

# THE MESSAGE OF ACHARYA SANKARA

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by

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The advent of a mastermind is observed today throughout the country – the coming into our midst of the well-known philosopher-saint Acharya Sankara, who was on this earth plane several centuries back. He is supposed to have mastered all the four Vedas when he was only eight years old; and all the arts and the sciences, the literature of the day, he mastered when he was only twelve years old. The *magnum opus* which he brought forth – the commentary on the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras – he wrote when he was sixteen years old; and he left this world at the age of thirty-two. Like a whirlwind, like a comet, like a meteor that shoots through the sky, this philosophical and spiritual genius shone through the firmament of Indian culture and spirituality.

We may say Acharya Sankara was a philosopher in the sense that he went deep into the causative factors behind every kind of conceivable or visible phenomenon; or we may say he was a scientist, in the sense that he never took anything for granted. Arguments and deductions followed in a logical sequence in the process of his expositions and writings, and he took his stand ultimately on indubitable facts, and never came to any kind of dubious conclusion.

Is there any fact in this world, any truth, which can be considered as entirely free from any kind of doubt? If such a thing is possible, we can take our stand on the rock bottom of this great indubitable fact; but if there is no such thing, there cannot be anything certain in this world. Uncertainty everywhere will reign supreme. We cannot even believe that we will be alive tomorrow. We all know very well that we will also be alive tomorrow, though there is no logical ground to substantiate this belief. We know that we existed yesterday. Are these not facts that are free from every kind of doubt in our minds? We cannot argue in a semantic or logical fashion the conclusion – namely, that we were yesterday and that we shall be tomorrow. Here is something that defies logic and refutes the requirements of human scientific observation and reasoning. Which observation, which reasoning can prove that we will be alive tomorrow? And yet, it is an indubitable fact.

The fact referred to on which Acharya Sankara bases his entire philosophy and religious outlook may be said to be twofold in its operation and manifestation. Firstly, it hinges upon the existence of one's own self; and, secondly, from this consciousness of the existence of one's own self there follows another fact – namely, that this indubitable self has a characteristic of its own which is different from the nature that we observe in things in the world. We cannot ultimately believe in the presence of anything except the presence of our own self. Everything may be an object of final suspicion. The only thing that we cannot suspect is that we are. If we begin to suspect the possibility of our own existence, that suspicion may have to be grounded on another fact - namely, that there should be somebody who entertains this suspicion or manifests this doubt. A doubter has to be there behind the doubt.

No one ever believes that one's own self is non-existent. No one ever says "I am not". Never did we feel at any time that we not existing. We may have a doubt regarding the existence of other things, but we cannot have a doubt regarding the existence of our own self. Even supposing we

go to the extent of doubting our own self, there should be something behind this procedure of doubting, which itself cannot be doubted – else there would be only a bundle of doubts with no one to doubt. Here is a stand which Acharya Sankara considered as final and reliable – namely, that something is, and that can be defined as what we usually call the Self.

What do we actually mean by the Self? It is that which knows but itself cannot be known by any sort of perceptual process. It cannot be known because if it is to be an object that is to be known, there should be somebody else to know it, and that which knows it would become the Self and that itself would stand in the position of a non-Self, or Anatman. That is to say, the Self is some such thing which knows and which itself cannot be known.

If the Self cannot be known, how does one come to the conclusion that it exists at all? It is known in a manner quite different from the way in which we know things in the world. We require the facilities of perception, inference, etc. to know that things exist outside; but our existence, our awareness that we are existing, does not require sense organs - namely, the perceptual process. We also do not have to infer the fact of our being from premises other than that which is directly on hand. Our knowledge of our being here is something doubtless and most reliable. This fact is not known through the sense organs. Even if we close our eyes and close all the sensations, plug the holes of the avenues of available knowledge, we will know that we are existing. This is an intuitive grasp of our being, a fundamental awareness which is free from the encumbrances of sensory perception. The Self is, and nothing more can be said about it.

Well, let us accept this primary fact of the nature of the Self – namely, that it is Existence. In Sanskrit we call Existence as *sat* or *satta*. This Existence is aware that it is existing. It is not an existence minus the consciousness of existence. It is *bhoda*, or Knowledge at the same time. In a very famous passage in Acharya Sankara's commentary on

the Brahma Sutras, he tells us that Existence is Consciousness, Consciousness is Existence. It is an existence which is not bereft of awareness, nor is it awareness bereft of existence. It is not an unconscious existence; it is also not a conscious non-existence. It is Consciousness-Existence. We call it *sat-chit*. This is, and no one can doubt this. Even doubting one's own self is not permitted, because that adventure of the possibility of doubting one's own self would require a doubter who cannot be doubted. Here is the firm rock on which we can stand, unshaken, in our further investigations into the nature of all experience, whatever it be. This is the primary fact of existence, the fundamental characteristic of what is called the Self.

The other aspect of it is: Where is this Self located? The unthinking mind generally would like to point to its own physical appearance and make a statement "the Self is within me". This is an untutored, unthought-of statement, though it looks like it is a very valid statement. If the Self is not inside you, where else can it be? It cannot be sitting on the tree. It is certainly inside you. But, is it only inside you?

It is mentioned that Self is the knower of all things. There is a temple in front of me, and I know that there is a temple. This Self which is me is the knower of the fact of there being such a thing called a temple being in front of itself. How does the Self that is inside know the temple which is outside. Does the Self jump out of the Self and go and touch the walls of the temple? If it is only inside, as generally people say "I am inside", "my self is within me", if that is the case it will know only what is happening inside the body. It cannot know even its own skin outside; and what is outside the skin, it can never know. But I know that I am in the temple. I am seeing people sitting in front of me who are not inside my body. How does this become explicable on the assumption that the Self is within me?

This question can be answered by a slight extension of the argument that may arise from the acceptance of the fact that there is a Self at all. Is this Self within me only, or within

you also? It is within you also. So it is not within one person; it is within all persons. It is not merely within persons; it also has to be in everything, because everything in this world seems to be manifesting a selfhood of its own Self. Everything exists. Even an atom exists, a particle of sand exists, an insect exists, an ant exists. The smallest thing exists, and the largest thing exists. Inasmuch as existence has been characterised as the basic nature of the Self, and inasmuch as this existence seems to be the common feature that is at the background of everything, this Self is perhaps not within this or that, but within everything. This is the second conclusion that we draw in regard to the nature of the Self. The first thing is that it is; the second thing is that it is not only in one place. If it is within all things, it follows that it is everywhere.

Now, this knowing Self, if it is to be everywhere, what will it know as its object? That thing which we call the object also has a selfhood in its own self; it also exists. Is not the object existing? It does exist. All objects, all things, everybody exists, and if existence is the nature of the Self, the object also is characterised, in some way or the other, by the Selfhood we speak of. Then, what will the Self know when we say the Self is aware?

That the Self exists is the first conclusion. That the Self is everywhere is the second conclusion. A third conclusion, which is intriguing and mind-boggling, also follows - namely, that the Self knows without knowing anything outside itself. The question of knowing anything outside itself will not arise because of the fact that even the outsideness is enveloped and invaded by the very same Self, because of that something being an existence in the same way anything else exists. This Self is, therefore, Universal Existence. In Sanskrit, the Self is called the Atman. The deepest recess of the knowing principle, subjectivity, which we call the Self, is known as the Atman in the Sanskrit language. Inasmuch as it is an all-pervading universality, it is also known as Brahman, the Absolute Existence. So Acharya Sankara came to the great, great immortal conclusion that the Atman is Brahman; the Self is Universal.

If this is the case, we seem to have broken a very hard nut indeed, which is the object of the quest of philosophy as well as science. This is what is called the highest reach of philosophy and the noblest pursuit of science. There are certain other conclusions that follow from this great achievement of the height of thinking possible to humanity as a whole. This is the height, the apex of thought that humanity has reached, and we cannot go beyond it.

What are the other conclusions that evidently follow from this great apex of human possibility? The possibility is simple and something tremendously effective in our day-to-day existence – namely, that our life in every degree of its manifestation is integrated and stands as a wholeness, and neither the small nor the big, neither the insignificant nor the important, can be fractionally surviving if existence survives as a whole by itself. Every thought is a gestalt, as German psychologists tell us. It is a wholeness that is manifesting itself in our thinking, whatever be the thought that may arise in our mind. Half thought is not possible. A fraction of thinking is unimaginable. Every thought is total in the sense it comprehends all the avenues of thinking. It is integral. If every thought is a gestalt, every aspect of our living also is a gestalt. We not only think in a wholesome fashion, we also live socially in a wholesome way.

Acharya Sankara, therefore, was not merely a metaphysician and a master spiritual teacher. He was a great social reformer in the sense that he has taught us the art of living wholly in every level of the manifestation of human existence, right from the individual to the galaxies. This little me, this little you, this little he or she or whatever it is, is a whole thing that is there, and not a part. A little ant is a whole life, and not a part. An elephant is a whole, and not a part. None of us, no one in the world will ever consider himself or herself as a part human being; an entire human being will be the feeling of every person, small or big.

This integratedness is manifest firstly in thought, and secondly in the feeling of the totality of one's personality.

This manifestation of the gestalt of thought in our own personality is what we call healthy living. If we cannot think in this manner, we are unhealthy persons. So Acharya Sankara can also be said to be a physician of the soul. He was a medical man also, at the same time, because he told us how to be happy, how to be healthy. The health of a person depends upon the total concept that one has of oneself. If we think we are only partial beings, we are unhealthy.

This concept of totality, integration or gestalt is not only seen in one's own individual personality, but also in its further extension - in the family. A family, a father, mother, child, brother, sister - these constitute a family, as we call it. These members in a so-called family are something like the thoughts of a mind, and if thoughts are a total, then the family also is a total. If thoughts cannot quarrel among themselves, members in a family also cannot have conflict among themselves. So family happiness also follows from this totality which is the way of thinking, which is gestalt. Therefore, Acharya Sankara brought not only God into our hearts, he also brought happy family circumstance. He brought health into our bodies, and if we extend this family condition further into society, it is also a way of managing the provinces and the country as a whole, and the entire international system. He would be the best member of the United Nations, and the best organiser of any kind of system of managerial procedure.

Thus, drawing corollaries after corollaries from the fundamental fact of the existence of the Self which is universal, everything that is worthwhile in life follows: physical health, psychological integration, logical process of thinking, family happiness, provincial management, national welfare, international setup, and even a method of encountering the whole universe of creation - the art of facing God Himself.

With these words that I spoke to you, you might have gathered that there is nothing left unsaid by Acharya Sankara. Every item possible for thinking, every school of thought, every facet of reality, every religious outlook is

comprehended within this total presentation which you will find adumbrated in his masterly writing, if only you are to read them thoroughly from cover to cover. These days people read only a few selections for the purpose of passing an exam, and have a poor understanding of what actually is the core of this thought. No one reads the whole of it; they only take passages. That would be like trying to understand a human being by studying his nose, his fingers and some part of his body, knowing very well that no part of the body can be regarded as the whole person. It is unfortunate that the modern system of education is piecemeal; it has never taken into consideration the necessity to become wholesome in its aspect. Education has become a farce and a job-making technique, but not a soul-making process.

Here is Sankara before us. The great master's blessings are upon us, and God is with us with this noble thought that he has introduced.