



Shrimat Madhvacharya

Madhvacharya was born in 1238 at Pajaka-kshetra, a small village situated five miles southeast of Udupi, a small town on the western coast of South India. His philosophy and writings have distinguished him as one of India's greatest spiritual teachers. His teachings were wholly theistic. After Gautama Buddha philosophically liberated the imprisoned minds of India's ritualistic worshipers who had missed the essential import of the *Vedas*, many years later Shankara reestablished the *Vedas* as the literary standard of spiritual knowledge. While Buddha chose not to comment on the existence of God, Shankara through Vedic reference posited the theory of *Advaita Vedanta* (non-dualism), extolling enlightenment and a hazy conception of God about whom he personally spoke, revealing his own inner inclination towards devotion. Later Ramanuja brought to light in a philosophical paradigm shift the theistic understanding of the *Vedas*, revealing the personal aspect of Godhead. Madhva followed Ramanuja historically and his theistic rendering of the Vedic knowledge in no uncertain terms laid stress on what Ramanuja had eluded to— devotion as both a means and ends to God realization.

Madhva traveled the length and breadth of India, visiting sacred places and at every opportunity he expounded his teachings. He was a prolific writer as well as a great saint. He wrote commentaries on the *Vedanta-sutra*, *Bhagavad-gita*, *Srimad Bhagavatam* and *Mahabharata*. He also established a strict standard of temple ritual at Udupi which is still intact today.

Madhva's father Sri Madhyageha Bhatta and his wife originally lived in Kadiyali, a small village near Udupi. Aggrieved by the loss of two sons, they moved to the village of Pajaka-kshetra. Every day Madhyageha and his wife would go to Udupi from Pajaka-kshetra and pray to the deity for the blessing of an illustrious son. They performed this austerity for twelve years. One day during a temple festival one of the priests climbed the flagpole and announced that soon the god of the wind, Vayu, would be born on earth and perform many uncommon deeds. Shortly thereafter the prophecy was fulfilled and the two were blessed with a male child whom they named Vasudeva, later to be known as Madhvacharya.

On several occasions Vasudeva revealed that he was not an ordinary son. Once Madhyageha had incurred some debts. The persistent creditor came to the house and sat on the doorstep announcing that he had decided to fast until the debt was repaid. Seeing Madhyageha's anxiety, Vasudeva, decided to save the situation. He took the creditor behind the water tank under a big tamarind tree, grabbed a handful of tamarind seeds and poured them into the hands of the creditor. The creditor first thought that the child was simply playing, but looking again at his hands he saw that the seeds had turned into just enough gold coins to repay the debt.

Wonderful as Vasudeva was, his father out of filial affection wanted to give him an education. Thus he performed the *akshara-abhyasam*, the ceremony with which the child begins his schooling. One day, soon after his first studies, Vasudeva had a chance to test his learning. In the nearby village of Nayampalli a *brahmana* named Shiva was delivering lectures on the *Puranas* and Vasudeva's parents had brought the young child with them to attend the discourse. A difficult passage came and the *brahmana* was visibly perplexed, unable to expound the clear meaning of the text. He spoke anyway and suddenly Vasudeva also spoke up revealing the true intent of the aphorism to the astonishment of the assembly.

Vasudeva soon became known not only for his intellectual prowess but his physical strength as well. Every day on his way home from school the boy would visit the temple of Durga on top of the Vimanagiri hill. One day about a half mile from his house he was attacked by a powerful snake. It is said that the snake was none other than a reincarnation of the great Maniman, a demon mentioned in the Mahabharata. The serpent tried to kill the child, but Vasudeva crushed the serpent under his powerful toe. Still today there is a mark in the exact spot where Madhvacharya killed the demon.

While Vasudeva was delayed by the attack of the Maniman demon, his mother worried about his welfare. Understanding the mind of his mother, Vasudeva jumped from the bottom of the hill to the feet of his mother, a distance of about eight hundred yards. The rocky ground on which he landed with great force gave way to the impression of his lotus feet. Those footprints can be seen even today in Udupi, where they are kept in the temple.

After the completion of his Sanskrit study at the age of eleven, Vasudeva went in search of a guru who would initiate him into the renounced order of life, *sannyasa*. Already at age five he had received initiation into the brahminical (priestly) order. It was at Udupi that he found Achyuta Preksha, an *Advaitin* monk. He approached Achyuta Preksha with great respect and received his blessings; living under his guidance, he became an obedient disciple. Meanwhile Vasudeva's father was worried about the prolonged absence of his son from home. Madhyageha came to Udupi and found his beloved child in Achyuta Preksha's monastery. After discovering the intention of his son, Madhyageha tried to convince him to return home, but his efforts went in vain. Madhyageha went home under great duress. After relating the incident to his wife, the whole family was plunged into a distressful condition and his wife convinced Madhyageha to set out again in search of the beloved son and do everything possible to bring him home.

Madhyageha went back to the *ashrama* only to find that Achyuta Preksha had begun a pilgrimage to all the great holy places of South India. He immediately followed in the footsteps of the party. Crossing the river Netravati, just south of Udupi, he found his son in the Kayuru village in the Kuthyadi *ashrama*. Again he requested him to come home. The two, father and son, discussed for some time and at one point Madhyageha became furious and threatened to kill himself if Vasudeva took *sannyasa*. Seeing his anxiety, Vasudeva told his father that he would wait for his mother's opinion and even then not enter the renounced order until after she had given birth to another son.

After his sixteenth birthday another male child was born, and with the permission of his parents an auspicious day was selected and Vasudeva accepted the renounced order at the Anantasana temple in Udupi. An interesting relationship between the two, guru and disciple, ensued: while Achyuta Preksha was a staunch follower of the lineage of Shankara, Madhva was destined to start his own lineage, shedding new light on the less developed scriptural conclusions of Shankara.

Madhva differed from Shankara in many ways. He, like Ramanuja, maintained that Shankara had not given emphasis to the principle aphorism of the *Vedas*, *pranava omkara*. Instead, in the view of Madhva, Shankara had diverted attention to secondary dictums such as *tat tvam asi*. Thus according to Madhva, Shankara's teachings presented only partial knowledge of what the *Vedas* were indicating; not the whole picture.

Shankara insisted on the oneness or identity of all things, so much so that in his vision of ultimate reality all "things" or separateness as such ceased to exist. Madhva on the other hand insisted on five absolute and eternal distinctions between Godhead, the individual soul and matter: the distinction between God and the finite souls, between God and the inanimate world of matter, between one finite soul and another, between the finite soul and matter, and between one inanimate object and another.

Madhva also recognized an absolute oneness in each of the five eternal distinctions just described. Both God and the finite soul are identical in the sense that they are both conscious and related to one another as a whole is related to its parts. God and matter are related inasmuch as the latter requires the former for its creation and maintenance. Finite souls are identical because they are all parts of Godhead, all dependent on Him and conscious. The finite soul and matter are the same in the sense that they are both dependent on the Oversoul, and inanimate objects are identical because each is dependent on Godhead, who binds them together into an orderly system.

His philosophy, Dvaita (dualism), emphasizes the eternal difference between the living entity and Godhead. In this sense his philosophy is directly opposed to Shankaracharya's *Advaita* (non-dual) doctrine. It is important to note, however, that both Madhva and Shankara concur that the duality that arises due to sense perception is illusory. Madhva's dualism is a transcendental viewpoint and in order to arrive at this perception one must allow the "false ego" to die and the real ego (individual identity) to thrive in selfless service to Godhead.

Madhva introduced the concept of *vishesha* in order to reconcile Godhead's unity with the plurality of His qualities and attributes. Just as we do not perceive any difference between a sheet and its whiteness yet at the same time we recognize a peculiarity (*vishesha*), namely sheet's whiteness, so similarly Madhva maintained that a closer look at Brahman (consciousness, the ultimate reality) reveals that Godhead exists in harmonious variegatedness. This is a theistic concept, as opposed to the monistic tones of Shankara, inasmuch as the finite soul remains an individual engaged in divine service to Godhead. At the same time all of existence is viewed as an organic whole.

During the course of philosophical discussions, Purna Prajna, as Madhva was then called, regularly pointed out the numerous defects of the *Advaita* interpretations of the *Vedanta-sutra*. This was noted by his guru. Realizing that his student was very powerful and would be a great teacher in his own right in the near future, Achyuta Preksha made him the head of a separate monastery and gave him the name 'Ananda Tirtha.'

As soon as the news spread that Ananda Tirtha was a new spiritual leader, many *panditas* flocked to Udupi and tried to defeat him, as was the custom at the time. At that time many Buddhists and Jains were present in the south Kannara area. The greatest scholar of the Buddhists, Buddhi Sagara, came to challenge Purna Prajna and was defeated. His defeat was acknowledged when he fled in the night after only one day of debate. This victory brought considerable attention to Madhva. Even though Madhvacharya's guru was a staunch *Advaitin*, from the very beginning he was impressed by the seemingly irrefutable arguments of the ever fresh Madhva. Thus he challenged Madhvacharya to write his own commentary on the *Vedanta-sutra*; Madhva accepted the challenge. It is said that any philosophical system of thought based on the Vedic literature must be founded on a commentary of the *Vedanta-sutra*.

Much of Madhvacharya's time was spent in philosophical debate with the prominent schools of thought prevailing in India at the time. He discussed with both those within the Vedic tradition and those such as Buddhists and Jains, who do not accept the *Vedas* as the standard of revealed knowledge in literary form. Those outside of the Vedic tradition, to be sure, had their own standard literary foundation upon which their doctrines were based. With these philosophical opponents Madhva applied astounding logic—the likes of which is found in the *Vedanta-sutra*—with overwhelming success. With those within the Vedic tradition, Madhva's discussions took the shape of establishing support for his thesis directly from *Vedanta-sutra*, which is still accepted in India as the zenith of logic and reasoning (*nyaya-shastra*).

Within the Vedic tradition, the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* and their corollaries such as the *Puranas* are considered much like law books in our present-day legal system. When two lawyers go to court they do so with a view to establish exactly what the law is in any given case. They both attempt to establish their case by citing from the standard books of law, as well as from those books which contain case histories of how the law was interpreted in similar instances. The *Vedas* and their corollaries can be compared law books case histories. Thus when we speak of the philosophical debates of Madhva we are discussing debates much like those that are held by lawyers today—or more accurately like those of scientists—due to the nature of the topics. They discussed reality and its nature in all states of perception, and each party theoretically was prepared, should he be defeated, to give up his previous conception, accepting the victor as his spiritual mentor.

Before writing his *Vedanta-sutra* commentary, Madhva travelled for several years. It was during this period that he realized that he should write a commentary on the *Bhagavad-gita*. Writing this, he decided to go to the Himalayas to pay his respects to Veda Vyasa (said to be the original author of the Vedic literature who is still living in the Himalayas) and obtain from him his blessings for his new devotional philosophical system (*sampradaya*). Accompanied by his disciple Satya Tirtha, he arrived at Badari and stayed at the Ananda Ashrama to prepare for the final part of the journey.

That night after presenting his *Gita* commentary as an offering to the Deity, Madhva began to read the first line. Just then a celestial voice came from the deity asking Madhva to make a small correction. Where Madhva had written "I shall explain the meaning of the *Gita* according to my capacity" the deity interjected, "You can explain the full meaning, but you shall explain only a little in accordance

with the capacity of your students to understand.” Thus it was indicated that the unfolding of the fully theistic understanding of the *Gita* was to come through yet another great teacher at some future date.

Madhva then felt the desire to journey into the higher Himalayas to the hidden Badarinatha, or place of Vyasa. He prepared for the journey by observing forty-eight days of fasting and silent meditation. Before his final departure he wrote to his disciples, “This place is holy. Vishnu is the supreme. My word is meant for the good of all. I leave to pay respects to Vyasa. I may or may not return. May God bless you.” Ending his arduous journey, Madhva slowly moved to the sacred area where Veda Vyasa was sitting surrounded by *rishis*. There, from the mouth of Vyasa, he received the blessings to write his commentary on the *Vedanta-sutra*. His mission accomplished, Madhva came back to the Ananda Ashrama where Satya Tirtha took down Madhva’s commentary and prepared for advance copies to be sent out.

Then, traveling towards the east, Madhva eventually came to the Godavari River (east-central India). There on the bank of the Godavari, at the town of Ganjam, he met a group of *panditas* and discussed philosophy. He defeated Buddhists, Jains, Charvakas and followers of Shankara. He converted the two great *panditas*, Sri Shobhana Bhatta and Sri Rama Shastri, who became his disciples and received the names Padmanabha Tirtha and Narahari Tirtha respectively. Accompanied by Shobhana Bhatta and other disciples he returned to Udupi, his spiritual position now undefeated and unchallenged. He initiated many devotees and convinced thousands of people to take shelter of his *Dvaitavada* philosophy.

Udupi was to become the seat of Madhva’s transcendental ontology of *Dvaitavada*. It was in this town that one of the most significant events of his life occurred. While bathing in the sea Madhva noticed a merchant seaman in distress. High winds had made his approach to the shore hazardous and he had run aground on a sandbar. From the shore Madhva, waving his cloth, directed the sailor safely to shore. Upon arriving safely, the captain felt greatly indebted to Madhva and expressed his desire to offer him a gift. Madhva consented and asked for a large piece of clay, the value of which was insignificant. But much to the astonishment of everyone, inside the clay was a large Deity of Krishna. The news spread throughout Udupi and the Deity was installed in the temple. Thus Madhva’s school became firmly established in Udupi and to this day the Deity is worshiped by the numerous followers of Madhvacharya.

Madhva then decided to visit Badarinatha for the second time, no easy task even today. His travels met with much success and the reputation as a great scholar and devotee followed him wherever he went. Upon his return news of his influence came to Sringeri, the headquarters of the followers of Shankaracharya. Indeed, the main topic in Sringeri was the increasing fame and influence of Madhvacharya. Padma Tirtha, the leader of the Sringeri *ashrama*, felt the necessity to meet the challenge thus he and Pundarika Puri came to Udupi to meet Madhva in a philosophical debate. Since Madhvacharya would never refuse any opportunity to discuss and prove the superiority of his philosophy, he consented.

The chosen text from which to debate was the *Rig Veda*. Pundarika Puri started to explain his view on the first hymn, but no sooner had he started when Madhva challenged him with questions that he was unable to answer. Padma Tirtha tried to save the situation, but he too became implicated in a humiliating defeat at the hands of Madhva.

That night, driven by envy, Padma Tirtha and his men stole Madhva’s library consisting of many rare books. When the librarian reported this news to Madhva he started in immediate pursuit of the thieves catching up to Padma Tirtha’s party about twenty miles southeast of Mangalore. As soon as

Madhva reached there he sent a messenger to Jaya Simha, the ruling king of the area. The king in reply informed Madhva that the books had been given by Padma Tirtha as a gift on the full moon night, an ancient Vedic tradition.

Madhvacharya thus proceeded to meet the king in the town of Vishnumangalam Tirtha. The procession was magnificent. Crowds of cheering people had gathered there to greet the attractive mendicant. Bands of musicians were playing melodious songs, *brahmanas* were chanting Vedic mantras and many parties were singing the names of God. Madhvacharya walked through the centre of town at a slow, majestic pace, his face beaming, his body effulgent. A garland of fragrant *tulasi* leaves was hanging from his neck all the way down to his knees. A beautiful pearl-white silk umbrella was held over his head, and great crowds were gathering on each side to have a glimpse of the renowned teacher.

As the procession continued the king came to greet him. He got down from his palanquin and bowed to the lotus feet of Madhvacharya. The king then proceeded on foot with Madhva until they reached the temple where a gorgeous reception was arranged in which the inhabitants of twenty-five villages had gathered together to welcome him. Madhva and the king entered the big hall and everyone sat down to listen to the recitation of *Srimad Bhagavatam* and Madhva's commentary. Among the listeners was the erudite Pandita Trivikramacharya. Although he was ready to find fault and challenge Madhva, Madhva's explanations were so sharp and brilliant that there was no possibility of finding any fault with the discourse.

After recovering his library at Vishnumangalam, Madhva departed and established his camp at Amaralaya. It was while delivering lectures on his commentary of the *Vedanta-sutra* that he was challenged by Trivikramacharya. During the time that Madhva's books had been stolen, Trivikrama had the opportunity to study the commentaries of Madhva and was thus at an advantage over everyone who had debated with him thus far. Furthermore, Trivikrama was so learned that it is said his command of Sanskrit enabled him to convey through explanation of any text any meaning that suited his purpose. However, after fifteen days Madhva finally defeated the *pandita* and Trivikrama became Madhva's disciple.

In due course Madhvacharya established eight temples in Udupi appointing eight of his principle disciples as head priests in charge of ancient deities. He lived for seventy-nine years and wrote thirty-seven books.

His philosophy at one point was thought by Western scholars to have been influenced by Christianity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Madhva has clearly supported his thesis with evidence from Vedic literature and his teachings can better be seen as a development in theistic thought from what was offered earlier by Ramanuja.

It is widely accepted that Madhva was an incarnation of the Hindu demigod Vayu, said to be in charge of controlling the wind. The idea that he descended for a particular mission and was thus greatly empowered to perform many uncommon deeds is offered as an explanation for the extraordinary events that surrounded his life. Uncommon feats of strength, flying in the sky, causing on two separate occasions plants to sprout from seeds by singing a particular melody (thus proving long ago that plants respond to music), eating four thousand bananas and one hundred pots of milk at one sitting, using small amounts of food to feed hundreds, meeting Vyasadeva at Badarinatha, etc. are only a few of the wonderful feats of Madhvacharya. Many more have not been mentioned here. We have instead tried to emphasize his most outstanding contribution in the realm of philosophy and devotion, and even in this connection space will not allow us present in any detail his philosophical treatise of *Dvaitavada*.

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Those who are inclined can study for themselves Madhva's in his treatise on the *Vedanta-sutra*. A comparative study of the *Vedanta* commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva will prove very revealing for the sincere inquirer into the nature of the absolute truth as described in Vedic literature.