

# Evolution of Theism



SWAMI B. G. NARASINGHA

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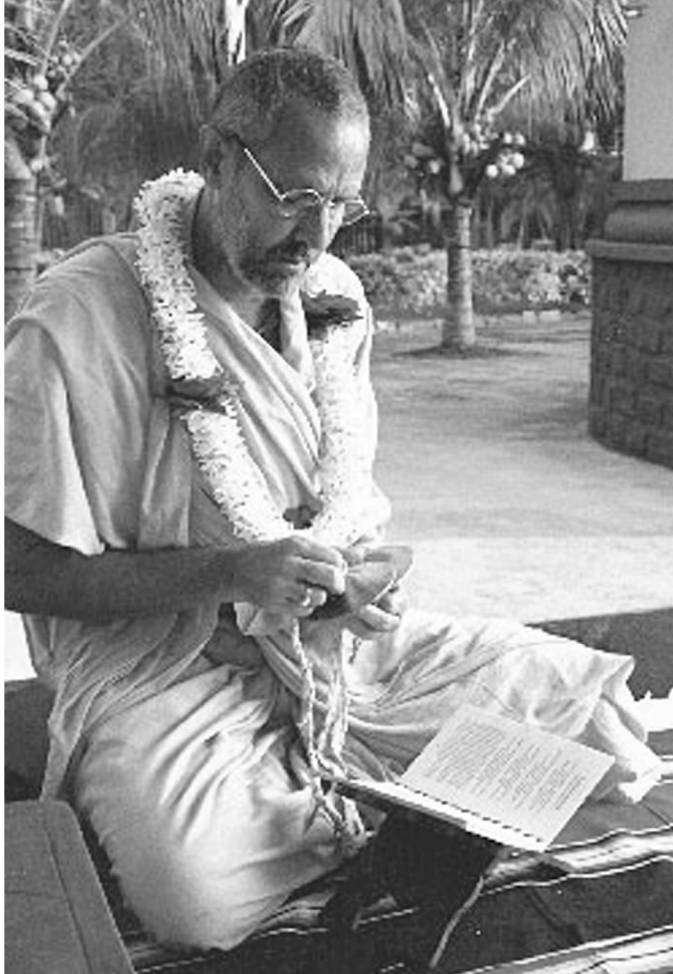
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His Holiness Tridandi Goswami Sripada  
Bhakti Gaurava Narasingha Maharaja

## ABOUT SWAMI B.G. NARASINGHA

His Holiness Sripada Bhakti Gaurava Narasingha Maharaja is a leading *sannyasi* disciple of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada — recognized as a dynamic preacher and distributor of the unlimited mercy that emanates from the lotus feet of his guardians— Their Divine Graces Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Srila Bhakti Raksaka Sridhara Deva Goswami Maharaja and Srila Bhakti Pramoda Puri Goswami Maharaja.

In *Evolution of Theism*, Sripada Narasingha Maharaja gives a comprehensive overview of the lives of the great masters Buddha, Shankara, Ramanuja,

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## PREFACE

Madhva and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu along with a treatise of their philosophical teachings. These teaching form a theistic evolution starting with Buddha and continuing through Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

Stripada Narasingha Maharaja is the author of various essays, articles and books in which the principles and conceptions of pure devotion are clearly defined. Presently Stripada Narasingha Maharaja is preaching Krishna consciousness in the Untied States and India and he is also developing DevaVision (<http://www.devavision.org/>), a series of spiritual video documentaries.

# DEDICATION

To My Diksha and Siksha Gurus

His Divine Grace  
Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami  
Prabhupada

and

His Divine Grace  
Srila Bhakti Raksaka Sridhara Deva  
Goswami Maharaja

## PREFACE

Throughout the history of mankind it is noted that events repeat themselves. As many times as man turns his life toward material acquisition and pleasures, inevitably he will turn back to a theistic search. This is due to the inner nature of all living entities. One cannot escape for long one's eternal spiritual nature, no matter what external trappings one may wear.

*nitya-siddha krishna-prema sadhya kabhu naya  
shravanadi-shudda-chitte karaye udaya*

“Pure love of God is eternally situated within everyone's heart and only needs to be awakened by association. This is the special mercy of great spiritual

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masters—to kindle the fire of devotion to the Supreme Godhead within everyone.

In this present book *Evolution of Theism*, a comprehensive overview of the lives of the great masters Buddha, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabu is presented along with a treatise of their philosophical teachings. These teachings form a theistic evolution starting with Buddha and continuing through Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

We believe that this book will be well received by the educated classes both in India and abroad. The subject of truth, which is treated in this book in elegant language, is not a truth which belongs to one man or another, but is of universal application. Now is the time for all genuine spiritualists to stand together in the name of truth against the evil of illusion. We feel that this book will help to serve this purpose.

Tridandi Goswami

Bhakti Bhavana Vishnu.

## INTRODUCTION

It is sometimes found that the students of various spiritual disciplines argue amongst themselves as to who's teaching is right or wrong, it is often the case that the students argue simply on the basis of dogma, and never really touch upon the truth. In yet other instances the students are seen to argue about the truth, each supporting his own knowledge or realization but not realizing that his opponent is also discussing the same Absolute Truth but from a different angle of vision.

To illustrate this point there is a very nice Sufi poem entitled: 'The Blind men and the Elephant'

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It was six men of Hindustan  
To learning much inclined  
Who went to see an Elephant  
Though each of them was blind  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
“God bless me! but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!”

The second, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried, “Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me tis very clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
is very like a spear!”

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The Third approached the animal,  
and happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
“I see quoth he, “The elephant  
Is very like a snake!”

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,  
And felt about the knee  
“What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain!” quoth he:  
“Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!”

The Fifth who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: “Even the blindest man  
Can tell what this resemble most:  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!”

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The Sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!”

And so these men of Hindustan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong

So oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what the others mean,  
And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!

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## INTRODUCTION

According to India’s great literature, Shrimad Bhagavatam, the Absolute Truth is realized in three stages according to the position of the seer; Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan.

*vadanti tat tattva-vidas tattvam yaj jnanam advayam  
brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti shabdyate*

“Learned transcendentalists who know the Absolute Truth call this nondual substance Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan.”

Brahman is the stage of impersonal realization. Paramatma is the partial representation of the Absolute Truth in the heart of every living entity. And Bhagavan is the stage of realization of the Personality of Godhead, Shri Krishna, as the fountainhead of ecstatic mellows of divine love. The ‘ONE’ Absolute Truth is thus manifest in three stages Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan.

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To help the fallen souls in this world in their march toward the divine realm of Shri Krishna in Goloka Vrindavana, the supreme spiritual abode, the Lord sometimes comes Himself or sends His bonafide representative. Knowing this important fact, a sincere seeker of the truth can draw down the ultimate good from all bonafide spiritual masters.

At a glance such spiritual masters may appear to have differing opinions and even contradict each other. But to the actually learned person, these differences are only external while internally he sees the spiritual unity amongst them in that they work only for the benefit of the world and work only under the orders of the Supreme Lord.

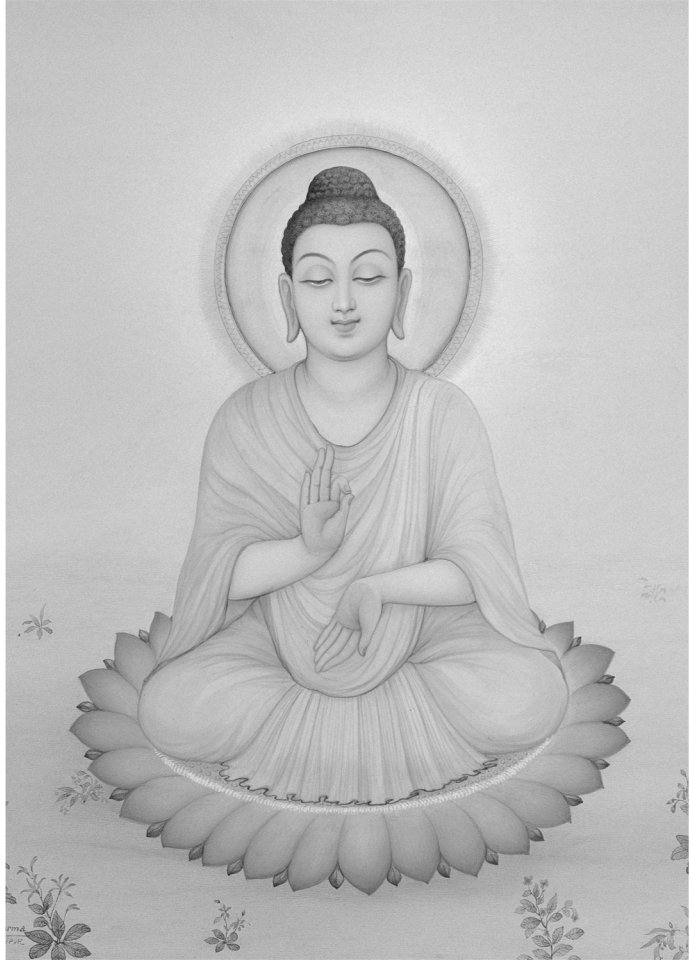
Although the truth is eternal, the truth nevertheless evolves in human society in gradual stages. In presenting these five essays on the lives and teachings of India's leading spiritual authorities beginning with Buddha we hope that our readers will not only gain a wealth

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of knowledge about the lives of these saints but that they will also understand the contribution of each in a progressive way, culminating in the teachings of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the Great Master.

The truths discussed in this book are not a sectarian concern and we do not place any master above another on the basis of sectarian favoritism. Yet the truth is dynamic and it can be seen at the apex in the teachings of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Therefore if one sincerely reads this book with an open and pure heart they will surely understand the ultimate goal of life and how to achieve it.

Swami B. G. Narasingha



## PART ONE

### BUDDHA

A...theistic Evolution

When the religion of the Vedas became weakened due to the influence of less intelligent men who blindly performed ritualistic ceremonies and wantonly killed animals in the name of Vedic injunctions, Buddha appeared on the scene as a great reformer. Totally rejecting the Vedic literatures and substituting his rational, atheistic views, Buddha advocated the path of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *nirvana* (the negation of reality as we know it) as the ultimate goal of life.

The actual date of the Buddha's birth is unknown, but according to some authorities, he was born in the fifth century B.C. in a small province in Bihar, on the border of Nepal and India. The Buddha was born to

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King Suddhodana and his queen, Mayadevi, a woman of pure character. It is said that at the birth of the divine child, four angels appeared from heaven and proclaimed his future glory as one who would redeem the world. Upon the birth of Buddha, Suddhodana's kingdom prospered like a great river whose waters were swollen by many tributaries. Each day new riches poured into his treasury. His stables were too small to hold the horses and elephants that were presented as gifts. Everyone in the kingdom felt great joy and satisfaction.

On the day after the child's birth, a sage named Asita Rishi came to the palace of King Suddhodana. Delighted by the arrival of the sage, the king brought the child before him. Asita shed tears of love at the sight of the child and spoke of the child's previous birth as an Indian *brahmana* named Sumedha, and of his becoming a great renunciate in this life. He said that one day, as Sumedha sat absorbed in thought, he received a revelation unto himself: "Behold, I am

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subject to birth, death, old age, and disease. Certainly I shall have to discover the path of enlightenment and reveal it to all mankind." The story of the Buddha told by the sage Asita was foretold in the ancient Sanskrit scriptures and was revealed to the king at that time.

On the fifth day after the child's birth, a festival was held on the auspicious occasion of his name-giving ceremony. Eight astrologers were summoned to tell the child's future. The child was named Siddhartha, and seven of the astrologers foretold his future as a great king who would rule the world. The eighth astrologer said that the young prince would one day give up his royal dress and take to the path of renunciation. He foretold that the prince would become the Buddha —the Knower, the Enlightened One. King Suddhodana did not want his son to leave home to become the Buddha. "What will my son see that will be the cause of his renouncing worldly life?" he inquired. The astrologer replied, "Four signs. He will see a man worn by age, a sick man, a dead body,

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and a mendicant. Moved by compassion for the suffering of humanity, your son will leave the royal household and walk the path of enlightenment.” At that moment the king resolved that no such sights would ever come before the eyes of his son.

On the seventh day, misfortune fell upon King Suddhodana. His wife Mayadevi passed away from the world. The grandmother of Siddhartha, Anjana, took good care of the small child and raised him with love and affection.

So it was that the young prince never experienced anything except the finest pleasures life could offer. When Siddhartha turned 16 years of age, the king decided that it was time for his son to marry. “Yes, I will marry,” said Siddhartha, “But only to a girl of perfect manners, who is wholly truthful, modest, and congenial to my temperament. She must be of pure and honorable birth, young and fair, but not proud of her beauty. She must be charitable, contented in self-denial, affectionate as a sister and tender as a mother

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to all living creatures. She must be sweet and free from envy. Only such a girl can I take as my wife.”

It was no easy task, but after a long time the king finally found the ideal girl to become his son’s wife: Yashodhara, the daughter of Dandapani. The wedding was performed and after some time, Yashodhara became pregnant and gave birth to a male child. It also happened at this time that Siddhartha desired to visit the royal pleasure gardens. King Suddhodana ordered that all aged, sick, or otherwise distressed people should be hidden away so that the prince may not see them on the way to the gardens. But the hand of fate proved more powerful than the devices of the king. For it would be en-route to the pleasure gardens that Siddhartha would see the ‘four signs’ which the astrologer foretold would move him to the path of renunciation.

The city was nicely decorated for the occasion. Only young and beautiful people lined the streets; all others were kept out of sight. Suddenly, as though moved by destiny, Siddhartha ordered his chariot driver, Channa,



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to take an alternate route through the city. Within a short distance Siddhartha saw something he had never seen before—an old man bent over and worn by time. “What is this?” asked Siddhartha, “And why does he bend so?” Afraid to speak but obligated to reply to his master, Channa said, “It is a man bent over by old age, sir.” “Must all men grow old?” asked Siddhartha. “Yes,” replied Channa, and the chariot drove on.

Again Siddhartha ordered Channa to stop when he saw a man with leprosy lying by the road. “What is this?” asked Siddhartha.

“It is a man stricken with disease,” Channa replied.

“Are all men subject to disease?”

“Yes, sir. All men in this world are subject to disease.” And the chariot drove on.

Again the chariot stopped when Siddhartha saw a funeral procession. “What is this?” asked Siddhartha, “And why does that man lie motionless?”

“He is dead,” replied Channa. “The energy of life has left his body.” “Must every man die?”

## BUDDHA

“Yes, sir. Everyone in this world must die.” And the chariot drove on.

Siddhartha’s mind was very much troubled by the sight of old age, disease, and death. “Is there not a solution to these problems? Is there not a way to attain freedom from all anxieties?” Siddhartha thought deeply to himself as the chariot moved on. Then a mendicant appeared. “What is this?” asked Siddhartha, “And why does this man seem so contented?” “Sir,” replied Channa, “He is a mendicant. He has given up all material possessions to dedicate himself to the attainment of absolute knowledge—that which gives freedom from all the miseries of material existence.”

Hearing this, Siddhartha immediately took hope within his heart and ordered Channa to return the chariot to the palace. When news of the event reached King Suddhodana, he was very distressed at the thought of losing his son. In a vain attempt to occupy his son’s mind with worldly pleasure, the king sent the most beautiful girls in the kingdom to dance for Siddhartha

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and to please him by any means. The girls, whose beauty was unparalleled in heaven or on Earth, danced and sang to please the prince. But Siddhartha could not be distracted. He was now resolved to seek the path of supreme enlightenment.

As the girls danced and sang, Siddhartha, whose mind was far away, fell asleep. Seeing that the prince was no longer attentive, the girls also laid down and went to sleep. During the night, Siddhartha awoke from his sleep and decided to quit the palace and take up a life of renunciation. He went to see his wife and child. When he looked into the royal bed chambers he saw his son, his wife Yashodhara, and her many female attendants sound asleep. Their bodies laid here and there and their hair was in disarray. Some of them twisted and turned as they slept. Some of them groaned, some drooled, and some passed air. "This is disgusting," thought Siddhartha. "The illusion of pleasure in material life is very deep, yet I see that it is only a breeding ground for old age, disease, and death."

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Resolved as he was, Siddhartha left that very night. He got into his chariot and ordered Channa to drive him away from the royal palace. The next morning, by the banks of the Anoma River, Siddhartha gave up his royal dress, cut his beautiful locks of hair from his head, and prepared to enter the forest alone. Before departing, he said, "Grieve not for me, but mourn for those who stay behind, bound by longings of which the fruit is only sorrow." Weeping, Channa returned to the palace to tell King Suddhodana of the great 'disaster.' What followed was the widespread conversion of the Indian masses from sophistry, ritualism and hedonism to Buddhism. In the Buddha's sermon at Saranath, he taught his disciples 'the four noble truths:' *Duhkha*, there is suffering; *samudaya*, suffering has a cause; *nirodha*, suffering can be surpassed; and *marga*, there is a method by which one can attain freedom from all suffering. "This, my disciples, is the truth of suffering: Birth, old age, disease, and death. This is the cause of suffering: Lust and desire; the thirst for sensual

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pleasure and the thirst for power. This is the extinction of suffering: Extinguishing lust and desire, letting it go, expelling it, separating oneself from it, giving it no room. And this, my disciples, is the path of freedom from all suffering: Right belief, right aspiration, right speech, right living, right effort, and right rapture.” For 80 years, until his death, the Buddha traveled and preached his many sermons known as ‘The Turning of the Wheel of Law.’ He taught that above the world of misery there is peace or *Nirvana* —only to be attained by the pure. And only those who restrained themselves from violent life on both the physical and mental plane could know the truth.

The philosophy of the Buddha has been disseminated widely since the time of its founding patron saint. Although there are many forms of Buddhism prevalent in the world today, all of them hold certain basic common tenets which may be traced back to the founding father. For instance, all Buddhists seek a ‘negative’ solution to life’s problematic scenario.

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They are silent on the issue of self-realization. They seek the dissolution of our temporal existence by way of empiric exercise. Thus the core of Buddhism is much akin to that of a modern scientific approach.

Buddha is revered by both the theists and the atheists for different reasons. The atheists who constitute his actual ‘followers’ revere him for his condemnation of immorality and simultaneous conviction that moral life in and of itself was ultimately unable to produce any positive permanent results. His advocacy of empiric exercise with a view to cross over the hurdle of action and reaction (*karma*) ultimately culminated in self annihilation (*prakriti-nirvana*). The theists laud his insistence that rationalism cannot lead to any positive transcendental existence or God consciousness. Buddha described the natural course of events resulting from empiric speculation but did not directly comment on the existence of God. He set himself against all hypothetical speculations about transcendence, but never denied the existence of transcendence or the

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possibility of attaining it. In effect he taught that a transcendent reality could not be realized by intellectual exercise. However, the question of the existence of such a reality was not entertained by him. Thus he appeared to be an atheist or agnostic.

Buddha is also thought to be atheistic because of his denial of the authority of the Vedas. At a closer look, however, this may be explained as a tactical maneuver to reestablish the principles of religion. As the old saying goes, “It may be easier to build a new house than attempt to recondition an old one.”

At the time when Buddha took birth, the people in general were atheistic and preferred eating animal flesh to anything else. On the plea of performing Vedic sacrifices (*karma-kanda*), even temples were turned into slaughterhouses and animal killing was indulged in without restriction. Thus Buddha preached nonviolence, taking pity on the poor animals.

Seeing the atrocities that were the norm at the time, and the petitioning of demigods with a view to

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enjoy heavenly delights, the Buddha reasoned that if this was the people’s understanding of the Vedas, then this particular class of people would do better to put the Vedas aside. Buddha actually preached a portion of the Vedic principles in a manner suitable for the time. In this way we see that while appearing as an atheist, he cleverly set the stage for the development of future theistic thought.

“Arise and delay not,  
follow after the pure life!  
Who follows virtue rests in bliss,  
alike in this world and the next.”



## PART TWO

### SHANKARA

The Incarnation of Lord Shiva

Ours is an age of inquiry into the secrets of the cosmos and life itself. As intelligent people, we yearn to know what is beyond. We study the nature of things in this world to further our understanding of who we are and where we came from. We fill our library shelves with volumes of books so that future generations may share in the wealth of our discoveries. We do all these things in the name of science and the advancement of knowledge. But we are not the first people to inquire about the mysteries of life. In fact many great civilizations before ours have penetrated deep into the unknown. One such era in bygone days was that

of Shankaracharya, who pioneered a paradigm of enlightened thought, the dawning of *advaita-vedanta*.

During the eighth century A.D., when Shankaracharya appeared in India, the authority of the Vedas, which guide humanity toward progressive immortality, had been greatly minimized by the prevailing influence of Buddhist thought. At the time most of India's philosophers, in pursuance of the teaching of Buddha's *Shunyavada* philosophy of negative existence or *prakriti-nirvana*, had renounced the Vedic conception of *ishvara* (the Absolute Truth) and *jiva* (the eternal spark of the same). Under the patronage of powerful emperors like Ashoka, Buddhism had spread throughout the length and breadth of India. By dint of his vast learning and his ability to defeat opposing philosophies in philosophical debate, Shankaracharya, however, was able to reestablish the prestige of the Vedic literatures such as the *Upanishads* and the *Vedanta*. Wherever Shankaracharya traveled in India he was victorious and opposing philosophies

bowed. Shankaracharya established his doctrine, *advaita-vedanta* (non-dualistic *Vedanta*) by reconciling the philosophy of the Buddhists. He agreed with the Buddhist concept that corporal existence is unreal or *asat*—but he disagreed with their conception of *prakriti-nirvana*. Shankaracharya presented Brahman, spiritual substance, as a positive alternative to the illusory plane of matter. His philosophy in a nutshell is contained in the verse '*brahma satyam jagat-mithya*'—Brahman or spirit is truth, whereas *jagat* or the material world is false. In other words, Shankaracharya's philosophy was a compromise between theism and atheism. It is said that Shankaracharya, according to the necessity of time, place and circumstance, took the position between theism and atheism because the wholesale conversion of Buddhists to the path of full-fledged theism would not have been possible.

Professors of philosophy in India refer to a verse from the Padma Purana that reveals the hidden identity of Shankaracharya:

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*mayavadam asac-chastram  
pracchannam bauddham ucyate  
mayaiva vihitam devi  
kalau brahmana-murtina*

“‘The Mayavada philosophy,’ Shiva informed his wife Parvati, ‘is covered Buddhism. In the form of a *brahmana* in the Kali-yuga I teach this imagined philosophy.’” Shankaracharya is thus widely accepted as an incarnation of Shiva.

In the small village of Kaladi, in the southern province of India, Sri Shankaracharya advented himself as the son of a Vedic *brahmana* named Shivaguru and his wife Arya. Even in childhood it was apparent that Shankara, as his father named him, was a great personality. At his birth astrologers predicted that the boy would become a powerful scholar, who would be like an elephant in a banana plantation in the matter of destroying false religions and spurious doctrines. As a student Shankara quickly gained proficiency in

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the Sanskrit language. He had a prodigious memory; anything his teachers said stuck in his mind forever. What the average student learned in twelve years Shankara learned in one.

When Shankara was three years old his father passed away. Life was difficult for mother and son, but by the grace of God they lived peacefully according to their means. Shankara continued his studies until his eighth year when he decided to take *sannyasa* and live a life of renunciation. One day Shankara said to his mother, “The life of a man on earth is so full of misery that he sometimes wishes that he had never been born. The dullest among men knows that the body is destined to die at the appointed time. What the yogi alone knows is that in the cycle of *samsara* one is born and dies again and again a million times. In the cycle of *samsara* he sometimes plays the role of a son, a father, a husband, a daughter, a mother, or a wife in an unending succession. Therefore true and lasting happiness can be achieved only by transcending birth

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and death through renunciation, which is the gateway to self-realization. My dear mother, please permit me to embrace that state and strive to realize myself. Allow me to accept *sannyasa*.”

“Don’t speak like that again,” replied his affectionate mother. “I wish to see you marry and become a good husband for a good woman. Please do not speak of taking *sannyasa* again.”

A few days later while Shankara was bathing in the river a crocodile caught hold of his leg. Seeing the hopeless position of her son the mother began to cry piteously. It appeared that the crocodile might devour her son alive. “Mother!” said the boy, “there may be a way that I can be saved. It is said by the wise men of our country that if one agrees to accept *sannyasa* when one’s life is in danger, one will get out of that danger. Therefore please permit me to renounce the world.”

Prepared to do anything to save the life of her son, the poor woman consented to his request. Shankara

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then raised his hands and pronounced the words ‘*sannyaso’ham*,’ (I have renounced). When this was done the crocodile immediately let go of Shankaracharya’s leg and his life was spared. As he came out of the water he and his mother embraced. “My dear mother, you have always been my provider. Now I am going out into the world and henceforth whoever feeds me is my mother, whoever teaches me is my father. My pupils are my children, peace is my bride, and solitude my bliss. Such are the rigors of my undertaking.”

“Be blessed my son. Your life is now in the care of the Supreme Benefactor.” With this heartfelt exchange between mother and son, Shankara departed.

Wearing a simple cloth, carrying a water pot, and traveling only on foot with a staff in his hand, the young Shankara roamed across the countryside for many months. One day while resting in the shade of a banyan tree Shankara noticed several frogs sitting peacefully next to a cobra. Seeing this curious site he remembered the lessons of his previous teachers that



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coexistence between natural enemies was possible only in the vicinity of a great sage or an enlightened guru.

Upon inquiring from the people of the local village, Shankara learned of a saintly person named Govindapada who lived nearby in a cave. He decided to go there immediately. Offering prostrated obeisances in front of the cave Shankara recited a delightful hymn in praise of the great guru.

“My obeisances to you, revered Govindapada, who are the abode of all knowledge. Your fame has spread far and wide because you have traveled inward into yourself—to the very core of your being. You are the most realized person on earth, since you had the good fortune to become the disciple of Gaudapada, the disciple of Sukadeva, who was the self-realized son of Vyasadeva, the compiler of Vedic literature. Thus you have a most remarkable line of spiritual preceptors.

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Please accept this unworthy *sannyasi* as your disciple and make me heir to the knowledge of self-realization.”

Govindapada was pleased to accept this little *sannyasi* as his disciple and he imparted the four *sutras* to him that Shankara would later preach throughout the world:

*prajnam brahma* (Brahman is pure consciousness)

*ayamatma brahma* (soul is Brahman)

*tat tvam asi* (you are that consciousness)

*aham brahmasmi* (I am Brahman)

Shankara stayed with his guru for a long time, until one day Govindapada, understanding that the young Shankara was an incarnation of Shiva, said, “Now listen to my wish. Proceed to the holy city of Banaras immediately and start instructing the people on how they can understand their real self. That which

is taught by the Buddhist philosophers does not reveal the nature of the *atma* or self. It is your mission to bring the people to the path of theism. Banaras has many well-known scholars in all systems of philosophy. You must hold discussions with them and guide them along the lines of correct thinking. It is most urgent! Please do not delay even one minute.” Taking the order of his *guru*, Shankara started for Banaras.

When Shankara entered among the learned circles of Banaras he was barely twelve years old. Indeed, his tender age accompanied by his extensive knowledge and deep realization astounded all who came to see him. As destined by providence, Shankara soon attracted many disciples who sat before him in rapt attention to his every word on transcendence. From that time onward Shankara became known as *acharya* or Shankaracharya.

At Banaras, Shankaracharya turned the tide of atheism. He compiled commentaries on the *Brahma-sutra*, *Bhagavad-gita*, and the principle *Upanishads*, all of

which explained the nondual substance, Brahman, as the ultimate reality. Among his followers, his commentary on the *Brahma-sutra*, known as *Sariraka-bhasya*, is considered the most important. Shankaracharya comments on the nature of Brahman as that which is beyond the senses, impersonal, formless, eternal, and unchangeable, as the summum bonum of the Absolute Truth. According to Shankaracharya, that which is known as the *atma* or soul is but a covered portion or illusioned portion of the Supreme Brahman. That illusion, says Shankaracharya, is due to the veil of *maya*, which is created out of ignorance or forgetfulness of the true self. The idea that the Absolute Truth can be covered by *maya* was later challenged successfully by Sri Ramanuja. Those who followed the teachings of Shankaracharya then became known to many as Mayavadis, or philosophers of illusion.

Shankaracharya’s theory of illusion states that although the Absolute Truth is never transformed, we think that it is transformed, which is an illusion.

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Shankaracharya did not believe in the transformation of energy of the Absolute. Acceptance of the transformation of energy would have necessitated the acceptance of the Personality of the Absolute Truth or the personal existence of God—full-fledged theism. According to Shankaracharya we ourselves are God. When the veil of ignorance is removed, one will realize his complete identity as being nondifferent from the Supreme Brahman or God.

Shankaracharya held that the questions about the origin of the universe and the nature of illusion were unanswerable and inexplicable. Shankaracharya's conviction was that the spiritual substance, Brahman, is supra-mundane —separate from the gross and subtle bodies of mind and intelligence in this world. Shankaracharya further stressed that *mukti*, or liberation from the cycle of birth and death, is possible only when the living being renounces his relationship with the material world. Shankaracharya says that the concepts of 'I' and 'Mine' —I am an individual and these are

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my possessions: wife, children, property, etc.— are the causes of bondage to material existence and must be given up. Thus the bulk of his followers were and continue to be celibate students.

To support his conclusions of *advaita-vedanta*, Shankaracharya interpreted the Vedas to suit his means. In other words, the Vedas have their direct and indirect meanings. Shankaracharya, using grammatical jugglery of suffixes, prefixes and affixes, gave an imaginary or indirect interpretation of his own. Thus Shankaracharya, positioning himself between the theist and the atheist, sometimes appears to have been the friend of both. The great acharya adopted this stand to lay the foundation for future theistic evolution. The contribution of Shankaracharya in the development of theistic thought, from the atheistic or neo-theistic concepts of the Buddhists' *prakriti-nirvana* to those of the sublime transcendental substantive Brahman, has made India and generations of future theists forever grateful.

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Accompanied by a group of disciples Shankaracharya traveled throughout India. To the north he traveled as far as the *ashrama* of Badarinatha in the Himalayas. There he established a monastery for meditation and Vedic studies. Similar monasteries were established during his travels to Puri, in the east, Dvaraka in the west, and Shringeri in the south. All of these institutions established by Shankaracharya still exist twelve centuries later.

On one of his journeys in southern India, Shankaracharya chanced to debate with a famous scholar of Mahismati named Mandana Mishra, 'the jewel among scholars.' Many learned persons gathered for the debate and Bharati, the good wife of the scholar, was chosen to be the judge and moderator. At the outset of the debate Bharati placed a garland of flowers around the neck of each of the two contestants. She proclaimed that at the end of the discussion whoever was wearing the garland which had not withered would be the winner.

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Mandana, who had never known defeat, opened the debate by stating, "I accept the authority of the Vedas. Their main teaching is that merit can be acquired by the performance of the prescribed rituals in the prescribed manner. One who performs these rituals will go to heaven and dwell in the company of Indra and the celestial damsels. When the merit is exhausted, he will return to earth so that he can acquire more pious credits for a longer stay in the world of the gods. The Vedas also contain related commandments as a prerequisite to the performance of the rites," The audience, consisting of many of Mandana's admirers and disciples, applauded his statement.

Shankaracharya then responded, "I also accept the authority of the Vedas. Their main purpose, however, is this: Brahman alone is real; the phenomenal world is an illusion; and the individual soul is identical with Brahman. The parts of the Vedas containing descriptions and injunctions pertaining to ritual are subordinate to the major part that deals with the

knowledge of the self and the ways of its acquisition. Rituals can only lead to *karma* —both good and bad, which prevents one from attaining self-realization. The only goal of the Vedas is Brahman.”

Both scholars showed profound knowledge of the Vedas in various ways, and the discussion continued unabated for eighteen days. On the last day it was seen that the garland of Mandana Mishra had begun to wither and the garland of Shankaracharya remained ever-fresh. Bharati then declared Shankaracharya the winner. Now Mandana Mishra would have to renounce his connection with the world and become the disciple of Shankaracharya.

In a final attempt to save her husband, Bharati said, “Oh Great *acharya*, you are certainly victorious in the debate with my husband and he will have to become your disciple. However, I, the wife of Mandana Mishra, am his better half. Before your victory is complete you will have to defeat me also.” Shankaracharya was somewhat surprised, but he accepted the challenge.

Addressing Shankaracharya, Bharati said, “I can not admit that you are the master of all learning unless you can prove that you have a good understanding of sex education also. Now, tell me, what are the various forms and expressions of love? What is the nature of sexual love? What is the effect of the waxing and waning moons on sex urge in men and women? You must answer all these questions.”

Being a celibate monk and only sixteen years old, it appeared as though Shankaracharya had been bewildered by his opponent. He then asked for forty days additional time since he was not prepared to speak on the subject immediately. Bharati granted the request and Shankaracharya and his disciples left the assembly. Through the powers of mystic yoga Shankaracharya entered into trance. He left his body and entered the body of a sensuous king named Amaruka. In the body of the king Shankaracharya experienced erotic love and acquired knowledge of all its intricacies. Before the forty days had

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ended Shankaracharya re-entered his own body and returned to debate with Bharati.

After a brief discussion, Bharati conceded that Shankaracharya was the undisputed winner. Shankaracharya was now the leading spiritual master in India. Day and night for sixteen continuous years Shankaracharya preached the *advaita-vedanta*. In his thirty-second year while on pilgrimage in the Himalayas, Shankaracharya left this mortal world for the eternal abode.

During his life Shankaracharya had composed a number of beautiful verses known as *Bhaja Govindam*, 'Worship Govinda.' A mystery surrounds these prayers in that Shankaracharya taught consistently throughout his commentaries that Brahman is the supreme goal. Yet in his prayers he says, "Just worship Govinda." Many commentators on the life of Shankaracharya consider that his being an incarnation of Shiva means that Shankaracharya was in fact the greatest devotee of Godhead, but due

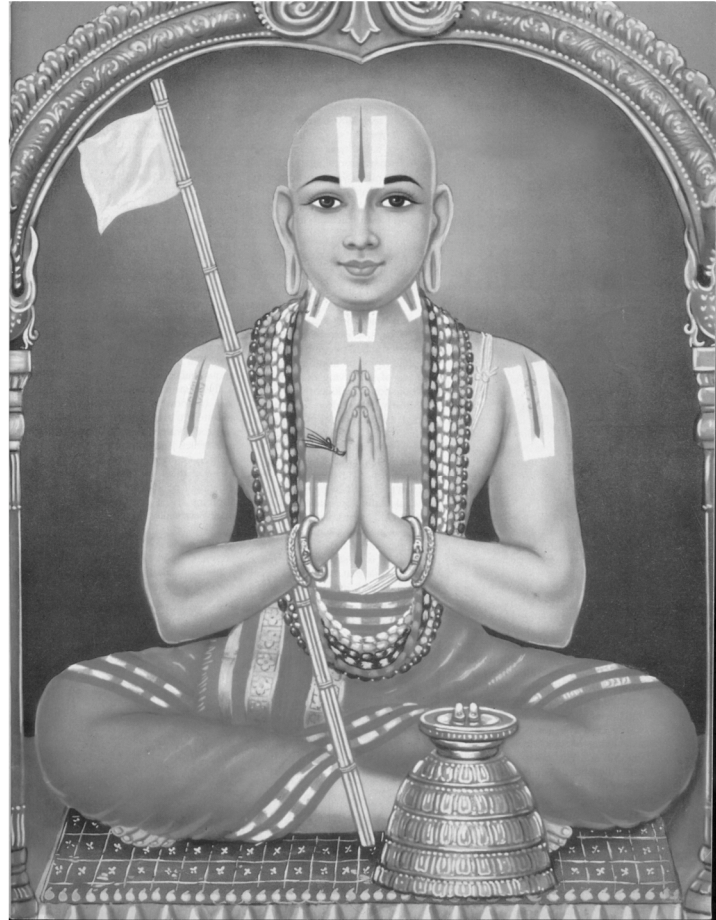
## SANKARA

to the necessity of the time he could not directly advocate devotion as the highest attainment.

Before departing from this world Shankaracharya spoke these last words:

*bhaja govindam, bhaja govindam  
bhaja govindam mudha-mate  
samprapte sannihite kale  
na hi na hi rakshati duhkrin karane*

““Worship Govinda, worship Govinda! Oh, you fools and rascals, just worship Govinda. Your rules of grammar and word jugglery will not help you at the time of death.”



## PART THREE

### RAMANUJA

#### The Dawning of Devotion

After the disappearance of Buddha, the philosophy of Shankaracarya overpowered Buddhism and spread throughout India. The authority of the *Upanishads* and other Vedic literatures were revived by Shankara and employed as weapons to fight the Buddhist doctrine. Interpreting the Vedas to draw a particular conclusion, Shankara established the doctrine of non-dualism, stating that all living entities were on an equal level with God. He prominently stressed those texts which afforded an answer to the rationalistic atheism of the Buddhists, yet the teachings of Shankara were also not wholly theistic, and thus a further unveiling of the

ultimate reality was destined. That destiny was fulfilled through Sri Ramanujacharya.

Ramanuja was born in India during the year 1017 A.D. when, according to astrological calculations, the sun was in the zodiacal sign of Cancer. His parents were Keshavacharya and Kantimati, both from aristocratic families. Ramanuja passed his childhood days in Sriperumbudur, the village of his birth. At the age of 16 he was married to Rakshakambal.

Only four months after his wedding, Ramanuja's father was struck with a severe illness and died. Upon the death of his father, Ramanuja became head of the household and decided to move to Kanchi, a holy city famed for its scholars and magnificent temples.

In Kanchi there lived a scholar named Yadava Prakasha, who was renowned for his scholarship in the doctrine of *advaita-vedanta*. No one could surpass Yadava in his ability to explain Shankara's commentaries on *Vedanta-sutra*. Ramanuja enrolled in Yadava's school and engaged in the study of

Sanskrit and Vedic literature. Although not at all convinced by the Shankarite conception, Ramanuja learned his lessons well and soon became one of Yadava's favorite students. Thinking Ramanuja to be a sincere follower of the conclusions of Shankara, Yadava showed Ramanuja special affection. But that affection did not last for long.

One day, after delivering a discourse on the *Chandogya Upanishad*, Yadava asked Ramanuja to massage his body with oil, as was the customary service to be performed by a student in those days. While giving the massage to his teacher, another student came to Yadava for some clarification on a point from the morning discourse. The boy had failed to grasp the meaning of the seventh verse of the first chapter, which began with, '*tasya yatha kapyasam pundarikam evam akshini.*' Yadava proceeded to expound an interpretation which described the sublime qualities of the Godhead in a manner which was flagrantly objectionable. On hearing the words of his teacher, the heart of Ramanuja,



which was full of love for the Supreme Godhead, was saddened, and hot tears streamed down from his eyes and fell on the thigh of Yadava. Looking up at the touch of the hot tears, Yadava could understand that something was troubling Ramanuja. When he inquired about Ramanuja's distress, Ramanuja replied, "O great and wise master, I have been sorely afflicted at heart to hear such an unbecoming explanation from a noble soul like you. How sinful it is of you to debase the Supreme, who is endowed with all gracious qualities and who is the source of all beautiful things in this world. From the mouth of such a learned man as yourself I would never have expected such a low and deceitful interpretation!"

Yadava became so angry that he could hardly control himself. "Well then," he scorned, "maybe you would like to give your own interpretation since you obviously think you know better than I!"

In a very gentle voice Ramanuja replied, "Revered sir, there is no need to give a low-minded

interpretation to the verse when the real meaning is direct and glorious."

"Then let us hear this meaning of yours which is so glorious!" said Yadava. Ramanuja then stood and with great humility recited the meaning of the verse. "The two eyes of the Supreme are as lovely as two lotuses that are blossomed by the rays of the sun."

"I see," said Yadava. "You speak as though there actually was such a 'Supreme Person.' That is due to your childish ignorance. You have not learned your lessons properly. You should always remember that the Supreme is without form, without name, and without attributes. That is the teaching of the great Shankara. In the future you should not voice your foolish sentiments!" The words of Yadava were painful to Ramanuja's ears, but out of respect for his teacher he remained silent.

A few days later a second incident occurred. While explaining a verse from the *Taittiriya Upanishad* beginning with '*satyam jnanam anantam brahma,*'

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Yadava said that Brahman was intelligence, truth, and the infinite. Hearing this explanation, Ramanuja politely added, “Brahman is endowed with the qualities of intelligence, truth, and the infinite —this means that He is not covered by ignorance as are ordinary living entities, He is never untruthful, and His energies are unlimited, not limited. The Supreme Brahman is the reservoir of all good qualities, yet He is superior to those qualities, as the sun globe is superior to sunlight.”

The agitation which Yadava felt within his mind made his voice tremble. “You young fool!” he shouted. “Your conclusions do not agree with those of Shankara or any of the previous masters! If you are going to persist with this useless talk about a personal God, why come here at all to simply to waste my time? Why don’t you start your own school and teach whatever you like? Now get out of my classroom immediately!”

As Ramanuja rose from his seat and quietly left the room, Yadava began to reflect, “This Ramanuja is not an ordinary boy. If he starts his own school, the

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philosophy of devotion might become a threat to the philosophy of non-dualism. For the sake of preserving our doctrine, this fool should be killed!”

Shortly thereafter, Ramanuja opened a small school at his home, and in no time many people began to come to him to hear his devotional discourses. Ramanuja’s lectures were wholly theistic. He rejected the concept that the *jiva*, a living entity, could be equal to the Supreme Brahman or become God as postulated by Shankara. The living entity, Ramanuja taught, is a particle of Godhead, and as such, his position is to serve the complete whole. He said that as the hand is part of the body and thus a servant of the body, similarly the living entity is part of the Supreme and thus his constitutional position is to serve the Supreme.

Ramanuja’s philosophy became known as *Visishtadvaita* or qualified non-dualism. Accordingly, the living entities are believed to be qualitatively one with the Supreme and at the same time quantitatively different. Ramanuja’s assertion was that the quantitative

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difference means that the fragmentary parts of the Supreme are dependent on the Supreme but they cannot become the Supreme.

The philosophy of Shankara stated that everything is Brahman and Brahman itself is absolutely homogeneous, undifferentiated, and without personality; individuality arose only due to illusion or *maya*. But this concept was staunchly opposed by Ramanuja. His philosophy stated that there can never be knowledge of an unqualified object; knowledge necessarily points to an object as characterized in some way. Ramanuja never accepted an attributeless, undifferentiated Brahman, but rather a Brahman which is an attribute of a greater reality: Godhead Himself. He reasoned that as the living entities are individual personalities, so too is the Supreme also a personality—the Ultimate Personality.

Ramanuja further reasoned that if illusion could cover the identity of the Supreme, then illusion was greater than Godhead. Therefore he asserted that we

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are eternally individual personalities and the Supreme is eternally the Supreme Personality, but due to our finite nature we are sometimes subject to illusion.

Ramanuja also accepted the theory of transformation rejected by Shankara. According to Shankara the material world is false; it has no existence. Ramanuja, on the other hand, said that the material world is the energy of Godhead, and the subjective reality does not undergo any change of substance in the matter of material manifestation in the same way that a singer who creates a song out of his own energy is not diminished due to his creation; rather, he becomes more glorious.

Neither the material world nor the living entities are conceived of as being independent of the Supreme Personality in the system of Visishtadvaita philosophy. The living entities are a different manifestation of the Supreme due to their being endowed with free will, whereas the material energy is manifest directly under the will of the Supreme. The free will of the living

entity is an all-important factor, since that free will is considered to be the basic principle of reciprocal relations between Godhead and the living entity.

Ramanuja presented the living entities' relationship with Godhead as being one of eternal service. According to Ramanuja, when the living entities are freed from the illusions produced by the material energy, by the method of devotion and natural love of God—like the dealings between an affectionate servant and his master—then the soul enters the spiritual sky known as Vaikuntha. Once having reached the Vaikuntha world, the soul engages in eternal service to the Supreme Person, Narayana (Vishnu). This sublime message was daily imparted by Ramanuja to his listeners.

Seeing the growing popularity of Ramanuja and the influence which he had on the people of Kanchi, the proud and arrogant Yadava Prakasha became restless. Gathering his faithful students by his side, Yadava said, "This impudent Ramanuja is a heretic! He is a nuisance to society and a threat to our

doctrines of non-dualism. I can see no other solution to the problem than to kill this rascal! What do you say?" Yadava's disciples were in complete agreement with their teacher since they too were envious of Ramanuja. Thus they devised a plan to kill him.

On the plea of worshiping the sacred river Ganges, Yadava and his disciples made arrangements for a pilgrimage to Banaras and asked Ramanuja if he would like to join them. Unsuspecting of their treacherous plan, Ramanuja accepted the invitation. As the group was about to depart, Ramanuja requested his cousin Govinda to accompany him. On the fourth day of their journey, Govinda was taken into confidence by some of Yadava's younger students who disclosed the plan to kill Ramanuja.

Shocked at the evil intentions of Yadava and his followers, Govinda took Ramanuja to a secluded place in the forest and informed him of the danger. Govinda requested Ramanuja to flee into the forest immediately before it was too late.

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Govinda then returned to the camp and told the others that while he and Ramanuja were looking for wild berries in the forest, a tiger had pounced upon Ramanuja and dragged his helpless body away. Outwardly Yadava and his disciples displayed symptoms of sorrow, but inwardly their hearts leaped with joy. Ramanuja was now gone from their lives forever. Or so they thought.

While wandering across the countryside trying to find his way home, Ramanuja came to a well where a man and woman were busy drawing water to take to their village. The couple offered Ramanuja a cup of water to relieve his thirst. After drinking, Ramanuja laid down to rest and fell into a dreamful sleep. He dreamt that while walking in the forest he saw the incarnation of Godhead Ramachandra and His consort Sita-devi, who showed him the way to his village. When Ramanuja awoke from his dream, the man and woman at the well were gone. As he looked around he saw that he was now on the outskirts

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of Kanchi. How he had gotten there he could not ascertain, save and except that it was by a miracle.

Ramanuja resumed his normal life at Kanchi and did not reveal to anyone that his life had been in danger. Several months passed until one day, Yadava and his disciples finally returned to Kanchi after completing their pilgrimage. They were staggered at the sight of Ramanuja —alive and conducting his school as usual. Thinking that their plan might have been discovered, they became fearful and abandoned any further plans to kill Ramanuja.

The fame of Ramanuja continued to spread far and wide. One day as Ramanuja sat in the solitude of his study, a venerable saint named Yamunacharya came to his door for alms. Extending his full courtesy, Ramanuja welcomed the saint into his home. Ramanuja learned that Yamuna was from Sri Rangam, the famous temple of Vishnu. In the course of their discussion, Ramanuja soon realized that Yamunacharya was a qualified spiritual master of the science of devotion.

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Overwhelmed with ecstasy and jubilation, Ramanuja fell at his feet and asked to be accepted as his disciple.

Yamuna instantly raised Ramanuja up from the floor, and embracing him with deep love, said, "My child, I am blessed today by seeing your devotion to God. May you live a long and fruitful life always being intent in the service of Narayana, the Personality of Godhead." Ramanuja then circumambulated his guru to invoke auspiciousness, and Yamuna left for Sri Rangam.

Now more than ever, Ramanuja preached the doctrine of devotion with strength and conviction. So convincing was Ramanuja in his presentation that even Yadava Prakasha and his followers surrendered and became the disciples of Ramanuja.

Then one day, a messenger came from Sri Rangam and informed Ramanuja that his guru was ill and on the verge of death. Ramanuja immediately departed for Sri Rangam, but was not able to reach there in time. Shortly before Ramanuja arrived, Yamuna left his body and entered the blissful realm of Vaikuntha.

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Crossing the river Kaveri, Ramanuja reached the island on which the temple of Sri Rangam was located, and went directly to the place where his guru was lying. Surrounded by a group of his disciples, Yamuna laid on a bed with his eyes closed, his arms outstretched at his sides, and his face shining as if immersed in thoughts of infinite beauty.

Momentarily, everyone's attention focused on Ramanuja as he entered the room and came to sit by the side of his guru. Tears of love filled his eyes and he wept, his heart feeling great separation from his master. The left hand of Yamuna was poised in the yoga posture for peace, with three fingers extended and the thumb and forefinger joined together at the tips. His right hand, however, was at his side but clenched into a fist. All the disciples were struck with wonder about the position of their guru's right hand, and none of them could understand the meaning. As everyone looked on in wonder, Ramanuja broke the silence by declaring, "Our guru, the revered Yamunacharya, has

three desires that he wishes to be fulfilled. I will protect the people in general who are deluded by impersonalism by bestowing upon them the nectar of surrender at the lotus feet of Narayana.”

As Ramanuja spoke, one of the fingers on Yamuna’s right hand extended outward. Then Ramanuja said, “For the well-being of the people of the world, I will prepare a commentary on the *Vedanta-sutra* which will establish the Supreme Person as the ultimate reality.” At this, a second finger extended, and Ramanuja continued speaking. “And in order to honor Parasara Muni, who in ancient times established the relation between *jivas*, living entities, and *ishvara*, the Supreme Person, I shall name one of my disciples who is greatly learned and devoted after him.”

Ramanuja then became silent and the third finger on the right hand of Yamuna extended. Everyone present was amazed to see this miracle, and from that day on they all accepted Ramanuja as their leader and guide. Ramanuja continued to live at Sri Rangam for

the remainder of his life and in due course all three vows were fulfilled by him.

Although he lived for many years as a successful householder, Ramanuja was destined to accept the path of renunciation. Eventually he took up the renounced order of life, *sannyasa*, by going before the Deity in the temple and praying to be exclusively engaged in the service of Godhead. From that day forward Ramanuja always wore *tilaka* —the symbol of Narayana— on his forehead, dressed in saffron cloth, and carried the renunciate’s three-sectioned staff (*danda*), which signified service to God by body, mind, and words.

So powerful was Ramanuja, that the philosophers of non-dualism soon found it difficult to maintain their position in any kingdom. Ramanuja established the tenets of devotion so firmly that none could oppose him. Many great and learned scholars came to hear him speak and became his disciples.

Feeling oppressed by the growing popularity of devotion, a certain group of impersonalists went to see

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the Chola king, Krimikantha, at Kanchi. Bowing humbly before the king, who was himself an impersonalist, they asked him to do something to stop Ramanuja. After some discussion it was decided that the king would invite Ramanuja to take part in a philosophical debate at the palace. Thus the king's messengers were sent to Sri Rangam to fetch Ramanuja. The king had it in mind to convert Ramanuja, by force if necessary. Once Ramanuja had been indoctrinated, he thought, then everyone in his kingdom would return to the fold of Shankara.

After receiving the king's message at Sri Rangam, Ramanuja prepared to go to Kanchi. However Kuresha, a wise disciple of Ramanuja, did not trust the intentions of the king, and pleaded with his guru to allow him to go in his place. Kuresha insisted, and Ramanuja had to submit. Kuresha then dressed in the saffron robes of his guru and appeared before the messengers with staff in hand. Thinking Kuresha to be Ramanuja they started for Kanchi. Meanwhile, dressed in white robes, Ramanuja remained behind.

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When Kuresha reached the palace, King Krimikantha greeted him with respect, thinking him to be Ramanuja. But later, when Kuresha refused to be intimidated by the behavior of the king, Krimikantha, in a mad rage, ordered his soldiers to arrest Kuresha and burn his eyes out. The king's men took Kuresha to a prison, and after blinding him, released him in the forest. During the entire horrifying experience Kuresha never once protested. He found strength within knowing that his guru was safe.

With the help of some people from Kanchi who were appalled by the action of the king, Kuresha was able to rejoin his guru at Sri Rangam. Within a matter of days after committing that grave offense against Kuresha, King Krimikantha was stricken with an incurable disease and died a miserable death.

At Sri Rangam, Ramanuja took Kuresha before the Deity of Narayana, and with fervent prayers asked the Deity to restore his sight. "O master of the universe, You are the protector and well-wisher



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of Your devotees. Kindly be merciful and renew the eyes of Kuresha, who without protest has made the supreme sacrifice.” At that very moment Kuresha felt a gentle breeze blow across his brow and he immediately regained his sight.

Ramanuja continued living at Sri Rangam, serving the Deity of Narayana and imparting enlightenment to whoever came to him until he was 120 years old. One day while worshipping the Deity, he prayed, “Dear God, whatever I could do to preserve the essence of the Vedas, to uplift the fallen souls, and to establish the shelter of Your lotus feet as the supreme goal in life, I have done. Now my body has grown tired after many years in this world. Kindly allow me to depart from this mortal world and enter Your supreme abode.”

With this prayer Ramanuja returned to the assembly of his disciples and announced his desire to depart from this world. Thrown into an ocean of grief, the disciples clasped the feet of their guru and petitioned him to remain with them. “It is unbearable

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for us to conceive of the disappearance of your divine form, which is the supreme purifier, the abode of all that is good, the destroyer of all afflictions, and the fountain of unlimited joy. Out of pity for your children, please stay with us for some time longer.”

Ramanuja remained on Earth for three more days. To appease their afflicted hearts, Ramanuja spoke his last instructions to those who were most near and dear to him. “Always remain in the company of and serve those souls devoted to Godhead just as you would serve your own spiritual preceptor. Have faith in the teachings of the Vedas and in the words of the great saints. Never become the slave of your senses; always strive to conquer the three great enemies of self-realization: lust, anger, and greed. Worship Narayana and take pleasure in uttering the holy names of God as your only refuge. Sincerely serve the devotees of Godhead; by service to the great devotees, the highest service is done and one quickly gains the supreme mercy. Remembering these

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things you should live happily in this world for the attainment of the next.”

With these departing words, Ramanuja, keeping his head on the lap of Govinda and his mind fixed in spiritual trance, relinquished his mortal body and entered the realm of Vaikuntha.

Ramanuja was indeed a great theologian whose life and teachings have had a lasting influence on the development of theistic thought in India. Ramanuja’s introduction of the Godhead as the Absolute Entity with super-subjective characteristics and his having pioneered the dawning of devotion to Godhead, opened the door for future theistic reformers who would in due course fully reveal the highest potential of the soul in a loving relationship with God and His eternal servants.

“I take refuge at the feet of Sri Ramanuja, our venerable master, who, during the dark night of the impersonal conception of divinity,

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carried the torchlight of knowledge and thus illuminated the path of devotion to the Personality of Godhead.”



## PART FOUR

### MADHVA

Devotion as Both The Means  
and The End

Sripada Madhvacharya was born in 1238 at Pajaka-kshetra, a small village situated five miles southeast of Udupi, a small town on the western coast of South India. His philosophy and writings have distinguished him as one of India's greatest spiritual teachers. His teachings were wholly theistic. After Buddha philosophically liberated the imprisoned minds of India's ritualistic worshipers who had missed the essential import of the Vedas, many years later Shankara reestablished the Vedas as the literary standard of spiritual knowledge. While Buddha chose

not to comment on the existence of God, Shankara through Vedic reference posited the theory of *advaita-vedanta*, extolling enlightenment and a hazy conception of God about whom he personally spoke, revealing his own inner inclination towards devotion. Later, Ramanuja brought to light in a philosophical paradigm shift the theistic understanding of the Vedas, revealing the personal aspect of Godhead. Madhva followed Ramanuja historically and his theistic rendering of the Vedic knowledge in no uncertain terms laid stress on what Ramanuja had eluded to —devotion as both a means and ends to God realization.

Madhva traveled the length and breadth of India, visiting sacred places and at every opportunity he expounded his teachings. He was a prolific writer as well as a great saint. He wrote commentaries on the *Vedanta-sutra*, *Bhagavad-gita*, *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, and *Mahabharata*. He also established a strict standard of temple ritual at Udupi which is still intact today.

Madhva's parents originally lived in Kadiyali, a small village near Udupi. Aggrieved by the loss of two sons, they moved to the village of Pajaka-kshetra. Every day the two of them would go to Udupi from Pajaka-kshetra and pray to the Deity for the blessing of an illustrious son. They performed this austerity for twelve years. One day during a temple festival, one of the priests climbed the flagpole and announced that soon the god of the wind, Vayu, would be born on earth and perform many uncommon deeds. Shortly thereafter the prophecy was fulfilled and the two were blessed with a male child whom they named Vasudeva, later to be known as Madhvacharya.

On several occasions Vasudeva revealed that he was not an ordinary son. Once his father, Madhyageha, had incurred some debts. The persistent creditor came to the house and sat on the doorstep announcing that he had decided to fast until the debt was repaid. Seeing Madhyageha's anxiety, Vasudeva decided to save the situation. He took the creditor behind the water

tank under a big tamarind tree, grabbed a handful of tamarind seeds and poured them into the hands of the creditor. The creditor first thought that the child was simply playing, but looking again at his hands he saw that the seeds had turned into just enough gold coins to repay the debt.

Wonderful as Vasudeva was, his father out of filial affection wanted him to have a good education. Thus he performed the *akshara abhyasam*, the ceremony with which the child begins his schooling. One day, soon after his first studies, Vasudeva had a chance to test his learning. In the nearby village of Nayampalli a *brahmana* named Shiva was delivering lectures on the Puranas and Vasudeva's parents had brought the young child with them to attend the discourse. A difficult passage came and the *brahmana* was visibly perplexed, unable to expound the clear meaning of the text. He tried anyway, but suddenly Vasudeva spoke up revealing the true intent of the aphorism, to the astonishment of the assembly.

Vasudeva soon became known not only for his intellectual prowess but his physical strength as well. Every day on his way home from school the boy would visit the temple of Durga on top of the Vimanagiri hill. One day about a half mile from his house he was attacked by a powerful snake. It is said that the snake was none other than a reincarnation of the great Maniman, a demon mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. The serpent tried to kill the child, but Vasudeva crushed the serpent under his powerful toe. Still today there is a mark in the exact spot where Madhvacharya killed the demon.

While Vasudeva was delayed by the attack of the Maniman demon, his mother worried about his welfare. Understanding the mind of his mother, Vasudeva jumped from the bottom of the hill to the feet of his mother, a distance of about eight hundred yards. The rocky ground on which he landed with great force gave way to the impression of his lotus feet. Those footprints can be seen even today in Udupi, where they are kept in the temple.

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After the completion of his Sanskrit study at the age of eleven, Vasudeva went in search of a guru who would initiate him into the renounced order of life, *sannyasa*. Already at age five he had received initiation into the *brahminical* (priestly) order. It was at Udupi that he found Achyuta Preksha, an Advaitin monk. He approached Achyuta Preksha with great respect and received his blessings; living under his guidance, he became an obedient disciple. Meanwhile Vasudeva's father was worried about the prolonged absence of his son from home. Madhyageha came to Udupi and found his beloved child in Achyuta Preksha's monastery. After discovering the intention of his son, Madhyageha tried to convince him to return home, but his efforts went in vain. Madhyageha went home under great duress. After relating the incident to his wife, the whole family was plunged into a distressful condition and his wife convinced Madhyageha to set out again in search of the beloved son and do everything possible to bring him home.

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Madhyageha went back to the ashrama only to find that Achyuta Preksha had begun a pilgrimage to all the great holy places of South India. He immediately followed in the footsteps of the party. Crossing the river Netravati, just south of Udupi, he found his son in the Kayuru village in the Kuthyadi ashram. Again he requested him to come home. The two, father and son, discussed for some time and at one point Madhyageha became furious and threatened to kill himself if Vasudeva took *sannyasa*. Seeing his anxiety, Vasudeva told his father that he would wait for his mother's opinion and even then not enter the renounced order until after she had given birth to another son.

After his sixteenth birthday another male child was born, and with the permission of his parents an auspicious day was selected and Vasudeva accepted the renounced order at the Ananteshvara temple in Udupi. An interesting relationship between the two, guru and disciple, ensued: while Achyuta Preksha was a staunch follower of the lineage of Shankara, Madhva was destined

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to start his own lineage, shedding new light on the less developed scriptural conclusions of Shankara.

Madhva differed from Shankara in many ways. He, like Ramanuja, maintained that Shankara had not given emphasis to the principle aphorism of the Vedas, pranava *omkara*. Instead, in the view of Madhva, Shankara had diverted attention to secondary dictums such as '*tat tvam asi*.' Thus according to Madhva, Shankara's teachings presented only partial knowledge of what the Vedas were indicating; not the whole picture.

Shankara insisted on the oneness or identity of all things, so much so that in his vision of ultimate reality all 'things' or separateness as such ceased to exist. Madhva on the other hand insisted on five absolute and eternal distinctions between Godhead, the individual soul and matter: the distinction between God and the finite souls, between God and the inanimate world of matter, between one finite soul and another, between the finite soul and matter, and between one inanimate object and another.

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Madhva also recognized an absolute oneness in each of the five eternal distinctions just described. Both God and the finite soul are identical in the sense that they are both conscious and related to one another as a whole is related to its parts. God and matter are related inasmuch as the latter requires the former for its creation and maintenance. Finite souls are identical because they are all parts of Godhead, all dependent on Him and conscious. The finite soul and matter are the same in the sense that they are both dependent on the Oversoul, and inanimate objects are identical because each is dependent on Godhead, who binds them together into an orderly system.

His philosophy, '*dvaita*' (dualism), emphasizes the eternal difference between the living entity and Godhead. In this sense his philosophy is directly opposed to Shankaracharya's *advaita* (non-dual) doctrine. It is important to note, however, that both Madhva and Shankara concur that the duality that arises due to sense perception is illusory. Madhva's

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dualism is a transcendental viewpoint and in order to arrive at this perception one must allow the 'false ego' to die and the real ego (individual identity) to thrive in selfless service to Godhead.

Madhva introduced the concept of *vishesha* in order to reconcile Godhead's unity with the plurality of His qualities and attributes. Just as we do not perceive any difference between a sheet and its whiteness, yet at the same time we recognize a peculiarity (*vishesha*), namely the sheet's whiteness, so similarly Madhva maintained that a closer look at Brahman (consciousness, the ultimate reality) reveals that Godhead exists in harmonious variegatedness. This is a theistic concept, as opposed to the monistic tones of Shankara, inasmuch as the finite soul remains an individual engaged in divine service to the Supreme Godhead. At the same time, all of existence is viewed as an organic whole.

During the course of philosophical discussions, Purnaprajna, as Madhva was then called, regularly

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pointed out the numerous defects of the *advaita* interpretations of the *Vedanta-sutra*. This was noted by his guru. Realizing that his student was very powerful and would be a great teacher in his own right in the near future, Achyuta Preksha made him the head of a separate monastery and gave him the name Ananda Tirtha.

As soon as the news spread that Ananda Tirtha was a new spiritual leader, many *pandits* flocked to Udupi and tried to defeat him, as was the custom at the time. At that time many Buddhists and Jains were present in the south Kanara area. The greatest scholar of the Buddhists, Buddhi Sagara, came to challenge Purnaprajna and was defeated. His defeat was acknowledged when he fled in the night after only one day of debate. This victory brought considerable attention to Madhva. Even though Madhvacharya's guru was a staunch *advaitin*, from the very beginning he was impressed by the seemingly irrefutable arguments of the ever-fresh Madhva. Thus he challenged



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Madhvacharya to write his own commentary on the *Vedanta-sutra*; Madhva accepted the challenge. It is said that any philosophical system of thought based on the Vedic literature must be founded on a commentary of the *Vedanta-sutra*.

Much of Madhvacharya's time was spent in philosophical debate with the prominent schools of thought prevailing in India at the time. He discussed with both those within the Vedic tradition and those such as Buddhists and Jains, who do not accept the Vedas as the standard of revealed knowledge in literary form. Those outside of the Vedic tradition, to be sure, had their own standard literary foundation upon which their doctrines were based. With these philosophical opponents Madhva applied astounding logic—the likes of which is found in the *Vedanta-sutra*—with overwhelming success. With those within the Vedic tradition, Madhva's discussions took the shape of establishing support for his thesis directly from *Vedanta-sutra*, which is still accepted in India as the zenith of logic and reasoning (*nyaya shastra*).

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Within the Vedic tradition, the Vedas and the *Upanishads* and their corollaries such as the *Puranas* are considered much like law books in our present-day legal system. When two lawyers go to court they do so with a view to establish exactly what the law is in any given case. They both attempt to establish their case by citing from the standard books of law, as well as from those books which contain case histories of how the law was interpreted in similar instances. The Vedas and their corollaries can be compared to books of law and case histories. Thus when we speak of the philosophical debates of Madhva, we are discussing debates much like those that are held by lawyers today—or more accurately like those of scientists—due to the nature of the topics. They discussed reality and its nature in all states of perception, and each party theoretically was prepared, should he be defeated, to give up his previous conception, accepting the victor as his spiritual mentor.

Before writing his *Vedanta-sutra* commentary, Madhva traveled for several years. It was during

this period that he realized that he should write a commentary on the *Bhagavad-gita*. Writing this, he decided to go to the Himalayas to pay his respects to Vedavyasa (said to be the original author of the Vedic literature, who is still living in the Himalayas) and obtain from him his blessings for his new devotional philosophical system (*sampradaya*). Accompanied by his disciple Satya Tirtha he arrived at Badari and stayed at the Ananda Ashrama to prepare for the final part of the journey.

That night after presenting his *Gita* commentary as an offering to the Deity, Madhva began to read the first line. Just then a celestial voice came from the Deity asking Madhva to make a small correction. Where Madhva had written “I shall explain the meaning of the Gita according to my capacity” the Deity interjected, “You can explain the full meaning, but you shall explain only a little in accordance with the capacity of your students to understand.” Thus it was indicated that the unfolding of the fully theistic

understanding of the Gita was to come through yet another great teacher at some future date.

Madhva then felt the desire to journey into the higher Himalayas to the hidden Badarinatha, or place of Vyasa. He prepared for the journey by observing forty-eight days of fasting and silent meditation. Before his final departure he wrote to his disciples, “This place is holy. Vishnu is the supreme. My word is meant for the good of all. I leave to pay respects to Vyasa. I may or may not return. May God bless you.” Ending his arduous journey, Madhva slowly moved to the sacred area where Vedavyasa was sitting surrounded by rishis. There, from the mouth of Vyasa, he received the blessings to write his commentary on the *Vedanta-sutra*. His mission accomplished, Madhva came back to the Ananda Ashrama where Satya Tirtha took down Madhva’s commentary and prepared for advance copies to be sent out.

Then, travelling towards the east, Madhva eventually came to the Godavari River (east-central

India). There on the bank of the Godavari, at the town of Ganjam, he met a group of *pandits* and discussed philosophy. He defeated Buddhists, Jains, Charvakas, and followers of Shankara. He converted the two great pandits, Sri Sobhana Bhatta and Sri Rama Sastri, who became his disciples and received the names Padmanabha Tirtha and Narahari Tirtha respectively. Accompanied by Padmanabha Tirtha and other disciples he returned to Udupi, his spiritual position now undefeated and unchallenged. He initiated many devotees and convinced thousands of people to take shelter of his *dvaita-vada* philosophy.

Udupi was to become the seat of Madhva's transcendental ontology of *dvaita-vada*. It was in this town that one of the most significant events of his life occurred. While bathing in the sea Madhva noticed a merchant seaman in distress. High winds had made his approach to the shore hazardous and he had run aground on a sandbar. From the shore Madhva, waving his cloth, directed the sailor safely to shore.

Upon arriving safely the captain felt greatly indebted to Madhva and expressed his desire to offer him a gift. Madhva consented and asked for a large piece of clay, the value of which was insignificant. But much to the astonishment of everyone, inside the clay was a large Deity of Krishna. The news spread throughout Udupi and the Deity was installed in the temple. Thus Madhva's school became firmly established in Udupi and to this day the Deity is worshiped by the numerous followers of Madhvacharya.

Madhva then decided to visit Badarinatha for the second time, no easy task even today. His travels met with much success and the reputation as a great scholar and devotee followed him wherever he went. Upon his return, news of his influence came to Sringeri, the headquarters of the followers of Shankaracharya. Indeed the main topic in Sringeri was the increasing fame and influence of Madhvacharya. Padma Tirtha, the leader of the Sringeri *ashrama*, felt the necessity to meet the challenge; thus he and Pundarika Puri

came to Udupi to meet Madhva in a philosophical debate. Since Madhvacharya would never refuse any opportunity to discuss and prove the superiority of his philosophy, he consented.

The chosen text from which to debate was the Rig Veda. Pundarika Puri started to explain his view on the first hymn, but no sooner had he started when Madhva challenged him with questions that he was unable to answer. Padma Tirtha tried to save the situation, but he too became implicated in a humiliating defeat at the hands of Madhva.

That night, driven by envy, Padma Tirtha and his men stole Madhva's library consisting of many rare books. When the librarian reported this news to Madhva he started in immediate pursuit of the thieves catching up to Padma Tirtha's party about twenty miles southeast of Mangalore. As soon as Madhva reached there he sent a messenger to Jaya Simha, the ruling king of the area. The king in reply informed Madhva that the books had been given to him by Padma Tirtha as a gift.

Madhvacharya thus proceeded to meet the king in the town of Vishnumangalam. The procession was magnificent. Crowds of cheering people had gathered there to greet the attractive mendicant. Bands of musicians were playing melodious songs, *brahmanas* were chanting Vedic mantras and many parties were singing the names of God. Madhvacharya walked through the center of town at a slow, majestic pace, his face beaming, his body effulgent. A garland of fragrant tulasi leaves was hanging from his neck all the way down to his knees. A beautiful pearl-white silk umbrella was held over his head, and great crowds were gathering on each side to have a glimpse of the renowned teacher.

As the procession continued the king came to greet him. He got down from his palanquin and bowed to the lotus feet of Madhvacharya. The king then proceeded on foot with Madhva until they reached the temple where a gorgeous reception was arranged in which the inhabitants of twenty-five villages had gathered together to welcome him. Madhva and the

king entered the big hall and everyone sat down to listen to the recitation of *Shrimad Bhagavatam* and Madhva's commentary. Among the listeners was the erudite *pandit* Trivikramacharya. Although he was ready to find fault and challenge Madhva, Madhva's explanations were so sharp and brilliant that there was no possibility of Trivikramacharya finding any fault with the discourse.

After recovering his library from the king, Madhva departed and established his camp at Amaralaya. It was while delivering lectures on his commentary of the *Vedanta-sutra* that he was challenged by Trivikramacharya. During the time that Madhva's books had been stolen, Trivikrama had the opportunity to study the commentaries of Madhva and was thus at an advantage over everyone who had debated with him thus far. Furthermore, Trivikrama was so learned that it is said his command of Sanskrit enabled him to convey through explanation of any text any meaning that suited his purpose. However, after fifteen days

Madhva finally defeated the *pandit* and Trivikrama became Madhva's disciple.

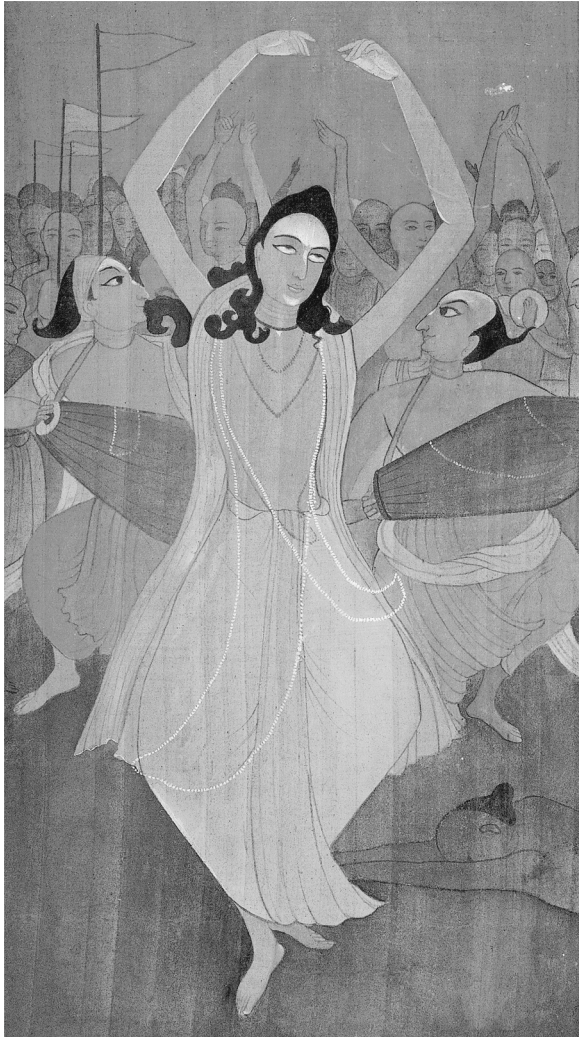
In due course Madhvacharya established eight temples in Udupi, appointing eight of his principle disciples as head priests in charge of ancient Deities. He lived for seventy-nine years and wrote thirty-seven books.

His philosophy at one point was thought by Western scholars to have been influenced by Christianity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Madhva has clearly supported his thesis with evidence from Vedic literature and his teachings can better be seen as a development in theistic thought from what was offered earlier by Ramanuja.

It is widely accepted that Madhva was an incarnation of the Hindu demigod Vayu, said to be in charge of controlling the wind. The idea that he descended for a particular mission and was thus greatly empowered to perform many uncommon deeds is offered as an explanation for the extraordinary events

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that surrounded his life. Uncommon feats of strength, flying in the sky, causing on two separate occasions plants to sprout from seeds by singing a particular melody (thus proving long ago that plants respond to music), eating four thousand bananas and one hundred pots of milk at one sitting, using small amounts of food to feed hundreds, meeting Vyasadeva at Badarinatha, etc., are only a few of the wonderful feats of Madhvacharya. Many more have not been mentioned here. We have instead tried to emphasize his most outstanding contribution in the realm of philosophy and devotion, and even in this connection, space will not allow us to present in any detail his philosophical treatise of *dvaita-vada*. Those who are inclined can study for themselves Madhva's teachings in his treatise on the *Vedanta-sutra*. A comparative study of the *Vedanta* commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva will prove very revealing for the sincere inquirer into the nature of the absolute truth as described in Vedic literature.



## PART FIVE

### SRI CHAITANYA

The Great Master

Since ancient times India's ascetics and holy men have endeavored to realize the Absolute Truth by the culture of spiritual knowledge. Many of these saints and sages dedicated their entire life to the performance of austerity and spiritual activities. Some of them followed in the footsteps of Buddha, practicing *ahimsa*, the path of nonviolence, seeking *nirvana* as the highest attainment.

Later in history, some that preferred to renounce work, the *advaita-vedantists*, followed Shankaracharya, and by the practice of sense control, they fixed their minds in meditation, merging the individual ego

into Brahman, the ultimate state of oneness. In the development towards transcendental theism, those following Ramanuja and Madhva on the path of devotion, considered realization of the self as an eternal servant of Godhead, as the highest goal. All these transcendentalists have obtained their respective stages of realization and experience by constant and sincere determination.

While Ramanuja and Madhva established theistic schools of thought based on *Vedanta* (as opposed to Shankara's ultimate monism), it was not until the advent of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu that *Vedantic* theism's limits were unveiled to the world of spiritual seekers. Mahaprabhu revealed the confidential and sublime aspects of the Absolute Truth, *achintya-bhedabheda-tattva* (simultaneous, inconceivable oneness and difference) and *prema* (love of God).

Mahaprabhu appeared in this world at Mayapura, Navadvipa Dhama, West Bengal on February 18, 1486 in the home of Jagannatha Mishra, a scholarly

*brahmana* priest of the Vaishnava community. At the time of His appearance the moon was eclipsed, and thus all the noble residents of Navadvipa Dhama had gone to take their bath in the Ganges. Everyone was in a happy mood, and according to the customs of their time, everyone chanted Vedic mantras and the Names of God as they bathed in the Ganges. Due to the chanting of these mantras the atmosphere became surcharged with spiritual vibrations, and at that auspicious moment, Mahaprabhu advented Himself.

The life of Mahaprabhu has been told by historians, scholars, and devotees alike. According to popular accounts, Mahaprabhu was a great personality who in the prime of His youth entered the renounced order of life and led India into a renaissance of devotion centered around the chanting of the Holy Names of God. This is certainly true, yet there is another account of the life of Mahaprabhu—one which is highly esoteric and spiritual. That commentary comes to us through the agency of a self-realized soul, one who is not covered



or conditioned by the material experience known as *maya*. A self-realized soul is one who, having directly experienced the Absolute Truth by divine revelation, can discriminate between matter and spirit for the benefit of the people in general. The insight of the self-realized soul into the identity of such personalities as Mahaprabhu is considered superior to the observations of the learned scholar and historian because the self-realized soul is above the defects of *maya*, namely illusion, cheating, mistakes, and imperfect senses. Although the academicians have correctly informed us about the historical events of Mahaprabhu's life, they have not been able to discover the inner identity of Mahaprabhu which is fully transcendental and without the slightest tinge of matter.

The esoteric description of Mahaprabhu's appearance is found within an internal analysis and it is upon this which His teaching is based—a teaching that might well be considered the zenith of theism. Within this school of thought the prospect for an

intimate relationship with a personal God, beyond the duality of the world of time and space, invites the devoted to participate in a labor of love which culminates in an eternal life of ecstatic rapture.

The Bengali classic *Chaitanya-charitamrita*, compiled in the sixteenth century by the self-realized soul Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami, reveals the inner identity of Mahaprabhu, which is accepted by all His followers. In this book, published in India in 17 volumes, the author describes Mahaprabhu as none other than the summum bonum of the Absolute Truth, the Supreme Being, who in this appearance disguises Himself as His own devotee.

Krishnadasa says, “What the *Upanisads* describe as the impersonal Brahman is but the effulgence of Mahaprabhu's transcendental body, and the Supersoul in the hearts of all living beings is but His localized portion. He is Parabrahma, Krishna Himself, full with six opulences. He is the Absolute Truth, Paratattva, and no other truth is greater than or equal to Him.”

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Krishnadasa emphasizes that Mahaprabhu is the personal manifestation of the Absolute Truth in full, and he urges His readers to regard Him in that way in order to enter into an understanding of the confidential nature of His life and precepts.

The Vedas describe four ages (*yugas*), the last of which in a continuous cycle is Kali-yuga, the iron (industrial-technological) age of quarrel. For each age there is an *avatara* who teaches the recommended spiritual discipline for that particular age (*yuga-dharma*). According to Krishnadasa, Mahaprabhu is the *Kali-yuga-avatara* described throughout the Vedic literature.

*krishna-varnam tvisakrishnam  
sangopangastra-parshadam  
yajnaih sankirtana-prayair  
yajanti hi su-medhasah*

In this Age of Kali, people who are endowed with sufficient intelligence will worship the

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Lord, who is accompanied by His associates, by performance of *sankirtana-yajna*. (*Shrimad-Bhagavatam* II.5.32)

The ultimate conception of Parambrahma as personal, making possible eternal devotion, and that Mahaprabhu is that transcendental person is paramount to Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy.

The appearance of Mahaprabhu in this phenomenal world is the culmination of a transcendental dialectic which is inherent in the very nature of the Supreme Being. Parabrahma is *rasa* or concentrated bliss. The figure of such bliss is that of Sri Krishna. That figure is dynamic, restless, effulgent, ever-flowing, and ever-growing. It is astonishingly new and relishable—passing every moment beyond itself to new levels of *rasa* consciousness. Within *rasa* or love there must also be *rasika*, or the ability to taste transcendental bliss. Thus in Krishna the unity of *rasa* and *rasika* bursts and blooms into the duality of Krishna and Radha. In that duality Krishna is *rasa*,

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the highest thing to be relished, and Radha is *rasika*, the greatest enjoyer of *rasa*. After reaching the highest state of divine love called *prema-vilasa-vivarta*, in which Radha and Krishna, the potent and the potency, are fully absorbed in one another's love, the transcendental duality of Krishna and Radha again combines. This combination is Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

This union of love between Radha and Krishna, however, does not imply a monistic union, as does the *advaitic* conception of formless Brahman or the Neo-Platonic concept of God as an experience, in which the loss of individuality of the devotee or the *sadhaka* is complete and irrevocable. It is like the union between fire and a piece of iron. A piece of iron, when put for a long time in fire, becomes red-hot like the fire. Every part of it is animated by fire and acquires the characteristics of fire. Still, iron remains iron and fire remains fire. Similarly, both Krishna and Radha retain their identity. They are so absorbed in each other's love and lost in each other's thoughts that there is hardly

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any room in their hearts for the thought of anything else. Mahaprabhu is the substantial or personalized form of this union. Thus the birth of Mahaprabhu in this world at Mayapura was not like that of an ordinary child, but rather it was of the nature of divine descent.

After the birth of Mahaprabhu, all the women of the village loved to see Him every day. His uncle, who was a famous astrologer, foretold that the child would be recognized as a great personality in time, and he named Him Vishvambhara (maintainer of the universe). The child's mother Sachi-devi, however, preferred to call Him Nimai since there was a neem tree near the place where he was born.

As a child Nimai began His pastimes or *lila* as an ordinary human being and liked to play with His friends on the banks of the Ganges. As boys will be boys, Nimai and His friends would often get into mischief. Sometimes the boys would even splash water on the yogis who came to the banks of the river to meditate. However, when the adults came to chastise

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Nimai for His tricks, they became charmed by His cunning behavior. Everyone came to love Nimai as if He were their own son. In His fifth year Nimai was admitted into the school of Gangadasa Pandit, where He mastered Sanskrit in two short years. After that, Nimai studied at home, and by His tenth year He was already renowned as a great scholar, now known as Nimai Pandit.

Nimai had an older brother named Vishvarupa who left home to become a *sannyasi*, a member of the renounced order of life. This came as a tremendous shock to Jagannatha Mishra and Sachi-devi, but Nimai, in His usual way, consoled His parents in their grief and showered them with love. Shortly after the loss of their older son, Jagannatha Mishra himself expired from this world, leaving His wife to widowhood with only Nimai to look after her.

On the request of His mother, Nimai married Lakshmi-priya, a charming girl from a nearby village. But just after His fifteenth birthday, while Nimai was

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away from His village, Lakshmi-priya died after being bitten by a snake. Although, at the request of His mother He had accepted another wife, Vishnu-priya, this marriage was also not to last for long.

During the years that followed, Nimai became the most famous scholar in all of Bengal. Nimai's fame as a great scholar soon attracted the Digvijaya Pandit of Kashmir, who came to Navadvipa to challenge Nimai to a debate. The Digvijaya Pandit had thus far defeated all the great scholars of India; none could oppose him. It was as if he had achieved the personal favor of Saraswati, the goddess of learning.

After reaching Navadvipa, the Digvijaya met Nimai along with a group of His friends and students on the bank of the Ganges. Nimai respectfully requested the Digvijaya to compose 100 verses in Sanskrit eulogizing the Ganges. Upon request, the Digvijaya began to spontaneously recite 100 verses in Sanskrit, with the same ease and skill as a great eagle soars high in the sky. Indeed, the Digvijaya was a proud poet.

Nimai's friends were astonished at the way in which the Digvijaya spontaneously composed verse after verse, which flowed from his tongue like a swift wind. With each verse he gave newer and newer enlightenment about the glory of the Ganges. Nimai, however, sat silently without comment until the Digvijaya had completed his recitation. Praising the Digvijaya for his scholarly abilities but at the same time finding error in his composition, Nimai spoke as follows: "Sir, there is no greater poet than you in the entire world. Your poetry is so difficult that no one can understand it but you and Sarasvati, the goddess of learning. However, could you please explain the five faults and five literary ornaments of the 64<sup>th</sup> verse?"

The Digvijaya was startled! What was Nimai saying? How could there possibly be any error in his composition, and how had Nimai memorized the verses so quickly? Nonetheless, the Digvijaya refused to acknowledge that there were any faults in his presentation —only embellishments. When

requested by the Digvijaya, Nimai then pointed out five faults in the grammatical composition of the verse after praising its five embellishments which the Digvijaya himself did not know. Nimai did this according to the rules of Sanskrit grammar that govern literary composition, and when He had finished, the Digvijaya was literally speechless. He had been defeated by a mere child of 16 years. How was it possible?

That night when the Digvijaya slept, he had a dream. The goddess of learning came to him in his sleep and revealed that although the Digvijaya was certainly her favorite student —Nimai, on the other hand, was her eternal master. Sarasvati then requested the Digvijaya to approach Nimai and become his disciple. The news of Nimai's victory over the Digvijaya spread far and wide. Nimai was now the most important scholar of His time.

While Mahaprabhu Himself was a great scholar, he consistently deprecated the acquisition of

knowledge for its own sake. In His view, learning was connected with reality only inasmuch as Godhead was served thereby.

That same year Nimai traveled to Gaya with a group of His students, and there He met the celebrated *guru* Ishvara Puri. Nimai received His spiritual initiation from Ishvara Puri at that time and biographers have noted that this initiation marked a turning point in Mahaprabhu's life.

When Nimai returned to Mayapura, He was no longer interested in scholastic achievement, His mind turned instead toward spiritual matters. Externally He appeared to have lost interest in conventional duties; from then on Nimai was a man transformed, as if God-inspired.

In the evenings Nimai would gather His intimate followers together in the house of Shrivasa Thakura and perform *sankirtana*, the congregational chanting of the Names of God. In those chanting sessions Nimai would sometimes exhibit ecstatic symptoms

of love of God, and sometimes He would reveal His form to be the same as that of Sri Krishna. As the hidden identity of Nimai became more well known, He was addressed as Mahaprabhu, the Great Master. For almost eight years Mahaprabhu continued to live at Mayapura.

In the daytime Mahaprabhu used to send His followers from door to door to request every man, woman, and child to chant the Names of God. Mahaprabhu taught that simply by chanting the Names of God, whose Name is non-different from Himself, one would easily realize his eternal relationship with God. Mahaprabhu said, *jivera svarupa haya, krishna nitya dasa*: "All living beings are the eternal servant of Krishna." In this way He taught the *yuga-dharma* for the age of Kali, the chanting of the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra*:

*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare  
Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*

Mahaprabhu instructed His followers that there are no hard and fast rules for chanting the Names of God. Regardless of one's position in society, anyone and everyone was eligible to take part in this process. This, however, drew objection, and certain members of the caste *brahmana* community who 'held a monopoly' on spiritual blessings as well as certain students and professors of the Vedic scriptures opposed Him. He had started the movement of chanting the Names of God to uplift all classes of human society, announcing love of God to be the birthright of everyone, yet thinking Him to be only an ordinary human being, foolish persons objected.

Contemplating in this way, Mahaprabhu devised a plan to capture the whole world in the net of *prema*, divine love. Knowing that a *sannyasi*, a member of the renounced order of life, was respected by everyone — even by the atheists— He decided to accept *sannyasa*. Thus even the non-believers would benefit by showing Him respect. Once Mahaprabhu had decided on His course of action, nothing could turn Him back.

Early one morning in January, at the end of His 24th year, Mahaprabhu bid farewell to hearth and home. Without the notice of anyone except His mother, He swam across the Ganges River and ran to Katwa, a distance of some 25 miles. At Katwa He went to the *ashrama* of the *sannyasi* Keshava Bharati and requested him to kindly give Him *sannyasa*.

Keshava Bharati refused, however, and told Mahaprabhu that the residents of Mayapura would be extremely angry at him if he did such a thing, but Mahaprabhu insisted.

Meanwhile the residents of Mayapura came to know that Mahaprabhu had gone to Katwa to take *sannyasa* and they became almost crazy. They rushed to Katwa to protest the horrible thing which was about to happen. After the crowd assembled there, they began to make threats of violence. They told Keshava Bharati that if he gave Mahaprabhu *sannyasa* they would burn his *ashrama* to the ground. There were mixed feelings of sorrow and anger; no one could

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conceive of their beautiful Nimai shaving His head, putting on the saffron-colored dress of a *sannyasi*, and leaving their village forever. For Mahaprabhu's followers the thought of this was unbearable. When emotions were at their peak, Mahaprabhu began the congregational chanting of the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra*:

*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare  
Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*

It was an intense scene. Some wept bitterly and some beat their fists against the ground in protest, while others swooned in delight at the sound of the Holy Name. The chanting continued day and night for three consecutive days. Sometimes Mahaprabhu would stand and dance in the midst of that chanting and sometimes He would roll on the ground in ecstasy. At the end of the third day the will of Mahaprabhu prevailed and He took the staff of renunciation from

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the hand of Keshava Bharati. At that time He was given the name Sri Krishna Chaitanya.

It was as though the whole world had gone mad. No one could believe what had just happened. Ecstatic tears of love of God poured from the eyes of Mahaprabhu, and whoever those tears fell upon also began to cry in ecstatic love.

Now more than ever before, He was inspired to benedict the world with divine love. Taking a small group of followers with Him, He immediately started for Jagannatha Puri. Along the way, whoever saw Him became absorbed in the mellows of ecstatic love, and He requested everyone He met to chant the Holy Names of God. Indeed, Mahaprabhu was just like a great ocean that inundated everything and everyone with love of God.

At Jagannatha Puri, Mahaprabhu converted Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, who was at the time the greatest logician in all of India, into a follower of His movement of divine love. Sarvabhauma then became



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one of Mahaprabhu's principal associates. Mahaprabhu remained at Jagannatha Puri for some time, and then decided to tour South India. For the next two years He traveled almost continuously and preached His doctrine of love everywhere He went.

On the banks of the river Godavari Mahaprabhu met Ramananda Raya, the governor of Vidyanagar, and held enlightening discussions for several days with him on the topic of *prema-bhakti*, devotional service in pure love of God. The followers of Mahaprabhu maintain that the apex of theistic thought was revealed in those discussions. Ramananda Raya was a great devotee of Sri Krishna, and Mahaprabhu solicited from him higher and higher truths regarding the nature of spirit at every moment of their conversation. The climax of their dialogue disclosed that the highest transcendental sentiments of love for God were those shown by the *gopis* (milkmaids) of Vrindavana during the advent of Sri Krishna. In their service to Sri Krishna, the *gopis* exhibited the topmost platform of surrender and unalloyed love in

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which even social conventions of mundane morality were transcended, thus showing that although the morally stout serve as a good example of religious life, there is yet a higher plane where adherence to law is overruled by love, and that pure love must ultimately be free from the type of calculation which is even found in the theistic conclusions of Ramanuja and Madhva.

During their talks, both Ramananda Raya and Mahaprabhu became lost in ecstatic rapture. Being pleased with Ramananda, Mahaprabhu blessed him and requested him to go to Jagannatha Puri, where He would join him later.

According to Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy, never before was *bhakti* described as both the means and the end. Mahaprabhu's characterization of love as the supreme goal is the most important landmark in the history of philosophy and religion. According to Mahaprabhu, the center of reality is love, not Godhead. Love is the center not only for the devotee, but also for God. Love governs both. Though Godhead is the

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embodiment of love itself, He has an ever-growing desire for love. Love is a gravitational force that works at two ends: it draws the devotee to Godhead and Godhead to the devotee.

Continuing on His journey, Mahaprabhu then visited all the important places of pilgrimage in south India such as Tirupati, Sri Rangam, Ahobalam and Chidambharam. At the place known as Kurmakshetra, Mahaprabhu performed a miracle by curing a leper named Vasudeva simply by touching him with His hand. Traveling in the day and spending each night at a different holy place, Mahaprabhu went as far as Cape Comorin where He turned again to the north and eventually returned to Jagannatha Puri.

After some days at Puri, Mahaprabhu decided to visit Vrindavana, the land of Sri Krishna. Taking one servant named Balabhadra Bhattacharya with Him, He traveled along the banks of the river Yamuna and through the Jarikhanda forest where, according to Balabhadra's diary, Mahaprabhu caused wild beasts

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to chant and embrace, losing their natural enmity towards one another.

When Mahaprabhu reached Vrindavana, as in other places around India, Mahaprabhu exhibited His ecstatic mood of dancing and chanting and many thousands of people came to see Him every day.

Through Mahaprabhu's transcendental vision, He revealed the places of Sri Krishna's *lilas* (pastimes) in Vrindavana, which were otherwise lost for the last five-thousand years. He also converted a large group of Mohammedans into devotees of Shri Krishna by preaching to them from the Koran.

Later, under His direction His principal disciples excavated the whole area of Vrindavana with the help of wealthy patrons, establishing temples at those holy places of Sri Krishna's *lilas*. To date these temples are the principal places of worship in that holy land.

After leaving Vrindavana, on His return to Jagannatha Puri, Mahaprabhu stopped at Allahabad where He instructed Rupa Goswami about the

process of devotional service, and after instructing him in the details of spirituality, He sent him to Vrindavana to write books on the science of *bhakti* and excavate the places of Sri Krishna's pastimes.

From Allahabad Mahaprabhu went to Banaras, where He met the brother of Rupa Goswami, Sanatana Goswami. On the banks of the Ganges Mahaprabhu instructed Sanatana in confidential spiritual matters, and after one month He sent him to join his brother at Vrindavana.

Later, it was these two brothers and their nephew Jiva Goswami who, along with others, established the literary support for Mahaprabhu's theology based on the Vedic literature.

Wherever Mahaprabhu went, monists such as the highly renowned Prakashananda Sarasvati of Banaras raised strong objections against Him for His public dancing and chanting the Names of God. They contended that He was a misguided sentimentalist without any real understanding of the *Vedanta-sutra*,

which was at that time considered the single-most important Vedic literature. They maintained that the sole duty of one in the renounced order was to study the *Vedanta-sutra* commentaries of Shankara. Unaware of the conception of transcendental emotion, they assumed that Mahaprabhu's chanting and dancing were mere mundane sentimental outpourings.

On the invitation of a *brahmana* from Maharashtra, Mahaprabhu met with Prakashananda Sarasvati and one thousand of his followers. Upon entering that assembly, Mahaprabhu won the hearts of all with His natural humility. Everyone at that gathering perceived a glowing effulgence—the Brahman—to be emanating from Mahaprabhu's body. Prakashananda put various questions before Mahaprabhu on the subject of *Vedanta* and Mahaprabhu answered them one by one. When the discussion had ended, Prakashananda admitted that they had never been satisfied with Shankaracharya's commentary on *Vedanta* which dealt only with the indirect meaning. They now said that they could realize,

after hearing from Mahaprabhu, that the commentary of Shankara was simply based on world jugglery. From that day on until Mahaprabhu left Banaras, Prakashananda Sarasvati and his followers joined Mahaprabhu in His congregational chanting.

Mahaprabhu maintained that there was no need of any commentary on *Vedanta-sutra* since Vyasadeva, its author, had already written his own commentary in the form of *Shrimad-Bhagavatam*.

Mahaprabhu advocated that proper study of the *Bhagavatam* would culminate in God-realization and a state of transcendental emotion, as opposed to the dry, emotionless *advaitic* monism. Generally, the followers of Shankara accept *advaita-vedanta*, nondualism (the soul being one with God) as the highest theistic understanding.

Mahaprabhu taught that the *Bhagavatam* propounded *achintya-bhedabheda-tattva* —that the Absolute Truth in the ultimate issue is simultaneously and inconceivably one and different— the soul is part

and parcel of God, but neither one nor any number of finite souls combined is equal to Godhead in full (qualitatively one but quantitatively different).

Mahaprabhu taught that the *ananda-brahman* of the monists is the formless expansive glow [aura] of Godhead, just as moonlight is the formless expansive glow of the moon. In *ananda-brahman*, *rasa* is dormant, still and motionless. It is not *rasa* in the real sense. *Rasa-brahman* [on the other hand] is dynamic, restless, effulgent, ever-flowing, and ever-growing. It is astonishingly new and relishable —passing every moment beyond itself to new levels of *rasa* consciousness.

After traveling and canvassing for some time, Mahaprabhu finally returned to Jagannatha Puri. There He stayed for the remaining eighteen years of His life until His disappearance from the sight of mortal men during His 48th year, at a time when congregational chanting was being held in the temple of Tota Gopinatha. Mahaprabhu's biographers have commented that during those last 18 years, He was surrounded by numerous

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followers, all of whom were on the highest level of devotion, distinguished from the common people by their character and learning, firm religious principles, and spiritual love for Radha and Krishna.

Historically, Mahaprabhu has been regarded differently by different individuals. The immediate followers of Mahaprabhu have accepted Him as the Supreme Truth, Sri Krishna. Others have regarded Him as a *bhakta-avatara*, a divine incarnation to distribute love of God. But that Mahaprabhu was a noble and holy teacher, the Great Master, is accepted by all who have come in contact with His life and teachings with an unbiased mind and pure heart.

Mahaprabhu did not appear in this world to deliver a certain section of human beings in India, but rather His purpose was to uplift all souls in all countries of the world to the pure and sublime platform of ecstatic love of God, the eternal religion of all souls.

It is the authors' conclusion, after having gone through the teachings of the spiritual masters of India

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, that together they demonstrate a theistic development over thousands of years. There is no contradiction between Buddha, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, and Mahaprabhu —each represents a particular stage of enlightenment on the path of the ultimate truth. They all agree that our present egoistic preoccupation must be transcended, if we are at all to know any peace. There is visible in these masters a continuity of theistic evolution from one to the next, starting with the Buddha and culminating in Mahaprabhu.

Buddha's 'Four Noble Truths' —there is suffering, suffering has a cause, suffering can be surpassed, and there is a method by which one can attain freedom from suffering— have laid the foundation for the premise that there is a higher attainment, a higher goal in life than that which is generally accepted as reality. Buddha was then followed by Shankara who, improving on the premise of Buddha, established that eternal spirit (*atma*), and not simply negation of material existence, is the positive reality. Ramanuja then developed the

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theistic conception found in Shankara from abstract monism to concrete monism, describing a Brahman with transcendental attributes. He founded a movement of *bhakti*, or devotion, based on the inherent nature of the living spirit. Madhva then continued the development from Ramanuja, emphasizing the eternal existence of both the soul (*atma*) and the Supersoul (*paramatma*) as the functional elements of *bhakti*.

This development of theism as found in the teachings of Buddha, Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva has sometimes been compared to the growth of a mango tree. From its seed conception in the 'Four Noble Truths' of Buddha to its sprouting as Shankara, to its developing branches and twigs in Ramanuja and Madhva, all are important stages of growth in the evolution of theism in Indian philosophy. When the tree of theism reached maturity, it produced fruits, and Mahaprabhu is compared to a transcendental gardener Who harvests those fruits in the form of love of God and feely distributes them to the world. Mahaprabhu

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tastes those fruits of love of God and teaches others how to taste them by His personal example.

Mahaprabhu presented a love not of self-sacrifice, but one of self-forgetfulness, in which love itself, personified as Sri Radha, becomes the center for both Godhead and His devotee.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura, a biographer and proponent of Mahaprabhu's school of divine love, has given a valuable word of advice to all sincere souls who are hankering to know the Absolute Truth,

“Party spirit—that great enemy of truth—will always baffle the attempt of the inquirer who tries to gather truth from the religious works of his nation, and will make him believe that absolute truth is nowhere except in his old religious book.”

Therefore, the adherent of the path of self-realization should always have a comprehensive,

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gentle, generous, honest, sympathetic, and above all, an impartial approach, in order to acquire the greatest hope of attaining success on that path.

Since ancient times India's holy men have endeavored to realize the Absolute Truth by the culture of spiritual knowledge. Some of them followed in the footsteps of Buddha, practicing *ahimsa*, the path of non-violence. Some that preferred to renounce work followed Shankaracharya. In the development towards transcendental theism, Ramanuja and Madhva considered realization of the self as an eternal servant of Godhead, to be the highest goal. All these culminated in the path of Divine Love as taught by the Yuga Avatara, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

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