

The Advaita Philosophy Of Sri Sankara Acharya by Swami Shivananda

The first systematic exponent of the Advaita is Gaudapada, who is the Parama-Guru (preceptor's preceptor) of Sri Sankara. Govinda was the disciple of Gaudapada. He became the preceptor of Sankara. Gaudapada has given the central teaching of Advaita Vedanta in his celebrated Mandukya Karikas. But it was Sankara who brought forth the final beautiful form of Advaita philosophy, and gave perfection and finishing touch to it. Carefully go through Sri Sankara's commentaries on the principal Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad-Gita. You will clearly understand his Advaita philosophy. The commentary on the Vedanta Sutras by Sankara is known as Sariraka Bhashya.

The teachings of Sankara can be summed up in half a verse: “*Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya Jivo Brahmaiva Na Aparah*—Brahman (the Absolute) is alone real; this world is unreal; and the Jiva or the individual soul is non-different from Brahman.” This is the quintessence of his philosophy.

Brahman—The One Without A Second

The Atman is self-evident (Svatah-siddha). It is not established by extraneous proofs. It is not possible to deny the Atman, because It is the very essence of the one who denies It. The Atman is the basis of all kinds of knowledge, presuppositions and proofs. Self is within, Self is without; Self is before, Self is behind; Self is on the right, Self is on the left; Self is above and Self is below.

Brahman is not an object, as It is Adrisya, beyond the reach of the eyes. Hence the Upanishads declare: “*Neti Neti*—not this, not this, not that.” This does not mean that Brahman is a negative concept, or a metaphysical abstraction, or a nonentity, or a void. It is not another. It is all-full, infinite, changeless, self-existent, self-delight, self-knowledge and self-bliss. It is Svarupa, essence. It is the essence of the knower. It is the Seer (Drashta), Transcendent (Turiya) and Silent Witness (Sakshi).

Sankara's Supreme Brahman is impersonal, Nirguna (without Gunas or attributes). It is above all needs and desires. It is always the Witnessing Subject. It can never become an object as It is beyond the reach of the senses. Brahman is non-dual, one without a second. It has no other beside Sat-Chit-Ananda constitute the very essence or Svarupa of Brahman.

The Nirguna Brahman of Sankara is impersonal. It becomes a personal God or Saguna Brahman only through Its association with Maya. Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman are not two different Brahman. Nirguna Brahman is not the contrast, antithesis or opposite of Saguna Brahman. The same Nirguna Brahman appears as Saguna Brahman for the pious worship of devotees. It is the same Truth from two different points of view.

The World—A Relative Reality

The world is not an illusion according to Sankara. The world is relatively real (Vyavaharika Satta), while Brahman is absolutely real (Paramarthika Satta).

The world is the product of Maya or Avidya. The unchanging Brahman appears

as the changing world through Maya. Maya is a mysterious indescribable power of the Lord which hides the real and manifests itself as the unreal: Maya is not real, because it vanishes when you attain knowledge of the Eternal. It is not unreal also, because it exists till knowledge dawns in you. The superimposition of the world on Brahman is due to Avidya or ignorance.

Nature Of The Jiva And The Means To Moksha

The Jiva identifies itself with the body, mind and the senses, when it is deluded by Avidya or ignorance. It thinks, it acts and enjoys, on account of Avidya. In reality it is not different from Brahman or the Absolute. The Upanishads declare emphatically: “*Tat Tvam Asi*—That Thou Art.” Just as the bubble becomes one with the ocean when it bursts, just as the pot-ether becomes one with the universal ether when the pot is broken, so also the Jiva or the empirical self becomes one with Brahman when it gets knowledge of Brahman. When knowledge dawns in it through annihilation of Avidya, it is freed from its individuality and finitude and realises its essential Satchidananda nature. It merges itself in the ocean of bliss. The river of life joins the ocean of existence. This is the Truth.

The release from Samsara means, according to Sankara, the absolute merging of the individual soul in Brahman due to dismissal of the erroneous notion that the soul is distinct from Brahman. According to Sankara, Karma and Bhakti are means to Jnana which is Moksha.

Vivarta Vada Or The Theory Of Superimposition

To Sankara the world is only relatively real (Vyavaharika Satta). He advocated Vivarta-Vada or the theory of appearance or superimposition (Adhyasa). Just as snake is superimposed on the rope in twilight, this world and body are superimposed on Brahman or the Supreme Self. If you get knowledge of the rope, the illusion of snake in the rope will vanish. Even so, if you get knowledge of Brahman or the Imperishable, the illusion of body and world will disappear. In Vivarta-Vada, the cause produces the effect without undergoing any change in itself. Snake is only an appearance on the rope. The rope has not transformed itself into a snake, like milk into curd. Brahman is immutable and eternal. Therefore, It cannot change Itself into the world. Brahman becomes the cause of the world through Maya, which is Its inscrutable mysterious power or Sakti.

When you come to know that it is only a rope, your fear disappears. You do not run away from it. Even so, when you realise the eternal immutable Brahman, you are not affected by the phenomena or the names and forms of this world. When Avidya or the veil of ignorance is destroyed through knowledge of the Eternal, when Mithya Jnana or false knowledge is removed by real knowledge of the Imperishable or the living Reality, you shine in your true, pristine, divine splendour and glory.

The Advaita—A Philosophy Without A Parallel

The Advaita philosophy of Sri Sankaracharya is lofty, sublime and unique. It is a system of bold philosophy and logical subtlety. It is highly interesting, inspiring and

elevating. No other philosophy can stand before it in boldness, depth and subtle thinking. Sankara's philosophy is complete and perfect. Sri Sankara was a mighty, marvellous genius. He was a master of logic. He was a profound thinker of the first rank. He was a sage of the highest realisation.