



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING BRAHMAN

The Hidden Lives of Śaṅkara's Vedānta Teaching

Most interpreters have regarded Śaṅkara's works as an intellectual tradition concerned primarily with *brahman*, understood as the ultimate reality transcending all particular manifestations, words, and concepts. Śaṅkara's primary teaching, this view asserts, is that the transcendent brahman cannot be attained through any effort or activity, as it is already the essential nature of anyone who seeks it.¹ Building on the work of Marcaurelle (2000), Malkovsky (2001) and Suthren Hirst (2005), I show in this book that such a characterization is technically correct, yet also significantly misleading, as it ignores the hidden lives, as it were, of the notion of brahman. For Śaṅkara as for brāhṃaṇa traditional generally, brahman is paradoxically just as much an active force, fully connected to the dynamic power of words and imagination, as it is a transcendent ultimate. Malkovsky (2001) has argued that for Śaṅkara, "the world . . . is constantly pervaded by [brahman acting as] reality-providing and directing cause," and that brahman also acts as merciful and generous Lord (71, 83). In this book I describe the ways brahman's dynamic presence has manifested in embodied practices and settings up to the present day; the notion of brahman's hidden "lives" provides thematic continuity for this description.

To set the tone for exploring the hidden lives of brahman in Śaṅkara's teaching, I begin with an account of the annual celebration of his *Jayanti* celebration—literally his "victory day," today also widely interpreted as his "birthday"—in the bustling pilgrimage town of Śṛṅgeri, nestled in the cool hilly landscape of Karṇāṭaka state. When I first visited Śṛṅgeri during the torrential monsoon rains of 1997, two years before attending the "victory" celebration there, I made the three-hour car journey up the mountains from

the coastal town of Udupi, just north of the port of Mangalore on India's southwest coast. As I approached the town on barely paved single-lane roads full of pot holes, winding through a terrain lush with rice patties, palm tree groves, and small tributaries flowing into the nearby Tunga river, I experienced the enchantment that has drawn so many people to this place throughout its long history. I later found its idyllic setting frequently highlighted in pamphlets and publications about Śṛṅgeri, often in quaint Indian English prose: "The highpeaks (sic) of the Western Ghats silhouetting against the sky, the dense forest full of tropical vegetation, the warbling birds and the solitudes (sic) of sun-rise and sun-set conjure up an irresistible vision of a hermitage of ancient rishis."² "Rishis" are the visionary poets whose words are recorded in the vast oral collection known as *veda*, still preserved by traditional *brāhmaṇas* (Brahmins), from which the tradition of vedānta stems.

The Celebration of Śaṅkara's Victory

Calmly avoiding oncoming buses as they walk through Śṛṅgeri's main street, men and women return from their early morning ritual baths at the river's edge. Today is the first day of Śaṅkara's Jayanti celebration, the day after the new moon in April, but few people seem to know about it. Hidden to the side of the town's *maṭha*, its center of teaching and worship, hidden from the open terraces crossed daily by hundreds of pilgrims making their way to the large riverside stone temples for which Śṛṅgeri is famous, a much smaller wooden temple shelters an icon of Śaṅkara. Inside its enclosure, a *brāhmaṇa* has removed the metal shell that usually covers the stone statue, revealed only on special occasions like this one, and bathes it with water. Several dozen *brāhmaṇa* men wrapped in traditional bordered white cloth gather outside the temple, sitting on the veranda of the quarters that surround and conceal it.

Men, both young and old, sit in groups of three or four; some sit on straw mats, while others stand, reciting the three-tone melodic patterns of *veda*. These are the hymns and ritual formulas originally composed and chanted in Saṃskṛta (often anglicized as "Sanskrit") during elaborate fire-offering rituals known as *yajñas*, among the most ancient rituals of Hindu tradition. Few *brāhmaṇas* today perform *yajñas*, yet many still memorize with extreme precision the hymns and other recitations composed and compiled over many generations to accompany the ritual. On this morning, each group is chanting the *veda* of its own lineage learned by heart from fathers and teachers; long ago, each lineage would have been expected to fulfill a different ritual function in communal *yajñas*, but here the distinct sounds all blend together.

Scattered between these clusters of chanters, several other brāhmaṇas sit by themselves. Each stares down at a book propped up on a short wooden desk, muttering the text to himself. Some books contain praise verses describing the purported events of Śaṅkara's life; others summarize his ideas, and still others are his own commentaries—most of them on *upaniṣads* (also sometimes designated *vedāntas* in the plural), stories and proclamations about the mystical insight inspired by fire-offering. Those who study Śaṅkara's vedānta teachings and commentaries usually recite them individually, rather than intoning them in groups. Today, the neighboring intonations of veda drown out such vedānta mutterings, but the mutterers persist all the same.

As the morning wears on, dozens of young boys from Śṛṅgeri's vedic school (*pāṭhaśālā*) begin to arrive, also dressed in white. Advanced students join the groups of older men reciting veda, who examine the boys to see how well they have memorized their assigned portions. Most students, however, gather before the steps of the Śaṅkara temple and recite the better-known vedic hymns and ritual formulas taught to all brāhmaṇa boys at Śṛṅgeri, if they have not already learned them at home. In this group the higher pitches of prepubescent voices combine with the lower tones of the older boys, rivaling in volume the veda recitations of the older men.

At the back of the veranda, finally, stands a student of a different kind, watching the icon of Śaṅkara and the men gathered around it from a distance. Though dressed in white like everyone else, his pale skin color, peculiar facial features, and gray backpack all betray a foreign origin. From his remote vantage point the distinct sounds of recitation blend into a single mass of sound, which seems to him to bathe the icon of Śaṅkara like the water being poured over it. Yet as he approaches and sits near individual reciters, chatting with them and asking about their recitation, he discerns different melodies and sounds. The school's students, teachers, and local residents are by now familiar with the peculiar American visitor, freely answering his many questions posed in clumsy Kannaḍa, the local language. The brāhmaṇa guests who have come to recite at this festival, however, are more cautious, keeping their distance from him.

That evening, in the larger audience hall adjacent to the Śaṅkara temple, the same brāhmaṇas return once again to honor Śaṅkara. This time, however, the voices that had competed and blended together at the morning session are distributed differently. In the morning, the praises, ideas, and comments of Śaṅkara himself were barely audible. Now in the evening praise of Śaṅkara's ideological "victory" over competing points of view, brāhmaṇas feature these very same comments, ideas, and praises in public speeches, delivered into microphones and broadcast by loudspeaker to the entire temple grounds and to most of the town. Much briefer veda recitations, on the other hand, merely begin and end the program, like a decorative frame.



1.1 Bronze icon of Śaṅkara worshipped in the small temple at the back side of the Śringeri audience hall during Śaṅkara's "Victory Day" celebration (photograph by Prashant Sringeri).

This shift in emphasis from the raw power of sound and gesture in worship to eloquent proclamations of Śaṅkara's teaching manifests also in the spatial focus of the evening proceedings. The stone icon is out of sight; now all gather around the living representative of Śaṅkara's lineage at Śṛṅgeri, a bearded man on a silver throne, dressed in ochre robes lined with gold borders. Ochre cloth is the traditional mark of one who has renounced all ties to family life and its accompanying rituals, as Śaṅkara himself reportedly did, to devote himself exclusively to the pursuit of spiritual goals. In formal announcements, this ochre-clad man is known either as *jagadguru* ("world-teacher") or by his proper name, Bhāratī Tīrtha. In common discourse, he is often simply the *ācārya* ("[teacher] of *ācāra*" or tradition), a title often appended to Śaṅkara's name ("Śaṅkarācārya"). To most of Śṛṅgeri's residents and frequent visitors he is "Svāmijī" ("master," a common term of address for renunciators).³ Reciters, speakers, and dignitaries all sit to either side, the brāhmaṇa students in front, and behind them many other spectators—town residents, pilgrims, and of course the curious looking foreigner, now in shirt and pants, equipped with notebook and tape recorder.

Narasimha Mūrti, the young principal of Śṛṅgeri's traditional school for the study of veda, welcomes everyone. He then quotes a well-known verse of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (BG), thus setting the theme that will be broadcast repeatedly throughout this and subsequent evenings:

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata |
abhy-ut-thānam adharmasya tadā 'tmānam sṛjāmy aham ||

Whenever there is a fading away of order,
O descendent of Bharata,
And an uprising of disorder—
at that time I propel myself forth (i.e., incarnate in some form). (BG 4.7)

Just as the Supreme Lord incarnated in the world as Kṛṣṇa at a time of internecine conflict, so also He manifested as Śaṅkara when *nāstikas* ("those who say 'it is not'") were maligning *āstikas* ("those who say 'it is'"), who upheld the authority of veda. Narasimha Mūrti clearly implies (as later speakers will make explicit) that in this modern age of acculturation and technological distraction, the current ācārya has appeared among us to uphold the true teaching of veda.

Indeed, Bhāratī Tīrtha's maintains a firm guiding hand from the start of the proceedings. Vipra Nārāyaṇa, an energetic elderly teacher from Śṛṅgeri's veda school, comes forward to recite the *Śaṅkara Dig Vijaya* (ŚDV, "Śaṅkara's Conquest of the [Four] Directions") a widely known, late medieval Saṃskṛta life story of Śaṅkara. After stumbling over his written text and accepting brusque corrections uttered by the ācārya, he notes the dimness of the light where he is sitting; the ācārya instructs him to move further forward into the light, insisting on clear recitation. Once Vipra

Nārāyaṇa is reading more confidently, Svāmijī sits with his face intent. Sometimes he mouths the words silently as he hears them. Once he jokes with those sitting near him about a pun suggested in the text. Occasionally he closes his eyes and folds his palms in salutation during the refrain of a verse. At other times he yawns and scratches his beard, his eyes remaining alert. When the recitation concludes nearly an hour later, the ācārya's face remains attentive as the evening's two featured speakers take turns delivering their own eulogies of Śaṅkara in Kannaḍa. While they occasionally mention Śaṅkara's ideas and quote his works, their discourse focuses on his superhuman talent and the urgent need for his teaching today. As the evening unfolds the hall fills with curious passersby; many have never heard of Śaṅkara, but are eager to catch a glimpse of the charismatic figure on the silver throne around whom this celebration centers.

As the celebration moves towards its fourth, concluding day, Bhārati Tīrtha becomes increasingly involved in both the morning and evening sessions. Arriving on the morning of the third day, he calls the reciters of Śaṅkara's branch of the veda, the Taittirīya, to sit by the steps of the Śaṅkara temple and chant together. The men and boys sit facing each other in two rows, one side chanting a line and the other picking up where the first left off. As they alternate back and forth their volume increases; the ācārya urges them on by chanting along, correcting flaws in pronunciation. As in the evening program the ācārya's presence attracts spectators, mostly brāhmaṇa families who have come to hear the recitation and to see "Svāmijī" in action.

During the fourth and final evening session, the hall is tightly packed: by now everyone knows about the celebration, and many have heard that Svāmijī himself will be speaking. Vipra Nārāyaṇa, now properly illuminated, confidently completes the ŚDV, and after some brief introductions that again stress the need to maintain tradition during our current age of moral decline, the ācārya takes the microphone and assumes his authority as "world-teacher." He jokes in characteristic fashion that everyone says they like to hear a talk on vedānta, because then they know they will easily fall asleep. He begins to discuss more closely the teachings of the founding figure whose worship he has overseen for the previous three days. After preparing his audience to listen carefully, he imparts loudly and clearly the teaching that the speakers of the three previous evenings have been advertising: you yourself are already *paramātman*, the supreme self of all beings, the ineffable, transcendent reality known as *brahman*, the goal which everyone is seeking. Any notion that you have to do something to attain that goal is an obstacle to higher understanding!

The ācārya's audience responds to this potentially startling message much as they faced the preceding hours of recitation and eulogy. Some attentively nod their heads; others sit with eyes glazed and eyelids drooping; many exhibiting responses between these two extremes. The pale-skinned foreign observer, by contrast, is relieved finally to hear some teaching familiar from his previous study of Śaṅkara's thought through written sources, and to observe this teaching delivered in public. Just weeks earlier, while visiting



1.2 Bhāratī Tirtha presides over recitation of *Śaṅkara's Conquest of the Directions* at Śaṅkara's Victory Day celebration in the Śringeri audience hall, April 1999 (photograph by Prashant Sringeri).

the more traditional brāhmaṇa village of Mattūr a few hours from Śṛṅgeri, he had observed the care with which some brāhmaṇas guard both vedānta teaching and the sacred syllables of veda with which that teaching is associated. One brāhmaṇa teacher leading students in veda recitation at a small temple paused the group's chanting as the foreign observer passed by; others declined to admit him to classes studying Śaṅkara's upaniṣad commentaries.

Śaṅkara's Vedānta Teaching and The Hidden Lives of Brahman

Despite a thirteen hundred year gap between Śaṅkara and contemporary Śṛṅgeri's socio-cultural context, the structure of many of Śaṅkara's unquestionably authentic works⁴ intriguingly parallels that of the contemporary celebration of his "victory" described above. Just as hours of methodical veda recitation and elaborate praises frame the Śṛṅgeri "world teacher's" universal proclamation about brahman, so also Śaṅkara's commentaries deal primarily with upaniṣadic descriptions of ritual and narratives praising the exploits of divine powers. In both cases, ritual and eulogy frame the less common, powerful descriptions of the ultimate, ineffable brahman for which Śaṅkara is better known. In contrast to the spontaneous flow of morning worship and evening proclamations at Śṛṅgeri, of course, Śaṅkara's exegeses and proclamations are now fixed in print, and also adhere closely to the fixed words of the sources on which he comments. Yet subsequent chapters will highlight significant continuities between contemporary practice and the much older vedānta writings of Śaṅkara and others, traveling repeatedly back and forth from ancient sources to ethnography, allowing each to inform the other despite the differences. Malkovsky (2000, 72), Marcaurelle (2000, 13) and Suthren Hirst (2005, 5) have each in their own way emphasized that considerable detective work is needed to gather clues regarding the worldview that provides the foundation for Śaṅkara's writings. In this book I build on and deepen their analysis of those writings, by showing that understanding continuities between vedānta's past and present is the key to reconstructing the wider intellectual, ritual, and social contexts that framed Śaṅkara's teaching.

Specifically, this study combines consideration of ethnographic details like those described above with study of Śaṅkara's unduly neglected commentaries (*bhāṣyas* or "bh" in title abbreviations) on the *Taittirīya* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣads* (TU and BU), often excerpted but so far rarely studied independently.⁵ The examples I present confirm the assessments of Ingalls (1954) and Suthren Hirst (1996, 581; 2005, 161) that these two works are at least as important as others that have received far greater attention. Building on Suthren Hirst's observation that Śaṅkara's commentaries reveal his skill as a teacher (2005, 3, 66–88), I treat those works as selective transcripts of Śaṅkara's exchanges with students, highlighting that it is in such upaniṣad commentaries that Śaṅkara teaches most dynamically and

imaginatively. Although the small talk and tangential discussion commonly observed in contemporary exchanges between vedānta teachers and students are only hinted at in such “transcripts,” the TUbh and BUbh nevertheless reflect the long-standing influence of a similar teaching format. But while I refer to this and other continuities and changes in vedānta and brāhmaṇa culture from medieval times to the contemporary period, I leave for future researchers the more sustained comparison of past and present, hinted at in the final paragraph of chapter 10, which would otherwise have compromised the focus of the book as a whole.⁶ I draw on contemporary practice solely to reconstruct Śaṅkara’s medieval pedagogical environment.

As stated at the outset, I take the concept of brahman as the thematic focus for this reconstruction. As Bhāratī Tīrtha’s pronouncements succinctly summarize in vedānta’s own terms, brahman is completely beyond knowing or attainment, yet at the same time essentially identical with the self of every individual being, and so in fact self-evident to everyone. Interpreters of Śaṅkara—including many predecessors of the “pale-skinned foreign observer” and author of this book—have been fascinated with this characterization of brahman as a completely abstract yet immediately accessible ultimate.⁷ But the above scenes reveal that there is more to brahman than this theoretical description. Marcaurelle (2000) notes that “most of the key words [Śaṅkara] uses to discuss renunciation are polysemous,” distinguishing polysemy from ambiguity by noting that proper evaluation of polysemous terms in Śaṅkara’s writings generally yields a clear, specific meaning (12). The polysemous nature of the term “brahman” unites the chapters of this study, though along the way I will also point out other polysemous terms. Śaṅkara himself alludes to the polysemy of the term “brahman” in commenting on one upaniṣad’s claim that the syllable “Om̐” is a form of brahman, noting that “the word ‘brahman,’ without any qualifier, simply denotes a great thing.”⁸

Three historically ancient uses of the term “brahman,” typically neglected in the study of Śaṅkara, hint at ritual and pedagogical practices integral to the brāhmaṇa communities where Śaṅkara studied and taught, which remain important in places such as Śrṅgeri and Mattur.⁹ First, in the ancient period, the term “brahman” designated the mysterious power of fire-offering rituals (*yajñas*)—especially their power to maintain the harmony of the cosmos. The nature of this power is exhaustively described and debated in esoteric declarations known collectively as “brāhmaṇas”; the oldest upaniṣads are a small yet influential part of those brahmaṇa collections, collected and studied separately only since the medieval period. Somewhat confusingly, at least since Śaṅkara’s time, members of the social class entrusted to preserve this “brahman” have also been known as “brāhmaṇas”—the Saṁskṛta term commonly anglicized as “Brahmin.” Secondly and closely related to the first designation, the term “brahman” initially referred to the resonant, mysterious sound of the numerous verses and prose consecrations, collectively known as *mantras*, that were uttered during *yajñas* and embodied

their power. Thirdly, brāhmaṇa sources that comment on the fire-offering rituals of veda commonly speak of brahman as the personified creator god Prajāpati—commonly referred to in medieval literature by the masculine form “Brahmā”—whose world-creating ritual activity serves as the model for human ritual activity. This personified brahman’s all-pervasiveness is also evident in hidden parallels between the macrocosm of divine reality and the microcosm of human reality. This notion of divine-human correspondence is rooted in the ancient vedic concept of *ṛta*, which Mahony (1998) describes as “that eternal truth, that universal artfulness of being, which preceded even the gods themselves, to which the gods aligned and harnessed themselves” (49).¹⁰

In this study I show that all these aspects of brahman, especially language and ritual, are key to understanding both Śaṅkara’s teaching and the worldview of the brāhmaṇa sources from which ancient upaniṣads are drawn. To isolate any one aspect of brahman is to misunderstand the worldview in which Śaṅkara’s teaching is rooted. The mystery and expansiveness of veda, printed records of which span over a dozen volumes, and the rituals that inspired it, which span the annual cycles of days, months, and seasons, all mirror the mysterious expanse of brahman’s creation. For Śaṅkara as for the upaniṣads on which he draws, I claim, brahman is far from a nondescript, all-encompassing abstraction; it is a richly textured web of divine mystery, which not only transcends all limited things but is also fully immanent in them.

Threefold Preparation for Insight in Śaṅkara’s Teaching

Using Suthren Hirst’s systematic descriptions of Śaṅkara’s teaching method and religious context as a foundation, this study emphasizes that Śaṅkara assumes his students have already done considerable work to prepare themselves. This preparation, I argue, involves three increasingly subtle types of skill, each associated with one or more of the commonly unacknowledged aspects of brahman outlined above. The teaching method spotlighted by Suthren Hirst, I contend, builds on those three skills in leading students to brahman-insight.

In his commentary on the first aphorism of the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, Śaṅkara famously lists four qualities that must be addressed before a person can inquire (*jijñāsa*) into the nature of brahman: (i) “discrimination between constant and inconstant things” (*nityānitya-vastu-viveka*); (ii) “disenchantment with enjoyment of things wished for, both here [in the physical world] and there [in other realms]” (*ihāmutrārtha-bhoga-virāgaḥ*); (iii) “mastery of methods such as quieting [the mind] and taming [body and senses]” (*śama-damādi-sādhana-saṃpat*), and (iv) “yearning for release [from all limitation]” (*mumūkṣutvaṃ*).¹¹ The first of these involves primarily insight into the underlying reality that encompasses all change. The second and fourth are negative and positive descriptions of a particular

affect: disenchantment with limited forms of enjoyment, and yearning for release from all limitation. The third quality consists of control over externally and internally directed impulses. The four qualities may thus be condensed into three: (i) discriminating insight regarding brahman's constancy; (ii) disenchantment with enjoyment of limited things and yearning for release from limitation, which complement one another; and (iii) control over mind and senses.

Since Śaṅkara does not himself explicitly discuss these qualities apart from briefly alluding to them, one might initially conclude that he is simply intoning an inherited formula to which he is not personally committed. As Suthren Hirst (2005, 74–88) points out, however, the teaching process modeled in Śaṅkara's commentaries directly encourages these qualities; similarly, Rambachan's (2006) independent assessment of the "Advaita worldview" emphasizes that "understanding of these values and their expression in one's life grows and deepens" as the student progresses (21). In this study, I extend Suthren Hirst and Rambachan's observations by pointing out that the perfection of each quality entails the development of *skills* that imply engagement in specific *practices*—practices broadly valued by brāhmaṇas, but that have generally been ignored and/or deemed peripheral by readers standing far removed from Śaṅkara's pedagogical environment. As Marcaurelle (2000) notes, Śaṅkara acknowledges that veda study is accessible to ruling and merchant classes, and that there are alternative practices for those unqualified to study veda (31–32, 130); but he most likely "taught mainly to Brahmins, who were probably the most qualified to understand the subtle argumentation of his revival, the most concerned about it, and the most competent to spread it throughout society once converted to his doctrine" (39). I expand on this observation by demonstrating that Śaṅkara's works not only explicitly encourage but also precisely guide the development of skills developed through *brāhmaṇa* practices.

For most brāhmaṇas, such skills and the practices that hone them develop in the order opposite to that suggested by the traditional list, beginning with training that leads to (iii) control over mind and senses. This training involves actively envisioning the dynamic network of sacred symbols and divine powers addressed through fire-offering. Such envisioning is not free-form, but rather involves reflection honed in a ritual context, most often designated *upāsana* or "attending:" the veneration of simple objects, such as the rising sun, food, and one's breath, accompanied by gestures of offering and recitations, while verbally and mentally associating these objects with deities and other symbols described in vedic sources. The heart of such ritually informed reflection is often a vedic declaration which summarizes key features of the deity or symbol in question, and identifies the practitioner with it. Envisioning entities encompassed by the term "brahman," then, involves actively visualizing the mystical connections suggested by vedic declarations.

Brāhmaṇas who recite at Śṛṅgeri's "victory" celebration publicly display the power of vedic words that inspire *upāsana*. Chapters 2 and 3 expand

on this description, observing the way these brāhmaṇas draw on vedic declarations to guide the upāsana rituals that frame their daily tasks, noting important parallels to ancient sources. In chapters 2 and 4, I expand on the work of Bader (1990), Marcaurelle (2000), Malkovsky (2001) and Suthren Hirst (2005) to illustrate that upāsana is just as important to Śāṅkara, considering often ignored passages from his TU and BU commentaries that interpret upaniṣadic descriptions of deities as prompts for upāsana practice. In these contexts, familiarity with upāsana ritual clearly drives Śāṅkara's method in making sense of his sources. His willingness to make space for describing upāsana suggests that he has in mind students who are still perfecting (iii) control over mind and senses. Such examples, then, show Śāṅkara approaching brahman as a power rooted in ritual, and especially in the recitations that guide most brāhmaṇa worship.

The second type of preparation clearly assumed by Śāṅkara's commentaries builds on (iii) the self-control developed through upāsana, but more directly addresses (ii) disenchantment with enjoyment of limited things and yearning for release from limitations; it also lays the foundation for (i) the discriminating insight, dealt with more directly as part of the third type of preparation described below. The skills in question here involve imagining brahman's multifaceted nature, including its creations, its all-encompassing transcendence, and the hidden connections (also called "upaniṣads"¹²) between the parallel micro- and macrocosms of its created forms and its all-encompassing nature as transcendent source. Such imagination helps to discern that which obscures brahman's ever-present reality.

As with the envisioning involved in upāsana, imagining the transcendent brahman's relationship to the forms it creates involves more than free-form, spontaneous reflection; it depends on deep conditioning (*saṃskāra*) formed through years of Sāṃskṛta language training that often either accompanies or follows memorization of veda. Such training seeks to develop a combination of grammatical skill, aesthetic sensibility, and logical acuity that enables the mind to grasp the imaginative depictions of brahman in vedic sources, as well as the artful words of teachers who sort through those sources. Grammar provides the foundation both for logical thinking and for appreciation and application of literary and rhetorical techniques. The study of post-vedic, medieval (i.e., "classical") poetic works, which commonly employ nature metaphors and analogies to praise exemplars of vedic tradition, plays a central role in the development of Sāṃskṛta conditioning. Aesthetic sensibility is also a key element in the more advanced study of abstract aphorisms, which often rely on striking analogies and the dramatic exchange of conflicting views to reveal the hidden patterns underlying language and nature. The imaginative engagement with brahman enabled by Sāṃskṛta training complements and enhances envisioning brahman by means of upāsana; yet such engagement requires greater sensitivity to the meanings of and connections between Sāṃskṛta words.

Eulogies of Śaṅkara and his modern representative at Śṛṅgeri publicly display the grammatical skill, aesthetic sensibility and logical acuity developed through Saṃskṛta training. Chapters 5 and 6 build on this description by detailing the year-round training of brāhmaṇa students at Śṛṅgeri, which aims at the same balance of grammar, aesthetics, and logic already evident in historically distant, classical Saṃskṛta sources. The public debates of Saṃskṛta scholars at Śṛṅgeri each autumn most fully display the perfection of such training. In chapters 5 and 7, expanding on examples surveyed by Suthren Hirst (1996, 2005), I show that Śaṅkara relies on the literary and rhetorical techniques developed through such Saṃskṛta training to enhance the use of inferential reasoning in his TU and BU commentaries, in distinctive ways that scholars highlighting the logical dimension of Śaṅkara's thought have often ignored. Guided and inspired by the striking imagery and words of the upaniṣads themselves, Śaṅkara artfully adds his own analogies to pivotal transitions between key sections of the TUBh and BUBh. He systematically cross-references vedic descriptions of divine beings and psycho-spiritual phenomena, thus highlighting the TU and BU's own creative use of imagery. And he uses word plays and dramatic exchanges between conflicting views during the simulated commentarial debates that break up the commentary. All of these examples reveal that Śaṅkara's depictions of brahman are considerably more multifaceted and colorful than is commonly assumed by those unfamiliar with his Saṃskṛta prose.

The third and most complex preparation assumed in Śaṅkara's commentarial teaching builds on the logical acuity nurtured via imagining brahman, but focuses exclusively on developing (i) discrimination between the constancy of brahman and the inconstancy of its created forms, the first and arguably most important of Śaṅkara's prerequisites for inquiry into brahman. Most importantly, this third type of skill distinguishes constant brahman-insight from the inherently inconstant efforts and means aimed at attaining it. Śaṅkara stresses that inconstant effort directed towards ritual and envisioning can in no way produce constant brahman-insight, since brahman is already the self-existent perceiver present in all; thus the two should never be confused. Paradoxically, however, Śaṅkara at the same time admits that ritual and envisioning help clear a space for brahman-insight both before and following its emergence.

Discerning this paradoxical relationship between constant insight and inconstant effort grows out of a yet another culturally specific brāhmaṇa tradition: deep inquiry (*mīmāṃsā*) into the intricate structure of vedic ritual and the vision it inspires, which trains the brāhmaṇa mind to perceive in the seemingly heterogenous words of vedic sources a set of coherent underlying aims. For Śaṅkara, it is *mīmāṃsā*'s deep thinking about vedic ritual, the words that guide it, and the vision it inspires that holds the key to discriminating between constant and inconstant things.

But *mīmāṃsā* and the ritual and visionary practices on which it is based are barely visible at the Śṛṅgeri celebration of Śaṅkara's "victory." The

worship of Śaṅkara's image, which to some extent echoes the structure of vedic fire-offering, hints at vedic ritual's lingering influence. The solitary readers whose mutterings are drowned out by the recitation of veda at each morning session also provide clues about mīmāṃsā's residual impact: a few of them hold books analyzing the elements of fire-offering. Śṛṅgeri's more specialized fall gathering of Saṃskṛta scholars, described already in chapter 6, includes more public display of mīmāṃsā, though discussants have for the most part abandoned fire-offering itself. Chapter 9 suggests that the clearest evidence of mīmāṃsā's lingering importance is provided by several renunciators who quietly sit to the side of these scholarly debates, dressed in the same ochre color worn by Bharati Tirtha and thus most visibly representing the ideal of Śaṅkara's teaching. Although these less royal renunciators understand only a few words of mīmāṃsā discourse, they nevertheless reverently honor its importance.

In chapters 8 and 10, nevertheless, I observe that Śaṅkara's medieval upaṇiṣad commentaries vividly illustrate the power of deep inquiry into the nature of fire-offering. Relating the work of Olivelle (1975, 1992), Rambachan (1991), and Clooney (1990 & 1993), who have together conclusively demonstrated the central place of mīmāṃsā in vedānta teaching, to the more recent insights of Marcaurelle (2000), I propose that it is upaṇiṣad commentaries like the TUBh and BUBh that most consistently explore and illuminate both sides of the paradoxical relationship between constant brahman-insight and inconstant efforts to attain it. Most dramatically, Śaṅkara expands BU 1's references to the creator Prajāpati, the personification of brahman in brāhmaṇa sources. Śaṅkara depicts Prajāpati engrossed in the inconstant efforts of fire-offering and envisioning the divine powers of his own creation, guided by mīmāṃsā principles; yet the same Prajāpati also seeks constant insight into his own nature as brahman. More systematically, in commentarial passages noted by Marcaurelle (2000) and Hirst (2005), Śaṅkara explicitly discusses the relationship between ritual, envisioning, and brahman-insight, explaining the deeply rooted parallels and connections between them by highlighting the central role that vedic sources play in all three. I throw clearer light on these densely worded discussions by pointing out a striking analogy, hinted at in imagery and semantic patterns scattered throughout Śaṅkara's works, that dramatically resolves the puzzling contrast between inconstant ritual and envisioning and independently arising, constant brahman-insight, likening the emergence of brahman-insight to the inspired moment of fire-offering and the pause that follows it. Through this analogy, Śaṅkara conveys that discerning the constant brahman does not require retreat to a disembodied state, but rather involves perceiving brahman in the midst of ritual activity enlivened by envisioning the divine. These activities wear away whatever obstacles prevent insight from arising, and also repeatedly bring the mind's awareness back to that insight once it has arisen.

The three types of preparatory skill outlined above, interestingly, parallel the threefold process of hearing (*śravaṇa*), reflective thinking (*manana*),

and intensive concentration (*nididhyāsana*) for seeing (*darśana*) the transcendent self; most vedānta thinkers accept this threefold process, based on Yājñavalkya's instruction to his wife Maitreyī (BU 2.4.5/4.5.6), as a standard paradigm.¹³ But vedānta tradition typically applies the threefold process of hearing, reflecting, and concentrating only to the study of "great statements" (*mahā-vākyas*), short upaniṣadic sentences that proclaim brahman's intimate connection to the individual self. The parallel between my own and traditional vedānta's threefold sequence, however, supports Suthren Hirst's (1996) observation that, at least in the BU, Śaṅkara associates the three processes with a broader range of activities. The traditional focus on a small number of potent utterances thus likely builds on the significantly broader foundation of skills highlighted in this study.

Like his living representative Bhāratī Tīrtha at Śrīngeri, Śaṅkara emphasizes that brahman is always fully available, transcending notions of agency and activity; beyond any limited form, however expansive; and thus unattainable through skills and practices. Yet Marcaurelle (2000, 105–30) and Mayeda (1992, 88–94) have argued that Śaṅkara is able to make these radical claims so emphatically only because he assumes that those he addresses are well prepared to grasp such claims through the three types of training describe above. This threefold preparation, the fourfold qualities referenced by Śaṅkara as prerequisites for inquiring about brahman, and the traditional vedānta threefold process of hearing, reflection, and concentration are not steps leading to brahman, but rather mutually reinforcing ways to *abandon* all means. Śaṅkara's upaniṣad commentaries directly illustrate this point: in them, he guides the development of each of the three skills as the occasion arises, rather than in sequence. The three parts of this study underscore this dynamic interweaving of skills, surveying the same two commentaries but pointing out different features with each pass through the material. Though more involved than widely available summaries of vedānta concepts, this layered approach mimics the learning trajectory of the traditional (i.e., brāhmaṇa) vedānta student.

I have noted that Śaṅkara's major commentaries most vividly illustrate the importance of the threefold preparation outlined above; below I discuss more fully this and other reasons for taking a closer look at them. I also clarify in what sense I speak of brahman's "lives" reflected in these two sources, and point out distinctive elements in my approach to translating vedānta terms.

The Central Place of Upaniṣad Commentaries in Śaṅkara's Teaching

Before beginning the research that led me to the conclusions spelled out in this study, I assumed I would find nothing new to report about Śaṅkara's writings themselves. I hoped, rather, that my ethnographic observations might make clearer the relevance of those written sources. As my research progressed, however, I found it increasingly peculiar that few scholars,

whether in India or abroad, had directly analyzed Śaṅkara's upaniṣad commentaries (*bhāṣyas*). These commentaries deal directly with ten of the earliest upaniṣads, comprising roughly half of Śaṅkara's verifiably authentic literary output; those upaniṣads are the primary sources on which vedānta thinking claims to be based. Anyone unfamiliar with the existing literature might assume that such commentaries would be studied extensively.

At the time of my initial research, however, scholars had focused primarily on the better-known, other half of Śaṅkara's verifiably authentic literary output.¹⁴ These are Śaṅkara's systematic works, which sort through and juxtapose examples drawn from often quite different upaniṣads, and occasionally other brāhmaṇa sources, in order to articulate a coherent set of principles related to brahman and the nature of brahman-insight. Though there are several such works,¹⁵ the most comprehensive and widely studied is Śaṅkara's commentary on the *sūtras* or aphorisms attributed to Bādarāyaṇa, which has become the standard work for evaluating the authenticity of other writings attributed to Śaṅkara. This work is often called *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, though in order to highlight the work's intimate connection with the discipline of ritual inquiry (*mīmāṃsā*), examined in detail in part 3, I hereafter follow Clooney's (1993) lead in referring to this work as the *Uttara Mīmāṃsa Sūtra Bhāṣya*, or UMSbh. Paul Deussen asserted in 1912 that this work "gives a substantially complete and sufficient picture of [Śaṅkara's] system;" despite the protests of a few scholars, until recently most seem to have shared this judgment, including many Indian scholars from the late medieval period onward. While many have cited and analyzed substantial and highly valuable passages from Śaṅkara's upaniṣad commentaries, they have done so almost exclusively in the context of analyzing concepts, principles, and themes highlighted in his more systematic works. It is only recently that Malkovsky (2001) and Suthren Hirst (1996, 2005) have offered independent explorations of upaniṣad commentaries, highlighting the vedic context of each.¹⁶

As illustrated by the opening description of Śaṅkara's Jayanti celebration at Śṛṅgeri, early on during my time in India I myself quickly noted the degree to which contemporary brāhmaṇa followers of Śaṅkara revere and study vedic sources, including the brāhmaṇas labeled "upaniṣad." It began to dawn on me that Śaṅkara's direct commentaries on upaniṣadic portions of veda actually constitute a unique genre, worthy of independent study. Approaching the upaniṣad commentaries as sources deserving separate attention, in fact, gives a very different impression of Śaṅkara's style as a teacher, revealing details of the kind rarely mentioned in more systematic works such as the UMSbh. To begin with, especially in commenting on early upaniṣads tied to particular vedic lineages—that is, the *Aitareya*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Taittirīya*, and *Chāndogya*—Śaṅkara patiently and often enthusiastically sorts through numerous references to myth and ritual, stopping only occasionally to remind his audience of the overall goal of brahman-insight; Suthren Hirst (2005, 76–83) notes that such upaniṣads are filled with examples and stories. The analyses in the current study draw attention also to the many explanations

of Śaṅkara related in one way or another to yajña, the fire-offering rite that served as the setting in which most vedic hymns and declarations were composed; Śaṅkara typically regards such details as material for contemplative focus. The issues treated in his commentary on the above mentioned upaniṣads do also arise in the UMSbh and in his non-commentarial works as well, but in such systematic writings Śaṅkara extracts only those upaniṣadic passages directly relevant to his argument. In upaniṣad commentaries, on the other hand, Śaṅkara considers every detail in sequence, arguing for the coherence and relevance of each. It is thus not surprising that teachers since Śaṅkara's time have widely regarded the upaniṣads as a "foundation" (*prasthāna*) of vedānta distinct from the UMSbh.

My visits to the school and village of Mattūr, a setting quite different from Śrīṅgeri, further confirmed the impression that these commentaries constitute a unique genre. Although the teachers there were happy to discuss with me the systematic works of Śaṅkara, they would not allow me to observe classes where upaniṣad commentaries were being recited and taught. Historical records as well as statements in Śaṅkara's writings (most obviously UMSbh 1.3.38) suggest that he himself was equally restrictive about who could have access to vedic sources. Given the unique features of his upaniṣad commentaries and the social restrictions on those who may study them, the amount of energy Śaṅkara dedicated to composing them suggests he considered them no less important than his systematic writings, and perhaps more so. This dedication is especially remarkable given that he could have focused his time, as did almost all of his contemporaries and later followers, on composing works synthesizing key upaniṣadic passages to support larger claims. There is no evidence, furthermore, that writing commentaries on veda, or at least orally imparting and propagating them, was considered standard or even acceptable within Śaṅkara's highly orthodox social world.¹⁷ Most vedānta scholarship, however, seems to assume that Śaṅkara composed such commentaries by default, implying that he would have preferred to spend his time entirely on more systematic works that highlight primarily the transcendent nature of brahman.

Thus, focused analysis of Śaṅkara's major upaniṣad commentaries is needed to complement Rambachan (1991), Clooney (1993), Marcaurelle (2000), Malkovsky (2001), and Suthren Hirst's (2005) in-depth treatments of the other two "foundations" of vedānta teaching, the UMSbh and BG.¹⁸ Rather than following Malkovsky's (2001) ambitious attempt to survey all ten upaniṣad commentaries in single work, I focus more deeply on the TUbh and BUbh, which I propose below are the most significant.¹⁹ But first, the BU and TU must be considered in the broader context of veda.

Both works occur in the collections of yajur-veda lineages, which were most directly concerned with the concrete details of vedic ritual. The BU (literally "Great Wilderness Upaniṣad") concludes the most clearly organized of brāhmaṇa collections, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB) or "Hundred Paths Brāhmaṇa." The ŚB lists its prose explanations according to the

different rituals to which they pertain, separated from the ritual formulas recited during preparations, consecrations, and offering. In contrast to this, *yajur-veda* collections of other lineages—of which the *Taittirīya* is the most carefully preserved and thus most widely influential—mix together ritual formulas with prose, grouping together passages about different rites that are nevertheless related by similar activities.²⁰ The TU (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*) also constitutes the concluding segment of the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*—the final text of the *Taittirīya*’s “black” or mixed-order collection—and thus like the BU is considered not only an *upaniṣad* but an *āraṇyaka* (“wilderness text”). The TU however is much shorter than the BU, and its ritual concerns simpler: its first section deals explicitly with the student’s training, and its remainder is linked to a single ritual context.²¹

Despite its simplicity, the TU holds special interest among all the *upaniṣad* commentaries because the *Taittirīya* is the branch of the *veda* to which Śaṅkara himself is said to have belonged, and the one with which Śṛṅgeri’s *maṭha* and *vedic school* are affiliated. The students at Śṛṅgeri’s *vedic school* all learn the TU even though most of them belong to a *ṛg-veda* lineage; they chant it loudly during many of the temple processions in which they walk, and also chant a portion of it before every midday meal (see chapter 3). Moreover tradition claims that Śaṅkara was born to a family of Nambudiri *brāhmaṇas* of the *Āpastamba* sub-lineage, a branch of the *Taittirīya*.²² This identification of Śaṅkara as a *Taittirīya brāhmaṇa* also fits with the textual evidence. Most obviously, a little known and rarely studied commentary on one section of the *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra* seems to be an authentic work of Śaṅkara’s.²³

Furthermore, as would be expected if the TU had been one of the first *upaniṣads* he recited and studied, Śaṅkara’s commentary on that source shows several signs of being one of his earliest works. The most influential hagiography of Śaṅkara depicts him writing his commentaries all at once after conferring with ancient sages (ŚDV 6.52–63), but subtle differences between his *upaniṣad* commentaries suggest the need for a more refined chronology. The TUBh is the only one of Śaṅkara’s commentaries that begins with an original invocatory verse, a feature cited by one authority as a mark of Śaṅkara’s early phase of literary activity.²⁴ More compellingly, as discussed more fully in chapter 4, Śaṅkara highlights the phenomenon of superimposition (*adhyāsa*, *adhyāropa*)—used to explain how it is that most sentient creatures remain perpetually unaware of the radiant, ever-present reality of *brahman*—at the start of other major commentaries such as the BUBh and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* (CUBh), and describes it most fully in the UMSbh; yet reference to it appears only once, seemingly as an afterthought, in the TUBh.²⁵ It would be difficult to imagine that such a key element of Śaṅkara’s major works would be largely left out unless he had not yet developed it. Finally, even in commentaries such as the BUBh, Śaṅkara cites other texts of the *Taittirīya* collection (the *Taittirīya Samhitā*, *Brāhmaṇa*, and *Āraṇyaka*) with extremely brief telegraphic references;

this contrasts sharply to his extensive word by word citations of the ŚB, suggesting that *Taittirīya* sources constitute a much more deeply ingrained part of his, and perhaps many of his students', vedic repertoire.²⁶ These clues, reinforced by the observations of Staal (1961) and Mayeda (1992, 7–8, n. 7 & 13), suggest that Śāṅkara's birth lineage has been accurately preserved.

Thus the TU and BU in themselves constitute a striking contrast: the first clearly tied to Śāṅkara's lineage, and the second much longer work nevertheless paralleling the first in its content. Śāṅkara's commentaries present an equally interesting opposition: while the TUBh shows signs of being an early work, the BU commentary is perhaps Śāṅkara's most developed articulation of his teaching. It is certainly his most voluminous upaniṣad commentary, only partly due to the size of the upaniṣad itself: the written text of the BU is approximately equivalent to that of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (CU), an upaniṣad of the less widely represented sāma-veda, yet Śāṅkara's commentary on the former is nearly twice as long. This difference in length is due primarily to the fact that in the BUBh Śāṅkara often expounds at length on issues only briefly suggested by his vedic source, whereas in the context of the CUBh he for the most part comments only directly on the words of the text. The extensive discussions and debates of the BUBh suggest that Śāṅkara is addressing a different group of listeners than those of his other works, or at least that his audience is more familiar with conflicting interpretations of the BU than they are of other upaniṣads.

Indeed, later commentators point out that Śāṅkara is directly confronting the views of an influential predecessor, Bhartṛprapañca, whose system of vedānta seems to have been based largely on the BU.²⁷ It seems likely that Bhartṛprapañca was himself a brāhmaṇa of the ŚB lineage, which among all vedic branches most clearly rivals the Taittirīya; and thus in commenting on the Bhartṛprapañca's favorite upaniṣad, Śāṅkara was making a more aggressive move than in his other writings.²⁸ To whatever extent this move was a bold one, the reason for it is clear: the teachings of the sage Yājñavalkya featured throughout BU 3-4 are central to Śāṅkara's understanding of the ultimate, ineffable brahman, as explained most fully in chapter 10. Thus Śāṅkara could not simply skip over this upaniṣad's record of Yājñavalkya's teaching, and chose to engage with it directly through commentary. Instead of simply extracting what he considers essential, however, Śāṅkara takes on the upaniṣad as whole, refusing to divorce Yājñavalkya's teaching from its wider context. In fact his treatment of BU 1's various creation texts is the longest of the BUBh's six parts—in it he foreshadows many of the themes dealt with in BU 3-4—even though BU 1 itself is equivalent to or shorter than that of other sections. Due to its significance in providing the wider context for Yājñavalkya's worldview, in this study I focus primarily on BUBh 1, alluding more briefly to relevant examples in BUBh 2-6.²⁹ This emphasis is intended to balance the fact that most who study the BUBh, including Suthren Hirst (1996), focus only on the above-mentioned central portions, largely

omitting BUbh 1 altogether. I likewise highlight more strongly elements of TU 1 and 3, whose ritual focus prior scholars have tended to ignore.

One other set of clues underscores the importance of both the BUbh and TUbh: the subsequent commentary they generated among students who most clearly carried on Śaṅkara's mission. Sureśvara, apparently the only student of Śaṅkara whose writings fully preserve the finer details of his approach, wrote verse commentaries (*vārtikas*) that paraphrase only these two works; the BUbh-*vārtika* is itself several times the length of Śaṅkara's already voluminous original.³⁰ Later hagiographers, who typically regarded the UMSbh as Śaṅkara's greatest work and portrayed most latter commentators of it as Śaṅkara's direct disciples, developed various stories to account for the fact that Sureśvara did not comment on the UMS, most of them postulating some sort of rivalry with Śaṅkara's other disciples (e.g. *ŚDV* 13.1–75). The more obvious explanation, however—especially since there is no clear evidence of Śaṅkara having had successors as scholarly as Sureśvara—is that Sureśvara himself thought of TUbh and BUbh as primary texts particularly worthy of close study and accurate transmission, as indeed the nature and volume of those commentaries suggest. I have not investigated more deeply the connection between Śaṅkara and Sureśvara's work in this study, but hope to inspire others to do so.

Two Aspects of Brahman's "Lives"

My examination of the TUbh and BUbh strongly emphasizes the multiple connotations of the word "brahman" and the many Saṃskṛta terms related to it. This emphasis is integrally linked to the idea of brahman's "hidden lives," mentioned briefly above yet still to be fully explicated.

The related genre *Secret Life of [X]* has been widely used in the past hundred years. Many older writers employing the "secret life" formula have drawn attention to (a) *the unacknowledged activities of different types of people*: some, for example, have focused on the unreported and often controversial personal lives of various public figures;³¹ others have explored the more explicitly covert activities of a detective, a spy and an inventor;³² and still others draw attention to unremarkable individuals whose stories nevertheless highlight personal issues relevant to a wide range of people.³³ In the last several decades, on the other hand, yet other authors have extended the "secret life" genre to include explorations of (b) *the metaphorical "lives" of insentient objects that nevertheless seem to take on a life of their own*—buildings, food, paintings, money, nature, and objects generally. This last type of study emphasizes the limitations of human-centered perspectives, highlighting viewpoints of which most humans are only vaguely aware. Indeed all the applications of the "secret life" genre stress the same theme to some extent, applying it to progressively subtler aspects of human experience: by presenting unknown and often surprising