

## The Advaita Philosophy of Sri Sankaraacharya

### Introduction

The first systematic exponent of the Advaita is Gaudapada, who is the Parama-Guru (preceptor's preceptor) of Sri Sankara. Govinda was the disciple of Gaudapada. He became the preceptor of Sankara. Gaudapada has given the central teaching of Advaita Vedanta in his celebrated Mandukya Karikas. But it was Sankara who brought forth the final beautiful form of Advaita philosophy, and gave perfection and finishing touch to it. Carefully go through Sri Sankara's commentaries on the principal Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad-Gita. You will clearly understand his Advaita philosophy. The commentary on the Vedanta Sutras by Sankara is known as Sariraka Bhashya.

The teachings of Sankara can be summed up in half a verse: "Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya Jivo Brahmaiva Na Aparah-Brahman (the Absolute) is alone real; this world is unreal; and the Jiva or the individual soul is non-different from Brahman." This is the quintessence of his philosophy.

The Advaita taught by Sri Sankara is a rigorous, absolute one. According to Sri Sankara, whatever is, is Brahman. Brahman Itself is absolutely homogeneous. All difference and plurality are illusory.

### Brahman-The One without A Second

The Atman is self-evident (Svatah-siddha). It is not established by extraneous proofs. It is not possible to deny the Atman, because It is the very essence of the one who denies It. The Atman is the basis of all kinds of knowledge, presuppositions and proofs. Self is within, Self is without; Self is before, Self is behind; Self is on the right, Self is on the left; Self is above and Self is below.

Brahman is not an object, as It is Adrisya, beyond the reach of the eyes. Hence the Upanishads declare: "Neti Neti-not this, not this...." This does not mean that Brahman is a negative concept, or a metaphysical abstraction, or a nonentity, or a void. It is not another. It is all-full, infinite, changeless, self-existent, self-delight, self-knowledge and self-bliss. It is Svarupa, essence. It is the essence of the knower. It is the Seer (Drashta), Transcendent (Turiya) and Silent Witness (Sakshi).

Sankara's Supreme Brahman is impersonal, Nirguna (without Gunas or attributes), Nirakara (formless), Nirvisesha (without special characteristics), immutable, eternal and Akarta (non-agent). It is above all needs and desires. It is always the Witnessing Subject. It can never become an object as It is beyond the reach of the senses. Brahman is non-dual, one without a second. It has no other beside It. It is destitute of difference, either external or internal. Brahman cannot be described, because description implies distinction. Brahman cannot be

distinguished from any other than It. In Brahman, there is not the distinction of substance and attribute. Sat-Chit-Ananda constitute the very essence or Svarupa of Brahman, and not just Its attributes.

The Nirguna Brahman of Sankara is impersonal. It becomes a personal God or Saguna Brahman only through Its association with Maya.

Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman are not two different Brahman. Nirguna Brahman is not the contrast, antithesis or opposite of Saguna Brahman. The same Nirguna Brahman appears as Saguna Brahman for the pious worship of devotees. It is the same Truth from two different points of view. Nirguna Brahman is the higher Brahman, the Brahman from the transcendental viewpoint (Paramarthika); Saguna Brahman is the lower Brahman, the Brahman from the relative viewpoint (Vyavaharika).

### The World-A Relative Reality

The world is not an illusion according to Sankara. The world is relatively real (Vyavaharika Satta), while Brahman is absolutely real (Paramarthika Satta). The world is the product of Maya or Avidya. The unchanging Brahman appears as the changing world through Maya. Maya is a mysterious indescribable power of the Lord which hides the real and manifests itself as the unreal: Maya is not real, because it vanishes when you attain knowledge of the Eternal. It is not unreal also, because it exists till knowledge dawns in you. The superimposition of the world on Brahman is due to Avidya or ignorance.

### Nature Of The Jiva And The Means To Moksha

To Sankara, the Jiva or the individual soul is only relatively real. Its individuality lasts only so long as it is subject to unreal Upadhis or limiting conditions due to Avidya. The Jiva identifies itself with the body, mind and the senses, when it is deluded by Avidya or ignorance. It thinks, it acts and enjoys, on account of Avidya. In reality it is not different from Brahman or the Absolute. The Upanishads declare emphatically: "Tat Tvam Asi-That Thou Art." Just as the bubble becomes one with the ocean when it bursts, just as the pot-ether becomes one with the universal ether when the pot is broken, so also the Jiva or the empirical self becomes one with Brahman when it gets knowledge of Brahman. When knowledge dawns in it through annihilation of Avidya, it is freed from its individuality and finitude and realises its essential Satchidananda nature. It merges itself in the ocean of bliss. The river of life joins the ocean of existence. This is the Truth.

The release from Samsara means, according to Sankara, the absolute merging of the individual soul in Brahman due to dismissal of the erroneous notion that the soul is distinct from Brahman. According to Sankara, Karma and Bhakti are means to Jnana which is Moksha.

## Vivarta Vada Or The Theory Of Superimposition.

To Sankara the world is only relatively real (Vyavaharika Satta). He advocated Vivarta-Vada or the theory of appearance or superimposition (Adhyasa). Just as snake is superimposed on the rope in twilight, this world and body are superimposed on Brahman or the Supreme Self. If you get knowledge of the rope, the illusion of snake in the rope will vanish. Even so, if you get knowledge of Brahman or the Imperishable, the illusion of body and world will disappear. In Vivarta-Vada, the cause produces the effect without undergoing any change in itself. Snake is only an appearance on the rope. The rope has not transformed itself into a snake, like milk into curd. Brahman is immutable and eternal. Therefore, It cannot change itself into the world. Brahman becomes the cause of the world through Maya, which is Its inscrutable mysterious power or Sakti.

When you come to know that it is only a rope, your fear disappears. You do not run away from it. Even so, when you realise the eternal immutable Brahman, you are not affected by the phenomena or the names and forms of this world. When Avidya or the veil of ignorance is destroyed through knowledge of the Eternal, when Mithya Jnana or false knowledge is removed by real knowledge of the Imperishable or the living Reality, you shine in your true, pristine, divine splendour and glory.

## The Advaita-A Philosophy Without A Parallel.

The Advaita philosophy of Sri Sankaracharya is lofty, sublime and unique. It is a system of bold philosophy and logical subtlety. It is highly interesting, inspiring and elevating. No other philosophy can stand before it in boldness, depth and subtle thinking. Sankara's philosophy is complete and perfect.

Sri Sankara was a mighty, marvellous genius. He was a master of logic. He was a profound thinker of the first rank. He was a sage of the highest realisation. He was an Avatara of Lord Siva. His philosophy has brought solace, peace and illumination to countless persons in the East and the West. The Western thinkers bow their heads at the lotus-feet of Sri Sankara. His philosophy has soothed the sorrows and afflictions of the most forlorn persons, and brought hope, joy, wisdom, perfection, freedom and calmness to many. His system of philosophy commands the admiration of the whole world.

## Adi Shankara and his Advaita philosophy

According to the Advaita tradition the supreme Lord, Sri Narayana or Sadashiva himself revealed the wisdom of Advaita to Brahma, the creator, who in turn imparted it to sage Vasishtha. This wisdom was handed down first as vamsha-parampara, i.e. as line of succession from father to son; from Vasishtha to his son Shakti, from Shakti to his son Parashara, from Parashara to his son Veda

Vyasa and from Veda Vyasa to his son Shuka. From Shuka commenced the sishya-parampara, i.e. the line of succession from preceptor to disciple; from Shuka to his disciple Gaudapada and from Gaudapada to his disciple to Govinda Bhagavatpada and from Govinda Bhagavatpada to Sri Adi Shankaracharya.

Sri Adi-Shankaracharya was born at Kalati in Kerala in 788 A.D. to Shivaguru and Aryamba. He became an ascetic at a young age and on the banks of river Narmada met his guru, Govinda Bhagavatpada under whom he studied for four years. Govinda Bhagavatpada taught Shankara the profound philosophy of Advaita and directed him to write a philosophical commentary on the Vedanta Sutras, also known as Brahma Sutras, then interpreted in diverse theological ways. Later Shankara went to Varanasi and wrote commentaries on the Brahma Sutras, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. Then he travelled throughout India on foot three times from Nepal to Rameshwaram preaching the universal philosophy of Advaita in important centers of learning, places of pilgrimage and in capitals of kings. He also defeated many opponents in debates of whom the Mimamsa scholar Mandana Misra of Mahishmati and his wife Bharathi and the Sakta commentator Abhinava Gupta were famous.

#### Shankara's works

Shankara wrote commentaries on the eleven principal Upanishads like the Chandogya, the Brihadaranyaka, the Taittiriya, the Aitareya, the Svetasvatara, the Kena, the Katha, the Isa, the Prasna, the Mandukya and Mundaka. He also wrote commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutra. His other important works Atmabodha, Aptavajrasuchi, Dasasloki, Aparoksanubhuti, Upadesasahasri, Prabuddha Sudhakara and Viveka Chudamani. His religious hymns are contained in works like Dakshinamurthy Stotra, Ananda Lahari and Soundaraya Lahari.

#### Socio-religious reforms

Shankara's aim was to revive the Vedic dharma based on the philosophy of Advaita. He saw to it that morally reprehensible modes of worship followed by the Kapalikas, Saktas and followers of Ganapati were abolished. For the benefit of theists Shankara instituted the Panchayatana puja or worship of the five aspect of the deity – Shiva, Vishnu, Devi, Aditya and Ganesha. He also composed hymns on them and either founded or renovated temples dedicated to them. He united various religious sects by popularizing the collective worship of Shiva, Vishnu, Surya, Ganesha, Kumara and Shakti; for which he came to be known as Shanmata Sthapanacharya. Shankara established four monasteries, at Dwaraka (Kalikapeeta with Padmapada in charge) in the east, Badri (Jyotirmatha with Totaka in charge) in the north, Puri (Govardhanapeeta with Hastamalaka in charge) in the east and Sringeri (Sri Sharadhapeeta with Sureshvara in charge) in the south. He is said to have brought five Lingas from Kailasa and consecrated them at Kedara, Nilakanta Kshetra in Nepal, Chidambaram, Sringeri and Kanchi.

Shankara organized the numerous wandering monks all over the country into ten definite orders of sanyasis under the name Dasnamis. The Dasnamis add at the end of their names any one of the following suffixes, namely Saraswathi, Bharathi, Puri, Giri, Tirtha, Vana, Sagara, Aranya, Parvata and Asrama.

### Advaita in practice

Shankara wanted his followers not just to theorize his Advaita philosophy but put it into practice. This message he gave in the form of an episode in which he himself was involved. Once when Shankara was on his way to have his bath at river Ganga at Kashi his pupils asked a Chandala coming in the opposite direction to make way for their guru. The Chandala asked Shankara how he might consistently teach Advaitism and practice such differentiating observances. This thought provoking question struck Shankara who composed Manisha Panchaka, containing five philosophical verses expressing the Advaita sentiments and where he (Shankara) acknowledge the Chandala as his guru. The message of Shankara was that for a follower of Advaita it is absurdity to practice discrimination between humans and that one should view all as One and the same.

### Shankara's Advaita philosophy

#### Reality or Brahman

According to Shankara nothing really exists but the Supreme Spirit known as Brahman. Brahman is pure Existence, Consciousness and Bliss (Sat-cit-aaananda). He is Absolute, impersonal, changeless, eternal and all-pervading. What is commonly called Nature (animate and inanimate) is but an illusion (Maya) and a dream caused by the ignorance (avidya) which surrounds the Supreme Spirit and hides it. This has been summed up in the words 'Brahma Sathya, Jagan Mithya'. Phenomena appear real for the same reason that things seen in a dream are real so long as the dream lasts. The aim of life is therefore to cast off the gross sheaths that surround the Spirit within us and to realize its identity with the Supreme Spirit.

#### Orders of Reality

Shankara distinguishes four kinds of reality.

Paramarthikasatta– The ultimate metaphysical reality (of Brahman).

Vyavaharikasatta– The pragmatic or empirical reality which is experienced by humanity as a whole for all time.

Pratibhasikasatta– The apparent reality which belongs to the objects of illusions, hallucinations and dreams. This is privately experienced and is of short duration. For example, mistaking a rope for a snake.

Tuccasatta– The reality which is inexperienceable, imaginary objects, some of which may be self-contradictory or impossible. For example, one may speak of 'the son of a barren woman'. A barren woman cannot have any sons, so the existence of the son of a barren woman is impossible and self-contradictory.  
Soul or Atman

The Atman is the individual human soul clothed in the upaadhis or limiting adjuncts and is called Jiva. The Jiva or individual soul is essentially the same Brahman and is therefore self-luminous, unlimited and free. Its limitedness and all its consequent effects are due to certain conditions (upaadhis), which again appear through nescience (avidhya) and as such are unreal. Thus an elimination of the upaadhis amounts to an elimination of the apparently dual nature of the jiva.

States of experiences

Advaita Vedanta identifies four states of experience for a jiva. They are

The waking state (Jagrat avastha)

The dream state (Svapna avastha)

The deep sleep state (Sushupti avastha)

The pure consciousness state (Turiya)

The world of duality is available for our experience only in the waking and dream state. But in deep sleep state we are not aware of any objects or any world of plurality. It is a state wherein we experience only the knowledge of ignorance; we neither know the truth or falsehood. In the Turiya state the entire pluralistic world rolls away and the experience of the non-dual reality alone remaining as eternally true; for Turiya is Brahman, indivisible and immanent. Hence attaining this state of experience which is the highest upasana (worship) is instructed upon ascetics.

The Universe or Jagat

Brahman as a sole Reality appears as the objective universe and it an illusory manifestation of Brahman. Reality or Brahman has the power of taking an existential form, namely the universe without undergoing any modification. The existence of the universe is relative and is not original, separate or independent of Brahman. How Brahman manifest itself is beyond human comprehension and can be answered only by some theory such as that of Maya.

Maya and Avidya

Maya is the cosmic illusion and the potency of Brahman which makes the jiva experience duality. It is the medium for the reflection of Brahman (as jivas) and for the projection of this world. Maya presents to the human mind Reality broken up into subject and object. This division, splitting up is unreal; but as the mind works only as an organ of differentiation, it cannot disclose truth which is ever

one and undivided. Maya has no real entity and has only an apparent existence and the moment truth is known it is dissolved. Maya, which is also called, avidya, (or nescience in English) has two powers, called, avarana sakti and vikshepa sakti. Avarana sakti covers Brahman, as it were, as a cloud covers the sun and makes us, the jivatmas, forget that, in our true nature, we are Brahman. At the macrocosmic level, vikshepa Sakti is the force that projects the differentiated nama roopa, i.e., the world of objects and bodies and minds and superimposes them on the sub-stratum, i. e., Brahman. At the microcosmic level, vikahepa sakti makes Jivatmas make the mistake of looking upon themselves as limited individuals and the universe of nama roopas as real. As a result, we, the ordinary human beings, identify ourselves with our body mind complex and regard ourselves as separate individuals, limited in space, time and entity, subject to all the vicissitudes, changes, joys and sorrows of life and go through the cycle of births and deaths. When we understand that we are not different from the infinite Brahman, we are freed from this cycle. Until this happens, one goes through the cycle of births and deaths.

### Theology in Advaita Vedanta

While maintaining that on the paramarthika plane (i.e. as absolute reality), there is only the non-dual attribute less Brahman (nirguna Brahman) Advaita Vedanta accommodates, on the vyavaharika plane, (as a lower order of reality), Brahman with qualities (saguna Brahman) called Ishwara. As Ishwara, Brahman has all the characteristics of what is called a personal God; the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world and a friend and savior of finite souls. The purpose of accommodating Ishwara is to enable a spiritual aspirant (jiva) go through the ritual of devotion and worship and gradually acquire knowledge of the Self through meditation. The specialty of Advaita Vedanta is it does not make any distinction between gods of one religion and another. An aspirant can accept Jesus, Allah, Buddha, Rama, Krishna or Durga as manifestation of saguna Brahman and worship in a church, mosque or a temple. The worship in this plane is meant as a preparatory and purificatory discipline and from this he has to move to the next stage of identifying himself with the Supreme Spirit (Brahman). From metaphysical standpoint, both jiva and Ishwara are Brahman, but on the phenomenal level from the religious standpoint their relation is in terms of master and servant. Ishwara the master knows his oneness with Brahman and therefore enjoys eternal bliss whereas jiva the servant is ignorant of his higher, divine origin and is therefore subject to the self-deceptive trials and tribulations of a mundane existence.

### Way to Moksha

Shankara prescribes Jnanamarga for self-realization. But a mere intellectual apprehension of the advaitic truth is of no avail. Only through a systematic approach can this is achieved through Shravana (formal study), Manana (reflection) and Nididhyaasana (meditation), i.e. to transform into direct

experience the mediate knowledge of Ultimate Reality acquired by the study of Upanishad and by reflection upon their teaching. In Advaita, moksha is not something which has to be attained hereafter. The essential nature of every jiva is already Brahman and only the wheel of ignorance has concealed its real nature and therefore the jiva undergoes pains of samsara until it realizes its inherent divinity. Therefore the jiva does not lose its individuality in moksha but the limitations of that individuality are overcome by knowledge and immediately here and now it attains universal Brahman.

### Advaita- A Universal philosophy

Shankara's system of Vedanta can stand on its own feet as pure metaphysics without the help of any theology, unlike other theistic Vedanta systems like Visishtadvaita of Sri Ramanuja and Dvaita of Sri Madhvacharya. Hence those prefer a philosophy to a theology will have a natural leaning towards Shankara. But at the same time Shankara's system also provides theologies as provisional stand-point- just a base camp for those attempting to climb the Mount Everest of Advaita. And the beauty is that not one particular theology but any number of them including foreign religions like Islam and Christianity can be fitted into the frame work of Shankara's metaphysics provisionally. This wonderfully accommodating power of his doctrine is perhaps the most attractive feature of his philosophy to many of its followers.

To Shankara goes the credit for reviving the Sanatana Dharma and rescuing the Vedic culture from foundering. A brilliant thinker and vigorous debater he reconciled the conflicting sects prevailing in his times. He was a realized soul, a sage, philosopher, scholar, poet, socio-religious reformer and organizer; all rolled into one. He passed away in 820 A.D. at Kedarnath.