

# Appearance and Reality: *Advaita Vedanta* Ontology

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“Thou art that” because this whole world emanates from Brahman, which alone is . . . It is the supreme cause. . . all the worlds of name and form are its effects.

- Sri Ramana Maharshi (1970)

Metaphysics, literally “beyond physics,” is concerned to discover, to know, and to realize the ultimate nature of what is, the essential nature and source of all of this becoming in Being Itself. Thus metaphysics involves ontology, knowing the ultimate nature or ground of all appearing reality, Reality Itself. Metaphysics, as the “science of Being as such,” attempts to reveal and to understand this Ultimate Reality through its triune nature as it arises in mind as *Maya*: *illusory appearance, empirical (relatively real) appearance*, and the *Absolute base or sourceground that transcends yet enfolds all of this appearance*. Our nondual Primordial Wisdom Tradition understands this triad through the Two Fundamental Truths, the ultimate ground that is Absolute Spirit manifesting as relative-conventional spacetime appearance, empirical mental and physical phenomena.

## Brahman and the World: *Maya*

In *Maya's* Sanskrit root, *ma* denotes “not,” and *ya* denotes “that.” So *Maya* is “not that, not that” (*neti, neti*). It cannot be reduced to a concept, archetype or symbol. It is only through the fiery *sadhana* of spiritual practice of the Path (*marga*) that the veil of *Maya* may be pierced and its ultimate nature recognized.

*Brahma Satya, Jagat Mithya*, “Brahman is the only Reality, the world is an illusion.” Brahman, *Atman* and *Maya*, the interdependence of these three reveal the nature and essence of the prior unity of the Two Truths. The realization of this unity is *paramananda (mahasuka)* that is ultimate “Happiness Itself.”

*Maya* then, is the illusory appearance, and also the empirical, “real” appearance of phenomenal arising from the Absolute primordial base of all appearance. *Maya* is the power of relative manifestation inherent in Ultimate Brahman. *Maya* has no independent self-existence and it has no beginning. Its end is liberation (*moksha*). Brahman as *Maya* is the causal principal of *kosmos*. *Maya* through *avidya (avidya-Maya)* creates plurality, “the many” without recognizing the prior unity. *Maya* is the creative *shakti* energy of Brahman, the Absolute, and is therefore unseparate from Brahman, even as it arises as all the manifestations of phenomenal reality. **Without Brahman there is no matrix (*amba*) through which such appearances may arise. There could be no spacetime reality at all. Therefore conditional, phenomenal reality necessarily requires Brahman as its inconceivable nondual base.** Brahman/*Atman* and *Maya* together are Ishvara the Shakti energy of the creator-sustainer-destroyer God of *Kosmos*, and of human desire, understanding and worship. *Maya* draws the veil of ignorance or

illusion (*avidya*) over the divine face of Brahman, the changeless (*avikari*) unreal (*mithya*) yet only-existent (*satyam*), monadic nondual Supreme Absolute such that only the dualities of relative, conditional reality are perceived. (For twentieth century quantum theory, *Maya* is the illusion of objectivity — the real material world — finally refuted by the inherent and ultimate subjectivity of the uncertainty relations).

*Vikshepa (adhyasa/adhyaropa)*: *Vikshepa* is the cloaking, veiling or concealing aspect of *avidya* or ignorance.<sup>1</sup> Ignorance (*avidya/ajnana*) is the inability to discriminate (*viveka*) between *Maya*, illusion or the unreal, and Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. When ignorance is present the nondual truth, the Reality matrix that is Brahman is always veiled or cloaked or overlaid by the mere illusory appearance. Shankara uses Nagarjuna's analogy of the coiled rope (Brahman) in the dark that is cloaked (*vikshepa*) by the illusion of a snake (the phenomenal world). The illusion of the snake is projected or superimposed by the perceiver onto the reality of the rope. But in the clear light of *vidya* the error is sublated or corrected and the truth of the matter becomes permanently clear, certainty beyond all doubt, beyond thinking and belief, beyond any experience (*nyam*) whatsoever.

The seer and the object seen are like the rope and the snake. Just as knowledge of the rope which is the substrate will not arise unless the false knowledge (*avidya-Maya*) of the illusory serpent goes, so the realization of the Self which is the substrate will not be gained unless the belief that the world is real is removed.

Sri Ramana Maharshi (1970)

While Hindu metaphysics generally, and monistic *Kashmiri Shivaism* in particular are essentially realistic, in Shankara's centrist *Advaita Vedanta*, a relative, empirical, real phenomenal world appears and exists by way of perceptual and conceptual imputation, designation and reification (realism), but is not the ultimate or absolute Reality that is Brahman (idealism). "It is neither real nor unreal." Brahman is the Real, the only reality (*satyam*) in whom arises the unreal (*mithya*). Phenomenal empirical reality then, is not merely illusion. From the view of relative truth it is objectively real (realism). However, from the view of perfectly subjective absolute truth it is unreal or illusory (idealism). This is a centrist view between monistic objective realism (eternalism) and absolute subjective idealism (nihilism). Therefore *Maya* represents the conditional reality of physical and mental appearance, its inherent impermanence and selflessness, and our confusion and ignorance in mistaking this illusory reality for the *Purusha*, the nondual Supreme Absolute Reality that is Brahman. As we have seen, this is essentially the nondual view of Mahayana Buddhism's *Dzogchen*, *Mahamadra* and

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<sup>1</sup>In *Vedanta* there are two kinds of *avidya*: *mulavidya*, the intersubjective mass-mind illusion as to the reality of relative-conditional existence, and *tulavidya*, this illusion at the level of the individual. There are also two ways in which *avidya*-ignorance functions, concealment (*avarana*) and mis-representation or cloaking/covering (*vikshepa*). Both are examples of perceptual error (*mithya jnana*) which is the false knowledge that is *avidya*.

*Saijojo Zen*. Thus, the apparently separate ego—the sense of self—is *Maya*. However, because *Maya* is unseparate from Brahman, *Maya* is also the *Atman*—bright *vidya* presence of Brahman that shines awake at the heart of all beings. In the Buddhist *Dzogchen* tradition, Longchen Rabjam (Longchenpa) teaches of “the two *Mayas*,” undefiled, ultimate “Immaculate *Maya*,” and relative “Delusory *Maya*” (Dowman, 2010). It is urgent to remember that the two *Mayas* are always an ontologically prior unity – two aspects or views of one non-dual ultimate reality. Even “*prakriti* (conditional nature, objective and subjective reality) is *Maya* and the Great God (Ishvara) is the Lord of *Maya*” (*Shvetashvatara Upanishad*). In his commentaries on the *Vedanta Sutra (Brahma Sutra)* Adi Shankara teaches that “Everything other than Brahman, the Supreme Absolute is created by *Maya*, the ineffable, creative (*shakti*) energy of God (Ishvara), and is not the Real.” **All physical and mental phenomena, even our concept and belief in God is *Maya* beside the actual Supreme Absolute. “Dualistic (reality) is illusory, the nondual is the Absolute Reality” (Shankara).** Shankara’s *Maya* functions dualistically in the relative, conditional world of appearing reality and therefore, as with the *Dzogchen Maya* of Longchenpa, has two faces: ignorance (*avidya*) and wisdom (*vidya*). *Avidya—Maya (apara-maya)* sees only the world, veils Brahman, the supreme source. *Vidya—maya (para-maya*, the light of realization) guides us on the relative path to *moksha*, our realization of Brahman that is the very transcendence of the world of relative truth, conventional spacetime reality. However, as neither of these are nondual Brahman, both are *Maya*. Moreover, *Maya* functions in two indivisible and interdependent modes: individual or personal illusion (*pratibhasika*), and collective, intersubjective mass-mind illusion (*vyavaharika*). Then, *Maya* functions through concealment—the relative – conventional “concealer truths” —*tulavida* (collective) and *mulavida* (individual). Finally, *Maya* functions through super-imposition or projection (*vikshepa-adhyasa*).

*Maya*’s power then, arises from Brahman, and is not separate from Brahman, the Absolute Truth that is Reality Itself. *Maya* co-exists, co-creates and participates with Brahman, but *Maya* is not Absolute Brahman. It is because of *avidya*/ignorance that the arising of the phenomenal world is reified into solid objects by the ego-I. Mind and world arise together. Ignorance as relative *Maya* that arises within absolute Brahman is the relative **cause** of this arising of the separated “other” — subject and object, I and thou, spirit and matter. The **effect** is the apparently separate objects—mental and physical—of experience of phenomenal existence. For most sentient beings *Maya* is universal, with no beginning and no end. Wherever name and form (*namarupa*) arises, there is *Maya*. Thus, *avidya* is without beginning—but for human beings may be ended with *jnana-vidya*, nondual wisdom-presence of the divine. This is the “Immaculate” or Ultimate *vidya-maya*. As we have seen, Brahman is infinite, atemporal and changeless, beyond any conceptual attribute or understanding, and with no beginning and no end. We cannot, without conceptually reducing It, ascribe a creative principle to It. Indeed, we can ascribe no predicate, quality or attribute to It. Brahman is simply the

single, monadic primordial Base, the Supreme Source in whom *kosmos* arises, dwells and returns again.

We need then, a creative principle through which we may explain this miraculous arising of the world of relative spacetime reality. That principle is Ishvara, the creator-sustainer-destroyer God, by whatever name, of all monotheistic religions.

“Ishvara is the supreme interpretation of Brahman, the divine Absolute by relative human thought.”

Swami Vivekananda

Ishvara is the conditional, relative creative principle required by *Maya* to explain appearing, real conditional existence. Nirguna Brahman however, remains the utterly unknowable changeless Absolute (Tao, *shunyata*). The *Trimurti* with its *triguna* or three qualities of conditional existence (Brahma/*rajas*, Vishnu/*sattva*, Shiva/*tamas*) is the Hindu expression of Ishvara who is a projection or superimposition on Brahman, much as the Holy Trinity is the Christian expression of the Hebrew creator-God Yahweh. Brahman as the *Atman*, the timeless divine Self, is the always, already present presence, *vidya* (light), *rigpa*, *logos* of the absolute, changeless source or primordial Base of all arising relative conditional existence. We arise in Brahman. Brahman/*Atman* is our actual, supreme identity. *Maya* is the illusory, yet conventionally real relative-conditional world that arises, dwells, and returns without every leaving the ground of Brahman.

Thus, *Maya* has three fundamental qualities or *gunas*, the *Triguna*, which comprise the relative-conventional phenomenal world that obscures the self-luminous face of Brahman. *Sattva* is purity of intention, integrity, peace and clarity; *That* that is to be realized. *Rajas* is energy-motion, activity, desire and passion. *Tamas* is heavy and unmoving, laziness, torpor and ignorance. *Tamas* obstructs realization of *sattva*. *Rajas* is the quality of energy that dispels *tamas*, while *sattva* dispels *rajas*. When the three are in balance there is the state of no arising, or *vidya-samadhi-moksha*, nondual liberation that is the still silence (*mouna*) of the nondual Absolute that is Nirguna Brahman.

Again, there are the two *Mayas*: *avidya-maya* (delusory *maya*), ignorance of the divine presence, and *vidya-maya* (immaculate *maya*), the wisdom presence that removes *Maya's* veil of ignorance and harmonizes the *Triguna* toward enlightenment/*moksha*. The ultimate realization of Brahman in our lifeworld finally transcends this duality of *Maya*, of ignorance and wisdom, dark and light, in the luminous stillness of the monadic Supreme Source, Nirguna Brahman, the great perfection that is *sahij samadhi- moksha*. Here, relative knowledge, Saguna Brahman, including the nondual view, even the *samadhi-moksha* experience of Brahman are all transcended in their very nondual source condition, perfectly subjective, primordial Spirit-Reality Itself that is ineffable Nirguna Brahman, which for human beings is *ananda*, happiness-bliss, and when stabilized and actualized in the conduct of the everyday lifeworld is *Paramananda*, the ultimate happiness of luminous *Maha-rishi* or Christ-Buddhahood.

## Brahman and the World: Causality

Brahman . . . is the cause of the emanation, preservation, and reabsorption of the world.

Sri Ramana Maharshi

The *Advaita Vedanta* of Shankara and Ramana Maharshi is essentially the nondual Primordial Wisdom teaching: the ego-I of the bodymind, the soul-self, God, and the Supreme Source, the nondual Absolute sourceground of all appearing physical and mental phenomena are “non-different” and identical. *Kham Brahm*. All is Brahman.

To review: Appearing reality *Saguna* Brahman arises from *Nirguna* Brahman, the nondual source as the creative activity of Ishvara, the spacetime creator-God as the *shakti* energy-motion forms (*namarupa*) of *chit* or consciousness (*Satchitananda*). Sentient beings, including self-aware beings perceive and experience this phenomenal world through the dualistic gross perceptual and conceptual veil of *Maya*, illusion. Through ignorance (*avidya-Maya*) illusory reality is projected or superimposed upon nondual Reality Itself, Brahman, just as the coiled rope in the darkness is mistaken for the snake. This perceptual and conceptual error is *vikshepa* or *adhyasa*, the projection of illusory reality onto Brahman. The apparent transformation of Brahman (as Ishvara) into the relative-conventional phenomenal world without any change in nondual Brahman Itself is known as *vivarta*. ***Vivarta is the causal explanation that “Brahman is cause, Maya (as the world) is effect.”*** But what does this mean?

According to the exoteric, relative-conventional, empirical view (*vyavaharika*), under the influence of *vikshepa-Maya*, Brahman is the “material and efficient cause” of the world (Nikhilananda 1947, 1963). The **effect** that is the phenomenal world “pre-exists” in Brahman, its divine **cause** (*satkarya*). Brahman transforms Itself, through Ishvara, into *namarupa*, the relative conventional world of name and form, because Brahman is the primordial sourceground of all of the projections (*vikshepa*) of *Maya*. The conditional effect (the snake) is projected on to the nondual absolute cause (the rope). Thus, from the relative view, an effect is merely its material cause. Such a view is supported by common sense reality and the general Western philosophical-scientific materialist view of causality.

From the esoteric view of the nondual absolute however, the *vivarta* causal doctrine teaches that, although from the relative view the effect pre-exists in the cause (*satkarya*), actually this effect is but an illusory **appearance** of its cause.<sup>2</sup> In Brahman, beyond

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<sup>2</sup>*Sankarya*, that the effect pre-exists in its cause is the relative view of *Advaita Vedanta* and is the objective counterpart of *vivarta* which holds that the effect (reality) is but the illusory appearance of its cause (Brahman). The transformation is apparent, not actual. The Hindu *Mimamsa*, *Nyaya* and *Vaisheshika* view of causality is *asatkarya*, that is, the denial of *satkarya*, the denial of an ultimate material causality. Here effects are independent of their causes (Deutsch, 1969). *Parinama* or *vikara* in *Samkhya* yoga is the actual transformation of the cause into its effect as opposed to mere apparent transformation. Buddhist *Madhyamaka* utilizes relative causality – the cause and effect of karma – but denies that Buddhahood has a cause because *Tathagatagarbha*, Buddha Nature, is already present in all beings from the very beginning.

spacetime causality altogether, there can be no distinction between cause and effect. Brahman, the apparent cause, is the absolutely Real, nondual Reality Itself, “yet is distinct from cause and effect, without attributes” (Ramana Maharshi). Brahman’s apparent effects are merely *namarupa*, interdependent relative-conventional names and forms arising through Brahman’s power as *vikshepa-Maya*. They have no ultimate reality. In the nondual view the “One without a second” cannot transform Itself (*vivarta*) into “the many” without ceasing to be the One, the nondual Absolute All. Rather, phenomenal reality arises, unseparate from the One, yet it appears through the obscuring superimposition power of *Maya* as the many. **Brahman, perfectly subjective Reality Itself, appears through Ishvara as *namarupa*, name and form, but there is no actual creation, merely *avidyic* appearances. Therefore, in the *Advaita Vedanta* nondual view, there can be no causal relation between Absolute Brahman—ultimate truth—and the relative spacetime world. Nondual Brahman (Ultimate Spirit) transcends yet embraces this empirical domain of Relative Truth. And wonder of wonders, “All is Brahman...” That is our ultimate Relationship.** This is essentially the Buddhist non-causal or contextual-causal view of dependent origination (*pratitya samutpada*). However, in the relative, conditional world, “Brahman is cause, *Maya* is effect.”

Brahman and the world are different in kind; qualitatively, they are incommensurable. In order to set forth a causal relation between two things, a minimum requirement is that they be of the same order of being . . . one cannot establish relations between disparate levels of being.

Eliot Deutch (1969)

**We cannot therefore, logically derive a relative, temporal and finite effect (the phenomenal world) from an absolute, infinite cause (Brahman).** In the nondual view Brahman, the “cause” is Ultimate Reality Itself, “The Real,” and its “effect,” the phenomenal world, is merely real by conventional imputation and designation. There is no causal relationship between the objects of the realm of relative truth (*Maya*), and Ultimate Truth (Brahman). Absolute Reality is utterly nondual. The finite conditional mind of the ego-I can do no more than reduce the infinite to finite conceptual names, forms and experience (*nyam*). Indeed, that is its primary and constant activity; our constant seeking strategy. Alas, until the full *bodhi* of liberation, the bodymind of the ego-I must exist and function through the relative-conventional veil of *avidya-Maya-vikshepa*, in ignorance, suffering and separation from the bright “always, already” present *vidya-rigpa-logos* presence of infinite divine Spirit-Being Itself, awaiting its realization, now, at the spiritual Heart (*hridayam*).