Chapter Six

The Adwaita of Shankaracharya

Shankara’s Mayavada

If Shankara’s conception of the undifferentiated pure Consciousness as the Brahman is your view of it, then it is not the path of this Yoga that you should choose; for here the realisation of pure Consciousness and Being is only a first step and not the goal. But an inner creative urge from within can have no place in an undifferentiated Consciousness — all action and creation must necessarily be foreign to it.

I do not base my Yoga on the insufficient ground that the Self (not soul) is eternally free. That affirmation leads to nothing beyond itself, or, if used as a starting-point, it could equally well lead to the conclusion that action and creation have no significance or value. The question is not that but of the meaning of creation, whether there is a Supreme who is not merely a pure undifferentiated Consciousness and Being, but the source and support also of the dynamic energy of creation and whether the cosmic existence has for It a significance and a value. That is a question which cannot be settled by metaphysical logic which deals in words and ideas, but by a spiritual experience which goes beyond Mind and enters into spiritual realities. Each mind is satisfied with its own reasoning, but for spiritual purposes that satisfaction has no validity, except as an indication of how far and on what line each one is prepared to go in the field of spiritual experience. If your reasoning leads you towards the Shankara idea of the Supreme, that might be an indication that the Vedanta Adwaita (Mayavada) is your way of advance.

This Yoga accepts the value of cosmic existence and holds it to be a reality; its object is to enter into a higher Truth-Consciousness or Divine Supramental Consciousness in which action and creation are the expression not of ignorance and imperfection, but of the Truth, the Light, the Divine Ananda.
But for that, surrender of the mortal mind, life and body to that Higher Consciousness is indispensable, since it is too difficult for the mortal human being to pass by its own effort beyond mind to a supramental consciousness in which the dynamism is no longer mental but of quite another power. Only those who can accept the call to such a change should enter into this Yoga.

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The Shankara knowledge is, as your Guru pointed out, only one side of the Truth; it is the knowledge of the Supreme as realised by the spiritual Mind through the static silence of the pure Existence. It was because he went by this side only that Shankara was unable to accept or explain the origin of the universe except as illusion, a creation of Maya. Unless one realises the Supreme on the dynamic as well as the static side, one cannot experience the true origin of things and the equal reality of the active Brahman. The Shakti or Power of the Eternal becomes then a power of illusion only and the world becomes incomprehensible, a mystery of cosmic madness, an eternal delirium of the Eternal. Whatever verbal or ideative logic one may bring to support it, this way of seeing the universe explains nothing; it only erects a mental formula of the inexplicable. It is only if you approach the Supreme through his double aspect of Sat and Chit-Shakti, double but inseparable, that the total truth of things can become manifest to the inner experience. The other side was developed by the Shakta Tantrics. The two together, the Vedantic and the Tantric truth unified, can arrive at the integral knowledge.

But philosophically this is what your Guru’s teaching comes to and it is obviously a completer truth and a wider knowledge than that given by the Shankara formula. It is already indicated in the Gita’s teaching of the Purushottama and the Parashakti (Adya Shakti) who becomes the Jiva and upholds the universe. It is evident that Purushottama and Parashakti are both eternal and are inseparable and one in being; the Parashakti manifests the universe, manifests too the Divine in the universe as the Ishwara and herself appears at his side as the Ishwari Shakti. Or, one may say, it is the Supreme Consciousness-Power of the
Supreme that manifests or puts forth itself as Ishwara Ishwari, Atma Atmashakti, Purusha Prakriti, Jiva Jagat. That is the truth in its completeness as far as the mind can formulate it. In the Supermind these questions do not even arise — for it is the mind that creates the problem by erecting oppositions between aspects of the Divine which are not really opposed to each other but are one and inseparable.

This supramental knowledge has not yet been attained, because the supermind itself has not been attained, but the reflection of it in intuitive spiritual consciousness is there and that was what was evidently realised in experience by your Guru and what he was expressing in mental terms in the quoted passage. It is possible to go towards this knowledge by beginning with the experience of dissolution in the One, but on condition that you do not stop there, taking it as the highest Truth, but proceed to realise the same One as the supreme Mother, the Consciousness Force of the Eternal. If on the other hand you approach through the supreme Mother, she will give you the liberation in the silent One also as well as the realisation of the dynamic One and from that it is easier to arrive at the Truth in which both are one and inseparable. At the same time the gulf created by Mind between the Supreme and his Manifestation is bridged and there is no longer a fissure in the truth which makes all incomprehensible. If in the light of this you examine what your Guru taught, you will see that it is the same thing in less metaphysical language.

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They [two philosophers] want to show that Shankara was not so savagely illusionist as he is represented — that he gave a certain temporary reality to the world, admitted Shakti etc. But these (supposing he made them) are concessions inconsistent with the logic of his own philosophy which is that only the Brahman exists and the rest is ignorance and illusion. The rest has only a temporary and therefore an illusory reality in Maya. He farther maintained that Brahman could not be reached by works. If that was not his philosophy, I should like to know what was his philosophy. At any rate that was how his philosophy has been
understood by people. Now that the general turn is away from the rigorous Illusionism, many of the Adwaitins seem to want to hedge and make Shankara hedge with them.

Vivekananda accepted Shankara’s philosophy with modifications, the chief of them being Daridra-Narayan-seva which is a mixture of Buddhist compassion and modern philanthropy.

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I believe according to the Adwaitins God is only the reflection of Brahman in Maya — just as Brahman is seen outwardly as the world which has only a practical not a real reality, so subjectively Brahman is seen as God, Bhagavan, Ishwara, and that also would be a practical not a real reality — which is and can be only the relationless Brahman all by itself in a worldless eternity. At least that is what I have read — I don’t know whether Shankara himself says that. One is always being told by modern Adwaitins that Shankara did not mean what people say he meant — so one has to be careful in attributing any opinion to him.

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Of course Shankara must have meant Mayavada. It is hardly possible that everybody should have misunderstood his ideas (which were not in the least veiled or enigmatic) till his modern apologists discovered what they really were.

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Shankara surely stands or falls by the Mayavada. Even the Bhaja Govindam poem is Mayavadic in spirit. I am not well-acquainted with these other writings¹ — so it is difficult for me to say anything about that side of the question.

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Chittashuddhi belongs to Rajayoga. In the pure Adwaita the method is rather to detach oneself by vichara and viveka and

¹ Writings attributed to Shankara such as Prabodhasudhākara. The correspondent asked whether Shankara changed his view from Mayavada to Lilaavada later in his life. — Ed.
realise “I am not the mind, not the life, etc. etc.” In that case, no shuddhi would be necessary — the self would separate from the nature good or bad and regard it as a machinery which having no more the support of the egoless man would fall away of itself along with the body. Of course chittashuddhi can be resorted to also, but for cessation of the chittavrittis, not for their better dynamism as an instrument of the Divine. Shankara insists that all karma must fall off before one can be liberated — the soul must realise itself as akartā, there is no salvation in or by works in the pure Yoga of knowledge. So how could Shankara recognise dynamism? Even if he recognises chittashuddhi as necessary, it must be as a preparation for getting rid of karma, not for anything else.

**Mayavada and Nirvana**

About Nirvana:

When I wrote in the Arya, I was setting forth an overmind view of things to the mind and putting it in mental terms, that was why I had sometimes to use logic. For in such a work — mediating between the intellect and the supra-intellectual — logic has a place, though it cannot have the chief place it occupies in purely mental philosophies. The Mayavadin himself labours to establish his point of view or his experience by a rigorous logical reasoning. Only, when it comes to an explanation of Maya he, like the scientist dealing with Nature, can do no more than arrange and organise his ideas of the process of this universal mystification; he cannot explain how or why his illusionary mystifying Maya came into existence. He can only say, “Well, but it is there.”

Of course, it is there. But the question is, first, “What is it? is it really an illusionary Power and nothing else, or is the Mayavadin’s idea of it a mistaken first view, a mental imperfect reading, even perhaps itself an illusion?” And next, “Is illusion the sole or the highest Power which the Divine Consciousness or Superconsciousness possesses?” The Absolute is an absolute Truth free from Maya, otherwise liberation would not be
possible. Has then the supreme and absolute Truth no other active Power than a power of falsehood and with it, no doubt, for the two go together, a power of dissolving or disowning the falsehood, — which is yet there for ever? I suggested that this sounded a little queer. But queer or not, if it is so, it is so — for as you point out, the Ineffable cannot be subjected to the laws of logic.

But who is to decide whether it is so? You will say, those who get there. But get where? To the Perfect and the Highest, pūrṇam param. Is the Mayavadī’s featureless Brahman that Perfect, that Complete — is it the very Highest? Is there not or can there not be a higher than that highest, parātparam? That is not a question of logic, it is a question of spiritual fact, of a supreme and complete experience. The solution of the matter must rest not upon logic, but upon a growing, ever heightening, widening spiritual experience — an experience which must of course include or have passed through that of Nirvana and Maya, otherwise it would not be complete and would have no decisive value.

Now to reach Nirvana was the first radical result of my own Yoga. It threw me suddenly into a condition above and without thought, unstained by any mental or vital movement; there was no ego, no real world — only when one looked through the immobile senses, something perceived or bore upon its sheer silence a world of empty forms, materialised shadows without true substance. There was no One or many even, only just absolutely That, featureless, relationless, sheer, indescribable, unthinkable, absolute, yet supremely real and solely real. This was no mental realisation nor something glimpsed somewhere above, — no abstraction — it was positive, the only positive reality — although not a spatial physical world, pervading, occupying or rather flooding and drowning this semblance of a physical world, leaving no room or space for any reality but itself, allowing nothing else to seem at all actual, positive or substantial. I cannot say there was anything exhilarating or rapturous in the experience, as it then came to me, — the ineffable Ananda I had years afterwards, — but what it brought was an inexpressible Peace, a
stupendous silence, an infinity of release and freedom. I lived in
that Nirvana day and night before it began to admit other things
into itself or modify itself at all, and the inner heart of experience,
a constant memory of it and its power to return remained until in
the end it began to disappear into a greater Superconsciousness
from above. But meanwhile realisation added itself to realisation
and fused itself with this original experience. At an early stage
the aspect of an illusionary world gave place to one in which
illusion\(^2\) is only a small surface phenomenon with an immense
Divine Reality behind it and a supreme Divine Reality above it
and an intense Divine Reality in the heart of everything that had
seemed at first only a cinematic shape or shadow. And this was
no reimprisonment in the senses, no diminution or fall from
supreme experience, it came rather as a constant heightening
and widening of the Truth; it was the spirit that saw objects, not
the senses, and the Peace, the Silence, the freedom in Infinity re-
mained always with the world or all worlds only as a continuous
incident in the timeless eternity of the Divine.

Now that is the whole trouble in my approach to Mayavada.
Nirvana in my liberated consciousness turned out to be the be-
ginning of my realisation, a first step towards the complete thing,
not the sole true attainment possible or even a culminating finale.
It came unasked, unsought for, though quite welcome. I had no
least idea about it before, no aspiration towards it, in fact my
aspiration was towards just the opposite, spiritual power to help
the world and do my work in it, yet it came — without even a
“May I come in” or a “By your leave”. It just happened and
settled in as if for all eternity or as if it had been really there
always. And then it slowly grew into something not less but
greater than its first self! How then could I accept Mayavada or
persuade myself to pit against the Truth imposed on me from
above the logic of Shankara?

But I do not insist on everybody passing through my ex-
perience or following the Truth that is its consequence. I have

\(^2\) In fact it is not an illusion in the sense of an imposition of something baseless and
unreal on the consciousness, but a misinterpretation by the conscious mind and sense
and a falsifying misuse of manifested existence.
no objection to anybody accepting Mayavada as his soul’s truth or his mind’s truth or their way out of the cosmic difficulty. I object to it only if somebody tries to push it down my throat or the world’s throat as the sole possible, satisfying and all-comprehensive explanation of things. For it is not that at all. There are many other possible explanations; it is not at all satisfactory, for in the end it explains nothing; and it is — and must be unless it departs from its own logic — all-exclusive, not in the least all-comprehensive. But that does not matter. A theory may be wrong or at least one-sided and imperfect and yet extremely practical and useful. That has been amply shown by the history of science. In fact a theory whether philosophical or scientific is nothing else than a support for the mind, a practical device to help it to deal with its object, a staff to uphold it and make it walk more confidently and get along on its difficult journey. The very exclusiveness and one-sidedness of the Mayavada make it a strong staff or a forceful stimulus for a spiritual endeavour which means to be one-sided, radical and exclusive. It supports the effort of the Mind to get away from itself and from Life by a short cut into superconsciousness. Or rather it is the Purusha in Mind that wants to get away from the limitations of Mind and Life into the superconfscient Infinite. Theoretically, the most radical way for that is for the mind to deny all its perceptions and all the preoccupations of the vital and see and treat them as illusions. Practically, when the mind draws back from itself, it enters easily into a relationless peace in which nothing matters — for in its absoluteness there are no mental or vital values — and from which the mind can rapidly move towards that great short cut to the Superconscient, mindless trance, susupti. In proportion to the thoroughness of that movement all the perceptions it had once accepted become unreal to it — illusion, Maya. It is on its road towards immergence.

Mayavada, therefore, with its sole stress on Nirvana, quite apart from its defects as a mental theory of things, serves a great spiritual end and, as a path, can lead very high and far. Even, if the Mind were the last word and there were nothing beyond it except the pure Spirit, I would not be averse to accepting it as
the only way out. For what the mind with its perceptions and
the vital with its desires have made of life in this world, is a very
bad mess, and if there were nothing better to be hoped for, the
shortest cut to an exit would be the best. But my experience is
that there is something beyond Mind; Mind is not the last word
here of the Spirit. Mind is an ignorance-consciousness and its
perceptions cannot be anything else than either false, mixed or
imperfect — even when “true”, a partial reflection of the Truth
and not the very body of Truth herself. But there is a Truth-
Consciousness, not static only and self-introspective, but also
dynamic and creative, and I prefer to get at that and see what
it says about things and can do rather than take the short cut
away from things offered as its own end by the Ignorance.

Still, I would have no objection, if your attraction towards
Nirvana were not merely a mood of the mind and vital but an
indication of the mind’s true road and the soul’s issue. But it
seems to me that it is only the vital recoiling from its own disap-
pointed desires in an extreme dissatisfaction, not the soul leaping
gladly to its true path. This vairagya is itself a vital movement;
vital vairagya is the reverse side of vital desire — though the
mind of course is there to give reasons and say ditto. Even this
vaivragya, if it is one-pointed and exclusive, can lead or can point
towards Nirvana. But you have many sides to your personality
or rather many personalities in you; it is indeed their discordant
movements each getting in the way of the other, as happens when
they are expressed through the external mind, that have stood
much in the way of your sadhana. There is the vital personality
which was turned towards success and enjoyment and got it and
wanted to go on with it but could not get the rest of the being to
follow. There is the vital personality that wanted enjoyment of
a deeper kind and suggested to the other that it could very well
give up these unsatisfactory things if it got an equivalent in some
faeryland of a higher joy. There is the psycho-vital personality
that is the Vaishnava within you and wanted the Divine Krishna
and bhakti and Ananda. There is the personality which is the
poet and musician and a seeker of beauty through these things.
There is the mental-vital personality which when it saw the vital
standing in the way insisted on a grim struggle of Tapasya, and it is no doubt that also which approves vairagya and Nirvana. There is the physical-mental personality which is the Russellite, extrovert, doubter. There is another mental-emotional personality all whose ideas are for belief in the Divine, Yoga, bhakti, Guruvada. There is the psychic being also which has pushed you into the sadhana and is waiting for its hour of emergence.

What are you going to do with all these people? If you want Nirvana, you have either to expel them or stifle them or beat them into coma. All authorities assure us that this exclusive Nirvana business is a most difficult job (duhkham dehavadbhih says the Gita), and your own fatal attempt at suppressing the others was not encouraging, — according to your own account it left you as dry and desperate as a sucked orange, no juice left anywhere. If the desert is your way to the promised land, that does not matter. But —

Well, if it is not, then there is another way — it is what we call the integration, the harmonisation of the being. That cannot be done from outside, it cannot be done by the mind and vital being — they are sure to bungle their affair. It can be done only from within by the soul, the Spirit which is the centraliser, itself the centre of these radii. In all of them there is a truth that can harmonise with the true truth of the others. For there is a truth in Nirvana — Nirvana is nothing but the peace and freedom of the Spirit which can exist in itself, be there world or no world, world-order or world-disorder. Bhakti and the heart’s call for the Divine have a truth — it is the truth of the divine Love and Ananda. The will for Tapasya has in it a truth — it is the truth of the Spirit’s mastery over its members. The musician and poet stand for a truth, it is the truth of the expression of the Spirit through beauty. There is a truth behind the mental Affirmer; even there is a truth behind the mental doubter, the Russellian, though far behind him — the truth of the denial of false forms. Even behind the two vital personalities there is a truth, the truth of the possession of the inner and outer worlds — not by the ego but by the Divine. That is the harmonisation for which our Yoga stands — but it cannot be achieved by any
outward arrangement, it can only be achieved by going inside and looking, willing and acting from the psychic and from the spiritual centre. For the truth of the being is there and the secret of Harmony also is there.

The Illusionist Metaphors

The illusionist metaphors all fail when you drive them home — they are themselves an illusion. Identification with the body is an error, not an illusion. We are not the body, but the body is still something of ourselves. With realisation the erroneous identification ceases — in certain experiences the existence of the body is not felt at all. In the full realisation the body is within us, not we in it, it is an instrumental formation in our wider being — our consciousness exceeds but also pervades it; it can be dissolved without our ceasing to be the self. That is about all.

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Your objection is correct. The snake-rope image cannot be used to illustrate the non-existence of the world, it would only mean that our seeing of the world is not that of the world as it really is. The idea of complete illusion would better be illustrated by the juggler’s rope-climbing trick, where there is no rope and no climber, and yet one is persuaded that they are there.

Laya

According to both Buddha and Shankara liberation means laya of the individual in some transcendent Permanence that is not individualised—so logically a belief in the individual soul must prevent liberation while the sense of misery in the world leads to the attempt to escape.

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The impulse towards laya is a creation of the mind, it is not the sole possible destiny of the soul. When the mind tries to abolish its own Ignorance, it finds no escape from it except laya,
because it supposes that there is no higher principle of cosmic existence beyond itself — beyond itself is only the pure Spirit, the absolute impersonal Divine. Those who go through the heart (love, bhakti) do not accept laya, they believe in a state beyond of eternal companionship with the Divine or dwelling in the Divine without laya. All this quite apart from supramentalisation. What then becomes of your starting point that laya is the inevitable destiny of the soul and it is only the personal descent of the Avatar that saves it from inevitable laya?

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There were two points of error [in the correspondent’s remarks about laya]. (1) That the soul formerly had no other possibility once it reached the Divine than laya. There were other possibilities, e.g. passing into a higher plane, living in the Divine or in the presence of the Divine. Both imply the refusal of birth and leaving the Lila on earth. (2) That it was only for the sake of living with the incarnate Divine and by reason of this descent that the soul consented to give up laya. The capital point is the supramentalisation of the being which is the Divine intention in the evolution on earth and cannot fail to come; the descent or incarnation is only an instrumentation for bringing that about. Your statement therefore became wrong by incompleteness.

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It is the Vedantic Adwaita experience of laya. It is only one phase of experience — not the whole or the highest Truth of the Divine.