

## Moha Mudgaram – ‘The Shattering of Illusion’

Who is thy wife? Who is thy son?  
The ways of this world are strange indeed.  
Whose art thou? Whence art thou come?  
Vast is thy ignorance, my beloved.  
Therefore ponder these things and worship the Lord.

Behold the folly of Man:  
In childhood busy with his toys,  
In youth bewitched by love,  
In age bowed down with cares  
And always unmindful of the Lord!  
The hours fly, the seasons roll, life ebbs,  
But the breeze of hope blows continually in his heart.

Birth brings death, death brings rebirth:  
This evil needs no proof.  
Where then O Man, is thy happiness?  
This life trembles in the balance like water on a lotus-leaf  
And yet the sage can show us, in an instant, How to bridge this sea of change.

When the body is wrinkled, when the hair turns gray,  
When the gums are toothless, and the old man's staff shakes like a reed beneath his weight,  
The cup of his desire is still full.

Thy son may bring thee suffering,  
Thy wealth is no assurance of heaven:  
Therefore be not vain of thy wealth,  
Or of thy family, or of thy youth  
All are fleeting,  
All must change.  
Know this and be free. Enter the joy of the Lord.

Seek neither peace nor strife with kith or kin, with friend or foe.  
O beloved, if thou wouldst attain freedom,  
Be equal unto all.

Shankara took the vows of monkhood, after arranging for his mother's needs, and promised to return before she died. He went out in search of a teacher, and finally met the sage Gaudapada, the first sage of Vedanta, who sent Shankara to his foremost disciple, Govindapada, who in turn initiated and taught Shankara in meditation and the whole process of Yoga. Shankara soon reached enlightenment, and went out to teach.

Shankara died at the age of 32 in the Himalayas, yet had already established many monasteries, founded 10 monastic orders (organizing monasticism for the first time in India, and his system still exists in the present day), and left an extensive body of written work, both intellectual and devotional. It may be tempting, given the exceptional intellectual quality and rigor of his works — as well as the fact that he established several orders of monks — to regard him as an elitist and an intellectual. That would be a mistake. He also composed many hymns and devotional songs that are still sung in villages today. In his teachings he easily

descended from the intellectual heights of dialectical inquiry to speak clearly and simply, and often in quite earthy terms. If anything, he spoke with such intellectual rigor to answer the intellectuals decisively on their own terms, while reinstating the simplicity and genuineness of devotion to the heart of yoga.

Shankara was a reformer rather than an innovator. He did not teach any new doctrine, but gave new impulse to the spiritual life of his time, while offering deeper insight into the teachings of Vedanta.

## Key Teachings of Vedanta

### Shankaracharya's 'Crest Jewel of Discrimination' — Viveka-Chudamani

“Brahman – absolute existence, knowledge and bliss – is real. The Universe is not real.  
Brahman and Atman (your own inner Self) are one.”

This is a single, concise statement of Shankara's entire philosophy, which he lays forth with simplicity and clarity in his key work, the *Viveka-Chudamani* — The Crest Jewel of Discrimination. In this work, Shankara accepts the essential teaching of the Upanishads and of his predecessor, Gaudapada, that the “**Real**” is that which neither changes, comes into being, nor ceases to exist.

This is more than just a philosophical concept to him. The path to arriving at the *experience* of the Real, the Self, is the **path of negation** or ‘via negativa’: Reality is one indivisible, unchanging truth - everything else that is *not* that, *is* not – i.e. is not real, in the sense that it has no independent or ultimate existence apart from the one reality. Thus every object of knowledge, external (objects) or internal (thoughts and ideas) is subject to change and is therefore “not real.”

Only one thing is changeless and ever-present: consciousness, the awareness we experience as the ‘Witness’, which is ever-present and abiding, and is and must be changeless if we are to have any awareness of change around us. Even in dreamless sleep, that Witness abides, and because of It we are aware of how we slept. The ego-self, by contrast – our individuality made up of shifting self-conceptions and ideas – is not that Self.

Samkhya was both dualistic and a ‘realistic’ philosophy, saying that reality or the true state of things is really as it appears – the phenomenal world does have its own objective reality. This is dualistic so far as Samkhya says that the phenomenal world — Prakrti — stands apart from and is not reducible to any source in another reality (i.e. Purusha). In other words, it did not come from — it was not created by — any higher divine reality; Prakrti eternally stands on Her own independent being.

Advaita Vedanta is, by contrast, a non-dualistic system — a monism which asserts that the difference and diversity we perceive is not the ultimate Truth. The ‘things’ we perceive do not have their own independent reality, but are instead appearances superimposed on the one Reality, Brahman. The natural world came from Brahman as an emanation from the Being or Reality of Brahman, and has no existence or reality apart from the radiant presence of Brahman. Moreover, our experience of manyness and division is something we superimpose upon that deeper Truth, and thus the Oneness of all things in Brahman is veiled from us by this act of superimposition.

## Existence and Reality

I have re-emphasized this point here because this teaching on the ‘illusoriness’ of the world is so often misunderstood and even criticized, while the important truth it communicates is largely missed.<sup>4</sup>

Shankara is *not* saying that the world does not exist. The world both *is* (it does exist apart from our individual perception of it) and *is not* (i.e. does not have its own independent reality, but rather is dependent upon Brahman, the eternal, for its appearing – and hence for its existence.) There is also not just one kind of illusion, but several, and critics often confuse them. Shankara draws an important distinction between one’s private illusions/perceptions (which he calls *pratibhasika* – illusory), and the universal or world-illusion, our shared experience of the illusion of the world (which he calls *vyavaharika* – phenomenal).

The world *is* – as a shared experience – yet *is not*; it is a shifting appearance that has no enduring ‘is-ness’ of its own but is dependent upon the unchanging eternal Self for its appearing at all. This world is what he calls **Māyā**, the world-appearance that has its basis in Brahman.<sup>5</sup> In the light of the knowledge realization of the oneness of Reality, the ‘otherness’ of world-appearance vanishes: the world can no longer be seen as the world you and I know. With realization, the world as world disappears – indeed, it *never really was* as it seemed – only Consciousness, Brahman, the Absolute, ever was and is and will be, exactly as it is.

Only one thing is changeless and ever-present: consciousness, the awareness we experience as the ‘Witness’, which is ever-present, abiding and changeless, yet cannot be ‘known.’ Instead we arrive at the experience by **negation of ordinary ways of knowing**.

Shankara gives an example of what this transformation of vision is like. In the dimness of twilight, we may come upon a coiled rope and ‘see’ a snake, yet when a light is shined upon it, we see that it is a rope. The snake ‘vanishes,’ but in truth nothing has vanished because there *never was* a snake; it was never anything but a rope. We *superimposed* the perception of a snake on the rope.

## Superimposition: Vivartavada

In the same way, the universe, Shankara says, is an appearance that we **superimpose** upon Brahman. Māyā is the appearance of Brahman *as* the universe to us, because of our ignorance (i.e. non-awareness) of Brahman. What we see is not really there: what is really there, we do not, at least for now, see.

The obvious question is, then how did this appearance come to be superimposed upon Brahman? Was it the doing of God – Brahman – Himself?

On the face of it, the question is itself nonsensical. If the effect doesn’t really exist, what sense does it make to ask about the cause? It is the same as asking if the rope ‘caused’ us to see a snake – there is no reality to the snake apart from our projection of it onto the rope – so how can you ask whether the rope ‘caused’ the superimposition? Moreover, cause and effect is dualistic thinking: there must be ‘two’ for one to act upon another, and this ‘twoness’ is the illusion. Cause and effect have meaning and application only within the context of Māyā and the appearance of multiplicity. It follows that you can’t really conceive of the relation between Brahman and Māyā in any conceptual terms, since causality applies only to appearances in the realm of Māyā, and not to Brahman.

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<sup>4</sup> In particular, in the Anusara system, the critique of Vedanta takes the term ‘illusion’ at face value and largely dismisses the teaching without exploring it. The result is a false dichotomy between Vedanta and what it calls ‘Tantra.’ This dichotomy robs Tantra of its true dimensionality and depth. Tantra accords ‘Maya’ its place as a Tattva, and offers a deep contemplation upon its meaning, which is essentially Vedantic. To divorce Vedanta from Tantra — and moreover to belittle Vedanta — is a serious mistake.

<sup>5</sup> The word ‘Māyā’ is often misused: Māyā applies only to the phenomenal world, our shared experience of the world consisting of names and forms, and not to our own private illusions.

The point of Shankara's doctrine of superimposition is not the question of whether Brahman is responsible for the appearance of Māyā; his point is to get us to realize that this is something *we do* all the time. The first step in getting beyond illusions, big or small, is to recognize the role we play in creating them.

**Shankara's definition of superimposition:** "Superimposition is the apparent presentation to consciousness, by the memory, of something previously observed elsewhere."

We see a snake. We remember it. The next day, we see a coil of rope; we superimpose the remembered perception of a snake upon it, and thereby misunderstand what it really is. We *do* this constantly in our everyday lives; we perceive and interpret present experiences according to our memory of past experiences.

Two questions arise from this, of course.

The **first question** is this: Brahman is not something we can ever perceive; so how is it that we can superimpose appearances on that which we do not perceive? Shankara himself recognizes this question, saying, "For every man superimposes objects only upon such other objects as are placed before him (i.e. as come into contact with his sense-organs)".

Shankara's answer actually strengthens his point. There is a respect in which we do perceive Brahman: **Brahman is what we perceive as self, and we project our own ego upon that awareness of self.**

"Brahman is not non-objective in the absolute sense. For Brahman is the object of the ego-idea. We know quite well, by intuition, that the Inner Self must exist, since the ego-idea is a presentation of the Self. Nor is it an absolute rule that objects can be superimposed only upon such other objects as are placed before us; for ignorant people superimpose a blue color upon the sky, which is not an object of sense-perception."

Our very sense of ego, of individual selfhood (and it is *very* hard to put your thumb on the ego; ego is our word for how we appear to ourselves) is a proof – or at least an indication – of our intuitive awareness of Brahman. Our *ignorance* is that we perceive this ego-self in a limited way, superimposing our own idea of our private individuality upon the absolute existence of the Self. This superimposition of the ego-idea on the Self is our first and most important act as human beings – our normal lives are an inevitable elaboration upon this superimposition, spinning out in a web of relationships, possessions, attachments and so on.

The superimposition of the ego-self on the one True Self is the key. Lose your grip on the ego-idea, and the entire world-appearance created by the ego vanishes as if it never happened.

The second question is, when and how did all this come about? When did this ignorance begin? According to his doctrine, to superimpose a snake upon the rope, we had to have seen a snake 'before'. *When* was 'before'? A previous life?

Yet time exists only within the realm of Māyā – to ask when Māyā began is to step outside of time and ask when time itself began. If there was a time when time began, then what was happening 'before' *that*? Since the question can't really be asked, much less answered, the only possible conclusion is that Māyā, like Brahman, is without beginning. Ignorance is the cause, and the world-appearance is the effect; both have always and always will exist.

Shankara's philosophy is more urgent than such questions: we know quite well that, however it all began, we do continue to couple the real and the unreal as a result of our ignorance every day and suffer for it. There is no immediate point in asking when it began; when shot with an arrow, as Shankara says, there is no time or purpose to asking where and when the arrow was made. The one thing needful is to get it out.

Yet the one nagging question that remains unanswered in this account is ‘Why?’ Why did this Māyā come about, if Brahman is the cause of all reality? Why is it that Māyā exerts such a strong hold upon us, as if it has its own kind of shadow-reality? Given the practical bent of Shankara’s philosophy, I don’t think he really makes a serious attempt to answer this question, though elements of an answer are present.

This is something that tantric philosophy — and Kashmir Shaivism in particular — picks up and attempts to answer. The ‘why’ cannot so much be answered by a ‘purpose’ or ‘reason,’ since Brahman in His perfection has nothing to achieve, no purpose He yet needs to fulfill in order to be complete. But rather, Tantra emphasizes the nature of Consciousness as Play (the ‘play of consciousness,’ or *chid-vilas*), as sporting in its own perfection.

In this respect, Tantra emphasizes the feminine aspect of Consciousness, and gives robust meaning to Freedom or *Svatantrya* as being the most essential truth about the nature of Consciousness. And a firm foundation in Vedanta is essential to fully understanding the nature of this play, since ‘play’ or ‘drama’ or ‘sport’ inherently involves a veiling, a voluntary self-concealment (such as when an actor takes on a role and ceases to be himself while inhabiting the role) for the sake of engaging in this play.

Apart from the question of ‘Why?’, the fact of the matter is that we *do* engage in superimposition on many levels, from the trivial to the profound, and this exercises such a powerful influence over every aspect of our awareness of ourselves as individuals because we so strongly identify with these projections. This notion of identification of course has venerable roots dating back to the Classical period, and even beyond.