

Adi Sankaracharya: The Jagadguru of Advaita

The guru-disciple paramparas of India are like malas strung with gems; each jewel is precious and invaluable. Still, some shine with an attention-commanding splendor. Sri Adi Sankaracarya was such a diamond. Sri Sankara's accomplishments were many, but he is singled out because his brilliant commentaries on the prasthanatrayam—upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Brahma Sutras—crystallized the Advaita Vedanta Darshanam forever, establishing it as the ultimate message of the Vedas. During his short life of 32 years, he travelled the length and breadth of India, on foot, engaging in debates with the leading proponents of the other Indian schools of thought. His various opponents—including the Purva Mimamsakas, who professed that the Vedas' prime teaching was the performance of rituals for the attainment of heaven and otherworldly splendor—were knocked flat, as Sankara laid bare the defects of their philosophies with his one-two punch of scriptural authority and logic. As per tradition, once defeated by Sankara, they became his disciples.

As Amma herself says, Advaita is the ultimate truth—the inherent darshanam of the Vedas. Therefore, it should always be remembered that Sankara is not the father of the Advaita Vedanta Darshanam. The advaitic knowledge flowed down to Sankara from an illustrious parampara that includes not only Sankara's direct guru, Sri Govinda Bhagavadpada, and grand-guru, Sri Gaudapada, but also Veda Vyasa; its origin being the Almighty. Nor was Sankara the first to create Advaitic commentaries on the prasthanatrayam. This is something that Sankara himself never failed to acknowledge.

Due to the commandment of Govinda Bhagavadpada, who instructed Sankara to compose commentaries and propagate them throughout India, Sankara became Advaita's Jagadguru—world teacher. For, even though Sankara himself never left India, his commentaries on the prasthanatrayam have been translated into dozens of languages and are today studied throughout the world. The acceptance of Advaita Vedanta as the ultimate truth professed by the Vedas has become so widely accepted that the word Vedanta itself has become a synonym for Advaita. With each passing year, the vision of Advaita Vedanta gathers more and more acceptance throughout the world. Perhaps one day it will truly become, as Swami Vivekananda predicted, a universally shared worldview.

Although Sankara's advaitic commentary on prasthanatrayam was his magnum opus and his greatest contribution for the upliftment of mankind, we should never say that Sankara rejected dvaitic spiritual practices such as karma yoga and selfless service, meditation on God with form,

mantra japa, bhajan, following dharma and developing values, etc. Not only did Sankara acknowledge the necessity of such practices for purifying the mind, but he also made outstanding contributions to them, including methods for conducting puja, the division of the Hindu pantheon and its worship into six major categories, and the composition of Sanskrit hymns such as Saundarya Lahari, Sivananda Lahari and the Mahishasura-Mardini Stotram. Sankara's sole desire was to lead mankind to the ultimate realization: the supreme reality of the universe, of God and of all beings is one and the same—an eternal blissful consciousness. Yet in his wisdom, Sankara understood that, for this transformative understanding to dawn, the above-mentioned preparatory steps were needed in order to purify and refine the mind. Thus, the advaitin accepts dvaitic methods while always trying to imbibe the advaitic principle. As Swami Candrasekharendra Sarasvati, the 68th Sankaracarya of Kanchi, said: “[Adi Sankaracarya] has himself designed convenient steps for us to move up. Even when we follow those steps, we must have the thought within us that whatever we see is all one. The real experience that ‘everything is one’ may come in its own time. But from the beginning we have to develop the thought that this is the truth.”

Most scholars agree that Sankara lived between 788 and 820 CE, although some say he was born as early as 77 BCE. Regardless of the date, all agree he was born in Kalady, which today is in the Ernakulam District of Kerala. He was initiated into Vedic study at five and mastered all four Vedas by eight, at which point he took sannyasa and headed north in search of a guru. On the banks of the Narmada River [in modern day Madhya Pradesh], he met the sannyasi who was to become his guru, Govinda Bhagavadpada. According to legend, when Govinda Bhagavadpada asked Sankara for his identity, the child burst forth with a spontaneous composition of 10 Sanskrit verses (today referred to as the Dasa Sloki), in which he illustrated the profundity of his wisdom and inner experience. He was immediately accepted as a disciple.

The legends associated with Sankara's life are many and fantastic. Whether they are pure fact or not is not germane. For even if they are not true, they are Truth; the adamant principles and reality they demonstrate have the power to uplift us. More relevant are Sankara's actual accomplishments. To say they were vast would be an understatement. Aside from his commentaries and hymns, he also wrote many prakarana granthas⁵, including Vivekacudamani, Atma Bodha and Upadesa Saahasri. His mastery of Sanskrit was unparalleled. Unraveling the twists and turns of his poetic slokas is simply exhilarating. His verses are not only majestic and multi-faceted, but also of unfathomable depth. It was as if the language were his very breath. Furthermore, it should be noted that Sankara is said to have put down his pen at age 16.

Aside from his compositions, Sankara's sanmata⁶ division and panchayatana system of worship, helped reintegrate a Hinduism that was in danger of fracturing into various cults, showing the various gods and goddesses to be but different personifications of the one ultimate

reality. In many ways, Sankara was India's first monastic organizer. He empowered the sannyasa tradition by revitalizing the dasanami structure, wherein monks were organized under 10 titles. And to protect and propagate Sanatana Dharma, he established asrams throughout India, including four primary such institutions: one in Sringeri, Karnataka (southern India); one in Dvaraka, Gujarat (western India); one in Puri, Orissa (eastern India); and one in Jyotirmath, Uttarakhand (northern India), putting each one in charge of preserving a particular Veda. Towards the end of his life, Sankara ascended to sarvajna-pithams in Sri Nagar [Kashmir] and in Kanchipuram [Tamil Nadu].

Reflecting upon Sri Sankara's life—which was the epitome of sannyasa—should annihilate any wrongheaded notion that renouncement of action is the crux of Hindu monasticism. As Sankara demonstrated, both in deed and word, what requires eradication is not action but the misunderstanding that one is the actor. Cidananda rupah sivoham sivoham—'I am consciousness-bliss. I am Siva. I am Siva.' Sankara did not only pen this composition; he lived it. And having done so, he left his body at the mere age of 32, having ensured the truth of Advaita Vedanta would thrive not only in India but throughout the world.

The very fact that Hinduism is still a dynamic and all-encompassing religion stands as ample testimony to the deeds of Adi Shankaracharya. Apart from being the champion of Advaita philosophy, one of his invaluable contributions towards Hinduism was the reordering and restructuring of the ancient Sannyasa order. These Sannyasis help eternal code of life contained in the Vedas, still flows as the dynamic force underlying and unifying all humanity reach the masses.

Bhagavan Adi Shankaracharya is considered to be the ideal Sannyasi. It is commonly accepted that he lived about one thousand two hundred years ago though there are historical sources that indicate that he lived in an earlier period. He was born in Kalady, Kerala and in his short life span of 32 years, his accomplishments seem a marvel even today, with our modern conveyances and other facilities. At the tender age of eight, burning with the desire for Liberation, he left home in search of his Guru.

Adi Shankaracharya

From the southern state of Kerala, the young Shankara walked about 2000 kilometres— to the banks of the river Narmada, in the central plains of India, to his Guru— Govindapada. He stayed there serving his Guru for four years. Under his teacher's compassionate guidance, the young Shankaracharya mastered all the Vedic scriptures.

At the age of twelve, his Guru deemed that Shankara was ready to write commentaries on major scriptural texts. At his Guru's command, Shankara wrote commentaries elucidating the subtle meanings hidden in the teachings of the scriptures. At the age of sixteen, he dropped his pen having completed writing all the major treatises.

There is a legend about the young disciple during this period of his stay with the Guru. (scroll down to read the legends)

From the age of sixteen to thirty-two, Shankaracharya went forth, travelling across the length and breadth of ancient India bringing to the hearts of the masses the life-giving message of the Vedas. "Brahman, Pure Consciousness, is the Absolute Reality. The world is unreal. This is the correct understanding of the Sastra is the thundering declaration of Vedanta "

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः।

अनेन वेद्यं सच्छास्त्रमिति वेदान्तडिण्डिमः॥ (ब्रह्मज्ञानावलीमाला)

In essence, the individual is not different from Brahman. Thus by the statement "Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya, Jeevo Brahmaiva Na Para" he condensed the essence of the voluminous scriptures.

In those days ancient India was sunk in a quagmire of superstitions and scriptural misinterpretations. Degraded ritualism flourished. The essence of Sanatana Dharma, with its all-embracing message of Love, Compassion and the Universality of Humankind was completely lost in the blind performance of these rituals.

shankaracharya with disciples

Shankaracharya challenged various eminent scholars and leaders of various religious sects in vigorous disputes. They championed their own interpretations of the scriptures but the prodigious boy sage was easily able to overcome all of them and make them understand the wisdom of his teachings. These men of stature then accepted Shankaracharya as their guru.

They started to practice in accordance with his guidance, and this change in their lives also wrought a change in the lives of their innumerable followers, who came from all strata of society.

He established 4 ashrams in four corners of India and entrusted his four disciples to teach and propagate Advaita through them.

In Shankara's time, there were innumerable sects following their own narrow philosophies and systems of worship. People were totally blind to the underlying common basis of the One God. For their benefit, Shankaracharya formulated the six sect system of worship which brought to the fore the main godheads – Vishnu, Siva, Shakti, Muruga, Ganesha and Surya. He also formulated the rituals and rites to be followed in most of the major temples in India.

Apart from his immense intellectual and organisational abilities, Shankaracharya was an exquisite poet, with a heart brimming with Love of the Divine.

He composed 72 devotional and meditative hymns like Soundarya Lahari, Sivananda Lahari, Nirvana Shalkam, Maneesha Panchakam. He also wrote 18 commentaries on the major scriptural texts including the Brahma Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita and 12 major Upanishads. He also authored 23 books on the fundamentals of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy which expound the principles of the non-dual Brahman. These include Viveka Chudamani, Atma Bodha, Vaakya Vritti, Upadesa Sahasri, among others.

Considered to be an incarnation of Lord Siva, Sri Shankara lived only a short life span of 32 years. There are many inspiring legends about him.

Four Maths – Char Dhams – established by Shankara

During his travels across the length and breadth of India, he established four maths (ashrams) to unify the scattered and diverse groups of Sannyasis. Four maths were established, about 700 AD, in four different corners of India. He selected four of his senior-most disciples to head each of these maths. Each of these maths was assigned the task of maintaining and preserving for posterity, one of the four Vedas (the main scriptures of Hinduism) and a Maha Vakya.

Shankaracharya reorganised all the Sannyasis in India into ten main groups (the Dasanami Sannyasa Tradition) allocated to different maths.

Historical and literary evidence also exist which prove that the Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt at Kancheepuram, in Tamil Nadu, was also founded by Shankaracharya.

Chatur Dhams

Direction	South India	West India	North India	East India
Place	Sringeri	Dwaraka	Badrinath	Puri
Math Name	Sringeri Math	Sarada Math	Jyotir Math	Govardhan Math
Acharya	Sureswara	Hastamalaka	Trotaka	Padmapada
Veda	Yagur	Sama	Atharva	Rik
Mantra	Aham brahmāsmi	Tattvamasi	Ayamātmā brahma	Prajñānam brahma
Sanyasa Order	Saraswati, Bharati, Puri	Tirtha, Ashrama	Giri, Parvata, Sagara	Vanam, Aranyam