

## Adi Shankara



Bhagavan Adi Shankaracharya is considered to be the ideal Sannyasi. It is commonly accepted that he lived about one thousand two hundred years ago though there are historical sources that indicate that he lived in an earlier period. Most scholars agree that Sankara lived between 788 and 820 CE, although some say he was born as early as 77 BCE. He was born in Kalady, Kerala and in his short life span of 32 years, his accomplishments seem a marvel even today, with our modern conveyances and other facilities.

### Birth and childhood

Adi Shankara's parents were childless for many years. They prayed at the Vadakkunnathan temple (also known as Vrishachala) in Thrissur, Kerala, for the birth of a child. Legend has it that Shiva appeared to both husband and wife in their dreams and offered them a choice: a mediocre son who would live a long life, or an extraordinary son who would not live long. Both the parents chose the latter; thus a son was born to them. He was named Shankara (Sanskrit, "bestower of happiness"), in honour of Shiva (one of whose epithets is Shankara).

His father died while Shankara was very young. Shankara's upanayanam, the initiation into student-life, was performed at the age of five. As a child, Shankara showed remarkable scholarship, mastering the four Vedas by the age of eight. Following the customs of those days, Shankara studied and lived at the home of his teacher. It was customary for students and men of learning to receive Bhikṣā ("alms") from the laity; on one occasion, while accepting Bhikṣā, Shankara came upon a woman who had only a single dried amalaka fruit to eat. Rather than consuming this last bit of food herself, the pious lady gave away the fruit to Shankara as Bhikṣā. Moved by her piety,

Shankara composed the Kanakadhārā Stotram on the spot. Legend has it that on completion of the stotra, golden amalaka fruits were showered upon the woman by Lakṣmi, the Goddess of wealth.

At the tender age of eight, burning with the desire for Liberation, he left home in search of his Guru.

### **Sannyasa**

From a young age, Shankara was attracted to sannyasa ("monastic life"). His mother was against his becoming a monk and refused him formal permission. However, once when Shankara was bathing in the Purna River near his house, a crocodile gripped his leg and began to drag him into the water. Only his mother was nearby, and it proved impossible for her to rescue him. Shankara asked his mother to give him permission to renounce the world then and there, so that he could be a sannyāsīn at the moment of death. This mode of entering the renunciatory stage is called Āpat Sannyāsa. At the end of her wits, his mother agreed. Shankara immediately recited the mantras that made a renunciate of him. Miraculously, the crocodile released him and swam away. Shankara emerged unscathed from the water.

With the permission of his mother, Shankara left Kerala and travelled towards North India in search of a Guru. On the banks of the Narmada River, he met Govinda Bhagavatpada, the disciple of Gaudapada. When Govinda Bhagavatpada asked Shankara's identity, he replied with an extempore verse that brought out the Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Govinda Bhagavatpada was impressed and took Shankara as his disciple. Adi Shankara was commissioned by his Guru to write a commentary on the Brahma Sutras and propagate Advaita Vedanta. The Madhavīya Shankaravijaya states that Adi Shankara calmed a flood from the Reva River by placing his kamaṇḍalu ("water pot") in the path of the raging water, thus saving his Guru, Govinda Bhagavatpada, who was engaged in Samādhi ("meditation") in a cave nearby.

On his mission to spread the Advaita Vedanta philosophy, Adi Shankara travelled to Kashi, where a young man named Sanandana from Choladesha in South India, became his first disciple. In Kashi, Adi Shankara was on his way to the Vishwanath Temple, when he came upon an untouchable with four dogs. When asked to move aside by Shankara's disciples, the untouchable replied: "Do you wish that I move my ever lasting Ātman ("the Self"), or this body made of food?" Understanding that the untouchable was none other than God Shiva, and his dogs the four Vedas, Shankara prostrated himself before him, composing five shlokas known as Manisha Panchakam.

On reaching Badari in the Himalayas, he wrote the famous Bhashyas ("commentaries") and Prakarana granthas ("philosophical treatises"). Afterwards he taught these commentaries to his disciples. Some, like Sanandana, were quick to grasp the essence; the other disciples thus became jealous of Sanandana. In order to convince the others of Sanandana's inherent superiority, Adi Shankara summoned Sanandana from one bank of the Ganga River, while he was on the opposite bank. Sanandana crossed the river by walking on the lotuses that were brought out wherever he placed his foot. Adi Shankara was greatly impressed by his disciple and gave him the name Padmapāda ("lotus-footed one"). The sage, Vedavyāsa, visited Adi Shankara in the guise of an old brāhmaṇa. Adi Shankara debated with the brāhmaṇa for over eight days when at last, Vyasa revealed his real identity and blessed Adi Shankara.

### **Meeting with Mandana Mishra**

One of the most famous debates of Adi Shankara was with the ritualist Mandana Mishra. Mandana Mishra's Guru was the famous Mimamsa philosopher, Kumarīla Bhaṭṭa. Shankara sought a debate with Kumarīla Bhaṭṭa and met him in Prayag where he had buried himself in a slow burning pyre to repent for sins committed against his Guru: Kumarīla Bhaṭṭa had learnt Buddhist philosophy incognito from him in order to be able to refute it. This constitutes a sin according to the Vedas. Kumarīla Bhaṭṭa thus asked Adi Shankara to proceed to Mahiṣmatī (known today as Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh) to meet Mandana Mishra and debate with him instead.

Adi Shankara had a famous debate with Mandana Mishra in which the wife of Mandana Mishra, Ubhaya Bhāratī, was the referee. After debating for over fifteen days, Mandana Mishra accepted defeat. Ubhaya Bhāratī then challenged Adi Shankara to have a debate with her in order to 'complete' the victory. This debate was to be on the subject of kāmāśāstra ("science of sex-love"). But Adi Shankara, being a sannyasi, had no knowledge of this subject; thus, after requesting for some time before entering into this fresh debate, he entered the body of a king by his yogic powers and acquired the knowledge of kāmāśāstra. Later, however, Ubhaya Bhāratī declined to debate with him and allowed Mandana Mishra to accept sannyasa with the monastic name, Sureśvarācārya as per the agreed rules of the debate.

### **Dig-vijaya**

Adi Shankara then travelled with his disciples to Maharashtra and Srisailam. In Srisailam, he composed Shivanandalahari, a devotional hymn to Shiva. The Madhaviya Shankaravijayam says that when Shankara was about to be sacrificed by a Kapalika, the god Narasimha appeared to save Shankara on Padmapada's prayer to him. So Adi Shankara composed the Laksmi-Narasimha stotra. He then travelled to Gokarṇa, the temple of Hari-Shankara and the Mūkambika temple at Kollur. At Kollur, he accepted as his disciple a boy believed to be dumb by his parents. He gave him the name, Hastāmalakācārya ("one with the amalaka fruit on his palm", i.e., one who has clearly realised the Self). Next, he visited Śrngeri to establish the Śārada Pīṭham and made Toṭakācārya his disciple.

After this, Adi Shankara began a Dig-vijaya ("missionary tour") for the propagation of the Advaita philosophy by controverting all philosophies opposed to it. With the Malayali King Sudhanva as companion, Shankara passed through Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Vidarbha. He then started towards Karnataka where he encountered a band of armed Kapalikas. King Sudhanva, with his army, resisted and defeated the Kapalikas. They safely reached Gokarna where Shankara defeated in debate the Shaiva scholar, Neelakanta.

Proceeding to the west in Dwarka, Shankara defeated the Vaiṣṇavas in debate. Bhaṭṭa Bhāskara of Ujjayini, the proponent of Bhedābeda philosophy, was humbled. All the scholars of Ujjayini (also known as Avanti) accepted Adi Shankara's philosophy. He then defeated the Jainas at a place called Bahlika. Later, he had an encounter with a tantrik, Navagupta at Kamarupa. Navagupta pretended to have become a disciple, but later caused Adi Shankara to develop a rectal fistula. However, Adi Shankara was soon cured and Navagupta later died of the same disease.

Adi Shankara thus travelled throughout India, from the South to Kashmir and Nepal, preaching to the local populace and debating philosophy with Hindu, Buddhist and other scholars and monks along the way.

## Accession to Sarvajnapitha

Adi Shankara visited Sarvajñapīṭha in Kashmir (now in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir). The Madhaviya Shankaravijayam states this temple had four doors for scholars from the four cardinal directions. The southern door (representing South India) had never been opened, indicating that no scholar from South India had entered the Sarvajna Pitha. Adi Shankara opened the southern door by defeating in debate all the scholars there in all the various scholastic disciplines such as Mimamsa, Vedanta and other branches of Hindu philosophy; he ascended the throne of Transcendent wisdom of that temple. The Madhaviya Shankaravijayam states that Goddess Saraswati ("goddess of knowledge and all literary arts") herself proclaimed the unquestioned scholarly triumph of Adi Shankara on this occasion.

Towards the end of his life, Adi Shankara travelled to the Himalayan area of Kedarnath- Badrinath and attained videha mukti ("freedom from embodiment"). However, there are variant traditions on the location of his last days. One tradition, expounded by Keraliya Shankaravijaya, places his place of death as Vadakkunnathan temple in Thrissur, Kerala. The followers of the Kanchi Matha say that he ascended the Sarvajñapīṭha in Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu), not Kashmir, and also spent his last days in Kanchipuram itself.

## Dates

Modern scholarly opinion is that Sankara's date should lie somewhere in the mid-8th century CE. It has proved impossible to reach agreement on Adi Shankara's precise dates of birth or death. Traditional sources from the Shankara Maṭhas give two different dates; some cite 788 – 820 CE, while others cite 509 – 477 BCE. The Śrīgeri Śāradā Pīṭham, accepts the 788 – 820 CE dates. Of the other major Shankara Maṭhas active today, the ones at Dwaraka, Puri and Kanchi ascribe the dates 509 – 477 BCE to Adi Shankara. If these dates were true, they would require moving back the date of Buddha (which serves as an anchor for modern academic history of India). (See also Mathas). According to Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati's biography of Adi Shankara, published in his book Sannyasa Darshan, Adi Shankara was born in Kalady, Kerala, in 686, and attained mahasamadhi at Kedarnath, Uttaranchal, in 718.

From the age of sixteen to thirty-two, Shankaracharya went forth, travelling across the length and breadth of ancient India bringing to the hearts of the masses the life-giving message of the Vedas. "Brahman, Pure Consciousness, is the Absolute Reality. The world is unreal. This is the correct understanding of the Sastra is the thundering declaration of Vedanta "

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः ।  
अनेन वेद्यं सच्छास्त्रमिति वेदान्तडिण्डिमः ॥ (ब्रह्मज्ञानावलीमाला)

In essence, the individual is not different from Brahman. Thus, by the statement "Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya, Jeevo Brahmaiva Na Para" he condensed the essence of the voluminous scriptures.

In those days ancient India was sunk in a quagmire of superstitions and scriptural misinterpretations. Degraded ritualism flourished. The essence of Sanatana Dharma, with its all-embracing message of Love, Compassion and the Universality of Humankind was completely lost in the blind performance of these rituals.

Shankaracharya challenged various eminent scholars and leaders of various religious sects in vigorous disputes. They championed their own interpretations of the scriptures, but the prodigious boy sage was easily able to overcome all of them and make them understand the wisdom of his teachings. These men of stature then accepted Shankaracharya as their guru.

They started to practice in accordance with his guidance, and this change in their lives also wrought a change in the lives of their innumerable followers, who came from all strata of society.

He established 4 ashrams in four corners of India and entrusted his four disciples to teach and propagate Advaita through them.

In Shankara's time, there were innumerable sects following their own narrow philosophies and systems of worship. People were totally blind to the underlying common basis of the One God. For their benefit, Shankaracharya formulated the six sect system of worship which brought to the fore the main godheads – Vishnu, Siva, Shakti, Muruga, Ganesha and Surya. He also formulated the rituals and rites to be followed in most of the major temples in India.

Apart from his immense intellectual and organisational abilities, Shankaracharya was an exquisite poet, with a heart brimming with Love of the Divine.

He composed 72 devotional and meditative hymns like Soundarya Lahari, Sivananda Lahari, Nirvana Shalkam, Maneesha Panchakam. He also wrote 18 commentaries on the major scriptural texts including the Brahma Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita and 12 major Upanishads. He also authored 23 books on the fundamentals of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy which expound the principles of the non-dual Brahman. These include Viveka Chudamani, Atma Bodha, Vaakya Vritti, Upadesa Sahasri, among others.

#### **Four Maths – Char Dhams – established by Shankara**

During his travels across the length and breadth of India, he established four maths (ashrams) to unify the scattered and diverse groups of Sannyasis. Four maths were established, about 700 AD, in four different corners of India. He selected four of his senior-most disciples to head each of these maths. Each of these maths was assigned the task of maintaining and preserving for posterity, one of the four Vedas (the main scriptures of Hinduism) and a Maha

Vakya. Shankaracharya reorganised all the Sannyasis in India into ten main groups (the Dasanami Sannyasa Tradition) allocated to different maths.

Historical and literary evidence also exist which prove that the Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt at Kancheepuram, in Tamil Nadu, was also founded by Shankaracharya.

#### Chatur Dhams

<b>Direction</b>	South India	West India	North India	East India
<b>Place</b>	Sringeri	Dwaraka	Badrinath	Puri
<b>Math Name</b>	Sringeri Math	Sarada Math	Jyotir Math	Govardhan Math
<b>Acharya</b>	Sureswara	Hastamalaka	Trotaka	Padmapada
<b>Veda</b>	Yagur	Sama	Atharva	Rik
<b>Mantra/Mahavakya</b>	Aham brahmāsmi	Tattvamasi	Ayamātmā brahma	Prajñānam brahma
<b>Sanyasa Order</b>	Saraswati, Bharati, Puri	Tirtha, Ashrama	Giri, Parvata, Sagara	Vanam, Aranyam

Considered to be an incarnation of Lord Siva, Sri Shankara lived only a short life span of 32 years. There are many inspiring legends about him.

#### Legends of Shankaracharya

##### Shower of Gold

Before he was eight, as a young Brahmachari, the young Shankara went to a house to beg for his daily food. The hostess was a kind but very poor lady. All she could give him was a small amalaki goose-berry fruit. Shankara was deeply touched by the sincerity of this poor lady, and he invoked Goddess Lakshmi (the Goddess of wealth) by singing spontaneously the Kanakadhara Stotra. The legend has it that the Goddess showered golden amalaki fruits into the house.

##### Changing the course of the Purna river

Shankara's mother used to go a long way every day to take her bath in the Purna river. One day the young Shankara found her lying unconscious, due to exhaustion. He prayed to the Lord and the next morning the river started flowing by the side of his house.

### **Guru Govindapada's blessings**

During the rainy season, the river Narmada was in spate. The floodwaters rose and were about to enter the cave in which his Guru was sitting, deeply immersed in Samadhi. His disciples did not dare to disturb him, though his life was in danger. Then Shankaracharya placed his kamandalu (water pot) at the entrance of the cave saying that it would absorb all the waters of the flood. His words came true. The floodwaters could not disturb his Guru's meditation. Guru Govindapada blessed him saying "Just as you contained the floodwaters in your kamandalu, you should write commentaries containing the essence of the Vedantic scriptures. By this work, you will gain eternal glory."

### **Sannyasa**

When Shankara broached the topic of his embracing the Sannyasa way of life, his mother was reluctant to give him her permission and blessings. One day, however, when he accompanied his mother for a bath in the river, a crocodile caught hold of his leg and started dragging him. His mother could only stand and watch helplessly. Then Shankara called out to his mother, asking her to permit him to become a Sannyasi at least during these last moments of his life. She agreed and miraculously the crocodile let go of Shankara's leg. To console his mother he promised her that he would come back to her at the time of her death and perform the last rites.

### **Final rites of his mother**

Shankaracharya was somewhere in North India when he came to know of his mother's impending death. By using his Yogic powers, travelled through the air to reach her quickly. At her request, he granted her divine visions.

When he tried to arrange the cremation of his mother's body, his relatives refused to help him on the grounds that as a Sannyasi he was not permitted to perform funeral rites. Normally this would have been a serious setback as a cremation involves rituals, which would require physical assistance by a few people. So Shankaracharya performed a miracle. He made a funeral pyre out of plantain stalks. After placing the body on the pyre, he took some water and after chanting a few mantras he sprinkled the water on the pyre. Immediately the pyre caught fire. Thus, he was able to complete the funeral rites without help.