

12. Sankara's Nondualism

The six enemies of humanity get a foothold in the mind because it is filled with the darkness of ignorance (*ajnana*). Those enemies are nocturnal birds, like bats and owls, which cannot tolerate light. Darkness will not flee if you throw stones at it; nor will it disappear if you lay about it with a sword or shoot it with a gun. It will be destroyed only when a lamp is lit.

Sankara taught this simple truth to many who were ignorant of this simple fact. The people of this country were lost in the pursuit of many goals because their vision was blurred by darkness. Sankara taught them that the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Sastras* had but One in view: the One-without-a-second (*adwaitha*).

Sankara, when quite a young boy, was one day offering worship to Devi, the household Deity, because his father was away and his father had asked him to perform worship in his absence. He placed milk before the image and prayed pathetically that She should sip the milk, as he imagined She was wont to do when his father did the worship. He wept so sincerely that Mother Devi melted at his wailing and drank the entire quantity! Sankara had seen his father distribute the milk that was offered to the Mother, a tiny spoonful, to every member of the family; but, since the cup was emptied in one quaff by Her, nothing remained. The boy feared that he would be blamed for drinking what was the share of the others, so he wailed again. Devi felt great pity at the plight of Sankara, who had taken the Image to be alive and who had compelled Her already to manifest Herself from it. But she did not pour milk out of Her palm, as I do; instead, she pressed Her Maternal Breasts and filled the cup. Sankara's anguished yearning had succeeded in making Devi respond!

Beginners only need image worship

Similarly, the other day, Sri Ramamurthy, who is sitting among you here, shouted, "Swami" in sincere faith and agony. His wife was writhing in pain because her clothes had caught fire. She was too panic stricken to call out My name, but his cry was heard by Me. I hurried to the spot, which is, as you say, 400 miles away; I crumpled the fire out, before it was too late.

Sankara worshipped images in childhood, and he knew the value of God as endowed with qualities (*Saguna swarupa*). He advised worship of the Form to the large majority of people, even later in his life. Little children must be taught with the help of slates and boards on which illustrations are drawn. Temples, images, and pictures are the slates and boards for the children in spiritual progress. But, if you play with a toy elephant, you cannot derive the experience of contacting the real one. The Formless can be conceived only when you have transcended Form.

Sankara's nondualism is the ultimate truth

When Sankara thought of renouncing the world (in order to get the authority to educate it), he felt that his mother's consent had to be taken for the step. So, while bathing in the Poorna river near his house, he cried out one day that a crocodile had caught his leg. It was true, for the crocodile was, as in the Gajendra-liberation story, only worldly life (*samsara*) called by the name "sensual desire", to put it in other words. When Sankara's mother came rushing to the bank of the river, he told her that the crocodile would let him off only if he became a monk! This was also true, for renunciation, detachment, giving up worldly ties is the means of saving oneself from bondage.

The bewildered mother agreed, and the boy left home to seek his *guru* and, through him, the secret of liberation.

Sankara lived for only thirty-two years, but during that time, he purified and consolidated the various schools of worship and brought them under the over-all care of one philosophical principle, nondualism (*advaita*).

The great aphorisms (*mahavakyas*) on Supreme Reality of the *Vedas* once again began ringing in the hearts of all, with their true meaning. “I am Brahman; Thou art That; Consciousness is Brahman (*Aham Brahma smi; Thath-thwam-asi; Prajnanam Brahma*)” —all were explained in simple, convincing logic, in sweet captivating poetry. Sankara’s nondualism is the ultimate truth, so it is only confirmed, not shaken, by the discoveries of science or the flights of intellect. It speaks of the unity of matter and energy; of time and space, of the universe being but Brahman seen through the veil of illusion (*maya*), which also is but an activity of the Primordial.

Sankara knew that nondualism requires intense spiritual effort of will to remove all trace of ego, all idea of duality, from the mind of the human being. So, as a preparatory discipline to the dawn of the awareness of one’s real unity with the substance of the universe, he taught the rules of yoga and devotion and *karma*. These, according to him, will brighten the intellect, cleanse the emotions, and purify the heart. Nondualism is the awareness of the Divine in everything, everywhere, in full measure.

Sankara suggested good company as the very first step in spiritual discipline. The company of the wise and the good will develop into detachment and love of silence and solitude. That will promote the disappearance of delusion (*moha*), which, according to Arjuna, is the fruit of listening to the *Gita*. When that happens, one is established steadily in the reality of this and that, the identity of this with that (the *Thath-thwam*). Well, the recognition of that identity is the attainment of liberation.

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