

SHANKARA, TEACHER OF INDIA.

BY CHARLES JOHNSTON.

A SHORT TIME AGO, an esteemed friend of mine who has devoted much study to Buddhism in writing of Indian philosophy, drew a comparison between Shakya Muni and Shankara, saying that while the Saint of the Gotamas might well be compared to the founder of the Christian religion, Shankara could only rank with philosophers, like Kant and Schopenhauer.

Now, it seems to me that, while this comparison does justice to one side of the great Vedantin's character, as his lucid insight and cogent reasoning may be equalled, but are certainly not surpassed, by the greatest minds of our own or classical times, it quite fails to take into account another side of Shankara's life, which is of the greatest interest, though too generally ignored by the writers on Indian philosophy.

I shall try to outline this side of the teacher's work, using materials gathered, for the most part, in Southern India, among living followers of the master of Advaita philosophy. It has been noted, in passing, by several writers that during his short lifetime Shankara, besides writing his famous Commentaries, founded three Monasteries, or Colleges, the chief of which was at Shringeri in the northern part of the province of Mysore. But I do not remember to have seen it clearly stated that the great organisation of which Shringeri was the centre, is full of life and vigor at the present day and has influential branches, not only throughout the Deccan, Madras, and Bombay, but even in Northern India, Benares, and Lower Bengal. To this organisation belong all the best and most influential students of the Advaita doctrine; and chiefs or overseers are appointed for each province, whom we might well call bishops and doctors in philosophy.

The life of the central organisation at Shringeri has been preserved in a wonderful and peculiarly Oriental way. Just as Shan-

kara himself during his lifetime chose pupils whom he initiated into the deepest mysteries of his esoteric doctrine, so each chief of the Shringeri College chooses his successor, generally selecting a youth or even a boy of quite tender years; and this elect pupil is trained during the life of his superior in all the wisdom which comes down from the first great head of the College, who himself was but the follower of earlier sages, stretching back in unbroken line to the dim dawn of the Vedic age. There is thus what we may well call an apostolic succession, with the single difference that the chief is in each case selected, not by a college of dignitaries or royal mandate, but by his immediate predecessor, who chose him, as I have said, at an early age, and watched over the gradual growth of his mind, character, and learning. Each chief of Shringeri is spoken of as the Shankaracharya; the name of the founder having become a title of honor; and the present Shankaracharya is a man of the highest character, a magnetic personality, a fine Sanskrit scholar, and a perfect master of all the intricacies of the Vendanta philosophy, familiar with the works of his great predecessors. A discourse of his, delivered during one of his periodical visits to the outlying organisations which are under the control of the Shringeri College, was recently published; and it bears, in thought and language, the clearest resemblance to the works of the great Shankara, such as the *Tattva Bodha*, or the *Atma-Anatma-Viveka*.

To such an apostolic succession as that established by Shankara at Shringeri the Indian schools of philosophy give the name of *Guru-parampara*,—the same term, it will be noted, which Shankara himself uses in his Commentaries on the *Chhandagya* and *Brhadaryaka Upanishads*, where he speaks of the teaching of Rebirth, or Reincarnation, having been handed down as a secret esoteric doctrine, by the line of teachers, or *Guru-parampara*, of the Rajput race, before being revealed to the Brahmans. The *Upanishads* themselves contain lists of very ancient lines of teachers, which go back to mythological ages and invariably lead up to the deity, as their first founder; and, within historical times, we find constant traces of the same institution, as, for instance, in the case of Shankara himself, who was the pupil of Govinda Guru, the pupil of Gaudapada.

There is a tradition in Southern India, among the followers of Shankara's school, that this Gaudapada, who is known to us as the author of a poem expanding the ideas of the *Mandukya Upanishad*, is the same person as Patanjali, the author of the *Yoga Sutras*. If this tradition represents a historical fact, it will be necessary for us

to date Shankara not more than two generations later than Patanjali, or some time in the second century before the Christian era; and I have been assured by many Brahmans connected with Shringeri, that the lists of Gurus, still preserved in the archives of the College there, fully bear out this date for the great Vedantin teacher; notwithstanding that the accepted opinion among European scholars is that the first Shankaracharya lived in the eighth century of our era. Up to the present, however, I have not been able to obtain a satisfactory copy of this list of Gurus; several which have been published being imperfect or incomplete, so that it seems best to leave the matter open, merely recording the fact that this tradition exists and is widely accepted by the followers of Shankara themselves. I have further seen it stated that the lists in the minor Colleges founded by Shankara also fully bear out the same date; but further evidence is necessary before we can come to any definite conclusion.

It will at once be seen that the Shringeri College and the organisation of which it is the head are perfectly analogous to the Lamaic system of Tibet, and we may very well compare the Chief of Shringeri with the Teshu Lama. I believe I am right in saying that the Chief of the Mysore College is invariably a celibate, like the first Shankaracharya, while his deputies in the various provinces are married men, following the old Brahmanical laws for households. It is interesting to note that Mysore State, in the northern part of which the College of Shringeri is situated, still largely conforms, even in its temporal government, to the Brahmanical ideals, the dominant powers being strictly orthodox, and thus furnishing our best analogy to the political conditions of Buddha's day when the Brahmans practically ruled even in affairs of state, as ministers and diplomatists, not less than as teachers and priests.

The great organisation founded by Shankara has withstood unshaken the conquering armies of the Prophet; and when we consider the great learning and high philosophical training of its living followers, we may be confident that this closely knit association of Advaita schools will in no way be weakened or changed by contact with Western thought, which has too often been but another name for the most ignorant materialism, especially when coming into contact with Eastern faiths.

It will thus be evident that the comparison with Kant and Schopenhauer by no means does justice to this side of Shankara's work. If we can imagine that Paul, instead of Peter, had founded the hierarchy of the Christian Church, to perpetuate and preserve

the mystical teachings which we find in his Letters to Colossi, Galatia, and Corinth, we shall have a much truer parallel. Or if we could conceive a practical reformer, such as tradition tells us Pythagoras was, leaving writings like the Platonic dialogues, we shall again approach to a truer conception of Shankara's work. If we had an apostolic succession of masters in Greek philosophy, each bearing the name and inheriting the thought of the greatest pupil of Socrates, lasting through the centuries, supplying an inner, philosophic side to the successive phases of popular religion; and conserving, as the heart of a widely extended and powerful organisation, the highest ideals of Plato's best thought, we should be more in a position to understand in what relation Shankara the Teacher stands, not only to Indian philosophy but also to Indian life.

Many of the finest scholars and most influential men among the followers of Shankara affiliated with the Shringeri College are also graduates of the English universities in India, and are prominent as lawyers or administrators under the present government; their position as such in no way interfering with their relations to the great Vedanta College, just as their studies in European science or history in no way clash with their earlier allegiance to Advaita idealism, since their intellectual training has thoroughly fitted them to find a just and harmonious relation between our physical knowledge and their own metaphysical theories.

We are not in a position to judge how far the numerous traditions of Shankara's life, preserved in the popular histories, are faithful records handed down from contemporary sources; and I am far from holding that the element of the so-called supernatural, which often tinges them, justifies us in rejecting the pictures they give us of the great Vedantia's personality. But what we know of Shankara's practical work, as embodied in the great and powerful organisation I have described in outline, is quite sufficient to show that the Advaita teacher must have been a man of rare power of character, endowed with a commanding will, as well as with a penetrating intellect; for no man of less magnetic force could have persuaded his contemporaries to found and support such colleges completely devoted to his ideals, especially when we remember that his work lay almost wholly among the Brahmans, whose class had long grown old in privilege and power; and, with these, as we know from Buddha's life, had inherited a profoundly conservative suspicion of change.

That this powerful body should have continued to cherish, and should cherish to-day, an ideal of the highest and most abstract

philosophy, with a vast body of learning continually added to, though already of great compass at Shankara's death, is the liveliest testimony to his genius and power, as a ruler of men, not less than as an illuminer of minds.

The very reasons which make the excellence of the schools founded by Shankara—the facts that they deal with the loftiest and most abstract regions of philosophy, and appeal almost wholly to intellectual and cultivated minds—have been the causes that we have not, for Shankara, as for Buddha, a mass of legends full of popular feeling and emotions, such as sway the minds of the masses, appealing rather to the ignorant than the learned.

Shankara is thus a figure for whom it would be difficult to find a parallel; as, indeed, to furnish comparisons, we have been compelled to resort to imagination; a philosopher of the highest rank, who, not content with the world of abstract thought, went forth into the world of men; seeking, and finding pupils who should accept and carry out his teachings, and impressing his will on their minds with such imperious power that his best ideals are perpetuated and preserved, by a hierarchy of philosophers, to the present day.

A word in conclusion as to Shankara's teaching. Briefly stated, it is this: The cause of the sorrow and suffering of mankind is a belief in the reality and isolated existence of the personal life. But the personality, with the fate of which each one of us identifies himself, has no real existence; it is nothing but an image of the body in the mind, and its sufferings are imaginary. Its original cause is the "beginningless, ineffable un wisdom" of separation; and this illusion of isolated being is dispelled by an insight, which we may well call illumination, or inspiration. When the false self is dispelled, Shankara tells us, the real Self rises in the heart, as the sun shines out when the clouds are dispersed. The real Self is the self of all beings; hence the revelation of it brings an end of egotism, of the sense of separate life. The real Self is, further, the reality underlying all outward things; hence its possession makes an end of all lust and desire for outward things. Thus the realisation of the selfless Self, destroying all egotism and lust, makes an end of the sorrow of the world. But this illumination, which is perfect freedom, must be led up to by right understanding; for the errors of the mind are the true cause of bondage. Hence the necessity for a sane and broad philosophy, and for schools and teachers to preserve and perpetuate this philosophy. To supply this necessity, was the aim of Shankara's life-work.