

Extracts from the Srimad Bhagavatam

Book Eleven

II – V - *Narada Instructs Vasudeva*

While the aforesaid Rishis stayed at Pindaraka, Sage Narada used frequently to come to Dwaraka to wait upon Krishna for some time. On one of these visits Vasudeva approached him with a prayer to teach him those actions which pleased the Lord most, for in the previous life, he said, he worshipped Him for the purpose of getting offspring, but now, with Narada's help, he aspired to rid himself of transmigration, which is replete with misery. The Sage answered:

“The virtues and duties (actions) you seek to know, O Vasudeva, indeed purify the mind. I will do well to repeat to you the conversations which took place on this subject in ancient times between the nine sons of the divine Rishabha (p. 92) and Nimi, king of the Videha. The wise declare that Rishabha was a ray of Lord Narayana in a human body, who came to teach Liberation by the path of Renunciation. Out of his one-hundred sons, eighty-one turned Brahmin authors of treatises on ritualistic worship, and nine were naked ascetics, dedicated to the knowledge of the Self, and roamed about to teach it to the world. Their names were: Kavi, Hari, Antariksha Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avirhotra, Drumila, Chamasa and Karabhajana. When once Nimi was performing a big sacrifice conducted by the local Rishis, these nine ascetics came in and were received with great respect. At the right time in the course of the celebration the King bowed to them, praised them that it was very rare in life to meet such blessed souls as them, and solicited their favour to instruct the assembly in the virtues which end in the attainment of the supreme bliss. The Sages complimented the King for his piety and were pleased to answer one by one all his questions, which proved very comprehensive, beginning with Kavi who said:

‘For him whose mind is ever restless, the worship of the Lord, O King, is safest, inasmuch as complete reliance on Him does away with all fear. All actions whatever, whether of the body, the mind, or the senses should be surrendered entirely to Him, Lord Narayana, Who is one's own Self, which will annihilate the sense of duality. Although duality has no existence, it, however, appears in the mind that dwells on it, like a dream in the dreamer's mind. The seeker should train himself not to place faith in the thoughts that rise from it (the mind), but to take them like pictures or dreams. From this fearlessness results. An uninterrupted concentration on the Lord brings about a distaste for the pleasures of the senses and immediate knowledge of Him Who is supreme Peace.’”

Narada continues.

King Nimi now humbly inquires about the peculiar traits which distinguish the devotees. The sage Hari answers:

‘He is a great devotee of the Lord, who sees himself in all beings and all beings in himself — the Divine Self. He is a second rate devotee who is simply friendly to his fellow-devotees, compassionate towards the ignorant, and indifferent to enemies. The most ordinary devotee is he who worships the Lord with faith in an image and serves no one else. The highest devotee is he who sees the universe as the Lord's illusion and, although he contacts objects of sense, he neither delights in them nor feels repulsion for them. By virtue of his constant remembrance of the Lord, he is never overwhelmed by the world phenomena — birth, death, hunger, thirst, fear, longing — which, strictly speaking, pertain to the body. Cravings and impulsion to action, which sow the seeds of karma in a future birth, never take root in his heart. Being different from his body, he never attributes to himself lineage, birth, death, social status, race, or designation in life, nor does he distinguish between his own property and that of others. Ever serene, he looks upon all beings with an equal eye.’”

Nimi now inquires about the nature of Maya which bewilders even those who use it to deceive others. Antariksha answers:

“In order to enjoy the senses as well as the bliss of Liberation, the Prime Purusha created out of Himself the great elements from which He made all things, high and low. Then He became one mind and ten organs and entered the great elements as the many jivas with bodies, through which He enjoys the sense-objects and to which He grew attached by identifying Himself with them. This identification with the gross body rather than with His own eternal Self is Maya, which causes Him much suffering as jiva, and from which He, however, escapes by seeking the realisation of His true nature, and after many many births attains it. This realisation is very blissful and is called Liberation.

The King of the Videhas again asks how can the man who mistakes his body for himself overcome this divine Maya, which is so difficult to conquer by those of uncontrolled mind. The sage Prabuddha replies:

“It is common knowledge that human couples who expect to derive happiness from their union reap only misery. What happiness can be gained from wealth which is gathered with so much hardship, or from children and relatives, who are but temporary acquisitions, when even heavenly felicities do not last to eternity? Lasting happiness, O King, can be found nowhere but in the realisation of the absolute Truth through the guidance of a guru, who has mastered the meaning of the Vedas and has himself experienced it, and through the practice of the well-known virtues namely, friendship, humility, benevolence, purity, performance of duty, endurance, study of the Scriptures, sincerity, non-violence, evenness of mind, control of speech, etc. The company of saints and the study of the Lord’s avataras also increase devotion (to Him), which eventually never fails to carry one safely across the bottomless ocean of Maya.”

The King said:

“You are, O Sages, the best knowers of Brahman, Who is also called Paramatman (Supreme Self) or Supreme Narayana. Pray explain to me His real Nature.”

Rishi Pippalayana answered:

“Know it, O Ruler of men, to be the absolute Reality, that which causes other things to exist, itself remaining causeless; that which prevails in the waking, dreaming and deep sleep states; that which animates the body, the breath, the senses and the mind, enabling them to perform their respective functions, and illuminates (knows) them without being illuminated (known) by them, even as the sparks cannot illuminate the fire which gives rise to them. Nor can the Scriptures (Vedas) give a positive delineation of it, though they are its authority: they affirm its existence by merely denying that of its opposite (world phenomena). It is thus the effect as well as the cause. This Brahman is unborn and deathless, neither grows nor changes but is the witness of all changeable things. Just as the sunlight is visible to the healthy eye, so is the Self (Brahman) perceivable by the heart which is devoted to the Lord and which has been purified from the changing gunas and from action.”

Narada continues.

Speaking of action reminds King Nimi to inquire:

“Pray, O Sages, describe to me that Yoga of Action which rids one of the consequences of action (karma) and entitles one to the Supreme Knowledge which springs from inaction. On a former occasion in the presence of my father Ikshwaku I put this question to the celibate Rishis (the four Kumaras), but got no answer from them. You may be aware of the cause of their reticence.”

The Sage Avirhotra replies:

“In prescribing certain actions and prohibiting certain other actions, the Vedas have the one ultimate purpose of ridding one of action and its fruits. The prescribed actions tempt the unregenerate with the joys of heaven, just as sweets tempt the child to swallow medicines. The ignorant who has no control over his senses, however, must not fail to perform the prescribed actions, or he will incur the sin of neglecting his religious duties, which will keep him bound to the cycle of birth and death.

“Performance of the prescribed actions without attachment to their fruits, as dedication to the Lord, leads to its ultimate fulfilment, which is the same as Supreme Knowledge, which results from inaction. The fruits promised by the Vedas to result from action are intended to create interest in action (which will gradually lead to their renunciation). Therefore the seeker who is determined to cut the knot of ignorance from his heart and attain the Self, takes to worship Lord Keshava through the Vedic and Tantric rites, after having received initiation and detailed instructions from a qualified preceptor.”

Nimi asks the Sages to tell him of the different avatars of Sri Hari, of what He is doing now and will do in future. Drumila answers:

“To endeavour to recount the deeds of the Lord would be more difficult than to count the particles of dust in this earth. When He projects the five primary elements out of Himself as the physical universe and enters it, He assumes the name of Purusha, who is pure consciousness by nature. By association with Rajas He becomes Brahma the creator, with Sattva guna He becomes Vishnu the preserver, and with Tamas Rudra the destroyer. In each cycle these three come into play.”

As for the Lord’s descents as special avatars, Drumila cites them one by one ending with Kalki, the twenty-second, which will take place at the end of Kali age, to destroy the Sudra rulers who will not be competent to administer justice and protect the people. He closes by saying that His manifestations are too many to be exhausted in the telling.

The King of the Videha again asks:

“What, O Jewel among the knowers of the Self, is the fate of those who do not worship Sri Hari, whose desires are strong, and whose minds and senses uncontrolled?”

The sage Chamasa replies:

“The four Ashramas and the four Varnas — Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra — are (like everything else) subject to the play of the gunas. Those who do not worship the Lord, though cognisant of Him as being the Ruler and Creator of the universe, fall from their castes and descend to the infernal regions. Most women and Sudras do not have the remotest chance of hearing of Him and His glory, and thus deserve your pity. The first three castes are nearer to His sacred feet by virtue of their birth and Vedic initiations and ceremonies. Yet they miss the meaning of the Vedas by taking literally their reference to the material rewards bestowed by ritualistic actions, and become confounded. Though foolish, they consider themselves learned and swell with conceit, yielding to the fascinating descriptions of the fruits of action. Dominated by rajas, their desires are insatiable, their deeds cruel, their anger is as dangerous as that of poisonous serpents, their love centres on ostentation. They mock at the humble devotees, revel in sexual delights, talk of pleasure only, and offer their devotion to women. In their sacrifices they fail to observe the most essential parts, namely, distribution of charity in food and money, and kill animals for food rather than for the sacrifices alone, winking at the sin of destroying life unnecessarily. Blinded by the pride of birth and wealth, these wicked sinners despise not only the devotees of the Lord, but the Lord Himself (by killing Him in the form of animals for their consumption). They interpret the Vedas according to their own tastes and ignore the portions which speak of the Lord as the aim and object of all human endeavour. Man is inclined by nature to the enjoyments of sex, flesh and wine, but the Vedas provide a check on the abuses of these tendencies by permitting sex relation only with one’s wedded wife, the eating of flesh only at

animal sacrifices, and the drinking of wine only at the sautamani sacrifice. By curbing these inclinations the mind will turn to the pursuit of dharma and true piety, which will develop insight and realisation of the supreme peace of Liberation. Those who use their wealth for their own and their families' comforts forget death, their formidable enemy, which may at any moment strike them down and deprive them of that very wealth and that very family. Those who kill animals remorselessly are fated to be devoured by those very animals in a future life, and those who hate their fellow-creatures hate the Lord Who dwells in them, for which they will be punished by a precipitous fall. Likewise those who run only after the three pursuits — kama, artha and dharma — taking no heed of the fourth (namely, moksha), invite ruin upon themselves by deliberately keeping themselves in ignorance. They kill their own selves and, as punishment for it, they will be compelled to leave behind everything that they had so painstakingly and unrighteously amassed, and enter abysmal darkness.”

Nimi now asks his last question:

“We are told, O holy Sages, that the Lord assumes various shapes, names and complexions in various yugas and that men, likewise, worship Him differently.”

The Sage Karabhajana replies:

“No doubt Lord Narayana appears differently in the four different yugas. In Satya He assumes a white complexion and a form and dress peculiar to it, namely, four arms and matted locks, holding a staff and a kamandalu, like an ascetic, and is dressed in deer skin and barks of trees. His names are then Vaikuntha, Dharma, Suparna, Hamsa, Yogeswara, Amala, Ishvara, Purusha, Avyakta, Paramatman, etc. In that age people are serene in mind, friendly to all creatures, free from bias. Their worship consists of meditation and control of the mind and senses. In the Treta pious men teach the Vedas and worship the Lord as the embodiment of all the deities, following the Vedic rites. His names are then Vishnu, Yajna, Sarvadeva (the Lord of all), Jayanta, etc., and His form is crimson in colour, having four arms, golden locks and a triple string round the loins. In the Dwapara Yuga seekers of truth worship Him through hymns, praising Him as the almighty Narayana, Vasudeva, Sankarshana, all-pervading, all-containing and dwelling in all hearts. (His appearance and dress as well as weapons have already been described again and again). In the Kali Yuga, He is worshipped by Vedic and Tantric rituals and by recitation of all His names. The wise who understand the merits of this age declare it to be the easiest for the attainment of Liberation, for, by merely repeating the Lord's names freedom from transmigration is achieved. In the Kali age, however, O great King, few are devoted to Lord Narayana, but in the land of the Dravidians, which is purified by many sacred rivers, the number is much larger. Renunciation of all duties and seeking refuge only at the feet of the Lord, absolve one from all debts to the gods, the Rishis and the ancestors.”

Narada continued.

When King Nimi heard the expositions of the nine sons of the Divine Rishabha, he, his priests and preceptors worshipped them and, acting upon their teaching, he attained the highest Goal:

“You too, O Vasudeva, will certainly attain it if, full of faith and detachment, you will likewise act upon it. Your fame and that of Devaki has already filled the universe for your being the parents of Lord Hari, Whose mere touch, let alone your love and service to Him as your son, has already purified you.”