



Advaita Ashrama

# Stories from The Bhagavatam



**Stories *from***  
**The Bhagavatam**



Swami Bodhasarananda



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# Advaita Ashrama

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## ***Publisher's Note***

The Bhagavata Purana has for centuries been one of the favourite religious texts of India, and this is mostly because of its charming and attractive stories. For those people whose busy schedule does not allow them time to go through the complete Purana, we have brought out this collection of stories from the Bhagavatam.

Here readers will find all their favourite stories—the story of Prahlada, of Dhruva, of King Bharata, and many more. There are stories of rishis, kings, heroes, avatars, and of devas and asuras. But along with the stories, the Bhagavatam also presents relevant teachings.

What the Bhagavatam is most known for, however, are the stories of Krishna's life, from his birth in a dungeon in Mathura to his passing away at Prabhas. Almost all his stories are included in this volume—his childhood in Vrindavan, his youth in Mathura, and his later years in Dwaraka.

In order to keep the volume to a reasonable length, we have had to condense these accounts. However, the main points of the stories are contained here. This volume is especially helpful for readers who do not yet know the stories and would like to learn them. But it is also helpful for readers who know the stories already—or at least some of them—as this volume will refresh their memories and also help them learn many new stories. And, above all, it is an invaluable reference for children.

We are extremely grateful to Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana for meticulously editing the original manuscript and also writing a thoughtful introduction. Mahendra Zinzuvadiya has drawn the beautiful sketches which adorn the book and Shubhabrata Chandra has designed its cover.

May the ageless stories contained in this book fill the minds of its readers with devotion for the Supreme Being.

November 2014

Publisher



# Introduction

Few scriptures have had such great influence on a religion and culture as the Srimad Bhagavatam has. Along with the Bhagavad Gita and the various versions of the Ramayana, it has been the main text of most of the Vaishnava schools of India after Ramanuja. Probably composed in its final form around the tenth century, it was greatly influenced by the Advaita school of Vedanta—though Visishtadvaita and Dvaita are also given their due. But in spite of the Advaitic theology in it, the Bhagavatam was also heavily influenced by the songs of ecstatic divine love written by the Alvars, the Vaishnava saints of Tamil Nadu who lived between the sixth and ninth centuries.

The Alvar songs set a new standard for devotional fervour and poetry. Loving devotion became ecstatic devotion. Devotional poetry became sublime lyricism. This influence on the Bhagavatam can clearly be seen if we compare sections of the older Vishnu Purana with those in the later Bhagavatam.

Though most of the stories in the Bhagavata Purana are basically the same as those in the Vishnu Purana, the relationship between the Lord and his devotees takes a new turn in the Bhagavatam, and this also brings about a change in the teachings and philosophy. For instance, in the stories of both Prahlada and the gopis in the Bhagavatam, their minds become so absorbed in the thought of the Lord that they feel they *are* the Lord, and they start imitating some of his actions.

Why are these stories so important? Myths and religious stories are actually pointers to another realm, a divine realm. They raise our awareness away from this mundane physical plane and take us to a higher plane of consciousness. Sometimes they do this through obvious teachings, sometimes through allegories, but very often they do it by working on a deeper level of our consciousness and we are hardly aware of the impact they make on us.

The story of the Avadhuta, given in the 11th skandha of the Bhagavatam, would be an example of a story with obvious teachings. So also is the story of King Bharata, in the 5th skandha. There the teachings are spelled out. Regarding allegories, the Bhagavatam itself unabashedly admits that the story of Puranjana in the 4th skandha is an allegory. Probably the story of Gajendra, in the 8th skandha, is also one.

One of the most wonderful examples of the third kind of story, or myth—that is, one that works on a deeper level of our consciousness—is the story of Markandeya, given in the 12th skandha. This is a type of myth that has no particular ‘meaning’ that we can attribute to it. It speaks of a mysterious spiritual experience, and works on the subtle level of our mind to awaken our spiritual consciousness.

But then there are stories like that of Prahlada, which are possibly a combination of some or all of the above. They are partly teachings, partly allegorical, and partly pure myth. Readers should feel free to check out all the stories presented here and make their own judgements. But, as we said, readers should also remember, not all stories have ‘meanings’.

The stories of Krishna, which comprise the largest section of the Bhagavatam, most likely also have a combination of all these elements. Though there may be teachings, and there may even be allegories, yet the general rasa (flavour) of each story is meant to be savoured within. The stories are meant to feed our inner soul. Otherwise, much of the benefit is lost.

We should also remember that there are many Puranas that give these same stories. But just as there are many Ramayanas that tell different versions of the story of Rama and Sita, so also each Purana tells its own version of each story. In fact, the Bhagavatam itself has its own version of the Ramayana—one with a surprising twist to it.

Why don’t the Puranas all tell the same version of each story? What the Puranas are trying to say is that it doesn’t matter if there are different versions of the same story. And, in fact, it doesn’t even matter

if these stories are historical or not. The point is not whether Krishna lived at a certain time and enacted a certain lila in a certain way, and at a certain place. For the devotees, the real point is that Krishna lives now—here and now. For them, he still exists and he is still enacting his lilas. The same goes for Rama and other characters from these stories. The point the Puranas are making is that if we listen to these stories with our minds as well as our ears—really listen to them—the divine dramas of Krishna (or Rama) will be awakened in our heart.

These Puranas then—and particularly the Bhagavata Purana—are manuals for spiritual life. The stories are there to inspire us to search within. The more we get a taste for them, the more they will work on our minds. This is why the present volume focuses on the stories.

However, we still must face critics who dismiss myths and stories as being unhistorical and unscientific. Such critics cannot understand what relevance these stories can possibly have for people of our time. To answer this, Swami Vivekananda said to an audience in the USA, ‘It is good for you to remember, in this country especially, that the world’s great spiritual giants have all been produced only by those religious sects which have been in possession of very rich mythology and ritual.’ (1)

Bemoaning the lack of development of myth in Western civilizations, Carl Jung once wrote: ‘Our myth has become mute, and gives no answers. The fault lies not in it as it is set down in the scriptures, but solely in us, who have not developed it further, who, rather, have suppressed any such attempts. The original version of the myth offers ample points of departure and possibilities of development.’ We are very fortunate that this is not the case in India. Perhaps no other country in the world has delighted so much in the development and redevelopment of its mythology as India. And this is one of the reasons why, when Westerners visit India, they often mention how they are inspired by the spiritual atmosphere there.

Western countries need to take note of this. Is a totally ‘rational’ or totally ‘scientific’ outlook enough to feed the spirit within? Besides feeding our religious instincts, mythology also feeds our poetry and all

the other arts. And what would life be like without them?

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[1] Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 2.392



## BOOK ONE

### *A Minstrel Shares the Bhagavata*

LONG AGO IN THE NAIMISHA FOREST in India, Shaunaka, along with some other rishis, decided to hold a religious ceremony that would last for many years and which many other saints and holy men could take part in.

In those days there were saintly minstrels who sang and recited the holy puranas, scriptures that give stories of the gods and goddesses. These storytellers were called Sutas. The great Suta Ugrashrava, son of Romaharshana, was one of them. When he arrived to take part in the ceremony at Naimisharanya, all the other saints, sages, and holy people were pleased. With great respect, they asked him to recite the stories of Lord Hari—especially of his divine play as Krishna.

Suta Ugrashrava was delighted. He said: ‘When you ask about the Bhagavatam, the story of the one called Krishna, or Vasudeva, you are talking about the story of the Supreme Being. The Vedas find their fulfilment in Vasudeva; the goal of all sacrifice is Vasudeva; the fruit of all yoga is Vasudeva; the end of all actions is Vasudeva. Wisdom, austerities, and holy living are all contained in Vasudeva. Vasudeva alone is the goal of all.

‘He who is Vasudeva, Sri Krishna, is the ever-playful Sri Hari. It is He who incarnates himself as the avatara in different ages. The supremely wise Vyasa recounted the story of his life, activities, and teachings in the Bhagavata Purana, and he then taught it to his son Shukadeva. When, after the death of Sri Krishna, everything was engulfed in darkness, this Bhagavata Purana was the sun, illuminating the world with spiritual truth. When King Parikshit heard the Bhagavata Purana from Shukadeva, I too was there, listening with



great attention. Whatever I heard from him, I shall narrate to all of you now as best I can.'

## ***The Incarnation Story***

At the beginning of creation, God assumed his Cosmic Form (Virat), which is the source of his many incarnations (avatars), and into which they withdraw. From him also, all the gods, human beings, and sub-human creatures have been created.

Ten avatars are usually spoken of, but the Bhagavatam speaks of twenty-four and of even more than that. As countless streams flow from a single lake, so also countless incarnations spring from Sri Hari, the source of creation. Some are portions of him, some are transformations of his qualities into human terms. But Sri Krishna is God himself. He kindly incarnates himself in every age to save us from sufferings produced by various causes.

Shaunaka then asked Suta: Shukadeva is an ever-free soul and is the greatest among the ascetics, and he is always absorbed in the bliss of the Self. Why then did he take up the study of this scripture?

Suta replied: Such are the blessed qualities of the Supreme Lord Hari that even those sages whose sole delight is in the Self and whose bonds of ignorance have been severed—even they have spontaneous love for the Lord. Moreover, besides being drawn to the wonderful qualities of the Lord, Shuka is also fond of the devotees, so he learned this text in order to relate it to the devotees.

Suta continued: I shall now relate to all of you the story of King Parikshit's life.

## *King Parikshit*

King Parikshit was the son of the great hero Abhimanyu, who was himself the son of another great hero, Arjuna, one of the five Pandava brothers. While still in his mother's womb, Parikshit had been saved from the deadly brahmastra weapon by Sri Krishna. Later, before the Pandavas left on their final earthly journey, King Yudhishtira gave his kingdom to Parikshit, and installed him on the royal throne. Parikshit then ruled and protected the vast kingdom and its subjects with great heroism and righteousness.

One day King Parikshit was on a hunting expedition in a forest when he became terribly hungry and thirsty. Wandering about, he spied a small hermitage with a sage inside who was seated in deep samadhi. Not realizing the state that the sage was in, the king eagerly approached him and asked for water, but the sage gave no reply. He didn't even move. After asking again and again, the thirsty king finally lost his patience. Seeing a dead snake nearby, he picked it up and hung it around the ascetic's neck. Then he left to search further for water.

The meditating sage was named Shamika, and he had a young son called Shringi. When Shringi learned that the king had put a dead snake around his father's neck, he was furious. Immediately he uttered a curse: 'Whoever has thus insulted my father will die in seven days from the venom of the snake Takshaka!'

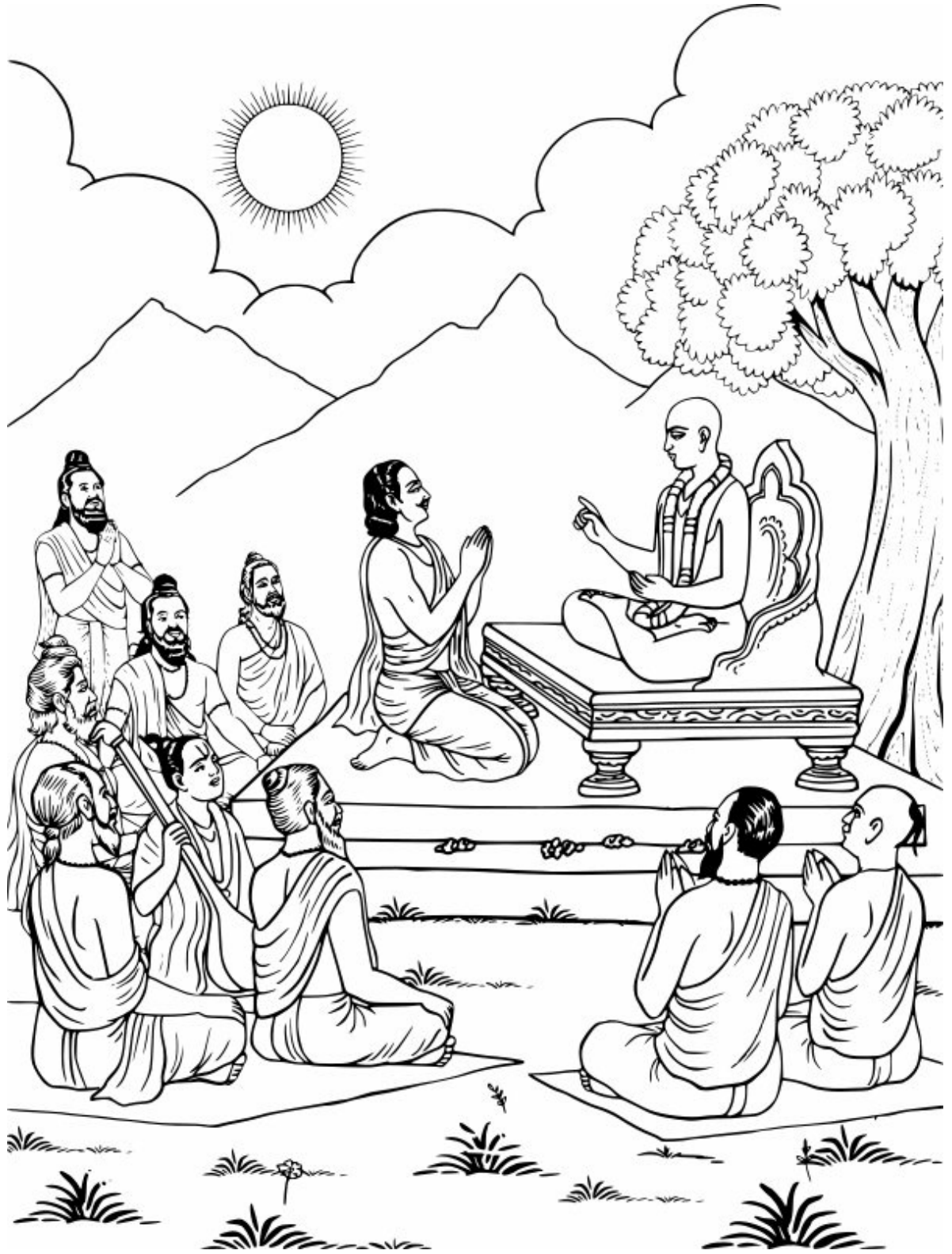
The great sage soon learned of his son's angry curse, and he was not at all happy. He understood that the man who had just visited his hermitage had been King Parikshit, protector of the realm and preserver of dharma. He was a supremely virtuous king. Shamika then rebuked his son: 'Alas, you foolish boy, what have you done? This was not a serious offence, but you have inflicted a serious punishment. He was a righteous king who protected this country. Who will do that now?' But the die was cast and the curse had to be fulfilled.

After returning home, King Parikshit began to feel remorseful for

his ill-treatment of the sage and could not forgive himself. Just then he received the news of the curse on him and decided to prepare for death. He handed his kingdom over to his son Janamejaya and went to the bank of the Ganga. There he spread a grass mat, took his seat, and resolved to give up his body by fasting to death.

When the news of the king's resolve spread, many saints and sages came and gathered around Parikshit, praising him for his lofty vow. They also decided to stay there with him until he gave up his body.

Just then the young saint named Shukadeva, son of Vyasa, who wandered about always immersed in the bliss of the Self, came to the bank of the Ganga to meet Parikshit. Though young, he was already a liberated soul of great wisdom and purity. Seeing him, the king felt like a drowning man catching hold of a log. After prostrating himself at the feet of Shuka and honouring him in various ways, the king said with folded hands: 'O great yogi, in the presence of Lord Vishnu the demons are destroyed, and in your presence a person's greatest sins disappear. Has Sri Krishna, the friend of the Pandavas, sent you here to console me during my last few days on earth? It must be so! You are a liberated soul, the guru of yogis. Please instruct me. What shall I do with the seven days that remain of my life? What will bring me the greatest good? How should I meditate on God and worship him? How shall I find him and attain liberation?'



*Shukadeva instructing Parikshit*

Shukadeva was pleased with King Parikshit's questions, and he began to speak.



## BOOK TWO

### *Shukadeva's Advice*

SHUKADEVA SAID: O King, you have asked the only question worth asking. Most people are drunk with thoughts of worldly pleasure, and never turn their minds towards God. For those who want to become free from the fear of death, constant remembrance of the Lord is the way. Though my mind was ever absorbed in the Absolute Reality, it became entranced, like other ascetics before me, with this Purana describing the Lord's wonderful qualities that was taught to me by my father, Vyasa. O King, I shall now narrate all that I heard from him to you.

## *The Story of Khatvanga*

Shukadeva said: Let me tell you about someone who set a great example for others. His name was King Khatvanga. As soon as he learned that his life was coming to an end, he sat in meditation and renounced all thought of the world. Khatvanga was a strong and powerful king. He had joined the devas in their battle against the demons, and with his help the demons were defeated. After the battle, the devas informed the king that he had less than an hour left of his life. Wanting to pass the last few moments of his life thinking only of God, he set aside all other concerns and fixed his mind on Sri Hari, the supreme Lord.

Shukadeva continued: O King, you have one week left to live. You must use this time preparing for death. Purify yourself, and repeat the holy mantra 'Om'. This sacred mantra, called Pranava, is the very essence of Brahman. By controlling your vital forces and repeating Om, your mind will become steady. Fix your steadied mind on God and meditate on him; then you will attain him.

Shukadeva then explained to the king the methods of yoga, concentration, and meditation in detail.

After that, Shuka said: Everything I have told you was revealed in ancient times by Lord Vasudeva to Brahma. When Brahma desired to begin the creation of the universe, he was wondering how to proceed when he heard a voice saying, 'Tapa'. Brahma searched around him but could not find out who spoke to him, so he understood that the voice was that of the Lord himself. Thus he decided to follow the instruction and practise austerities. For a long time Brahma engaged himself in meditation and self-control, and at last the Lord revealed himself to him. The Lord said to him: 'It is at my request that you have practised austerities. It is not through austerities that you have attained me. Rather, it is through my grace. Though I am eternal, ever-existing, still I practise tapas for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe. Tapas, austerity, is my very soul.'



Shukadeva's words entered the king's heart, and he immediately surrendered his body, mind, and life to the Lord.



## BOOK THREE

### *Vidura Meets Uddhava and Maitreya*

SHUKADEVA WAS DELIGHTED to see King Parikshit's eagerness. Though the king had only seven days to live, he showed no fear of death. Shukadeva then began to tell the story of the Kauravas and Pandavas.

Dhritarashtra, the blind king, wanting to please his wicked sons, allowed them to torture and persecute the Pandavas, his nephews. He even allowed his sons to burn the Pandavas' house down while they were in it. And he also allowed them to humiliate their noble wife Draupadi before the royal court. Finally, Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra's eldest son, drove the Pandavas into exile in the forest, cheating them out of all their worldly possessions in a crooked game of dice.

Dhritarashtra had a brother named Vidura, who was wise and righteous. Vidura wanted to divert his brother from his evil ways and bring him to the right path, so he advised Dhritarashtra to disown his evil son Duryodhana. This made Shakuni and other friends of Duryodhana extremely angry. Duryodhana heaped abuse upon Vidura and drove him from the court.

Vidura no longer wanted to live in the city of Hastinapura, so he left the palace, dressed in humble clothes, and set out on a long pilgrimage. After many days he happened to meet Sri Krishna's beloved friend, Uddhava. When Vidura asked him about Sri Krishna, Uddhava, who had been devoted to the Lord since childhood, began to weep. He said, 'Sri Krishna has ended his sport here on earth, and has left for his own abode.' He then began to relate many stories of Krishna's life—how he was born, how he killed the demon Kamsa, how he played with the gopis in Vrindavan, and so on. Then, after relating how Krishna gave his final teachings to him before leaving the world, Uddhava said: 'The pain of separation from him is unbearable. Now I

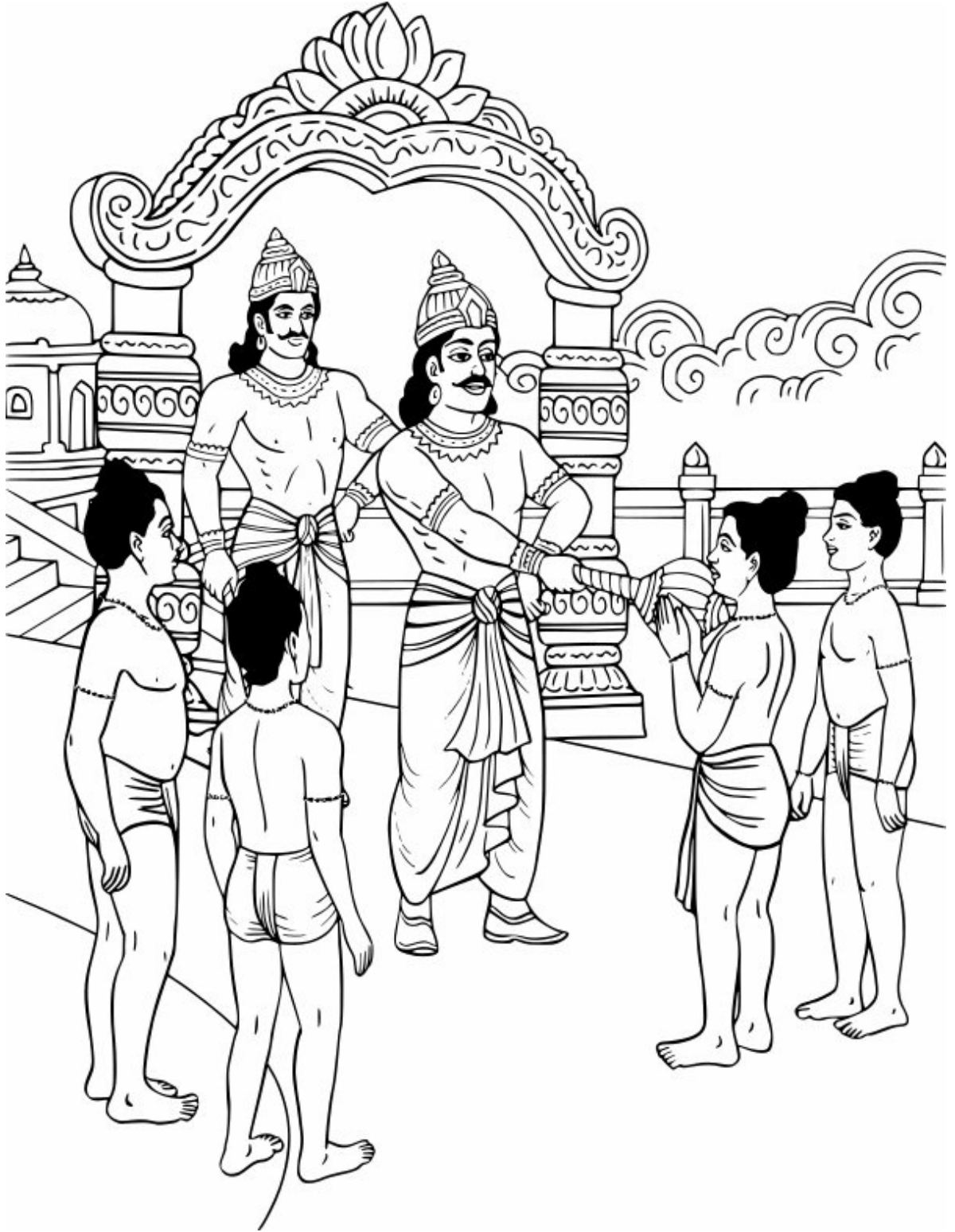
am going, at the Lord's command, to Badrikashrama to spend my days in meditation on him.'

Seeing Vidura's grief at getting the news of Krishna's passing away, Uddhava said: 'Sri Krishna has asked the rishi Maitreya to instruct you. Please go to him.' Vidura was overwhelmed, hearing that Krishna had thought of his welfare before his passing away, and he immediately left to meet Maitreya. Seeing Vidura, a great devotee of the Lord, Maitreya felt great joy. Maitreya told him about how God incarnates himself on earth as an avatara and about the creation of the universe. He explained that before creation, there is just absolute Consciousness existing, nothing else. This Consciousness is identical with God. Through the power of God's maya, the universe manifests, making that one absolute Consciousness appear as many.

While relating to Vidura the accounts of the Lord's incarnations, Maitreya related the following stories:

## ***Jaya and Vijaya***

Brahma had four sons: Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana, and Sanatkumara. They remained brahmacharins (celibate) and spent their time in meditation on the Lord. Though ancient rishis, they looked like young boys. And as they were totally established in the knowledge of Brahman, they had no body-consciousness. One day the four of them went to Vaikuntha to see Lord Vishnu. After passing through gate after gate, they finally reached the seventh gate of Vaikuntha, the heavenly realm. Two gatekeepers, Jaya and Vijaya, were standing guard.



*Jaya and Vijaya stopping Sanaka and other rishis at the gate of Vaikuntha*

Seeing the young-looking sages enter without asking their permission, the gatekeepers got angry. They would not allow them to come before Lord Vishnu, but instead, raised their staffs and blocked the way. Again and again the sages entreated the guards to let them pass, but the guards insulted them and wouldn't budge. Finally the sages became angry, and cursed Jaya and Vijaya: 'You will be born in evil wombs and be demons!' Hearing these words, the two gatekeepers repented and begged the sages' forgiveness.

After getting the news of his gatekeepers' bad behaviour, Lord Vishnu hurried to the gate with his consort Lakshmi Devi. He apologized to the four rishis for their ill-treatment at the hands of his servants, and also accepted the curse on them. But Jaya and Vijaya were his beloved sentinels, so he told them: 'Do not fear. You will have to be born three times, but then you will return to me.'

Jaya and Vijaya first took birth in the womb of Diti, and became the demons Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaksha. Hiranyakashipu, the elder, was very arrogant. By performing tremendous austerities, he acquired great power and won a boon from Brahma. His story will be told in detail later.

Hiranyaksha, the younger brother, drove out all the devas from heaven by his prowess with a club. He then entered the ocean to celebrate his victory, but all the creatures of the sea were afraid of him and went away. At last he entered the city called Vibhavari, the city of Varuna, the god of waters and lord of Patala, the nether region. When Varuna approached Hiranyaksha, the latter challenged him to a fight. But Varuna had no desire to fight and advised him to go to Vishnu, who could give him a better fight.

Meanwhile Dharani, the earth, had been submerged by the waters of a great flood, and the Lord, in His incarnation as Varaha the Boar, had lifted her up with his tusks to carry her to the surface. Just then Hiranyaksha arrived. Seeing that Vishnu had taken the form of a boar, he began to ridicule him. But Vishnu, as Varaha, brought Dharani to

the surface of the water first, and then turned to deal with Hiranyakasha.

With Brahma and the devas looking on, Varaha picked up a club and began to fight Hiranyaksha. When the demon could not prevail over the Lord with his club, he resorted to magic tricks. He created one illusion after another to hide himself and confuse the Lord, but Varaha could not be fooled. At last the Lord used his discus, Sudarshana, to overcome the illusions, and Hiranyaksha again appeared before him. The demon then began to strike at Varaha with his fists, but with one blow Varaha killed Hiranyaksha, and Brahma and the devas sang his praises.

## *Kapila Muni*

Vidura then asked Maitreya to tell him about the creation of the world and how it became populated.

Svayambhuvamanu had a daughter, Devahuti. He gave her in marriage to the sage Kardama, who had been commanded by the Lord himself to break his long celibacy and take Devahuti as his wife. The Lord had also promised that he would be born as a partial avatara to them. Thus, after many years of austerities by both of them, Kardama and Devahuti had a son, Kapila Muni, who became the expounder of the Samkhya philosophy. Knowing that their son was a partial manifestation of Vishnu, Kardama felt that he had fulfilled the purpose of their marriage. When Kapila came of age, Kardama decided to renounce the world and leave Devahuti in his care. After singing praises to his son and asking for his blessings, Kardama left to practise spiritual disciplines and austerities.

When his father departed, Kapila Muni lived with his mother at Lake Bindu. One day Devahuti said to him: ‘My son, my senses have completely bewildered me. Please dispel my attachment and delusion. You are the Lord himself, born in this world to destroy delusion.’ Kapila replied: ‘O Mother, the mind alone is the source of both bondage and liberation. The mind is attached to the three gunas: sattva, rajas, and tamas—the principles of light and balance, activity and attachment, and darkness and delusion. This attachment to the three gunas binds us. But if we can give up all sense of the ego—that is, of “I” and “mine”—then the mind will attain purity and can be fixed on the Supreme Spirit. Devotion to the Lord is the easiest way to do this.

‘When a person focuses all his sense-organs on the Lord through love, his impurities become burned up, just as fire burns up things that are put in it. This is true bhakti, or devotion. And though such devotees do not care for mukti, liberation, their devotion for the Lord leads them easily to that state which is beyond birth and death. Devotion alone takes one to the highest.’



After explaining to his mother the various facets of bhakti, the path of devotion, Kapila began to teach her the nature of Reality according to the Samkhya philosophy. In the course of his discussion, he taught her about Purusha (the soul), Prakriti (primordial nature, which entangles the soul), and the twenty-four cosmic principles. He then explained ashtanga yoga, also called Raja Yoga, the eightfold path of meditation. All this made Devahuti very happy. Her ignorance was dispelled. She then chanted a hymn in praise of her son and said: ‘How wonderful, even a chandala who repeatedly takes your name is worthy of respect. Those righteous persons who repeat your name with faith must have performed meritorious acts in a previous birth to enable them to do so in this birth.’

Following the instructions of her son, Devahuti began practising meditation and other spiritual disciplines. Soon she became absorbed in samadhi and attained the highest state—the realization of the supreme Self.

After instructing his mother, Kapila moved north towards the sea. With great respect, the lord of the seas worshipped the sage and offered him shelter. It is said that he is still there, absorbed in yoga-samadhi, the highest meditation, for the welfare of the three worlds.



## BOOK FOUR

### *Daksha's Sacrifice and the Death of Sati*

SHUKADEVA WENT ON NARRATING the Bhagavatam to King Parikshit and the many sages gathered there, all of whom were listening with great attention. Shukadeva then told them about Daksha's sacrifice.

Brahma's son Daksha had many daughters. Among them was Sati, whom he gave in marriage to Mahadeva. This meant that the God of gods, Lord of the devas, Lord Shiva himself, was Daksha's son-in-law. One day the devas were conducting a yajna, a religious ceremony, when Daksha paid them a visit. The devas received him with great courtesy, standing up to show him respect—all, that is, except Mahadeva. Though he was Daksha's son-in-law, Mahadeva remained seated, ignoring Daksha's arrival.

Daksha was furious at this slight. He insulted Shiva using harsh words and then cursed him, saying, 'From now on you will no longer receive a share of the offerings at the sacrifices!' Mahadeva remained sitting peacefully, but his follower Nandi lost his temper and cursed Daksha in return, saying that he would lose his spiritual consciousness and become like an animal, immersed in worldly desires, and that his head would turn into a goat's head.

After some time Daksha himself organised a great sacrifice. He invited the devas, rishis, sages, and many others. Only Shiva and his wife, Sati, were not invited. When Sati heard about the grand sacrifice that was taking place at her father's house, she begged Shiva to allow her to attend it. She said, 'Does a daughter need an invitation to go to her own father's house?' At first Mahadeva tried to talk her out of it, but ultimately Sati decided to go anyway. Some of Shiva's attendants then accompanied her.

Sati arrived at her father's house, but only her mother, sisters, and

a few other close relatives greeted her. Her father did not even show any sign of recognizing her. Then Sati noticed that there was nothing allotted to Shiva as his proper portion of the sacrifice.

Furious, she chastised her father before the whole assembly. 'Alas!' she said. 'You are insulting one whose name, even uttered casually, frees a person from all sins. You are the essence of all inauspiciousness, yet you dare insult one who is the essence of all auspiciousness, who is the epitome of fame and greatness.' Then she said: 'I can no longer bear to live in this body that was born from you—you who despise the noble Shiva. In order to save the three worlds, he even drank poison, and for that he is called Nilkantha. I am ashamed of my relationship with you. For this reason I shall cast off this body right now.'



*Sati immolating herself at Daksha's sacrifice*

Immediately Sati entered into a yogic state. Through the power of her concentrated mind, she set her body ablaze, while cries of grief rose all around. Sati's attendants then rose to kill Daksha, but the sage Bhrigu, who was the chief priest of the sacrifice, quickly made offerings in the sacrificial fire to invoke troops to destroy the

attendants. Those troops of the devas soon drove away Sati's attendants.

Meanwhile Narada went and informed Shiva all that had happened. Furious, Shiva plucked a hair from his head and threw it on the ground. From that hair a frightful-looking warrior arose who was called Virabhadra. With great humility, he asked Shiva, 'What shall I do for you?' Shiva replied, 'Go and destroy Daksha, along with his sacrifice.' With a great roar, Virabhadra left, followed by Shiva's retinue.

Virabhadra raced to the sacrificial ground, and with the help of Shiva's companions, cut off Daksha's head and offered it in the sacrificial fire. The devas were also attacked. Terrified, they ran to Brahma for protection. Brahma in his turn, accompanied by the devas, went to meet Shiva at Kailasha. In order to placate him, they sang a hymn in praise of him. Then Mahadeva, who is known to be easily pleased, was pacified. In reply to their hymn, he said that Daksha would live again, but with the head of a goat, and the devas and others who had been maimed would have their limbs restored. The devas then requested Shiva to come to the sacrificial grounds and bring Daksha back to life.

Through the benign glance of Shiva, Daksha's life was restored. On regaining consciousness, the first thing Daksha saw with his goat head was Shiva standing before him. This time, however, his mind had been purified, and he extolled Shiva with a hymn. The sacrifice then resumed, and everything went well. When the priests performed the meditation on Hari, Lord Vishnu immediately appeared, riding on the back of the great bird Garuda. All then prostrated before him and sang his praises. The Lord said: 'Know me to be both Brahma and Shiva. One who knows this—that we three are all one and pervade all beings—attains eternal peace.' After this, Mahadeva got his share of the offerings. And Sati was reborn as the daughter of Himavan and his wife Menaka. She was named Uma, or Durga, and was again married to Shiva.

## ***The Story of Dhruva***

Svayambhu Manu was a son of Brahma and a part of Hari. He and his wife Shatarupa had two sons, Uttanapada and Priyavrata.

When Uttanapada grew up, he became the king and had two queens, Suruchi and Suniti. Suruchi's son was named Uttama, and Suniti's was Dhruva. As King Uttanapada loved Suruchi more than Suniti, he would often take her son Uttama on his lap. One day when Uttanapada was sitting on the throne, Suniti's son Dhruva came and wanted to sit on his father's lap also. But Suruchi, his stepmother, forbade him. She said: 'You are Suniti's son. You have no right to sit on the king's lap. To get this privilege you have to be born as my son. So pray to Lord Hari and practise spiritual disciplines and maybe it will happen in another life.'

Dhruva burst into tears and went crying to his mother, who also became afflicted with grief. Taking him on her lap, she then consoled him and said: 'My dear boy, don't cry. And don't bear ill-will towards your stepmother. One who makes others suffer will himself have to suffer. Can your stepmother, by speaking so harshly to you, ever get peace? But my dear son, she was right. The king does not care for me. Suruchi has rightly told you to worship Sri Hari with one-pointed devotion. There is no other way for you to get the favour of the king. Even Brahma attained his position the same way—by worshipping Hari's lotus feet. The rishis meditate on those same lotus feet. Pour out your heart to that lotus-eyed Sri Hari. He alone can take away your unhappiness.'

Dhruva had complete faith in his mother's words. Wasting no time, he set out for the forest, leaving the kingdom far behind.

On the way to the forest Dhruva met Narada, the rishi who is always near God's sincere devotees. When Dhruva told him about his plan, Narada said: 'My dear Dhruva, I see you are a mere child, and yet you are going to practise tapasya—intense spiritual disciplines?

Tapasya is extremely difficult. And to realize God—that is even more difficult. Even great sages who have practised intense austerities cannot always attain that. So, dear boy, surrender yourself to the Lord’s will and accept whatever he ordains. Then you will gradually acquire knowledge.’

But Dhruva was not consoled by these words. He replied: ‘My stepmother has insulted me terribly. My mind is very restless, and my heart finds no peace. In this state of mind, your words do not make any impression on my mind. O great rishi, you are a descendant of Lord Brahma himself. Please show me the way to realize God.’

Narada was full of admiration for the child’s determination. He told him: ‘I was only testing you. You are right—worshipping and meditating on Sri Hari is the only way to realize him. Go to Madhuvana, on the bank of the Yamuna river. Sri Hari is always there. Call on him there with your whole heart and soul. With a concentrated mind, meditate on his four-armed form endowed with all the auspicious qualities. And repeat this mantra: “Om Namō Bhagavate Vasudevaya.”’

Narada’s instructions sank deep into Dhruva’s mind. After paying respects to Narada, he left for Madhuvana. There he practised such intense meditation and austerities that even the gods became frightened. After six months of terrible austerities, Sri Hari became pleased with the boy’s tapasya and decided to reveal himself to him.



*Lord Vishnu appearing before Dhruva*



Suddenly, standing there before Dhruva, stood the bewitchingly beautiful Lord! Dhruva was overwhelmed with wonder and love. He threw himself at Sri Hari's feet, surrendering his entire heart and soul to him. Now he wanted to sing the Lord's praises, but as he was a mere boy, he didn't know how. So Sri Hari touched the boy's cheek with his divine conch, which represents the Vedas themselves, and, in a voice choked with emotion, Dhruva began to sing to the Lord.

Sri Hari was pleased and wanted to grant Dhruva a boon. He said: 'My dear Dhruva, you will ascend your father's throne and rule for a long time. At the end of your life, remembering me, you will go to a resplendent realm that has never been attained by anyone else. All the luminous bodies revolve around that realm, as it is the Dhruva polestar. That realm is eternal. You will never have to come back to this world from there. It will survive even the destruction of the universe.' Saying this, the Lord returned to his own abode.

Dhruva had left his father to propitiate the Lord, and now his desire was fulfilled. Yet he was not happy. He now repented that, after seeing the Lord himself, he had not thought to ask him for the Lord's own blissful state. Deluded by maya, he had been satisfied with attaining an earthly kingdom.

Hearing the news that his son was returning home, the king himself, accompanied by his ministers, went out of the city in a beautifully decorated chariot to receive him. He had heard from Narada about his son's intense austerities, and how Sri Hari had blessed him by appearing before him. Now, at his son's return, the king's joy knew no bounds. After embracing and kissing his son with tears flowing down his cheeks, Uttanapada placed Dhruva on the back of an elephant for a ceremonial return to the city.

When Dhruva came of age, Uttanapada crowned him king, and then he retired to the forest to practise tapasya and meditation. Dhruva ruled the kingdom well, as the Lord had commanded him to. In the meantime his brother Uttama, Suruchi's son, was killed by a yaksha, a demigod, while out hunting. Suruchi, who went out looking for him, also died.

Learning of their deaths, Dhruva was filled with anger and grief, and set out to punish the yakshas, attacking them in their kingdom Alakapuri. In a terrible battle, thousands of yakshas were killed. Only when Dhruva's grandfather Svayambhu Manu intervened did Dhruva cease his wrathful killing and end the battle. Kubera, the ruler of the yakshas, was pleased with Dhruva for recognizing his mistake and ending the battle, and he offered Dhruva a boon. Dhruva replied that his sole desire was to have constant remembrance of the Lord. With great joy, Kubera granted his prayer.

Dhruva was an enlightened ruler who saw God within himself and in all beings. After a long reign, he gave the kingdom to his son and left for Badrikashrama to meditate on the Lord. When his end drew near, the messengers of Vishnu came and took him straight to Dhruvaloka, within the realm of Vishnu. And to this day, the Dhruva star shines bright in the night sky, reminding everyone of this great soul.

## ***The Story of Puranjana***

There was a descendent of Dhruva named Prachinabarhi, who thought the path to heaven lay in performing sacrifices. Many animals lost their lives that way. The sage Narada wanted to turn him away from this path and towards God, so he told him the following story of Puranjana.

Long, long ago there was a king named Puranjana, who had a friend whose name no one knew. Puranjana wanted to find a city he liked well enough to settle down in, so after much searching he found just the place at the foothills of the Himalayas. The city was magnificent. It had nine gates, stately palaces, beautiful gardens, and crystal lakes. It had everything he wanted, and he was very happy to have found such a wonderful place. As he wandered around in the garden he saw a bewitchingly beautiful young woman. She was attended by ten women, each of whom commanded eleven soldiers, as also a serpent with five heads. Puranjana immediately fell in love with her and married her.

The couple spent their days in great happiness in the city of nine gates. Puranjana fulfilled every command of his wife. When she was sad, he was sad. When she was happy, he was happy. His mind always dwelt on her. This beautiful damsel was his all in all. In time, they had many sons and daughters.

One day Puranjana went hunting in a magnificent chariot drawn by ten horses, and out of sport he killed a large number of animals. When he returned it was very late, and his wife was hurt and angry. She wouldn't even speak to him. Only after speaking many sweet words could Puranjana console her.

No happiness lasts forever. While Puranjana was thus immersed in worldly pleasures and deluded by attachment, Chandavega, a gandharva king, attacked the city with 360 of his followers and their 360 wives. Gradually they began to destroy the city. After many years

of fighting, Puranjana's capable commander of the city became exhausted and grew weak. At that time a foreign king named Bhaya arrived, along with his troops, and also attacked the city. Puranjana was taken prisoner, led away, and then killed by the same animals he had previously killed in sacrifices and who had been reborn.

Due to his excessive attachment to women, he was soon reborn as a woman, the daughter of the king of Vidarbha. This woman was then married to Malayadhvaja, the king of the Pandya territory. Her past life as King Puranjana was completely forgotten.

In the course of many years Malayadhvaja and his wife had many children and grandchildren. Then the king decided to divide his kingdom among his sons and retire to Kulachala (Tirupati) and spend his time in worship of the Lord. His wife, the princess of Vidarbha, also renounced everything and left with her husband to serve him.

After practising meditation and austerities, King Malayadhvaja passed away in a state of meditation. In those days, it was the custom for the queen to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The wood was gathered and the pyre made ready. Just as the wife was about to get on the pyre, a brahmin came there and addressed the queen, saying: 'Well, who are you? And who is this person you are grieving for? Do you not recognize me? I was your friend with whom you used to travel. Forgetting me, you went off in pursuit of sensual pleasures.'

After hearing this story of King Puranjana, King Prachinabarhi understood that it had a deep meaning, and he asked Narada to explain it to him. Narada said: 'Puranjana is the jiva, the human being, and his great friend, the brahmin, is Ishvara, the Lord. The woman who controlled Puranjana is buddhi, the intellect. Puranjana's city had nine gates, and so do our bodies: two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, a mouth, and two openings for answering the call of nature. With the help of the buddhi, the jiva enjoys sense objects. Prana, the vital energy with its five functions, is the five-headed snake. The 360 gandharvas and gandharvis are the days and nights of the year; Chandavega, the gandharva king, is time, the destroyer of all; Bhaya,

the foreign king, is death.

‘The human self and the supreme Self are great friends. The supreme Self dwells beyond the reach of our physical eyes, so we cannot see him. But when someone is in dire trouble, he comes running to guide that person. The human self runs here and there in search of enjoyment. He reaps the fruits of his past actions, becoming sometimes happy, sometimes miserable. ‘I and mine’ is the demon that binds him to the world and to his work. Thus one birth leads to another. And birth is nothing but a dream of sorrow. In a bad dream, we suffer terribly. But when the dream breaks and we wake up, we are freed from our suffering and we gain deliverance. If we can wake up from our sleep of delusion, then our misery will come to an end.

‘Oh king! Give up your attachment. Give up violence. Stop killing animals in sacrifices, for that will never bring you good. Do your work only after dedicating it to God. That learning is true learning which is done to honour and love God. Sri Hari is the only rock on which man can build his home. The path of God is the best. God is the closest and the innermost friend of a person. He who knows this is truly learned.’



## BOOK FIVE

### *Jada Bharata*

BEFORE BHARATA WAS BORN AS JADA BHARATA, he was King Bharata, the eldest of the hundred sons of Rishabha Deva, who was himself an incarnation of the divine and a great king. After Rishabha Deva had ruled over his kingdom for many years, he made Bharata the king, and gave up the world to become a wandering holy man. Thus Bharata became King Bharata.

King Bharata was a wonderful ruler. He loved the people of the kingdom very much, and ruled over them with great affection. In fact, he was such a great ruler that India is named Bharatavarsha after him. He performed many sacrifices and dedicated all the fruits of them to the Lord, Vasudeva. As a result, his heart became purified, and intense devotion to the Lord grew in him.

After many years, it came time for him too, like his father, to renounce the kingdom and spend his last years in worship of and meditation on God. So he divided the kingdom among his five sons and went to live in a secluded ashrama called Pulaha Ashrama.

Pulaha Ashrama was a beautiful and holy place on the bank of the river Gandaki, with forests on all sides. Many holy men had the vision of God there. In that holy atmosphere, King Bharata began his austere life of worship and meditation. How much joy he felt! While worshipping the Lord, meditating on him, and praying for his vision, tears would flow from his eyes out of longing and joy. His mind became fully fixed on the Lord.

One day Bharata was repeating the sacred syllable Om on the banks of the Gandaki after his morning worship. A pregnant doe came to the river bank to drink. Suddenly, the terrible roar of a lion echoed through the ashrama. The doe was terror-stricken, and sprang to the

opposite bank, trying to flee. But her fear and effort were too great: as she jumped, she gave birth to her young one. The little fawn, then fell into the flowing water of the river. Meanwhile, the mother doe died of shock. All this happened before the eyes of the royal sage. Bharata was filled with pity for the motherless fawn. He rescued it from the flowing waters and brought it to the ashrama.

Now Bharata started to take care of the motherless fawn. He said to himself: 'This poor fawn has no one to look after him. He has no one in this world but me. It is my duty to look after him.' Day by day, Bharata's love for the fawn grew more and more. He would gather grass and other things for him to eat, protect him from dangerous animals, and take him on his lap and fondle him. If the fawn was out of his sight for a moment, he would wonder, 'Oh where is my little deer?' Bharata spent less and less time worshipping Sri Hari, and more and more time thinking of his deer and looking after it.

Soon Bharata forgot all about his meditation and worship. All his time was spent looking after the fawn, and thinking about it. When the fawn wandered off, Bharata would search everywhere for it, fearful that something might have happened to it. His whole thought, his whole life, was centred on that little deer.

At last the hour that must come to all came upon King Bharata: the hour of his death. He lay helpless, looking at his fawn sitting by his side, and with his whole mind fixed on the fawn, he left his body.

What happens to a person after death is determined by the thoughts that are in his mind at the time of death. King Bharata was thinking of his deer when he died, so he was soon reborn as a deer.

However, by virtue of his meditation and devotion, Bharata could remember his past life, even though he had a deer's body. Now he was extremely remorseful. 'Alas!' he thought, 'I was completely devoted and dedicated to God alone, meditating only on him, when somehow I became attached to a deer, so now I have been born as a deer.' The deer-Bharata then left his deer-mother and went to the Gandaki river, near Pulaha Ashrama. There he lived alone, waiting for the day when

he could leave his deer-body behind. At last, Bharata was able to give up his deer-body in the waters of the river.

Bharata was soon reborn to noble brahmin parents, who were wise and devoted to God. This time Bharata was determined not to be caught by the world. To avoid people, he behaved as if he were deaf and dumb and of low intelligence, though in his mind he was always meditating on Sri Hari. Because he seemed so stupid, people called him Jada, inert. His father tried to teach him the various duties of a brahmin boy, but to no avail. Jada Bharata would not be taught.

After his parents died, his brothers briefly tried to teach him, but in vain, so he was sent away to fend for himself. Many people abused him. He was made to work very hard in various jobs, and sometimes he even had to go without food. But he was unaffected by any hardship, since within he felt the bliss of the Self and was always meditating on Sri Hari.

One day King Rahugana was travelling by palanquin to the ashrama of Kapila. One of the palanquin bearers was ill and couldn't work, so the bearer's captain was looking for a replacement. He saw Jada Bharata sitting under a tree and asked him to take the place of the sick bearer. Jada Bharata did not reply, so the bearers grabbed him, placed the palanquin's pole on his shoulder, and continued on their way.

But Jada Bharata, though strong, moved very slowly and unevenly. He was carefully watching the ground beneath his feet so as not to step on any insects or worms crawling there. King Rahughana became annoyed at the uneven movement of the palanquin and asked the captain about it. The captain told him that the new bearer was not walking properly. The king then mocked Jada Bharata: 'Oh, you must be so tired because you have been carrying this palanquin all by yourself for such a long time. And you are old and sickly!' The king's words had no effect on Jada Bharata, who continued to walk in the same way. Then the king became angry and said: 'You fool! You living corpse! I will turn you into your proper state of a corpse! I think you need a good beating.' Then, finally, Jada Bharata opened his lips, and



for the first time in his life spoke.

‘O King,’ he said, ‘whom do you call a fool? Whom do you say is tired? Whom do you call “you”? If you mean by “you” this body, it is made of the same materials as your body, and is unconscious. Being unconscious, it cannot feel pain or feel tired. But I am not this body; I am the Atman, the Self. You call me a living corpse. That is true of this body, and indeed, of all things which have a beginning and an end. Our relative positions as king and servant are temporary. Except for convention, there is no difference between you and me. We are both the Atman. O King, if I am acting strangely because I am established in the knowledge of the Atman, then any beating would have no effect on me. And if I am truly an idiot, then, likewise, a beating would have no effect on me!’ Though Jada Bharata seemed to be an idiot, within he was an inexhaustible storehouse of knowledge.

King Rahugana was himself a devotee of God. When he heard Jada Bharata’s words he was astonished, and he realized that he must be a great saint. He quickly got down from the palanquin, prostrated at the feet of the tranquil sage, and begged his forgiveness for insulting him. He said: ‘Revered Sir, I could not understand who you are. You must be a great sage. Hearing your words, I feel a strong desire for spiritual knowledge. Please be gracious to me. Feeling proud at being king, I lost my discrimination. I have insulted a great soul, a holy man, which is surely a great sin. Please save me from this sin. O wise one, please instruct me in the knowledge of the Atman.’

Jada Bharata then began instructing the king, and also told him about his past: ‘In a previous life, I was King Bharata. I spent my last days in prayer and meditation, but at the end I became attached to a fawn whose life I saved. In my next life I was born as a deer, but thanks to my life of prayer and devotion, I remembered my previous life. Now I have again taken birth in this body you see before you. I keep aloof from people to avoid attachment.

‘There is only one Truth, the Supreme Lord, and one goal, knowledge of Him. You cannot attain this knowledge without the holy company of saints and sages. O King, this world is like a dense forest

where people, roaming about looking for happiness, lose their way. There are six terrible thieves in this forest—the five senses, and their evil leader, the confused intellect. They attack and rob travellers of their possessions. Wandering around, lost in this forest, they become entangled in the creepers of worldly attachments, and suffer from various sorrows and afflictions. O King, you too are in this jungle. What is the way out? Love all beings, practise detachment, offer all your work to the Lord, and with the sword of knowledge, sharpened by the worship of Sri Hari, cut your way out of the jungle of ignorance. Finally, you will gain the knowledge that you are the Atman and not the body, and will attain to Sri Hari.’

After instructing King Rahugana, the great sage Jada Bharata left to roam about the country. And the king, practising what he had been taught, realized himself to be the Atman, and eventually attained to Sri Hari.



## BOOK SIX

### *Ajamila*

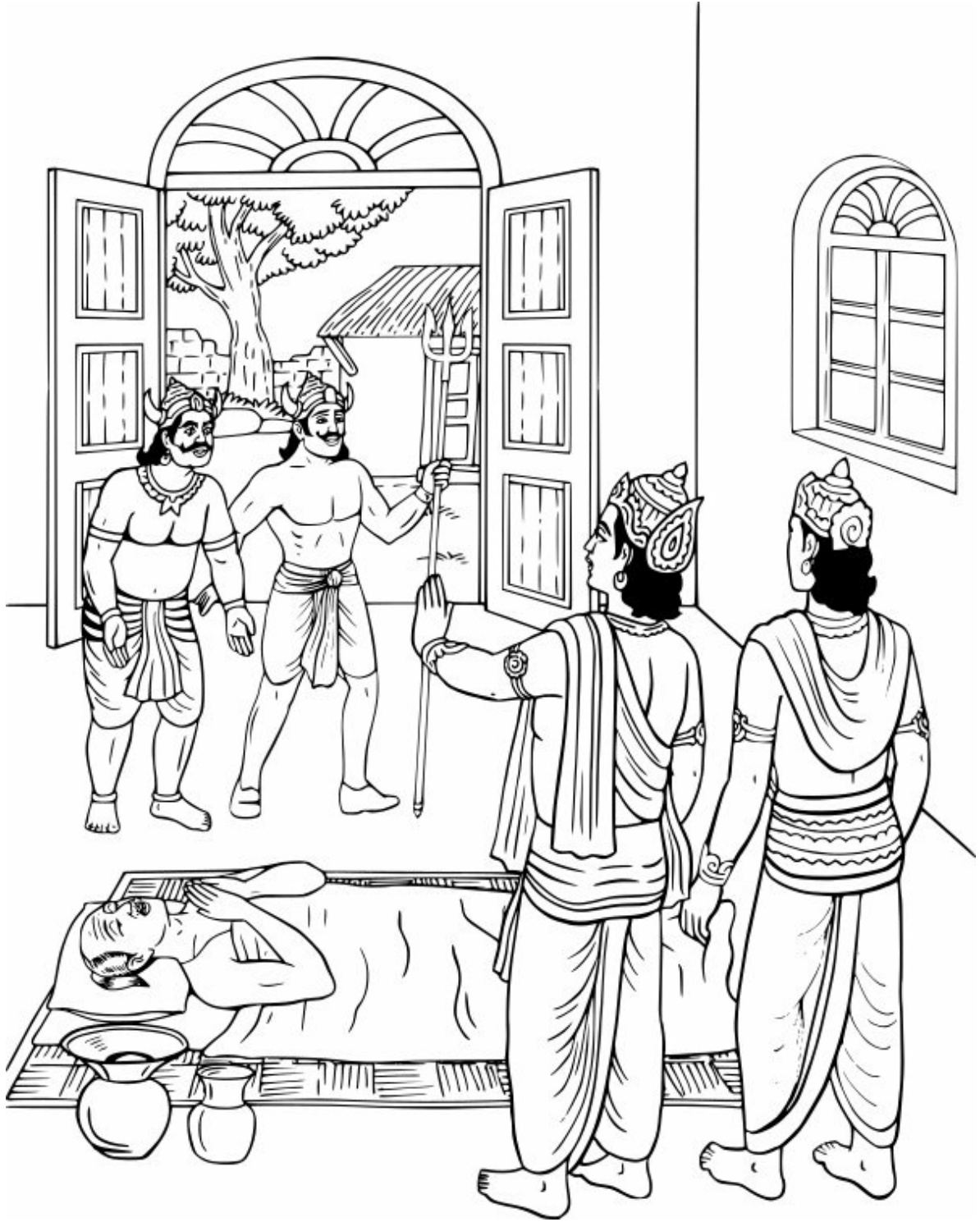
SHUKADEVA DESCRIBED TO KING PARIKSHIT the terrible regions where evildoers go after death. After hearing about the horrible punishments inflicted there, the king asked Shukadeva, 'O holy one, now you must tell me how one can save oneself from these tortures.'

Shukadeva replied: One must do penance for the wrong actions one has done in life. But this will only cancel the effects of particular wrong actions. As long as ignorance remains, a person will continually commit wrong actions. So one must practise spiritual disciplines to purify the mind and attain knowledge of God. By practising austerities, chastity, control of the mind, charity, kindness, japa, and worship, one can destroy the effects of many terrible deeds, as when a fire consumes a grove of reeds. But if one can surrender oneself completely to Sri Hari, with intense devotion for him, then all one's bad actions are wiped away, like fog that disappears with the rising of the sun. Now hear the story of Ajamila:

Ajamila was a righteous and truthful brahmin, who lived with his parents and young wife. He studied the scriptures, and performed all the duties of a virtuous householder. One day he went into the forest to collect flowers, fruits, firewood, and other items. But there in the forest he was tempted by a wicked girl, and overcome by desire, he forgot everything. He left his family to live with the girl, and together they gradually had ten children. To support the family, he robbed, cheated, and stole from the innocent. In short, he lived a despicable life of vice. However, he loved his youngest son very much. The boy was called Narayana, and Ajamila would always call his son, fondle him, and keep him on his lap.

Ajamila grew old and finally reached his eighty-eighth year. Still,

he kept his mind fully occupied with his youngest son. When his last day came he saw that three fierce demons, the messengers of Death, had come to take him away. As they tied him up with their ropes, Ajamila was terrified. He knew his last moment had come, and in anguish, he called out for his son Narayana. So intense was his cry of grief that it reached the celestial abode of Lord Vishnu, who is also called Narayana. Lord Vishnu at once sent four of his attendants from Vaikuntha to attend to the helpless brahmin.



*Ajamila calling Narayana*

When they arrived, they saw the messengers of Death tying up

Ajamila to take him to hell. They stopped them at once. But Death's messengers protested: 'This brahmin left his wife, and has been living a sinful life with another woman. It is only right that he should be dealt with according to the laws of the universe. So we are taking him to Yama, the king of Death.'

The angels of Vishnu replied: 'Not so fast. Don't you know that this person has already been absolved of his sins, not only from this birth, but from millions of previous births? In a state of total helplessness, he has called out the name of the Lord, the supreme refuge, Narayana! Acts of charity and austerity may wipe out the effects of sins, but the Lord's name removes their very cause by purifying the heart. If someone takes a strong medicine, it must have its effect, whether that person knows it or not. It is the same with the supreme medicine, the name of the Lord. If a person takes the name of the Lord, the effect is sure. This man has called out in earnest the Lord's name at the very moment of death. Therefore, he has been released from all his sins, and has gained the protection of Lord Vishnu. So you have no right to take him to hell.'

The terrible messengers of Death could not argue anymore, so they untied Ajamila and returned to Death's kingdom to report to Yama what had happened. Ajamila was, for the time being, saved from death. He then fell at the feet of the Lord's messengers in deep gratitude and joy. But before he could talk to them, they disappeared.

After the angels left, Ajamila started living a new life. Filled with great shame and regret, he thought: 'Alas, what terrible things I have done! I left my noble wife to live in sin with a wicked girl, and have robbed innocent people to support her. I left my aged parents all alone. I am surely a great sinner and deserve to be punished in hell. Yet, just because I called earnestly on my son Narayana, the Lord's angels appeared and rescued me from the clutches of death. From now on, I shall live a pure life of self-control, austerity, peace, and benevolence. And I shall spend my days fixing my mind on the Lord through devotional practices such as repeating his name and glories.' Ajamila then went to Haridwar, and passed his days in contemplation

on the lotus feet of the Lord. When his end came, the Lord's messengers took him in a golden chariot to Vaikuntha, the heavenly abode of the Lord.

## ***Dadhichi's gift, and the killing of Vritrasura***

One day in the heavenly region, Indra, the king of the gods, was sitting on his throne with his wife Shachi Devi. He was then quite puffed up with pride from the attention and praise of his subjects and attendants. At that time Brihaspati, the guru of the gods and of Indra himself, entered the assembly, but Indra did not rise to welcome him or offer him a seat. In fact, he showed him no respect whatever.

Brihaspati understood that Indra's ego had become swollen with pride, and he immediately left the heavenly realm. Indra quickly realized his mistake, and started looking for his guru to apologize and make amends. But though search parties were sent everywhere, Brihaspati was not found.

The asuras, eternal enemies of the gods, took this opportunity to invade the heavenly realm. They attacked with full force, and defeated the gods. Severely wounded by the asuras, the gods ran to Brahma for shelter. Brahma told them: 'O devas, you have failed to show proper respect to such a holy person as Brihaspati. Therefore you were defeated by the asuras, even though they are weaker than you. Now, go to Vishvarupa, the son of Tvashta, and please him with your respect and service. Though he is young, he is the only one who can help you.'

Accordingly, the devas appealed to Vishvarupa to help them. He agreed, and by the power of his sacrifices, austerities, and meditation, took away the asuras' powers, and gave them to Indra. Indra then easily defeated the asuras and drove them out of heaven.

Vishvarupa continued his sacrifices for the devas. But his mother was an asura, so he also had some affection for them. Whenever he performed a sacrifice for the devas, he secretly gave some of the offerings to the asuras also. When Indra found out about this, he became furious and chopped off Vishvarupa's head.



Vishvarupa's father, Tvashta, was grief-stricken and vowed to take revenge. He began a sacrifice to bring about Indra's death, and soon from the sacrificial fire, a dreadful-looking being emerged named Vritrasura. At Tvashta's orders, Vritrasura turned on the devas. The devas hurled all their weapons at the demon, but he immediately swallowed them all, and along with the weapons he also took away the devas' powers.

The devas realized they were in trouble, and they began praying to Lord Vishnu and singing his praises. At last, pleased with their hymns, the Lord appeared before them and told them: 'I understand everything. There is only one way for you to overcome Vritrasura: if Vishvakarma forges a vajra—a thunderbolt—for you. But this vajra must be made from the bones of a rishi who has lived a perfectly pure and holy life, and whose body is strengthened by austerities. Go to the rishi Dadhichi, who is a knower of Brahman, and pray to him for his bones.'

The devas went to Dadhichi and made their request. Dadhichi, in order to test them, answered: 'To give you my bones means to invite death! And who wants to die?' He would not agree to the devas' request. Then the devas said, 'For great souls like you, who are full of compassion, holiness, and love for all, and who always strive to do good to others, what is there that they cannot give away?' Dadhichi replied: 'I was testing you. I wanted to hear about the right path from you. No doubt the body is dear to all. But one day this body must die. It will be my good fortune if it can be of service to others. For your benefit, I shall leave this body today.' Then Dadhichi went into deep meditation, united himself with the Supreme Brahman, and left his body on the earth.

Vishvakarma then made the vajra from Dadhichi's bones, and gave it to Indra. Uniting together, the devas attacked the asuras. Great and terrible was the battle that followed on the banks of the river Narmada.

Armed with the vajra made from Dadhichi's bones, the devas seemed invincible, and the asuras scattered in terror. Seeing his army

fleeing from the devas, Vritrasura roared out: ‘O Indra! You killed my dear brother Vishvarupa. It is right that today you shall be punished for that. And it is my good luck that you stand before me so that I may kill you myself to avenge my brother’s death. But in case you are thinking of destroying me with the vajra made from Dadhichi’s bones, that would actually be a boon for me. Your divine weapon is strengthened with the austerities of that great sage and filled with the power of the Lord. You have been sent by Lord Vishnu himself. And wherever the Lord is, victory prevails. If I should die today, my worldly bonds shall be cut by Sri Hari’s grace, and I shall attain to his lotus feet.’

The battle then began in earnest. Vritrasura flung his deadly trident at Indra, but Indra cut it with his vajra, and then cut off one of Vritra’s arms. Vritra then struck Indra on the cheek with his mace, and Lo! the vajra slipped from his grasp and fell to the ground. All the devas gasped to see this. But Vritra said: ‘O Indra! Pick up your vajra and fight! Victory and defeat, happiness and misery, and life and death are to me all alike, because I know we are all just instruments of the Lord. The three gunas—sattva, rajas, and tamas—belong to Prakriti; the Atman is merely their Witness. Our battle is like a game of dice—no one knows who will win and who will lose.’

Surprised to hear the asura’s wise words, Indra replied: ‘O Vritrasura, you must have attained perfection through your worship of God; otherwise, how could you speak such words of wisdom? How wonderful that you have taken refuge at the feet of Lord Hari, the supreme Friend of all beings and the inner Self of all. You have certainly transcended the world-bewitching maya of the Lord and have attained limitless bliss as a result of your deep devotion for the Lord.’

The battle then resumed. After retrieving the vajra, Indra cut off Vritrasura’s other arm. Then the armless asura opened his huge fanged jaws, which were as wide as the sky, and rushed at Indra, swallowing him as well as his elephant, Airavata, whole! But as Indra was protected by the power of Vishnu, he did not perish. He quickly cut himself out of the belly of the asura and then cut off Vritra’s head

with the divine vajra. Thus came to an end the great battle. All who were present saw a bright effulgence, the light of the Self, emerge from Vritra's slain body and ascend to the supreme abode of Vishnu.



## BOOK SEVEN

### *Prahlada*

GOD IS THE FRIEND OF ALL. Then why is he more fond of the devas? Why should he kill the asuras to save Indra?’ King Parikshit asked of Shukadeva. Shukadeva replied: ‘You have asked a very good question. You are right—God is the same to all. But as the Master and witness of the three gunas of Prakriti—that is, sattva, rajas, and tamas—he makes use of these gunas according to the need of the age. When he wants sattva to increase, he allies himself with the devas; when he wants rajas to increase, he allies himself with the asuras; and when he wants to go into his cosmic sleep, he increases tamas. The Supreme Lord is beyond all the gunas, and is the inner controller dwelling in all beings. Ordinary beings feel pain, fear, anger, and so on, because they are identified with their bodies. The Lord may punish or chasten people for their own good, but this does not mean that he is cruel or angry. He is free from all passions. Now listen to the story of Prahlada.

A long, long time ago there were two powerful asura brothers named Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu. The Lord, in his incarnation as the boar, killed Hiranyaksha. Hiranyakashipu then vowed to take revenge for his brother’s death. He began to practise terrible austerities, such as no mortal had done before. Thus he was able to please Brahma, who appeared before him and offered him a boon. Hiranyakashipu prayed to Brahma: ‘May no deva, no asura, no man, and no beast be able to kill me, either on earth, or in the air, by day or by night, nor should any weapon be able to kill me.’ Brahma granted this boon, saying, ‘Let it be so.’

Armed with Brahma’s boon, Hiranyakashipu conquered the three worlds and then moved his court to the heavenly region, where he sat on Indra’s throne. He made the devas serve him, and he tyrannized the three worlds. Finally, seeking relief, the devas sought shelter with Lord

Vishnu. Lord Vishnu reassured them: 'Wait a while. At the proper time, Hiranyakashipu will be properly punished.'

Hiranyakashipu had four sons, the youngest of whom was Prahlada. Prahlada was a very gentle, good-natured boy who never quarrelled or fought with others. He thought of God night and day and served holy people like a servant. Sometimes he was so overwhelmed with the thought of the Lord that he wept tears of joy, and he would be like an automaton, totally unconscious of where he was or what he was doing. Sometimes he loudly chanted the names of the Lord, and sometimes he danced about in great joy. Sometimes he was so absorbed in the Lord that he imitated the Lord's actions. Again, sometimes he was so identified with the Lord that he could not speak at all and he remained still with his eyes half closed, absorbed in bliss.

The demon-king's guru, Shukracharya, had two sons, Shanda and Amarka, who served as Prahlada's tutors. One day they brought him to his father. The king took the boy on his lap and asked him, 'Dear son, tell me, out of everything you have learned, what do you consider to be the highest good?' Prahlada answered: 'Father, the idea of "I and mine" is false, yet people take it to be true, and thus they suffer. And from this idea comes their downfall. To save themselves, people should take refuge in Sri Hari and remember him always as the Supreme Lord. That, I think, is highest good.'

The king smiled. He thought, 'Surely, one of Vishnu's spies must have secretly taught all this to my son.' He then cautioned the boy's teachers: 'See that all these ideas are kept away from my son. Make sure no one comes near him to put such ideas in his head.' So with extra vigilance, Shanda and Amarka continued to teach Prahlada, being careful not to let him hear anything about Lord Hari.

After some time, the teachers again presented Prahlada to his father. Prahlada, with great humility, touched his father's feet. Hiranyakashipu took Prahlada on his lap and affectionately asked him the same question: 'Dear boy, you have been studying for many days. Tell me, what is the greatest lesson you have learned?' Prahlada replied: 'Father, to hear about God, to sing His name and glories, to

remember Him, to serve Him, to worship Him, and love Him, to be His servant, to be His friend, and to surrender oneself completely to Him—to offer Lord Vishnu these nine kinds of devotion is the greatest lesson I have learnt.’

Hiranyakashipu was livid with rage. He shouted at Prahlada’s tutors: ‘What arrogance! You have defied me, filling my boy’s head with nonsense about my arch-enemy Vishnu!’ The teachers humbly replied: ‘Revered King! Neither we nor anyone else taught Prahlada these things. We have no idea how he learned them. He seems to have a mind of his own. Please don’t be angry with us.’

Prahlada was still sitting on his father’s lap. He blurted out: ‘These teachers have not taught me these things. They are bound souls, governed by their passions, so how could they teach me about love for Sri Krishna? Only those who get the blessings of a great, all-renouncing saint can turn their minds to God.’

Now nearly blind with rage, Hiranyakashipu threw his son to the floor and shouted: ‘Guards! Kill him immediately! He is the servant of my most despised enemy, Vishnu! If an arm or a leg becomes diseased and endangers the rest of the body, it must be cut off. If a son of five years becomes the enemy of his father, then he must be destroyed. So do away with him!’

The demon guards, baring their sharp fangs, struck Prahlada with their tridents, piercing his body all over. But Prahlada’s mind was fully immersed in Sri Hari, and he withstood all these tortures. He could not be killed.

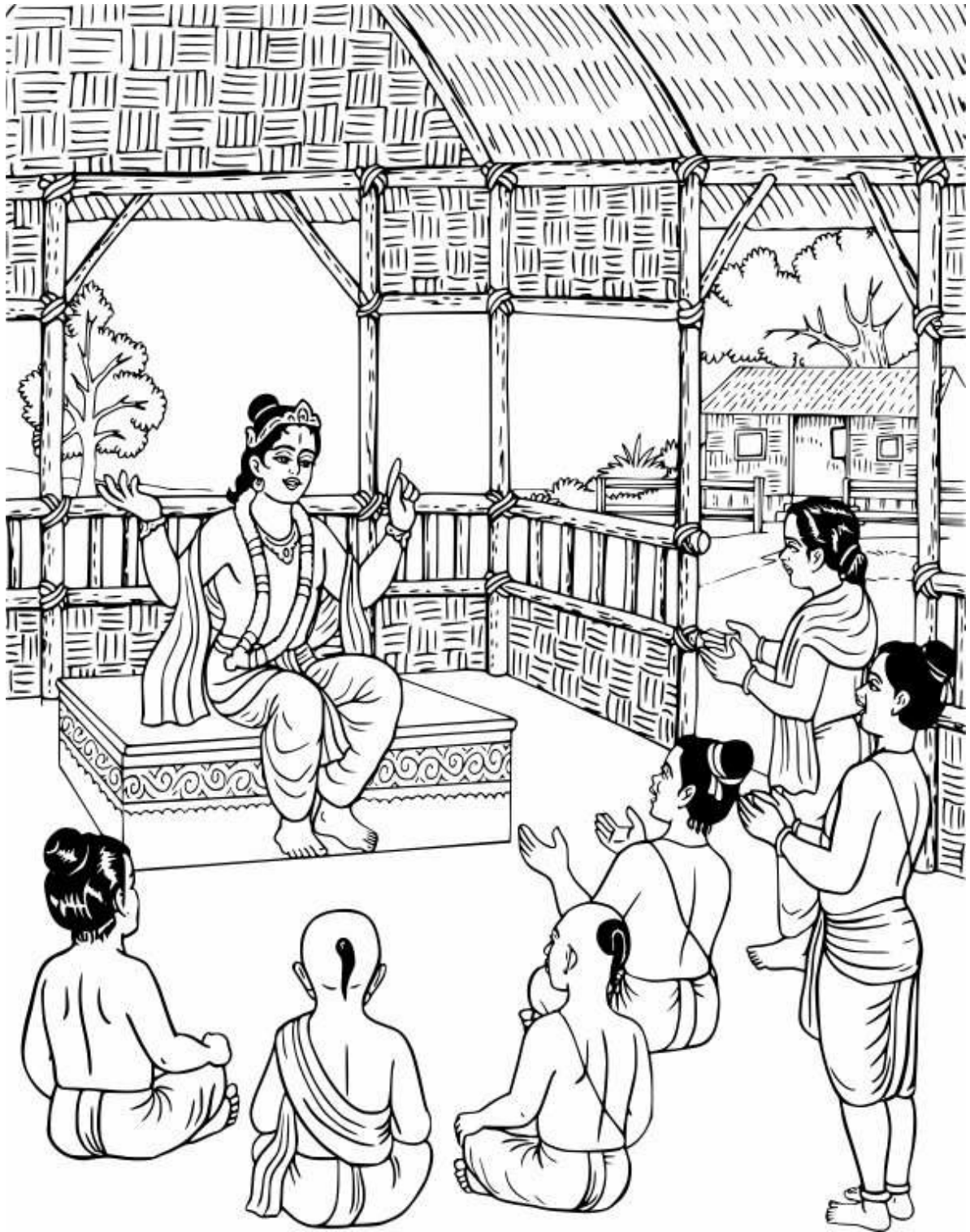
Hiranyakashipu became worried, and instructed his guards to try to kill Prahlada in different ways. They threw Prahlada under the feet of a mad elephant to be trampled by it, but he survived. He was bitten by poisonous snakes, thrown from a mountain top, imprisoned, poisoned, starved, and even tortured with black magic, but nothing was of any avail. It was as though the boy had drunk divine nectar—death could not lay his hands on him. By Sri Hari’s grace, he survived all the tortures inflicted on him. The demon guards tried their utmost

but could not kill Prahlada.

Hiranyakashipu now became very distressed. He thought to himself: 'What a strange and amazing thing! Where did this little boy get so much power? Perhaps I shall meet death at his hands.' Shanda and Amarka reassured him: 'O king, you are the conqueror of the entire universe. There is no one who does not tremble in fear before you. Prahlada is but a baby; he can do you no harm. Give him back to us. We shall try again to put some sense into him. Let us see if we can bring him around.'

So Prahlada went with Shanda and Amarka, who continued to teach him. But when his teachers were busy elsewhere, Prahlada's friends would gather around him. How many stories he would tell them—all about God. He would say: 'Dear friends, our human life is very precious, because it is only in this life that we can realize God. Again, this body is mortal. There is no knowing when it will die. So from a very young age we should begin spiritual practices. One life is a matter of a hundred years at most. Of that time, we spend half in sleep. Of the other half, twenty years are wasted in youth, and another twenty in the weakness of old age. Whatever time is left is frittered away in various household chores, maintaining a family, and trying to satisfy desires. Thus we bind ourselves. The silkworm spins its own cocoon and is then bound by it. That's why, dear friends, I say the one thing we should do is completely surrender to the Lord, who is the refuge of all beings.'

'And it is not difficult to please him, for he is our very own, the nearest of the near. Just a crumb of devotion pleases him. And when he is pleased, all things are possible.'



*Prahlada teaching his fellow-students*

Prahlada's friends begged him to tell them where he had gotten all



this knowledge, which their teachers didn't seem to have. Prahlada replied: 'I learned all this spiritual wisdom from the rishi Narada while I was still in my mother's womb. And the Lord Narayana himself taught it to Narada.'

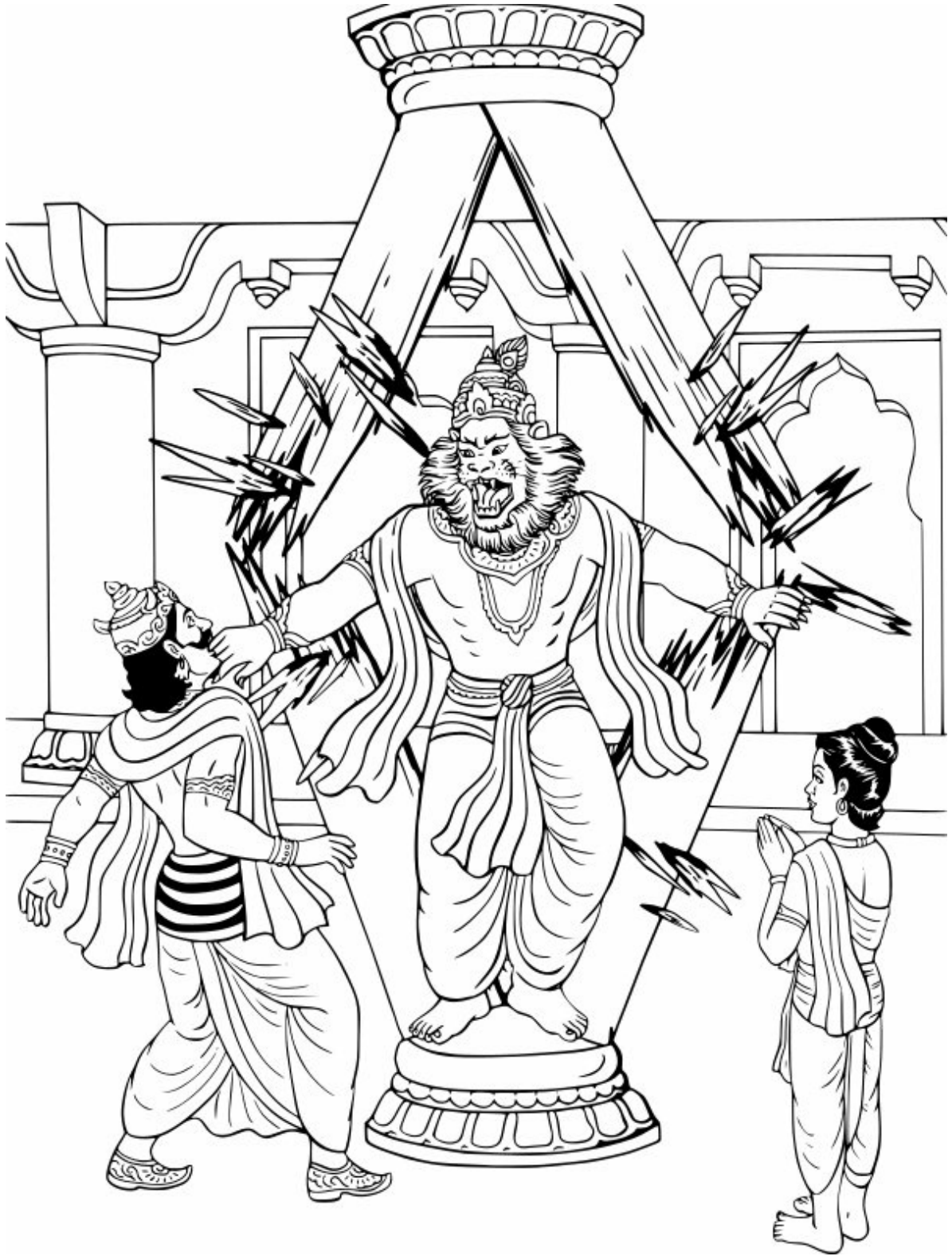
Prahlada continued to teach his friends. He said: 'Let me tell you about the path of devotion. To grow in devotion, we must revere our guru and serve him, and we must keep holy company, the company of other devotees of God. We must dedicate all we possess to the Lord, and worship and pray to him. We should have faith in the scriptures, and sing the Lord's name and praises. We should meditate on his lotus feet, and behold and worship his sacred image. Keeping in mind that he dwells in all beings, we must love all, and we must serve him in others. Even though God is pleased by such disciplines as meditation, japa, and charity, he is most pleased when he sees ecstatic devotion for him. Everything else bereft of pure devotion is fruitless. To proceed on any path without pure love for the Lord is futile. The ultimate goal of all human beings is to have ecstatic love for Sri Hari, and to see him within one's own heart and in the hearts of all.'

Hearing all these words from Prahlada, the asura boys became devotees of Sri Vishnu. But when Hiranyakashipu heard about it, he was infuriated. He told Prahlada: 'You wretched rogue! The gods and demons tremble merely to think of me. On whose strength do you defy me?'

Prahlada said: 'Father, it's not only I whose source of strength is Vishnu. Your strength too, and the strength of every other strong person, emanates from him. From Brahma to everything that moves or doesn't move, including the least blade of grass—all are under his control. He is the supreme Lord; he is Ishvara. He is the reservoir of strength, courage, and intelligence. Please give up your animosity towards Sri Vishnu. Banish wicked passions from your life. Many think they have conquered the three worlds, but they have not even conquered the world of their own passions. Only those holy men who have conquered their lower nature and who view all with an equal eye are the true conquerors. All enemies become their friends.'

Hiranyakashipu replied: 'You scoundrel! It seems you are ready to give up your life; otherwise how would you dare try to teach me? Just now you mentioned another god besides me. Who is he? I have heard of him. They say he exists everywhere. If that be so, then does your god exist in that pillar over there?' Prahlada replied, 'Yes, he is there.' Then the king said: 'I'll break that pillar right now. After that, I'm going to chop off your head with this sword. Now call out to your Sri Hari and see if he can save you.'

Hiranyakashipu jumped off his throne and punched the pillar hard with his fist. A tremendous rumbling sound emanated from the pillar, and the Lord emerged from within it. But what kind of God was this? Part of him appeared to be a man, and part of him was a lion.



*Vishnu coming out of the pillar as Narasimha*

So it was that God descended in the form of Narasimha, the Man-lion. He then attacked Hiranyakashipu with tremendous fury. Of what avail was Hiranyakashipu's great sword? Of what use his famous strength? As easily as Garuda can catch a snake, Narasimha Deva took hold of the demon king and threw him—not on the ground, nor in the air—but on his own thigh. Then he tore apart his body into bits and pieces with his long nails, as if it were a cloth doll. Hiranyakashipu was dead.

Narasimha then went on to attack the followers of Hiranyakashipu. At last, when they were all dead, Narasimha sat down on the throne. The devas heaved a sigh of relief and sang hymns of praise to the Man-lion. But even they were frightened of the terrifying form of Narasimha. Even Brahma would not approach him. Though all the enemies had been slain, Narasimha still seemed as if he could destroy the whole world. Then Brahma suggested that Prahlada prostrate before Narasimha and sing His praises. This, he thought, would restore the Lord to a benevolent mood. When Prahlada approached the Lord and bowed down, Narasimha lifted him up and placed his reassuring palm on the boy's head.

At the touch of the Lord's hand, Prahlada's heart became filled with profound bliss, and with tears streaming down his face, he sang a hymn to Narasimha. He prayed for the Lord's grace not only for himself, but for all ignorant persons of the world. When Prahlada had finished, Narasimha said: 'My dear child, I am very pleased with your devotion. Ask whatever boon you want of me.' Prahlada, whose sole desire was for the Lord, could not be tempted by any material enjoyment. Rather, he prayed to be free from all temptations. With folded hands, he said: 'If you want to grant me a boon, then grant that no desire for any boon shall arise in my mind. For only when a person becomes free from all desires does he become fit to attain you. And please grant me another boon, that my father be saved from the sin of hating you.'

Bhagavan Narasimha then said: 'I am very much pleased with

you. Your life shall be the standard for all my future devotees to emulate.' After this, the Lord disappeared.



## BOOK EIGHT

### *The Liberation of the Elephant King*

LONG, LONG AGO THERE WAS A MOUNTAIN by the name of Trikuta within view of the Himalayas. It had three peaks—one gold, one silver, and one iron. In the valley at the foot of the mountain was a beautiful lake where the celestial women used to play. One day an elephant named Gajendra, who was the king of a great herd, came to bathe in the lake with a few of the other elephants. Naturally, a lot of elephants plunging into the water caused a great commotion. Seeing the elephants, a powerful crocodile came swimming over and clamped his huge jaws around Gajendra's leg. Gajendra tried his utmost to free himself, and seeing him in trouble the other elephants also tried to help him. But the crocodile's grip was unrelenting.

This battle between the elephants and the crocodile lasted a thousand years.

Astonished to hear what was happening, the devas came to see the fight. Finally Gajendra felt that he had lost all his strength, and he thought to himself: 'There are so many elephants here helping me, and as a king I have much power, yet I can't get out of the jaws of this crocodile. The Lord himself must have sent this enemy here. Therefore, I see no other way than to pray to the all-powerful Lord for deliverance.' As he was accustomed to praying in his previous life, he started praising the Lord in the following manner:

'That Brahman, the formless, who yet assumes infinite forms and performs astounding deeds—to Him the Lord of all, my salutations! He who is self-luminous consciousness, the witness of all, the Supreme Self, the One beyond the grasp of mind, words, and every kind of mental mode—to Him my salutations!'

Suddenly there appeared before him the Lord of all gods, the rider

of Garuda, Sri Hari himself. Seeing Narayana seated on Garuda, holding the conch, discus, mace, and lotus in his four hands, the king of the elephants gently plucked another lotus with its trunk and offered it to the Lord. Then, with what was left of his strength after battling the crocodile for a thousand years, he uttered a few words: 'O Narayana, O Lord, I bow to Thee.'

Pleased, the Lord alighted from Garuda. Wading in the water, he ripped open the mouth of the crocodile using his Sudarshana Chakra. The elephant king was saved.

It so happened that this crocodile had been a gandharva, or heavenly musician, who had been cursed. He had to take birth as a crocodile through the curse of the sage Devala Muni. Now, at the touch of Sri Hari, the curse was lifted and he regained his previous form. Saluting the Lord, the gandharva bowed down and sang the Lord's praises, and then went back to heaven.

The elephant king, in his previous birth, had been King Indradyumna, who ruled over the Pandya territory. The king had been very devoted to the Lord. In an ashrama on Mount Malaya, he was engaged in silent spiritual practices when Agastya Muni suddenly appeared there with many of his disciples. Since the king had taken a vow of silence, he could not welcome the guests with the proper reverence. At that, Agastya became very angry. He thought, 'One who disrespects one's guests is nothing but a dunderhead.' He then cursed the king: 'Let this blockhead king become an elephant!' Saying this, Agastya went away with his disciples. The king took this curse as God's will, and accepted it.

He then took birth as an elephant, and he forgot everything about his previous birth until he was caught by the crocodile. The all-merciful Sri Hari released the elephant king, accepted him as one of his attendants, and took him to his own abode.

## ***The Churning of the Ocean***

Amid much excitement, preparations were being made to churn the ocean. Deprived of their wealth and strength by the asuras, the devas had gone to Lord Vishnu for help, and it was at his bidding that the ocean was about to be churned. On one side was King Bali and his battallion of asuras. On the other was Indra and his retinue of devas. The churning stick was Mount Mandara, and the churning rope was to be the great serpent Vasuki. The goal? To acquire the nectar of immortality.

However, as the churning began, they soon found that the mountain could not remain in position, as there was nothing stable underneath it to support it. The Lord himself then took the form of Kurma the Tortoise and held the entire weight of the mountain on his back.

The churning resumed. Very soon, however, another problem cropped up. A terrible poison, called Halahala emerged from the ocean, and the whole creation was about to be annihilated. Terrified, the devas ran to Mahadeva and pleased him by singing his praises. Shiva is the friend of all. His very name signifies that he is always doing good to everyone, so he agreed to drink the poison to save all creatures of the world. As he swallowed it, his throat turned blue. Ever since, Shiva has been called Nilakantha, 'the blue-throated one'. Not just Shiva but all good and devoted people generally feel the sufferings of others as their own. Their empathy with others is the highest form of worship of the Supreme Being, who is the soul of all.

The churning continued. Now many divine gifts began to emerge from the ocean: First, a heavenly cow named Kamadhenu; then a horse named Uchhaishravas; then the elephant Airavata, white as snow and with four tusks; then the jewel Kaustubha; and then the wish-fulfilling tree called Parijata. But the devas and asuras continued to churn the ocean. Heavenly damsels called Apsaras came next, and finally the most beautiful of all: Lakshmi Devi.



All the deva and asura men lost their hearts to her and all began to worship her with various gifts. Then Lakshmi herself began to look for someone to be her spouse.

She thought: ‘Some people, like Durvasa, practise spiritual disciplines but have not conquered anger; in some, like Brahma and Chandra, there is elevation of soul, but they have not been able to conquer lust; in some there is knowledge, but they have not been able to rid themselves of desire, such as Shukracharya; in some there is dharma, but no compassion, such as Parashurama; some have a long span of life, but are not attractive, like Markandeya; and then there are some like Sanaka who have all the virtues but will never marry. But Vishnu has all the virtues. There is no one like Vishnu. So I want Lord Vishnu to be my husband.’ Lakshmi then placed a garland of lotuses around his neck, and Vishnu accepted her as his bride.

Again the churning resumed. A girl called Varuni appeared, and the asuras adopted her. At long last, Dhanvantari appeared out of the swirling waters with the pitcher of nectar. The greedy asuras immediately snatched it away and carried it off. Now all the efforts of the devas to obtain the nectar of immortality seemed to be in vain—for it had fallen into the hands of the asuras.

The devas then sought help from Vishnu, who assured them that he would retrieve the pot of nectar. He then took the form of a exceedingly beautiful woman. Meanwhile the asuras were busy quarrelling over which of them would get to drink the nectar first. But now, bewitched by Mohini, the female form of Vishnu, they handed over the pitcher of nectar to her without question. They said, ‘Please settle our dispute and bring good to us all.’ Mohini got the devas and the asuras to form two separate rows. While beguiling the asuras with sweet words, she distributed all the nectar to the devas.

Rahu was the most cunning of the asuras. He disguised himself, joined the devas, and was able to get a sip of the nectar. But Surya and Chandra, the sun and moon, recognized him and revealed his identity, whereupon Sri Hari chopped off the rest of his body with his discus, leaving him as only a head. But one who has drunk nectar cannot die,

so to this day the head of Rahu chases the sun and moon to take revenge on them. Now and then, at the time of an eclipse, he swallows them.

After distributing the nectar to the devas, Sri Hari cast off his woman's disguise and took his own form back. He then went away. The devas became immortal by drinking nectar, but the asuras failed to get any of it, so they were terribly angry. Led by their king, Bali, they attacked the devas, but after a long and terrible battle, they were defeated.

## ***Bali and Vamana***

Although Bali was defeated in the battle with the devas, he did not despair. In order to take revenge, he started a yajna (a sacrifice) with renewed vigour with the help of his teacher, Shukracharya. From that yajna came out celestial weapons and a chariot with horses. Armed with these weapons, Bali laid siege to Indrapuri, the devas' heavenly abode. Brihaspati, the guru of the devas, told Indra: 'You will not be able to defeat Bali this time. You will have to leave the city and go into hiding. Eventually Bali will be subdued by Sri Hari himself. Just wait.'

Without any resistance, Bali took possession of heaven, and with great joy started a hundred Ashwamedha yajnas (horse sacrifices) to strengthen his power. Soon after, Bhagavan Sri Hari was born from Aditi's womb as Vamana Deva. Vamana's body was very short, and his legs were even shorter. In due course his sacred thread ceremony was held with great rejoicing and celebration by the devas. Then Vamana, effulgent like the sun, left for Bali's yajna dressed as a brahmachari and carrying a water pot and umbrella.

King Bali cordially welcomed him with due respect, and said, 'O revered soul, I am ready to give you cows, gold, horses, elephants, chariots, villages, food and drink—whatever you wish.' Vamana replied: 'This behoves a king like you. Your ancestor Prahlada was renowned for his generosity. Your father Virochana even donated his longevity to his enemies, the devas. Like your ancestors, you are also highly religious and devoted to dharma. I don't want much. All I ask for is a small piece of land—just what can be measured by three of my steps.'

Bali replied: 'O brahmin, you are a mere boy. I am the king of the three worlds. What is this you have asked from me? Do at least pray for land sufficient to provide you with your daily needs.'

'No, king,' said Vamana, 'I do not require any more land. Keep your word, and give me what I have asked for.' Bali laughed and

picked up his water pot. He said, 'You may take what you have asked for.'

Shukracharya, the guru of the asuras, had been watching everything all this time. He now came running to his disciple King Bali and cautioned him: 'O King! What are you doing? This brahmin in the form of a dwarf is none else but Sri Hari himself. He has come to deceive you. He will divest you of your kingdom, your fame, and your knowledge, and give them all to Indra. His body encompasses the entire universe. With three strides he will acquire the three worlds. O King! After you have given everything away to Sri Vishnu, how will you live? That gift which endangers the life and livelihood of the benefactor does not earn the praise of the learned.'

King Bali said: 'O Gurudeva, what you have said is right. But I am the descendant of Prahlada. I have given my word that I shall give away whatever is asked for. How can I take back my words for love of money or for fear of life? There is nothing more heinous than untruth. In olden days great souls like Dadhichi even sacrificed their lives to serve others. What is a small piece of land? You will find many a hero who can give up his life on the battlefield. But scarcely will you find a person who, with due respect, will give up his possessions to a deserving person. Therefore, he who has come to me—he may be Vishnu, or he may be my enemy—I will fulfil his prayer.'

In spite of being forbidden by his guru, Shukracharya, King Bali resolved to give to Vamana land measured by Vamana's three steps. Seeing this great act of moral courage, the devas and others caused flowers to rain down on the king.

Now Vamana assumed his own cosmic form. His body filled the whole universe. Indeed, it grew so much that King Bali saw that one stride had covered the entire earth and the second had covered the heavens. Seeing how Vamana had deceived their king, the asuras became furious and rushed to kill Vishnu in the guise of a dwarf. But Bali could not bear this and stopped them: 'O warriors, stop this fighting and retreat. That same Lord who favoured us previously has now reversed his attitude. Time is no longer in our favour. Therefore

we must retreat and wait for a more propitious time.'

Meanwhile, Brahma had brought a waterpot and worshipped the feet of Vishnu, which had measured the worlds in two steps. The water that washed the feet of the Lord then became the Ganga, which sanctifies all the worlds. However, as all the worlds had been measured by only two steps of Vamana, there was not even one iota of space left for the third step. Vamana said: 'O King! My first two strides have covered the earth and the heavens. Now give me a place for my third step. You will have to enter the nether regions if you don't fulfil your promise to give me what I asked for.'

Bali then said: 'O great Lord, O Man of all men, if you think I have made a false promise, I shall presently establish its truthfulness. My word shall never go in vain. Here I make a place for your third step. My head is that place. I am not afraid of the nether regions, but I am certainly afraid of dishonour. I take your punishment as a boon.'



*Vamana and Bali*

The Lord in the form of Vamanadeva was very pleased at this. He thought: 'This bright jewel of the demon dynasty has certainly won over the invincible maya. Even after detecting my deceit, and in spite of his guru forbidding him to do so, this fortunate asura did not renounce truth. I shall give him a boon that is difficult for even the devas to attain.' He then said, 'O demon king! In a coming age, you will be born as Indra, king of the devas. For now, you may remain in the realm called Sutala. None shall be able to overpower you there. With my discus I will forever protect you, and you will always feel my presence there.'

## ***Incarnation as a Fish***

Raja Parikshit then asked Shukadeva: Why did the Lord assume the low form of a fish, as if he were under the bondage of karma?

Sri Shuka replied: The Lord incarnates himself whenever the need arises. And though he pervades all beings, he is not affected by the qualities of the bodies he pervades. At the close of a kalpa, Brahma retires for his night and a periodic deluge takes place. When Brahma was about to go to sleep at the end of the last kalpa, the Vedas came out of his mouth and were stolen by an asura name Hayagriva. Lord Hari then took the form of a fish to retrieve them.

There was a king at that time named Satyavrata, who was very devoted to the Lord and who was then practising austerities by the Kritamala River. One day when he took water in his hands to make an offering, he noticed there was a tiny fish in his hand. As he bent down to release the fish back into the water, the fish protested, saying: ‘O King, why are you putting me back in this water where I have to live in fear of other creatures who desire to eat me? Please give me protection.’

The king took pity on the fish and put it inside a water jar. But by the next day the fish had outgrown the vessel and asked to be put in something bigger. The king did so, but within a short time that vessel also was too small. Again and again the same thing happened. The king put the fish in a pond, then in a lake, then in a bigger lake, but it kept growing bigger and bigger. At last, when the king was about to put it back in the ocean, he said to the fish: ‘Surely you must be the worshipful Hari, Lord Narayana, who has assumed the form of a fish for the good of the world. Salutations to you! But please help me understand why you have taken this form.’

The Lord replied: ‘Seven days from now the whole universe will be submerged in the deluge of the periodic dissolution (naimittika pralaya). I will soon send a ship to you. You must collect seeds from all



the plants and also take representatives of all animal life and get on the ship with them. The Saptarishis (the seven sages) will also come with you. Then I shall come to you and you will tie your ship to the horn on my head, using the serpent Vasuki as the rope. I will guide your ship through this pralaya until Brahma's night is over and the pralaya comes to an end. At that time I shall answer any questions you put to me about my true nature as Brahman.'

Satyavrata did as he was told, and after seven days the ship arrived. Then the king and the Saptarishis got on, along with specimens of all plant and animal life. After that, the Lord in his incarnation as a huge gold-coloured fish appeared. The ship was tied to the fish with Vasuki as the rope, and they set sail.

After the king sang a hymn of praise, Hari, in the form of a fish, began to give Satyavrata and the Saptarishis various spiritual instructions regarding the Atman and Brahman and other sacred subjects. At last, when the pralaya was over, Satyavrata was made Vaivaswata Manu of the new cycle of creation. Brahma then awoke from his sleep and the Lord returned to him the Vedas, which the Lord had retrieved after killing Hayagriva.



## BOOK NINE

### *Ambarisha and Durvasa*

IN THE BHAGAVATAM there are many priceless tales. Shukadeva is narrating them one after another, and King Parikshit is listening to them with great joy.

From the lotus-navel of Lord Vishnu, Brahma appeared. And from Brahma's own thought, Marichi was created. Marichi's son was Kashyapa, and Kashyapa's son was Vamana. We have just heard the story of Vamana. The peerless devotee Ambarisha was born in this same family.

Let us first say a few words about Ambarisha's father Nabhaga. Nabhaga was a very good man. When he returned home from his guru's house after spending many years there studying, his brothers had already divided the family property amongst themselves. As Nabhaga's share they gave him their old father. When Nabhaga went to his father and told him this, his father said: 'You have been deceived by your brothers, for I am not some property to be enjoyed. But don't worry, my son. I will teach you two mantras. When the king of the country holds a yajna, you go and recite these two mantras, which the sages there do not know, and then they will greatly respect you.' And that is exactly what happened. The sages were very pleased with Nabhaga, and gave him all the wealth that remained at the close of the sacrifice.

Now, that wealth actually belonged by right to Rudra, as he was supposed to get whatever remained at the close of a sacrifice. When Rudra came to claim it, he told Nabhaga, 'All this wealth rightfully belongs to me.' Nabhaga replied, 'The rishis have given it to me.' 'Well,' said Rudra, 'let your father settle our dispute. Let him decide who should get this wealth.'

After hearing everything, Nabhaga's father decided in favour of Rudra, and Nabhaga obeyed his father's order. He went to Rudra, humbly apologized for taking the wealth, and handed everything over to him. Rudra was greatly pleased at this, and gave everything back to Nabhaga.

Nabhaga spent his days happily. His wealth was the envy of kings. In due course his son Ambarisha inherited his father's property. But Ambarisha was completely indifferent to property and wealth. His mind was dedicated to the lotus feet of Sri Hari.

Ambarisha used to spend most of his time worshipping the Lord. So fervent was his devotion that Sri Hari became very pleased with him and ordered his Sudarshana Chakra to guard Ambarisha as long as he lived. Now one day Ambarisha, who was by now a king, was observing the dvadashi vow. After fasting for three consecutive nights, he completed the rituals connected with this vow and, with the blessings of the holy men present there, was ready to break his fast. Just then the famous sage Durvasa appeared. Ambarisha welcomed him with due ceremony and invited him to have his meal there, and Durvasa agreed.

King Ambarisha could not break his fast before feeding the sage. But Durvasa had gone for his bath in the Yamuna and was taking a long time. The auspicious moment for Ambarisha to break his fast was coming to an end. 'What shall I do?' the king wondered. Thinking of Sri Hari, he fulfilled his vow by taking a small sip of water—but he did not eat anything.

Durvasa returned from his bath, and was respectfully welcomed by Ambarisha. But, through his supernatural power, Durvasa understood that Ambarisha had broken his fast before offering him anything. Durvasa became wild with anger. He tore out one of his matted locks, and out of that lock sprang a ferocious monster, which charged at Ambarisha.

Ambarisha was not at all afraid. He didn't move one bit. He stood there and continued to take the name of Sri Hari. Then suddenly the

Sudarshana Chakra came and burnt the monster to ashes. After that, the Chakra went towards Durvasa.

Durvasa started running. He ran to the distant corners of the earth; he ran to all the heavenly regions, and to all the lower regions. Wherever he went, the Sudarshana Chakra followed. In desperation, Durvasa approached Brahma for shelter. Brahma said: 'I cannot help you. You have offended a devotee of Sri Hari.' Durvasa then ran to Kailash and sought shelter at the feet of Mahadeva. There, Mahadeva told him: 'I cannot help you either. Go to Vaikuntha. Nobody but Sri Hari can save you.' So Durvasa ran to Vaikuntha and took refuge with the king of Vaikuntha, Sri Hari himself.

Sri Hari said: 'I am subject to my devotee and am not free. Those who come to me and take refuge in me alone—how can I abandon them? True devotees are my heart—and I am the heart of the devotees. They know none but me, and I know none but them.'

Sri Hari added: 'Learning and austerities are of immense good for spiritual aspirants. But for the proud and arrogant who use their learning to try to harm others, they can be very harmful. So go to that great devotee Ambarisha, whom you have aggrieved. Beg for his forgiveness. Then only will your wrong be pardoned.'

As instructed by Sri Vishnu, Durvasa went to Ambarisha, fell at his feet, and begged to be forgiven. The king felt extremely embarrassed that the rishi was clutching his feet. He then began to sing the praises of the Sudarshana Chakra. He prayed: 'O Sudarshana! You are the protector of Dharma, and the terror of asuras! I bow to thee! You are the protector of the whole world! Be gracious, and pardon the offence of this holy man.' Thus the Sudarshana Chakra was pacified and Durvasa was saved.

Durvasa addressed King Ambarisha: 'O King, today I have witnessed the wonderful greatness of the servants of God. Though I have done harm to you, yet you have done good to me. You are indeed highly compassionate. I have been blessed by you. You have pardoned my offence, and have saved my life.'

All this time, King Ambarisha had not yet eaten anything. He had been waiting for Durvasa. Now the king pleased the sage by serving him a sumptuous feast, and afterwards Ambarisha himself finally ate.

## ***Sagara and the Descent of the Ganga***

On the advice of his guru, King Sagara decided to perform the Ashwamedha sacrifice (the horse sacrifice) to worship the Lord. Indra, however, wanted to obstruct the sacrifice, so when the horse was let loose to wander at will, he stole it. Sagara had two queens, Sumati and Keshini. Not knowing where the horse had gone, Sagara sent the two sons of Sumati to find it. The sons were very proud of their strength and did not mind even digging up the earth to look for the horse.

One day they found the horse in a cavern underground, standing by the side of the sage Kapila, who was in deep meditation. The sons of Sagara immediately accused Kapila of stealing the horse and of pretending to be in samadhi. They were just on the point of killing the sage when they were burnt up by fire that came from their own bodies.

After these two sons were killed, Amshuman, Sagara's grandson, came forward to retrieve the horse and redeem his uncles. Amshuman was the son of Asamanjasa, who was the son of Sagara's second wife, Keshini. Amshuman went through the underground path that his uncles had made and gradually came upon the horse standing next to the ashes of his uncles. The sage Kapila was also there in deep meditation. Unlike his uncles, Amshuman immediately realized that this was a great sage, and after making obeisance to him, he began to extol the sage with deep reverence. Kapila then came out of his meditation, blessed Amshuman, and said: 'My child, you may return this horse to your grandfather. As for your uncles, only if their ashes have been touched by the holy waters of the Ganga can they be redeemed.' Bowing down to the sage again, Amshuman took the horse to his grandfather and helped him complete the sacrifice.

After some time, Sagara turned his kingdom over to Amshuman and left for the forest to spend the remainder of his life practising spiritual disciplines. Amshuman practised austerities for many years in order to bring the Ganga from heaven, but he did not succeed. His son, Dilip, also did the same, but was not successful. At last, when

Dilip's son, Bhagiratha, performed intense disciplines, then Mother Ganga became gracious and revealed herself to him.

When Bhagiratha informed the Goddess that he wanted her to come to earth to redeem his ancestors, she replied: 'Who will bear the impact of my fall? Besides, I shall have to take on the sins of all the people who bathe in me. How can I get rid of all those sins?' Bhagiratha then replied: 'Lord Shiva will be able to bear the impact of your fall. Besides this, those great souls who are knowers of Brahman will come to bathe in you, and they will purify you from the sins of others.'



*Ganga descending on Shiva's matted hair*

Bhagiratha then went to do austerities to please Shiva, and in a short time Shiva appeared before him and agreed to bear the impact



on his head of Mother Ganga's fall to earth. After coming to the earth, Mother Ganga was led by Bhagiratha to the spot where his ancestors' ashes lay. As soon as the ashes came in contact with the flowing waters of Mother Ganga, Sagara's sons were released from their plight and immediately attained the heavenly realm. In the same way, everything that came in contact with Mother Ganga as she flowed toward the ocean also became purified. Such is the great power of Mother Ganga.

## ***The Incarnation of Rama***

After listening to the prayers of the celestials, the Lord agreed to descend on earth. He then divided himself into four parts, and was born to Dasharatha, the king of Ayodhya, as Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Shatrughna. In his youth Rama destroyed the demons who were wrecking the sacrifices of the sage Vishwamitra. Then he easily broke the bow of Shiva and gained Sita as his bride. While returning from the marriage ceremony, Rama was confronted by Parashurama, but he easily humbled the great warrior.

A few years later, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana left for the forest for fourteen years of exile in order to keep Dasharatha's word. After mutilating Surpanakha, who wanted to kill Sita, Rama fought and killed single-handedly Khara's army of fourteen thousand asuras. Ravana heard about Sita's beauty from his sister Surpanakha, and went to the forest and kidnapped her. Rama then took the help of the monkeys and through them found out that Sita was in Lanka.

A huge army of monkeys and bears marched with Rama and Lakshmana to the seashore, where the god of the sea advised them to build a bridge across the sea to Lanka. After building the bridge, they all crossed over and began their attack on Lanka. With trees, mountain tops, clubs, and arrows, Rama's army soon destroyed the army of Ravana. Then Ravana himself was killed by Rama.

Rama immediately went to the Ashoka grove and found Sita reduced to skin and bones due to separation from him, and he felt great compassion for her. Vibhishana, Ravana's righteous brother who had helped Rama, was crowned king of Lanka by Rama himself. As his fourteen years of exile were now over, Rama, along with Sita, Lakshmana, Sugriva, Hanuman, and others, entered an aerial chariot and returned to Ayodhya.

Rama's younger brother Bharata, who had managed the kingdom during those fourteen years, was overjoyed at the news of Rama's

return. All that time Bharata had lived on a meagre diet, wore only bark for clothes, and slept on the ground. He and Shatrughna went to welcome Rama, carrying Rama's sandals. They were accompanied by all the citizens, including scholars chanting Vedic mantras and others carrying banners, flagstaves, and other royal insignia. Laying Rama's sandals at his brother's feet, Bharata fell prostrate before his brother, his eyes swimming in tears. Rama was then crowned king of Ayodhya, and he ruled wisely, like a father to all his subjects, for many years.

Once when Rama was moving about in the city incognito, he happened to hear a man say to his wife: 'I shall not keep you in my house any longer—you who have lived in another's house. I will not follow the example of the uxorious Rama, who is still living with Sita.' Though saddened by this slur on his and Sita's characters, he decided to abandon Sita. Sita, who was at that time pregnant, took shelter in Valmiki's ashrama, where she gave birth to twin boys, Lava and Kusha.

Unable to bear separation from Rama, Sita entrusted her sons to Valmiki and entered the earth from where she had been born. After many years of performing sacrifices even without his wife, Rama also entered his own Supreme State.

## ***The Story of Parashurama***

Sri Shuka said: There was at this time a sage named Jamadagni who had several sons, the youngest of whom was Parashurama, who destroyed the line of Kshatriyas twenty-one times.

King Parikshit asked: What was the offence that the Kshatriyas did that would cause such terrible retribution?

Sri Shuka replied: The king of that territory then was a powerful ruler named Arjuna, who acquired a thousand arms and many other boons after worshipping Dattatreya. He could travel all over the world through the air, and none could defeat him. Once he came with his army to the ashrama of Jamadagni when Parashurama was away. The sage Jamadagni welcomed the king and his followers and began to entertain them royally with the help of Kamadhenu, the celestial wish-fulfilling cow. But out of arrogance, Arjuna refused the sage's hospitality and left. On his return to his city, Arjuna sent some men to capture Kamadhenu and bring her to him. The men then went to the ashrama and took away Kamadhenu as well as her calf.

When Parashurama returned to the ashrama and found out what had happened, he became enraged. Taking his axe and his bow and arrows, he went out to bring back the cow and calf. Arjuna saw him coming and sent out a huge army, with elephants, horses, chariots, and foot soldiers to fight this one man. But nothing could stop Parashurama. Singlehandedly he destroyed the whole army.

Arjuna was furious and came out himself to fight. Holding five hundred bows in his thousand arms, he began showering arrows on Parashurama. But with just two arms and one bow, Parashurama destroyed all the arrows that Arjuna shot. Then Arjuna came with trees and mountains in his arms to attack Parashurama, but again Parashurama cut everything to pieces with his axe. He then cut off all Arjuna's arms, and finally killed him by cutting off his head.

Seeing the destruction carried out by Parashurama, Arjuna's ten thousand sons all fled. Parashurama then found Kamadhenu and her calf and took them back to the ashrama.

When Parashurama returned to the ashrama and told his father and brothers what he had done, Jamadagni scolded him, saying: 'O Rama, you have committed a sin. For no purpose you have killed a king within whom reside all the divinities. We are brahmins. It is by virtue of patience that we are preeminent. Patience is what gives us our strength.' Jamadagni then told his son to expiate this sin by going on a pilgrimage to holy places, by practising yoga, and by meditating on the Lord.

Some years later, after Parashurama had returned from his pilgrimage, he was again out of the ashrama with his brothers one day when Arjuna's sons came there to avenge the death of their father. Seeing Jamadagni sitting in meditation, they cut off his head and carried it away with them. Even from quite a distance, Parashurama could hear his mother's cries of grief and ran back to the ashrama. Stunned and enraged at the sight of his father's body, he entrusted the body to his brothers and left with his axe to eliminate all kshatriyas from the earth.

After twenty-one campaigns, he killed almost all of the kshatriyas and then stopped. He then recovered the head of his father's body, placed it on the trunk, and began a great sacrifice. All the lands that he had won he gave away to the performers of the sacrifice and their assistants. At the conclusion of the sacrifice, Jamadagni returned to life and eventually became one of the saptarishis, the seven sages. Parashurama then went to practise austerities on the Mahendra mountain.

## *Yayati and Devayani*

Devayani, the daughter of Shukracharya, the guru of the asuras, and Sharmishtha, the daughter of King Vrishaparva, were close friends. One day they went to a park and enjoyed bathing in a lake. However, after their bath the princess Sharmishtha by mistake put on Devayani's sari. Devayani felt very offended and insulted the princess. She said, 'Like a dog eating up the offerings meant for a yajna, you have put on my sari!' Sharmishtha was not prepared to tolerate such harsh words. 'It is true,' she thought, 'that by mistake I put on Devayani's sari, but that does not give Devayani the right to abuse me.' Sharmishtha got very angry, pushed Devayani into a well after insulting her and her father, and then went back to the palace.

At that time King Yayati was hunting in that park. He happened to come close by the well in which Devayani was trapped, and heard her wails. He rushed to the helpless girl's rescue and pulled her out of the well. Gradually they became enchanted with each other, and Yayati promised to marry Devayani. He then took leave of her.

When Devayani went to her father and told him what Sharmishtha had said and done, Shukracharya was disheartened and decided they should leave the kingdom. But when King Vrishaparva heard about it he came, fell at the preceptor's feet, and begged his forgiveness. The demon guru said: 'I can forgive you, but you have to fulfil the wishes of Devayani.' Then Devayani said, 'Wherever I go after my father gives me in marriage, Sharmishtha will have to accompany me as my maidservant, along with her attendants.' As King Vrishaparva was worried about what would happen to his kingdom if Shukracharya left, he agreed.

According to Devayani's wish, Shukracharya married her to King Yayati, and as per the agreement with King Vrishaparva, Sharmishtha accompanied her to her husband's place as her maidservant. Before they left, Shukracharya commanded Yayati, 'You must never share a bed with Sharmishtha.'

After some time Devayani gave birth to a boy. But Sharmishtha was deprived of the pleasure of having a child, so she begged King Yayati to fulfil her desire. Although Shukracharya had forbidden Yayati from having any relationship with Sharmishtha, fate decreed otherwise. The king felt compelled to fulfil Sharmishtha's wish. As time went by, Sharmishtha became the mother of three sons.

Eventually Devayani learned that Sharmishta had children by Yayati, and she became very angry. She left her husband to return to her father's place. Yayati, however, was very much in love with Devayani and began to pursue her. 'How can I live without her?' he wondered. He earnestly begged her not to go, entreating her as they went, but he was unable to persuade her. Finally both of them arrived at Shukracharya's place.

Shukracharya had been apprehensive of this. Greatly distressed at the turn of events, he cursed his son-in-law, saying: 'You unfaithful creature! You have defied my order! You will lose your youthful vigour and become a doddering old man!' When King Yayati begged for forgiveness, Shukracharya cooled down a little and amended his curse, saying, 'Well, if any young man is willing to accept your old age, then you may exchange your old age for his youth.'

King Yayati thus became a doddering old man, but he still hankered for earthly pleasures. He then approached his eldest son, Yadu, and asked him to accept his old age. But what normal person would give up earthly pleasures without first enjoying them? Yadu did not agree. Yayati then asked his other sons in turn, but they also declined their father's request. Finally he asked his youngest son, Puru. Puru said: 'I am indeed fortunate to get this rare chance to make adequate recompense to my father, who has given birth to my body. By pleasing him, I shall earn the greatest good.' So Puru accepted the old age of his father, while Yayati received the full vigour of his son's youth.

With his regained youth, Yayati enjoyed the pleasures of life to his heart's content for a thousand years. But his desire for enjoyment did not come to an end. On the contrary, it was increasing every day. But

finally realization dawned on Yayati, and he said to his wife Devayani: 'Being duped by maya, I have forgotten what is good and what is bad. A fire is not extinguished if one pours ghee into it; rather, the fire leaps higher and higher. In the same way, the fire of desire is never satiated by enjoyment. Enjoyment only increases desire. So one who really wants the highest good for oneself should unhesitatingly give up the thirst for enjoyment.'

Yayati then returned his youth to his son Puru, and handed over the entire kingdom to him. He accepted his old age, and immediately left for a forest to practise meditation on God. Devayani also realized that this world is but the maya of the Lord, and devoted her mind to Sri Krishna. Mentally bowing to him, she said: 'O Lord Vasudeva, I salute Thee. Thou art the indwelling Self in all beings, the Supreme Person. I bow to Thee.'



## *Dushyanta and Shakuntala*

Next Shukadeva told King Parikshit the story of Dushyanta and Shakuntala:

In the family in which Parikshit was born—the Kuru dynasty—there once reigned a very powerful king named Dushyanta. One day he went out hunting with some of his men, and eventually reached the hermitage of the sage Kanva. In this hermitage he saw a stunningly beautiful girl. The entire hermitage was illumined by her beauty. Dushyanta fell in love with her at once and began to talk with her. He asked: ‘Who are you, O lotus-eyed beauty? Whose daughter are you? And why are you here in this forest? You must be the daughter of some king, not of a hermit!’

Shakuntala replied: ‘I am the daughter of Vishwamitra and Menaka, who abandoned me in the forest. Kanva has brought me up with affection and care. My name is Shakuntala. O handsome one! Please take a seat. Let me serve you some wild rice. You may stay here if you like.’

Dushyanta then said, ‘O beautiful one, the daughters of kings have the right to choose their own husbands. This is called a Gandharva marriage.’ Shakuntala agreed to the marriage, so Dushyanta and Shakuntala were married then and there.

The next day Dushyanta returned to his capital. In course of time, Shakuntala gave birth to a son and named him Bharata. The boy grew up under the affectionate protection of the sage Kanva. Gradually, the young prince grew so strong that he would even catch lions and play with them.

After some time Shakuntala took Prince Bharata to the palace of her husband Dushyanta. But Dushyanta would not accept Shakuntala as his wife, nor Bharata as his son. Then a voice from the heavens was heard, saying: ‘O Dushyanta, Bharata is indeed your son. Part of your

soul has taken birth in him. Accept your son, and don't humiliate Shakuntala.' King Dushyanta realized his mistake, and immediately accepted his wife and son. After the demise of Dushyanta, Bharata became the king of this Bharatavarsha.

## *Rantideva*

Rantideva, though born in the line of King Bharata, lived with his family as a hermit. He had nothing in the way of possessions himself, yet whenever he saw anybody suffering, he would try to ameliorate their hardship, for he saw the Lord in all beings.

Once it so happened that he could not get any food for forty-eight days. All the members of the family were sick with hunger and thirst. At last Rantideva was able to procure through begging some rice pudding with ghee, some wheat, and some water. His family was greatly relieved to see the food.

Rantideva and his family were just ready to sit down to eat when a brahmin guest arrived. Seeing Lord Hari dwelling within the guest, Rantideva very cordially served food to him, and the brahmin left highly satisfied. Rantideva then distributed the rest of the food amongst the members of the family, and was about to sit down himself to eat when another guest appeared, a labourer. Again, seeing the Lord dwelling within this guest, Rantideva gave him the food that he had just finished dividing for himself and his family. The guest ate it and left.

Suddenly another guest appeared—a hunter with several dogs. He pleaded with Rantideva: ‘I am starving. So are my dogs. Please give us some food to eat.’ There were only a few scraps of food remaining, which Rantideva distributed amongst the guest and his dogs. He then saluted them, seeing Sri Hari himself in them. Rantideva was then left with no food at all. Just a small amount of water was left. Just when he was about to drink that, a pariah came and cried: ‘Pray, please give me at least some water.’

Rantideva assured him, saying: ‘I do not ask God for the eight miraculous powers. Nor do I pray for even my own liberation. All I desire is to abide in all beings and undergo the sufferings that accrue to them. By my taking on their sufferings, they will be free from

misery. By supplying the life-giving water to a man panting for it in great distress, I have been freed from all sufferings—hunger, thirst, exhaustion, physical ailment, sorrow, and mental confusion.’ Rantideva then gave whatever water was there to the suffering outcaste.

All this time Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva had been testing Rantideva. It was they who had come in the forms of the brahmin, the hunter and the dogs, the labourer, and the outcaste. Now they revealed themselves to Rantideva in their true forms.

Rantideva bowed down to them, but as he had no desire within him for anything, he would not ask for any boons, in spite of his trying circumstances. He had totally surrendered himself to Lord Vasudeva. Through their association with Rantideva, all those yogis who followed the path shown by Rantideva attained absolute devotion to Lord Narayana.



## BOOK TEN

### *The Birth of Sri Krishna*

KING PARIKSHIT WAS WAITING for his imminent death, as Shukadeva recited to him the stories of the Bhagavata. The king said: 'I am drinking the nectar of the holy words coming from your lotus lips. All that you have narrated about Sri Hari is nectar to me. I am fasting. I am not even drinking water. In spite of that, I am not feeling any distress. Pray, narrate to me now the story of the birth of Sri Krishna and of his lila in full detail.'

Shukadeva replied: 'I am very happy to see your deep interest in the story of Sri Krishna. Even one who tells this story is blessed. Just as the holy water of the Ganga purifies everybody, so questions about the Lord purify these three: the one who asks the question, the one who answers it, and the one who hears the answer. The words of Sri Krishna purify the narrator, the hearer, and the questioner alike.'

## ***The Birth of Sri Krishna***

One day the earth took the form of a cow and, with tears of sorrow, told Brahma her tale of woe: 'I am terribly oppressed by hundreds of tyrannical kings and their retinues of demon soldiers. I cannot bear it any more. Please do something.'

Brahma, hearing the sorrowful plea of the earth, went along with Parameshwara to the shore of the Milk Ocean where he repeated the Purushasukta with great attention in order to invoke Mahavishnu. Brahma then became immersed in deep meditation. At last he heard the voice of the Lord in his heart saying to him: 'I am already aware of the misery of the earth. I shall soon descend on the earth and will be born in the house of Vasudeva. In the meantime, the devas and their wives will be born on earth with a part of their being. Anantadeva, with his thousand heads, will descend first. Even my power of maya will also descend to fulfil a certain purpose.'

Vasudeva was born in the royal family of the Yadus in Mathura. In time he married King Kamsa's cousin Devaki. After the wedding, Kamsa himself drove the chariot of Devaki and Vasudeva, and was taking them back to Vasudeva's home. Suddenly Kamsa heard a voice coming from the sky: 'O Kamsa, you fool! You are taking Devaki in this chariot. But the eighth child of this very Devaki will kill you!'

At once the evil Kamsa grabbed Devaki by her hair and drew his sword, ready to put an end to her life. In order to save his young bride's life, Vasudeva intervened, saying: 'How can you think of killing your own cousin, and that too at the time of her marriage celebration? It is not Devaki who is going to kill you. If the words uttered by that heavenly voice are true, then your killer will be her eighth child. Why then commit the sin of killing an innocent woman? I give you my word that I myself will hand over to you all the children born to Devaki, and you do whatever you please with them.'

Kamsa was appeased by these words and let Devaki go.

But the fear of death did not leave Kamsa. It is said that one must not let an enemy live. With that in mind, Kamsa threw Vasudeva and Devaki in prison. As each child was born to them, Kamsa killed it. Meanwhile Kamsa was becoming a brutal despot, terrorizing the people of Mathura. He even imprisoned his own father so he could take over the throne.

The time was approaching for the birth of Balarama, the seventh child of Devaki. Sri Bhagavan told Yogamaya: 'O Devi, go to Devaki, take the unborn child from her womb, and place it in the womb of Rohini, who is staying in Vraja, in Nanda's camp. After that, I shall be born as Devaki's son, and you shall be born as the daughter of Yashoda.' Yogamaya did as the Lord wished, and soon Balarama was born to Rohini in Vraja.

At long last the time came for Devaki's eighth child to be born. It was night. Devaki and Vasudeva were in Kamsa's prison. At a supremely auspicious moment, Bhagavan Sri Krishna was born. But what did the anxious parents see? Sri Vishnu himself was standing before them, illuminating the dark prison with his radiance, and holding in his four hands a conch, mace, chakra, and lotus. The parents dropped to their knees, overwhelmed, and hymns of praise rose to their lips. Sri Bhagavan was pleased and said: 'I have been born to you twice before—first, as Prishnigarbha, when you were Prishni and the Prajapati Sutapa, and again as Vamana, when you were Aditi and the Prajapati Kashyapa. Think of me as the supreme Brahman, and also as your son, and you will rise to higher and higher stages of divine love and attain to my state.' Then Vishnu took the form of a normal human baby.



*Birth of Sri Krishna in jail*



‘God has descended to earth as a human being, but he is a mere newborn babe. And when the terrible Kamsa learns that a child has been born, he will come to kill him!’—thinking thus, Vasudeva took the baby in his arms and decided to set out for Vraja. It was dead of night. Rain was falling in torrents. How was he to escape from the prison? Through the power of Yogamaya, the prison guards were in deep sleep, and the locked gates opened of themselves. Behind Vasudeva, Ananta, the thousand-headed serpent, spread his hoods to protect the father and child from the rain.

Vasudeva reached the Yamuna, but it was flowing in torrents due to the heavy rain. How was he to cross it? Suddenly the waters of the Yamuna parted, and Vasudeva was able to pass through. He then came to Vraja, to Nanda’s village of cowherds, and entered the home of Nanda and Yashoda.

That same night Yogamaya had been born as the daughter of Nanda and Yashoda, but as Yashoda had been put into a deep sleep by Yogamaya, the mother did not know whether the baby born to her was a boy or a girl. Vasudeva found the girl lying by her sleeping mother. He gently laid the divine baby by Yashoda’s side, took the girl baby in his arms, and returned to the prison, where the gates locked automatically behind him. There he placed the baby girl in Devaki’s arms. Such was the maya of Yogamaya that no one found out about Vasudeva’s mission.

The baby girl began to cry, waking up the prison guards. They ran to Kamsa and informed him that a child had been born. Immediately the merciless Kamsa came and snatched the girl away from Devaki. As he was about to dash the baby on a slab of stone to kill her, she flew out of his hand and rose into the air. Taking the form of an eight-armed goddess, she said: ‘What is the use of killing me? Your killer is elsewhere. Stop killing innocent children.’ Then the goddess disappeared.

## *The Salvation of Putana*

Now there was no peace in the mind of King Kamsa, so he sent the demoness Putana, who was an expert in finding children, to search for newborns and kill them. Putana discovered that a newborn was indeed growing up in the home of Nanda. She disguised herself as a beautiful woman, entered Nanda's house, and caressed the baby Krishna. The terrible demoness had poison on her breasts, and she had killed many children by offering them that poison. Now she took the baby Krishna in her arms and began to nurse him, sure that he would soon die.

But this was no ordinary baby. Krishna kept on sucking and sucking, and at last sucked the very life out of her. All that was left was her huge, ugly carcass.

Vraja was in great turmoil. The gopas and gopis were stunned at the sight. Putana's huge body was then cut into pieces and set on fire. But strangely enough, as the body burned, a sweet smell of sandalwood began to spread everywhere. Some say that by feeding Krishna and touching his feet, Putana had been purified of her sins. Or you could say that by feeding him, although her milk was tainted with poison, she had become his mother.

## ***Shakatasura and Trinavarta***

One day, when Krishna was three months old, a celebration was held in his honour. As the baby was getting sleepy, Yashoda laid him down under a cart to sleep while she took care of the guests. But the cart was actually an asura, Shakatasura, in disguise. Suddenly everyone noticed that the huge, heavy cart had fallen over and broken into pieces, and its contents also had fallen all over. Everyone came running. Some young boys who had been playing nearby insisted that the baby had knocked the cart over with a kick, but who would listen to them? The brahmins who had assembled there for the celebration then pronounced benedictions for the child.

A few days later Kamsa sent an asura by the name of Trinavarta to kill Krishna, but he too met an untimely end. That day Krishna was seated on his mother's lap when suddenly she could not bear his weight any longer. He felt like a mountain. Putting him down on the ground, she went to do some work. Just then Trinavarta came in the form of a whirlwind and carried Krishna away. As there were clouds of dust everywhere, Yashoda could not see what happened to Krishna, nor could she find him in the place she had left him. She then began to wail piteously. When other gopis came running, hearing her cries, they also began to cry.

Meanwhile Trinavarta could not move very far away, due to Krishna's extraordinary weight, and was soon stopped altogether. Krishna then grasped his neck and strangled him. With Krishna hanging on, Trinavarta fell down dead from the sky. The women were astonished to see Krishna sitting on the chest of the dead demon, and they picked him up and brought him to his mother.

## *Yashoda sees the Universe in Krishna*

Miracles seemed to follow the young Krishna wherever he went. The village folk of Vraja were amazed and could find no explanation. Mother Yashoda would sometimes worry about this, but soon, thinking again of Krishna, she would forget all about it. Her neighbours used to complain, saying: 'Your Gopala is always up to some mischief. He lets the calf loose so it can drink its mother's milk. He steals milk, curds, and butter, and shares them with his friends. He even gives them to the monkeys. Then he pulls our braids and our saris. If we complain, he laughs at us.' Yashoda merely smiled. What could she say? She knew exactly what they were talking about.

One day, Balarama and the other cowherd boys came running to Yashoda, and said, 'Krishna is eating mud!' When asked about this, Krishna replied: 'No, mother, I did not eat mud. For nothing they are complaining about me. You see for yourself who is correct. Here—I am opening my mouth.'

Krishna opened up his mouth, and there inside Yashoda saw the entire universe—the sky, clouds, moon, sun, and stars; the earth, trees, rivers and mountains; animals, men, women, and children; and even the land of Vraja and Yashoda herself too. Seeing all this in the mouth of her child, Yashoda was terrified and thought: 'Am I dreaming? Or am I mad? Or is this the Lord's maya?'

Such was the maya of Krishna that the next moment Mother Yashoda forgot all she had seen. She took the little child on her lap and held him as if nothing had happened.

## ***Sri Krishna is Bound***

Though Yashoda had servants, she often attended to various household chores herself, such as churning the curds. One day she was churning curds in the courtyard to make butter when Gopala came to her and grabbed the churning rod. He wouldn't let her finish. Understanding what was on his mind, she took him on her lap and began to nurse him. Suddenly she heard the milk in the kitchen boiling over.

Quickly putting Gopala back on the floor, she ran to the kitchen. But Gopala wasn't finished nursing and became angry. He broke the earthen pot of curds with a stone, and the curds went flying everywhere. Then he went inside, stole some butter, and fed a monkey with it.

When Yashoda came back from the kitchen, she was surprised to see the pot broken and the curds everywhere. Smiling to herself but feigning anger, she went with the churning rod in her hand to catch the naughty child. But Gopala was very clever, as usual, and wouldn't let himself be caught. He who cannot be reached by the yogis through their meditation and worship was now being chased by mother Yashoda—and she couldn't catch him either.

At last, seeing his mother tired, he allowed himself to be caught. But at the same time he pretended to be scared and began to cry. Yashoda hid her smile and started to tie Krishna to the husking mortar with a piece of rope. As she found that the rope was slightly short, she got another piece and tied it to the first, but still the rope was too short to tie up the boy. The more rope she brought, the larger Gopala's body seemed to become! Finally Gopala took pity on her and let her tie him up, proving that the one who controls the whole universe can be bound by the love of his devotees.

## ***Nalakubara and Manigriva are Liberated***

In this way Krishna was tied to a mortar. With the naughty boy out of her way, Yashoda was making some progress with her housework. Suddenly two arjuna trees in front of the house caught young Krishna's eyes. He knew that they had been two sons of Kubera who had been cursed to become trees. Krishna started crawling towards them, dragging the mortar behind him. Although he managed to crawl through the space between the two trees, the mortar got lodged between them. But he went on and on tugging at the mortar. There was no stopping him! With a cracking sound, both trees crashed to the ground. Then from within the trees, two luminous beings appeared and approached the baby Krishna. Bowing to him with folded hands, they said: 'O Lord of the Universe! We are attendants of Shiva, and the servants of your servants. By the blessing of the sage Narada we are fortunate to see you today. O Lord, bless us—may our lips always chant your name and glory; may our ears ever hear the tales of your deeds; may our hands be ever engaged in your work; may our minds be ever immersed in the thought of you; may our heads be ever bowed before you; and may our eyes be ever engaged in seeing your devotees.'

King Parikshit interrupted Shukadeva to ask: 'Who were those two devas? And why were they cursed to be trees?' Shukadeva replied, 'O King, hear the story of Nalakubara and Manigriva.'

Nalakubara and Manigriva were sons of Kubera and attendants of Shiva. In their vanity, they thought nothing of the rest of the world. One day while drunk, they were frolicking and singing in the waters of the river Mandakini near Mount Kailash with some celestial women. Just then Narada came by. When the women saw Narada, they quickly put on their clothes, ashamed at their rowdy behaviour. But Nalakubara and Manigriva stayed in the water, naked.

Narada thought: 'Oh, how drunk they are, and proud. I shall discipline these two. Let them become immoveable. Let them become

two trees. However, they will not forget who they are. At the end of a hundred years, they will be redeemed from this curse by Lord Vasudeva himself. They will then regain their present forms and also attain devotion to the Lord.'

So Nalakubara and Manigriva became twin arjuna trees, and were freed from the curse by the sacred association with Krishna.

\* \* \*

One after another, miracles manifested around Gopala, but such was the maya around him that Yashoda would quickly forget them. When Gopala would crawl on all fours, Yashoda would become overwhelmed and gaze unblinkingly at him with a heart full of love. And gradually he grew to be a little boy.

## ***Brahma's Doubts are Removed***

The citizens of Gokul felt alarmed at the strange events taking place around them. At last the elders said to each other: 'Let us leave Gokul and go to Vrindavan. There the grazing fields are plentiful and beautiful.' So, on an auspicious day, they left Gokul in their carts with their children, cows, furniture, and all, and moved to Vrindavan. Here also the residents of Vrindavan noticed some of the supernatural powers of the boy Krishna, such as how one after another he killed Vatsasura (the calf demon), Bakasura (the huge crane demon), and Aghasura (the huge python demon). And as each asura was killed, an effulgent light came out of its body and entered into the body of Sri Krishna.

Aghasura was particularly powerful. He was the brother of Putana and Bakasura, and he was determined to take revenge for their deaths. Seeing all the cowherd boys playing with Krishna, he decided to take the form of an immense python and lure all the boys into his mouth. He lay down on a path and opened his huge mouth. It was so big that to the cowherd boys it seemed to be a cave. When Krishna saw it, he realized it was an asura, but it was too late. The other cowherd boys had already entered the mouth of the asura. The asura was just waiting for Krishna to enter to close his mouth.

Krishna wondered how he could save his friends, and then he decided on a plan. He also entered the mouth of the asura, but he began to take a huge form, thus obstructing the air passage of the demon. When Aghasura could not get his breath, he began to roll around in agony. At last, his head burst and he died. Krishna then came out of the demon along with his friends.

After killing Aghasura, Krishna, Balarama, and their cowherd friends went to eat their food on the banks of the Yamuna River. They found a beautiful spot on the sandy bank with grass nearby for the cows. It was getting late and they were very hungry, so after tying up the cows, they all sat down to eat. As the petals of a lotus grow around



its centre, so did the cowherd boys appear, sitting around Krishna. That day, on the bank of the Yamuna, the cowherd boys indulged in a great feast with Krishna sitting in the middle.

Brahma and other devas were watching this scene from above. Brahma had his doubts. He wondered: 'Is this boy really Sri Vishnu, who has descended on earth to relieve it of its unbearable burden? Well, let me test him.' Brahma then lured the calves away to a distant wood. Soon the cowherd boys noticed that the calves were gone, and began to worry. But Krishna reassured them, saying: 'Don't worry. I'll check on them. Don't stop your feast.' While Krishna was searching for the calves, Brahma kidnapped the cowherd boys and hid them in a cave. After sometime, Krishna couldn't find the calves anywhere and returned to the bank of the Yamuna. 'But where is Sridama, and where is Sudama, and where are all the other gopas?' thought Krishna. He searched the entire forest, but couldn't find them.

Then Krishna remembered who he was, and it struck him: 'Ah, this must be the mischief of the creator Brahma.' So Krishna transformed himself into all the cowherd boys and the calves. He became each and every boy and each and every calf—with whatever clothes each was wearing, with whatever instrument each was carrying, with whatever character, name, form, and age each had. In this way Krishna proved the saying that 'All this is Vishnu'.

So all the 'Krishna-cowherd boys' and 'Krishna-calves' returned to the village, to their respective mothers and mother cows. And what joy the mothers felt! For the container of all bliss, Krishna, had himself become their sons and calves. The mothers loved their Krishna-sons even more than they had loved their own sons! For a full year the Krishna-cowherd boys and Krishna-calves lived in Vraja, and no one suspected anything.

One year on earth is equal to just one moment of Brahma. When Brahma looked up after a moment, he was startled. He thought: 'The cowherd boys and calves are still asleep in the cave where I hid them. And yet Krishna is playing with the same boys and calves.' Brahma thought and thought, but he could not solve this riddle. Then he began

to wonder, 'Which ones are real, and which ones are unreal?' Brahma had tried to ensnare Krishna in Maya, but instead he himself became ensnared.

As Brahma looked at the scene with his mind in confusion, he suddenly saw that all the cowherd boys and calves had turned into four-armed manifestations of Vishnu. He could not even tell which one of the boys was Krishna. His mind became more confused. It was as if he were in a stupor. At last the spell cast by Krishna was removed, and Brahma saw Vrindavan before him just as it was before, with Krishna there. Immediately Brahma got down from his vehicle and prostrated himself before Krishna and said: 'Salutations to Thee, O Lord. You are the One without a second; you are the Self; you are the Indweller within every being. You are the Ancient one; you are the Truth. You are without limit; you are the Cause of all causes. You are the Deathless One, the Eternally Blissful, and the Everlasting.'

After permitting Brahma to take leave, Krishna brought the cowherd boys and the calves back to the banks of the Yamuna where they had been picnicking exactly a year before. And it seemed to them as if just a moment had passed. They happily continued their feast, and in the evening they returned home with Krishna to their village.

## *The Serpent Kaliya is Tamed*

Krishna was born for the destruction of the wicked.

There was a place in the Yamuna River where the water was full of poison. So terrible was this poison that no fish could live there, no birds could fly over it, and no people could swim there. Why? Kaliya, a huge, ferocious serpent with many hoods, lived under the water. So terrible was its poison that the water of the Yamuna would boil at that place. The trees on the banks had all withered away—all except one Kadamba tree. When the heavenly bird Garuda had flown by with the pot of Amrita—the nectar collected from the churning of the ocean—he had perched on one branch of that Kadamba tree, and a few drops of nectar had fallen on it. That’s why that tree had not dried up.

One day, unnoticed by his friends, Krishna climbed that Kadamba tree, and went out on the branches overhanging the river. Then he jumped into the river and swam fearlessly around. Hearing the sound of water splashing, the terrible snake came out of its hole in anger. He bit Krishna all over his body, and then wrapped itself around him.

At that moment terrible omens appeared in Vraja, and the gopas and gopis became very frightened. Not seeing Krishna anywhere around, they desperately began tracing his footprints and were led to the Yamuna where he was being held by Kaliya. Some of Krishna’s young friends were lying unconscious on the river bank, while Krishna was motionless, in the grip of Kaliya. All the rest of the gopas and gopis began shouting and wailing for their beloved Krishna. They thought he was surely going to be killed. Only Balarama knew his brother’s power, and he advised the others to be patient.

Krishna, still in the grip of the snake, began to expand his body, forcing the snake to release him. Then he swam around and around the snake till the snake became exhausted. After that, he jumped on the snake’s hoods and began to dance. Seeing this wonderful scene, the devas showered flowers on him from the heavens. Whenever

Kaliya tried to raise any of his hoods, Krishna would trample or dance on it. The great snake had many mouths, and blood started spewing from them all.

At last Kaliya began to think of the Lord, the Master of all beings, and mentally took refuge in him. Meanwhile, Kaliya's wives hurriedly came to Krishna and humbly prayed: 'O Lord! We don't understand what meritorious deed our husband performed to get the privilege of having the dust of your feet on his head. Salutations to thee, the Indweller of all! May you be pleased with us and spare the life of our husband.' Krishna was moved by their prayer and granted the snake's life.

After Kaliya regained consciousness, he also prayed to Krishna: 'O Lord, please forgive me. We snakes are evil-natured by birth. What one is by nature cannot be changed. This is but your own maya. Now do with me what you think best.' Krishna said, 'Leave this place immediately and go to the sea with your wives, your family, and friends.' Knowing that Kaliya had left the sea out of fear of the great bird Garuda, Vishnu's carrier, Krishna assured the snake: 'Now that you bear the marks of my feet on your head, Garuda will not harm you.'

Then Kaliya and his wives bowed before Krishna, offered him many gifts, and left the Yamuna to go to the ocean. Ever since, the waters of the Yamuna have been free from poison, and are sweet like nectar.

## ***Balarama Kills the Demon Pralambha***

One day Krishna and Balarama went with the rest of the cowherd boys to the forest with the cows, and as usual began to play various games. Some of them danced while others played musical instruments. Sometimes they played leap-frog or hide-and-peek, and sometimes they swung from the limbs of trees like monkeys, and sometimes they imitated the sounds of the birds and beasts.

While all this was going on, Krishna noticed that an asura, whose name was Pralambha, was in their midst disguised as a cowherd boy. Pretending to be fooled by his appearance, Krishna greeted him and invited him to play with them. He then divided the cowherd boys into two groups, one having Balarama as the leader and the other with himself as the leader. The idea was that they would play a game in which the defeated group would have to carry the winning group on their shoulders. In a short time Balarama's group won, so the boys of Krishna's group took those of Balarama's group and carried them on their shoulders. Balarama was then being carried by Pralambha.

Thinking this was a good opportunity to kill Balarama, the asura quickly ran to a secluded place, where he assumed his asura form, and then flew into the sky. Balarama then thought of his real nature and began hitting the asura on the head. Soon the asura screamed in agony and fell down dead. The other gopas were surprised at what had happened and ran to embrace Balarama.

## ***Krishna Steals the Gopis' Clothes***

At the beginning of the winter season the young gopi girls decided to observe a month-long vow connected with the worship of Devi Katyayani. Getting up at sunrise, they would bathe in the river and then make offerings to the goddess. The purpose of this vow was to try to get Krishna as their husband.

One morning during this time, the gopis went as usual to the river, left their clothes on the bank, and entered the river to bathe. Krishna had heard about the vow they had undertaken, and he also came to that spot by the river that morning. Unnoticed by the gopis, Krishna gathered up all their clothes and climbed with them into a tree. He then called to the girls from the top of the tree: 'I would like to help you all fulfil your vow. So each of you can come here and take her own cloth.'

The gopis were shocked at Krishna's words, and, while shivering in the river, they began to plead with him to give them back their clothes: 'O Krishna, you know what you are doing is not proper.' But as Krishna insisted that they had to come out of the river to get their clothes, the gopis at last did so, covering themselves with their hands. But this was not enough for Krishna. He said to them: 'You are observing a vow, yet you are bathing in the river without clothes. This is not proper. To atone for this you must place your hands in salutation on the top of your heads and prostrate on the ground. Then you will receive your clothes.' So, in order to fulfil their vow, the gopis did as they were asked.

After giving them their clothes, Krishna told them that he would give them the result of their vow in autumn. He also reminded them that any sensual attraction for him would be automatically destroyed by association with him. In this way, Krishna destroyed for the gopis their sense of shame – one of the fetters that keeps a soul from attaining the Lord.

## ***Krishna Blesses the Pious Brahmin Women***

One day when Krishna and Balarama and the other gopas had taken their cattle out to graze, they all became very tired and hungry. The boys said to Balarama and Krishna: 'We are overwhelmed with hunger. Do something to help us.' Nearby there lived a group of brahmins who were then engaged in performing a long sacrifice. Krishna told the boys to go to these brahmins and beg for some food for all of them.

The boys went, and after introducing themselves to the brahmins as messengers of Krishna and Balarama, they asked the men to give them some food. But the brahmins simply kept quiet and ignored the boys. They heard what the gopas said, but pretended that they did not. At last, unable to get a response from them, the gopas returned empty-handed to Krishna and told him what had happened.

Krishna then told the boys to approach the wives of those brahmin men, as he knew that they were pious and loved him very much. When the gopas informed the women that Krishna was nearby and wanted some food, the women were thrilled. They immediately rushed to meet him, carrying all kinds of good food with them. Krishna also was happy to meet the women, who were sincerely devoted to him.

After giving the food to Krishna, the women begged for refuge at his feet. They understood that from their actions their husbands and other family members would not accept them back in their homes. But Krishna assured them that they should have no fear. Through his grace, their families would accept them as if nothing had happened. Before the women departed, Krishna told them to meditate on him and they would soon attain him thereby. Then Krishna, Balarama, and the other gopas all began to eat.

When the brahmin men returned to their homes and saw that their wives were so full of devotion to Krishna, they realized they had made a great mistake. They became extremely repentant and bitterly regretted their missed opportunity. Out of fear of Kamsa, they did not go to find Krishna, though they were anxious to do so.



## ***Lifting Mount Govardhana***

Arrangements for a great festivity were going on. Nanda and the citizens of Vrindavan were preparing for a great sacrifice to Indra. Though Krishna knew everything, he still asked his father what the celebration was all about. Nanda replied: ‘The clouds give rain to all. The rain nourishes all the crops, and refreshes the earth. Without rain we cannot live. The god of the clouds is Indra. Therefore we shall worship him.’

Krishna then pleaded with Nanda: ‘Please stop this worship. We are a race of cowherds. Our livelihood is not in plowing the land, but in looking after the cows. If we are to do any worship, we should worship the cows. Along with that, we should worship the brahmins, the poor, and this Govardhana hill. This hill is our home, and helps us so much. We can use these offerings that you have collected for Indra towards that worship.’ Everybody accepted the young boy’s idea.

From the items that had been collected, Nanda gave many gifts to holy men. Then he fed the poor sumptuously, gave plenty of good fodder mixed with oil-cake to the cows, and worshipped Mount Govardhana. After that, the cowherd folk circumambulated Mount Govardhana. Krishna himself in one form assumed the form of the mountain and ate large quantities of the food. In another form he remained with the gopas and gopis and prostrated before the mountain. Then they all returned to their homes.

But Indra was furious. He thought: ‘These insignificant forest dwellers have become very proud of their wealth. Depending on a silly boy, they dare to ignore me!’ He then gave the order to the clouds: ‘Crush their pride! Submerge them with rain.’ So the clouds descended on Vraja and deluged it with torrential rain. The thunder roared, the lightning flashed, and the rain fell and fell and fell. Vrindavan was about to be washed away. At last the gopas and gopis went to Krishna and prayed to him, ‘O Lord of Gokul, please save us from the wrath of Indra!’

Krishna then resolved to humble the pride of Indra. Like a boy picking up a toadstool, Krishna picked up Mount Govardhana with his left hand and called all the people of Vraja to take shelter under it. Bringing all their belongings, along with their cows and calves, they stayed there safe from the raging storm. Krishna held Govardhana up with his left hand, like an umbrella, for one full week. He took neither food nor drink, nor did he move an inch.



*Krishna lifting the Govardhana*

Indra was stunned to see Krishna's power. He called the clouds back, and the rain stopped. Then Krishna also called all the people of Vraja to come out from underneath the mountain, and he put it back down where it had been before. All the gopas and gopis—and especially Yashoda, Nanda, Rohini, and Balarama—came and embraced him and pronounced benedictions over him. The devas also threw flowers on him and praised him.

Then Indra came and bowed his crowned head at Krishna's feet and said: 'I was blinded by my own vanity, and wanted to destroy Vrindavan with rain and storm. Salutations to thee, O Lord. You have blessed me by destroying my pride. I seek shelter in thee, the soul of all beings.' Krishna replied: 'O King of heaven, I stopped the yajna to you in order to crush your pride of wealth and power. Those who are infatuated with wealth and power are unable to see me. So when I wish to bestow my grace on someone, I first remove his wealth.'

Surabhi, the celestial cow, gave a consecrational bath to Krishna with her milk. After that, Indra brought water down from the heavenly Ganga in vessels of gold, bathed Krishna with it, and consecrated him with the name Govinda.

## ***Rasa Lila***

*The Rasa Lila forms a particularly important portion of the Bhagavatam. It has been narrated in five chapters, and is therefore called rasapanchadhyaya. The subject of it is Krishna's dance with the gopis on the banks of the Yamuna. The young sage Shukadeva, pure to his very bones, narrated this story of supreme devotion to King Parikshit, who was close to death. This is an allegorical story of a very high order of devotion to God.*

### **1**

It was autumn and the night of the full moon. The Yamuna and her banks, bathed in moonlight, were sublimely beautiful. Like a lotus in full bloom, the moon floated in the sky. The gopis were all in their homes, busy with their various duties. Some were milking their cows, some were baking bread, some were feeding their children. Suddenly they heard the bewitching strains of Krishna's flute wafting through the breeze. Standing on the Yamuna's bank, full of joy, Krishna had begun to play. The minds of the gopis at once became fixed on him. They dropped their work, whatever it was, and ran quickly to the Yamuna's bank to see the beloved of their hearts.

There on the bank of the Yamuna, Krishna said to the gopis: 'Why have you come here at this hour? Ferocious animals roam here after dark! It is not safe for you—go back home. Your families will wonder where you have gone. If you came to see the beauty of the forest, well, you have seen it. If you have come out of love for me, well, it is not surprising, for all creatures are devoted to me. But you have your husbands and families to look after. That is your duty. Please go back home.'

Govinda's harsh words stung the gopis' hearts. They said: 'We have left our families, left our wealth, in order to worship your feet. We have taken shelter at those feet. Do not abandon us. As God

accepts all who seek only him, you must accept us. O lotus-eyed Lord, even Lakshmi herself longs for your golden feet, not to mention we cowherd women of Vraja. We have already been blessed by touching your feet. Can our duties to our husbands and children make us forget you? Never. We know for sure that just as Brahma is the protector of heaven, likewise you are the protector of Vraja. So, friend of the unfortunate, do touch our heads with your soft hands, for we are slaves of your lotus feet.'

Govinda then agreed, and he began to play with the gopis on the banks of the Yamuna. But after a while, pride began to creep into the hearts of the women. They began to think: 'We are not ordinary people. We are surely the worthiest women in the world to receive so much attention from Krishna.' When this egotism crept into their hearts, Krishna immediately disappeared. He wanted to purify them and make them worthy to receive his grace.

## 2

Words cannot describe the anguish of the gopis when Krishna disappeared. They began to search frantically, crying out, 'O Krishna, where are you?' They became almost insane with longing. They asked the flowers of the forest: 'O Jasmine, O Mallika, have you seen where Krishna has gone? O Tulsi, Govinda is very fond of you. But where is he?' They called out to all the trees: 'O Vilva, O Kadamba, O all ye trees standing on the banks of the Yamuna for the good of others! Can you tell us which way Krishna went? Without Krishna, we are lost.'

Krishna had become so dear to the gopis that now, losing him, they were about to go crazy. Soon their minds became so absorbed in the thought of Krishna that they even began to think that they themselves were Krishna. They started acting as if they were Krishna in various events in his lila, like the killing of Putana, the taming of Kaliya, playing the flute, and the lifting of Mount Govardhana. Like this, roaming about the forest dazed, they suddenly came across a footprint of Krishna. How great was their joy just seeing his footprint! It was not difficult to recognize: In it they could see the signs of Vishnu

—the flag, lotus, thunderbolt, goad, and grain.

But close by they saw another person's footprints. 'Look! There are a woman's footprints here next to Krishna's. Who is it that has had the good fortune to be taken away by Krishna? She must have done some special worship, for deserting us, Krishna has gone with her to a secluded spot.'

However, that woman also became filled with pride, thinking that she was the most favoured one, and suddenly Krishna disappeared from her also. Soon the rest of the gopis found her crying and broken-hearted, and they all resumed their search for Krishna, distracted by love.

### 3

Immersed in thoughts of Krishna, the gopis returned to the spot where they had first seen him, and they sat down on the bank of the river. They constantly talked about his various deeds, and they prayed to him: 'Just remembering you gives us immense joy. Your words, like nectar to our ears, dispel the misery of the world. Blessed are they who hear of you, and blessed indeed are they who speak about you. They are the world's great benefactors. O Master, O Lord, the very thought that you might hurt your feet on the rough ground and thorns of the forest is unbearable to us. But Oh! Where are you now? You are our life; you are our everything. Hearing the notes of your flute, we become hypnotized, leaving our husbands, children, all our relations, and everything, to come running to you. All you have to do is show yourself to us.'

After praying in this way, the gopis started crying inconsolably. And it was then that the yellow-robed flute player, Krishna, appeared before them. It was then, again, that they went mad with joy. And it was then that Madanamohana, Hari as the god of love, began once more to play with the gopis on the bank of the river Yamuna.

The riverbank was carpeted with flowers. Honeybees, attracted by the flowers' sweet scent, filled the air with their melodious hum. The

moon graciously covered the river, the bank, the flowers, trees, gopis, and Krishna with its liquid silver light. Perhaps if the beauty of all the three worlds could merge for one night into one person, it would be as beautiful as Krishna was that night. Like the moon among stars, he was shining among the gopis.

Then Krishna began the rasa dance. Through his yogic power, he multiplied himself so that he danced between every two gopis. Each gopi saw that Krishna was holding her own hand and dancing next to her. All this time they had been meditating on Krishna and seeing him within. Now they saw him right beside them.

‘Krishna is within, and Krishna is without. He fills the whole universe. The gopis are dancing, Krishna is dancing, God is dancing! Krishna to the right, Krishna to the left, Krishna far away, and Krishna so close. None else but Krishna exists in the universe! Krishna, full of bliss, dwells in all beings as the taste of bliss in everyone at every moment. He is the very embodiment of bliss.’ – This is how the gopis experienced Krishna on that sacred night of the rasa dance.



## ***Sudarshana, Shankhachuda, and Arishtasura***

Many miraculous events of Krishna's boyhood have been told already. Now some more events, which took place after the Rasa Lila, will be narrated.

One day the gopas went with Nanda to the bank of the Saraswati River to observe the festival of that season. They bathed in the holy river, worshipped Shiva and Parvati with offerings of flowers, sandal paste, and delicacies, and then offered gifts of cows, gold, cloth, and honey-sweetened rice to holy men. That night they slept on the river bank. While Nanda was asleep, a huge, starving python came upon him and coiled itself around him. 'O Krishna, help me! A huge snake is attacking me! O help!' shouted Nanda. The gopas came running and saw Nanda in the grip of the snake. They tried to drive the snake away by scorching it with burning branches from the campfire, but it wouldn't let go of Nanda.

At last Krishna came and touched the snake with his feet. Immediately the snake gave up his snake body and took the form of a beautiful celestial being, a Vidyadhara, who bowed at Krishna's feet. Krishna asked him: 'Who are you, O brilliant one? And how did you come to have this snake body?' The Vidhyadhara replied: 'My name is Sudarshana. I was a very beautiful Vidyadhara, and I could fly anywhere in my winged chariot. I was proud of my beauty, and I made fun of the rishis of Angiras's family who are ugly. They then cursed me to become a snake. But their curse has proved to be a great blessing for me, since it has brought me the touch of your feet, which has purified me of all my misdeeds. Now please permit me to return to my celestial home.' Sudarshana then worshipped Krishna and departed.

One night Krishna and Balarama were playing their flutes in the deep forest, surrounded by the gopis. The gopis, enthralled by the music, forgot even their own bodies, so great was their joy. Just then

an officer of Kubera, the god of wealth, happened to come there. His name was Shankhachuda, and he had a precious gem on his head. Suddenly, right in front of Krishna and Balarama's eyes, Shankhachuda abducted the gopis. The gopis screamed in terror, 'O Krishna, O Balarama, save us!' and Krishna and Balarama gave chase. Before long they caught up with the villain, who then left the gopis and fled for his life. While Balarama stood guard over the gopis, Krishna pursued Shankhachuda, struck off his head, and removed the crest-jewel from his head. He then presented it to his elder brother Balarama.

Another day there came to Gokul a huge ox-demon called Arishta. As he galloped around, the earth trembled, and huge holes were left wherever his hooves struck the earth. The citizens of Gokul ran here and there in fear of their lives, and called on Krishna to save them. Krishna immediately came and yelled at the demon: 'O fool, what are you doing? I am here to destroy the pride of demons like you!'

Arishtasura became angry and charged at Krishna, tearing up the ground with his hooves. Then Krishna caught him by the horns and pushed him back. Again the demon charged. This time Krishna grabbed his horns, threw him to the ground, and twisted his body the way one wrings out a wet towel. Then he pulled the horns out, and beat the asura to death with them. Thus Arishtasura departed in great agony to Death's abode.

## ***Akrura Comes for Krishna and Balarama***

A few days after Krishna had killed Arishtasura, the sage Narada came to King Kamsa and said: ‘Kamsa, you probably don’t know that the seventh child of Devaki and Vasudeva is Balarama, and the eighth child is Krishna. They are growing up in Vraja as Rohini’s and Yashodha’s sons. It is they who are killing your emissaries. The girl-child that you killed, thinking her to be the eighth child of Devaki, was actually not Devaki’s at all. She was the daughter of Yashoda.’

Seething with rage, Kamsa vowed: ‘The time has come: I must kill Krishna and Balarama.’ He then called his advisors together and announced: ‘Balarama and Krishna are living in Vraja. I am supposed to die at their hands, so we shall invite them here and kill them. On the fourteenth day of the month, we shall hold a “Bow-yajna”. In connection with the yajna, arrange a wrestling tournament. Build big galleries and stages for the various festivities. Station the elephant Kuvalayapida at the gate of the arena. When my enemies come in, have it grab the boys with its trunk and trample them to death. If they escape from the elephant, then our best wrestlers, Chanura and Mushtika, shall kill Krishna and Balarama in a wrestling match.’

Meanwhile, Kamsa also sent two more demons, one after the other, to try to kill Balarama and Krishna. But both of them—Keshi, the horse demon, and Vyoma—were quickly killed by Krishna.

Akrura was a well-respected member of the royal Yadu family. Summoning him to his presence, Kamsa said: ‘You are my friend. You know very well that although Balarama and Krishna are my arch-enemies, they are also my nephews. Take a well-decorated chariot and go immediately to Nanda’s house. Bring the two brothers here to witness the great festivities. Also invite Nanda on my behalf.’

The next day Akura went in a beautiful chariot to Vraja to bring Krishna and Balarama to Mathura. Akura was so eager to see the two boys that his mind reflected over and over again, with great longing,

on how he would greet them and how they would greet him when they met. When he arrived, his wish came true. Nanda cordially welcomed him, and Balarama and Krishna washed his feet and gave other offerings. He was treated to a sumptuous feast. Akrura then said: 'I have come to invite you to the bow-yajna, with all the related festivities. But I must reveal to you the hidden motive behind this apparently cordial invitation. Kamsa is actually planning to kill Krishna and Balarama using this invitation as a ruse.'

When Krishna and Balarama heard this, they laughed and replied: 'Very well. We accept this invitation, and shall go to Mathura.' Nanda and other gopas also decided to go.

When the gopis heard the heart-rending news that Krishna would go away to Mathura, they were stricken with grief. They all said: 'O Creator, how cruel you are. You bring us things to be loved, and immediately take them away from us again. You are like a child. Just as a small child holds his favourite toy to his heart, and then the next moment throws it away to the ground, likewise, you also are doing this to us. It is said that Akrura is very pious and compassionate. But his actions show just the reverse. He has now come to snatch our dear Gopala from us. But then, what is the use of admonishing him? Gopala's ever-changing flow of love stuns us. He is always looking for new sources of love. Blessed are the women of Mathura. They live in a town, whereas we dwell in the village. Will he ever come back to us once he is settled in a town?' The gopis began to weep, and they continued to weep, all the while crying out, 'O Govinda, O Madhava, O Damodara.'

But Krishna and Balarama were destined to leave for Mathura. The next day the chariot was made ready. Nanda and other boys and men also mounted their carts. In spite of all attempts by the gopis to stop the chariot containing Balarama and Krishna, it left for Mathura, carrying the two brothers, along with Akrura.

On the way Akrura halted the chariot by the Yamuna. They all got down, saw the beautiful riverbank, touched the Yamuna's waters, and quenched their thirst. Akrura then brought Krishna and Balarama

back to the chariot, and he went for a holy bath in the river. When Akrura went under the water, he was astonished to see Krishna and Balarama there. ‘Aren’t they in the chariot?’ he thought. Then he came up for air and looked at the chariot. There he saw Krishna and Balarama sitting where he had left them.

Again Akrura submerged himself in the water. This time he saw not two, but One: he saw the Supreme Person Mahavishnu, seated on the divine serpent Anantanaga. Vishnu was deep blue in complexion and radiated peace, bliss, and all auspicious qualities. Akrura was struck dumb. He could not move at all, and tears rolled down his cheeks. Who can understand the maya of Krishna and Balarama?

Then Akrura began to sing a hymn to Mahavishnu. ‘O Lord,’ he said, ‘I bow to you! In your Divine lila, you take different forms on this earth from time to time. People worship you in these different forms, and are released from their woes. You took the form of the Causal Fish, and moved in the turbulent sea. You killed the two asuras Madhu and Kaitabha in your incarnation as Hayagriva. I bow to you! It is you who took the form of Kurma, the Tortoise, to hold Mount Mandara on your back at the time of the churning of the ocean. I bow to you! To save the earth, you took the form of Varaha, the Boar, and again, to destroy Hiranyakashipu, you became Narasimha, the Man-lion. I bow to you! As Vamana, you measured the entire universe in three steps, and as Parashurama, you crushed the egotism of the Kshatriyas. I bow to you!

‘As Ramachandra, the greatest of the Raghus, you destroyed Ravana and his followers. And again you were the Buddha, the pure one, who taught the Truth to one and all. I bow to you! O Lord! All beings are intoxicated with the feeling of “I and mine”, and are caught in the endless wheel of birth, death, and rebirth. I too mistakenly look on impermanent things—such as my body, my family, and my wealth—as permanent and fail to know you, the source of all bliss. So I surrender myself at your feet. I bow to you, O Vasudeva, the Soul of all souls! Protect me, who have taken refuge at your feet.’

Then Akrura’s vision of Mahavishnu in the water disappeared. He

finished his bath and came back to the chariot. Acting as if he knew nothing, Krishna asked: 'Well, what happened to you? You look as though you have seen something wonderful!' Akrura replied, 'Whatever wonderful things there are in this world, they all exist in you alone!' Akrura then got in the chariot, and they continued to Mathura.

## *The Killing of Kamsa*

Krishna and Balarama entered Mathura and were very happy to see the beautiful city. They saw large houses with golden gates and silver walls, as well as beautiful parks with large moats around them. The more they saw, the more impressed they were. The women heard about the arrival of Krishna and Balarama and came running to get a glimpse of them. They mused amongst themselves: 'How fortunate are the womenfolk of Vraja! What great austerities they must have done to be blessed to enjoy the sight of such beauty.'

On their walk through the city, Krishna and Balarama chanced across Kamsa's washerman. He was taking Kamsa's washed clothes to the king. Krishna and Balarama asked for some clothes, but he refused and insulted them. Krishna then killed him, kept some of the clothes, and gave the rest to the gopas. A weaver then came and made the two brothers some clothes having colourful designs and beautiful decorations, and Krishna blessed him. After that, they entered the house of Sudama, who was a garland maker. Sudama decorated Krishna, Balarama, and the gopas with garlands and sandal-paste and worshipped them. He also was blessed by Krishna.

Next the brothers came across a woman holding a pot of sandal-paste. Though she was hunchbacked, she was young and pretty. She said: 'I am a housemaid of the king. My job is to make these fragrant pastes for applying to the king's body. The king likes my preparations very much. Come, let me put this fine sandal paste on you.' She then applied generous quantities of that sandal-paste on the bodies of Krishna and Balarama, enhancing their beauty all the more.

Krishna was very pleased with this woman, and decided to straighten out her body. He placed his feet on hers, and placed two fingers under her chin. Then he lifted her chin, and the bends in her deformed body were straightened out. Her heart was filled with gratitude and love for Krishna, and she insisted that they come to her house. But Krishna said: 'Not now. Let us go to our destination. But

rest assured, we shall come one day.'

By this time, the Bow-yajna of Kamsa had started. Asking their way, Krishna and Balarama found the hall where the bow was kept and worshipped. They entered and saw the enormous weapon, which was as wonderful as Indra's bow, and very heavy indeed. There were guards standing all around, keeping a strict watch. Krishna quickly jumped up on the altar where the bow was kept, and before the guards could stop him, picked up that enormous bow with his left hand. He then easily strung it, and with one twang, broke it in two. The tremendous sound of the bow being broken echoed throughout Mathura and reached the palace of the king. When Kamsa heard it, he trembled in fear.

Infuriated, the guards surrounded the two brothers, intending to kill them. But Krishna and Balarama each took a part of the broken bow and beat the guards to death.

The main festivities were scheduled for the next morning. Kamsa had first arranged for a wrestling match. At the crack of dawn, all the citizens of Mathura assembled to watch the wrestling. Kamsa too came to the arena, but he was morose and mounted the throne slowly. Both in the waking state and in the dream state, he had seen terrible omens.

The two best wrestlers were Chanura and Mushtika. Along with them, many other wrestlers entered the fighting arena. Nanda and the other gopas laid gifts before King Kamsa and took their seats.

As Krishna and Balarama passed through the gate of the arena, they saw the elephant Kuvalayapida ready to charge them. Krishna shouted to the mahout: 'You had better hold your elephant and let us pass. Otherwise, be prepared to go to the house of Death!' But instead of listening, the mahout prodded the elephant. Prompted by the mahout, that enormous elephant charged at Krishna and caught him in its trunk. But Krishna slipped out of its grip, grabbed it by the tail, and started dragging it backwards. One moment he gave a mighty blow to the elephant, and the next he ran just ahead of it until it tripped and fell to the ground. Again Krishna tugged at the elephant's



tail, and again the elephant charged at Krishna to trample him. Finally Krishna took hold of the elephant's trunk, threw the elephant to the ground, and then pulled out its tusks. With the tusks he beat the elephant and its mahout till they were both despatched to the abode of Death.

After this the two brothers entered the arena. The spectators were already aware of the power of Krishna and Balarama, and they said among themselves: 'Oh, they are Narayana himself! They have, by their grace, adorned the house of Vasudeva.'

Now Chanura, the main wrestler in the court of Kamsa, challenged Krishna and Balarama to a bout of wrestling. Mocking them, he said: 'We have heard that the cowherd boys, while grazing the cows, play at wrestling among themselves. The king has heard a great deal about you, and is keen to see a wrestling match between you two and myself.' Sri Krishna said: 'We are mere boys who roam around in the woods. We know nothing about the rules of fighting. Wrestling, in fact, should take place between equals.' But Chanura replied: 'Indeed, you are not mere boys, nor are you weak. We have just witnessed your strength when you killed the king's elephant. You are undoubtedly very powerful. Let Krishna fight with me, and Balarama with Mushtika. Now show your strength.'

So the wrestling match began. Fist against fist, elbow against elbow, head against head, and chest against chest they fought. Pushing, shoving, strangling, whirling, lifting up, and pressing down—each tried to beat his opponent. But Chanura and Mushtika were no match for their opponents. At last Chanura, who was getting tired, gave a terrific blow to Krishna's chest. Immediately, Krishna held him up by his arms, swung him around in the air, and smashed him down on the ground. That was the end of Chanura.

The fight between Balarama and Mushtika went almost the same way. Balarama finally struck Mushtika with such a blow that Mushtika vomited blood and died. Then the wrestlers Kuta, Sala, and Tosala attacked Krishna and Balarama, but they were immediately sent to Death's abode. The rest of Kamsa's wrestlers ran away in fear.

Trumpets and conches sounded. Krishna and Balarama danced for joy in the arena with the rest of the gopas. But King Kamsa ordered the trumpets to stop. He shouted: 'Expel these two wicked sons of Vasudeva from Mathura. Tie Nanda up with strong ropes, and kill Vasudeva. What is more, my father, Ugrasena, is a follower of my enemies. Kill him at once!'

These words of the evil Kamsa enraged Krishna, and he immediately leapt up onto the high dias where Kamsa was seated on his throne. But Kamsa quickly jumped up from his seat and drew his sword, ready to fight for his life. Though he moved with the speed of a falcon, jumping here and there with his sword in hand, he could not evade his destiny. Krishna grabbed him by the tuft of his hair and threw him down into the arena. Then he jumped down on him and killed him. Kamsa was dead at last.



*Krishna killing Kamsa*

Kamsa had been so terrified of Krishna that he had thought of him all the time. Whether eating, drinking, speaking, walking, sleeping, or breathing—at all times he imagined that Krishna was standing in front of him. Thus thinking of the Lord, when his body was killed, he entered into Krishna—an end so difficult to obtain.

But now Kamsa's eight brothers came running in great anger to avenge their brother's death. Balarama was ready for them, and with an elephant tusk in hand, he killed all of them.

Flowers rained down from the heavens, and divine drums sounded. Immediately Krishna arranged for the performance of the last rites of Kamsa and his brothers. Then Krishna and Balarama went to Kamsa's dungeon to free their parents, Vasudeva and Devaki. Seeing their parents, they bowed before them, touching their feet with their heads.

## *Ugrasena is Enthroned*

When Krishna and Balarama came to free their parents, Vasudeva and Devaki did not embrace them. They saw that their own sons were none other than the Lord himself, and were filled with awe. But this realization deprived them of the pleasure of greeting their sons with affectionate embraces and kisses. Thus Krishna spread his maya over their eyes so that they would again look upon him and his brother as their sons, and not as God.

Krishna said: 'O Father, O Mother! We are your sons. You have suffered endless worries and anxiety for us. It is our misfortune that we were forced to live far away from you all these years. You never had the joy of raising us, of watching us grow up, and of taking care of us. To repay the debt to one's parents is not possible. They have given birth to and nourished our bodies, which are the repositories of all wealth and earthly pleasure. Out of fear of Kamsa, we have not served you the way we should have. Please pardon us.' These words filled Vasudeva and Devaki with great pleasure. They held their sons and caressed them, overwhelmed with joy.

Now that Kamsa was dead, who would occupy Mathura's throne? Everybody thought that Krishna would be the king of Mathura. But Krishna refused. Instead, he installed his maternal grandfather, Ugrasena, on the throne. Again and again we notice in the life of Krishna that he was the epitome of detachment. He made many people kings, but he never became one himself.

It was now time to bid farewell to Nanda and the gopas. With great love, and with words of reassurance that they would visit them soon, Krishna and Balarama sent Nanda and the gopas back to Vraja.

## ***Guru-dakshina of Krishna and Balarama***

In Avantipur there lived a sage named Sandipani, who was famous as a teacher. After the proper rituals, Krishna and Balarama went to study under him. In spite of their great feats—killing Putana, taming Kaliya, and killing Kamsa—Krishna and Balarama served the sage Sandipani just as the other students did, and they were humble in behaviour and polite to their guru. Sandipani was pleased with them and taught them the Vedas and Upanishads. After that they learned about dharma, ethics, logic, politics, the art of administering a kingdom, rules of war, and similar subjects. They mastered everything. Such was their power of concentration that in sixty-four days they mastered all sixty-four subjects. And with that, their training came to an end. They then requested their guru to accept their homage in the form of a gift, or guru-dakshina.

The sage consulted his wife. ‘What shall I ask from them? God himself has come to me to be taught. I am blessed to be their teacher. Well, our only son drowned in the ocean at Prabhasa. If Krishna and Balarama are really God, let’s ask them to bring our son back to life.’

To fulfil the desire of the sage, the two brothers hurried to Prabhasa, which is on the seashore. When the god of the Sea learned that the Lord himself had come to him as Krishna and Balarama, he came and bowed at their feet. Krishna said: ‘O Sea, you have engulfed the son of my guru with your enormous waves. Now bring him back.’ The Sea god replied: ‘It was not I who swallowed that boy. It was Panchajanya, the asura who lives in my water in the form of a conch.’

Krishna immediately dove into the sea and found and destroyed the demon, but there was no boy in the demon’s stomach. He returned with the conch, which had been part of the asura’s body. Then he went with Balarama to the abode of Yama, Death. There he loudly blew the Panchajanya conch. Yama hurried there and said: ‘O Lord, both of you are incarnations of Vishnu himself, and have taken human form in your divine play, your lila. Do tell me how I can serve you.’ Krishna

replied: ‘The son of my guru has died, according to the fruits of his karma, and you have brought him here. This was right. You have acted properly. But I must now command you to return him.’ The king of Death immediately agreed.

Krishna and Balarama then brought their guru’s son back to his home. The guru and his wife were immensely happy, and wholeheartedly blessed the two brothers. Krishna and Balarama, endowed with the blessings of their guru, returned to Mathura and its citizens, who were overjoyed to have them back.

## ***Uddhava and the Gopis' Complaint***

After returning from his guru's house, Krishna spent some time in Mathura. Meanwhile, in Vrindavan, the gopis were despondent. Mother Yashoda and Nanda were also anxious to see their darling sons, Krishna and Balarama, so Krishna sent Uddhava as a messenger to Vrindavan.

After arriving at night in Vrindavan, Uddhava was warmly welcomed by Nanda. 'Does Krishna still remember us?' Nanda asked. 'And when does he plan to come back and see us? His memory haunts us. We think about him so much that we neglect our own work.' Nanda then continued: 'Balarama and Krishna are two divine beings who have come to earth. Just think: Krishna killed Kamsa and the wrestler Chanura effortlessly, as if they had been a dog and a cat. He broke Kamsa's huge bow into pieces like an elephant snapping off a sugar cane. He saved us from the flood unleashed by Indra, holding Mount Govardhan in his left hand for a week.'

Nanda and Uddhava went on and on talking about Krishna until the anguish of Nanda's grief became too much for him to bear. Yashoda also, who was listening to them speak, could not control her tears. Seeing their love for Krishna, Uddhava said: 'O great ones! You have attained to the highest form of devotion to that Being, the Supreme Narayana, who is the soul of all. What other end is there left for you to achieve? Surely Krishna will come soon to see you. Do not grieve.'

The next morning the women of Vrindavan went to see Uddhava as he was returning from his morning ablutions. The gopis said to him: 'We understand that you attend on Krishna. We're sure he has sent you to find out how his parents are keeping. He must have forgotten all about us. But then, why wouldn't he? As soon as their needs are met, subjects leave the king behind, disciples leave the guru behind, the priest leaves the worshipper behind. The birds leave the tree when the fruit is gone. Guests leave a banquet when the feast is



over. So it's not surprising that Krishna would leave us.' Though speaking in such strains, the gopis could not hold back their tears of love and anguish.

To comfort them, Uddhava said: 'You have devoted yourselves solely to Krishna, who is the Lord himself. We bow to all of you. You see, it's not easy to acquire devotion to the Lord. The sages undertake a lot of penance, meditation, and japa, but they still don't get this kind of devotion. You all are so fortunate that you have acquired such deep devotion to Krishna. Moreover, you have surrendered your minds completely to him. It is good fortune earned over many lifetimes to be able to leave everything behind and worship the greatest of all beings, Sri Krishna. I have brought a message from your beloved one. Please listen. Here's what the Lord said to tell you:

“You can never be separated from Me, since I permeate the entire universe, including your minds and bodies. I dwell within all as the Self. I create, sustain, and also dissolve everything within myself and out of myself by my maya-power. I know I am everything to you. I am your all in all. And yet, I am staying so far away from you. This has a reason. When you don't get to see me with your eyes, you will devote your entire mind to me. You will forever meditate on me. Through meditation you all will be united with me.”

The gopis, however, could not be consoled. Though knowing in their minds that what Krishna had said was true, yet his words could not relieve the anguish of their hearts. In order to comfort the gopis, Uddhava lived in Vrindavan for a few months. The gopis' devotion opened his eyes and revealed to him what *ahetuki bhakti* really is—that is, perfectly selfless and unfathomable devotion. He thought: 'We are the companions of Sri Krishna, and we try to attain such love for him, but we don't succeed. But look at these forest-dwelling women, who love Krishna. Krishna fulfilled for them the highest purpose of life through his divine dance—his *Rasa Lila*. I shall consider myself extremely fortunate if I am born even as a blade of grass in blessed Vrindavan where I shall be covered with the dust of the feet of these women. I repeatedly bow at their feet.'

## *News from Hastinapura*

Krishna was a close relative of the Pandavas. One day he told Akrura: 'I have not heard any news about the Pandavas for a long time. I understand that after the demise of King Pandu, the Pandavas, along with their grief-stricken mother, went back to Hastinapura. The blind king Dhritarashtra is surely not treating them as he does his own sons. Please go to Hastinapura and get the latest news of them.'

Akrura came to Hastinapura and met the Pandavas. Mother Kunti wept, and told her brother Akrura: 'Have the people from my father's house, along with Krishna, forgotten me completely? My sons have lost their father. We are living amongst people inimical to us. Don't you realize how helpless we are?'

Akrura consoled her and said: 'The Pandavas are protected by the devas. No one can harm them.' Then he went to King Dhritarashtra, and tried to advise him. He said: 'It is your bounden duty to maintain the earth according to the dictates of dharma. You must treat all your relatives and subjects equally and keep them happy. Then only will your name and fame spread and will it do good to you. O king, please judge for yourself: even the connection with one's own body is impermanent. Then how little is the bond between you and your sons. A human being is born alone and dies alone. Neither does one come with anyone, nor does one depart with anyone.'

Dhritarashtra said: 'O great benefactor, you are extremely kind and are well known for your generosity. Today you have been kind enough to enlighten me on my duties as a king. Your words are beautiful. I would love to hear more. But because of my attachment to my sons, my mind strays. This delusion has been brought about by that very same person who has taken birth in the Yadu family to relieve the earth's burdens.'

Akrura could well read the mind of Dhritarashtra, and he realized that war between the Kurus and Pandavas was inevitable. He then

went back to Mathura and conveyed to Krishna the outcome of his mission.

## ***Fight with Jarasandha***

The father-in-law of Kamsa was Jarasandha, the king of Magadha. His daughters Asti and Prapti had been married to Kamsa, and were now grieving widows living with their father. When Jarasandha heard about Kamsa's death, he was furious, and was determined to put an end to the Yadu race. With twenty-three battalions of soldiers, he came to Mathura and laid siege to the city. But Krishna resolved in his mind: 'Those who are helping Jarasandha should be killed first. For I have come to relieve the earth of her burden. Hence, I will not kill the king of Magadha now.'

As Krishna was thinking in this way, two shining chariots, driven by charioteers, descended from the sky. Krishna saw that the chariots were full of divine weapons, and he said to Balarama, 'O brother, with the help of these weapons, please kill the enemy soldiers and protect the Yadus.' Then Balarama and Krishna put on their armour, got into the chariots, and entered the field of battle with a small army. But seeing Krishna, Jarasandha said: 'Krishna is a mere boy and a coward who was brought up in hiding. I cannot possibly fight with him. However, I am prepared to fight with Balarama.'

A fierce battle ensued. At the onslaught of Krishna's arrows and Balarama's plough-weapon, Jarasandha's men began to die. Rivers of blood flowed. Finally only Jarasandha remained alive. Grabbing hold of him, Balarama tied him up with a rope and was about to kill him, but Krishna had other plans and advised Balarama to let Jarasandha go. Humiliated, Jarasandha went back to his own kingdom.

Time and again Jarasandha mustered up large battalions of soldiers. And time and again he was defeated and had to flee the battlefield. In this way he was defeated seventeen times, and thousands of his soldiers were killed. One of the main purposes of God's incarnation on earth is the destruction of the wicked. That purpose was well served in this way.

## ***Kalayavana and Muchukunda***

When Jarasandha was about to strike for the eighteenth time, the great hero Kalayavana decided to join him with thirty-five million soldiers. It was feared that Jarasandha and Kalayavana would attack Mathura from opposite sides. For this reason, Krishna and Balarama decided to build a huge fort far to the west of Mathura, containing many large houses, palaces, roads, and gardens. Krishna named it Dwaraka.

Through his yogic powers, Krishna took the Yadus to the new city. Leaving them there, he returned to Mathura with Balarama. While Balarama remained inside Mathura to guard it, Krishna went out alone and unarmed through the main gate.

Seeing Krishna unarmed and on foot, Kalayavana threw down his arms and ran after him. But it is difficult even for yogis to catch God. Again and again Kalayavana came within touching distance of him, yet he still could not catch Krishna. With Kalayavana chasing him, Krishna ran up a mountain and darted into a cave.

Though Kalayavana was right behind Krishna, in the dark cave he lost sight of him. Then he noticed someone lying down on the floor of the cave, covered with a blanket. Kalayavana thought, 'Ah, now I've got him!' and gave that person under the blanket a terrific kick. But it was not Krishna. It was another man, who awoke from his slumber in fury. Looking at Kalayavana, fire came out of his eyes, and Kalayavana was burnt to ashes.

King Parikshit eagerly asked Shukadeva: 'O holy one, who was that man who burned up the Yavana? How could he do so by a mere glance?'

Shukadeva explained: This man was King Muchukunda. He was the son of the noble Mandhata, who hailed from the Ikshvaku family. Truth, righteousness, and devotion were Muchukunda's constant

companions. He had done many righteous deeds. When the devas approached him for protection from the asuras, he protected them for a long time. So the devas were very pleased with him and wanted to give him a boon. Muchukunda said: 'I am very tired. I need a long, undisturbed sleep.' The devas then said, 'If anybody awakens you while you are sleeping, he will be burnt to ashes as soon as you look at him.' So Muchukunda entered the cave and fell asleep. Kalayavana was burned up by the power of the deva's boon.

When Krishna returned to Mathura, Jarasandha's army was approaching. Rather than fight, Balarama and Krishna decided to run. Jarasandha then chased them to a mountain and set fire to it, thinking he would kill them in the fire. But Balarama and Krishna escaped unnoticed and went to Dwaraka.

## ***Rukmini Marries Krishna***

Bhishmaka, the king of Vidarbha, had a beautiful daughter by the name of Rukmini. Rukmini had five brothers, of whom the eldest was named Rukmi. Hearing about the beauty and virtuous qualities of each other, both Krishna and Rukmini became attracted to each other. Rukmini set her heart on marrying Krishna, and her relatives agreed—all except Rukmi. Rukmi had other plans. He wanted his sister to marry his friend Shishupala, the king of the Chedis.

Rukmini heard about her brother's plan and sent a letter to Krishna through a trusted brahmin. She wrote: 'O Enchanter of the World, I have heard so much about your beauty and virtues, and have completely surrendered my soul to you. O Lord, let not this jackal—this king of the Chedis—snatch away that which is rightfully due to a lion. Tomorrow is the wedding day. You must defeat Shishupala and Jarasandha, and marry me. It is our custom that the bride goes to the temple of Ambika as part of the rites prior to the wedding. When I go there, you must forcibly carry me away in your chariot. If you don't accept me, know for sure that I will kill myself. Even if I have to wait for a hundred lifetimes, I will have you as my husband. This is my resolve.'

When Krishna received this letter, he was determined to rescue Rukmini and marry her. At Krishna's command, his charioteer Daruka brought the chariot, and that same night they arrived in Kundina, the capital of Vidarbha. As soon as Balarama heard about Krishna's plans, he too started for Kundina with a large army of foot soldiers, horses, and elephants.

Bhishmaka (Rukmini's father) and Damaghosha (Shishupala's father) both started the preliminary rites for the wedding, according to the customs of their respective families. The brahmin messenger had not returned, and Rukmini was very worried. Finally, the brahmin arrived with the news that Krishna had arrived in Kundina.

Constantly remembering the lotus feet of Krishna, Rukmini performed all the religious functions at the temple of Ambika, accompanied by her friends and attendants. Armed soldiers stood on every side, closely guarding the princess. The assembled kings were enchanted at the beauty of the bride. Amongst them was Krishna. When she saw him, the bride was happy and reassured. As Rukmini was about to leave the temple, Krishna made his move. He sped through the assemblage of kings towards Rukmini, seized her, put her in his chariot, and rode off at lightning speed.

At this sudden turn of events, the kings that had assembled were furious that Krishna would dare do such a thing right in front of them. They immediately got in their chariots and went in pursuit of him. But Balarama and his army soon routed them all. Seeing his would-be bride abducted by another man, Shishupal was crestfallen and lamented his fate. Jarasandha then told Shishupal: 'O king, don't grieve over this matter. There is no certainty about anything in this world—either pleasant or unpleasant. Just as a puppet dances according to the will of the puppeteer, so does a person receive rewards or retribution according to the will of God.' Jarasandha then said: 'With twenty-three battalions of soldiers, I attacked them eighteen times, and won only once. There is nothing to grieve at or rejoice over in this. If the time is opportune, we will win again.'

The kings returned to their respective kingdoms. But Rukmi could not tolerate the insult. He also pursued Krishna, but inevitably he was no match for him. Krishna was about to kill Rukmi when Rukmini begged him to spare her brother's life. At her earnest request, Krishna did not kill him, but instead shaved off his hair and beard and tied him up. Later, Balarama came and freed Rukmi.

According to the custom, Krishna returned to Dwaraka with Rukmini, and they were married. The whole city of Dwaraka celebrated with great rejoicing.



## *Pradyumna*

In due course Rukmini gave birth to a beautiful boy named Pradyumna. However, a demon named Sambara kidnapped him six days after he was born and threw him in the sea. Immediately a huge fish swallowed the child, and was then caught in a fisherman's net. By a strange coincidence, the fisherman gave the fish to Sambara. When Sambara's cooks cut the fish open, they found a beautiful baby inside and quickly called Mayavati, the superintendant of the kitchen. Everyone was amazed at the beauty of the child and exclaimed: 'What a beautiful child! Why, he's as beautiful as Kamadeva <sup>(1)</sup>!'

Narada came there then and informed Mayavati that, in fact, this child in its previous incarnation was Kamadeva, and that Mayavati, in her previous life, had been Rati, Kamadeva's wife. Mayavati then began to raise the child with great care and love.

Pradyumna started growing up in the house of Sambarasura. When he was fully grown, Mayavati took on her previous form as Rati Devi and reminded him all about his previous birth. Pradyumna, the son of Krishna, then learned from Rati a magic spell to kill the demon. He immediately took up some weapons, killed Sambarasura, and went back to Dwaraka with Rati.

Mother Rukmini, however, could not recognise Pradyumna and his wife Rati. Again Narada appeared on the scene and narrated the story of Pradyumna's life, both in his present birth as well as in his previous one. Seeing her lost child with his wife Rati, the joy of Rukmini and the other women of the household knew no bounds.

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[1]. The God of love.

## ***The Syamantaka Jewel Jambavati and Satyabhama***

The Sun god possessed a marvellous jewel called Syamantaka, whose brilliance was as bright as the sun itself. Not only that, the jewel was capable of producing gold eight times its weight. Again, wherever the jewel is worshipped famine, epidemics, diseases, the fear of serpents, and other misfortunes would be totally dispelled.

Satrajit was a devout worshipper of the Sun god. Pleased with him, the Sun god gave him this unique jewel. Satrajit then put it in a temple and worshipped it. Consequently, he possessed a large amount of money and property. One day Krishna asked for the jewel from him on behalf of the king of the Yadus, but Satrajit refused his request. Some days later Prasanjit (Prasena), the brother of Satrajit, wore that jewel when he went out hunting. As he entered the forest, a lion attacked and killed him, and then took the jewel to a nearby hill. The king of the bears, Jambavan, lived close by. He then killed the lion and took the jewel to his cave and gave it to his child.

Now Satrajit could not find his brother anywhere, and he thought that Krishna had killed Prasanjit and taken the jewel away. A rumour to this effect spread far and wide, and in due course Krishna also came to know about it. To remove all doubts about him from the minds of the people, Krishna set out for the jungle with some companions to look for Prasanjit.

Eventually they found the bodies of Prasanjit and his horse in the jungle. They then went a little further and found a dead lion on a hillock. Leaving his companions behind, Krishna entered a nearby cave. Inside the cave, the young child of Jambavan was playing with the jewel. At the sight of an unknown face, the child's nurse started yelling, which caused Jambavan to rush to the cave. Soon a wrestling match ensued between Krishna and Jambavan, who did not recognize Krishna.

After twenty-eight days of fierce fighting, Jambavan realised that Krishna was no ordinary man and was God himself. Jambavan had been a follower of Ramachandra. It then struck him that his own Lord Ramachandra had taken birth as Krishna and had returned to the earth. Jambavan cried out: 'I have now come to my senses and have realised that you are the Primordial Lord Vishnu. In your incarnation as Rama you killed Ravana with a sharp arrow. You are my Lord Ramachandra, whom I worship.' Krishna was pleased to hear this. Soothing the tired and bruised limbs of Jambavan with his hand, he said, 'I have entered this cave in search of a jewel so that the rumour spread against me may be removed.' Immediately Jambavan handed over the Syamantaka jewel to Krishna. And along with it, he also gave his daughter Jambavati.

Since Krishna had been away from Dwaraka for a long time, there was a hue and cry all around, and everyone began to invoke Mother Durga, the destroyer of all evils. Now Krishna came back with the Syamantaka jewel and Jambavati, and he narrated the detailed story of the retrieval of the jewel. Then he returned the jewel to Satrajit in the presence of the citizens of Dwaraka.

Satrajit had spread a false allegation against Krishna, so he was thoroughly ashamed. He pondered over the whole thing and finally decided that he should give the jewel to Krishna, and along with that, he would also give his beautiful daughter Satyabhama. Accordingly, Satrajit handed over to Krishna the jewel along with Satyabhama. Through the usual rituals, the wedding of Satyabhama with Krishna was solemnised. Krishna then addressed Satrajit and said: 'You are a worshipper of the Sun god. The jewel given by him may remain with you. We shall only reap its benefits.'

## ***A Conversation with Kunti in Indraprastha***

Time passed. The house of lac was burned down, but Duryodhana's conspiracy to kill the Pandavas came to naught. The Pandavas eventually began to live at Indraprastha with Draupadi.

Krishna, accompanied by Satyaki and other Yadavas, arrived in Indraprastha to meet Kunti and the Pandavas. As Krishna bowed to Kunti, she was moved to tears. Her voice choked with emotion, Kunti recalled all the previous misfortunes and then wept, saying to Krishna: 'You are our well wisher. That is why you sent Akrura to collect information about us. That itself was a great solace for us and did us immense good. You are the friend of all creatures, and you are the very soul in every body. To you who are the well-wisher and the Atman of the whole world, there is no distinction between friend and stranger. Still, in the case of those who always remember you, you remain ever in their hearts and remove their sufferings.'

Krishna spent a few months at Indraprastha. One day he and Arjuna set out for the Khandava forest to offer it to the god of Fire. By the grace of Krishna, the asura Maya was saved from that devastating fire in the forest. Having escaped that ordeal, Maya, out of gratitude, built a beautiful assembly hall for the Pandavas. When Duryodhana went to visit that hall, he was repeatedly confused. He mistook water for the floor and the floor for water.

After returning to Dwaraka from Indraprastha, Krishna married Kalindi, the daughter of the Sun god. He then also married Mitravinda, Satya (after taming seven bulls), Bhadra, Lakshmana, and sixteen thousand other women who had been kidnapped by Narakasura.

## *Usha and Aniruddha*

We have already heard the story of King Bali. Bana, the son of Bali, was the king of Sonitapura. As a result of a boon given to him by Lord Shiva, Bana had a thousand arms, and thus he became immensely powerful.

His daughter Usha one day dreamt of an exquisitely handsome young man. The princess almost went mad for this prince who had appeared in her dream. Seeing her condition, Chitrlekha, the daughter of the prime minister, asked Usha: 'My dear friend whatever is the matter with you? Why do you look so perturbed? Please tell me everything.' Usha replied: I had a dream that a very handsome man appeared before me. I have never seen a man more handsome than this one. But alas! I don't know who he is.'

This problem was easily solved by Chitrlekha. She was gifted with an exceptional ability to draw the pictures of all the kings and princes. Chitrlekha put to use this extraordinary ability of hers and kept on drawing pictures of kings and princes one after another. When at last Chitrlekha drew the picture of Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna and son of Pradyumna, Usha looked down out of shyness and said: 'He is the one.'

Chitrlekha also had another yogic power. She could fly in the air anywhere she wanted to go. Knowing that the picture was of Aniruddha, Krishna's grandson, she flew to Dwaraka, picked up the sleeping prince from his bed, and brought him to Usha at Sonitapura. Usha was overjoyed to see the man she had dreamt of, and Aniruddha also was quite enchanted by the grace and beauty of Usha. He continued to live secretly in Usha's apartment.

But such news could not be kept secret for long, and the king soon came to know about it. He went one day to his daughter's apartment with some soldiers to see for himself, and there he found Aniruddha engaged in a game of dice with Usha. Bana was furious. Seeing the

soldiers enter with Bana, the prince took a mace and began striking them. However, King Bana's powerful nagapasha (serpent noose) soon tied him up.

The sage Narada then went to inform Krishna. He said, 'Your grandson Aniruddha is being held captive in the palace of King Bana at Sonitapura.' As soon as Krishna heard this, he led his army to the kingdom of King Bana. There was a fierce battle. Shiva also was there on the side of Bana, but Krishna himself defeated Shiva with a weapon that put Shiva to sleep. After many of his warriors were defeated, King Bana took up arms against Krishna, and with his thousand hands he kept on hurling thousands of arrows at Krishna. Krishna, however, could not be easily alarmed. He fought back with his powerful Sudarshana Chakra. With the help of the Chakra, he kept on chopping off one arm after another of King Bana till the king was left with only four arms.

It was because of Shiva's boon that King Bana was so powerful, so Mahadev came to his rescue. He entreated Krishna: 'Bana is a great devotee of mine. Besides that, he is also a descendant of Prahlada, upon whom you have showered your blessing. Please excuse him and have mercy on him.'

Krishna replied: 'Prahlada and his descendant King Bali are devoted to me. I had promised Bali that I shall not kill anyone in his family. Therefore, I cannot kill Bana. But I have arrived here to humble him. The four arms that are left will enable him to rule over his kingdom. I have destroyed his army so that the weight of the earth is lessened. I assure Bana that he will not be killed.' In gratitude, King Bana bowed at the lotus feet of Krishna.

The obstacle in the way of the marriage of Usha and Aniruddha was thus removed. King Bana handed over his daughter Usha to Aniruddha. Then, in his golden chariot, Krishna went back to Dwaraka along with his grandson and his bride.

## ***Narada's Visit to Dwaraka***

The sage Narada was aware that Krishna was living in Dwaraka with his many wives, and he was very curious to see how Krishna spent his time. The great architect Vishwakarma had built a beautiful garden in Dwaraka that had sixteen thousand houses. Narada entered one of them and found that Rukmini Devi was fanning Krishna with a chamara (1). Seeing Narada, Krishna got up from his seat, washed Narada's feet, and then sprinkled his head with the water that had washed those feet. After that, he enquired about Narada's well-being and wanted to know if he needed anything.

Narada very politely said: 'I am indeed lucky that I have been able to see you. O saviour of the world, you are the refuge of all those who surrender to you. Only the devas are capable of meditating upon you. Your lotus feet are all that can save human beings from being immersed in deep distress. It is my great good fortune that I have witnessed those feet. Do bless me so that I remember them always.'

Narada entered another house. There also Krishna along with another wife were playing dice with Uddhava. Here also as soon as Krishna saw Narada he rose and washed the sage's feet and enquired if Narada needed anything. Narada was astonished at this. He was dumbstruck and thought: 'Are they one and the same person? The one whom I spoke to a little while ago and this person are certainly the same person, yet he acts as if he were someone else.'

Narada could not speak, and moved to the next house. There he found that Krishna was caressing a little child. In the next house he saw that Krishna was getting ready for his bath. He continued to move from house to house and found in one place Krishna was engaged in studying the Vedas; in another, making offerings in a sacrifice; and in still another he was making various social arrangements for his daughter and son-in-law. Again, somewhere else he was worshipping the devas, who are only parts of himself, in an elaborate yajna. Yet in other places he was busy with household activities like ordinary

people, such as digging a well, consecrating a temple, or other such activities. In some places he was following a normal practice of a king and arranging to set out for hunting. Again, somewhere else he was meeting with his ministers to plan a strategic move.

Krishna, out of his own Divine play, descended on earth in the form of a human being. He was at once a loving husband, a dutiful householder, an able administrator, and a valiant warrior.

Sage Narada was amazed to see the innumerable expressions of Krishna's power. He bowed to the Lord and said: 'Oh Yogeshwara, I am extremely fortunate to witness you in various forms. Pray, do permit me to go back and tell people about your manifold lila.'

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[1]. A fan made of the tail of a yak.



## *The Killing of Jarasandha*

One day at Dwaraka a messenger came and said to Krishna: ‘O Lord Hari, Jarasandha is holding many kings captive in fort Giribraja. There is no end to their misery. You are the only person who can free them from their terrible state.’ Just at that moment the sage Narada arrived there. He said: ‘Yudhishtira intends to hold a Rajasuya yajna. For this, he needs the consent of Krishna, the dearest friend of the Pandavas.’ Krishna then asked Uddhava what he thought best in these circumstances.

Uddhava said: ‘By killing Jarasandha, we can accomplish both missions. On one hand Yudhishtira will be able to hold the Rajasuya yajna, and on the other, we shall be able to set the captive kings free. Bhimasena is the only fighter who is equal to Jarasandha. Let Bhimasena take the garb of a brahmin and challenge Jarasandha to a fight. But you must also be present there. Your presence is essential for the killing of Jarasandha.’

Narada and the elderly Yadus welcomed Uddhava’s advice. Then Krishna, with the permission of Balarama and the Yadu king, left for Indraprastha to meet the Pandavas with a large contingent of soldiers.

There is a strict rule laid down for holding the Rajasuya yajna. It stipulates that the person holding the yajna must conquer all the kings of the country. With the consent of Krishna, Yudhishtira sent out his four brothers, accompanied by large numbers of fighters, to four different directions to conquer the kings all over the country. Sahadeva went to the south; Nakula to the west; Arjuna went to the north; and Bhimasena went to east.

The heroes conquered all the other kings and returned with a huge amount of wealth. However, none could defeat Jarasandha. Then Krishna, Bhima, and Arjuna, all disguised as brahmins, arrived at Jarasandha’s capital and asked to have an audience with Jarasandha. When their request was granted, they told Jarasandha: ‘We are

travellers from a faraway place. We have a request to make of you. O King, please fulfil our request.'

Jarasandha became a little suspicious. He thought to himself: 'What kind of brahmins are these? They are tall, well built, and have harsh voices. Their hands are rough, and it seems they are accustomed to holding bows, arrows, and maces in their hands. I am sure they have come in the disguise of brahmins, but they must be kshatriyas.'

However, without making his feeling known, Jarasandha resolved in his mind: 'Since they have appeared here in the clothes of brahmins they will no doubt get the respect due to brahmins. Whatever their request is, it shall be fulfilled. To crush the pride of the demon king Bali, Bhagavan Vishnu came as a brahmin dwarf and begged for three strides of land from the king. King Bali, in spite of being forbidden by Shukracharya, kept his promise, and gave the land away as prayed for. I also shall fulfil their request.'

Then Jarasandha said: 'Tell me, what is it that you want? I shall give whatever it is.' Krishna replied: 'We challenge you to a fight. Indeed, we are kshatriyas. This is Bhima, this is Arjuna, and I am your well-known foe, Krishna.'

Hearing these words, Jarasandha laughed and said: 'Krishna! You are a coward. You have fled from Mathura and have taken shelter on an island in the sea. You are not worthy of fighting with me. Arjuna is younger than me, and therefore I do not consider him worthy of fighting with me either. The fight will be between Bhima and I.' With these words, he brought two maces. He handed one to Bhima and kept one for himself.

However, Bhima could not get the better of Jarasandha in the mace fight. And when the maces were all split they began fighting with their hands. Twenty-seven days went by. Then, by a gesture, Krishna motioned for Bhima to split Jarasandha's body by pulling apart his legs, as if the branch of a tree were being split in two parts.

Now, when Jarasandha was born his body was in two different

parts. A rakshasi (1) by the name of Jara connected those two parts together, and hence the king's name became Jarasandha (2). Bhima then threw Jarasandha on the ground and pulled apart his two legs. Immediately the entire body of Jarasandha split into two parts and he was killed. Jarasandha's son Sahadeva was crowned king by Krishna. Then he freed all the kings who were held captive by Jarasandha.

The kings bowed at the feet of Krishna and said: 'Salutations to you, Krishna! Salutations to the Supreme Being! Salutations again and again to you, Govinda, who removes the difficulties of those who prostrate before you, seeking relief!' Krishna was pleased with the kings. After seeing that they had been well fed and given many gifts by Jarasandha's son, Krishna sent them back to their own kingdoms.

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[1]. A female demon

[2]. Jara—the name of the rakshasi; and Sandha—bringing together.

## ***The Rajasuya Yajna and the Killing of Shishupala***

The arrangements were now made for holding the Rajasuya sacrifice. At the cordial invitation of Yudhishtira, many sages well versed in the Vedas, as well as brahmins and kings from far and wide, came to attend the yajna. In fact, people from all castes were invited. Dronacharya, Vidura, Bhishma, and other elders came from Hastinapura. Shishupala was also present. The yajna duly started in the presence of the gods like Indra and other celestials.

After the worship had gone on for a few days, the question arose: Who will be the recipient of the first worship? In other words, who should be honoured as the greatest person present? Discussions were held to arrive at a consensus to determine who the most worthy person was to receive the first offering. Finally Sahadeva, the son of Madri, said: 'Sri Krishna is the foremost of all who have assembled here. The entire universe lies within him. He should receive the highest honour.' Almost everybody acclaimed this proposal to be the proper choice. Thus King Yudhishtira offered the first worship to Krishna.

But one person had not approved this, and he was infuriated. That person was Shishupala. He now stood up and protested, saying: 'This, I'm afraid, is the beginning of the kali yuga, which we all dread. The words of a mere cowherd boy have confounded the elders. I fail to understand how he could distinguish himself above so many knowledgeable and learned persons.' Then Shishupala started hurling abuses at Krishna, Yudhishtira, and others. Meanwhile Krishna kept silent. A number of kings armed with swords, arrows, etc., stood up to kill Shishupala, who was wearing armour and ready for a fight. But Krishna restrained them. Then, throwing his own Sudarshana Chakra, he cut off Shishupala's head.

Immediately a bright ray of light, like a meteor, emerged from Shishupala's body and merged with Krishna. Continuous

contemplation on an object gives one the nature of the object of contemplation. Three incarnations of the same person—Hiranyakashipu, Ravana, and Shishupala—had been mentally engrossed in the thought of Krishna, albeit as an enemy. But finally he was delivered from the curse on him, and he merged with the Lord.

## ***Destruction of Shalva and Dantavaktra***

We have already heard that by the curse of Sanaka and other sages, Jaya and Vijaya, the doorkeepers of Vaikuntha, had to take birth on earth three times. First they took birth as Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaksha, then as Ravana and Kumbhakarna, and finally as Shishupala and Dantavaktra.

Shishupala's friend Shalva was among the kings who had been humiliated when Krishna carried off Rukmini to be his bride. Angered by Krishna's behaviour, he started performing very austere tapasya and meditation on Shiva, eating but a fistful of dust every day. Shiva was pleased at his severe austerities and bestowed on Shalva various supernatural powers. Shalva also received from Shiva a huge vehicle that could travel in the air and could not be destroyed by humans, devas, or asuras. Thus he could travel anywhere he pleased, and it was also capable of doing a number of supernatural feats.

While Krishna and Balarama were at the Rajasuya sacrifice, Shalva came to Dwaraka and attacked the city. Pradyumna and other warriors were able to decimate Shalva's army and hold off the attack for twenty-seven days, but they could not destroy the aerial vehicle with Shalva. In the meantime, Krishna saw bad omens and, with Balarama, hurried back to Dwaraka. With the help of that machine, Shalva created an illusory form of a man who looked like Krishna's father, Vasudeva, and he killed this illusion in front of Krishna.

At first Krishna was overwhelmed with grief to see the death of his own father. However, through his yogic powers he came to know that this was not his father but an illusory Vasudeva. Immediately Krishna destroyed the magic vehicle by a blow with his mace, and after Shalva came out, Krishna cut off his head with his Sudarshana Chakra.

In a place called Karusha there was a king whose name was Dantavaktra. He was a close friend of Shishupala and Shalva. Hearing that they had both been killed by Krishna, Dantavaktra was enraged.

He came before Krishna with a mace in his hand in order to kill him. He said: 'Krishna, you are our cousin, but still you are our enemy. I will kill you today.' With these words, he hit Krishna's head with great force with the mace. Krishna then retaliated with his Kaumodaki mace and dealt a severe blow that smashed Dantavakra's chest. Dantavakra started vomiting blood and soon died. Just as in the case of Shishupala, a very bright and fine ray of light came out from the body of Dantavakra and mingled with the body of Krishna.

The cursed lives of Jaya and Vijaya, the doorkeepers of Vaikuntha, thus ended with the destruction of Shishupala and Dantavakra.

## *The Story of Sridama*

Sridama was a brahmin and had been a fellow student of Krishna at the ashrama of the sage Sandipani. Many years had gone by since they had been together, and both had gotten married. Sridama was a very gentle person. He was well versed in the Vedas and had control over his senses, but he was so poor that he could scarcely obtain two meals a day. The clothes of his pious wife were in tatters. Very often the couple went without food, or were half fed.

One day Sridama's wife could not serve any food to him, so with great sorrow she told him: 'I have heard that the consort of the goddess Lakshmi, Sri Krishna, is your friend. Why don't you go to him? When he comes to know of your great financial distress, I am sure he will give you a lot of wealth so we can have food every day.'

After being reminded of this several times by his wife, Sridama thought: 'By following my wife's advice, if nothing else, at least I will see Krishna again. That will be good enough for me.' Addressing his wife, he said: 'I will be seeing my friend after a long time. Please give me something so that I can take a gift to him.' His wife begged from the neighbours and finally collected a few handfuls of flattened rice. After putting it in a torn cloth, she tied it up and gave it to Sridama.

Krishna was living in a huge palace in Dwaraka. A great number of soldiers guarded the palace, but somehow Sridama, in torn clothes, managed to enter. There he found Krishna sitting on a couch with Rukmini beside him. As soon as Krishna saw his old friend, he got up and warmly embraced him. Then he made him sit on the couch and asked him about his well-being. While he was talking, Krishna proceeded to worship the brahmin while Rukmini fanned him. Everybody was astonished to see that an ill-clad brahmin was receiving such respect from the royal couple.

The two friends started reminiscing about their student days. They recalled that one day, at the request of their teacher's wife, the



two of them went out to collect wood for fuel. The sun set; it started raining heavily and the wind was blowing hard. Then they lost their way in the forest. The night passed. The next morning their guru, the sage Sandipani, came in search of them. Full of sympathy for his disciples, Sandipani showered his blessings upon them. These memories came back to Krishna and Sridama and they could not stop talking. Suddenly Krishna asked, ‘O my friend, let me see what you have brought for me.’

All the while, Sridama had been trying hard to hide that pouch of flattened rice. The difference in their status was so great. Here on one side was Krishna, at whose feet goddess Lakshmi bows down, and on the other was he himself, who lived in abject poverty, clutching some flattened rice in a torn pouch. Nevertheless, Krishna snatched a handful of the flattened rice, put it in his mouth, and exclaimed: ‘O dear friend, no food on the earth can taste better than this. Even if something insignificant is brought to me with deep love, I accept it as the best in the world. Whatever is offered to me with devotion—be it a leaf, flower, fruit, or even water—I accept with delight such offerings given by one with deep faith and devotion.’

As he was about to have some more flattened rice, Rukmini Devi snatched it away from him and said: ‘You are the fulfiller of all desires. There is no need to eat any more. For the good of the worshipper, your accepting one handful is enough.’ Krishna thought to himself: ‘This poor brahmin has not asked for any wealth from me. He has come to me at his wife’s request. I will bestow so much wealth upon him, the like of which none else can have.’ However, he did not utter a single word. Sridama was fed sumptuously, and that night he slept well on a soft bed.

The night passed, and the sun rose. It was time to go back home. The brahmin could not ask for anything from Krishna. It was more than worth the visit that he was simply able to see his old friend. Musing over his pleasant memories, he left for his home. But when he reached his house he could not find it. There in its place was a large well-built mansion. There was a beautiful garden and well-dressed

men and women all around. How was this possible? How could the hut of a poor man be transformed into such a beautiful palace?

Hearing that her husband had returned, his wife came running to meet him. But how beautiful she looked! He was amazed to see she looked almost like goddess Lakshmi herself. At the sight of her husband, Sridama's wife burst into tears of joy. The brahmin also was quite astonished.

Then suddenly he realised that all this had been made possible through the mercy of Krishna. He thought: 'I did not ask for anything. Even then he has given me all this. I only hope I will be worthy of his friendship and can continue to serve him. He is the receptacle of all virtues. He is the ocean of compassion. I only pray that I may enjoy his company birth after birth.'

The brahmin couple happily spent their days in their own palace. They knew no wants or grief. Through the grace of Krishna, their eyes were opened to true knowledge. After his demise, Sridama attained Vaikuntha, the realm of Vishnu.

## ***Vrikasura Attacks Mahadeva***

One day Vrikasura asked the sage Narada, 'Oh Supreme Sage, please tell me, who of all the Gods is easiest to please?' Narada replied: 'I am sure you know of Mahadeva (1). He is also known as Ashutosha (2), which means he feels pleased at the slightest offering. True to his name, he can be pleased very easily indeed.'

Vrikasura then started doing austerities before a sacred fire in which he had invoked Mahadeva. He even offered flesh from his own body to the fire. But after seven days he still had not gotten Mahadeva's darshan. Vrikasura got very worried then and was about to offer his head. Just as he was all set to chop it off and offer in the fire, Mahadeva appeared from the fire of the yajna and said: 'I am very much pleased at your sincerity. Seldom have I seen a person almost ready to chop off his own head to offer to his Chosen Deity. Ask for a boon and I will grant you whatever you want.'

The demon Vrikasura was very cunning and begged Mahadeva to give him the boon that upon whomever's head he would put his hand, that person would immediately die. Mahadeva was not at all happy to grant such a boon, but since he had already made the promise, he agreed.

Now the demon, as said before, was very cunning. He already had planned to kidnap Gauri, Shiva's consort. So, in order to get rid of Shiva, and also to confirm the veracity of Mahadeva's words, Vrikasura went forward to put his hand on the head of Mahadeva himself. Mahadeva then realised that he was in trouble, and that his boon was about to bring about his own destruction, so he began to run. Hoping to get some shelter, Mahadeva went to Brahma. But even Brahma and other gods were unable to offer any help to Mahadeva. They simply remained silent.

Mahadeva then arrived at Vaikuntha where Vishnu resides. Vishnu is ever ready to save people in distress. He immediately

understood Mahadeva's predicament, and to save him, he took the form of a small boy. Feigning innocence, he went to Vrikasura and very sweetly asked him to narrate the whole story. Vrikasura was so charmed by the simplicity of the young boy that he stopped running after Mahadeva and told Krishna, in the form of the small boy, the entire story of how he had pleased Mahadeva, how he had obtained the boon, and how he was running after Mahadeva to prove that the boon really worked.

In an artless manner, the boy told the demon: 'Yes! Yes! Mahadeva is a very naughty person. Do not tell me how bad he is. At the curse of king Daksha, who at one time was his father-in-law, he has now taken to crude work befitting a low person. He is verily an evil soul. What is more, ghosts and evil spirits always surround him. You should not trust a man of such low character. If you really want to verify whether his boon works or not, why not put your hand upon your own head? You will soon see that whatever he said is false.'

The demon was so struck by Vishnu's words that he lost all power to think rationally. Without giving it a second thought, he put his hand upon his own head. In fulfilment of Mahadeva's boon, Vrikasura's head immediately cracked into pieces, and he died instantly. The devas were very happy and broke into loud cheers.

Krishna told Mahadeva, who was now saved from imminent danger: 'The demon has died because of his own sins. You are the Deva of all devas. One who does wrong to you can never survive. No good can come to him.'

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[1]. Another name of Lord Shiva.

[2]. Ashu—quick; tosha—to please

## ***Bhrigu's footprint***

Arrangements were made for a big yajna on the bank of the river Saraswati, and sages and seers came from far and wide. In the course of their discussion, the question arose, who is the greatest among Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara? Not being able to settle it among themselves, the sage Bhrigu, Brahma's son, was sent to settle the matter. First he went to his father Brahma. Approaching him, Bhrigu neither bowed down nor did he show any sign of respect to him. Brahma was clearly very angry with his son, but he restrained himself and calmed down.

Bhrigu then went to Kailasha. Mahadeva was very happy to see him and came to embrace Bhrigu. However, the latter immediately rebuffed him, and on the contrary, started abusing him. Mahadeva was very angry at his words, and was about to hit Bhrigu with his trident. With great effort, Devi Parvati calmed him down.

From there Bhrigu went to Vaikuntha, the abode of Vishnu. Vishnu was then resting with his head on Lakshmi's lap. Bhrigu went straight to Vishnu and kicked him on his chest. In spite of this, there was no change in Vishnu's demeanour. He immediately got up and heartily welcomed the sage. He said: 'O Sage of all sages, I hope your long journey was comfortable. We are extremely sorry we did not know you were coming and therefore could not make proper arrangements for welcoming you.' Stroking Bhrigu's feet, Vishnu continued: 'I hope your tender foot was not hurt by my hard chest. Please pardon us for these lapses. Your footprint will ever remain installed on my chest.'



*Bhṛigu kicks Lord Viṣṇu*

The quest to find the greatest of the Gods came to an end. Sage Bhrigu had his answer. Extremely happy at the sweet words and cordiality of Sri Krishna, he was greatly moved and could not check the tears rolling down his cheeks. He went back to the place of the yajna and told the assembled sages, 'Vishnu is indeed the greatest of the three Gods.' Great ones say that he is the supreme goal of those sages who do not exploit others, who are at peace with all, who have unwavering equanimity of mind, who own no possessions, and who are endowed with universal benevolence.

## ***Dwaraka and the Yadu Dynasty***

Shukadeva then began describing to King Parikshit the wealth and splendour of Dwaraka. The palace was filled with all kinds of jewels and other valuables, and the citizens with glowing health added to the beauty of the place. The broad roads were filled with beautifully decorated horses, elephants, and chariots. The gardens were full of beautiful flowers.

Krishna had many wives, among whom eight, including Rukmini, were the principal ones. Each one of them had ten sons, among whom eighteen were regarded more highly than the others. They were Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Diptiman, Bhanu, Samba, Madhu, Brihadbhanu, Chitrabhanu, Vrika, Aruna, Pushkara, Vedabahu, Shrutadeva, Sunandana, Chitrabahu, Virupa, Kavi, and Nyagrodha. Again, out of these eighteen, Rukmini's son Pradyumna was considered the best and most virtuous.

Pradyumna's son's name was also Aniruddha. Aniruddha's son Vajra was the only one to survive after the fall of the Yadu dynasty. But all of them had the good fortune of being followers of Krishna. Salutations to Lord Krishna, who is both the abode and the indweller of all beings! Though said to be born of Devaki, he is really the eternal and ancient One. Surrounded by attendants of the Yadu clan, he destroyed the forces of unrighteousness by the prowess of his arms. He redeemed all beings from their sins. By his benign and smiling countenance, he inspired Divine Love in the hearts of the women of Vraja and Mathura.





## BOOK ELEVEN

### *The Curse of the Sages*

IN SPITE OF THE AFFLUENCE AND EMINENCE of the Yadu dynasty, various destructive elements started cropping up. The children of the Yadu family were becoming more and more spoiled and arrogant. Because Krishna belonged to this family, the children were proud and egotistic. It had almost become their habit to ignore the elders and insult the revered leaders.

Moreover, the Yadava clan had become so powerful that Krishna knew none would be able to defeat them in battle. He also knew it was time for him to end his play on earth, but he felt that the Yadavas were too dangerous to leave behind. Thus, he decided to instigate a quarrel among the Yadavas themselves in which they would destroy each other. Then he himself and Balarama would withdraw from this world. The quarrel came about in the form of a curse.

On one occasion a few sages, including Vishwamitra, Vashishtha, and Narada, had come to Dwaraka to perform some rites for Krishna, and when it was over Krishna sent them on a pilgrimage to Pindaraka. Some men of the Yadava clan were also there then, and they hatched a plan to try and embarrass the sages. They disguised Jambavati's son Samba as a pregnant woman and brought him before the sages. Making a show of respect, they asked the sages: 'This girl is pregnant. You all can see the future. Can you tell us whether she will give birth to a girl or a boy?'

The sages were not fooled and were extremely angry at this insulting behaviour of the young men. Out of anger they said: 'You idiots! She will deliver a pestle and that will be the ruin of your clan!' In order to make Samba appear pregnant, he had been dressed up with several layers of cloth. When the layers were removed, it was

found that there was actually an iron pestle under the cloth. The boys were afraid. They ran to King Ugrasena and confessed everything to him. The citizens also were frightened at the sight of the club. At the order of the king, the iron club was crushed into powder, and only a small piece remained. All the powder, along with the remaining piece, was then thrown into the sea, and the Yadavas were greatly relieved.

Unbeknownst to the Yadavas, however, all the fine particles from the broken club were washed back ashore by the waves of the sea, and those particles grew into a kind of reed by the name of eraka. In addition, a fish swallowed the small piece of iron from the broken club. That fish was then caught by a fisherman, who took out the iron piece from the stomach of the fish and gave it to a hunter named Jara. Jara then made a sharp arrow out of that piece.

Krishna heard the whole story but did not want to nullify the curse of the sage.

## *The Nava-yogis*

The sage Narada used to visit Krishna at Dwaraka quite often. One day Vasudeva and Devaki, Krishna's parents, were sitting with him when Vasudeva asked: 'Long ago I prayed to the Lord for a son, but I did not pray for deliverance. Can you please tell me how I can attain liberation?'

Narada replied: 'The kind of liberation that you are seeking now was discussed in great detail by Nimi (Janaka), the king of Videha, and the nine yogis. At a big festival devoted to scriptural discussions that was arranged by King Nimi, nine of the sons of Rishabha were present (1). The names of these nine yogis were Kavi, Hari, Antariksha, Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avirhotra, Drumila, Chamasa, and Karabhajana. After honouring the yogis with worship, the king, with great humility, put some questions to them. When King Nimi asked a question, one of the nine yogis would reply. The questions and their replies are as follows:

1. The first question of King Nimi was: 'Could you please tell us about the religion of devotion? The Lord, it is said, becomes very pleased with one who follows it.'

In reply, Sri Kavi said: 'To achieve fearlessness one has to constantly serve the lotus feet of the Lord. By worshipping him, you will be able to dispel all fears. Whatever you utter, whatever you think, whatever you decide by your intellect, and whatever actions you perform with your sense organs, you must dedicate everything to the Lord. That is to say, whatever actions one does with one's body, mind, organ of speech, and all other sense organs through the prompting of tendencies generated by one's past karma—all that should be dedicated to Narayana (in respect of both their fruits and their agency).

'In order to gain control of one's sense organs, a person should continually hear about the Lord's play and also chant his names. One

who continually chants the names of the Lord gradually develops intense love for the Lord and also detachment from the things of this world. This is the essence of the Bhagavata Dharma, the religion of devotion.'

2. King Nimi then asked, 'What are the signs of such devotion to God?'

Sri Hari replied: 'He who sees God in every being and sees every being in God is indeed the best devotee. One who has love for God, friendship for living beings, compassion for the ignorant, and indifference towards the enemies of the Lord is a mediocre devotee. But the one who only worships images of the Lord and knows nothing more is the lowest devotee.'

'Passions can never prevail in the devotee's heart that has once been soothed by the moonlight of peace radiating from the feet of the Lord established in the heart. One who ties himself to the Lord's lotus feet with the cord of love is never separated from Him.'

3. The third question of King Nimi was, 'Please tell us about maya, the deluding power of the Lord.'

Now it was the turn of Sri Antariksha to reply. He said: 'The power through which the Almighty creates this world, that power is maya. The jiva (the individual self) is really the master of the body, but being deluded by maya, he thinks the body is his self. Thus people get completely attached to the body and suffer when the body suffers. In this way, living beings are constantly deluded by the power of maya, and remain in the cycle of birth and death till the final day when the great deluge arrives.'

4. The next question of Nimi was, 'How can one get rid of this maya?'

Sri Prabuddha gave the reply to this question. He said, 'The way to be free from maya is to seek knowledge from those who are well versed in the Vedas and in the knowledge of Brahman (Brahma

Jnana). One should also give up attachment to the things of the world, cultivate kindness and humility, purity and patience, faith in the scriptures and self-control. One should hear and sing about, and meditate on, the glories of the Lord, and one should dedicate all one's actions and all that one has to the Lord. Constant remembrance of the Lord gradually leads one to supreme love for the Lord. Thus, such a devotee goes beyond maya.'

5. The fifth question of King Nimi was, 'What is the real nature of the Paramatman, the Supreme Spirit?'

Sri Pippalayana answered: 'One who is the cause of the creation, sustenance, and destruction of this universe, and yet is himself causeless is that Supreme Reality. Though unchanging himself, he manifests as the changing states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. Still he is unaffected by these states. He gives life to the body, senses, and mind, and he is the cause of their manifestation. That One, who is beyond birth and death, is the Supreme Soul, the Paramatman.'

6. The King then asked, 'Please describe to us that yoga of action through which a person becomes purified and his past actions are destroyed, and by thus becoming free from actions he attains Supreme Knowledge.'

Sri Avirhotra replied: 'By doing such work that has been prescribed by the scriptures, one can be free from the bondage of work. However, such work must be done without any desire or attachment for the results. The fruits of such works must be offered at the lotus feet of God. Thus you may free yourself from the bondage of work.'

7. The seventh question of King Nimi was, 'Please tell us all the various deeds that have been or will be done by God through his various incarnations, which he has intentionally undertaken for the benefit of human beings.'

Now was Sri Drumila's turn to answer. He narrated the various lilas that were performed by the Lord in his various incarnations. He

continued, saying that for the welfare of living beings, God has taken birth on this earth several times as an Avatar. Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana, Sanatkumara, Nara-Narayana, Dattatreya, a swan, and Rishabhadeva were all parts of God and took birth on this earth. These avatars gave their teachings regarding the knowledge of the soul to all those who lived on this earth. [These teachings were given in earlier chapters. Here their lilas are being briefly described.]

God also took the form of Hayagriva, or Hayashirsha, in order to restore the four Vedas from the demon Madhu. He has saved the earth from the great deluge in the form of Matsya (the Fish) avatara. He, in the form of Varaha (the Boar), caused the destruction of the demon Hiranyaksha. The churning of the oceans was possible because of Kurma (the Tortoise) avatara. There God took the form of a tortoise and was the agent for holding up the Mandara mountain. It was God again who saved the endangered elephant king (Gajendra) from the mouth of a crocodile. He also descended on the earth in the form of Narasimha (the Man-lion) to reassure and rescue holy men like Prahlada and others.

As Vamana (the Dwarf) avatara he crushed the ego of Bali, the king of the asuras. He descended as Parashurama, a descendant of Bhrigu, and caused the earth to be rid of kshatriyas twenty-one times. The beloved of the people Sri Ramachandra was one of his incarnations, who caused the death of Ravana, the king of Lanka. Now God will take birth in the Yadu Dynasty as Sri Krishna and will perform such valiant acts that are even beyond the power of the devas. He will preach words of non-violence when he takes birth as Buddha. Moreover, at the end of the kali yuga he will be the avatara Kalki, who will cause the destruction of unrighteous kings.

8. The eighth question of King Nimi was, ‘Those who do not worship the Lord, those whose minds are never at rest, and those who have failed to control their senses, what will happen to them and what misfortune will befall them?’

Sri Chamasa replied: ‘Many do not worship God out of ignorance, but some purposely ignore him. Both these groups are devoid of

righteousness (dharma) and suffer birth after birth. They may be literate, versed in literature and science, but they have no regard for ethical or moral knowledge. Being shorn of any sense of rectitude, they consider earthly affluence to be the prime goal of life. They are deeply attached to the body, but they never attain peace.

‘They may earn much wealth by toiling hard, they may build beautiful houses, and they may be surrounded by near and dear ones. Nevertheless, these things are all impermanent and cannot give lasting happiness. Whether they like it or not, some day or other they have to leave all these behind when death comes and takes them away to a vile hell.’

9. The final question of King Nimi was: ‘Please tell us what form and complexion God assumes from time to time. Please also tell us, by what name is He to be worshipped?’

In reply Sri Karabhajana said: ‘God takes different complexions in the four yugas—satya, treta, dwapara, and kali. In the satya yuga he has a bright white complexion; in the treta yuga he has a red complexion; in the dwapara yuga his complexion is blue; and in the kali yuga he has a brilliant black complexion.

‘In the satya yuga he has four arms, is dressed as a brahmacharin in tree bark, holds a staff and begging bowl, and is known as Hamsa, Suparna, Ishwara, Paramatman, etc. In the treta yuga also he is four-armed, and he wears a girdle of three cords. He is decorated with garlands and sandal paste, and among his names some are Vishnu, Yajna, and Prishnigarbha. In the dwapara yuga he is clothed in a yellow garment, and he holds a conch shell, a chakra, a mace, and a lotus in his hands. He is worshipped as Vasudeva, Shankarshana, Narayana, and other names. Finally, in the kali yuga, he is as bright as a dark-coloured diamond, and he is surrounded by his attendants.

‘People worship God in a form appropriate to the relevant yuga. In the satya yuga God was worshipped by practising self-control, austerities, and meditation. In the treta yuga the devotees worshipped him through the rituals as prescribed in the Vedas. In the dwapara



yuga the Supreme Being was worshipped in both Vedic and Tantric manners. But in the kali yuga he shall be worshipped by chanting his names and singing his glories.

‘Knowledgeable persons are full of praise for the kali yuga because just by taking God’s name people will be able to reach their goal. Great men who see into the heart of things believe that the age of kali is greater than the other ages. For in this age a person attains the goal merely by extolling the Lord’s names and qualities. People who are struggling in this life in the world can gain the most by repeating his name. And if they repeat his name during their last days, they will attain eternal bliss and will be freed from the bondage of samsara (worldly existence).’

Having heard the Bhagavata dharma from the nine yogis, King Nimi was very pleased. And by following the path taught in this dharma, he felt that his life was fulfilled.

Vasudeva and Devaki also considered themselves very fortunate to hear from the sage Narada the conversation between King Nimi and the nine yogis. Sage Narada finally told the couple, ‘God has taken birth as your son, and therefore you have no worries at all.’

*The conversation between King Nimi and the nine yogis is of a very high order. For the sake of brevity, it has been given in a short form here.*

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[1]. The nine sons were considered to be the best of the yogis and that is why they were collectively known as the Nava-yogis.

## ***Sri Krishna and Uddhava***

One day Brahma came to Dwaraka with Rudra and many of the devas. After they had chanted the Lord's praises with great devotion, Brahma said to Krishna: 'You have come to this earth for the establishment of dharma and for the destruction of evil doers. (1) One hundred and twenty-five years have gone by since you descended in the Yadu Dynasty. Your objective has been accomplished. Now please come back to your own abode. In Vaikuntha also you will be able to work for the welfare of the kings and their subjects.'

To this Krishna replied: 'O Ruler of the devas, I am aware that I have been able to relieve the earth of its burden, and my work on this earth is nearly over. However, the members of the Yadu dynasty are still proud of their wealth and power. They are on the verge of bringing about the ruination of the world. I cannot go back until I have brought about the end of this dynasty.'

After saluting Krishna, Brahma went back with the devas. Evil portents were then seen in Dwaraka. Krishna called a meeting of the elders and said: 'You can see all the bad omens that are happening around us. In order to save our lives, we should not stay in Dwaraka anymore. Without any further delay, we must set out for the holy pilgrimage place of Prabhas. We shall be rid of all evils after a holy dip in the sea at Prabhas and by worshipping the Lord.' All the assembled people agreed, and they prepared to leave for Prabhas. The chariot of Krishna was made ready.

Uddhava was an ardent devotee and attendant of Krishna. As soon as he heard that Krishna was leaving, he came running and prayed with folded hands: 'O Lord! O Almighty One! You are capable of nullifying the curse of the sages, and yet you have not exercised that power of yours. I understand from this that you are arranging to leave this earth after eradicating the Yadu dynasty. You are the Soul of all souls. How can I live without you?'

Krishna replied: ‘O Uddhava! You have spoken the truth. The holy purpose for which I descended on this earth, as prayed for by Brahma, has been served. The people of the Yadu dynasty are fighting one another and are thus bringing about their own ruin. Know that on the seventh day from today the ocean will completely swallow up Dwaraka. Therefore, you must not stay here. Renounce your attachment for your relatives and friends and surrender yourself completely to me. You must wander over the earth, seeing me in everyone.’

Uddhava saluted the Lord and said: ‘O Greatest of the great! You are advising me about renunciation, yet you know how difficult it is for common people like me to achieve it. We are full of ego. This feeling of “I and mine” keeps us completely submerged in a sea of ignorance and identified with the body. Please instruct me in the way to fulfil your command.’



*Sri Krishna instructing Uddhava*

Krishna said: 'A person himself brings about his own liberation.'

The soul of a human being is its own guru. Even lower creatures are somewhat capable of looking after their own welfare. A human being, who is endowed with intelligence and discriminative power, can surely be his own teacher. For, by observation and inference, he is able to understand what contributes to his ultimate good. Human beings alone can attain me. I cannot be seen or felt with the sense organs. I am beyond all logic, and yet people are constantly searching for me, who can neither be seen nor known. But one who finally realizes me is immersed in eternal bliss.’

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[1]. Dharma Sthapanaya—to establish dharma in the minds of people who venerate truth.

## ***Uddhava Gita***

*The sixth to the twenty-ninth chapters of the eleventh Skandha of the Srimad Bhagavatam are of special importance. These chapters comprise Krishna's last instructions to Uddhava, and are known as the Uddhava Gita.*

*During the battle of Kurukshetra, the Lord addressed Arjuna for the good of the entire human race. He propagated the ideals of karma yoga, jnana yoga, raja yoga, and bhakti yoga. In a similar manner, just before leaving the earth, Krishna related to his dear friend Uddhava, for the benefit of the world, the ideals of divine love by relating stories of his devotees and of the pure love of the gopis.*

# The Twenty-Four Gurus of the Avadhuta

Krishna said to Uddhava: 'Our ancestor King Yadu was a very pious man. Now I will tell you the lessons he learned from a young mendicant (Dattatreya, the Avadhuta).'

The Avadhuta used to move about all over in a happy mood. King Yadu saw him one day and asked him: 'You appear to be very happy. But I see you are engaged neither in any work nor in earning anything. You are not moved by any desire or motive. Please tell me what the source of your joy is and who has instilled this sense of happiness in you.'

The mendicant replied: O King! You are right. I am indeed very happy. I have learnt many things, but I do not have only one or two gurus. I have as many as twenty-four of them. I shall tell you one-by-one what I have learned from each of them.

1. My first guru was the Earth: We create a lot of trouble for this earth. Yet see, the earth remains unmoved. From it I have learned that we must remain steadfast on our path towards our goal and be unmoved by obstacles. Again, many things can be learned from the mountains and trees, which the earth holds. From them I have learned that we should work unselfishly for the good of others, and in such striving we should find the meaning of our existence.

2. The Air: The air is never affected by the smells it carries, or by the good and bad it comes in contact with. From it, I have learned that one can remain completely detached at all times.

3. The Sky: The sky abides everywhere and in everything. Though it appears to end at the horizon, it is limitless. Likewise the Atman (the Self), though seeming to exist in the limited sphere of the body, is endless and untainted by the body. Thus one should always identify oneself with Brahman, which is everywhere and in everything, and yet is untainted by everything.

4. Water: The flowing water of the Ganga purifies those who see it or have contact with it. Similarly, an ascetic ever remains sweet-natured and purifies those who come in contact with him.

5. Fire: The ascetic who is always in communion with Brahman remains unaffected by whatever food he is given, just as fire is never tainted by anything that it burns. Again, just as fire is always present in fuel, so also God is present everywhere, within and without.

6. The Moon: The moon seems to grow and shrink from day to day. From the new moon to the full moon, and then back to the new moon again it goes through various phases. But the moon does not undergo any change at all. It merely appears different in size and shape. Likewise, transformation takes place in the various phases of our life from birth to death. However, no change, whatsoever, comes to the Atman. It remains completely unchanged. It is immortal and imperishable.

7. The Sun: I have learned from the sun that the soul is one and inseparable. From our limited knowledge, we think that different souls reside in different bodies, just as the same sun appears different and separate when reflected in different pots. Further, the sun draws water from the earth, and then returns the same water in the form of rain. Similarly, a yogi accepts what is given and then at the right time gives it to others for their welfare.

8. The Pigeon Couple: A pair of pigeons used to live on a tree along with their young ones. One day, taking advantage of the pigeon couple's absence, a hunter caught all the young ones in a net. On her return, the female pigeon found all her young trapped. Disregarding the danger to her own life, she rushed to save them and in the process became herself entangled in the net. Then the male pigeon, unable to bear the grief of seeing his whole family trapped, threw himself in the net with the others. Thus, extreme attachment brought about the death of the pigeon couple.

After attaining a human birth, if one becomes entangled in maya through attachments, like the pigeon couple, then one is regarded by



the wise as doomed.

9. The Python: Yet another guru of mine was a python. Without making any effort to find its food, a python eats anything that comes in its way. If nothing is immediately available, it remains patient and waits. Likewise, knowledgeable people never make an effort to gratify their senses. Rather, they partake of anything they get without making any effort. To them it is immaterial whether the food is palatable or not, or even whether they get anything or not.

10. The Ocean: The ocean is deep and boundless. Neither does it dry up in summer nor does it overflow during the monsoon. Likewise, sages with deep devotion to Narayana are neither jubilant by the acquisition of things nor dejected by their absence. They remain calm and profound in all situations.

11. The Moth: Just as moths are enchanted by the glow of fire and fly into it only to die, similarly, the foolish are ruined by desire for objects of the senses.

12. The Honey Bees: Just as the bees collect the essence of the flower, so also the wise should try to learn the essence of the scriptures.

13. The Elephant: A bull elephant, attracted by a female elephant, falls into a trap and is caught by the hunter. Therefore, hermits should not touch even with their foot a wooden image of a person of the opposite sex, as even that might draw them into the bondage of samsara.

14. The Honey-gatherer: Just as the honey that has been gathered by bees is taken away by the honey-gatherer, so also the wealth that is hoarded by a miser is taken away by thieves.

15. The Deer: The hunter's imitation of the cry of a doe lures the male deer to walk into a trap, and eventually it is killed. The sage Rishyashringa became enchanted by the music and dance of women and became overpowered by them. Thus, an ascetic should never be

attracted by sensuous dancing and singing.

16. The Fish: I have learned from the fish that unless you can win over the desire for tasty food you are sure to perish, just as a fish gets caught in a hook, tempted by the bait. A discriminating person can give up all enjoyments that attract the other sense organs, but his desire for the taste of food leaves with great difficulty. Until a person becomes indifferent to the taste of food, he cannot be said to have mastered the sense organs. If the palate is conquered, all the other senses are as good as conquered.

17. Pingala: Once there was a courtesan by the name of Pingala. From her I have learned that it is desire that is the cause of all our suffering. Therefore, it is best not to nurture any desire, and thereby we can attain true happiness. Desire for anything is the source of the greatest sorrow, and desirelessness is the cause of the greatest happiness. As Pingala finally realized, it is love for the Lord alone, and dedication to him, that brings us happiness—nothing else.

18. The Osprey: When a bird like an osprey flies with a fish in its beak, other birds chase it in order to snatch the fish away. But as soon as the bird lets go of the fish, it is no longer troubled by other birds and is at peace. From the osprey I have learned that it is best to be without any possessions. The main cause of a person's unhappiness is his attachment for possessions. One who knows this and can renounce earthly possessions attains limitless peace.

19. A Child: A young child is completely devoid of cares and worries. He cares for nothing, and roams about happily. Like a child, I roam about with my joy in the Self alone.

20. A Maiden: A young girl who was entertaining some guests who had a marriage proposal was wearing many conch shell bangles on her arms. Whenever she tried to do anything her bangles made a noise, thereby betraying the poverty of the family. Eventually she broke all the bangles except one on each arm. Thus they could not make any noise. From her I learned that one should live alone. If one lives with other people, quarrels are bound to ensue, thereby

disturbing one's meditation.

21. **The Arrow-smith:** An arrow-smith was making arrows with rapt attention. A king with his retinue passed by, but the arrow-smith was not at all aware of it. From him I have learned that the mind that has been trained in deep meditation and is absorbed in the Self alone has no awareness of anything outside.

22. **The Snake:** The snake does not have any home of its own. Rather, it takes shelter for a while in other creatures' holes and then moves from place to place. From the snake I have learned that it is best to have no home, for only then can one be free from worries.

23. **The Spider:** A spider creates its gossamer-like web from out of its mouth, sports in it for some time, and then seems to withdraw it back within itself. Likewise, God manifests this world through his divine maya, plays His divine game in it, and then withdraws it back within himself. This is what I have learned from the spider.

24. **The Worm:** A wasp will catch hold of a worm and bring it into its hole. Out of fear of the wasp, the worm constantly meditates on the wasp, and from this meditation the worm takes the form of a wasp. From this I have learned that on whatever object a person meditates, he attains that very state.

25. **My own Body:** I have one more guru, apart from those already mentioned, and that is my own body. After repeated births and deaths, and the suffering these have produced, I have at last attained dispassion and can move around happily alone. Through all these births I have seen how one gets entangled by the objects of the senses. And as the body is impermanent, one must assume new bodies to fulfil the cravings of the senses. Yet it is through this body alone that one can realize the supreme truth. Thus, as long as one has a body, one must strive to attain that supreme truth, which alone brings liberation from the cycle of repeated births and deaths. For sense enjoyments are possible in any body, but one can attain supreme knowledge only in the human body.

After hearing the teachings of the Avadhuta, King Yadu renounced all his desires and engaged himself in meditation on God.

Uddhava felt extremely blessed to hear these instructions from Sri Krishna.

## ***Bondage and Freedom***

Uddhava then asked: ‘O Lord, please tell me how a person can attain liberation while engaged in actions under the influence of the three gunas? What is the difference between a free soul and a bound soul? How does a free soul behave? And how can the soul, which is said to be ever free, become bound?’

Krishna replied: ‘Though the Self, the soul, is ever pure and free, it appears to be in bondage when it is associated with the three gunas. But as the gunas themselves are derived from my own power of maya, therefore the Self in reality is never bound. Just as a soul has various experiences in the dream state, so also does it experience happiness and misery, pain and pleasure, and birth and death, being deluded by my maya. The Self, the Atman within, however, is never touched by them. Know, O Uddhava, that my maya has two aspects—avidya maya, which makes the soul believe it is embodied; and vidya maya, which destroys delusion and makes the soul realize its relationship and identity with me.

‘Two beautiful birds, who are friends and have identical plumage, have built their nests on the same tree. One of them, the bound soul, continually eats the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree. The other bird, the free soul, never eats, yet it remains ever strong and glorious. The wise soul, who is ever aloof from the good and bad actions of this world, always enjoys the knowledge of his own glorious nature as Satchidananda (Absolute Existence, Absolute Consciousness, and Absolute Bliss). But the bound soul, deluded by this world, knows nothing of his true nature, and thus goes again and again from birth to death and death to birth.’

## ***The Glory of God***

Uddhava: ‘O Krishna, you are truly that supreme Brahman, without beginning and without end. The whole universe exists in you. You are the cause of the universe, and again you dwell within all beings as the inmost Self. Yet, deluded as they are by maya, people do not see you. Please tell me, where and in what way do you manifest yourself the most?’

Krishna said: ‘Just before the battle of Kurukshetra, Arjuna asked me a similar question. I shall tell you in brief what I told him.

‘I am the Self of all, their friend, and the Lord of all. I manifest all beings from myself; I sustain them, and again all beings dissolve into me. By my power all beings live and move. Among all mantras, I am “Om”. Among metres, I am the Gayatri. Of the devas, I am Indra. I am Agni (Fire) among the eight Vasus. Among the Adityas, I am Vishnu. Among the great sages, I am Bhrigu. Among the royal sages, I am Manu. Among the celestial sages, I am Narada. I am Kapila among the perfected yogis. I am Garuda among the birds. I am Prahlada in the demon dynasty. I am the moon among the planets. I am Kubera in the kingdom of Yakshas and Rakshasas.

‘I am Airavata among the elephants. Among human beings, I am a king. I am Uchchaishravas among horses. I am gold among the metals. Among sacred rivers, I am the Ganga. Among remote areas, I am the Himalayas. Among trees, I am the ashwattha (peepul). Of vows, I am that of non-violence. Of seasons, I am spring. I am Margashirsha (December-January) among the months. I am the Satya Yuga among the four Yugas. Among those called Bhagavan, I am Vasudeva; I am you (Uddhava) among devotees. Among Kimpurushas I am Hanuman; and among Vidyadharas, Sudarshana. I am the cow’s ghee among materials for offering. I am the wealth of the industrious. Know that I am the power behind the powerful. Of heroes, I am Arjuna. I am the five elements—earth, air, space, water, and fire. I am the ego, cosmic intelligence, all modifications of Prakriti; and I am both Purusha and

Prakriti. I am sattva, rajas, and tamas. I am all these, and I am the supreme Brahman. Nothing at all exists but me.'

Krishna further advised Uddhava: 'Control your speech, your mind, your vital force, and your senses. Control your lower self by your higher self. If this is achieved, one becomes free from samsara (the world).'

## ***Questions and Answers***

**Uddhava:** ‘O Krishna, how are yama and niyama explained?’

**Krishna:** ‘Non-violence, truth, non-covetousness, detachment, humility, non-accumulation of wealth, faith in the guru and the scriptures, continence, moderation in speech, patience, forgiveness, and fearlessness—these twelve are said to be yama. Purity of body and mind, repeating the Lord’s name, austerity, sacrifice, faith in oneself, hospitality, worship, going on pilgrimage, working for the welfare of others, contentment, and service to one’s teacher—these twelve are said to be niyama.

‘Whoever practices these disciplines attains the highest.’

**Uddhava:** ‘What is real happiness and what is real sorrow? Who is learned and who is ignorant? How do you define heaven and hell? Who is the friend? What is the distinction between the wealthy and the poor?’

**Krishna:** ‘Real happiness is in being unaffected by both pleasure and pain. Attachment to sense pleasures is the cause of real sorrow. That person is intelligent who can discriminate between bondage and freedom. That person is ignorant to whom the body along with its sense organs is everything. Heaven is when sattva predominates in the mind, and hell is when it is overpowered by tamas. The real friend is the guru, and no one else. He is wealthy who has all the virtues, but one who is never satisfied with anything is poor.’



## ***The Last Advice of Sri Krishna to Uddhava (The essence of Bhakti Yoga)***

**Uddhava:** ‘O Krishna, I think the path of yoga that you have spoken of is very difficult. Please tell me in a simple way a path to attain liberation for an ordinary person like me.’

**Krishna:** ‘O Uddhava! I will now tell you the way of devotion that can save a person from the jaws of death. Please listen to me.

‘As you do your duties, always remember me and surrender yourself to me. Keep the company of the holy and be guided by their behaviour. You should observe the holy days with celebrations to honour me. When your mind is purified through such observances, you will see me in every being. One who views the holy and the wicked, the sun and a spark of fire, and the good and the bad, all as manifestations of me—that person is truly illumined. To perceive me in all beings is the best way to reach me.’

**Krishna:** ‘O Uddhava, to surrender all one’s actions at the feet of God is the surest way to attain liberation.

‘I have narrated to you the essence of the teachings of the scriptures regarding Brahman. By hearing these teachings, all your doubts will be removed and you will attain liberation. To one who gives these teachings to my devotees, I give myself out of love. But it will be of no avail to preach this knowledge to the proud and the atheists. Uddhava, have you been able to fully comprehend this supreme teaching on Brahman? Are you now free from grief and delusion?’

Uddhava placed his head on the lotus feet of Krishna and said: ‘O Immortal One, O primordial Lord! Today my delusion has vanished by your endless mercy upon me. You have bound me with your affection,

expressed through your maya, and it is you again who have severed this bondage by the sword of knowledge. O greatest of yogis, I bow down to you. I have taken refuge with you. May my mind be fixed on your lotus feet. May my devotion to you be constant and unwavering.'

Krishna further told him, 'Now I am advising you to go to my abode in Badrikashrama. There you should think deeply over what I have told you, and let your mind be absorbed in me. By following this supreme dharma, you will gradually be freed from this relative existence and will attain my Supreme State.'

## ***Krishna Returns to His Heavenly Realm***

After hearing with great reverence Krishna's teachings to Uddhava, King Parikshit then enquired about how the earthly existence of Krishna came to an end. Sukadeva said: At the advice of Krishna, Uddhava set out for Badrikashrama, and then Krishna, accompanied by other members of the Yadu family, left for a pilgrimage to the holy place of Prabhas. There, men of the Yadu family, along with Krishna, started appropriate rituals on the shore of the ocean with great devotion. But as ill luck would have it, the Yadavas drank a sweet intoxicating drink and became inebriated and started quarrelling. It was Krishna's maya that deluded them.

Soon the Yadavas lost all sense of right and wrong, and started fighting one another with bows, arrows, and clubs. The shore of the ocean at Prabhas became a veritable battlefield. As if under a spell, brothers started fighting each other; sons fought fathers; nephews fought uncles; friends fought friends. Near and dear ones killed each other, deluded by the Lord's maya.

Gradually, in the course of the fight, all arrows were exhausted, bows were broken, and no more weapons were found. The fighters then started plucking the cursed eraka reeds to fight one another. Lo! How God plays his game! As soon as they held those reeds in their hands, the reeds became as hard as rods, and the Yadus fought with them. Krishna tried his best to stop them, but the Yadavas were in no mood to listen to wise counsel. On the contrary, they even came to strike at Krishna and Balarama.

Thus it happened that the curse of the sages on the Yadavas came to fruition, and then the maya of Krishna deluded them further. Just as a wild fire burns up an entire forest, so did the arrogance of the Yadavas bring about the destruction of the Yadu dynasty.

Balarama then sat down at the seashore and went into deep meditation. Fixing his mind on the Supreme Soul (Paramatman), he

gave up his body. At the passing away of Balarama, Krishna sat silently under an ahsawattha tree and assumed his four-armed form. The whole area was illumined by the effulgence from His body. His complexion was dark like the new clouds of a monsoon sky. His chest bore the Srivatsa mark, and a yellow cloth covered his body. His left foot, looking like a red lotus, rested on his right thigh.

As ordained by the Lord, Jara, the hunter who had received the remaining piece of the accursed iron club, now entered the woods. Seeing Krishna's red feet, he mistook him for a deer and shot an arrow at him. The hunter then came running to look for the deer, but instead he found Krishna sitting there in his four-armed form. Overwhelmed with grief, Jara laid his head on the lotus feet of Krishna and loudly lamented. He prayed: 'O Lord, without knowing what I was doing I have committed this heinous sin. I beg you to forgive me. Please pardon this sinful man.'

Krishna then assured him: 'O hunter, do not be afraid. What has happened was due to my will. You are not to be blamed for this. You have only fulfilled my wish. Therefore you will now ascend to devaloka, which people attain only after doing good and virtuous work throughout their life.' Jara, the hunter, then circumambulated Krishna three times, entered a celestial chariot that had come for him, and ascended to heaven.

Now Daruka, the charioteer of Krishna, who had been looking for his master, arrived and found him sitting under the peepul tree in his four-armed form. With tears flowing from his eyes, Daruka said: 'I have been searching for you. Without you, everything seems like darkness.' Just then Krishna's celestial chariot descended, and Krishna said: 'Go now to Dwaraka and inform all our relatives there about the destruction of the Yadus. Tell them that Balarama has left his body through yoga, and that I also have left. Again, tell all of our remaining relatives there that they should leave the city immediately. It will soon be submerged in the ocean. Everyone should go to Indraprastha and remain under the protection of Arjuna. O Daruka, do not grieve. Know that all this is my maya.' Filled with sorrow, Daruka circumambulated

Krishna three times, bowed down at his feet, and then left for Dwaraka.

Now the devas came to witness the passing away of Krishna. Seeing that Brahma and other devas had all assembled before him, Krishna sat with his eyes closed and went into deep samadhi. By the power of yoga, he burnt up his body and returned to his own Supreme State.

Shukadeva said to King Parikshit: ‘After the passing away of Krishna, Dwaraka was completely submerged under the water of the sea. Arjuna, who was stricken with grief over the loss of Krishna and the others, then brought the remaining members of the Yadu dynasty, comprising children, the elderly, and women, to Indraprastha. Vajra, the son of Aniruddha, was crowned as king of the remaining Yadus, and he ascended the throne.

‘Hearing from Arjuna about the passing away of Krishna and Balarama, your grandparents (Yudhishtira and his brothers) all left for their final journey after installing you on their throne. Whoever recites or contemplates this beautiful story of the birth and passing away of the Lord, or narrates it to others will attain supreme devotion to the Lord.’



## BOOK TWELVE

### *Yuga Dharma and the Last Advice of Shukadeva*

SHUKADEVA SAID: In the satya yuga, dharma is practised in four ways: truth, compassion, austerities, and charity. In the treta yuga, one fourth of each of these observances is destroyed by its opposite—that is, by falsehood, violence, discontent, and acrimony. In the dwapara yuga, dharma loses another quarter, and one more quarter of its opposite is added. In the kali yuga, dharma is further reduced and is left with only one part out of the four.

But in the satya yuga, owing to a prevalence of sattva, people strive for knowledge and meditation. In the treta yuga, rajas predominates, giving rise to an interest in religion, wealth, and sense pleasure (dharma, artha, and kama). In the dwapara yuga, rajas combines with tamas, giving rise to greed, discontent, quarrels, etc. Finally, in the kali yuga, due to the preponderance of tamas, human beings are ruled by falsehood, laziness, cruelty, delusion, and other such qualities.

To attain liberation during the satya yuga, one has to engage in meditation; in the treta yuga, one must perform sacrifices; one must serve the Lord through worship in the dwapara yuga, and in the kali yuga one can simply sing the names and praises of Krishna.

King Parikshit's mind was now illumined with the light of knowledge given by Shukadeva. Gradually the last few moments of his life approached. Hence, Shukadeva gave these final words of counsel:

‘O King, to feel that you are going to die would be more befitting of an animal than a person of your stature. Give up all such ideas. Now understand that just as your body didn't always exist, so also now it

must perish. But you are not your body; you have neither birth nor death. You are none else but the Atman.

‘Like fire that exists in wood yet is separate from it, the Atman resides within the body but is actually independent of the body. When a pitcher is broken, the space inside becomes one with the space outside. Similarly, when the body of an illumined soul perishes, the Atman becomes one with Brahman.

‘Oil, a wick, and fire—these three come together to make a lighted lamp. Similarly, the Self’s transmigratory existence arises from various factors coming together. The embodied jiva experiences births and deaths, yet the Atman, the Self within, is never born and it never dies. Birth and death relate only to the body, and not to the Atman.

‘Now, O king, engage yourself in meditation on the supreme Truth: “I am Brahman, the supreme Abode. I am Brahman, the supreme State.” Thus the curse of the sage’s son will not affect you. When you are one with the Lord, you will conquer death itself. Takshaka, his poison, your body, and this whole relative world will exist only as Brahman.’

## ***Parikshit's Illumination***

King Parikshit laid his head on the lotus feet of Sri Shuka and said in a voice choked with emotion: 'Through your blessings I have attained the ultimate goal of life. You have narrated to me about the greatness and glory of the eternal Lord, Sri Krishna. However my death may come, whether by the bite of Takshaka or otherwise, I have no fear. My ignorance has been removed. You have shown me the path to eternal bliss. Please bless me now so that I may leave this body free from desires and with my mind and vital force totally absorbed in the Supreme Lord.'

After giving his final blessing to the king, Shukadeva departed. The king then sat on the bank of the Ganga on a grass mat facing north with his Self totally absorbed in Brahman.

At that time Takshaka, the snake, was approaching the king to bite him. On his way he met the brahmin Kashyapa, who knew how to treat snakebites. By offering the brahmin a lot of wealth, Takshaka was able to send him away. Takshaka then took the form of a Brahmin, approached the king, and bit him. In the presence of all the people assembled there, the body of the king, whose soul had already merged in Brahman, was completely burned by the poison of Takshaka. Cries of grief rose from the people around him, but the devas threw flowers and raised shouts of 'Jay!'



## ***The Snake Yajna of Janamejaya***

Parikshit's son, Janamejaya, was furious at Takshaka's murder of his father, and he vowed to take revenge by performing a snake sacrifice. The priests continually offered into the sacrificial fire one snake after another, and countless snakes were burnt to ashes. Seeing this, Takshaka became frightened and ran to Indra for shelter. Hearing of the protection of Takshaka by Indra, Janamejaya instructed the priests to pronounce a mantra that would send both of them into the fire. Immediately both Indra and Takshaka began falling towards the sacrificial fire.



*The Snake Yajna of Janamejaya*

Seeing this, Brihaspati, the guru of the devas, became very upset, and he rushed to King Janamejaya, saying: 'O King, you cannot kill Takshaka, as he has drunk the divine nectar. Life and death are determined by one's karma, and so are one's happiness and misery. Therefore, stop this low sacrifice, which is intended only for causing death.' Out of respect for the great sage Brihaspati, the king agreed and desisted from proceeding any further with the yajna. This tale has also become immortalized in the great epic Mahabharata.

## *The Story of Markandeya*

Though the discourse of Shukadeva to Parikshit was now over, Shaunaka and the other sages at Naimisharanya wanted to hear more. They asked Suta to tell them the story of the remarkable life of the sage Markandeya, who is said to be immortal.

Suta said: Markandeya, the son of the sage Mrikanda, practised intense austerities even from his childhood. Every day after worshipping Lord Hari, he would recite the Vedas and then collect alms for his teacher. Only when permitted by his teacher, would he also eat from that food. It is said that due to his devoted worship of the Lord, he was able to conquer death. Gradually, through his long observance of continence and austerities, he was able to fix his mind one-pointedly on the Lord in meditation. In this way, six manvantaras passed while he was immersed in meditation.

At last Indra became frightened, thinking that Markandeya would take over his post, and he decided to send some apsaras, gandharvas, and others to entice the sage from his meditation. But all their attempts failed. Markandeya was completely unfazed, and Indra had to admit defeat. Moreover, not even the least bit of anger arose in Markandeya over this attempt by Indra to lure him away from his meditation.

Delighted at seeing Markandeya's total dedication to him, the Lord appeared to him in his dual form of Nara-Narayana to bless him. Seeing those two manifestations of Vishnu before him, Markandeya fell at their feet and began to sing a hymn of praise to them. Then, pleased with his great devotion, the Lord told him to ask for a boon.

But what could a desireless sage want? All his desires had been fulfilled with the vision of the Lord. At last Markandeya said, 'I have a desire to experience your maya, by whose power all the worlds and everyone in them perceive duality in your non-dual being.' The Lord granted his prayer, and smiled as he disappeared. For, while all others

pray to be free from maya, this sage was asking for an experience of maya. Markandeya then remained at his ashrama, waiting for his prayer to be fulfilled.

One day a violent storm set in. Torrential rain poured from the sky with no respite. Day after day it went on and on. Gradually all the rivers, lakes, and oceans overflowed their banks until the whole world was covered with water. Markandeya alone remained floating in the water. Everything and everyone else had been submerged, and the whole world was dark. For aeons, it seemed, he floundered in the waters of the deluge, exhausted and with no food, overcome with grief and delusion.

At last, after thousands of years, Markandeya spotted a bit of land raised above the ocean. There, on that island was a banyan tree. Coming closer, the sage spotted an infant lying on a leaf in the middle of the tree. All Markandeya's exhaustion and grief disappeared at the sight of this beautiful baby, dark green in complexion, who was lying there sucking his toes.

With some hesitation, Markandeya approached the infant to speak with him. But as soon as he got close, he was drawn into the mouth of the baby. Even stranger, Markandeya saw the whole universe, just as it had been before the deluge, inside the stomach of that baby. Everything was the same.

Just as he was wondering about all this, Markandeya was pulled out of the baby as the baby breathed out. Again Markandeya was back in the deluge, but the banyan tree with the baby was still there. Markandeya understood that this baby was Lord Vishnu, on whom he meditated. The baby smiled at him with a divine smile, and Markandeya again approached him to embrace him. But in an instant the baby disappeared—and so also did the banyan tree as well as the whole deluge. The next moment Markandeya found himself back in his ashrama, as if nothing had happened. The whole thing was the Lord's maya.

Sometime later Shiva and Uma came to the ashrama and found

Markandeya in meditation. When Markandeya opened his eyes, he saw the divine couple before him, and prostrated himself at their feet, singing a hymn of praise. Knowing of Markandeya's suffering at the time of his experience of the Lord's maya, Shiva praised his devotion to Lord Hari and told him to ask for a boon. Markandeya replied, 'May I have unfaltering devotion to Sri Hari, to myself, and to all thy devotees.' Shiva then said: 'All that you have asked for is granted, and besides this your fame will last forever. Moreover, you shall live a life of total renunciation and illumination till the cosmic dissolution, with knowledge of the past, present, and future.'

With devoted salutations to Lord Vasudeva, to Shukadeva, and with praise for the Bhagavata, Suta concluded this great Bhagavata Purana.

# ***The Essence of the Bhagavatam in four Shlokas (Chatuhshloki-Bhagavata, II.9.32-35)***

The Lord said to Brahma:

1. Before the creation of this universe, I alone existed. Nothing else, gross or subtle, existed other than me—not even the cause of anything gross or subtle. And after this creation disappears, I alone exist. Again, when this phenomenal world is manifest, it is nothing else but me.

2. That which makes something seem to appear in me as a different entity from my Reality is my maya. That maya hides my Reality and creates an illusion of something else existing—like the illusion of a second moon in the sky.

3. It can be said that the gross elements of the creation (earth, water, fire, air, and space) have entered into all created things of the world, large and small, and yet it can also be said that they have not entered into them (as the elements pre-exist these created things). In the same way, I can be said to be within the elements and the created things, yet at the same time, not within them (as in reality nothing exists except me).

4. One who desires to know the supreme Reality must ascertain it through the process of discrimination—understanding that the Atman alone exists through all the seeming transformations superimposed on it.

