

A TEACHING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Sankara

Sankara¹ is regarded as the driving force behind the 8th century Advaita Vedanta movement. It was he who returned Indian religion to its traditional Vedic base after a period of domination by Buddhism; it was he who gave birth to the Shankaracharya lineage; it was he who carved out the path of non-dual philosophy from the Vedas; it was he who put the emphasis on the way of knowledge (*jnana*). What better authority then to look to for the purest expression of *jnana*²?

The Vedas are a mixed bag philosophically, containing as they do non-dualist, dualist, and theist material. Sankara's achievement was to tease out a single golden thread from this tangle, one that begins and ends with *Brahman*, the supreme spirit, the Absolute. *Brahman* is seen as composing, perfusing or underlying the whole universe. Sankara has a particular view of the relation between *Brahman* and the universe, to which we should return at a later date. But from the practical point of view, it is the relation between the individual self, the *jiva* or the *atman*, and *Brahman* that matters. Sankara's golden thread knits together passages from the Vedas to say that they are the same: *atman* is the same as *Brahman*. That is the rock on which Advaita is founded.

In the Chandogya Upanishad there is what seems at first sight to be a light-hearted story in which a son returns to his father after studying all the Vedas for 12 years, rather full of himself. The father says:

'Svetaketu, my dear, since now you are conceited, think yourself learned, and are proud, did you also ask for that teaching whereby what has not been heard of becomes heard of, what has not been thought of becomes thought of, what has not been understood becomes understood?'

'How pray sir is that teaching?'

'Just as, my dear, by one piece of clay everything made of clay may be known – the modification is merely a verbal distinction, a name; the reality is just "clay".'

The father goes on to explain the creation and the threefold nature of things and of man, and he ends with a series of nine examples to explain what is the essence of things, what lies behind physical forms. Here is an example:

'Bring hither a fig from there.'

'Here it is, sir.'

'Divide it.'

'It is divided, sir.'

'What do you see there?'

¹ Various: Samkara, Shankara, Shankaracharya, adi Shankara(charya).

² This paper draws on a number of sources attributed to Sankara that modern (mostly non-Indian) historians believe to be later additions to the Sankara corpus, especially the *Vivekachudamani*, the *Crest Jewel of Wisdom*. However, the *Crest Jewel* is readily accessible and much of the subject matter of this paper which is found there has parallels in 'genuine', but less accessible, works.

‘These rather fine seeds, sir.’

‘Of these, please divide one.’

‘It is divided, sir.’

‘What do you see there?’

‘Nothing at all, sir.’

Then he said to him: ‘Verily, my dear, that finest essence which you do not perceive – verily, my dear, from that finest essence this great Nya-rodha (sacred fig) tree thus arises.

Believe me, my dear’ said he, ‘that which is the finest essence – this whole world has that as its soul. That is Reality. That is *Atman* (Soul). That thou art, Svetaketu.’

‘Do you, sir, cause me to understand even more.’

‘So be it, my dear,’ said he.

The last three remarks are repeated at the end of each example of an essence. The phrase ‘That thou art’ (*Tat tvam asi*) is one of the defining sayings of Advaita. Sankara analyzes what is meant by each of the three words: who or what is ‘that’, and ‘thou’, and what does ‘art’ imply about their relationship.

Another defining saying, from the *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad*, is ‘*aham brahmasmi*’, ‘I am *Brahman*’. Again there are questions about what ‘I’ and ‘am’ mean.

Finally there is Sankara’s own expression of the relation between the Self and the Absolute. There are a number of versions of this, such as ‘The *Atman* is one with *Brahman*’, but the one most often quoted, from the *Brahmanjnanavali*, is:

brahma satyam jagan mithya jivo brahmaiva na parah

Brahman is real, the universe is false. The self is *Brahman* itself and not different.

This is a powerful saying. As the first line of *Brahmanjnanavali* states: ‘by hearing this work just once knowledge of *Brahman* is attained, enables all to obtain liberation.’

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The fact that we do not experience ourselves as *Brahman* is, according to Sankara, because of *avidya*, ignorance or nescience (false knowledge), and it is nescience that has to be removed. We have to realise that what we take to be our world is an illusion, and to understand *that* needs knowledge: ‘Only knowledge can eradicate ignorance.’ Therefore part of the approach is to try to separate what is *Brahman* and what is non-*Brahman*. It is often referred to as the negative approach, *neti, neti* – not this, not this – as found in the *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad*.

What does this mean in practice? Sankara takes the view that we project on to the world our image of it, and this is easily understood by observing how our view of the world changes with fluctuations of our mood, even a landscape looks entirely different according to the internal weather. One has the impression that this is the main drive in Sankara’s practical approach: to experience the world as it is, close to its reality; to encounter *Brahman*. This would change everything.

That is the exterior work of separating *Brahman* from non-*Brahman*. Similarly there is the interior work of separating what is *Atman* from what is non-*Atman*. Sankara accepts the view that the *Atman* is

surrounded by five sheaths, and that the nature of the work is to strip away these sheaths. How is this to be achieved? Part of it is through discrimination and detachment, but that is by no means all. One biographer writes: 'In Sankara's philosophy while *jnana* is the immediate means of liberation, it requires a prior purification of the mind of which *bhakti* is the prime means.'

Something of the *bhakti* element is found in statements like the following:

The truth of *Brahman* may be understood intellectually. But the ego-sense is deep-rooted and powerful, for it has existed from beginningless time. It creates the impression that "I am the actor, I am he who experiences". This impression causes our bondage to rebirth and death. It can be removed only by the earnest effort to live constantly in union with *Brahman*.

Know your true *Atman* as the witness of the mind and intellect, and of the thought-waves that arise in them. Raise one single wave of thought constantly: "I am *Brahman*". Thus you will free Yourself from identification with non-*Atman*.

It is a hundred times better to reflect on the truth of *Brahman* than merely to hear about it from the scriptures. And meditation is a hundred thousand times better than reflection. But *nirvikalpa samadhi* is infinitely the best of all.

In several of his works Sankara writes page after page of exultant tributes to *Brahman*; pages full of joy. Sankara himself is said to have worshipped Siva and Vishnu, and to have practised Tantra Yoga. This no austere intellectual; the knowledge component is knowledge of the Self and it is understood that devotional and physical practices shore up the *jnana* approach.

Yet, Sankara's way, as prescribed by him, is too extreme for the householder: killing the ego, withdrawal from ordinary life, obsession with escape from the cycle of rebirth, repulsion with the ordinary pleasures, the body. But the *jnana* way is clarified in his writings: detachment, discrimination, purification through meditation, devotion to *Brahman*.

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It is highly recommended to read through the whole of the Crest Jewel of Wisdom, but here are some sample passages:

Of the steps to liberation, the first is declared to be complete detachment from all things which are non-eternal. Then comes the practice of tranquillity, self-control, and forbearance. And then the entire giving-up of all actions which are done from personal, selfish desire. . .

Then the disciple must hear the truth of the *Atman*, and reflect on it, and meditate upon it constantly, without pause, for a long time. Thus the wise man reaches that highest state, in which consciousness of subject and object is dissolved away and the infinite unitary consciousness alone remains—and he knows the bliss of Nirvana while still living on earth.

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. . .

The *Atman's* bondage to the non-*Atman* springs from ignorance. It has no external cause. It is said to be beginningless. It will continue indefinitely until a man becomes enlightened. As long as a man remains in this bondage it subjects him to a long train of miseries – birth, death, sickness, decrepitude, and so forth.

This bondage cannot be broken by weapons, or by wind, or by fire, or by millions of acts. Nothing but the sharp sword of knowledge can cut through this bondage. It is forged by discrimination and made keen by purity of heart, through divine grace.

A man must faithfully and devotedly fulfill the duties of life as the scriptures prescribe. This purifies his heart. A man whose heart is pure realizes the supreme *Atman*. Thereby he destroys his bondage to the world, root and all.

Wrapped in its five coverings, beginning with the physical, which are the products of its own *Maya*, the *Atman* remains hidden, as the water of a pond is hidden by a veil of scum.

When the scum is removed, the pure water is clearly seen. It takes away a man's thirst, cools him immediately and makes him happy.

When all the five coverings are removed, the pure *Atman* is revealed. It is revealed as God dwelling within; as unending, unalloyed bliss; as the supreme and self-luminous Being.

The wise man who seeks liberation from bondage must discriminate between *Atman* and non-*Atman*. In this way, he can realize the *Atman*, which is Infinite Being, Infinite Wisdom and Infinite Love. Thus he finds happiness.

Brahman dwells within the shrine of the heart – the eternal existence, the supreme, the one without a second, standing apart from the gross and subtle aspects of this universe. The man who dwells within this shrine, united with *Brahman*, is no longer subject to rebirth and death.

The truth of *Brahman* may be understood intellectually. But the ego-sense is deep-rooted and powerful, for it has existed from beginningless time. It creates the impression that "I am the actor, I am he who experiences". This impression causes our bondage to rebirth and death. It can be removed only by the earnest effort to live constantly in union with *Brahman*. The sages define liberation as freedom from all such impressions, and hence from the cravings which are caused by them.

It is ignorance that causes our sense of identity with the body, the sense-organs and everything else which is not the *Atman*. He is a wise man who overcomes this ignorance through devotion to the *Atman*.

Know your true *Atman* as the witness of the mind and intellect, and of the thought-waves that arise in them. Raise one single wave of thought constantly: "I am *Brahman*". Thus you will free Yourself from identification with non-*Atman*.

Man's life of bondage to the world of birth and death has many causes. The root of them all is the ego, the first-begotten child of ignorance.

As long as a man identifies himself with this wicked ego, there can be no possibility of liberation. For liberation is its very opposite.

Once freed from this eclipsing demon of an ego, man regains his true nature, just as the moon shines forth when freed from the darkness of an eclipse. He becomes pure, infinite, eternally blissful and self-luminous. . .

Utterly destroy the ego. Control the many waves of distraction which it raises in the mind. Discern the reality and realize "I am That".

You are pure consciousness, the witness of all experiences. Your real nature is joy. Cease this very moment to identify yourself with the ego, the doer, which is created by ignorance. Its intelligence is only apparent, a reflection of the *Atman*, which is pure consciousness. It robs you of peace and joy in the *Atman*. By identifying yourself with it, you have fallen into the snare of the world – the miseries of birth, decay and death.

You are the *Atman*, the infinite Being, the pure, unchanging consciousness, which pervades everything. Your nature is bliss and your glory is without stain. Because you identify yourself with the ego, you are tied to birth and death. Your bondage has no other cause.

The disciple listened attentively to the words of his teacher. He learned the supreme truth of *Brahman*, to which the scriptures bear witness, and confirmed it by the aid of his own reasoning powers. He then withdrew his senses from the objective world and concentrated his mind upon the *Atman*. His body appeared as immovable as a rock.

His mind was completely absorbed in *Brahman*. After a while, he returned to normal consciousness. Then, out of the fullness of his joy, he spoke:

The ego has disappeared. I have realized my identity with *Brahman* and so all my desires have melted away. I have risen above my ignorance and my knowledge of this seeming universe. What is this joy that I feel? Who shall measure it? I know nothing but joy, limitless, unbounded!

The ocean of *Brahman* is full of nectar—the joy of the *Atman*. The treasure I have found there cannot be described in words. The mind cannot conceive of it. My mind fell like a hailstone into that vast expanse of *Brahman*'s ocean. Touching one drop of it, I melted away and became one with *Brahman*. And now, though I return to human consciousness, I abide in the joy of the *Atman*.