

## Adi Sankaracharya



Sri Adi Sankaracharya or the first Sankara, known as Bhagavatpada Acharya (the guru at the feet of Lord), with his remarkable reinterpretations of Hindu scriptures, especially on Upanishads or Vedanta, had a profound influence on the growth of Hinduism at a time when chaos, superstition and bigotry was rampant. Sankara advocated the greatness of the Vedas and was the most famous Advaita philosopher who restored the Vedic Dharma and Advaita Vedanta to its pristine purity and glory. Sri Adi Sankaracharya apart from refurbishing the scriptures cleansed the Vedic religious practices of ritualistic excesses and ushered in the core teaching of Vedanta, which is Advaita or non-dualism for the mankind. Sankara restructured various forms of desultory religious practices into acceptable norms and stressed on the ways of worship as laid down in the Vedas.



### **When & Where Born**

Sankara was born in a Brahmin family circa 788 AD\* in a village named Kaladi on the banks of the river Purna (now Periyar) in the Southern Indian coastal state Kerala to a pious couple Sivaguru and Aryamba.

*\*This is the mainstream scholarly opinion, placing Sankara in mid to late 8th century CE. These dates are based on records at the Śrīgeri Śārādā Pīṭam, which is the only matha to have maintained a relatively unbroken record of its Acharyas; starting with the third Acharya, one can with reasonable confidence date the others from the 8th century to the present.*

### **Brief Life History of Sankara**

Legend has it that Aryamba had a vision of Lord Shiva and promised her that he would incarnate in the form of her first-born child. His father died while Sankara was very young. Sankara's upanayanam, the initiation into student-life, had to be delayed due to the death of his father, and was then performed by his mother.

Sankara was a prodigious child and was hailed as 'Eka-Sruti-Dara', one who can retain anything that has been read just once. Sankara mastered all the Vedas and the six Vedangas from the local gurukul and recited extensively from the epics and Puranas. Sankara also studied the philosophies of diverse sects and was a storehouse of philosophical knowledge.

Sankara's hagiography describes him as someone who was attracted to the life of Sannyasa (hermit) from early childhood. His mother disapproved it earlier. A story, found in all hagiographies, describe Sankara at age eight going to a river with his mother, Sivataraka to bathe, and where he was caught by a crocodile. Sankara called out to his mother to give him permission to become a Sannyasi or else the crocodile would kill him. The mother agreed with one condition that he would be by her side when she would breathe her last. Sankara was then freed and left his home in search of knowledge. He reached a



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Saivite sanctuary along a river in a north-central state of India, and became the disciple of a teacher named Govindapada. Several texts suggest Sankara schooling with Govindapada happened along the river Narmada a few place it along river Ganges in Kashi (Varanasi) as well as Badari (Badrinath in the Himalayas). It was with his teacher Govinda that Sankara studied Gaudapadiya Karika, as Govinda was himself taught by Gaudapada. His Guru instructed Sankara to take this teachings to the public across India.

Sri Sankara went to Kasi and by that time, he had a lot of disciples. One of them, Sanandhyaya, was drying the clothes of his Guru and suddenly Sri Sankara called him to the other bank of the river as he needed the clothes urgently. Sanandhyaya, little realising that he would drown, starts walking into the river. However, the Grace of his Guru resulted in a lotus appeared and supported him wherever he was keeping his foot. When asked as to how he crossed the river, he said that when his Guru called, he was not to worry about anything. Sri Sankara named him as Padma Padar (lotus feet)

When Sri Sankara was 16, a very old Brahmin of ill health started arguments with him about Brahmasutra bashyam which Sri Sankara had written. Sri Sankara was astounded by his intelligence and arguments but they continued their discussion. The arguments continued for days together and the more Sri Sankara argued, his ideas crystallised more and more. On one moment realising that the old man was none other than Vyasa Rishi, who was the creator of Brahmasutra, Sri Sankara said that he had done a great disrespect to the sage by entering into an argument. Vyasa Rishi said that he fully agreed with his Bashyam and he wanted to establish that Sankara's Bashyam was correct. He blessed Sri Sankara to live for another 16 years and advised to spread the Advaita throughout the country."

Sri Sankara learnt that there was a great learned person by the name Mandana Mishra who lived in Mahishmati and who followed the Karma Mimaamsa method of devotion. Mandala Mishra admired the intelligence of Sri Sankara and started debating with him. Sri Sankara said that there should be a judge to decide the winner and suggested that Sarasawani, the wife of Mandala Mishra, to be the judge. Sarasawani, who was extremely intelligent and learned, realised that Sri Sankara was none other than Lord Shiva, did not want to declare her husband as the loser. She suggested that both of them should wear a garland of flowers during the debate and whichever garland fades first, that person would be the loser. When Sri Sankara won the debate, as per the original condition, Mandala Mishra became an ascetic and started to leave the house with Sri Sankara. Unable to bear the separation, Sarasawani stood transfixed and told Sri Sankara that according to tradition & faith, the husband and wife, even though had two bodies, were spiritually one and

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she would be incomplete without her husband. Sri Sankara accepted this and started debate with this lady.

Saraswani showered questions like rain and Sri Sankara gave very beautiful answers and Sarasawani acknowledged him, and followed Sri Sankara and her husband's footsteps at the end.

In their travels, they reached Sringeri in Karnataka, which was on the banks of Tungabhadra. While Sri Sankara and Mandala Mishra were walking, Sarasawani did not move and stood fixed in the sands of Tungabhadra. Sri Sankara turned back and realised by his divine powers that Sarasawani did not want to proceed any further and created a seat for her for spreading the Advaita. This seat is today called the Sharada Peetham or the Seat of Sharada. This was the first Mutt installed by Sri Sankara, with the direction that all the heads of the Mutts would be called Sankaracharyas and they would have a lineage of Shishyas or disciples.

When Sri Sankara was in Sringeri, he divined by his superior powers that his mother was in her deathbed, and as per his promise while taking Sanyas that he would be by her side while she breathed her last, he reached Kaladi and paid his last respects to the old lady. Aryambal was happy that her son had come back. Sri Sankara prayed to Lord Venkateswara who appeared in person and blessed Aryambal. Sri Sankara did the last rites for his mother but the people of Kaladi said that a Sanyasi did not have the right to do the last rites, but he did not hear that and carried the body of Aryambal and put her in the pyre himself.

After the death of his mother, he went all over the country and converted the people of other faith to Advaita. He revived a number of temples and using his powers, he established a number of Yantras in these temples to spread the blessings of Parasakthi. During his travels, he arrived at Mukambi, a religious place in Karnataka. A poor brahmin came to Sri Sankara with his deaf and dumb son and prostrated before Sri Sankara. Sri Sankara asked the boy, "who are you?" The dumb and deaf child, for the first time, opened his mouth and explained, "The body is not me, it is the Paramatma who is my body." Sri Sankara was pleased with his answer and he gave an amla fruit and named this boy as Hastaaamalakan. (Hastaa means hand and Amalakan means amala). Hastaamalaka became one of the principle disciples of Sri Sankara

Sri Sankara, with his three principle disciples, namely, Padmapadar, Sureshwarar (Mandala Mishra) and Hastaamalaka, went from place to place, and preached Advaita. Sri Sankara gave intense training to his disciples. One of the other disciples, Giri, while listening to the discourses, would not ask any doubts, would



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not open his mouth, and kept silence at all the time. Some of the other disciples thought that this Giri was a dumb idiot and did not know anything. One day, all the disciples were ready to listen to Sri Sankara's discourses. Sri Sankara waited for Giri to arrive. Ultimately, Giri turned up but instead of keeping silent on that day, burst forth into eight slokas which had never been heard by the disciples earlier. These were the creation of Giri. On hearing this, all the disciples felt ashamed and praised Giri. These slokas are called "Thotaka ashtakam". Giri was named as Thotakar by Sri Sankara.

Once, in Kasi, when Sri Sankara was going to the Vishwanath Temple, his path was blocked by an "untouchable" who was accompanied by his wife and 4 dogs. The disciples of Sri Sankara shouted at him to go away, and to keep a distance. The untouchable smiled and said, ""According to your principle of Advaita, which you practice, all the Jivatma are same as God. How do you ask me to go? How am I different from your Paramacharya? What you say is unreasonable. How can I go away from myself?" Sri Sankara realised that it was not an ordinary person and understood that it was Lord Shiva himself who had come along with His consort and the four Vedas. He prostrated before the Lord and sang five slokas called "Manisha Panchakam". Lord Shiva presented himself along with Visalakshi and blessed Sri Sankara.

Thereafter Sri Sankara completed his travels and went to Badrinath. Lord Vishnu appeared before him and told that his sculpture in Alaknanda river should be taken out and a temple should be built for it. This temple is called Badrinarayan temple and is one of the important religious places for Hindus.

It is believed that Sankara attained heavenly abode in Kedarnath and was only 32 years old when he died.

### **Principles & Practices in Spiritual Life**

Adi Sankara, in his text *Upadesasahasri*, discourages ritual worship such as oblations to *Deva* (God), because that assumes the Self within is different from the Brahman.

The "doctrine of difference" is wrong, asserts Sankara, because, "he who knows the Brahman is one and he is another, does not know Brahman".

However, Sankara also asserts that Self-knowledge is realized when one's mind is purified by an ethical life that observes Yamas such as *Ahimsa* (non-injury, non-violence to others in body, mind and thoughts) and Niyamas. Rituals and rites such as yajna (a fire ritual), asserts Sankara, can help draw and prepare the mind for the journey to Self-knowledge.



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He emphasizes the need for ethics such as Akrodha and *Yamas* during Brahmacharya, stating the lack of ethics as causes that prevent students from attaining knowledge.

Adi Sankara has been varyingly called as influenced by Shaivism and Shaktism. However, his works and philosophy suggest greater overlap with Vaishnavism, influence of Yoga school of Hinduism, but most distinctly his Advaitin convictions with a monistic view of spirituality.

He introduced the Pañcāyatana form of worship, the simultaneous worship of five deities – Ganesha, Surya, Vishnu, Shiva and Devi. Sankara explained that all deities were but different forms of the one Brahman, the invisible Supreme Being

Works of the early Vedanta schools do not contain references to Vishnu or Shiva. It was only after Sankara that "the theologians of the various sects of Hinduism utilized Vedanta philosophy to a greater or lesser degree to form the basis of their doctrines," while the Nath-tradition established by him, led "its theoretical influence upon the whole of Indian society became final and definitive.

Sankara, himself considered to be an incarnation of Shiva, established the Dashanami Sampradaya, organizing a section of the Ekadandi monks under an umbrella grouping of ten names. Several other Hindu monastic and Ekadandi traditions remained outside the organisation of the Dasanāmis.

Adi Sankara organised the Hindu monks of these ten sects or names under four Maṭhas (monasteries), with the headquarters at [Dvārakā](#) in the West, [Jagannatha Puri](#) in the East, [Sringeri](#) in the South and [Badrikashrama](#) in the North. Each math was headed by one of his four main disciples (Hastamalakacharya, Padmapada, Suresvara, Totakacharya respectively), who each continue the Vedanta Sampradaya.

Yet, according to Pandey, these Mathas were not established by Sankara himself, but were originally ashrams established by [Vibhāndaka](#) and his son [Rsyāśṅga](#). Sankara inherited the ashrams at Dvārakā and Sringeri, and shifted the ashram at Śṅgaverapura to Badarikāśrama, and the ashram at Angadeśa to Jagannātha Purī.

Monks of these ten orders differ in part in their beliefs and practices, and a section of them is not considered to be restricted to specific changes made by Sankara. While the dasanāmis associated with the Sankara maths follow the procedures enumerated by Adi Śankara, some of these orders remained partly or fully independent in their belief and practices; and outside the official control of the Sankara maths





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According to Nakamura, these mathas contributed to the influence of Sankara, which was "due to institutional factors". The mathas which he built exist until today, and preserve the teachings and influence of Sankara, "while the writings of other scholars before him came to be forgotten with the passage of time".

Each mutt was assigned one Veda. The mutts are Jyothir Mutt at Badrinath in northern India with Atharva Veda; Sharada Mutt at Sringeri in southern India with Yajur Veda; Govardhan Mutt at Jaganath Puri in eastern India with Rig Veda and Kalika Mutt at Dwarka in western India with Sama Veda.

### **Teachings of Adi Sankara**

- Advaita Vedanta is based on śāstra ("scriptures"), yukti ("reason") and anubhava ("experiential knowledge"), and aided by karmas ("spiritual practices"). Starting from childhood, when learning has to start, the philosophy has to be a way of life. Sankara's primary objective was to understand and explain how moksha is achievable in this life, what it means to be liberated, free and a Jivanmukta. His philosophical thesis is that jivanmukti is self-realization, the awareness of Oneness of Self and the Universal Spirit called Brahman
- Sankara considered the purity and steadiness of mind achieved in Yoga as an aid to gaining moksha knowledge, but such yogic state of mind cannot in itself give rise to such knowledge. To Sankara, that knowledge of Brahman springs only from inquiry into the teachings of the Upanishads. The method of yoga, encouraged in Sankara's teachings notes Michael Comans, includes withdrawal of mind from sense objects as in Patanjali's system, but it is not complete thought suppression, instead it is a "meditative exercise of withdrawal from the particular and identification with the universal, leading to contemplation of oneself as the most universal, namely, Consciousness". Sankara rejected those yoga system variations that suggest complete thought suppression leads to liberation, as well the view that the [Shrutis](#) teach liberation as something apart from the knowledge of the oneness of the Self. Knowledge alone and insights relating to true nature of things, taught Sankara, is what liberates.
- He placed great emphasis on the study of the Upanisads, emphasizing them as necessary and sufficient means to gain Self-liberating knowledge.
- Sankara also emphasized the need for and the role of *Guru* (Acharya, teacher) for such knowledge
- Sankara's theology maintains that seeing the self where there is no self, causes spiritual ignorance or avidya. One should learn to distinguish knowledge (jnana) from avidya to realize the True Self or Brahman. He taught the rules of bhakti, yoga and karma to enlighten the intellect and purify the heart



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as Advaita is the awareness of the 'Divine'.

### Authentic writings of Adi Sankara

Adi Sankara is most known for his systematic reviews and commentaries (*Bhasyas*) on ancient Indian texts. Sankara's masterpiece of commentary is the *Brahmasutrabhasya* (literally, commentary on Brahma Sutra), a fundamental text of the Vedanta school of Hinduism

His commentaries on ten Mukhya (principal) Upanishads are also considered authentic by scholars, and these are: *Bhasya* on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the Chandogya Upanishad, the Aitareya Upanishad, the Taittiriya Upanishad, the Kena Upanishad, the Isha Upanishad, the Katha Upanishad, the Mundaka Upanishad, the Prashna Upanishad, and the Mandukya Upanishad. Of these, the commentary on Mandukya, is actually a commentary on Madukya-Karikas by Gaudapada

Other authentic works of Sankara include commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita (part of his Prasthan Trayi Bhasya). His *Vivarana* (tertiary notes) on the commentary by Vedavyasa on [Yogasutras](#) as well as those on Apastamba Dharma-sūtras (*Adhyatama-patala-bhasya*) are accepted by scholars as authentic works of Adi Sankara. Among the *Stotra* (poetic works), the Dakshinamurti Stotra, the Bhajagovinda Stotra, the Sivanandalahari, the Carpata-panjarika, the Visnu-satpadi, the Harimide, the Dasa-shloki, and the Krishna-staka are likely to be authentic

Sankara also authored [Upadesasahasri](#), his most important original philosophical work.<sup>[44][46]</sup> Of other original *Prakaranas* (प्रकरण, monographs, treatise), seventy six works are attributed to Adi Sankara. Modern era Indian scholars such as Belvalkar as well as Upadhyaya accept five and thirty nine works respectively as authentic.<sup>[47]</sup>

Sankara's stotras considered authentic include those dedicated to Krishna (Vaishnavism) and one to Shiva (Shaivism) – often considered two different sects within Hinduism. Scholars suggest that these *stotra* are not sectarian, but essentially Advaitic and reach for a unified universal view of Vedanta.<sup>[45]</sup>

Adi Sankara's commentary on the Brahma Sutras is the oldest surviving. However, in that commentary, he mentions older commentaries like those of Dravida, Bhartrprapancha and others which are either lost or yet to be found

The authenticity of Sankara being the author of Vivekacūḍāmaṇi has been questioned, but scholars generally credit it to him.





**Sources**

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