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Swami Vivekanand Concepts On Maya, Soul And Its Liberation

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Abstract: *MAYA is a word which states the contradictory nature of the world and things. We perceive the world to be real but actually it is not so. Though the Absolute alone is real, it remains unmanifest and transcendental. The world is manifest and perceptible to all of us but it actually does not exist. We find inner contradiction in the world itself. Maya simply describes this contradiction inherent in the cosmos.*

Key words: Maya, Soul, Liberation, contradiction, cosmos, nature of world, empirical, pure illusion

When we say that the world is Maya, we mean that the world is ultimately unreal and false. But Maya also connotes that the world is not unreal in the sense that it never existed before nor can exist in the future. The world is not like a sky-flower, the son of a barren woman or the horns of a hare which does not exist, nor will exist in the future. The world is a positive reality and it is perceived by all of us. To an ignorant individual it is positive, concrete, eternal and everlasting. The world is true for all purposes, it is unreal only from the ultimate point of view. Maya relates to the fact that the world is real from the empirical point of view, but from the spiritual and transcendental view, the world is unreal. It is, from that standpoint, pure illusion.

Maya describes this empirical nature of the world. "This world has no existence." It exists only in relation to my mind, to your mind, and to the mind of everyone else. We see the world with five senses, but if we had another sense, we would see in it something more. If we had yet another sense, it would appear as something still different. It has, therefore, no real existence; it has no unchangeable, immovable, infinite, existence." All realities of this world, matter, mind and self, whatever they may be, are ultimately unreal, they are only empirically real. They are unreal from the transcendental standpoint but are real to us in all senses. We cannot say, therefore, whether the world is real or unreal. It is in one word indescribable, anirbachaniya. Maya simply connotes the indescribable nature of the world. It is within this world that we live, play, eat and drink. We are born in Maya, live in Maya and die in it. We are scholars, scientists, philosophers and poets in it. All human knowledge is knowledge in Maya. Everything exists in Maya. The names and forms exist in it.

The universe is the apparent manifestation of God. God is the material cause of this universe but only apparently. But where does this apparent cosmos exist? It exists in God. The cosmos exists in God as the snake (illusion) exists in the rope. We perceive the rope as a snake. The rope does not change into snake, likewise God also does not really take the form of the world. All that exists in the world is really the appearance of God. God does not really change but falsely appears to us as the world. In reality, Brahman is pure identity, oneness, and pure existence. There is no manyness and manifoldness in it. It is an indeterminate and form-less reality. In truth only the Brahman exists but we perceive manifoldness. So long a man is in ignorance, he perceives the world, but when he is free from ignorance, he perceives God alone, and nothing else. Swami Vivekananda says, "When one is in ignorance he sees the phenomena and does not see God. When he sees God, this universe vanishes entirely for him."

Maya is not a theory of explanation but a statement of fact. It is a simple statement of contradiction found everywhere in this universe. We never come across an eternal, unchangeable and immovable truth. Take for an example the fact that the Christians are prosperous. They are so because they have dominance over the non-Christians. The Christians must have a prey and those are non-Christians. It is because of the non-Christians that the Christians are prosperous. But if the whole world becomes Christian, then the Christians will not be prosperous. They will become poor and their prosperity will go away. The contradiction of prosperity and poverty remains a true fact in the cosmos. In the same way wherever there is good, there is evil at the same time, and wherever there is evil, there is good also. The whole cosmos is full of contradictions and oppositions. Maya is a name of this contradiction. Swami Vivekananda says, "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, that wherever there is good, there must also be evil, and wherever there is evil, there must be some good."

One asks, what is the world? Swami Vivekananda answers that it is the sum total of one's sensations, perceptions and ideas. The world is nothing more than this. In the dreaming state also, one has a universe of sensations, perceptions and ideas. There is hardly any difference between the waking world and the dream world, for both are empirical and phenomenal. The dream is also real when an individual is dreaming. If he is thirsty in a dream, a glass of water gives him happiness. If he is injured, he suffers pain. Therefore, even in dreams, the experiences are real to the dreamer. Just as in the waking state the dream-world disappears, this world that we perceive as real vanishes into nothingness when the soul is identified with the Absolute. The Maya states the phenomenal character of this universe. There is no real universe in the ultimate sense. When a man is possessed of wisdom the illusion of the world disappears, and he perceives the infinite, eternal, everlasting consciousness or the Absolute. The ignorance and the manyness of the objective world disappear for him. The cosmos is a big illusion of the ignorant minds. The world is a mirage. Just as a man passing through a desert perceives the mirage of lake, similarly he suffers from the illusion of this cosmos. But when he actually knows that the lake was merely sand, the illusion disappears from him, and he perceives sand and sand alone and nothing else. He is no longer deceived. The knower is never deceived. One who knows the Brahman does not perceive the cosmos. To a knower of Brahman all illusions disappear, and he perceives unchangeable, vast and infinite consciousness.

The whole world with wife, children, belonging, etc., is delusion, mere mirage. They have no reality. Maya, therefore, states the fact that the world which appears to us to be real is in fact unreal. Maya is not a theory but an explanation of the fact that this world is nothing more than an illusion. We all perceive this world but it actually does not exist.

The Soul : The Atman is Brahman, and the Brahman is Atman. It is one, infinite, eternal, existence, consciousness and bliss. It is spiritual and indivisible consciousness. It is immortal, eternal, beginningless, endless, nameless and formless. The Atman is not a part of the Absolute, for the latter can never be divided and limited into manyness. There can be no parts of the Infinite for it is eternal, indivisible and vast. The Brahman cannot be divided into pieces. There is actually no individual Atman or soul in the real sense. The Brahman alone is real. The images of the Brahman cast at different centres in Maya, give us the reflections of innumerable souls in large numbers. But they are souls in images. They are not the real Soul or Atman. The real soul is the Absolute.

In the Upanishads, we have reference of the two souls in us, the lower and the real. The lower self is the ego which takes part in the universe. The higher soul is the Atman, the pure witness, con-sciousness, calm and unchangeable. The Upanisad writes that there are two birds sitting on a branch of a tree. There is one bird which enjoys the fruits and flies to and fro, and the other one is the pure witness, calm and silent Being. The real Atman in us is the pure witness, calm, silent, unlimited, infinite, eternal and unchangeable Being. The Atman is not a limited and finite thing, it is Absolute, Brahman, Truth, Consciousness and Bliss.

The Atman or Soul is beyond time, space and causation. The latter exist in the mind, and the Atman is beyond the mind. The Soul transcends them all. There is only one Atman in all of us, which is formless and infinite Being. As the Atman is infinite, vast and unlimited, it cannot be more than one. The infinite Atman can only be one. Therefore, the view that there are many souls living on earth is totally wrong. The apparent self, however great it may be, is only an unreal reflection of the Brahman. The Atman reflected on different centres of Maya gives rise to the innumerable finite souls. But the real Atman is not the reflected image. The Atman transcends all finite and limited individuality or ego. The individual souls do not really exist, they are all unreal reflections, mere images of souls and not the Atman. The only reality is to be found in the Atman.

But what is this individuality? The individuality is not to be found in body because with the changes of the body, the individuality would be lost. It cannot exist in physique, memory, drinking, dressing etc., because these are constantly changing. Everything in this universe is in a state of flux and becoming, therefore, the individuality cannot be found in body, mind and ego. As all these are perishable, there can be no individuality except in the Infinite. The true Atman never changes. The Atman is immutable, unchangeable and Absolute.



We are not yet the true individual, the Atman or Spirit. In those moments alone in which we are detached from this physical consciousness and united with the Spirit, we keep our individuality. The true individual is Atman, which is undivided, infinite, vast, imperishable and eternal.

The creation of the plurality of the unreal selves takes place due to the reflection of the Brahman at different centres in Maya. The selves are merely selves in images. Again, some selves are more conscious and some are opaque because of the constitution of the Maya. Just as when the water of the river is transparent and pure, the reflection of the sun is clear, and when the water is dirty or muddy, the reflection is very dim, similarly, the reflection of the Brahman at different centres in Maya gives either the clear image or indistinct ones. The selves, therefore, have degrees of consciousness. If Brahman is reflected on the Sattvic elements of Maya, the self will be pure, sublime and relatively more conscious. It will be the exact representation of the Soul. We mistake the reflected self for the real Soul.

By the help of the practice of the Yogas, all illusions of the ego, mind and finite self-disappear. With the dawn of the yogic consciousness, all individuality and cosmos disappear forever. When we have discovered our true soul or Atman, the Brahman in us, we realise freedom, transcendence and oneness with the Divine. With the dawn of the spiritual consciousness all illusions of the ego, mind and finite self-disappear. When we have discovered the true Soul or Atman, we realise freedom, transcendence and oneness with the Divine.

Liberation : Swami Vivekananda conceives of two kinds of liberation, the Jivan Mukti and the Videha Mukti. The former is a state of freedom realised in one's own lifetime. The Jivan Mukta realises union with the Brahman but he yet remains tied with the body. This is due to the binding effects of the acquired karmas. But when the potencies of acquired karmas are spent up, the body ceases to function. The Jivan Mukta then realises permanent and eternal repose in the Brahman.

The Jivan Mukti precedes the final liberation. It is evidently a lower state of liberation in comparison to the final liberation. Though the ego and ignorance disappear from the Jivan Mukta, he has links with the past karmas which keep him detained in the world. But soon after when the energy of the past karmas get spent up, the soul realises eternal freedom from body, life and mind.

Man is composed of soul and body. Whereas the body is perishable, the soul is immortal and eternal. It is Brahman itself. In the Upanisads, there are passages, e.g., "That thou art" (Tat tvam asi) and 'I am Brahman' (Aham Brahmasmi). These passages do not mean that an individual with his body and life is the Brahman itself. It means that the soul, that exists within the individual, is identical with the Brahman. The Atman and Brahman are one.

Liberation means the realisation of Soul's identity with the Brahman. Though such an identity was always there, the Soul was, as it were, forgetful of its own existence or nature. Even in bondage, the Soul remains in identity with the Brahman, but it is oblivious of its identity with the latter. Liberation is the realisation of the identity of the Soul with the Brahman, which was always there. To realise freedom is, therefore, like finding of a necklace on the neck by one who has forgot its existence there and tried to search it hither and thither.

The final liberation, the Videha Mukti, is attained when the self reposes in eternal identity with the Brahman. It becomes one with the Absolute, which is truth, existence, consciousness and bliss. The liberated soul becomes united with the Absolute forever. There remains for him no ignorance, no suffering, no ego, no world, no life and no rebirth. The soul realises eternal freedom, everlasting bliss and infinite existence. It becomes infinite, immortal, eternal and transcendental Absolute.

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