

# ILLUSION & REALITY:

The World is Maya and Nothing Else.

VOLUME IV IN THE SERIES:

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Excerpts from the Teachings of Hazrat Inayat Khan and  
Three Illuminated Souls from the Hindu Tradition:  
Shankara, Sri Ramakrishna, and Sri Ramana Maharshi

## INTRODUCTION

*The world is maya and nothing else.*

Assuming that the above quote was made by a yogi is entirely reasonable. The concept of *maya* is deeply embedded in Hindu philosophy and religion. However, the quote is not from a yogi, but from a sufi, Hazrat Inayat Khan. As with many aspects of his teaching, Murshid is describing a process, not a principle. The quote should not be taken as Murshid's ultimate statement on the subject. "The world is *maya*" is a process, a step on a staircase.

The step, or station, of "the world is *maya*" is a place of disillusionment and dis-intoxication. It leads a seeker of truth to a place of sobriety, which is an intoxication of a different order. This intoxication can be called the state of *vairagya*, which is the indifference that results from seeing through *maya*. *Vairagya* is a strong drink that may not be to everyone's liking and it may be suitable only in moderate doses. It is a drink that brings one face-to-face with death, not only the death of the body, but the death of one's interests, desires, enjoyments, personal concerns, personalty, and even one's very self. It is "dying before death" and the rising above life's joys and sorrows. It is a breaking into the wide expanse and the freeing of the soul. The yogis have perfected this station.

The three Hindu mystics quoted in this volume are three spiritual giants, each of whose influence has spread far and wide. For Sri Ramakrishna (d. 1886), the staircase of "*neti, neti*" where each thing that appears to the consciousness is negated and rejected as relative, transitory, contingent, or not-Self, leads to the "roof" where all the universe is seen as Brahman.

Adi Shankaracharya (better known as Shankara; d. 718) was one of the earliest proponents of Avaita (non-dual) Vedanta and his influence can be traced in all subsequent Hindu philosophy and mysticism. The Ashtavakra Gita, a passage of which is quoted in this volume, comes from Shankara's school of thought. With regards to the relationship of Brahman and *maya*, Shankara's view can be summarized as follows:

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The universe is unreal.  
Brahman alone is real.  
The universe is Brahman.

The Clear-mind, the Buddha-mind, the great “I Am”, was expressed with eloquent insight and precision through Sri Ramana Maharshi (d. 1950). His profound influence on all subsequent teachers of non-dualism cannot be overstated.

Several passages in this volume, *Illusion and Reality*, allude to the analogy of the rope and the snake: At night we see a snake coiled and ready to strike. We become afraid and make plans to avoid harm. When the sun rises, we see that the snake is in reality a rope and our fear vanishes. The next night, we again see the snake and become afraid, but then we remember that, although it really does look like a snake, we know it as it really is. Once we realize the “truth” of the rope, the illusory snake vanishes.

Except as specified, all passages in this volume are the words of Hazrat Inayat Khan. I changed his language to be gender neutral consistent with the current practice of the Inayatiyya Order. I struggled whether and when to capitalize certain words, like “truth” and “reality.” I opted to simply leave the words as prior editors left them, which is mainly in lower case, even though I believe that in some contexts it is clear that “truth” or “reality” are merely stand-ins for the word “God.” I left the words of the Hindu teachers quoted in this volume as they have been previously translated without making them gender neutral.

Like all volumes in this series, this volume is intended as an aid to spiritual practice. Its intention is to point towards the realization brought about by seeing “the world is *maya*.” For a sufi, this is a step on a staircase and, although a step can be a momentary resting place, a step is intended as a means to elsewhere.

Habibullah Rogers, 2021

All things arise, suffer change, and pass away. This is their nature.  
Ashtavakra Gita

Everything in the world is *fani*, that is, awaiting annihilation. For every rock, every tree, every being that we see the day will come when it is destroyed.

This life of continual rise and fall and of continual changes is like running water, and people identify themselves with this running water, although in reality they do not know who they are.

Every moment of the day we live in illusion. Everything we do has the effect of covering our spiritual vision.

In the activity of the world a person is just like a piece of wood, lifted by the waves of the sea when they rise up, and cast down when they subside. That is why the Hindus have called the life of the world *Bhavasagara*, an ocean, an ever-rising ocean. And a person is floating on this ocean of worldly activity, not knowing what they are doing, not knowing where they are going.

I hold that life is but a passing dream, out of the shifting mists of Maya made.

We must see what in us is *fani*, to be annihilated, and what is *baqi*, life, what will remain with us and what will not.

Reality must be always real. It is not with forms and names. That which underlies these is the reality. It underlies limitations, being itself limitless. It is not bound. It underlies unrealities, itself being real. Reality is that which is. It is as it is. It transcends speech. It is beyond the expressions 'existence, non-existence', etc. The reality which is the mere consciousness that remains when ignorance is destroyed, along with knowledge of objects, alone is the Self (*Atman*)... The reality which shines fully, without misery and without a body, not only when the world is known but also when the world is not known, is your real form. The radiance of consciousness-bliss, in the form of one awareness shining equally within and without, is the supreme and blissful primal reality. Its form is silence and it is declared by knowers (*jnanis*) to be the final and unobstructable state of true knowledge (*jnana*).

Sri Ramana Maharshi

What is stable is real, what fades away is false.

God alone is real and all else is illusory.

Sri Ramakrishna

Under the spell of God's maya man forgets his true nature. He forgets that he is heir to the infinite glories of his Father.

Sri Ramakrishna

The nature of illusion is such that the facts of nature lose their importance after passing from their present state. For instance, you are not suffering the pain which you may have suffered yesterday or you may not feel the comfort you may have experienced formerly. And if your past condition is of no importance to you just now, the joy or sorrow that you may be experiencing just now will not be with you tomorrow. Such is the case with every moment of life, that which at present seems a reality, when passed becomes a dream and an illusion...The loss and gain in life performed its part, and disappeared; did good or bad, and was finished with. The one came and the other passed away from your sight. If you can say that anything remained with you constantly it would be no other than consciousness.

The Atman's appearance as an individual soul lasts only as long as our delusion lasts; since this misapprehension arises from a delusion of our understanding. As long as our delusion continues, the rope appears to be a snake. When the delusion ends, the snake ceases to exist.

Shankara

Both bondage and liberation are the fictions of our ignorance. They do not really exist in the Atman. Just as a piece of rope remains a rope, whether or not we mistake it for a snake. The imagined snake does not really exist in the rope. Bondage and liberation exist in the mind only.

Shankara

There is no reaching the Self. If Self were to be reached, it would mean that the Self is not here and now and that it is yet to be obtained. What is got afresh will also be lost. So it will be impermanent. What is not permanent is not worth striving for. So I say the Self is not reached. You are the Self, you are already that.

Sri Ramana Maharshi

The word *vairagya* comes from the Sanskrit and means indifference. By Sufis it is called *fana*, and it is shown in the cross, the symbol of the Christian religion... This indifference comes to every being and is the first step to his annihilation, because not one atom can have its evolution without annihilation.

Indifference and independence are the two wings which enable the soul to fly.

If once a person has got hold of the Real, they need nothing else, for that is the seeking of every soul.

The closer one approaches reality, the nearer one comes to unity.

So long as a person does not see the Self which is the origin of all, but looks only at the external world as real and permanent, you have to tell him that all this external universe is an illusion. Take a paper. We see only the script, and nobody notices the paper on which the script is written. The paper is there whether the script on it is there or not. To those who look upon the script as real, you have to say that it is unreal, an illusion, since it rests upon the paper. The wise person looks upon both the paper and the script as one. So also with Brahman and the universe.

Sri Ramana Maharshi

If you take the appearance to be real you will never know the real itself, although it is the real alone that exists. This point is illustrated by the analogy of the snake and the rope. You may be deceived into believing that a piece of rope is a snake. While you imagine the rope is a snake you cannot see the rope as a rope. The non-existent snake becomes real to you, while the real rope seems wholly non-existent as such.

Sri Ramana Maharshi

The *jnani* gives up identification with worldly things, discriminating, 'Not this, not this' (*neti, neti*). Only then does the *jnani* realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijnani*, realizes something more. The *vijnani* realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, brick-dust. That which is realized intuitively as Brahman, through the eliminating process of '*neti, neti*,' is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings.

Sri Ramakrishna

Truth is our very self. Truth is the divine element in us. Truth is every soul's seeking. Therefore as soon as the clouds of illusion are scattered, that which we begin to see is nothing but the truth which has been there all the time. We find that the truth was never absent; it was only covered by clouds of illusion.

The process of mystical development is the annihilation of the false ego in the real ego. Sufis call the false ego *nafs*, and the real ego Allah or God. It is not that the false ego is our ego and the true ego is the ego of God. It is that the true ego, which is the ego of the Lord, has become a false ego in us. One might ask how something that is true can become false, but false and true are relative terms. In reality all is true and nothing is false. When we call something false it means that it is less true compared with that which is more true. Reality has become confused. The soul, coming from a higher source but having identified itself with a smaller domain, the domain of the body and the mind, has conceived in itself a false idea of itself; and it is this false idea which is called *nafs*.

All things which one seeks in God such as light, life, strength, joy and peace, these all can be found in truth.

Make God a reality, and God will make you the truth.

This whole manifestation before us is a play of shadows; it continues for the night, and in the morning it is all over. One might ask, "If that is the case, then what are we supposed to do? By considering it unreal we do not seem to arrive at anything; but at the same time by considering it unreal, we stay in the unreal, and we do not open our eyes to the real." The idea is to make the best of this world, which is unreal; and at the same time hold fast with both hands to the knowledge of reality, which alone is the savior in which we find our liberation. Verily, truth is inspiring and truth alone will save.

The soul in its journey onward strikes a plane where it exclaims, "I am the truth."

Life for me is a dream that changes continually, and when I withdraw my real self from the false, I know all things, and yet stand remote; so I rise above all changes of life.

There is some purpose in this manifestation which is illusion. If there were no illusion, then reality could not be found, for everything is revealed by its contrast, even reality. We look for reality when we discover illusion; if we had never known illusion we would never have known reality.

The seer distinguishes between the real and the unreal, until arriving at a point where all to the seer becomes the reality.

The phenomena which the intelligence creates by its own creative power becomes a source of its own delusion, and as the spider becomes caught in its own web, so the soul becomes imprisoned in all it has created. This picture we see in the lives of individuals and of the multitude...The Hindus have called whole phenomena of life by the name *maya*, which means illusion, and once the true nature and character of this illusion is realized, the meaning of every word of language becomes untrue, except one, Truth, which words cannot explain.

Maya is nothing but the egotism of the embodied soul. This egotism has covered everything like a veil. This maya, that is to say, the ego, is like a cloud. The sun cannot be seen on account of a thin patch of cloud, when that disappears one sees the sun.

Sri Ramakrishna

Every experience on the physical or astral plane is just a dream before the soul.

Reality finds itself.

A mystic's God is Reality.

What uncovers the soul from these veils of illusion? The change which is called death. This change can be forced upon the soul against its desire, and is then called death. This is a most disagreeable experience like snatching away the bottle of drink from the drunken man, which is, for the time, most disagreeable to him. Or the change can be brought about at will, and the soul throws away the cover that surrounds it and attains the same experience of sobriety while on earth, even if it be but a glimpse of it. This is the same experience which the soul arrives at after millions and millions of years, drunk with illusion; and yet not exactly the same. The experience of the former is *fana*, annihilation, but the realization of the latter is *baqa*, resurrection...It is then that the soul realizes fully that 'I exist'.

Neither on the earth-plane were people their own selves, nor in the sphere of the jinns, nor in the heaven of the angels. They were only a captive of their own illusion, caught in a frame; and yet they were not inside it, it was only their reflection. But they saw themselves nowhere, so they could only identify themselves with their various reflections, until their soul realized, 'It is I who was, if there were any. What I had thought to be myself was not myself, but was my experience. I am all that there is, and it is myself who will be, whoever there will be. It is I who am the source, the traveler, and the goal of this existence.' Verily truth is all the religion there is; and it is truth which will save.

Nothing matters really, though everything matters.