THE ROLE OF MĀYĀ IN MAN'S EVOLUTION

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The Blavatsky Lecture, 1986

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THE BLAVATSKY LECTURE
delivered at the Annual Convention of
the Theosophical Society in England at the
College of Ripon and York, St John, Ripon
29 July 1986

The Theosophical Society in England
50 Gloucester Place, London W1H 3HJ

Introduction

Early in the study of the esoteric tradition known as Theosophy the student sees that it presents a vast panorama of the universe and everything in it in a state of continuous motion. This motion is qualified as evolutionary: the manifested universe and its contents are seen advancing and unfolding in accordance with some teleological purpose not fully discernible. Theosophy affirms, therefore, that the drift of the universe is not random but exhibits design. The pre-eminent exposition of this concept is set out in Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*. That she did not write this long work so that the student might become merely an informed observer of the universal process soon becomes apparent to the thoughtful reader. Rather, man is seen not so much an observer but a contributor to, a participator, in the universal process. The metaphysical basis for this notion is the concept, fundamental to the theosophical position, that man is the microcosmic reflection of the universe. The principles that constitute the universe similarly shape and are at work in man; for a long time in his evolutionary history he is aware of those of his principles that are experienced as the physical and psychological 'me'. His task is to reduce and eliminate this personal self and see it as energies ranging from the physical to the psychological surrounding an inner centre of reality for which there is no ultimately satisfactory and all-sufficient name.

At the heart of this concept of man and nature is what Madame Blavatsky* calls in the first of three 'Fundamental Propositions' in the Proem of *The Secret Doctrine*[1], 'an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable Principle' which is the ground for everything in manifestation, from the universe to man. It is the same ground, on the one hand, for the energies and many particles found by physicists in this century to constitute the atom that have dislodged finally the concept of that once thought to be so solid building block of the universe; and on the other, it is that same ground of man's inner nature, abiding through all changes in the so-called outer man.

Man, in the theosophical synthesis, takes up his role of participator in the universal process as he consciously and deliberately begins the long journey and adventure of self-discovery, and the testing of the proposition and its eventual realization that he *is*, indeed, rooted in the ultimate Real. Simultaneously with the moving towards, and entering, that transforming experience, his appreciation and understanding of his environment is extended and very much altered as we will presently see.

By 'environment' is meant the world he lives in, his circumstances, the flow of events and objects in space and time about him. We are presented in *The Secret Doctrine* with a detailed description of the vast procession of objects, events, forms, all of them changing, coming into view, then disappearing. H.P.B. bears out the ancient idea that through all the play

*Hereinafter H.P.B.

and hurry of the cosmos and its contents an emerging design and pattern defeat the notion of a chaotic and purposeless universe.

The Notion of Māyā

However, very early in the same work she stresses that though it outlines the sequence of manifestation in an interesting, not to say remarkable manner, a vital feature of the esoteric tradition contains the notion that all manifestation is to be regarded as illusion. Illusion is the usual translation of the Sanskrit word *māyā*. Yet although she uses this definition of the Sanskrit H.P.B. presents important qualifications to the word to help the student fathom the subject matter in her major work. She brings out much more of the meaning of the term when she writes: 'Māyā or Illusion, is an element which enters into all finite things, for everything that exists has only a relative, not an absolute, reality, since the appearance which the hidden noumenon assumes for any observer depends upon his power of cognition ...' Nothing is permanent except the one hidden absolute Existence which contains in itself the noumena of all realities. The existences belonging to every plane of being, up to the highest Dhyan Chohans, are, comparatively, like the shadows cast by a magic lantern on a colourless screen. Nevertheless all things are relatively real, for the cognizer is also a reflection, and the things cognized are therefore as real to him as himself. Whatever reality things possess, must be looked for in them before or after they have passed like a flash through the material world; for we cannot cognize any such existence directly, so long as we have sense instruments which bring only material existences into the field of our consciousness. Whatever plane our consciousness may be acting in, both we and the things belonging to that plane are, for the time being, our only realities. But as we rise in the scale of development, we perceive that in the stages through which we have passed, we mistook shadows for realities, and that the upward progress of the Ego is a series of progressive awakenings, each advance bringing with it the idea that now at last, we have reached "reality"; but only when we have reached absolute Consciousness, and blended our own with it, shall we be free from the delusions produced by Māyā.[2]

The foregoing paragraph may be regarded as one of the key passages in *The Secret Doctrine*. It is not the only place where we may find statements concerning the universe as māyāvic in character. In the section called, the Summing Up, we find these words: 'The Universe with everything in it, is called Māyā, because all is temporary therein, from the ephemeral life of a fire-fly to that of the sun. Compared to the eternal immutability of the One, and the changelessness of that Principle, the Universe, with its evanescent ever-changing forms, must be necessarily, in the mind of the philosopher, no better than a Will-o'-the-wisp. Yet the Universe is real enough to the conscious beings in it, which are as unreal as it is itself.'[3]

These two passages, among others having reference to māyā, it is

suggested, are firmly supported, indeed, founded on what their author calls Three Fundamental Propositions, which have previously been referred to. These Propositions are among the most celebrated passages in that whole voluminous work. They are, she declares, crucial to the understanding of the occult tradition. She urges the reader to study and reflect carefully on these '. . .few fundamental conceptions which underlie and pervade the entire system of thought to which his attention is invited. These basic ideas are few in number but on their clear comprehension depends the understanding of all that follows.'[4]

The First Fundamental Proposition proposes an ultimate Reality forming the ground of all manifestation about which, she admits, a full and final definition is impossible. She calls it 'an omnipresent, eternal, boundless and Immutable Principle, on which all speculation is impossible . . . [and] which antecedes all manifested, conditioned Being'. The Second Proposition – 'affirms', she says, 'the manifesting and disappearing of 'numberless universes' in accordance with a universal law of periodicity whose functioning is illustrated in innumerable ways such as the cycle of day and night, sleeping and waking, the birth and death of stars and systems etc. The Third Proposition states that man, rooted in the Real as postulated in the First Proposition, progresses towards the realization of that supreme fact about his whole nature by means of a long series of experiences and incarnations.

This summary of the Propositions is not to be thought of as conveying anything more than a glimpse of what is stated in them. They are mentioned because of their bearing on the subject of this lecture: māyā and its role in man's evolution. It would appear from reading them carefully that various phrases and words do point towards the concept of māyā, and in so doing enlarge our understanding of the meaning of illusion. Let us illustrate this: in the First Proposition part of the writer's task was to try to describe the nature of that which she calls the 'One Absolute Reality'. This she admits cannot be done. Rather in the manner of the ancient Hindu and Buddhist writers, phrases are used that state what Reality is not. Thus she says this Reality 'transcends the power of human conception' and is beyond man's perception. What he perceives, what he can take in, is the phenomenal world by means of his senses, the use of reason, and the employing of instrumentation. What he is doing is measuring his environment.

'Measuring' is an additional qualification to the definition of māyā, whose root, 'mā', means just that. H.P.B. is saying, then, in the First Proposition that the 'One Absolute Reality . . . antecedes all manifested, conditioned Being'. The world about us, the world of measurable, shifting, appearances, is the māyāvic realm, which according to our capacity to take in manifestation, seems set over and against the Reality postulated in the First Proposition.

We find this notion is carried further in the Third Proposition where we

read that '. . . the plane of manifestation' and all its contents 'are viewed by metaphysical antiphrasis as illusive and māyāvic'. Continuing, she says, 'For although the root of every atom . . . and of every form . . . is the . . . One Reality, still, in its manifested and temporary appearance, it is no better than an evanescent illusion of our senses'.[5]. This, of course, is not the way we evaluate and experience the world we wake up to every day of our lives. We regard it as very real, sometimes wonderful, other times very much the reverse.

At this point it is frequently asked, 'If the world is an illusion, how is it possible for man to advance towards Self-knowledge – the goal placed before man – when he himself seems to be a part of the same all-pervading māyā'? Further understanding of the concept of māyā, it is thought, can clarify the nature of the challenge before him.

Man's task is to know and experience the primal truth about himself. He will achieve this task as he assesses the māyāvic nature of the world about him and how it beclouds perception of the Real within himself. The second part of the task that follows on immediately is the search for the means to counteract the influence and strength of māyā and thus awaken to the abiding reality. In the final portion of this essay we will explore how this task may be effected. To that end, we will look at some additional notions about māyā.

The Significance of Māyā

As an aid to grasping the significance and meaning of the profound features of the occult tradition, H.P.B. did not hesitate to use metaphors which might stimulate that higher cognitive power in man called buddhi or intuition. She wrote that theosophical concepts at a certain level of their understanding require the employment of man's higher faculties. Symbols and metaphors may offer guidance to man immersed in the māyāvic world. So she uses, for instance, the familiar metaphor of the world as a stage and drama when she writes: 'During the great mystery and drama of life, known as the Manvantara, real Kosmos is like the objects placed behind the white screen upon which shadows are thrown . . . Men and things are thus but the reflections, on the white field, of the realities behind the snares of Mahāmāyā, or the Great Illusion.'[6]

One is reminded of Plato's parable of the cave. Men were so placed in the cave they could only look at the wall which was illumined by the sunlight outside. Life embodied in all sorts of forms moved outside and were reflected as moving shadows on the cave's wall, prompting the cave's prisoners to guess, speculate, and perhaps even to form philosophies as to their significance. Yet seeing only two-dimensional shadows, they could not know the truth, the reality that existed beyond that pantomime. Not until they freed themselves from the cave.

In what is known as the Kashmir school of Shaivism, or more correctly as

the Advaita Shaiva philosophy of Kashmir, we find in one of its texts the metaphor of the mirror. In Dr I. K. Taimni's translation of *The Secret of Self-Realization (Pratyabhijña Hridayam)* in the second of its twenty succinct verses we read: 'This Reality emerging as Divine Power (shakti), by Her own independent Will unfolds the manifested universe on the screen of Her own consciousness'.[7] The universe in this school is a projection, a mental phenomenon, emerging at the opening of the manvantara drama. 'Her own consciousness' means that the Ultimate Reality needs nothing other than itself to set the manvantara and all its events and processes in motion. If it did, then the monistic position of this school would be changed into that of a dualism. We are going into the philosophy of this school a little further because it offers an explanation, philosophically at least, for the source and energy of māyā. Professor Jaideva Singh in his introduction to his translation of the same text quotes a verse from a Shaivite sage: 'When the Absolute feels like [manifesting] the universe contained in Him, the first vibration of this Will is known as Shiva'.[8] That Will when it becomes operative at the manvantara's commencement, becomes Shakti, force, the creative aspect of Shiva. Another Shaivite mystic puts it this way: 'When He becomes intent to roll out the entire splendour of the Universe that is contained in His heart (in a germinal form) he is designated Shakti'. Shakti is, therefore, his intentness to create, and is, writes Professor Jaideva Singh, the active or kinetic aspect of consciousness.

Manifestation cannot be thought of as a museum filled with cases and exhibits of every object because māyā is not static: it seems 'wavelike', observes H.P.B.[9] Māyā therefore, one suggests, is in some way linked to Shakti. Man lives in a dynamic universe.

Although H.P.B. could and did draw on philosophers from the past and in more recent generations whose views lent support to aspects of the occult tradition, she was not able to find much in western science to assist her. Western physics in her time, the late Victorian era, seemed to convey an air, an assumption, that the mysteries of matter had been largely cleared up. It is reported that when Max Planck, one of the founders of the Quantum Theory, wanted around 1870 to study physics, the head of the department at his university tried to put him off by telling him, 'Physics is a branch of knowledge that is just about complete. The important discoveries, all of them, have been made. It is hardly worth entering physics any more.'[10] It was believed then that the atoms of material substances and forms were in themselves the solid, building blocks of the universe and everything in it including man and not subject to further division. They were ruled by the same laws formulated by Newton. From the seventeenth century the solar system was viewed as a superb, awesome, and beautiful machine. As scientists with supporting technologies developed the means to explore the heavens beyond the solar system, the basic notion of matter as indivisible pellets accompanied their thinking and entered the summations of their findings. The same notion was held and not to any degree lessened as they

explored with ever more innovative instruments the minutiae of the phenomenal world.

It may be suggested here that the then current views about the nature of matter, scientists maintained, were in the background of the thinking, at least initially, of many of the first generation of students of Theosophy. A student then pondering the import of māyā would not have received any help from science. Quite the contrary, the so-called solidity of the universe's building blocks hindered thought by scientists along that line.

Philosophically, the notion of māyā could be entertained, and therefore the student would see its place in H.P.B's exposition. But today we are in a much better position to grasp the meaning of this concept because of the revolution in physics in this century. Within a few years of the appearance of *The Secret Doctrine* there began the experiments whose findings were to bring about in the 20th century an abandoning of long-held conceptions of matter and its behaviour and of the structure of the universe.

To such an extent that around 1930 Sir James Jeans was to declare that the universe he was perceiving might be thought of as the embodiment and functioning of a supreme mind. If not very many of his contemporaries would go that far – Einstein did – it certainly was not the customary thinking of scientists in the previous century: it would have struck them as mystical. They could not conceive that the experience and insights of mystics had any relationship with what they were learning from their disciplines. But today there are some few who do perceive a relationship. There are scientists who now see the universe, that is, all manifestation, as an organic whole, the expression of an all-informing life-consciousness, not unlike the concept found in Theosophy. We are not going to trace the whole fascinating story of what is regarded as one of the great periods in scientific discovery but touch very briefly on some of its aspects relating to our theme, māyā and man's evolution. How did this concept and that of māyā, emerge in the West?

The New Physics and Māyā

After the turn of the century experiments in laboratories began to reveal the emptiness of the heretofore hard and solid atom. Since that time more and more particles, minute knots of energy, have been found in its interior. Even so there yet remained relatively vast empty spaces, and if all the subatomic particles truly touched each other familiar objects would vanish from our sight.

But there was much more to come. The classical laws of physics held when applied to the analysis of the movement, speed, trajectory, and the mass of the presumed solid objects of matter such as tennis balls, cannon balls, and celestial objects. However, those same Newtonian formulations did not work when used in the study of the movement and nature of the recently discovered particles found in the atom's interior. It came to be

realized, in fact, that experiments could yield information about the position of the atomic particle or its momentum, but no experimental procedure could be worked out to give both. It was thought at first that the traditional practice of refining the instruments, rethinking the experiment in the examining of nature would solve the questions being raised as atomic structure was being explored. But it was found that the sophisticated devices in laboratories seemed to intrude on and alter what was being searched for in the atom's heart. A crude example might be the effort to determine how hot or cold was a liquid in a container. Placing a thermometer in it yields an answer; but not the exact answer for the reason that the thermometer, being at another temperature has taken up, dissipated, some of the heat in the act of measuring. Thus man, observing nature, at the atomic level, does not truly stand aside with some sort of gap or void between himself and nature as he proceeds with his experiments. However, when probes are undertaken into the heart of nature, looking into the atomic foundation of all the objects and things of this world is a very different story. A certain elusiveness is felt, as though the stuff of the universe slipped away from the grasp of the ultimate mathematical formula. One is reminded of H.P.B's note that Durga, one of the names of Shiva's consort and power, is 'translated by the Orientalists as "inaccessible" but meaning in truth the "unreachable " in the sense of illusion and unreality . . . the personification of illusion'.[11]

Nevertheless physicists, one gathers, feel in this last quarter of the century that they are moving nearer to an enduring understanding of the phenomenal universe. Their work has resulted in the formation and extension of a major milestone in the history of science known as the quantum theory. It has had far reaching consequences. The advent of the quantum theory has led to the disappearance of the old concept of the solid atom that dominated scientific thought for centuries; and in its place is an entity, a knot of energy, with strange and unpredictable behaviour. Matter, so-called, seems to be energy slowed down, energy congealed.

What is found instead are patterns of statistical probabilities. Before the quantum theory scientists thought the basic reality of the universe was found in its atomic parts. But now, says Dr David Bohm, 'The inseparable quantum interconnectedness of the whole universe is the reality',[12] dissolving the 'things-are-separate' characteristic of māyā. A further consequence of the quantum theory is that consciousness therefore flows into the cosmic fabric and affects the world.

One of the major results of the new physics and the quantum theory has been its rejection of the premises and influence of Cartesian philosophy. In his *Discourse on Method* published in 1637, René Descartes set out what amounts to principles to bring one's mind into that state most helpful for the search for philosophic truth. Its publication coincided with the rise in modern science and helped to shape and mould the attitude and the approach men of science were to adopt and maintain until our century.

Descartes saw the universe as being divided into two areas only: *res cogitans,* that is, the observer, the mind; and *res extensa,* the observed, the objects in nature, matter. Thus for him the universe was a duality; and matter was solid, dead, and soulless. The *Discourse on Method* brilliantly clarified and fortified the scientific notion that the observer was separated from the universe, seen as a machine, and able to explore its working and undoubted marvels without disturbing its mechanism. All this is the converse of the dictum we find in *The Secret Doctrine:* 'Everything in the universe is conscious . . . There is no such thing as . . . dead matter'.[13]

Obviously this and similar statements of H.P.B. could not have been acceptable in the 17th century, or indeed in the ones that followed. Yet in this century we are finding that quantum theorists such as physicists, David Bohm and Fritjof Capra, and neurosurgeon Karl Pribrahm would find their thinking very close to hers. For these men are viewing the universe as an all-encompassing consciousness, perhaps a conscious entity; informing the innumerable flow of events and objects whose movements and modifications hint at the presence of an abiding, non-material reality, that Ground upon which all manifestation dances.

At this point it may be suggested that the splitting of man from his environment in Descartes' philosophy had far reaching consequences. For example, ecological notions about man and his relationship to his co-operation with nature had to wait centuries. But also a firm belief in the Cartesian division of the universe blocks attempts to understand the concept of māyā. Because if it is philosophically believed that matter is solid, real, and 'out there' the meaning and intentions of the new physics will not be perceived. What the new physics is proposing is that so-called matter is a form of energy and is linked with all other forms, events, and occasions. Fritjof Capra put it in these words:

> 'At the atomic level, then, the solid material objects of classical physics dissolve into patterns of probabilities, and these patterns, ultimately, do not represent probabilities of things, but rather probabilities of interconnections'.[14]
> 'Quantum theory forces us to see the universe not as a collection of physical objects, but rather as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of a unified whole'.[15]

Although up to this point we have been referring to important concepts in the new physics that are supportive of certain fundamental features in Theosophy, we might bear in mind that in spite of the revolution in physics the late philosopher and mathematician, A. N. Whitehead, who once said all western philosophy was a series of footnotes to Plato, cautioned: 'Systems, scientific and philosophic, come and go. Each method of limited understanding is at length exhausted'.[16] More than forty years earlier we

read much the same thing in *The Secret Doctrine:* 'Nature, as a creative potency, is infinite, and no generation of physical scientists can ever boast of having exhausted the list of her ways and methods . . .'[17]

To his observation Whitehead went on to add this perceptive amplification: 'The transitions to a new fruitfulness of understanding are achieved by recurrence to the utmost depths of intuition for refreshment of imagination. In the end – though there is no end – what is being achieved is width of view, issuing in greater opportunities'.[18]

This sort of thinking, it is submitted, was what H.P.B. had in mind when she talked to a few serious students in the last month of her life on how to approach occult studies in general and *The Secret Doctrine* in particular. Notes of those meetings were taken by Robert Bowen, a retired naval officer, and were shown to and approved by H.P.B. and only published some forty years later.[19] They are of inestimable value. In the Foreword, H. Shearman notes: 'Repeatedly they assert that any descriptive Theosophy is not to be taken as a necessarily correct picture of the universe. It is rather a secondary pattern which is brought into being in the course of an experience of a truth which is beyond words, beyond description and beyond relative values'.

R. Bowen writes that she repeatedly stressed that the study of her master work required understanding certain core concepts of the esoteric tradition. What she emphasized was the central notion of, to use her words, 'the fundamental unity of all existence'. 'Existence', she says, 'is one thing and not any collection of things linked together'. Here again is the resonating of the First Fundamental Proposition set down in the Proem of *The Secret Doctrine*. She dwells on this not only to assist and inspire the student to move with intuition to the heart and intention of *The Secret Doctrine* but also there is the implication 'to holdfast', to use her phrase, to this concept, and see it as a means of assessing the true nature and experience of māyā in daily life. All of which leads me now to consider the process of our involvement in māyā, that veil over the Real, called by the Zen Buddhist the Original Face, that veil which sweeps down and trails through the gradations of the multiple spaces, the multiple times, and throngs of events and objects of manvantaric existence.

Man's Involvement in Illusion

How then did man become involved in māyā? What are the means available to man to extricate himself from this condition?

As a preface to answering these questions we should remind ourselves that man's evolution is to the end of realizing that his deepest nature is the one Reality pervading the whole of manifestation. Or, to phrase it another way, man's evolution may be thought of as a journey of Self-realization, the progressive awakening to the unsuspected potential deep within the restricted, limited sense of self (the every day me) presently governing his behaviour and conception of the world about him.

The long pilgrimage of man, the microcosmic reflection of the macrocosm, consists of two main phases. They both occur in the theatre of manifestation, consisting of the series of energy levels, generally called planes but which we may think of as gradations of māyā, with the densest being the fields of experience wherein many men progress to self-realization.

During the first phase there is the growth in man over many lives and experiences of the familiar sense of 'me' paralleling his increasing involvement in the world of māyā. By this is meant, as has been said before, that he perceives the world as a series of separate things and events. Some of these events and objects please him, others he does not like. The succession of pleasings and dislikings are subtly building and strengthening the inner psychological perceiver of these events into a strong 'me', not to say an egotistical person, 'getting and spending' in a world set over opposite to him. The world out there is the container of objects and events from which he selects those he wishes to possess and dominate – all in the name of becoming a 'better' self. How man defines himself is the psychological motive behind his plans, actions, what he selects, what he rejects, all of which builds his dependence on māyā. This is what is meant in part by the phrase in H.P.B's Third Fundamental Proposition where it speaks of the acquiring of individuality, 'by self-induced and self-devised efforts, checked by . . . karma', the principle or law of balance and compensation. The very presence of this principle seems to hint to the striving man that the world's reality as he sees it may not be quite what he supposes.

The world seen as separate things, māyā, bends to the self-willed man – for a time – no less than it beckons. But the supple and sinewy power of karma very surely restores balance to nature usually to man's discomfort if not pain and becomes a means whereby there will be that transformation of his conceptions of self and the world leading to the restoration and rekindling in him of the realization of H.P.B's frequently repeated statement in the Bowen Notes, 'existence is one thing'.

Yet long before that transformation has been brought about he will have started entering into the second phase of the long pilgrimage. It is characterized in part by the divesture of the fond trappings of the little self. As illusions about self are removed, illusions about the world slowly begin to fade, their usefulness on the path of self-discovery now drawing to a close, he has come to that point where the experiences and insights of others who have penetrated māyāvic barriers and seen into the heart of existence are of useful guidance to him.

Having very briefly surveyed the concept of māyā, we have some idea of its pervasiveness when considered on a universal scale and in relation to our first question. Manifestation, whatever else it may be, Theosophy says, may be thought of as the veiling of ultimate Reality for the duration of the manvantara. The veiling extends to the microcosmic units, the reflections of the macrocosm, called man. His vision, being obscured, is a māyāvic view of the world and he not seeing all of it, he does not see all of it; it is not false,

yet it is an incomplete world. It seems to be in pieces; and this is māyā.

It is as though a man were unaware that he had on rose-coloured spectacles; and everywhere he looked he would see a rose-tinted world. He is continually superimposing on the world ideas, memories that are not really there. Shankaracharya calls this adhyāsa, the mental act of superimposition causing man to see the world as dual, as a series of separate items. It seems as though the original veiling, obscuring the Real in man, functions at the workaday level of consciousness in this manner. This makes it inevitable that man will impose on the rope the idea, the mental picture that what he is seeing is a snake. Nevertheless, man one day will arrive at a level of consciousness that results in that false experience vanishing leaving just a piece of rope. Therefore, it follows that if he can free himself from superimposing on what he is experiencing, the world of dualities, whirling pieces, dissolves and what is revealed as there, what has always been there, is Brahman, the ultimate Real.

We might think of māyā not only as a condition, but also as a practice. The word, we remind ourselves, comes from the Sanskrit root meaning to measure. Here is an appropriate place to note that as everyone has a daily round, a life to live, he must continue the practice of, shall we say, māyāvic living. To the extent that we are engaged in getting and spending – and hurrying, we might add – there are practical features to a māyāvic existence. But up to a point only. We will go into this when we come to the second of our two questions.

So what do we mean by measuring? Because man experiences the world not as one thing but as Plato's the Many, i.e., māyā, he will try to define it by measuring. With what does he do the measuring? The measuring faculty and power in man is a characteristic of his mind. There is a constant pouring into the mind of sensory data rising from man's contacting, brushing against nature. The senses channel those portions of the contacts appropriate to each sense to the mind for analysis and co-ordination with existing concepts, pieces of information, and subsequent unifying so as to convey to consciousness the meaning and significance of each whole packet of sensory input. This sort of activity goes on all the time as man lives his life in what he defines as his three-dimensional, sensate world. As long as he has been man he has measured his environment with the mind and his senses, and still continues to do so with a large array of instruments, sciences, and technologies.

Over the ages one of the results of this activity of man has been a succession of philosophical theories of man's nature and world-pictures. May this not be a form of evidence that man has some inner instinct, very faintly felt, that he is rooted in some sort of Reality? However, the esoteric tradition states that this search for the real meaning of existence can only be pursued just so far by the mind as man understands and uses it. Mind in this tradition is that strange dual principle that when turned inward beyond all distractions beholds plurality coalescing into unity, yet looking outward sees existence as plural and engages in the dissection and careful study of the

things of the phenomenal world. It is capable of the accumulation and/or creation of innumerable 'facts' about the phenomenal world. (It is interesting to note that the word 'fact' comes from the Latin verb, facere, to make, to do). Man's experience of the world through the use of the mind and the senses is to see the 'thingness' of māyā: objects as having boundaries, surfaces, surrounded by empty space. The mind coupled to sensory input denies one of the significant concepts in the new physics: that all things are contiguous; and separations are apparent. Objects and space are not two separate things. A. N. Whitehead puts it this way: 'Modern physics has abandoned the doctrine of Simple Location. The physical things which we term stars, planets, lumps of matter, . . . quanta of energy are each to be conceived as modifications of conditions within space-time, extending throughout its whole range. There is a focal region which in common speech is where a thing is. But its influence streams away from it . . . throughout the utmost recesses of space and time.'[20] Man projects his measurings out onto the world about him; and the measured world is the world of māyā. Thinking as man usually experiences it perpetuates duality.

Looking more deeply into the question of how and why man is involved in māyā, we find Dr I. K. Taimni stating that 'The obscuration of consciousness [in man] is brought about by the centralization of the infinite . . . universal consciousness . . . But what causes this centralization? Yoga terminology says the constricting agent is avidyā or primal ignorance defined in aphorisms II.4 and 5 of the *Yoga Sutras.*'[21] He goes on to say that in the Kashmir school of Shaivism the constricting agent is māyā; and in his view as far as the psychology of man is concerned the two terms are identical. Shankaracharya in his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* (chapter 14, verse 20) says that the three elements of the phenomenal world are the gunas. 'The three gunas', he says, 'constitute the upādhi (vehicle) of māyā'.[22] The gunas, the student will recall, rajas (energy, activity), tamas (inertia, density), and sattva (harmony) are in their numberless combinations and mixtures the objects and events in the world. These same gunas also figure in their qualities and combinations in the varieties of psychological temperament which we cannot explore at this time except to say that the same three strands (the word, guna, carries the connotation of 'thread') weaving the ever changing world, flow and interweave in man's psychological interior to form that ignorance, avidyā, which for so long cuts him off from realization of his deepest nature.

Even more interesting in certain ways is how the aforementioned Kashmir school of Shaivism defines māyā from the standpoint of man's psychological structure which brings about his forgetting the true dimensions of the Reality within. To give a very brief summary of it, māyā, enwrapped about man, consists of what are called the five 'coverings', or aspects:

(1) The limitation of the Universal Consciousness's omnipotence is called kalā, causing man to think he is the doer.

(2) The limitation of the omniscience of the Universal Consciousness is called limited knowledge, or vidyā in man.
(3) The limitation of the completeness, the wholeness of Universal Consciousness results in that limitation in man called rāga compelling him to desire this thing and that thing.
(4) The limitation of the non-partitioned eternity, the infinite duration of Universal Consciousness becomes the limitation of kāla, the divisions of past, present, and future.
(5) The limitation of the omnipresence of Universal Consciousness gives rise in man to niyati; the limitation in space.[23]

Freedom from Māyā

We look finally, at our second question. How may man free himself from his involvement in the world of māyā. This stage of man's evolutionary journey is beginning when he asks, who am I?. As a matter of fact he has been doing this all along, but seeking for most of the answers in the world around him. This has involved him in various strategies, crude or sophisticated, to gain dominion over his environment, by establishing what he hopes will be lasting equations between his self-estimation and his world, the latter to be so organized with his activities, possessions, and the people in his circle that it, mirror-like, reflects back to him his definition of himself. (Others may see quite a different person). In all this striving he is intent on determining his *location* in the māyāvic world. Not to have a location will cause apprehension because – runs his unvoiced and vague thought – without some location or place in this world of space and time he feels the threat of non-existence. The student of Theosophy sees in this one of the ways in which the thirst for sentient existence (trishna) shows itself in the psychology of man and has for so long urged him to acquire things from the world in order to be a real person. Furthermore, man makes every effort to hold on to things even when he knows upon thinking about it that the tide of the world moves things towards him and away from him.

After countless long and repeated experiences the time does arrive when he begins to sense that answers to his question are more likely to be found as he looks within himself. And it is then that the practice of some form of yoga comes to his attention. It is not our purpose here to enter into descriptions of yoga procedures but rather to dwell on some of the consequences of yoga with reference to the decline of the māyāvic influence in man's life. What yoga does is slowly to untie the psychological knots in the thinking and feeling area in man's subjective nature. These knots usually are formed by the impacts of māyāvic environment on the limited, restricted sense of self in man; in fact, one feeds the other. Yoga will in time cut that interchange which enhances the limited sense of self and the notion that the external world truly consists of separate things and is separate from man. Yoga thus brings about the dispelling of the interior shadows cast by the psychological knots and patterns by allowing the light of deeper layers of self to flood and modify notions of self.

With the gradual untying of the knots of thought-feeling patterns, this beclouding of the interior arena of waking consciousness slowly thins out with several consequences. One is the awakening of the heretofore less used second function of the mind by which is meant its capacity to focus inwards and to receive and regard without customary discursive movements, intimations, and glimpses of the self's larger principles. At the same time the constant rain of the data input of the senses is acknowledged at their ports of entry by the mind and the conscious self, yet not allowed to invade and turn the mind into a playground of the senses. What then follows is a diminution of the experience of the world as a multitude of objects and events, that one either likes, craves or dislikes. In its place arises an expanding vision of a unified whole and the objects and events are not seen any longer as totally separate items but rather like the colours and shapes that make up an artist's painting.

The reason is that man's inner being is in that ultimate reality H.P.B. so frequently declared was at the heart of the esoteric tradition: thus whatever hints he may have of it welling up from within his inner self may also be experienced as he gazes at the world about him because his and the world's ground are the same. Nor will he scorn the world, that act of splitting himself from it, but rather will love it even more and see that every ripple and wave of the motion of māyā, once perceived and accepted as a particular thing or event, are linked to every occasion and object symbolizing that ultimate unified Reality.

The domain of māyā develops and draws out from man the esthetic sense since only in the levels of manifestation are found forms, textures, colours, ratios, qualities, sounds, varying time sequences in arresting combinations that awaken the esthetic response. It is, one thinks, a response of recognition causing man to remember some aspect of that First Fundamental Proposition. At the peak of an esthetic insight and experience something of that ultimate Reality is just touched in a flash of time. For a split second the esthetic occasion and self vanish and duality is transcended. We are reminded that H.P.B. has said, referring to the world of māyā: 'māyā is everywhere and in everything that has a beginning and an end. Therefore everything is an aspect of that which is eternal, and in that sense, of course, māyā itself is an aspect of Sat...'[24] (Sat is a Sanskrit term, one of several, used to qualify and define ultimate Reality.)

A further point about the esthetic sense and experience is found in Plato's observation that of the three aspects of the Real, that is, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, the most accessible for the majority, the one that could lead to some awareness of the Real, was the Beautiful found in the phenomenal realms.

Māyā seems to have two functions in man's search for himself. During the outward journey when he is almost totally immersed in māyā he is engaged in building the concept of 'me', that combination of thinking, feeling, and physical activity, which could not be entered upon without the māyāvic world stage. Like a stage set designed to mirror the intent of the play, so is

the malleable stuff of māyā arranged as a backdrop to our own dramas. A most spectacular example must be the setting and planning of the Palace of Versailles, a visible expression of the idea one man had of himself, his political power, and position in the France of his day; he did not mind at all being known as the Sun King. To stand on the terrace at its centre and look down on the fountains and the avenues that radiate from that central position and seem to stretch forever through all the formal landscaping, is to understand how it matched and enhanced Louis XIV's concept of himself. In fact anyone standing at the same point cannot help but feel some expansion of his notion of himself. Such is the magic of māyā.

The Value of Māyā

During the second phase, or homeward journey, when man begins to look within, intimations of the inner Self are synchronized with instances of perceiving in the world around him something that endures, with the quality of the perpetual that does not negate māyā but illumines it. This means, it is suggested, that in whatever the shape or form of that arresting moment, it is no longer something one wants to possess or adorn oneself with, but on the contrary becomes a point of entry to just touch the Reality that is its living and conscious substratum.

Patanjali's opinion of the value of māyā is found in part two of the *Yoga Sutras,* the eighteenth aphorism where he says: 'The Seen (objective side of manifestation) . . . has for its purpose (of providing man) with experience and liberation'.

But how long will it be before man will cease to react to māyā from the level of the personality, and instead respond from the depths of his being? To respond means to donate without calculation to the presentment before him in the special way Patanjali calls, 'Ishvara-pranidhāna', the recognizing and reverencing the Reality that ever abides hidden in the transitory form.

In conclusion, we refer again to the fact that there are physicists in this century whose work and insights into the nature of the universe are also seen to support certain fundamental notions in the esoteric metaphysical tradition. One of the most important, māyā, has been the theme of this lecture. It has become apparent to scientists that with the decline of the Newtonian view of the universe, the exact nature of the universe and its contents has defied final description. Some leading physicists seem to be moving towards concepts of a universe that is holistic, wherein all its seemingly separate parts, entities, and events are interlinked, indeed constitute one organic entity. This, as we have seen, is close to the theosophical position that existence is one thing, in H.P.B's words; and that unity during the manvantaric cycle appears limited, obscured, giving rise to the provisional duality of consciousness and matter-energy. The limiting and conditioning factor, māyā, in man leads to his māyāvic experience of that unity: he sees himself as separated from environment. Physicists, David Bohm, Fritjof Capra, John Wheeler, among others, are talking about an

interaction and an underlying relationship between what we call consciousness and the matter-energy aspect of manifestation. Less than a century ago such hypotheses would not have been entertained. Dr Wheeler, for instance, is proposing we should think of man as more of a participator than an observer of the universe. One of the implications of this is that matter is not independent of consciousness, and that each may affect the other.

Was not H.P.B. saying very much the same thing when she wrote in the paragraph defining māyā previously quoted: '. . . since the appearance which the hidden noumenon *assumes* [italics, mine] for any observer depends upon his power of cognition? 'Can there be, will there be, final facts that will fix forever the meaning of māyā? One is reminded again that māyā is personified as the goddess Durga, which means 'the illusive'.

Nevertheless, for man's evolutionary journey the characteristic of change in māyā is a great boon. Māyā, although temporary, misleading, partially true, not wholly false, so elusive, is the theatre and the means whereby man will move from self-ignorance to Self-realization. It is the stage that encourages him to essay every sort of illusory idea about himself and play every sort of role, so often in the belief that at last he has found himself. Until the day arrives when he will say, 'I have played, and understood so many roles, but have never wondered who is the actor'. Surely it is somewhere around here in his journey that he will encounter the esoteric doctrine.

Some physicists, as has been said, are seeing man as a contributor and participator in the universal process. We find the same notion in *The Voice of the Silence* where we read: 'Help nature and work on with her'. Preceding that sentence we read how man may help nature: '. . . struggle only with the personal, the transitory, the evanescent, the perishable'.

What is the 'evanescent, the perishable' but the roles man plays? They are not totally false, nor totally true; they are māyāvic, with the potential of bringing light or darkness to his surroundings. A very great actor illumines his role and we leave the theatre perhaps with some expansion of insight and wisdom.

Thus it follows that the man who now is beginning to look seriously within will find in yoga a great means to consume, burn away, that area, patch if you like, of māyā most adjacent to the partially hidden, but never utterly forgotten, reality within. That area is his own psychological, conditioned self. And as this māyāvic self fades something of the one Reality as pure consciousness blazes forth into the world and helps nature, seeming to say 'Look for the Light'.

The pilgrim, patiently persisting in this process of Self-awakening, increasingly comprehends the meaning of something H.P.B. quotes by the great Indian teacher, Āryāsanga: 'That which is neither spirit nor matter, neither light nor darkness, but is verily the container and root of these, that thou art. The root projects at every dawn its shadow on Itself, and that shadow thou callest light and life, O poor dead form. (This) life-light streameth downward through the stairway of the seven worlds, the stairs of

which each step become denser and darker. It is of this seven times seven scale that thou art the faithful climber and mirror, O little man. Thou art this, but thou knowest it not.'[25]

Notes

1. *The Secret Doctrine,* 4th (Adyar) Edition. All references to this edition Vol. 1, p.79.
2. *S.D.*, Vol. 1, p.112.
3. *S.D.*, Vol. 1, p.317.
4. *S.D.*, Vol. 1, p.79.
5. *S.D.*, Vol. 1, p.83.
6. *S.D.*, Vol. 1, p.321.
7. *The Secret of Self-Realization,* (Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar), p.19.
8. *Pratyabhijña Hridayam,* trans. Jaideva Singh, (Motilal Banarsidas, New Delhi) p.8.
9. *S.D.*, Vol. 1, p.283.
10. *Men who made a New Physics,* Barbara Lovett Cline, (Signet Science Library), p.34.
11. *S.D.*, Vol. 2, p.112.
12. Quoted in *The Tao of Physics,* Fritjof Capra, p.138 (Shambhala).
13. *S.D.*, Vol. 1, p.317.
14. *The Tao of Physics,* p.68.
15. op.cit. p.138.
16. *Adventures of Ideas,* p.188 (Penguin Books).
17. *S.D.*, Vol. 3, p.161.
18. *Adventures of Ideas,* p.188.
19. Published with the title, *Madame Blavatsky on How to Study Theosophy* (T.P.H. London).
20. *Adventures of Ideas,* p.186.
21. *The Secret of Self-Realization,* p.45. (Sutra 4. Avidyā is the source of those that are mentioned after it, whether they be in the dormant, attenuated, alternating or expanded state. Sutra 5. Avidyā is taking the non-eternal, impure, evil and non-Ātman to be eternal, pure, good, and Ātman respectively.)
22. *The Bhagavad Gita,* trans. A. Mahadeva Shastri (V. Ramaswamy Sastrulu and Sons, Madras) p.390.
23. Summary of description in *Pratyabhijña Hridayam,* Jaideva Singh translation.
24. *Transactions of the Blavatsky Lodge,* p.31. (Theosophy Company.)
25. *S.D.*, Vol. 5, p.489.

Printed by Southwell Press Limited, Camberley, Surrey.