

Shankara, the Great Vedantist

By Tara Mata

TWELVE centuries separate us from the time of Shankara, but the influence of his mighty intellect and flawless life is felt increasingly in India and in all lands where men seek guidance for divine inspiration.

Shankara is regarded in India as an incarnation of Shiva, one of the aspects of the three-fold Godhead. The following passage is found in one of Shankara's works:

"I prostrate not to the gods.
One who is beyond all gods
Does not salute a god.

After that stage, one does no prescribed act.
I prostrate again and again to my own Self,
Which is the root of all endeavor. . . .

The Lord facing the south
(*Dakshinamurti, the Lord Shiva*
In the shape of a spiritual teacher)

Himself has composed this work entitled,
'The Definition of One's Own Self',
Which will dispel the darkness of ignorance
And will carry one across the shoreless ocean
Of phenomenal existence. The sky of my mind
Is illumined by the sun of the Master
Who is the Lord Vishnu,

That causes the lotus of realization to blossom."

Shankara was born in 788 AD in the Malabar section of the Deccan, the son of Shivaguru, a Brahman of learning and devotion who placed the child in a Vedic school at an early age. At three, Shankara was familiar with the Puranas and could read the deepest philosophy with understanding. He adopted the life of a wandering ascetic in his eighth year, and soon became the disciple of Govinda, a famous sage who taught from a mountain cave near the Narbuda River. The guru (master) of Govinda was Gaudapada, who also accepted Shankara as his disciple. Three years later, when Shankara was only twelve, he wrote his famous *bhasya* (commentary) on the Brahma-Sutras, the essence of the Upanishads.

Miracles cluster thickly in the story of Shankara, as they do around all supremely enlightened men whose conscious oneness with the Universal has given them mastery over the forces of nature. This son of India, born with Yogic powers, was tenderly attached to his mother, and the tale goes that once, when she was suffering from the intense heat, he caused the river nearby to rise and cool her. Another story concerning his mother is that she opposed his plan to become a wandering *sannyasin*, and that he would not leave without her permission. One day a crocodile seized his foot as he was bathing, and he cried out to his mother that he would not release himself from the crocodile until she had promised to release him from home ties. In this way he won her reluctant consent.

Still another exercise of his Yogic power in connection with his mother occurred at her death. He had promised to return to her should she ever need him, and fulfilled his word by reaching her death-bed in time to give her instruction in divine knowledge. His life as a yogi forbade that he witness her funeral rites; to overcome this difficulty, he caused her body to be consumed before his eyes by fire which spurted from his upraised hand. Another interesting story concerns Shankara's favorite disciple, Sanandana. This young man, hearing his guru's voice calling him from the opposite shore of a river, plunged into the water without hesitancy. Shankara caused a lotus flower to emerge from the dark depths to support each footfall of his disciple across the rushing river. From that day on, Sanandana was known as Padmapada, "lotus-foot." This same disciple later wrote a

bhasya which was accidentally burnt. Shankara had read it once and, to Padmapada's joy, recited it faithfully from memory while the disciple wrote it down. It has been preserved for us as the Pancapadika, a commentary on the Brahma-Sutras. Shankara is unique among the outstanding spiritual teachers of the world in that he was a great scholar—"mightiest mind that ever dwelt in human body," in the opinion of Douglas Grant Duff Ainslie, the English philosopher—and left many written works behind him. He did not, however, claim to be the originator of any new system of philosophy or plan of salvation, but regarded the ancient Vedas as the infallible, divinely inspired repository of Truth. He writes: "The Vedas are the highest authority, either because they are beginningless or because they are the utterances of the Supreme Lord. Knowledge, therefore, cannot result either by itself or from any other authority. The Vedic word which does not depend on any other proof, but on which depend proofs, is the only source of the knowledge of Brahman. As no authority is equal to the eye in the perception of forms, so no authority is equal to the Vedas in the realization of that which is beyond perception."

Shankara's main works are his commentaries on the first ten Upanishads, and on the Brahma-Sutras and Bhagavad Gita. These bhasyas earned him the title of Acharya, "great spiritual teacher," (Shankaracharya), and he is considered the foremost Vedantist, whose authority exceeds that of Ramanuja, Vallabha and other celebrated Vedic commentators.

Vedanta means "end of the Vedas" and refers expressly to the Upanishads, which constitute not only the last part of the Vedic texts but also summarize the final and ultimate meaning of the entire scriptures. The principal teachings of the Vedanta, and hence of the Upanishads, were formulated by Vyasa into a collection of aphorisms called the Brahma-Sutras. These sutras have formed the subject-matter of various commentaries by different writers, but the first *bhasya* on them which is available to modern students, that of Shankara, is by far the most famous, due to its profound and subtle reasoning and power of illumination. Because of this, the Vedanta philosophy has come to mean the Brahma-Sutra interpretation of Shankara.

The great Acharya insisted on a strict non-dualistic, absolutist interpretation of the Vedas, and credited his own guru, Gaudapada, with the recovery of the monistic (*advaita*) creed of the Upanishads, which had been misinterpreted for centuries by commentators who professed to find grounds in the traditional scriptures for belief in dualism. According to Vedanta, individual souls (*jiva*) are but illusory manifestations of One Soul or pure consciousness the Brahman; according to the Sankhya philosophy, *jivas* are true and numerous. Sankhya cosmology also claims the reality of *Prakriti* (root principle of matter); Vedanta denies reality to anything except Brahman.

Shankara expounded his teacher Gaudapada's monistic views on the Vedas with additional insight of his own, and Shankara's bhasyas, rather than Gaudapada's, have been the basis for a host of additional commentaries by later Vedantists. But Shankara himself wrote a bhasya on Gaudapada's work, and at the conclusion, he says that

"He adores by falling at the feet
Of that great guru, the adored of his adored,
Who on finding all the people
Sinking in the ocean
Made dreadful by the crocodiles of rebirth,
Out of kindness for all men,
By churning the great ocean of the Veda
By his great rod of wisdom,
Recovered what lay deep
In the heart of the Veda,
Hardly attainable even by the immortal gods."

In another place, Shankara eulogizes the guru thus:

"There is no known comparison
In all the three worlds for the venerable teacher

That bestows knowledge.
If the philosopher's stone be assumed as such,
It could only turn iron into gold,
But not into another philosopher's stone.
The venerable teacher, on the other hand,
Creates equality with himself
In the disciple that takes refuge at his feet.
He is therefore peerless,
Nay, even transcendental."

Shankara reorganized the ancient monastic Order of Swamis. The title of Swami can rightfully be bestowed on a disciple only by one who is himself a Swami, tracing his title from Shankara's time and following the life prescribed by the great Vedantist. Shankara traveled about from place to place in India, meeting in public debate all the eminent sages of his time, and converting Buddhist, Sankhya and Mimamsa philosophers to his own monistic view of the Vedas. It is said that Vyasa¹, author of the Brahma-Sutras, returned to earth in the guise of a Brahman scholar in order to debate with Shankara, thus testing the latter's Vedic knowledge. But even a superhuman adversary could find no flaws in the young Acharya's exposition, and Shankara was admitted the victor.

An interesting story comes in here. At Shankara's birth, his horoscope was cast, in accordance with the ancient custom of the Hindus. The astrologer found that the boy was allotted but sixteen years of life. A short time later, a great Rishi announced that Shankara's years would stretch to thirty-two.

When the Acharya met and conquered Vyasa in debate, the latter declared that, because of this great victory, Shankara's life span would be doubled, In this way, the predictions both of the astrologer and the Rishi were justified. The disputation with Vyasa presumably took place before or during Shankara's sixteenth year. It is interesting to note that both Jesus and Shankara had incarnations of thirty-two years each.

One more extraordinary story of Shankara must be told. The great Vedantist went to Benares to meet in debate the eminent Mimamsa scholars of the day. Of these Kumarila was the chief, but he was then at death's door. He arranged for his own most distinguished follower, Mandana, the author of Vidhiviveka, to meet Shankara. The Mimamsist was so much impressed by the superiority of the Vedanta expounded by Shankara that he became a great Vedantist himself, taking the new name of Suresvara. His wife, one of the greatest women of India, a veritable *Saraswati* (goddess of wisdom), acted as umpire during the debate. Afterwards, she herself engaged Shankara in controversy. Confident that the young ascetic knew nothing of the science and art of earthly love, however wise he undoubtedly was in Bhakti or divine love, she questioned him on intimate matters beyond his ken. He admitted his temporary defeat and asked for a month's grace. Committing his body to the care of his disciples, Shankara directed his consciousness into the corpse of King Amaraka, even then on its way to the funeral pyre. The mourners were overjoyed to see the King awake to life, and bore him back to his throne and Queen. A month later, the borrowed body of Amaraka knew the vivifying consciousness of Shankara no more, and the great sage, returned to his own earthly habitation, met and answered the *Saraswati* whose questions had previously confounded him.

Out of this experience, Shankara wrote a famous treatise on that branch of astrological science dealing with the conception, evolution and reproduction of the human species under certain categorical conditions laid down by the ancient Rishis. It expounds certain principles regarding the structure of the human organism, its mental and moral qualities, aesthetic, physical and psychological tendencies; interrelation of the sexes, and attraction and repulsion of persons born under various stars. Shankara also dealt with this subject in his commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

He took final leave of his body in his thirty-second year, in the city of Kanchi. His disciple Anandagiri describes the end thus: "As he was seated he absorbed his gross body into

the subtle one and became Existence, then destroying this subtle one he became pure reason; then, attaining to the world of *Ishwara* (the personal God), with full happiness completed like a perfect circle, he passed on into the Intelligence which pervades the universe, and in this he still exists. The Brahmins of the place and his pupils and their pupils, reciting the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma-Sutras, then excavated a grave in a very clean place and making due offerings to his body raised a tomb." The unpolluted body of a Yogi is considered in India to be beyond the need of the purifying funeral fire.

Some of the writings of Shankara have been made available to the western world through the translations of Radhakrishnan, Max Muller and other scholars. An English translation by S. Venkataramanan, entitled Selected Works of Sri Shankaracharya, (Natesan & Co., Madras), contains the famous Century of Verses by the great Vedantist. Some extracts from this work are given below.

Shankara pointed out that the study of Vedanta was not for everyone, but only for those who were filled with a true desire for emancipation. Such a man should have the following qualifications: (1) true discernment, an understanding of the difference between the transitory and the eternal, (2) desirelessness for rewards both in this world and the next, and (3) faith, concentration, self-control, patience, peace and longing for liberation.

Spotless freedom from desires means dissatisfaction in respect of all objects.

Discrimination of the real means the determination that the nature of the self is eternal while all that is perceptible is otherwise. The constant eradication of mental impressions is called control of mind. The restraint of external activities is called control of body.

Extreme abstention is the turning away from the objects of enjoyment. The endurance of all kinds of pain is called resignation, which is beneficial. Devoted belief in the sayings of the Vedas and of the teacher is called faith. The concentration of the mind on the Reality that is the ultimate goal is called balance. Desire for liberation is the name given to the intense thought, "How and when, O Lord, shall liberation from the bonds of *samsara* (phenomenal existence) come to me?" Whoever desires his own welfare should, after acquiring the above-mentioned qualifications, commence the inquiry with a view to the attainment of knowledge.

Knowledge cannot spring up by any other means than inquiry, just as the perception of things is impossible without light. "Who am I? How was this universe born? Who is its maker? What is its material cause?" This is the kind of inquiry referred to.

Whatever is made of gold retains forever the nature of gold. So, too, all that is born of Brahman is of the nature of Brahman.

Just as one sees not the separate existence of the pot when he knows that it is clay, or the illusive existence of silver when he knows that it is mother-of-pearl, so, too, does one see not the condition of the individual soul when he knows Brahman. Just as a pot is only a name of clay, and an earring, of gold, so too is the individual soul a name of the Supreme.

When the knowledge of the Reality has sprung up, there can be no fruits of past actions to be experienced, owing to the unreality of the body, in the same way as there can be no dream after waking. Action done in past lives is called *prarabdha*. But that has no existence at all at any time, since past life is itself unreal. Just as the dream body is a mere illusion, so is this physical body also. How can an illusory thing have life, and how, if there is no life, can there be past action? As clay is the efficient cause of the pot, so is ignorance declared by the Vedanta to be the efficient cause of the universe. When that ignorance itself is destroyed, where then is this universe?

Without constant practice, the self that is pure existence and knowledge cannot be realized. Therefore, one who desires knowledge and seeks liberation should meditate on Brahman for a long time.

The control of the senses (*yama*), the control of the mind (*niyama*), the avoidance of unreality (*tyaga*), spiritual silence (*mauna*), place (*desa*), time (*kala*), posture (*asana*), the subduing of the root-cause (*nulabandha*), the equipoise of the body (*deha-samyak*),

the firmness of vision (*driksthiti*), the control of life-forces (*pranayama*), the holding of consciousness (*dharmana*), self-contemplation (*dhana*) and absorption (*samadhi*)—these, in order, are said to be the steps.

One should see the cause in the effect, and should then eliminate the effect. The cause, as such, will vanish of its own accord. What then remains, that the sage becomes. For, one soon becomes that which he contemplates with extreme assiduity and absolute certainty. This should be understood by the illustration of the wasp and the worm.² Feeling, while going about, that he is a wave of the ocean of the self; while sitting, that he is a bead strung on the thread of universal consciousness; while perceiving objects of sense, that he is realizing himself by perceiving the self; while sleeping, that he is drowned in the ocean of bliss—he who, inwardly constant, spends his whole life thus is, among all men, the real seeker of liberation.

Fire does not touch wet fuel even exceptionally, but only fuel that has been dried in the sun. So the fire of knowledge does not touch the mind that is wet with attachment, but only the mind that is dried with non-attachment.

Water taken from the sea, when solidified, goes by the name of salt; when it is thrown back into the sea and is dissolved, it loses its name and form. So does the individual soul merge into the Supreme Self. At the same time, the mind is dissolved into the moon, speech into fire, sight into the sun, blood and semen into water, and hearing into the (four) directions.

Compared with other means, knowledge is the only direct means to liberation. As cooking is impossible without fire, so is liberation impossible without knowledge. Ritual cannot dispel ignorance, because they are not mutually contradictory. But knowledge surely destroys ignorance, as light the densest darkness.

One should separate the grain of the pure inner self from the chaff of the body and other sheaths by the threshing of reason.

Passions, desires, happiness, misery, etc., exercise their function when the consciousness is present, and do not exist in deep sleep when the consciousness is absent. They belong, therefore, to the consciousness and not to the self.

The very nature of the self being knowledge, it does not depend, for a knowledge of itself, on any other knowledge, in the same way as a light does not require another light to reveal itself.

The flame of knowledge that arises by the constant churning of meditation on the wood of the self will completely burn away the fuel of ignorance.

Brahman being known, all this universe will become known, in the same way as all earthen jars, pots, etc. become known when the clay, which is their cause, becomes known.

¹One of the seven *Chirajivis*, literally, "beings endowed with longevity: whose manifestation is not confined to any one epoch.

²A popular belief that the worm in the wasp's nest develops into a wasp by its constant expectation of the wasp's return.