

ADI SHANKARA

A God Without Qualities

Eighth century CE

Day dawns in the South Indian pilgrimage town of Sringeri, in Karnataka. It's a brief moment of stillness and cool. Walking sleepily in the half-light, I'm startled by something coiled on a veranda: a snake that, from the looks of it, is drowsy, too. But as my eyes adjust to the rising light, I look again and laugh: it's not a snake—merely a coiled rope, left behind by a man who's been fixing the tiled roof.

This bit of self-deception—mistaking a rope for a snake—is an occasional false alarm in Indian life. It's also among the most well-known, even hackneyed, examples cited in Indian philosophical thought. Its purpose is to show that, although the sensory world is out there, our imaginations sometimes intervene between us and reality. Our minds, in other words, are tricksters. At the same time, what we perceive (the snake superimposed on the rope) has real power. As another famous example from Indian philosophy runs, even someone who only *thinks* he has been bitten by a snake can die from shock.

Mistakings pervade Hindu philosophy, which is full of metaphors of concealment and obscuration. Many serve as examples of *maya*, the reality that substantially and unarguably presents itself to us but whose true nature remains elusive because of the limitations of our consciousness. Push aside this slippery, illusory world and something pure and constant is revealed: god, the divine, or the universal spirit, *Brahman*.

Although the varieties of Hinduism defy doctrinal unity, *maya* and Brahman are essential parts of a philosophical vision that many people now identify with the religion. In large part, we owe this vision to Adi Shankara, a religious thinker (perhaps the nearest that Hinduism has to a theologian) who, roughly twelve hundred years ago, transformed Hindu beliefs and practices, established temples and schools across the subcontinent, and in many ways laid the foundations of modern Hinduism, which is now the third-largest religion in the world.

In Europe, the eighth century was the era of Charlemagne's bloody expansion of Christendom, through campaigns against the Saxons, Saracens, Moors, and Slavs, and of his ascension to Rome's Christian imperium. Shankara's roughly contemporaneous efforts to establish a monastic order and assert his religious vision in India were vastly different: his was an intellectual struggle, prosecuted through debates across the subcontinent. At the heart of Shankara's interpretation of Hinduism is an idea that remains as powerful as it is paradoxical: *nirguna Brahman*, "a god without qualities."



The narrow roads to Sringeri wind up through the Sahyadri Hills, past miles of laboriously tended coffee plantations, stands of palm, and splays of bamboo. Here, in this remote temple town, Shankara is said to have founded his first Hindu monastery, or *mutth*—one of four he would establish, along with various temples, at the cardinal points of the subcontinent: at Badrinath, in the Himalayan foothills of the north; at Puri, on the Bay of Bengal in the east; at Dwarka, where the Gulf of Kutch opens into the Arabian Sea, in what is now the western state of Gujarat; and here at Sringeri, in the south.

Shankara, or Shankaracharya as he was also known, supposedly began traveling across India at a young age. As with so many of these ancient figures, there's uncertainty and dispute about his early life. It's generally reckoned that he was born in the eighth century, in the Malabar region of southern India, now in the state of Kerala. Some religious biographies, written in verse several hundred years after Shankara's death, claim that the deity Shiva appeared to Shankara's parents in a dream and gave them the choice of producing a son who was "all-knowing and virtuous but short-lived" or one who would live long but "without any special virtue or greatness." They opted for the former, and named their precocious child Shankara, another name for Shiva. As promised, the boy turned out to be a prodigy, but was just thirty-two when he died.

It was said that Shankara had to hear something only once to remember it, and that he had mastered the four Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures, by the age of eight. Around the same time, or possibly even earlier, Shankara declared his desire to become a sannyasi, an ascetic, wandering monk. This announcement scandalized his by-then-widowed mother. In the traditional life cycle of a Hindu male, *sannyas* (renunciation of the world) is the fourth and final stage. A boy first has to grow to be a student and then an adult householder, and then later withdraw into hermetic retirement. Only after that can he take the final step and become a religious wanderer.

But Shankara prevailed, and, by the age of sixteen, with half his life already spent as an ascetic, he was producing sophisticated scriptural commentaries and articulating a radical new version of what eventually became known as Hinduism. He remained devoted to his mother, though. After she died, Shankara returned home intending to perform the death rites, but his community refused to let him. Only a householder could do the rites, they said—not a sannyasi. It was a painful snub, and perhaps the pivotal incident that turned Shankara against high Brahminical rituals and toward what he considered the undervalued inner wisdom of post-Vedic texts.

In celebratory biographies such as the *Shankara-Vijayas*, or the “Conquests of Shankara,” the earliest of which date from around the fourteenth century, Shankara is portrayed as more than just a wandering religious figure. He is miraculous in physique as well as deeds: a face like the full moon, a broad chest, arms so long they reached his knees, and fingernails the color of blood. But what really awed people was his capacity for intellectual jousting and dialectic victories over scholarly rivals. The most dramatic was over the venerable pandit Mandana Misra, an old-style believer in ritual recitation of mantras and *japas*. These were sounds, conveying no meaning as such, but considered purifying because they were believed to have been handed down by the gods.

A dying sage directed Shankara to meet Mandana: he told Shankara to look for a big house, surrounded by walls and with a tall locked gate, where parrots could be heard chanting Vedic mantras. Shankara triggered yogic powers to leap into the courtyard, and after exchanging insults by way of introduction, he and Mandana decided to debate the validity of their beliefs. Mandana’s wife was chosen as umpire. She placed two fresh flower garlands around their necks, declaring that whichever garland faded first would indicate the loser.

The disputations went on for eighteen days. Finally, Mandana’s flowers

wilted, and he conceded defeat. His wife took up the challenge and thought she had found a subject for debate that would surely flummox the celibate Shankara: the art of love. Shankara asked for a month to investigate. Using his yogic powers once more, he entered the body of a king, proved a quick student at gathering the necessary knowledge, and returned to claim victory.

Shankara turned now to spreading his message across the country, arguing down rivals one by one. According to one of the *Shankara-Vijayas*, he continued his “merciless refutation of all hostile creeds and philosophies: the teachings of the Tathagata [the **Buddha** (1)] became lifeless, the school of Kumarila became silent, the Naiyayika philosophy became weak and paralyzed, and the Kapila’s system also followed suit.”



In Shankara’s day, there existed a range of religious sects devoted to various gods, sects that followed distinct practices, from animal sacrifice and fire rituals to tantric sex and magic. These beliefs, along with Buddhism and a range of other philosophical schools, sustained a world of debate and controversy, and challenged the Brahminic tradition.

Shankara aimed to bring some order to this profusion of belief and practice, both orthodox and heterodox. By his time, Sanskrit texts of the Vedas existed alongside oral versions, and the canon had expanded to include a collection of two hundred broadly philosophical works known as the Upanishads. Also known as the Vedanta (literally, “after Vedas” or “at the Vedas’ end”), the Upanishads ventured answers to questions posed in the Vedas: Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where do we go? Shankara seized on these writings and turned them, through his commentaries, into a powerful new doctrine.

According to Jonardon Ganeri, a professor of philosophy at New York University, “Shankara’s ambition as a thinker was to provide a unified, coherent reading of the great plurality and diversity of the Hindu scriptures.” Ultimately, Ganeri says, this project was a moral one: “I think of Shankara as a theologian, interpreting canonical religious texts as providing the foundation around which a moral vision is organized.”

For Shankara, the focus of this vision was the *jnana*, or “knowledge,” contained in the Vedas and Vedanta that revealed the essential unity of the cosmos. “Shankara thought there was just one real entity, Brahman, the fundamental grounding principle of the universe,” Ganeri says. “Everything else—all the apparent distinctions and differences in the world, including

differences between different individual selves—is illusory.” Perhaps most radically, Shankara held that the distinction between self (atman) and the divine (Brahman), which appears so evident in the sensory world of maya, was also a misapprehension. This was the core of the monist doctrine that Shankara systematized. It is now known as Advaita Vedanta—that is, “non-dualist” Vedanta—because it does not recognize two substances in the universe, but only one.

As a result of this tenet, Vedic Hinduism had to be newly formulated, and turned away from popular forms of worship, which, according to Shankara, misunderstood the individual spirit’s path to liberation. Obsession with rituals had to be replaced by asceticism, celibacy, the giving up of family life, and an intellectual rigor that could help others grasp the truth that the seeking person divined. Instead of mantras, Shankara prescribed meditative reflection, through which each individual could pierce the veil of maya and come to recognize the identity between his or her own essence and the universal spirit. Once we grasp that oneness with the eternal, Shankara said, we attain *moksha*, or release from the cycle of life and death.

Shankara explicated this moral vision in volume after volume—some estimate the number at four hundred—of subtle commentaries on the Upanishadic texts. In other modes, Shankara could be direct—for instance, in his popular call to devotion, *Bhaja Govindam*. Yet in his efforts to capture the ineffable oneness of the universe, he produced a beautiful, if at times confounding, literature:

I am neither earth nor water nor fire nor air nor sense-organ nor the aggregate of all these; for all these are transient, variable by nature . . .

I am neither above nor below, neither inside nor outside, neither middle nor across, neither the east nor west; for I am indivisible, one by nature, and all pervading like space.



Though the term Hindu, denoting those who lived in the subcontinent, beyond the Indus River, was known to the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE, Hinduism entered the historical record only around Shankara’s time. It was a name used by Arabs who were attempting to describe the different religious strands they encountered in India. Indeed, some scholars see in Shankara a response to the first incursions into the subcontinent of that great proselytizing monotheistic religion, Islam, in the mid-seventh

century (and many later monistic Hindu sects became proselytizing themselves, emulating what they opposed). But Shankara's monism was crucially different from monotheism. Unlike the jealous, paternal God of the Abrahamic faiths or the superhuman personal gods of the Vedic pantheon, his Brahman was without positive attributes, an essential substance rather than a divine agent.

Arguably more important than any response Shankara may have been making to Islam was the way he took on Buddhism, then by no means at the end of its Indian decline. Throughout the subcontinent, he engaged in verbal combat with Buddhist philosophers, who taught, as the Buddha had, such doctrines as the momentariness of all things, and the denial of the existence of a deity. At the same time, however, he learned a trick or two from them and also adopted in his mutths organizational aspects of the Buddhist sangha. Some later critics spoke of Shankara's "hidden Buddhism." Others denounced his theory of monism by quipping that Shankara was simply too dim to count beyond one. Yet perhaps his ability to adopt important features of Buddhist practice, such as the monastic order, into Hindu tradition was one small part of what forced Buddhism into its long dormancy on the subcontinent.

Unlike Buddhism at its inception, and during its Dalit renewal in the middle of the twentieth century, Hindu monistic doctrines, of which Shankara's became the most prominent, sometimes slid toward intolerance. Shankara himself maintained that only Brahmins could renounce the world (and thus achieve moksha). Moreover, as Wendy Doniger, a professor of the history of religions at the University of Chicago, has argued, the belief that the lived world is "ultimately unreal generally siphons off the impulse to take action against social injustices, against poverty and cruelty."

Even commentators sympathetic to Shankara detected troubling contradictions in his account of liberation. In particular, the lack of distinction between atman and Brahman led to a sort of paradox of inquiry: If we are one with the undifferentiated, qualityless essence of the universe, how can we possibly reflect on that universe in order to discover what we truly are? Furthermore, if the Vedas, Vedanta, and Shankara's own thought are all part of the illusory world of maya, how can we hope to find in them the truth of the unity of being?

According to Jonardon Ganeri, Shankara's most startling idea (one shared by Hindu philosophers in other, connected schools) was that "the way out of colossal error" (out of maya) was "to embed within the illusion the catalyst of its own destruction." In other words, Shankara turned on its head the example

of the imagined but no less fatal snakebite: even (the right set of) illusory beliefs and practices can help lever one into an awareness of the truth.



By midmorning, Sringeri fills with pilgrims and tourists who swarm the mutth and temples. It's a sight repeated on most days at the four corners of the country. Shankara's monasteries continue to thrive and (along with a fifth, established at Kanchi) have become some of the most important Hindu religious sites in modern India. Each one is headed by a Shankaracharya, who adopts Shankara's name as an official title.

In his lifetime, Shankara's teachings gained him many devoted followers, but it's the afterlife of his teachings that makes his doctrine far more popular today than it ever was in the eighth century. His pruned-down version of Hinduism caught the interest of the broad-minded Mughal emperor **Akbar (16)** in the sixteenth century, and later found a ready ear among India's nineteenth-century colonial masters. Doniger explains:

One branch of Hinduism, which includes the Shankara tradition, the philosophical tradition, was very attractive to the British when they came to India and established the Raj. They liked the fact that there was a philosophical tradition; they could come to terms with it. The rest of Hinduism, which is to say most of Hinduism—with the gods with many arms and goddesses that drink warm blood—the British didn't really like that part of Hinduism.

In addition, Christian missionaries, who were often the forerunners to the colonial administrators and factory men of the Raj, sought to undermine the various forms of Hinduism they encountered. "They wanted to find points of weakness, and polytheism was one of the principal targets," Ganeri says. "They accused Hinduism of not being a well-organized, coherent religion precisely because of its polytheism."

Many educated Indians, working closely with British overlords in the vast machinery of the subcontinental empire, came to adopt these prejudices—and the Christian model of religion, if not its content, seeped into the culture at large. Elite Hindus grew ashamed of the lack of systematization and scriptural authority in their religion, yet, according to Doniger, they did not abandon Hinduism altogether: "They became proud of the philosophy of Shankara."

In this way, the absorption of British prejudices had the contradictory effect of consolidating Hinduism, albeit in a very particular form. At the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, Hindu revivalists and Indian nationalists embraced Shankara's philosophy as a muscular indigenous religion. Thinkers such as Swami **Vivekananda (28)** invoked Shankara's ideas and argued for the creation of schools to promote Advaita Vedanta and foster national pride.

Despite the powerful afterlife of Shankara's doctrine, even today his version of the religion is by no means one that all Hindus would recognize. Doniger has compared Hinduism to a Venn diagram without a center: clusters of overlapping practices and beliefs, with no single feature shared by all the religion's many manifestations. "Shankara's there, everybody knows about him," Doniger says. "Some people use him as their own guide to thinking about the meaning of life, and those people say that's what Hinduism really is. But that's really not true: it's what some of Hinduism is."



On a hill leading up to the Sringeri mutth is a clutch of market stalls selling trinkets, images of Shankara and other religious paraphernalia—the kind of thing I imagine that Shankara himself would not have had much time for: idols within a world of illusion. At the top of the path that leads to the monastery, you can hear monks reciting mantras, apparently oblivious to Shankara's rejection of such practices.

But it's that constant capacity to allow beliefs, however abstract, to be observed and practiced in different ways that keeps Hinduism invigorated. Shankara's thought, Ganeri says, "performed an admirable function by providing a Hindu analog of European ways of thinking, but it was just the opposite from what I think is the essence of Hinduism: its great diversity and polycentricity and plurality."

That plurality clearly survives. The present-day Shankaracharyas may be the nearest thing Hinduism has to a pope or papacy, but Hinduism itself remains much as it was in the eighth century, when the Arabs first tried to label it: multiple in form, bubbling with internal arguments, accepting of different types of belief. There is no single, defining text or interpreter. What we have are mesmerizing questions, puzzles, early-morning doubts about the nature of our perceptions, the limits of self, and the relationship between that self and the wider flow of time.