S'ankarachārya, the young sanyasin who was to release the essence of religion from the cave of confusion, was one almost unique in the history of thought. His genius was many sided as so also were his works, as he endowed with the best gifts that nature and sādhanā could provide, had combined in himself the attributes of a poet, a dexterous logician with faultless acumen, a staunch devotee with unshakable faith, as well as a mystic of high order further he was the sole architect of the monistic system of philosophy which has been popularised as the Advaita.

The Indian mind has always been more concerned with truths than with details regarding personalities. One finds generally only the thoughts of men recorded and not many other facts about the personalities that brought them forth. This has also been the case with Śri. S'ankarachārya, hence the difficult task of assigning the dates as connected with S'ankara's life was the domain of the historian and literary critics. Telang thinks that S'ankara may have belonged to the sixth century AD while others have fixed S'ankara's date as the 9th Century AD.

The masterful commentary written by Śri. S'ankara on the Brahma-Sūtra as well as his commentaries of the Upaniṣads and on the Gīta as well as certain condensed expositions like 'Vivekā Chudamani', 'Ātma-Bodha', 'Satasloki', 'Prabodhasudhākara', 'Aparakshanubhūti', and that unequalled compendium of wisdom the
'Dakshinamūrti Stotra', set forth such a high standard of rigourous teaching that they immediately demanded the whole further development of the Vedānta School. But what really set Śrī Śankaracārya above all previous Vendāntins was his success in synthesising for the first time the elements of pure wisdom scattered in the Upanīṣadās.

The commentaries of Śankaracārya on the Prastānatraya display his rare faculty of relentlessly logical and concatenated argument and refutation, and also such subtlety of reasoning as has not been surpassed in the philosophical writings of the world. To quote Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "It is impossible to read Śankara's writings packed as they are with serious and subtle thinking, without being conscious that one is in contact with a mind of a very fine penetration and profound spirituality. His philosophy stands forth complete, needing neither a before nor an after.... whether we agree or differ, the penetrating light of his mind never leaves us where we were".

Śankara emerged at a time when Indian thought was caught in a great spiritual crisis and dryness. When vedic rites and ceremonies had lost their original importance and appropriateness, and when temple worship had become universal, and spiritual insight was conspicuous by its absence. This was the time and state of environment, that Śrī Śankaracārya not only successfully vindicated but also firmly established the Advaita

1. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Op.Cit., P.446-447
philosophy which has very rightly been described to be one of the supreme achievements of Hinduism. The special glory of Sankara is that over and above being the protagonist of monistic approach, he is the author of innumerable Stotras of great poetic excellence and of feeling for and devotion to God.

According to Sankara, 'the test of the authority of or otherwise, of a passage is not whether it states a fact or an action but its capacity to generate certain and fruitful knowledge. A passage that has this is authoritative while the one that lacks it is not.

Spiritual experience is the final authority in matters of religion. Sankara explains his doctrines with the help of logical reason. He sets out to explain in terms of logic what he has spiritually experienced himself.

Again while he makes allowances for the indispensable place of rituals in the infancy of religion he makes no compromise on the fact that only on the basis of a strict and advanced ethical structure can the superstructure of spiritual life of realization of God or the self stand. Rituals performed only in a proper attitude of mind would help pave the way for an ethical life and ultimately evolve in man a sense of detachment.

Sankara's commentaries on the Gīta, the Upanīṣads and the Brahmasūtras are his greatest contribution to the world of philosophical thought and higher religious study. They contain

1. Stotras = Hymns of praise
the elucidation of fundamental philosophical and religious principles such that the main trend and purport of the vast scriptures does not remain shrouded in utter obscurity and unfathomable vagueness to the ignorant masses of mankind.

The main theme of the doctrines of the Advaita Vedānta can be briefly stated as Brahman is Reality, the world has apparent Reality (Mithyā) and, the soul is non-different from Brahman.

Brahman

Śankara is a non-dualist. He believes and posits the reality of only one category or entity. And that entity he calls Brahman. Śankara derives the word Brahman from the root ‘bṛhati’-to exceed, atidāyana and means by it eternity and purity. All that is, is verily Brahman alone. There is nothing besides Brahman and there is no second to it. It is Ekam-advitiyam for the Absolute for Śankara is absolutely non-dual. In the words of Williams James, Śankara’s system can be aptly said to be - “the paragon of all monistic systems”.

Brahman according to Śankara is the highest transcendental truth. It is all perfect and the only truth. Being the ultimate truth it also stands non-contradictory. Brahman transcends all limitations of space, time and causality. It is beyond all determinations and finitude (Neti-Neti). It is existent, beginning-less and unchanging.

Saguna and Nirguna

Śankara advocates the Nirguna or Acosmic Brahman which in
other words is trans-empirical and thus maintains that Brahman in itself is devoid of all forms and attributes and is Anirvachaniya or indescribable. To state that Brahman is indescribable means that it cannot be described in the pragmatic language because it is beyond the senses, mind and intellect. Also if we begin describing we run into logical difficulties, for, to describe a thing is to relate it to something other than itself, and of Brahman there is nothing besides it to relate it to. It is devoid of all internal and external relations. It is in fact Sudha-Chaitanya - there is nothing like it.

Again a description would naturally presuppose some measure in terms of which it is to be described. But when Brahman itself is the measure of all, one definitely, cannot measure the measure itself for such an endeavour would be only absurd.

The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad says :-

"For when there is duality as it were, there one smells another, there one speaks to another, there one thinks of another, there one understands another........ where verily everything has became the self, then by what and whom should one see, then by what and whom should one hear, by what and whom should one speak, then by what and whom should one understand..... By what should one know that by which all this is known? By what should one know the knower?".

Sankara's Brahman is beyond the sphere of all predications. It cannot be truly designated in positive terms and can be best

1. Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, III.5.7.
described negatively as to what it is not, yet, this should never
be mistaken to be an abyss of non-entity since Brahman being the
Supreme Self-stands self revealed transcending all affirmations
and negations.

Brahman is the essence and foundation of all objective
existence. It is not any point in space although it pervades
everywhere since all things not only imply it but also depend on
it. Brahman is not an object of knowledge but it, itself is the
knowledge the knower and the known. Brahman is pure
consciousness, bliss-unconditioned and self-illumined and eternal
in the sense of timeless perfection and completeness.

Hence Brahman according to Sāṅkara is neither a personality
nor a substance but it is the spirit - the homogenous composite
spirit which cannot be defined in terms of any categories. To
quote the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad,

"It is unseen, in-capable of being spoken of, ungraspable,
without any distinctive marks, unthinkable, unnameable, the
essence of the knowledge of oneself, that into which the world is
resolved, the peaceful, the beginning and the non-dual".

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad says "The Absolute is the existence
of all existences - the Truth of all truths, the Reality of all
realities".

1. Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad. 2.4.3.
2. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. 2.3.6.
Iśvara

The personal God of Sāṅkara is called the Iśvara. Advaitic tradition and practice have accorded a very important place to Iśvara. Iśvara is not the ultimate Reality which is Brahman alone but then Iśvara is Brahman in relation to the world. But again Brahman is non-different from Iśvara. Brahman reflected in or conditioned by Māyā is Iśvara. Iśvara is the personal aspect of the impersonal Brahman. Finite thought cannot grasp the Brahman hence the concept of Iśvara becomes necessary for the finite mind of man.

Iśvara is Sat-Chit-Ānanda, the existence, consciousness and bliss. He is the Lord of māyā. He is the Soul of souls and is called Antaryāmin. He is the creator, sustainer and Destroyer of this Universe. He is the source and the final haven of everything. He is the object of devotion and inspirer of moral life. Brahman is the transcendental truth while Iśvara is the pragmatic truth.

Creation is the expression of the self power of Iśvara in the world of space & time. He creates by the power of his Māyā and the world is his Īśā. He satisfies the needs of his devotees and is the abode of all auspicious qualities.

Hence Iśvara can be said to be the mediating link between Brahman and the world of experience. But on the transcendent level there is no distinction between Iśvara and Brahman.

Ātman and Jīva

Self luminosity (Śvayaṃprakāśa) which is the capacity of
being ever present in all acts of consciousness without, in any way being an object of Consciousness, this self luminosity which is pure consciousness is what the Vedānta says is same as the self or Ātman. The real Self is identical with the pure manifesting unity of all consciousness.

Sāṅkara admits of no dualism between the Ātman and the Brahman. " This Brahman is without a prior, or a posterior without interior or exterior, this Ātman is Brahman the 1 experiencer of everything ".

Since the Ātman is all pervading, partless, beyond space and time, Ātman transcends the subject object duality. This self is the unqualified absolute and can never be denied for the very idea of denial presupposes it." To refute this self is impossible 2 for he who tries to refute it, is the self.

The self stands self proved - 'swayam siddha'. Brahman is omnipresent in the form of self & Ātman. Brahman or Ātman is existent - Consciousness. About the Ātman, Sāṅkara says, "you are not the body because body is perceived, because it has a form and jati or class etc, because it is material, impure and non-eternal, while you are non-perceived, without form and jati non-material, pure and unchanging your essence lies in knowing, you are therefore not the body which is known, just as the knower of

1. Brhadāraṇyaka Upanīṣad.II.5.19
2. Sharīraka Bhāṣya.II 3,7,
the pot is not the pot".

Hence Ātman can be said to be the innermost truth in man. The Ātman is the witness of the changing states of the Universe and is itself beyond all change. It is again that cause which is itself beyond all cause and effect. Again "the self cannot be the abode of any action since action cannot exist without modifying that in which it abides".

Hence, the self for Sāṅkara is Turiya which is unconditioned, homogenous and immortal known only through direct experience, that is, self realisation.

Jīva or the individual means the empirical self in association with the ego. Jīva is the product of avidya or ignorance. This phenomenal self feels, suffers and is ever affected by worldly experiences. It is the doer, enjoyer and seer. Due to the veil of ignorance, that covers it, Jīva sees distinctions and is by its actions caught in the web of rebirth from which it seeks its liberation. Thus on self realization where the veil of avidhya is shattered, the Jīva stands out in its true essence which is again nothing but the self proved immortal Ātman.

Māyā a World

The doctrine of Māyā occupies the central place next to Brahman in the Advaitic Metaphysics of Sāṅkara.

1. Tattvopadesa.2.3.
2. Sāṅkara Bhāṣya on Brahmasūtras.1.1.4.
Māyā is a quality which is found only in sentiment beings. It is a 'centana dharma' and is found only in souls. It is that which requires a locus and content to manifest itself and the locus (Āshraya) and content (Viṣaya) of Māyā is Brahman itself but yet the Brahman in itself is untouched by it. Although Māyā is attributed the quality of being beginning less (Anādi) yet it does not stand eternal like the Brahman for it gets destroyed the very moment Brahman realisation takes place.

Māyā or illusion performs a two-fold function that is Āvarana or the concealment of Reality and Vikṣepa or the projection of the illusionary or the false appearance of Reality, which means that while Māyā conceals Brahman, it shows up in its place the universe and world of souls. Since it projects something in the place it conceals it is considered as a positive substance (bhāva-rūpa).

Māyā is absolutely dependent on, and inseparable from Brahman which provides the base for its emancipation. It also provides the sole medium for the reflection of Brahman and for the projection of this world of appearances. It is essentially the indistinguishable, inherent power or potency (Śakti) of Brahman. It is coeval with Brahman and non-different (ananyā) from Brahman. The relation of Māyā and Brahman is tādātnaya i.e. it is neither identity nor difference nor both. Māyā is considered by Sākara as Sadāsadānirvachanīya which means it is indescribable and undefinable for it is neither real nor unreal nor both.
It cannot be real since it apart from Brahman, has no existence of its own and again it vanishes at the dawn of Brahman knowledge. It is not unreal since it projects the world of appearance and also stands true as long as it lasts and Māyā cannot be both real and unreal since these are mutually contradictory just as light and darkness cannot exist bracketed together at the same time.

Māyā can be considered as a pragmatic reality or vyāvahārika since it is of the nature of reflection of Brahman in the practical world.

In his introduction to the commentary on the Brahma-Sūtras Sāṅkara says that the essence of all illusory perception is that one thing is mistaken for another, that the qualities, characteristics or attributes of one thing are taken as that of another. Hence Māyā is nothing but the false appearance of one thing with the characteristics of another just as a conch shell appears as silver or that one moon appears as two.

Māyā is not only absence of knowledge but can be a aid to be also positive wrong knowledge (mithyāchārarūpa). It is not only non-apprehension but it is also misapprehension. It is that entity which makes the infinite appear as finite. The unlimited Ātman due to the effect of Māyā appears as the limited Jīvas. It is that which produces in this world the notion of plurality and

2. Praśna Bhāṣya I.16.
differences. It is also the fact of co-existence of contradictions in the same entity.

Sankara in his description of Reality envisages a distinction between three stages of existence.

1. The Paramarthika Satta which is the absolutely real state and which is never sublated.

2. The Vyavaharika Satta which is objective and positive state which is only relatively real and

3. The Pratibhasika Satta or the world of dreams and illusions. The world of nature, Sankara classifies, as that belonging to the Vyavaharika state. This phenomenal world of objects is called by Sankara as Mithyā or that which has only apparent reality. It is not real since it is not eternal like Brahman. According to Sankara the multiple objects of name and form are real so far as their essence is concerned. But they themselves in their particular form are unreal.

The effect he maintains is non-different from the cause and exists in it. The effect is merely a modification (Vivarta) of the cause. Vivarta signifies the appearance of the Absolute Brahman as the relative world of space & time. The world resides in Brahman even as the illusion of a snake resides in the rope. Hence the causal relation also is not a real change. So he adheres to the notion that the changing world is merely a reflection of Brahman and this reflection is brought about by adhyāsa or Māyā. At the same time these false creations must have some basis of truth, the changing appearances must have some
unchanging basis on which they are imposed. Brahman is the basis of this entire changing world, while in its true, real nature it remains unchanged, beyond the phenomenal world. Although the world is based on the real it is not the real itself but is only the appearance of the real.

'Just as a person of defective vision sees double moon or mosquitoes and flies floating in the atmosphere or just as a dreamer sees many things in a dream, similarly, this world of plurality, of names & forms is imagined through ignorance.

According to Sankara's philosophy, it is not only the objective world that constitutes the world of appearance but also the subjective world of all experiences and predicates that may be associated with the self.

Sankara describes the nature of the world as anirvachaniya or indescribable. It is different from the real as it is not eternal like the Brahman. It is again different from being unreal because it is cognised. It is not Real and unreal at the same time for such a position involves contradiction. All qualities and actions belong to this world of nature. So long as we are engrossed in ignorance, the world is quite real for us. It is only when time knowledge of self realization dawns that the world becomes sublated.

Bondage & Liberation or Mokṣa

The concept of liberation as the state of identity with

Brahman is integrally connected with the basic Advaitic views that the so called Jīva, the individual soul which although in essence is the same as Brahman, is yet in a state of bondage in the world. The Jīva is the Brahman-Ātman itself appearing through the limiting adjuncts i.e. mind, senses and body which are the products of avidya. This Jīva through essentially identical with the infinite Brahman forgets as it were its innate identity due to the influence of avidya and consequently undergoes transmigration, associating itself wrongly with the finite body-mind complex. As a result of this, the Jīva is wrongly viewed as involved in action and enjoyment and is hence subjected to the incessant cycle of birth and death. It is in the state of bondage that the sense of individuality in the form 'I' and 'mine' arise and due to this the Jīva failing to know its own essential nature, strives after temporal and transitory objects and in consequence experiences suffering and misery. The cause of all this suffering and plurality in the world is avidya or ignorance. The only means to over come all sorts of evil and bondage according to Sankara is to uproot avidya. And this is possible only by right knowledge of Brahman.

As long as these false notions about the self persist, the result is the empirical self and the objective world, and when these notions are destroyed by right knowledge, the result is liberation, through ultimately both bondage and liberation are phenomenal because the self is really non-different from 1 Brahman.

The moment this right knowledge arises avidya and its products are totally removed and the true self stands in all realization. Hence it would be, but right to say that liberation is not the product of the highest knowledge but is the highest knowledge itself.

Sankara is a staunch believer in the concept of liberation in life itself—JivanmuktI. He believes that the theory of liberation is not a inconsistent with embodiment. "Liberation means removing of ignorance by knowledge." that blessed person who has realised Reality is liberated here and now". When the sense of the falsity of the world takes firm hold on man who has awakened to his real self, the conviction of the truth of his supreme reality always remains uppermost in him and he spontaneously experiences the unchanging self of imperishable bliss, all compact in himself ever when alive. This is a liberated soul jivanmukta.

Liberation or jivanmuktI according to Advaita of Sankara consists in the individual soul (Jiva) realizing directly its own essential nature as Brahman, the absolute which is of the nature of Reality, Consciousness and Bliss (SadchidAnanda).

Sankara describes liberation as, "that incorporeal entity, which is real in the absolute sense, immutably eternal, all pervasive like ether, free from all modifications, ever content, partless, self effulgent by nature in which neither good nor evil, nor effect, nor past, nor present nor future has any place".

1. Ibid.1.14
2. Brahma-Sutra Bhagya.1.14
This entity, undoubtly is none else but the Brahman itself, for liberation for Śaṅkara is the realization of one's identity with Brahman. But when Śaṅkara says that the state of liberation is being identical with Brahman, the difficulty of explaining it arises, for this statement cannot be logically explained in any precise terms as it transcends all empirical categories of logical explanation. In fact it is matter for realization and not one for explanation. But so long as it has not been realized it can best be grasped through a whole lot of negative descriptions and with the help of superlatives. Hence the best that can be said of this state of liberation is that in an absolute sense it is anirvācanaīya - the realm of silence.

Actually, according to Śaṅkara, Mokṣa is not a mere attainment, it is the realization of something and this something, which is the Brahman is eternally there. For Śaṅkara there is no heaven where the liberated man will go but the pure soul is here itself on the earth and we are just to realize it in ourselves.

Śaṅkara believes in the possibility of gradual liberation commenting on a verse in Prāṇānīṣad he says that true meditation leads to liberation, also worship of the attributed Isvara leads to purification of sins, the attainment of bliss and gradual liberation.

Again for the liberated all activities are in Brahman, the past karmas are destroyed and the future ones do not attach themselves to him since he is not the 'doer but merely an
instrument of the lord. The world of plurality and multiplicity are not annihilated but it is the wrong notion about it that is destroyed.

Hence the liberated one, realizing his oneness with Brahman, passes beyond the good and evil, that is he transcends the dualities of the phenomenal world. For him there is only one supreme truth and that is Brahman.

Thus studying the sublime and logically tested teaching of Sri Sankaracharya one gets drawn to the fact that religion to him consisted in bringing out the divinity of man found latent in him, for whatever one may ignore, none striving for a spiritual life can ignore the grand truth of the divinity and unity of the soul.