

# Adi Sankara

## The Supreme Visionary

*Adi Sankara, the greatest teacher, who gave  
religion a philosophical precept.*

R. KRISHNAMURTHY

No historical person except perhaps the Buddha has exercised deeper influence on Indian thought, intellect and spiritual life than Sri Sankaracharya (c. 788 to 820 A.D.), popularly known as Adi Sankara. The impact of his impassioned intellect and spiritual knowledge, in a short span of 32 years, on Indian philosophy, poetry, science, metaphysics, ethics and humanism is evident even today, and it is increasingly reaching all shores of the world.

### **Sankara the World Teacher**

As a universal teacher, Sankara taught the world the path of knowledge and salvation by means of *dharma* or righteousness. He showed with convincing logic and reasoning that by steadfastly abiding in the consciousness every human being is just a reflection of the infinite power that controls the universe, everyone in this world is entitled to attain self-knowledge.

And this self-knowledge has no boundaries of geography, religion, caste or any other narrow construct whatsoever. The entire world is entitled to this knowledge, for the world is just one big family, *vasudhaiva kudumbakam*.

By the wonderful power of Sankara's writings, religion and philosophy blended into a harmonious whole, bereft of the least inner contradiction. Sankara knew indeed that religion without philosophy was bound to perish, and that mere philosophy without any religious basis could not bring about true enlightenment and release.

### **Reason Integral to Religion**

Therefore, in his works, he has shown how reasoning is an integral part of religion, and how fruitful it becomes when used in harmony with the age-old scriptures.

In this sense, Sankara did not propound any new system of thought, but an exposition of the truths contained in the age-old *Sastras* with a remarkable insight. Sankara's system, grounded on *Sastras* and confirmed by experience, has an artistic merit all its own, which compels conviction and invites acceptance.

Sankara's teaching is simple to the core. In the Hindu scheme of knowledge, a distinction is made between higher and lower knowledge. The lower knowledge includes all sciences and arts that pertain to the experiential world. This knowledge is obligatory to every individual to enable him to go through the concerns of his life successfully and has an important place in the Hindu scheme of education.

But there is a sphere of higher knowledge, which relates to the Super Consciousness or Knowledge of the Self. The mind functions at the point of the Great Divide between the

external world facing the world and the inner world within oneself.

Sankara urged every human being to see or inquire within. For, upon such enquiry, it would be evident that the individual soul, though limited in some ways, is not a separate entity but a mere reflection of the Super Consciousness or the Absolute Power that controls the universe and beyond.

### **System of Non-dualism**

Sankara builds a subtle and intricate theory of knowledge, and proceeding from certain assumptions, leads up to the complete system of *Advaitism* or non-dualism.

He compares the human soul to the space in a jar, the *Brahman* being the universal space. The space encased in a jar is unaffected by its walls, whether they are intact or broken. Once the jar is broken, the space it contained becomes indistinguishable from the space outside. The individual soul thus realises that it is part of the limitless space.

Sankara's reasoning thus provides the logical basis for the existence of multitude of religious faiths and beliefs. His emphasis is rightly on the unity in diversity. The message is to go behind the apparent and see the core. Sri Ramana Maharshi, who also expounded Sankara's principle of *Advaita*, said, "Fix your thought on the unchanging movie screen and not the fleeting images on the screen".

### **Aim of Life**

Through this exposition of nonduality, Sankara as the world teacher leads the enquiry as to the meaning and purpose of human life. He says the only thing that can distinguish a man from animals is the possession of an aim in life, which he can consciously strive after, and to which all the activities of life may be directed.

Common people may suggest as the goal in life health, wealth, power, happiness, children, etc. Through logical reasoning, Sankara expounds that all these are transient.

### **Connecting with Brahman**

Sankara convincingly argues that in the end, having exhausted all possibilities, every person will be forced to the conclusion that the goal of life must lie in establishing some sort of relationship or a realisation with the *Brahman*, the Supreme Consciousness that is beyond life.

This Supreme Reality is *Sat*, the fundamental reality or being from which all else arise. It is *Chit*, the conscious reality, the life of all lives, the consciousness of all consciousness; and it is *Ananda*, one of eternal and undivided bliss, that is beyond both pain and pleasure as understood by finite beings.

Such a living realised person, whom he calls *jivanmukta*, is at peace with the entire world. His presence is characterised by universal benevolence and he radiates goodwill. His look is a benediction, his words are wisdom, and his conduct a consecration.

In his presence, all physical and mental ills disappear in the sense that their edge is blunted, and one can bear them with fortitude. This can be the highest service to the suffering humanity.

### **Power of Surrender and Love**

Sankara expounded that every human being can attempt this great search for unity through two ways. One, by a constant, ceaseless search by the mind as to the source of its

origin, the source of breathing, seeing, speaking, or the source of very existence. In his celebrated book *Vivekachudamani*, or the Crest Jewel of Discrimination, Sankara dwells at length on the process of ceaseless self-enquiry that can lead to the realisation of oneness.

The other path is total surrender to and love for, the supreme force that guides everyone at every moment. Expounding surrender and love as *bhakti* in poetic grandeur, he said *bhakti* is the source of *jnana* and eliminates hindrance to knowledge. It is the cause for the emancipating divine grace. No spiritual life can be complete without devotion, and in *bhak,ti* one finds one's fulfillment and abiding peace.

Sankara composed hundreds of hymns to extol the virtues of love and surrender. His mostly widely read composition, *Bhajagovindam*, describes in lilting poetry the futility of life without love to the Supreme Being.

Sankara established a system of approaching the personal God through six forms of worship and installed images and *Chakras* at several places to let the mind prepare for the great *advaitic* thought.

### **Power of Action**

Sankara was no mere dialectical metaphysician. He also prescribed a way of life that must inevitably lead to realisation of the goal of life.

In his *Gita Bhashya*, the commentary on the *Gita*, Sankara extols the virtue of action, and emphasises that the wheels of the world can move only by action, and one who refrains from the prescribed action commits sin. Performance of action is a means of attaining freedom from action. Sankara taught that one should act in the world in a selfless way, restraining the senses.

Perhaps the best action and the greatest service rendered by Sankara is his avowed mission of integration through setting up four seats of learning in four different parts of India, for the lofty task of preaching, preserving and protecting the sacred values of *Sanatana Dharma*.

He established the four seats, or *mathas*, and installed his chosen disciples hailing from different parts of the country as the first guru at each *matha*, thus displaying a remarkable foresight of integrating the basic values throughout the country.

One of the four *mathas* established by Sankara at Sringeri in South India has been the foremost in upholding the traditions and *dharma* taught by him, and remains a beacon light of *advaitic* thought.

Adi Sankara was a multi-faceted genius. Be it as a poet or a philosopher, be it as an organiser or a teacher, be it as an integrator or an interpreter, he stands as a world visionary in every respect.

The catholicity and deep humility of this greatest sage is brought out by this incident: While staying at the most venerable place in India, Benares, one forenoon, after a holy bath in the river Ganga, Sankara was walking through a narrow street chanting *slokas*, as was his wont, when he saw a member of the hunter-clan coming from the opposite direction. The robust rustic was leading a pack of dogs. As the hunter showed no sign of making way, the sage asked the hunter to stand aside.

The man did not obey, but looked Sankara in the eye and asked, "what indeed do you want to stand aside and from what? If your target is this physical body of mine, its contents are no different from yours. And in case you had *Brahman* in mind, that is One

and One only, and that there is nothing other than it to stand aside from. So tell me, what is polluting what?"

As the curious onlookers around were witnessing this verbal exchange, Sankara prostrated before the hunter on the bare ground, and touched his feet in total humility. In the place of the hunter, he saw the divinity and he was thrilled to the core of his being on hearing these words, and accepted the hunter as the one who gave him the greatest message of his life.