



## Newsletter Archives

### **What is Maya? A Conceptual Analysis**

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# What is Maya? A Conceptual Analysis

## Article of the Month – July 2010

In the seventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna makes a promise to Arjuna:



"I will explain to you how to know me fully and clearly. I will give you the knowledge, after knowing which, nothing more will remain to be known by you. It is only the rarest of men who come to know me in my true essence." (7.1-3).

Having made this exciting promise, Krishna begins His explanation by saying:

"I have two kinds of Maya – lower (apara) and superior (para). The first is the cause of the inert world, and the second is my shakti in the form of prana which sustains this world. Because My Maya, in these two forms, is the cause of this entire world, it is actually Me, who is the ultimate source and dissolution of the world." (7.4-5)

Promising to give a 'full and clear' description of Himself, Krishna begins with Maya. Actually, this is the only way we can understand God. The Upanishads state:

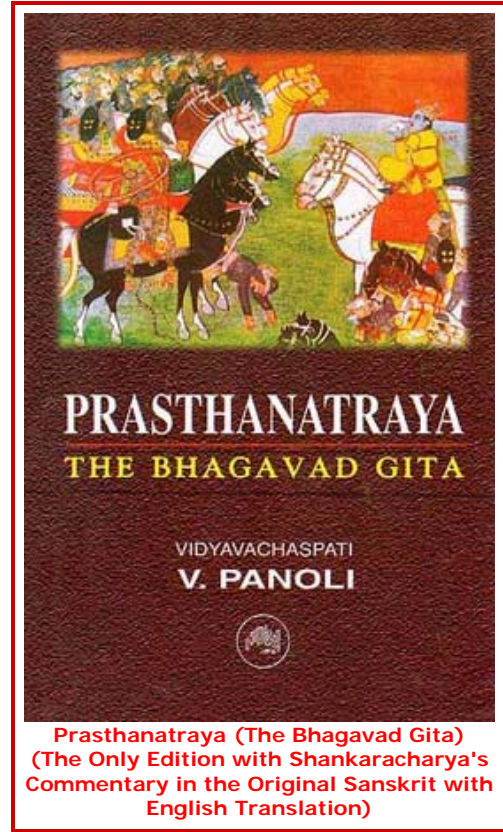
'The speech and mind return without reaching the ultimate God' (Taittiriya Upanishad 2.4.1).

The implication thus is that our sense organs are not capable enough to discern the ultimate God. Therefore, the only way to understand Him is through His creation, namely this world, which is perceptible to our senses.

**Objection:** You mean to say that that the One God can be known through this infinitely varied world? How is this possible?

**Resolution:** The Shrimad Bhagavatam says that the One God has become many through His Maya (12.9.6). The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad says: 'God takes on many forms through His Maya. He takes on these various forms to reveal His own self' (2.5.19). The great Shankaracharya, while commenting on this Upanishad verse says: "If these various names and forms had not been made manifest, then it would not have been possible to realize God."

Thus this world is but the manifest form of God, created by Him to facilitate our realization of Him. Moreover, it is this Maya, which, during creation, takes on the form of the world: 'It is God's Maya which takes on the shape of the world. The purpose of this transformation is to facilitate both, the reaping of the fruits of our karma, and also to facilitate our Moksha (God-realization)', Shankaracharya's Introduction to the 13th Chapter of the Gita.

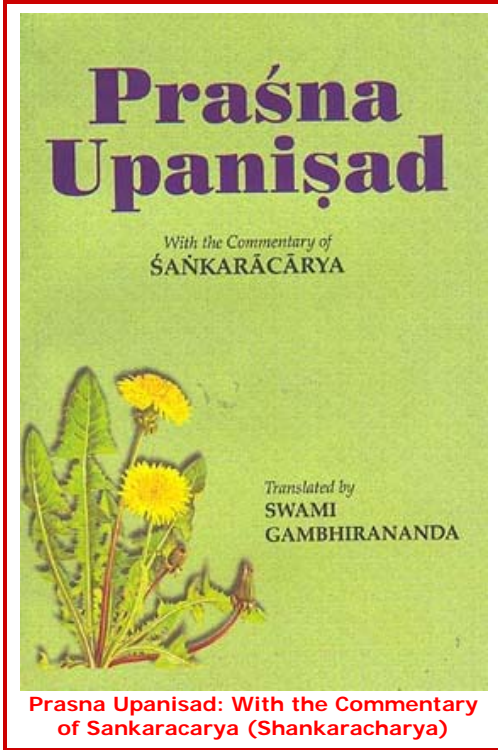


Since the supremely compassionate God is ever interested in the Moksha of all human beings, each of whom is conditioned by a different set of samskaras and backgrounds, it is but imperative that there be as many means to realize God as there are variety of people. Hence the diversity in this world.

**Objection:** The Gita verse 7.4-5 you have quoted above contains the word Prakriti, which you have interpreted as Maya. How do we know they both mean the same?

**Resolution:** The Shvetashvatara Upanishad clearly states: "Know Maya to be the same as Prakriti." (4.10)

# What is Maya?



Shankaracharya Ji puts it as follows 'Maya means showing oneself as something else from the outside' (Commentary on the Prashna Upanishad, 1.16).

We know from the example of science that even as water is opposed to fire, its cause, namely hydrogen and oxygen, both are supporters of combustion. To explain this transformation, science postulates a force named valence bond. Any science, in order to explain the transformation of a cause to an effect different from it, has to postulate a force characteristic of the cause. Vedanta too is an objective science. Therefore, there comes into play Maya, which efficiently explains the transformation of the non-inert, unchanging Brahman, into the inert, changing world. Maya is that which hides the fundamental transcendental form (svarupa) of God and presents it as something else.

Without this Maya, or Shakti, it is not possible to prove God as creator of the world – 'Without Shakti or Maya, God cannot be the creator, because in absence of Maya, there cannot be an inclination (pravritti) to create in God' (Shankaracharya's commentary on the Brahmasutras 1.4.3).

## Synonyms of Maya:

Shankaracharya Ji has been much castigated and it has been insinuated that he is the one who has laid undue stress on the term Maya. However, this is not justified because it is the scriptures themselves which use this word to explain the power or Shakti of God (Brahman). The Brhadaranyaka and Prashna Upanishads use it while the Shvetashvatara Upanishad also mentions it several times. The Bhagavad Gita uses the word Maya four times, and its synonym Prakriti more than 20 times. In fact, in addition to Prakriti, all sacred scriptures use the word Maya in one or more of the following synonyms:

1. Shakti: Because it is the power of God which creates the world.

2. Akasha: Because of its unlimited extent, or because it is the cause of akasha.
3. Akshara: meaning indestructible.
4. Maya: Because of this wonderful creation, which shows God in a form discernable to us.
5. Avyakta: Meaning unmanifest, because at the time of dissolution (pralaya), it remains latent inside God.

## Maya is under the Control of God:

This world is created by Maya to facilitate the reaping of our karma. Not only this, getting attached to Maya, attempting to 'lord' over it or possess it, we perform various karma, accumulating both Dharma and Adharma in the process and thus are forced to take birth again and again. In this manner, all beings are under the control of Maya. However, Krishna says: "I take Avatara keeping My Maya under control" (Bhagavad Gita 4.6). Thus, unlike the jivas, Maya is under the command of God.

## How is the World Created Through Maya?

We have seen above Krishna saying that He creates this world using His two types of Mayas, lower and superior. The first, called in Bhagavad Gita as the 'apara prakriti', is responsible for creation of the material world, which is inert. The second superior Shakti, known as 'para prakriti', upholds and sustains the world through 'prana', or life breath. The former is contaminated, while the second is pristinely pure.

Actually, the ultimate reason behind the creation of this world is avidya, our ignorance about our true status as being one with God. Due to avidya we see the world as different from God (ourselves), and thus get entangled in a plethora of attachment (raga) and hatred (dvesha). Inspired by these emotions, we perform more and more karma to bring that which we like near us, and push what we dislike away from us. To reap the fruits of these new actions God has to create this world again for us. It is like the father who gets his wailing child a toy to play with, even though he is himself totally uninterested in the toy itself (udasin). The desire for this world is ours; the capability to create it is God's.

'First prana is created by the superior form of Lord's Maya. It is our avidya which then actuates the lower form of Maya This Maya creates the various bodies fit enough to reap the fruits of the karmas of our previous lives. Thus the para prakriti sustains this world through prana or 'life breath', and the apara prakriti is responsible for the bodies, which if it hadn't been for the prana would have been lifeless' (Shankaracharya's Commentary on Bhagavad Gita 7.5).

**Doubt:** It is still not clear why one of the Maya is called lower (impure) and the other pure?

**Resolution:** Apara prakriti is said to be the inferior form of the Lord's Maya because it is actuated by our avidya. Para prakriti is pure, uncontaminated by our avidya. Even though the exhortation (pravritti) to create the world comes from avidya, the power to create is solely God's. This apara power, because of this association with our avidya is called impure.

Shri Shankaracharya says clearly:

'Within Maya is avidya, the impure seed of the world' (Commentary on the Gita: 12.3).

'Even though God (Brahman) is essentially quiet and neutral, It creates the world by this Maya which is joined with the avidya of beings' (Commentary on the Brahmasutras 2.2.2).

'The avidya of beings situated inside Maya is responsible for the creation of the world' (Gita Commentary 13.21).

## Maya is Eternal:

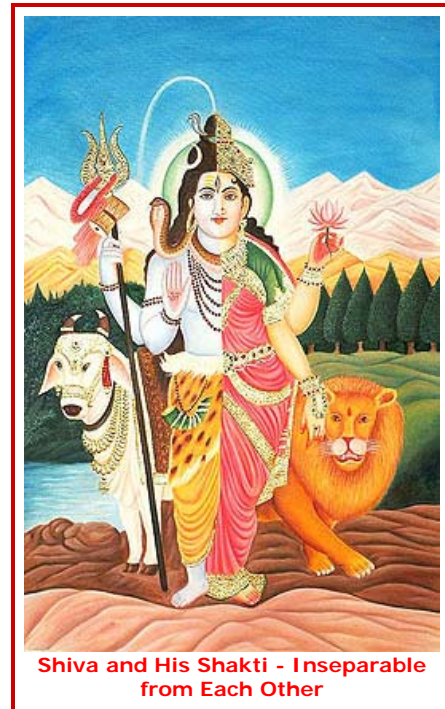
We know that this world was created to reap the fruits of karma performed by us in previous lives. Similarly, the world before this, was created for the fruits of our karma of lives previous to that and so on. Therefore, there is no world which can be said to have been created 'first of all'. A few rare beings may be able to overcome their avidya and become free from this cycle of life and death. They will not be born again, that is why they do not need the world again. However, the number of beings is infinite (Atharvaveda 10.8.24). Therefore, how so many people may become free, there will always remain many who would be bound to the circle of life. Thus, the creation and dissolution of the world too is a never-ending process, and this timeless cycle is both beginningless and endless.

'As tiny sparks come forth from fire, so does this diverse world always come forth from God, sustains in It and also dissolves back into It' (Shankaracharya's Commentary on Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 2.1.20). Since the world is continuously being created and dissolved, the Maya required for this cyclic process too is eternal.

## Status of Maya vis-à-vis God:

Bhagavan Shankaracharya puts it clearly:

'Shakti is fundamentally the same as its cause' (karanasya atmabhuta shakti), Commentary on the Brahmasutras 2.1.18.



'Shakti is none other than God, because Shakti is non-different from the one who wields it.' (sa shakti Brahm ev, shakti shaktimato anyatvat), Gita Commentary

14.27. 'It is My Maya, which is non-different from Me (svabhuta), which creates all beings', (Commentary on the Gita 14.3)

'That which is called as Mula-prakriti, it is the same as our God (Brahman)',  
Commentary on the Brahmasutras 2.3.9.

We go and lift a stone. Can we say that the power (Shakti) we used to achieve the task is different from us? Similarly, Brahman, the Supreme God, and His Maya are one and the same.

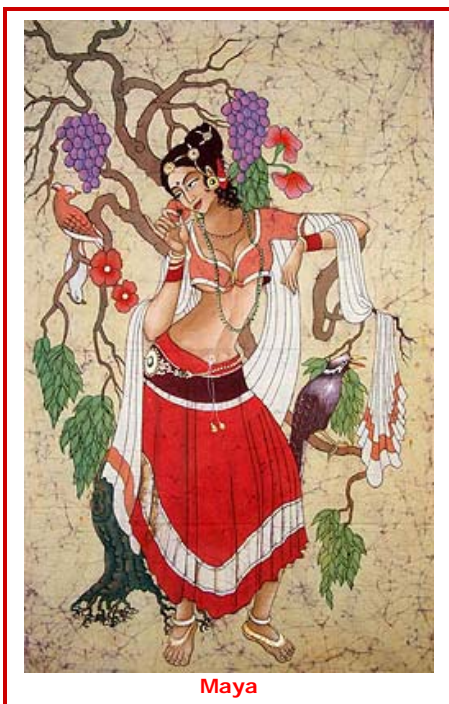
## Why Then Maya?

**Objection:** If God and His Maya are one and the same, why introduce the concept of Maya at all?

**Resolution:** We know that God created this world. We also know that this world is extremely different from the nature of God as stated in the ancient scriptures, which are infallible. Therefore, Maya is the force, power or Shakti, which efficiently explains the transformation of the non-inert, unchanging Brahman, into an inert, changing world.

Maya thus presents the cause as an effect having a nature different from the cause. It is the latent force which is activated every time God creates this world prompted by our avidya. When we speak solely of God, there is no need to bring in Maya, but as soon as we talk of this world or its creation we cannot communicate without understanding the concept of Maya.

God wants the jivas to understand Him, therefore, He dons that form which they can understand and comes before them in the form of this world. After that, He provides them with the Shastras Shastras (Vedic Scriptures), which explain how to realize Him by understanding how He is non-different from the world.



However, the world is very attractive, and we get bound to its outward appearance, failing to apprehend its Ultimate Source.

Actually, the world is like a language and God is its meaning. We concentrate on the beauty of the language, rather than look at the meaning behind it. When can we understand the meaning? When we give less importance to the language (world), keeping our interaction with it to the bare, minimum necessity, and fix our attention solely on the meaning (God). However, at the same time we have to realize that meaning cannot reveal itself without the word; God cannot be known without the world.

**Doubt:** All this talk about going beyond Maya is all very good. However, it has still not been explained how one actually goes about achieving this?

**Resolution:** This is a very important question. Krishna answers it in the Bhagavad Gita in a manner which is beautiful in its simplicity, yet profound in implication. He says:

"Only those who take refuge in Me can cross over My Maya." (7.14)

Consider this: We believe the peak of our pleasure to lie between the legs of a woman. It is highest form of pleasure we know. However, have we ever paused to reflect why God has located the locus of this pleasure at the dirtiest spots in the bodies of the two partners? Even if we have pondered on this question, have we still not failed to overcome our intense physical desires? After trying our best and still not being able to win over our desires, what way other than praying and surrendering to God remains for us? Our revered saints, the ones that have crossed over Maya, are unanimous in declaring that taking refuge in Krishna and sincerely praying to Him to help us overcome our desires is the only sure shot way to succeed.

## Is Maya 'Illusion'?

In the Shrimad Bhagavatam Krishna says to His Maya: "People will worship you with much fanfare and gifts. You will grant people whatever boons they ask for". In addition, in Gita 7.14, Krishna calls His Maya divine (daivi). Would Krishna call an 'illusion' divine,? Or, can something which is mere illusion, be capable of fulfilling our wishes and desires?

Nearly all Vedantic Texts translated into English read Maya as 'illusion'. This is very disturbing. God has many a times called it 'My Maya'. When we speak of a compassionate God, will such a God subject His beloved beings to illusion? Such a God would be malicious and not benevolent. Maya is real (bhava-rupa). It is there for us to perceive the reality of God in terms we can understand. Thus in India women are named after Maya, considering it to be sacred. Numerous temples honoring her adorn this land from top to bottom. Ultimately, we have seen, Maya is non-different from God. Does this mean God is an illusion too? There is no substance in such an interpretation.

## Conclusion:

The desire for the world is ours, but the capability to create it is God's. Maya not only just does its job – create the world for us to reap the fruits of our previous karma, but at the same time also facilitates our Moksha by presenting God in terms we can understand. For this we need to be grateful to Maya. That we get attached to Maya, and create more karma in order to possess it is but our own faulty ignorance. The Mahabharata puts it crisply:

'It is not the fault of Maya but mine, that, looking away from God, I became attached to it' (Moksha Dharma 307.34).

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*This article is based almost entirely on the teachings of Param Pujya Swami Paramanand Bharati Ji. However, any error is entirely the author's own.*

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*This article by Nitin Kumar.*

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