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The glorious saga of Shankara

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43. The glorious saga of Shankara

*When the branch of a tree robs
against another branch incessantly,
Fire emerges from the branches.
When you repeatedly chum buttermilk
you get butter from which ghee is got.
By engaging one's self in a
continuous process of enquiry
One realises the Divinity within. (Telugu Poem).*

BY perseverance anything can be accomplished, says a Telugu proverb. The Geetha declares that by repeated practice one acquires the wisdom that ultimately leads to *Thyaaga* (renunciation). Every activity in life is based on practice. Likewise, to realise the Divine, constant practice is necessary. Mere repetition of the lord's name is not enough. Devotion should express itself in social service. Any service done with social well-being in mind will become service to God.

"The one Self dwells in a myriad bodies like butter in milk, oil in thil seeds, fragrance in a flower, sweet juice in a fruit and fire in a faggot," says a *Sanskrit sloka*. This is the truth proclaimed by *Vedhaantha*. Today, modern youth, not realising this truth, are wasting their lives in every way.

The doctrine of *Adhvaitha*

Aadhi Shankara demonstrated that underlying all forms, names and qualities, there is one basic reality which alone is real and changeless. This is the doctrine of *Adhvaitha* (Non-dualism). Out of a mango seed comes a tree with branches, leaves, flowers and fruit each with distinct forms and uses. But all the myriad things that have come from the seed owe their existence to the seed from which the tree arose. This truth was declared by Krishna in the Geetha when He said: "*Beejam maam sarvabhoothaanaam*" (I am the seed that is the origin of all beings). All things in the universe are manifestations of the One Divine.

Yesterday I related the story of how Aadhi Shankara took to *sanyaasa* at an early age and came to his *guru*, Govindha. The preceptor for Govindha was Gaudapaadha. Gaudapaadha distinguished the *Riks in Rig-Vedha* which proclaimed the oneness of the Divine. Shankara received this teaching from Govindha and mastered all the *Vedhas* and *Shaasthras* by his fourteenth year. Earnest pursuit of knowledge leads to total understanding (*Jnaana*).

Shankara's debate with preceptor

One day, to test Shankara's mastery of the scriptures Govindha engaged Shankara in a philosophical debate. It was a debate between the preceptor and the disciple. Shankara was full of humility and reverence for the *guru*. Hence, before entering on the debate he prostrated before the preceptor and prayed to him for permission to argue with him. With the *guru's* sanction he began his argument with amazing skill and demolished, with due scriptural authority, the propositions of the preceptor and presented his views in accordance with *Vedhik* authorities with

due regard to worldly understanding and showed how the *Nivritthi* (inward) path could be harmonized with the *Pravritthi* (external) path.

Shankara was deeply perturbed over the conduct of great *Vedhik* scholars of those times who were concerned about making a money out of their scriptural scholarship than to gain spiritual wisdom from it. They forgot that knowledge should not be used for commercial purposes. Even today many students consider education as a means for earning a living. This is utterly wrong. One should work for a living. But knowledge should be sought for acquiring wisdom. Shankara sought to bring about a change in the use of scriptural knowledge.

*Of what use is the acquisition
of all kinds of knowledge if
One does not think of God and use his hands
for the adoration of the Divine?
All such knowledge is a sheer waste,*
says a Thelugu poem.

Shankara was deeply distressed over the conduct of the scholars. His preceptor Govindha observed Shankara's sadness. Govindha's guru, Gaudapaadha, also felt unhappy over this state of things. Both of them were elated at the sublime feelings of the young Shankara. They both realised that Shankara was best qualified to use the sacred teachings of the *Vedhas* to combat the prevailing unrighteous and immoral tendencies in the society. They summoned Shankara-and told him "Child! There is no need for you to stay here any longer. Leave for Kaasi tomorrow. You must meet the great *pandiths* in Kaasi and propagate the doctrine to the whole world. Nobody else can carry out this mission."

Students today should realise that they are the most powerful instruments for rectifying all the evils rampant in our society today.

Shankara's journey to Kaasi

With the permission of the two preceptors, Shankara set out for Kaasi. No modern means of transport were available in those days. Shankara had to walk all the way to Benares. The sixteen-year-old lad gathered his disciples and left for Kaasi. On the way he saw a *pandith* sitting under a tree and cramming the rules of grammar. At that moment, he began composing the famous hymn. "Bhaja Govindham." (Svaami recited the opening stanza from Bhaja Govindham). "You dull-witted fellow! Why do you immerse yourself in the rules of grammar? They will not save you when death knocks at the door. Instead, worship Govindha!" At the time of death nothing and nobody will follow the departing soul when it leaves the body. Only the remembrance of the name of the Lord will keep you company at all times. Shankara advised the *pandith* to chant the name of the Lord instead of conning the rules of grammar.

After teaching him this lesson, Shankara proceeded to Kaasi with his disciples. Shankara's teachings were spreading far and wide. The of Benares arranged for a grand assembly of scholars in the holy city.

Shankara and the scholars

Many scholars had gathered there in all their regalia. Nothing was lacking in terms of ostentation at that assembly. Shankara entered in a simple way, wearing a *dhothi* covering upto his knees and a towel over his shoulder. On seeing him, the *pandiths* seemed to feel that it was all a joke. Some *pandiths* remarked: "He does not even wear a *rudhraaksha maala* (a garland of beads). Apandith should have an imposing figure. What is it that this stripling can tell us?" They addressed him thus: "We have come to know that you are proficient in all the *Vedhas and Shaasthras*, an authority on grammar and logic and a great exponent of the *Adhvaitha* doctrine."

Shankara then sang the Bhaja Govindham songs, pointing out the transitory nature of material wealth and exhorting all to give up worldly desires. He declared that *pandiths* should be equal-minded and should give up the desire for wealth, which is the result of one's actions. "Give up this thirst for money. Develop the thirst for God," declared Shankara in strident terms. Then he gave a superb exposition of the metaphysics of *Adhvaitha*.

All the *pandiths* and their disciples were astonished at the performance of the young Shankara. They realised that here was one who was not only a great teacher but one who practised what he taught. This unity in thought, word and deed is the mark of greatness. Shankara was the very embodiment of unity and purity in thought, speech and action.

Many *pandiths* got up and plied Shankara with questions. He answered them all with perfect ease. He declared that *Adhvaitha* means oneness of the spirit and awareness of this oneness is true *Jnaana* (wisdom). Spiritual wisdom alone is true wisdom. *Pandiths* today, he declared, are not having this realisation.

Exposition of *Adhvaitha*

Shankara pointed out that though names and forms may be many, the Self is one only. That Self resides in everyone's heart. He exhorted the *pandiths* to purify their hearts and follow the dictates of the conscience. Shankara made it clear that creeds may vary but God is one.

Shankara called upon the *pandiths* to be content with moderate incomes and not hanker after riches. Vast knowledge and petty desires go ill together.

Students should realise how a young lad born in Kaaladi brought greatness to Kerala and Bhaarath.

Students should cultivate human values like love, compassion, righteousness and truth and become truly human. Every student should strive to lead an ideal life like Shankara.

In this context, I should like to mention that in Bhaja Govindham Shankara commends renunciation of all worldly attachments. People may feel that Svaami is telling the students these unworldly teachings. This does not worry me, because what I am saying is the Truth. Is renunciation acquired so easily?. No. People who have been listening for years have not changed to the slightest extent. To imagine that a single discourse is going to make a big change is fanciful. Only a fortunate few experience such transformation. If real renunciation is promoted in anyone, there can be no greater blessing than that.

Nearness to God will inspire the spirit of renunciation even without one being conscious of it. In that renunciation lies fulfillment. And one's life is redeemed.

Discourse in Sai Kulwant Mandap on 7-9-1996.

*Steady adherence to Truth, Renunciation, Genuine Prema (Love),
Self-less service these are the essential components of character.
Follow the dictates of your conscience. You can never be wrong.*

Baba