

*Shimmering Reality: The Metaphysics of Relativity in Mystical Traditions.*

Patrick Laude

Copyright *Philosophy East and West*, 65-2.

It can be argued that what most clearly sets “mystical theology” apart from ordinary religious consciousness and rational<sup>1</sup> or apologetic theology is its treatment of the relationship between the Ultimate Reality and the non-ultimate. In fact mysticism tends to combine the strictest concept of the Absolute, one that points to transcending any polarity, duality and distinction, and a vision of relativity that both denies the reality of the world of manifestation, when considered independently from its Source, and affirms an essential continuity or unity between the Ultimate and that which is not in an ultimate sense.

The Absolute is literally *ab-solutum*, which means that it is “unbound,” “detached” and “free.” Although most often understood as “complete” and “self-sufficient,” and therefore also “cause of itself,” the Absolute must also and consequently be approached in terms of its perfect freedom, which is itself a dimension of its transcendence vis-à-vis any “relationality.” In this connection “relationality” entails an aspect of “obligation” or “reciprocity” by virtue of the “relationships” and “relations” it involves. Therefore, our understanding of “absoluteness” as utter freedom immediately brings the central question of this inquiry to the fore by highlighting the apparent logical impossibility of positing concurrently the ontological reality of both the Absolute and “non-absolute realities” –including ourselves. In other words, is the Absolute conceivable side by side with the existence of a myriad of “non-absolute” realities given that such a mode of “co-being” or “co-existence” would perforce imply some sort of “relationality” between the former and the latter, and thereby run contrary to the notion of an *ab-solutum*? It is this question that we would like to ponder in this

---

<sup>1</sup> Let us specify from the outset that “mystical theology” is not “irrational” even though it highlights the supra-rational source of spiritual knowledge and the limitations of reason: in fact any “mystical theology” makes use of reason when providing doctrinal and theoretical concepts. To be aware of the limitations of reason does not amount to a disqualification of its power and usefulness within the scope of its epistemological “jurisdiction.” Moreover what we call “rational theology,” even though it is by definition a rational discourse, depends on the supra-rational data of revelation for its development.

essay through a liminal survey of some of the most rigorous concepts of the Absolute provided by a cross-religious spectrum of teachings of “mystical theology,” or rather “mystical metaphysics.” We readily acknowledge that the term “mystical” is approximative, possibly even misleading and given to likely misunderstandings. We consider nonetheless the use of this term suitable as a distinct indication that we will be considering doctrines and teachings that are not understood by their proponents as mere conceptual descriptions of Reality, but are also intimately associated by them to ways of spiritual realization, thereby highlighting the vital coalescence of epistemology, ontology and soteriology.

Within the manifold tradition of Hinduism the Advaitin or non-dual perspective of Shankara (788-820 AD) provides a fitting starting point for an analysis of the ontological status of relativity, or “other-than-the-Ultimate,” when characterizing *Māyā* --which has been variously translated as “veil,” “illusion,” “art,” “wonder” or “appearance”-- as “neither real, nor unreal”<sup>2</sup> in his *Vivekacūdāmani*<sup>3</sup> or *Crest Jewel of Discrimination*. We will use these perplexing words as keys to argue that wisdom and mystical traditions, across religious boundaries, tend to assign an ambiguous ontological status to phenomenal realities as apprehended “outside” of the realm of the Ultimate Reality or Recognition. Furthermore, we propose to show that each of these traditions does emphasize one of the two aforesaid characterizations in its approach of the mystery of universal metaphysical relativity, or universal existence: neither “being” or real, nor “non-being” or unreal.<sup>4</sup> It bears specifying that the terms “is,” “real,” and “being” are used alternatively in this essay

---

<sup>2</sup> « *San āpi asan āpi ubhayātmikā no bhinna āpi abhinnā āpi ubhayātmikā no sāṅga āpi anahga hi ubhayātmikā no maha ādbhuta anirvacanīya rūpā* – If you ask of its form, it cannot be stated. It is beyond description. It is neither real nor non-real ; neither is it the mixture of the two. Is it separate from the Ātman ? It is neither separate, nor yet non-separate ; nor part of the Ātman, yet neither can you say it is not part. It is not the body. It is most wonderful and beyond all description. » Sri Sankarācārya, *Vivekacūdāmani*, verses 109-111, translated by Svāmī Turīyānanda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 1991, 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that the attribution of the *Vivekacūdāmani* to Shankara has been disputed by scholars is not directly relevant to our purpose since this text has been, and continues to be, a classical reference for the perspective of *Advaita*.

<sup>4</sup> We need to acknowledge that Shankara adds a third negation to these two: *Māyā* is “neither real, nor unreal, nor both,” or a mixture of two. In the limits of this essay we will only touch marginally and as it were incidentally upon this third negative characterization, although we do intend to approach this complex third exclusion more directly in a future essay.

without significant difference in meaning to imply ontological substantiality and permanence. The term “existence” will sometimes be understood in a similar sense, sometimes more technically with the specific nuance of the Latin *existere*, from *ek-sistere* which connotes manifestation as in “phenomenon” or a coming into being out of nothingness that is contingent upon a higher “existentiating” agency. In other words “being” and “real” or reality will point to ontological substance, and “existence” to phenomenal manifestation. We will also keep to the principle that such emphases do not amount to exclusive doctrinal propositions since “mystical theologies” should not be understood as philosophical systems rationally denoting realities, but rather as symbolic approaches by way of conceptual representations intended to open the mind to a spiritual, existential, “experiential” realization or assimilation of Reality. In other words, some teachings lay emphasis on the “not real” dimension of relativity, while others stress its being “not unreal,” and others still both its being “not real and not unreal;” but at any rate such conceptual characterizations can never be totally exclusive of their counterpart positions since they tend to suggest ontological aspects and epistemological points-of-views, being thereby akin to the Jain principle of *Anekāntavāda*, or limitless plurality of perspectives.<sup>5</sup> The need to consider these perspectives in a non-exclusive fashion stems from their implying a gap between their doctrinal formulations and the ontological and existential realities they denote.

### ***Dispelling Appearance.***

The first approach of metaphysical relativity consists in predicating it primarily as “not real.” Among all the expressions of this approach, two of the most powerfully suggestive are no doubt Shankara’s *Advaita* and Nāgārjuna’s Mahayanic *Mādhyamaka*. Two words of caution are in order before we move further: first, it bears stressing from the outset that these two doctrines are traditionally at odds on

---

<sup>5</sup> « *Anekāntavāda* may be translated as the ‘non-one-sided’ or ‘many-sided doctrine’, or the ‘doctrine of many-sidedness’ (...) *Anekāntavāda* is an ontological doctrine. Its fundamental claim, as it eventually came to be understood by the tradition, is that all existent entities have infinite attributes. (...) The apparent contradictions that our perceptions of reality involve – continuity and change, emergence and perishing, permanence and flux, identity and difference – reflect the interdependent, relationally constituted nature of things. Reality is a synthesis of opposites.” Jeffery D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction*, I.B. Tauris: London, New York, 2009, 141.

fundamental points touching upon their respective understandings of Ultimate Reality, and secondly they both can be read –as we will see later and as we have already intimated—in a way that qualifies their overall “non-realism.” While Shankara’s perspective is *a priori* epistemological, in the sense that its chief concern is to dispel ignorance or *avidyā* to reveal the true nature of being and consciousness, Nāgārjuna’s perspective can be deemed to be primarily soteriological since its ontology chiefly responds to the central question of Buddhism, i.e. suffering and the way to free oneself from it. This being said, it is in fact nearly impossible, in both cases, to disconnect epistemology, soteriology and metaphysics or ontology: as we will see Shankara can at times approach the problem of *Māyā* in onto-cosmological terms, and Nāgārjuna’s concepts of “emptiness” and “co-dependent origination” are intrinsically connected to ontological and epistemological stances that are aligned with a spiritual intent.<sup>6</sup>

As aforementioned, metaphysical relativity is, in *Advaita Vedānta*, primarily identified with *Māyā*. Now *Māyā* is most often approached by Shankara as an epistemological phenomenon of superimposition upon Reality. In other words *Māyā* is that which makes us mistake “the rope for the snake.”<sup>7</sup> It is a principle of distortion of Reality that stems from one’s inability to recognize Reality as it is, that is as the non-dual Self or *Ātman*. On the one hand, *Māyā* is the “epistemological” fruit of a false identification of the Self with the body, on the other hand it is *Māyā* itself, or more specifically *tamas* --the lowest, most opaque of the three cosmological elements that enter into the composition of *Māyā*’s world of relativity, that is constitutional of delusion as such:

The power of *tamas* is a veiling power. It makes things appear to be other than what they are. It is this which is the original cause of an individual’s transmigration and is the cause of the origination of the action of the

---

<sup>6</sup> “All of Nāgārjuna’s works are broadly soteriological in nature: he is trying to break the habit of reification that is at the root of grasping and craving and hence all suffering.” Richard H. Jones, *Nāgārjuna: Buddhism’s Most Important Philosopher*, New York, 2010, 135.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Arvind Sharma, *The Rope and the Snake: Metaphorical Exploration of Advaita Vedānta*, Manohar, 1997.

projecting power.<sup>8</sup>

It must be noted, furthermore, that the ontological status of *Māyā* is incomprehensible: “She is most strange. Her nature is inexplicable,” to use Shankara’s words.<sup>9</sup> *Māyā* is fundamentally *the* unintelligible, and this lack of intelligibility is a function of the “obscurity” or uncertainty of its origin, as well as being bound to the undecidability of its ontological status. Although *Māyā* is most often not accounted for in terms of creation or emanation, since it is an “inexplicable wonder,” some Advaitin authoritative texts do relate *Māyā* to a creative process on the part of the Lord.<sup>10</sup> In such cases, *Māyā* tends to be identified with *līlā*, or the divine sport or play that “symbolizes” creation. In Shankara’s *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, for example, we read that “Isvara amuses Himself assuming, of His own accord, the forms of worshipper and the worshipped, of teacher and disciple, of master and servant, and so on.”<sup>11</sup> Inasmuch as these dualities pertain to *Māyā*, the latter may be read to be implicitly ascribed to the Lord, or to the Personal God, as its Originator. In fact the very consideration of the Lord entails a duality, or a relationship between the One Lord and the multiplicity that relates to Him.<sup>12</sup> This deluding duality and multiplicity that is in the very nature of *Māyā* is sometimes compared by Advaitin authors to a fishing net that expands or contracts depending upon the will of the

<sup>8</sup> *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śaṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda: an introduction and translation* by John A. Grimes, Śaṅkarācārya, Ashgate: Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, Vermont, 2004, 113. « Taking this world as a tree, the seed of this tree of the world is *tamas*. » *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, Turīyānanda, 64. *Tamas* is the third of the *gunas*—cosmological « strings » with which the entire relative realm, including the Divine Being or *Saguna Brahman*, is woven-- the two others being *sattva* and *rajas*. *Sattva* corresponds to light, ascension and purity, *rajas* to fire, desire and passion and *tamas* to heaviness, obscurity and ignorance. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, by contrast with the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, considers all of the three *gunas* to be principles of delusion: “All this universe is deluded by these three states of being/ Composed of the qualities./It does not recognize Me./ Who am higher than these, and eternal.” (*The Bhagavad Gītā*, translated by Winthrop Sargeant, State University of New York Press: Albany, 1994, VII, 13, 331.)

<sup>9</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, Turīyānanda, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Although Advaitin writers most often refrain from treating *Māyā* in terms of creation by or from *Ātman*, this is not the case of the *Upanisads*, which frequently refer to *Brahman* as creator: “Unlike Advaita commentators, the Upanisads are not reticent about *brahman* as the creator and are not hesitant to suggest desire and purpose. Aitareya Upanisads (1.1), for example, begins with the act of creation. ‘In the beginning this world was the self (*ātman*), one alone, and there was no other being at all that blinked an eye. He thought to himself: --Let me create the worlds.’ “ Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview. God, World, and Humanity*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Sri Shankaracharya, *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, translated by Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, Samata Books : Chennai, 152.

<sup>12</sup> « The Sruti says : By *Māyā*, Siva became two birds always associated together ; the One, clinging to the one unborn (Prakriti), became many as it were. » *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, VII-27, 158.

Lord. The fishing net is to be understood here as a power of allure and delusion, and its contraction to a divine grace, so that *Māyā* is in such cases considered as being under the control of a sometimes misguiding --i.e. “expanding” *Māyā*--, sometimes liberating --i.e. “contracting” *Māyā*-- Lord .<sup>13</sup> However, the main focus of *Advaita* is not on the origin or cause of *Māyā*, which is in a way an ever open question, but rather on its “end,” or its being dispelled by knowledge. It could actually be said that the only fully satisfactory “definition” of *Māyā* is to found in the words “that which can be nullified,” or to use Eliot Deutsch’s terminology “that which can be sublated by other experience.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, *Māyā* is not as much “definable” as it is “recognizable” by and through its ontological and spiritual “reduction,” or else *Māyā* is known by being dispelled. *Māyā* as appearance has no meaning independently from Reality which, in *Advaita Vedānta*, is none other than the Supreme Divine Selfhood, or *Ātman*. So it is precisely because “*Māyā* is nullified by knowledge of *Ātman*,”<sup>15</sup> and because this nullification is in fact the only way of knowing *Māyā* for what it is. If there is a way to “know” the unknowable, undefinable, inexplicable *Māyā* it is in fact through the realization of *Ātman*. It is this very fact that allows us to consider *Advaita Vedānta* as a set of metaphysical doctrines that lay emphasis on the “non-real” character of that which is not the Ultimate, notwithstanding the ontologically undecidable and ambiguous nature of *Māyā*. The latter is best described by Shankara in the following passage: “It is not non-existent, because it appears; neither is it existent, because it is nullified.”<sup>16</sup> Such terms would seem to contradict our characterization of *Advaita Vedānta* as a perspective emphasizing the “non-reality” of universal relativity, since they deny both the “non-existent” and

---

<sup>13</sup> “*Māyā*, the binding capacity of Hari, and the generator of things external and internal, spreads out like the net of the fisherman, in respect of ignorant *jīvas*, and contracts (in the case of *jīvas* with knowledge) through the will of the Lord. Be this *māyā* real or illusory, (but) contraction and the opposite (expansion) are natural (therefore); and, thus, too (say some).” In Sarvajñātman’s *Samksepaśārīraka*, Eliot Deutsch and Rohit Dalvi, editors, *The Essential Vedānta*, Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004, 344.

<sup>14</sup> « *Reality* is that which cannot be sublated by any other experiences. (...) *Appearance* is that which can be sublated by other experience. (...) *Unreality* is that which neither can nor cannot be sublated by other experience. » Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta : A Philosophical Reconstruction*, The University Press of Hawaii : Honolulu, 1969, p18-24. On the basis of such epistemological distinctions, *Māyā* is clearly to be identified with appearance.

<sup>15</sup> *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, VII-12, 153.

<sup>16</sup> *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, VII-13, 154.

“existent” aspects of *Māyā*. However, it is quite clear that the negation of the “non-existent” nature of *Māyā* is methodologically and epistemologically less important than the negation of its “existence.” In fact, or in practice, the state of epistemological and spiritual delusion from which the Advaitin practitioner is called to awaken is not so much connected to the need to recognize the “non-non-existence” of *Māyā* as it is to the necessity of discerning its “non-existence.” If it were not so, *Māyā* could not be referred symbolically by Shankara, for example, as a “harlot” whose “coquetry” allures only those who do not make use of discerning scrutiny (*viveka*).<sup>17</sup> It is clearly the seductively “non-real” aspect of *Māyā* that serves as point of reference for the Advaitin discriminating meditation toward deliverance, especially when considering the ability of *Māyā* to shortchange the human mind in posing as reality.

*Mādhyamaka* Buddhism, or the Middle Way initiated by the Indian “Patriarch” of *Mahāyāna*, Nāgārjuna (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD), is no less adamant than *Advaita* in asserting the “non-essentiality” or “non-self-nature” of what we have been referring to as “metaphysical relativity.” In fact, the ultimate lack of substance of phenomena is extended by Nāgārjuna to everything, including the Self, in concordance with the Buddhist teaching of *anatta* or no-self. In this respect, it could be argued that Nāgārjuna emphasizes further than *Advaita* the “unreal” character of phenomena in the sense that no absolute Selfhood is posited by him that would “lend” some reality to the latter. One of the fundamental reasons for this state of affairs lies in that, from a Buddhist point-of-view, metaphysics is determined by soteriology, and the concern for doctrinal conceptualization or “perspective” superseded by a focus on method. In other terms, the spiritual and moral reality of suffering is connected to craving, and craving is itself a function of an ignorance of the status of reality. The whole issue revolves, therefore, around an erroneous notion of the “substantiality” or “essence” of phenomena and the self. The fundamental intent of Nāgārjuna, therefore, is to deny the “own being” (*svabhāva*)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, VII-16, 155.

<sup>18</sup> The term *svabhāva* (literally “own nature”) can be closely approximated by the notion of “essence.” David Kalupahana translates it as “inherent nature” (cf. *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*,

of the latter, thereby freeing consciousness from its attachment to the sources of delusion (*moha*) and suffering. The Nagarjunian rejection of “self-existence,” “own being” or “inherent essence” is not to be equated, however, with an utter negation of the reality or existence of phenomena. It simply means, as we will discuss further, that there is no such thing, for Nāgārjuna, as an inherent, essential, timeless nature of phenomena that would define them as discrete entities.

What has just been specified indicates that the most proper way to characterize the ontological status of phenomena consists in denying both that they are “existent” and that they are “non-existent,” hence the characterization of *Mādhyamaka* as Middle Way. This Middle Way is defined in contradistinction with two metaphysical pitfalls which are often referred to, in Buddhist commentaries, as “eternalism” and “nihilism.” Eternalism refers to the status of “essences” as independent from time and change, whereas nihilism is simply the negation of any existence whatsoever:

‘Exists’ implies grasping after eternalism. ‘Does not exist’ implies the philosophy of annihilation. Therefore, a discerning person should not rely upon either existence or non-existence.<sup>19</sup>

According to Candrakīrti, a major seventh-century disciple and commentator of Nāgārjuna, a lack of insightful and contemplative intelligence may result in either of two errors, with respect to the doctrine of emptiness: The first is a confusion between emptiness and nothingness, or *śūnyatā* and *abhāva*. This is the basis for the common Western misinterpretations of Buddhism as a form of “pessimism,” or else nihilism. The second erroneous interpretation of *śūnyatā* consists, in Guy Bugault’s terms, in “hypostasizing” it, misleading one thereby into a mental fixation that

---

University of Hawaii Press, 1976, 27). Christian Lindtner (*Master of Wisdom. Writings of the Buddhist Master Nāgārjuna*, Dharma Publishing, 1986-1997) translates it by “own being,” while Jay Garfield prefers to render it as “self-nature”: “When a Mādhyamika philosopher says of a table that it is empty, that assertion by itself is incomplete. It invites the question, empty of what? And the answer is, empty of inherent existence, or self-nature, or in more Western terms, *essence*. Now, to say that the table is empty is hence simply to say that it lacks essence and importantly *not* to say that it is completely nonexistent.” Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, Oxford University Press, 1995, 89

<sup>19</sup> Nāgārjuna, *The Philosophy of the Middle Way - Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, translated by David J. Kalupahana, SUNY Press, 1986, 234.



prevents one from recognizing emptiness.<sup>20</sup> Let us note, in this connection, that the characterization of phenomena as neither “existent” nor “non-existent” appears as analogous, but not identical, to the Advaitin status of *Māyā* as neither “real” nor “unreal.” A closer examination shows that the matter is both ontological and epistemological in *Mādhyamaka* and *Advaita* alike, but with a definitely different emphasis in each case. Here is a passage from Nāgārjuna that epitomizes the *Mādhyamaka* outlook and will help us bring it into sharp contrast with *Advaita*:

When something is not related to anything, how then can that thing exist?  
For example, when it is not related to ‘long’, how can ‘short’ exist?  
When there is existence there is non-existence, as there is short when there is long. Since there is existence when there is non-existence, each of the two does not exist.<sup>21</sup>

As it appears plainly in the previous passage, the refutation of both “existence” and “non-existence” is entirely connected to relationality, relativity, and the duality and multiplicity they entail. Without relation there is no existence because existence is empirically and ontologically relational, and always implies non-existence, the same holding true in return for non-existence in regard to existence. For Nāgārjuna, the refutation of existence and non-existence is therefore founded both on ontological relationality and epistemological and linguistic relativity. There is nothing that lies outside the range of this relativity, and therefore everything is “empty,” neither existent nor non-existent.<sup>22</sup>

The originality of Nāgārjuna’s perspective is to connect *nirvāna* to an existential recognition of the “emptiness” of all phenomena, without which the “blowing out” of bound, deluded and alienated consciousness would be impossible.<sup>23</sup> In this view, the origin and cessation of suffering, that lies at the core of the

---

<sup>20</sup> “A wrongly perceived emptiness ruins a person of meager intelligence. It is like a snake that is wrongly grasped or knowledge that is wrongly cultivated.” Nāgārjuna, *The Philosophy of the Middle Way - Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, translated by David J. Kalupahana, SUNY Press, 1986, 335. Cf. also, Nāgārjuna, *Stances du milieu par excellence (Madhyamaka-kārikās)*, translated, introduced and annotated by Guy Bugault, Paris : Gallimard, 2002, 309.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13, 17.

<sup>22</sup> This has implications on the use of language in the sense that the exclusion of both existence and non-existence leaves us with a clear sense of the limitations of linguistic categories, thereby opening the way to a transcending of conceptual crystallizations.

<sup>23</sup> This is in critical reaction to Abhidharma Buddhists who postulated a continuity of the *dharma*s and their “nature” or *svabhāva*.

Buddhist intuition of reality, are accounted for in terms of “emptiness,” which is none other than “dependent co-origination” or “relative conditioning,” *pratīyasamutpāda*.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the direct methodical implication of *pratīyasamutpāda* appears on an existential level when referred to the central focus of Buddhism, i.e. suffering. As is well-known, the latter is conceived as the result of a chain of conditioning that begins with ignorance and ends with birth and the manifold limitations and frustrations it entails:

And what is dependent co-arising? From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications. From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness. From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form. From name-and-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media. From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact. From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling. From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving. From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance. From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering.<sup>25</sup>

The end of ignorance, first link of this chain, is none other than the cessation of the delusion of ontological causality or “arising” that makes “substances” out of objects of experience. This cessation is the realization that there is in reality no arising and no ceasing. The doctrine of dependent co-origination is therefore intimately bound to the practical goal of the Buddha’s teachings, which is the eradication of suffering. In other words, *pratīyasamutpāda* teaches that the above “chain” should not be understood as a sequence of causal links, since its doctrine reveals, through meditative intuition, the non-substantiality and “emptiness” of the various “links”

---

<sup>24</sup> One of the most famous classical statements of *pratīyasamutpāda* teaches that nothing is caused by itself, by another, by itself and another, and by nothing: “No existents whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from themselves, from another, from both, or from a non-cause.” Kalupahana, 105. These four negations amount to an affirmation of the « relative conditioning » of all beings. In summary this foundational passage amounts to 1) the negation of a self-caused cause as God or *causa sui* that would be independent from relations, 2) the idea that a cause would be antecedent in relation to its effect and therefore independent from it, *quod absit*, and 3) the idea of a relationship with nothing, which is an impossibility.

<sup>25</sup> *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*, translated from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2000, 12 *Nidānasamyutta* 1(1), 533.

themselves, and in fact of the whole chain of phenomena. Realizing *nirvāna* means realizing the truth of *pratītyasamutpāda*. This realization means the recognition of the unsubstantiality of suffering itself, without which recognition there would not be any way out of the latter into *nirvāna*.<sup>26</sup>

To sum up our previous reflections, *Pratītyasamutpāda* could be succinctly outlined as follows. Everything whatsoever is relational, and therefore relative and contingent, that is neither ontologically independent nor metaphysically necessary. Nothing, therefore, can be legitimately substantialized, objectified, reified, nor even quite adequately “verbalized.” Nothing is a self-existent substance ontologically separated from other existents, nothing is an object independent from a subject, nothing is a “thing” if by “thing” is meant a reality defined by a substance and circumscribed by it.

### ***Paradoxes of Reality and Non-Reality: Appearance and Emptiness***

What precedes is indicative of a sharp contrast between *Mādhyamaka* “emptiness” and the relativity of the Advaitic *Māyā* which is, as we have seen, revealed by That which is not relative, or *Ātman*. In fact, *Māyā* is not real because it is not *Ātman*, but it is –in a sense-- not unreal because there is only *Ātman*, and *Ātman* is Reality as such. It is important to note, in this connection, the way in which the “not-real” aspect of “other-than-the-Ultimate” is qualified in Shankara’s *Advaita*. This is illustrated by the onto-cosmological dimensions of Shankara’s doctrine of *Māyā*, and more specifically the doctrine of the *gunas*, upon which we touched earlier. The *gunas* are the three cosmological principles known as *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*. Now, it is quite clear that as cosmological principles these three *gunas* belong to *Māyā* since the cosmos pertains to the latter. However it appears that the principles of inertia and passion respectively epitomized by *tamas* and *rajas* are not to be placed on the same ontological level as the ascending quality of *sattva*, which is luminous, pure and Reality-centered. Therefore, *sattva* is like a seed or a trace of the “Real” in the “non-real,” and it is as such “not unreal.” Shankara writes:

---

<sup>26</sup> Nāgārjuna considers that no *nirvāna* would be possible if one were to posit the reality of “essences.” “If all this is non-empty, there exists neither arising nor ceasing, [As such,] through relinquishing and ceasing of what does one expect freedom?” *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 25:2, Kalupahana, 356.

The property of *tamas* is to cover, as scattering is the property of *rajas*. It makes things appear to be what they are not, and that is the cause of bondage, and even of decentralization [projection]. (113) (...) Pure *sattva* is blissfulness, realization of Self, supreme peace of attainment, cheerfulness, and an abiding quality in the Self, by which one becomes ever blissful.<sup>27</sup>

The preceding quotes make it plain that one can distinguish, within relativity, levels of reality that could be approximately referred to as “higher *Māyā*” and “lower *Māyā*.” The “higher *Māyā*,” as epitomized by the *guna sattva* provides us with a picture of relativity in which the perspective of *Māyā* as “not real” is largely counterbalanced by the point of view of *Māyā* “not being unreal.” This means that *Māyā* is in a certain sense a “manifestation” of *Ātman*, although the term manifestation would normally not be satisfactorily applicable in the context of *Advaita* inasmuch as the main Advaitin emphasis lies upon *Māyā* as an epistemological obstacle to metaphysical recognition, rather than as positive projection of *Ātman*.

In contradistinction with *Advaita*, the perspective of *Mādhyamaka* is less prone to acknowledge this secondary “not unreal” dimension of relativity, and more inclined to emphasize more exclusively its “not real” aspect by ignoring qualitative distinctions within the context of *pratītyasamutpāda*. There are three ways, however, in which one must qualify this statement. First, as we have mentioned, phenomena are no less “non-existent” than “existent.” Secondly *Mādhyamaka* Buddhism makes use of a concept of reality, or *tattva*, which, without being the equivalent of the concept of Self, or *Ātman*, is nevertheless denotative of truth or “things as they are.” In this context, *Mādhyamaka* draws a very clear distinction between *svabhāva*, which is an ontological notion, and *tattva*, which pertains primarily to epistemology. The latter refers to reality as it is, in its truth, but this reality is not to be identified with existence as commonly understood, nor with non-existence either: its status transcends the duality of existence and non-existence. *Tattva* is the “object of a cognition without an object”<sup>28</sup> in the sense that it is a

<sup>27</sup> *Viveka-cūdāmani*, p 49 and 52.

<sup>28</sup> Christian Lindtner, *Master of Wisdom. Writings of the Buddhist Master Nāgārjuna*, Dharma Publishing, 1986-1997, xx.

recognition of the emptiness of all objects, and of the subject itself as dependent upon an object. Non-duality is here radicalized to the point of abolishing not only the duality of subject and object, as in *Advaita*, but even the very terms of the duality. This “consciousness-without-an-object,” to make use of Franklin Merrell-Wolff’s expression, or non-dual wisdom, *Advayajñāna*, coincides with the recognition of *tattva*.

The recognition of *tattva* is none other than the “goal” of Buddhism: it points to the end of the Buddhist wayfaring as leading from suffering, *dukkha*, to a state of “blowing out” of the causes of suffering, *nirvāna*. But at the same time, in its ultimate truth, it denies the essential reality of the path and its goal. This is the supreme spiritual paradox of *Mādhyamaka* that introduces us to the third qualification of our argument concerning the *Mādhyamaka* non-recognition of the “not unreal” aspect of phenomena. This paradox is most directly expressed by Nāgārjuna in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

The Buddha did not teach the appeasement of all objects, the appeasement of obsession, and the auspicious as some thing to some one at some place. <sup>29</sup>

The meaning of this *prima facie* perplexing statement makes full sense when referred to the fundamental distinction between two kinds of truth; this is the doctrine of *satyadvayavibhāga*. Nāgārjuna articulates the distinction between conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca* or *vohāra-sacca*) and ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*) as follows:

The teaching of the doctrine by the Buddhas is based upon two truths: truth relating to worldly conventions and truth in terms of ultimate fruit. Those who do not understand the distinction between these two truths do not understand the profound truth embodied in the Buddha’s message. Without relying upon convention, the ultimate fruit is not taught. Without understanding the ultimate fruit, freedom is not attained. <sup>30</sup>

The truth, in an ultimate sense, is none other than emptiness or co-dependent origination. However, the teachings of the Buddhas need to make use of conventional truth in order to lead mankind toward the ultimate truth. In that sense

<sup>29</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 25: 24. Kalupahana, 369.

<sup>30</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 24: 8,9,10. Kalupahana, 331-333.

conventional truth is none other than the *upāya*, or the “expedient mean” *par excellence*, through which people may be brought up to ultimate reality. The

The paramount distinction between “teaching” and “ultimate fruit” is akin to that between “doctrine” and “method,” or that between intellectual cognition and spiritual recognition. Conventional truth is both a necessity in terms of teaching and a potential impediment in terms of recognition.<sup>31</sup> The latter aspect appears in the fact that conventional truth unknowingly relies on linguistic phenomena that pertain to what the *Mādhyamaka* tradition refers to as *prajñaptir upādāya*, which is understood by most commentators as “dependent designations.” A radical interpretation of this concept, in the wake of Candrakīrti, sees all designations as not related in any essential way to objects, but as constituting, rather, a conventional network of metaphorical modes of cognitive perception, that are ultimately illusory. This view implies that emptiness itself as a concept is necessarily a dependent and provisional designation and therefore itself empty. Such an understanding allows for a maximal, and indeed radical, differentiation between emptiness as such and the doctrine of emptiness, the latter being subsumed under the realm of conventional truth, the former denoting ultimate truth. When other commentators and translators have resisted such an understanding of the concept of co-dependent origination as pure “dependent designation” they have done so on account of its effectiveness in leading to spiritual recognition, an effectiveness that seems incompatible with pure emptiness and utter lack of referentiality.<sup>32</sup> Douglas Berger has thus argued, against the emptiness of all uses of language as implying “being,” in

---

<sup>31</sup> This is analogous, incidentally, to Shankara’s distinction between the real and figurative senses of *Ātman*’s “binding” by *Māyā*: “That *Ātman* does acts, that He bound by them, and that He is released from them, is true only in a figurative sense; it is a mere illusion.” *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, VIII-21 156.

<sup>32</sup> “If the concepts ‘conditioned co-arising’ and ‘emptiness’ don’t refer at all to the way the world works, if impermanence, birth-and-death, ignorance, and desirous attachment are not in fact features of unenlightened human existence, then why would the Buddha even bother to claim that they are at the root of our suffering and point toward an effective solution? Why again, in this case, would Mahāyāna Buddhists bother to argue against theories that espouse some notion of *svabhāva* in the first place, since, if no words refer to reality anyway, there would seem to be nothing about an accurate understanding of human existence at stake in the dispute? If the answer is that the conventional meaning of conditioned co-arising is a more effective means of bringing about enlightenment, then we would seem entitled to ask why it is so? » Douglas L. Berger, « A Reply to Garfield and Westerhoff on “Acquiring Emptiness” » *Philosophy East and West* - Volume 61, Number 2, April 2011, p. 369.

favour of a distinction between two kinds of linguistic practices, one assuming being and the other not. The latter is the language of *upāya* which makes it possible to refer to the emptiness of reality through its own referential "transparency," as it were, that is without falling into a kind of self-substantialization. In this sense, the most effective *upāya* is the one that invites us not to treat it as an independent substance. Regardless of whether one universalizes the view that designations are co-dependently arisen and empty or one leaves room for a conventional language adequate to convey the truth of emptiness, epistemological truth needs be equated with that which produces positive outcomes or recognition.<sup>33</sup>

As the previous pages have intimated, emptiness is not the essence of realities in the sense in which a transcendent source, or a transcendent paradigm of their being would, but it is so if we understand by essence the fundamental "structure" of reality: "We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness."<sup>34</sup> This explanation, for Buddhists, is not the recognition of a Supreme Object, because no object can be supreme in the sense of being independent from reciprocal conditioning in its being. It is not the recognition of a Substantial Subject either, since no subject is without being relational to an object upon which it depends to be a subject. For Nāgārjuna, the position of a Subject or Self as *Ātman*, necessarily gives, or lends, some substantial existence to all phenomena. This is so because the position of an *Ātman* that would be independent, as it were, from co-dependent origination, is incompatible with the latter and therefore implies the self-substantiality of everything else. To postulate a Self is to substantialize not only the Self but also, by the same token, everything else through and by Its being immanent

---

<sup>33</sup> « For the Buddha, language derives its "meaning" (*attha*) when it is able to produce results (*attha*), and thus what is true (*bhuta, taccha*) is that which bears results (*attha-samhita*). The Buddha did not recognize anything that is false to be productive of results Truth in this sense can be equated with "meaningful" language. Thus, linguistic expressions that imply permanence and annihilation would be "meaningless" (*an-attha*) in that they do not communicate anything that in experience (*dhamma*), where experience is understood in terms of the felt results (*attha*) rather than in terms of an indefinable ultimate reality. » *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, translated by David J. Kaupahana, Motilal Barnasidass, Delhi, p.19. « Some more skillful, more illuminating constructions might just be better in bringing us to see that no construction is true. That is the nature of *upāya*. » Jay L. Garfield and Jan Westerhoff, « Acquiring the Notion of a Dependent Designation : A Response to Douglas L. Berger. » *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 61, Number 2, April 2011, p. 367.

<sup>34</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 24 :18, Kalupahana 339.

to everything that is not unreal. In that sense, Nāgārjuna goes a step further than *Advaitin* metaphysics in stressing the “non-reality” of phenomena. By excluding the consideration of a reality that would be “exempt” from *pratītyasamutpāda*, Nāgārjuna asserts an utter and fundamental emphasis on the conditioned unsubstantiality of everything to which the mind could cling.

The all-encompassing validity of *pratītyasamutpāda* must lead us to ponder its meaning with respect to the ontological status of *nirvāna* itself; it must be considered, in particular, whether *pratītyasamutpāda* does not deprive *nirvāna* of any ultimate reality and meaning, thereby betraying a fundamental incompatibility with the ultimate goal of Buddhism itself, as some of Nāgārjuna’s opponents have argued. Early Buddhist teachings from the *Abhidharma* canon<sup>35</sup> point to a nirvānic mode of being from the vantage point of which the relatively conditioned can be perceived as such, without being itself relatively conditioned, but on the contrary literally unconditioned. This is expressed by one of the most famous canonical Pali passages:

There exists, monks, that which is unborn, that which is unbecome, that which is uncreated, that which is unconditioned. For if there were not, monks, that which is uncreated, that which is unconditioned, there would not be made known here the escape from that which is born, from that which is become, from that which is created, from that which is conditioned. Yet since there exists, monks, that which is unborn, that which is unbecome, that which is uncreated, that which is unconditioned, there is therefore made known the escape from that which is born, from that which is become, from that which is created, from that which is conditioned."<sup>36</sup>

Thus, there is a sense in which the “not unreal,” the “unbecome,” the “unborn,” which is transcendent to the “unreal,” the “become” and the “born” is also mysteriously immanent to them, without which the validity and effectiveness of the path itself would be called into question. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism has drawn the ultimate conclusions from this principle in the paradoxical recognition that “*nirvāna* is *samsāra* and *samsāra* is *nirvāna*,” or that the “unbecome is the become and the

<sup>35</sup> *Abhidharma* texts, dating back as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C, include abstracts of doctrinal elements from the earlier *sūtras*, the scriptures that are largely comprised of words of the Buddha.

<sup>36</sup> *Udāna, Khuddakanikāya, Suttapiṭaka*. Quoted in Joseph Walser, *Nāgārjuna in context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and early Indian culture*, Columbia University Press, 2005, 177.



become is the unbecome,” or else transcendence is immanence and immanence is transcendence. In this perspective, however, the transcendent is neither apprehended as a supreme Object (God) nor as an ultimate Subject (*Ātman*). It is neither Object nor Substance: Neither an object, that is an element of a cognitive duality, nor a substance, i.e. a reality that would be independent from co-dependent relationality by being as it were “sub-jacent” to it. In Nāgārjuna’s thought, transcendence is envisaged as immanent in that the “object” of recognition or “ultimate truth” is the very “structure” of an experienced reality. The empirical problem, for Buddhists, is a “subjective” problem, or how to stop the mental process that inherently objectifies and substantializes, and is, thereby, a source of craving and suffering. The Buddhist response is that this is only possible through “negation,” or rather through the “negation of negation” --since conditioned consciousness is a negation of the unconditioned, that opens access to an adequate perception of reality.<sup>37</sup>

### ***The Unity of Reality***

By contrast with the previously examined metaphysical accounts of relativity, we would like to review and analyze, in a second section of this essay, the ways in which some major and influential forms of mystical theology are characterized by an emphasis on the “not unreal” dimension of that which is not the Ultimate Reality. In doing so, our objective will not merely be to draw a contrast with the *Advaita* and *Mādhyamaka* perspectives, but also to look into some of the theoretical and spiritual implications of this contrast. In order to do so, we will focus on the Śaivite perspective of Abhinavagupta (ca 950-1020 AD) and some other authoritative figures and texts of the non-dualistic Tantric tradition on the one hand, and on the

---

<sup>37</sup> In parallel, there needs not be a “subject,” the latter being necessarily caught into the net of a relationship with an “object” and the two-fold “substantialization” that ensues. However, because “objectification” and “substantialization” are spiritual possibilities, and perhaps even necessities on some level, we find, in later *Mahāyāna*, an objectification of *nirvāna* as Amida, the “Other,” in Jodo Shin, and a substantialization of *nirvāna* as Buddha-Nature or *Buddha-dhātu* in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* and later, among other schools, in Zen. One may infer from these developments that it may be too arduous for most practitioners to keep to the principles of emptiness and conditioned co-origination. It bears stressing, however, that the “objectification” that we are considering here is in a sense “abstracted” from a “subject,” at least efficiently or operatively, since the whole stress is on *tariki*, or the Power of the Other, while the kind of “substantialization” at stake in *Buddha-dhātu* is still vacuity of “forms.”

other hand on the doctrine of the “Unity of Being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*) exemplified by Sufi masters of gnosis such as Ibn ‘Arabī (1167-1240) and ‘Abd-al-Karīm al-Jīlī (1366-1424). It is important to recognize, as a starting point, that both perspectives are focused, *a priori*, on the Divine Reality as it is envisaged respectively by the Hindu Śaivite and Islamic traditions. In this context, Śiva and Allāh –notwithstanding the profound contextual differences that shape their reality-- are considered on the level of the Personal Divinity referred to in Hindu and Islamic scriptures as well in devotional practices, but also on the level of the Divine Essence as such, which both traditions understand to lie beyond all determinations, qualities and actions, including the personal dimension of Divinity. Mystical metaphysicians hailing from these traditions, such as Abhinavagupta and Ibn ‘Arabī, have in fact no difficulty whatsoever envisaging Śiva and Allāh on these two distinct ontological levels.<sup>38</sup> Hence, Śaivism considers Śiva as *Paramaśiva*, or Ultimate Reality, and as such, “It is non-relational consciousness.”<sup>39</sup> At the same time, each and every Śaivite treatise begins with words of dedication and worship to Śiva, and the latter has been the focus of devotional adoration on the part of those Hindus who made him the more and more exclusive object of religious fervor.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Allāh is both the Personal Deity who speaks in and through the *Qur’ān*, and the super-ontological Essence (*dhāt*) that is both boundless and unknowable. Jīlī clearly characterizes the latter as follows:

Know that the Essence (*adh-dhāt*) signifies the Absolute Being in its state of being stripped of all connection, relation, assignation and aspect. (...) This is the pure Essence in which are manifested neither Names nor Attributes nor

---

<sup>38</sup> This must be qualified by the fact that the Quranic context of definition of Allāh is much less ambiguous, or much less fluid, than that of Śiva.

<sup>39</sup> Jaideva Singh’s Introduction to *Śiva Sūtras – The Yoga of Supreme Identity*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, xix.

<sup>40</sup> “There are simply too many large gaps in the sequence that leads from the Mohenjo-Dara Proto-Śiva through the Vedic Rudra, the *Yajur Vedic Śatarudrīya*, the Rudra-Śiva of the *Śvetāśvatara Upanisad*, the *astamūrtī* and *pañcavakra* of the Purānic Śiva, and the notions of *early* sectarian groups such as the Pāśupatas, to the increasingly complex theologies of Śiva in different *āgamic* revelations that finally result, in one branch of the process, in the concept of Śiva as taught by Abhinavagupta. What we do know of this process is that Śiva, from being one in a pantheon of divinities, increasingly became the focus of sectarian groups who worshipped him exclusively.” Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva*, Albany: State University of New York, 1989, 26.

relations nor connections nor anything else. <sup>41</sup>

This passage marks without any ambiguity the distinction between the Divine Essence and the Personal God as comprised of aspects and involved in relationships. Two general conclusions may be drawn from the preceding remarks: first, Śaivism and Sufism present us with perspectives that are centered *a priori* on the objective Reality of the Divine rather than being primarily focused on the subjective need for deliverance or freedom from suffering ---in other words they begin with God's fullness rather than man's lack; secondly, their capacity to envisage the Divine both as unconditionally absolute and personally "engaged" allow them to recognize the Divine Presence both in its ontological immanence and creativity as flowing from its own infinite Essence, as well as in its revelatory and devotional relationality. Now both dimensions ascribe a significant coefficient of reality to the relative realm, since relationality and creativity presuppose a degree of ontological reality on the part of the latter. Furthermore, let us note that the aforestated regard for immanence is symbolically and suggestively marked by the fact that both perspectives make a significant use of the image of the relationship between the ocean and its waves, as a representation of the relationship between the Ultimate and the non-Ultimate, or the Absolute and the relative. In Abhivagupta's metaphysical account, the Supreme Self is equated to the ocean of consciousness (*sindhu, ambhonidhi, samdudra*), the waves (*ūrmi*) of which are the vibrations (*spanda*) of consciousness that constitute finite reality. Describing the latter, Abhinavagupta writes:

For that vibration, which is a slight motion of a special kind, a unique vibrating light, is the wave of the ocean of consciousness, without which there is no consciousness at all. For the character of the ocean is that it is sometimes filled with waves and sometimes waveless. This consciousness is the essence of all. <sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *Universal Man*, extracts translated with commentary by Titus Burckhardt, Roxburgh, Scotland: Beshara Publications, 1983, 57.

<sup>42</sup> *Tantrāloka*, 4.184-186a, in Paul-Eduardo Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva*, Albany : State University of New York Press, 1989, 146. "It is the powers of the Self (*svasakti*) that, emerging from the ocean of consciousness and uniting together in various and sundry ways, create the finite realities."

The ocean is a direct symbol of the infinite consciousness, which is none other than Śiva. As intimated above, the symbol is, moreover, apt to connote the dimension of energy, motion and vibration that characterizes consciousness in Śaivism. Similarly, the symbol of the ocean is used in Sufism as a suggestive pointer to the Divine Essence in its limitlessness. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabī’s prayer “Enter me, O Lord, into the deep of the Ocean of Thine Infinite Oneness!” is, as Martin Lings has indicated, one among many instances of a reference to the ocean which is “mentioned again and again” in the treatises of the Sufis.<sup>43</sup> For Ibn ‘Arabī, the knowledge of God, like the knowledge of self with which it is intimately connected, is identified as “an ocean without shore” since “there is no end to knowledge of God” who is infinite reality.<sup>44</sup> As for Rūmī, in conformity with his approach of the Divine as Love, he identifies the latter with “an ocean whose depths cannot be plumbed.”<sup>45</sup> It is quite clear that the choice of this symbol is already indicative of perspectives that are particularly attuned to a focus on the boundless and creative infinity of the Ultimate on the one hand, and on the “participation” of the waves into this divine “ocean” on the other hand, thereby suggesting the “not unreal” aspect of the former.

### ***Reality as Creative Freedom.***

It has been repeatedly asserted by scholars that Kashmiri Śaivite metaphysics and mysticism, by contrast with *Advaita Vedānta*, is primarily focused on the dynamic and active dimensions of Absolute Consciousness, i.e. Will, or *icchā*, and Action, or *kriyā*. These characters of the Absolute derive from Śiva’s primary understanding as utter freedom. The *Śiva Sūtras* identify absolute freedom as the nature of Śiva *par excellence*:

Though Highest Śiva has infinite number of other attributes, such as eternity, all-pervasiveness, formlessness etc., yet because eternity etc. are possible elsewhere also, here it is intended to show the predominance of absolute freedom which is not possible in any other being.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* University of California Press, 1975, 11.

<sup>44</sup> *Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, II. 121-25, in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Albany : State University of New York Press, 1989, 345.

<sup>45</sup> Mathnawi, V 2731-32, in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, State University of New York Press, 1983, 195.

<sup>46</sup> *Śiva Sūtras – The Yoga of Supreme Identity*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, 7.

In other words, the Supreme Liberty of the Absolute Consciousness is the essence of this Consciousness.<sup>47</sup> In this metaphysical context, freedom involves two main aspects, which are lack of constraint on the one hand, and infinite creativity on the other hand. The first character implies that there is nothing external to Śiva that could either limit, compel or contain Him in any way, which ultimately means that everything is Śiva.<sup>48</sup> This is the doctrine known in India as *ābhāsavāda*, or the thesis of “limited manifestation,” following which limited entities themselves are delimitations of the limitless consciousness of Śiva. The second aspect, which is in fact intimately connected to the first, points to the dynamic and productive nature of the Absolute that Śaivism always envisages as ever flowing in an unending multiplicity of new forms. This is the doctrine of *svātantryavāda*, the thesis of self-dependency, according to which the intrinsic power of the Ultimate is the utterly free energy of conscious manifestation. Manifestation is in the nature of Supreme Consciousness, and this principle, when fully understood, should silence any question as to the why of existence and its myriad of forms and contents.<sup>49</sup> This is so because, in essence, the realm of finite reality is none other than Śiva himself, the Supreme Consciousness, that both manifests and binds itself through its Śaktic vibration and projections. In the Śaivite perspective, everything is pure Consciousness or *Cit*. There is not an ounce of existence, on whatever level of being, which is not Śiva’s consciousness. Everything is consciousness, and therefore everything *is*. Relative beings *are*, and they are *as* limitations of the Supreme

---

<sup>47</sup> “(The Absolute) is called Maheśvara because of its absolute sovereignty of Will, *sva-tantratā* or *svātantrya*. This absolute Sovereignty or Free Will is not a blind force but the *svabhāva* (own being) of the Universal Consciousness (Cit).” *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam-The Secret of Self-Recognition*, Jaideva Singh, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003, 16.

<sup>48</sup> “Just as every drop of water comes to rest in the ocean, so all acts and cognitions [come to rest] in the Great Lord, the ocean of consciousness. Even a little water on the ground drunk by the sun’s rays goes, as rain, to the great ocean. Similarly all knowledge and action in the universe merge in the ocean of Śiva either spontaneously and evidently (*sphutam*), by itself or [indirectly] through a series of other [processes].” Abhinavagupta, Malini, in Mark S.G. Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration. An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism*, Albany: State University of New York, 1987, 71.

<sup>49</sup> “Here it may be asked ‘Why does the Self manifest these Ābhāsas [limited manifestations]?’ Abhinava answers this question by saying that the nature of a thing cannot be questioned. It is absurd to ask why fire burns. To burn is the very nature of fire and so to manifest without what lies within is the very nature of the Self. It is natural for consciousness to assume a variety of forms.” Kanti Chandra Pandey, *Abhinavagupta-An Historical and Philosophical Study*, Varanasi: Chaukhamba Amarabharati Prakashan, Fourth Edition, 2006, 335.

Consciousness. In this sense, Śiva is both absolute and relative, and He, in fact, transcends the two categories of absoluteness and relativity. It is clear that the Śaivite emphasis lies on the “not unreal ” dimension of the relative realm inasmuch as it is none other than the unbound, infinite domain of Consciousness and, as such, gives potential access to the latter.

This dynamic and creative process through which the Absolute Consciousness outpours into multiplicity is highlighted in the central teaching of the intrinsic union of Śiva and Śakti. While Śiva is pure Consciousness (*citi*) and Light (*prakāśa*), Śakti can be characterized as the intrinsic and efficient power of Self-revelation of Śiva through which he manifests, supports and reabsorbs the realm of manifestation. In this sense, Śakti is none other than *Svātantrya*, or the intrinsic energy of Śiva.<sup>50</sup> By contrast with any dualistic understanding of Śakti, such as in the *Nyāya*, Śaivism emphasizes the intrinsic unity of being and its power, the relationship between the two being akin to the indissociable unity between fire and its power to burn.<sup>51</sup> As such Śakti is the inner, dynamic reality of Śiva, and their intimate unity is more powerfully asserted as we consider the essence of the Ultimate, while their latent duality, although more and more perceptible as we descend the stages of the limitations of Consciousness by and through manifestation, is nevertheless ever transcended by Śiva’s sovereign Infinity and unending ability to affirm Himself in and through the negations of Himself. As Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega puts it, “(Śiva) is always the ‘third’ element that transcends, undercuts, and in the end, unifies all possible oppositions.”<sup>52</sup> To this could be added that He is the third because He is the first and because He is essentially none other than the second. In other words, Śiva always reconciles all oppositions because He is, with and through Śakti, the very productive source from which they emerge and into which they flow.

---

<sup>50</sup> “For non-dualist Kashmir Śaivites (...), the higher Brahman is already full of inner potencies and powers (*Śakti*) and is evolving into the multitude of the created universe through a series of self-transformations (*parināma*).” Natalia Isaeyeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 134-5.

<sup>51</sup> “(...) The distinction between the power and its possessor is as imaginary as between the fire and its power to burn.” K.C. Pandey, Introduction, *Doctrine of Divine Recognition of Abhinavagupta*, volume II, 1986, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986, x.

<sup>52</sup> *The Triadic Heart of Śiva*, 94.

In Kashmiri Śaivism, Śakti is the principle of universal relativity, since it is through Her that everything is brought into existence. By contrast with the Advaitin *Māyā*, Śakti is not ontologically ambiguous nor deficient –although She manifests on a variety of degrees, but rather powerfully and creatively productive. As such she is less a “negation” of Śiva, as *Māyā* would be one of *Ātman*, than a sort of inner dimension of Śiva that actualizes and exteriorizes His freedom to be all that He can be, that is everything. This being said, while being eminently affirmative and dynamic, there is somehow a vantage point from which *Śakti* could be considered as a kind of “negation” of Śiva. This somewhat negative aspect of *Śakti* appears inasmuch as Śiva being infinite and undivided Reality, she cannot but appear in some respects and on some levels as the principle that brings out the finite and discrete realities that delimit and “divide” the Śivaic plenitude. In that sense Śakti is within Śiva the seed of the principle of negation, limitation and division that allows for the unfolding or outpouring of Śiva’s infinite nature on the level of finite realities. However, Śaivism is not intent on attributing this “negativity” to Śakti herself, but rather to the lower ranges of the process she triggers. Thus, Śakti is first and foremost the principle through which the nature of Śiva as infinite reality and sovereign power is affirmed. In fact, when Śiva is approached as Emptiness, Śakti will be deemed to express Divine Fullness.<sup>53</sup> On that account, Śiva being characterized as *śūnyatā*, like an empty sky in which the colors of the dawn are shimmering, Śakti will be the fullness of these colors:

The [dawn] sky, though one, appears radiant white, red and blue, and the clouds accordingly seem various; so pure, free consciousness shines brilliantly with its countless forms, though they are nothing at all.<sup>54</sup>

Here, Emptiness is like the reverse side of Fullness, if one may say so, or the silvering void of the mirror in which Fullness manifests its wealth of reality: it is the

---

<sup>53</sup> “Śakti represents the all-encompassing fullness (*pūrnatā*) of the absolute, the ever-shifting power of awareness actively manifesting as the Circle of Totality (*viśvacakra*). Śiva is the Void (*śūnyatā*) of absolute consciousness –its supportless (*nirālamba*) and thought-free (*nirvikalpa*) nature. Integral and free, Śiva, the abode of the Void, dissolves everything into Himself and brings all things into being.” Mark S.G. Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration – An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism*, Albany: State University of New York, 1987, 119.

<sup>54</sup> *Mālinīvijayavārtika*, 1/949 in *The Doctrine of Vibration*, 119.

metaphysical “ambience” of universal exteriorization. It stands “under” Fullness as an infinite Sub-stance that ever transcends the flow of delimitations.

As principle of projection and manifestation, Śakti needs be considered on a plurality of levels. Indeed, as we will further suggest, the capacity to consider the projection of Consciousness on a multiplicity of degrees can be deemed to be one of the hallmarks of metaphysical perspectives that emphasize the “not unreal” character of relative phenomena, among which Śaivism and the Sufi doctrine of Unity rank eminently. Thus, Abhinavagupta’s foremost disciple, Ksemarāja, distinguishes three levels of Śakti, which are *Parāśakti*, *Parāparāśakti* and *Aparāśakti*, or Supreme, Intermediate and Inferior Śakti. These three levels subsume no less than thirty-four degrees of projection of Consciousness, or *tattvas*, from Śiva Himself as pure “I” to *prthivī*, or earth, the utmost limit of condensation and materialization of consciousness.

The Supreme Śakti, *Parāśakti*, while pertaining to *abheda* or “non-difference,” also refers to the level of Pure Consciousness that is already the seed of the process of production; it is, among other possible characterisations, the level of *vimarśa*. Jaideva Singh notes that the term *vimarśa* implies through its root the meaning of “touching,” and through its prefix a reference to the mind, probably through the implications of negation, discrimination but also intensification.<sup>55</sup> It is the free and conscious self-determination of Absolute Consciousness. *Vimarśa* refers to the emergence of a state of Self-Awareness within the Absolute Consciousness Itself.<sup>56</sup> It is in fact *none* other than *svātantrya* or utter freedom of manifestation, and this freedom manifests itself through a sort of “doubling” awareness of oneself that is at the same time source of differentiation and manifestation. This emergence of

---

<sup>55</sup> “*Vimarśa*—*Vi*+*mrś*. The root *mrś* means to touch. *Vimrś* means to touch mentally. It is a highly technical term of this system. ParamaŚiva, the ultimate reality is not only *prakāśa* or luminous consciousness, but also *Vimarśa* i.e. consciousness of its consciousness. *Vimarśa* is Self-consciousness or pure I-consciousness of the highest Reality.” Jaideva Singh in *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, 125. K.C. Pandey characterizes *prakāśa* as pure receptive consciousness and *Vimarśa* as determinate reactive awareness. *Doctrine of Divine Recognition of Abhinavagupta*, xiv.

<sup>56</sup> “The word ‘*vimarśa*’, (...) when used with reference to the Universal Self, stands for that power which gives rise to self-consciousness, will, knowledge and action in succession.” Kanti Chandra Pandey, *Abhinavagupta-An Historical and Philosophical Study*, Varanasi: Chaukhamba Amarabharati Prakashan, Fourth Edition, 2006, 327.



*vimarśa* is described by Abhinavagupta as having four stages, which could be symbolized by the numbers 1, 2, 3 and 0.<sup>57</sup> There is first an intrinsic move to differentiate the other from within the self, secondly a re-affirmation of the self in contradistinction with the other, then a unification of the two, and a final reabsorption of their union within the Infinite Self. The selfsame Consciousness is therefore affirmed in and through negation, and reaffirmed further in and through the transcending of the unity of affirmation and negation. This *parāsakti* is identified by Abhinavagupta to the pronoun “ I “ because it is the one and only supreme Self-Consciousness that affirms Itself through the myriad of productions, transformations and reintegrations through which It proceeds. As such, *parāsakti* is that which makes everything real, or not unreal. The centrality of *parāsakti* means that Śaivism is always inclined to approach phenomena as “not unreal,” precisely because they are produced by her ontological energy, which is none other than Śiva’s. Hence, *Parāsakti* is in fact identified by Abhinavagupta with the couple Śiva-Śakti which is, in this case, considered as an intrinsic bi-unity of I-consciousness, and not as a duality. As a linguistic expansion of this principle, Abhinavagupta considers the Śiva-Śakti Supreme Consciousness as being comprised of I-ness --or *Aham*, and expansion of I-ness --or *A-ha-m*, in the sense that it contains the first Sanskrit letter, A, symbolizing Śiva, the last letter, H, symbolizing Śakti, and their “passion” expressed by the totality of the alphabet that joins them together.<sup>58</sup>

At a second stage, that of *parāparāsakti*, we enter the realm of that which could be most satisfactorily referred to as “relativity,” both in the sense of a field that takes us away from pure Consciousness, and more specifically in that the relationship between subject and object, unity and diversity, is most emphatically present therein; this is the domain of *bhedābheda*, or “identity and difference.” It is on this level that the Unity of Consciousness and the multiplicity of its productions are as it were “meeting” in the confrontation of Consciousness and its objects, the

---

<sup>57</sup> “The self-referential capacity of consciousness is united with all things. From within its very self, this capacity of consciousness differentiates the other, and from the other it actualizes itself again. It then unifies both of them, the self and the other, and having unified them, it submerges them both back into itself.” 1:205 in *The Triadic Heart of Shiva*, 96.

<sup>58</sup> Abhinavagupta, *Parātrīśikā-Vivaraṇā—The secret of Tantric Mysticism*, translated by Jaideva Singh and edited by Bettina Baumer, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000, 127.

latter still being endowed, however, with the Light of the former. In this connection, Abhinavagupta associates the realm of *parāparāśakti* with the pronoun “thou” and with Śakti (inasmuch as she can be distinguished from Śiva) because it is the domain of correlates, as well as the field of cross-relations between subject and object, unity and diversity, pure consciousness and its productions. The Śaivite sage also associates this intermediary level with the first, second and third degrees of consciousness below the Supreme bi-unity of Śiva and Śakti, that is Sadāśiva (the revealer, by contrast with Maheśvara, i.e. the Supreme who conceals), Īśvara (the creator who introduces a slight gap in non-difference), and Śuddhavidya (pure knowledge of equilibrium). This ontological zone of contact, junction and relative equilibrium is also, by the same token, one of ambiguity, and therefore a site of potential bifurcation. What Mark Dyczkowski calls the middle level of “unity-in-difference” is the critical parting point between the recognition of the one pure Consciousness in and through the diversity of its manifestations, and the deadly submission to their binding limitations. At this stage, the polarity I-thou reveals ontological division without for that matter ever essentially severing the unity and integrity of Śiva’s Supreme Consciousness. *Parāparā* means both identity and difference in the sense of *bheda* (difference) and *abedha* (non-difference) being in equilibrium, or one and diverse at the same time. It is therefore at this intermediary point of junction –and separation-- that a contact with Supreme Consciousness from the vantage-point of multiplicity can be established, or conversely it may be the channel through which unity may be overwhelmed by diversity. In other words it is at this juncture that the potentiality of liberation and that of alienation and perdition are both most affirmed.<sup>59</sup> Therein lies, in other words a “precarious balance” between the subject and the object –or rather the other subject, thou-- inwardness and outwardness, the number two referring in this case to a relatedness that provides one with the possibility of experiencing both terms within the context of an underlying unity of consciousness. In the “thou” of *parāparāśakti* the I of

---

<sup>59</sup> “If through this power the yogi realizes the oneness of consciousness and its manifestations, he is elevated, but if he fails to do so, this same power throws him down. Thus the Intermediate power plays a dual role by illumining both the “pure Path” to liberation and the ‘Impure Path’ of bondage. “ *Doctrine of Vibration*, 114.

Supreme Consciousness is still at hand, as it were, since Śakti can be recognized as the other “side” of the same subject, a side that also shares in the same consciousness.

On the third level of projection of Śakti, or *aparāśakti*, we move forward or downward from the realm of duality in unity to that of a multiplicity increasingly abstracted from unity. It is the realm of difference and distinction, or *bheda*. It ranges over 29 *tattvas* or degrees of Śaktic projection, the highest source of which is *Māyā*, or more exactly *Mahāmāyā*. With the latter we enter the domain of *bheda* or difference, or at least its emergence (the latter being associated with *Mahāmāyā*, and the former with *Māyā*). This is the level of maximal objectification, and thereby diversified exteriorization, of Śakti. It is the realm of multiplicity, fragmentation and knots where the underlying unity of Consciousness has become most difficult to perceive and realize. The relative “balance” between I and thou is broken as the scales are tilted on the side of objectification. Abhinavagupta relates this level of Śakti to *nara*, that is empirical and phenomenal reality, and to the third personal pronoun “he.” Here the emphasis is on the multiplicity of empirical experience, the focus of consciousness being brought down from unity into diversity and multiplicity. *Aparāśakti* takes us down from the recognition of the “I” in the “thou” to a lower degree at which consciousness is not recognized in alterity but simply apprehended and treated as a mere object. It is important and instructive to note that Kashmiri Śaivism makes use of the concept of *māyā* to refer primarily to a lower dimension of Śakti, at the degree of *bheda* or difference, where the pole object has taken precedence over the pole subject, or the domain of the “insensible” that lie on the outer edges of Consciousness has obfuscated, as it were, the Light of Consciousness. This teaching is made explicit in Abhinavagupta’s *Parātrīśikā-Vivarana*, a source in which the sixth and seventh *tattvas* are associated with *Māyā*.<sup>60</sup> This is a way to suggest a distinction between Śakti as such and *Māyā*, thereby emphasizing the positive function of the former. Along different and seemingly diverging lines, the *Śiva Sūtra* considers *Māyā* in three different aspects or levels,

---

<sup>60</sup> *Parātrīśikā-Vivarana*, 127-8.

which are *Māyā Śakti*, *Māyā Tattva* and *Māyā Granthi*: the first is the freedom of consciousness that manifests Śiva's nature, the second is the objective limitation and the fragmentation that is inherent to the process of this manifestation, while the third is the coming into contact of the two in and through which *Māyā* functions as a principle of bondage by "confusing" the two levels of the free Supreme Consciousness and objective fragmentation. However close this latter "confusion" comes to the Advaitin concept of superimposition upon *Ātman*, it is most significant to note that the *Śiva Sūtra* considers that *Māyā* can and in fact must be "purified" by the knowledge of Śiva consciousness: in other words, the matter is not so much to dispel *Māyā* as to cleanse it by reintegrating into its highest aspect as Śakti. At any rate, whether *Māyā* is identified with the lowest degrees of Śaktic projection and its *bheda* aspect as if to preserve the positive function of Śakti, or it is conceived as being susceptible to be purified through a sort of reintegration into its Śaktic roots, it is clear in either way that Kashmiri Śaivism is intent on emphasizing the "not unreal" aspect of Śaktic projections and productions.

While the above lines have outlined the various degrees upon which Śakti manifests, fragments, limits and reabsorbs consciousness, it must be added that the various Śaktic ontological degrees, although delineating in one sense a decrease in consciousness, as illustrated by the series of descending *tattvas*, need be integrated in order to account for the full spectrum of the unfolding of *Śiva-Śakti*, and therefore the whole range of reality. It must be so since there is ultimately and essentially, indeed *really*, not any gap in the unity of Consciousness that is Śiva. Śakti does not "lessen" the plenitude of Śiva, it manifests it. Accordingly, the three planes of Śakti that we have sketched above, i.e. supreme, intermediary and lower, encompass and express the integrality of Śiva's nature. This ontological totality is moreover mirrored in realizational perfection, in the sense that the supreme spiritual maturity and utmost inner deliverance lies in the recognition of the essential unity of all the moments of the unfolding of Śakti within Śiva's underlying consciousness. As Mark Dyczkowski puts it:

The harmonious union (*sāmarasya*) of these three planes are Bhairava's (Śiva) Supreme glory, the radiance of the fullness of His power (*pūrṇaśakti*) which fills the entire universe.<sup>61</sup>

The vertical projection of Śakti is also the key to the reintegration of delimited consciousness into the One.

Aside from these "vertical" degrees of manifestation, projection, contraction, fragmentation and limitation, Śakti must also be considered in its various modes, among which most important ones the tradition mentions *caitanya*, *sphurattā*, *spanda*, *mahāsattā* and *parāvāk*.<sup>62</sup> In itself the absolute Consciousness is apprehended as Light (*prakāśa*) in the sense of being the substratum and the condition of possibility of everything. Without *prakāśa* there would not be a metaphysical "context" for reality, if one may say so. Absolute Consciousness keeps reality "alighted" at every new instant through its Śaktic energy by the power of *citi* or *caitanya*.<sup>63</sup> The way in which Supreme Consciousness is understood to project her power in unfolding the manifold existence is sometimes compared to reflections on a screen or a mirror. In the second *sūtra* of Ksemaraja's *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam* we read:

By the power of her own will (alone), she (*citi*) unfolds the universe upon her own screen (i.e. in herself as the basis of the universe.)<sup>64</sup>

The commentary of the same *sūtra* indicates that *Citi* unfolds the universe "like a city in a mirror, which though non-different from it appears as different." *Citi* is the very reality, the very being that underlies all manifestation, and from within which all manifestation spring forth. As for *mahāsattā*, which is none other than *Citi* in its aspect of infinite wealth of being, it has been translated as "absolute possibility of being," or literally "great possibility of being."<sup>65</sup> It is the metaphysical equivalent of the Supreme Freedom of Śiva, or the All-Possibility that is his infinite nature. Closer

<sup>61</sup> *The Doctrine of Vibration*, 116.

<sup>62</sup> Pancey, *Abhinavagupta*, 329.

<sup>63</sup> *Citi* refers to universal consciousness as a whole whereas *caitanya* tends to denote its pure, unfragmented, state. Cf. *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam-The Secret of Self-Recognition*, Jaideva Singh, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003, 59.

<sup>64</sup> *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam*, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Lin Ma, *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue: Anticipating the Event*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 163.

to the extrinsic effects of this nature, *sphurattā* is the radiance of the world-producing energy of *Śakti*. Jaideva Singh translates this term as “throb-like gleam of the absolute Freedom of the Divine bringing about the world-process.”<sup>66</sup> It refers to the radiating projection of *Śakti* as manifested in objective forms and subjective senses, alike the innumerable rays of the Sun of Being. As such, *sphurattā* refers to a sort of oscillation or quivering of light, an “immovable movement” in and by which the light of consciousness is propagated from the conscious Subject to its objectifications.<sup>67</sup> Notwithstanding the importance of the three aforementioned characterizations of the I-Consciousness, the two most representative aspects, or modes of manifestation, of *Śakti* in Tantric Śaivism are no doubt *spanda* and *parāvāk*, or pulsation and vibration, and “Supreme Word” or “Speech.” It belongs to *spanda* and *parāvāk* to differentiate most clearly the Śaivite perspective from other Hindu perspectives such as *Advaita*. These two concepts bring to the fore the centrality of the rhythmic, pulsating and vibrating energy of reality and consciousness in Śaivism, as well as the parallel Śaivite emphasis on the sound centered, linguistic and “mantric” dimension of *Śakti*. The concepts of pulsation and vibration (*spanda*) express a sense of continuity in discontinuity, a kind of rhythmic alternation that is the very life of the Absolute. The Infinite and finite realities are linked in a series of expansions and contractions the essential continuity of which is to be grasped through and in its apparent discontinuity. The Tantric emphasis is on succession as the alternation of manifestation and re-absorption. In its origin, the vibration of the Absolute is none other than the “disturbance” of an equilibrium that results in opposite motions towards manifestation and reintegration.<sup>68</sup> In a sense, “relativity” is the very pulsation of the Absolute: it is not only the exteriorization, fragmentation and ultimately objectification of Consciousness, it is also the very motion through which Consciousness is realized both in a centrifugal and centripetal way. Relativity is dynamic motion, and the latter is like the rhythm of the

---

<sup>66</sup> *Śiva Sūtras*, 262.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Raffaele Torella, in *The Īśvarapratyabhijñānārikā of Utpaladeva with the Author's Vritti*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003, 121.

<sup>68</sup> “The absolute oscillates between a ‘passion’ (*rāga*) to create and ‘dispassion’ (*virāga*) from the created.” *The Doctrine of Vibration*, 41.

Absolute: hence Śaivism's thrust in celebrating the totality of the cycle of expansion and contraction. By contrast with *Advaita* and *Mādhyaṃaka* there is a strong emphasis on levels of succession and propagation, degrees of projection and continuity. If "relativity" is primarily considered as "not unreal" it is because the contraction is no less real than the expansion, the manifestation no less important than the reintegration. The dynamic nature of "relativity" stems from its being the result of a "disequilibrium" inherent to the nature of the Absolute. However, this "disequilibrium" is not as much a lack as it is a fullness: it is an intrinsic tendency to radiate and "vibrate," a tendency to be one and other, unity and diversity.<sup>69</sup> If equilibrium is conceived as a static unity without productive energy, then the Absolute Consciousness can be described as ontological disequilibrium. To speak of "disequilibrium" amounts here to perceive the root of diversity within unity as self-consciousness. It goes without saying that the "disequilibrium" in question is in fact, from another point of view, part of a greater equilibrium that has to do with the ebb and flow or the pulsation of reality at large. In another sense, one could also refer to this creative fullness as to a delicate, ever mobile equilibrium between subjective consciousness and its objectification. The importance and centrality of the *parāvāk*, or Supreme Word or Speech, in Śaivism pertains to this inherent exteriorization and objectification which is none other than the very freedom of the Absolute:

Consciousness has as its essential nature reflective awareness (*pratyavamarśa*); it is the supreme Word (*parāvāk*) that arises freely. It is freedom in the absolute sense, the sovereignty (*aiśvarya*) of the supreme Self.<sup>70</sup>

Divine Speech is both internal and external: the latter is obvious since the Word is manifested outwardly, but the former is also a central tenet of Kashmiri Śaivism precisely because there is no consciousness that is not *a priori* "language." The articulation of Divine Speech is already present *ab initio* in the Supreme

---

<sup>69</sup> In *Parātrīṃśikā-laghuvṛtti*, Abhinavagupta, contrasting his views with those of Vedānta, opposes the latter's state of repose of *brahman-ātman* to the productive "agitation" of Bhairava-Śiva: "According to us, however, there occurs, beyond that, Bhairava, who manifests the entire universe by means of his activity of churning that state of repose." Mueller-Ortega, 176

<sup>70</sup> *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*, Torella, 120.

Consciousness but it is so in a “compressed” way (*samḥṛtarūpa*).<sup>71</sup> The Absolute Consciousness is never in a state of non-awareness of itself and therefore in a sense never in a state of “non-utterance,” albeit non-articulated. “Relativity” as utterance and projection is “already” present in Absolute Consciousness, hence its not “non-real” ontological status since non-being cannot be part of Being. The Supreme is both Consciousness and Speech, *parāvāk*, in its most essential, intrinsic ipseity.<sup>72</sup> Once exteriorized, fragmented and objectified into signifiers and signified Speech becomes, or reveals itself, as the “ontological alphabet” of universal reality. This is the concept of *mātrkā*, the divine matrix of all phonemic manifestations, but also, and by the same token, of all ontological emanations.<sup>73</sup> The projection or emanation of the energies of *parāvāk* into letters and sounds is closely dependent upon its triadic division into Will, Knowledge and Action, or *icchā*, *jñāna* and *kriyā*. These three aspects are respectively connected with Śakti, Sadāśiva and Īśvara who are, as we may recall, the three levels stemming from the bi-unity of Śiva-Śakti and preceding the level of *Māyā*.<sup>74</sup> Below the level of the distinction without separation characteristic of this Triad, the manifestation and objectification of Consciousness appears like a garland of letters and sounds that constitutes the emanation of the “worlds.” These energies of emanation and manifestation are at the same time energies of reintegration in the form of the *mantra*. The highest source of these energies of Consciousness is none other, in fact, than the supreme *mantra*, *parāvāk* itself. Hence, any *mantra* is ultimately the manifestation of *parāvāk*, or in Lyne Bansat-Boudon’s words, “the *mantra* is not a simple formula for ritual usage, but represents ultimate reality itself.”<sup>75</sup> It “represents” reality in the strong sense of

---

<sup>71</sup> See Utpaladeva, *Les stances sur la reconnaissance du Seigneur avec leur glose*, *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*, introduction, translation and commentary by David Dubois, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010, 78.

<sup>72</sup> “Being essentially reflective awareness (*pratyavamarśa*), consciousness (*citi*) is represented also as ‘Supreme Speech’ (...).” Lyne Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy-The Paramārthasāra of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Yogarāja*, Routledge: London and New York, 2011, 63.

<sup>73</sup> “The name *mātrkā* (...) connotes not only the ‘mother of the words, but also of the worlds, inasmuch as the multitude of words entails the multitude of objects by them denoted.” Lyne Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, note 443, 107.

<sup>74</sup> *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*, Torella, xvii.

<sup>75</sup> *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, 50.



making it present, because it “contains” it. The *mantra* is like the central “energetic substance” that flows from the Self or the I-Consciousness.<sup>76</sup> It is the world as “reality,” or the reality of the world, which amounts to saying that it is a most direct Śaktic manifestation, or indeed *Śakti* herself. Hence, its capacity of projection and its power of reintegration are one. The *mantra* is none other than the focal vibration of Consciousness and, as such, the source and the end of the cycle of manifestation, and likewise the origin and the goal of the spiritual path. As Consciousness unfolds its Self-Awareness, the bi-unity of “signifier” and “signified,” or manifesting subject and manifested object, tends to be cut asunder and open wider and wider, thus entailing a greater and greater objectification, without however altering in the least the essential unity of Śiva’s I-Consciousness. The dichotomy between words and things is the final “product” of this emanation. In the *mantra*, however, the synthetic unity of signifier and signified is re-affirmed in such a way as to give access to the unicity of pure Consciousness. As Mark Dyczkowski puts it, the language of *mantras* “is not concerned with external objects” and it is “directed inward, deriving its energy from the supreme power of consciousness into which it ultimately involutes.”<sup>77</sup> As a foremost means of spiritual realization, the *mantra* allows Śaivite practitioners to be reabsorbed, together with the world that surrounds them, into the pure Subject, in a non-dualistic and non-objectified state of being. This being so, the *mantra* is like the symbol, as well as the ontological and soteriological evidence, of the “not unreal” nature of the non-Ultimate. Indeed, its liberating, realizational, power is based on this “non-unreality,” without which “mantric exteriorization” would be powerless to achieve the reintegrative goal of the path, the end of the *sadhana*. Such are the means and the goal of Śaivism: to “realize” the world of appearances –in the sense of giving it back its full “reality” as modification of Supreme Consciousness-- whereas, by contrast, *Mādhyamaka* Buddhism “de-realizes” the world of phenomena by undoing the perception of the latter as a set of self-existent substances. Similarly, while *Advaita* emphasizes discrimination, or

---

<sup>76</sup> “This I-feeling is the stage of great power, for all mantras arise from and come to rest in it (...). *The Secret of Self-Recognition*, Jaideva Singh, 110.

<sup>77</sup> *The Doctrine of Vibration*, 200.

separation and discontinuity, as a way to free oneself from the lures of *māyā* as superimposition upon Reality, the strong Śaivite emphasis on the power of the *mantra* as the productive and reintegrative “vibration” of Śiva-Śakti is in keeping with its concentration on the creative and dynamic unity of Consciousness.

***No reality but the Reality.***

The Sufi doctrine of the “Unity of Being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*) presents a number of central commonalities with Kashmiri Śaivism, the most evident of which are perhaps no better suggested than by a single quote and commentary of Ibn ‘Arabī unexpectedly gleaned in a note from David Dubois’ edition of Utpaladeva’s *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*:

“There is only one Essence and one Reality”. This reality appears as *Ilāh* (God) in a certain respect and as *‘abd* (servant) and *khalq* (creature) in another respect.<sup>78</sup>

The unicity and diversification of Absolute Consciousness that lies at the heart of both perspectives could not be more plainly affirmed. However, this self-same affirmation unfolds in contexts and with emphases that are significantly different. While Śaivism emphasizes Freedom as the chief characterization of the Absolute, and considers the manifestation of this Freedom within and through the bounds of limitations, Sufism stresses the Necessity of the Absolute, or the intrinsic unity of its Essence and its Being, and envisages the non-Ultimate by contrast in terms of mere ontological “possibilities.” Moreover, by contrast with Śaivism, the main matter in Sufism is not as much the manifestation of the productive energy of the I-Consciousness into and through the manifold, as it is the relationship between Divine Unity and the world of multiplicity and creation. The world of Islam is entirely dominated by the metaphysical and spiritual imperative of Divine Unity. It is also, and this is less often stressed, a world in which the importance of the multiplicity of creatures and phenomena is paramount. Such a diversity ranges, in the Qur’ān, from the multiple “signs,” or *āyāt*, on the horizon of the cosmos and the soul, but also in the many verses that form the texture of the

---

<sup>78</sup> *Les Stances sur la Reconnaissance du Seigneur*, p 232-3. *The Spiritual Writings of Amir ‘Abd al-Kader*, edited by Michel Chodkiewicz, State University of New York Press, 1982, 17.

Book, to the enumerations and pairs that characterizes its content, including the Names of God and the alternations of the masculine and the feminine. It could be said that doctrinally and spiritually Sufism is a way to account for and realize Unity into multiplicity. This also means that, on the basis of the principle of essential Unity that has been mentioned above, there could not be an absolute chasm between the One and the many. In other words the “not unreal” nature of the many, or the relative realm, pertains to its being indissociably “connected” with the Real. The way this connection occurs will be described in the following pages. However, before proceeding with our analyses of this connection, we must readily acknowledge that Sufism is a diverse set of phenomena, be it doctrinally or spiritually. Some forms of Sufism, and some particular statements within others, tend to lay emphasis on a way of perceiving and realizing the Real that strikes more harmonic chords with Shankarian *Advaita* than the teachings upon which we have focused in this essay.<sup>79</sup> It is enough to consider the following passage from Ibn ‘Arabī to realize to what extent the discriminative perspective of *Advaita* and its focus on the pure Subject can find a striking echo in some expressions of Sufism:

Naught is except the Essence, which is Elevated in Itself, its elevation being unrelated to any other (...) Thus, in a certain sense, it may be said that He is not He and you are not you.<sup>80</sup>

Be it as it may, it is important to remember, in order to understand the foundations of the *wahdat al-wujūd*, that the central formulation of Islam is the testimony of faith, the *shahādah*, and particularly its first half that states “*lā ilāha ill’Allāh*” or “no divinity if not the Divinity.” This formula is, first of all, the expression of the Muslim creed, and a most direct affirmation of its monotheistic emphasis. Beyond this first and evident meaning of the *shahādah* however, there has developed since the start of Islam modes of understanding of this formulation that reach the most consistent and significant metaphysical meaning of the doctrine of Unity, in a way that transcends, without abolishing it, the ordinary understanding of *tawhīd* as enunciating the reality of one God as opposed to many. It needs be stressed that this

---

<sup>79</sup> See for example the remarkable *Paths to Transcendence According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart* by Reza Shah-Kazemi, World Wisdom, 2006, for a further exploration of these harmonics.

<sup>80</sup> « The Wisdom of Holiness in the Word of Enoch, » *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Paulist Press, 1980, 85.

ultimate metaphysical meaning of the *shahādah* is not the mere theoretical production of speculative reason, but that it is above all the doctrinal outcome of the spiritual assimilation of the principles of the *Qur'ān*. In other words, the fact that the tenets of the *wahdāt al-wujūd* may be unfathomable, or even anathema, to most Muslims, does not mean that they should be considered as external borrowings *a priori* foreign to Islam. Quite to the contrary, they constitute the doctrinal crystallizations of an interiorization of Islam in the most metaphysically profound, consistent and fundamental way. These interpretations of the *shahādah*, most often associated to Sufism, present us with a metaphysical account of the relationship between the Absolute and the relative that is strewn with metaphysical paradox. The crux of this metaphysical understanding of the *shahādah* lies in the definition of *Allāh* as the Reality, or the Real –*al-Haqq*. This means that the word God does not only refer to the Supreme Divinity but also, and consequently, to the Real as such, *Wujūd*. In other words, Sufism has tended to derive two consequences from its consistent consideration of God as the Real : --first, Reality cannot be predicated to anything besides God, --and two, everything that *is* participates in one degree or another, in one mode or another, in God's only Reality. The term *wujūd*, which is most often translated by being or existence, is akin to the Arabic root WJD which denotes “finding” and “knowing about.” *Wujūd* as that which may be “found” and “known about” can refer to at least three different realities: it may first refer to the Divine Reality whose Essence is Being; it may secondly refer to any *mawjūd*, any entity that is “made to be,” and it may finally denote the reality that underlies all existents in a single unity, or *wahdat al-wujūd*. The *shahādah* implies both the first and third of these meanings. According to the first acceptation it is metaphysically exclusive, while it is inclusive according to the third. It exalts the Divine as that which lies above everything while being the essence of all things; it posits God both in His transcendence and immanence. By virtue of transcendence it affirms the nothingness of all else, while following its inclusive immanence it affirms the “non-unreality” of creation. The originality of Islam, however, is that the exclusive and inclusive aspects of Unity, as real as both are in their own respective rights, are not situated on the same “credal” level, as it were. While the exclusiveness, transcendence and incomparability of God as *the* Real, in

Arabic *tanzīh*, directly pertains to the immediate, plain, binding, religious meaning of the Revelation –a meaning that is theoretically understood and accepted by all, the full meaning of the immanence, analogy and inclusiveness, or *tashbīh*, of the Real as One without a second can only be alluded to esoterically as a subtle, delicate and perplexing truth that presupposes a measure of metaphysical and spiritual intuition without which it could be misunderstood, and either rejected or accepted on the basis of erroneous assumptions. This being said, it is also true that, from the point of view of Sufi gnosis, the recognition of God’s immanence through his “signs” (*āyāt*) is more accessible to believers at large than is the pure transcendence of the One, which remains for most an abstraction rather than being, as in the highest forms of Sufi gnosis, a matter of inner realization. Now one of the keys in understanding the *wahdat al-wujūd* lies precisely in the metaphysical tension between exclusive transcendence and inclusive immanence. Ibn ‘Arabi expresses the paradox of this tension in the following way:

The Elevated is one of God’s Beautiful Names; but above whom or what, since only He exists ? (...) In relation to existence He is the very essence of existing beings. Thus, in a certain sense, relative beings are elevated in themselves, since (in truth) they are none other than He and His elevation is absolute and not relative. This is because the (eternal) essences are immutable unmanifest, knowing nothing of manifested existence, and they remain in that state, despite all the multiplicity of manifested forms. The Essence is Unique of the whole in the whole. <sup>81</sup>

Although the immanence of the Real cannot be artificially severed from its transcendence without distorting Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine into a pantheistic confusion, it is also true that this immanence refers to the essential nature of the Real since it follows from the very affirmation of transcendence as predicated upon otherness. Hence the question : “The Elevated is one of God’s Beautiful Names ; but above whom or what, since only He exists? “

The interplay between transcendence and immanence, or exclusive Unicity and inclusive Unity is no better expressed as in Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of the “permanent essences” or “permanent entities,” *a’yān thābita*. According to this

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, “The Wisdom of Holiness in the Word of Enoch,” *Bezels of Wisdom*, edit. R.W.J. Austin, Paulist Press, 1980, 85.

doctrine, everything that exists is *a priori* a “possible entity” in God’s pre-eternity. It is only through God’s existentiation that possible entities come to be actualized in the world of creation. In God, or in God’s knowledge, entities are both metaphysically “real” and inexistent. In creation by contrast, entities are existent but ultimately “unreal.” By “reality” is meant here identity with or participation into Reality, by “existence” is intended *ek-sistere*, that is “standing out” from the Source of Being and being projected into the world of creation. The paradoxical ontological status of “existents” between “essential non-existence” and “non-real existence” is referred to in another suggestive way when saying that “the possible thing is that reality whose relationship to existence and non-existence is equal.”<sup>82</sup> According to Ibn ‘Arabī, to say that a possible entity is existent without qualifying this existence by inexistence is like mistaking it for the Real, i.e. God Himself, while to affirm that it is inexistent without qualifying it with existence amounts to make it impossible. Entities have therefore two “sides,” each of which is like a sort of “negation” of the other, while they are of course one and the same in the last analysis. Their “existence” in the cosmos is their “non-being” in God, and their “being” in God is their non-existence. With respect to the former, it is not that an existent in this world ceases to be a possibility in God when it is existentiated, since this would absurdly make a possible impossible, but it means that its existence is pure “nothingness” in relation to the act of God which “has clothed it in the robe of existence through Himself,” or in relation to the Divine Name which has brought it into existence. As for the latter, it means that there is no room in God for other than God, and therefore no existence of entities. The non-existence of entities is their reality in God since it *is* God, whereas their existence in the world is not real in and of itself since it is none other than the manifestation of the very Being and Qualities of God “through” and “in” them.<sup>83</sup> In this connection Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the phenomena of the world as “places of manifestation,” *mazhar*, of the Divine Being and Qualities. A *mazhar* is a place where God appears because God makes it appear

---

<sup>82</sup> *The Sufi Path of Knowledge – Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, SUNY, 1989, Press 82.

<sup>83</sup> “In the last analysis we see only the properties of the divine names, which are the qualities and attributes intrinsic to Being.” Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 80.

through its existentiating act. In a sense there is a sort of reciprocity between God and the *maẓhar*. The latter is actualized by God's creative act from its state of mere possibility, while the Divine Being is made manifest through its receptable, or place, of manifestation. A ponderous consequence of this is that the ontological status and salvific virtue of the phenomena of the world depends on whether they are considered, and one may even say "experienced," as "places of manifestation" of God or as mere phenomena as such. In his *Niche of Light*, the *Mishkat al-Anwār*, Ghazālī – whose perspective includes in his most esoteric treatises very penetrating insights into the tawhidic concept of relativity-- refers to these two aspects of creatures as follow:

"Everything is perishing except His face" [28:88] [It is] not that each thing is perishing at one time or at other times, but that it is perishing from eternity without beginning to eternity without end. It can only be so conceived since, when the essence of anything other than He is considered in respect of its own essence, it is sheer nonexistence. But when it is viewed in respect of the "face" to which existence flows forth from the First, the Real, then it is seen as existing not in itself tbut through the face adjacent to its Giver of Existence. Hence, the only existent is the Face of God. Each thing has two faces: a face toward itself, and a face toward its Lord. Viewed in terms of the face of itself, it is nonexistent; but viewed in terms of the Face of God, it exists. Hence nothing exists but God and His Face.<sup>84</sup>

As emphasized by Ghazālī , the phenomenon "considered in respect of its own essence, (...) is sheer nonexistence." However, it is existent as it is "facing" toward its Source or as it is the "place of manifestation" of the radiance, *tajallī*, of Divine Being. The Islamic rejection of any "second" to God leads, paradoxically, to an emphasis on the "not unreal" aspect of what we have called "relativity." This "non-unreality" of the non-Ultimate has already appeared in three ways. First of all, "relativity" is not "not real" inasmuch as it is "possible" as *a'yān thābita* in God. In fact, it follows from the doctrine of *a'yān thābita* that, according to Ibn 'Arabī, relative beings are "elevated" in themselves inasmuch as they are "included" in the Real as "immutable essences," or inasmuch as they *are* the Real. To put it in a somewhat elliptical manner: "other-than-God" is *in* God, *is* God, and thereby *not*

---

<sup>84</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Light*, translated by David Buchman, Provo: Brigham Young University, 1998, 16-17.

unreal. Secondly, each relative reality is a site of Self-disclosure of the Real, to make use of the English lexicon proposed by William Chittick. The “not unreal” nature of the world of creation as “theophany” or *tajallī* is therefore clearly asserted, as each “unit” of reality in creation is none other than the revelatory appearance of Reality Itself. The qualities, determinations and properties of the receptacles of the Real cannot be unreal: if they were, they could not function as sites of manifestation of Being. Another aspect of the same point is that each unit of receptivity to the One Being is “unified,” i.e. “made one” by the One. Whereas the situation of the “possible entities” in God’s knowledge pertains to the One as *al-Ahad*, and can be mathematically symbolized by the multiplication of unity (1X1X1...) that bars any existential plurality, the reality of the “existent entities” relates to the One as *al-Wāhid*, that “unifies” and “constitutes” each and every entity in differential oneness in the form of the addition 1+1+1+1...<sup>85</sup> The theophany of Unity in and through “unities” is at the same time the very principle of the Unity of the Real in each and every of the “occurrences” of unity, as well as through the whole spectrum of multiple existence: hence the expression *wahdat al-wujūd*. Interestingly, the Śaivite notion of *kula*, or “group,” refers to a similar principle of unity in which “because of the presence of Śiva within each of these units, each part in some sense contains all the other parts.”<sup>86</sup> Thirdly, the “not unreal” nature of the non-Ultimate appears in the very existentionation of the entities by the act of Being. “*Kun fa yakun*,” God says “Be! And it is.” In other words the immanence of the Divine Being to the various theophanies through His Act makes it impossible for one to consider them as “non-being.” This threefold “not unreal” aspect of the non-Ultimate amounts to a recognition of the relative “necessity,” if one may so, of creation in relation to God. The Amir ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī encapsulates this paradox of the “necessity” of the “contingent” in the following lines:

---

<sup>85</sup> For further developments on these various degrees and modes of theophany see “Le Dieu-Un et les dieux multiples” in Henry Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, Paris: L’Herne, 1981, p21-23.

<sup>86</sup> Mueller-Ortega, 59.



(...) Without God the creatures would not be existentiated (*khalqun bi-lā haqqin lā yūjad*) and without the creature, God would not be manifested (*haqqun bi-lā khalqin lā yazhar*)<sup>87</sup>

The Islamic notion of theophany is thereby central to the articulation of the One and the many. The latter are as many unveilings or disclosures of the limitless Real. Sufism highlights the central function of these theophanic disclosures both from an ontological and a soteriological or spiritual point-of-view. From the latter perspective the doctrine of theophany teaches that there is no other way of knowing and “seeing” God than through His theophanic manifestations, or through His Aspects and Qualities as they are manifested in the world of creation. This is clearly asserted by Ibn ‘Arabī when he writes that “contemplation of the Reality without formal support is not possible, since God, in His Essence, is far beyond all need of the Cosmos.”<sup>88</sup> This is a very significant point in Sufi doctrine as it emphasizes the centrality of the recognition of immanence in the Way. In other words, there is no contemplative way without a full recognition of the “not unreal” aspect of the world of relativity.<sup>89</sup> Now, it must be added that this perspective does not exhaust the cognitive possibilities envisaged by the *wahdat al-wujūd*. For there is in fact a way in which the Essence is known “by Itself” through or within the heart of the gnostic, independently from external theophanic mediations, and it cannot be otherwise since the Essence is ultimately all that is. It behooves the commentator to distinguish, therefore, between an “analytical,” “theophanic” knowledge of the Essence through the Names, and a synthetic Self-Knowledge of the Essence beyond all theophanies. Although our thesis lays emphasis on the former, which we deem to be more representative of Islamic spirituality at large, the significance of the latter in some major sectors of Sufi metaphysics cannot be disregarded.

---

<sup>87</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of the Amir ‘Abd al-Kader*, edit. Michel Chodkiewicz, SUNY Press, 1982, 114.

<sup>88</sup> *Bezels of Wisdom*, 275.

<sup>89</sup> It must be noted that the reverse position can be at times asserted from another point of view, as when Jīlī affirms that true knowledge is that of the Essence and not of Qualities, because in the former the servant “recognizes that the Divine Essence is his own essence”, whereas there is no knowledge of the Qualities since “there is no means ever to exhaust (them.)” *Universal Man*, 14. Obviously, Jīlī expresses here a point-of-view that is closer to Advaita’s doctrine of *Ātman* by understanding immanence in a mostly inward way.

It flows from the previous considerations that, when discussing the non-Ultimate, or “relativity,” in Sufism, it is important to differentiate between the two concepts of *mā siwā Allāh*, or “other-than-God”, that underscores the “inclusive exclusiveness” of the Principle, and Divine Names or Qualities, *Asmā’* or *Sifāt*, that tend to accentuate its “theophanic” inclusiveness. The *mā siwā Allāh* is not, precisely because only *Allāh* is in a true sense. To grant reality to *mā siwā Allāh* would amount to severing the non-Ultimate from the Divine, and setting it into illusory “otherness.” By contrast, as we have already suggested, if one were to look for “non-unreality” in the relative realm one would have to consider, rather, the nature and function of the Divine Names. The Names (*Asmā’*) do not only refer, here, to linguistic designations, be they divinely revealed, but to the actual Qualities (*Sifāt*) or Aspects of the Divine Itself.<sup>90</sup> In fact, every existent being is a name of God,<sup>91</sup> and when we capitalize the substantive we are more specifically referring to a Name as Divine Quality, or Aspect, such as the Compassionate (*ar-Rahmān*) or the Beautiful (*al-Jamīl*.) Be that as it may, the consideration of the ontological reality of the Names must be related to their two “aspects.” On the one hand, the Names are none other than the Essence inasmuch as they “face” the Essence. This also means, as indicated by Ibn ‘Arabī, that each Name can be “qualified” by all other Names by virtue of its and their *being* the Essence.<sup>92</sup> On the other hand, the Names are “relational” and therefore “relative” to creation. Names are “relationships,” they are not existing substances. For any of them to become distinct from the others it needs to be brought into the created realm through and in its relationship to its “effects.” The Amir ‘Abd al-Qādir refers to this process of distinction and manifestation through the analogy of colors which “were inexistent in the dark,” and light which “was a condition *sine qua non* of

---

<sup>90</sup> Hence the distinction between “Names” and “Names of the Names.” “The words which we call divine names are not, strictly speaking the names themselves, but the ‘names of the names’ (*asmā’ al-asmā’*) which have been revealed by God to His servants through the Koran and other scriptures.” *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 34.

<sup>91</sup> “(...) Each thing other than God is a name of God. And since God is Being, every *thing*, every entity, every possible being, is a name of Being.” Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 94.

<sup>92</sup> “(...) Every Name implies the Essence as well as the particular aspect it enshrines. Therefore, insofar as it implies the Essence Itself, it partakes of all the Names, whereas, as evincing the particular aspect [of the Essence] it is distinct and unique [relatively].” *The Bezels of Wisdom*, edit. R.W.J. Austin, 88.

their existence. “<sup>93</sup> The “darkness” of the Essence does “include” all the Names and all the “possible entities,” but it is the Light of the Divine Existentiating Act that makes them manifest in and through the “shadows” of the existents. As such the Names are principles of “non-unreality” for relativity precisely because they are no different from the Essence which *is*, and given that they have no meaning outside of the entities of creation that they actualize.

The diversity of Names is not the only way in which the Essence and the world of creation are as it were “connected. “ Besides the “horizontal” range of Divine Names and Aspects the relationship between Unity and multiplicity also appears in the various Sufi versions of the doctrine of the Divine modes of Presence. These Divine Presences (*hadarāt*) highlight the strong “immanentist” bent of Sufi metaphysics in that they express the universal underlying Presence of the Divine, while manifesting this Presence in a hierarchy of levels of being that encompasses the whole ontological scale, from the Divine Essence to the material shell of the universe. Sufi metaphysics differentiates the degrees of Divine Presence in a binary, tertiary or --most often, quinary pattern. The binary model, which stems from Quranic terminology, distinguishes between the “world of mystery” (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) and the “world of testimony” (*‘ālam ash-shahādah*). The first refers to invisible Divine realities, and the second to manifestation. In his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, Al-Ghazālī refers to the first as the “world of dominion” (*‘ālam al-malakūt*) and to the second as the “world of sensation and visibility” (*‘ālam al-hiss wa ash-shahādah*). The vertical descent of Divine Presence that links these two worlds is clearly expressed in the following passage:

The visible world comes forth from the world of dominion just as the shadow comes forth from the thing that throws it, the fruit comes forth from the tree, and the effect comes forth from the secondary cause. The keys to knowledge of effects are found only in their secondary causes. Hence, the visible world is a similitude of the world of dominion. (...) <sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> *Spiritual Writings*, 114.

<sup>94</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, translated by David Buchman, Brigham Young University Press, 1998, 12.

The world of sensation is a similitude (*mithāl*) of the world of dominion. This means that it is a reflection of the higher world, thereby testifying (*shahādah*) to the reality of the latter. This binary layout of reality is the most elementary way of expressing the relationship between the Divine and the world of creation. Other descriptions of the levels of Divine Presence differentiate further by distinguishing within the invisible world the domain of “fire” and that of “light,” which correspond respectively the animic and imaginal level on the one hand, and the spiritual and angelic level on the other hand. This distinction results in a tripartite universe that encompasses, in ascending order, *al-mulk* or *al-nasūt*, *al-malakūt* and *al-jabarūt*.<sup>95</sup> But the most encompassing account of the degrees of Divine Presence is to be found in the doctrine of the five Divine Presences (*hadarāt*). Al-Qāshānī, one of the foremost commentators of Ibn ‘Arabī, enumerates these *hadarāt* as follows: the Essence (*dhāt*),<sup>96</sup> the Divinity as Qualities and Names (*ulūhiyah*), The plane of Divine Acts (*rubūbiyah*), the level of imagination (*khayāl*) and the level of physical and

---

<sup>95</sup> Cf. for example, Ibn ‘Ajība, *Kitāb Mi‘rāj al-Tashawwuf ilā Haqā’iq al-Tasawwuf*, Edited and translated into French by Jean-Louis Michon under the title *L’Ascension du regard vers les réalités du Soufisme*, Albouraq, Paris 2010, 196.

<sup>96</sup> Jīlī considers four degrees of manifestation of the Divine Essence (*dhāt*), which are Divinity (*ulūhiyah*), Unity (*ahadiyah*), Unicity (*wāhidiyah*) and Compassionate Beatitude (*rahmāniyah*). The first two refer to the Essence in Itself, so that it would be more accurate, it seems, to consider them as dimensions of the Divine Reality, rather than degrees of its manifestation. Jīlī explains the distinction between Divinity and Unity as follows:

The Unity is the most exclusive affirmation of the Essence for Itself, whereas the ‘Quality of Divinity’ is the sublime affirmation of the Essence for Itself and for other than Itself.

The distinction between Divinity and Unity corresponds to a recognition of the absolute and infinite dimensions of the Essence. In other words, *al-ahadiyah* is exclusive of everything that is not the Essence. The Name *al-Ahad* means the “One and only One,” as clearly expressed in the *surah al-Ikhlās*:

Say: He is Allah, the One and Only;  
Allah, the Eternal, Absolute;  
He begetteth not, nor is He begotten;  
And there is none like unto Him.  
(112-1, Yusuf Ali)

This *surah* is the best Quranic expression of the exclusive transcendence of the Divine Essence that lies beyond all relationship and comparability. However, the Essence is also infinitely inclusive as well as absolutely exclusive. And it is this infinite dimension of the Divine Essence that is referred to by Jīlī as *ulūhiyah*. Divinity is the synthesis of all the Qualities and Names that are contained in the Essence. The Unicity (*wāhidiyah*) and Compassionate Beatitude (*rahmāniyah*), by contrast with the Unity and the Divinity, relate to the manifestation of the Essence. The Unicity refers to the inherence of the Essence in all the Names and Qualities while the Compassionate Beatitude “dominates and penetrates the existences and (...) Its principle rules them.” *The Universal Man*, 31.

sensory existence (*mushāhadah*).<sup>97</sup> Other accounts are characterized by a slightly different terminology.<sup>98</sup> It is so that the level of the pure Essence is often referred to as *al-Hāhūt*, from the pronoun *Huwa*, He, that points to the Essential Ipseity. The plane of the Qualities is referred to as *al-Lāhūt*, referring to *Allāh*. The level of the Divine Acts is *al-Jabarūt*, which has to do with God's Power as expressed by His Acts and his Angels, and is akin to the Divine Name *al-Jabbār*, which entails irresistible compelling. The two lowest domains of manifestation of the Divine Presence are that of imagination *al-Malakūt* and that of the physical forms *al-Nāsūt*: that is the world of invisible animic realities, and that of corporeal existence.<sup>99</sup> Whatever might be the specific distinctions and syntheses brought about in the various versions of the metaphysical doctrine of the Divine Presences, what needs to be stressed is that the doctrine itself highlights the "non-unreality" of the relative realm of manifestation by affirming the ways in which the principle of Reality is present and efficient throughout. Instead of emphasizing an exclusive discrimination between the Real and the illusory these teachings suggest a gradually decreasing but never annulled inherence of the Divine Presence throughout the totality of existence, leaving thereby no entities or phenomena "out of touch" with Reality as it were. Moreover, notwithstanding the discontinuity between their respective realms the Divine Presences involve an essential continuity from the Divine Source precisely by virtue of pertaining to Presence, and not to absence or ontological chasm. This teaching is in keeping with the Quranic verses that stress the absence of "rent" or "rift" in the fabric of creation: « Thou (Muhammad) canst see no fault in the Beneficent One's creation; then look again: Canst thou see any rifts? »<sup>100</sup> Moreover, the Sufi emphasis on the immanence of the Divine finds another important correlative manifestation in the significance of the Divine Name both as ontological reality and as spiritual support of inner realization. Jīlī makes this point

---

<sup>97</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: a comparative study of key philosophical concepts*, University of California Press, 1983, 11.

<sup>98</sup> Sometimes, the two supreme presences are considered to be the Divinity and the Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). The latter stands for the Divine Essence, whereas the second represents the synthetic quintessence of Divine Qualities and, thereby, the Prototype of creation.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. for example, Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, World Wisdom, 2008, 71.

<sup>100</sup> Quran 67:3, translation of Marmaduke Pickthall.

very emphatically by asserting the ontological identity of God and His Name on the one hand,<sup>101</sup> and consequently by underscoring, on the other hand, that this Name is the only methodical means of access to the Divine.<sup>102</sup>

As we have noted, the Kasmiri Shaivite and Sufi *wahdat al-wujūd* share a consideration of “theophanic degrees” in the manifestation of the Absolute within and through the fold and garb of relativity. The main thrust of the Śaivite perspective is the need to recognize the Supreme Consciousness of Śiva in all the phenomena that surround us, and to “enlarge” our awareness, as it were, through this recognition. There is nothing that is not Śiva, although our perception may not be adequate to this supreme truth, which is why we must untie the knots of limitations and contractions through and by our connection to the productive and reintegrative energy of the Śakti, instead of identifying exclusively with particular stases or moments in the unfolding of the Absolute. Similarly, there is nothing in existence but God, or “*Laysa fi’l wujūd ill’Allāh*” to make use of Ghazālī’s expression. The Islamic “sin” of “association” or *shirk* is therefore ultimately identified with a spiritual inability to recognize the pure Unicity of the Real, a failure to acknowledge the most inclusive and consistent understanding of the first *shahādah*. It follows from their strong emphasis on immanence that the perspectives of Śaivism and Unity of Essence tend to underscore the ontological continuity between the various degrees of reality, thereby pointing to the Supreme Reality by recognizing and actualizing It within and through that which appears to be distinct from It. In other words, the “not unreal” nature of the domain of “other-than-the-Ultimate” must lead to the Ultimate since it is not in the last analysis other than It. This is in sharp methodical contrast with those perspectives that accentuate the need for a “nullification,” “subrating,” “dissolving,” or “emptying” of delimited phenomena and experiences. It is also significant that in such metaphysical accounts of Reality as to be found in the Kashmiri Śaivism and the *wahdat al-wujūd*, the lower degrees of

---

<sup>101</sup> « (...) The perfection of the Named is eminently manifested by the fact that He is revealed by His Name to he who ignores Him, so that the Name is to the Named that which the exterior (*az-zāhir*) is to the interior (*al-bātin*), and in this respect the Name is the Named Himself.” *Universal Man*, 9.

<sup>102</sup> “(...) Each Name and each (Divine) Quality (is) contained in the Name Allāh, (and) it follows that there is no access to the knowledge of God except by way of this Name.” *Ibid*

existence are as it were included in the higher ones. This is eminently true of the Real Itself which, as Supreme Being and Consciousness, embraces within itself *in potentia* all that is. The Śaivite image of the feathers and egg of the peacock<sup>103</sup> and the Akbarian concept of the “pre-existential possibilities” express, in different ways, this metaphysical inclusion of the relative into the Absolute. The common emphasis on the methodical centrality of the *mantra*, or *dhikr* in Sufism, is akin to the aforementioned metaphysical perspectives since it rests upon an essential identity between the projection and power of the linguistic symbol and its divine matrix. It is by virtue of this identity that relativity as a whole can be as it were reabsorbed into its Source.

### ***Transcendence and Immanence in the Economy of Reality***

As we hope to have intimated throughout our essay beneath the surface of our conceptual distinctions and classifications, none of the four metaphysical perspectives that we have sketched can be deemed to be utterly exclusive of the others, if only to the extent that they all tend to caution against any excessive fixation on ideational phenomena. The fact is that none of the four perspectives in question may be deemed to brand the relative realm with unqualified reality, no more than any of them can be considered to deny its reality altogether.

In order to recapitulate the findings of our inquiry it might be pedagogically useful, as well as epistemologically expedient, to situate the four metaphysical traditions that we have analyzed as ranging from an emphasis on transcendence to one on immanence, notwithstanding the unavoidable simplifications that such a classification might entail. In such a contrasted spectrum of metaphysical vantage points, *Mādhyamaka* Buddhism may appear as the doctrinal epitome of what could be called paradoxically a “transcendence of transcendence.” This elliptical phrase may be understood to mean that, by refusing to posit --at least affirmatively, a reality that would transcend *pratītyasamutpāda*, *Mādhyamaka* Buddhism aims at transcending, as it were, the perspective of transcendence, thereby ending up

---

<sup>103</sup> “The entire universe is already contained in the highest consciousness or the highest Self even as the variegated plumage of the peacock is already contained in the plasma of its egg (*mayūrāndarasa-nyāyena*).” Jaideva Singh, in *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam*, 125.

“placing” the principle of emptiness as a reality immanent to everything that “neither is nor is not.” In other words the backbone of this perspective lies in the negation of the position of any Absolute, or any Self, that would transcend the realm of co-dependent origination and make it henceforth impossible to reach Emptiness. By contrast, *Advaita* may be deemed to highlight a perspective chiefly characterized by a “transcendence of immanence,” meaning thereby that *Ātman* transcends radically, and therefore annuls, the realm of *Māyā*. In other words, the ordinary, benighted, state of consciousness fails to recognize That which transcends the realm of immediate and appearing existence. However, lest this Advaitin standpoint be taken for a one-sided “transcendentalist” perspective, it bears remembering that this annulment results in its turn in the highest affirmation of the immanence of the Self, since there is nothing but *Ātman*. At any rate, in both *Advaita* and *Mādhyamaka*, one is confronted with a clear-cut need to free oneself, through transcendence, from the conditioning relativity of binding phenomena and states of consciousness. In contradistinction with those perspectives, both Shaivism and Sufism are by and large characterized by an attention to the theophanic and soteriological sheaves of immanence. They perceive the latter as manifestations of the Ultimate, and tend to make a maximal methodical and spiritual use of them. Considering the Sufi perspective of *wahdat al-wujūd*, we would be tempted to refer to it as expressing, by and large, the point of view of the “immanence of the transcendent.” Starting as it does from the Islamic premise of an exclusive Divine Unity, “abstraction” and incomparability, or *tanzīh*, the *wahdat al-wujūd* cannot but affirm the Divine Immanence that this exclusive Unity implies as its metaphysical counterpart and corollary. “No god but God” or *lā ilaha ill’Allāh* signifies both the exclusive transcendence of *Allāh* and His immanence as *az-Zāhir*, the Manifest or the Outward. Finally, it would not be inaccurate to refer to Kashmiri Śaivism as to a metaphysical and mystical perspective that focuses upon the dynamic, liberating and universal “immanence of the Immanent,” if one may say so without apparent redundancy. This means that Śaivism is intent on recognizing and “freeing” the Divine Consciousness and Energy that pervades everything within and without, which amounts in fact to teaching that this selfsame Consciousness frees us from its



delimitations through the very same delimitations that It has assumed. Here again, however, it needs be kept in mind that this awareness of the immanence of Shiva is ultimately realized and actualized into its full meaning in and through a realization of his transcendence as pure Freedom.<sup>104</sup> The preceding lines must therefore lead us to underscore *in fine*, lest our classification be overstated or unduly isolated from its overall context, that the distinction between immanence and transcendence is both provisional and relative. In Reality Itself, or for Consciousness Itself, as well as in the heights of spiritual realization in which It manifests, there is neither transcendence nor immanence, these notions presupposing otherness, hence provisional duality.

### ***Paradoxes of Metaphysical and Mystical Discourse***

The quasi-totality of the considerations that precede are theoretical, and the reader might be entitled to raise the question of the practical, spiritual, implications of these metaphysical notions, given that mysticism is primarily a matter of “realized knowledge.” Whatever might be the important differences in emphasis among the various traditions of “mysticism,” it cannot escape us that the centrality of the doctrine of universal metaphysical relativity in “mystical theology” stems from a radical difference of accent in the way religion at large and mysticism as a distinct current within religious traditions envisage the relationship between the human and the Ultimate. Religions, and theology inasmuch as it is the rational and apologetic mouthpiece of religion, deal primarily with the moral and social conformity and alignment of the human with the Ultimate, both individually and collectively. In other words, they aim at ordering, coordinating, and balancing the various aspects of human existence on this earth in conformity with, or in view of, the ultimate end of Reality. Religious teachings are therefore primarily “symbolic,” in the sense of fostering a human approximation of the Above that might be

---

<sup>104</sup> Finally, a word must be said of the proportional “presence” and “absence” of God as a present and personal reality as we move from immanence to transcendence, or from an emphasis on relativity as “not unreal” to one stressing its “non-real” aspect. From the apparent negation of God in *Mādhyaṃaka* to His universally pervasive and polymorphic presence as “embodied” Śiva in Śaivism the extent to which God is a determining “spiritual reality” varies proportionally to the degree of “non-unreality” conceded to the relative realm. This should come as no surprise since God Himself is by definition “relative,” His notion presupposing as it does a relationship with the world of creation and mankind.

conducive to a life according to transcendent principles. Paradoxically, and perhaps unexpectedly given its affinities with symbolic expressions and its usual distance from formalism and literalism, mysticism is more “literal” than religion in the sense that it takes the highest teachings of religion “at face value” and lends them the most powerfully consistent meaning and impact. This is why it asserts the exclusive Reality of the Ultimate and the utter transcendence of this Reality vis-à-vis any relationship that would essentially limit It or confine It within human mental coagulations. Consequently “mystical theologies” refrain from considering any existent aside from its utter dependence upon the Supreme, thereby intimating its paradoxical, ambiguous, status as “neither real nor unreal:” Not real because only the Real is real, but not unreal because everything *is* the Real.

As an initial response to the question raised at the beginning of these conclusive remarks, it could be proposed that the metaphysical rigour of mystical discourse cannot but translate into an exacting awareness of the Ultimate, thereby informing the totality of the spiritual and moral components of the path. In this respect, the “mystical” emphasis on the “shimmering” dimension of reality needs be understood once again in contradistinction with the ordinary religious perspective. As we have indicated above, the latter could be defined as a system of beliefs and practices destined to “orient” mankind toward the Ultimate Reality of the creed. This is the primary aspect of religious laws, codes and disciplines, without which religion has no effectiveness in relation to the needs and limitations of the individual as such, as well as to those of the collectivity. Such orientation presupposes a conventional “density” and quasi-absoluteness of the means, in a way that is not without opening the way to the possibility of a confusion between the finger and the moon. By contrast, mystical teachings on relativity tend to go well beyond such structuring and facilitating goals, while parrying any danger of the aforementioned confusion of means and end, inasmuch as they aim at a radical modification of one’s perception of reality. A re-assessment of reality and its criteria of definition and perception requires the acquisition of a mode of consciousness that fundamentally alters and upsets the largely delusory balance of one’s mental habits and existential comfort.

Thus, the methodological focus on the ontological paradoxes of the non-Ultimate may be, on the part of sapiential and mystical teachings, a function of the operative imperative of the metaphysical path as a way of life and an awakening of consciousness. Even though the teachings concerning relativity are obviously every bit as conceptual as the affirmative doctrine of the Real as such, they converge on a conversion of outlook that is the very hallmark of sapiential and mystical teachings. Arguably, such an operative priority comes more obviously to the fore in *Mādhyamaka* than it does elsewhere, the general economy of the Buddhist tradition being the most reticent of all vis-à-vis any conceptualization of the Ultimate. Nāgārjuna underlines the principle in question when specifying, in conclusion to his *Vigrahavyāvartanī* that “(dependent origination) is to be understood by each one by himself according to this instruction” and “only some of it can be taught verbally.”<sup>105</sup> This statement, which is echoed in various degrees and diverse modes in all metaphysical and mystical teachings, highlights two core principles that provide us with a suggestive coda. First of all, the understanding of the teachings is to be effected “by each one by himself.” On this point, the Sufi *tahqīq* as inward verification or realization of *tawhīd* provides a striking parallel to Nāgārjuna’s injunction inasmuch as it implies a spiritual actualization of enlightened consciousness through a breaking of the shell of outward conceptual language.<sup>106</sup> Secondly, and concurrently, this call for inner and transformative understanding presupposes a gap between theoretical knowledge and operative recognition. It is in this gap that lies one of the most perplexing questions of metaphysical and mystical expression, for “only some of it can be taught verbally.” The shimmering ambiguity of existence or the non-Ultimate invites the question of the puzzling status of any discourse giving access to it. The notion of *upāya* remains a key symbol

---

<sup>105</sup> *The Dispeller of Disputes – Nāgārjuna’s Vigrahavyāvartanī*, translation and commentary by Jan Westerhoff, Oxford University Press, 2010, p.41. “They are to be understood individually by each person, following this direction (*svayam adhigantavyā anayā diśā*): a part [only] can be taught in words (*kiṃcic chakyaṃ vacanenopdeṣṭum*)” *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna—Vigrahavyāvartanī*, translated by Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1998, p.137.

<sup>106</sup> « That belief which the commonalty of mankind learns is the mould of truth, not truth itself. Complete gnosis is that the truths be uncovered from that mould, as a kernel is taken out of the husk.” Al-Ghazzali, *On Knowing Yourself and God*, translated from the Persian by Muhammad Nur Abdus Salam, Great Books of the Islamic World, 2002, p.31.

in this respect, one that allows us to account for the plurality of perspectives and degrees of spiritual fruitfulness, as it embraces both epistemological power and ontological emptiness in the shimmering language of mystical metaphysics.