

**Śrī Śankara<sup>1</sup>**  
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In the *Guru Stotram* that we chant, the *guru* is praised by just presenting him as one in the form of the very *vastu*, the very thing that he teaches.

***akhaṇḍamaṇḍalākāraṃ vyāptaṃ yena carācaraṃ  
tatpadaṃ darṣitaṃ yena tasmai śrigurave namaḥ***

Salutations to that *guru* who showed me the abode of the one who is to be known, whose form is the entire universe and, by whom all that is moving or not moving is pervaded.

***gururbṛhmā gururviṣṇuḥ gururdevo maheśvaraḥ  
gurureva paraṃ bṛhama tasmai śrigurave namaḥ***

Salutations to that *guru* who is the creator, the sustainer and the destroyer and who indeed is the limitless *Brahman*.

### **Śankara as Īśvara**

To talk on Śankara is to unfold what Īśvara, the Lord, is. We do not look upon Śankara as an individual. In fact we do not look upon any teacher as an individual. When he is not a person, there cannot be *jayanti*, birthday celebration either! We do not have Īśvara Jayanti. We do have Rāma Jayanti or, Rāma Navami and Kṛṣṇa Jayanti or, *Gokulāṣṭami*.

Even though Īśvara is in the form of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the particular form of Rāma or Kṛṣṇa has a history. These forms were born, as *avatāras*, at a given time and disappeared at a given time. Still they can be worshipped as Īśvara. Every form, no doubt, is Īśvara's form. But Īśvara in

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the form of Kṛṣṇa is someone with whom I can relate and at whose feet I can place a flower. The form can become an altar where I can offer worship etc. Kṛṣṇa form and Rāma form are available for worship, for relating to as the Lord. That is why we celebrate Rāma *Navami*, and Kṛṣṇa *Aṣṭami*.

In the Bhagavat Gītā, when Kṛṣṇa uses the first person singular, it is only in the sense of his being as Īśvara. Īśvara who is limitless, *vastu*, taking this form, *upādhī*, becomes the *avatāras*. Similarly, the birth of Śankara is possible only from the standpoint of the *upādhī*. From the *upādhī* standpoint alone a *jayanti* is possible.

A *guru* is always looked upon as the very thing that he teaches. That is the difference between what Śankara taught and what any other teacher would teach. If a teacher teaches that Īśvara is Īśvara, *jagat* is *jagat* and, you are what you are, what will you feel after listening to such a teacher? Before you went to the teacher you knew this very well. This was your original feeling and then you went to this teacher and exposed yourself to the Upanishads. Afterwards, you go back with the same original feeling! You will definitely conclude that the teacher cannot be the *vastu* since he teaches that the *vastu* is different from you and even himself.

If the teacher says that you are the *vastu*, then the teacher is the *vastu* and you are also the same *vastu*. If the teacher is the *vastu* and he teaches you the same *vastu*, then there is only one *vastu* that is there about which he talks. Therefore he can be looked upon as the very *vastu* itself and that is why we say that *guru* in the form of *vastu* alone is Brahmā, that alone is Viṣṇu and that alone is Maheśvara. The Trinity is nothing but the same *vastu* alone. Not only the Trinity is the *vastu*; you are also the same *vastu*. So, one who teaches this is not separate from the *vastu*. You have an *upādhī*

here talking about a *vastu* which is not, in any way, limited by the *upādhī*. The *upādhī* is limited by time, limited by place, limited by its own accomplishments. But at the same time the *upādhī* does not limit the *vastu*. An individual, who has understood this, is as good as Śankara.

### **Śankara as Upādhī Viśeṣa**

There were many enlightened people in the world besides Vyāsa, who compiled all the Vedās and Brahma Sūtras and Śankara, who made the knowledge available to the common people. Why then, do we worship only Vyāsa and Śankara and not others? If some other teacher is talking about the same thing when he says “You are not separate from the *vastu*”, what is so special about Vyāsa and Śankara?

There are certain kings among the many who are remembered. There were a number of teachers. Some of them are remembered, not others. It is not because only they taught the *vastu*. There were many people who taught the *vastu*. But, a person is remembered because historically there was a significant contribution on part of that person which happens to be a blessing for the future generations. Therefore, that person becomes a very special person. This is *upādhī viśeṣa*.

*Upādhī viśeṣa* can also mean that a particular person has got some special features or, that person has a capacity that is miraculous. Generally, anyone having miraculous powers is praised. It is not considered as anything great, really. Hindu tradition does not have any value for miracles. If you look at the tradition you will find that all the *asurās* had miracles and they all performed a lot of tricks. We have been reading Mahābhārata for sometime now and we find that every *asurā* had miracles. In Rāmāyana, Mārīca came in the form of a deer. Thus, one can assume another form.

Some individuals can be carried away by miracles but in the Hindu tradition, these types of miracles have no real meaning. Hindus are not miracle-mongers because everybody had miracles. It was very common. Every *asurā* had it. All of them were Niśācarās, moving in the night and Khecarās, moving in the sky. This is also called *upādhī viśeṣa*. We do not have anything to do with them. All the *asurās* were meant to be destroyed. If a miracle man has to be worshipped then *asurās* cannot be destroyed!

People of mediocre knowledge think of a great man only as a miracle man. Some of them will extol the story of Śankara who composed the Kanakadhārā Stotram and brought gold coins for the poor woman who gave him a berry when he went to her house for alms. But, when we praise Śankara, definitely this miracle aspect has nothing to do with it. There is a simple verse we generally repeat whenever we think of Śankara. This verse exactly tells how Śankara is *upādhī viśeṣa*.

***śrutismṛtipurāṇānām ālayam karuṇālayam  
namāmi bhagavatpādam śankaram lokasankaram***

I bow at the feet of the Lord in the form of Śankara, who is the blessing for the humanity, who is the abode of all the Vedās, the *smṛtis* and the *purāṇās*, and, who is the abode of compassion.

In this verse, there is a statement of fact: Śankara is ‘*śrutismṛtipurāṇānām ālayam*’. A shrine or a temple is called *ālaya*. A place where things abide is *ālaya*. Any place where a sacred thing is kept is an *ālaya*. Books are sacred so a library is called *pustakālaya*. If it is a treasure, that also can be considered an *ālaya*. Śankara was an *ālaya* – a *pustakālaya*. And, what are the books? ‘*Śrutismṛtipurāṇānām*’. *Śruti* means all the Vedās – *karmakāṇḍa* as well as the last portion of the Vedās,

known as Vedānta. The entire thing is called *śruti*. All the four Vedās can be called *śruti*. *Smṛti* can be taken as works born of the mind. *Śruti* has come down to us through the *ṛṣis*. There is no authorship for *śruti* whereas, *smṛti* has got authorship. They are a spin off from the *śruti* statements, written by people who had status similar to what the *ṛṣis* enjoyed; people like Parāśara, Āpastambha, Bodhāyaṇa, etc. They knew about rituals, values, *dharma*s etc. All the *Dharma Śāstras* come under *smṛti*. Even *Itihāsā* is called *smṛti*. It is half history and half poetry; not like modern history which is half history and half fiction! *Purāṇā* is a bigger canvas. Its topic is entirely different. There, *Bhagavān*'s *avatāra* is discussed. There are thus 18 *purāṇās*. All of them abide in the shrine that is Śankara. That means the *upādhi* in which all the subject matter of *śruti*, *smṛti* and *purāṇā* are enshrined, is called '*śrutismṛtipurāṇānām ālayam*'.

Then again, suppose there is a person in whom all this knowledge is enshrined, who is an embodiment of this knowledge and, that man of knowledge is walking up and down this country. And, at the same time he is a Maunibābā, a person committed to keeping silent. Then what will you get? There will be nothing for us and there will be no Śankara Jayanti. Of course, definitely some devotees will be there because anybody who does not talk in India is considered to be great! Thus non-talking persons, the Maunibābās are always respected in our country. If Śankara was a Maunibābā, he might have had a few devotees and one or two generations might have worshipped him.

But definitely we won't be celebrating his *jayanti*. How do we know him? Fortunately, he was a *karuṇālayam*. He was not only an *ālaya* of this knowledge but there was *karuṇā*, compassion – flowing compassion, not a

stagnant compassion but, a dynamic compassion. Compassion can be just stagnant in your own heart, it has no expression outside. But his was a dynamic compassion, always flowing. And this compassion made Śankara what he was. We celebrate his *jayanti* because of his compassion alone.

Not only did Śankara teach his disciples who were around, he also made sure that the teaching came down to posterity through his writings. In those days writing was not an easy job. There were no laptops; there were no computers; there were no typewriters, or even paper and pens. He had to write on palm leaf and every copy had to be handwritten. All the books were on palm leaves and there are hundreds and hundreds of such manuscripts in India today in spite of so many of them having burnt or lost. Still they are there. They are there in somebody's house. People loved to enshrine this knowledge in their own homes. I do not think there is any culture other than Vedic culture that gives so much value for learning – whether it is scriptural or otherwise. He wrote not just a small little book but he wrote extensive commentaries, *bhāṣyās* on Chāndogya, Brhadāranyaka, Īśa, Kena, Katha, Praśna, Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍukya, Taittirīya and Aitareya. All these *bhāṣyās* were written to include *pūrvapakśās*, objections and arguments, and then unfolding of *siddhānta*, the main purport.

When writing *bhāṣyās*, you have to give the *anvayā*, comprehensive meaning. Afterwards you should defend against any other possible meaning or any other meaning given by somebody. If one head can figure out in one way, there will always be another head to think in some other way. Therefore it has to be dealt with over a wide canvas. When you do not know your canvas, you always reserve. Many teachers do this. Then, there are people who are committed to certain schools of thought. These are different

types of errors people make. There cannot be a different school of thought in arithmetic because one plus one is two. Where is the question of a school of thought in understanding Īśvara? To avoid any incompleteness, Śankara has discussed different topics, different contemporary ideas. When you are dealing with facts about the reality, it has got to be dealt with exactly as it is. There cannot be any 'school of thought'. It is a silly thing to say there are schools of thought.

People say that there can be different points of view. There can be points of view only if the view is complete. When there is no vision, there can be no point of view. We give freedom to the people to hold their ideas. There is nothing wrong in that. But, there is no way of reconciling between what is right and wrong. What is right is right. There is nothing to reconcile. A wrong thing has to be said as wrong and understood as such. The other person has the freedom to hold a wrong idea. That is understandable. But you cannot accept it just because some nice man has got some wrong idea. You cannot have a charismatic approach in dealing with the reality.

Writing all this on palm leaves is not easy. How much *karuṇā* Śankara must have had to write. Compassion for spiritual up lifting of the mankind made him write all these books and finally, the Brahmasūtra *Bhāṣya*. It is not an ordinary thing. This is the proof of what he has done, proof of his compassion. Therefore, he is called *śrutismṛtipurāṇānām ālayam karuṇālayam*. Unto him I salute, who is considered Śankara, whose name is Śankara. He is *sam karoti iti Śankara*. He does *mangalam*, benevolence, the grand finale for the *jīvā*. *Jīvā*'s history has to end. When will it end? It is always a loose sheet. It is never bound because there is

always a next birth. It is endless. It is always an unbound book. You put an end to this history and become history. One who brings about that *mangalam* is Bhagavatpāda Śankara, who is likened to Bhagavān. Unto him our *namaskāra*. Is there any miracle pointed out in this verse?

### Śankara And The Teaching Tradition, Sampradāya

Then there is another verse we chant.

*śankaram śankarācāryam keśavam bādarāyanam  
sūtrabhāṣyakṛtau vande bhagavantau punaḥ punaḥ.*

Salutations again and again to Lord Śivā in the form of Śankara and Lord Viṣṇu in the form of Vyāsa for having created the *sūtras* and *bhāṣyās*.

One was the Bhāṣya-kṛt; the other was Sūtra-kṛt. Vyāsa wrote the Sūtra. Śankara wrote the Bhāṣya on the Sūtra. Thus, there has been a *sampradāya*, a tradition. All other teachers came and talked about a variety of things that had nothing to do with *śṛuti*. But they always drew their philosophy, their validity from the same *śṛuti* because of the *sampradāya* being available in written words and it is maintained by the *paramparā*, the lineage of teachers. Think of the teachings if Śankara was not there. The very method of teaching is presented in his commentary. This method of teaching is not there in the Upaniṣads. It is not in the Gītā either. How is it to be taught? What is the first and second chapter? How to deal with the whole topic? How a word is to be unfolded? How to know exactly what the *śṛuti* says? For this you require a *sampradāya* and Śankara says one should be a *sampradāya-vit*, a knower of teaching tradition. He says “*asampradāyavit murkavat upekṣāṇiyah*”, meaning that one who does not know and enjoy the tradition of teaching, that person should be kept away

like a stupid person. For learning, we need the right person, a *sampradāya-vit*. Śankara identifies with the *sampradāya*. He reveals himself as a *sampradāya-vit*.

Secondly, it is necessary for us to see Śankara as a *sampradāya-kṛt*, one who creates and maintains the tradition. He didn't say that. It was not necessary. It is necessary for us to see it. Without his revealing the *sampradāya* through his own *bhāṣyas*, there is no way we could approach the *śruti* and get something out of it. In the second chapter of the Sūtra-Bhāṣya, he deals with the various schools of thoughts and points out their errors. Thus, he reveals himself as a *sampradāya-kṛt*. Therefore, Śankara is looked upon as a link in the *sampradāya*. If Śankara can trace his origin in Vyāsa, then Śankara is in the flow of *sampradāya* and Śankara becomes a shining link. Everybody wrote a commentary on his *bhāṣyās* and made the original manuscript available to all. Many people wrote a commentary on Śankara's Bhāṣya for their own understanding and clarity and thus, we have so many commentaries. Some of them are popular. We need not read them all, but they are useful. These commentaries help us trace the Bhāṣya. These commentaries also help us in understanding the original.

We must see Śankara as a *sampradāya-kṛt*. *Śruti* is the source of wisdom; *śruti* has to be unfolded only by a *sampradāya-vit* and a *sampradāya-kṛt*. He was such a link. This is the wisdom that knocks off differences as well as accommodates differences; knocking off all differences and again accommodating all differences. It is amazing. By accommodating all differences it makes you a wise person. It helps you to grow out of your own wrong conclusions. This is possible only when you know that the truth is beyond all this and that it accommodates differences.

It is not an accommodation with a patronizing attitude. That's why Śankara is a saving grace for humanity, which is now struggling due to problems of differences. To that Śankara we salute again and again.