



# International Journal of Sanskrit Research

अनन्ता

ISSN: 2394-7519

IJSR 2024; 10(6): 01-04

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[www.anantaajournal.com](http://www.anantaajournal.com)

Received: 02-08-2024

Accepted: 06-09-2024

**Samuel Debbarma**

Assistant Professor, Department  
of Sanskrit, Government Degree  
College, Kamalpur, Dhalai,  
Tripura, India

## The concept of maya in the bhagavad gita: Illusion and transcendence

**Samuel Debbarma**

### Abstract

The Bhagavad Gita presents the concept of maya as a powerful force that distorts human perception and creates an illusion of reality, binding individuals to a cycle of desire, attachment, and suffering. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that the material world is temporary and constantly changing. It emphasizes that our true nature is eternal and beyond the physical realm. By identifying with the eternal soul rather than the temporary material body, we can break free from the illusion of attachment and experience lasting peace and joy. This paper explores how maya operates within the context of the Gita, examining its impact on human perception and action. The Bhagavad Gita offers a path to liberation through a combination of jnana (knowledge), bhakti (devotion), and karma (selfless action). Lord Krishna's teachings emphasize that by developing spiritual understanding, practicing devotion, and performing duties without attachment, individuals can transcend maya and achieve liberation (moksha). The Gita integrates these paths to provide a holistic approach to overcoming illusion and attaining spiritual freedom. Ultimately, the study shows that the Gita's timeless teachings remain relevant for those seeking to rise above the illusions of the material world and discover their true, eternal nature.

**Keyword:** Maya, Bhagavad Gita, illusion, transcendence, Atman (self), moksha (liberation)

### Introduction

Maya refers to the deceptive nature of the material world, which makes us perceive things differently from their true essence. It creates a veil of ignorance, distorting our perception of reality and trapping us in the cycle of attachment and suffering. In philosophical terms, Maya represents the cosmic illusion that creates a sense of separation between the individual and the divine. It gives rise to the perception of duality in a universe that is, in reality, non-dual, or Advaita. The Bhagavad Gita, a seminal text in Indian philosophy, serves as a spiritual and philosophical guide addressing the dilemmas of human existence, the nature of the self (atman), and the path to liberation (moksha). Set as a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and the divine charioteer Krishna, the Gita explores the intricate dynamics of life, duty (dharma), and spiritual realization. One of the central themes discussed is maya, often translated as illusion, which veils the true nature of reality and entangles individuals in a cycle of desire, attachment, and suffering. Maya is not merely a deceptive force; it is a cosmic power that sustains the illusion of separation and duality, causing beings to mistake the transient, material world for the ultimate reality. The Gita emphasizes that transcending maya is essential for realizing one's true self, which is eternal and beyond physical form. The text presents a structured path to overcome this illusion through the combined practice of jnana (knowledge), bhakti (devotion), and karma (selfless action). The concept of maya in the Bhagavad Gita, its philosophical implications, and the methods Krishna prescribes for transcending illusion<sup>[1]</sup>.

### The Concept of Maya in the Bhagavad Gita

The concept of illusion, or maya, is inextricably linked to attachment in the Bhagavad Gita. In the Bhagavad Gita, maya is portrayed as a fundamental cosmic principle that veils the true nature of reality, causing living beings to experience the material world as real and permanent when, in fact, it is transient and illusory. Maya creates a false sense of duality, leading individuals to identify with their physical bodies and external surroundings rather than their eternal spiritual essence (atman). It binds the soul to the cycle of birth and death (samsara), trapping it in a state of ignorance and suffering<sup>[2]</sup>.

**Corresponding Author:**

**Samuel Debbarma**

Assistant Professor, Department  
of Sanskrit, Government Degree  
College, Kamalpur, Dhalai,  
Tripura, India

Krishna explains the power and influence of maya in several verses.

‘मम माया दुरत्यया मामेव ये प्रपद्यन्ते मायामेतां तरन्ति ते’ [3]

This verse highlights the formidable nature of maya, describing it as a divine power that is challenging to surmount. It implies that maya is not simply a superficial illusion but a powerful, intrinsic aspect of the cosmic order that governs perception and experience.

Maya in the Gita operates by distorting human perception, making people identify with their desires, attachments, and fears. This distortion manifests as dvandva (duality), leading individuals to perceive opposites such as pleasure and pain, gain and loss, and success and failure. These dualities are the basis for human suffering, as they create attachment and aversion, clouding the mind and preventing individuals from seeing beyond the superficial aspects of life. The Gita presents maya as an obstacle that must be overcome to achieve liberation. It teaches that the illusion of the material world is a creation of prakriti (nature), and one must understand the difference between prakriti and purusha (consciousness) to transcend it. The interplay between these elements is central to the Gita’s teachings on maya. By recognizing that prakriti is temporary and ever-changing, while purusha is the unchanging essence of life, an individual can begin to detach from illusions.

Thus, the nature of maya in the Bhagavad Gita is both a powerful, binding force and an opportunity for transcendence. The text underscores the importance of understanding and overcoming this illusion through surrender to the divine, spiritual knowledge, and right action.

### The Impact of Maya on Human Perception and Action

In the Bhagavad Gita, maya significantly affects human perception and behavior, leading individuals to misidentify with our physical bodies, desires, and the material world. This misidentification creates attachment, aversion, and a false sense of duality, which cloud the true nature of the self and drive human actions towards suffering and bondage. The illusion of maya manifests in various ways, shaping how individuals perceive reality and respond to life's challenges.

Krishna explains that maya deludes all beings by creating dualities such as pleasure and pain, success and failure, and gain and loss. These dualities arise from attachment (raga) and aversion (dvesha), as described in verse 7.27:

इच्छाद्वेषसमुत्थेन द्वन्द्वमोहेन भारत |

सर्वभूतानि सम्मोहं सर्गे यान्ति परन्तप || [4]

This verse highlights how maya entangles individuals in a cycle of emotional responses based on desires and dislikes. The perception of opposites (dualities) becomes the driving force behind actions, as people are drawn toward pleasurable experiences and repelled by painful ones. This cycle perpetuates suffering, as attachment to fleeting material objects and experiences prevents individuals from recognizing their eternal, unchanging self (atman).

Maya influences the mind (manas) and intellect (buddhi), making them focus on external objects and sensory gratification. It creates a false identification with the body and ego, leading individuals to believe that they are their physical forms and the roles they play in the world. This

misidentification is reinforced through senses, which are drawn to the ever-changing, impermanent aspects of life.

ममैवांशो जीवलोके जीवभूतः सनातनः |

मनःषष्ठानीन्द्रियाणि प्रकृतिस्थानि कर्षति || [5]

This verse emphasizes that the soul, though eternal and divine, becomes entangled in prakriti (nature) through the senses and the mind. The senses, influenced by maya, distract the soul from its true nature, directing it toward temporary and illusory material objects. This diversion leads to actions rooted in selfish desires, perpetuating the cycle of karma and samsara (repeated birth and death).

The impact of maya on perception and action extends to how individuals make decisions. Under the influence of maya, actions are often driven by ego and a false sense of self-importance. People pursue power, wealth, and status, believing these achievements bring lasting happiness. However, Krishna teaches that such pursuits, rooted in illusion, lead to disappointment and suffering when the transitory nature of these goals is revealed.

Krishna also highlights the role of maya in creating attachment to outcomes, which hinders the practice of selfless action (karma yoga).

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन |

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि || [6]

This verse illustrates the importance of detaching from the outcomes of actions, a practice that is only possible by transcending maya. Attachment to results stems from the illusion that success or failure defines one’s identity and worth. When influenced by maya, individuals become fixated on the outcomes of their actions, leading to anxiety, fear, and hesitation. By transcending this illusion, one can act with detachment, focusing solely on performing one’s duty (dharma) without concern for the consequences.

Maya also impacts the ability to perceive the true nature of reality, as it obscures the vision of the divine presence that pervades all. Krishna explains in verse 7.13:

मोहितं नाभिजानाति मामेभ्यः परमव्ययम् | [7]

The verse underscores that maya prevents individuals from recognizing the divine essence within themselves and all beings. The illusion of separateness and individualism creates a barrier that obscures the unity and interconnectedness of existence, keeping individuals trapped in ignorance and the cycle of rebirth.

Overall, the impact of maya in the Bhagavad Gita is multifaceted, affecting perception, emotion, and action. It distorts the understanding of self, creates attachment to temporary objects, and generates dualities that lead to suffering. The Gita teaches that only by transcending maya through surrender, knowledge, and selfless action can one achieve liberation and realize the true nature of the self beyond illusion.

### Transcending Maya: The Path to Liberation

The Bhagavad Gita provides a comprehensive framework for transcending maya and attaining liberation (moksha) through a combination of knowledge (jnana), devotion (bhakti), and selfless action (karma). Krishna, as the divine teacher, guides

Arjuna in understanding the nature of maya and offers practical and philosophical methods for rising above this illusion. The transcendence of maya is presented as essential for realizing the eternal self (atman) and connecting with the ultimate reality (Brahman):

### 1. Jnana Yoga (The Path of Knowledge)

Knowledge is a fundamental aspect of the path to liberation in the Bhagavad Gita. Lord Krishna emphasizes that understanding the distinction between the eternal self (atman) and the temporary, material aspects of existence is crucial for transcending maya. In Chapter 13, Krishna explains the nature of the field (ksetra, the body and material reality) and the knower of the field (ksetrajña, the soul):

क्षेत्रज्ञं चापि मां विद्धि सर्वक्षेत्रेषु भारत |  
क्षेत्रक्षेत्रज्ञयोर्ज्ञानं यत्तज्ज्ञानं मतं मम ॥<sup>[8]</sup>

Krishna explains that knowledge of the body (ksetra) and the soul (ksetrajña) is true wisdom. Realizing that the self is not confined to the physical body but is an eternal consciousness helps one detach from the illusory attachments created by maya. By developing this jnana, one can discern the transient nature of material experiences and the permanence of the self, thereby reducing the power maya holds over the mind.

### 2. Bhakti Yoga (The Path of Devotion):

Devotion (bhakti) to the divine is another powerful means to transcend maya. Krishna advocates for complete surrender as a way to overcome illusion and achieve spiritual freedom. In Chapter 18, he instructs Arjuna to surrender all duties and seek refuge in him alone:

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं ब्रज |  
अहं त्वां सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥<sup>[9]</sup>

This verse highlights that ultimate liberation is achieved through complete surrender to the divine, transcending the ego and false identifications created by maya. By cultivating devotion and love for the divine, one develops a sense of unity and detachment from the material world. Bhakti allows the devotee to align their consciousness with the divine presence, dissolving the illusion of separation imposed by maya.

Bhakti enables the individual to focus the mind and heart on a higher reality, transcending the dualities and distractions that maya creates. It shifts the focus from material attachments to spiritual fulfillment, leading to inner peace and the realization of the divine within.

### 3. Karma Yoga (The Path of Selfless Action):

The Bhagavad Gita also emphasizes karma yoga, or selfless action, as a means to rise above maya. Krishna advises Arjuna to perform his duty without attachment to the results, illustrating that detachment from the fruits of action helps in overcoming the illusions of gain and loss, success and failure.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ॥<sup>[10]</sup>

Krishna's teaching emphasizes that one should focus on performing actions aligned with their dharma (duty) while remaining detached from the outcome. This detachment is crucial for transcending maya, as attachment to results is one

of the primary ways maya binds individuals. When actions are performed selflessly, without the expectation of reward, the ego and its illusions diminish, allowing one to align with the higher purpose of life.

Karma yoga also encourages mindfulness and presence in action, transforming everyday activities into opportunities for spiritual growth. By focusing on the process rather than the results, an individual rises above the dualities and distractions imposed by maya, leading to equanimity and spiritual liberation.

### 4. The Integration of Paths

The Bhagavad Gita does not advocate for a singular path but integrates jnana, bhakti, and karma as complementary practices that together help transcend maya. Each path addresses different aspects of the human condition: jnana dispels ignorance through knowledge, bhakti purifies the heart through devotion, and karma yoga aligns action with divine will. Krishna explains that a balanced approach, incorporating elements of all three, allows for a holistic transcendence of maya.

In Chapter 12, Krishna outlines the various approaches and suggests that while devotion is the most accessible, each path, when practiced sincerely, leads to the same ultimate realization. This integrative approach ensures that individuals, regardless of their inclinations or abilities, can find a means to transcend maya.

### 5. The Role of Surrender and Divine Grace

A recurring theme in the Gita is the need for surrender and reliance on divine grace. Krishna emphasizes that maya is difficult to overcome through human effort alone:

दैवी ह्येषा गुणमयी मम माया दुरत्यया ॥<sup>[11]</sup>

Krishna acknowledges the formidable power of maya but assures that those who surrender to him can transcend it. Surrendering involves letting go of the ego and the false sense of individual control that maya reinforces. By placing faith in the divine and relinquishing the illusion of separateness, an individual receives the grace needed to rise above illusion and experience true spiritual freedom.

### Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita offers profound insights into the nature of maya, portraying it as a powerful force that creates illusions, distorts perception, and entangles individuals in the cycle of birth and death (samsara). Through its teachings, the Gita emphasizes that overcoming maya is essential for realizing the true self (atman) and attaining liberation (moksha). By understanding the impact of maya on human perception and behavior, the text reveals the ways in which desires, dualities, and attachments obscure the ultimate reality and lead to suffering. Lord Krishna provides a comprehensive approach for transcending maya, integrating the paths of jnana (knowledge), bhakti (devotion), and karma (selfless action). Each path addresses a different aspect of the illusion, helping individuals gain knowledge, cultivate devotion, and perform their duties without attachment. This holistic approach ensures that spiritual seekers, regardless of their disposition or inclination, can find a method suited to their journey. Ultimately, the Gita teaches that surrendering to the divine is the key to transcending maya. By aligning one's actions, mind, and heart with the divine essence and embracing the paths of knowledge, devotion, and selfless service, an

individual can rise above illusion and experience true spiritual freedom. The timeless teachings of the Bhagavad Gita remain relevant, guiding us to seek liberation from the illusions of the material world and the realization of their eternal nature.

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