Chapter 3
Vivekananda on Māyā

In the October of 1896, Vivekananda gave three lectures in London on *Māyā* titled "Māyā and illusion", "Māyā and the evolution of the conception of God" and "Māyā and freedom." The concept of *Māyā* is essential in Vedanta philosophy and forms an important counterpart to the notion of *ātman*. In one sentence, *Māyā* is identical with space, time and causation. But this synoptic definition conceals a universe of meaning and it is important in the study of Vedānta to understand its manifold aspects. There are physical and psychological textures of meaning. We will also see how the word evolved in the course of India's spiritual history.

Māyā is not a theory. It is a statement of fact, that life is full of contradictions and mysteries. Every human being is confronted by this ocean of *Māyā*. But how to cross it? This is what Vivekananda takes up in his three lectures.

3.1 Māyā and illusion

Vivekananda begins by reminding his listeners that many have probably heard the word before and understood it to mean "illusion, or delusion, or some such thing." But since the concept of *Māyā* is one of the "pillars upon which the Vedānta rests" it is important to go into it further. (BG, 284)

Tracing the idea of *Māyā* to the earliest recordings in the Vedic literature, he says it was used in the sense of magic citing passages like "Indra through his *Māyā* assumed various forms". The idea then developed into a deeper notion. In the later writings, one finds the question "why can't we know the secret of the universe?" "And the answer given was very significant: "Because we talk in vain, and because we are satisfied with the things of the senses, and because we are running after desires; therefore, we as it were cover the Reality with a mist." (BG, 284) This passage comes closer to the meaning of *Māyā*. Expanding on this, Vivekananda says, "Here the word

Māyā is not used at all, but we get the idea that the cause of our ignorance is a kind of mist that has come between us and the Truth." (BG, 284) The Buddhists later used the word to mean Idealism. Thus, the word morphed in meaning from magic to a sort of mist until the great philosopher Shankara in the 6th century CE used it in the sense of space, time and causation. "But the *Māyā* of Vedānta in its last developed form, is neither Idealism nor Realism, nor is it a theory. It is a simple statement of facts - what we are and what we see around us." (BG, 285)

Science is no doubt a wonderful discovery in that it helps us to understand the external world of matter. However, science is limited in its ability to pierce beyond space, time and causation and thus cannot answer the ultimate question of the human heart, namely, what is the secret of the universe? In spite of all claims for a "theory of everything", the scientific mind operates in the realm of *Māyā* and thus cannot go beyond. Vivekananda amplifies this. The universe "exists onlly in relation to my mind, to your mind, and to the mind of everyone else. We see this world with the five senses, but if we had another sense, it would appear as something still different. It has, therefore, no real existence; it has no unchangeable, immovable, infinite existence. Nor can it be called non-existence, seeing that it exists, and we have to work in and through it. It is a mixture of existence and non-existence." (BG, 286)

For every person, life is a series of contradictions. We oscillate from optimism to pessimism. If we are rich, we do not want to hear of poverty. If we are poor, we do not want to hear that the world is fine. "Then, there is the tremendous fact of death," says Vivekananda. Everything is going towards death and yet we all cling to life. And this is *Māyā*.

In a series of poetic passages highlighting these contradictions that face us every day, Vivekananda underscores the contradictory aspect of *Māyā*. There is the love of the mother for the child, even though the child may grow up to be a violent brute. Then there is the mad pursuit after the "Golden Fleece." Day after day, month after month, we can see the mad frenzy of the human race. No one stops to ask what is all this about. "Animals are living upon plants, men upon animals and, worst of all, upon one another, the strong upon the weak. This is going on everywhere. And this is *Māyā*." (BG, 288)

Vivekananda gave these lectures more than a century ago, and yet his diagnosis of the human dilemma resonates with the way things are today. "Machines are making things cheap, making for progress and evolution, but millions are crushed, that one may become rich; while one becomes rich, thousands at the same time become poorer and poorer, and whole masses of human beings are made slaves. That is the way it is going on." (BG, 289)

This is the contradiction confronting man. We speak about progress and evolution. But is it really? One has only to survey recent history and especially the atrocities of the two world wars to know about man's inhumanity to fellow man. This is *Māyā*. The common man "does not know how man

becomes a thousand times more diabolical than any other animal, with all his vain knowledge and with all his pride. Thus it is that, as we emerge out of the senses, we develop higher powers of enjoyment and at the same time we have to develop higher powers of suffering too." (BG, 289) This amplifies the age-old teaching that one cannot have pleasure without pain. Using a mathematical simile, Vivekananda concludes that "if we increase our power to become happy in arithmetical progression, we shall increase, on the other hand, our power to become miserable in geometrical progression. We who are progressing know that the more we progress, the more avenues are opened to pain as well as pleasure. And this is *Māyā*." (BG, 290)

Māyā is philosophical realism. It is not a theory. It is a statement of fact that these contradictions are there in every moment of our waking life. That in everything, opposites co-exist. Vivekananda elaborates further. "*Māyā* 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, wherever there is life, death must follow as a shadow, and everyone who smiles will have to weep, and vice-versa." (BG, 290)

It is this philosophical realism that often leads to the label of the philosopher as being a pessimist. But in Vedānta philosophy, the understanding of *Māyā* is an essential component. Awareness of these contradictions, the co-existence of the opposites, will lead us to approach them in a more mature manner. Awareness of the problem is the first step towards its solution. Only a child will take a world view in binary categories, as 'good' and 'evil'. These do not have an independent existence, but only are in the way we relate ourselves to them. Vivekananda expands this thought. "The Vedānta philosophy is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It voices both these views and takes things as they are. It admits that this world is a mixture of good and evil, happiness and misery, and that to increase the one, one must of necessity increase the other. There will never be a perfectly good or bad world, because the very idea is a contradiction in terms. The great secret revealed by this analysis is that good and bad are not two cut-and-dried, separate existences. There is not one thing in this world of ours which you can label as good and good alone. The very same phenomenon which is appearing to be good now, may appear to be bad tomorrow. The same thing which is producing misery in one, may produce happiness in another. The fire that burns the child, may cook a good meal for a starving man." (BG, 290)

Does this then mean that there is no point in pursuing good, as it is somehow intertwined with evil? What then is the use of philosophy? What then is the use of doing good work? Vivekananda answers this as follows. "We must work for lessening misery, for that is the only way to make ourselves happy. Every one of us finds it out sooner or later in our lives. The bright ones find it out a little earlier, and the dull ones a little later. The dull ones pay very dearly for the discovery and the bright ones less dearly. In the sec-

ond place, we must do our part, because that is the only way of getting out of this life of contradiction." (BG, 291)

Here we see the important idea of *detachment*. This becomes the underlying idea of *karma yoga*, the yoga of action. In Sanskrit, the word is *tyaga* often translated as renunciation. A more accurate translation would be detachment. The central thesis of karma yoga is that we should work for good, but should not be attached to the fruits of our work. This is a difficult thing to understand, and even more difficult to practice, but as Vivekananda says, it is not easy to be a philosopher.

Even in the teachings of the Buddha, we find the same idea enunciated in his famous *madhya mārga* or the middle path. Buddha would say, "do not go to extremes" but follow the middle path. This is not an academic teaching from the lips of the Buddha but the quintessence of his own experience. Born as a prince in the lap of luxury and enjoyment, he sought out wisdom by following the path of the ascetic that taught that starvation of the senses is the means of enlightenment. The Buddha followed this path only to find himself on the edge of death. Legends tell us that at that moment, a little girl by the name of Sujatha offered him a bowl of rice pudding which he ate and this enabled him to revive from delerium. From that day onwards, he taught about the middle path. Seeing how life is full of contradictions and how opposites co-exist, this is indeed sage advice. We must use our wisdom.

Thus, the theory of *Māyā* underscores that life is full of contradictions. But we may not be willing to accept this. We may dream of pleasure without pain, happiness without misery. With a profound seriousness, Vivekananda says, "Both the forces of good and evil will keep the universe alive for us, until we awake from our dreams and give up this building of mud pies. That lesson we shall have to learn, and it will take a long, long time to learn it." (BG, 291)

The solution to the problem of *Māyā* is renunciation (*tyāga*). Quoting from the text *Vairāgyasatakam* of Brtrihari, Vivekananda says "There comes a time when the mind awakes from this long and dreary dream ... It finds the truth of the statement, 'Desire is never satisfied by the enjoyment of desires, it only increases the more, as fire when butter is poured upon it.' This is true of all sense enjoyments, of intellectual enjoyments, and of all the enjoyments of which the human mind is capable. They are nothing, they are within *Māyā*, within this network beyond which we cannot go. We may run therein through infinite time and find no end and whenever we struggle to get a little enjoyment, a mass of misery falls upon us." (BG, 292)

Happiness is followed by unhappiness and the whole of life is a cyclic recurrence of these two. The pragmatic individual may say that we should look at the bright side and bear with the misery when it occurs. But the mind of the philosopher is unsatisfied with this approach. For he or she sees how human life is entangled in this *Māyā*. Is there then no solution?

Māyā is a psychological phenomenon. As such, it must be approached psychologically, not by fanaticism but by patience and equanimity, through

renunciation. Vivekananda reiterates. "Let me repeat, once more, that the Vedāntic position is neither pessimism nor optimism. It does not say that this world is all evil or all good. It says that our evil is of no less value than our good, and our good of no more value than our evil. They are bound together. This is the world, and knowing this, you work with patience." (BG, 293)

The agnostics have also recognized that the nature of the world is *Māyā*. "They tell us to be satisfied and enjoy life," Vivekananda says. "Here, again, is a mistake, a tremendous mistake, a most illogical mistake. And it is this. What do you mean by life? Do you mean only the life of the senses? ... Our feelings, thoughts, and aspirations are all part and parcel of our life; and is not the struggle towards the great ideal, towards perfection, one of the most important components of what we call life? ... The agnostic position takes this life, *minus* the ideal component, to be all that exists. And this, the agnostic claims, cannot be reached, therefore he must give up the search." (BG, 293)

This is the position of Kant. The external world is unknown and unknowable. Kant said that the "thing in itself" could never be known. Therefore, the human being must give up the search. But Vedānta's position with the theory of *Māyā* begins where Kant left off.

Vivekananda says that all religions are more or less attempts at solving the problem of *Māyā*. "All religions are more or less attempts to get beyond nature - the crudest or the most developed, expressed through mythology or symbology, stories of gods, angels or demons, or through stories of saints and seers, great men or prophets, or through the abstractions of philosophy - all have that one object, all are trying to go beyond these limitations. In one word, they are all struggling towards freedom." (BG, 294)

This struggle towards freedom, Vivekananda says, has led to the concept of a Personal God, who is beyond *Māyā*, beyond space, time and causation. But Vedānta does not stop there. "This *Māyā* is everywhere. It is terrible. Yet we have to work through it. ... The way is not with *Māyā*, but *against* it. ... The whole history of humanity is a continuous fight against the so-called laws of nature, and man gains in the end. Coming to the internal world, there too the same fight is going on, the fight between the animal man and the spiritual man, between light and darkness; and here too man becomes victorious. He, as it were, cuts his way out of nature to freedom." (BG, 294)

It should be stressed that this journey towards freedom is a psycho-spiritual journey. The idea of a Personal God who is outside of *Māyā* may be a help in this journey. But Vedānta does not stop there. "The idea grows and grows until the Vedāntist finds that He who, he thought, was standing outside, is he himself and is in reality within. He is the one who is free, but who through limitation thought he was bound." (BG, 295) So the ultimate end is this ideal of freedom, when we realize our infinite dimension, the Reality within.

In Indian philosophy, this is humorously expressed when the Vedāntist says "I was an atheist until I realised I was God!" Joking aside, this is very profound. The first 'I' is the ego personality. The second 'I' is the 'ripe ego' of Ramakrishna and the third 'I' is the ātman.

In this lecture, I believe that Vivekananda reveals an inner spiritual experience. It is said that during his itinerant days in India, he would meditate deeply on the Upanishads and the problems of Vedānta. On one such occasion, I believe he had the vision of the Upanishadic school. Speaking about the problem of *Māyā*, he says, "I see before me, as it were, that in some of those forest retreats this question is being discussed by those ancient sages of India and in one of them, where even the oldest and the holiest fail to reach the solution, a young man stands up in the midst of them, and declares, "Hear, ye children of immortality, hear, ye who live in the highest places. I have found the way. By knowing Him who is beyond darkness we can go beyond death."" (BG, 294) The verse is fom the Svetasvatara Upanishad.

3.2 Māyā and the evolution of the concept of God

In his second lecture on *Māyā*, Vivekananda traces how the idea arose in the Vedic period. Often, when we go back in history, we are repelled at some of the customs and beliefs of the period but we forget that people's ideas are also evolving just as much as their physical bodies. He underscores this as follows. "In judging others we always judge them by our own ideals. This is not as it should be. Everyone must be judged according to his own ideal and not by that of anyone else. In our dealings with our fellow beings we constantly labour under this mistake, and I am of the opinion that the vast majority of our quarrels with one another arise simply from this one cause." (BG, 296) This seems not only an important academic observation essential for any scholar or historian but also for the common people in their daily dealings. We judge others from our own standpoint. We imagine their motives for action to be the same as our motives rarely realizing that even though outwardly the actions may be the same, the motive may be different. It is this quality that is essential for the philosophical mind. Observing this human frailty, Vivekananda cautions that "in judging of those ancient religions we must not take the standpoint to which we incline, but must put ourselves into the position of thought and life of those early times." (BG, 297)

Citing various examples from ancient religions, he says that Vedānta attempts to find the underlying theme in all of the religions in their conception of God. Many religions begin with some form of a wrathful and vengeful God and slowly this evolves into a loving, Personal God. This was how the ancients dealt with the problem of evil. Ideas of morality and ethics are needed for communities of people to live together harmoniously. Thus

evolved the idea of restraint. Vivekananda explains. "There is one impulse in our minds which says, do. Behind it rises another voice which says, do not. There is one set of ideas in our mind which is always struggling to get outside through the channels of the senses, and behind that, although it may be thin and weak, there is an infinitely small voice which says, do not go outside." (BG, 298)

Two words in Sanskrit, *pravritti* and *nivritti* translated as "circling outward" and "circling inward" convey this tendency of the mind. Vivekananda says, "Religion begins with this circling inward. Religion begins with this "do not". Spirituality begins with this "do not". When the "do not" is not there, religion has not begun. And this "do not" came, causing men's ideas to grow, despite the fighting gods which they worshipped." (BG, 298)

Thus the idea of restraint, which identifies a higher power of the mind, came into the consciousness of humanity. "The whole social fabric," explains Vivekananda, "is based upon that idea of restraint, and we all know that the man or woman who has not learnt the great lesson of bearing and forbearing leads a most miserable life." (BG, 299) In this way, the ancient cultures replaced their wrathful and vengeful god with a more ethical and loving god. Unfortunately, this still did not solve the problem of evil. Analysing the modern predicament of man, Vivekananda says that "as the explanation assumed greater proportions, the difficulty which it sought to solve did the same. If the qualities of god increased in arithmetical progression, the difficulty and doubt increased in geometrical progression." (BG, 299) He diagnoses the predicament of modern man thus. "Ideals come into our head far beyond the limit of our sense-ideals, but when we seek to express them, we cannot do so. Yet if I give up all ideality, and merely struggle through this world, my existence is that of a brute, and I degenerate and degrade myself. Neither way is happiness. Unhappiness is the fate of those who are content to live in this world, born as they are. A thousand times greater misery is the fate of those who dare to stand forth for truth and for higher things and who dare to ask for something higher than mere brute existence here." (BG, 300)

Everyone in their heart of hearts understands this. That life seems to be an eternal play of contradictions. On the one hand there is something that says we must aspire higher. On the other, our animal past keeps pulling us down. This eternal tension between *nivritti* and *pravritti* is a fact. This is *Māyā*.

Vivekananda elaborates. "This standing between knowledge and ignorance, this mystic twilight, the mingling of truth and falsehood - and where they meet - no one knows. ... This is the fate of all sense-knowledge. This is the fate of all philosophy, of all boasted science, of all boasted human knowledge."

Vedanta says that consciousness is trapped in the meshes of space, time and causation (*desa, kāla, nimitta*) which we have already said is what is meant by *Māyā*. Later philosophers reduced this three-fold aspect of *Māyā*

to a two-fold one and called it name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*). "Everything that has form, everything that calls up an idea in your mind, is within *Māyā*, for everything that is bound by the laws of time, space, and causation is within *Māyā*," explains Vivekananda (BG, 301). Analysing the notion of *Māyā* deeper, Vedānta found that the idea of Personal God is insufficient to explain it. "The philosophy of India was compelled to admit this," confirms Vivekananda. Then he makes the forceful claim that "The Vedānta was (and is) the boldest system of religion. it stopped nowhere." (BG, 302) The reader will recall that Vivekananda's view of Vedānta is similar to the way we view science, as a method to understand the physical universe. For Vivekananda, Vedānta is a method to understand both the internal world of mind and the external world of the universe. It is an all-embracing method. Highlighting the fact that India enjoyed religious freedom from time immemorial, he says that Vedānta was able to reach an ultimate solution in its ideas of *ātman* and *Brahman* not as a Personal God but as the Impersonal Absolute.

Contrasting the virtues of West and the East, Vivekanda says, "here in the West, society is very free. Social matters in India are very strict, but religious opinion is free." Then, with his characteristic humor, he says, "In England a man may dress any way he likes, or eat what he likes - no one objects, but if he misses attending church, then Mrs. Grundy is down on him." (BG, 302) In India, the social norms are strict but there was freedom in religious thought so that religions of every stripe have found a home in India. Finally, he says, "In India, we have to take off the shackles from society; in Europe, the chains must be taken from the feet of spiritual progress. Then will come a wonderful growth and development of man." This is the ideal for the 21st century. Holding this ideal vision, Vivekananda says, If we discover that there is one unity running through all these developments, spiritual, moral, and social, we shall find that religion, in the fullest sense of the word, must come into society, and into our everyday life. In the light of Vedānta you will understand that all sciences are but manifestations of religion, and so is everything that exists in this world." (BG, 303)

Thus, Vedānta is not a religion, nor is it a philosophy. It is a method to understand our world, both the inner and the outer. As such, it includes all aspects of human endeavour. Surveying the history of the human race, Vivekananda gives his analysis as follows. "We never build anew, we simply change places; we cannot have anything new, we only change the position of things. The seed grows into the tree, patiently and gently; we must direct our energies towards the truth, and fulfil the truth that exists, not try to make new truths. Thus, instead of denouncing these old ideas of God as unfit for modern times, the ancient sages began to seek out the reality that was in them. The result was the Vedānta philosophy, and out of the old deities, out of the monotheistic God, the Ruler of the universe, they found yet higher and higher ideas in what is called the Impersonal Absolute; they found oneness throughout the universe." (BG, 304)

3.3 *Māyā* and freedom

In his third lecture on *Māyā*, Vivekananda begins with a poetic refrain on life and its contradictions, how every human being plunges headlong into happiness, hoping against hope and finding at last, at the end of life that it was a vanishing dream. "Like moths hurling themselves against the flame, we are hurling ourselves again and again insto sense pleasures, hoping to find satisfaction there. We return again and again with freshened energy, thus we go on, till crippled and cheated we die. And this is *Māyā*." (BG, 306)

In his sequence of literary portraits on the human condition, Vivekananda now underscores the psychological aspect of *Māyā*. We look at the world through the mist of our own past conditioning, our prejudices and our preconceived notions. We project these outward onto persons, places and things. This psychological tendency is also *Māyā*.

Our psychological tendencies are called *samskāras* in Sanskrit. They are the root of human bondage and are responsible for all of our difficulties. Our struggles in life are really struggles for freedom from this psychological bondage. Surveying the whole of the life of man, Vivekananda writes, "Time, the avenger of everything comes , and nothing is left. He swallows up the saint and the sinner, the king and the peasant, the beautiful and the ugly; he leaves nothing. Everything is rushing towards that one goal, destruction. Our knowledge, our arts, our sciences, everything is rushing towards it. None can stem the tide, none can hold it back for a minute. We may try to forget it, in the same way that persons in a plague-stricken city try to create oblivion by drinking, dancing, and other vain attempts, and so becoming paralysed. So we are trying to forget, trying to create oblivion by all sorts of sense pleasures. And this is *Māyā*." (BG, 307)

There is a nice story that illustrates this phenomenon. It is to be seen as the counterpart of Shankara's snake and the rope image. A monk was walking along a river and he sees a blanket floating in it. Thinking how wonderful it would be to have a blanket to shield him in the winter months, he dives in to retrieve it. He finds that he is caught by it and begins to cry for help. Passers by tell him to let go of that blanket and swim away. But then he cries, "It's not a blanket. ... It's a bear!" So it is with all of us. We project our ideal outward onto persons, places or things and find it is not there. But by the time we find out, we are entangled and cannot extricate ourselves from it. And this is *Māyā*.

Philosophical reflection begins with this sobering admission of our psychological entanglement. But it should not end there. Many philosophies come to the same conclusions but offer no way out. This is what gives philosophy its pessimistic coloring. However, bold we must be in our assessments and bold we must be if we are to move forward towards a solution to this problem of human bondage.

Looking back at world philosophies, Vivekananda writes that two ways have been proposed to deal with this problem. The first is what is commonly known as "pragmatic philosophy." This remedy is essentially to ignore the problem. " 'Make hay while the sun shines,' as the proverb says. It is all true, it is a fact but do not mind it. Seize the few pleasures you can, do what little you can, do not think at the dark side of the picture, but always towards the hopeful, the positive side." (BG, 307)

There is some wisdom in this approach. Hope and a positive outlook are good motive powers for work. But this simplistic approach, Vivekananda says, will not solve the problem in the long run. "We cannot hide a carrion with roses, it is impossible. It would not avail long; for soon the roses fade, and the carrion would be worse than ever before. So with our lives. We may try to cover our old and festering sores with cloth of gold, but there comes a day when the cloth of gold is removed, and the sore in all its ugliness is revealed." (BG, 308)

This realization is the beginning of religion in its truest sense of the word and not in its dogmatic or theistic sense. Vivekananda says, "He alone can be religious who dares say, as the mighty Buddha once said under the Bo-tree, when this idea of practicality appeared before him and he saw that it was nonsense, and yet could not find a way out. When temptation came to him, to give up his search after truth, to go back to the world and live the old life of fraud, calling things by wrong names, telling lies to oneself and to everybody, he, the giant, conquered it and said, 'Death is better than a vegetating ignorant life; it is better to die on the battle-field than to live a life of defeat.' This is the basis of religion." (BG, 309)

According to Vedānta, all religions evolved to solve this problem. But in the course of time, they degenerated into ritual and custom. They became dogmatic. But real religion is this bold assertion about the nature of things and a firm determination to hew a way out of this tangle of *Māyā*.

Urging us to see the essential aspect of religion, Vivekananda elaborates. "That is what every religion preaches, and the duty of Vedānta is to harmonise all these aspirations, to make manifest the common ground between all the religions of the world, the highest as well as the lowest. What we call the most arrant superstition and the highest philosophy really have a common aim in that they both try to show the way out of the same difficulty, and in most cases this way is through the help of some one who is not himself bound by the laws of nature, in one word, some one who is free." (BG, 309)

This is the idea of a "Personal God" which is the common denominator of all religions. In one sweeping unifying principle, Vivekananda enables us to understand all religions, from the most primitive tribal practices to the most sophisticated academic treatises. They are all after freedom. They are all trying to present to us the solution of human bondage by presenting something or someone who is free. "In spite of all the difficulties and differences of opinion about the nature of the one free agent, whether he is a Personal God, or a sentient being like man, whether masculine, feminine, or

neuter - and the discussions have been endless - the fundamental idea is the same. ... This golden thread has been traced, revealed little by little to our view, and the first step to this revelation is the common ground that all are advancing towards freedom." (BG, 309)

This struggle for freedom is not confined to religion. All human endeavour, says Vivekananda, is a movement towrds freedom. Whether he knows it or not, all of our experiences, our pains, our pleasures, have this one end in view. In the midst of all these oscillations, we all feel in our heart of hearts that we are free and we hear that voice of freedom. With this realisation, everything changes.

Vivekananda says, "What happens then? The scene begins to shift. As soon as you know the voice and understand what it is, the whole scene changes. The same world which was the ghastly battle-field of *Māyā* is now changed into something good and beautiful. We no longer weep and wail. As soon as we understand the voice, we see the reason why this struggle should be here, this fight, this competition, this difficulty, this cruelty, these little pleasures and joys; we see that they are in the nature of things, because without them, there would be no going towards the voice, to attain which we are destined, whether we know it or not. All human life, all nature, therefore, is struggling to attain freedom." (BG, 310)

Vedānta gives the example of a thorn being used to remove another thorn to describe its solution to the problem of *Māyā*. The thorn of *Māyā* is stuck on our foot. We take the thorn of Vedānta to remove it. Once removed, we throw both of the thorns away. Vedānta is thus viewed as the science of all religions. The way to transcend this world of relativity is through this universal understanding of the underlying pervasive psychological principle. The Gita puts it very poetically. It says, *vedā avedā bhavati*. That is, the sacred *Vedā* becomes *Avedā*, that is irrelevant. it is quite a pronouncement on the sacred literature. The purpose of Vedānta is not to seek worship, but to liberate the human being.

But Vedānta does not stop at the idea of a Personal God, which is the common denominator of all religions. It declares that what we are seeking is the nearest of the near, the *ātman* within. "The God of heaven becomes the God in nature, and the God in nature becomes the God who is nature, and the God who is nature becomes the God within this temple of the body, and God dwelling in the temple of the body at last becomes the temple itself, becomes the soul and man - and there it reaches the last words it can teach. He whom the sages have been seeking in all these places is in our own human hearts." (BG, 311)

This has been echoed by many other Eastern philosophers. Lao-Tsu said that "the longest journey is from the head to the heart." At last, the seeker of truth finds the truth within, in his own heart, as the Self within. This is the solution of Vedānta.

"Nature never has power over you, " says Vivekananda. "Like a frightened child you were dreaming that it was throttling you, and the release

from this fear is the goal; not only to see it intellectually, but to perceive it, actualise it, much more definitely than we perceive this world. Then we shall know that we are free." (BG, 312)

This is the constant refrain of Indian philosophy. The intellectual ideas must be realised, must become part of our experience, nay, must become the fibre of our very being. Religion is realisation.

This is the solution to the problem of *Māyā*. Until we realise this goal, it is a struggle. But we can view this struggle in a different light, says Vivekananda. "Then, and then alone, will all difficulties vanish, then will all the perplexities of the heart be smoothed away, all crookedness made straight, then will vanish the delusion of manifoldness and nature; and *Māyā*, instead of being a horrible, hopeless dream, as it is now, will become beautiful, and this earth, instead of being a prison-house, will become our playground; and even dangers and difficulties, even all our sufferings, will become deified and show us their real nature, will show us that being everything, as the substance of everything, He is standing, and that he is the one real Self." (BG, 312)

Ramakrishna did not call it 'He' but rather 'She'. His name for the Self was 'The Divine Mother.' However we want to refer to the underlying reality, whether as masculine, feminine or neuter, the goal is this freedom. And this freedom is achieved by changing our perspective, says Vedānta. *Māyā* is the thorn and Vedānta is the other thorn used to remove it. Having removed the thorn, we throw both of the thorns away. Then we transcend this world of space, time and causation, this world of *Māyā*.

Vedānta claims that bhakti, or the yoga of devotion is essential for the mind to rise higher. Having a personal relation to the object of knowledge, opens a secret door. This is what is called "knowledge by identity".

Aurobindo elaborates: "In reality, all experience is in its secret nature knowledge by identity; but its true character is hidden from us because we have separated ourselves from the rest of the world by exclusion, by the distinction of our self as subject and everything else as object, and we are compelled to develop processes and organs by which we may again enter into communion with all that we have excluded. We have to replace direct knowledge through conscious identity by an indirect knowledge which appears to be caused by physical contact and mental sympathy. This limitation is a fundamental creation of the ego." (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 580)

To summarise, no single view or system can encompass the cosmos and manifold experiences of the human psyche. It must be admitted that mind is in evolution. Vedanta begins with the premise that there is something deeper than what is perceived either by the senses or the mind. But the way to discover this is through the mind. The "book" we must learn to read is our own mind. As a scientist uses the reasoning faculty combined with intuition, so also the seeker after knowledge must combine both. Vedanta is not a system, but rather a psychic journey. It is a journey of the mind. Just as science is not a finished system but is evolving, so also Vedanta represents

the spiritual knowledge in evolution. Just as science is a method, Vedanta is a method and according to Vivekananda, it includes science since it takes the whole universe of human experience for its field of investigation.

It is reflection that needs to be cultivated. Knowledge by identity is what is called meditation. Radhakrishnan explains it as follows. "Meditation is the way to self-discovery. By it, we turn our mind homeward and establish contact with the creative center. To know the truth, we have to deepen ourselves and not merely widen the surface. Silence and quiet are necessary for the profound alternation of our being and they are not easy in our age. ... What is called *tapas* is a persistent endeavor ... It is a gathering up of all dispersed energies, the intellectual powers, the heart's emotions, the vital desires, nay, the very physical being itself and concentrating them all on the supreme goal. The rapidity of the process depends on the intensity of the aspiration, the zeal of the mind." (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 633)

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