

Sankara, His Merciful Life

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*Lord Siva's divine mercy, which knows neither
beginning nor end, is verily permeating
Sankara's life from beginning to end.*

Times were ripe, men were ripe. The divine Avatar was much needed and awaited by both gods and human beings. The gods were deprived of their due sacrificial offerings. Men were beguiled and bewildered by many misleading paths and preachers. Both were longing for the restoration of *dharmā* and right knowledge. The task was a difficult and momentous one.

Moved with boundless mercy, Lord Siva thought within himself that he should now appear on earth as a sage whose words and deeds would be noted and trusted. The Lord, whose resolves and desires are ever truthful, embodied himself as the great master, Sankara.

It would be impossible to recount all the deeds of Sankara in his short life, but let us ponder on the main events that marked him as mercy incarnate.

Gracious Childhood

Once while going for alms with his fellow *brahmacharis*, the young Sankara reached the house of a poor brahmin. The lady of the house was greatly honoured at the sight of the *brahmachari*. But she was so poor she could give him a mere amalaka fruit. Young Sankara was deeply touched by the plight of the lady. He composed extempore what might be his very first hymn-- a prayer for mercy to Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. No sooner did Sankara sing her praise than the Goddess, highly pleased with him, showered golden *amalakas* (gooseberries) on that house to the astonishment of all. Hence the hymn bears the name 'Kanakadhara Stotram' or a praise for the shower of gold. Such was Sankara's compassion even in that tender age.

Having completed his Vedic studies at the age of seven, Sankara returned home to attend to his widowed mother. He felt sad as she was very weak and had to walk a long distance for her daily bath in the river Purna. One day, as his mother fell down on the way, the merciful boy addressed a prayer to the river deity requesting her to flow nearer to their home. Next morning, all people were surprised to see that Purna river had changed her course and was flowing very near to Sankara's home.

Devoted Discipleship

Eager to enter *sannyasa asrama*, young Sankara left his native Kerala and became the devoted *sisya* of renowned master Govindapada. It was rainy season. Heavy clouds were covering the sky. Flashes of lightning and torrential rains continued for several days, to the dismay of all inhabitants. Swollen by the 'heavy rains, river Narmada was threatening to overflow its banks.

While his revered master remained immersed in deepest *samadhi*, Sankara was watching the situation. When he saw danger to the life of his teacher, he took the water-pot in his hand and gathered all the flood waters of Narmada into it through his yogic powers. Everything calmed down. After coming back to the normal state of consciousness, Govindapada praised Sankara for his wonderful act.

Spreading Dharma

Govindapada then commissioned him to go to Varanasi for writing commentaries on Vedānta and to spread the Vedic Dharma among the people. Although Sankara would have spent all his life in the service of his revered master, he followed respectfully his orders. He started for Varanasi with a heavy heart, bearing in his mind the spiritual good of the world.

Holy men sanctify the earth by the pollen-like dust of their lotus feet. They move from place to place, bringing virtue and peace into the young as minds of all who meet them.

Sankara's mission for the upliftment of the country was just beginning. He was still a youth. A momentous task awaited him.

Many fallacious creeds were prevailing, and impure practices were in vogue. *Dharma* was mistaken as *adharma*, and *adharma* as *dharma*. Bauddha and Jaina schools had supplanted Vedic faith. And even amidst orthodoxy there was a lot of controversy.

Sankara was to prove himself as a master of all learning. He had to combine within himself the ideals of firmness and mercy, without giving way either to narrow-mindedness or licentiousness. The restoration of true *Vaidika Dharma* was resting upon his super-human wisdom. And the growth of spiritual life was dependent on his boundless mercy.

A Merciful Guru

During his stay at Varanasi, Acharya Sankara was surrounded by a number of disciples. Among them Sanandana was highly devoted to Sankara. Later at Badri, Sankara wanted other disciples to know the uniqueness of Sanandana. He called him from the opposite bank of the Ganges. The devoted disciple, who had crossed over *samsara* with the raft of guru *bhakti*, did not hesitate to step into the Ganges to reach the master's feet. While walking on the river, lotuses sprang forth under his feet to support him. From that day onward, he came to be known as Padmapada, the lotus footed. He was a worthy recipient of Sankara's mercy indeed.

While at Varanasi, the young ascetic Sankara was confronted by an outcaste who revealed himself as none other than Lord Siva in disguise. Sankara who felt graced by the Lord, declared that scriptures were useless without the guru's mercy. Mercy was useless if not followed by knowledge. And knowledge was sterile if it did not bestow on one, the Supreme Truth.

With Lord Siva's blessings, Sankara departed for Badri in the North, to write his reputed commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita. He achieved this distinction in his twelfth year. He also produced the renowned Vedantic works like Vivekacudamani and Llpadesa Sahasri.

In his sixteenth year, Sankara was granted another life span of 16 years by Vyasa who was highly pleased with Sankara's commentary on his Brahma Sutras. During his travels Sankara composed numerous stotras for instilling faith and devotion. He had only one thing in his mind--the good of the world.

Visiting holy places, Sankara went to the shrine of Mukambika. On his way, he saw a grieving woman carrying her dead child. This greatly moved his heart. A voice was heard from the sky saying, "Grieving at such a plight is useless. It will only harm the one feeling so." In assent the Acharya said, "That is true. Thou alone, an adept in protecting the worlds, can contrive the impossible." Thereupon, as though awakening from sound sleep, the child stood up happily to the surprise of all onlookers. Thus even without intention, Sankara showered his mercy on the afflicted lady. He revealed once more his oneness with the Lord.

Sureshvara Becomes a Disciple

Desirous of throwing light upon the true purpose of Vedic rites (*Karmakanda*), and of restoring Vedantic knowledge (*Jnanakanda*) as the direct means of liberation, the Acharya went to Mahishmati on the banks of Narmada where lived Mandana Misra, the renowned Mimamsaka or ritualist believed to be the Avatar of Brahma. Both of them entered into a long philosophical debate relating to the true import of Vedas.

The wager was that the defeated one should give up his views and accept those of the victor. Mandana's wife Ubhaya Bharati was declared as the umpire. She was given the uneasy task of deciding who would have the best of the argument. Taking her seat and garlanding both the parties, she said that whoever's garland was seen to fade first would be considered as defeated.

Sankara brought forward untiringly all his arguments in favour of Vedanta with great accuracy and power. Mandana found it more and more difficult to answer the arguments and maintain his views. Several days went on. The debate was approaching its conclusion. Ubhaya Bharati declared Sankara as the victor, because Mandana's garland began to fade. Sankara's garland was fresh and fragrant.

Enlightened by the wisdom of Sankara's words, Mandana became his disciple. The great Acharya gave him the name of Sureshvara. Ubhaya Bharati then revealed herself as Goddess Sarasvati, and proclaimed Sankara as an all-knowing sage. At his earnest request, the Goddess promised to grace him with her presence wherever Sankara invoked her as Divine Mother Sarada.

Hastamalaka's Wisdom

One day, as the Acharya was passing through a village with his disciples, a brahmin named Prabhakara approached him for help. His son would not speak nor listen to anyone. He would just spend all his time in a meditative mood. He did not care to take even food. Prabhakara asked Sankara the reason for his son's unusual behaviour. As the boy made his bow to Sankara and did not get up, he lifted the boy's head gently and asked him who he was and why he behaved in such a manner.

To the amazement of his father, the boy who was heard speaking for the first time, answered the Acharya in 12slokas dealing with the highest knowledge. Every sloka concludes as follows,. "I am that Self whose nature is Eternal Consciousness." Sankara recognised him as a realised sage and took him as one of his disciples.

Sankara named him Hastamalaka. The hymn he composed was called Hastamalaka Stotram. Later there occurred an unusual event between the guru and his sishya. Sankara graced Hastamalaka's Stotram with an enlightening commentary of his own, raising it to the status of a true and waited patiently for his return. Vedantic work. Sankara disclosed how Hastamalaka was a born yogi.

Establishing Mathas

Travelling with Sureshvara and other disciples, Sankara decided to settle down in Sringeri for a number of years. On his arrival he had seen a snake giving shade to a frog in labour pains. He felt that this act of mercy between natural foes was a good omen for establishing the first of his mathas at Sringeri under the headship of Sri Sureshvaracharya.

In Sringeri the Acharya had a beautiful temple built, in which he installed the murti of Sri Sarada, invoking her presence and blessings. In this connection Sri Vidyananya Swami said:

"She who bears the name of Mother Sarada, who is keeping up her promise, who is residing in Sringeri even now, is granting boons to all devotees, in all her brilliance. "

At this time, a new disciple by name Giri came to Sri Sankara. He was kind-hearted and virtuous. He talked very little. Completely devoted to Sankara, he served with utmost care and respect. It happened one day that Giri was washing Sankara's clothes in the river. The other disciples were impatient to begin the peace chant so that the Acharya could start the *bhasya patha*. They did not want to wait for Giri and delay the lessons, as they thought he was not such a bright student. Out of mercy for his devoted disciple, and also to remove the pride of others, the Acharya imparted spiritual knowledge to Giri by his mere wish and awaited patiently for his return.

As an enlightened person Giri came toward them singing a beautiful hymn in praise of Sankara as follows:

"Ocean of mercy, do Thou save me whose heart is afflicted by the pains surging from the sea of worldly life, Confer on me the truth of all scriptures. Be Thou my refuge, O Master Sankara!"

Though he had become instantly a scholar and a knower of scriptures, the sishya was very humble. All his co- disciples were astonished to behold the power of their master's mercy. They now regarded Giri with a different attitude.

Since all the slokas were composed by the sishya in Totaka metre, Sankara gave him the name Totakacharya. The hymn too came to be known as *Totakashtakam*. Later, Totaka composed another work entitled *Srutisara Samuddharanam* in the same metre. He was appointed as the first *Pithadhipati* of Jyotir Math in the North.

There arose a question between Sureshvara and other disciples as to who among them

was best qualified to write an exegesis on Sankara's *Sutra Bhashyam*. The Acharya settled the matter and made Sureshvara write an independent work, known as *Naishkarmyasiddhi*, to prove himself as a true follower of *Jnanakanda*, and also write two *Vartikas* on Sankara's *bhashyas*. Then he entrusted to Padmapada the writing of an exegesis on the Sutra Bhashyam. Later when Padmapada's work happened to be burnt, Sankara dictated it from memory and Padmapada could retrieve the lost manuscript.

A Dutiful and Truthful Son

While Padmapada was on pilgrimage, the Acharya got an insight into his mother being close to death. Remembering his promise that he would attend on her deathbed and perform her funeral rites, he left Sringeri for Kaladi without delay. Though free from all attachment and delusion, his heart was full of mercy for his mother who was so weakened and frail. At the time of her passing away, he started chanting a hymn in praise of the Lord from whom all beings are born, by whom they are sustained and into whom they re-enter. Thus he made her attain the supreme abode. Her heart was at peace as she was blessed by the saintly presence of her enlightened and glorious son.

As he prepared himself for the due performance of cremation, Sankara was strongly opposed by his relatives because he was a renunciate. In spite of his explanation that he had made a solemn promise to his mother, they refused to listen to him. Without any help from others, Sankara took some wood and lit the funeral pyre, showing his unimpeded power and adherence to truth.

Forgiving Enemies

In course of time, Sankara vanquished many opponents in philosophical debates throughout the country. Among them was Navagupta, who wanted to take his revenge on the invincible Acharya through black magic. Within a few days the great master suffered from a severe disease in the rectal region. Despite the loving care of Totaka and other disciples, the ailment was increasing day by day, causing them great concern. They knew Sankara was unattached to the body and could endure greatest pain and had no fear of death. But they felt it was their duty to call for a doctor. In spite of his refusal, they insisted that he should care for his health for the sake of his mission on earth. Though he agreed to their request, the best physicians could not do much for him, as the disease was neither of a physical origin nor due to karma. The doctors were sent away.

With Lord Siva's grace, the Acharya understood the nefarious origin of his ailment, but he entertained no ill-feeling towards its sponsor. On learning this, Padmapada uttered the Pranava mantra, and the evil spell returned at once to Navagupta causing his instant death. Injuring others, especially holy men, is against scriptural law.

Embodiment of Good

In addition to establishing mathas at Sringeri and Badri under the headships of Sureshvara and Totaka, he also founded mathas at Dwaraka and Puri under the headships of Padmapada and Hastamalaka. He thus laid secure foundations for his followers, showing once more his deep concern for the spiritual good of all. In him mercy was not a mere idea or even a simple ideal, but it found its way into all of his deeds.

After ascending the *Sarvajna Pitham* in Kashmir, Sankara went to Badri. He was then 32. After having spread his teachings, he left for Kedarnath, the abode of Lord Siva. His disciples could not beat the bitter Himalayan cold. With a merciful heart, he prayed to Lord Siva to protect them. Hot springs started flowing from the lotus feet of the Lord. Even to this day the hot springs bear testimony to one of Sankara's last merciful acts.

Everlasting Mercy

Adi Sankara's great mercy did not end with his life; it has been kept alive in the hearts

and lives of all successive Acharyas who have striven hard for the welfare of the people. The last decision of His Holiness Sri Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji to undertake a Vijaya Yatra for the benefit of people in various places is a recent proof, if any proof be needed at all.

Knowing the Acharya's bountiful and merciful nature, who could see the least dryness or monotony in his life and his teachings? Who could fail to notice the uniqueness of that great Avatar of Lord Siva? Who could not be touched to the core of one's heart? Whose life will not be transformed and purified by his abiding grace and mercy?