Seeking What's Real
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INSIGHT

Seeking What's Real

A tribute to Adi Shankara, the precocious ninth-century Indian philosopher

SRI ADI SHANKARA IS IRREFUTABLY ONE OF THE MOST significant historical figures of India. His life story, writings and sayings were diligently documented, and tales of miracles and fantastic feats fill his biographies. With devotion, a trenchant intellect and an unyielding will, he led and gave lasting direction to an India-wide Hindu renaissance that countered the prevailing Buddhist influences of the day. He reformed Hindu lineages that he deemed errant and unified splintered ones by revitalizing and reaffirming the message of the Vedas. He was an ardent Hindu missionary, an exemplary ascetic and a formidable opponent to all who challenged his thinking. He had accomplished more by age sixteen than most achieve in a lifetime, including his most significant works--lofty commentaries on major Hindu scriptures. These commentaries and his expository writings are so highly regarded that every philosopher since him has felt compelled to counterpoint their credo with his. Shankara's persistent logic and stunning insights were fortified by an overwhelming compassion for every human soul's plight. His words and deeds instantly reveal him as one who knew the pinnacle, source and cause of all circumstance. This Self-knowledge endowed him with the authority to lead and to effect changes. His reach was perhaps

the greatest of any swami in Indian history, spanning the entire sub-continent and every strata of Hindu society. Tomes have been written about him. We offer, by way of introduction, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's tribute from his book, Indian Philosophy. Hear now, how even today, Shankara changes lives and leads minds toward the Absolute.

It is impossible to read Shankara's writings, packed as they are with serious and subtle thinking, without being conscious that one is in contact with a mind of a very fine penetration and profound spirituality. With his acute feeling of the immeasurable world, his stirring gaze into the abysmal mysteries of spirit, his unswerving resolve to say neither more nor less than what could be proved, Shankara stands out as a heroic figure of the first rank in the somewhat motley crowd of the religious thinkers of mediaeval India. His philosophy stands forth complete, needing neither a before nor an after. It has a self-justifying wholeness characteristic of works of art. It expounds its own presuppositions, is ruled by its own end and holds all its elements in a stable, reasoned equipoise. The list of qualifications which Shankara lays down for a student of philosophy brings out how, for him, philosophy is not an intellectual pursuit but a dedicated life. The first, "discrimination between things eternal and non-eternal," demands of the student the power of thought, which helps him to distinguish between the unchanging reality and the changing world. "Renunciation of the enjoyment of the reward here and in the other world" is the second requirement. The seeker after truth must refuse to abase himself before things as they are and develop an austere detachment characteristic of the superior mind. Moral preparation is insisted on as the third requisite and, lastly, longing for liberation is mentioned.

Shankara finds the basis of truth in the immediate self certainty which is untouched by any of the doubts cast on other things. The Self is prior to the stream of consciousness, prior to truth and falsehood, prior to reality and illusion, good and evil. "All means of knowledge exists only as dependent on self-experience, and since such experience is its own proof, there is no necessity for proving the existence of Self...The very existence of understanding and its functions presupposes an intelligence known as the Self, which is different from them, which is self-established and which they subserve." Atman cannot be doubted, "for it is the essential nature of him who denies it."

For Shankara, philosophy is an exposition of the eternal nature of reality, or the innermost essence of the world. He presents to us the true ideal of philosophy, which is not so much knowledge as wisdom, not so much logical learning as spiritual freedom. For Shankara, as for some of the greatest thinkers of the world, Plato and Plotinus, Spinoza and Hegel, philosophy is the austere vision of eternal truth, majestic in its freedom from the petty cares of man's paltry life. Through the massive and at the same time subtle dialectic of Shankara there shows forth a vivid, emotional temperament, without which philosophy tends to become a mere game of logic. A master of the strictest logic, he is also master of a noble and animated poetry which belongs to another order. The rays of his genius have illumined the dark places of thought and soothed the sorrows of the most forlorn heart. While his philosophy fortifies and consoles many, there are, of course, those to whom it seems to be an abyss of contradiction and darkness. But whether we agree or differ, the penetrating light of his mind never leaves us where we were.

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Thirty-Two Years

IN 788 IN KALADI, KERALA, A BRAHMIN couple's prayers to Siva for a child were answered with the birth of Adi Shankara.1 His prodigious intellect shone early, and he entered a gurukula at the age of five. By eight, he excelled in Vedic knowledge, counseled scholars and even hosted Kerala's King Rajasekhara.2 Some of his most famous devotional hymns were composed in those early years, and his name and fame began to spread. But his deepest longing was to know the truth not found in books.

With his mother's reluctant blessings,3 eight-year-old Shankara sought out his guru, Govindapada, disciple of Gaudapada, and renounced4 the world. After training the youth in Omkarnath for three years, Govindapada sent Shankara to Banaras to write commentaries on the scriptures. Miraculous tales trailed him as he traveled, such as his saving a village from a swollen river by catching the flood-waters in his water-pot.5 He composed Sanskrit hymns at every occasion. A chance encounter with a chandala (outcaste) on a Banaras street6 revealed his own residual caste bias and inspired the famous Manisha Panchaka, wherein he vowed to see the Self in everyone. By age 16 he had completed his world-famous commentaries on the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita, and he began his travels throughout India.

Shankara met with students, scholars and leaders of the

prevailing philosophical and devotional sects. By debating and promulgating his pure monistic vision, he unified divergent factions. It was he who revived and empowered the Smarta Sampradaya, one of the four most prominent denominations of Hinduism. With his renunciate initiates, Padmapada, Totaka, Hastamalaka and Sureshwara, he established the lineage's cardinal monastaries at Sringeri (where he witnessed a cobra giving shade to a frog),7 Badri, Dwarka and Puri. At 32, his work done, the remarkable renunciate disappeared into the Himalayan hills at Kedarnath.8 His life ennobled Hinduism in deep and enduring ways.

Insights and Invocations

Selections from Sri Adi Shankara's noble teachings

Over 300 literary works are ascribed to Shankara. Some are poetic hymns, others are instructive and the rest are scriptural analysis, all written in Sanskrit. Most renowned are his critical commentaries on the Brahma Sutras, the twelve Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Sanat Sujatiyam. While his devotional outpourings are among the most oft-recited of Hindu chants, he is associated more with his austere philosophical theses. Here is offered a sparse sampling of both worlds.

TO GANESHA

Maha Ganesha Pancharatna Stotra, 1; 5

I bow to Vinayaka, who with glee holds a half-eaten modakam, who is the ever-present means of liberation, who has the moon as an ear ornament, who protects all the worlds, who is the single leader for those who have been left leaderless, who destroyed the elephant demon and who swiftly removes the blemishes of those who bow to Him

TO LORD VISHNU

Vishnu Bhujangam, 1

I salute the immaculate, auspicious, tranquil, without beginning or end, life of the universe, unbounded by time, space or objectivity, who is known through the Vedas, whose effulgence pales the light of millions of suns and moons risen together, who is invisible, who is neither heat nor cold, who is pure knowledge.

TO LORD HANUMAN

Sri Hanumat Bhujangam 14-15

Disease, decay and other troubles weigh me down and give me sorrow. You are of indomitable valor, O compassionate one, grant me devotion to thy feet and love towards you. I salute Him who is generous, who is ever devoted to Sri Rama, whose deeds are great, who appears with a mace to his enemies, who is ever serene in attitude, the destroyer of darkness whose body is mighty.

TO GODDESS GANGA

Sri Gangashtakam, 7

You have paths as many as the eyes can see; and when your waves come to sight, how can the waves of samsara remain? You are yellowish, having been to the dwelling place of Vishnu who wears yellow silk. O Mother Ganga, if my slender body falls on your lap, then even attainment of the status of Indra appears small in comparison.

TO GODDESS ANNAPURNA

Annapurnashtakam 11-12

Beloved Shakti of Siva, fullness everlasting and fully

manifest as this food; O, Mother of the universe, nourish us with this gift of food so that we may attain knowledge, dispassion and spiritual perfection. Goddess Parvati is my mother. God Mahesvara is my father. All devotees of Siva are my family. All three worlds are my home.

COUNSEL TO SEEKERS

Sadhana Panchakam, 2; 5

Seek the company of the pious. Develop strong faith in God. Acquire with determination peace and divine qualities. Approach a pious one learned in the scriptures. Worship at his sandals daily. Concentrate upon the highest Brahman. Perceive everywhere the all-pervading Self. See this world as falsified by It. Identify the Self in you with Parabrahman and stay in the state of experience divine.

TO THE SELF BEYOND

Dasa Sloki,Siva Kevaloham 9

I am indivisible, one by nature, all-pervading like space. All this universe, being other than the Self, is unreal; for the Self alone is all-inclusive, constitutes the ultimate goal, is self-established and self-dependent. I am that One, auspicious and pure, that alone remains.

Sankara's two primary philosophical dissertations are the Upadesasahasra and the Viveka Chudamani. The latter, the Crest-Jewel of Discrimination, is considered by many his magnum opus. In it Shankara elaborates the very nature of Reality as he dissects and reveals the subtle essence of the world, body, mind and soul. It is a profound and lengthy treatise. The excerpt below offers a glimpse of his teachings on

the soul.

THE ATMAN

Crest Jewel Of Discrimination

There is a self-existent Reality, which is the basis of our consciousness of ego. That Reality is the witness of the three states of our consciousness, and is distinct from the five bodily coverings. That Reality is the knower in all states of consciousness--waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep. It is aware of the presence or absence of the mind and its functions. It is the Atman. That Reality sees everything by its own light. No one sees it. It gives intelligence to the mind and the intellect, but no one gives it light. That Reality pervades the universe, but no one penetrates it. It alone shines. The universe shines with its reflected light.

Because of its presence, the body, senses, mind and intellect apply themselves to their respective functions, as though obeying its command. Its nature is eternal consciousness. It knows all things, from the sense of ego to the body itself. It is the knower of pleasure and pain and of the sense objects. It knows everything objectively, just as a man knows the objective existence of a jar.

This is the Atman, the Supreme Being, the ancient. It never ceases to experience the infinite joy. It is always the same. It is consciousness itself. The organs and vital energies function under its command. Here, within this body, in the pure mind, in the secret chamber of intelligence, in the infinite universe within the heart, the Atman shines in its captivating splendor like a noonday sun. By its light, the universe is revealed. It is

the knower of the activities of the mind and of the individual man. It is the witness of all the actions of the body, the sense organs and the vital energy. It seems to be identified with all these, just as fire appears identified with an iron ball, but it neither acts nor is subject to the slightest change. The Atman is birthless and deathless. It neither grows nor decays. It is unchangeable, eternal. It does not dissolve when the body dissolves. Does the ether cease to exist when the jar that enclosed it is broken?

The Atman is distinct from Maya, the primal cause, and from Her effect, the universe. The nature of the Atman is pure consciousness. The Atman reveals this entire universe of mind and matter. It cannot be defined. In and through the various states of consciousness--waking, dreaming and sleeping--it maintains our unbroken awareness of identity. It manifests itself as the witness of the intelligence.

With a controlled mind and an intellect which is made pure and tranquil, you must realize the Atman directly, within yourself. Know the Atman as the real "I." Thus you cross the shoreless ocean of worldliness, whose waves are birth and death. Live always in the knowledge of identity with Brahman and be blessed.

CHANTS ARE DRAWN FROM SHANKARA THE MISSIONARY: 1978, CENTRAL CHINMAYA MISSION TRUST, MUMBAI. THE ATMAN IS FROM VIVEKA CHUDAMANI: TRANSLATED BY SWAMI PRABHAVANANDA AND CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD, 1947, VEDANTA PRESS, HOLLYWOOD.