

Is All This Real?

Maya and the Nature of Reality

We can only understand the nature of illusion or maya when we come to know our deepest nature. **BY CHARLES SHAHAR**

WHEN YOU WAKE UP in the morning and think back to the figures and phenomena of your dreams, you never question whether they were real or not. It was a dream after all. Dreams are just like a motion picture we watch while asleep. As soon as we open our eyes, our memories of the dream fade and we don't usually ascribe to them any reality outside of what is going on in our minds.

What if I told you that waking consciousness is a dream too, just a longer one. That everything you register and appreciate with your senses is part of this dream. Life, which is experienced as this formed existence, is just a play on the canvas of your mind. The mind itself is just a mechanism that processes sensory information that it imagines to be real.

Your thoughts, which are fleeting, and your memories that fade with time, are likewise part of the illusion. They come and go. They may or may not reflect your past experiences, depending on your emotional state at the time. And when you leave your body they dissolve along with your form. So does your personality and your ego.

But everything around you seems so real. If you hit a table with your fist it will hurt. How much more real can anything get? Surely that deadline you have to meet at work, or the concert you attended the other day, or the headache you got from listening to someone complain about their spouse, was real. It really happened. Really?

So what is this illusion, or maya, as it is referred to in Hindu philosophy? There are several characteristics that can be attributed to this relative field of illusion.

First, the field of illusion is constantly changing. Nothing remains static in this universe. Physical atoms are in a state of perpetual motion. Your body is always changing and your mind is in constant flux.

The implications of this changing field of maya is huge. If you believe that something which is constantly changing is real, or permanent, you will suffer greatly.

For instance, if you believe that your reality begins and ends with your body you will agonize because the body ages and inevitably breaks down. People who are caught up with their appearance will suffer when their outer beauty begins to fade with age. One day your body feels great, the next day it feels unsettled. Therefore, if you know yourself to be only this changing form, depending on its condition, you will go up and down along with it.

You also suffer when you follow your changing emotions and desires. It is true that when a specific desire is met you experience contentment. But how long does that contentment last? In fact, discontent is at the heart of desire. It is what makes us feel restless and unfulfilled. Life is like a roller-coaster ride when you follow your desires, all for a fleeting sense of satisfaction.

The second characteristic of maya is more profound, or more subtle for the mind to grasp. Anything that appears is not real. This seems like a contradiction. Anything that appears must be real, simply by virtue of its appearance. It has a presence and must therefore have a reality. But we can also say that anything that appears must also at some point disappear.

This implies that anything that has a beginning must also have an end. I am including your birth. If you are born you must surely die. If you believe in your birth and death, and that your existence merely consists of the span between these two points, then you will also suffer, because it implies that you were born to die. This sounds very harsh but there is no denying that birth and death are inextricably linked to one another.

Finally, our mental perception of life is bound in space and time. Or more accurately, our perception of

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space and time is a product of maya. This points to the fact that human consciousness is ultimately finite and limited, appreciating reality only in terms of specific forms and their evolution over time. It cannot conceive of anything beyond those boundaries.

The implications here are enormous. For instance, there seems to be a space or a sense of division between us and everything else. This sense of separation implies that who we are, our very essence, is separate from that of everyone else. This sense of duality is the cause of our greatest suffering, because ultimately it separates us from the source of our existence, which is the same being everywhere. I will get back to this point presently.

We have examined what Reality is not. This puts us in a good position to understand what Reality must be.

First, Reality is not changeable. It remains constant and unalterable. It does not have a beginning or an end, but has always been and always will be. It is not bound by space and time, and therefore does not have different parts or facets, nor qualities or characteristics. It is absolute and infinite, and therefore, is beyond the dimension of form.

What exactly are we talking about here? Let me first say that there is no way that the mind can understand such a Reality. When I talk about The Absolute, I am not referring to any concept or idea. Words are insufficient to describe it and will always fall short. One can say it is a state of consciousness, but that too is meaningless because the mind will ascribe its own references, which will ultimately fall short. The mind needs to grasp something. It can never comprehend the formless.

What are the implications here? How can this Reality have no beginning or end, be indivisible, unalterable, and immutable? The answer is that true Reality—we can call it “The Divine,” “The Oneness,” “The Absolute”—IS ALL THAT THERE IS. Maya itself is just a ripple or modification in an infinite ocean of Pure Consciousness. But the wave sees itself as separate from the ocean. That is why the sense of separation or duality arises.

So how do you come to appreciate such a Reality? The Reality I am speaking about is WHO YOU ARE.

It is your essence, your pure being. For some souls, their journey of discovery starts when they begin to experience *vairagya*, a state of disillusionment with the world. When significant difficulties and challenges arise, a person will sometimes begin to wonder whether their faith in this world was misplaced. They may then start to seek a higher, more profound spiritual understanding.

Ultimately, true Reality must be experienced directly to be known. I have connected to that Reality through two means. The first is through meditation. There is a wonderful tranquility that one experiences when there are no waves in the mind and the awareness is directed back to its source. Time and space cease to have meaning, and the individual I-sense dissolves into that infinite ocean of consciousness. Therein lies the experience of true Self, beyond the confines of the human divisive mind.

The other way I experienced such an awareness was during my time spent with an enlightened teacher. Because he lived a sublime reality, just being in his presence re-arranged the atoms of my consciousness, and accelerated the pace of my ascension. Such a spiritual guide or teacher can take you to the edge of the water, but you must take the plunge into the infinite ocean yourself. No one can do it for you. It can only be done if you have purity and openness of mind.

We can only understand the nature of illusion or maya when we come to know our deepest nature. If we think we are merely the body, senses, mind, intellect and ego, then we are caught in the realm of space and time, and we live out our existence as limited human consciousness, disconnected from our essence. At some point, when we realize that there is no substantial reality to this formed existence, we can then take the steps required to lift our awareness beyond the changing field, and let it merge with, or dissolve into, the Absolute Pure Consciousness. 🌸

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