

Sankara

Sankara is a name that stands for auspicious and merciful. Historians suggest that Sankara was born either in 568 AD or 805 AD (Isayeva 83). According to legend, (Isayeva 72) many signs were given prior to the birth of Sankara that he would be an incarnation of Siva. Siva promised the other gods to go down to earth to restore Vedanta and to reestablish the state of self-realization. Meanwhile, Sankara's parents, Sivaguru (the teacher Siva) and Sivataraka (Siva's eye), had great protection from Siva. They were trying to conceive, and after having no luck for quite some time decided to seek blessings for a child. They traveled to Trichur, a Saivite sanctuary for this blessing. While there, Siva appeared to the couple separately in dreams. To Sivaguru, Siva appeared as an old man, and offered the choice of having a son whose destiny it was to become a great sage with a short and brutal life span, or 100 happy, successful sons. To Sivataraka, Siva was revealed to her in a dream, undisguised, and pronounced the fact that her forthcoming child was to be a great Vedanta teacher. Once sharing these dreams with each other, Siva's voice was heard, declaring that he himself would be born as their son. (Isayeva 83)

Throughout Sankara's childhood, he achieved many great things. By the age of one, it is said that Sankara could read and speak Sanskrit. His belief in monotheism was first apparent when he settled a dispute among classmates (Isayeva 74). He pronounced that the number of gods who created the universe was to be the same as the number of seeds in this particular melon that they were bickering over. They opened it to find only one. After his father passed away, he was old enough to take part in the sacred thread ceremony, and start studying the Vedas. This bright child was asked for guidance and advice by neighbors and travelers from nearby villages. Sankara felt the need to become a

sannyasin, but was held by his mother from taking the vows. At the age of eight, Sankara was taken by a crocodile and dragged into a river and most likely would have died. However, if his mother allowed young Sankara to become a *sannyasin*, he would be reborn and given a second chance at life. This would in turn rescue him from a *durmarana* (evil/bad death), which was so awful it could be considered a sin. She of course made this promise, and Sankara was released, with new life. (Isayeva 75)

Sankara then proceeded to travel to the banks of the Narmada River, where a Saivite sanctuary was located. Here he found his teacher, Govinda. Govinda had been waiting for Sankara for quite some time. Sankara stayed under the discipline of Govinda for around 2 years. It is believed that it was during this time, Sankara composed many of his works, including Saivite hymns, philosophical treatises, and a commentary on *Brhadaranyakopanisad* (Isayeva 76). Badarayana had given a prophecy to Govinda, stating that the one to tame a wild river would be the one who would write the best commentary on his text, the *Brahmasutra*. Sankara, as predicted, composed a commentary on the *Brahmasutra*, which ended up being Sankara's main work. While Sankara and Govinda were meditating, the Narmada River flooded into the cave they were in. Sankara then said an incantation and pushed his bowl forward. The river then proceeded to fill the small bowl, and disappear. The river then purported to have receded back to its original size. (Isayeva 77)

After receiving Govinda's blessings, Sankara set off on a voyage to the sacred mountain Kailasa. It was here that he met Siva for the first time, who was in the form of Daksinamurti (Giver of true knowledge) (Isayeva 77). Here Sankara stayed, on the edge of the Ganga river until he received word that his mother was ill. When Sankara first set

off as a *sannyasin*, he promised his mother he shall return when she was upon her deathbed. Therefore, he returned to his mother's side to comfort her and let her die in peace. A *sannyasin* is considered to be above any worldly attachments such as family, and therefore the *sannyasin* vow did not allow for the regular ritual of the eldest son preparing the death rituals (Isayeva 77). However, Sankara disobeyed these vows and performed his mother's death rituals. Once his mother passed, Sankara received word that Govinda had fallen ill, and was also dying. He then headed back to say his tidings to Govinda, accompanied by a follower of his own, Padmapada.

In regards to Sankara's beliefs, he relied on the Upanisads to support his monistic philosophy of Brahman. Brahman [derived from Brh, meaning growing; not to be confused with Brahmin, the priestly class or Brahmanas, the ritual texts] is without any cause and effect, and remains unaffected by anything (Masih 64). Sankara's monistic beliefs are in favor of the Mahavakyas (foundational texts of Vedanta, sayings from Upanisads), using them to gain Brahman. By becoming Brahman, one can conquer daily life. To become Brahman, one must know Brahman. Passages from the Upanisads, such as "This everything, all is that self" (Brihadaranyaka Upanisad, II.4.7), and "Brahman alone is all this" (Mundaka Upanisad, II.2.11) support Sankara's beliefs. The basis of Sankara's teachings can be summed into one sentence: *Brahma satyam, jaganmithya jivo brahmaiva na parah*, (Brahman alone is real, the world is illusory and the *jiva* is identical with Brahma) (Masih 66).

Sankara teaches that to realize Brahman, one must achieve *bodhi* (awakening) (Masih 102). *Karma*, in this sense, is disregarded from the process of obtaining liberation. *Karma* is a temporary achievement, therefore cannot be associated with the

attainment of Brahman, since liberation through Brahman is eternal. In no way does Sankara support the belief of *karma*. He does not even support the doctrine of *jnana-karma-samuccayavada*, in which Brahma-*jnana* and *karma* are combined (Masih 102). In order to gain liberation, one must gain purification of the mind (Sattva-Suddhi), by concentrating to the point where the mental stream is steadily flowing wards off disturbing thoughts. It is only then that one can fully attain enlightenment and followed by liberation.

Throughout the thirty-three years of life that Sankara attained (presumed death in either 600 or 837 AD) (Isayeva 83), he brought new beliefs to the world.

Bibliography

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- <http://www.advaita-vedanta.org/avhp/sankara-life.html>
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