

## Six Stanzas on Extinction (Nirvâna-Shatka)

Attributed to Shankarâcârya

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The *Nirvâna-Shatka* ("Six [Verses] on Extinction") is a well-known didactic poem that is probably wrongly ascribed to Shankara, the great preceptor of radical nondualism (*kevala-advaita*), a particular form of Vedânta. The reference to *nirvâna* in the poem's title may strike one as odd in a Hindu work, but already the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (2.72), composed about the time of Gautama the Buddha, uses the phrase *brahma-nirvâna* or "extinction in the Absolute." Thus *nirvâna* is not an exclusively Buddhist term, although it is predominantly so.

The fact that this poem, which does not mention *nirvâna* at all, goes by the name *Nirvâna-Shatka* does, however, underscore the ideological proximity of radical nondualism to Buddhism, in particular Asanga's Yogâcâra and Vasubandhu's Vijnânâvâda. Shankara himself has often been accused of being a crypto-Buddhist. All such scholarly conjectures notwithstanding, the poem is thoroughly Vedântic in its worldview. The refrain "I am of the nature of Awareness and Bliss. I am Shiva. I am Shiva" leaves us in no doubt of the composer's philosophical heritage.

*Om*. I am not mind\*1, higher mind\*2, I-maker,\*3 or memory\*4; not hearing, tongue, smell, or eyes. I also am not ether, air, fire, water, or earth. I am of the nature of Awareness\*5 and Bliss\*6. I am Shiva\*7. I am Shiva. (1)

I am not the life force, not knowledge, not the five "breaths"\*8; neither the seven elements\*9 nor the five casings\*10. I also am not speech, hands, feet, genitals, or rectum. I am of the nature of Awareness and Bliss. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. (2)

I have no hatred or passion, no greed or delusion. I also am without pride and envy, without law and aim, without desire and release. I am of the nature of Awareness and Bliss. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. (3)

I know not good or evil, not pleasure or pain, not *mantra* or sacrificial place, not the *Vedas* or sacrifice. I am neither the enjoyer nor that which is to be enjoyed, and also not enjoyment. I am of the nature of Awareness and Bliss. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. (4)

I know neither death nor fear, and belong to no caste. I also am without mother and father; I am even without birth, and without relatives or friends, without teacher or pupil. I am of the nature of Awareness and Bliss. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. (5)

I am free from change, formless. I am omnipresent, ever transcending the senses. I am without liberation and impossible to know. I am of the nature of Awareness and Bliss. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. (6)

The *Nirvâna-Shatka* illustrates the key Vedântic method of *neti neti* (“not thus, not thus”), as first introduced in the early *Upanishads*, by means of which spiritual practitioners distance themselves from everything that is not Reality itself but merely an attribution or superimposition made by the mind. The Ultimate Reality is without qualities. Whenever anything is experienced as having qualities, we can be sure that it is not the Ultimate Reality.

Our most prominent confusion consists in attributing to that formless Singularity a specific body and mind. In other words, instead of abiding as that Singularity, we experience ourselves as a body composed of various organs and a mind constituted by many mental factors. This misidentification is the cause of suffering (*duhkha*), and in order to overcome suffering, we constantly hunt after pleasure (*sukha*). In experiencing pleasure, however, we commit the further error of confusing it with the innate bliss (*ânanda*) of the Ultimate Reality. We attribute to our body-mind a consciousness it simply does not possess. Only the Ultimate Reality *is* pure Awareness. What we experience as awareness or consciousness (*citta*) in the body or through the mind is only an apparition, or a limited reflection of that supreme, limitless Awareness (*cit*).

The diverse schools of Vedânta explain the relationship between the supreme Awareness and the limited consciousness in different ways. The *Nirvâna-Shatka* seems to articulate the kind of Vedântic metaphysics that regards the limited consciousness and the world it experiences as illusion (*mâyâ*), though admittedly this term is nowhere used in the poem. That is to say, the world of multiplicity is not what it appears to be but a construct of the unenlightened mind. Upon enlightenment, the world shines forth in its true nature, which is the formless Singularity transcending space and time.

## Notes

1. The Sanskrit text has *manas*, which is the lower mind, the relay station for the input from the senses (*indriya*).
2. The higher mind, or *buddhi*, corresponds to the ancient Greek notion of *nous*. It is the organ of intellection, intuition, and wisdom. Whereas the *manas* is characterized by a preeminence of the quality (*guna*) of dynamism (*rajas*), the *buddhi* is predominantly composed of the factor of lucidity (*sattva*).
3. “I-maker” is a literal rendering of the Sanskrit term *ahamkâra* (from *aham* “I” and *kâra* “maker”). It is the psychic principle of individuation.
4. The Sanskrit text has *citta*, which here stands for memory rather than the mind in general. The differentiation into *citta*, *manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahamkâra* is typical of Vedânta.
5. Awareness, or *cit*, is not merely a quality of the Ultimate Reality but its very nature. According to the nondualist metaphysics of Vedânta, the Ultimate Reality transcends all forms and qualities, and yet can be talked about as Being (*sat*), Awareness (*cit*), and Bliss (*ânanda*).
6. Bliss, or *ânanda*, is not an experience or state of mind. It is simply another word for Ultimate Reality, which goes beyond all limitations and suffering (*duhkha*).
7. Shiva (“Benign one”) is one of the many names of the Ultimate Reality. It also appears

in the classical Hindu triad, consisting of Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Shiva (the Destroyer). In religious mythology, Shiva is the Supreme as a person who has various human qualities as well as divine attributes.

8. The five “breaths” are the five types of life force in the body: *prâna*, *apâna*, *samâna*, *udâna*, and *vyâna*.

9. The seven elements of the body are generally said to be water, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen.

10. The five “casings” (*kosha*) are the physical body or casing composed of food (*anna-maya-kosha*), the casing composed of life force (*prâna-maya-kosha*), the casing composed of mind (*mano-maya-kosha*), the casing composed of intelligence (*vijnâna-maya-kosha*), and the casing composed of bliss (*ânanda-maya-kosha*). These are veils concealing the true Self (*âtman*).

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