

# 11 ŚAṄKARA AND HIS ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

Upaniṣadic thought, especially as systematized in Bādarāyaṇa's *Vedāntasūtras*, has remained the major inspiration for Hindu mysticism. Its variety and diversity carried over into the philosophical schools that developed over the centuries. The extremely elliptic *Vedāntasūtras*, containing about 550 aphorisms, often consisting of only a fragment of a sentence, require a commentary to make them understandable. Given the latitude of Hindu interpretation, the commentaries that were produced over the centuries vary widely. Thus, between the ninth and the fourteenth centuries ten recognized branches of Vedānta developed, each with its own *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (commentary), often enough augmented by *ṭīka* (subcommentaries).

It is obviously beyond the scope of this short introduction to give a description of all of them. Only a few will be introduced: Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta offers a non-theistic reading of the Vedāntic tradition. Rāmānuja's *Vīśiṣṭa-Advaita*, Madhva's *Dvaita Vedānta* and Vallabha's *Puṣṭimārga* offer a theistic, Vaiṣṇava alternative interpretation.

In order to qualify as founder of a school of Vedānta, to be entitled to the name of 'Master' (*ācārya*), a religious leader had to compose commentaries on the major *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Brahmasūtras*. Many, of course, wrote much more, and so an extensive, sophisticated literature developed, often in response to critique from other schools of thought.

## THE LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENT OF ŚAṄKARA

There is a major dispute about when Śaṅkara lived. While the majority of scholars accept 788-820 CE as his lifetime (some would have him born about a century earlier), a group of Hindus associated with a Śaṅkara *maṭha* in Kañcīpuram claims a pre-Buddhist period for the Ādiśaṅkarācārya, its founder. There is, however, common agreement that Śaṅkara considered it to be his life's work to consolidate Hinduism *vis-à-vis* Buddhism, the dominant religion of the time, which by then was already on the wane in many parts of India.

Details of Śaṅkara's life have to be culled from several half-historical, half-legendary accounts of his victorious debating campaigns (*Digvijaya*), written by some of his disciples and later followers. According to these, Śaṅkara was born in Kālādī, Kerala, to Śivaguru and his wife Satī after they had prayed to Śiva for a son. Śivaguru died when Śaṅkara was only three. At five, he was sent to a *guru's* home. Within two years he mastered the Vedas and the auxiliary literature, a study that normally takes twelve years. At a young age he desired to become a *samnyāsi*, an itinerant monk. His mother, entitled to refuse permission for her only son to renounce family-life, did not give in to his repeated entreaties. One day, however, while bathing, young Śaṅkara was caught by a crocodile. Threatened by death, he took the *samnyāsi* vow. According to Hindu tradition such a vow is valid. Miraculously, Śaṅkara escaped, and left home soon after. His *guru* was a sage, Govinda by name, living in the Narmadā forest. He is said to have been identical with Patañjali, the ancient teacher of Yoga and grammar. His reputed *guru's* own teacher, Gauḍapada, however, seems to have exerted the greatest influence on Śaṅkara. Gauḍapada's exposition of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, the *Kārikās*, were the first and foremost text which Śaṅkara commented upon and made his own. His *guru* sent him to Banaras, since ancient times the major seat of Hindu learning. Śaṅkara soon established himself as a powerful exponent of *Advaita Vedānta*, the most radically monistic school of Hinduism.

A telling anecdote recounts how Śaṅkara, on his way to take his bath in the Ganges, met an outcaste accompanied by some dogs. Disgusted, he told him to go away. The man, however, began arguing with him, wondering on what basis he, who taught the identity of all things with *brahman*, made this distinction. Śaṅkara was embarrassed when the supposed sweeper revealed himself as Śiva, the great god. Śiva, however, blessed him and predicted Śaṅkara's greatness as teacher of Advaita Vedānta.

At the age of twelve Śaṅkara, according to tradition, composed his commentaries on the *Brahmasūtras*, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Upaniṣads*, as well as some other works. A total of seventy-two minor works, in addition to the major commentaries, are ascribed to him, including many hymns to Śiva, Viṣṇu and Devī. Having established himself as an *ācārya* ('Master'), he went on a *digvijaya* ('Victory Tour') through the length and breadth of India.

It is interesting to note that the main opponents he went to defeat were the *Mīmāṃsakas*, traditional vedic scholars, who held that the true Hindu tradition was circumscribed by vedic ritual and that the *Upaniṣads* were mere *arthavāda* (eulogy), words that did not form an essential part of religion. Their understanding of Hindu tradition was identical with the *karmamārga*, the performance of prescribed ritual acts. They had been successful in re-establishing Hinduism over against Buddhism. A major event in Śaṅkara's life was his debate with Maṇḍana Mīśra, the foremost *Mīmāṃsaka*, which lasted for eighteen days. Maṇḍana Mīśra's wife, herself a scholar, acted as umpire. In the end Maṇḍana Mīśra declared himself convinced by Śaṅkara and became his disciple under the name of Sureśvara.

The traditional histories report a great many encounters with representatives of different schools of thought and sects then established in India. It is always Śaṅkara who wins the debates. He is as adept at countering stratagems and foul tricks as at defeating his opponents by logic and argument. He is credited with having renovated many temples, re-organized temple worship and, in general, with having renewed and reformed Hinduism. His most lasting contribution to living Hinduism, however, was his reputed establishment of monasteries (*maṭhas*) in the South, North, East and West of India and the organization of ten orders of monks (*daśanāmīs*) associated with them. The *Śāradā Pīṭha* of Śrīringerī in the South, the *Jyothi Maṭha* of Bādrinātha in the North, the *Kālikā Pīṭha* at Dvārakā in the West, and the *Vimalā Pīṭha* in Jagannātha Puri in the East, are still centres of learning, and the respective heads of these, with the title of Śaṅkarācārya, enjoy a high reputation as religious leaders. Like their founder, the Ādiśaṅkarācārya, they spend much of their time travelling through their allotted districts, teaching and exhorting people to practise their religion. The *Daśanāmi samnyāsis*, who have to undergo a rigorous training before initiation, count at present only a few hundred, but are highly respected throughout India. While in the West Śaṅkara's fame rests on his philosophy – by many he

is regarded the greatest of India's thinkers – in India itself his major contribution is seen in his practical achievements in consolidating and reforming Hinduism.

Śaṅkara, according to tradition, died at the young age of thirty-two and was buried at Kāñcīpuram, which also became a major *maṭha* presided over by a Śaṅkarācārya.

## ADVAITA VEDĀNTA AS PHILOSOPHY

Śaṅkara, like all other Hindu thinkers, does not claim originality for his thought but considers it the correct exposition and interpretation of *śruti*, revealed truth. Nevertheless, ideas that are unmistakably his became the focus of disputes with other schools. One of these ideas is the notion of *adhyāsa* (superimposition). Śaṅkara maintains that all subject/object knowledge is distorted by it: we habitually superimpose objective notions on the subject, and subjective notions on the object. Since this *adhyāsa* is congenital, we are not even aware of it. In order to know truth as such, however, we have to overcome it. Śaṅkara uses the familiar illustration of the traveller who mistakes a piece of rope for a snake, or a snake for a piece of rope. Śaṅkara concludes that all knowledge acquired through the senses is ambiguous and cannot be used to arrive at certain truth. However, the existence of the thinking subject is not to be doubted. Every perception, be it right, wrong or ambiguous, needs a perceiver, distinct from all objects perceived. The *ātman*, the subject proper, is pure consciousness, different from all objects and all sense-organs, including *manas*, the rational mind. *Ātman* finally emerges as the only reality, identical with *brahman*, characterized only by *sat* (being), *cit* (consciousness) and *ānanda* (bliss).

Śaṅkara does not consider the world a pure illusion, as is sometimes maintained; he condemns the Buddhist idealists, for whom everything is *śūnyatā*, emptiness. He only looks at it from the standpoint of absolute being. If *brahman*, which is eternal, self-sufficient, pure consciousness, is the measure of reality, then the phenomenal world, which is evanescent, changing, devoid of consciousness, cannot be called real in the same sense. It is the congenital *avidyā* (ignorance) that superimposes features of *brahman* on the world of senses, and features of things on the Absolute. To gain *vidyā* (knowledge) means to recognize this situation and to understand *brahman* and the world on their own terms. If ignorance of the true nature of reality keeps us in *samsāra*, the round of

births and deaths and the world of becoming, true knowledge will emancipate us from it.

Śaṅkara sees in the Great Sayings of the *Upaniṣads* the expression of revealed, liberating truth. Their common message is that *ātman* is *brahman*, which means that the individual self is no different from the ground of being. *Brahman*, by its very nature, is imperceptible by the senses and is not identical with any object. Śaṅkara quotes Upaniṣadic passages which speak of a 'lower' and a 'higher' *brahman*. He interprets the 'lower *brahman*' to mean *īśvara*, the God of religion, who is worshipped as creator, sustainer and destroyer of this world. The 'higher *brahman*' he understands to be the quality-less, acosmic principle of all.

This is the source of his controversial distinction between a *saguṇa* and a *nirguṇa brahman*, an Ultimate with and without qualities. For Śaṅkara, the creator-god, *īśvara*, is essentially connected with his creation. With the dissolution of the universe he too disappears, whereas *brahman*, understood as *nirguṇa*, remains forever. Śaṅkara is known as composer of various popular hymns in praise of Viṣṇu, Śiva and Devī. For him, devotion to *īśvara* is a necessary stage on the way to emancipation, not an end in itself.

The process that alone leads to emancipation from *samsāra* and a complete merging of the individual *ātman* with the universal *brahman* is called *viveka*, discernment. There is a short text ascribed to Śaṅkara, the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇī* ('Crestjewel of Discernment'), which teaches methodically how to differentiate between the Self and the not-Self. It states: 'There is no *avidyā* (ignorance) outside the mind. Mind alone is *avidyā*, the cause of the bondage of transmigration. When that is destroyed, all else is destroyed, and when it is manifested, everything else is manifested. The mind is the only cause that brings about a person's bondage or liberation.' And further: 'This bondage can be destroyed neither by weapons, nor by wind, nor by fire, nor by millions of actions – by nothing except the wonderful sword of knowledge that comes from discernment, sharpened by the grace of the Lord.'

Śaṅkara's philosophy has been called *Māyāvāda* ('Illusionism'), especially by his opponents, who resisted the equation of the phenomenal universe with *māyā* (illusion). Śaṅkara, however, does not simply declare the world an illusion. He distinguishes between two modes of knowing: *vyavahārika* and *paramārthika*: knowledge derived from a pragmatic, worldly perspective, and knowledge gained from an ultimate, transcendent point of view. From a pragmatic perspective the

world is as real for Śaṅkara as for anybody else: one has to accept the reality of the world if one wishes to undertake any action whatsoever. However, and this is Śaṅkara's point, that is not the only way one can look at it. Someone who has intuitively understood the nature of *ātman/brahman* can no longer equate reality with the everchanging, transient world. Only to persons who have reached that level of enlightenment, who are able to see it from the viewpoint of eternity, will the world appear as *māyā*, 'unreal'.

### PREREQUISITES FOR THE STUDY OF VEDĀNTA

The study of *dharma* results in transitory heaven and this depends on the performance of rituals. The inquiry into the nature of *brahman*, however, results in liberation. It does not depend on the performance of ceremonies.

These are the preconditions for the inquiry into the nature of *brahman*:

1. discernment between the eternal and the non-eternal
2. renunciation of all enjoyment of the fruit of one's actions both here and hereafter
3. practice of the standard virtues such as peaceableness, self-restraint, etc.
4. overriding desire for liberation.

The object of desire is the knowledge of *brahman* and complete understanding of it. Knowledge is therefore the means to perfect *brahman* cognition. The complete knowledge of *brahman* is the supreme goal of humans, because it destroys the root of all evil, namely ignorance, which is the seed of transmigration.

Śaṅkara, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I,1,1.

### ADVAITA VEDĀNTA AS RELIGION

While, generally speaking, traditional India did not distinguish between philosophy and religion the way this is done in the West, from our own perspective we can do so. The issues dealt with in the preceding section may be termed 'philosophical'. They represent an attempt rationally and speculatively to explore the nature of reality. As became clear from the brief biographical sketch, Śaṅkara was not only a philosopher, but also – and principally – a religious reformer. Śaṅkara never leaves any doubt

that he grounds his *darśana*, his world-view, not on reason, but on *śruti*, revelation. Only the *Upaniṣads* lead to *brahmavidyā*, the knowledge of the highest; only the insight gained from an understanding of the *mahāvākyas*, the Great Saying of the *Upaniṣads*, brings liberation. Śaṅkara also says that one of the preconditions of the study of Vedānta is faith (*śraddhā*) and he recommends devotion (*bhakti*) to God in order ultimately to realize *brahman*. The attainment of *mokṣa* (liberation) is not a matter of one's own effort alone, but also of divine grace. The very goal to be reached is religious: it is not a sensual paradise or a gain of empirical knowledge, but a total identification with the quality-less reality called *brahman*.

Already during his lifetime Śaṅkara's disciples considered his words to be on a par with divine revelation and he himself, regarded by many as an incarnation of Śiva, was treated as an embodiment of divine wisdom. Śaṅkara's tradition, his philosophy as well as his religion, has continued right up to our time. Many scholars have studied his works and written books in defence of his thought. A galaxy of famous names in the history of Hinduism – Sureśvara, Padmapada, Vācaspati Mīśra, Madhusūdhana Sarasvatī, Vidyāranya, to name but a few – have, in the centuries following Śaṅkara, refined Advaita Vedānta and defended it against rival systems. One particularly ingenious defence deserves mention. In his *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, a survey of all philosophical systems, Mādhava, a fourteenth-century Advaitin, presents a total of sixteen different schools of thought. Beginning with the *Cārvākas*, crude materialists, who by common consent are at the bottom of the ladder, he lets each school be refuted by the next. The last system presented, of course, is Advaita Vedānta, which, after all the other schools have successively annulled each other, shines forth as the final statement of truth.

In today's India, many academic philosophers would call themselves Advaitins: Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the President of India from 1962 to 1967, and perhaps the most widely known contemporary representative of Indian thought, was an Advaitin. T.R.V. Murti, S.K. Maitra, T.M.P. Mahadevan, major luminaries in twentieth-century Indian philosophy, were Advaitins. Mahadevan, in particular, virtually established in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Madras, and in the Centre for Advanced Research in Philosophy, a new school of Advaita Vedānta. Under his leadership many Advaitic texts were edited and translated, and he personally kept in close touch with the Śaṅkarācārya of Kāñcīpuram, about whom he spoke and wrote with great reverence.

He was a very religious person, devoting, especially towards the end of his life, a great amount of his time to meditation and worship. He not only wrote learned monographs on Advaita and Advaitins, but also translated and commented on the religious hymns ascribed to Śaṅkara.

Today's Śaṅkarācāryas, the heads of the monasteries established by Śaṅkara, are highly respected religious authorities. Each *maṭha*, the headquarters of one or more orders of monks, not only has a school which cultivates traditional learning and especially the study of Advaita Vedānta, but also has a temple where regular service is performed, and which serves as a place of pilgrimage for thousands, who may have little knowledge of Advaita Vedānta as a philosophy.

Advaita Vedānta has also attracted Western thinkers. While in the nineteenth century many found it of interest because they saw in it a kind of Indian Hegelianism, more recent and more adequate readings of Advaita appreciate it for its own sake. Thus Erwin Schrödinger, a Nobel-prizewinning physicist, offers in his writings a quasi-empirical proof for Vedānta, exemplified in the unity of knower, known and knowledge. He did not think it possible that this unity of knowledge, feeling and choice which one calls one's own should have come from nothingness just now. He was convinced that this knowledge, feeling and choice were 'essentially eternal and unchangeable and numerically one in all humans, nay in all sensitive beings.' Schrödinger, as a contemporary man, was haunted by the question 'What is Real?' and as a nuclear physicist he was no longer prepared to equate the real with the empirical. After all, even in today's physics there is nothing to be seen or touched once the subatomic barrier has been crossed. The 'unseen' has in a very convincing manner turned out to be the source of the 'seen' – a twentieth-century verification of Uddālaka's teaching, illustrated several thousand years ago by a fig and its seeds. *Tat tvam asi*, 'That are you', said Uddālaka to his son Śvetaketu. To find our true identity remains the great task for all of us.

#### SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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# Hinduism

## A SHORT INTRODUCTION

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