

# The Unique Teaching of Sankara

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*When the veil of ignorance is lifted, we become  
instantly free. And supreme knowledge drives  
away ignorance, as light dispels darkness.*

Sankara came into this world to give us knowledge, *Brahma Jnana*. This is not the type of knowledge which we are accustomed to and which is acquired through a process. He took on the role of an acharya to impart transcendental knowledge, *advaita jnana*, to humanity. So he is looked upon as a *Jnana Avatara*.

This knowledge is so unique and distinct from all other forms of knowledge that it is hardly understood by even the mightiest of intellectuals. And even when they grasp a little, it is often misunderstood or misinterpreted.

In the first place Sankara emphasises that *brahmajnana* is never a product (*utpada*), not a thing to be generated by any process whatsoever and as such, cannot have the slightest trace of any *kriya*. He declares unequivocally that *brahma jnana* is beyond all process.

It is not a thing to be modified (*vikarya*), nor a thing to be acquired (*apya*) nor one to be brushed up or purified (*Samskarya*). It shines in its own majesty eternally in every absolutely on the object which is human heart. One has only to known wake up to that reality and find what is always there in its fullness.

## Unproduced Knowledge

The second most important point that Sankara makes is that, knowledge when sought after as something to be acquired, cannot be real. All schools of thought are agreed that freedom must be permanent and enduring, everlasting in its nature.

Yet they forget tht whatever is gained through an effort, movement or modification, i. e. any form of action (*kriya*), is liable to be lost. It is destined to perish. So to those who look upon freedom as something to be attained (*sidhya*), Sankara, by his unerring logic, points out that knowledge is unproduced and eternal in nature, and cannot be acquired.

The third unique point that Sankara conveys to us is the distinction between *dhyana* and *jnana*. While the former is *kartruparatantra*, i.e. dependent on the person or the subject who is meditating, the later is *vastuparatantra*, i.e. dependent absolutely on the object which is known or realized. The person who is meditating may do,undo or modify the object he is meditating upon, according to his will. But there is no such option in the case of *jnana*. It is wholly dependent on the *pramana* or means of knowledge. If the eye, which is the organ of perception, is open, one has performance to behold the object which is before it as it is. The seer or perceiver has no choice in this act of perceptual knowledge and cannot modify it in any way whatsoever.

## Important Distinction

Unfortunately we do not care to take note of this important distinction between *dhyana* and *jnana*. As a result many of us confuse *nididhyasana* with *dhyana*. The Yoga system is engaged in the analysis and control of the mind and has prescribed *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi* for absorption of mind. So *dhyana* is a process for stilling in mind, whereas *nididhyasana* is the last step for knowledge of *sakshatkara* of the ultimate reality or *vastu*, i.e. *Atman* or *Brahman*.

This *Atman* is to be seen, as enjoined by the Upanishad: *atma va are drastavyah*. It

does not ask us to meditate upon *Atman* in any such statement as *atmadhyatavyah*. This *saksat aparoksa*, a direct vision of Reality, is the goal of the *Vedanta*, and lest we are misled in thinking that the *Upanishads* goad us to have this vision through an injunction as *drastavyah*, Sankara corrects us by his illuminating statement that such apparently injunctive statements as *vidhicchayani vacanani*, are meant only to turn the mind away from our natural propensity towards the objects of the world. So it has only a negative value and not a positive directing purpose, as is found in all *vidhivakyas* or injunctive statements.

### **Freedom Here and Now**

The fourth and last point to which Sankara draws our attention is to the supreme fact of freedom attained here and now on the revelation of the unity between *Brahman* and *Atman* through the *vedapramana* or hearing of the *mahavakyas* or great utterances, such as *tattvam asi* or *aham brahmasmi*. Many of us may object that even after hearing about *Brahman* one remains as much a man of the world as ever, to which Sankara emphatically replies thus:

Once one has realised the nature of *Atman* as *Brahman* it is not at all possible to continue as before in the ignorant worldly state of existence because the two are entirely opposed to each other like day and night. The gloom of ignorance having been dispelled through the knowledge generated by the *veda pramana*, the self can no longer have any trace of its previous embodied existence.

### **Embodiment Illusory**

This state of utter freedom is called by the *Upanishads* as the state of bodilessness and on being freed reactions of the pleasant and the unpleasant also vanish: *asariram vava santam pnyaprrye na sprasatah*. Sankara again clarifies this concept of *asariratva*, which we are apt to misconstrue as a state to be achieved after death.

He says emphatically that our embodiment is entirely due to our false knowledge, i.e. misapprehension or ignorance. The moment the veil of ignorance is lifted the sense of our embodied existence is bound to go. We become free here and now and not in some distant date or in a far-off heaven after dropping the body. With such soul-stirring words, breathing his intense conviction born of direct realisation, Sankara refutes all misconceptions about the nature of *asariratva* and brings out its true nature.

This is the ultimate test of all selfrealisation whether or not one has shed his identification with the bodily existence. One who has really got the supreme realisation can never be a man of the world as before; if he is still a man of the world, i.e. if he has still that sense of identification with the body, he has not yet attained the state of identity of the *Atman* and *Brahman*. Sankara, therefore, concludes by lucidly distinguishing between the two states thus:

*tas man na avagatabrahmatmabhavasya yathapurvam samsaritam. Yesya tu yathapurvam samsaritam nasa vayga tebrahmatmabhava ityanavadyam.*

Let us try to ponder deeply over the implication of this unique and wonderful teaching left for us by that great avatara, Sankara. His greatness bestows on all, immediate freedom and cessation from all misery.