

The Life of Jagatguru - Adi Shankaracharya



Sanatan Dharma (commonly known as Hinduism) remains a dynamic and all-encompassing tradition, and this enduring vitality stands as a powerful testament to the works and efforts of Adi Shankaracharya. Beyond being the foremost champion of Advaita philosophy, one of his most invaluable contributions was the reorganization and revitalization of the ancient Sanyasa order. Through this order, the eternal code of life contained in the Vedas continues to reach the masses, flowing as a unifying and transformative force for all humanity.

Adi Shankaracharya embodied the ideal Sannyasi. It is widely accepted that he lived around 1,200 years ago, though some historical sources suggest an even earlier period. Born in Kalady, in the Indian state of Kerala, he achieved in just 32 years what continues to astonish us even today, despite our modern conveniences and resources. At the tender age of eight, driven by an intense longing for liberation, he left home in search of his Guru.

From the southern state of Kerala, the young Shankara walked nearly 2,000 kilometres (1,243 miles) to the banks of river Narmada in central India, where he met his Guru, Govindapada. He remained as a disciple for 4 years, serving his teacher with devotion. Under Govindapada's compassionate guidance, Shankaracharya mastered the vast body of Vedic scriptures.

By the age of 12, his Guru recognized his extraordinary brilliance and declared that Shankara was ready to write commentaries on the major scriptural texts. At his teacher's command, Shankara composed profound commentaries that revealed the subtle and hidden meanings of the scriptures. By the age of 16, he had completed all the major treatises and set aside his pen.

Many legends surround this period of his discipleship, reflecting both his spiritual depth and his unwavering dedication. (Refer to the Amar Chitra Katha story)

From sixteen to thirty-two, Shankaracharya travelled tirelessly across the length and breadth of ancient India, bringing to the masses the life-giving message of the Vedas. His teaching resounded with the central declaration of Vedanta: **"Brahmam, Pure Consciousness, is the Absolute Reality. The world is unreal. This is the correct understanding of the Śāstra."**

**ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः।
अनेन वेद्यं सच्छास्त्रमिति वेदान्तडिण्डिमः ॥ (ब्रह्मज्ञानावलीमाला)**

In essence, the individual soul is not different from Brahman. With the statement **"Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya, Jeevo Brahmaiva Na Para,"** Shankaracharya distilled the vast teachings of the scriptures into a single, profound truth.

In those times, ancient India had sunk into a quagmire of superstition and misinterpretation of sacred texts. Degraded ritualism had taken root, and the true essence of Sanatana Dharma—its universal message of love, compassion, and the oneness of humanity—had been overshadowed by the blind performance of rituals devoid of understanding.



Shankaracharya engaged in vigorous debates with eminent scholars and leaders of various religious sects. Each upheld their own interpretations of the scriptures, yet the young sage—brilliant and unwavering—was able to address and overcome their arguments with ease. Through his clarity and insight, he helped them recognize the wisdom of his teachings. Many of these respected figures ultimately accepted Shankaracharya as their Guru.

Guided by his teachings, they transformed their own lives, and this transformation naturally extended to their countless followers across all levels of society.

Shankaracharya went on to establish four ashrams in the four corners of India, entrusting each to one of his principal disciples. Through these centers, the teachings of Advaita Vedanta were preserved, practiced, and propagated.

During his time, India was home to numerous sects, each following its own narrow philosophy and system of worship. People had become blind to the underlying unity of the One Supreme Reality. To restore harmony, Shankaracharya formulated the **Shanmata** system—six modes of worship—highlighting the principal deities: **Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Muruka (Kartikeya), Ganesha, and Surya**. He also codified the rituals and rites that continue to guide worship in many major temples across India.

Beyond his intellectual brilliance and organizational genius, Shankaracharya was a poet of exceptional sensitivity, his heart overflowing with devotion to the Divine. He composed **72**

devotional and meditative hymns, including *Soundarya Lahari*, *Sivananda Lahari*, *Nirvana Shatakam*, and *Manisha Panchakam*. He authored **18 commentaries** on foundational scriptures such as the *Brahma Sutras*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and twelve major Upanishads. In addition, he wrote **23 treatises** on the fundamentals of Advaita Vedanta, including *Viveka Chudamani*, *Atma Bodha*, *Vakya Vritti*, and *Upadesa Sahasri*, which expound the principles of non-dual Brahman.

Revered as an incarnation of Lord Shiva, Sri Shankara lived only 32 years, yet his impact remains immeasurable. Numerous inspiring legends surround his life, each reflecting his spiritual greatness and enduring legacy.

Four Mathas (Char Dhams) – established by Shankaracharya

During his extensive travels across India, Shankaracharya established 4 **maths** (monastic centers) to unify the scattered and diverse groups of Sannyasis. These maths, founded around 700 CE in the four corners of India, were each placed under the leadership of one of his senior-most disciples. To each math, he assigned the responsibility of preserving one of the four Vedas for future generations, along with one **Mahavakya** (a great Vedic declaration).

Shankaracharya also reorganized the Sannyasis of India into ten principal orders, known collectively as the **Dasanami Sannyasa Tradition**, and aligned these groups with the respective maths.

Historical and literary evidence further suggests that the **Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt** in Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu, was also founded by Shankaracharya, adding to the spiritual and organizational legacy he left behind.

Chatur Dhams

Direction	South India	West India	North India	East India
Place	Sringeri	Dwaraka	Badrinath	Puri
Math Name	Sringeri Math	Sarada Math	Jyotir Math	Govardhan Math
Acharya	Sureswara	Hastamalaka	Trotaka	Padmapada
Veda	Yagur	Sama	Atharva	Rik
Mantra	Aham brahmāsmi	Tattvamasi	Ayamātmā brahma	Prajñānam brahma
Sanyasa Order	Saraswati, Bharati, Puri	Tirtha, Ashrama	Giri, Parvata, Sagara	Vanam, Aranyam