

The Great Madhvācārya

1238–1317 A. D.

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Śrī Madhvācārya, also known as Vāsudeva, Ananda Tīrtha and Pūrṇaprajña, is one of India's greatest theologians. He is the founder of *dvaita* philosophy, and along with Śaṅkarācārya, is one of the most important commentators on the *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Brahma-sūtras*.¹ His doctrine asserts that this world is real and that there is an eternal and immutable difference between the individual soul and God.

What is known of Madhva's personal life is largely taken from the *Madhva-vijaya*, a work by Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa, who was the son of a direct disciple of Madhva.² Madhvācārya was born of Tulu speaking parents in the Karnataka region of South-west India near present day Udupi. (See the accompanying map.) The *Madhva-vijaya* mentions how the young Vāsudeva, Madhva's boyhood name, expressed a desire to become an ascetic as early as age 8. Madhva's parents naturally objected, and so it was not until he was about 16 years of age that Madhva was able to leave home and become a *sannyāsī*.³ From then on the young Vāsudeva became known as Ananda Tīrtha, the name given to him by his *sannyāsa guru*.⁴ Ananda Tīrtha later assumed the name Madhva by which he is most commonly known today. In many of his

¹ One might expect to see the name of Rāmānuja on this list, but Rāmānuja did not write any commentaries on the Upaniṣads.

² Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa was the son of Trivikrama Bhaṭṭa (1258-1320).

³ One who has adopted a formal vow of renunciation according to the ancient social system of *varṇāśrama-dharma* is called a *sannyāsī*.

⁴ The *sannyāsa-guru* is the teacher who initiates the student into the formal path of renunciation. Madhva's *sannyāsa-guru* was Acyutaprekṣa.

writings Madhva openly identifies himself as the third incarnation of *mukhya-prāṇa* (Primal Breath) alluded to in the *Ṛg Veda*⁵ It is said that *mukhya-prāṇa* takes the form of the wind-god (Vāyudeva) and descends into this mortal world in three successive incarnations: as Hanuman, the follower of Rāma, as Bhīmasena, one of the Pāṇdava, and finally as Madhva, who in *Kali-yuga*⁶ appears in the guise of a *sannyāsi*. Ananda Tīrtha's followers readily accept and worship him as Madhva, the incarnation of Vāyudeva. (See the accompanying illustration showing this triple descent.) Sometimes Ananda Tīrtha is also known as Pūrṇaprajña due to his display of vast learning.⁷

Madhva's childhood, like most great saints in this world, is filled with much hagiographic information including miracles and wondrous events. On one such occasion Madhva's father safely carried him as an infant through a jungle infested with man-eating tigers in order to dedicate him at the temple of Ananteśvara in Udupi. It is said that Madhva, as a child, often went missing from home only to be found worshipping God and discussing philosophy with the priests in the nearby temples. Madhva once saved his father from a debt collector by miraculously satisfying the man with a handful of seeds instead of coins. It is said that Madhva had no need to learn the alphabet. Instead he spent his time wrestling and swimming. When the examinations came the young Madhva easily passed, much to the consternations of his teachers.

⁵ In eleven of his thirty-seven works, Madhva declares himself to be an *avatāra* of Vāyu (the wind deity). These works include his commentaries on the *Aitareya*, *Taittirīya* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* as well as his *Mahābhārata* commentary, *Mahābhārata-tatparya-nirṇaya*. *Ṛg-veda: Baḷīthā-sūkta* 1.141.

⁶ In the Hindu view of time there are four *yugas* or cyclical ages: *satya*, *treta*, *dvāpāra* and *kali*. *Satya-yuga* is considered the most conducive to spirituality. *Kali-yuga* is the least.

⁷ The word *pūrṇa-prajña* literally means "full wisdom."

There is some controversy over the date of Madhva's birth. However all sides agree that he lived for 79 years. B. N. K. Sharma gives the date of his birth as 1238. Older estimations suggest the date of 1199.⁸

As Aristotelian logic dominated education during the medieval days of Europe, so Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita-vedānta* dominated Hindu education during the days of Madhva. We are told how Śaṅkara's *advaita-vedānta* produced a profound dissatisfaction in the mind of the young Madhva, which often brought him into conflict with his teachers. In fact Madhva's objection to *advaita-vedānta* became the most compelling force in this life and he spent much of his adult life arguing against this view of the world.

After studying in Udupi, Madhva traveled east to Tamil Nāḍu where he continued to meet and debate with *advaita* scholars. Throughout his life, wherever Madhva traveled, he vigorously engaged in debate, not only with *advaitins*, but also Jains, Buddhists and *nyāyayikas*.⁹ This first tour was most important for Madhva because it allowed him to see firsthand that the followers of Rāmānuja also objected to Śaṅkara's *advaita-vedānta*. He witnessed how they had attacked Śaṅkara, and he realized that the monolithic walls of *advaita* were not impervious after all. As a result Madhvācārya became determined to establish his own school of Vedic thought, free of what he considered the blunder of Śaṅkara's interpretation of the Vedas.

⁸ For a detailed account of the dates of Madhva's birth see B. N. K. Sharma's *History of the Dvaita School of Vedānta and its Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), p. 79.

⁹ The Nyāyayikas are the followers of the classical school of Hindu logic called Nyāya. This is one of 6 traditional philosophies of India.

Madhva soon returned to Udupi, but after a short time he again found himself yearning for more travel. This time he desired to make a pilgrimage to North India. In particular, he wanted to visit Veda Vyāsa¹⁰ at Badari in the northern Himalayas. In those days it was thought that Vyāsa still resided on earth in a remote place in these mountains. Not much is known about the route Madhva took or what occurred along the way, but after arriving in Badari he mysteriously disappeared one night. We are told that he had ascended alone to the mythical abode of Vyāsa at Mahābadari. Many months passed and Madhva's followers thought that he had perished in the desolate mountains. When he finally appeared he was resplendent and joyful. He had received the blessings of Vyāsa. Upon his return to Udupi, he immediately began to write his famous *Brahma-sūtra* commentary.

With the emergence of this important commentary, Madhva had something positive to add to his otherwise destructive debates with his opponents. With the zeal of Hanuman he began his missionary work. As a youth Madhva was a superb athlete in wrestling and water-sports. As an adult he now used his physical stamina and sonorous voice to travel and preach. Madhva was so effective in his teaching that he soon won the conversion of his former teachers and many other learned men to his new school of Vedic thought.

The *Madhva-vijaya* describes the effect Madhva had on his audience:

People came in large numbers to see that Madhvācārya, who shone like the moon with his gentle smile, lotus-eyes, golden complexion and words of blessing. He had the gait of a

¹⁰ Vyāsadeva is the ancient compiler of the Vedas and the author of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*.

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.

Soon Madhva started his own temple in Udupi by installing a beautiful image of Bala Kṛṣṇa, the child form of God. It is said that he obtained this image by rescuing a ship in distress near the coast of Udupi.

Madhvācārya signaled the ship to shore by waving lamps and flags. Convinced that it was through the grace of Madhva that the ship was saved, the ship's captain offered him a gift. Madhva chose the clay (*gopi-candana*) that was used for the ship's ballast. Upon washing the clay, Madhvācārya discovered a beautiful image of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, which He personally carried to Udupi and began to worship. This image of Kṛṣṇa is still worshipped today in the central temple of Udupi.

Madhva's Udupi temple is one of the most important Kṛṣṇa temples in all of India. It is said that the lamp beside this image of Kṛṣṇa was lit by Madhvācārya himself and has never been extinguished.

The force of Madhva's personality, the clarity of his thought and the appeal of his vast learning brought many followers. But his rising success also brought great resistance and even hostile attacks from his opponents. We read of a raid on his huge collection of manuscripts. He was also attacked for instituting religious and social reforms in the Udupi region that included an end to animal sacrifice and the prohibition of liquors (*soma-rasa*) during religious ceremonies.

Madhvācārya later made another tour to Badari and the modern-day cities of Delhi and Benares. He also made numerous tours throughout

his own region of south India. Along the way he continued to spread this new faith and increase the number of his followers.

During his lifetime, Madhvācārya wrote many important commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad-gītā*, *Brahma-sūtra*, *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. In addition, he wrote many original works that dealt with important aspects of his new doctrine. In all, he wrote 37 works. Not only did Madhvācārya's powerful literary output help to establish his teachings during his own lifetime, it has inspired a vast literary tradition that continues to the present day.

The final years of Madhva were spent in teaching and worship. In the end he instructed his followers not to sit still, but to go forth and preach. His biographers tell how Madhvācārya disappeared one evening while reciting his favorite text, the *Aitareya Upaniṣad*. Gandharvas and other heavenly beings gathered in the sky above him and showered flowers. They describe how he suddenly disappeared from underneath this mass of flowers and now he now resides, beyond ordinary vision, with Veda Vyāsa at the high mountain hermitage of Badari,.

The Writings of Madhvācārya

The writings of Madhvācārya comprise thirty-seven works, collectively called the *sarva-mūla*. They are divided into four groups. The first group includes his commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Vedānta-sūtra*. In this group there are ten *Upaniṣad* commentaries, two

Gītā commentaries and four *Vedānta-sūtra* commentaries.¹¹ The second group includes ten short works called the *Daśa-prakaraṇas* that outline the basic principles of Madhva's theology and demonstrates his refutation of key aspects of *advaita* theology. The third group is Madhva's commentaries on the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*¹² and the *R̥g-veda*. The fourth group is his miscellaneous works that includes important poems, writings on rituals, image worship and rules for the ascetic order.¹³

Madhva's writing style is straightforward, unembellished and terse. Were it not for the explanations of his later commentators, especially Jayatīrtha in the 14th century, Madhva's theology may have remained obscure due to its extreme brevity. Never does Madhva engage in long discussions like his predecessors, Śaṅkara or Rāmānuja. It was left to the work of his followers to bring forth the subtlety of his thoughts.

There is a controversy that hangs over Madhva's writings. His works are filled with a great number of corroborating sources that are no longer extant. Consequently, the authenticity of his sources has been called into question. Madhva has even been accused of inventing many of his references. Over the centuries this has been an important issue for Madhva scholars. It is known that Madhvācārya had an extensive library of manuscripts and it has been argued that his references have

¹¹ The ten *Upaniṣads* that Madhva has commented on are: *Īśa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Praśna*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Aitareya*, *Taittirīya*, *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya*. The two *Gītā* commentaries are *Gītā-bhāṣya* and *Gītā-tātparya*. His *Vedānta-sūtra* commentaries are entitled: *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*, *Aṅu-bhāṣya*, *Anu-uyākhyāna* and *Nyāya-vivaraṇa*.

¹² Madhva's *Mahābhārata* commentary, *Mahābhārata-tātparya-nirṇaya* is one of his most important works. In it he demonstrates how scripture (*śāstra*) can be interpreted on three levels: historical, allegorical and metaphysical.

¹³ This fourth division includes Madhva's *Dvādaśa-stotra* that is regularly sung before honoring *prasāda* (eating).

been drawn from this collection of manuscripts. B. N. K. Sharma has elaborately discussed this criticism.¹⁴

A Brief Synopsis of Madhva's Theology

The school of theology that Madhva founded is commonly called the *Dvaita School*. It is also known as *tattva-vāda*, the doctrine of categories. The word *dvaita* means duality. According to this view, reality is composed of only two basic principles: the independent (*sva-tantra*) and the dependent (*para-tantra*). God or the Supreme Being is the only independent reality. Everything else, soul (*jīva*), matter (*prakṛti*), time (*kāla*), action (*karma*), etc. are dependent realities. Although these dependent realities are eternal and distinct in their own right, they only exist through the consent and sanction of God.

Stated as *tattva-vāda*, Madhva says that reality is composed of three basic categories (*tattvas*): God (*īśvara*), soul (*jīva*) and matter (*prakṛti*). All three of these categories are real and distinct, but with one essential qualification, soul and matter are dependent on God.

The idea of two orders of reality, one independent and the dependent, and the real differences that exist between the various categories of reality are the hallmarks of Madhva's *dvaita*. Madhvācārya is often depicted in a sitting posture with his hand raised showing two fingers. The gesture of two fingers indicates duality (*dvaita*). Madhva's theology is based on a strict realism. For Madhva the differences that we see in this world are real and not due to illusion (*māyā*). Madhva's

¹⁴ See B. N. K. Sharma's *History of the Dvaita School of Vedānta and its Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), p. 85-89.

duality, therefore, greatly contrasts Śaṅkara's theology of oneness, *advaita*.

In fact Madhva describes five basic differences: the difference between the soul and God, the difference between matter and God, the difference between one soul and another, the difference between matter and the soul, and finally, the difference between one element of matter and another. Suffering in this world is the result of improperly understanding these differences. One who correctly understands these five differences has attained knowledge and is fit for *mokṣa* (liberation).

Another notable feature of Madhva's theology is his tripartite classification of souls. According to Madhva there is an infinite number of souls that can be divided into three groups. Some of them qualify for liberation, some are condemned to eternal hell, and others are subject to eternal rebirth. Madhva's tripartite classification of the soul is unique in Hindu theology, but one that he and his followers maintain can be substantiated from Vedic scripture.

Followers of Madhva

In the last 700 years there have been many great scholars and saints in the tradition of Madhvācārya. Here is a short biography of just a few of the earliest:

Jayatīrtha (c. 1388). After Madhva himself, Jayatīrtha is the most important theologian in the *dvaita* tradition. During his time he wrote 22 works including many commentaries on Madhva. He is to Madhva what Vācaspati Mīśra was to Śaṅkara. His depth of scholarship can be

credited with raising the fledgling *Dvaita* School to a position of scholastic equality with *Advaita* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita*. Jayatīrtha's most important work is his *Nyāya-Sudhā*, which is an exposition of Madhva's *Brahma-Sūtra* commentary, *Anu-Vyākhyāna*.

Vyāsatīrtha (Vyāsarāja Svāmī) (1460 – 1539) Together with Madhva and Jayatīrtha, Vyāsatīrtha is considered the third of the three founders (*muni-trayam*) of *Dvaita Vedānta*. His writings include commentaries on the works of Jayatīrtha and Madhva. He was the guru and spiritual advisor to the famous Krishnadevarāya¹⁵ and played an important role in the Vijaya Nagar Empire. He is credited in writing nine works, the most important of which is his *Nyāyāmṛta*. Not only did his writing include polemics on Śaṅkara's *advaita*, but also an exhaustive refutation of the Nyāya-vaiśeṣka school of logic in his *Tarka-tāṇḍava*. Vyāsatīrtha is also known for his involvement in the Hari-dāsa order of itinerant singers.

Vādirāja Tīrtha (1480 – 1600) Along with Jayatīrtha and Vyāsatīrtha, Vādirāja Tīrtha is considered the senior-most scholar of the *Dvaita* School. He was a prolific writer with more than a 100 works to his name. Using a less demanding writing style, it was Vādirāja who brought the beliefs of *dvaita* to the general reader. His writings include a number of commentaries and well-known *stotras*. His most important work was the *Yukti-mallikā*, which is a defense of the *dvaita* system. He also translated Madhva's *Mahābhārata* commentary into Kannada, and has composed numerous devotional songs in that same language.

¹⁵ Krishnadevarāya was the most famous ruler of the Vijaya Nagar Empire. He assumed the throne in 1509.

Purandara Dāsa (1494 – 1564) This saint among the Mādhvas is widely renowned as the father of Karnataka music. He was also one of the founders of the Hari-dāsa tradition that sought to spread the doctrine of *dvaita* through music and in the language of the ordinary people. He was a disciple of Vyāsātīrtha and a contemporary of Vādirāja Tīrtha. He is regarded by Mādhvas as an outstanding scholar and devotee. Purandara Dāsa and his followers, the Hari-dāsas, did in Karṇāṭaka what the Aḷvār movement¹⁶ did in Tamil Nāḍu. Purandara Dāsa was a great musician and composer of popular songs that embody the devotional flame lit by Madhva.

Rāghavendra Tīrtha (c. 1671) Over forty works have been attributed to Rāghavendra Tīrtha. Most are commentaries on the works of Madhva, Jayatīrtha and Vyāsātīrtha. Chronologically he is the last of the major commentators of the early school of *dvaita*. His writings cover the widest range and the most variety of topics. Although he ranks as one of the greatest scholars of *dvaita*, he is most known and worshipped by the masses as a source of solace in times of crisis.

Mādhva Institutions

Today the followers of Madhva, collectively known as the Mādhvas, are governed by 23 religious organizations called *maṭhas*.¹⁷ The *maṭha* consists of a senior ascetic known as a *svāmī* along with his students and other followers, usually married couples. Such *maṭha* institutions govern the entire religious sect (*sāmpradāya*). The Mādhva *maṭhas* can broadly be grouped by the language spoken by a majority of its followers: Tulu, Kannaḍa, Marāṭi, Telugu, and Konkani. These *maṭhas*

¹⁶ The Aḷvars were saints within the tradition of Rāmānuja who popularized the path of devotion in the Tamil language.

¹⁷ The word *maṭha* is often anglicized and written as mutt.

also correspond to the geographic regions where the languages are spoken.

In 1278 Madhvācārya founded the Krishna Mutt in Udupi. In his later years he gave responsibility to eight of his senior disciples¹⁸ to conduct the worship and administrative affairs for his Krishna Mutt. These eight disciples gradually collected their own followers and established their own *maṭhas* that later became known as the *aṣṭa-maṭhas* (eight mutts) of Udupi. These eight *maṭhas* are named after the surrounding villages where they originally resided.¹⁹

Down to the present time this succession of eight *maṭha-svāmīs* are the joint trustees of Madhva's original Krishna Mutt. Consequently, they hold prestigious positions as custodians of the historical and spiritual center of the Mādhvas. In a system of rotation lasting two years they hold office as High Priest for the Krishna Mutt. The change of office from one *maṭha-svāmī* to the next takes place four days after the annual *makara-samkranti* festival²⁰ on January 14th of every even year. The festival that marks this change is known as the *ṣaryāya* festival. The *ṣaryāya* festival is still current today and is worth traveling to Udupi to see. In addition to the eight *maṭhas* of Udupi there are four other *maṭhas*, which govern the Tulu speaking followers of Madhva.²¹

Outside of Madhva's home territory there are 11 other *maṭhas* called the "out-country" or *deśastha-maṭhas*. These *maṭhas* serve the needs of

¹⁸ Hṛṣīkeśa Tirtha, Narasimha, Janārdana, Upendra, Vāmana, Viṣṇu, Rāma and Adhokṣaja Tirtha.

¹⁹ The names of the eight Udupi *maṭhas* are as follows: 1. Palimār Mutt 2. Ādamār Mutt 3. Kṛṣṇāpur Mutt 4. Puttige Mutt 5. Śirūr Mutt 6. Sode Mutt 7. Kāñūr Mutt and 8. Pejāvar Mutt.

²⁰ *Makara-samkranti* is the time of the year when the sun moves into the zodiac sign of Capricorn (*makara*). It is also the date when the sun resumes its northern path (*uttarāyāna*) in the northern hemisphere.

²¹ 1. Bhaṇḍārakere Mutt 2. Bhīmanakaṭṭe Mutt 3. Kukke Subrahmaṇya Mutt 4. Chitrāpur Sūratkal Mutt.

Madhva's Kannada, Marāṭī Telugu and Konkani speaking followers.²² Each of these *maṭhas* has their own rich spiritual and historical traditions.

The Hari-dāsas

There is one other important "institution" within the Madhva tradition. This is the order of the Hari-dāsas. Literally the expression *hari-dāsa* means servant of Hari (God). The Hari-dāsas were a traveling order of saintly souls who dedicated themselves to the service of God through song and music. The Hari-dāsas are particularly centered around the Deity known as Viṭhala of Pandhapur. They were able to exercise a powerful influence on the masses because their songs were in the common language of the people. The Hari-dāsas captured the heart and the imagination of the people in general. They did for the lower stratus of society unlearned in Sanskrit what the great writers on the *Vedānta* did for the higher strata of society. The Hari-dāsas extolled the merits of knowledge and devotion and gave good advice on matters of morality and ethics. As followers of Madhva the Hari-dāsa tradition reflects the strong influence of *dvaita* through its songs and music.

Some important names within the Hari-dāsa tradition are Narahari Tīrtha (1324), one of Madhva's direct disciples, Vyāsatīrtha and Purandara Dāsa, already mentioned as important commentators, and Kanaka Dāsa (1508 1606), a simple shepard devotee. Saturated with devotion, Kanaka Dāsa composed thousands of musical compositions in praise of God. There is a famous story that tells how the priests of

²² 1. Uttarādi Mutt 2. Vyāsatīrtha (Vyāsarāj) Mutt 3. Rāghavendra Mutt 4. Śrīpādarāja Mutt 5. Majjigenahalli Mutt 6. Abbūr or Kundāpūr Mutt 7. Kūḍli (Akshobya) Mutt 8. Bālagāru (Akshobya) Mutt 9. Kanva Mutt 10. Gokarṇa Mutt 11. Kāshi Mutt.

Udupi refused to allow Kanaka Dāsa to enter the temple because he belonged to low caste. One day as Kanaka was singing the praises of Udupi Kṛṣṇa outside the temple an earthquake occurred that created a small crack in the back of the temple wall facing Kanaka Dāsa. The image of Śrī Kṛṣṇa then turned from east to west to see Kanaka Dāsa through this crack in the temple wall. Today this place is famous and pilgrimes come to see the image of Kṛṣṇa through this “crack” known as Kanaka’s window.