

Who Are You... Really?: Shankara's Advaita Vedanta

Brahman is the only truth, the world is an illusion, and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and individual self.

-- Adi Shankara in the Vivekacudamani

IN THIS CLASS we will be studying one of the most famous of all the Indian traditions, Adi Shankara's Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta. Although he is believed to have lived for only 32 years, from 788-820 CE, Shankara had an enormous effect on later Indian thought and religious life. In his commentaries on the Upanishads, the *Brahma Sutras*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, Shankara taught that ultimately there is no difference between the world, the individual who perceives, and the world that is perceived. To do this he modified the Buddhist concept of conventional and ultimate reality, arguing that although our ordinary experience tells us that the world is real, from the transcendent perspective the world of space, time and form is as illusory as a dream. For Shankara, *moksha* (liberation) is the process of removing the veil of *maya* and ignorance and seeing both self and world for what they truly are: *brahman*. During his short life Shankara traveled and debated throughout India, sparking a revival of Hinduism in a land that had been split into a wide variety of philosophical and religious traditions. He also established centers of monasticism and study (called *maths*), as well as ten monastic orders, all of which are still in existence today.

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENTS:

READ "Shankara and his Advaita Vedanta" written by Klaus Klostermaier: a contemporary professor of Hinduism gives a brief overview of our topic.

DO THIS CONTEMPLATIVE EXERCISE:

- Write your name at the top of a piece of paper. Underneath, write a list of at least ten things that describe who you are. Start each one with "I am..."
- Contemplate the qualities that you have written on your list. How many of them have been true since you were born? How many do you think will be true until you die? Are there any that you could let go of and still be who you are? Think about what these qualities mean to you. Are they important to you? Do they make you feel better than other people? Less worthy than other people? If so, why?

LISTEN to a talk called "Who Are You... Really?" given by Gangaji: A contemporary American guru presents a method of self-inquiry strongly influenced by the teachings of Advaita Vedanta.