

Shimmering Reality

Contemplative and Mystical Concepts of Relativity

It can be argued that what most clearly sets contemplative metaphysics apart from ordinary religious consciousness and rational¹ or apologetic theology is its treatment of the relationship between the Ultimate Reality and the non-ultimate. In fact, the various forms of mystical theology and metaphysical teachings that are the focus of the current chapter tend 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 very notion of an *ab-solutum*? It is this question that we would like to ponder in the current chapter through a liminal survey of some of the most rigorous concepts of the Absolute provided by a cross-religious spectrum of

teachings representative of mystical theology and contemplative 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, in parallel to the adjective *contemplative*, 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 with 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 nondual perspective of Shankara (AD 788–820) 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”² in his *Vivekacūḍāmani*³ 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 to the mystery of universal metaphysical relativity, or universal existence: neither being or real, nor nonbeing or unreal.⁴ It bears specifying that the words *is*, *real*, and *being* are used alternatively in this 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. To put it otherwise, the words *being*, *real*, and *reality* will point to ontological substance and the term *existence* to phenomenal manifestation. We will also keep to the principle that such emphases do not amount to exclusive doctrinal propositions since mystical and contemplative teachings 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. This means that some teachings lay emphasis on the “not real” dimension of relativity, while others stress its being “not unreal,” and others still its being both “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 view, being thereby akin to the Jain principle of *Anekāntavāda*, or limitless plurality of perspectives.⁵ The

need to consider these perspectives in a nonexclusive 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 undoubtedly Shankara’s *Advaita* and Nāgārjuna’s Mahāyānic *Madhyamaka*. Two words of caution are in order before we move farther: first, it bears stressing from the outset that these two doctrines are traditionally at odds on 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 “nonrealism.” 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, that is, 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 codependent origination are intrinsically connected to ontological and epistemological stances that are aligned with a spiritual intent.⁶

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.”⁷ It is a principle of distortion of Reality that stems from one’s inability to recognize Reality as it is, that is as the nondual 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, which is constitutive 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 projecting power.⁸

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.⁹ *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.¹⁰ In such cases, *Māyā* tends to be identified with *līlā*, or the divine sport or play that “symbolizes” creation. In Shankara’s *Daksināmūrti Stotra*, for example, we read that “Īśvara amuses Himself assuming, of His own accord, the forms of the worshiper and the worshiped, of teacher and disciple, of master and servant, and so on.”¹¹ 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.¹² 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 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.¹³ 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 be found in the words “that which can be nullified,” or to use Eliot Deutsch’s terminology “that which can be sublated by other experience.”¹⁴ 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*. This is so precisely because “*Māyā* is nullified by knowledge of *Ātman*,”¹⁵ 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 “nonreal” 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.”¹⁶ Such terms would seem to contradict our characterization of *Advaita Vedānta* as a perspec-

tive emphasizing the “nonreality” of universal relativity since they deny both the “nonexistent” and “existent” aspects of *Māyā*. However, it is quite clear that the negation of the “nonexistent” 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 as much connected to the need to recognize the “non-nonexistence” of *Māyā* as it is to the necessity of discerning its “nonexistence.” If it were not so, *Māyā* could not be referred to symbolically by Shankara, for example, as a “harlot” whose “coquetry” allures only those who do not make use of discerning scrutiny (*viveka*).¹⁷ It is clearly the seductively “nonreal” aspect of *Māyā* that serves as a point of reference for the *Advaitin*’s discriminating meditation toward deliverance, especially when considering the ability of *Māyā* to shortchange the human mind in posing as reality.

Madhyamaka Buddhism, or the Middle Way initiated by the Indian “Patriarch” of *Mahāyāna*, Nāgārjuna (second and third century AD), is no less adamant than *Advaita* in asserting the “nonessentiality” or “non-self-nature” of what we have been referring to as “metaphysical relativity.” The ultimate lack of substance of phenomena is extended by Nāgārjuna to everything, including the Self, in concordance with the Buddhist teaching of *anattā* or no-self. Indeed, 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. This means that 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 basic intent of Nāgārjuna is to deny the “own being” (*svabhāva*)¹⁸ of the latter, thereby freeing consciousness from its attachment to the sources of delusion (*moha*) and suffering. The Nāgārjunian 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 “nonexistent,” hence the characterization of *Madhyamaka* 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.¹⁹

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 *sūnyatā* 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 *sūnyatā* consists, in Guy Bugault’s terms, in “hypostasizing” it, misleading one thereby into a mental fixation that obstructs one’s recognition of emptiness.²⁰ Let us note, in this connection, that the characterization of phenomena as neither “existent” nor “nonexistent” 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 *Madhyamaka* and *Advaita* alike, but with a definitely different emphasis in each case. Here is a passage from Nāgārjuna that epitomizes the *Madhyamaka* 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.²¹

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 nonexistence, the same holding true in return for nonexistence in regard to existence. For Nāgārjuna, the refutation of existence and nonexistence 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 nonexistent.²²

The originality of Nāgārjuna’s perspective lies in his connecting *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.²³ In this view, the origin and cessation of suffering that lie at the very core of the Buddhist intuition of reality are accounted for in terms of emptiness, which is none other than “dependent co-origination” or “relative conditioning,” *pratītyasamutpāda*.²⁴ Accordingly, the direct methodical implication of *pratītyasamutpāda* appears on an existential level when referred to the central focus of Buddhism, to wit, 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, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering.²⁵

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, *pratītyasamutpāda* teaches that the above chain should not be understood as a sequence of causal links, since its doctrine reveals, through meditative intuition, the nonsubstantiality and emptiness of the various links themselves, and in fact of the whole chain of phenomena. Realizing *nirvāna* means realizing the truth of *pratītyasamutpāda*. This realization amounts to a recognition of the nonsubstantiality of suffering itself, without which recognition there would not be any way out of the latter into *nirvāna*.²⁶

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 of 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

The preceding remarks are indicative of a sharp contrast between *Madhyamaka* 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 “nonreal,” and it is as such “not unreal.” Shankara writes:

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]. . . . 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.²⁷

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 a positive projection of *Ātman*.

In contradistinction with *Advaita*, the perspective of *Madhyamaka* 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 “nonexistent” than “existent.” Secondly, *Madhyamaka* 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, *Madhyamaka* 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 nonexistence either: its status transcends the duality of existence and nonexistence. *Tattva* is the “object of a cognition without an object,”²⁸ in the sense that it is a recognition of the emptiness of all objects, and of the subject itself as dependent upon an object. Nonduality 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 nondual wisdom, *Advayañāna*, 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 has been deemed, at least as a perplexing metaphysical riddle, to deny the essential reality of the path and its goal. This is the supreme spiritual paradox of *Madhyamaka* that introduces us to the third qualification of our argument concerning the *Madhyamaka* nonrecognition 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.²⁹

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.³⁰

The truth, in an ultimate sense, is none other than emptiness or codependent 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, conventional truth is none other than the *upāya*, or the “expedient mean” par excellence, through which people may be brought toward ultimate reality. 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.³¹ The latter aspect appears in the fact that conventional truth unknowingly relies on linguistic phenomena that pertain to what the *Madhyamaka* 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 codependent 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.³² Douglas Berger has thus argued, against the emptiness of all uses of language as implying “being,” in favor 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 codependently arisen and empty or one leaves room for a conventional language adequate to convey the truth of emptiness, epistemological truth needs to be equated with that which produces positive outcomes or recognition.³³

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 be, but it is so if we understand by essence the basic “structure” of reality: “We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness.”³⁴ This explanation, for Buddhists, is not the recognition of a Supreme Object, because no object can be supreme in the sense of being independent of 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 universal codependent 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, since the substantiality of the Self is mirrored in the countless substances to which it is immanent. In that sense, Nāgārjuna goes a step farther than *Advaitin* metaphysics in stressing the “nonreality” 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 nonsubstantiality 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 radical incompatibility with the ultimate goal of Buddhism itself, as some of Nāgārjuna’s opponents have argued. Early Buddhist teachings from the *Abhidharma* canon³⁵ 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.³⁶

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 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 ob-ject, that is, an element of a cognitive duality, nor a sub-stance, that is, a reality that would be independent of codependent 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. Although not being the only Buddhist position on the matter—as testified, for example, by the definitely and ultimately affirmative bent of influential streams of Chinese Buddhism—the *Madhyamaka* response is that deconditioning is only possible through “negation,” or rather through the “negation of negation”—since conditioned consciousness is a negation of the unconditioned, which opens access to an adequate perception of reality.³⁷

The Unity of Reality

By contrast with the previously examined metaphysical accounts of relativity, we would like to review and analyze, in the second section of this chapter, 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 *Madhyamaka* 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 AD 950–1020) and some other authoritative figures and texts of the nondualistic

Tantric tradition on the one hand and, on the other hand, on the doctrine of the “Unity of Being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*) exemplified by Sufi masters of gnosis such as Ibn al-‘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 as 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.³⁸ Mystical metaphysicians hailing from these traditions, such as Abhinavagupta and Ibn al-‘Arabī, have in fact no difficulty whatsoever envisaging Śiva and *Allāh* on these two distinct ontological levels.³⁹ Hence, Śaivism considers Śiva as *Paramaśiva*, or Ultimate Reality, and as such, “It is non-relational consciousness.”⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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 relations nor connections nor anything else.⁴²

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” allows them to recognize the Divine Presence both in its ontological immanence and creativity as flowing from its own infinite Essence and 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 aforesaid 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—notwithstanding the general consonance of this symbol with mystical expression in general and its occurrences outside of these two universes of meaning—as a representation of the relationship between the Ultimate and the non-Ultimate, or the Absolute and the relative.⁴³ In Abhinavagupta's metaphysical account, the Supreme Self is equated to the ocean of consciousness (*sindhu*, *ambhonidhi*, *samudra*), 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.⁴⁴

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 al-'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.⁴⁵ For Ibn al-'Arabī, the knowledge of God, like the knowledge of self with which it is intimately connected, is understood as "an ocean without shore" since "there is no end to the knowledge of God" who is infinite reality.⁴⁶ 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."⁴⁷ 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*, are primarily focused on the

dynamic and active dimensions of Absolute Consciousness, namely, Will, or *icchā*, and Action, or *kriyā*. These attributes 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.⁴⁸

In other words, the Supreme Liberty of the Absolute Consciousness is the essence of this Consciousness.⁴⁹ In this metaphysical context, freedom involves two main aspects, which are a lack of constraint on the one hand, and an infinite creativity on the other. 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ Manifestation is in the nature of Supreme Consciousness, and this principle, when fully understood, silences any question as to the why of existence and its myriad of forms and contents.⁵² This is so because the realm of finite reality is, in essence, 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 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.⁵³ 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 indissoluble unity between fire and its power to burn.⁵⁴ 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."⁵⁵ 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. 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.

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 in 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 like an inner dimension of Śiva that actualizes and exteriorizes His freedom to be all that He can be, that is, everything. This being said, while Śakti is eminently affirmative and dynamic, there is also a vantage point from which she 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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

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

As the principle of projection and manifestation, Śakti needs to 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 *Saivism* 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 characterizations, 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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 *vimarśa* is described by Abhinavagupta as having four stages, which could be symbolized by the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 0.⁶⁰ There is, first, an intrinsic move to differentiate the other from within the self, secondly a reaffirmation 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 *parāśakti* 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, *parāśakti* is that which makes everything real, or not unreal. The centrality of *parāśakti* 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, *Parāśakti* 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*, an 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.⁶¹

At a second stage, that of *parāparāśakti*, 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 absolute and 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 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 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 contact with the 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.⁶² Therein lies 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 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 twenty-nine *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 generally 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 lies 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*.⁶³ This is a way to suggest a distinction between Śakti as such and *Māyā*, thereby emphasizing the positive function of the former. Along seemingly diverging lines, the *Śiva Sūtra* considers *Māyā* in three different aspects or levels, 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 previous pages have outlined the various degrees on which Śakti manifests, fragments, limits, and reabsorbs consciousness, it must be added that these various Śaktic ontological levels, 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, she manifests it, and therefore entails the paradox of its self-negation. Accordingly, the three planes of Śakti that we have sketched above, namely, 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.⁶⁴

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*.⁶⁵ In itself, the absolute Consciousness is apprehended as Light (*prakāśa*) in the sense of being the substratum and