The two powers of Maya

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**Introduction**

In the earlier essay we have seen that māyā in its samaśṭi (collective or total) and vyāśṭi (individual) aspects becomes the upādhis of Īśvara and Prājñā respectively. Also we have seen quite methodically as to how the nature of Īśvara and Prājñā are poles apart due to the differences in their upādhis

1. In this essay we will address two questions:

1. If Brahman is of the nature of self-effulgent (svayamprakāśa) Consciousness, how does māyā veil Brahman – how does the experience of 'I am a limited individual' come about?

2. If Brahman is unattached (asaṅga) and indifferent (udāsīna) how does the world come about?

To answer the above two questions we will have to understand the two powers of māyā – āvaraṇa śakti and vikṣepa śakti.

**Āvaraṇa Śakti**

The word śakti means 'power' and āvaraṇa means 'veiling'. So āvaraṇa śakti means the 'power of veiling'. It is the power of māyā by which our nitya-suddha-buddha-mukta-svarūpa, our true nature of being ever pure knowledge and being ever free of bondage is hidden from us. But then,

\[1\text{Refer to the essay Īśvara and Prājñā in the August 2003 issue of Tapovan Prasad for a detailed analysis.}\]
1. How can the all-effulgent Self be hidden?

2. How can māyā hide the infinite Brahman? To hide something, the one that hides should be bigger than the thing it hides, or at least equal to the size of that which it hides!

These two are certainly valid questions. Vēdaṇṭa-Sāra of Śwāmī Sadānanda explains the nature of āvarāṇa śakti, māyā’s veiling power with a classic day-to-day experience.

Just as a small patch of cloud, by obstructing the vision of the observer conceals, as it were, the solar disc extending over many miles, similarly ignorance though limited by nature, yet obstructing the intellect of the observer, conceals, as it were, the Self which is unlimited and not subject to transmigration.

This example is very beautiful and highly suggestive. The sun is all-effulgent. But the clouds hide it. The sun is immensely huge — millions and millions of miles wide. Yet it is covered by a small piece of drifting cloud, maybe a few hundreds of metres wide! To cover the sun, we don’t have to go so far to the clouds! Just put your thumb in front of your eyes and the huge sun is covered in an instant!

Let us now methodically analyse the example of the sun hidden by the clouds and relate it to the present topic of Brahman being covered by māyā.

**SWEET THOUGHT**

The intellect can investigate only the presence of things; consciousness can illumine their absence as well.

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1. The clouds come from the sun's power. Without the sun's heat where is the cloud? So too āvaraṇa sakti is from the Lord's māyā itself.

2. The clouds can never truly and physically cover the sun in spite of our experience of the sun appearing concealed by the clouds. In the same way māyā cannot cover the eternal and infinite Brahman though He appears to be hidden by māyā.

3. The sun being covered by the clouds is only from the standpoint of the person who is seeing it and not from the standpoint of the sun. So too māyā veiling the Self is only from the standpoint of the ignorant jīva's intellect and not from the standpoint of the Self.

4. The sun has not even a vague notion of being covered. So, too, Brahman is beyond even the very concept of it being concealed.

5. Is it not interesting to note that the clouds that cover the sun are seen only through the light of the sun? Similarly māyā, which seemingly veils the Self, is also known only through the light of the Self. My ignorance of my true nature as being saccidānanda (existence-consciousness-bliss) is also known only in the light of the Self.

With this analysis of āvaraṇa sakti, we have answered the first question — 'If Brahman is of the nature of self-effulgent (svayam-prakāśa) Consciousness, how does māyā veil Brahman?' The answer is — the āvaraṇa sakti of māyā seems to have veiled the Self of the ignorant, like the clouds hiding the sun for a person whose vision is obstructed by a cloud.

Conquest of Āvaraṇa

For the knower of the Self there is no āvaraṇa (veiling) or āvaraṇa sakti (the power of veiling). Hastamalakācārya, one of the four important disciples of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, asserts his clarity of Self-Knowledge to his great guru —
Just as a very ignorant person whose vision is obstructed by a cloud thinks that the sun, covered by a cloud, is devoid of brilliance, so also, to a person who is deluded by ignorance the Ātman appears to be bound. That Ātman which is of the nature of eternal consciousness, I am.

It is the question of our vision – when our vision is on the Self there is no āvarāṇa. But if the attention is on the upādhis, the conditioning of the gross, subtle and causal bodies, there is āvarāṇa and saṃsāra. To the person who is carried away by the shadows on the screen there is joy and sorrow. But for the one whose attention is on the pure white screen, there is neither.

**Vikṣeṇa Śakti**

The word ‘vikṣeṇa’ means ‘to scatter variously’. This is the power of māyā by which various names and forms, so to say, are projected or scattered on the pure Self. Śrī Śvāmī Vidyārāṇya in Vākya-Sudhā (Drg-Drśya-Viveka) summarily describes the function of vikṣeṇa śakti:

विक्षेपशक्तिः लिन्द्रदिब्रह्माण्डानं जगत् सृजेद्।

Vikṣeṇa śakti creates the world beginning from the subtle body to the total universe.

When the āvarāṇa śakti conceals Brahman, vikṣeṇa śakti starts creating. From (the tamasic aspect of māyā) are first created the subtle elements – first ākāśa (space), from ākāśa is born vāyu (air), from vāyu comes agni (fire), from agni comes āpa: (water) and from āpa comes the element prithivi (earth). These subtle elements

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1 Vākya-Sudhā is commonly called Drg-Drśya-Viveka and is considered by some to be written by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya. But the style of the text seems to be that of Swami Vidyaranya. Hence many scholars rightly ascribe the text to him.
(tanmātra) create the subtle world of the mind and intellect, the jñānendriyas (organs of knowledge like eyes, ears etc.), the karmendriyas (organs of action like the hands, legs etc.), as well as the prāṇa (vital airs like prāṇa, apana etc). These subtle elements then combine pentamerously through the process of pāṇcikaraṇa to become the gross elements which in various permutations and combinations form the whole perceived external world of names of forms. This kind of gradual creation as explained in the Taittiriya Upaniṣad and other texts of Vedanta is called krama-srṣṭi. Please note that vikṣepa sakti not only creates the external world of names and forms but also the internal world of the ego and its devilish retinue of desire, anger, greed, delusion, pride, jealousy and so on. Thus, creation is because of the vikṣepa sakti which goes into action due to the āvarāṇa of the Self.

This analysis of vikṣepa sakti thus answers the second question — ‘If Brahman is unattached (asaṅga) and indifferent (udāśina) how does it create the world?’ The answer is — when Brahman is veiled by the āvarāṇa sakti of māyā, the vikṣepa sakti of māyā goes into action and creates the world.

Brahman may be unattached and indifferent but that does not prevent māyā from acting. The action of māyā does not depend on Brahman, but it depends on our ignorance of Brahman. Hence Brahman is not to be blamed! Māyā creates the external world of infinite variety and beauty and the internal world of attachment, likes and dislikes, makes one bound, go through the ups and downs of saṃsāra and has nice fun at our cost! Brahman, our Self, remains

1 One may wonder why the eyes, ears, legs and hands are considered subtle when they are seen and hence are experientially gross. When these organs are mentioned in Vedanta the gross external eyes, legs etc. are not meant but the inner faculty, which uses these external organs to function. These internal faculties are all subtle.

2 There is another type of creation which is explained in the Scriptures and which is called yugapat-sṛṣṭi or instantaneous creation. The differences between karma-sṛṣṭi and yugapat-sṛṣṭi will be explained in a future essay. So also the various terms and concepts mentioned in this paragraph like pāṇcikaraṇa, creation from the tāmasic aspect of māyā etc.

3 These six are rightly termed as shad-ripus or ‘the six enemies’ in the Scriptures.
as the pure substratum unaffected by the whole tamasha! Destroy āvaraṇa and render vikṣēpa sakti ineffective. That is the only solution.

Non-apprehension and misapprehension – Causal relationship

Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayanandaji has used two beautiful words for the terms āvaraṇa and vikṣēpa. He called āvaraṇa non-apprehension and vikṣēpa mis-apprehension. These words are highly explanatory in their nature for they convey very well the functions of āvaraṇa sakti and vikṣēpa sakti, the two powers of māyā. Āvaraṇa sakti causes non-apprehension and vikṣēpa sakti makes us perceive the false as the true; in other words, it makes us misapprehend. To use the common Vedantic example to clarify — when there is non-apprehension of the rope, then there is the misapprehension of the snake. Please note that misapprehension presupposes non-apprehension and there can be no misapprehension without non-apprehension. First, there should be the non-apprehen-

Are birds better than the eggs from which they have hatched out? The ego is the egg, the liberated self is the bird. Thus the realised, or the liberated is not something unique and rare. We are today in our ego-restrained state. In the warmth of the scriptural study, in the constant contact with the mother hen (the Self), we can hatch out of our shell, during meditation, and emerge into the vast domain of the Infinite Reality. Try. Be steadfast and regular in your meditations.

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sion of the rope; only then there comes forth the misapprehension of the rope as the snake. Ādi Śaṅkaraścārya in a poetic exuberance makes clear the causal relation between āvaraṇa śakti and vikṣeṣaṇa śakti in Vivēkacūḍāmaṇi:

Just as on a cloudy day, when the sun is swallowed by dense clouds, cold shivering blasts persecute man, so too, when the Ātman is screened off by utter ignorance, the dreadful projecting power persecutes foolish man with endless sorrows.

**Conclusion**

Let us conclude this essay by explicitly giving the answers to the two questions we raised at the beginning:

**Question:** If Brahman is of the nature of self-effulgent consciousness how does māyā veil Brahman?

**Answer:** Āvaraṇa śakti of māyā veils Brahman like a cloud veiling the sun. One then fails to perceive one’s real nature.

**Question:** If Brahman is unattached and indifferent, how does it create the world?

**Answer:** Māyā’s vikṣeṣaṇa śakti becomes activated due to the veiling of the Self and it creates the world. Of course nothing can happen without the presence of Brahman, but Brahman remains the pure substratum unaffected by the activities of vikṣeṣaṇa śakti and unattached to its creations.

May the Lord and the Guru bless us all to destroy the āvaraṇa śakti of māyā! This is the only purpose of the study of Vedānta.

The causal relationship of the Lord with respect to the creation is explained in Vedānta by indicating Iśvara as the abhinna-nimitta-upādhana-kāraṇa of the universe. This will be the topic of our next essay.

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