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Swami Kuvalayananda Yoga Foundation Newsletter

No. 25

January – June, 1999



Jagadguru Śrī Śaṅkarācārya
(788-820 A.D.) 720-752

LIFE SKETCH

Name	Śaṅkara, Śamkara
Father's Name	Śivaguru
Mother's Name	Śivatārakā (Āryambā)
Birth Date	788 A.D.
Sex	Male
Caste	Brāhmaṇa
Place	Kalāḍī, Kerala, South India
Marital Status	Single
Lifespan	32 Years

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

Home

Both parents were devotees of Lord Śiva. Śaṅkarācārya lost his father when he was about five years old. He did not marry. There is a story that while taking a bath in the river, a crocodile caught his leg and was swallowing him. He asked his mother to allow him to take sannyāsa if the crocodile spared him. And the crocodile released him.

Education

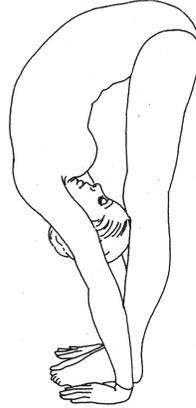
It is said that he was able to speak and read Saṅskṛt when he was only a year old. He studied the Vedas at eight years of age.

Caste

He was a Brāhmaṇa. Brāhmaṇas were arrogant. They were not living the life befitting their status. Women were not honored. A widow did not have any respect in the society.

Other events

Buddhism was on the decline. Tāntrikas (followers of non-Vedic practices) and Kāpālikas (skull-wearer, involved in questionable practices, i.e. animal and human sacrifices) were misusing their powers.



PĀDAHASTĀSANA Hand-to-Foot Pose

Technique

Stand with heels and toes together, and hands along the sides of the body.

Slowly bring both of your hands toward your feet by bending your body at the waist without bending your knees.

Place both hands by the sides of your feet, palms touching the floor and fingers pointing forward.

Be steady.

Bring your forehead toward the knees and maintain it for some time.

Now bring your head up, take your hands off the floor, and stand erect, with hands by your sides.

Repeat the pose three or four times.

Suggestions

1. Keep your feet together.
2. Before you bring your forehead to the knees, be sure of your balance.
3. Do not bend your knees.
4. Avoid jerks both in bringing your head to the knees and your hands to the ground.
5. Do it slowly and gradually.

Results

It improves digestion, increases the blood circulation in the upper parts of the body, tones the nervous system, and strengthens the leg muscles.

Discussion and References

Pāda means foot. Hasta means hand. Āsana means pose. Therefore, Pādahastāsana means Hand-to-Foot Pose.

This pose is not described in any authentic traditional text, per se. However, it seems to be a variation of the Posterior Stretch, with a shift of the center of gravity.

People who find the Posterior Stretch difficult may practice this first with benefit.

A Teacher's Guide for Beginning Yoga, Chapter XVIII

ॐ आत्मा म आत्मनिष्ठितः ।

आत्मा हृदये ।

हृदयं मयि ।

अहममृते ।

अमृतं ब्रह्मणि ॥

om ātmā ma ātmaniṣṭitaḥ /
ātmā hṛdaye /
hṛdayam mayi /
ahamamṛte /
amṛtam brahmaṇi //

OM

ATMA (SELF) DWELLS IN MY SELF;
THE SELF IN THE HEART;
THE HEART IN ME;
I IN IMMORTALITY.
IMMORTALITY DWELLS IN BRAHMAN.



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**For a realized person,
it is all perfection.**

Anonymous

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REACTION

Śaṅkarācārya left home in search of knowledge. He promised his mother that he would come back to give her the last rites, even though a Sannyāsi was not permitted to do that.

PRACTICES

He met his guru Ćovindaswāmī on the bank of the Narmadā River, and stayed with his teacher for two years. He studied Vedānta, composed hymns and commentary on the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, mastered some Mantras and was said to have acquired certain Siddhis. He also composed commentaries on the Brahmasūtra, Bhagavadgītā and the principal Upaniṣads in four years. This was all accomplished before the age of sixteen.

TEACHING

He traveled to the Himalayas, Kāśī or Vārāṇasī (Benares), Prayāga (Allahabad). He had meetings with noted scholars (Mīmāṃsakas) Kumāriḷa, Prabhākara and the well-known Maṇḍanamīśra who was a learned householder well-versed in ritual injunctions. It is said that Maṇḍanamīśra's parrot and myna (bird) recited Vedas. Śaṅkara defeated him in a debate that continued for fifteen days.

It was Bhārati (Maṇḍanamīśra's wife) who presided over the debate, finding in favor of Śaṅkara. She then challenged him on the question of sexual experience.

The defeat of Bhārati was necessary to convert Maṇḍanamīśra to Advaita, so Śaṅkara left his body for a month, and entered the dead body of the king Amarūka. In the form of the revived king, he spent time with the queen, then came back and defeated Bhārati. As a result, both Maṇḍanamīśra and his wife joined Śaṅkara's order.

He resided in Vārāṇasī at Maṇikarṇikā ghāṭa with his disciples and preached to orthodox Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. His first and main disciple was Padmapāda (Sanandana) who accompanied him wherever he went. When he was thirty he founded ten monasteries. Out of the ten, five main monasteries are still well-known today: Dvārakā in the west, Badrinātha in the north, Purī in the east, Śṛṅgerī in the south, and Kāñcī in the center of India.

He created ten monastic orders of Sannyāsins (Daśanāmins): Āśramin, Ćiri, Araṇya, Bhārati, Sarasvatī, Tīrtha, Purī, Vāṇa, Parvata, and Sāgara.

His works (more than 400) are divided into three categories: interpretation of basic texts (Bhāṣya, Vīvaraṇa, Tikā), poems (Stotra, Stava, Stuti), and other writings.

FINAL MESSAGE

It is reported that during his victory tour, Śaṅkarācārya climbed the mountain Kailāsa and was cursed with a nasty disease by a Śaiva philosopher. Padmapāda rebounded the curse and that Śaiva died of the disease.

The hagiographies differ about the circumstances and place of Śaṅkarācārya's death. One records that he died in Kāñcī. Another says that his life ended at Kedāranātha in the Himalāyas. And another suggests that he did not die at all!

The message of Śaṅkarācārya can be condensed in the following:

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः ।

Brahm satyam jaganmithyā jīvo Brahmaiva nāparaḥ /

Brahman is the only Truth, the world is untrue (illusion),
the individual soul is identical with Brahman.

SUMMARY and CONCLUSION

Śaṅkarācārya was born into a family devoted to Lord Śiva. He lost his father when he was very young. He did not marry. He renounced the world when he was eight years old. He studied with a great teacher at the bank of the Narmada River. During his victory tour he defeated Buddhist, Tāntrika, Śākta, and Cārvāka opponents, re-establishing traditional Hinduism. He lectured, wrote many works, and founded five major monasteries in India. Though he lived only thirty-two years, he left a monumental legacy. He is known as the founder of Advaita Vedānta. The tradition that he began continues to this day.

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Your suggestions are welcome.

From the forthcoming book,
Explorers of the Truth
by Vijayendra Pratap