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-sampradāya-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 Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-

¹. See Śaṅkara, Śvetāśvataraopaniṣad-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. Both passages from Gauḍapāda’s Kārikās and occasionally his name, keep cropping up in later Vedānta works, 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’, ‘Gauḍapādācārya’ (Śaṅkara’s Commentary on Śvetāsvatara Upanishad, 1.8), ‘Gauḍācārya’ (Vidyāranya’s Pańca-daśi [“The Five Chapters”], 2.23), and simply ‘Gauḍa’ (Sūreesvara, 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 Māṇḍūkyakārikā, 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

Jñanottama’s gloss to the text of Sūreesvara, the passage is identified as “the saying of Gauḍapāda” (gauḍapāḍīya-vākyā). See Colin A. Cole, Asparśa-yoga: A Study of Gauḍapāda’s Māṇḍūkya Kārikā (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982), 3-4.

3. See Sūreesvara, Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārttika, 1.4.389 (with the reference to gauḍapāḍīya-vācas—“the words of Gauḍapāda”) as well as 2.1.386 and 4.4.886.

4. To name only a few instances: Vidyāranya, Pańca-daśi, 2.28 and 2.29; Sadānanda, Vedānta-sūra; Maṇḍanamiśra, Brahma-siddhi, etc. See more details in Cole, Asparśa-yoga, 4.

5. This version is found in Bālakṛṣṇānanda’s Śārīraka-mimāṃsā-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 Śūka. 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 Hirarāvatī (probably, North Bengal). 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 Śaṅkara, 780-820, since he precedes Śaṅkara by approximately a century). However, after Śaṅkara’s date was shifted to an earlier time, it was felt that the same should apply to Gauḍapāda. V. Bhattacharya and T. M. P. Mahadevan both suggested that a much more plausible date for Gauḍapāda’s life should be about A.D. 500. Their assumption was largely based upon the testimony of some Buddhist texts. For instance, Bhāvaviveka in his Tarka-jvala (“The Jewel of Reasoning”), the auto-commentary 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 Śāntarakṣita’s Tattva-saṅgraha (“The Collection [of Writings] on the Essence [of Learning]”), 93, while his pupil, Kamalaśīla, in his commentary Pañjikā, identifies them as upaniṣat


7. See Mahadevan, Gauḍapāda, 309.

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 Asaṅga, 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 Māṇḍūkyakārikā. The metrical treatise Māṇḍūkya-kārikā is also known
under the names ‘Gauḍapāda-kārikā’, ‘Gauḍapādiya-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 Tantric 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. Karmarkar, Gauḍapāda-Kārikā, v-x, as well as
the general enumeration of his works in Cole, Asparśa-yoga, 7-10.

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