

A Tale of Austere Faith and Guru-Bhakti

A few disciples of a great saint were drying their Guru's clothes on the bank of the river Ganges. Meanwhile, the Guru had taken his bath on the other side of the river and standing with his wet clothes on, asked one of his disciples named Sanandana to



bring back the dry clothes to him. In his earnestness to immediately fulfill his Guru's wish, Sanandana was absorbed into a divine trance and stepping on the water he began to walk completely oblivious of the deep, vast Ganges flowing before him in all her splendor.

The intense devotion of this young disciple towards his Guru deeply pleased even Mother Ganga and She acknowledged Sanandana's Guru-bhakti by placing lotuses to support each of his steps as he walked over the Ganges. While the other disciples stood awestruck and astonished by this rare miracle, Sanandana crossed the river unconcerned and happily handed over the dry clothes to his Guru. To recognize this supreme power of Guru-bhakti, the Guru affectionately named him 'Padmapada'. The Guru was none other than the great Acharya Shankara!

Sri Padmapadacharya was born in the Kingdom of the Cholas on the banks of the river Kaveri in South India in a devout Brahmin family. His father's name was Vimal. Being immensely talented, Acharya Padmapada had mastered all the Vedas while still in his teens. He was also an ardent devotee of Lord Narasimha (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu in the half-lion half-human

form) ever since his early childhood and often escaped to the forests to perform severe penances in search of realization and direct vision of the Lord.

There is an interesting story that relates to one such episode when Sri Padmapada had become utterly frustrated failing to have a darshan of Lord Narasimha after several years of penance. One morning, out of extreme desperation he ran into a deep forest in the hills of 'Ahobila' and attempted to end his life by hanging himself from a high tree branch. As he was preparing the noose using a few creepers and vines, a hunter who resided in that forest suddenly appeared before him and enquired about the cause for such intense grief as that compelled him to even attempt a suicide. Padmapada feeling that an illiterate hunter devoid of any spiritual knowledge would be unable to comprehend his earnestness for Lord Narasimha's darshan, he explained the hunter that he was searching for a strange animal having the head of a Lion and the lower half that of a man. Even when the hunter tried to pacify Padmapada assuring that he had never come across such an animal, Padmapada insisted on the existence of such an animal.

Beholding Padmapada's conviction, the hunter decided to search for the strange animal himself and he asked Padmapada to wait till evening. Padmapada would be free to commit suicide if the hunter failed in his search by sunset. So saying, the hunter searched every nook and corner of the forest for the entire day all the while being completely absorbed only in the thought of the animal described by Padmapada. He had combed through the entire forest but the animal was nowhere to be found. Ultimately, when the sun was about to set and the

hungry, thirsty and tired hunter had given up all hope of finding the animal, Lord Narasimha suddenly appeared before him in his human-lion form. The hunter's joy knew no bounds as he would now be able prevent Padmapada from committing suicide. He immediately tied the animal to a tree and called Padmapada.

However, although Padmapada saw the rope tied to the tree, he was unable to see Lord Narasimha. Being utterly pained and wailing with tears in his eyes, he asked the Lord why He considered Padmapada unworthy of the grace of His *darshan* when He revealed Himself even to the illiterate hunter! Then the divine aerial voice of the Lord answered saying that the extreme determination, ardent desire and the true unselfishness of motive in the hunter's search forced the Lord to reveal Himself to the hunter. But Padmapada was not yet prepared for the complete realization of the Lord. However, Lord Narasimha promised to always be present by his side whenever Padmapada would actually need him.

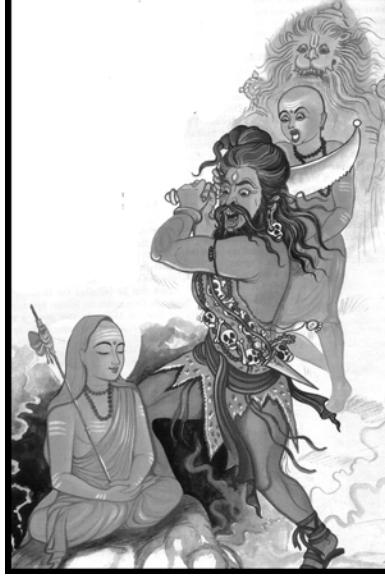
After this, Padmapada felt complete dispassion towards material life. Finally, when he was asked to marry, Padmapada renounced worldly life and started wondering in search of a Guru who would lead him across the ocean of *samsara*. Padmapada met his Guru Shankaracharya when he was staying at Kashi. Shankaracharya's all-pervading serenity, profound spiritual knowledge and the inimitable *Bhasyas* immediately captivated his entire imagination and he offered himself in absolute self-surrender at the Acharya's holy feet. Shankaracharya also lovingly accepted him as his disciple and initiated him into Sanyasa under the name of Sanandana. Sri Padmapada's unparalleled devotion, generosity and earnestness in his search for truth pleased the Acharya so

much that he even took trouble to explain Padmapada his *Bhasyas* thrice.

There is a famous incident about how Padmapada had once saved Sri Shankaracharya's life. A Kapalika once approached Shankaracharya and begged from the Acharya his head as an offering to Lord Shiva. The Kapalika explained that he had performed austerities for a boon from Lord Shiva to enable him attain Kailasa with his physical human frame. Lord Shiva had declared that the Kapalika's desire could only be fulfilled if he performed a sacrifice offering with the head of a King or an omniscient person. The Kapalika thus narrating his ambition said that Shankara with his deep spiritual knowledge and complete non-attachment to materialism was the most befitting person he could find for the sacrifice. Saying this, the Kapalika prostrated before Shankara. The extremely generous and noble Shankara was filled with mercy for the Kapalika and willingly consenting to his request said that as the physical body is impermanent and perishable, it would be a matter of great satisfaction and glory if his head could pave the path for a person's spiritual salvation. But he warned that his head must be taken away in absolute secrecy taken without the knowledge of his disciples. Accordingly, the Kapalika came at a pre-appointed time when the disciples had all gone to have their bath in the river. He found the Acharya in a state of supreme blissful Samadhi, completely oblivious of his surroundings and ready to sacrifice his body.

Just as the Kapalika raised his sword to sever Shankara's head, the whole plot flashed at the inner-eye of Padmapada. Padmapada's entire being flared up in rage and the consciousness of Lord Narasimha took possession of him. Converting into an absolute embodiment of ferocity,

Padmapada leapt into the sky and pounding on the Kapalika tore open his chest with his nails. Thus Lord Narasimha kept his promise of being at his aide when his actual need would arise. The other disciples heard the terrible roar of a lion and rushed to the spot to find the Acharya in Samadhi and the corpse of the Kapalika lying nearby. With Padmapada still roaring and possessed with the consciousness of Narasimha, Sri Shankara came out of his Samadhi and saw Padmapada in the formidable Narasimha form. Sri Shankara then sang hymns to pacify Lord Narasimha and brought back Padmapada to his normal state. Sri Shankara also mentioned that by dying at the hands of Lord Narasimha Himself, the Kapalika had in fact been graced with a place in 'Golaka', the abode of Lord Vishnu and freedom from future rebirths. Thus the supreme power of Padmapada's austere devotion again came to the fore.



Of the four most prominent disciples (Padmapadacharya, Sureswaracharya, Hastamalakacharya and Totakacharya) of the great Acharya, Padmapada was the first. He became the first head of the Govardhana Shankara Math in Puri. Padmapada also founded Thekke Matham in Thrissur, Kerala. Together with Sureswaracharya, he developed ideas that led to the founding of the Vivarana school of commentators. However, the only surviving work of Padmapada known to be authentic is the *Panchapadika*. It is said that this work was carried out in response to Shankara's request for a commentary on his own *Brahmasutrabhasya* but the completed work was once destroyed by a jealous uncle. The surviving text is supposed to be what Shankara had recalled of the five chapters of the commentary which Padmapada had once read out to him.

—Sri Arnab Sarkar, Her Blessed Child

Egoism and Egotism

It may be argued that the greatest thing that a person loves is his own self. It is the nearest possible thing to him – it is his existence. For this reason, our knowledge of sacredness comes from the Ego. The partial knowledge that we have through variations develops into comprehensive knowledge, the more we try to approach the Ego. Hence, the knowledge of the Ego is indispensable to solve any metaphysical problem as to the source of the idea.

Egoism or the knowledge of the Ego is the basis of all philosophy and all religion but when the same is perverted and put into a limited sphere it becomes egotism. We call a man egotistic who is always talking about his little self ignoring the stupendousness of the same self that is standing behind. There is no doubt but a perverted and distorted view is taken of it and so it is offensive. In other words, the continuity and the comprehensiveness of the Ego is lost sight of and only the tiny self is taken as the *summum-bonum*.

—Sri Mohendra Nath Dutta (Brother of Swami Vivekananda)