Vedanta-

Brahma Satyam Jagat Mithya

Jivo Brahmaiva Naparah

It means Brahman alone is real. It is the only truth, the world is unreal , and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and Individual self.

So this is the unique formulation of the non-dualistic school of Advaita Vedanta. In Advaita point of view the maya is nothing but ignorance. Ignorance of our true nature. In Advaita Vedanta maya has two function-

i) Avarana - It obscure the reality (Brahman), it veil the reality. It is known as Avarana.

ii) Vikshepa- it means error, it projects the reality as it is not . It is known as Vikshepa.

For example-I see a snake by mistake it's a rope. I did not know rope as a rope, it is veil or avarana and next what happen because I did not know the rope as a rope I mistaken for a snake. This is projection or Vikshepa.

So Ramakrishna (teacher of Vivekananda) explain about maya with the help of his beautiful example, he says one of the function of maya is Avarana. He give the beautiful story from Ramayana, where Rama, Sita and Lakshmana around to the way of forest exile. Here Rama is Paramatma (the Supreme Self), Lakshmana is Jivatma (the individual self) and Sita is the veil of Maya. So she is in between Rama and Lakshmana. And Lakshmana can seen Rama only if Sita graciously step aside and lets him see. So that's Ramakrishnan beautiful example on maya. Again he speak about the example of Cobra which has poison in his mouth. Little bit of that poison is enough to knock out the mouse or a frog, but all of his poison is in mouth of Cobra , it does not do anything to the Cobra. Its the power of the Cobra. So Ramakrishna says maya is the power by which all we are diluted, we are trapped in Samsara, but the entire power is willed by God, but God is not trapped by maya.

It is true that Vivekananda has borrowed the doctrine of Maya from Advaita Vedanta, but his conception of Maya is not exactly similar to that of Sankara. Like Advaita Vedantins Vivekananda also believes that maya is a power of the creator that makes creation possible.

According to Vivekananda 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 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 donot know why we cling to lie; we cannot give it up. And this is Maya according to Vivekananda.

Nature can hurl a thunderbolt of any magnitude to any distance. If a man do one small part as much, we praise him and laud him to the skies why ? Does not nature do infinitely more than any human being can do ? – and nature is dull, insentient. Why should it be glory to imitate the dull, the insentient? The force of gravitation can pull to piece the biggest mass that ever existed; yet it is insentient. What glory is there in imitating the insentient ? Why should we praise him for imitating nature, imitating death, imitating dullness imitating insentience? Yet we are all struggling after that. And this is Maya.

The senses drag the human soul out. Man is seeking for pleasure and for happiness where it can never be found. For countless ages we are all taught that this is futile and vain, there is no happiness here. But we cannot learn ; it is impossible for us to do so, except through our own experiences. We try them and a blow comes. Do we learn then ? Not even then. 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.

In our desire to solve the mysteries of the universe, we cannot stop our questioning, we feel we must know and cannot believe that no knowledge is to be gained. A few steps and there arise the wall of beginningless and endless time which we cannot surmount and the whole is irrevocably bound in by the walls of cause and effects. We cannot go beyond them. Yet we struggle and still have to struggle. And this is Maya.

The mother is nursing a child with great care; all her soul, her life, is in that child . The child grows, becomes a man, and perchance become a blackguard and a brute, kicks her and beats her everyday; and yet the mother clings to the child; and when her reason awakes , she covers it up with the idea of love. She little thinks that it is not love. That it is something which has got hold of her nerves, which she cannot shake off; however

she may try, she cannot shake off the bondage she is in. And this is Maya.

What you call matter or spirit or mind or anything else you may like to call them, the fact remain the same; we cannot say that they are, we cannot say that they are not. a fact yet at the same time not a fact; awake and at the same time asleep. This is a statement of fact. If you aren't confused by quantum mechanics, you haven't really understood it and this is what is called Maya.

True it is that we are all slaves of Maya, born in maya, and live in maya. Is there then way out ,no hope? That even our so called trailing, beauty is but a prison house and that ever our intellect and mind are prison house.. One the one side , therefore , is the bold assertion that this is all nonsense, that this is Maya, but along with it there is the most hopeful assertion that beyond maya, there is a way out. At every step we are knocked down, as it were, by maya and shown that we are bound; and yet at the same moment, together with this blow, comes the other feeling that we are free. Some inner voice tells us that we are free.

With all this terrible fact before us, in the midst of sorrow and suffering, there is a still small voice that is ringing through all ages, through every, country and in every heart. We see, then, that beyond this maya the Vedantic philosophers find something which is not bound by maya. This idea is in some form or other the common property of all religions. But with the Vedanta , it is only the beginning of religion and not the end.

The goal of all nature is freedom and freedom is to be attained only by perfect unselfishness. Freedom is never to be reached by the weak. Throw away all weakness. Tell your body that it is strong, tell your mind that it is strong and have unbounded faith and hope in yourself. We have seen that it is the subjective world that rule the objective. Change the subject and the object is bound to change; purify yourself the world is bound to be purified. Our limitation is play just the fun of it. You were never bound. We are all acting our parts in this play of our own invention.

Thus Maya is a statement of the fact of this universe ,of how it is going on. Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world; it is simply a statement of facts as they exist. That the very basis of our being is contradiction, that everywhere we have to move through this tremendous contradiction. Vivekananda says this is Maya..... 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.

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