

Adi Shankaracharya and Advaita School of Philosophy

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Introduction

Most problems in human understanding, especially philosophical thoughts result from the lack of effort on the part of all involved, who continue building individual thought process, dwell on that, and assert the same. However, the real problem occurs when the thought process of the other is regarded as outright wrong without making any attempt to understand and find similarity with the thought process of the other. No where it is more noticeable today than in the major religions, where the principle and/or the message of their single founders or an ancient seer has been interpreted differently by their different denominations. The consequential problems have caused major intra and interdenominational as well as interfaith strife, causing violence, and loss of life and property in the extremes. The early seers had recognized this aspect of human understanding of the divinity in the absence of complete revelation of the divine for any space and time conditions. Correspondingly, they rightfully revealed in the Rigved, “*ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti agnim yamam matariswan amahuh*,”[1] meaning, the Truth is one, but the learned ones refer to it by different names such as *agni*(the fire principle), *yama*(the death principle), *matariswan* (the origin principle).

The world is so steeped in misconception, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding of the Truth that having evolved from the same *Brahman* (the original conscious state of all beings), it is misrepresented and miscommunicated by human beings. As its highest manifestation, human beings, ignoring human values that define us, take great pride in differentiation. Born a human being, we identify ourselves as Sanatnas, Jews, Zoroastrians, Jains, Taoists, Buddhists, Confucianists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Baha'is. Further, we continue our differences of race, caste, culture, gender, national origin, and social, economic and political orders, all a mark of advancing civilization. Most distinctions come from the interest groups with personal agenda to exploit those who may not have time or energy at their disposal to offer factual disagreement. But the concept that there is single *Brahman* and that all manifested reality is its forms, is clearly mentioned in the Vedanta (Upanishads). Its implications can be seen in different *Darshanas* (Vedantic schools of philosophy) and *Puranas* (creation stories from the ancient). One such *darshan* is Shankaracharya's philosophy of *Advaita*.

Shankaracharya was an erudite scholar, yet he found himself short of practicing his own propounded *Advaita* principles. Shankara realized his shortcoming in Kashi [2], when once he was going to the Vishwanath Temple. His path was blocked by an “untouchable” who was accompanied by his wife and 4 dogs. Shankara's disciples shouted at him to make way, and to keep a distance. The untouchable smiled and said, “Oh Master! Is this how you practice your

principle of *Advaita*, which states that there is only *Brahman* and nothing else? How do you ask me to go? How am I different from *BrahmGyani*(the knower of *Brahm*)? What you say is unreasonable. How can I go away from myself?"Shankracharyarealized that the untouchablewas not an ordinary person and understood that it was Lord Shiva ('the life and death' principle) himself who had come along with His consort and the four Vedas. He prostrated before the Lord and sang five *slokas* called "*Manisha Panchakam*." Lord Shiva presented himself along with Visalakshi and blessed Shankara.

Brahman and the philosophy of Advaita

Brahman is a state of human subjective existence in which an individual experiences completeness and fullness with no demand or reaction. For the duration of no demand or reaction, one encounters individual existence as if unassociated with any other object, situation, and being; one is beyond individual awareness. With the potential and capacities of will (without specific desire for something), knowledge (without specifically knowing about something), and action (without specifically initiating any action), an individual in this specific state of existence is motionless (even as life dwells in one's body). While *Brahman* is devoid of any determination, knowledge, and action, no such capacities are possible without its presence. There is a complete absence of the notions of 'I', 'Mine', 'Ego', as well as any expectations, thoughts, desires, knowing and experience. While completely detached, all said notions exist in *Brahman*. *Brahman* is beyond space, time, and the mind; it is the absolute frame of reference of any subjective experience and objective knowledge. The subject *Brahman* exists in a state of pure consciousness and bliss.

Literally, and traditionally, *Brahman* means one which expands. *Advaita* philosophy refers to *Brahmanas Sad* (Truth), *Chit* (Consciousness), and *Anand* (Bliss). Truth is the changeless state of existence, which is maintained: at all times (that is, it does not change with three periods of time), at all locations (which includes all space), and in all subjective contexts (which includes all subjective situations and conditions). There is nothing outside of its extent; it is unbounded vastness. In that sense, it is unborn, eternal and it only exists. It is without any qualifications or attributes, so it is without shape or form. In day-to-day parlance an individual's: determination to gain a piece of knowledge or perform an action; knowledge about a being, object, or event; and pursuit of an action is good only relative to its time, location, and context; these expressions of individual awareness happen in *Brahman*. Correspondingly, all subjective intentions, knowledge gained, and actions performed lead to relative truths (with existence in individual awareness), and can easily co-exist in *Brahman*. Just as individual awareness resides in individual consciousness, sum total of all individual consciousness resolves in Universal Consciousness, *Brahman*.

Brahman is the beginning, resting point and the end of everything. All objects, events, and beings originate from *Brahman*, are maintained in *Brahman*, and are finally resolved in *Brahman*. Without qualifications and attributes of Itself, all objects, beings, and event have qualifications and attributes because of *Brahman*. *Brahman* is indescribable. It can only be experienced and realized. In fact, there is nothing other than *Brahman*. Shankara said, when a person's mind and intellect is dissolved in *Brahman*, he only enjoys the bliss; *nandathi, nandhati, nandathyeva*, from verse 19 of *BhajaGovindam* by Shankaracharya. [3]

*Yogarathovaabhogarathovaa, sangarathovaasangaviheenah;
Yasyabrahmaniramathechittham, nandattinandathinandathyeva*

The verse is translated as, "One may be reveling in yoga, or, in *bhoga*, in company or in solitude – if one is reveling in one's mind in *Brahman*, one will enjoy; one only will enjoy."

So, external actions such as yoga, *bhoga*, association with a being, object, an event or living in solitude are essentially immaterial. Joy is a natural outcome of a fearless mind, which revels in *Brahman*. The state of fearlessness is achieved by living in Truth in all modes of expression of action, namely, thought, speech, and action. One of the ways to achieve fearlessness is *satsang* (the company of the good and the truthful people). Fears dissolve in a continuous practice of *satsang*. In such a state of mind, one is joyful and with practice would attain *Brahman*.

One can ask a question as to why do we want to be joyful at all? The simple answer is that all of us want to return to our natural state, which is, being joyful. The individual self is in *Anand* (Bliss, *Brahman*) in oneself. So, one wants to return to that state. Fears are acquired by external factors such as, possessions, relations, and attachments. With the practice of non-attachment in the mind, one can experience real joy without any fear. In reality, the joy comes from within oneself, because the self is joy in itself.

Shankara likened *Brahman* to the soil in which is rooted an upside down *ashvatta* or a peepul tree as mentioned in the Katha Upanishad (2.3.1) as well as in the Bhagavad Gita (15.1-4). This way *Brahman* is superior and higher than anything else. The stem of this tree is the Principle of Creation. Fed by the material nature and the sense objects are the tender leaves and the buds that symbolize the Vedas. Both, the branches extending downward as well as lateral are different orders of creation as the senses of perception nourish the leaves. The roots of this tree bind the soul according to the actions of human body, spread upwards and downwards. Nikhilananda [4] translated Shankaracharya's writings about this Tree of the Universe as *Samsara* (the cycle of birth and death), which is noisy and constantly reverberating with the

discordant sounds of all human activity. Its trunk is formed by the subtle bodies of living beings. Its growth is fed by desire and its fruits represent the worlds of the afterlife, which are experienced as the reward for actions.

While the tree of creation is without beginning and is fed by desire, it doesn't seem to have an end in sight. It can only be felled with an axe of dispassion. It is because of this nature of the tree that it is considered unreal. It is true of all living things on the Earth, who go through six phases of life. They are born, grow, maintain, go through modifications, until their bodies can no longer be maintained, in which case, they degenerate and die. It is a common observation that all living beings are born and they die. Because of their limited life span, they are called unreal. The statement *Brahmsatyamjaganmithya*, attributed to Shankara's Advaita philosophy reflects just that notion and it appears in one of his writings, as verse 20 of *Brahmajanavalimala*[5],

*Brahmsatyamjaganmithyajivobrahmaivanaparah;
Anenavedyamsacchastramitivedantadindimah*

Translated by Shankara, *Brahm* is the only Truth, the universe is *mithya* (that is, it cannot be categorized as either real or unreal), and *jiva*, the individual self, is *Brahm* itself and nothing different. This should be understood as the correct *shastra* (a compendium in the specialized area of knowledge). This is so proclaimed by Vedanta.

The meaning of the popular phrase *Brahmsatyamjagatmithya* is best explained looking at the actual meaning of the terms involved. The terms involved in the phrase are: *Brahma* (the most fundamental and ever expanding entity which makes up the universe), *Satyam* (changeless, eternal and existent), *Jagat* (*Ja – jaayate*, to arise, to originate, to be born; *Ga – gamana*, to go, to move, to change; and *gati* – speed, change; *Mithya* – root word *Mith*, to associate with, to unite, to understand, to grasp. Combining the meaning of the individual words, the phrase translates as, “The universe undergoes continuous change and constantly evolves to its current state due to its association with changeless existence, which is Truth or *Brahm*.” Further clarification of the statement is described in the following:

- a. *Brahma satyam* (*Brahman* is the Truth) – As stated earlier *Satyam* (Truth) refers to the changeless state of existence in all the three periods of time as well as in all the three states of consciousness (waking state, dream state and deep-sleep state). It is therefore the absolute Reality which exists of its own accord – changeless, without birth, and always; it is mentioned in the Upanishads as *Brahman*.

On examining the state of deep-sleep, we determine that there is total absence of knowledge, feelings, thoughts, and actions. It implies that in deep sleep, the intellect, mind, senses of perception, the body, and the whole world are all negated. The conscious entity alone exists, but it is steeped in ignorance of all volitions, knowledge, and actions in the individual awareness. From this state, we wake up after the duration of the state of dream to the familiar “waking state” that we perceive. Correspondingly, we all consider waking state as the reality.

- b. *jaganmithya* (the world is an illusion) – The world appears “real” only in the “waking state,” but it is negated (disappearance) in the states of dream and deep-sleep. Based on the explanation of the existence above, the “waking state” is not real. Correspondingly, Shankara referred to the world as *mithya*.

In the dream state we dream about people, objects, and events mostly unrelated to real life situations. While dreaming all that appears real (it appears as if we use the intellect, mind, senses of perception, and the body), yet in fact not engaging our physical senses of perception and the body. But the moment we wake up from the dream state, the dream experience becomes an illusion. The illusion of the dream state disappears in the light of the “waking state.”

In the waking state, we engage our intellect, the mind, senses of perception, and the body, all conditioned to the prevailing cultural (geographical, racial, faith, national) norms and social, economic and political orders to experience the world. Correspondingly, the reality of the Truth, the essence of all that exists (the principles of volition, knowledge and action in which all volitions, knowledge and actions of all space, time, and mind exist), the unchanging, timeless, endless and indestructible entity, *Brahman* stays hidden.

Even so, people, who are not the seekers of Truth, react to the word, *mithya*, when referring to the perceptible world. For this reason, Shankara, in his later works, such as *Brahmasutra Bhashya*, calls it *Vyavaharika Satta* (relative reality) or *Pratibhasika Satta* (apparent reality), to satisfy their observations [6].

- c. *jivabrahmaivanapara* (the *jiva*, the living entity is *Brahman* alone, none else) – *Jiva* refers to the living entity (the principle of life, or the sentience principle) in all living beings, including human beings. It is through this principle that while a human being is alive, they experience their subjective presence (self awareness) as well as the availability of the capacities of the physical body and the subtle body (the intellect, memory, mind

and ego) to initiate an action, acquire knowledge, and perform an action. In the state of deep-sleep, all the capacities of the physical body as well as the subtle body are rendered ineffective. In this state, the sentience principle is dissociated with its inert physical and subtle bodies even as it keeps the bodies alive to be engaged in the states of dream and dream-less sleep. This principle of sentience is the *atman* (individual consciousness) and is the same in all beings. *Brahman* of the Upanishads is repository of all known *atmans* and all unknown sentience present in existence. *Brahman* (also known as universal consciousness, spirit) is equally present in all *jivas* as it energizes the life principle.

All differentiation of faith, race, culture, national origin, as well as that of social, economic and political orders exist only in the subtle body of thoughts, intellect and ego. The differentiation of gender as well as that of physical capacity is in the physical body. But all human beings are manifestations of the same *Brahman*, which is expressed in the simple statement 'I am,' and is hidden from the other layers of the subtle body as well as the physical body.

In the state of death, the conscious entity, finding the physical body ineffective to carry out its mission, completely detaches itself from the physical body causing it to die. The dead physical body decays and undergoes decomposition in the vastness of *Brahman*. The conscious entity with the feeling 'I am,' comprising of the subtle body of unfructified pursuits (intentions, knowledge and actions, collectively called *sanskaras*), steeped in *Brahman*, wanders free. It is ready for its next manifestation to express itself in order to pursue the unfructified actions.

Once the conditioning factors vanish, *jivaatmanis* are seen as one with *Brahman* as taught in the *Mahavakyas* (great sayings) of the Upanishads. Vedas consider human beings as manifestation of *Brahman*, with each human being (*jiva*) as a body-mind-soul complex. The knowledge of this oneness is *moksha* (liberation). There are several recommended paths, such as *Karma yoga* (selfless service of others without expectation) and *Bhakti yoga* (exclusive devotion to one deity with intense faith and total surrender) in the Upanishads for the attainment of this knowledge when pursued with mental purity. *Mahavakyas* have a profound significance as indicators for the individual to realize identity with *Brahman*. The *Mahavakyas* are [7]:

(1) *AhamBrahmasmi* (from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 1.4.10 YajurVeda) – I am *Brahman*. Here, 'I' is the witnessing consciousness (*Atman*), apparent through every act of perception, thought, and feeling, and is different from the individual intellect, the individual ego. This witness-consciousness, being the same in all, cannot be distinguished from *Brahman* that prevails all. However, confined in the individual human body-mind complex,

it becomes individual awareness, which is different in all human beings. ‘am’ relates the two entities not in the sense of an empirical relation, but affirms the non-duality of the same essence.

(2) *Ayam Atma Brahma* (from the Mandukya Upanishad, 1.2 Atharva Veda) – This Self is *Brahman*. Here, the Self is that Reality, which though undivided and indivisible, eternal, manifests itself as the body-mind complex. That undivided Reality is *Brahman*, the All-pervading and Absolute out of which all things are really made. *Ayam* refers to the *Atman* (self-conscious nature of the self), which is internal to mind and the physical body. Because of universality, the self and *Brahman* are the same. This identification of the self with *Brahman* is an affirmation that *Brahman* includes everything, and there is nothing outside it.

(3) *Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma* (from the Chandogya Upanishad, 3.14.1) – The Universe is *Brahman*. The entire universe is the all prevailing *Brahman*, which includes our self (individual consciousness). *Brahman* is not only the consciousness in all of us, it is also the being principle in all matter. It is the ultimate Reality as well as the inner most self in all beings. It is the same Consciousness in all that exists.

(4) *Prajnanam Brahma* (from the Aitareya Upanishad, 3.1.3 Rig Veda) – Consciousness is *Brahma*. Consciousness refers to the intuitive truth (in all of us) which can be verified by reason. Our discernment of truth is the truth itself. It indicates that Consciousness is present within us and has the power to return us to the Absolute Consciousness. Our inmost intelligence is that Consciousness through which we can merge into the Absolute.

Brahman is ultimately the fundamental and prime cause for all our perception, knowledge, and experience. As stated earlier, while *Brahman* does not directly perceive and experience. All perceptions, knowledge and experience take place in its eternal and endless presence. Correspondingly, we make volitions, gain knowledge and perform actions in *Brahman*. In other words, *Brahman* is the Absolute frame of reference for all space, time, and mind conditions. It is complete in itself, and is continuously present in all matter, energy, and life. It is beyond mechanics, heat, light, and sound, electricity, and magnetism. All matter, energy, and mind are energized and are created, maintained, and finally resolved in *Brahman*. This is the meaning of the great saying *Prajnanam Brahma*.

Atman (individual consciousness) is continuously and consistently utilizing its appendages of the body and mind for self discovery, to know its origin, and its purpose. When an *Atman* with its individual awareness (*Atman* with all past and present conditioning due to its self-selected instruments of the body and mind, also called the ‘Life’ principle) realizes that it is self-similar to

the *Atman* in all human beings and that the source of all *Atmans* is *Brahman*, it resolves in *Brahman*. *Brahman* is One without a second, the origin and the final resting place of all, the only Truth, *Advaita*.

The non-duality between *Atman* and *Brahman* is further clarified in Uttara Gita (2.9)[8]. It states, “As there is no distinction between water mixed with water, milk when mixed with milk, butter mixed with butter, similar is the non-differentiation of the Individual Self (*jivatman*) with the Supreme Self (*paramatman*).”

The difference between milk and milk is the container in which each is held. Whereas, *Brahman* (Universal Consciousness) exists independently of its own accord and all containers arise from it, an *Atman* (individual consciousness and the intelligent cause of the life principle), being a part of *Brahman*, dons a container (the aforesaid subtle body (the instrumental cause of the life principle) and a physical body (the material cause of the life principle)) to know what it is and where it is from. The moment, *Atman* realizes the knowledge of its origin it becomes free of the container in which it is held. Just as a drop of water is water, so the free *Atman* finds its oneness in *Brahman*.

Vedanta and Advaita

Advaita Vedanta is based on *shastra* (scriptures), *yukti* (reason) and *anubhava* (experiential knowledge) with *abhyasa* (intense practice) and *karma* (spiritual practices) [9]. For Shankara, the philosophy is the way of life when learning begins. Accordingly, his objective was to understand, explain, and attain *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death) in this life [10]. He equated *moksha* with self-realization, and *Atman* (the individual consciousness, self) with *Brahman* (the Universal Consciousness).

The term *Veda* means ‘knowledge’ and *anta* means ‘the end of’ (the conclusion of, the goal of). It suggests that the ultimate goal of all knowledge is self discovery. The Vedanta is also known as *Uttara Mimamsa* (Superior or higher inquiry) and is one of the *Darshans*, the Hindu schools of Philosophy. According to the Vedanta, the real nature of all beings is divine. In other words, the inner self of all beings is divine as well, that is, infinite (universal consciousness and bliss) existence. And the goal of human life is to realize this existence.

The Vedas are comprised of four parts: The *Samhitas* and the *Brahmanas* form the *Karma-Kanda* (action segment) of the Vedas, and the *Aranyakas* and the Upanishads form the *GyanKanda* (knowledge segment) of the Vedas [11]. The *Samhitas* are a collection of *mantras* for the forces of nature and the corresponding deities. The *Brahmanas* are mostly in

prose deciphering the secret power of the sacrificial rituals for the religious rites. The *Aranyakas* were developed by the sages, living in the forests. Because of limited resources in the forests, they could not perform the traditional sacrifices, so they developed *Aranyakas* to throw light on the philosophy and spiritualism behind the rites. The Upanishads (literally, to sit near a *guru* with a desire to acquire knowledge) are the concluding portions of the Vedas. They are in forms of dialogs between a master and a disciple. The dialogs contain the subtle and essential knowledge about the *Brahman*, the *atman*, the existence, life and death, *moksha* (freedom from the cycle of birth and death), the *jagat* (the perceptible world), and the knowledge of the known and the unknown.

As stated earlier, when we wake up to the same familiar world every morning, we experience the absence of the dream world. But having experienced the dream world, what is the guarantee that the world of the wakeful state that we perceive and experience is not yet another illusion. It definitely lays bare the possibility of another world, higher than the wakeful state if we were to experience that world. However, the hesitation to negate the wakeful state is because of the fact that the five gross elements that make us (our body and mind) are the same gross elements the world is made. Correspondingly, we are all attached to it and we call it real.

Shankara understood this difficulty, because of his intellectual and divine genius. He had experienced the supreme state of complete identification with *Brahman*, just as was experienced by the ancient seers. He is the only spiritual giant, who could confirm and authoritatively summarize the vision of the ancient seers of *Sanatana Dharma* — the truth of *Advaita*. He firmly established this philosophy by his masterly commentaries on the *prasthanatraya* (the three basic texts on *Vedanta*, namely, the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and the *Brahma Sutras*) [12]. *Advaita* is the highest philosophical truth of *Shruti* (what is heard through revelation by the ancient seers). After knowing this truth, nothing more needs to be known. The examples of *Advaita* are found in all of Shankara's writings; a few select verses are given below:

The opening verse of Ishavasya Upanishad states [13],

*Om Poornnam-Adah Poornnam-Idam Poornnaat-Purnnam-Udacyate
Poornnashya Poornnam-Aadaaya Poornnam-Eva-Avashishyate
Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih*

Translated, the outer manifested universe is complete (filled) with Universal Consciousness; the inner unmanifested *Brahman* (Universal Consciousness) is complete; it implies that the manifested universe comes out of the completeness of *Brahman*, so it is complete as well. When

it resolves in the *Brahman* again, what remains is the unmanifested *Brahman* which is always complete. Thus there is a connection between the Unmanifested and the manifested *Brahman*. In other words, the world is an organic whole; and a part represents the whole, just as the seed contains the entire tree.

Kathopnishad (1.2.18) states that Consciousness is beyond birth and death. The *Atman* (the intelligent cause) is unborn and not subject to death. It does not manifest from anything nor does it give rise to a new entity. The *atman* is unborn, always existing, everlasting, and ancient and is not perished when the body (container) is perished [14].

*Na jaayate mriyate va avipashcinna ayam kutashcinnababhoovakashcit;
Ajonyashashvato 'yampuraanonahanyate hanyamaaneshareere.*

Translated, *Atman* is not born, nor does it die; It did not spring from anything, and nothing sprang from it; unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient, it is not slain although the body is slain.

In Bhagavad Gita (2.55), Lord Krishna talks to Arjuna about the four qualities of *sthitaprajna*. *Prajna* means *buddhi* (the faculty of the mind where reason and discrimination reside). The intelligent being, who is firmly established in *Brahman*, is called *sthita prajna* (*Prajñānam Brahma*).

*Prajahati yada Kaman sarvan Parthamanogatan,
Atmanyevatmanatushtahsthitapragyastadochyate.*

Translated, “O Arjuna, when one fully renounces all the desires that have entered the mind, and remains satisfied in the Self alone by the Self, then he is called a man of steady wisdom (*sthitaprajna*).”

Again in the Bhagavad Gita (13.17), Lord Krishna states that the Knowable entity, though undivided, appears to exist as divided in all beings, and It is the sustainer of all beings as also the annihilator and originator.

*Avibhaktam cha bhooteshu, vibhaktamiva cha sthitam;
bhootabhartree cha tajgyeyam, grasishnuprabhavishnu cha.*

Translated, “Although the *Paramatma* (Supersoul) appears to be divided among all beings, It is never divided. It is situated as one. Although It is the maintainer of every living entity, it is also the origin and end of all.” Just as the sun, at the meridian, situated in its place appears in many

places to many persons, so is Vishnu* (the Preservation Principle) that pervades all and nothing pervades Vishnu.

It is evident that in many Vedic texts, glories of both *Saguna*(with attributes) and *Nirguna*(without attributes) *Brahmanis* described. It implies that *Saguna* and *Nirguna Brahman* are not different from each other. So, if a person experiences *darshan* of a deity in a physical or subtle form (*saguna*) in all reality he is seeing *Nirguna Brahman*.

Shankara presented the concept of universal consciousness as the absolute frame of reference, an invariant, called *Brahman*. The variants of space, time and the human mind evolve by his potency, *Prakriti*. It is through the indescribable aspects of *Prakriti*, *avarana* (to conceal) and *vikshepa* (to project), called *Maya* that *Brahman* appears as the universe. The *jivaatman* (the individual consciousness) is not different from *Brahman*. But living in different physical bodies as the life principle (*Atman* with a subtle body) and associated *Upadhis* (different appellations that separate an individual from the other) appears to be different. Simultaneously, it is affected by different conditions of space, time, and the prevailing norms, that are ever changing. The *Upadhi* only limit our comprehension and understanding of the unified and unchanging existence of all.

Such a masterpiece rendition and clarity of thinking about the conclusions of the Upanishads, which are at many places contradictory, couldn't have been possible unless by a genius of extra-human revelations.

Adi Shankaracharya, Life and Works

Adi Shankaracharya was a thinker extraordinaire so that in some traditions he is considered

* Through this article, I formally propose to all Vedic scholars and readers the concept of Vishnu to mean 'the Preservation Principle,' and not the 'Preserver God.' 'Principle' implies that it is indestructible element of existence. Simultaneously, I propose, Brahma to mean 'the Creation Principle,' and not the Creator God, and Shiva to mean 'the Life and Death Principle,' and not the Destroyer God. I've used these definitions in my book, *Who Are We?*, AuthorHouse, 2006.

anavatar (reincarnation of Shiva). An *avatar* in the Hindu way of thinking is a process in which 'the Divine' manifests itself in a physical form and appears on the Earth at the time, place and circumstances of its choosing. In the Bhagavad Gita (4.8) Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that to protect the good, to destroy the evil, and to reestablish the order, He appears time and again. The essential purpose of an *avatar* is to reestablish 'Dharma.' *Dharma** is a composite word that implies different meaning to suit the situation and circumstance. It has been used to mean duty,

precept, order, justice, guidance, faith, and the way of life which support and sustain the individual, family, society, nation and the environment.

While the appearance of an *Avatar* is left to the Divine Will, Shankara's acceptance as an *avatar* can be attributed to the prevailing conditions at the time of his birth. There was a total vacuum of philosophical thought, and the meaning of *Sanatana Dharma* (the Eternal precept) and the Vedic way of life was completely forgotten. New philosophical thoughts such as Charvaka, Lokayata, Kapalika, Shakta, Sankhya, Buddha, Madhyamika and many others were introduced and were in constant conflict [15]. With the lack of qualified teachers to provide guidance on *dharma* for their station and stage in life people misinterpreted the Vedic contexts and started practicing rituals and *Tantra* (the application of cosmic sciences to attain spiritual ascendancy; *Tantriks* worship either Goddess *Shakti* or Lord Shiva). Buddhist and Jain religions were on the rise. The conditions were ripe for the appearance of a divine manifestation to reintroduce *Sanatana Dharma* and Vedic knowledge in a manner to suit the time and the circumstances. Undoubtedly, the advent of Shankara, the great seer of the modern times, was considered as none other than a reincarnation of Shiva.

AdiShankara is also considered a *Jagadguru* (the teacher of the world) [12]. Only he can be called a *Jagadguru*, who can explain reality in a manner that is acceptable to all. A *Jagadguru*, being a master of the *Shruti* (Vedas and Upanishads), *Smriti* (*Dharmashastras*), *Puranas*, and *Itihasa* (history, essentially, Mahabharata and Ramayana) removes misconceptions, corrects interpretations and properly communicates the Truth and in doing so brings harmony among all. He has total faith in *Sanatana Dharma* and the Vedas, on the basis of which he gives credence to the other faiths. For a *Jagadguru*, all paths chosen by different faith groups lead to the same Truth, so he connects all faith traditions and reinforces belief of a faith adherent to his faith. The word *Adi* in the beginning of his name connotes him being the very first in the tradition of the Shankaracharyas. The word *Acharya* in the ending of his name connotes him as the great teacher.

AdiShankara is most known for *Bhashyas* (systematic reviews and commentaries on ancient Indian texts). Shankara's masterpiece of commentary is the *BrahmasutraBhasya*

*The English translation of *dharma* as religion is not satisfactory. Based on the literal meaning of *dharma* from its root, *dhri*, meaning to hold, to support, and to sustain, in this paper, I formally propose to all Vedic scholars and readers, the English translation of *dharma* to mean, sustainability.

(Commentary on *Brahma Sutra*), a fundamental text of the Vedanta school of philosophy. Shankara also wrote *Bhashya* on ten principal Upanishads: the Brihadranayaka Upanishad, the Chandogya Upanishad, the Aitareya Upanishad, the Taittiriya Upanishad, the Kena Upanishad, the Isha Upanishad, the Katha Upanishad, the Mundaka Upanishad,

the Prashna Upanishad, and the Mandukya Upanishad. He also wrote *Bhashya* on the Bhagavad Gita (part of his *Prasthanatrayi Bhashya*) as well as on *Apastamba Dharma-Sutras (Adhyatama-patala-bhasya)*. For gaining practical knowledge his important works are: *Atma Bodha*, *Aparoksha Anubhuti*, *Ananda Lahari*, *Atma-Anatma Viveka*, *Drik-Drishya Viveka* and *Upadesa Sahasri* [16][17][18][19][20][21]. Adi Shankara's other popular *Bhashya* is on *Vishnu Sahasranama* (one thousand names of Vishnu).

Shankara's *Brahmanis Nirguna* (without properties), *Nirakara* (formless), *Nirvishesha* (without attributes) and *Akarta* (non-doer) [22]. He is above all needs and desires. Shankara says, "This *Atman* (individual Self) is self-evident, that is, this *Atman* is not established by proofs of the existence of the Self. It is also not possible to deny this *Atman*, for it is the very essence of even the one who denies it. The *Atman* is the basis of all kinds of knowledge. The Self is within, the Self is without, and the Self is all around. *Satyam* (Truth)-*Jnanam* (Knowledge)-*Anantam* (Endless)-*Anandam* (Bliss) are not separate attributes. They form the very essence of *Brahman*. *Brahman* cannot be described, because description implies distinction. *Brahman* cannot be distinguished from any other than Itself.

Advaita is essentially the identity of the *Atman* with *Brahman*. He wrote, "*Ekameva Adviteeyam Brahma* (The absolute is one alone, not two) (Chandogya Upanishad 6:2:1)." There is no second, but there is the appearance of multiplicity. He explains thusly, "There may be many stalks of sugarcane, but the juice from each one of them has the same sweetness." Similarly, beings are many, but their breath is the same. Nations are many, but the Earth is one. In this manner, Shankara proclaimed that unity underlies the apparent diversity.

Shankara preached *Vivarta Vada* (the Vedantic theory of causation) [16]. Just as the snake is superimposed on the rope in twilight until in the light of the day, the snake vanishes. In the same manner, this world and this body are superimposed on *Brahman* until in the light of *Gyana* (Knowledge of the Self), the world vanishes. If one gets knowledge of the rope, the illusion of the snake vanishes. Even so, if one gets knowledge of *Brahman*, the illusion of the body and the world will vanish.

Adi Shankara explained the oneness of the three aspects of the Hindu Divine Trinity (Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma). He also composed many devotional hymns for various deities – *Dakshinamurti Stotra*, *Shiva Pancakshara Stotra*, *Saundarya Lahiri*, *Sivananda Lahiri*, *Guru Paduka Stotram*, *Guru Ashtakam*, etc. Shankara's stotras are also dedicated to Lord Krishna as well as to Lord Shiva. Both Vaishnavas and Shaivaites are considered two different sects within Hinduism. These Stotras convey universal view of Vedanta, *Advaita* and are non-sectarian [23].

Adi Shankara promoted *Smarta Sampradaya* (Tradition in which adherents worship both consciousness and form. Typically *Smartas* worship Ganesha (Principle of auspiciousness, the

remover of obstacles), Shiva (Consciousness, the 'life and death' principle), *Shakti* (Energy), Vishnu (the Preservation Principle) and *Surya* (Sun, the principle of heat and light) as different manifestations of same *Brahman* [24]. AdiShankara added sixth deity *Skanda* (principle of bravery, strength, and leadership) for universal harmony.

AdiShankara took an active role in reconstruction and repair of many temples. For the propagation of *Sanatana Dharma* he established *Muths* at four locations in India. Known as *Amnaya Peethas*, each of these *muths* had its deity, *tirtha* (pilgrimage with a source of water), and *sampradaya* (tradition). There is a story about Jagannatha Puri Temple where once the idol was missing. The Lord appeared in AdiShankara's dream, showed him the idol's location and instructed him to install the idol. AdiShankara went to the location, found the idol, installed it, and established one of the *Amnaya Peetha* there [25]. This *muth* is known as Govardhana Muth. AdiShankara also re-consecrated *Sri Yantra* (geometrical representation of the union of Masculine and Feminine Divinity in the *Tantra* tradition) at Kamakshi Temple in Kanchi and revived *Shakta* (Believers of Energy manifested in a female form) as a tradition.

AdiShankara had a great following who served him as their great teacher for the propagation of *Advaita Vedanta* and *Sanatana Dharma*. Four of his prominent disciples had excelled in their own ways: Padmapada for intense devotion, Totaka for exemplary service, Hastamalaka for supreme self-realization and Sureshwara for deep learning. AdiShankaracharya installed each one of them as *Acharya* of one *muth*: Padmapada as the *acharya* of the Dwaraka Muth in the West, Totaka as the *acharya* of Jyotir Muth in the North, Hastamalaka as the *acharya* of the Govardhana Muth in the East, and Sureshwara as the *acharya* of Sringeri Sharada Peetham in the South. [22]

AdiShankara organized ten definite orders of *Sannyasins* under the name *Dasanamis* who add, at the end of their names, any one of the following ten suffixes: *Puri* (Sringeri Muth) and *Sarasvati, Bharati, Tirtha, Ashrama* (Dwaraka Muth); *Giri*, (Joshi Muth) and *Parvata, Sagar*; (Govardhana Muth) and *Vana, Aranya* [22]. The *Paramahansa* represents the highest of these grades. It is possible to become a *Paramahansa* by a long study of Vedantic philosophy, meditation and Self-realization. The *Ativarnashramis* are beyond caste and order of life. They dine with all classes of people. Sankara's *Sannyasins* are to be found all over India.

Two of the AdiShankara's greatest writings are *Upadesa Sahasri* (A Thousand Teachings) and *Bhaja Govindam* (Chant the name of Krishna). Partly in prose and partly in verses, *Upadesa Sahasri* is a philosophical treatise, in which AdiShankara explains a method of teaching the means to liberation for the benefit of desiring spiritual aspirants with intense

faith. In *Upadesa Sahasri* [26] the message about *Brahman* is very clear and succinct. “The *Brahman* that is immediate and direct, the innermost Self, the unseen seer, the listener of the unheard, the thinker of the unthought, the knower of the unknown, which is of the nature of eternal knowledge, without interior or exterior, consisting only of knowledge, all-pervading like the ether and of infinite power – that Self of all, devoid of hunger etc., as also of appearance and disappearance, is, by virtue of Its inscrutable power, the cause of the manifestation of unmanifested name and form which abide in the Self through Its very presence, but are different from It, which are the seed of the universe, are describable neither as identical with It nor different from It and are cognized by It alone.”

Bhaja Govindam, popularly known as *Bhaja Govinda Stotra* further known as the *Moham Mudhgarah* – a hammer to crush delusion. It might appear that the *Bhaja Govindam* [27] is a reverential melody. It is substantially more than that. It contains the very quintessence of Vedanta philosophy in the least difficult of Sanskrit verses. It is the most mainstream reverential tune and a philosophical treatise, beyond compare. Adi Shankara begins by saying “Goodness fool quit squandering your time in pointless things. Ruminating upon God and attempting to comprehend His real nature.” Adi Shankara said, “Getting enjoyment with what one has earned by genuine diligent work will bring peace, however coveting for riches won't bring peace. While youngsters are occupied in playing, youthful grown-ups are involved in romance and sentiment, more established individuals stress a great deal, yet how tragic that nobody is keen on Govinda.” Adi Shankara likewise said, “One is regarded only during the length of time one is fit for supporting one's family. Nobody is occupied with him the day he gets to be old, powerless and vulnerable.”

Adi Shankara obviously expresses that attachment is the underlying driver for all agonies in this world. He says “Lust has no spot past one's youth. The lake has no importance with its water become scarce. Without riches companions and relatives don't approach.” He asserts, “Gracious man, think! Bondage vanishes when true knowledge is experienced.” He emphatically suggests the way of *gyana* (learning of the truth) bolstered by the ways of *bhakti* (commitment) and *karma* (action). One must spend the whole life in the contemplations of God, and perform each activity for God. For a man, who has procured *gyana*, even the Lord of Death will need to find an appropriate support.

Adi Shankara says that, when a person totally surrenders himself at the feet of his *Guru* (teacher of *gyana* by virtue of continued disciplined practice and penance), he will be released from all bondage instantaneously. Performance of one's duty (earnestly, effectively and efficiently) with uniformity of thought, speech, and action leads to the Supreme Lord.

AdiShankara, Personal Details

AdiShankara was born in a very poor Nambudiri Brahmin family in the year 788 A.D. in the village Kaladi, six miles to the east of Alwaye, Kerala. His father, Sivaguru studied the Shastras and married at the proper age. They had no child. His father and his mother, Aryambaprayed to Lord Shiva to bless them with a son. Shankarawas born to them in the auspicious *Abhijit Muhurta* under the constellation *Ardhra* in the spring season at noon. Shankara was seven years old when his father died. His mother took the responsibility for his education in all the *Shastras*. Correspondingly, she first performed Shankara's *Upanayana* (sacred thread ceremony) in his seventh year. Since his childhood, Shankara possessed extraordinary intelligence. At sixteen, he became a master of all the philosophies and theologies. He began to write commentaries on the Gita, the Upanishads and the *Brahma Sutras*[22].

While Shankara's mother was counseling astrologers to find a suitable girl for her son's marriage, Shankara had firm plans to renounce the world and turn into a *Sannyasin*. Shankara's mother's concern was that there would be nobody to perform her memorial service after her demise. Shankara gave full affirmation to his mother that he would dependably be prepared to serve her at the demise. Even then to the end of her time she was not satisfied.

One day, Shankara and his mother went to clean up in the stream. Shankara dove into the water and felt that a crocodile was dragging him by the foot. He yelled out to his mother as loud as possible: "O dear mother! A crocodile is dragging me down. I am lost. Give me a chance to die gently as a *Sannyasin*. Give me a chance to have the satisfaction of dying as a *Sannyasin*. Give me your consent now. Give me a chance to take *Apatt-sannyasa*[22]."

The mother quickly permitted him to take *Sannyasa*. Shankara took *Apatt-sannyasa* (taking of *Sannyasa* when passing is close) without a moment's delay. The crocodile let him go unharmed. Shankara left the water as an ostensible *Sannyasin*. He again rehashed his guarantee to his mother. He left her under the care of his relatives and gave away his little property to them. He then continued to discover a Guru with a perspective to get himself formally started into the sacred order of *Sannyasa*.

Shankara met Swami Govindapada Acharya in his retreat in Badrikashram in the Himalayas and he prostrated at the teacher's feet. Govinda asked Shankara who he was. Shankara answered: "O revered *Guru*! I am neither fire nor air nor earth nor water - none of these, yet the Immortal *Atman* (Self) that is covered up in all names and forms." He likewise said at last: "I am the child of Sivaguru, a Brahmin of Kerala. My father died in my childhood. I was raised by my mother. I have studied the Vedas and the *Shastras* from a teacher. I took *Apatt-sannyasa* when a crocodile

got my foot while I was taking a bath in the river. Compassionate One, initiate me formally into the blessed order of *Sannyasa*.”

Swami Govinda was especially satisfied with the honest portrayal given by Shankara. Having started him and offering him with the robe of a *Sannyasin*, Swami Govinda taught him the logic of *Advaita* which he himself had learnt from his Guru Gaudapada Acharya. Shankaralearnt all the philosophical precepts from his Guru Govindapada. Govinda requested that Shankara go to Kashi. Shankarawent to Kashi where he wrote all his celebrated analyses on the *Brahma Sutras*, the Upanishads and the Gita and effectively met every reaction leveled against his writings. He then started to spread his reasoning. Shankara had the best regard for his *GuruGovindapada* and his *Parama Guru*(the teacher's educator), Gaudapada [22].

Shankara continued to Kamarup(Guwahati) in Assam and held a debate with Abhinava Gupta, the *Shakta*follower, and triumphed over him. Abhinavadefinitely felt his thrashing. He made Shankara experience an extreme type of piles through black magic. His disciple, Padmapadaremoved the evil impacts of the black magic. Shankara turned out to be entirely alright. He went to the Himalayas, constructed a Muth at Joshi and a temple at Badri. He then continued to Kedarnath in the Himalayas. He unified with the Lingain his thirty-second year in 820 A.D [22].

In summary

AdiShankaracharya is considered to be one of the greatest intellectuals India has ever produced. He is known for his clarity of expression, vision, experience, and his understanding of the reality of the world. Adi Shankarahas earned the credit of establishing the non-dualistic philosophyof *AdvaitaVedanta* at a very difficult time for the Vedic teachings around the 7th-8thCentury. He was direct in his approach, clear in his expression and exposition and had a unique understanding of head and heart. Some critics of Hindu philosophy, the eminent scholar statesman Rajaji said that the way of devotion is different from the way of knowledge, “When intelligence matures and lodges securely in the heart, it becomes wisdom. When that wisdom is integrated with life and issues out in action, it becomes devotion. Knowledge, which has become mature, is spoken of as devotion. If it does not get transformed into devotion, such knowledge is conspicuouslyuseless.”

Shankara'sscholarly education and his excellent method for peace of mind bogging philosophical issues have the profound respect of all the philosophical schools of the world at the present moment. Shankara was anintellectual virtuoso, a significant thinker, a capable advocate, an incomparable minister, a talented artist and an incredible religious reformer. Maybe, never ever, an awesome author like him has been found. Indeed, even the Western researchers of the present day pay their reverence and regards to him. Of all the antiquated

frameworks, that of Sankaracharya will be observed to be the simplest of acknowledgment to the advanced mind.

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