

The Vaishnava Concept of Māyā

Based on Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī's Bhagavat Sandarbha

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The Lord has two types of energy: *parā* and *aparā*. *Parā* means distant, beyond, superior, and so on. The energy is called *parā* because it is superior to, or beyond, the material energy, which is thus called *aparā*, i.e. near or inferior. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa states that the living beings can be counted as *parā*, because of their conscious nature:

This eight-fold separated energy (the material nature) is called *aparā*, but different from it, O mighty-armed one, is the *parā* energy of mine, called the *jīva* (living being), by which this world is sustained. (Gītā 7.5)

In Śrī Bhagavat Sandarbha, Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī explains these energies in detail. To understand *parā*, he first explains *aparā* because it is easier to understand. This is called *candra-śākhā-nyāya* or “the branch-moon principle,” by which one precedes the development of a more complex argument by first explaining an easier point, just as one might first point to the branch of a tree to show someone where the moon is.

To define the *aparā*, or external energy, Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī cites one of the four seed verses (*catuḥ-slokī*) of the *Bhāgavatam* that Lord Kṛṣṇa spoke to Brahmā at the dawn of creation. In this verse the Lord defines His external energy, *māyā*. The term *māyā* has various meanings, such as false, cheating, illusion, compassion, power, wisdom, entanglement, the goddess of fortune, magic and so on. Kṛṣṇa here uses it in the sense of the energy that causes bewilderment, the external energy.

According to this verse the basic characteristics of *māyā* are as follows:

1. *Māyā* does not exist within the Lord.
2. *Māyā* does not exist without the Lord.
3. *Māyā* exists outside the Lord.
4. *Māyā* is perceived when the Lord is not perceived.

A doubt may be raised concerning this definition. A conditioned living being also has the above characteristics and thus this definition has the defect of being too broad. To avoid this, Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī says that the *jīva* is conscious and has been counted in the same

category as the Lord. Moreover, the above definition should include the *jīva-māyā* and *guṇa-māyā* features, which are indicated in the verse. *Māyā* is not in the *parā-śakti*. This also implies that it is not in the *svarūpa* of the *jīva*, or in the nature of the living being, and this is good news. Were *māyā* part of the *jīva*, there would be no question of being liberated from it.

This explanation of *māyā* defies the monistic view. Monists say that *māyā* is neither *sat* (real), *asat* (false), nor a combination of both. It is different from both, and yet not non-existent. Thus, it is inexplicable, or *anirvacanīyā*, and antagonistic to knowledge. Śaṅkarācārya describes *māyā* as follows:

Māyā is neither *sat* nor *asat*, nor is it a combination of *sat* and *asat*. It is neither different from, nor one with, Brahman, nor is it different from and one with It simultaneously. It does not have limbs or divisions, nor is it without them, nor is it a combination of both of these conditions. *Māyā* is most astonishing and inexplicable. (*Viveka-cūḍāmaṇi* 111)

The reason for such an explanation is due to the fact that radical nondualists do not accept the potencies of Brahman. Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī, however, establishes that the Absolute is full of inconceivable potencies that manifest in multifarious ways. This is a simple fact, yet without acknowledging it, Absolute Reality cannot be comprehended. Because Advaita-vādīs cannot accommodate this fact, they are forced to manufacture complicated definitions. Instead of accepting inconceivable power (*acintya-śakti*), they are forced to accept a power that simply defies description (*anirvacanīyā māyā*), which is a convenient way not to have to adequately account for it. This strategy of theirs is itself inconceivable.

Advaita-vādīs also propose that both *īśvara* and *jīva* are products of *māyā* and at the absolute level there is only formless, unqualified Brahman. The Absolute Person, Śrī Kṛṣṇa however, does not agree with such ideas. Rather, He states that *māyā* His energy and that it is beginningless (SB 11.11.3). Lord Brahmā also confirms this in the Second Canto, “The Lord is the support of both the *vidyā* and *avidyā* features of *māyā*” (SB 2.6.20).

The existence of an entity that can influence Brahman to turn into *īśvara* and *jīva* is impossible as well as inconceivable. We cannot invent a new category different from existence and non-existence (*sat* and *asat*). Kṛṣṇa Himself states in *Bhagavad Gītā* that there is either *sat* or *asat*; there is no third category, as speculated by the monists:

The unreal (*asat*) has no existence and the real (*sat*) has no non-existence. The conclusion about both of these has been seen by the knowers of Truth. (*Gītā* 2.16)

This definition of *māyā* also invalidates the Śākta philosophy. The Śāktas consider Śakti or Devī, who has various forms, to be the supreme controller. She is the *mūla prakṛti*, original nature, and divides herself into *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. She is *mahā-māyā*, who creates Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahmā out of herself and enables them to perform their respective duties. In her

ultimate feature she is *nirguṇa* and called *para-brahman*. There are various branches of the *Śāktas* and they have various types of practices for attaining their goal.

In contrary, *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* clearly indicates that *māyā* cannot exist without the support of Lord Kṛṣṇa. She cannot even face Him (SB 2.7.47). In *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa says, “*māyā* is My divine material energy” (7.14). Since *Bhagavad Gītā* is accepted as authoritative even by the Śāṅkaraites, certainly the claim of the Śāktas is not supported by the *prasthāna-trayī*, the three sources of scriptural authority, which are accepted by all Vedic philosophers.

Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī says that *māyā* can be subdivided into two categories based on her functions. The first is called *jīva-māyā*, the feature of *māyā* that covers the living being’s true nature, or *svarūpa*. He also uses the term *nimittāṁśa*, “efficient or instrumental aspect,” to refer to this subdivision due its being instrumental in covering the living being with ignorance. But it is not sufficient to cover consciousness, or the nature of the living being. To perfect the soul’s bondage she must also provide the material body, senses, and sense objects for the *jīva*’s enjoyment. This is called *guṇa-māyā*, because all this paraphernalia is a transformation of the *guṇas* of *māyā*.

The *guṇa-māyā* feature is also called *upādāna*, or the material aspect, because it supplies the material ingredients. Just as when a man goes to a nightclub, he first gets intoxicated, which covers his intelligence (like *jīva-māyā*); then he gets allured by the sense objects, such as a young woman (comparable to *guṇa-māyā*). That makes his illusion complete. In this way, the attack of *māyā* is two-fold—internal and external. The two features complement and strengthen each other. Thus it is impossible for a conditioned soul to get out of her clutches without assistance from beyond the *guṇas*.

Although *māyā* is real and this world manifested by her is also real, the good news is that the bondage of the *jīva* is not real. Otherwise there would be no possibility of liberation.