

[A Krishna-lover's Fascinating Insights](#)

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A Krishna-lover's Fascinating Insights Was Shankara a Buddhist in Disguise?

Stephen Schaffer, better known as Shyamdas, was launched into his spiritual quest at age 17 through contact with Neemkaroli Baba. Now 33, Shyamdas is an avid practitioner of the Vaishnava Vallabhacharya lineage (Pushti Marg, or the Path of Grace), having studied for 7 years with various Vaishnava pundits in the Vrindavan area of India. He is a translator of Hindi, Braja Vasa and Sanskrit and Vice President of the International Pushti Margiya Vaishnava Parishad. An art dealer by profession, Shyamdas resides with his wife in Vermont. He lectures on various aspects of Hinduism and publishes his English translations of Vallab sampradaya scriptures into English. Shyamdas shared the following insights with Hinduism Today in Hawaii on March 14, 1986.

Hinduism Today. Please tell us how you became involved so deeply in the Vallabhacharya sampradaya.

Shyamdas: I went to India, got going there originally by a teacher, Neemkaroli Baba, who was the guru of Ram Dass and he resided in Vrindavan as well as in the Himalayas. So I went to Vrindavan to meet him and remained in the Vrindavan area, a 168-mile area which encompasses all the areas that are sacred to Lord Krishna. I eventually took initiation in Vallab sampradaya about a year or two afterward and lived on the Goverdan hill, which was the hill which Lord Krishna upheld to ward off Indra's rains for 7 days. There I studied with various bhaktas and acharyas on Vaisnav Vedanta. I specialize in 16th century Vrajbhasha poetry which are the poems of Surdas, who is very well known. He is perhaps the Shakespeare of Hindi literature, like Jayadev is the Shakespeare of the Sanskrit devotional literature. Surdas and Tulsidas. Surdas is considered the sun of bhakti devotion, and Tulsidas, who wrote on Rama, would be considered the moon. So I studied the poems of Surdas and I translated his life story and many of his poems, and those of a number of other poets.

I also studied Vedanta, Shuddha Advaita Vedanta of Vallabhacharya, which could be translated as "realistic monism." Vaishnavism has a number of schools, four main schools: Nimbarka, Madhva, Ramanuja (often known as Sri Sampradaya) and Vallab sampradaya. Vallab sampradaya's realistic monism is different from Shankara's interpretation of monism and parallels closely Kashmiri Shaivism and perhaps other forms of Saivism as well in that it is a real advaita philosophy that does not incorporate Shankaracharya's theories of maya, the world being false. The world is true. But what could be false about the world is the way we see it. But the world itself is true and is the manifestation of the Supreme Godhead...Vallab sampradaya believes that everything is Krishna and nothing but Krishna.

Q: Who is your guru?

A: My teacher is His Holiness Goswami Prathameshji, who heads the first seat of Vallab sampradaya. Vallab sampradaya has seven seats. He is very active in Hindu activities. He does a lot of preaching. Hindu Vishwa Parishad invites him to many of the functions.

Vallab sampradaya does not have a monk lineage per se. It's a primarily householder lineage. None of the teachers in Vallab sampradaya are sannyasins. They are all grihastha. They are all householder. That is the way the lineage was set up, unlike the other Vaishnav sampradayas. Some of them are more oriented toward sannyas. The ISKCON lineage is more sannyas oriented.

Q: Do the goswamis wear orange?

A: No, no. White. It is an extremely Vedic sampradaya. Householders are traditionally initiating gurus, too. That is something that is according to Vedic teachings, that sannyasis initiate sannyasis, and householders traditionally initiate householders. The acharyas in Vallab sampradaya observe homa and other Vedic rites as well. Of course bhakti is the main emphasis...Vallab sampradaya has a following of perhaps 30 million people. It is one of the largest Vaishnav sampradayas in India. It is not well known in the West. Its followers are all through Gujarat...And in London you have thousands of Vallab sampradaya Vaishnavas.

Vallab sampradaya is also not well known in the West. There has not been much written in English on it. And what has been written by other people who were not initiated nor studied with the lineage is often incorrect. And that is what I have been trying poetic aspect and some which have to do with its Vedantic side.

Vallab sampradaya is centered in the lilakirtan which means singing the exploits or the divine pastimes of Sri Krishna in a more classical Indian raga system. And Vallab sampradaya is very oriented towards seva, the worship of the swarupa or deity. In Vaishnavism there is no lineage that has such sublime worship - I would not call it temple worship because the worship is supposed to be a private home worship, although there are temples. It is taught in Vallab sampradaya that you should always worship Krishna. One of the ways is offering food and ornamentation, music and bhajan.

Q: Could you elaborate on your perception of Sri Adi Shankara's impact on Hinduism especially in the West.

A: Let me first say I think Shankara was a genius. I don't think there is any teacher, from Saivism to Vaishnavism, who has written as beautiful Sanskrit as Shankaracharya. He was a fantastic writer and a great teacher of what he was teaching. But if you want to view Shankara in the spirit of Vedic teachings, I think there is a problem. Number one, he is called "Buddha in disguise" by many of the earlier teachers, and this is correct. At the time Shankaracharya appeared in India, India was fairly Buddhist, and Shankaracharya could not teach a true Vedic school, because Vedic school teaches of an atma or a soul, and Buddhism does not have an atma concept, per se, and they don't accept the soul existing within the body. Shankaracharya could not bring the theistic aspect of the Vedas directly back to the people because they were too influenced by the teachings of Buddha. So what he did was bring in a teaching which was cloaked in Vedic terminology and mirrored Buddhist teachings. He brought in the pantheon of all the Hindu devas, but his teachings were essentially Buddhist to a large part. When Shankaracharya writes about Buddhism, he is unable to criticize it directly because it parallels his own thinking too much. So he just says the whole school is too ridiculous to even comment on.

Shankaracharya's theory of maya is not supported in the Upanishads. It's not supported in the Brahma Sutras and it's not supported in the Vedas - as the world being false, that this world is an illusion, a dream with no substance and in some

way separate from God. This is not a Vedantic thought. Even Western scholars who are impartial who have studied the Brahma Sutras and have studied the teachings of Shankara and, let's say one of the Vaishnav teachers, Ramanuja or Madhva - they would have to side with Ramanuja as being more true to the spirit of the Brahma Sutras.

Q: Why do you think Shankara's teachings have been so popular in the West?

A: I think perhaps because many of the Western practitioners who go into Eastern studies have had it with Western theology. They are either disenchanted with the heaven/hell duality of Christianity and with the personal Godhead as being a father image that strikes terror in the hearts of those who sin against him. They are afraid of a god image, so they move toward something that is far away from it, which is Shankara. Shankara does give respect to all the different deities, to Krishna to Ram to Shiva. But to him, in the final analysis they are mayic. They are illusion, and you must leave all of them and merge into the Ultimate Formless, which for him is the final state. This, I think has appealed to many Westerners because they didn't want any sort of Godhead or God in between them and their final liberation of Ultimate White or Nothingness.

And I think it's because of a lack of study of the true Vedic teachings which do point to a personal theistic deity, if you are going through Saivite or Vaishnavite traditions. And the teachers who have come from India have been predominantly influenced by the Shankaracharya teachings,...because Shankara had such a strong influence on the Indian teachings. He swept India. He was only 36 years old when he left, but he had left such an impression on the Indian mind that even today in India if you say the word Vedanta, people think that you are speaking about Shankara. They say, "Oh, he is a Vedanti," which in certain circles means that he is a follower of Shankara, which is not correct. Vedanta means Vedanta: that which is the end [or final conclusion] of the Veda or knowledge.

This confusion which Shankara put into the world of this world being false means that Shankara's teachings must also be false. So there are certain contradictions. He says the world is false, and he is Jagadguru, meaning guru of the world. This means he is guru of the false world. There are many many problems when we look into the actual teachings of Shankaracharya (If it is an illusion, where did the illusion come from?), if you want to get into the subtleties of where Shankara faltered. And this has always been a great spirit of the Vaishnavas and the

Shankaracharyas to have debates, which I think is good, because if you want to have a debate about something it should do. I've published five or six books on the different aspects of Vallab sampradaya, some historical, some having to do with its be a debate about the Ultimate Reality as opposed to just squabbling about commonplace matters.

Q: Do you agree with the idea that Shankara overlaid his mayavadin philosophy onto the prevailing theistic religion?

A: Yes. Today if in fact you visit some of the Shankaracharya tents when you visit the Kumba Mela, you'll see that the Shankaracharya lineages have Rama and Krishna lila, the play in which children between 10 and 15 enact the pastimes of Krishna. Shankaracharya has these. They ultimately have to go back into the whole Hindu trip of Krishna and Rama and Shiva and all the different pastimes to try to attract followers into their fold to ultimately tell them that it's all false. It's wild and that's what most Westerners follow.

But then again, I think that the concept of Sanatana Dharma is so great that it allows for these things to occur...I may have said something about Shankaracharya, how I don't personally agree with his interpretation, but I respect Shankaracharya...Contradictions can exist within truth, and no one has a turnkey formula. That is one of the most important concepts of Vedantic thought, that the person who says he knows, doesn't know. And the person who says he doesn't know knows. Hinduism is perhaps the only religion in the world that has allowed an incarnation to establish a religion which is anti-Vedic in its actual teachings. What other religion would accept a teacher who taught against their own school? It is a mind-boggling religion if you try to look at it and say this is Hinduism. Hinduism is so broad that to study any particular school of Hinduism would take at least one lifetime and probably several. And to try to make broad, sweeping statements about Hinduism being this or that-Hinduism has the most theistic attitudes of any religion in the world, and it has attitudes that are almost atheistic in terms of the very abstract forms of yoga that don't give importance to the Godhead and just give importance to deep contemplation and samadhi. It's got everything in between. It's got tantra. It's got devotion. It's got Goddess worship. It's got sacrifice. It's got a complete code of law. It's a complete religious system that did not separate art, music, science, philosophy, medicine, from its actual main scriptures. So hence you have all the different branches of the Vedas. It was not essentially a religion. It was a dharma.

Shankara accepted from the Vedas and the Upanishads only things that agreed with his teaching. This is Shankara's style. He has taken only those passages. And the passages which didn't agree he wouldn't comment on. He had a system, and he said "My interpretation is this, and I will only accept those Upanishads or slokas which fit into it." Why didn't he comment on Upanishads like Isa Upanishad? He couldn't. Isa Upanishad was too much against his system. But he was still a fantastic personality.

What has impressed me so much with your work here in publishing your Hinduism Today is that instead of trying to homogenize Hinduism as a kind of wishy washy Shankaracharya-type monism that sort of denies everything ultimately and excepts to limited degrees Ganesh and Krishna and Shiva, you accept and promote the various bonifide lineages within the vast amphitheater of Hinduism, or what I would prefer to call Sanatana Dharm - of Saivism and the various forms of Vaishnavism and the ways which Bhagavan, Brahman, has decided to reveal Himself to the various different types of souls that exist within the world. Because each soul has a different eligibility. Each soul has a different way to express its relationship with the Godhead. And this is the beauty of Vedic dharm. It has allowed a very personal relationship with the Supreme. And if you look in the Bhagavad, you see that so many types of people achieve God through so many different types of paths, whether it is kundalini yoga, whether it is bhakti yoga, whether it is worshipping God through a feeling of dasatva, servitude, whether it is a feeling of even worshipping God through hatred or jealousy. There are examples of people who hated God, achieved God because they hated God. Or people who were lusty after God or who were jealous of God. These attitudes were all accepted, and that is the beauty of Vedic dharm, that it can embrace everything and is able to digest every philosophical concept without any sort of stomach ache, which is difficult to say for any other dharma in the world. And that is the reason that I am so impressed with Sanatana dharm. And I think that while Vedic dharm is extremely broad, it is also one-pointed. And that's the place that I think people stumble at because they either become one-pointed and then they become fundamentalists, or they become so broad that they miss out on all the different aspects of it.

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