

Where do we stand: Is the world real or illusory?

Source: PARAVIDYA UPANISHAD and THE DIGITAL NOTEBOOKS OF PAUL BRUNTON

Published on web-ur.com: 2023-12-20

Date of last update: 2023-12-20

Edited version of the English text in Paravidya: David Godman <https://www.davidgodman.org/sri-ramana-paravidyopanishad/>

Article edited by: JD Arimathea



We begin this article by exposing some of the wise and enlightening reflections of Ramana Maharshi published in a Sanskrit work of over 700 verses, entitling "Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad" by Lakshmana Sarma, and where Ramana clearly argues how to understand (and determine) whether the world is truly real or unreal...

The whole world, which is composed of causes and effects together with space and time, is illusory. The real Self never undergoes change, whether by space or by time, or by causality.

Also the divisions of time, namely, past, present and future, are not at all real. The past and the future are dependent upon the present, and are themselves present in their own times.

Thus all time is only present; men make this division only by words; the eternal reality is indeed the real Self alone. Hence, it alone is present, nothing else .

The aspirant must therefore aim at the experience of the truth of that Self by attaining the supreme state. The discussion of the past and of the future is declared to be like trying to count without knowledge of the number 'one'.

Only the number 'one' exists, and none else, because all numbers are modifications of it. In the same way, the consciousness that is the Self alone exists, and the whole world is only that.

This world is not other than the body; this body is not distinct from the mind; the mind does not exist apart from the real Self; therefore that Self is all the world.

Enquiring into unrealities, taking them to be real, leads to forgetting the real [Self]. And there is no death other than this forgetting, because in this way the Self is almost lost to the seeker.

If the aspirant knows the Self in this [very] life, then and only then, for him the real is real. If in this life he fails to know the Self, for him the real [Self] remains concealed by the unreal.

Therefore the aspirant, being firmly convinced that space and time are unreal, should give up the whole world and seek to know the substratum, the Self, through the quest of his own true nature.

And ending with Ramana, a quote that, in a few words, sums it all up (extracted from the book "*Talks with Ramana Maharshi*"):

The world is unreal if seen as apart from the Self and real if seen as the Self.

And now with Paul Brunton, and through a selection of some of his most notable notes, we can also obtain, without a doubt, a clear perspective and a well-reasoned answer to this singular question that we have proposed as the title of this article.

The non-existence of the world: an incomplete truth

Let us not be bewitched by Oriental futility and deny what is palpably factual. It does not benefit truth, reason, or experience to deny the world's existence. It does not help the spiritual life to do so. It is a waste of time and an unnecessary cause of bewilderment or confusion to Western students, setting vain problems for them which they need never have had. This does not mean that they should desert the idea of nonduality and fall back into dualism. It means only that they should not repeat, like parrots, what others teach them without having first got a satisfactory understanding of the teaching and tested its truth or falsity. To say that the world does not exist is either a clumsy semantic error or one of those incomplete truths which, unless fitted to its other half, misleads others and leads him into a labyrinthine maze from which he either never gets out or takes years in the process. By deep enough meditation he may get into a half trance which tricks consciousness, so that he wriggles out of his five senses and loses his awareness of what they normally tell him. The world is gone. But is it really lost? For after his meditation he must come back to his senses when the world reappears like a faithful dog. Instead of rejecting its claim to exist, the honest thing is to accept it and make a proper appraisal of it. **For the world is a phenomenon: as an appearance it certainly does exist. But it appears in the mind, not in matter.** In the decade after the First World War great scientific research was made. Einstein's formulations on relativity are justly praised. Heisenberg's work on the structure of the atom with its ions, electrons, and quanta brought him the Nobel Prize. The most advanced workers in nuclear physics know the mentalist position if they have the willingness to reflect deeply enough upon their observed facts and the mathematical capacity to support this reflection. Few possess both. Most refuse to go so far because they dare not abandon the last remnants of materialism which got so intertwined with science during the past two hundred years that getting rid of them now actually seems unscientific: Einstein deliberately refused even though he had the capacity. Heisenberg accepted but would not publish his acceptance of the truth until now. I believe he will do so before passing away. Professor Carl von Weizsäcker, who worked in both fields—atomic physics and academic philosophy—also perceives the truth about reality but must leave the immense labour of presenting publicly the mathematical formulas involved, to a younger man. The point of all this is that we do not have to swallow the incredible doctrine of the world's non-existence in order to deny its materiality. Science properly demands an explanation of the world. If it pushes this demand to the fullest possible extent, it comes to the same truth as philosophy, even though it be by a different way. **The world is what it is, an appearance in the little mind;** but behind both is Mind, the great unchangeable reality which transcends all human thought and touch and which alone is, was, and will be.

When we say the world is not real, we mean that it lacks *intrinsic* reality for it is an idea only in a mind, an appearance only to something else.

Mentalism offers the key to understand it

We hear from the East that the world is unreal and that the ego is unreal, or that the world does not exist and that the ego does not exist. It is here that semantics as developed by Western minds may perhaps be of some service in clarifying confused thinking leading to confused statements. The body is a part of the world. Do we or do we not dwell in a body? If we do not then we should stop feeding it and stop taking it to the physician when it gets sick. Yet even those people who make such extraordinary statements do continue to eat, to fall sick, and to visit a doctor. Surely that disposes immediately of the question whether or not the body exists. In the same way and by the same pattern of reasoning we can discover that the world also exists. What then has led these Indian teachers to proclaim otherwise? Here we begin to intrude upon the field of mentalism and as a necessary part of the key to mentalism we must turn to the dream state. If we dream of a world around us and of a body in which we live in this dream world and of other bodies of other persons moving in it, the Indians say that these dream persons and this dream world is seen to be non-existent when we wake up and hence they deny its reality. But the experience did happen, so let us scrutinize it. There was no such thing as this world, true, but something was there; **what was there? Thoughts.** All this world and all these persons about whom we dream pass through consciousness as thoughts, so the thoughts were there. Whether we consider dream or hallucination, the pictures are there in the person's mind; they exist there, but they exist there only as mental creations. But when we say they are merely mental creations, we are bringing in an attempt to judge them, to judge their nature, what they really are. The statement that they are unreal is therefore a judgement and is acceptable only on the basis of a particular standpoint, the standpoint of the observer who is outside the dream, outside the hallucination. It is not acceptable on the basis of the person who is having the experience at that moment. Thus we see that the existence of the ego, the body, and the world need not be denied; **it is there, it is part of our experience, but what we have to do is to examine it more closely and**

attempt a judgement of its nature. And this judgement does not alter the fact that they are being experienced. This is a fact of our own, of everyone's experience, including the highest sage, only the sage and the common man each has his own judgement from his point of view, from his knowledge. In all these topics we can see how much easier it is to pick our way if we adopt the attitude which was proclaimed in *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* that there is a double viewpoint and a double standard in this teaching in order that we may be clear about our experiences and about our ideas and not get them mixed up. These two standpoints, the immediate and the ultimate, the common and the philosophic, are absolutely necessary in all talk and study about such metaphysical topics. Otherwise we get lost in mere verbiage, words, words, words.

A thought exists in intimate relation with the mind that produces it. The world-thought exists in intimate relation with the World-Mind, God. The world is not bereft of reality although it does not possess ultimate reality.

Not only is the world an appearance-in-Consciousness, but so is the ego. It is in the end a thought, perhaps the strongest of all; and only the Consciousness-in-Itself is the Reality from which it draws sustenance, existence, life.

If men refuse to see the transiency of person and possessions or acknowledge the inevitableness of change in mind and body or recognize the duality of pleasure and pain in all things, then Life itself will come and teach these lessons directly and definitely in some way or other. Sickness may invade their flesh, bereavement their families, loss their fortunes, or darkness their minds. Is it not better, prudent and wise, to remember the eternal in this present moment, to understand the mentalistic nature of their world-experience, to hold all things as "idea" and thus, freed from inner conflicts and false hopes, attain an unruffled tranquillity?

The value to the seeker after wisdom of comprehending the world's mentalistic nature is that it assists him to lose his fear of it as well as his attachments to it.

Understanding Reality

Just as the Divine Being is both Mind-in-itself and Mind-in-activity, according to which aspect we look at, as well as Power-static and Power-dynamic, so its ray in man is Pure Being-Consciousness appearing as the mentally-active ego, as well as Life-Force appearing as physically-active body.

Although we live in a world that is basically unreal—if we define reality as that which never changes, which ever was, is, and will be—we have to live in this world as if it were real, substantially real. We are compelled to do so, because we find ourselves here and we have to be active here. What it amounts to is that the *maya* of the Indians has to be treated as if it were *Brahman*, but we can only do so safely if we know the Truth.

The Hindu metaphysicians write off the Universe as our own fault, because we are deceived by the power of illusion, while our personal ego receives the same labelling: it is a fiction. At the same time they propound the teaching of a constant series of reincarnations in other forms which we have to undergo. Thus, their idea of immortality takes a different shape from the Christian one. We forget what we suffered and enjoyed, only to fall into new memories and new resurrections. Thus they deny we have any personal ego at all, yet go on behaving as if it is really there. The serious man may be forgiven his bewilderment. He is promised liberation (from the existence which at the same time is denied) if he rises to a height not only of incredible moral virtue but also of incredible psychological subtlety and semantic penetration, while we too have to go on attending to the earthly matters which are quite illusory.

To say that the world does not exist helps neither the cause of truth nor the seeker after truth. To admit that it does exist but to qualify the admission by adding "but not materially, only mentally" is to describe experience accurately. The dream exists in the dreaming mind as a series of thoughts, even though its world is not physical.

Prof. T.M.P. Mahadevan said: "The truest Renunciation is to renounce belief in the world's reality." *P.B.'s comment on above:* This is the interpretation of Sankara given most commonly. Perhaps by altering the word "reality" to "materiality" we may help the Western mind.

Those who have not had the inward revelation granted them, who have not awakened what the Hindu yogis call *antardrishti*, a kind of clairvoyant insight, often believe that mentalism is mere theory and that its talk of the world's unreality is mere verbalism. Even some among the seers have not seen this, although they have seen much else that fleshly eyes cannot. Sri Aurobindo in India, for instance, disputed mentalism, although his neighbour and contemporary, Ramana Maharshi, fully accepted it. Rudolf Steiner in Switzerland likewise disputed it although J.J. Van der Leeuw, his Dutch contemporary, understood and explained it. This situation is strange, but among the sages with whom I found the deepest penetration into the nature of things and who were nearly all mentalists, some observed that the capacity to receive and understand the mentalist doctrine was the sharpest of all tests to which a truth-seeker could be subjected.

The mind passes through a stage when, seeking after truth, it finds out that the world is other than it seems to be, and that its material substance is not matter at all but energy: its form is illusory. But this is not the end. For the seeker does not stop there; if he proceeds farther, he may find that illusion is itself an illusion. It is next found to be derived from reality and to be a form assumed by reality. This is the sage's enlightenment, this is his experience.

Experiencing Reality, the Ultimate Energy.

The translation of the Sanskrit phrase "*antardrishti*" is literally "inward seeing" in the sense of seeing beneath appearances what is under them. It does not refer to clairvoyance in the psychic sense, but rather to the metaphysical or mystical sense.

It can be particularized as meaning entering into the witness state of consciousness. The ordinary person sees only the object; penetrating deeper, he enters the witness state which is an intermediate condition; going still deeper, he reaches the ultimate state of Reality when there is no subject or object, whereas in the witness there is still subject and object, but the subject no longer identifies himself with the object as the ordinary man does.

With the marriage of Orient and Occident, the developed minds of both hemispheres will perceive activity in rest, and recognize inaction in activity. "The doctrine of the Gita is intense activity, but in the midst of it, eternal calmness," says Vivekananda.

Finally, the failure of metaphysicians to produce practical fruit is partly due to the fact that they perceive ideas of truth and not truth itself, as the failure of mystics is partly due to the fact that they experience feelings of reality and not reality itself. The successes and services of the sage, on the contrary, are due to the fact that he perceives truth and experiences reality and not merely thoughts or feelings about them.

In the ordinary man's cosmic picture any one object is separate from any other object. In the scientist's cosmic picture they are also separate, but intellectually he may have arrived at the point of holding them together in the idea that **they are all different forms of one and the same ultimate Energy**. But this remains only an idea. In the philosopher's picture, the ordinary man's and the scientist's are both included, but there is an addition, namely, he knows by his transcendental experience that these two are projections of Consciousness and that this Consciousness is the reality.

So many conversations on the words of Jesus have taken his sentence "I and my Father are one" to mean a kind of union like marriage. But they overlook the fact that married couples still remain couples, still express the number two. Jesus did not say, "I and my father are two". The number one is definitely not two. For Jesus found, as every other man who attains that stage of consciousness finds, that when contemplating the Infinite Life-Power (which he named the Father) he himself vanished. There was then no other consciousness except that of the Infinite itself. For That was the substratum of his own "I". But what happened in his contemplation two thousand years ago still happens today; the same discovery is made when the illusion of egoity (individuality) vanishes.

And finally... how could we end the article? We see no better way to do it than with this forceful conclusion of PB to the solid arguments expounded in the previous notes...

Even though he knows it is like a dream, he must live, work and act, love, strive and suffer as if the dream were true.