

17. The ladder and the steps

INDIA was the nursery of heroes who ventured into the realms of the spirit, and achieved victories against the forces of evil; they opened up the paths to God that are described in the texts of *Sanaathana Dharma* (Eternal Universal Religion). India is the sacred land from where the Voice of the *Vedhas* (sacred scriptures) rang over the world. It is the land which still retains the splendour of *Yoga* (Divine communion), and the glory of Renunciation. But, every Indian has now to question himself whether he is aware of this fact and whether he is helping by his acts, words and thoughts to promote that glory and that splendour. One has to admit that the glory is being dimmed, the splendour is fast fading out. The *Gaayathri Manthra* (*Vedhic* prayer to illuminate the intellect), enjoined on all, because it is the crucial *manthra* (sacred formula) of the *Vedhas*, has become a ritual of holding the nose while mumbling illegible sounds. *Praanaayaama* (breath-control) and its later stage of *Prathyaahaara* (the control of the senses and of their listless pursuit of external pleasure) are discoverable only in dictionaries. *Yama* and *Niyama* (abstention from evil doing and various observances of devotion to God)---the first steps in spiritual discipline are not practised at all, even by those who claim to teach and guide. Members of the monastic order, who have vowed to detach themselves completely from worldly involvements and attachments are running about frantically; accumulating and investing money, with even greater fanaticism than householders. One wonders whether this is the same land that one reads about, the land that held high the ideals of the spirit.

Shankara's mission to revitalise Hindhu Dharma

With the return of Krishna to His abode after the incarnation interlude, the Age of *Kali* darkened the world. Many preceptors', saints and sages tried subsequently to remind the people of their heritage and guide them along the ancient path. Of these, Shankara, who realised the weakness of a dualistic interpretation of the Universe---and the need for a unifying philosophy, was the most effective. He was born in the village of Kaaladi, situated in the Kerala State. Initiated into the *Gaayathri Manthra* in his fifth year he mastered the *Vedhas* and their supplementary texts on grammar, logic, prosody, astrology, etc., and in his fourteenth year itself, he ventured forth on his mission of counteracting the forces of doubt, dissent and denial and establishing faith, wisdom and devotion throughout the land. He encountered many scholars reputed for their dialectical skill and convinced them of the validity of the non-dualistic basis of the subjective and objective worlds. He wrote commentaries on the *Upanishaths* (metaphysical scriptures), the Bhagavath Geetha (The Song-teaching of Lord Krishna) and the *Brahma Suuthras* (aphorisms on Supreme Spirit)---generally accepted as the authentic texts of the Hindhu faith. He dedicated his short life of 32 years to the revitalisation of the *Sanaathana Dharma* (Eternal Universal Religion).

The weapon to destroy the delusion

When Shankara was residing at Vaaraanasi (Benares City) on the banks of river Ganga with his pupils, he used to visit the *Pandiths* in their own houses, and draw them into beneficial conversation on themes of philosophy. One day, when he went to a *Pandith*, he found him immersed in complicated rules of grammar. When asked why he had taken up the intensive study of grammar, he replied that it would easily fetch him a few pieces of silver. "If I am designed a *Pandith*, I can go to the home of some big Zamindaars, and hope to receive alms and offerings from them, for the upkeep of my large family," he said. Shankara advised him in appropriate terms, and charged him with self-confidence and courage.

Returning to his hermitage, Shankara wrote a verse summarising the advice he gave the poor struggling Brahmin householder:

Bhaja Govindham, Bhaja Govindham,

Bhaja Govindham, Mooda Mathe,

Sampraapthe Sannihithe Kaale

Nahi Nahi Rakshathi Dukrn karane.

"Praise God, Praise God, Praise God, you fool, When death does knock at door, rules of grammar cannot save."

Shankara exhorted his pupils to disseminate the ideal of this verse, and they too, responded with verses on the same lines, each of the 14 contributing one verse. Shankara added another twelve of his own, as well as four more verses about the transformation that the teaching would confer. Thus, there are 31 verses in all, in the text called *Bhaja Govindham* or *Moha Mudgaram*. The latter name means, "The weapon with which delusion can be destroyed." Each one is a step in the ladder which lifts man into God.

The study of these verses and the inspiration derived from them will promote discrimination and detachment, and thus, prepare the mind for the vision of the Supreme. You have to be initiated into these disciplines now itself, when you are young and entering on the adventure of living, and so, I have decided to expound to you one verse a day, during this Summer Course.

"Those who deny the *Aathma* are fools" says Shankara

Shankara addressed these verses to "*mooda mathi*" (The foolish person). Now, who are these fools? He has given the answer in another context: '*Naasthiko mooda uchyaathe*'---"Those who deny the *aathma* are fools." Those who assert and believe that "I am not this perishable body; I am not this feeble intellect; I am the undying, everlasting, all-knowing, all-inclusive *Aathma*" are few indeed. The vast majority assert and believe that "I am the moulder of my destiny, I am the captain of my ship. I choose my likes and dislikes, I fulfil my desires through my own efforts." These are the fools.

But, even this vast majority pay taxes in ordinary life for the water they use, the electricity they consume, the houses they live in, and the professions they are engaged in. Now, what tax are they paying to Him who provides them with the essential requisites for mere living---the Sun, the Moon, Fire, Water, Air, Space, etc? Those who do not recognise the giver, the provider, the principle, the person, they are the fools.

Scientists can weigh, measure, and analyse materials that already exist. They can, by means of permutations and combinations, put into currency strange forms and shapes from out of existing matter. But, they cannot create oxygen or hydrogen or any other thing anew. That can happen only through the Will of God. Without any matter originally supplied, no scientist can deal with things from the very beginning. They are helpless in the realm beyond earth, water, fire, air and space, the subject matter of the senses. Their activities are confined to nature, which is but the part-manifestation of the Divine.

The verse with which Shankara started off the *Moha Mudgaram* speaks of the moment of the approach of the end of life. This indicates that of all the fears of man, the fear of death is the fiercest as well as the most foolish. For, none can escape death, having committed the error of

birth. To get rid of the wheel of birth and death, awareness of the undying unborn *Aathma* which is one's Reality is the only method available to man.

So, Shankara advises man to pray to Govindha. He refers to God as Govindha. *Govindha* means, "He who is the Cowherd." Man is both an animal and divine being. He has risen from the animal level and is on the way to reveal his divinity. He should be vigilant that he does not slide into animal again. Man alone can rise into Godhood, for, he is equipped with the endowment needed for the achievement.

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