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Sri Madhva, One of India’s  
Greatest Spiritual Masters**

**By Jeffrey Armstrong  
(Kavindra Rishi)**

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EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

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# The Remarkable Life of Sri Madhvacharya

Picture a man of powerful physique, a champion wrestler, who could eat hundreds of bananas in one sitting. Imagine a guru who was observed to lead his students into a river, walk them across the bottom and out the other side. Is this a modern action hero? No, it is one of the most controversial and influential Vedantic acharyas in India's modern history. Add to his qualities that he was an unparalleled Sanskrit scholar who knew the scriptures to mastery level by the age of eighteen, a powerful debater who openly and publicly challenged all views, and a mountain climber who, after fasting for 48 days, trekked to Badarik Ashram, high in the Himalayas, to meet the eternal Rishi Vedavyasa and receive his teachings. Allow me to introduce Shri Madhvacharya—also known as Vasudeva, Purnaprajna and Anandatirtha—the famous founder of the Dvaita school of Vedanta and the Brahma Vaishnava Sampradaya, of which I am a devout follower. Through his eloquent preaching and prolific dictation, this one brilliant man gave a new perspective to Vedantic scripture that influences millions of people to this day.

Vaishnava Hinduism, of which Madhva was one of the foremost exponents, holds a vision that this world and the transcendental world beyond it are populated by divine beings who can, at will, descend as avatars into our planet in what appears to be a human body. Some are manifestations of Parabrahman, from beyond all matter, whose apparent bodies are projections of their transcendent being.

They are not born and do not die, though they may appear to do so. Avatars manifest varying degrees of Divinity, from the perfect, or Purna-Avatars, like Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, to the avatars of various devas who manage our material world. Madhva announced himself as an avatar of Prana Vayu, the life force itself, come to Earth to revive and teach the real, eternal meaning of the *Vedas*.

As Lord Krishna states in the *Bhagavad Gita* (4.7), “Yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bhārata.” “Whenever there is a decline of dharma within the world, I descend myself to correct the situation.” It is for this reason that in the Hindu/Vedic culture we say, “Atiti devo bhavataha,” or “The guest should be treated as a descent of the Divine.” You never really know who is coming to dinner, since avatars are always wearing a disguise so as not to disturb unknowing humans.

Details of Madhva's life are known primarily from the *Madhva-vijaya* (or *Sumadhva-vijaya*), a biography by Narayana Pandita, the son of Trivikrama Pandita, a brilliant advaita scholar who was defeated by Madhva in debate and became one of his foremost disciples. This account tells us that, in 1238, on the auspicious occasion of the Vijayadasami festival held at the Ananteshvara Temple in the city of Udupi, a mute man became possessed of the spirit of Lord Ananteshvara, climbed the temple's stone flag pole and, from atop its

tiny platform, proclaimed to the crowd of devotees that Lord Vayu, the closest deva to Vishnu, would soon take birth to revive Hindu dharma. For twelve years, a pious brahmin couple of modest means, Narayana and Vedavati Naddantillaya, had prayed and performed severe penance at this temple, beseeching the Deity to bless them with a male child to perpetuate their family line. Eight months after the mute's declaration, Vedavati gave birth to a handsome son in their home in Pajaka, south of Udupi. They named him Vasudeva.

Vasudeva was physically and mentally precocious. Once, at the age of one, he grabbed hold of the tail of one of the family bulls who was going out to graze in the forest and followed the bull all day long. At sunset, to the great relief of his worried parents, Vasudeva returned home with the bull, hungry but otherwise happy. At the age of three, he disappeared one morning, and his increasingly frantic parents searched everywhere for him. Finally, his father found him seven miles away, at the Ananteshvara Temple in Udupi. The boy

As a boy, Madhva had already mastered and memorized the scriptures of Vedanta. His mother took him to a public lecture one day. When the speaker made an error interpreting a text, he boldly stood up to point out the mistake and offered the correct view, which the pundit gratefully accepted.

## Defending the view that “Difference is real”

There has always prevailed in India a tolerant view regarding differences of philosophical opinion. Hindu dharma not only tolerates, but encourages a grand diversity of opinions on ultimate issues, on matters of spiritual faith and practice. And it believes neither in aggressive conversion nor imposing its spiritual world view on others. Nurtured by this environment of free expression, countless great lineages of Hindu culture have emerged throughout history as India's great thinkers have given their interpretations of Vedic wisdom according to their experience and realization.

This Educational Insight takes us back to the thirteenth century in South India, where fervent public debates on the nature of truth were (as they are to this day) held between luminaries of various faiths and traditions. While religionists of Europe and the Middle East were immersed in bloody battles which they called the Holy War, great, spiritual warriors in India were locked in battles of wits and will. The goal was not land or booty, but correct knowledge of the nature of reality. If one's point of view could be proven with impeccable logic and scriptural evidence, it had to be true. At their best, these were powerful,

mystical encounters in which those present rose together to touch into higher planes of knowing and draw from the infinite well of wisdom. Such discussions were so sincere that the one who lost, if fully convinced of the other's point of view, might embrace his school of thought and become a faithful follower.

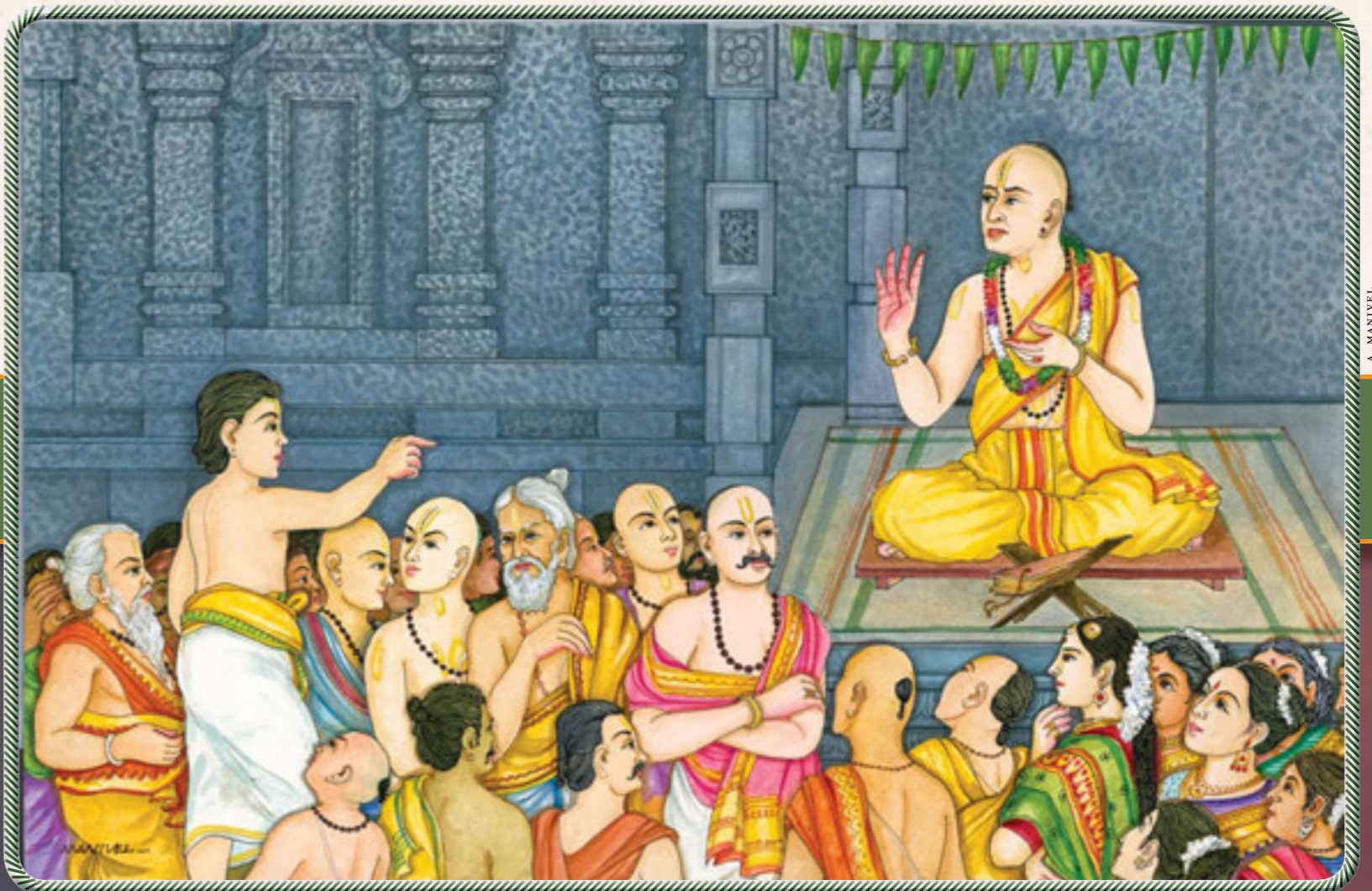
In those days, the prevailing Vedanta philosophy was the severely monistic view of Sri Adi Shankara (788–820ce), a brilliant young monk and intellectual giant who had traveled the length and breadth of India as a reviver of Hindu thought and practice. From his efforts and those of his followers emerged the highly influential and philosophically compelling system known as Advaita Vedanta, the core belief system of the Smarta Sampradaya, one of the most prominent denominations of Hinduism to this day. He built his seemingly unassailable fortress of logic not only by speaking, but by writing. His prolific commentaries on the three pillars of Vedic evidence—the ten principle *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Brahma Sutra*—became the benchmark of Vedantic thought. In a nut-

shell: everything is illusion; only the Absolute, Brahman, is real. The goal, as defined in scripture, is to break the spell of illusion with the power of discrimination and realize the oneness of soul and God.

While Shankara's view was prominent, it was not the only way Hindus viewed life or interpreted the holy books. In the centuries that followed, many luminaries challenged his system. To do so, each wrote commentaries on the same texts he had analyzed, and avidly debated with monastic and lay scholars of the Shankara school. Each in his day

stood up and propounded his own view of what the scriptures really mean, while refuting, point-by-point, the contentions that Shankara had given forth. Because Shankara's philosophy was so articulately stated, widely known and deeply established, the great thinkers who followed him defined their school of thought by debating the assertions of Shankara.

Between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, five such masters (see sidebar page 44) loom the largest in the halls of Indian history. All from





explained that he had walked there to have darshan of the Deity at the behest of the Lord Himself.

When he was five, his mother took him to attend a spiritual discourse by a prominent pundit. At one point, the speaker made a mistake. Vasudeva immediately stood up and corrected him, offering the proper explanation with reference to the shastra. Impressed by the child's knowledge, the pundit praised his discernment and courage.

Soon thereafter, a money lender came to their house demanding payment for a long overdue debt owed by Vasudeva's father. Curious, the boy spoke to the burly fellow and learned of his purpose. Asking him to wait a moment, Vasudeva ran to the back yard, picked

up some dry tamarind seeds, rubbed them in his palms and transformed them into gold coins, with which he paid the man even more than the amount of the debt.

At age seven Vasudeva received his *upanayana* initiation and was enrolled in Vedic studies at the gurukulam of Totanillaya. This did not impede his love of play, and he spent most of his time wrestling, swimming, trekking and lifting weights. In competition, he was fearless and invincible. One day, his teacher scolded him for neglecting his studies. Vasudeva replied, "I don't see any point in repeating what I have heard once and memorized." "Very well then" the teacher retorted, "recite all the *shlokas* I taught this morning!" Without hesitation, Vasudeva chanted the verses in resounding, sonorous

Sanskrit and then recited more from the same text that had not even been taught. That ended any further doubt in his Vedic prowess.

After nine years of formal learning, the students would each take a vow to take up a career and make a difference in the world. Their aspirations varied: priest, doctor, astrologer, merchant. Vasudeva vowed to study the scriptures to find out their true meaning, as he just could not accept the Sankaran Advaita view, so prevalent in his day, that the world is an illusion. He resolved to renounce worldly life and become a monk so that he could spend all his time combating Advaita and promoting theism, which he believed to be the essence of true religion.

Like most parents, Narayana and Vedavati were shocked by his decision and begged him to reconsider, reminding him that, as their only son, it was his duty to marry,

have children to perpetuate their family line and take care of them through their old age. Vasudeva was adamant and could not be dissuaded, but agreed to postpone his renunciation until Vedavati bore another child, which Vasudeva seemed to know would be a son. Upon the birth of his brother, the 16-year-old left home and joined the Ekadandi Order as a sannyasin at the Ananta *Matha* in Udupi. Vasudeva was initiated by Achyutaprekshacharya, who named him Purnaprajna, due to his prodigious knowledge.

Just forty days after his initiation, two famous scholars came to Udupi in search of a competitor worthy to engage in debate. They were Vadisimha of the Vyaya-Vaisheshika school and Buddhishagara, a Buddhist monk. Purnaprajna was chosen to represent the *matha*. Their easy victory turned to stunning defeat as the youth thoroughly worsted them on the first day of debate. They left Udupi that night rather than resume the contest the next day and publicly admit defeat before the extraordinary young monk. They, like so many who confronted Purnaprajna, were no match for his unassailable logic and encyclopedic knowledge of the shastras. Many an opponent was defeated and became his disciple or just quietly slipped away.

In 1256, at age 18, encouraged by his success, Madhva set out on a grand tour of South India, joined by his preceptor, Achyutaprekshacharya. On a three-year campaign passing through Anantasayana, Kanyakumari, Rameshvaram and Srirangam, Madhva preached Tattvavada, "doc-

### Vedanta: One of Six Hindu Darshanas

There are six classical darshanas, or ways of seeing and investigating reality in the Hindu tradition: Sankhya, which is material science; Nyaya, logic and epistemology; Vaisheshika, physics and atomic theory; Yoga, spiritual practice and meditation; Purva Mimamsa, hermeneutics and ritual worship; and Vedanta (Uttara Mimamsa), metaphysics. Vedanta is dedicated to defining the transcendental goal of life and outlining the means to its attainment. The word *Vedanta* tells it all—the "end" (anta) or "conclusion" of the *Vedas*.

The youthful Madhva spent most of his days in athletic pursuits with schoolmates. When his teacher, Totanillaya, advised he should spend more time practicing his chanting, Madhva countered that he had memorized and perfected all the verses that had been taught. A disbelieving Totanillaya challenged the claim, and Madhva then perfectly recited the shlokas from memory. The teacher never again questioned the boy's study habits.

reality, is the only truth."

In contrast, Madhva seeks to prove from scriptural statements that the Ultimate is a personal, lovable Supreme Being who is the source of all beauty, truth, unity and diversity. Further, the atma, soul or self, is eternally an individual, both in the material realm and in the transcendental. The names and forms we see temporarily manifested in the realm of matter are reflections of the eternal names and forms; and the transcendental realm, the material realm, souls and the Supreme Being are all eternally different and distinctive. His emphatic declaration is "Difference is real; difference is real; difference is real." That mantra is captured in the famous portrait in which he holds up his right hand with middle and index finger extended, a simple mudra indicating distinction (see art on page 38).

Shankara defines moksha, the soul's liberation from the cycle of rebirth, as the shedding of all distinctions, forms and personhood to merge in the timeless, seamless, formless reality of Brahman. Madhva's doctrine, which to this day forms the backbone of several Vaishnava bhakti schools, asserts that the individual atma and the Supreme Paramatma, as well as their friends, associates and paraphernalia, exist for

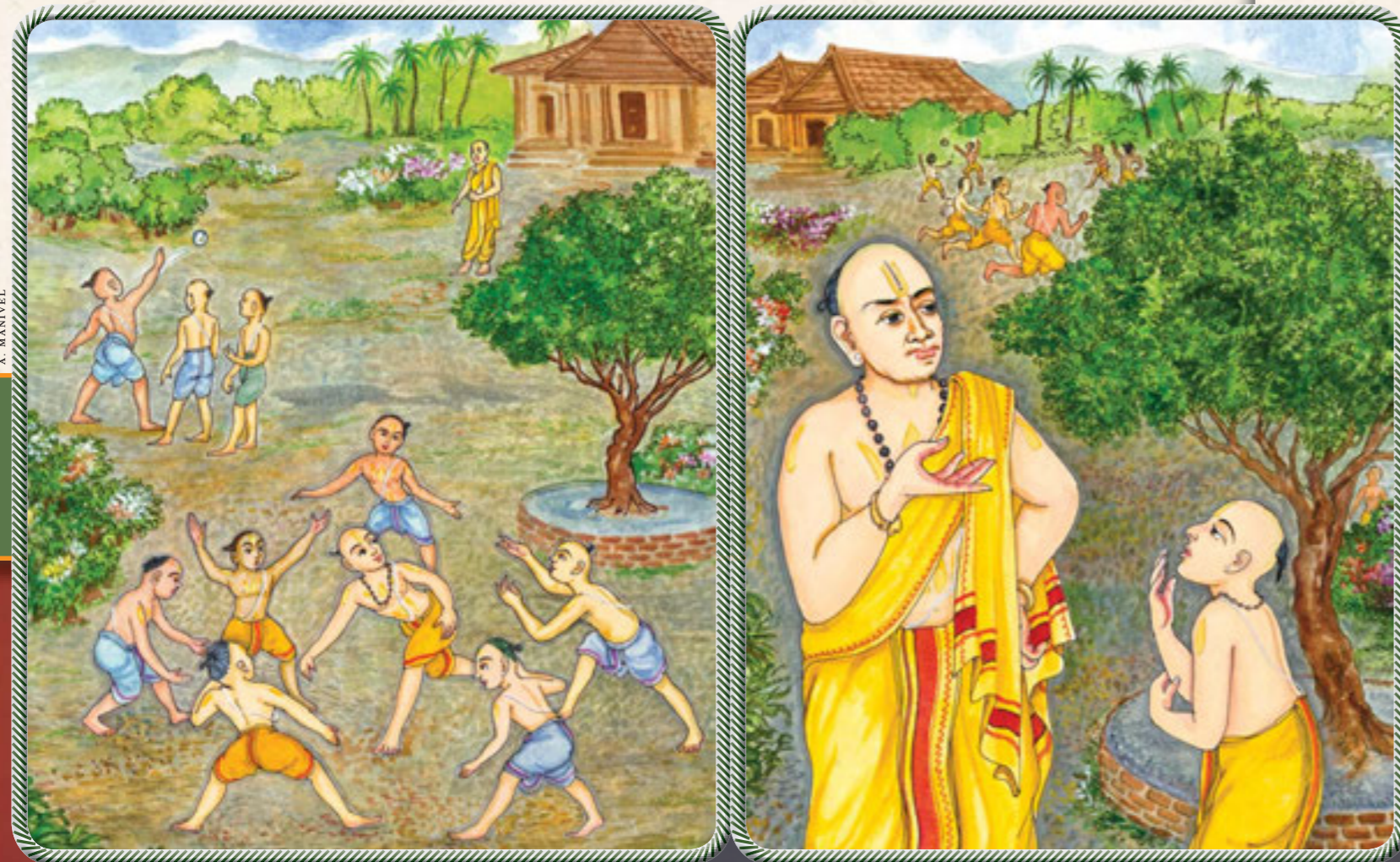
eternity in the transcendental realm. There they engage in various loving activities beyond the reach of the temporary material realm, in which birth, death, old age and disease interrupt our potential for eternal, loving service. That pure activity, called bhakti, or devotion, is the goal of life and ultimate message of the scriptures.

This very personal and permanent relationship with Divinity contrasts starkly with the view of Shankara—which ultimately considers the relationship between the worshiper and Bhagavan, God, as but another aspect of the grand illusion that must be transcended—and argues that liberation, being a formless state, can alone be attained by the path of jnana, the cultivation of knowledge of the impersonal Absolute, Brahman.

Shankara's Advaita defines the extreme left pole of Vedanta. In the middle range are the Vishishtadvaita views of Ramanuja, the Achintya-Bheda-Abheda-Tattva of Chaitanya and others. Madhva's Dvaita, called Distinctive Realism, is at the extreme right pole.

### What Evidence Is Trustworthy?

Madhva defines the three valid sources of the truth: perception, inference and testimony: "Perception is the flawless contact of sense organs with their appropriate objects. Flawless reasoning is inference. Flawless



the Vaishnava tradition, two lived in South India and three in the North. Among them was Sri Madhva, born in Karnataka. From his early teens, he was disturbed by the pervasive advaitic notion that we are all caught up in some fantastic dream in which Bhagavan, his beloved Lord, is ultimately nothing more than a phantom. "It is not true," he swore one day after completing his priestly training, "and I will prove it wrong."

Madhva's lifelong debate with Shankara centers around the definitions of Self, the reality or unreality of the world and the nature of the ultimate transcendental goal. His investigation begins with the *Brahma*

*Sutra*, a pithy, 550-verse text that stitches together the varied scriptures of Vedanta, including the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, into a consistent whole. Its first verse reads, "Athato Brahma jijnasu," meaning, "Now, therefore, let us inquire into the nature of the transcendent reality." Does it have qualities, forms, distinctions and individuality similar in any way to those we experience in the realm of matter? Or is it pure *advaita*, a boundless, unified, homogenous existence, without individuality, distinctions and forms, as Shankara claims: "Jagat mithya brahma satya," "The world is false or illusory, and Brahman, the non-distinctive



trine of truth,” and held heated debates with advaitins as well as scholars of all schools of thought, including Buddhism and Jainism.

Coming in contact with followers of the great Ramanuja, the South Indian founder of the Shri Vaishnava Sampradaya, Madhva realized he was not alone in his campaign against advaita, as they also argued against Shankara’s philosophy. This first of three great tours galvanized his resolve: “My whole life shall be dedicated to the spread of ultimate truth.”

People flocked to hear the handsome, charismatic preacher; many were won over and joined him as disciples. The *Madhva-vijaya* describes him: “Madhvacharya shone like the moon, with his gentle

smile, lotus eyes, golden complexion and words of blessing. He had the gait of a young lion, feet and hands like sprouts, nails like rubies; thighs like the trunk of an elephant, a broad chest and long muscular arms. Indeed, those who made sacred images considered him the model for their art.”

After the troupe returned to Udupi, Achyutaprekshacharya conferred on his disciple the title Madhvacharya and appointed him his heir-apparent to the *pitham* of Ananta *Matha*. For the next six years, Madhva remained in Udupi, during which time he authored the first of two commentaries (*bhashya*) on the *Bhagavad Gita*, dictating it in Sanskrit to his disciple Satyatirtha, who scribed it on palm leaves.

Around 1265, Madhva set out on his first tour of North India. Taking his *Gita* manuscript to present as a tribute to Vedavyasa, he set out on pilgrimage with a few close disciples to the legendary sage’s ashram in the Himalayas. Reaching Badri, he fasted, bathed in the Ganga and remained silent for 48 days, in a quest for spiritual guidance. Finally, the call came from within to go to Uttara Badri, the harsh and isolated spot high in the Himalayan peaks where the legendary Vedavyasa is said to still reside. Leaving a note for his disciples, he left alone, before dawn one morning, on the arduous journey. Satyatirtha, reading the note, followed his master into the treacherous frozen peaks. Catching up to the athletic saint, only halfway to Uttara Badri, Satyatirtha was so weak that he could neither go on nor go back the way he had come. It is said that in this moment Madhva blew a powerful and magical burst of air that sent

him flying back to safety with his brother disciples at Badri.

Reaching Uttara Badri, Madhva prostrated at the feet of Vyasa and spent weeks receiving instruction from him on the true meaning of Vedanta. Though Madhva begged to stay, the sage instructed him to return to the world and continue his mission. In obedience, the monk retraced his steps back to Badri, where his disciples, though fearful that he might have perished, had held a faithful vigil. Far from worn out by the arduous trek, Madhva returned energized and jubilant. In the days following he dictated to Satyatirtha the commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* that Vedavyasa had spoken to him. Satyatirtha scribed it, then arranged for the precious work to be copied and distributed.

Madhva and his monks headed south. As they were passing through Andhra Pradesh, around 1270, they got word that a huge

## Five Schools of Vaishnavism

Sect/Sampradaya	Founder	Philosophy	Spheres of Influence
Shri Vaishnava	Ramanuja (1017 to 1137)	Vishishta-advaita	Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka
Sanakadi Vaishnava	Nimbarka (13th century)	Dvaita-advaita	Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu
Brahma Vaishnava	Madhva (1238–1317)	Dvaita	Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal
Rudra Vaishnava	Vallabhacharya (1479–1531)	Shuddha-advaita	Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh
Gaudiya Vaishnava	Chaitanya (1486–1533)	Achintya Bheda-Abheda Tattva	Bengal and Orissa

This valuable summary is drawn from *The Sri-Krsna Temple at Udupi*, by B. N. Hebbar, who notes that “all five schools are theistic and realistic reactions to the absolutistic idealism of Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta.... The first two are South Indian and follow the *aishvarya bhakti-marga* (Master-servant relationship between the Lord and His

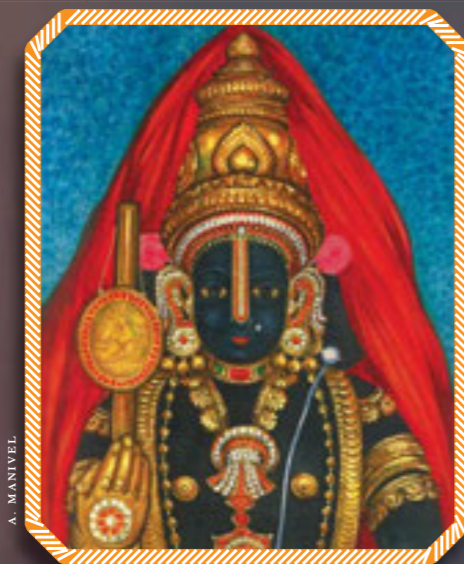
devotee), while the latter three are North Indian and adhere to the *madhurya bhakti-marga* (Lover-beloved relationship between the Lord and His devotee). Also, while the Lakshmi-Narayana concept predominates South Indian Vaishnavism, the Radha-Krishna element pervades the three North Indian Vaishnava sects.”

Around 1278, Madhva received a large mound of yellow clay from a ship captain in appreciation for his magically preventing the ship from capsizing during a gale. Inside the mound Madhva discovered an ancient stone murti of Gopi Krishna, which he carried to his monastery. Along the way, devotees are placing flowers at his feet in adoration. Below: The decorated Gopi Krishna murti that Madhva retrieved at Malpe Beach is still worshiped today.

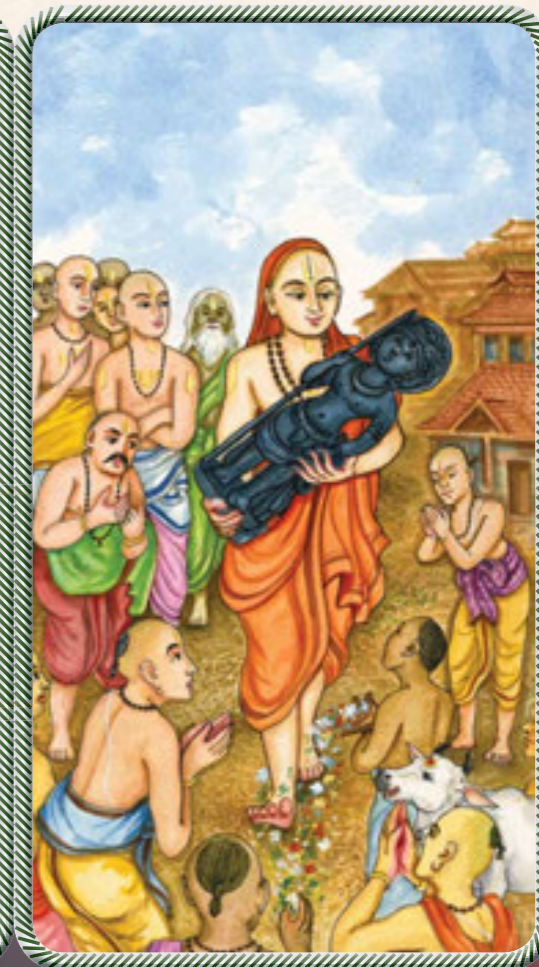
words conveying valid sense is testimony.”

Perception is *pratyaksha*, inference is *anuman* and testimony is *agama*. *Agama* is another name for the Vedantic library of evidence, all of which is considered divinely given information or testimony. All three sources of information—sense perception, inferential reasoning and scripture—are always accurate in varying degrees, and all three can be perfected and relied upon. This stands in contrast to Shankara’s assertion that inference and perception, like the world, are illusory, and testimony alone can lead us to the undifferentiated, impersonal conclusion regarding the nature of reality.

Madhva also berated Shankara for misusing inference, as he does in the following argument: The world is imperfect, illusory and has



form; therefore, the transcendental, which is not illusory, must not have form. Here is Madhva’s retort: “If inference is said to negate perception, when perception is not negated by another perception of equal strength, what then is the talk of the wretch, inference, who lives at the feet of perception, being the negator of that!” In other words, we cannot infer anything without the evidence of our senses. Thus, inference can be used to correct our perceptions but never to totally negate them. Yet, Shankara uses inference to not only prove the formlessness of the transcendental world but also deny the entire material realm and negate its reality, forming the crux of his philosophical stance by a



method he himself decries as illusory.

Madhva inquires: “What or who, in fact, is the ultimate perceiver or validator of any information?” He answers that it is the soul’s intrinsic intuitive faculty, known in scripture as *sakshin*, the witness. He explains: “The cognitive senses are of two kinds: the intuitive faculty, *sakshin*, or the cognitive agent, which is identical with the self; and the ordinary cognitive senses and the mind, which are made of matter.” Each *atma* has dormant spiritual senses which, when activated, are the instruments by which conclusive truth is perceived: “The perception by the

*sakshin* is that which, in our experience, is not open to contradiction and which is decisive in character. Knowledge that is acquired through sensory channels and the mind, and is thus subject to discrepancies, is to be regarded as a modification of the mind-stuff. The latter is liable to correction and contradiction, while the perceptions of *sakshin* are not. What is thus established by the flawless verdict of *sakshin* must be regarded as true and valid for all time.”

The saint argues that if there is no higher sense by which to verify the refutation of *sakshin*, then there is also no one to verify the conclusion



philosophical convention was being held at Rajamahendri on the Godavari River. It was convened by Sobhanabhatta, a staunch and brilliant advaitin and the prime minister of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal. Scholars from all over India were gathering. Madhva decided to attend. This was the first major public forum by which his new philosophy became widely known to the world of Sanskrit scholars. It was a turning point. At that convocation, Madhva won over the famous scholar Puri Swami Shastri, whom he accepted as his disciple and renamed Narahari Tirtha. Sobhanabhatta also

was converted to Tattvavada, and the two illustrious scholars joined Madhva's growing entourage on their return to Udupi, where they were greeted joyously by Achyutapreksha.

The time had now come, Madhva deemed, to bring his own guru into his philosophy, who while proud and supportive, was still an advaitin with strong reservations regarding Madhva's views. After a long series of debates, Achyutapreksha conceded defeat, accepted Madhva's Dvaita view as supreme and became his disciple as Padmanabha Tirtha. The Ananta Matha, which had been a stronghold

of Advaita for centuries, became the spiritual center of Madhva's Brahma Vaishnava Sampradaya.

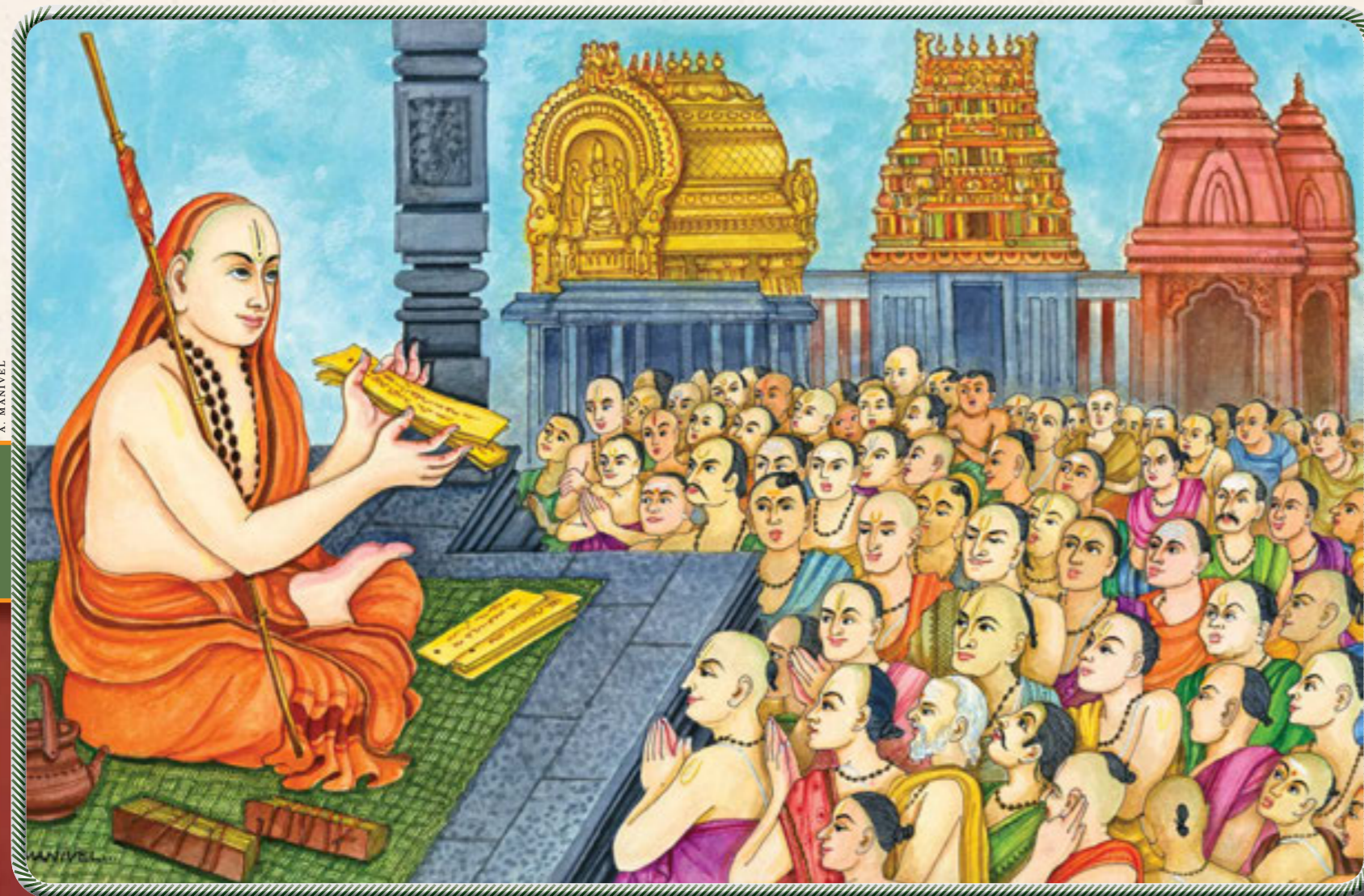
A few years later, a miraculous, landmark event occurred at Malpe beach, three miles west of Udupi. One day Madhva was meditating by the seashore, as he often did. A storm arose at sea and a cargo ship traveling from Dvaraka, which Madhva could see in the distance, began to flounder in the heavy waves. Madhva waved his saffron cloth. The ship suddenly stabilized, the waves abated. Certain that they had survived by the grace of a holy monk, the captain and a few mates took a tender boat to shore. Approaching Madhva, the captain offered him anything he wanted from the merchandise in the ship. To their surprise, he said he had no need for their goods, but would take the three mounds of gopi chandan clay that lay as ballast in the ship's hull. Amazed that the monk knew of the clay, the captain himself delivered to the swami the three mounds of gopi chandan native to the Godavari River that some Vaishnavas use in paste form to make their gold-colored sectarian body marks.

As Madhva must have intuited, when submerged in water and broken apart, each block of clay liberated an ancient stone murti of Krishna. These are said to have been lost when the original city of Dvaraka was submerged in the sea at the end of the Dvapara Yuga. The largest of the three, an icon of Janardana nearly three feet tall, he consecrated

for worship at the village of Yermal, 15 miles south of Udupi. The second, an image of Balarama 2.5 feet tall, he installed at a Subrahmanya temple in Malpe. The third murti, just twenty inches tall, is a unique statue of Balakrishna holding a shepherd's staff. This icon Madhva enshrined, in 1278, at the Ananta Matha, later renamed the Sri Krishna Matha. This small shrine at the matha is today one of India's most important Krishna pilgrimage destinations. This began the pattern Madhva would follow for the rest of his life, obtaining and consecrating images of the Lord and establishing unique sanctuaries specific to his Dvaita sampradaya. Setting up a new liturgy as well for his sampradaya, Madhva discontinued the Smarta Puja rites and replaced them with the Tantrasara worship patterns he learned from Sage Vyasa—elaborate, spectacular pujas that melt the heart of anyone attending and open the doors to the realm of God.

Leaving no aspect of religious life unexamined, Madhva also addressed social issues. In one of his most controversial battles, he spoke against the sacrifice of animals at Vedic rituals and brought an end to the practice in the Udupi region. Madhva offered a revolutionary meaning to caste, saying it should be determined by a man's behavior and nature, rather than his birth—that an illumined soul is a true brahmin, regardless of his occupation. He instigated the prohibition of liquor consumption during religious ceremonies. And, criticizing the priesthoods, he said, "Spirituality should not be confused with superstition." His opponents were equally bold. They continually denounced his reforms and went so far as to raid and pillage his large collection of rare manuscripts.

Madhva was as physically powerful as any warrior. On one oc-



On his long, philosophical campaigns throughout India, Madhva mesmerized audiences from North to South (indicated by the varied temple towers). Crowds were captivated by his charismatic presence and mastery of polemics and scripture, and many became devout followers.

that it stands contradicted. In other words, we must have an inherent faculty that can validate the truth; otherwise it can neither be validated nor rejected. The acceptance of an eternal sensibility, the individual soul—which is in its essential nature pure, conscious and infallible—is the ground on which Madhva discusses the nature of reality. He posits that the atma, or soul, is the final arbiter of the truth of anything.

#### Differences Are Real

While Madhva's Dvaita philosophy has been construed as dualism, it, in fact, articulates a view of multiple realities that all have particular

natures and are all real. Madhva's view is not dualistic, because he did not limit existence to two realities, pitted against one another, but rather described how the various categories of reality are eternally real. To him, the differences among things are not mere illusions to be denied outright, but rather are a gradient of different types of existence among which the eternal souls, who are distinctive individuals, are allowed to choose.

Madhva divided differences into five types, which he called Prapancha and described as the five-fold differences that lead to excellence and liberation and constitute right knowledge. The five distinctions are

between the Supreme and souls, the Supreme and matter, souls and souls, souls and matter, and matter and matter. For Madhva, difference is not at all a lower order of reality but is, in fact, the essence and true message of all the scriptures of Vedanta.

Shankara presents a radically different view in an earthy analogy: A man went to an outhouse at sunset and while there put his hand on a coiled-up rope, which he mistook for a snake. At first he was afraid the snake would bite him. When he realized that the snake was *mithya*, or false, the illusion was dispelled and he was released from his fear. Similarly, when the soul realizes the unreality of the world, it merges into the nondual and nondistinct Brahman.

To counter, Madhva presents his "transcendental realist" argument: "If this universe is to be regarded as imagined by our delusion (like the illusory snake in the rope), it would require the acceptance of a real universe that is the prototype of the imagined one. No theory of illusion can be demonstrated without at least two reals: a substratum of the illusion and a prototype of the superimposed object." Madhva's contention is that this material world is a reflection of the transcen-

dental realm. Both realms have form and are real, even though one is temporary and the other is eternal. All differences are real, though some are temporary.

When the scriptures speak of the world as illusory, dream-like or unreal, Dvaitins understand this to mean that it is a temporary manifestation of reality. When compared to realities that are eternal, it is less real in the sense of duration but no less real during the time of its manifestation. Just as in the case of the mirage of a lake seen in a desert, the perceptions of lake, desert, water, etc., are all real, but they are not where they appear to be (in the desert). Madhva argues that the reality of the world cannot be undermined, because it is our experience in the world from which all other stages of being are reached. He scolds Shankara: "If the universe is illusion, its creator must be no better than a juggler in rags who goes about giving performances in magic to eke out his livelihood."

#### The Nature of the Soul

The point of dispute is not whether the material world is a desirable place of residence for the soul, as Madhva and Shankara agree that liberating the soul from matter is the goal of Vedanta. Where they diverge sharply is on the nature of the soul. To Shankara, there is actually only



casation two champion wrestlers came to challenge him. Engaged in chanting the names of Lord Vishnu, Madhva paused to say he doubted they were strong enough for the contest. At this they began lifting and throwing heavy objects to demonstrate their prowess. Madhva said he would wrestle them if they could, by choking him, silence his japa. Grasping his neck, the two powerhouses tried to stop his chanting one at a time and then together, but to no avail. Exhausted, the Goliaths bowed in defeat and asked, "What, may we ask, is the source of your power?" Madhva said, "It is the names of Vishnu." They, too, became disciples.

Madhva undertook one more tour of North India between 1280 and 1290, after initiating a number of his disciples into sannyasa. The final destination of his troupe was Badri. Among their many adventures was a famous encounter at the south bank of the Ganga. They were planning to cross by boat, but none was operating. They learned that war was brewing locally and that Balban, the Sultan of Delhi, camped on the north bank, had forbidden anyone to cross without permission. He who disobeyed would be brought to him and put to death. Hearing this, Madhva had his disciples stand in line behind him, each holding the garment of the one in front, and, walking on the river bottom, led them safely to the other side. Seeing them emerge from the river, the Sultan's soldiers rushed forward to arrest them. Madhva is said to have commanded, "Be quiet and behave yourselves. I want to see the Sultan." Appearing swiftly, Bal-

ban demanded to know how they dared defy his decree. Madhva answered in fluent and chaste Persian, presenting himself as an apostle of theism who took directives only from God. "I worship that Father who illumines the entire universe; and so do you. Why should I fear then either your soldiers or you? I am traveling through on my life's mission to spread the true faith in the one Supreme Being who is the ruler of the cosmos, whom all persons should worship by their honest work and loving devotion. We are all citizens of His kingdom." Disarmed by Madhva's fearlessness and purity, the

Sultan paid his respects, offered gifts, which Madhva declined, and provided safe passage to the monk and his followers.

When highway robbers attacked the itinerants in a deep jungle, Madhva rolled up one of his saffron robes and threw it into their midst. By his mystic power they saw it as a bag of gold and began fighting over it while the travelers walked safely on.

It was on this tour that Madhva secured several more important sacred icons and artifacts that to this day are the focus of worship for followers, including a set of ancient icons of Sri Rama and Sita

that were retrieved from the treasury of the Kalinga court. It is known that before returning to Udupi, the saint visited Goa, where he is said to have enthralled audiences, not only with his oratory, but with his music.

Returning at last to Udupi, Madhva spent the next two decades, 1290-1310, engaged in missionary work in Tulanad, the home territory of his burgeoning new sect. It is said he visited every home in the region. It was during this time that he faced the most formidable adversary he had ever debated, Trivikrama Pandit, a champion of Shankara's Advaita. Over fifteen days of fierce dialog between two opposite views of Vedanta, Madhva slowly but steadily gained ground. Finally, on the fifteenth day, Trivikrama admitted defeat and prostrated to Madhva in submission. Rising from the floor, the pandit had a spiritual vision in which he saw in Madhva the three incarnations of Vayudeva: Hanuman, Bhima and Madhva. He spontaneously spoke forth a *shloka* in praise of Madhva that is recited daily by Madhvas to the present time.

Perhaps Madhva's greatest genius was that he recorded his philosophy and system of religion so eloquently and completely. He authored—not by writing, but by dictation—thirty-nine original Sanskrit works, including four works on the *Brahma Sutra*, commentaries on the ten major *Upanishads* and on the *Rig Veda Samhita's* forty hymns; commentaries on the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavat Purana*, and two commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gita*; five hymns in praise of the Divine and five manu-



Madhva, on his way to find Rishi Vedavyasa in the high Himalayas, realizes that Satyatirtha, his disciple, has been following him



Realizing that he young monk has grown too weak to either proceed or go back, Madhva sends a supernatural burst of air which carries Satyatirtha to the safety of their base camp at Badri

one atma, or soul, in the whole of existence, and that great soul is called Brahman. Due to inexplicable ignorance, or maya, that one soul imagines itself (and thus appears) to be many. To Madhva, souls are multiple and eternally individual, real and distinct from Brahman, while at the same time one with it in essence. To support his position, Shankara quotes from Vedanta's "identity texts," while Madhva cites "difference texts," such as the following verse from the *Bhagavad Gita* 14:27, in which Krishna says: "I am the basis of that impersonal Brahman, which is immortal, imperishable and eternal, and is the constitutional position of ultimate happiness." Madhva interprets this to mean that the soul is an eternal spark or part of the energy of the Being who is the source of the Supreme Brahman.

In assailing Shankara's position, Madhva queries: If Brahman is the Supreme, how could there be a greater power that could put it under illusion? If Brahman has no parts, how can there be a Brahman that is both liberated and not liberated? If there is no liberated Brahman, how could liberation be possible? If the world is merely a dream, since many individuals are seen in the world, whose dream is it? How could someone teach of the non-distinctive Brahman if he did not recognize

the need to teach it, which is in itself a distinction?

#### Karma and the Individual Soul

From Madhva's point of view, each soul has a spiritual body, which is its true identity. When that eternal individual enters the realm of matter, it becomes covered with many layers of dark and unconscious matter. As a result, the soul's true nature goes dormant and is forgotten. In that bewildered state, the atma takes on material bodies, beginning with the lowest species and eventually ascending the ladder of reincarnation to human birth. Throughout these incarnations, the soul identifies

fully with its material body and mind.

When the soul reaches the human condition, its further progress is determined by its own actions, according to its free will. Material nature, or the natural mechanism of karma, responds like a mirror to this stream of choices. Through this unfolding process, souls may elevate themselves to the highest stratum of the material world or propel themselves to the lowest. Madhva points out that though he and Shankara agree that in order to achieve liberation, souls must carefully follow nature's laws by adhering to good moral conduct, the laws of nature are real distinctions that lead the real soul to another reality and

are not false presentations, as claimed by Shankara.

In theory, once a soul is within matter, it is possible for it to behave so badly that, by the laws of karma, it could become caught up in virtually endless bondage. Some critics have likened this aspect of Madhva's doctrine to the Christian belief in eternal damnation. But the two views are actually quite different. Christianity believes in a single lifetime, before which the soul does not exist, and it does not believe in karma as a law of nature. Further, Christianity's damnation to hell is moral punishment meted out by a vengeful God. Madhva's view is of an eternally divine soul that is lost in matter but could release itself from bondage. Its sufferings within matter are temporary, not eternal, and are not the result of a punishment by a condemnatory God, but a self-imposed consequence of wrong action in relation to the rules that govern matter.

#### The Means to Liberation

Madhva proclaims that Vedanta's ultimate conclusion is that the highest substance is the Supreme Brahman—Bhagavan, Vishnu, Hari—in all His eternal forms and avatars, as well as His supernal form, eternally full of all beauty and distinctions in the transcendental abode



als on sectarian practices. This literary legacy, along with the scriptures it comments on, forms the canon of his *sampradaya*, which is today one of the strictest, well organized and tightly administrated spiritual bodies in India.

Madhva's bold approach and the clarity and force of his scholarly writings are unique not only in India but in any theistic tradition anywhere in the world. If Shankara was the original "Unitarian," as the one, for instance, whose philosophy influenced the views of Emerson, Thoreau and other transcendentalists, then Madhva was

a "unique-itarian" standing as the fearless champion of the eternal existence of the individual soul. His bold assertion that the eternal truth of the *Vedas* was nearly lost and so he had to go straight to the source—to sit at the venerable feet of Vedavyasa in Uttara Badri, hear the true meaning of the *Vedas* from their original source and write that truth as his own commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*—is stunning.

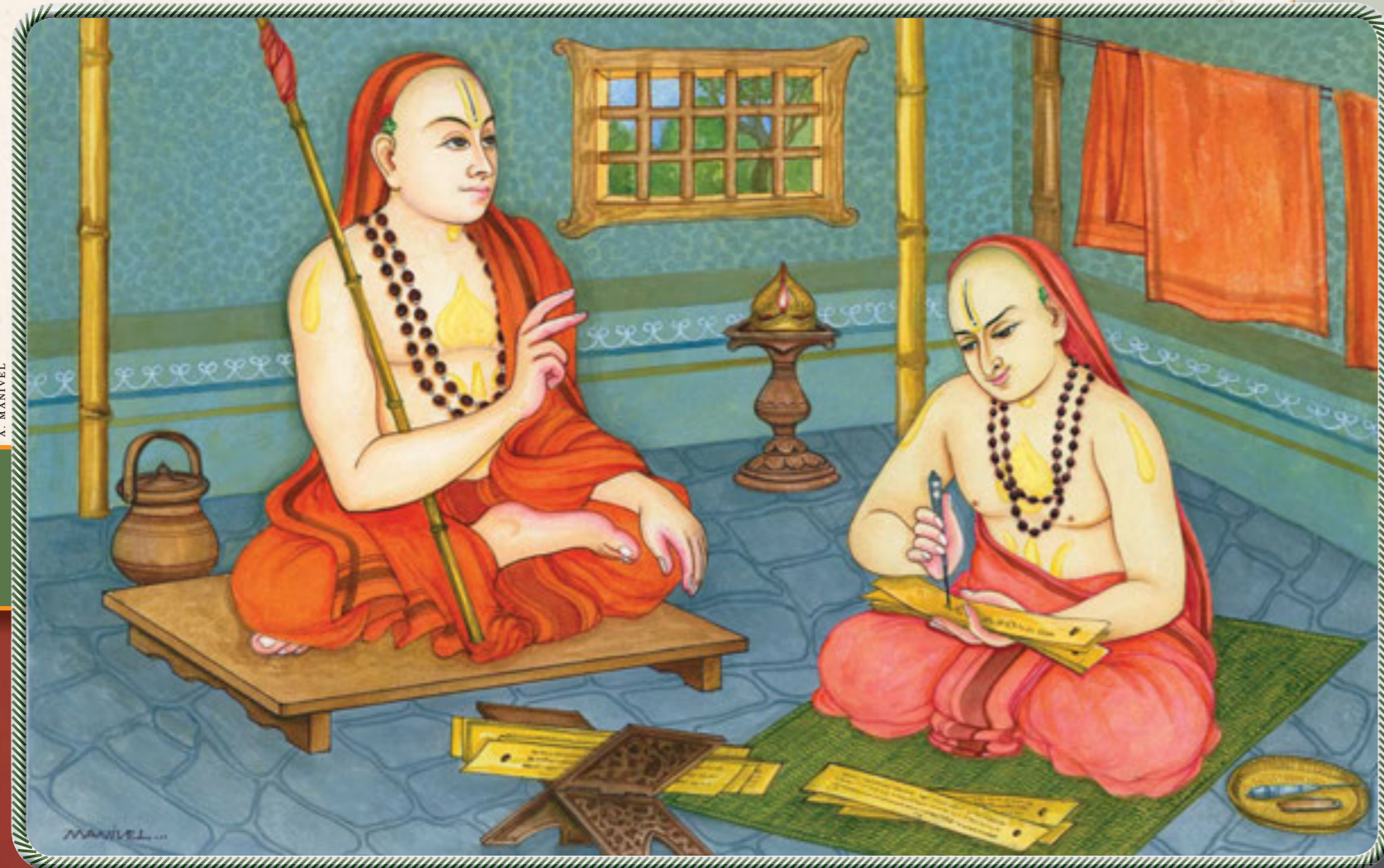
After his parents passed on, Madhva initiated his brother, Vishnuchitta, and seven other disciples into the order as sannyasins. The brother became known as Sri Vishnutirtha. Through these eight,

Madhva established eight (*ashta*) *mathas* in Udupi: Palimaru, Admaru, Shirur, Kaneyur, Pejavara, Krishnapura, Puttige and Sodhe.

Madhvacharya had a profound influence on other bhakti schools in his day, the most obvious and currently visible being the Gaudiya branch of Vaishnavism. Originating from Shri Chaitanya in West Bengal, its followers are widely known through the presence of ISKCON and related groups. The Gaudiya lineage traces itself to

Madhva, though the followers of Madhva are of the opinion that the Gaudiyas have deviated significantly from many important points in Madhva's teachings. Yet, both sects accept the nine points presented in this Insight (see sidebar below) as bedrock Dvaita Vedanta and have built their teachings on Madhva's foundation.

As for his own identity, in the last verse of his brief work summarizing Dvaita, the *Vishnu Tattva Vinirnaya*, Madhva declares, "In



## Madhva's Philosophy in Nine Tenets

From the Prameya Shloka, a summary of the tenets of Tattvavada written by Sri Vyasa Tirtha (1460–1539), a staunch and highly venerated Madhvite scholar and missionary

1. Hari (Vishnu) is Supreme. हरिः परतरः
2. The world is real. सत्यं जगत्
3. The differences are real. तत्त्वतः भेदः
4. The various classes of jivas are cohorts of Hari. जीवगणाः हरेः अनुचराः
5. They reach different states (lower or superior) ultimately. नीचोऽत्र भावङ्गताः
6. Mukti, liberation, is the experience of one's own nature. मुक्तिः नैज सुख अनुभूतिः
7. Mukti is achieved by pure devotion. अमलाभक्तिः च तत् साधनम्
8. The triad of perception, inference and testimony are the sources of valid knowledge. अक्षादित्रितयं प्रमाणम्
9. It is Hari alone who is praised in the *Vedas*. अखिल आम्नाय एकवेद्यो हरिः

Having returned to Udupi from the Himalayas, Madhva is dictating to Satyatirtha the Sanskrit commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* that he divinely received from Sage Vedavyasa. Satyatirtha is scribing his master's words on dried palm leaves. He will rub the leaf with lamp black to make the etching legible, then assemble the pages into a book, bound with a cord threaded through a hole in each leaf.

For Madhva, the scriptures, the guru and the Lord in person, within the heart or as an avatar, are the various ways in which Bhagavan, the Absolute Truth, reveals Himself. In all these revelations the soul can only invite the appearance of the truth. Sincere individual effort in material acts is necessary, but ultimately the Supreme Person, Vishnu, reveals Himself when and to whom He chooses. But what is it that induces the Lord to reveal Himself, and what is the destination of the soul to whom He has been revealed?

### Release Is the Attainment of Bhagavan

Madhva holds that nurturing the soul's relationship with Bhagavan is the correct aim of yoga practice or the cultivation of knowledge. It is not seeking knowledge of the impersonal Brahman or trying to negate and relinquish one's material identity that brings liberation, as Shankara would claim, but rather regaining the ability to see the transcendental form of Bhagavan face to face and then to render loving service to Him. Knowledge is not an end in itself; it is a means to awakening devotion.

In Madhva's view, the real soul remains an individual after liberation

and, in its spiritual body, resides in Vishnu's eternal abode, where it is no longer subject to birth, death, old age or disease. Madhva quotes from the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*, "Those who have attained final release assume, of their own accord, luminous bodies, and through them they enjoy only pure pleasures... They are rid of all miseries, as well as all undesirable merit, together with demerit, and they are freed from all defects and consist only of intelligence, bliss, etc."

This is radically different from the Advaitic view of liberation, to which such descriptions of the afterlife must simply be considered maya or illusion. Madhva argues that the scriptures abound in depictions of such spiritual places, which are real and eternal. Describing that transcendental world of bliss, he writes, "The liberated souls, having found their eyes and ears, loving one another, become hierarchically different in various qualities such as intelligence. Some among them play in the huge ocean of milk. Some play near and in the gardens. They bathe and behold themselves in deep, fine lakes fit to bathe in. They behold the Supreme Lord Himself."

### Genuine Worship

Madhva points out that while Shankara did institute among his followers a system of worshiping six Deities (Ganesha, Surya, Shakti, Siva,

and destination. The definition of Bhagavan, the Supreme Person, is *bhaga*, "wealth" (the six-fold opulence of riches, strength, knowledge, fame, beauty and renunciation), and *van* which means "who possesses." That being is also designated as Krishna, the Being who is by eternal nature the most attractive. Because the soul remains a distinct individual, now and in the transcendental state in the future, karma yoga and especially bhakti yoga are the surest means by which the soul achieves liberation and continues to act in the liberated state. Bhagavan is the highest substance, Madhva says, and moksha is reestablishing one's lost relationship with Him.

The Advaitic view, which was so troubling to Madhva, leads the soul

away from the world—for it is seen as false and illusory—and propels us toward an impersonal and indistinctive, transcendental Brahman, with which we merge in the final stage of moksha (liberation). At that moment, even our individuality is viewed as an illusion to be shed. We become the drop of water reuniting with the ocean, never again to be deluded by maya or our troublesome individuality. Due to Advaita's prejudice against all distinctions, including individuality, its preferred process of evolution is jnana yoga or the cultivation of discrimination and knowledge of Brahman. This inevitably leads to less emphasis on karma, or action, and especially bhakti, or spiritual emotion combined with service.



my first birth I was Hanuman, born to help Lord Rama rescue Sita from the asura Ravana. In my next birth I was Bhima, the strength of the Pandavas, born to defeat *adharmā* in the form of the evil-minded Duryodhana. And in this birth I am born to restore the real purport of the *Vedas* as serving only the highest truth, Lord Hari.”

One of the two most popular images of Madhva shows him as the muscular and indefatigable hero, scion of Vayu, the life force itself, in His triple form of Hanuman, Bhima and Madhva. The other shows him seated, resolute and focused, with two fingers on his right hand raised while chanting the slogan of Dvaita Vedanta, “Difference is real.”

Madhva left his body at the age of 79 in the year 1317. By one account, this occurred while he was lecturing to hundreds of dis-

ciples at the Ananteshvara Temple on the *Aitareya Upanishad*, his personal favorite. He recited a prayer based on the invocation to that terse scripture as his final instruction: “Om, may my mind and speech always be fixed upon the Supreme Being Who is the greatest of all. May that Being reveal Himself to me now and for evermore. May my mind and speech help me to understand the Vedic truths and may that truth always be present within me. Do not be idle. Day and night, remain dedicated to this endeavor. Always think this Truth and speak it to those who will listen. Lord Vishnu will protect those who do this and bring wisdom and peace to the world.” It is said that as he gave this final call for his followers to go forth and preach,

heavenly beings blanketed him in a shower of flowers under which he disappeared from this world and took residence in the transcendent realm of Sage Vedavyasa, high in the Himalayas. The place of his disappearance is honored as a holy spot to this day. By a simpler account, after passing on his various responsibilities to his disciples, he set out, all alone, for a third journey to Badri, never to be seen again. The day of his departure is celebrated as Madhvanavami.

Sriman Madhvacharya was the embodiment of resolution, individ-

uality and eternal truth, serving the wishes of Bhagavan Sri Vishnu to establish the eternal truths of the Hindu dharma, even with his final breath. He is one of Hinduism’s greatest heroes. The followers of Madhva continue his tradition with steadfast fervor.

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A primary reference for this brief summary of Madhva’s life was the book by B.N. Hebbar, *The Sri-Krsna Temple at Udupi, The Historical and Spiritual Center of the Madhwa Sect of Hinduism*, published in 2005 by Nataraj Books.

Inside the Krishna Matha, Madhva’s central monastery in Udupi, the guru gives a discourse on his philosophy, which he calls Tattvavada, “doctrine of truth.” His right hand displays the classic mudra by which he indicates, “Difference is real; difference is real; difference is real,” which is the essence of his doctrine.

Kumara and Vishnu), the devotee is, in fact, told to use the image of the Deity only as a means to concentrate the mind on Brahman. The aim is to go beyond the form and merge with Brahman. The form is thus, in the worshiper’s heart of hearts, taken as an illusory tool only—a means to an end, namely the unmanifest, formless Brahman. This, to Madhva, is not true worship. For worship to be true, he declares, the forms of the worshiped and the worshiper must be accepted as real and eternal and linked in a favorable relationship. He delineates three grades of image worship. In the first, the Deity is regarded as illusory and only a means to an impersonal, formless end. In the second, worship is performed in order to receive temporary personal benefits. In the third and only recommended type, the Deity is adored in full faith, as the Supreme Being, Bhagavan Vishnu. On this point he quotes the *Brihat Tantra*: “Just as Shri (the Goddess of Fortune), though eternally liberated and absolutely accomplished, eternally contemplates Vishnu, so shall the devotees of Vishnu do the same.”

To Madhva, it is as subversive for the soul to claim that there is no Bhagavan, but only an impersonal-energy Brahman, as it would be for an ordinary citizen to claim to be the king. It is on this crucial point that the doctrine of bhakti rests. If the soul will not recognize that Bhagavan is a Person, or that He can come to Earth as an avatar if He wishes, or make Himself known in the scriptures or within one’s heart, and, most importantly, that He is Bhagavan, the possessor of all opulence, then how, Madhva asks, can one render genuine service to Him? And without rendering service, how could one ever become liberated from ignorance and bondage? The world is, in fact, a jail full of rebellious souls who refuse to recognize the greatness of the Supreme Being. The Advaitin’s idea of becoming Brahman at the point of liberation is, to Madhva, the ultimate act of envy and hostility toward Vishnu.

Madhva quotes from the *Mathara Shruti*, “Devotion alone leads one to the Supreme; devotion alone shows Him; in the power of devotion is the Person. Devotion only is the best of means.” He writes, “The voice of the clouds, the music of the spheres, the fury of the winds, the roar of the ocean waves, the names of the Devas and the sages are all names

of the Supreme, giving voice to His eternal glory and majesty.”

Madhva deeply valued diligent scholarship and study of scripture. In this regard he quotes the *Brahma Taraka*: “Only on the proper study and understanding of all the *Vedas*, supplemented by a study of the *Itihasas* (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*), *Puranas* and the doctrines of logical principles guiding their interpretation (Mimamsas), is the knowing of Vishnu possible, and not otherwise.”

#### Final Distinctions

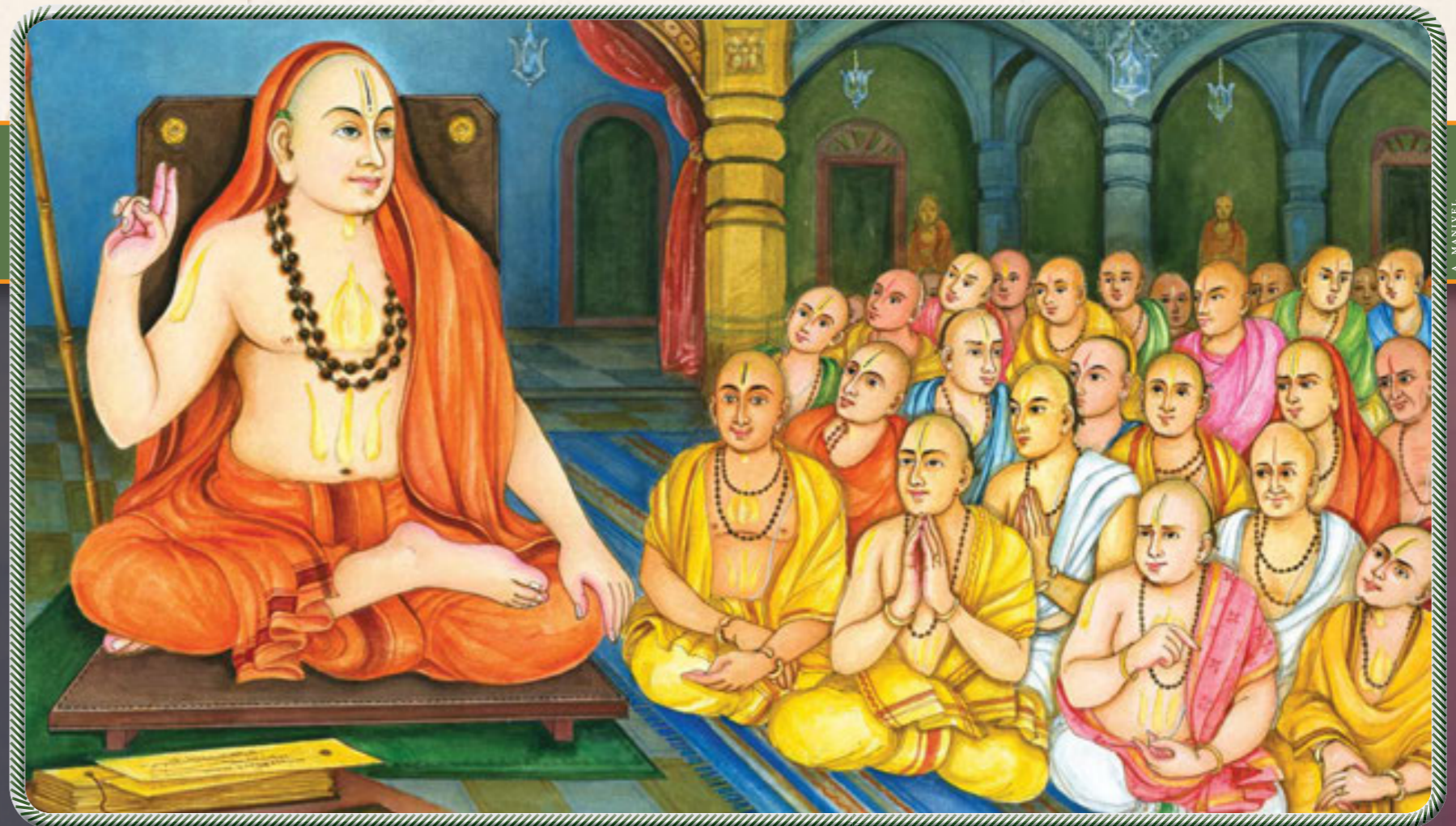
Madhva’s view culminates in the belief that our individuality never had a beginning and never ends. Differences or distinctions are not only real and eternal, but vital in that they convey to us the unique nature of all that exists. In spite of the fact that we are not and can never be supremely powerful, knowing and beautiful, we are so intrinsically unique and individual, that through our desire and actions we can inspire the Supreme Being to engage us in an intimate, loving relationship. Hindu holy texts abound in ideal paradigms: the friendship of Arjuna or Draupadi, the service of Hanuman, the parental love of Yashoda and Dasarath, the conjugal love of Sita, Rukmini or the all-consuming devotion of Radha and the Gopis, the unswerving devotion of countless beings sung of throughout the scriptures. All these give credence to Madhva’s thesis—that devotion, love and service are a path of eternal and joyous existence.

#### Conclusion

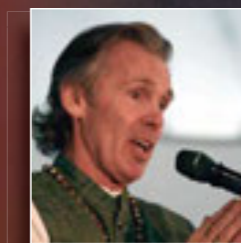
That, in brief, is the Vedantic thesis of the irrepressible Madhvacharya, one of the great saints of Indian history. Monumental doc-

trines have been created by many other saints: Tirumular, Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Vallabhacharya, Nimbarka, Vasugupta, Basavanna, Meykandar, Aghorasiva, Gorakshanatha, Srikantha, Swaminarayan and others. Their insights and debates are all gifts to humanity’s search for truth and spiritual liberation.

The magnificence of our Hindu dharma is that such great thinkers have delineated these philosophical points so keenly, creating a map of consciousness that followers may employ to discover for themselves what is real, unreal and relatively real. In our Hindu dharma, each seeker is free to decide which of these or other views he accepts, which inspires his heart and lights his path. What a marvelous diversity and arena for exploration Hindu dharma provides!



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeffrey Armstrong is the Media and Communications Director for both the Vedic Friends Association (VFA) and the Hindu Collective Initiative for North America (HCI-NA), and founder of VASA, the Vedic Academy of Sciences & Arts. In this role he speaks at corporations, yoga ashrams and centers, temples, ayurvedic and astrological conferences, and teaches a wide variety of seminars based on the Vedic knowledge. His website is [www.JeffreyArmstrong.com](http://www.JeffreyArmstrong.com).