

1 Gauḍapāda: Life and Works

The “great teacher” Gauḍapāda is one of the most venerated sages of the early Vedānta tradition; it is generally assumed that he is separated from Śaṅkara by at least one generation of preceptors. In the final passage of his commentary on Gauḍapāda’s magnum opus, the *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*, Śaṅkara pays tribute to him as his *parama-guru*, that is, either as a “great teacher,” or as the “teacher of [his] teacher.” In fact, passages from the *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā* are cited almost verbatim in Śaṅkara’s *Commentary on the Brahma-sūtra* (*Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*, 1.16, is referred to in *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*, 2.1.9, while the reference to the *kārikā* 3.15 is found in *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*, 1.4.14). Though Gauḍapāda is not named in Śaṅkara’s *Commentary on the Brahma-sūtra*, he is nonetheless hailed as a great “knower of the Vedānta tradition” (*vedānta-saṃpradāya-vid*). We can also find a reference to Gauḍapāda in Śaṅkara’s *Commentary on the Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, where it is stated that Gauḍapāda was a pupil of another renowned Vedānta sage, Śuka.¹ There is also the testimony of one of Śaṅkara’s closest disciples, Sureśvara, who cites Gauḍapāda’s *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā* in his work *Naiṣkārmya-siddhi* (“The Realization of [the state of] Non-action”),² as well as in his commentary on Śaṅkara’s *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*-

1. See Śaṅkara, *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad-bhāṣya*, 1.8: tathā ca śukaśiṣyo gauḍapādācāryaḥ / (“and thus [it was said] by the teacher Gauḍapāda, the disciple of Śuka”).

2. See *Naiṣkārmya-siddhi*, 4.41, where Sureśvara cites from the *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā* (hereinafter referred to as MK), 1.11, and *Naiṣkārmya-siddhi*, 4.42, where he introduces a passage from MK, 1.15. In

bhāṣya.³ Both passages from Gauḍapāda's *Kārikās* and occasionally his name, keep cropping up in later Vedānta works,⁴ the context usually being that of deepest veneration.

The very name of the Vedānta preceptor is known to us in several versions; apart from the most popular form of 'Gauḍapāda', favoured by Śaṅkara, there are close variations such as 'Gauḍācarana',⁵ 'Gauḍapādācārya' (Śaṅkara's *Commentary on Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, 1.8), 'Gauḍācārya' (Vidyāraṇya's *Pañca-daśī* ["The Five Chapters"], 2.23), and simply 'Gauḍa' (Sureśvara, *Naiṣkārmya-siddhi*, 4.44).

It is difficult to say anything definite about Gauḍapāda's life, since—as is the case with most early Indian religious teachers—the only available information is derived either from hagiographies or from scanty references in other works. In the living tradition of oral instruction in Vedic knowledge, Gauḍapāda is considered to be the teacher of Śaṅkara's own master, Govinda. A later Advaitin, Ānandagiri, who wrote his own commentary (*Ṭīkā*) on Śaṅkara's commentary to *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*, notes at the beginning of his text that Gauḍapāda started his spiritual quest with a long penance (*tapas*) deep in the Himalayas, at Badarikāśrama, which was considered to be the sacred residence of the Lord Nara-Nārāyaṇa. Having pleased

Jñānottama's gloss to the text of Sureśvara, the passage is identified as "the saying of Gauḍapāda" (*gauḍapādīya-vākya*). See Colin A. Cole, *Asparśa-yoga: A Study of Gauḍapāda's Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982), 3-4.

3. See Sureśvara, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārttika*, 1.4.389 (with the reference to *gauḍapādīya-vācas*—"the words of Gauḍapāda") as well as 2.1.386 and 4.4.886.

4. To name only a few instances: Vidyāraṇya, *Pañca-daśī*, 2.28 and 2.29; Sadānanda, *Vedānta-sāra*; Maṇḍanamīśra, *Brahma-siddhi*, etc. See more details in Cole, *Asparśa-yoga*, 4.

5. This version is found in Bālakṛṣṇānanda's *Śārīraka-mīmāṃsā-bhāṣya-vārttika*, 2.9-12. See T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Gauḍapāda: A Study in Early Advaita* (Madras: University of Madras Press, 1957), 7-8; Cole, *Asparśa-yoga*, 4.

the Lord with his perseverance, Gauḍapāda obtained permission to propound the tenets of Advaita Vedānta. Many believe that he received his preliminary instruction in this system from the legendary sage Śuka. After that period of study, Gauḍapāda composed his commentary on the *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*. According to the testimony of a later Advaitin, Bālakṛṣṇānanda (seventeenth century), Gauḍapāda was originally one of the esteemed masters of the Gauḍas, who lived on the banks of the river Hīrāvatī (probably, North Bengal).⁶ So it is quite possible that Gauḍapāda was named after his people, or ethnic group, with the *pāda*, a common honorific, added later.

For many years, scholars believed that Gauḍapāda lived about the seventh century (based upon the assumed date for Śāṅkara, 780-820, since he precedes Śāṅkara by approximately a century). However, after Śāṅkara's date was shifted to an earlier time, it was felt that the same should apply to Gauḍapāda. V. Bhattacharya and T. M. P. Mahadevan⁷ both suggested that a much more plausible date for Gauḍapāda's life should be about A.D. 500.⁸ Their assumption was largely based upon the testimony of some Buddhist texts. For instance, Bhāvaviveka in his *Tarka-jvala* ("The Jewel of Reasoning"), the autocommentary on his *Mādhyamika-hṛdaya-kārikā* ("The Kārikās on the Heart of Mādhyamika [Teaching]"), 8.10-13, cites passages extremely close to the *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*. And literal passages from the *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā* are found in Śāntarākṣita's *Tattva-saṅgraha* ("The Collection [of Writings] on the Essence [of Learning]"), 93, while his pupil, Kamalaśīla, in his commentary *Pañjikā*, identifies them as *upanīṣat*

6. Bālakṛṣṇānanda, *Śārīraka-mīmāṃsā-bhāṣya-vārttika*, 2.9-12. See T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Gauḍapāda*, 8-9; R. D. Karmakar, ed. *Gauḍapāda-kārikā*, translation and notes (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute Press, 1953), iv.

7. See Mahadevan, *Gauḍapāda*, 309.

8. See V. Bhattacharya, ed. and tr., *The Āgamaśāstra of Gauḍapāda* (Poona: 1943, lxxv-lxxviii; Mahadevan, *Gauḍapāda*, 13-15.

śāstra—“the teaching of the Upanishads.” Since Śāntarakṣita’s date is definitely ascertained from the Tibetan sources (705-762), this sets the latest limit for Gauḍapāda’s date. And since Gauḍapāda himself is citing passages that sound very much like Nāgārjuna and Aśaṅga, the earliest date could not be set before A.D. 400. In other words, most scholars now seem to agree that the probable date of Gauḍapāda’s writing is the fifth or the very beginning of the sixth century.⁹

Gauḍapāda’s most prominent work is, undoubtedly, his commentary on the *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*, or *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*. The metrical treatise *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā* is also known under the names ‘Gauḍapāda-kārikā’, ‘Gauḍapādīya-kārikā’ (“The Kārikās of Gauḍapāda”), and ‘Āgama-śāstra’ (“The Śāstra on the Sacred Text”). Gauḍapāda has also written a commentary (*Bhāṣya*) on Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s *Sāṅkhya-kārikā*, as well as another commentary (*Vṛtti*) on *Uttara-gītā*. Sometimes Gauḍapāda is cited as the author of a number of Tāntric works, including *Subhāgodaya-stuti* and *Śrī-vidyāranya-sūtra*. In Vedāntic tradition, he is also believed to have written other independent works and commentaries, but there is no evidence to substantiate this.¹⁰

9. See *Asparśa-yoga*, 7-8.

10. See R. D. Karmakar, *Gauḍapāda-Kārikā*, v-x, as well as the general enumeration of his works in Cole, *Asparśa-yoga*, 7-10.