Maya

The world exists as symbol of Brahman; but the mind creates or accepts false values of things and takes symbol for essential reality. This is ignorance or cosmic illusion, the mistake of the mind & senses, from which the Magician Himself, Master of the Illusion, is calling on us to escape. This false valuation of the world is the Maya of the Gita and can be surmounted without abandoning either action or world-existence. But in addition, the whole of universal existence is in this sense an illusion of Maya that it is not an unchanging transcendent and final reality of things but only a symbolical reality; it is a valuation of the reality of Brahman in the terms of cosmic consciousness. All these objects we see or are mentally aware of as objectively existing, are only forms of consciousness. They are the thing-in-itself turned first into terms & ideas born of a movement or rhythmic process of consciousness and then objectivised, in consciousness itself and not really external to it. They have therefore a fixed conventional reality, but not an eternally durable essential reality; they are symbols, not altogether the thing symbolised, means of knowledge, not altogether the thing known. To look at it from another point of view Existence or Brahman has two fundamental states of consciousness, cosmic consciousness and transcendental consciousness. To cosmic consciousness the world is real as a direct first term expressing the inexpressible; to transcendental consciousness the world is only a secondary & indirect term expressing the inexpressible. When I have the cosmic consciousness, I see the world as my Self manifested; in transcendental consciousness I see the world not as the manifestation of my Self but as a manifestation of something I choose to be to my Self-consciousness. It is a conventional term expressing me which does not bind me; I could dissolve it and express myself otherwise. It is a vocable of a particular language expressing
something in speech or writing which could be equally well expressed by quite another vocable in another language. I say tiger in English; I might equally have spoken Sanscrit & used the word shardula; it would have made no difference to the tiger or to myself, but only to my play with the symbols of speech and thought. So it is with Brahman & the universe, the Thing in itself and its symbols with their fixed conventional values, some of which are relative to the general consciousness & some to the individual consciousness of the symbol-being. Matter, Mind, Life for instance are general symbols with a fixed general value to God in His cosmic consciousness; but they have a different individual value, make a different impression or represent themselves differently, as we say, to myself, to the ant or to the god and angel. This perception of the purely conventional value of form & name in the Universe is expressed in metaphysics by the formula that the world is a creation of Para Maya or supreme Cosmic Illusion.

It does not follow that the world is unreal or has no existence worth the name. None of the ancient Scriptures of Hinduism affirms the unreality of the world, nor is it a logical consequence of the great but remote and difficult truth words are so inadequate to express. We must remember that all these terms, Maya, illusion, dream, unreality, relative reality, conventional value, are merely verbal figures and must not be pressed with a too literal scholastic or logical insistence. They are like the paint-brush hurled by the painter at his picture in desperation at not arriving at the effect he wanted; they are stones thrown at the truth, not the truth itself. We shall see this clearly enough when we come to look at the Cosmos from quite another standpoint, — the standpoint not of Maya, but Lila.¹ But certain great metaphysical minds, not perceiving sufficiently that words like everything else have only conventional values and are symbols of a truth which is in itself inexpressible, have drawn from the

¹ Illusion is itself an illusion. That which seems to the soul escaping from ignorance to be Maya, an illusion or dream, is seen by the soul already free to be Lila of God and the spirit’s play.
ideas suggested by these words, the most rigorous and concrete conclusions. They have condemned the whole world as a miserable & lying dream, all the more hateful & profitless for a certain element of ineffugable reality which the moreclearsighted part of their minds was compelled to realise & partially to admit. The truth in their premises has made their doctrines a mighty instrument for the liberation of great & austere souls, the error in their conclusion has afflicted humanity with the vain & barren gospel of the vanity not only of false mundane existence, but of all mundane existence. In the extreme forms of this view both nature & supernature, man & God are lies of consciousness, myths of a cosmic dream & not worth accepting. Amelioration is a chimera, divinity a lure and only absorption in a transmundane impersonal existence worth pursuing. The worshippers of God, the seekers after human perfection, those who would raise humanity from nature to supernature, find in their path two great stumbling blocks, on one side, the lower trend of Nature to persist in its past gains which represents itself in the besotted naturalism of the practical man & the worldling and on the other, this grand overshooting of the mark represented not only by the world-fleeing ascetic, who is after all, within his rights, but by the depressing pessimism of the ignorant who mean neither to flee the world, nor, if they did, could rise to the real grandeur of asceticism, but are still imbued intellectually & overshadowed in temperament by these high & fatal doctrines. A better day will dawn for India when the shadow is lifted and the Indian mental consciousness without renouncing the truth of Maya, perceives that it is only a partial explanation of existence. Mundane existence is not indispensable either to God’s being or to God’s bliss, but it is not therefore a vanity; nor is a liberated mundane existence—liberated in God—either a vain or a false existence.

The ordinary doctrine of Maya is not a simple truth, but proceeds upon three distinct spiritual perceptions. The first & highest is this supreme perception that the world is a mass of consciousness-symbols, having a conventional value, beings exist only in Brahman’s self-consciousness & individual personality & ego-sense are only symbols & terms in the universal
symbol-existence. We have said that & we shall see that we are not compelled by this perception to set down the world as a myth or a valueless convention. Nor would the Mayavadin himself have been brought to this extreme conclusion if he had not brought into the purity of this highest soul-experience his two other perceptions. The second of these, the lowest, is the perception of the lower or Apara Maya which I have indicated in the opening of this essay — the perception of the system of false values put by mind & sense on the symbol facts of the universe. At a certain stage of our mental culture it is easy to see that the senses are deceiving guides, all mental opinions & judgments uncertain, partial & haunted & pursued by doubt, the world not a reality in the sense in which the mind takes it for a reality, in the sense in which the senses only occupied by & only careful of the practical values of things, their vyavaharic artha, deal with it as a reality. Reaching this stage the mind arrives at this perception that all its values for the world being false, perhaps it is because there is no true value or only a true value not conceivable to the mind, and from this idea it is easy for our impatient human nature to stride to the conclusion that so it is & all existence or all world-existence at least is illusory, a sensation born of nothingness, a play of zeros. Hence Buddhism, the sensational Agnostic philosophies, Mayavada. Again, it is easy at a certain stage of moral culture to perceive that the moral values put by the emotions, passions and aspirations on actions & experiences are false values, that the objects of our sins are not worth sinning for & even that our principles & values do not stand in the shock of the world's actualities, but are, they too, conventional values which we do not find to be binding on the great march of Nature. From this it is natural & right to come to vairagya or dissatisfaction with a life of false valuations and very easy to stride forward, again in the impatience of our imperfect human nature, to the consummation of an entire vairagya, not only dissatisfaction with a false moral life, but disgust with life of any sort & the conclusion of the vanity of world-existence. We have a mental vairagya, a moral vairagya and to these powerful motives is added in the greater types the most powerful of all, spiritual
vairagya. For at a certain stage of spiritual culture we come to
the perception of the world as a system of mere consciousness
values in Parabrahman or to a middle term, the experience,
which was probably the decisive factor in the minds of great
spiritual seekers like Shankara, of the pure & bright impersonal
Sachchidananda beyond, unaffected by & apparently remote
from all cosmic existence. Observing intellectually through the
mind this great experience, the conclusion is natural & almost
inevitable that this Pure & Bright One regards the universe as
a mirage, an unreality, a dream. But these are only the terms,
the word-values & conventional idea-values into which mind
then translates this fact of unaffected transcendence; & it so
translates it because these are the terms it is itself accustomed
to apply to anything which is beyond it, remote from it, not
practically affecting it in tangible relations. The mind engrossed
in matter at first accepts only an objective reality; everything not
objectivised or apparently capable of some objective expression
it calls a lie, a mirage, a dream, an unreality or, if it is favourably
disposed an ideal. When, afterwards, it corrects its views, the
first thing it does is to reverse its values; coming into a region &
level where life in the material world seems remote, unspiritual
or apparently not capable of spiritual realisation, it immediately
applies here its old expressions dream, mirage, lie, unreality or
mere false idea and transfers from object to spirit its exclusive
& intolerant use of the word-symbol reality. Add to this mental
translation into its own conventional word-values of the fact of
unaffected transcendence the intellectual conclusions & temper-
amental repulsions of mental & moral vairagya, both together
affecting & disfiguring the idea of the world as a system of
consciousness values and we have Mayavada.