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Bhagavatha Vahini

Divine Discourses of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

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Dear Reader

This Bhagavatha is a dialogue between a person under the sentence of death and a great saint, who prepared him to meet it. We're all under a sentence of death; our hearts, like muffled drums, are beating funeral marches to the grave. Some reach it late, some soon. We require the counsel of a great saint to prepare us, too, for meeting Death and witness the horizon beyond.

The Bhagavatha is a Ganga, emerging from the Lord and merging in Him after a long journey through geographic descriptions, historic annals, philosophic disquisitions, hagiological narratives, epistemological enquiries, and after fertilising the vast valleys of human minds with the pure pellucid waters of Krishna episodes.

Bhagavan has come again as Sathya Sai for the revival of dharma among men. One important aspect of that revival is the reestablishment of reverence for the ancient spiritual texts, like the Bible, the Koran, the Zend Avestha, the Tripitaka, the Vedas, and the Bhagavatha. Reverence can spring at the present time only when the inner meanings of the statements and stories are explained in clear, simple, charming style, by the very Person who inspired the original scripture.

Here, in this book, we have His version of that voluminous textbook of devotion (bhakthi) that Vyasa composed at the suggestion of the sage Narada, so that he could win peace and equanimity.

This is not just a book, dear reader. It is a balm, a key, a mantra - to soften, solve, and save, to loosen the bonds, to liberate from grief and pain, thirst, and tutelage.

Open it with humility, read it with diligence, revere it with devotion, observe its lessons with steadfastness, and reach the Goal that Vyasa reached and Narada attained, that Suka taught and Parikshith learned. What greater recompense can man hope for?

- N. Kasturi

Prasanthi Nilayam

Guru Pournami

18 July 1970

1. The Bhagavatha

The name Bhagavatha can be applied to every account of the experiences of those who have contacted God and the Godly (Bhagavan and bhaktha). God assumes many forms and enacts many activities. The name Bhagavatha is given to the descriptions of the experiences of those who have realised Him in those forms and of those who have been blessed by His grace and chosen as His instruments.

The great work known by that name is honoured by all masters of the Vedas. It is a panacea that cures physical, mental and spiritual illnesses. The Bhagavatha is saturated with the sweetness of nectar, and it shines with the splendour of God.

The principle of descent (Avatara) of God on Earth, the incarnation of the Formless with form for the uplift of beings - this basic fact makes the Bhagavatha authentic.

By Bhagavatha we also mean those with attachment to God, those who seek the companionship of God. For such, the book Bhagavatha is most precious; it is the breath of their life. Being in the midst of such Bhagavathas fosters one's own devotion. Unless you have a taste for God-ward thoughts, you will not derive joy therefrom. To create that taste, the Bhagavatha tells stories to the earnest inquirer that relate to incarnations. Then, one develops the yearning to experience the thrill of God, through all the levels of consciousness. He who has this intense yearning can be a true Bhagavatha.

God incarnates to fulfill the yearning of devotees

People believe that incarnations of God happen for only two reasons: the punishment of the wicked and the protection of the righteous. But these represent only one aspect of the task. The granting of peace and joy, of a sense of fulfillment, to seekers who have striven long - this too is the task.

The Avatar, or form incarnate, is only the concretisation of the yearning of the seekers. It is the solidified sweetness of the devotion of godly aspirants. The Formless assumes the form for the sake of these aspirants and seekers. They are the prime cause.

The cow secretes milk for the sustenance of the calf. That is the chief beneficiary. But, as we see, others also benefit from that milk. So too, though the devotees (bhakthas) are the prime cause and their joy and sustenance the prime purpose, other incidental benefits also accrue, such as the fostering of dharma, the suppression of evil, and the overwhelming of the wicked.

There is no compulsive rule that incarnations should occur only on the earth and in human form. Any place and any form can be chosen by the fully free. Whichever place and form promote the purpose of fulfilling the yearning of the devotee, that place and form are chosen by the will of God. God is above and beyond the limits of time and space. He is beyond all characteristics and qualities, and no list of such can describe Him fully. For Him, all beings are equal. The difference between man, beast, bird, worm, insect, and even a god is but a difference of the 'vessel' (upadhi).

God is like the electric current that flows through various contrivances and expresses itself in many different activities. There is no distinction in the current; it is the same. To speak of it as different is to reveal one's ignorance (a-jnana). So too, the one single God activates every vessel and gives rise to manifold consequences. The wise see only the one uniform current; the ignorant feel that they are all distinct.

God appreciates the consciousness of unity as the basic motive of acts. He doesn't appreciate the activity itself being one without variety; it is suited to the various needs. The fruits of activity (karma) appeal only to those who identify themselves with the body and not to the others, who know that they are the indestructible Atma.

Again, you must know that there is no end to the incarnations in which God indulges. He has come down on countless occasions. Sometimes He comes

with a part of His glory, sometimes with a fuller equipment of splendour, sometimes for a particular task, sometimes to transform an entire era of time, an entire continent of space.

It is the story of the last of these that the Bhagavatha elaborates. The subject matter of the Bhagavatha is the drama enacted by the Avatar and the devotees who are drawn toward Him. Listening to it promotes the realisation of God. Many sages have testified to its efficacy and extolled the Bhagavatha, which they helped preserve for posterity.

Train yourself toward God and godly disciplines

Generally speaking, people get drawn to sense objects, for they are victims of instincts. Instincts easily seek sense objects. They come along with the body and aren't derived by any training. The infant seeks milk from the mother's breast, and the newborn calf nestles at the udder. No training is needed for this. However, for the infant to walk and talk, some training is necessary, because these actions are not automatic but are socially prompted, by example and by imitation of others.

Training is essential even for the proper pursuit of sense pleasure, for it is the wild untrained search for such pleasure that promotes anger, hatred, envy, malice, and conceit. To train the senses along salutary lines and to hold them under control, certain good disciplines like repetition of the name (japa), meditation (dhyana), fasts (upavasa), worship at dawn and dusk, etc. are essential. But however much their value is praised and their practice recommended, people don't develop a taste for them. This is because the desire for sensory pleasure has struck deep roots in the human heart. When one is asked to do spiritually salutary acts, one has no inner prompting at all. Still, one shouldn't give up in despair. Until the taste sprouts, the disciplines have to be strictly followed. This taste is the result of training. No one has it from the very beginning, but constant practice will create the zest.

The infant doesn't know the taste of milk. By taking it daily, it develops an attachment for it, which is so deep that when milk is to be given up and rice

substituted, it starts to protest. But the mother doesn't despair; she persuades the child to take small quantities of cooked rice daily, and by this process, the child starts liking rice and gives up milk. Milk was once its natural food; by practice, rice becomes its natural food - so natural that if no rice is available for a single day, the child becomes miserable.

So too, though sense pleasures are "natural" at first, by means of practice and training and listening to the commendation of the wise, slowly the greater and more lasting pleasure derivable from the glories of the Lord and their recapitulation is grasped. Thereafter, one can't exist without that atmosphere even for a minute; one feels that there is nothing as sweet as the experience of listening to the splendour of the Lord. The company of the worldly, who chatter about the senses and the sense objects, will no longer attract; the company that exults in praising the Lord will draw and hold.

Exulting in praising the Lord is the real hallmark of the good. Spiritual seekers (sadhakas) and votaries of the Lord should be judged by this, and not by external apparel or appearances. Mixing with people who revel in sensory talk and activities puts one out of court. Instead, spend your time in the company of the godly, and be engaged in godly affairs. Avoid getting mixed with the company of the ungodly. Don't see their activities or listen to their accounts. Only those who avoid such can be called Bhagavathas, or God's own.

Cleanse your heart through listening to expositions of the glory of God

Reading and enjoying the stories of the glory of Krishna in some sacred spot, temple, prayer-hall shrine, or hermitage of a saint or sage, or in the company of the virtuous and the good - that is a source of great inspiration and joy. It makes people forget everything else. Or, one can approach pious men, serve them, and listen to their exposition of the glories of God. Taste for such wholesome literature is the result of accumulated merit and endeavour.

This merit rewards one with such company. Listening will be enough in the beginning; later, the stories will arouse interest in the nature and

characteristics of God, and the aspirant will seek and find for themselves the path to realisation.

Listening to expositions by the wise is much better than reading oneself - although one can be looking into the text while listening. It is preferable to listen in company rather than alone; it is excellent to listen with a number of earnest aspirants. If the person who expounds has had the thrill of genuine experience, then it is the supremest luck, for it yields best results. For their face will blossom into joy and their eyes will shed tears of joy at the very contemplation of the glory of the Lord. Those who listen to such a person will catch that inspiration and will experience the joy themselves. In the midst of a group that weeps, tears will spring out of the eyes of those who have come in. Just as all smile in unison when an infant smiles, so too the words of those who are saturated with devotion to God will saturate the hearts of those who listen. It is impossible to measure the profit that one can derive while in the company of the great.

Through that process of listening, a dirt-laden heart will be transformed into a clean, illumined heart, shining with genuine light. To the foul odours of sense pursuits, keenness to listen to the glories of God is a valuable disinfectant, besides being in itself so full of sweet fragrance. The listening will cleanse the heart through the prompting it gives for good work.

Such a cleansed heart is the most appropriate altar, or tabernacle. In that fragrant bower, the Lord will establish Himself; at that very moment, another incident will also happen: The group of six vices that had infested the place will quit without so much as a farewell.

When these vices quit, the wicked retinue of evil tendencies and the vulgar attitudes that live on them will break camp and disappear without leaving even their addresses! Then, man will shine in his native splendour of truth and love (sathya and prema); he will endeavour without hindrance to realise himself; and, finally, he will succeed in merging with the Universal and Eternal. He will liberate himself from the tangle of ignorance (maya).

His mind will fade away; the long-hidden secret will be revealed to him; and he will discover his divinity.

Let Love alone occupy your heart

Man's nature is love (prema). Man cannot survive a moment when deprived of love. Love is the very breath of his life. When the six vices to which he was attached so long disappear, love is the only occupant of the heart.

But love has to find an object, a loved one. It cannot be alone. So, love is directed to the dark-blue divine child, the charming cowherd boy, who is purity personified, who is the embodiment of service, sacrifice, and selflessness, who has taken residence in that cleansed altar. There is no scope now for any other attachment to grow. So, step by step, this love for Madhava (God, Krishna) becomes deeper, purer, and more self denying, until at last, there is no other need for thought and the individual is merged in the Universal.

When Vasudeva (Krishna) enters the heart of a person, Vasu-deva (the god of wealth) no longer has a place therein. On the other hand, when the god (deva) of wealth (vasu) is seated in the heart, the divine Vasudeva cannot dwell therein.

An attempt to accommodate both in the heart is bound to fail. Darkness and light cannot exist at the same time and place; they cannot continue together. Wealth and divinity (dhana and daiva) cannot be joint ideals; when riches are sought, God cannot also be achieved. If both are sought, man will achieve not wealth or divinity but the devil (dayya).

It is creditable if man behaves as man; it is laudable if he behaves as the God (Madhava) he really is. But to behave as a demon or beast is despicable. Man was long born a mineral and died a mineral; then, he promoted himself as a tree. He was long born a tree and died a tree, but in the process, he got promoted as an animal. Now, he has risen to the status of man. This rise from one scale to another has been acknowledged by science and spiritual

experience. Now, alas, he is born as man and dies as man. It is a greater shame to slide into the beast or a beastly ogre. Praise is man's due only if he rises to the divine status. That is real fulfillment of his destiny.

Therefore, avoid contact with vices, develop attachment to virtues, transmute the heart into an altar for the Lord, and destroy all the shoots and sprouts of desire. Then, the lake of your inner consciousness (manasa-sarovar) will be sublimated into the pure ocean of milk (kshira-sagara), whereon the Lord reclines on the serpent-couch.

Your real Self will, like the Celestial Swan (Hamsa), revel in the placid waters of that lake. Thus transformed, it will discover endless delight.

Drink from God's limitless sweet nectar

Who can mark the beginning of the continuous waves of the ocean? It is an impossible task. If people decided to do so, the wave with which they started the calculation would be considered the beginning and the wave with which they stopped would be, for them, the last, the end. There is a beginning and an end for the count, but there is no beginning or end for the process. In that boundless illimitable expanse, no one can visualise either.

God's glory is the shoreless ocean. When people start describing it, it begins for them; when they finish their description it is the end, as far as they are concerned. But His glory is beyond space and time. Only little minds, limited minds, will argue that God's glory has a beginning and an end. The stage on which He plays (His leela) has no boundaries.

The story of His play is all nectar; it has no other component, no other taste, no other content. Everyone can drink his fill from any part of that Ocean of nectar. The same sweetness exists everywhere, in every particle. There is nothing inferior to mar the sweetness.

Love of God and love for God are both eternally sweet and pure, whatever the method of your accepting or attaining them. Such love is holy and inspiring.

Sugar is sweet when eaten during day or night. For it is night or day for the person who eats, not for the sugar. Sugar behaves uniformly always.

2. The Birth Of A God-loving Person

Parikshith is saved while in the womb

Maharaja Parikshith was the very self of Abhimanyu, who had attained the heavenly abode of heroes. When Parikshith was an embryo growing in the womb of Uttara, he saw the sharp arrow shot by Aswathama flying toward him, emitting sparks of fury and terror, bent on his destruction. But at that very moment, he also saw a person of brilliant charm armed with a terrific wheel, breaking that death-dealing arrow into a hundred pieces.

The royal foetus was filled with wonder and gratitude.

He pondered deeply on the identity of his saviour. "Who is he? He must be dwelling in this womb with me, because he could see the arrow at the very moment I saw it! But he has such intrepidity and skill that he could destroy it before it reached me. Can he be a uterine brother? How could he get hold of that wheel? If he is endowed with a wheel, why wasn't I? No. He is no mortal." He argued thus for a long time within himself.

He couldn't forget that face, that form. It was a boy, with the splendour of a million suns. It was benign, blissful, blue like the clear sky. After saving him so dramatically and so mercifully, the form had disappeared. He had the form always before him, for he was seeking to see it again. He examined whoever he saw to find out whether that form corresponded with the form he had reverentially fixed in his mind.

Thus, he grew in the womb, contemplating that form. The contemplation transformed him into a splendourfilled baby. When at the end of the period of gestation he was born into the world, the lying-in-room was lit by a strange light. Uttara's female attendants were dazzled by the brilliance. Their wits were overcome by wonder.

Recovering herself, Subhadra, mother of Abhimanyu, sent word to

Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas, announcing the birth. The Pandava brothers were overwhelmed with joy when they heard the glad tidings for which they were waiting anxiously. They ordered bands to play and guns to be fired in honour of the event, for a scion had been born for the royal family, a successor to the Pandava throne.

The people heard the peal of guns and sought the reason for the joy. They rushed toward Indraprastha in large masses of enthusiasm, and every corner of the kingdom gushed with joy at the event. Within minutes, the city was transformed into a heavenly garden, fit for gods to give audience to men. Yudhishtira distributed several varieties of sweets to all who came. He granted several cows as gifts to brahmins. He instructed the ladies of the court to give golden caskets full of saffron and kumkum (vermillion powder) to women. Brahmins were awarded silk clothes and precious gems. Citizens were transported with joy, for the dynasty had secured an heir. Night and day they reveled in hilarious exultation.

Next day, Yudhishtira called the family priest, Kripacharya, and performed the rite of first cleansing of the infant. He satisfied the brahmins by gifts of various costly jewels. The scholars and priests blessed the child and returned home.

The astrologers' predictions

On the third day, Yudhishtira called to his presence renowned astrologers as well as famous palmists and soothsayers, for he was eager to know whether the fair name of the kingdom and its culture would be safe in the hands of the prince who had come to carry the burden of the state. He received them at the palace with traditional hospitality; they were given appropriate seats in the hall and were offered scents and silks.

The king bowed before them and, joining his palms in reverential adoration, prostrated before them and prayed, "O, wise men, who know the past, present, and future, examine the horoscope of this infant, calculate the positions of stars and constellations and the planetary influences that will

guide his life and tell me how the future will be shaped." He wrote down the exact time of birth and placed the note on a golden plate before them.

The pundits took the note, drew up the plan of planetary positions, and studied it with great care. They communicated to one another their increasing joy as they began to draw conclusions; they were in great joy themselves and couldn't get words to express their amazement.

The doyen of the group, a great pundit, at last rose and addressed King Yudhishtira, "Maharaja! I have till this day examined thousands of horoscopes and prepared concerned plans of the zodiacs and constellations. But I must admit I have never come across a more auspicious grouping than is indicated in this horoscope. Here, all the signs of good augury have assembled in one moment, the moment of this prince's birth. The moment indicates the state of Vishnu Himself! All the virtues will gather in this child. Why describe each glory separately? The great Manu has again come into your dynasty." Yudhishtira was happy that the dynasty had such good fortune. He was overpowered by joy. He folded his palms and bent low before the scholars, who had given him such good news. "This family is lucky to claim such a gem as its scion, through the blessings of elders and of pundits like you as well as the blessings of the Lord, who is our guardian. You say that the boy will develop all virtues and will accumulate fame. But of what use is all that if he hasn't acquired the quality of reverence toward pundits, spiritual aspirants (sadhus), and brahmins? Please look into the horoscope once again and tell me whether he will have that reverence." The leader of the astrologers replied, "You need entertain no doubt on that score. He will revere and serve the gods and the brahmins. He will perform many sacrifices and rites that are prescribed in the ancient texts. He will earn the glory that your ancestor Bharatha won. He will celebrate even the horse sacrifice (aswamedha). He will spread the fame of this line all over the world. He will win all things that gods or men covet. He will outdistance all those who have gone before him." They extolled him in various ways to their hearts' content. They stopped because they were nervous to recount all the excellences; they feared they might be charged with exaggeration and flattery if they continued to detail the conclusions they had drawn from the baby's horoscope.

Yudhishtira was not satisfied; he wanted to hear more from them of the excellences of the Prince's character.

The pundits were encouraged by this yearning. They said, "O King, you seem eager to know about some more aspects of the child's fortune. We shall be only too glad to answer specific questions that you feel inclined to put us." Noting their enthusiasm, Yudhishtira came forward and asked, "During the regime of this prince, will there be any great war? If war is inevitable, will he achieve victory?" "No," said the pundits, "He won't be pestered by any foe. He knows no failure or defeat in any undertaking of his. This is absolutely true, an unshakable truth." Hearing this, Yudhishtira and the brothers Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva looked at each other with great joy.

Prediction of Parikshith's death by serpent bite

Meanwhile, Yudhishtira began to speak. He had said, "If that is so...," but, before he could complete the sentence, he hung his head and was plunged in thought. The pundits noticed it and said, "You seem to be anxious to know something more. You have only to ask, and we shall readily answer all questions." "Of course I am happy at all the answers you have given. He will be virtuous, famous, triumphant over all, loving, and kind, treating all equally. He will perform many sacrifices and rites. He will have no enemies, and he will bring honour to the dynasty and restore its reputation. All this gives me great joy. But, I would like to know also how he will meet his end." The brothers saw Yudhishtira getting rather upset at the anxiety that agitated him over this problem. His voice had faltered a bit, when he put the question.

They consoled him and said, "Why worry about that at this stage? The end has to come some day, some way.

It cannot be avoided. Something will cause it; some circumstance will bring it about. Birth involves the contingency of death. We are afraid that the extreme joy of this incident has queered your line of thought a bit. We think this much is enough. We shall leave the rest in the realm of doubt; let us not probe further. Let us leave it to God." But Yudhishtira could not give up his

desire to know how such a virtuous ideal prince would end his career on earth. He imagined it must be a truly wondrous finale to a glorious life. So he wanted the astrologers to tell him about it.

The scholars set about the calculations again, taking a pretty long time over it. Watching this, the King became excited; he hastened them and pressed for a quick answer. They gave the reply, "This prince will give up his kingdom as the result of a sage's curse." Yudhishtira wondered how such a paragon of virtue could ever invoke upon himself the curse of a sage. He was shocked at the possibility.

Then the pundits said, "Our calculations show that he will be bitten by a serpent." Yudhishtira lost heart at this news. All his joy evaporated in a moment. He became very sad and dispirited.

3. Child Parikshith And The Prophecy

"Alas! Is he to suffer at last this tragic fate? Is this to be the reward for all the good in store for him? Can the consequence of years of good living suddenly turn into this calamitous end? It is laid down that those who die drowning, those who are killed by fall from trees, and those who die of snake bite have a bad afterlife. Those are considered inauspicious deaths; those who die that way become ghosts and have to suffer so, it is said. Why should this child end up like that? O, the horror of it. O, the injustice of the whole thing!" lamented Yudhishtira, biting his lips to suppress his sorrow.

A boon, not a curse

The brahmins hastened to console him. "Maharaja," they interceded, "There is no reason to give way to grief. Such a great man will never meet with such a tragedy. No. In the horoscope of this child, studying the positions of the planets, we can clearly notice two happy conjunctions, which indicate the conjunction of Indra (vajra-yoga) and the conjunction of devotion (bhakthi-yoga), both powerful and propitious. Therefore, as soon as he learns of the curse, he will give up his kingdom as well as his wife and children and retire to the bank of the holy Bhagirati river and surrender himself to the Lord. The great sage Suka, son of Vyasa, will arrive there and initiate him into self knowledge (Atma-jnana) through the recital of the glories of Lord Krishna and the singing of His praise. Thus, he will spend his last days on the sacred bank of Ganga and breathe his last with the adoration of the Lord. How can such a man meet with any tragedy or calamity? He will not be born again, for through the yoga of devotion he will attain oneness with the Lord of All (Purushothama).

Hearing these words, Yudhishtira gave up grief and became happy. He said, "If so, it is a unique boon and not a curse!" At this, everyone rose. The brahmins were honoured as befitted their learning and austerity. They were given gems and silken clothes, and the king arranged to send them home. Yudhishtira and his brothers moved into their palaces, but they spent many

hours talking about the happenings of the day and of the fears, luckily removed.

They were filled with joy at the turn the predictions had taken.

The baby engages in a quest for the divine

The baby grew in the lying-in room as the moon in the bright half of the month. Since it was born as heir to the great empire, after a succession of dire dangers, everyone loved it and guarded it like the apple of the eye, as the very breath of their lives. Earlier, Droupadi had been broken by the loss of her own children (the Upapandavas), Subhadra had suffered inconsolable loss in the death of Abhimanyu, and the Pandava brothers had dreaded that Aswathama's terrific sorrow directed against Abhimanyu's posthumous child, still in Uttara's womb, might do the worst and destroy the Pandava line forever. All were relieved, nay overjoyed, when they saw the child.

They were supremely happy. They spent the days doting over the little lovely babe, whom they brought from the women's quarters for the purpose whenever they felt the urge to see it and hold it in their arms.

The child was very bright; it seemed to watch the lineaments of everyone who fondled it or came before it.

It stared into their face long and longingly. All were surprised at this strange behaviour. Every person who came to it was subjected to this searching examination by the child, who seemed determined to trace someone or some thing in the world into which it was born.

Some said, sadly, "it is seeking its father, Abhimanyu." Others said, "No, no; the child is searching for Lord Krishna." Others opined that it appeared to be trying to discover some divine brilliance. The fact remained that the child was examining all for some trait or sign that it knew already, to recognise some form it had in mind.

"Pariksha (quest)" was the word used by everyone for the "quest" in which the child was engaged, so, even before the formal naming ceremony, everyone in and out of the palace began referring to the child as Parikshith, "He who is engaged in quest!" That name, Parikshith, stayed. From the king to the farmer, from the scholar to the boor, from the monarch to the man in the street - everyone addressed or referred to the child as Parikshith. The fame of the child grew from day to day. It was on everyone's lips.

Preparing for the naming ceremony

One auspicious day, Yudhishtira had the court priest brought before him and commissioned him to fix a good day for the ceremony of naming the child-prince. The priest called together his group of scholars and astrologers.

After consulting the conjunctions of heavenly bodies, they discovered a day that all of them agreed was a good one for the event. They also settled the hour for the actual naming. Invitations to attend the ceremony were sent to the rulers of the land and to scholars and pundits, as well as prominent citizens. The king sent his emissaries to invite sages and personages full of spiritual wealth. Arjuna went to Lord Krishna and reverentially prayed for Him to shower His grace on the child on the occasion; he succeeded in bringing Krishna when he returned.

Kings, subordinate rulers, and citizens got ready to receive Him with respectful homage. The Pandava brothers, attired magnificently, waited at the main gate of the palace to offer Him welcome. When the Lord's chariot was sighted, drums sounded, trumpets pealed a mighty welcome, and joyful "victory, victory (jai)" rose from every throat. Yudhishtira approached the chariot and embraced the Lord as He alighted; he held Him by the hand and led Him into the palace, where a high throne was specially placed for Him. After the Lord was seated, everyone occupied seats according to their rank and status.

Parikshith's quest ends when Krishna appears

Sahadeva went to the inner apartments, and the child was brought on a gold plate, resplendent as the sun and made more charming by magnificent jewels. The priests recited mantras that invoked the Gods to bless the child and confer health and happiness on him.

Sahadeva laid the child down in the centre of the court hall. Maids and chamberlains came in long lines toward the prince, holding gold plates full of perfumes, flowers, silks, and brocades. Behind specially fitted curtains, the queens Rukmini, Droupadi, Subhadra, and Uttara watched the gambols of the child and rejoiced at the happy scene. Sahadeva took the child and placed it on a bed of flowers that was erected for the naming ceremony. But the child rose up on all fours and started crawling bravely on, in spite of the remonstrances of the maids. Apparently, it wanted to go somewhere!

Sahadeva's efforts to stop its journey proved futile. Yudhishtira, who was observing its movements with interest, said with a smile, "Sahadeva, don't stand in the way. Leave him alone. Let's see what he does." Sahadeva let go and allowed the child to move wherever he liked. He did take care to keep his eye always on him lest he fall or hurt himself. He followed him at every step, vigilantly.

With this freedom of movement, the child soon made a beeline toward Lord Krishna, as if He was seeking to meet an old acquaintance. The child grasped Krishna's feet and pleaded, by his looks, to be taken onto His lap and fondled! The Lord saw this yearning; He laughed aloud and graciously bent low to lift the child on to His lap.

Sitting on His lap, the prince stared at the Lord's face without even a blink; he didn't turn his head this way or that or pull at anything with his hands or make any sound. He just sat and stared. Everyone was amazed at this behaviour, so unlike that of a child. Even Krishna shared in the feeling that pervaded the hall.

Turning to Yudhishtira, Krishna said, "I didn't believe it when I was told that the child stared at everyone who came and examined their lineaments. I

thought it was a new explanation, given by these priests, to the usual prank and play of children. Now, this is really a wonder. The fellow has started examining even Me! Well, I shall test his behaviour a little Myself." Then, the Lord tried to distract the attention of the child from Himself by placing before him a variety of toys, and Himself hiding from view. He expected the child to soon forget Him. But his attention was not drawn toward any other object. He had fixed his eye inexorably on the Lord Himself; he sought Him and no other. He was trying to move toward where he imagined Krishna was.

When Krishna's attempts to transfer the attention of the child from Himself failed, He declared, "This is no ordinary child. He has won through My tests. So the name Parikshith is most appropriate for him. He lives up to it already!" At this, the pundits recited verses indicating their blessings on the child and the brahmins recited relevant passages from the Vedas. The music of trumpets rent the air, and women sang auspicious songs. The family preceptor dipped a nine-gemmed jewel in a golden cup of honey and wrote the Name on the tongue of the child; the name was written on the rice grains spread on a gold plate, and the rice was then showered on the head of the child, in token of prosperity and happiness. The naming ceremony was thus celebrated in grand style. Men and women who attended were given presents as befitted their rank, and they departed. Everyone was talking appreciatively of the wonderful way in which the child sought out the lap of the Lord. Many praised the steady faith that the child had already attained.

Vyasa explains baby Parikshith's searching looks

Yudhishtira, who was puzzled at the unique behaviour of the child approached Vyasa, the great sage, to learn from him the reason for the strange search and the consequences of this attitude. Vyasa said, "Yudhishtira! When this child was in the womb, the deadly arrow that Aswathama aimed at it in order to destroy it was about to hit its target. Lord Krishna entered the foetal home and made it safe and saved it from destruction. This child has been eager to know who had saved him from within the womb. He started examining everyone to find out whether he had the same effulgence that he saw while a foetus in the womb. Today, he saw that divine form with all its splendour, so

he moved straight toward Him and prayed to be taken up and seated on His lap. This is the explanation for the strange behaviour." Hearing Vyasa's words, Yudhishtira shed tears of joy and thankfulness. Overjoyed at the limitless grace of the Lord, he paid Him reverential homage.

4. The Penitential Sacrifice

Yudhishtira feels sinful of war killings

The prince's naming ceremony gave great delight to the subjects of the state as well as to the inmates of the palace and members of the royal household. But Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, was not content with the joyous festival alone and felt that something more had to be done. That evening, he called for an assembly of all the elders, scholars, pundits, subordinate rulers, and leaders of the people; he prayed for Lord Krishna to preside over the gathering and confer joy on all. The sages Vyasa and Kripa also attended.

Coming to the assembly, Yudhishtira stood before everyone in silence for a few seconds, before he fell at Lord Krishna's and sage Vyasa's feet. He then turned toward the rulers, scholars, and leaders and said, "I was able to defeat foes through your help, cooperation, and best wishes, as well as the blessing of the Lord who is present here and of the sages and saints who had installed Him in their hearts. We were able by means of that victory to win back the kingdom that we had lost. Again, through these blessings, the light of hope has gleamed in hearts that were darkened by despair about the continuation of this dynasty. The Pandava line will be continued by the prince, who today was named Parikshith by the Lord.

"While all this delights me, I must announce before you that I am overwhelmed with sorrow at the contemplation of another side of the picture. I have committed countless sins, killing kith and kin. I feel I must do some expiation for this, or else there will be no happiness for me, for my dynasty, or for my people. Therefore, I wish to take this opportunity to seek your advice on this matter. There are many among you who have known the Reality and have attained knowledge (jnana) of Brahman; we have here also the great sage Vyasa. I expect you to suggest some expiatory rite by which I can rid myself of the colossal quantity of sin that I accumulated as a result of this war." A warrior incurs no sin in a righteous war When Yudhishtira posed

this problem in great humility and with great contrition, Lord Krishna said, "Yudhishtira, you are famous as Master of Dharma (Dharmaraja) and you ought to know dharma. You know the intricacies of dharma and morality, of justice, of right and wrong conduct. Therefore, I am surprised that you are afflicted with grief over this war and this victory. Don't you know that a warrior (kshatriya) incurs no sin when he kills a foe who has come to the battlefield armed with intention to kill? Injury or pain or loss that is inflicted on the battlefield during a fight with armed foes is free from sin. It is the dharma of a warrior to take up the sword and fight to the very end to save his country, without any thought of self. You have only observed your dharma. How can activity (karma) along the lines of dharma be sinful? It isn't proper to doubt this and give way to despair. Sin can't touch, surround, or bother you. Instead of exulting over this naming festival for the newborn prince, why do you dread imaginary calamities and seek remedies for nonexistent sins? Be calm. Be happy." Vyasa also rose from his seat and addressed the king. "Sinful and blameworthy acts are inevitable in battle.

They should not be the cause for grief. The chief aim in battle should be the protection of dharma from its foes. If that is kept before the mind, the sin will not affect the fighters. A putrid wound has to be treated with the knife; it is not sinful to inflict the surgery. A doctor who knows surgery and doesn't save a man by doing it incurs sin. So too, a warrior (kshatriya) incurs sin by remaining quiet, not by using the sword. Dharmaraja, you speak under a delusion. I can understand others less wise being afflicted by these doubts, but I wonder why you worry over this fear of sin.

Not one but three horse sacrifices to atone for sins

"If our words do not carry conviction, I can suggest another remedy to remove all fear. Some rulers in the past have resorted to it after the conclusion of wars, to remove the effects of sin. It is the rite of the Horse Sacrifice (aswamedha). If you desire, you can perform this rite as an expiatory ceremony. There can be no obstacle to it.

But believe me, you are innocent of sin even without any expiation. Since

your faith is shaky, I suggest this rite for your satisfaction." And Vyasa resumed his seat.

At this, all the elders, scholars, and leaders rose as one man and applauded Vyasa's valuable suggestion.

They shouted, "victory, victory (jai)" in order to demonstrate their approval and appreciation. They exclaimed, "O! How auspicious, how significant," and they blessed Dharmaraja in his endeavour to free himself from the sinful consequences of war. But Dharmaraja was still heavy with grief; he was not free from fear. His eyes were wet with tears.

He pleaded with the assembly most piteously. "However much you assert my innocence, I am not convinced.

Somehow, my mind doesn't accept your argument. Rulers who were engaged in wars might have cleansed themselves by means of the horse sacrifice. Those were ordinary wars, of the usual type. But my case is very extraordinary.

My sins are three times more sinister, for I killed kith and kin, I killed holy elders like Bhishma and Drona, and I killed many crowned heads. Alas, my fate! How monstrous have been my actions!

"No other ruler could have done so much iniquity. Not one, but three horse sacrifices (aswamedha yagas) have to be performed to cleanse this quantity. Then only can I have peace. Then only can my dynasty be happy and secure. Then only can the administration of my kingdom be safe and meritorious. This must be kindly accepted by Vyasa and other elders and sages." When Yudhishtira spoke thus, tears dropped on his cheeks; his lips quivered with sorrow; his body was bent with remorse. Seeing this, the heart of every sage melted with pity. The king's subjects were moved in sympathy.

Vyasa and even Vasudeva were affected. Many pundits shed tears without being aware of it. The assembly was struck dumb with astonishment. All knew

in a flash how soft Dharmaraja's heart was. The brothers - Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva - stood with folded palms in reverential humility, awaiting the word that would assure relief from the Lord, who was in the presidential seat.

Then, the assembly, with one voice, approved the three horse sacrifices, to relieve Dharmaraja's distress.

One sage gave expression to the opinion of the assembly. He said, "We won't stand in the way of your desire. We accept it wholeheartedly. We shall celebrate the rites (yagas) in the best scriptural way until the final rites. For we seek peace of mind for you more than anything else. We are prepared to do anything that will give you satisfaction." This was acclaimed by everyone in the gathering.

Krishna finds the funds for the horse sacrifices

Hearing this, Dharmaraja said, "I am indeed blessed; I am indeed blessed." He gave his grateful thanks for the promised cooperation. He walked toward Krishna and Vyasa and fell at their feet. He held Krishna's feet and pleaded, "O Madhusudana! Didn't you hear my prayer? Didn't you witness my grief? I pray that you grant us your divine presence at the coming sacrifice (yaga), that you ensure me the fruit thereof and save me from this burden of sin." Krishna smiled and lifted him up from the ground before Him. He said, "Dharmaraja! I shall certainly answer your prayer. But you have taken upon your shoulders a burden as heavy as a range of mountains. This rite is no small affair. Moreover the performer is the celebrated king, Dharmaraja! This means that it has to be celebrated on a scale befitting your status. I know that you have no wherewithal for this very expensive undertaking. Kings derive money only from their subjects. To spend the money squeezed out of them on a rite is not desirable. Only well-earned money can be used for such holy rites; otherwise, it will bring evil instead of good. Nor can your subordinate rulers come to your help, for they also have been miserably impoverished by the late war. It is clear they have nothing to spare.

"Aware of all this, how could you accept to celebrate three horse sacrifices (aswamedhas) in a row? I wonder how you found such audacity in spite of these adverse conditions. And, you have already announced it publicly in this great and distinguished gathering. You didn't give Me even a hint about this costly idea. Had you done so, we could have thought out some plan. Well, it is not too late. We shall take a decision after some more deliberation. It doesn't matter if there is some delay."

Dharmaraja listened to the Lord's words and laughed a hearty laugh! "Lord, you are playing a drama with me, I know. I have never decided upon an act without deliberation. Nor have I ever worried about money or the wherewithal. When we have as our guardian - You, with your inexhaustible grace - why should I worry over anything? When I have the wish-fulfilling tree (kalpataru) in my garden, why should I worry, seeking roots and tubers? The all-powerful Lord, who has been guarding us all these terrible years as the eyelids guard the eye, won't give us up at this juncture.

"For You who can whiff huge mountains into dust, this little pebble is no problem at all. You are my treasure, My treasury. You are the very breath. Whatever You may say, I won't hesitate. All my strength, all my wealth is you and you alone. I place all my burdens, including the burden of state and this new burden of the three sacrifices (yagas) on Your feet. You can do anything you like. You may value my word and carry out my intention or you may discard it and cancel the sacrifices. I have no concern. I am equally happy, whatever you do. It is Your will, not mine." Of course, with the Lord who resides in the heart, no special pleading is needed. The Lord melted; He lifted Dharmaraja and helped him to stand. "No; I spoke in jest to test your faith and devotion. I wanted to demonstrate to these subjects of yours how strong your faith in Me is. You need have no worry on any score. Your wish will be fulfilled. If you follow My instructions, you can procure very easily the money needed for the celebration of the sacrifices. You can get it without harassing the rulers and squeezing the subjects." On hearing this, Dharmaraja was delighted. He said, "Lord we shall honour Your command." Then Krishna said, "Listen. In bygone times, a ruler named Maruth performed a sacrifice (yaga) in a style that no one since then could approach. The hall where the sacrifice

was celebrated, along with every item connected with it, were of gold. Gold bricks were given away as gifts to the priests who officiated; golden images of cows were given instead of cows, and plates of gold were distributed instead of lands! The brahmins were not able to carry them home, so they took only as much as they could lift or carry. The rest they just cast away. Those pieces of gold are now available in large quantities for your sacrifices. You can collect them." Dharmaraja didn't agree; he had qualms about it. He said, "Lord, that is the property of those to whom it was given. How can I use it without their permission?" Krishna replied, "They cast it away fully conscious of what they were doing and what they were discarding. They are not alive today. Their children know nothing about the existence of this treasure. It is now under the earth. Remember that all treasure inside the earth that has no master or owner belongs to the king of that realm. When the king wants to take possession of it, no one has the right to object. Bring that treasure soon and prepare for the celebration of the sacrifices," commanded Lord Krishna.

5. Sacrifices And Penance Of Elders

Obtaining the gold for the horse sacrifices

Dharmaraja accepted Vasudeva's advice as well as Vyasa's benediction. He sent his brothers, with the army, to bring the gold that had been thrown aside by the brahmins. They left after purifying themselves by partaking consecrated offerings. They discovered the quantities of gold that had been given as presents to the priests at the conclusion of the sacrifice by Emperor Maruth in the past. The priests had dropped the gold on the sides of the roads along which they returned home. The army collected the gold and conveyed it to the capital on camels, elephants, chariots, and carts. It took them some days to reach Hasthinapura with that load. They unloaded the gold amidst the acclamations of the people.

The citizens were amazed at the success of the expedition; they extolled the good fortune of the Pandavas.

They welcomed the princes and the gold, shouting "Victory, victory (jai, jai)" until their throats were hoarse; they jumped and danced in joy. They pictured among themselves the grandeur and magnificence of the sacrifice for which this gold was brought.

Krishna presides over the horse sacrifices

Preparations were started that very day for the construction of the ritual altar and the necessary adjuncts on the bank of the Ganga; the sacred area was many square miles in extent. The ground was leveled and cleaned. The dais was built, and beautiful buildings arose on the vast area. Porches and verandas were added. Decorations like flags and festoons embellished the structures.

When the holy day neared, chieftains, brahmins, scholars, and sages moved from all directions toward the sacred place, hastening each other in their

enthusiasm to reach early. They took residence in the quarters allotted to them according to their status and needs. They spent the night counting minutes, in joyful expectation of the extravagant but efficacious sacrifice (yajna) that they would witness when the dawn brought in another day.

The morning came, and the auspicious moment approached. The priests took up their positions and got ready to take the vows of initiation. They stood up facing Lord Krishna and the king and said, "O King, we understand that you have resolved to perform not one but three horse sacrifices (aswamedhas). Is that correct? If so, do you want us to perform them one after the other? Or shall we repeat every formula and rite thrice and have them all done concurrently? Tell us, and we will arrange the participants and performing priests accordingly." Dharmaraja replied, "What can I say when you know best; I agree to whatever advice you offer. I seek only Vasudeva's consent for whatever course we adopt." He turned toward Krishna with pleading eyes. Krishna left the decision to the brahmins. They discussed among themselves for a while and announced at last that the effect of "three horse sacrifices" could be secured by repeating each mantra thrice and presenting the brahmins presiding over the rituals thrice the usual fees. Vasudeva indicated His approval of this suggestion, and, taking his cue from this, Dharmaraja declared that he agreed. He desired that the sacrifice be inaugurated.

The recitation of the mantras by the brahmins shook both earth and sky. Preliminary rites were gone through, and the sacrificial horses proceeded on their planned round. They were caparisoned in great style, and they carried on their foreheads the declaration challenging anyone to take them into custody if he dared. When He who is the recipient of all sacrifices (yajnas), who is sacrifice personified (yajna swarupa), has taken the role of the presiding authority, no words can describe the fortune of the participants and the witnesses. The ceremony drew to a successful close with the valedictory oblation.

The experts in sacrificial mantras, sages, and brahmins were loaded with presents and fees. Enormous numbers of cows, large areas of land, and vast quantities of gold were gifted away by the king. The whole nation was filled

with happiness. Everyone praised the sacrifice as indescribably superb. All who came were fed sumptuously at all hours. Sages and ascetics who saw all this lavishness extolled Dharmaraja's sacrifice as grander even than the one performed by Emperor Maruth in the past! They were delighted at the chance to take part. People once claimed that the Maruth's sacrifice was presided over by Indra, the ruler of the Gods, and they felt that it made it incomparably superior to any other sacrifice. But now they congratulated Dharmaraja on securing Vasudeva Himself, the sacrifice personified, to preside over the sacrifice, a piece of good fortune far superior to Maruth's and far more difficult to secure.

At the end of the sacrifice, those who had come from far off returned; others too turned home. The kings and chieftains took respectful leave of Dharmaraja and went back to their own principalities. The king's kinsmen stayed for a few days more and left at their convenience. However, Krishna chose to spend some more time with the Pandavas, so He stayed in Hasthinapura. The Pandavas were delighted at this signal act of grace and made suitable arrangements for the residence of the Lord. They served Him every day. They filled their eyes with His beauty and their hearts with His gracious words of instruction. They spent the days in supreme joy.

After some time, Krishna returned to Dwaraka, taking Arjuna with Him. The Dwaraka people were overjoyed when their Lord returned to His capital. They welcomed Him in enthusiastic reverence. They feasted on the sight (darshan) of the Lord, immersed in bliss (ananda).

A royal reception for Vidura

Meanwhile, news came to Hasthinapura that Vidura, the king's uncle, was moving about on the environs of the city in the guise of a monk. The news traveled from mouth to mouth and at last reached king Dharmaraja's ears. It was received with surprise and joy. The king sent a few scouts to discover whether the news was authentic, and soon they brought the welcome information that Vidura had actually come and was present.

Dharmaraja couldn't contain himself with excitement, "Ah! How happy you have made me! This holy moment has made the dried trunk of the tree of hope put forth leaves again. Oh, I can now see and serve Vidura, who fostered us and guarded us and guided us, I who feared I might not get the chance at all." The heartening news was spread by courtiers among the queens and princesses and women of the royal household. Dharmaraja did not rest; he spoke about the great event to everyone around him and sought out others to share the joy with them. He issued orders to the army that appropriate arrangements should be made to welcome the brother of his late father, Sage Vidura, foremost among the votaries of the Lord, into the capital. The citizens were also alerted and asked to prepare a grand reception.

They decorated the streets and mansions on each side of them; they erected arches, hung festoons, and hoisted flags. They allotted galleries and seats on every road for children, women, and the aged, so that they might have a fine and clear view of the procession and of the great sage.

It was an inspiring sight to see many old men and women hobbling on with their sticks, eager to get a glimpse of Vidura, whom they extolled as the very embodiment of dharma and as the very godfather of the Pandavas.

Some thought at first that the sighting of Vidura on the outskirts of the city must have been in someone's dream, and not in actual fact. They had lived long enough to swallow the rumour without personal verification. For they never could believe that Vidura would ever come back to Hasthinapura. They grouped themselves on vantage points and got ready for the great moment when they could rest their eyes on the saint. All along the route, every building was overflowing with humanity; the trees carried strings of adventurous youth, full of excitement and expectation, shouting in acclamation of the oncoming guest.

The king, decked in ceremonial robes, ascended the royal chariot and started out of the palace with his brothers to bring home the famous votary of the Lord.

Vidura appeared before them walking barefoot, slow and dignified, with matted hair and wearing the robes of a monk. The king and his brothers stepped down from their vehicles, bowed reverentially to Vidura's feet, and walked behind him at a respectful distance. The citizens ran forward and fell at Vidura's feet in spite of the earnest entreaties of the guards that they should desist. The Pandavas could not express welcome in words; their joy was immeasurable. So their eyes spoke it, with tears of gratitude. They clasped Vidura in their arms and prayed to him to get into the chariot so that the thick ranks of onlookers on all the roads might get his sight (darshan) to their hearts' content. Vidura was persuaded to agree. Seated in the royal chariot of the king, Vidura gave his sight to the people who had amassed en route. At last, the procession reached the palace. A sweet flood of song and joy flowed along the roads of the city that day.

Some of the citizens were so overcome with joy that they were rooted to the spot. The arduous life of austerity (tapas) that Vidura had undertaken had so transmuted his personality that he appeared a different person, a person glowing with divine aura, like Indra, the king of Gods. The people described their exultation in their own words to one another. Many shed tears, remembering the trials and tribulations that Vidura had undergone and the peace that he had acquired. The queens and princesses also had his sight (darshan) from inside the women's quarters, and they were supremely happy.

6. Vidura's Renunciation

Who can overcome the decrees of fate?

In the palace, Vidura asked about the welfare of all of his kinsmen. Then Kunthi Devi, the queen mother, came in and, casting her endearing looks at him, said, "At last, we see you, O Vidura!" She could say no more.

After some time she resumed, "How could you stay away so long, ignoring the children whom you reared with so much love, as well as myself and others who revere you so much. Through your grace, my children are rulers of this land today. Where would they be today if you hadn't saved them on many a critical occasion? We were the target of many a disaster, but the greatest one was your being away from us. That affected us most. Even the hope of seeing you again was extinguished in us. Now, our hearts have sprouted again. Aspirations scattered by despair have come together. Today, our joy has attained fullness. O, what a happy day!" Kunthi sat for a while wiping her tears.

Vidura held her hands and could not resist his own tears, as he recapitulated the varied events of the past in the Pandava and Kaurava groups. He said, "Mother Kunthi Devi! Who can overcome the decrees of fate? What must happen happens. The good and evil that men do have to result in good and evil. How can man be called free when he is bound by this law of cause and effect? He is a puppet in the hands of this law. It pulls the strings, and then he moves. Our likes and dislikes are of no consequence. Everything is His will, His grace." As Vidura expounded the fundamental spiritual truths that govern human affairs, the brothers Dharmaraja, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva sat near, wrapped in close attention.

Kunthi raised her head at last. "Through your blessings, we won the war, but we were powerless to save the lives of Droupadi's and Subhadra's sons. Misfortune haunted us so strongly. Of course, as you said, no one can escape one's destiny. Well, let the past be forgotten. It is meaningless to worry over

what cannot be set right. I must say that my thirst has now been considerably relieved at meeting you at last. Where were you all this time?

Tell us."

Vidura replied that he had been on a pilgrimage to some holy places. The brothers listened with rapt attention, prodding him with questions. Dharmaraja said often that he was waiting for the day when he too could go through all those holy experiences. He folded his palms in reverence whenever a holy shrine was mentioned and, with closed eyes, pictured to himself the sacred spot.

Vidura describes the glory of Krishna

Meanwhile, Bhima interjected, "Did you go to Dwaraka? Please tell us your experiences there." Dharmaraja added, "You must have met Lord Krishna there, right? Tell us all what happened, in full detail." Kunthi Devi also became eager to hear his description, "Tell us, tell us. My son is there now; you must have met him too. How is everyone? I hope the old parents, Nanda and Yasoda, are well. And Devaki and Vasudeva?" A shower of questions fell on Vidura even before he started talking.

Vidura was not eager to answer. He talked as if he was anxious to avoid being drawn into the topic. He had learned from Uddhava while on the way to Dwaraka that the Yadava clan had perished and that Krishna had closed His human career. He didn't want to plunge the Pandavas into grief just when they were elated at meeting him after a long time. "Why should I, who has given them so much joy, be the cause of wiping out that joy," he argued. "They are sure to know about it from Arjuna, who will return from Dwaraka with the sorrowful news." So he swallowed the news that popped up often into his mouth; he satisfied himself and them by describing the glory of Krishna. He said, "I did not like to visit kith and kin with these ascetic robes on, so I didn't meet any of the Yadava leaders or Nanda, Yasoda, and others," and kept quiet. He didn't dilate further on Dwaraka and his own pilgrimage.

"I came to you because I knew you won the war and are at last peacefully engaged in ruling over the kingdom, which was rightfully yours. I felt drawn toward these children, whom I had fostered from a tender age. It was affection toward them that drew me here. Among my kith and kin, I was tempted to visit only you; I didn't want to meet any others," he said, and he turned to the Vedantic teachings that he wanted to impart.

When the conversation ended, Dharmaraja invited Vidura to stay at quarters specially arranged for him and accompanied him to the mansion. There, he appointed certain people to serve Vidura and asked him to rest.

Vidura decides to visit his brother, the blind king

Vidura didn't relish the idea of spending time in that seat of luxury, but he entered the mansion lest Dharmaraja be displeased. He lay on his bed, reviewing the past. He sighed when he realised that the stratagems that his blind brother, Dhritharashtra, used to destroy the Pandavas, the children of his other brother Pandu, recoiled and caused the destruction of his own clan. He admired Dharmaraja for the magnanimity he showed Dhritharashtra, in spite of the fact that he had tortured the Pandavas in various ways. Dharmaraja revered him with great faith and devotion and attended to his comforts. Vidura felt utmost disgust when he thought about the wickedness of Dhritharashtra's heart. He was ashamed that the old man coolly wallowed in the luxury of the palace instead of cultivating detachment from the flimsy pleasures of the senses and attempting to realise the goal of human life, liberation from the cycle of birth and death. He experienced uncontrollable agony that his brother was wasting his few remaining years of life.

His yogic vision told him that the Pandavas would also soon disappear, that the Krishna who guarded them here would look after their best interest in the hereafter too. But he guessed that the blind king would suffer more after the Pandavas' departure. He resolved to send his unfortunate brother out into pilgrimage and the ultimate realisation of his destiny. He didn't want any delay. So he slipped out in the darkness, without being noticed by anyone, and walked straight to Dhritharashtra's residence.

7. Vidura The Counsellor

Of course, the blind king and his queen, Gandhari, were expecting Vidura to call upon them, for they had learned that he had come to town. So when Vidura entered, the king embraced him and shed tears of joy.

He couldn't contain himself. He listed one by one the calamities that overtook him and his children and lamented over fate.

Vidura admonishes Dhritharashtra

Vidura tried to console him with profound teachings of the scriptures. But he soon discovered that the petrified heart of the old man would not melt at the application of cold advice; he knew that his stupidity could be overcome only by hard blows. So, he changed his tune and resorted to blame and abuse.

Hearing this, Dhritharashtra was alarmed. He expostulated, "Brother! We are burning in agony at the loss of our hundred sons, and you prick the wound with the sharp needles of your angry abuse. Even before we taste the joy of meeting you after so long a time, why do you try to plunge us deeper into distress? Alas! Why should I blame you for hardheartedness? I am laughed at by all, blamed by all. I have no right to find fault with you." With head bent and resting on his palms, Dhritharashtra sat in silence.

Vidura recognised this as the opportune moment for instilling the lesson of renunciation, which alone could save him from perdition. He knew that his purpose was beyond reproach, for he wanted them to undertake pilgrimages to holy places and fill themselves with sanctity. He wanted them to meet great and good men and recognise the Lord within and thus save themselves. So he decided to use even stronger words with a view to transforming him and the queen. Though filled with pity at their forlorn condition, Vidura had in mind the coming dire days when they would need all the courage that spiritual wisdom (jnana) alone could give them, and he was determined to wound them into action.

Vidura shames Dhritharashtra into repentance

Vidura said, "O foolish King! Have you no shame? Do you still find joy in earthly pleasures? Of what avail is it if you wallow in the mire until you die? I thought you had enough of it and more. Time is a cobra that lies in wait to sting you to death. You dare hope that you can escape it and live forever. No one, however great, has escaped the sting. You run after happiness in this temporary world, and you seek to fulfil your desires in order to get some paltry satisfaction. You are wasting precious years. Make your life worthwhile. It is not yet too late to begin the effort. Give up this cage called home. Dismiss from your mind the paltry pleasures of this world. Remember the joy that awaits you, the world that is welcoming you at the end of this journey. Save yourself. Avoid the foolish fate of giving up this life in the agony of separation from kith and kin. Learn to die with the thought of the Lord uppermost in your mind at the moment of departure. It is better by far to die in joy in the thick of the blackest forest than to die in distress in the palace of this capital city. Go, go and do spiritual penance (tapas). Get away from this place, this prison that you call home." Vidura continued his admonition of Dhritharashtra. "You have reached this advanced age; but still, without any shame or hesitation, you are leading a dog's life. You may not be ashamed of it, but I am. Fie upon you! Your method of spending your days is worse than that of a crow." Dhritharashtra could hear no more. He cried, "Oh enough, enough. Stop. You're torturing me to death. These aren't the words that one brother should address to another. Hearing you, I feel you aren't Vidura, my brother. He wouldn't have reprimanded me so cruelly. Am I now with Dharmaraja, or a stranger? Have I taken refuge with an alien? What are you saying? Why these harsh words! Dharmaraja fosters me with great love and care; how can you declare that I'm leading a dog's life, or a crow's? It's a sin for you to entertain such ideas. This is just my fate and nothing else." Dhritharashtra bent his head and moaned.

Vidura laughed in derision. He said, "Have you no sense of shame that you should talk thus? Dharmaraja might, out of his goodness, care for you more than his own father. He might look after you with a love greater than that of

your own sons. This is but a reflection of his character. This is but the amplification of the significance of his name. But shouldn't you plan for your own future? One leg of yours is already in the grave, and you're blindly filling your stomach in comfort and rolling in luxury.

"Reflect for a moment how you tortured Dharmaraja and his brothers to fulfil the wicked intentions of your vile sons, how you devised stratagems for their extinction. You put them in a wax house and set fire to it; you tried to poison them. You insulted their queen in the most humiliating manner before a vast assembly. You and your abominable brood piled grief over grief on the sons of Pandu, your own brother. Blind, senile, thick-skinned elephant, you sat on the throne, perpetually asking those beside you 'What's happening now? What's happening now?' "How can you stay in this place, enjoying Dharmaraja's hospitality, rolling over your mind the iniquities perpetrated by you for his destruction? When you were devising their end, did they cease to be your cousins? Or, did the cousinship emerge now, when you came to them for stay? You tell me so proudly that they are treating you well, without a shred of shame!

"Why speak so much? The disastrous game of dice took place at your initiative, didn't it? Do you deny it?

No. I witnessed that game. I advised you against it then - did you take it to heart? What happened then to the love and sympathy that you now freely pour forth? Today, like a dog, you gulp the food the Pandavas place before you and lead this despicable life." Dhritharashtra renounces his style of living. Hearing Vidura's words, which pained him like hammer strokes, Dhritharashtra developed a distaste for his style of living. Vidura's intention was to prod him into the life of a recluse and of spiritual practice, so that he might realise His Self before it was too late. Finally, he felt that Vidura was speaking the truth and giving him a true picture of his low nature. He said, "Brother! Yes, all that you have said is true, I admit. I have realised it now.

But, what am I to do? I'm blind, so I can't go alone into the forests for spiritual practice. I must have a companion.

What shall I do? For fear that I may suffer without food, Gandhari never leaves me even for a moment." Vidura saw that Dhritharashtra had modified his attitude and had seen light. He emphasised his original advice. "You became blind due primarily to this attachment to the body. How long can you be burdened with it?

It has to be dropped by the wayside some day, some place. Know that 'you' are not this body, this package of nauseating things. To identify yourselves with the physical frame is the sign of extreme foolishness. The body is being besieged perpetually by death, with His army of diseases. But you are unaware of it; you don't care for the pro and the con; you snooze your fill and snore. This drama has an end, remember. The curtain has to come down.

So hie toward some holy place without delay and meditate on God and save yourself. Let death come and carry away your body there; that is the most excellent end. Don't die like a dog or fox, somewhere, somehow. Arise and go; develop detachment. Give up this delusion and escape from this house." Thus was planted in the heart the seeds of renunciation. Dhritharashtra pondered long and broke into tears.

His lips quivered. He moved his hands from side to side to contact Vidura. At last, he held his hands and said, "Vidura! What can I say to you who gave this most valuable advice, advice that is certain to promote my best interests? Though you are younger in age, your spiritual wisdom (jnana) makes you senior to all of us. You have full authority to speak as you like. Don't consider me as someone outside your circle. Hear me with patience. I shall certainly follow your advice." He then began to describe his condition to his brother. "Vidura," he began, "How could I leave here without informing Dharmaraja, who looks after me with more care than even a son? It wouldn't be proper. And he might insist on coming along with us; his nature is such. Save me from this dilemma. Take me to a place where I can engage myself in spiritual practice." When he pleaded thus, Vidura replied, "Your words sound strange. You aren't going into the forest to eat banquets, to witness carnivals, or to enjoy the beauty of the scenery. You are giving up everything with a full sense of detachment. You are taking up a life of austerity and spiritual

discipline. And, in the same breath, you are talking of 'taking leave' of kith and kin! This is odd. You resolve to lay down the body in the pursuit of the Ideal, but you are considering how to get the permission of men who are related to you through the body. These bonds cannot help spiritual practice. They can never liberate you. Bundle them up and sink them deep. Move out of this place with just the clothes you wear. Don't waste a single moment of your life." Thus, Vidura advised him without mercy; he didn't change the tune of his song; he emphasised the importance of immediate renunciation.

Dhritharashtra was on his bed, listening intently and ruminating on the next step. He said, "Vidura, what you say is quite true. I need not describe to you my special difficulties. This body is decrepit; these eyes are blind. I must have someone at least to guide my steps, right? Your sister-in-law has blinded her eyes by a bandage so that she can share my handicap and suffer similarly. How can we two blind persons move about in the forest? We have to be dependent on others all our lives." Vidura saw the tears rolling down the cheeks of the old man; he pitied his plight, but he never revealed his pity. He said assuringly, "Well, I am prepared to take you to the forest. I am ready. What greater pleasure have I than to release you from here for this sacred purpose? Come, arise. Start." Vidura stood up. Dhritharashtra also rose from his bed and stood on the floor.

Off to the forest, with Gandhari

Gandhari stood by his side, with her hand on his shoulder. She pleaded, "Lord I'm coming with you, ready for anything." But Dhritharashtra said, "O, it is very hard to guard women in the jungle. The place is infested by wild beasts, and life there is bound to be full of privations." He spoke in this strain for a long time. But she argued that she could not desert her lord, that she could stand the privations as much as he, that it was her duty to continue serving him until her death, that she was only following the tradition set up by the gems of Indian womanhood, that it is not dharma to prevent her from observing her dharma, that life in the zenana without him would be unbearable for her, that she would welcome life in the jungle with her lord. She fell at the feet of her lord and demanded permission to accompany him.

Dhritharashtra was silent. He did not know what to say. It was Vidura who spoke. "This is not the time to discuss niceties of dharma. How can this lady, who never stayed away from you a single moment, suddenly leave your company and live apart? It is not proper. Let her also come; we shall take her. For those who march forward to do austerities, there should be no fear or delusion, no hunger or thirst, no grief or suffering. It is not asceticism (tapas) to complain of these or anticipate these. When the body itself is being disowned, what can privations do?

Come, there is no justification for delay."

Vidura moved forward, leading Dhritharashtra silently followed by Gandhari, who had her hand on his shoulder. The saintly votary of God, Vidura, took the pair, unnoticed by the guards and the citizens, through the side streets and out beyond the city limits. He hurried them on so that they might reach the forest before dawn.

But the Ganga had to be crossed in a boat, and no boatman was there to take them across before sunrise. So they had to wait on the bank of that holy river. Vidura made them rest for a while in a bower and arranged for a boat to take them to the other bank in the dark.

8. Dhritharashtra Transformed

Dhritharashtra, Gandhari, and Vidura reached the forest. Vidura searched for a site where they could practise austerities. He also advised them on the best means of seeking self-realisation. They spent the days in holy company and holy thoughts.

Dharmaraja finds Dhritharashtra missing

Meanwhile, in Hasthinapura, as soon as the sun rose, Dharmaraja woke up, finished his ablutions, and performed the ritual worship of the "household fire". He gave away in charity the usual daily gifts to the needy. He then went on foot toward the palace of Dhritharashtra, his paternal uncle, as was his wont, for he never began his daily round of duties without taking on his head the dust of his uncle's feet.

The king and queen were not in their chambers. So he waited for some little time, expecting them to return, looking for them all around, even while he was waiting anxiously for their return. But he noticed that the beds were not slept upon, the pillows didn't bear marks of use, and the furniture was undisturbed. He thought for a moment that the rooms had been reset by someone after use, but no, some fear got hold of him that they must have left. So he hurried toward Vidura's room only to discover that he too had fled; his bed was unused.

The attendants reported that the sage hadn't returned from his visit to the king and queen. This shocked Dharmaraja.

He went back to the palace and searched every room with great care, and his worst fears were confirmed.

His hands and feet shivered in despair; his tongue became dry; words did not emerge from his mouth. He fell on the floor, as if life had ebbed out. Recovering, he blabbered indistinctly. He called on Vidura more than once,

and the officers around him became afraid of his future. Everyone rushed to his presence, asking, "What happened?" sensing some calamity. They stood in a circle, awaiting orders from the master.

Sanjaya and Dharmaraja in deep distress

Suddenly, Sanjaya appeared. Dharmaraja rose and held both his hands. "My parents have gone; alas, I found their chambers empty. Why did they do this? Did they tell you anything? Tell me. If I knew where they went, I could fall at their feet and crave pardon for all my failings. Tell me quick, Sanjaya, where did they go?" Sanjaya also had no knowledge of their whereabouts. He knew only that Vidura must be at the bottom of the whole affair. He too shed tears, and, holding Dharmaraja's hands in his, said in a voice that shook with tremor, "Lord and Master, believe me, I speak the truth. Dhritharashtra used to consult me and ask for my suggestions even in small matters, but in this affair he acted without discussing with me or even informing me. I am struck with wonder at this act. Though I was near him, I didn't in the least know about his journey. I can't guess why he did this. I never dreamed that he would deceive me thus. He showed me some respect and had some confidence in me. But he has played me false. I can only say that this is my bad luck." Sanjaya started weeping like a child.

Dharmaraja consoled him, saying that it was really the consequence of his own sins and not Sanjaya's. "The extent of our bad luck can be gauged from this. Our father left us even while we were children; this uncle brought us up from that tender age. We revered him and tended him as both father and uncle. I must have perpetrated some error out of ignorance, for I am incapable of doing so, consciously. Both uncle and aunt were broiling in the agony of the loss of their hundred sons. I was eager to offer them some little peace, so my four brothers and I were wholeheartedly serving them so that they might forget the anguish of their terrible loss. We took care that no little point was missed while serving them. There was no diminution of reverence or affection. Alas, that they should have left this place! What a tragedy, what a terrible blow!" lamented Dharmaraja.

"My uncle and aunt are old and weak; besides, they are blind. I can't understand how they managed to leave this place. How they must be suffering now! Not even one attendant accompanied them. What good are all my servants? Groping along, the two might have fallen into the Ganga, by now. O, how unlucky I am! I fostered them both like the apple of the eye, but at the end, I allowed them to meet this tragic fate." Dharmaraja beat his breast and expressed his deep distress.

The Pandavas search for the missing three

The brothers heard the lamentation and flew fast to the side of the weeping Dharmaraja. Mother Kunthi also asked anxiously for the reason for the grief. She peeped into the chambers and, not finding Gandhari or Dhritharashtra, asked Sanjaya what had happened to them. Sanjaya couldn't reply; he could only shed tears. "Where have they gone, in their aged and helpless condition? Tell me!" she cried. But, no one could answer.

Meanwhile, Dharmaraja called the brothers to his side and made some gestures, which they could not understand aright. Then, he mustered courage and rose from the ground. He managed to tell them of the happenings since sunrise. He asked Bhima to send forces in all directions to search for them and find them, for they couldn't have gone far, since they were blind and couldn't travel fast - they must be groping their way.

Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva obeyed their brother's order and sent troops in all directions. They rummaged all the roads, lanes, and by-lanes, peeped into wells, and looked in all tanks and lakes, but they could find no trace of the blind couple. Believing that they must have fallen into the Ganga, they got experts to scour the banks and even dive into the waters to discover their fate. All their efforts were in vain. The Pandava brothers were sunk in grief that they couldn't save the king and queen from that horrid fate.

The three leave their bodies

Meanwhile, Dhritharashtra and Gandhari were joyfully contemplating on God,

seated in prescribed postures with their minds rigorously under control. While they were lost in divine contemplation and immersed in that supreme joy, a huge forest fire swept along, consuming them also in its fierce onslaught.

Vidura had a great desire to cast off his body at the holy centre of Prabhasa-kshetra, so he escaped the fire and, filled with joy at the immense good fortune of the couple, continued his pilgrimage and reached the place that he had chosen as the scene of his exit. There, he cast off his body, which was composed of the five elements and which therefore was material and momentary.

9. The Ascent Of Krishna

Dharmaraja sees many bad omens

Dharmaraja, reeling in agony at the departure of his uncle and aunt, had another bout of unbearable pain, like a needle thrust underneath the nails. Wherever he turned, he began seeing bad omens in his kingdom. He noted in every act around him the taint of falsehood, cruelty, and injustice. It met him at every step and confused his vision.

As a result, an inexplicable anguish possessed him. His face became pale with apprehension. It was marked by constant agitation and anxiety. Seeing this and becoming agitated themselves, the brothers - Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva - approached their eldest and expressed their eagerness to delve into the reasons for his strange sadness. They stood before him with folded hands and inquired, "Lord and master! Day by day we find your countenance rendered dimmer and dimmer; you seem sunk in unfathomable agony, sinking deeper and deeper with every passing hour. You have become too weak to stand firm. If any of us has caused you pain, please tell us; we will guard ourselves against repetition, and we pray for pardon. If all this is due to something else, you have only to tell us about it, we will set it right and restore your mind at the cost of our very lives. When you have such heroes, obedient as we are, to correct anyone, however high and mighty, it's not proper for you to give vent to grief. Tell us the reason and command us what to do," Dharmaraja replied: "What can I tell you, dear brothers? I see ominous things all round. From the homes of ordinary citizens to the hermitages of the saints and sages, wherever my eye falls I see only inauspiciousness, ill fortune, and the negation of joy. I argued within myself that this was only the result of my warped imagination, and I tried my best to muster up courage and confidence. I don't like to fall a prey to my fears. But, I couldn't succeed. Recollecting the scenes made my fear even more fearsome.

Forebodings of the onset of Kali

"To aggravate the sadness, I saw some scenes that are contrary to established morals and dharma. Not only did they come to my actual notice, but the courts of justice in this kingdom have been receiving petitions and pleas regarding wrongs, injustices, iniquities, and misdeeds. This makes me grieve deeply. "I saw some situations that were even worse. Last evening, when returning from a tour of the kingdom, I saw a mother cow refusing to nurse and feed her new-born calf! This is quite strange and contrary to nature. I saw some women wantonly loitering in the bazar. I hoped that they would rush into their homes when they saw me, but no, it didn't happen. They had no reverence for authority; they went on as if I was not in the picture; they continued to talk without restraint to the menfolk. I saw all this with my own eyes. I simply went away from that horrid place.

"Very near the palace, when I was about to enter it, I perceived brahmins selling milk and curds! I saw people emerging from their houses and closing the doors behind them. I found them fixing some iron lump to them, so that they couldn't be opened! [The reference is evidently to locks, which were strange things in Dharmaraja's kingdom, for no one had any fear of thieves.] My mind was very much concerned with all these tragic transformations.

"I tried to forget this state of affairs and started doing the evening rituals, the sacred rite of offering oblations to the consecrated fire, and shall I tell you what happened? The fire couldn't be lit, however hard I tried! O, what a calamity it was. My fears that these events foreboded some great catastrophe is fed by other happenings as well.

Every minute they confirm my premonitions. I find myself too weak to overcome them.

"Perhaps the Kali era has begun or is about to begin, I believe. For how else are we to explain such facts as this: a wife quarreled with her husband and is arguing before the judge in court that she should be permitted to go to her parents, leaving him to himself. How am I to face such a plea in court that she be permitted to dissolve the marriage and leave for her parents' home, deserting her husband? A petition from such a wife was admitted yesterday in

the Court of Justice! How am I to ignore such abominations?

"Why go on recounting these occurrences? Yesterday, the horses in the royal stables started weeping, did you hear? They were shedding copious tears, the grooms reported. Sahadeva tried to investigate the causes of their deep sorrow, but he couldn't discover why, and he was struck with wonder and consternation. These are indications of wholesale destruction, not of any minor danger or small evil." Dharmaraja placed his chin on his upright arm and rested a while, in deep thought Bhima didn't give way to despair. He laughed scornfully and began, "The incidents and events you mention might have happened; I don't deny them. But how can they bring disaster to us? Why should we give up hope?

All these abnormalities can be set right by administrative measures and their enforcement. Your worry over such small matters, which we can correct, is really surprising. Or do you fear the imminent breaking out of another war? Perhaps you are anxious to avoid the ravages that the revival of war might bring about. That contingency is impossible, for all our foes have been exterminated, with their kith and kin. Only we five are left, and we have to seek friends and foes only among ourselves. Rivalry won't break out among us, even in our dreams. So what agitates you? I don't understand why you are afflicted. People will laugh at you when you take these little things to heart and lose peace of mind." Bhima said this and, changing his mighty mace from the right hand to the left, laughed a laugh that was half a jeer.

Dharmaraja suspects the disappearance of Krishna

Dharmaraja replied, "I have the same discrimination and intelligence that you have in these matters. Nor do I have an iota of dread that enemies will overpower us. Didn't we defeat the renowned warriors Bhishma, Drona, and the rest, who could singly and with but one arrow destroy the three worlds? What can any foe do to us? And what can agitate us, we who bear even the direst calamities with fortitude. How can any difference arise between us now, who stood so firm in the days of distress?

"Perhaps you suspect that I am afraid of anything happening to me personally. No, I will never be agitated by anything that might happen to me, for this body is a bubble upon the waters; it is a composite of the five elements waiting to be dissolved back into its components. The dissolution must happen some day; the body is bound to fail, fall, fester, and be reduced to ash or mud. I don't pay heed to its fate.

"My only worry is of one particular matter. I'll disclose it to you without any attempt to conceal its seriousness.

Listen. It is now more or less seven months since Arjuna, our brother, left for Dwaraka. Yet, we haven't heard anything about the welfare and well-being of the Lord of Dwaraka. He didn't even send a message regarding, at least, his arrival in Dwaraka. Of course I'm not worried in the least about Arjuna and his reaching or not reaching Dwaraka. I know that no foe can stand up against him. Moreover, if anything untoward had happened to him, certainly, Krishna would have sent the information to us; of this there is no doubt. So, I am confident that there is no reason to be nervous about him.

"Let me confess: I'm worried about the Lord Himself. My anxiety increases with every passing minute. My heart suffers unbearable agony. I'm overwhelmed by the fear that He may leave this world and resume his permanent abode. What greater reason can there be for sorrow? "If this catastrophe has actually come about, I won't continue to rule this land, widowed by the disappearance of the Master. For us Pandavas, this Vasudeva was all our five vital airs put together; and when He departs, we are but corpses, devoid of vitality. If the Lord is upon the earth, such ominous signs dare not reveal themselves. Injustice and iniquity can have free play only when He is absent; I have no doubt about this. My conscience is clear about it; something tells me that this is the truth." At this, the brothers fell into the depth of grief. They lost all trace of courage. Bhima was the first to recover sufficiently to speak. He mustered some courage in spite of the wave of sadness that smothered him. "Don't picture such a dire calamity and start imagining a catastrophe just because Arjuna hasn't returned or because we haven't heard from him. There must be another reason for Arjuna's silence, or

else Krishna Himself might have neglected to inform us. Let's wait and seek further light; let's not yield to the fantasies that a nervous mind might weave. Let's not clothe them with the vesture of truth. I'm encouraged to speak like this, for one's nervousness is often capable of shaping such fears." But Dharmaraja was in no mood to accept this. He replied: "Whatever you say, however skillfully you argue, I feel that my interpretation is correct. Or else how can such an idea arise in my mind? My left shoulder is registering a shiver, see? This sign confirms my fear that this has actually happened. You know it's a bad omen if the left shoulder shivers for men and the right for women. This thing has taken place in my body, and it is a bad omen. Not merely the shoulder but the entire being - mind, body, intelligence - all are in a shiver. My eyes grow dim, and I am fast losing vision. I see the world as an orphan, having been deprived of its Guardian and Lord. I have lost the faculty of hearing. My legs are shaking helplessly. My limbs have been petrified. They have no life in them.

"What greater proof do you need to assert that the Lord has left? Believe me, dear brothers. Even if you don't, facts won't change. The earth is shaking under our feet. Don't you hear the eerie noises emanating from the agonised heart of the earth? Tanks and lakes are shaken into waves. The sky, air, fire, waters, and the earth all moaning their fate, for they have lost their Master.

"How much more evidence do you need to be convinced? News came some days back of showers of blood raining in some parts of our kingdom." Hearing these words, streams of tears coursed down the cheeks of Nakula and Sahadeva, even as they stood before their brother. Their hearts were struck with pain and they couldn't stand, for their legs failed them.

10. The Krishna Mystery

Arjuna brings bad news of Krishna's demise

Bhima managed to muster up courage. "Brother! Grant me leave, and I'll go to Dwaraka and return quickly, bringing full information of all that happened to remove your fear." Even while Bhima was praying on bended knees for permission, the sun set and the lamps started emitting feeble light, from every place.

A guard from the main entrance rushed in, announcing that Arjuna had come and was approaching the royal apartment. Everyone rose as if they had suddenly come to life; they hurried forward to meet Arjuna, thirsty for news from Dwaraka. Arjuna came in, depressed and despondent, devoid of any sign of joy. Without looking the brothers in the face, he rolled over Dharmaraja's feet.

The signs confirmed Dharmaraja's fear, and he became eager to inquire further. He asked about the welfare of friends and kinsmen at Dwaraka. Arjuna couldn't rise or turn his head. The brothers, seeing Dharmaraja's feet streaming with the tears shed by Arjuna, were shocked into immobility. Dharmaraja lost all hold on his mind. He tried to lift Arjuna. Shaking him by the shoulders, he shouted in agony into his ear, "Brother! What happened?

What happened? What happened to the Yadavas? Tell us! Our hearts are about to burst. Save us from terrible anguish." But Arjuna didn't reply. He couldn't rise or even spell out words. Dharmaraja continued raining questions on him, asking about the welfare of the Yadavas and others, mentioning them by name and asking about each one separately. Arjuna didn't react even to this desperate fusillade. He showed no response. He didn't raise his face and look on his brothers.

"You needn't tell us the rest, but this you must tell us: what has Vasudeva directed you to tell us, what is his message to us; tell us that," Dharmaraja

appealed. Arjuna could bear it no longer. The grief that he had held back so long gushed out in full flood. "We have Vasudeva no more. Oh, we are orphaned. We couldn't keep Him. We have no more luck," he said and fell on his face, sobbing on the floor.

Sahadeva grasped the situation and its possibilities and closed all doors that led into the hall; he engaged himself in trying to soothe Arjuna's distress.

"Alas, that we lived to hear this. What fate! O, destiny, how could you treat the world so cruelly?" the brothers lamented together. "Lord, why have you deserted the Pandavas? Why this breach of trust? We survived to hear this news; this is the result of the accumulation of sin during many generations." Each one was submerged in his own grief, in his own despair, and the hall was filled with gloomy silence.

Dharmaraja braved the silence first. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he asked Arjuna in pathetic tones. "Do you have news of the parents' condition and of Nanda, Yasoda, and other Yadavas? Tell us about them. They must be broken with the grief of separation from the Lord. When we have been reduced to this helpless depth, what can we say of them? They must be sunk in unfathomable despair. How can they keep body and breath together?

Why refer to individuals? The entire city of Dwaraka must have sunk in the sea of inconsolable grief. Dharmaraja sobbed with sorrow as he pictured these scenes.

The Yadavas go berserk due to a curse

Seeing him in this condition, Arjuna said, "Brother! The people of Dwaraka are far more lucky than ourselves.

We are the least fortunate. We are the only hardened beings that have withstood the shock of the news of the departure of Vasudeva from this world. The rest left the world even before news came of His departure." Dharmaraja exclaimed, "Hari, Hari, O God! What did you say? What is this

catastrophe? I don't understand anything. Did the sea rise and engulf Dwaraka? Or did a wild barbarian horde invade and overwhelm the city and slaughter the population? Arjuna, tell us what happened. Put an end to our frightful surmises, which raise up awful pictures." Dharmaraja held Arjuna's hand and turned his face up in an attempt to make him answer his queries.

Arjuna replied, "No, no sea got furious and swallowed Dwaraka; no ruler led his army against that city.

Wickedness and vileness grew madly wild among the Yadavas themselves and excited their strife and hate to such an extent that they slaughtered each other with their own weapons." Dharmaraja asked him, "Arjuna, some overpowering force must have urged the Yadava clan, young and old, to sacrifice themselves in this holocaust. No effect can happen without a cause, can it?" He waited for the details of what had led to the slaughter.

Arjuna paused a little to overcome the grief surging within him and then began his account of the events.

The other three brothers drew near and heard the tragic tale. "I learned that day that not even the tiniest event can happen unless willed by Vasudeva. I got fully convinced of this. He is the puppeteer (sutradhari), the holder of the strings that move the puppets and make them act their roles, but He seats Himself among the spectators and pretends to be unaware of the plot or story or cast. The characters cannot deviate a dot from His directions; His Will guides and determines every single movement and gesture. The varying emotions and events on the stage by which the drama unrolls itself affect the hearts of those who witness the play, but they don't cause a ruffle in the heart of the puppeteer.

"He decides what this person should say or that person should do, and He prompts the appropriate words and deeds (karma) in them. And, the consequence of the deeds performed and inherited by each individual from previous lives also adds its quota to this destiny. The Yadavas, who are our own kith and kin, were spiritual personages, full of devotion to God, as you all

know well. Perhaps, some day some sage had cast a curse on them, or else some day some dire sin was committed by them. For how else can we explain this sudden upset in their history, this unexpected tragedy?

"For seven full days, they performed a magnificent sacrifice (yajna) at Prabhasa-kshetra. It was celebrated in unprecedented pomp and style. The valedictory offering was poured in the sacred fire in true Vedic grandeur in the presence of Lord Krishna Himself. The participants and priests later performed the ceremonial bath in holy waters. The brahmins then received their share of the sacrificial offerings and distributed it to the Yadavas also.

Everything went off in an atmosphere of perfect calm, contentment, and joy.

"Toward noon, brahmins were served with food; afterward, the Yadavas seated themselves in long lines to partake of the feast. During the feast, as ill luck would have it, some of the Yadavas filled themselves with drink and lost self control so much that they mistook their own kinsmen as their foes. They started quarrels, which raged into fights of severe fierceness. It must have been in the plan of God, for however unruly and vile a man might be, he would not slaughter his own children and parents with his own hands. O, the horror of it! In the general melee that ensued, son killed father, father killed son, brother slew brother, son-in-law killed father-in-law, father-in-law killed son-in-law, in one insane orgy of blind hate, until no one was left alive!" Arjuna couldn't speak further; he leaned against the wall and held his head, bursting with pain and grief, between his pressing palms.

Dharmaraja listened with anguish and amazement. He placed his hand on Arjuna's back and said, "What are you saying? It's unbelievable. Since your tongue would never speak untruth, I'm forced to put faith in its correctness, or else how can we ever imagine such a sudden transformation of character and such a lightning massacre?

I have never seen or heard anywhere such intensity of mutual friendship as marked the Yadava clan. Besides, they don't deviate in the least from the path marked out for them by Krishna. They wouldn't deflect from it even on

the most frantically furious occasions. That they would beat one another to death in Krishna's very presence, regardless of all canons of good behaviour, is strange indeed. Such a turn of events comes only when the end of the world is near.

"Well, Arjuna! Couldn't Krishna stop the fight and advise them to desist? Did He try to bring about some compromise between the factions and send them back to their places? Krishna is the greatest adept in the art of war and peace, isn't he? That He didn't try to stop this tragedy makes me wonder more at this awful tale of destruction." Dharmaraja was lost in sorrow. He sat with his head resting on his clenched fist, his hand placed on his knee, and his eyes so full of tears that they rolled down his cheeks continuously.

Krishna is the Master Director

Arjuna tried to speak some words of consolation. "Maharaja! You are aware of Krishna's glory and grace, and yet you ask questions and entertain doubts whether He did this or that. How can I reply? The Yadavas' fate is the same as the fate of our own clan. Weren't we and the Kauravas brothers? We had kinsmen who were wellwishers on both sides, and we had this same Shyamasundar (Krishna) in our midst, but we had to go through the Kurukshetra battle. Can't we see that this war wouldn't have happened had He not willed it so? The forty lakhs of warriors who died on the battlefield wouldn't have been lost then, right? Did we ever wish to rule over this land after slaughtering all these? Nothing can ever happen without His express command. No one can cross His will or act against His command.

"This world is the stage on which each one acts the role He allotted him, on which each one struts about for the time given by Him, and each one has to obey His instructions without fail or falter. We may think in pride that we have done this or that by ourselves, but the truth is that everything happens as He wills." When Arjuna concluded, Dharmaraja thought aloud. "Arjuna! Many motives dragged us into the Mahabharatha War. We tried our best through diplomacy and peaceful means to regain our kingdom, our status, and what was legitimately our due. We bore patiently many insults and discomfitures.

We had to wander in the jungle as exiles. Through divine grace, we escaped many a plot laid to kill us. They tried arson and poison on us. They heaped public ignominy on our queen. They broke our hearts by systematic ill-treatment.

"There are only three reasons for the final fight everywhere: wealth, dominion, and woman. But consider the Yadavas - they had no such reason to fall out among themselves in mortal combat. It appears as if destiny was the only overpowering reason for this cataclysm.

"The Yadavas were rolling in plenty. They had no lack of grain or gold. And their wives? They were models of virtue - faithful and devoted. They never deviated from the wishes or commands of their husbands. They couldn't bring insult or discomfiture to their lords from any quarter. How then could faction and internecine strife raise their heads so suddenly among them?" Arjuna replied, "My dear brother! We see the outer circumstances, the processes that result in the final event, and in our ignorance we judge that this set of causes produced these effects. We guess the nature of emotions and feelings from what we gauge from events. But circumstances, events, emotions, and feelings are all simply 'instruments' in His hands, serving His will and His purpose. When the moment comes, He uses them for His plan and brings about the fight He has willed. He is the embodiment of time (kala); He comes as the Master of Time and, through some denouement of the plot, He finishes the drama. That which brought about birth brings about death, too. He finds reason for both in the same degree. Do we seek to know why there was a birth? No. Then, why seek to know why death occurs? It occurs; that's enough. Reason-finding is a superfluous occupation.

"He causes beings to create beings, and He causes beings to end beings. Bodies get born, bodies die; nothing more serious happens at birth or death. This was taught us often by Vasudeva. Why then should we doubt or deviate from the steady courage He sought to give us?

"You might say that it is not just, that He who caused us to be born should be the person who kills us. Between birth and death, man does have some

capacity to earn merit and demerit, and this has some influence on the course of events. Within these limits, the Lord plays the game of football with birth, death, and life.

"Birth and death are two high cliffs between which the river of life flows. The force of Atmic faith is the bridge that spans the chasm, and for those who have developed that force and faith, floods are of no concern.

With Atmic faith as their safe support, they can reach the other bank, braving all dangers. O, King! All this is but a grand puppet show by that Master Director. The Yadavas today, like the Kauravas yesterday, had no individuality of their own; there is no use blaming either.

"Can this material body composed of the five elements - earth, water, fire, air and ether - move or act without His prompting? No. It is His amusement to cause one to be born through another and to cause one to die through another. How else can you explain the fact of the snake laying eggs, warming them to bring out the young, and then eating the very children thus born? Even among them, it eats up only those whose term is ended, so to say, not every one of the snakelings. The fish that live in the waters get caught in nets when their term ends; why, the small fish get eaten by the big ones and they in their turn get swallowed by even bigger ones. This is His law.

The snake eats the frog, the peacock eats the snake; this is His game. Who can probe into the reasons for this? The truth is: 'Every single event is the decision of this Balagopala.' The deep mystery of the Lord's play "We can't sense the mystery of His play. We have failed to understand it. There is no profit in worrying over that failure now. With that deluding human form, He moved with us, mixed with us, dined with us, behaved as if He was our kinsman and well-wisher, friend, and guide, and saved us from many a calamity that threatened to overwhelm us. He showered divine mercy on us and solved for us the toughest problems that defied solution, in remarkably simple ways. During all this time that He was near and dear to us, we were carried away by pride that we had His grace; we did not try to fill ourselves with that supreme joy, to dive deep into the flood of His grace.

We sought from Him mere external victory and temporal benefits; we ignored the vast treasure with which we could have filled our hearts. We never contemplated on His real reality.

"He guarded us as if we five were the five vital airs (pancha-prana) for Him. He came forward to help us and lead us in every undertaking, however small, and He fulfilled it for us. Brothers! What shall I say? We might be born many times over, but we can never have again such a friend and kinsman. I received love much more intense than that of a mother from Him, a love that no mother can confer.

"On many occasions, He bore the burdens of the Pandavas as His own, and to relieve us of the bother, He used to plan measures within minutes and carry them on to final success. It is due to the gift of His grace that we Pandavas have survived in this world to this day.

"Why repeat a thousand things separately? Every drop of blood coursing through these veins is but a drop from the shower of His grace. Every muscle is but a lump of His love. Every bone and cartilage is but a piece of His mercy. Unable to understand this secret, we strutted about, boasting 'I achieved this' and 'I accomplished this'. Now it has become clear to us that without Him we are but bags of skin.

"Of course, all men have the same fate. They forget that the All-ruling, All-knowing Almighty plays with them as puppets; they assume they are the actual doers and enjoyers; like me, they are plunged in ignorance of the basic truth. When we who are far-famed heroes and warriors are in this sad plight, what can we say of ordinary folk who have no chance of awakening into this spiritual wisdom (jnana)? For this, the sad experience I had on my way is the 'direct proof'." Thus spoke Arjuna. He fell back, leaning against the chair that was behind him; for he couldn't bear separation from his life-long support and guide, Krishna.

11. The Pandavas' Grief

Krishna commands Arjuna to protect Yadava survivors

Dharmaraja, who was lost in contemplation, recapitulating the advice, help, grace, love, and sympathy that they had earned from Lord Krishna, suddenly raised his head and asked, "Arjuna, what did you say? What calamity overtook you on the way? Tell us in full, dear brother!" He slowly lifted Arjuna's chin while asking so.

Arjuna looked his brother in the face and said, "Brother, all my skill and attainments have departed with Lord Arjuna. I am now without any powers, incapable of any achievement, weaker than the weakest, indeed lifeless.

"Brother, listen. This most unlucky fellow did not have the chance to be with Lord Vasudeva when He left for His Abode, even though he was in Dwaraka at that time. I hadn't earned enough merit to get that chance. I couldn't have the sight (darshan) of our divine Father before He left. Later, the charioteer of the Lord, Daruka, gave me the message He had given for me when He departed. He wrote this message with His own Hand." Arjuna took from the folds of his dress the letter that he considered more precious even than life, for it was written by Krishna's own Hand. He gave it to Dharmaraja, who received it reverentially with alacrity and anxiety.

He pressed it on his eyes, which were full of tears. He tried to decipher the writing through the curtain of tears, but with no success.

It began, "Arjuna! This is my command; carry it out without demur and to the full. Execute this task with courage and earnestness." After this express injunction, Krishna had elaborated on the task in the following words, "I have accomplished the mission on which I had come. I shall no longer be in this world, with body. I am departing. Seven days from today, Dwaraka will sink into the sea; the sea will swallow everything except the house I had occupied.

Therefore, you have to take the queens and other women who survive to Indraprastha City, along with the children and babies and the old and decrepit. I am leaving, placing all responsibility for the women and other Yadava survivors in your hands. Care for them as you care for your own life; arrange for them at Indraprastha and protect them from danger." The postscript said, "Thus writes Gopala on leaving for His Home." Dharmaraja finished reading. Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva were shedding copious tears and squatting like rocks, oblivious to everything else.

Arjuna is overwhelmed by wild band of nomads

Arjuna said, "Brother, I had no desire to live for a moment more without the Lord in our midst, so I resolved to drown myself in the sea that was to swallow Dwaraka. I decided to split my own head with this bow and die.

But this command forced me to desist. The order from Him who ordains the universe tied me to this earth. I had no time to plan any line of action; everything had to be done quickly.

"So, I got the last rites done for the dead, according to the scriptures. Then in great anxiety, lest the sea swallow Dwaraka before the women, children, and old people were evacuated, I hurried them to come and started for Indraprastha, as commanded by Krishna. We left Dwaraka with no mind to leave it. We managed to reach the borders of Panchanada (Punjab) with hearts heavy on account of Krishna's absence, but I was urged forward by the need to obey the divine injunction and to carry the burden of those people according to that injunction, "The sun was setting one day. At that late hour, we dared not cross a flooded river that impeded our progress.

I decided to encamp on the bank of that river for the night. We collected the jewels and valuables of all the women and kept them in a secure place; the queens alighted from the palanquins, and the maids scattered themselves for rest. I approached the river for the evening rites, dragging myself along with the sadness of separation from Krishna. Meanwhile, pitch darkness pervaded the place, and soon we heard wild barbarian war cries from the surrounding

darkness. I peered into the night and found a horde of forest-dwelling nomads rushing upon us with sticks, spears, and daggers. They laid hands on the jewels and valuables and started dragging away the women, binding them hand and foot.

"I shouted and threatened them with dire consequences. 'Why do you fall like moths into fire,' I asked them.

'Why be like fish that meet death craving for the angler's worm?' I told them. 'Don't meet death in this vain attempt to collect loot,' I warned them. 'I imagine you don't know who I am. Haven't you heard of the redoubtable bowman, Pandu's son Arjuna, who overwhelmed and defeated the three world-conquerors, Drona, Bhishma, and Karna? I'll dispatch the whole lot of you to the Kingdom of Death with a twang of this bow, my incomparable Gandiva. Flee before you meet destruction, or else feed this hungry bow with your lives.' Arjuna's weaponry fails with his loss of memory "But they went about their nefarious task undismayed. Their cruel attack didn't abate; they fell upon our camp and dared attack even me. I held myself in readiness and fitted divine arrows to efface them all. But alas, a terrible thing happened; I can't explain how or why! I couldn't remember a single sacred formulae to fill the missile with potency! I forgot the processes of invocation and revocation. I was helpless.

"Before my very eyes, the robbers dragged away the queens, maids, and others. They were screaming in agony, calling on me by name, 'Arjuna! Arjuna! Save us; rescue us; don't you hear us? Why are you deaf to our cries? Are you giving us over to these brigands? Had we known that this would be our fate, we would have died in the sea like our city, Dwaraka.' I heard it all, in terrible agony; I saw it all. They were screaming and fleeing in all directions - women, children, the aged, and the infirm. Like a lion whose teeth have been plucked out and whose claws have been sheared, I couldn't harm the ruffians. I couldn't string my bow. I attacked them with the arrows in my clasp. Very soon, even the stock of arrows was exhausted. My heart was burning with anger and shame.

I became disgusted with my own pusillanimity. I felt as if I was dead. All my efforts were in vain. The greatly blessed 'inexhaustible' receptacle of arrows had failed me after Vasudeva had left.

"My might and skill had gone with Krishna when He went from here. Or else, how did this misfortune occur of my being a helpless witness of this kidnapping of women and children entrusted to my care? I was tortured on one side by the separation from Krishna and on the other by the agony of not carrying out His orders. Like a strong wind that fans the fire, this calamity added fuel to the anguish of my heart. And the queens - those who were living in golden palaces in the height of luxury! When I contemplate their fate in the hands of those fierce savages, my heart is reduced to ashes. O Lord! O Krishna! Is it for this that you rescued us from danger in the past - to inflict this drastic punishment on us?" Arjuna wept aloud and beat his head against the wall in despair, and the room was filled with grief. Everyone shivered in despair. The hardest rock would have melted in sympathy. Streams of hot tears flowed from Bhima's eyes. Dharmaraja was overpowered with fear when he saw him weeping so. He went to Bhima and spoke lovingly and tenderly to him in order to console him. Bhima came to himself after some time. He fell at Dharmaraja's feet and said, "Brother! I don't want to live any more. Give me leave. I'll go into the forest and immolate myself with the name of Krishna on my lips and reach Home. Without Krishna, this world, is hell to me." He wiped the hot tears with the cloth in his hand.

12. The Kali Age Dawns

Krishna's leaving marks the beginning of the Kali age

Sahadeva, who had been silent so long, approached Bhima and said, "Calm yourself, don't get excited. Remember the reply Krishna gave Dhritharashtra that day in the open assembly, when He proceeded there to negotiate peace between us?" Bhima said, "When Krishna was questioned in Dhritharashtra's court by Duryodhana, Dussasana, and others as to why He should intercede in the family disputes of the Kauravas and Pandavas and favour one section more than another, as if the Pandavas were nearer kin to Him than the Kauravas, what did the Lord reply? Remind yourselves of that reply now. Picture that scene before your eyes. Pacing up and down, like a lion cub, He roared, 'What did you say? Are the Kauravas as near to Me as the Pandavas? No, they can never be on the same level.

Listen, I shall tell you of the kinship that binds Me to the Pandavas: For this body of mine, Dharmaraja is as the trunk, and Nakula and Sahadeva are as the two feet. For the body constituted like this, Krishna is the heart. The limbs act on the strength of the heart; without it, they are lifeless.' "What does that declaration mean to us? It means we Pandavas will be lifeless because the heart has gone out of action. We are to meet dissolution. The Lord, who is time incarnate, is striving to merge us into Himself.

We have to be ready to answer His call.

"This is proof enough that the Kali Age has come. The day Krishna left this world, the doors of the Dwapara age closed and the gates of Kali opened. Otherwise, how could these evil forces and wicked minds roam about unchecked? Can Arjuna, who never forgets the ritual formulae for each divine arrow sent from his bow, even when the battle is raging most ferociously and fast - can he ever forget them in the direst crisis of the barbarian attack on that convoy of women and children? Certainly, the time-spirit of the Kali Age caused this dire calamity." Nakula also joined at this stage."Brothers, the

eastern sky reveals approaching dawn. Let's inform the queens and our revered mother of these developments; let's decide our the next step without delay. The body won't be dissolved immediately after the breath leaves, right? Of course, life went out of us the moment Krishna left, but the limbs will be warm for a little while. We have to reach Krishna's presence today or tomorrow. Let's not waste time in grief and anguish. Instead, let's think of the path we have to tread next and prepare for that journey." Everyone agreed with this suggestion, so full of wise detachment.

There was some anxiety about how the news would affect Droupadi, Subhadra, and the aged mother, but they ignored that anxiety and decided to communicate the news. For when the Lord Himself has left, why should anyone be anxious about what might happen to anyone else? The brothers resolved that Dharmaraja, the eldest, should go to the mother. That was the proper course, they thought.

Kunthi worries and waits for Arjuna's visit

Joy consumes time more quickly than grief does. When men are in joy, time passes fast; when in grief, it moves slowly. Grief is heavy, like a mountain range; it is like the final flood. Though the capital city of Dharmaraja was Indraprastha, the ancestral throne was still at Hasthinapura, because that place had lost its other glories when the Mahabharatha battle carried away the princes of the royal line and all senior scions. Therefore, Dharmaraja was spending some months at Indraprastha and the remaining part of the year at Hasthinapura. Unaware of this, Arjuna had gone to Indraprastha. Not finding Dharmaraja there, he had left the few women of Dwaraka whom he could retrieve from the barbarian hordes there and went to Hasthinapura alone. One solitary Yadava was there, a grandson of Krishna, named Vajra, the only survivor of the male population of Dwaraka. Poor Vajra had no mind to show his face to others, for he was so ashamed at having survived. He was so miserable at the death of all the rest that he hid himself in a dark room and sulked all the time, gloomy and alone.

The Queen Mother, Kunthi Devi, learned from a maid that Arjuna had arrived

within a short time after his arrival. She kept vigil the entire night, expecting Arjuna to rush to her and tell her the news from Dwaraka. She kept the lamps burning and refused to go to sleep. Whenever the slightest noise of footsteps reached her ears, she rose in joy that Arjuna had come, uttering the words: "O Son! I'm glad you came. What's the news?" When no answer came, she called her maid and asked, "What's the matter? Didn't you tell me that Arjuna had arrived from Dwaraka? Why hasn't he come to me yet? You must have been mistaken; you must have seen someone else arriving and mistaken him for Arjuna. If he had come, surely he would have been here immediately." Thus, Kunthi spent a sleepless night between expectation and disappointment.

Day dawned. Everyone was getting busy with their assignment. Meanwhile, her mind had undergone many questionings. Why hadn't Arjuna come to her? Had he really returned? Was he kept away by some urgent political problem that had to be discussed among the brothers until the small hours of the night? Or was he so tired by travel that he resolved to see his mother early next day instead of the same night? Or had some crisis developed in Dwaraka for which Krishna directed him to consult Dharmaraja urgently and bring him his reaction and solution?

Had he forgotten his duty to his mother in the confusion of these crises? Of course, he would come when the day has dawned, she finally told herself.

So, she rose even when darkness still enveloped the earth. She bathed and put on new clothes and got ready to receive her son. Just then, another doubt arose in her mind and agitated her. Every night, all her sons would invariably come to her presence, one behind the other, and fall at her feet, craving permission to go to bed, seeking her blessings. She wondered why not even one had come that night. This made her anxiety worse. She sent maids to Droupadi's and Subhadra's apartments and found that none of the brothers had even eaten dinner! Kunthi sank deeper into anxiety.

Kunthi dies on hearing news of Krishna's demise

When her mind was thus torn with travail, an old female attendant entered and informed her that Dharmaraja, accompanied by Arjuna, was coming to see her. Kunthi was agitated by fear at what they might tell her, by joy that she was meeting Arjuna after a long absence, and by eagerness to hear the news of the Yadavas. It made an amalgam of expectancy. She was shivering because she was unable to contain this anxiety.

Dharmaraja came in, fell at her feet, and stood silent. Arjuna couldn't raise himself from her feet for a long time. It was Kunthi who spoke to him, words of consolation. "Poor fellow! How did you manage to be away from me for such a long time?" She caressed him lovingly, but even before she spoke words of blessing or asked about his health and welfare, she asked, "Arjuna! I heard you arrived last night; is it true? Why didn't you come to me during the night? How can a mother who knows that her son has returned from a long absence sleep in peace without seeing him? Well, I'm glad you have come at least now, with the break of dawn. Tell me the news. Are your father-in-law, mother-in-law, and grandfather quite well? My brother, Vasudeva, is very old now; how is he?

Is he moving about? Or is he bedridden as I am? Is he being nursed as I am, dependent for everything on others?" She was holding Arjuna's hands, and her eyes were fixed on his face. Suddenly she asked, "What is this I see, my son? How did you grow so dark? Why are your eyes bloated and reddened like this?" "I understand! Dwaraka is far away, and the long jungle journey has told upon you. The dust and sun have affected you; the exhaustion of the road is written on your face. Let it go. Tell me what my Shyamasundar, my Krishna has asked you to tell me. When is He coming here? Or has He no desire to see me? Did he say anything?

Of course, He is Vasudeva; He can see all from wherever He is. When am I to see Him again? Will this ripe fruit be on the tree until He comes?" She asked questions and answered them herself many times. She provided no opening for either Arjuna or Dharmaraja to say what they wanted. Tears flowed without hindrance from Arjuna's eyes tears. Kunthi observed this strange phenomenon. She drew Arjuna closer to herself and had his head on her

shoulder. "Son, Arjuna, what has happened? Tell me. I have never seen tears in your eyes. Did Gopala find fault with you and send you away, because you are unfit to be with Him? Did any such terrible calamity happen to you?" She was overwhelmed with grief but was trying her best to console her son.

Dharmaraja hid his own face with both hands, groaning amidst sobs, "Mother! You speak of our Vasudeva still? It is ten days since He left us. He has gone to His own place. All the Yadavas have died." Even as he was speaking, Kunthi opened her eyes wide, asking, "What? My Gopala ... my Nandananda ...

the Treasure of my heart ... has He widowed the earth? O Krishna ... Krishna...," and, as if going to seek Him that very moment, she passed away.

13. The Coronation Of Parikshith

Pandavas lament the loss of their mother

Kunthi Devi took the road that Krishna had taken. The lifeless body was left. Arjuna wept aloud, "Brother!

What shall I say? We have lost our mother." Dharmaraja was shaken hard by the shock; he stepped toward the body and, finding the face blanched, stood petrified.

The maids outside the door heard Arjuna's words and peeped into the room. Kunthi Devi's body was lying on the floor; Arjuna had the head on his lap and was intently looking at the face with tearful eyes. The maids of the palace transmitted the news from one to another; they entered and realised that the dowager Queen had left them, without possibility of return. They wept aloud at the heart-breaking calamity.

Meanwhile, news reached the queens in the inner apartments. Within seconds, the sad tidings spread all over Hasthinapura. The queens were overcome with grief; they tottered in, beating their breasts in anguish. In an endless stream of sorrow, the denizens of the palace flowed into the apartment. Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, and the ministers were overpowered with grief.

The air was filled with indescribable agony. Nobody could believe that Kunthi Devi, who just a few minutes ago was so eagerly awaiting her son Arjuna to hear the news from Dwaraka, could have passed away so soon.

Those who came and saw stood mute and motionless. The wailing of the maids, the groans of the queens, and the grief of the sons melted the rockiest heart.

Dharmaraja consoled everyone and instilled some courage. He told them not

to give way to grief. He didn't shed tears but moved about bravely, directing everyone and infusing strength of mind. This made everyone wonder at his self-control. The ministers approached him and said, "O King, your unruffled nature fills us with admiration. You revered your mother and treated her as the very breath of your life. How has your heart taken her death so callously?" Dharmaraja smiled at their anxiety. "Ministers. I am filled with envy when I think of her death. She is indeed most fortunate. The world dropped from her life as soon as she heard the news of Krishna moving on to his heavenly Home. She left immediately to that Home, for she could not bear the pang of separation from Him.

"We are most unfortunate. We were so near Him and derived so much bliss (ananda) from Him. We heard of His departure, and yet we are alive! Had we really the devotion that we claim, we would have dropped the body like her when we heard of that loss. Fie on us! We are but burdens on the earth. All our years are a waste." When the citizens and others learned that Kunthi Devi had died as soon as she heard the news of Krishna's departure from the world, they wept even louder, for the grief at losing Krishna was far greater than the grief at losing the dowager queen. Many behaved as if they had suddenly become insane; many beat their heads on the walls of their houses. They felt miserable and forlorn.

It was as if petrol had been poured on a fire. In the flock of unbearable anguish, born out of the double loss, Dharmaraja was the only calm soul. He consoled the queens. He spoke softly and assuringly to each and told them that there was no meaning in lamenting the loss of the mother or departure of the Lord. Each of them had their course according to a predetermined plan. "It remains only for us to fulfil our destiny through appropriate steps," he said.

Kunthi's funeral

Dharmaraja called Arjuna. "Arjuna, dear brother, let's not delay any further. Mother's funeral rites must be begun immediately, and Parikshith must be crowned Emperor. We should leave Hasthinapura tonight. Every moment appears an age to me." Dharmaraja was filled with extreme detachment, but

Arjuna was filled with even more renunciation. He lifted the mother's head from his lap and placed it on the floor. He ordered Nakula and Sahadeva to make preparation for Parikshith's coronation. He gave instructions to others - ministers, officers, and so forth - on the arrangements to be made in view of the decision of the king and the princes. He was very busy, indeed. Bhima busied himself with the arrangements for the mother's funeral.

The ministers, citizens, priests, and gurus, were full of wonder, admiration, and sadness at the strange developments and incidents in the palace. They were sunk in grief and despair, but they had to keep it all to themselves.

They were also affected by a strong wave of detachment. Struck with wonder, they exclaimed, "Ah, His paternal uncle and aunt left the palace all of a sudden. The news of Krishna's departure fell like a thunderbolt on the head already distracted by this calamity. Then quite soon, the mother passed away; before the corpse was removed from where she fell, Dharmaraja is preparing for the coronation! And the Emperor is planning to give up everything - power, riches, status, authority - and move into the forest with all his brothers! Only these Pandavas can have such steady courage and renunciation. No one else is capable of this boldness." Within minutes, the funeral rites were performed. The brahmins were called in. Dharmaraja decided to have a simple coronation ceremony. The subordinate rulers and tributary kings were not to be invited; nor could invitations be given to citizens and kinsmen at Indraprastha.

Parikshith's coronation, amid acclamation and sorrow

Of course, a coronation in the Bharatha Dynasty, seating a ruler on the sacred lion throne of that line, was usually a grand affair. The date would be fixed months in advance, the auspicious moment chosen with meticulous care, and elaborate preparations on a magnificent scale would follow. But now, in a matter of minutes, everything was got ready with whatever material was available and whoever was near at hand.

Parikshith was given a ceremonial bath, the crown jewels were put on him,

and he was brought to the throne by the brahmins and ministers. He was placed on the throne. Everyone in the hall wept in distress as Dharmaraja placed the diamond-studded diadem on Parikshith's head with his own hands. The imperial authority that had to be assumed to the joyous acclamation of the people was imposed on the boy to the accompaniment of groans and sobs.

Parikshith, the newly crowned Emperor was weeping. Even Dharmaraja, the man who crowned him, couldn't stop his tears in spite of his best efforts. The hearts of all the spectators were torn by agonising sorrow. Who can stem the force of destiny? Fate executes every act at the time and place and in the manner it has to be so executed.

Man is nothing before It; he is helpless.

Parikshith was a well-bred, virtuous boy; he watched the sadness that pervaded every face and noted the incidents and happenings in the palace. He had sat on the throne because he felt he shouldn't transgress the command of his elders. But, suddenly, he fell at Dharmaraja's feet and pleaded pathetically, "My Lord! Whatever your wish, I will honour and obey. But please don't desert me, don't leave me alone." He didn't give up his hold on the feet; he continued weeping and praying. All who saw the tragic scene wept, even the hardest could not but weep.

It was terrible, fraught with dire distress.

The boy fell at the feet of his grandfather, Arjuna, and cried piteously. "Grandpa! How can you move out of here with peace in your hearts after placing this heavy burden of empire on my head? I am a child who knows nothing; I am very foolish; I am ignorant; I have no qualifications; I am incompetent. It is not just, it is not proper for you to lay this empire, which has been in the care of a long line of heroes, statesmen, warriors, and wise men, and remove yourselves to the forest, on my head. Let someone else bear this responsibility; take me with you to the forest."

14. The Exit Of The Pandavas

Parikshith pleads not to be left behind

It was a pitiable sight. Parikshith, the little boy with the crown on his head, plaintively approached his grandfather and others, clung to their feet, and pleaded to accompany them into the forest. He would eat roots and fruits, engage himself in sacred ceremonials, and be happy. "Please entrust the kingdom to some virtuous minister and allow me to come with you, so that I might serve you and make my life worthwhile," he appealed. Those in the hall were moved to tears by his agony at being left behind. Rocks would have melted in sympathy, had they listened to his anguish.

Dharmaraja managed heroically to suppress his emotions; he lifted the boy, placed him on his lap, and poured consolation and courage into his ear. "Dear child! Don't become so weak-minded. You are a child born in the dynasty of Bharatha; can a sheep be born in a dynasty of lions? Your father, mother, and grandfathers are full of courage, bold champions of truth, who made their names famous in the world. So it is not fit for you to weep thus. Henceforward, these brahmins are your grandfathers, your parents. Take their advice and rule this land accordingly.

Live up to the grandeur and glory of your name. Stop grieving over us."

But the boy was lovingly adamant in spite of all the persuasive advice of the elders. He lamented, "Grandpa!

I'm too young to convince you with my pleading. I know it. But listen. I lost my father even before I was born.

You brought me up with the care and affection that my father would have showered upon me had he lived. And now, when I love to sing and play and roam about with my companions, you hoist this great empire on my head.

Can this be right? Is it justice? Instead of leaving me alone, steeped in sorrow, you could sever my head with your sword and then leave. What harm did I do to you that you should punish me thus? Couldn't you have scotched me in my mother's womb on the day my father died? Was my lifeless body resuscitated just for you to inflict this assignment on me?" Parikshith continued to condemn himself for his fate, in this strain, for a long time.

Arjuna infuses courage into wailing Parikshith

Arjuna couldn't stand it any longer. He covered the boy's mouth with his palm; he caressed the child with sweet affection; he pressed his lips on his head. "Child! It is a disgrace to the protector (kshatriya) clan to behave like a coward. We also lost our father; we also grew up under the fostering care of ascetics and monks. At last, we were able to win our uncle's affection and, after overcoming many a formidable handicap, we established our sovereignty over this kingdom. He who guarded us, guided us, and directed our steps throughout will certainly be your guardian and guide. Don't lose heart; follow the advice that these brahmins and ministers will render for some years. Later, you will be able to solve the problems of the empire yourself," he said.

Parikshith could not be assuaged. He said, "Grandpa! Are you now discarding the throne and the kingdom and placing them on my head? Well, be with me for some years more, teach me the art and principles of government and then leave. I was happy and free, romping and roaming with no trace of care, for I was confident I had grandfathers to guard me, though I had lost my father. Now. If you too desert me, what will be my fate? You were the centre of all my hopes, the support on which I relied. And you are deserting me and plunging me suddenly into despair." He wept aloud, rending the hearts of all who saw and heard. He rolled on the ground, holding the feet of the elders.

Arjuna lifted him up with both hands and embraced him. He kept him on his shoulders and fondled him. He wiped the strings of pearly tears that rolled down his cheeks. He couldn't stop his own tears while doing so. Turning to the brahmins standing around, gazing at all this, Arjuna asked them why they

were only silent witnesses, not attempting to console the boy.

They were really too full of grief themselves to think of assuaging Parikshith. They said, "The sharp words this child is lisping are wounding us like arrows; his anguish is petrifying us. What can we tell him? How can we console him? What can instil courage in him now?" They too were overcome with grief.

Kripacharya, the family teacher, succeeded at last in suppressing his grief. He wiped the tears from his eyes with the ends of his garment and spoke to Arjuna, "What do you want us to tell this boy? We don't feel like saying anything. We are struck dumb. This day, you are renouncing the empire that you gained after a victory for which rivers of blood flowed, for which millions laid down their lives, for which you strove for years. You haven't ruled over it for a thousand years, no, not even for a couple of centuries, or even for seventy years. Who can say what lies in the womb of time? Of course, the actions of the great will have some inner purpose. Pardon us; you are our overlords; you know best." Kripacharya stood with head bent, for he was heavy with grief.

Dharmaraja declares Parikshith emperor of Bharath

Dharmaraja came forward a few steps and addressed the preceptor (acharya). "Every act of mine was according to Krishna's command, as you know. I dedicated all my activity to Him. I played my role as He dictated.

I did not desire or retain any individuality. All my duties and obligations have faded out with the departure of the Lord. Of what use is Dharmaraja's survival of now? I can't continue on this land even for a minute, since Kali has come to sway. It is your duty now to guard this boy, to guide and train him so that he may be secure on the throne.

Preserve adherence to dharma; continue the dynastic traditions; maintain the honour and fair name of the line.

Love him and foster him as your own son." Thus saying, he placed Parikshith's

hands in Kripacharya's. All those who were there, including Dharmaraja and the family preceptor, were in tears that moment.

In a few minutes, Vajra was called in. He was informed that from that very day, Parikshith was the Emperor of Bharath, so Vajra paid homage to him as befits the suzerain of the continent. The ministers and brahmins also honoured him as their ruler with due ceremony.

Afterward, Dharmaraja held Parikshith's hands and, placing them in Vajra's hands, announced, "This is Vajra, the Lord of the Yadavas; I now install him as the King of Mathura and of the Surasena State." He placed a diamond-studded golden crown on Vajra's head. "Be brothers both of you, staunch allies in peace and war, inseparable in friendship," he exhorted. He called Vajra aside and advised him to treat Parikshith as his own paternal uncle. He advised Parikshith to revere Vajra as he would revere Aniruddha himself; he told both of them that they should ensure the unimpaired continuance of dharma and to consider the welfare of their subjects as the very breath of life.

The Pandavas start their last journey

Then, the Pandava Brothers showered auspicious rice grains on the heads of Vajra and Parikshith. The brahmin priests recited appropriate mantras. Drums were beaten and trumpets flared. With tears in their eyes, Vajra and Parikshith prostrated before Dharmaraja and the rest. The Pandava brothers couldn't look the two darlings in the face, they were so overcome with detachment. They just held them in one quick embrace and spoke just one word of loving farewell, before filing out into the beyond, with nothing on except the clothes they wore.

The kith and kin, citizens, queens, others in the women's quarters, courtiers, and maids raised pathetic wails.

The citizens fell across the path of the ruler and tried to hold fast to his feet. They prayed piteously for him to stay.

They appealed to the Pandavas to take them with them. Some brushed aside objections and ran along with the royal party. However, the Pandavas never turned back; they never spoke a word. Their ears were closed to entreaties.

With their minds fixed on the Lord Krishna; they moved straight on, like men blinded by a fanatic resolve, heeding none, observing none.

Droupadi, with her maids, came running behind them, calling on her lords one by one. Parikshith also pursued them along the streets, but he was caught and carried away by the ministers, who tried to pacify him, though they were themselves greatly affected.

But the Pandavas walked on unconcerned, neither asking those who followed to stop nor permitting those who desired to join to come along. Hundreds of men and women had to stop when they were too tired, and they mournfully returned to the capital. The hardier ones kept on. The women of the zenana, unused to sun and winds, were exhausted quickly and fell fainting on the road. Maids, lamenting the terrible events, brought them relief.

Some ventured even into the forest but had to return fast after encountering the horrors of the wilderness. When dust storms rose, many citizens placed the dust reverentially on their foreheads, taking it to be the dust of Dharmaraja's feet. Thus, passing through bush and briar, the brothers soon got out of sight. What then could the people do? They returned to Hasthinapura heavy with unbearable grief.

The Pandavas stuck to the vow of death. The vow required that they should neither eat nor drink anything on the way, that they shouldn't rest, that they must proceed straight on in the northern direction until they fell dead.

This is the vow they observed, so grim and tight.

The Pandavas journeyed along with their eyes fixed straight ahead, awaiting the moment when their bodies would collapse out of sheer exhaustion and death would finish their earthly career. Their hearts were filled with emotions

centering around Krishna, His play and pranks, His grace and glory - they had no room for any other emotion or thought.

Droupadi and the Pandavas achieve immortality

Droupadi, their queen, dragged herself along for a considerable distance, but she became too weak to continue.

Her lords didn't turn back even when she appealed. Highly intelligent and devoted as she was, she realised that they were engaged in a terrific uncompromising vow. She decided that the bond that tagged her to them so long had loosened and she had to meet her end. She fainted, fell, and breathed her last, with her mind fixed on Krishna.

The Pandavas walked on in staunch discipline and met their separate ends at the times and places in which each had to shed his body. The body became dust, but the soul merged in Krishna. They attained immortality, losing themselves in the immortal essence of Krishna.

15. The Reign Of Emperor Parikshith

From the throne of imperial Bharatha, Parikshith ruled his dominion, adhering to the principles of justice and morality, lovingly fostering his subjects and guarding them from harm with parental care and affection. Whatever the task, Parikshith didn't move a step without calling to mind Krishna and his grandfathers and praying to them to crown him with success. He prayed to them morning and evening to direct him along the correct path of virtue. He felt as if he was the heart of his people and as if they were his body.

Throughout his empire, the very wind was reluctant to displace any article for fear of being implicated in theft. There was not the slightest fear of thieves. Nor was there any trace of injustice, immorality, or ill will. The kingdom gained great fame thereby. At the slightest sign of any such evil, Parikshith overcame it by means of terrific punishment and instituted preventive steps that decidedly scotched it. Since dharma was thus fostered with love and reverence, even nature was kind - rains came in time, crops grew high and rich, granaries were filled, and people were contented, happy, and unafraid.

Parikshith marries Iravathi

When Parikshith was on the throne, ruling over the empire with great care, the ministers and spiritual masters who were the guides of the dynasty discussed among themselves and resolved to approach the king with a proposal that he enter the householder (grihastha) stage by taking a partner by marriage. They submitted their request to him. When they found him agreeable, they asked his maternal uncle, Uttara, of the Virata royal family, for the hand of his daughter. The brahmins they sent to Virata returned with the happy news that he was happy over the proposal. The priests fixed an auspicious day and hour, and the marriage of Parikshith and Iravathi, daughter of Uttara, was celebrated with pomp and splendour.

Queen Iravathi was a great gem among virtuous women. She was endowed with a tenacious love for truth and was devoted to her husband. Whenever

she heard that anyone in the empire was in distress, she was much pained, as if she herself had the calamity. She mixed with the women of the capital and acquainted herself with their aspirations and achievements. She provided them with encouragement and consolation. She fostered the growth of virtue among them by teaching and example. She established institutions to promote and protect good character. She allowed women of all grades to approach her, for she had no false pride. She treated everyone with reverence. She was an angel of fortitude and charity. Everyone praised her as the Goddess Durga, bestower of food (anna-purna), herself in human form.

During the reign of this king and queen, men and women lived in peace and happiness, untroubled by want.

Parikshith also arranged for the performance of many Vedic sacrifices and rituals for the prosperity of mankind.

He arranged the worship in temples and homes of God in His manifold forms, with His manifold names. By these and other means, faith in God and love of man were implanted in the hearts of his subjects. He promoted measures to ensure peace and harmony among the sages and saints who were living as recluses in forest hermitages; he guarded them in their silent retreats from man and beast. He exhorted them to probe into themselves and discover the laws of self-control. He supervised personally the steps taken to ensure their safety and security.

A son is born to Parikshith and Iravathi

Thus, Parikshith and Iravathi ruled over their empire like Iswara and Parvathi, who rule over the universe with parental love and care. Shortly, news that the queen was in the family way spread among the women and was confirmed. The subjects prayed to God, at home and in public places of worship, to bless the queen with a son who would be endowed with all virtues and strength of character, who would be a staunch and unflinching adherent of dharma, and who would live the full span of years. In those ages, subjects loved the king so intensely that they renounced their own joys to please him; the king too loved

them and guarded them as the apple of his eye.

Parikshith saw and heard the enthusiasm of the subjects at the auspicious prospect of the advent of a child to continue the dynasty. He shed tears of joy when he realised how deeply his people were attached to him. He felt that the affection was the contribution of his grandfathers and the gift of Lord Krishna's grace.

Parikshith didn't deviate from his resolve to serve the best interests of his people, and he gave up his own likes and dislikes for this great task. He looked upon his subjects as his own children. The bond that brought the king and people together in such close and loving relationship was indeed of a high holy order, and his people used to say that they would prefer his kingdom to heaven itself.

On an auspicious day, a son was born. The whole land was filled with inexpressible joy. Sages, statesmen, and scholars sent blessings and good wishes to the King. They declared that new light had dawned on the state.

Astrologers consulted their books, calculated fortunes of the child from them, and announced that he would enhance the glory of the dynasty, bring added reputation on his father's name, and win the esteem and love of his people.

Parikshith invited the family preceptor to the palace and also consulted brahmin priests in order to fix a day for the naming ceremony of the child. Accordingly, during an elaborately arranged festival rite, the child was named Janamejaya. The brahmins present were given costly gifts, on the suggestion of Kripacharya, the doyen among the brahmin advisers of the king. Cows with golden ornaments on horns and hoofs were given away in large numbers. All were fed sumptuously for days on end.

Parikshith's dharmic reign keeps the Kali age at bay

When Dharmaraja had set out on his final journey, he had entrusted the little boy Parikshith on the throne to Kripacharya, and, as a true trustee, Kripa was

advising the boy-king and training him in statecraft. As he grew up, this dependence became more fruitful, and the king seldom strayed from his advice. He sought it always and followed it with reverential faith. Hence, the sages and recluses of the kingdom prayed for his health and long life and extolled the people's happiness and the ruler's solicitude for their welfare.

Parikshith was the overlord of the kings of the earth, for he had the blessings of the great, the counsel of the wise, and the grace of God. After a long campaign of conquest, he encamped on the bank of the Ganga and celebrated as a mark of his victory three horse sacrifices, with all the prescribed rituals. His fame spread not only over the length and breadth of Bharath (India) but even far beyond its borders. He was acclaimed by every tongue as the 'great jewel' of the Bharatha royal family. There was no state that had not bent under his yoke; there was no ruler who set his command at naught. He had no need to march at the head of his army to subdue any people or ruler. All were only too willing to pay him homage. He was master of all lands and all peoples.

The spirit of wickedness and vice known as Kali had already come in, with the end of the Krishna era, so it was raising its poisonous hood on and off, but Parikshith was vigilant. He adopted measures to counterfoil its stratagems and machinations. He sought to discover the footprints of his grandfathers throughout his realm, in the reforms they introduced and the institutions they established. He reminded his people whenever occasion arose of their nobility and aspirations; he told them of Krishna, His grace and mercy. He shed tears of joy and gratitude whenever he told them these stories. He was sincerely pining for the chance he had lost to have the Pandavas and Krishna by his side.

As the ruler, so the ruled

He knew that wickedness (kali) had entered his kingdom and was endeavouring to fix its hold on the minds of people. When he became cognisant of its activities, he investigated the conditions favourable for its spread, and, with the active cooperation of his teachers and elders, he

enacted special laws to counteract the tendencies Kali aroused. When the elders advised him that such precautions need be taken only when wickedness emerged as crimes, Parikshith didn't support that opinion. He was for alertness. He wanted to give the lead to his people.

Yatha raja, thatha praja
As the ruler, so the ruled

is the proverb, he said. He declared that wickedness (kali) can have sway only through the incompetence of the ruler, the loss of self reliance among the people, and the decline in the earning of grace. These three are the factors that promote the plans of Kali. Without them, man cannot fall a prey to his wiles. Aware of this, Parikshith went round his kingdom and sought, day and night, to drive Kali out of his haunts. That is to say, he attempted to give no room to injustice, force, evil character, untruth, and violence. His preventive plans were effective. He had so much quiet in his kingdom that he campaigned victoriously in the regions of Badraswa, Kethumala, Uttarakuru, and Kimpurusha.

16. Reverence For Krishna

Whenever Maharaja Parikshith toured any region, the rulers and kings of that area welcomed him enthusiastically, with appropriate honours, military and civil. They declared that they were ever ready to render him loyal service, whatever the nature of service that he required of them. Parikshith replied that he had no need of their services and that he expected from them only the promotion of the happiness and prosperity of the people entrusted to their care. He advised them to devote special attention to the protection of brahmins and women, guarding them against harm. He exhorted them to foster the worship of God throughout their dominions. Those were the only requests he made to those who were his tributary kings.

In some important regions of his empire, the people entertained him with folk songs depicting the fame and prowess of his ancestors. They sang of the excellences and exploits of the Pandava brothers. The songs extolled the mercy and grace that Lord Krishna showered on the Pandavas and the devotion and faith with which the Pandavas revered Lord Krishna at all times. They also enacted folk plays, taking on the roles of Pandavas and Kauravas, with Krishna in their midst, unraveling the story that He had planned with these instruments.

When Parikshith heard these songs and saw these plays, tears rolled down his cheeks, in spite of his efforts to control his emotions. The minstrels and storytellers, the actors, the stage men - all discovered that their emperor was fascinated by plays and songs with these themes only. So, they gave up other fields in their search for material and concentrated their attention on the dynastic history of Parikshith and the overpowering grace with which Krishna saved it at every turn. The emperor listened reverentially and sat through with great devotion. His gratefulness was shown in other ways, too. He was supremely happy and got confirmed from his ministers and elders that the tales were completely true. At this, his faith and devotion multiplied and he sought these chances more often and enjoyed them even more. He treated the performers and musicians with intense affection and honoured them with

lavish prizes.

When news spread that Parikshith delighted in hearing songs about his forefathers and Krishna, those with personal experience of these gathered around him wherever he went. They were eager to see a ruler who was so full of devotion.

Krishna gives divine vision of Himself

One day, while returning from Mathura, an old brahmin was among these who stood on the side of the road, to catch the imperial eye. The Maharaja didn't fail to notice him. He approached the brahmin and asked lovingly about his welfare.

The brahmin said, "Maharaja! Years ago, when your grandfather Dharmaraja performed the horse sacrifice in the divine presence of Krishna, I officiated as a priest, as the chief priest, to conduct the rites. On that occasion Krishna approached me and asked lovingly about my welfare, with as much affection as you are now showing me. Your words bring those words to my memory." The rest of the brahmin's words were smothered by his sobs and tears.

Parikshith exclaimed, "O, how fortunate you are! To be spoken to by the Lord in the sacrificial hall!" He took off the cloth he had on his shoulders and, placing it folded on the floor, pleaded with the old man to sit on it comfortably and tell him more about his experiences at the sacrificial hall and other places with the Lord.

"My heart is torn to pieces because it can't endure the grief at the error I committed that day," the old man wept.

The Maharaja asked, "Master! What is the error? If it can be revealed to me, I would like to know." He held both of the old man's hands, clasping them together, and prayed to him to disclose it to him.

The brahmin replied, "That day, all of us who had been initiated into the holy

order of priests for the sacrifice (yajna) put on the sacred clothes gifted to us and entered the sanctified enclosure. Then, Lord Krishna, sitting on a golden plankseat in front of a golden plate, poured water from a golden vessel on - no, I can't tell further, I don't get words." The old man wept and sobbed and couldn't continue with his narrative.

This sudden stoppage of the story just when it had reached a critical point only heightened the curiosity of the emperor. He prayed, "What happened, master! Tell me please." The brahmin took courage to comply. "O King. What shall I say? We priests were asked to place our feet on that gold plate, and the Lord washed the feet of each one of us. Later, He dried our feet with the cloth on His shoulder and sprinkled the water from our feet on His head. Since I was the chief among them, He consulted me about all the details of the rites. Lastly, on the day of the valedictory offering in the sacrificial fire, He granted us a vision of Himself, with conch, wheel, and mace in His divine hands, and that vision liberated us all from bondage for ever. Now that merciful Lord is away from us, I feel that seeing you is like tasting a few drops of refreshing water by a poor fellow, dying of thirst in the raging sun of the desert." The brahmin concluded his account. Holding Parikshith's hands, he placed a few grains of sanctified rice that he had with him tied in a knot at the corner of his dhoti, on the king's head.

Parikshith acknowledged the blessing and exclaimed, "Master! I am indeed fortunate. Though I could not see Lord Krishna in person, I have today the good luck of meeting the feet that He revered." So saying, he fell at the old brahmin's feet. He called the ministers to his side and instructed them to place the brahmin in a palanquin and take him to his home. He also gave him large quantities of valuable gifts and treasure.

17. Recalling The Bygone Days

Emperor Parikshith journeyed in state over the entire Indian continent, acquainting himself with the administrative excellence of the rule of his grandfathers, with the unique relationship they had established between themselves and Lord Krishna, who had then come down on earth as man, listening to the experiences of many a saint and scholar living in those halcyon days and reflecting on those cheering memories, as he traveled along.

Often he was overcome with remorse at the thought that he was not alive during the days when the grandparents were in such heavenly bliss.

While immersed in the joy of recollecting the annals of his forefathers and the glory of those bygone days with Krishna, Vyasa, the great sage, appeared quite unexpectedly. Parikshith welcomed him with great honour and seated him on an elevated seat. The sage praised Parikshith's rule and said that he was reminded of the reign of the Pandavas. The young king listened reverentially.

After some time, Vyasa said, "Son, I must be going."

How Parikshith was named by Krishna

But Parikshith said, "It's like placing a dish of delicacies before a starving man and just when he is about to stretch his hand toward it, dragging it away. Your accounts of the adventures of my grandfathers and of the splendour of Sri Krishna are like the most precious gems spread out before me. But you cause the most painful disappointment to me by refusing to let me have them. Your leaving me just now makes me feel desperately sorry." He pleaded with the sage to stay a little longer. "Tell me why you came. Be with me for some more time and assuage the hunger that is gnawing me. I missed the great good fortune that my grandparents had to spend their lives with the Lord Himself. I'll save myself from decline at least by listening to their exploits and

their devotion, which drew upon them His grace." Seeing the king praying in great earnestness and humility, Vyasa said, "Son do not feel that you are in any way inferior or less endowed with good fortune. I declare that no one else had such good fortune as you earned.

For you drew upon yourself the grace of the Lord the moment you were born. The Lord, Vasudeva, gave you the breath of life; He raised you in His arms and played with you while you were yet a baby. And you so closely stuck to Him that you scarcely kept aloof. Your youngest grandfather, Sahadeva, had to pluck you by force from Krishna and hand you over to the women in the inner halls.

"You were named ceremonially by Vasudeva Himself. What a memorable scene it was! You showed us that you were a wonderful child. Your eyes followed the Lord wherever He moved, whichever way He turned.

You were intent on "finding out (pariksha)" where He was, as if no one else was in the hall that day. Krishna hid Himself very cleverly behind pillars and tried various means to divert your attention from Him; but you proved too clever even for Him! Your eyes searched for Him alone; they saw only Him and His splendid form.

All of us present were wonder-struck at your devotion and concentration. It appeared as if you were examining each face and trying to find out whether it was Krishna's; your face fell when you saw it was not; it blossomed when your eyes saw Him and Him only. Scholars and simple folks, peasants and rulers - all realised that you were a remarkable child. That's why, when your grandfather Dharmaraja asked to Him to give you an appropriate name, He named you after your strange behaviour: Parikshith (he who examines, he who tries to find out).

"When the Lord announced this name to Dharmaraja in the hearing of that vast gathering of courtiers, scholars, and sages, they all applauded, saying, 'Very apt, excellent, fine.' Being so richly favoured by fortune, it's not right for you to condemn yourself as unlucky. You were fondled by the Lord; He played

with you and watched your gambols; He gave you your name. How few earn this fortune. Don't consider these just common gifts of grace." Tears of joy welled from Parikshith's eyes. A question rose up in his throat, but Vyasa saw him swallowing it, so he patted him on the shoulder and encouraged him to ask it. "Son, it looks as if you want to ask me something.

Ask without hesitation; don't quail."

Parikshith pleads for more tales of Krishna

Taking courage from this prompting, Parikshith said, "Worthy master! Man cannot know the value of either joy or grief unless he is aware of them. The joyful contacts of which you spoke now were awarded me when I was scarcely aware of the bliss inherent in them. Real joy can be tasted only when one is conscious of its value.

A child, given a billion-rupee diamond, will deal with it only as a lump of glass. The happiness of being with the Lord, which you say I had in my childhood, is as ineffective as the joy experienced in past births. I didn't know then what precious moments they were. Had I known, were I capable of knowing, I could have treasured that joy forever. Now it is all mere inference. I have no ocular proof of the Lord's grace that I received then, so I depend now on auricular proof only. Please tell me of Krishna's greatness and glory; let my ears drink the nectar of those stories." Vyasa was moved and agreed. "Son, do you consider His plays (leelas) to be just one or two? How can I relate them to you, since they are beyond one's capacity to enumerate? So ask about what He did in connection with some particular person, or during some particular incident or situation; I'll gladly tell you all the details." How Arjuna wins Droupadi's hand Parikshith was elated. He begged him with folded hands, "Master! Tell me how this great attachment between my grandparents and Lord Krishna was born." Vyasa burst into laughter. "Son, your earnestness surprises me. Only such earnest individuals can get spiritual wisdom (jnana), and I'm delighted that you have such a deep yearning. So I'll tell you what you asked for.

Listen!"

Saying this, Vyasa made himself comfortable in his seat. Parikshith also got ready to hear, with a heart that was blossoming with joy and ears that widened in the ambition to learn.

"Son! King Drupada grew anxious to give his only daughter in marriage to a suitable groom but couldn't succeed in securing one, in spite of the most diligent search. So he announced a festival for choice of bridegroom.

Kings of great might and majesty assembled in his capital, along with scholars endowed with charming personality, all eager to wed the princess, whose beauty was unexcelled in the three worlds. They were all proud of their wealth and valour, for they felt they could win her by those attainments.

"In the assembly hall, the king had fixed a contrivance on a pillar. It was a fast-revolving wheel, which was reflected in a sheet of water below the pillar on which it turned. The wheel had a 'fish' tied on it. One by one, the competitors for the hand of the princess were asked to come forward and, drawing the bow while looking at the reflection, shoot at the fish target up above. Drupada announced his intention to give his daughter in marriage to whomever hit the target. The city was full of princes and kings who wanted to try their hands at this unique festival of bowmanship.

"News of the festival reached the ears of your grandparents, who had assumed the role of brahmins to mislead the wily Kauravas. At first, they felt they shouldn't come out in the open on that occasion, but Arjuna, your grandfather, was able to persuade his brothers to attend the festival. No prince (kshatriya), he said, should stay away when bowmen compete for a worthy prize.

"Thus, the five brothers sat among the assembly in the garb of brahmins, like a group of lions, casting a halo of heroism around. All eyes were drawn toward them. People commented on their presence, many in admiration and some in derision. Some praised them as champions; some laughed at them as

prize fighters or cooks. The whispers aroused by them spread all round.

"Lord Krishna had come for the festival. His eyes were fixed on Arjuna all the time; this was noticed by Krishna's brother, Balarama, who said something to Krishna. At last, the bridegroom contest began. One by one, the candidates proceeded to the shadow seen in the water and aimed the arrow at the 'fish' rotating above.

They failed and returned, pale with humiliation. They walked back to their seats, heavy with disappointment and shame, and sat sunk in sorrow.

"Krishna had no intention of rising and having a try at the target. He sat quietly in His own place. If He had wanted, He could have quite easily hit the 'fish' and won. But, who can gauge the depths of His mind?

"Just then, Arjuna rose and walked toward the contrivance, casting a lightning flash of brilliance over the assembly by the heroic aura of his personality. Droupadi, the princess, lifted her head and watched him in admiration.

Her mind merged in that flash of light. In an instant, Arjuna's arrow split the 'fish', and he won. The applause of the gathering rose to the skies. The princess came forward and wedded him, placing a garland of flowers around his neck and holding his hand.

"When Arjuna emerged from the hall, holding the hand of the bride, the horde of defeated kings and princes yelled that the rules of the contest were broken, since a brahmin, who had no right to compete in bowmanship, was allowed to participate and was declared the winner. They fell on your grandfather in an angry clump. But Bhima pulled out a huge tree by its roots and whirled it at the crowd of foiled kings." Krishna introduces Himself and advises Arjuna "Observing the fight between the disappointed groups of suitors and the Pandava brothers, Krishna and Balarama smiled within themselves in appreciation of Arjuna's successful feat. Your grandfathers had no knowledge who they were; they had not seen them previously.

"The Pandavas reached their residence - the humble home of a potter - with the newly-won bride, Drupada's daughter. While Dharmaraja, the eldest brother, was describing the events of the day with great exultation, Balarama and Krishna, dressed in yellow silk and magnificent to behold, entered the lowly cottage. They fell at the feet of aged Kunthi, mother of your grandfathers. 'Auntie, we are your nephews,' they said. 'We are Nanda's and Yasoda's children.' Then, they touched Dharmaraja's feet, prostrating themselves before him.

"Krishna approached Arjuna and drew him aside, with a sweet simple expression of affection. 'I know you, but you don't know me, I'm seeing you for the very first time. I am the son of Vasudeva. My name is Sri Krishna.

I'm younger than you are; still, when you achieved that victory in the royal palace, I recognised you as the Pandava brothers, and I understood that you had escaped from the palace wherein you were when it was set on fire.

From the moment my eyes fell on you at the gathering of suitors, I somehow felt that you were Arjuna, and I told my brother so. This is my brother, Balarama. I was very happy that I recognised you, and my brother shared the joy. At last, I am able to meet you. The bride is the embodiment of virtue and intelligence.' "Speaking thus, Krishna called Arjuna to a distance and whispered in his ear, 'Cousin! It's not advisable for you to come out in the open so soon. Stay in disguise for short periods, in one place or other, for some more time.' Then, He took leave of His aunt and others and left with His elder brother, Balarama.

Krishna and Arjuna were close, like body and breath

"From that day, the affection between Krishna and Arjuna grew more and more intense; it grew into a huge tree and yielded fruits rich with sweetness, which they shared; in that sweetness, their minds merged and became one. Note that the first time your grandfather met Lord Sri Krishna, He was at the wedding hall of Droupadi. The significance of this lies in the fact that they too were bound throughout the years in bonds of love and affection of unailing

friendship. To consummate that friendship, Krishna taught him the highest wisdom. Did you note how chummy that Consummate Trickster was with your grandfather?" Vyasa rose and collected his things, in an attempt to depart. But Parikshith pleaded piteously, wiping tears of joy away, "Master, you made the Lord stand clear before me with your description of His divine play (leela) and His grace. Please tell me more of the many occasions on which the Lord showered His Mercy on my grandfathers, how He moved close with them and rescued them from calamity. Sleep is deserting my eyes and prompting me to listen to the stories of God. Make this night holy by relating to me the glory of the Lord. That alone can give me satisfaction. Let me spend the night in His thoughts. Your silence is causing me great agony." Vyasa saw Parikshith's steadfastness and devotion and changed his mind. He said, "Son, were the mighty miracles of Krishna one or two in number, I could have described them to you. But if one had a billion tongues, and the whole of eternity before him, description of His majesty could never be exhausted. All the Gods bowed before Him with folded hands. Sometimes He would raise His devotees (bhakthas) to the skies, but then He would drag them down into the depths.

"Krishna treated the world as a puppet show. He was always radiant with His smile. He never knew anxiety, disappointment, or distress. Sometimes He behaved like a common man, sometimes like an innocent child, at other times like a near kinsman, or an intimate friend, or a masterful monarch. Sometimes He behaved like a playful cowherd boy. He had the capacity and cleverness to play all roles with unique distinction.

"He loved your grandfather, Arjuna, with special fervour. He used to take him with Him, whatever the occasion or place. Why, Arjuna could move about freely even in the inner apartments of the Lord's residence. The Lord used to play with your grandfather in the Yamuna waters, diving in one place and rising at a distant spot to surprise him, calling on him to do likewise if he could, competing with him in various games, games that defy description and identification. Suddenly, He would take Arjuna to a solitary place and talk with him there on some mysteries. Often, He would discard smooth silken bed and sleep instead with His head on Arjuna's lap.

"Your grandfather reciprocated that love to the full. Although sometimes they were found angry against each other, talking as if they were enraged, they made up very soon and resumed friendly conversation quickly. My dear son, it can be said that they were human and God (nara and Narayana), like the body and the breath. There was no Arjuna without Krishna and no Krishna without Arjuna. There was no secret that your grandfather didn't share with Krishna or that Krishna didn't share with your grandfather.

"Which particular episode in their relationship should I tell about? Ask me what you would like to hear, and I shall gladly relate it to you."

18. The Escape Of Takshaka

When Vyasa yielded to his importunity, Parikshith who was all attention, replied in a voice that stuttered with emotion. "Master, I don't see clearly why my grandfather destroyed the Khandava Forest with a fire. Tell me how Lord Krishna helped him in the exploit. Make me happy by telling me the story." Parikshith fell at the sage's feet and prayed that this may be described to him.

Krishna and Arjuna meet hungry Fire God

Vyasa complimented him and said, "Right, you have made a request that does you credit. I'll comply." "Once, when Krishna and Arjuna were resting happily on the sands of the Yamuna, oblivious of the world and its tangles, an aged brahmin approached them and said, 'Son, I am very hungry. Give me a little food to appease me. I can't keep alive unless you do.' "At these words, they were suddenly made aware of a strange presence. Though outwardly he appeared natural, there was a divine effulgence around him, which marked him out as someone apart.

"Krishna came forward and accosted him. 'Great brahmin, you don't appear merely human. I assume that you won't be satisfied with ordinary food. Ask me what food you want, I'll certainly give it you.' "Arjuna stood at a distance watching this conversation with amazement. For, he heard Krishna, who allayed the hunger of all beings in all the worlds, asking this lean hungry brahmin, what food would satisfy him! Krishna was asking so quietly and with so much consideration that Arjuna was filled with curiosity and surprise.

"The brahmin suddenly burst into laughter and said, 'Lord, don't you recognise me? There's nothing in this world - nay, in all the fourteen worlds - that is beyond your ken. I'm one vital principle (prana) in your creation.

I am Agni the fire principle. I regret to inform you that even I have fallen ill. To cure my indigestion. I feel I must consume the arboreal juice of the Khandava

Forest. The forest must be burned in flames. That alone can appease my hunger and restore my appetite.' "Krishna replied, 'Well, consume it; why did you come to Me for this? This is indeed amazing. You have the power to reduce the universe into ash, so why do you crave my help?' "When Krishna pretended that He didn't know, Agni answered, 'Lord! You know everything. Doesn't the great serpent, Takshaka, live in this Khandava Forest with his kith and kin, attendants, and associates? Indra, the god of rain, is his close friend, so he's undertaken the responsibility of guarding that forest against fire and other calamities. He has given his word of honour that he will save the forest, and thus save Takshaka. As soon as I start eating up the forest, Indra will send his minions and soak the place with rain. I'll be forced into inaction; I won't be able to eat any more. So I'm taking refuge in You.' "Krishna laughed at his fears. 'If so, we'll help you out. Tell us what to do; we're ready.' Agni was delighted. 'I am indeed blessed! I am saved! You can help by keeping back the rain that Indra showers, by covering the forest with a roof of arrows that will allow me to consume the forest undisturbed.' Krishna assured him that his request would be fulfilled.

"Your grandfather addressed Agni. 'You can burn up the forest without hesitation. I have enough strength to oppose and overwhelm not one Indra but ten million of them. But I don't have with me the arrows necessary for this operation and the chariot that can carry all that weight. If these are supplied, I'll carry out your task, with Krishna's gracious permission.' "Agnideva, the god of fire, was gladdened at this. He granted Arjuna the two boons: an inexhaustible arrowsheath, from which he could draw a continuous supply of arrows, and a chariot with the Maruthi Flag. He also created the weapon of fire (agni-astra). Placing it in Krishna's hands, he took leave of them both.

Agni consumes the forest while Arjuna battles Indra

"Son, Parikshith! You must remember that Krishna accepted that weapon only to satisfy the god of fire. He has no need of such weapons. No weapon is more effective than His will, which can transform the earth into sky and the sky into the earth in a fraction of a second. He acts the human role when He moves among people, so men frame their own guesses without

understanding the inner significance of His acts. That is but the consequence of the delusion that veils the vision of man.

"After taking leave of Krishna in this manner, Agnideva started consuming the Khandava Forest. Just then, exactly as anticipated, Indra sent His attendants to save the forest from destruction. Their efforts failed to rescue it. They returned to their master and reported their discomfiture. So Indra himself rushed to the scene with His stalwart followers to save the Khandava Forest, and he fell upon your grandfather, Arjuna.

"Arjuna received Him with a shower of arrows from his famous Gandiva bow. Indra fought with all His might. Within minutes, Indra's followers turned back, unable to withstand the rain of arrows that pelted them from all sides. Indra realised that the person who was inflicting defeat on them was his own son, Arjuna! He was overcome with shame. He regretted that He couldn't defeat His own progeny and returned, sad and chastened.

"Meanwhile, the god of fire merrily and with hearty appetite consumed the forest, swallowing everything with His thousand red tongues and raising a huge conflagration. Only ash was left behind. The birds and beasts of the forest tried in vain to escape from the holocaust but could not. They were caught by the flames and roasted alive. Krishna was going round the forest in His chariot to prevent any denizen from running out into the open for safety, especially the animals and the snakes. He discovered the snake Takshaka, a great friend of Indra, in the act of escaping from the fire. Krishna called Arjuna to point this out to him, and this gave Takshaka the chance to wriggle out and speed toward Kurukshetra.

Takshaka, the serpent, is saved

"But Agni pursued the snake, and He sought the help of the wind god to catch up with his fleeing speed. So Takshaka sought refuge with Maya, the architect of the gods (devas) and the demons (danavas). He and Maya were moving fast toward Kurukshetra. Krishna noticed this and pursued them. Just then, Maya surrendered to Arjuna and sought his protection for himself and his

protegÃ©, Takshaka. Arjuna granted his wish.

"Maya, out of a sense of gratefulness, fell at his feet and said, 'O, son of Pandu, I will never forget this kindness.

I'll gladly do whatever is in my power for you. You have only to ask.'

"Your grandfather reflected for a while and replied, 'Maya! If you yearn to satisfy me, I demand but one thing: build an assembly hall for my brother to hold court, the like of which is not to be found on earth. It must be so grand that no god (deva) or demon (danavas) or Gandharva can ever hope to build such a one for himself. It must fill all who see it with amazement. I have no desire other than this.' Krishna added a suggestion. 'In that hall of wonder, you must establish a throne of wonder for Dharmaraja; then only will the hall be fully magnificent.' "Did you note, Parikshith, how much Krishna loved your grandfather? Do you need any more convincing proof than this to know that He is ever mindful of the welfare of His devotees?

What can one do to the Lord of creation?

The wicked Duryodhana was overcome with envy at the sight of that amazing hall. Duryodhana and Dussasana and their companions were puzzled and discomfited into humiliation when they were led to believe that there was water where there was none and that there were doors in places where there were no doors! They fell in so many places and knocked their heads against so many walls that they nurtured unquenchable hatred against the Pandavas. The Kauravas plotted incessantly to destroy the Pandavas. But, since the Pandavas had Krishna's grace in large measure, they were able to overcome the Kauravas as if it were mere child's play and to enjoy varied manifestations of His mercy. The Kauravas also developed violent hatred against Krishna, for they knew that the son of Yasoda was the bestower of fortune on the Pandavas. But what can anyone do to the very Lord of all creation?

To cultivate hatred against Him is a sign of their ignorance, that's all."

When Vyasa was relating Takshaka's story, Parikshith was listening with rapt attention. When he had finished, Parikshith asked in wonder, "What provoked the wicked Kaurava to ill-treat and insult my grandmother, Droupadi? How did my grandfathers bear the insults they heaped on their spouse? Why were they mere onlookers, unable to retaliate or punish, in spite of their prowess and undoubted manliness, when their spouse was dishonoured publicly in the royal court? It's beyond me to understand how these incidents came about. Tell me the real facts; enlighten me. You can clear my doubts, I am sure."

19. Pandavas - An Example For The Kali Age

The Pandavas lose Droupadi in the dice game

Parikshith prayed with tearful eyes and with such humility that Vyasa said, "Son! The Pandavas are staunch adherents of moral law; they never deviated from the given word. They observed the rule that the defeated party has no right to challenge the victors; your grandfather and his younger brother recognised the moral superiority of Dharmaraja, their elder brother, and suppressed themselves. Or else, they would have felled the foul Kauravas to wallow in their own blood and cast their corpses to be mangled by dogs and vultures.

"In spite of this, your grand uncle, Bhima, strained to fall upon those vicious men like a lion chained to a tree; he laughed cynically at the weak attachment that Dharmaraja had toward right action (dharma). But what could he do? He was rendered harmless by the will of his eldest brother. So he had to behave like an ineffective person." Parikshith asked how his grandfathers had been so enslaved; Vyasa smiled and replied, "Son, I'll tell you that. Your granduncle, Dharmaraja, celebrated in unprecedented grandeur the coronation sacrifice in the assembly hall that Maya built for him. The Kauravas were invited for the sacrifice and, as I said, were struck with amazement at its magnificence and wonder. They were filled with envy and a spirit of vengeance, as if they were insulted by the Pandavas' affluence and power. They held counsel with wicked elements, seeking a way to undermine the Pandavas' fortune. At last, they struck on a plan.

"That was the gambling contest through the royal game of dice. They behaved as if they were filled with filial love and as if they were motivated by the utmost affection. Their words were poisoned drops of honey, stabs steeped in butter. They persuaded their blind old father to send Dharmaraja a communication, which ran thus:

'Son, you are all brothers. Come and be together in one place and make

merry over a game of dice.' Kauravas dishonour Droupadi Your granduncle, who had no inkling of the wiles of which the Kauravas were capable, whose own mind was guileless, accepted it and played the games, unaware of the stratagems they had planned. He was then tempted to stake his brothers and, finally, even his queen, Droupadi. He didn't realise that the game was full of conspiratorial tricks and foul movements. He never imagined that his cousins would land him in abject misery. So, under the rules of the gambling game, Droupadi became the property of the victors. In order to wreak vengeance and cool their overwhelming passion of hatred, they designed to dishonour the Pandavas' queen in full sight of the entire assembly of courtiers. Foul brains hatch only foul plans." At these words, Parikshith began shedding tears. He asked Vyasa in a voice interrupted by sighs, "How did that blind Dhritharashtra, himself an emperor, allow this degrading behaviour toward a woman and a queen to happen? Of course, he had no eyes to see, but he certainly had ears to hear. Had he plugged his ears so that her wailing couldn't reach his understanding? Or had they too become blind? The scriptures (sastras) teach that no woman can be injured or insulted; she has to be given help and succour. And these rulers who ought to be exemplars to their subjects in morality and justice had the audacity to break the scriptures with impunity. How could such vicious people be emperors? Aren't they the meanest of mortals? Only the worst sinners will contrive to insult and dishonour another's wife, a helpless woman. I feel that this land has been torn into bits because such abominable people were raised to power; at last these disasters brought about total destruction. God is not blind, is He?" Parikshith continued his wailing of protest. "Even ogres and barbarians respect their womenfolk. Among them, if one woman is insulted, they avenge it as if the entire tribe is ill treated. In this case, the elders of the clan, the emperor, their preceptors, sages, and learned men were all present and watching this atrocious act in open assembly. Did the intelligence of those high-placed witnesses suddenly disintegrate? Were their eyes suddenly blinded by some dire disease? Did they feed on grass that their taste became so beastly? Did they forget in their animality the honour of the race? And the elders! Their sense of discrimination deserted them; they must have looked pathetic caricatures of themselves." Krishna saves Droupadi's honour Vyasa interrupted this tirade against the elders who sat quiet during those awful

moments. "Son, Parikshith, do not jump to conclusions and confusion. Not one of the elders in that assembly was in favour of the wicked behaviour of Duryodhana, Dussasana, and others. They warned them of the consequences of their iniquity. But what else could they do? When Dussasana was dragging Droupadi by the hair, right into the royal hall filled with courtiers and others, the agony of Vidura, Bhishma, and Drona was beyond control. Words are inadequate instruments to describe it. Tears flowed in streams down their cheeks. They couldn't lift their faces and cast their eyes upon the abominable gang.

"There was another reason. Sparks flew from Droupadi's angry eyes when she was so tortured, and if they had fallen on anyone in the hall they would have been reduced to ashes! Luckily she was looking only at your eldest grandfather, Dharmaraja; his fortitude and equanimity were imprinted on her mind, so the assembled men were saved from destruction. Or else, Duryodhana, Dussasana, and the rest of that foul brood would not have survived at all.

"Dharmaraja's face, so full of equanimity, had such a transforming effect. Your grandfathers Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva were watching that face while their hearts were being torn by Droupadi's struggles. As they watched, their tempers cooled. Dharmaraja's unruffled face saved everyone from cataclysm that day; or else, all would have been consumed in the fire of her anger, making the battle of Kurukshetra superfluous.

"Nothing can happen unless God wills it so, right? How can anyone override the will of Lord Krishna? She wailed that not one of her masters rose to save her, although she called upon them and reminded them of their prowess and valour. Just then, the thought of Krishna, the Saviour, flashed like lightning and filled her drooping heart with courage. 'O Shyamasundar!' she cried out, 'This is not an insult dealt to me. Nor is it an infamous injury to the Pandavas. It is an insult, an injury, to you. You are our all. We depend on you for everything. Is it just for you to tolerate this cruel injury being perpetrated on our honour? We have dedicated our hearts to you. Listen, I have dedicated myself to you. Perhaps you are not content with what we have so far offered

at your feet. Let your will prevail.' Thus, she surrendered fully and unreservedly, to the Lord.

"At this, the guardian of the forlorn, the Saviour of those who surrender, the Lord, took upon Himself the burden of rescuing her from distress. He moved in silently and unseen and blessed her, unnoticed. And, wonder of wonders, the sari that the human ogres were attempting to remove in order to disgrace her was rendered endless.

Everyone, including the tormentors, were stunned at the demonstration of Krishna's grace and Droupadi's devotion.

Good men and wise realised that truth (sathya) and dharma can never come to harm. The tears of joy that rolled from their eyes gave proof of the exaltation they experienced. The wicked Dussasana fell down, exhausted and humiliated. Droupadi didn't suffer the least dishonour. All the dishonour fell to the lot of the Kauravas, and the Pandavas were unaffected.

Droupadi surrenders to the Lord

"Can God permit the just and moral Pandavas to suffer humiliation? The harm that the Kauravas planned to inflict on the Pandavas recoiled on them only. This was the direct consequence of the grace that Lord Krishna showered on your grandfathers and grandmother and of the devotion and faith they had reposed on Lord Krishna.

"Intending to declare to the world the intense devotion of the Pandavas and its efficacy, and also to hold them up as examples for the Kali Age that was to come, the Lord contrived this thrilling drama. There is nothing more in this than that purpose of the Lord. You may be subjected to calumny, insult, and dishonour, or plunged into poverty or pain, but the person who has surrendered to the will of God will welcome each of these gladly and bear it with equanimity. The Lord will never give up His children; those devoted to God have to be patient and calm, under the most poignant provocations. The fact is that travails and troubles are visited upon the pious and the

Godfearing. In order to teach mankind these great truths, Krishna enacted this drama, with the Pandavas as the cast. Every incident in their lives is but a scene in His play."

20. Krishna Graces Droupadi

Sage Vyasa continued. "Listen, oh King! Droupadi was overwhelmed with amazement when she experienced the grace of Krishna, who granted the boon of unending folds of clothing to protect her honour. She shed profuse tears of gratitude and exclaimed in ecstasy, 'Krishna! Krishna!' with such a rush of feeling and zeal that those present were struck with fear. The shining splendour of her face made them suspect that she must be the veritable Goddess Sakthi, who energizes the universe.

Droupadi curses the Kauravas

"Meanwhile, Krishna manifested Himself in concrete form before your grandmother, Droupadi, and said, 'Sister! Why are you troubled in mind? I took birth with the express purpose of destroying these evil men blinded by pride. I'll see that the glory and fame of the Pandavas are held high for the admiration of this world for generations to come. Console yourself.' "She fell at the Lord's feet, washing them with her tears darkened by the collyrium in her eyes. The tresses of her long thick hair, unloosened by wicked hands, fell over His feet and covered them. She rolled on the ground round the feet.

"Her furious contentment and her angry excitement steeped the assembly of courtiers and warriors in astonishment.

Krishna raised her up and, placing His hand upon her head, blessed her. 'Rise! Tie the hair into a knot.

Await patiently the events that will happen in the days ahead. Go, join your companions in the inner apartments.' Hearing these words, Droupadi started like a serpent that has raised its hood. Her eyes shone through the veil of hair that covered her face; her glances were like flashes of lightning among the clouds.

"She stood in the centre of the assembly and, turning on Krishna, said in

deliberate tones, 'Krishna, cloth that gets torn can only be stitched; the rents can't be mended otherwise. A virtuous bride can be given away only once.

Curdled milk cannot be restored to its primal purity. The tusks of the elephant can't be withdrawn into the mouth from out of which they came. My tresses were loosened by the foul hands of these evil men. They can never be knotted again, as formerly, to mark the happiness of a wife.' At this, everyone sat silent with bent head, overcome with the shame of the insult to the queen.

"Krishna broke the silence. 'Then when will you dress your hair as of old, sister? These loose tresses make you really frightening.' The heroic queen roared like a lioness, 'Lord, pray listen! The filthy rascal who dared touch this hair, hold it in his foul hand, and drag me into this hall must have his head broken into bits and his corpse gnawed by foxes and dogs; his wife must be widowed; she must unloosen her tresses and wail in unquenchable grief; that day, I shall dress this hair into a knot, and not till then.' The elders in the hall were alarmed at its terrible consequences of this imprecation. They covered their ears so as not to hear more and pleaded, 'Pardon! Peace! Quieten yourself,' for they knew how calamitous the curse of a woman of virtue could be. The heart of Dhritharashtra, the old blind father of the wicked gang that insulted her, very nearly burst with fear. His sons tried to put on brave faces, but inside they were struck down by a tornado of panic. A wave of dread swept over the assembly, for they knew that her words would have to come true, the wrong would have to be avenged by the punishment she has pronounced.

"To reinforce this apprehension, Krishna said, 'Droupadi! May it happen as you have said. I shall destroy these wicked men who caused so much sorrow to your husbands. Your words must come true, for you have not tainted your tongue with falsehood, even in fun, since the moment of birth. Your voice is the voice of truth, and truth will triumph in spite of everything.' The depredations of Kauravas against Pandavas "This was the assurance given to your grandmother by the Lord. And the Kauravas were later destroyed and the righteousness of the Pandavas was vindicated before the world. Where

dharma is, there the Lord is; where the Lord is, there victory is. This holy axiom was taught to the world by the Lord through this tragedy.

"How great your grandfathers were to deserve this continuous shower of grace from Lord Krishna! Their adherence to dharma, their unwavering allegiance to truth, these won for them that grace. One can perform costly and elaborate rites and sacrifices (yajnas and yagas), but if one only adheres to the path of dharma and truth, one can cross the ocean of change and grief and reach the shore of liberation. Or else, when the terror-striking sage Durvasa went into the forest to 'burn' your grandfather into ashes, as planned by Duryodhana and his gang, how could they be rescued? Poor Durvasa had to learn that the grace of God is more effective than the earnings of years of asceticism and denials. He who was sent to destroy departed with deep admiration of his intended victims." When Vyasa was thus proudly reminiscing about the Pandavas' devotion to the Lord, Parikshith raised his head in wonder and asked, "What did you say? Did Durvasa suffer defeat at my grandfather's hands? Ah, how fortunate I am to be born in the dynasty that has proved itself superior even to that great sage! Tell me, Master, what happened? Why did Durvasa go to them and what was the result?" "Listen, Maharaja," Vyasa continued, "Your grandfathers spent their days happily in exile in the jungle, with their fame for hospitality unimpaired through the grace of Lord Krishna. To them, the jungle was more filled with joy than Hasthinapura. The hearts of the great will be so full of divine content and equanimity that they won't be affected by the ups and downs of fortune. A fragrant flower will please one with its captivating scent whether it is held in the left hand or the right; so too, whether in the sky or forest, in the village or city, on the heights or valley, the great are equally happy. They know no change, as your grandfathers demonstrated in their lives.

"When the good are happy and living in peace, the bad cannot tolerate it; they develop intense headache.

The bad have to contemplate the loss and hardships that the good undergo in order to be happy! The loss suffered by the good is the gain of evil minds. The sweetness of the cuckoo is bitter to the ear of the crow; similarly, the

unmolested happy life of the Pandavas gave misery and pain to the Kauravas in the capital.

"But, what more could they do? They had heaped on them as much grief as they could; they had cast on them all the abuses they could. Finally, they drove them out of the kingdom itself. They sent them into the forests on empty stomachs.

"Empty stomachs! Yes. That is what they imagined. But the truth was different. For their frames were saturated and filled with Lord Krishna. To fight against such God-filled bodies is only to engage in a hopeless fray.

That's why the Kauravas took their material possessions from them and sent the bodies away from the kingdom.

After the game of dice, all properties and possessions were taken away. The Kauravas tried their worst to create dissensions among the brothers and spread heinous scandals, affecting one or the other. But the brothers respected truth and stuck to truth, so nothing could separate them. The fact that nothing could make a dent on the happiness of the Pandavas consumed the Kauravas like forest fire.

Duryodhana plots to provoke Durvasa against the Pandavas

"At the moment of despair, Durvasa who was the very incarnation of rage, came to Hasthinapura with ten thousand disciples, determined to spend a four-month retreat in the royal city. The Kauravas knew very well Durvasa's ascetic powers, as well as his weaknesses and vagaries. So they invited him to the palace and lavished their hospitality on him and his followers during their four-month stay. They planned to use the sage for their wicked stratagem, so they showed extraordinary enthusiasm to provide for every want of his and of everyone in his huge entourage. They ensured that Durvasa had no cause to be disappointed or dejected or discontented. For four months, they served him with fanatic zeal. When the sage flew into fits of rage, they hung their heads and, with folded hands, put up with all the fire

poured on them. Thus, the holy visitor was mollified and won over.

"One day, when Durvasa was resting after a delicious meal, Duryodhana approached him and sat reverentially on one side. The sage spoke to him thus. 'O King, your service has pleased me much. Ask me any boon, no matter how valuable or how hard, and I shall grant it.' Duryodhana was prepared with the boon he wanted from Durvasa. He was glad the time had come for asking.

He exhibited great humility when he prayed that it might be granted. 'Master! Your pleasure at our service is itself as valuable as a million boons. That expression of appreciation is enough for me. What do I need in riches or fame? Even if I acquire sovereignty over the three worlds, I can find no joy in it. I am grieving that, while I could serve you for four months, my brothers, the Pandavas weren't with me here. Let them also save themselves by rendering this unique service; that is my desire. Please go to their resort, with all your disciples, and give them a chance. My elder brother, Dharmaraja, is such a staunch follower of dharma that, in spite of our protests and prayers, he chose to go into the forest rather than break his word. I hear that even there he is rendering magnificent hospitality to millions of guests and visitors. He can serve you with more luxurious banquets and festive dinners there. If you have a mind to shower your pleasing grace on me, I request just one favour: When you go to the Pandavas, go after Droupadi has eaten her meal!' Duryodhana fell at Durvasa's feet, to propitiate him more. The sage understood the stratagem and burst into laughter.

21. The Durvasa Episode

The never-ending food vessel

Vyasa hastened to explain Durvasa's queer laughter. "Durvasa, however, accepted Duryodhana's prayer! He started toward the forest, saying 'Right! I'll do it' In this prayer, there was a deep sinister purpose. It was this: One morning at sunrise, when the Pandavas were worshipping the Sun, the Sun took pity on their condition and, out of His immeasurable grace, gave them a vessel, whose contents would remain undiminished no matter much they were used up. It was called the never-ending plate (akshaya-pathra). As the dutiful wife, Droupadi used to take her food only after the five brothers had taken theirs. Before she finished eating, the vessel would be full of food no matter how many ate from it. But when she had finished and cleaned the vessel, it would give no more. Thus, once every day, the vessel was pouring plenty - until she had eaten. Prior to that, she could feed thousands, even millions, from that vessel. But once she had taken her food out of it, it lost its power for the day.

That is to say, there would have to be some particle of food in it so that it could be multiplied a millionfold and used. That was its peculiar glory.

"Duryodhana asked Durvasa to approach the Pandavas and demand hospitality after Droupadi had taken her food, for he had this special handicap in mind.

"If the short-tempered sage sought food and the Pandavas were unable to satisfy him and his huge retinue, in the throes of hunger he was certain to invoke a terrible curse, which would destroy the brothers forever. The knotty problem of living with them would be solved, and the Kauravas could rule the entire realm in peace. That was Duryodhana's evil intent.

"But the Pandavas looked for support not to something or someone outside them but to the Lord within them.

What could the curse of a sage, however mighty, do to such? With the all-protecting Lord on their side, how could the wiles of evil-minded men harm them? Their conspiracies would fail ignominiously. The wicked Kauravas didn't realise that when they planned in one direction, the Lord planned in another.

Droupadi seeks Krishna's help in satisfying Durvasa

"Durvasa appeared before the Pandavas with his ten thousand disciples just when Droupadi was conversing with her lords, resting after eating and then cleaning the sacred vessel. Dharmaraja saw the sage come toward the leaf-thatched hut where they spent their days. He rose quickly, welcomed him enthusiastically, washed his feet, offered flowers in worship, and fell prostrate before him. He declared, 'Today, I have realised my highest ambition in life; this is indeed a day of supreme luck.' He shed tears of joy and stood with folded hands. His brothers and Droupadi stood by his side, after their prostrations, with heads bent in reverential homage.

"Durvasa, who was visibly tired by the exhaustion of the long journey, spoke with evident exasperation, 'We are going to the river for a bath and noon rituals; please have food ready for me and my ten thousand followers when we return.' After this announcement they moved on quickly to the river,.

"When he heard these words, Dharmaraja felt a shock, and his heart nearly stopped. He consulted Droupadi and discovered that the vessel had been cleaned nicely and stored away. They all sank in sorrow, fearing what might happen to them. 'Ten thousand to be fed! O God! What does this day have in store for us?' they lamented, lost in grief.

"For Droupadi, the ideal housewife, the chance to entertain guests with food was a welcome gift. But at this late hour, when so many had to be fed so soon, in the jungle, where no provisions were available, she became desperate.

'The guest who has landed on us is the celebrated Durvasa, whose attainments and capabilities are known all over the world. By a mere thought,

he can turn those who anger him into ashes! Alas, what terrible calamity awaits my lords,' she wondered and shivered in fear.

"She couldn't decide on any plan to feed the horde that had descended on her. Who else could help her out other than the Lord, the saviour of the good, Krishna. 'O, Gopala! Save my lords. Guard us from the destruction that threatens us. Show us how to satisfy these ascetics and this sage.' She called upon Krishna, with tears streaming from her eyes and with anguish gnawing at her heart. She pleaded yearningly with the Lord. She didn't care what was in store for her, but she prayed that her husbands be saved and that her married status be retained intact.

She wept aloud, in irrepressible grief.

"The Pandava brothers heard the wail, and their agony was doubled. They also prayed to Krishna, their only refuge. 'O Nandananda, you rescued us from calamity after calamity designed by the Kauravas. You guarded us as the eyelids guard the eye. Why have you plunged us into this awful distress today? Pardon our sins and faults.

Save us from this dire peril. Help us to satisfy the sage and his huge retinue.'

Krishna to the rescue by relieving the guests' hunger

"The Pandavas' prayers and Droupadi's tears softened the heart of Krishna, at Mathura, and moved Him from there. Footfalls were heard. The Pandavas, whose heads were bent with anxiety about Durvasa returning from the river, raised their eyes and saw Krishna entering their hut, scattering brightness with His smile, His yellow robe trailing along the ground.

"They exclaimed, 'Krishna! Krishna!' and ran toward the Lord.

"Droupadi heard his voice and hurried out of the inner apartment; she surmised it must be some sign of the grace of God that might be showered on them. But when she saw Krishna, she hastened to fall at His feet and wash

them with her tears. 'Save me, save my happiness, satisfy the sage and his followers.' "Krishna, the consummate director of this universe drama, appeared unconcerned with their anxieties and immersed only in His own hunger! 'Droupadi! This is strange, I'm hungry. First appease My hunger; then you can ask Me what you need. Give Me a little food, immediately!' He put out His palm, as if He couldn't wait.

"Droupadi said, 'O Lord! This isn't the occasion for fun; this is a testing time for us. Save us, don't laugh at our plight.' She wiped the flow of tears with the border of her sari. She prayed, both hands extended in supplication.

"Krishna lifted up her head with His hand and said in soft assuring tones, 'Child! Tears collect in the eyes of women at the slightest provocation. But can My hunger be appeased by tears?' Evidently, Krishna was in a sarcastic mood.

Droupadi replied, 'Gopala! You're the second supplicant at our door today. If we don't give you what you ask, you won't curse us and bring destruction on us. But the other supplicant is waiting with ten thousand followers to appease his hunger by a dinner from us! We're all about to be reduced to ashes - where can we get even a single grain in this forest? How can I appease the hunger of so many people at such short notice, in this desolate place.' She explained the reason for the gloom that had overtaken them.

"Gopala laughed aloud. 'You say ten thousand guests have come but I don't see a single one here! I can only laugh at your words. You're throwing away the child on your hip to fondle the children who are afar. First give Me enough for My hunger; then you can think of satisfying people who are far away.' Krishna was adamant that He be attended to first; He acted the part of a hungry person so perfectly.

"Droupadi explained her predicament. 'Lord, the vessel had a variety of food. They were all served and finished, and I took my food last. I cleaned the sacred vessel gifted by the Sun and stored it away. How can I get food from it now? How can I appease Your hunger? You are our only refuge. If You, who

know everything, cause us suffering, what shall we say of others?' Droupadi wept again.

"Gopala said, 'Well, bring the vessel here. If I get even a particle of something edible, I'll be content.' So, she went in, got the vessel, and placed it in Krishna's hands.

"Gopala passed His fingers carefully inside the vessel, seeking some particle that might have escaped the scraping and washing. He found in the 'neck' of the vessel a fraction of a cooked leaf. So He asked 'Droupadi!

You seem to have had a leafy dish for lunch today!'

"Droupadi was surprised that Krishna had discovered a fraction of a leaf in the vessel she had scrubbed so clean. 'This must be your miracle; whatever work I do, I do efficiently. I couldn't have scrubbed it so shabbily,' she laughed.

"Krishna showed her the leaf, saying, 'Look! I got this from your vessel. This is enough to appease not only My hunger but the hunger of all beings in the universe.' He put it on His tongue with the end of His finger and, swallowing, exclaimed, 'How nice! My hunger is gone!' "At that very moment, Durvasa on the river bank and his ten thousand disciples felt their stomachs overfull with food. They experienced supreme happiness, free from the pangs of hunger they suffered a minute before.

They communicated their wonder to each other in gestures and then in words. 'Our stomachs are too full already.

There is no space in them for even an additional grain of rice! Dharmaraja will be waiting for us with a heavy banquet of extra-delicious dishes, and he'll insist on our doing full justice to his hospitality. But we don't have the space for the feast he has prepared! We are indeed in a terrible fix!' Satisfied Durvasa blesses the Pandavas "Someone then remembered the incident when their master, Durvasa cursed Ambarisha and suffered discomfiture at the hands of the very victim of his curse, through the intercession of Krishna.

They reported their condition and their surmise to Durvasa. The sage, who became aware of the grace that was won by Dharmaraja, blessed him profusely. He left the place with his disciples by another route, avoiding the Pandava's residence.

"But Krishna had commissioned Bhima to go to the river and bring the sage and his retinue quickly for lunch.

When Bhima saw them getting away through another route, he walked quicker, and the disciples, afraid of his intentions, ran into the jungle to save themselves.

"Bhima confronted Durvasa. 'Master! My elder brother ordered me to get you; lunch is ready for all of you.' "Durvasa pleaded inability. 'Bhima! We can't eat fraction of a mouthful. We're full to the bursting point. We aren't displeased with you. I bless you, that you may attain every happiness. I'll come to you when you are ruling the world as undisputed sovereigns. and I'll receive your hospitality then. Those who sent me to you with sinful motives will meet with total destruction.' Wishing them the best of luck, Durvasa left, with his followers.

"Parikshith! Did you notice that your grandfathers' devotion and sense of surrender had nothing to equal them? So also, the grace that Krishna showered upon them was unexcelled." While Vyasa was revealing these incidents to show Parikshith the Pandavas' faith and Krishna's grace, Parikshith listened intently, with awe and reverence, wonder and anxiety alternately affecting his mind. When the Pandavas dilemma was described, Parikshith was agitated; when some impending calamity was described, he shed tears of sympathy, when success was described, he shed tears of joy.

22. Arjuna's Fight With Gods

Vyasa continued. "O King, your grandfathers were ready to renounce everything to God, if the need arose.

They were also prepared to fight with God, if the need arose, for they were only observing warrior (kshatriya) dharma when they fought so. You must have heard the story of your grandfather fighting against Siva and winning from Him the divine weapon of Siva, the Pasupatha-astra." The king suddenly raised his head and asked, "Master! What did you say? Did my grandfather fight Siva? I hadn't heard about it so far. Tell me all about it. Satisfy my thirst to know about it." Parikshith fell at Vyasa's feet, importuning him to narrate the story.

Vyasa cleared his throat. "Son! How many stories do I have to tell you? For its full elaboration, the relationship between the Pandavas and the Gods needs not hours, not even months, but years! Still, since you implore, I'll tell as many as possible within the time available. Listen, King!

"The Pandavas were living in the forest. One day, Dharmaraja was overcome with anxiety. He felt that the wicked Kaurava cousins might not allow him to rest in peace even after the period of exile was over. It was very doubtful if they would give them their share of the empire. Dharmaraja was afraid that war was inevitable and that the great bowmen of the age - Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and Aswathama - would then range themselves on the side of the Kaurava hordes. He thought that the Pandavas might not be able to overcome such a galaxy of strength.

He feared that the war might end in defeat and that the Pandavas would have to spend their years in the jungle.

Seeing him in the depth of woe, Arjuna approached him, craved his blessings, and asked permission to go forth and win, by asceticism, weapons from the Gods to defeat the foe. Dharmaraja told him to go please the Gods and,

through their grace, win weapons to win the war.

Arjuna seeks divine weapons

"Arjuna went into the Gandhamadana area, which was inaccessible even to the most enterprising ascetic, and did ascetic practices (tapas) to propitiate Indra, the sovereign of the gods. Heaven was amazed at the rigors of his ascetic practice and his steady persistence. So, Indra appeared before him, saying, 'Son, I am pleased by your ascetic practice. But if your desire is to be fulfilled, first win Siva's grace. Thereafter, I'll take you to heaven and arm you with all weapons heaven can confer.' "In accordance with Indra's advice, Arjuna sat meditating on Siva in order to win His grace.

"Meanwhile, Siva resolved upon a drama of his own. I shall tell you what it was.

A boar threatens Arjuna

"A huge wild boar, ferociously enraged, ran across the place where Arjuna was observing penance. He saw it, and, though during the penance one had to desist from injuring any living being, he hastily took up his bow and arrows when the boar was about to fall upon him.

Just then, a Bhil of the forest, also armed with bow and arrows, appeared before Arjuna with his wife! Arjuna was amazed that a woman was accompanying the Bhil in that thick forest where no person could safely move about. But when he observed more closely, he found a huge retinue behind the Bhil, consisting of men and women of fierce appearance, yelling and shouting in strange ways. Arjuna was perplexed and astonished.

"The person who first appeared, the huntsman with the fierce face and the red glowing eyes, spoke to Arjuna.

'You there! Who are you? Why did you come to this place? You won't live if you shoot an arrow against that boar, even by mistake. Be warned! I have

pursued it and made it run here; what right do you have to take up your bow and arrow against it?' These words entered Arjuna's heart like a sheaf of arrows. He felt terribly hurt, for a common huntsman had insulted him. 'The fellow doesn't know my name or fame, or else he wouldn't have challenged me,' he said to himself. He raised his bow and shot an arrow at the boar. That very moment, the Bhil also shot an arrow at it.

Arjuna fights Siva in disguise as a hunter

"The boar rolled on the ground, dead. The huntsman was angry; he showered abuses on Arjuna. 'You there, you don't know the rules of hunting. When I have set my eyes on it, pursued it, and selected it as the prey for my arrows, how dare you aim your arrow at it? You're a greedy barbarian.' His eyes cast sparks, so uncontrollable was his rage.

Arjuna was also enraged. He shouted back, 'Shut up, you scoundrel. Or else I will despatch you to the domain of death. Save yourself by stopping your wagging tongue. Go back the way you came.' "The Bhil stood up to that threat; he did not quail. 'Whoever you are, I'm not afraid. You may have three hundred and thirty crores of gods on your side, but I won't yield. Take care. You're an interloper. Who gave you permission to come here? Who are you to order me out? This forest is ours; you're a thief who has sneaked in, and you have the audacity to ask us to get away!' "At this, Arjuna guessed that he was no ordinary huntsman. He spoke in a calmer tone. 'The forest is the property of all. You came to hunt; I came to do penance to please Siva. I shot the boar only to save myself from its rage.' "However, the huntsman was not softened. 'I don't care whom you adore, whom you want to please. Accept the wrong that you have done. Why did you shoot the animal I was stalking? Accept and apologise, make amends,' he insisted.

"Arjuna lost all patience. This fellow's life is to end like the boar's, he told himself. He is not to be cured by soft words, he felt. So, he selected a sharp arrow and shot it at him. It hit him, but, like a thorn on rock, it fell on the ground, bent by the impact! So the astonished Arjuna had to shoot a crescent headed arrow, which would sever his head. But this was brushed aside by the

hunter with his left hand, like a blade of grass.

"At last, Arjuna let go an unending shower of arrows from his ever-full shoulder bag. This too had no effect.

Arjuna became desperate, like a man robbed of all his possessions and deprived of all means of resistance. He stood helpless, filled with rage. He was like a bird with clipped wings, a tiger whose teeth have been pulled and whose claws have been cut, a ship without sails and rudder.

"He made an effort to beat the hunter with the bow itself; it broke into fragments at the impact. Startled, Arjuna decided to use his fists, for they were the only weapons left. Girding up his loins, he fell upon the Bhil and wrestled furiously, for sheer victory. The hunter welcomed this new move with a hearty laugh. They struggled to overpower each other with such terrific holds and blows that it appeared as if two mountains were in mortal conflict. The birds of the forest were so frightened at the unusual din that they flew in terror far up into the sky.

The animals of the jungle stood and stared, sensing some great calamity hovering over them. The earth shook, unable to bear the burden of the encounter.

"Despite everything, the Bhil showed no trace of exhaustion. He was laughing in absolute unconcern and was as active as when the fight first began. Arjuna, however, was bathed in perspiration. He was gasping for breath, and his fist was jammed and bleeding! The Bhil was unhurt and not in the least affected! Besides, when the Bhil once caught Arjuna in a light hold, Arjuna vomited blood. The Bhil burst into a cruel laugh, and exulted before his consort with a look that meant, 'Did you notice that?' Arjuna wins a divine weapon from Siva. Arjuna reeled and was in great confusion. He lost his moorings. He whispered to himself, 'Krishna! Why have you humiliated me thus? Ah, is this also a scene in your drama? Truly, this Bhil is no ordinary mortal. Perhaps you yourself came in this form to trample on my pride. Alas! To be overwhelmed by a forest-dwelling hunter!

No, this is your stratagem, your play. This Bhil is no ordinary fellow. Save me, for I believe this is you yourself.' "When he said this and turned to the couple in front of him, he saw not the Bhil and his wife but Siva and His consort, Gauri. They were blessing him with a captivating smile. Their hand was raised, with the palm toward him in the have-no-fear (abhaya) pose, assuring him that he had no reason to fear.

"Arjuna was overcome with delight. He ran toward them, exclaiming, 'O Sankara, Mother Gauri!' and fell at their feet. He prayed that They should pardon him for his rashness and ignorance.

"Gauri and Sankara, the embodiments of grace, lifted him lovingly by the shoulders and stroked his head affectionately. 'Son,' they said, 'You have attained the fruition of your life; you did your duty as you were bound to do. That is not wrong at all. Now, take this; here is the sign of our grace'. And he got from the hand of Siva Himself the divine weapon (Pasupatha-astra).

"O, Maharaja! How can I extol the prowess of your grandfather, who fought with Siva, armed with the invincible trident. The source of that courage and daring lay in the grace that the Lord Krishna showered on him. Your grandfathers never thought of even the slightest activity without His specific order. Indeed, in the Mahabharatha battle, His grace was bestowed unasked, every moment, in ample measure. The depth of love that prompted that grace was known only to them; others cannot gauge it." Remembering this, Vyasa shed tears of joy at the good fortune of the Pandava brothers - and not he alone.

The person who listened, namely Parikshith, was even more overcome with admiration and thankfulness. He shed tears of joy; his lips quivered with emotion; his voice was broken by excitement. He couldn't contain himself.

He exclaimed, "Ah, how fortunate I am to be born in this lineage! How brave, how devoted, how redoubtable my forefathers were! And imagine my luck, that I am able to hear their glories from the lips of divine sages like you! Oh, I am indeed thrice-blessed. When I listen to the exploits of my grandfathers

and the glories of Lord Krishna, I can never say I have heard enough. I long to hear more.

"Pray, tell how the Lord saved and guarded my grandfathers in battle. It will be some source of contentment for my hunger, some quench for my thirst."

23. Guardian On The Battlefield

Preparing for war

When the King prayed like this, Vyasa said, "O King! The Pandavas, as agreed upon, lived through the twelve years of exile in the forest and also completed one full year of 'life in incognito'. When at last they revealed themselves (on the occasion of the stealing of cattle from the Virata domain by the wicked Kauravas) Duryodhana, the eldest of the cruel clan, that monster of guile, swore that the full year had not elapsed and that the Pandavas had broken their contract. So, he said, they were bound by the penal clause, a further twelve-year exile and a further oneyear-of-incognito life! He was adamant about it.

"The elders, Bhishma, and others, claimed the Pandavas had scrupulously fulfilled the terms of the contract.

They had stayed in exile for a full twelve years and had not disclosed their place of stay during the entire last year.

But the Kauravas didn't accept the patent truth. They prepared the path for their own downfall and destruction!

They listened to no one, they gave ear to no counsel. They swore that the battlefield alone could settle the issue.

"What can anyone do in the face of that royal decree? So both parties prepared for war: the king endowed with sovereign sway, Duryodhana, and the claimants in exile, the Pandavas! But truth and justice allied themselves with the exiles, so a few kings who were motivated by moral principles joined them. The others, in large numbers, sided with the king. Thus, the Kauravas commanded eleven akshauhini; the Pandavas, only seven. (An akshauhini consists of 109,350 foot soldiers, 65,610 horses and horsemen, 21,870 elephants and elephant warriors, and 21,870 chariots and their human

equipment).

Arjuna's lamentation on the eve of battle

"Listen! Arjuna's chariot had Lord Krishna, the beloved of the cowherd maidens, as its charioteer. Not only that, He became the charioteer of the destiny of the Pandavas. Therefore, the Pandavas had no weak spot in their armour; He was all the strength they needed. Yet, Arjuna's role in the grand drama of the Lord took a sudden unexpected turn, which astounded all." "The Lord and Arjuna were in the chariot, which Krishna kept stationary between the two armies ranged for battle. When the Lord commanded Arjuna to examine the enemy leaders whom he had to encounter, Arjuna allowed his eyes to spot in a flash the heroes eager to meet him in contest. Tears flowed immediately from his eyes!

He crumbled with despondency and disinclination. It was a scene that filled spectators with shame.

"But your grandfather was not afflicted or affected with fear or cowardice. He saw before him Bhishma, the reverend grandparent who had loved to keep him on his lap and who had caressed him as his own child. He saw his respected teacher, Drona, from whom he had learned archery from A to Z. So his heart lamented, 'Alas! Do I have to endure this too, this bloody warfare with these great elders, people whom I ought really to worship with tender lovely flowers? How can I shoot arrows at them? Do I have to wound the very feet that I must really place reverentially on my head when I dutifully prostrate before them?' The sentiment that overpowered him was really this emotion of adoration. It was this that rendered him despondent, and not any other weakening emotion.

"The feelings of 'I' and 'mine' grew so intense in him that he turned to Krishna, 'Krishna, set the chariot back toward Hasthinapura, I want to go away from all this'.

Krishna explains the duty to fight for dharma

"Krishna laughed in derision and commented with unconcealed scorn, 'My dear brother-in-law, evidently you seem to be scared of fighting. Well, I'll take you back to Hasthinapura and bring your consort, Droupadi, instead. She has no fear. Come, we'll return. I didn't realise you were such a coward, or else I would not have accepted this position as your charioteer. It is a gross error of judgement on my part.' "While Krishna was saying this, and many other harsh statements besides, Arjuna retorted: 'Do you think that I, who fought with God Siva and won the Pasupatha weapon from Him, would quail before these common mortals? A sense of reverence and mercy makes me desist from killing my kinsmen. Fear doesn't hold me back.' "Arjuna argued for long on the lines of 'I' and 'mine,' but Krishna didn't appreciate the arguments. He explained the basic principles of all activity and morality and made him take up the arms he had laid down. He induced him to follow the dictates of the moral and social obligations of the warrior caste, to which he belonged.

Krishna rescues Arjuna by drawing weapons to Himself

"In the midst of battle, the Kaurava warriors all in one gang rained arrows simultaneously on Arjuna. Krishna saved him from the shower, as He had done earlier when He lifted the Govardhana Hill to save the villagers of Gokula and the cattle from the floods of hail rained on them by the angry God Indra. Krishna drew all weapons on Himself and rescued Arjuna, seated behind him in the chariot, from the deadly onslaught. Blood flowed from the wounds on His body. Nevertheless, He held it against the shower of fiery arrows let loose by the enemy. His aim was to preserve Arjuna from harm. He intended also to reduce the might and pride of the wicked opponent and heighten Arjuna's glory and reputation.

"He held no weapon Himself, but He brought about the annihilation of the enemies and proclaimed before the world the magnificence of the path of dharma, to which the Pandava brothers adhered. Often during the battle, your grandfather was pained at the role Krishna had taken on Himself. 'Alas, we're using You for this insignificant purpose. You, whom we ought to install in the lotus of the heart, are seated on the charioteer's plank! We've reduced you to

the status of a servant! We've devalued the Lord so meanly! Alas, that we are reduced to such straits!' he used to lament within himself.

Krishna as charioteer bears Arjuna's toe signals

"More distressing than all was another painful act that Arjuna had to do, on and off. Whenever he had to do this act, poor Arjuna was overcome with unbearable remorse." Saying this, Vyasa held his head down as if he wished not to mention it. Parikshith's curiosity was aroused even more, and he appealed, "Master! What inevitable harm did he have to do, in spite of its sacrilege?" Vyasa replied, "O King, in the thick of battle, when the master has to give an indication which way to turn, he cannot hope to be heard if he calls out right or left. The din is too loud and confusing. So, while totally immersed in the wild excitement of coming to grips with the enemy, he has to prod the charioteer's brows with the right or left toe; he keeps the toes always in touch with the sides of the brow, for this purpose. His plank is on a deeper level. If the chariot is to be driven straight, both toes are pressed with equal force. That was the convention. Since such pressure had to be applied with heavily shod feet, both sides of the brow of the Lord daily showed marks of scrape. Arjuna cursed himself for sheer shame; he hated the idea of war and prayed that the wicked game would cease that very moment. He used to be terribly upset that he had to touch with his feet the Head that sages and saints adored.

"Krishna's palms, soft and tender like lotus petals, developed boils, since they had to hold the reins tight and since the steeds strained their hardest when they were restrained or controlled. The Lord forsook food and sleep, performed services both high and low, and kept both horses and chariot ready and in perfect trim. He also went on sundry errands that were fundamental to victory. He bathed the horses in the river, attended to their wounds, and applied balm to cure them. Why go on with the entire list? He acted as a menial in the household of your grandfathers! He never assumed the role of the Universal Sovereign that is His real nature and status. That was the measure of His affection for those devoted to Him."

24. Parikshith Is Cursed

Parikshith listened to sage Vyasa's description of the deep devotion and steady faith of the Pandavas. He was thrilled when he heard of the unbounded grace that Lord Krishna showered on them. The king was so immersed in joy that he scarcely realised whether it was night or day! Suddenly, he was awakened by the sweet chirping of birds and the loud crow of the cock. He heard the songs with which his subjects daily welcomed the gods at dawn and the temple bells ringing around the palace.

Vyasa also realised that it was the beginning of another day. He said, "Son! I must be going now." Taking the water pot that he carried while journeying, he rose and blessed the king, who fell at his feet in great sorrow.

"Alas! Dawn broke so soon! I have yet to grasp fully my grandfathers' grandeur and glory! I have yet to fathom completely the depth of their devotion and sense of duty," he lamented.

Parikshith goes hunting

Parikshith turned over in his mind the incidents he had heard and tasted their uniqueness. He was so filled with exaltation that he couldn't turn to the affairs of the kingdom. In fact, he avoided entangling himself in them and sought to be alone. He decided to go hunting in the forest, as an alternative. He instructed that arrangements be made for an expedition into the jungle.

Very soon, the men at the door brought the news that everything was ready; the huntsmen and others had gathered in full strength. With a heavy heart, he dragged his body toward the chariot and placed himself in it. The attendants, with their equipment, moved on, both before and after the royal chariot, as was their wont. For some reason or other, the king felt that so many need not accompany him, so he asked some to return. When they advanced, a few herds were noticed moving about, and this stirred the king to activity. He got down from the chariot and, with the bow kept in readiness,

stalked the animals with a few men following him. The herds scattered in fear, with the huntsmen in hot pursuit. The king had his aim fixed on one group of fleeing animals, and he sped behind it, unaware that he was alone, cut off from his attendants, who had gone on different trails.

Parikshith, in a fit of anger, throws a dead snake on sage's neck

He had trekked a long distance, but couldn't bag an animal. A fierce thirst began tormenting him; he was exhausted beyond endurance. Frantically, he searched for water. Luckily, he espied a hermitage, a cottage thatched with grass. Highly expectant, he hurried toward it. There was no one in view! The place appeared empty. He called out very distressingly, as loudly as he could manage. With his feeble voice he shouted, "Thirst, thirst," plaintively. There was no reply from the cottage. When he entered, he found an ascetic engaged in meditation. He went near him and addressed him pathetically, "Sir, Sir." But the man was so lost in the depths of meditation that he gave no response.

At this, the king was overcome by resentment and a fierce gust of anger. Having come to a hermitage and seen the hermit, he was still helpless with hunger and thirst; this wounded his pride, for he was the ruler of the realm, and the hermit had dared to dwell within himself when he came before him and called out for him. He became blind to the rules of propriety, for he could hardly control his anger. His feet trod on some rope on the floor, and he discovered it was a dead snake. That put a wicked idea into his head, quite by a twist of fate. He threw it round the neck of the hermit, sitting like a statue, heedless of other's distress. Then he left the hermitage and walked away fast, to seek some other place to slake his thirst and get food.

Sringi curses Parikshith to die of snake bite

Some boys saw him emerge from the cottage. They entered the place to find out why he had gone in and what had happened there, for he looked like a stranger and he gorgeously dressed. They saw a snake around the neck of the sage Samika! They went closer and examined it and found that it was

dead. They wondered who could have done this atrocity. They surmised it must be the handiwork of the man who had just left the hermitage. So, they ran out and informed Samika's son, who was engaged in games with his comrades. The son wouldn't lend his ear to their story, for he thought that no one would insult his father so. He busied himself with the game. But the boys repeated the tale and insisted on his verifying its veracity, seeing the plight of his father with his own eyes.

Amazed at their insistence, Sringi became afraid that the incident might actually have happened. He ran into the cottage and found out that the unbelievable had indeed happened! He sought to find out the perpetrator of this atrocity against his revered father. He learned that a person in royal robes had gone in and come out and that no one else had been around since morning. The boys concluded that it must be his handiwork. Sringi ran in the direction pointed by them to catch him,. Before long, he saw the person in regal clothing, and his anger knew no bounds. He threw a handful of water at the king, slowly walking before him, and pronounced the curse, "May he who threw the dead snake round the neck of my father be bitten by a snake on the seventh day and die that day of the poison." The boys around him appealed to him not to, but he threw the curse at the king. Then, he went back to the cottage and slumped on the floor in a corner, with his head aflame with anger.

"Alas, that my father had to suffer this ignominy while I was alive and about. I could well have been dead.

What use is a live son who can't prevent someone from insulting his father?" He condemned himself thus and bewailed his fate most pitiably. His companions tried to pacify him. They abused the wrongdoer roundly and tried to console the disconsolate boy.

Samika is horrified by his son's curse

Meanwhile, the sage emerged from his inner bliss and entered the realm of consciousness. His eyes opened.

He unwound the dead snake from his neck and placed it beside him. He saw his son weeping in a corner and beckoned to him. He asked the reason for his grief and got from him the tale of the stranger and the dead snake. Samika smiled and said, "Poor fellow! He did it out of ignorance, and you reveal your ignorance, weeping for it. I'm not concerned with honour or dishonour. The knowledge of the Atma enables a man to keep himself on an even keel, neither rising when praised nor falling when blamed. Some boor must have played this silly prank. Since you are still boys, you exaggerate it into a big crime; you are undergoing a mountain of grief over a molehill. Get up and go to the playground," he said. He made his son sit on his lap and gently stroked his head, so that his grief might abate a little.

Sringi told his father, "This is no prank played by a boor. This is a terrible sacrilege committed by an egointoxicated fellow, in the garb of a king." Samika asked, "What do you say? A person in the garb of a king? Did you see him? Did the king commit this stupid misdemeanour? This silly thing could never enter a king's head." Sringi's comrades joined in and testified that they too saw the person responsible for this sacrilege. "Master!

We saw the dead snake, and we ran to Sringi and brought him here. Sringi got so angry that he took the water of the Ganga in his hand and threw it at the person, who was walking very fast. At the same time, with appropriate ritual formulae, Sringi cursed him: Let the person who placed the dead snake die of snake bite on the seventh day from today." The recluse who curses is no recluse Samika was shocked. He was astonished at his son's behaviour. He pushed him out of his lap onto the floor.

"What! Did you throw a curse like that? Alas, that the son of a sage should have behaved like this? What a calamitous curse for this trivial offence! Yours is a wrong that can never be atoned. You are a disgrace to the group of comrades around you, for you can't bear with fortitude such a silly, insignificant prank! I'm ashamed to say that such a boy is my son. You have no strength of mind to bear such little affronts. O, what a pity! Alas, that your childishness should plunge all sages and ascetics into ill- fame - people will say they haven't got even elementary patience and fortitude! Don't show me

your face; to see it is a sacrilege. To punish people for wrongs done is the duty of the king, not that of the recluse in the forest. The recluse who pronounces curses is no recluse at all.

"Moved by the yearning to achieve the vision and the presence of the Guide and Guardian of all the worlds, the recluse gives up all attachment and establishes himself in the forest. He lives on fruits and roots, and he denounces all catering to the senses as detrimental to spiritual progress. That such horrid curses born of impatience and egotism should come on the tongue of a recluse is a sign of impending doom. It marks the dawn of the Iron Age of untruth," Samika said.

"Alas! What a great sin you added to your burden today," he remarked. He described to his son and his comrades the heinousness of Sringi's act.

25. The Sage's Compassion

The father's pointed words inflicted great pain on Sringeri's tender heart. They fell like sword thrusts or hammer strokes. The poor boy could bear them no longer, and he fell on the floor, grasped his father's feet, and wailed, "Father pardon me. I was overcome by anger that the king himself should behave so outrageously, so insolently, so irreverently, so inhumanely. I couldn't control my resentment at the insult hurled on you. It isn't proper for a king to behave like this, in this most inappropriate manner, having come to a hermitage; isn't that right?" Destiny destroys reins of reason. Seeing his plight, Samika, the ascetic, took the son beside him and said, "Son, the compulsion of the moment is inescapable. The dictates of reason are often brushed aside by man, due to that compulsion. The drag of destiny will destroy the reins of reason. The force of the moment faces man with all its power, and he cannot but yield. This king is a staunch theist, a deep devotee. He has earned spiritual splendour. He is established in moral behaviour. He is the lord of all the regions; his fame has pervaded all the three worlds. He is served always by thousands of loyal men and minds. When he leaves his mansion and moves out, he is accompanied by many guards who await his least command with folded hands and eyes fixed on him, so that they may win his favour by executing them to his satisfaction. As soon as he enters a kingdom, its rule accords him a glorious welcome, with magnificent hospitality and respectful homage.

"A person accustomed to this rich routine was naturally shocked when he didn't receive any sign of welcome here; he wasn't even recognised and respected. The neglect was so serious that he didn't even get a cup of water to alleviate his thirst. He was torn by pangs of hunger and humiliation, for there was no response, even though he called out many times. So, unable to bear the agony and shock, he was led to commit this improper act. Of course, it is a fault, but just for this small misdemeanour, when you reacted so harshly, you brought irreparable damage to the entire community of ascetics and hermits. Alas! What a terrible calamity you have called down!" The aged hermit closed his eyes and sat silently for a while, seeking some means by

which the king could be saved from the curse. Finding none, and realising that God alone could set such things right, since He is allpowerful and all-knowing, he prayed with all his heart. "O, refuge of all the worlds! This immature little boy, with no knowledge of right and wrong, of what one's duty is and what is not, prompted by ignorance, has committed this great blunder, harmful to the king. Pardon or punish this boy, but promote the welfare of the king." The hermit opened his eyes. He saw the ascetics and the young comrades of his son who stood around him.

In sadness, he told them, "Did you notice the injury that my son has perpetrated? It isn't right that we hermits should insult and injure the king, who is the guardian and guide of humanity, is it? Therefore, I request you all to pray God that the king should come to no harm and that only auspicious things be added unto him." When the sage Samika directed them thus, an aged monk rose. He was the very picture of peace and resignation;.

"Great Soul! You are showering such profuse grace on this king. The person who pronounced this curse is your own son. Surely your spiritual attainments are much higher than your son's, and you can achieve anything, through them. Why are you so much concerned about the curse that this boy hurled at the king? You can make it ineffective, can't you?" At this, the rest of the group, the elders and the young ones, exclaimed, "True, true; listen to our prayers and pardon this boy. Bring about the welfare of the king and save him from harm." Samika decides to inform the king of the curse. The sage Samika smiled. He closed his eyes and saw with his inner yogic vision the past and future of the king. He examined whether his present was conditioned by his past or by his future. He found that Parikshith had to suffer the poisonous bite of the cobra, Takshaka; this was his destiny. He felt that trying to save him from this end would be going counter to the dictates of divinity. He realised that the king's misbehaviour and his son's angry reaction of his son were both consequences of that compulsive urge. He concluded that only God, the artificer of all resolutions and achievements, could modify events any effort on his part would amount to an exhibition of egotism.

He knew that egotism is the deadliest foe of hermits. Yet, he didn't amass his

undoubted strength against it and destroy it completely. He decided to render what little help he could to the unfortunate king of the realm.

Opening his eyes, he looked on all four sides to select a clever disciple of his from among the gathering. At last, he called one student to him and said, "You must go immediately to Hasthinapura and return; prepare yourself for the journey and come to me again." The student replied, "I am ever ready to obey your command; what have I to do with preparations? I am ever prepared. I can start this very moment; tell me what to do there." With these words, he fell at his feet and offered his obeisance.

The sage rose and took the student into the inner apartment. He told him in detail all the points that he had to inform the king. Then, the student fell at the master's feet and set out toward the capital.

The messenger meets the repenting Parikshith

Meanwhile, the king had reached his palace. After a short rest, he awoke to a realisation of the enormity of the wrong that he had done at the hermitage. "Alas, into what depths of foulness did my mind fall! It is indeed a heinous sin that I, the emperor, should cast an insult on that ascetic." He lamented to himself. "How can I make amends for this crime? should I go to the hermitage and plead for pardon? Or should I offer my head to bear the punishment that is my due? What exactly is my duty now?" He struggled with himself for an answer.

Just then, a guard came to the door and stood silently, with folded arms. He asked him why he had come.

The man said, "A student from a hermitage has come and is waiting for audience. He says that he has been sent by the sage Samika and that his message is very urgent and important. He is in great hurry. I await royal orders." When these words fell on his ears, the bed of jasmine flowers on which he was reclining appeared to have been transformed into a bed of snakes with fiery tongues, hissing and writhing all around him. He called the

guard and pelted him with question after question about the messenger. "How is he? Does he appear sad or angry? Or is he all joy and equanimity?" The guard replied, "O King! The sage's son is quite calm and peaceful. He is repeating the words, 'Victory to the king, Victory to our ruler.' I don't see any trace of anger or passion on his face." This gave the king some comfort. He sought to find out what reply had been given to the young student's questions.

The guard said, "We told him that the king had been to the forest and had just returned, and he is resting for a while. Please wait for some time. As soon as he breaks his rest, we shall inform him." The king inquired, "What did he reply?" "Lord, the young man was most anxious to see you as quickly as possible. He said he had some urgent message to communicate; his master would be awaiting his return and was counting the minutes. He said that the sooner he sees you the better. He repeated within himself all the time, 'May it be well with the king, May safety and prosperity be on him.' We offered him a high seat and invited him to occupy it, but he did not accept it. He preferred to stand at the door; he is counting minutes there." Tears of joy welled within the eyes of the king. Wiping them off, he hurried toward the entrance, without donning regal robes or insignia, without caring even to wear sandals or a robe over the chest. He fell prostrate at the feet of that son of a hermit. He held both his hands in his own, led him into the inner apartments, and placed him on a high seat. He himself sat on the floor beneath. He prayed to be told the reason for the journey.

The student said, "O King! my master, Sage Samika sends you his special blessings. He has commissioned me to communicate to you some special matters," and broke into tears.

Seeing this, the king exclaimed, "Well, tell me soon. If I have to do anything, tell me soon. I'm prepared to lay down my life in the discharge of my obligations. Or is my kingdom in any danger? Do I have to take any measure of relief? I'm ready to sacrifice anything to save it." The student messenger replied, "O King! No danger threatens the realm or the hermits. No fear can ever bother them. It is you whom dangers threaten, whom harm will

overtake." When he gave this subtle warning, the king declared exultantly, "I'm indeed blessed. When my subjects and the hermits engaged in asceticism are safe, I don't care in the least what happens to me. I inhale and exhale so that I can ensure peace and prosperity for them both." The king quietened after some time and asked the disciple, "Now, tell me what your Master wanted me to know." "King! my Master is very much concerned over a grievous wrong that has been committed, out of sheer ignorance. That is the prime reason for his sending me here." Parikshith was very much agitated. He asked, "What wrong are you speaking about? Who did that wrong?"

26. Curse Or Godsend

Parikshith is informed of his impending death by snakebite

The messenger from the hermitage replied, "O, Emperor, our preceptor has a son. Though he is of tender years, the splendour of his spiritual attainment is overwhelming. He reveres his father as his God and has his service and the upkeep of his renown as his chief aim in life. His name is Sringi. You came to the hermitage. Propelled by some inscrutable impulse, you placed a dead snake around the neck of Sringi's father, who is also my preceptor.

A few children saw it and ran to inform Sringi, who was engaged in games with his comrades. He didn't believe it at first and continued with his game. But the children repeated the news often and insistently and jeered at him for merrily playing on when his father had been insulted so grossly. Even his playmates laughed at his callousness.

So, he ran to the cottage as fast as he could and found that their report was true.

"When he turned back, he saw you moving off from the place. Without any sense of discrimination about what is of lasting significance and what is of temporary interest, urged on by frantic passion and anger, that teenage fellow lost control over himself and pronounced a curse on you. This has caused unending pain to my preceptor." The emperor interrupted him and asked, "O son of a hermit, tell me what the curse is." The youth replied, "Lord, I find it hard to tell you. My tongue refuses to utter it. But I have to communicate it since my preceptor ordered me to do so. My preceptor's son promptly took the waters of the holy Kausiki river in his palm and pronounced, 'Seven days from this day, may the king be bitten by the snake, Takshaka.' This is indeed a terrible curse." The youth stopped, for his grief overpowered him, and he broke into tears.

Parikshith, in repentance, welcomes death

But the emperor only smiled."Young hermit, is this a curse? To be bitten by Takshaka, and that seven days later? This is no curse, this is a signal gift of grace! This is a blessing from the lips of the son of the preceptor.

Immersed in the affairs of the empire, I had become slothful regarding the affairs of the spirit and God, which are the goals of life. As a result, the merciful Lord, Hari, moved the tongue of that sages son to articulate those words.

He has given me seven days! What a great blessing! It must be divine will that I should spend every moment of these seven days in the contemplation of God. From this very second I'll dedicate both time and thought, without intermission, at the Lord's feet. Young friend, what more did your preceptor tell you to inform me? Tell me soon.

My heart yearns to hear it."

The young messenger continued, "My preceptor felt that this curse amounted to unpardonable treason, for you are well established in dharma and are a great devotee of the Lord. So he sought for long to discover some means to avoid the consequences of the curse. However, he came to know through his yogic skill that you are destined to give up your life as a result of snake bite and destined also to reach the seat of the Lord on death. He felt that this was a worthwhile end and that it was sinful to obstruct such a glorious consummation. So he sends you, through me, his blessings that you may reach the presence of God. My mission is finished; I can leave as soon as you permit me." Parikshith gives up his throne Parikshith prostrated before the young disciple and asked him to communicate his reverential gratitude to the great saint Samika and his son. The messenger left and, reaching the hermitage, informed the hermit all that transpired at the capital.

Meanwhile, the emperor went in great joy to the inner apartments. Standing before the entrance of the womens' quarters, he asked for his son, Janamejaya. Hearing the call, the son wondered why he was summoned so

suddenly, and he ran toward the father. Parikshith got an old brahmin into his room. He placed his own crown on his son's head, entrusted the new king to the old priest, and walked barefoot toward the Ganga, with just the clothes he had on at the moment.

Within minutes, the news spread throughout the city. Groups of men and women, brahmins, and ministers hurried behind the king and remonstrated piteously. But it was all in vain. They wept aloud; they fell at his feet; they rolled along the road across his path. The king didn't notice anything; he vouchsafed no reply. He moved on, with the name of the Lord in his mind and with the goal of realisation in his thought. He was moving fast toward the bank of the holy Ganga.

Finding that the king had left alone and unattended, the royal elephant, the royal horse, and the palanquin were taken in a line behind him so that he could ascend any one of them as was his wont. But the king didn't pay any attention. The people were amazed to see their ruler discard food and drink. He was engaged without a moment's break in the recitation of the name of the Lord. Since no one knew the reason for this sudden resolution to renounce, all sorts of rumours started based on the imaginative faculty of each individual.

But some people investigated and discovered that the disciple of a hermit had come with some important news. They learned that the king had only seven days more to live. The people gathered on the bank of the river and sat sunk in grief around the king, praying for his safety.

The tragic news spread so far that it even reached the forest. The ascetics and spiritual seekers (sadhakas), the sages and saints - they too trekked to the bank of Ganga, with water pots in their hands. The whole place put on the appearance of a huge festival. It resounded to the chanting of the Om (primal sacred sound), the recitation of Vedic hymns, and the singing in chorus of the glory of the Lord. Some groups were roundly scolding Samika's son, who was the cause of all the tragedy. Thus, in a short time, the bank was so filled with human heads that not a grain of sand could be seen.

Parikshith confesses and tells about the curse of death

Meanwhile, an aged hermit who was filled with great pity and affection toward the emperor approached him and, shedding tears of love, spoke to him. "O king! People are saying all kinds of things. There are many versions going round from mouth to mouth. I have come to you to find out the truth. I can walk only with great difficulty. I love you so much that I can't bear to hear all that people say about you. What exactly did happen? Why this sudden act of sacrifice? What's the mystery behind the curse that a hermit's son pronounced on such a highly evolved soul as you? Tell us! Satisfy our craving to know the truth.

" I can't look on while the people are suffering like this. You were like a father to them, and now you pay no heed to their pleading. You have given up all attachments and have come here. Speak at least a few words of solace to them. With you sitting silent and hungry on the river bank, engaged in rigorous asceticism, the queens and ministers are like fish thrown out of water. Who was that young man whose words caused this disastrous storm?

Can he be genuinely the son of a hermit? Or is that only a disguise? It is all a mystery to me." The King listened to these words, spoken with such affection and equanimity. He opened his eyes and fell at sage's feet. "Master! Great soul! What have I to hide from you? It can't be hidden, even if I want to. I went into the forest hunting. Many wild animals were seen, but they scattered at our approach. The small band of bowmen that was with me was also scattered in pursuing the animals. I found myself alone on the track of game, but far away from my retinue. I got no game. The scorching heat exhausted me, and I was overcome with hunger and thirst. At last, I discovered a hermitage and entered it. I came to know later that it was the cottage of Sage Samika. I called out repeatedly to discover whether someone was home. There was no answer, and no one came out. I saw a hermit sitting, lost in his deep meditation. While coming out from the cottage, I felt something soft under my foot. I lifted it with my fingers and found it was a dead serpent. As soon as my eyes fell on it, my intelligence was poisoned, and a foul thought

came into me. I placed it around the neck of that hermit engaged. This was somehow cognised by the hermit's son, and he could not bear the ignominy. He cursed me: 'May this snake around my father's neck take the form of Takshaka and end the life of the man who insulted my father thus, on the seventh day from today.' "The sage sent me news of this curse and its consequence. I'm conscious of the sin I committed. I feel that a king capable of this sin has no place in the kingdom. So I have given up everything, every attachment. I have decided to use these seven days for the ceaseless contemplation of the glory of God. It is great good fortune for me to receive this chance. That's why I have come here." When the nobles, courtiers, princes, queens, ministers, hermits, and others who were around him learned the facts, they dropped the wild guesses they had made so far from their minds and prayed aloud for the curse to lose its fatal sting.

27. Enter Sage Suka

Some ascetics who heard the story of the curse from the lips of the King were so incensed at Samika's son that they declared he must be a fake, an unworthy child. No child born of a sage of Samika's stature would ever pronounce such a devastating curse for such a trivial misdemeanour. He must be an ignorant fool or a madcap, they guessed. How could the curse emanating from such a one take effect?, they asked. The king can't come to harm as a consequence of his curse, they affirmed. They tried to convince the king that he need not fear on that account. Many argued that the king had no reason to take the curse seriously.

The curse is a boon, not a punishment

But the king was unmoved. He replied to them with folded hands, "Your thinking and speaking on these lines is prompted by sympathy and kindness toward me. But I know that the wrong I committed is not light and inconsiderable. Is there a more terrible sin than casting insult on those deserving reverence? Besides, I'm the king, responsible for their welfare and the maintenance of their honour. How can my act be dismissed as light and inconsiderable? Moreover, if you consider it deeply, the curse pronounced by the boy is no curse at all. Instead, it is a great big boon.

"I had fallen into the well of sin called empire; I had deluded myself into the belief that pleasure is the be-all and end-all of life. I was leading the life of a mere beast, and I had forgotten God and my duty toward Him. God Himself has, by this means and through this instrument, directed me along the correct path. God has blessed me.

This is a boon, not a punishment, as you imagine."

Tears of joy and thankfulness flowed from the king's eyes. He was visibly moved by extreme sincerity and devotion. He was uttering what he felt in calm, unruffled contentment. The ascetics and subjects around him were

amazed at his equanimity. They knew his declaration was true.

King, facing death, seeks advice of sages

The aged ascetic rose. Standing before the wailing populace, he addressed the gathering. "O best of kings!

your words are rays of sunlight to the hearts of the ascetics. They are so appropriate to your lineage and upbringing, for you are a Pandava born. The Pandavas never even once slipped into wrong or sin. They always held fast to the feet of Hari, the Lord; they stuck unwaveringly to the commands of the Lord. When the Lord returned to His abode, they gave up the kingdom as a result of spontaneous renunciation and left for the northern regions.

Today, you are following this holy path, since you belong to this great clan, which has inherited this way of life." The king prayed to them, with palms folded in adoration. "O best among ascetics! I have just one doubt.

Please remove it from my mind; make my days worth while."

"Tell me what it is," responded the ascetic.

The king asked to be informed what the man for whom death is imminent can best do.

One sage rose and said that, as far as time permitted, one could perform sacrifices and rituals (yagas and yajnas), or one could engage himself in repetition of the name of God (japa) or spiritual exercises (tapas), acts of charity or pilgrimages, or fasts or ritual worship. Another declared that liberation can be acquired only through the acquisition of spiritual wisdom (jnana). A third spoke of the supreme importance of holy acts prescribed in the Vedas and scriptures (sastras). Some others argued that cultivating devotion to God is the best method of using the week, for the Lord is won over by devotion alone. In this confusion of conflicting opinions, the king sought the true path, and the ascetics were silenced by the king's persistence

in getting a real answer to his problem.

Parikshith is overwhelmed by Sage Suka's presence

Meanwhile, a youthful ascetic, with an extraordinarily bright face and a personality of attractive splendour, moved through the gathering of aged sages, like a fast stream of light. Reaching the king, he seated himself on a height. The onlookers were amazed at this sudden appearance. Some were stricken with curiosity about his antecedents.

To all outward appearance, he was the son of an ascetic. But his stance, his pose, his poise, his personality - all affirmed that he was a Master. In years, he was quite tender, but a divine halo bathed him.

One wise old sage identified him and approached him reverentially, with folded palms. "Blessed indeed are all of us. This ray of divine effulgence is no other than Sri Suka, the precious offspring of Lord (Bhagavan) Vyasa." Introducing the stranger thus to the gathering, the sage continued. "From the moment of birth, this person was free from all attachment. He is the master of all knowledge." The king heard this and shed tears of gratitude and joy. He rose like a kite in the air, so light and full of joy, and fell prostrate at his feet. His palms were folded in prayer, and he was straight and silent as a pillar. He was immersed in bliss. He visualised the youth before him as Krishna Himself. Suka's splendour was too brilliant for his eyes. To the king, his charm appeared equal to the God of love. The black curly rings of hair moved like black serpent hoods hovering over the white oval face. As stars amidst the dark clouds, his eyes shed cool lustre and shone extraordinarily bright. A smile showered drops of joy from his lips.

The king neared Suka with slow steps. His voice was broken and indistinct, and his throat quivered with emotion. He said, "Master! I have no strength to describe the depth of your grace. Every act of yours is aimed at the welfare of the world. It is indeed my fortune that I had your sight (darshan) so easily today, for I know it can be won only by protracted and persistent effort. O, how fortunate I am! I must ascribe it to the merit earned by my

grandparents." He stood with tears of joy streaming from his eyes, overcome with grateful joy at Suka's presence.

With a smile hovering on his lips, Suka directed the king to sit by his side. He said: "O King! You are no doubt straight and steadfast in moral conduct. You are ever intent on the service of the good and the godly. Your meritorious life has drawn this large gathering of sages around you today. Or else these ascetics, who are concerned with spiritual discipline, would not have left their schedules to come here and pray for you to attain the realisation of the Highest. This is no act of charity! You have earned this gift by many lives spent virtuously and well." What should a person facing death do?

The king was gazing with devoted admiration at Suka's face while he was speaking to him. Suddenly, he raised his head and addressed the young sage. "Lord! I have a doubt pestering me. Remove it and give my heart peace. I was laying it before this assembly when you came. I know you can solve my doubt in a trice. It must be child's play for you." Suka interrupted him. "Parikshith, I came here only to solve this doubt that is pestering you. You can ask me what you have in mind. I'll resolve your doubt and grant you satisfaction." When the great Suka uttered these words, the sages exclaimed, "What great fortune! Blessed indeed!" They all clapped their hands in joy so loud that the acclamation reached the sky.

The king spoke humbly, and with evident anxiety. "Lord, what should a person facing death, who is aware of the oncoming of the end, engage in? What should his mind dwell upon? At succumbing to death, he should not be born again. When that is his prayer, how should he spend the days at his disposal? This is the problem that is bothering me at present. What is my highest duty?" The king pleaded again and again for guidance.

Fix the mind on the Lord by listening to His glory

Suka answered, "Oh king, withdraw your mind from worldly thoughts and fix it on Hari, the Lord, who charms all hearts. I shall instruct you in the wisdom of the divine (Bhagavatha-thathwa). Listen to it with all your heart; no activity is

holier than that. There can be no greater spiritual exercise or discipline or vow. The human body is a worthy boat; the story of Hari is the rudder, and this world of change, this constant flow (samsara), is the sea. Hari is the boatman. Today, this sacred equipment is available for you.

"The problem you have raised is not only your concern. The whole world is concerned with it and its solution.

It is the most vital of all problems that deserves inquiry. The Atma principle is the panacea for all beings.

That is the ultimate truth. No one can escape it. To establish oneself in that faith during the final days is the duty of living beings. It is on this basis that status in the next birth is determined. So the question that you asked, the doubt that you raised, are matters of great moment for the welfare of the whole world. The answer is not for you alone. Listen."

28. The Enchanting Story: Divine Incarnations

Sage Suka began his momentous message to the King.

"Maharaja, the great tree that the Bhagavatha is truly inspires reverential awe. Incorporated in it is every conceivable source of auspiciousness and joy. The Lord, Sri Narayana, is the seed from which it has sprouted. The sprout is Brahman. The trunk of the tree is Narada. Vyasa constitutes the branches. Its sweet fruit is the nectarine story of Krishna. The earnest souls that yearn for that nectar and pine plaintively until they secure the fruit and imbibe its essence, regardless of bodily comfort or the passage of the years - such are real saints and yogis.

"O, ye ascetics and sages! This day, I am relating to you that Bhagavatha scripture (sastra), that enchanting story of Krishna. Treasure it in your memory and save yourself from delusion and grief. You have already listened to recitals of all scriptures. You have also mastered all spiritual practices. But you haven't known the greatest of them all. I shall now give you the sacred name of Krishna and the sweetness that is flowing from it. It is the sweetest name one can conceive. When it falls on the ear, the heart is filled with joy; when you recall the name to memory, a stream of love springs from the heart. The Bhagavatha inspires and promotes deep devotion to Lord Krishna.

The Bhagavatha transmutes the devotee into Divinity

"The Universal Absolute, the Birthless Formless, Unmanifest, Infinite took on limitations of name and form and concretised Itself as Incarnations (Avataras) on many occasions and manifested countless instances of divine intercession and grace. Through these, as well as through the characteristics assumed and the ideas propagated, God saved mankind from downfall. Those who sing the story of this glory, those who listen eagerly to the recital, those who imbibe and digest the lessons conveyed, these are the real devotees. These are the Bhagavathas - those who follow the path laid down in the Bhagavatha. Bhagavatha binds devotion (bhakthi) with Bhagavan; that is to say, the story

fills you with God and transmutes you into divinity.

"God incarnates not merely for the destruction of the wicked; that is just an excuse, one of the obvious reasons.

Really speaking, God incarnates for the sake of faithful devotees (bhakthas). The cow has milk primarily as sustenance for its calf. But it is used by man for maintaining his health and efficiency. So too, God incarnates primarily for the sustenance of the faithful, the devoted, the virtuous, and the good. But even the faithless and the bad use the chance for their own purpose. Therefore, in the Bhagavatha, stories of such wicked persons intervene amidst the accounts of the glory and grace of God.

This doesn't make the Bhagavatha any less holy. When the sweet juice has been squeezed out of the sugarcane, the bagasse is left over and discarded. When the sweetness of divine majesty has been tasted, the bagasse can well be thrown out. The cane has both bagasse and sugar; it cannot be only sugar. So too, devotees have to be amidst the faithless; there cannot be one without the other.

"God has no bondage to time and space. For Him, all beings are the same. He is the master of the living and the nonliving. At the conclusion of every aeon, the process of involution is completed in the deluge; then, evolution starts again and, as Brahma, He creates beings again. He enlightens everyone with a spark of his own glory and, as Vishnu, fosters every one of them on the path of fulfillment. As Siva, He concludes the process by the destruction of all.

"Thus, you can see that there is no limit to His might, no end to His potence. There can be no boundaries to His achievements. He incarnates in countless ways. He comes as an incarnation of a fragment (kala) or a part of His; He comes as an inner inspirer for some definite purpose. He comes to close an epoch and inaugurate another (Yuga-avatar). The narrative of these incarnations is the Bhagavatha.

Only the story of a Yuga-avatar is worth perusal

"The One Divine Principle works through three forms, as Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, in order to manipulate and complete the process of becoming a being, called creation (srishti). The three are fundamentally of the same essence. There is no higher or lower; all three are equally divine. Associated with creation, He is Brahma; with protection, Vishnu; with dissolution, Siva.

When He comes down assuming special form on special occasions for a specific purpose, He is known as Avatar. In fact, Manu and Prajapathi and other such are divine persons entrusted by Brahma with the mission of peopling the world. Everything happens in consonance with the divine Will. So we can assert that the saints, sages, ascetics, and men both good and bad are all Avatars of the Vishnu entity. Avatars are as countless as living beings, for each is born as a consequence of divine Will. But the story of the Yuga-avatar alone is worth perusal, for the advent is to restore dharma and moral life. The story of all the rest is but a story of distress and despair.

The mystery of creation: one body becomes two

"Brahma deputed Manu to go to Earth and create living beings on it. Devi, the feminine principle, eluded him and took the Earth into the nether regions. Brahma then had to seek help from Vishnu (Hari), who assumed the form of a boar and brought the Earth from the nether regions and placed it among the waters. Later, the Earth was so incensed at the atrocities of Emperor Vena that she kept all the seeds sown within herself and didn't allow them to sprout. So, all beings were afflicted with the agony of hunger. Earth became a medley of hills and valleys, with nothing green on it. Then the Lord assumed the form of Prithu, who leveled the surface and added fertility to the soil, induced the growth of agriculture, and promoted the welfare of mankind. He fostered the Earth like his own child, so the Earth is called prithvi. Prithu is said to have built the first cities upon the earth.

"That is to say, it was the Lord's Will that it should be done so. This is the Will that is being worked out. The Lord originated the Vedas for the preservation of man through the practice of morals and spiritual exercises. The Vedas

contain names that will liberate beings and rules and regulations that will guide. When the evil-minded (asuras) threatened to steal the Vedas, they hid themselves in the waters, so the Lord assumed the form of a fish to recover them. He saved the Seven Sages and Manu from the same waters. This is why it is said that the Lord incarnated as a fish.

"O, ye ascetics! O, King Parikshith! Doubts may arise in your minds when you hear the story of creation and the early history of man on earth. The processes of the divine Will are mysterious wonders. They can't be grasped by the faculties with which you measure earthly events. Often, they may strike you as devoid of any basis, but the Lord never involves Himself in any deed without proper cause. His will need not be explicable; it is its own prompter. Everything, everywhere, is due to His Will.

"To initiate creation, there must be some attraction that will act as the urge. So, Brahma had to become two in body and activity. The one body was transformed into two. Therefore, where formerly there was one will two appeared, one that attracted and the other that was drawn toward creation, the feminine and the masculine. Since the one attracted in a hundred distinct ways it was called Hundred-faceted (Satha-rupa) and beloved of Brahma (Brahma-priya). The other was named Manu. These two gained renown in the first stage of creation. Satha-rupa and Manu were the first progenitors."

29. The Dialogue Begins

Describing the stages of creation, sage Suka said, "Satha-rupa and Manu together approached the Lord of creation and asked what they had to fulfil. Brahma replied with a smile, 'Be mates of each other; beget and people the Earth.' Equipped with the authority derived from this command, they filled the earth with people." Origin of grief is infatuation At this the king interceded: "Master! I learned from my own experience that the origin of all grief in this world is infatuation (moha). I have no desire to hear about these matters; please tell me how to overcome infatuation, delusion. and attachment. In these last days, what exactly does man have to do? Which name does he have to keep constantly in mind in order to avoid this round of birth and death forever? Tell me these things." Suka was very much delighted at this query."O King! You are a spiritual soul. You serve sages with devotion.

This large gathering of monks, ascetics, and sages is proof of your meritorious acts. For these do not usually congregate in any place." The King interrupted him, with protests. "No, no my Lord! I'm a great sinner; I have no trace of spiritual progress in me. If I had the least merit, if I had served sages devotedly, I wouldn't have become the target for the curse of the brahmin. The fortune that I now enjoy, namely, the company of these great sages and the chance to adore your feet, is the consequence of the meritorious acts of my forefathers. I know fully well that my activities haven't contributed a thing to it. The grace that Shyamasundar (Krishna) showered on my grandparents is the cause.

Had it been otherwise, how could people like me, who are sunk in the well of worldly existence (samsara) and immersed in the vain pursuit of sensory pleasure, who do not contemplate for a moment the true, the eternal, and the pure - how could we ever hope to see your presence before us, in concrete form? Usually, you roam forever in the silence of the forests, unknown to man. Really, this is an unattainable piece of good fortune. All this is due to the blessings of my grandparents and the grace of Shyamasundar (Krishna), and not to anything else. You are full of affection for me, so you attribute this to

my own merit. I am only too aware of my failings.

Listening to Bhagavatha destroys sins

"Kindly continue to shower on me the same affection and help me decide what a person whose death is imminent has to be given, what he has to adopt and practise. Advise me on this and make my days worthwhile.

You alone can solve this for me. Tell me about the Bhagavatha, as you said you would. You told me that it is the basis for progress and liberation; it will destroy sins; it will result in prosperity. Let me quaff the sacred nectar of Krishna's name and refresh myself, in this feverish heat." Suka smiled at the king. "The Bhagavatha is as worthy of reverence as the Vedas, as worthy of study and observance. At the end of the Dwapara age, on the Gandhamadana mountain, in the hermitage of my father Vyasa, I listened to that sacred text. I'll repeat the same to you. Listen." The King asked, with his palms held together in prayer, "O incomparable sage! I had heard that you were an ascetic deep in detachment from the very moment of birth. Even without the traditional ceremonial rites that purify and clarify the intellect, such as cleansing the new-born and the thread ceremony (upanayana), you had won the fullest awareness of the Reality. I had heard you were moving about in the consciousness of that truth, away from men, in the forests. Hence, I'm surprised that your heart was drawn toward this text, which, you say, is saturated with devotion. What caused your interest in this path? Please describe the circumstances to me." The glory of the Lord is most captivating to hear Suka began explaining with a calm unruffled countenance. "Yes, I'm beyond prescriptions and prohibitions.

I'm in unbroken mergence in the attributeless (nir-guna) Brahman. That is the truth about me. Nevertheless, I must declare that there is an inexpressible sweetness in God that attracts and captivates one by His sportive activities and attributes. I must confess also that I have listened to the description of the beauty and sweetness of God.

My mind delighted in hearing and reading the glories of God, manifesting His

divine attributes through each of these. I could not remain at peace; I exulted like a mad man, thrilled by the bliss I derived from listening and reading.

His sweet pranks and sports intoxicated me with infinite joy.

"Today, I came because I became aware that a chance has arisen to relate them to a group of eager listeners, people who, in all respects, deserve to hear them, and understand their significance. So, I'll relate that sacred Bhagavatha to you and, through you, to the people gathered here. You have the avidity and attainment necessary to listen to it. You have resolved to achieve man's highest goal." For liberation, listen to the Lord's story with yearning and faith "Those who listen to this narrative with earnest devotion (but not merely listen), reflect upon its value and significance, and act according to the light it sheds on their minds will merge in the bliss of which the Lord, Vasudeva, is the embodiment. Their hearts will be filled with the sweet nectar of the personification of captivating charm, and they will experience the bliss of being One and Only (adwaita ananda). The highest spiritual discipline is the recitation of God's name with full vigilance of thought, utterance, and feeling (manas, vak, kaya) and the loud singing of His Glory. No better spiritual discipline exists.

"O King, don't lose yourselves in anxiety that time is short. Not much time is needed to win the grace of God.

The rays of grace from that embodiment of compassion can fall on you as quickly as the wink of the eye. I shall enable you to listen during these seven days to stories of many who experienced spiritual bliss - how Vasudeva blessed them with spiritual progress, how people crossed the ocean of birth and death through the hearing of such stories and the singing of the glory of God that is manifest in them. We won't waste a single moment.

"You are conscious that you have only seven more days of life. Therefore, give up all sense of 'mine' and 'thine', of the body in which you live and the home in which the body lives. Be aware only of the story of Madhava, the Lord of the universe. Drink the nectarine narratives of the Incarnations of the

Lord. It is quite common for stories to be told to gatherings of thousands. But spiritual wisdom (jnana) can be achieved only by placing complete faith in what is heard. That faith must result in a cleansed mind, a pure heart.

"One more point, O king! There are countless exponents who go about discoursing on morals and spiritual matters on the basis of mere study. They don't have an iota of experience of what they preach. They have no faith in the authenticity of the various manifestations of divine glory upon which they dilate. Such exhortation is as ineffective as offerings of ghee made not in flames but on a cold heap of ashes. It won't cure the mind of faults and failures.

"In your case, there is no fear of such ineffectiveness. Your heart is immersed in the uninterrupted flood of Love for Shyamasundar (Krishna). Whoever listens to this narrative and imbibes its nectar with a heart bubbling over with divine yearning, unshakable faith in God, and constant joy can attain the realisation of the Self. This is beyond doubt. O King! This occasion, this text, and this listener are all quite appropriate and excellent." "O, how fortunate you are!" said the sage Suka, placing his hand on the king's head in benediction and caressing the thick curls of his hair.

Mere living has no value by itself

The king pleaded most humbly, "Master, You know too well that I have very little time before me. Therefore," he continued with folded palms, "give me highest guidance, and I'll get myself established in it all these seven days. Give me the holy formula so that I can repeat it in the short time I have, keep it fresh in memory, and save myself." The sage laughed. "Parikshith! Those intent on sensory pleasures spend their days in worry, in anxiety, pain, grief, and tears throughout a long period of life. They breed like birds and beasts. They eat good food and cast it away as urine and faeces. This is the purposeless life that most people lead. Can you call this the process of living?

"Enormous numbers of living beings exist on the earth. Living is not enough. It has no value by itself, for itself. The motives, feelings, thoughts, and

attitudes that prompt the day-to-day life matter. If a person has divine qualities manifesting themselves as thoughts, feelings, etc., then they are alive. Instead, if a person defiles the holy encasement of their body by utilising it for unholy purposes that cater to momentary happiness, thereby ignoring the all-knowing, all-powerful providence, it is to be condemned as a calculated denial of one's humanity. Take the case of a person who has fixed his mind on the lotus feet of the Lord (Hari); it doesn't matter if they are shortlived.

During that short period, they can make their life fruitful and auspicious.

The story of royal sage Khatvanga

"O King, to remove your doubt, I'll tell you the beautiful story of a royal sage. Listen.

"In the solar dynasty, there was once a ruler who was mighty in prowess, heroic on the field, prolific in charity, upright in character, and just in his dealings. His name was Khatvanga. He had no equal; no one could challenge him. Meanwhile, the wicked demons (the daityas and danavas) mustered their forces and went to war against the gods (devas). The gods were afraid of being overwhelmed. They realised their weaknesses and came down to earth to seek help from King Khatvanga. The king was longing for the adventure of battle, so he collected his bow and arrows and, riding in his chariot, went to the scene of war. There, he shook the hearts of the demons by the sheer terror of his valour. They fled in panic, unable to withstand the terrific onslaught. Since it is immoral to subject a fleeing foe to hot pursuit, Khatvanga desisted from further clashes.

"The gods (devas) were happy to achieve victory with Khatvanga's timely help. They praised his might and his sense of righteousness. 'O King, no one in contemporary history can compare with you. You granted us triumph in this deadly struggle against the forces of evil. Please accept from us in return any help that you need that we can render.' "The king told them, 'Ye gods! Holy sacrifices and rituals (yajnas and yagas) are performed by men to please you,

right? This battle in which I had the privilege to participate is therefore a sacrifice, as far as I am concerned.

What else do I need from you than this grace that you have showered on me? This is adequate boon.' Declaring thus, he fell at the feet of the gods.

"Not satisfied with this reply, the gods compelled him to ask for something, some boon from them. Though he had no mind to ask anything, he was forced to frame some wish, since he felt he would not be left alone. At last, he said, 'Ye gods! Reveal to me how many more years I shall live. Only then can I decide which boon to ask.' 'Khatvanga achieved liberation by repeating the Lord's name "Purandara (Indra), the monarch of the gods is all-knowing, so without a moment's delay, he replied, ' King, your span of life is very nearly over. You can live only for a few more minutes (muhurtha).' "On hearing this, Khatvanga said, 'I have nothing to ask. I don't need anything. I feel that all the pleasures of this world and the next are trifles to be discarded. I won't enter again the slush of sensory pleasure. Give me the boon of attaining the sublime presence of the Lord, from which there is no return, for which all life is dedicated.' Then, he sat with closed eyes repeating the name of God and, at the end of the few minutes, he achieved the lotus feet of Hari (God).

"Note how in a few moments he cast off from the mind all attachment to objective pleasure! Khatvanga was thus able to reach the feet of the Lord, where fear dare not approach. You have seven days, while he had only a few minutes. So you have no reason to be anxious. During the following days, purify your inner consciousness by attentively listening to the best and holiest narrative of the manifestation of God." Parikshith shed tears of joy while thinking of the supreme benediction won by the great devotee, Khatvanga.

He exclaimed, "Master! Instruct me in what I must do now; I can't find words to express my yearning. My heart is overflowing with bliss." He sat in petrified silence.

Suka advised, "O King, equip yourself with the sword of detachment. Cut into pieces the deluded affection for the body. Give up the 'myness' that makes

you cling to your kith and kin. Be seated firmly on the bank of this sacred river." When Suka was about to begin his narrative, Parikshith appeared anxious to ask a question. Seeing this, Suka said, "You seem perplexed at something. Ask me what you wish to know and have the doubt removed from your mind." Immediately, the king said, "Master! You are indeed an ocean of compassion. As a tasty meal to a starving person, your words bring cool comfort to my burning heart. Revered preceptor, you had spoken to me a short while ago about the beginnings of creation. I didn't understand it clearly. Why did the attributeless, Highest, Formless-Immanence-Transcendence (ParaBrahman) assume form and attributes? Tell me about that." The king sat with expectant face, all attention and praying sincerely, eager to hear and learn.

30. The Bhagavatha Path

The Lord's incarnations are endless

The sage Suka adjusted himself in his seat and began. "The supreme sovereign Lord, manifesting as Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheswara through the prompting of primal desire (moha), is engaged in creating, fostering, and destroying the worlds. In what is thus created, there is always the principle of dualism. There is difference and disparity between one and another. If these differences and disparities are harmonised wisely, the world will have happiness and peace. On the other hand, if living beings behave wrongly, the world will be sunk in anxiety, misery and confusion. When these arise, the Lord assumes appropriate forms and affords necessary protection and correction. He sets right the damaged world, removes the evil forces that caused the damage, and instructs mankind in the science of fostering the right and the good.

Lord incarnates as a boar and rescues Earth

"It isn't possible to limit God's freedom in assuming forms. He adopts endless forms to manifest Himself in the world and saves it. His incarnation is in conformity with the need of the crisis at the time. When the Earth moaned under the injustice of Hiranyaksha, He had to appear as a boar, taking form and equipped with attributes, though in essence, He is without form and attribute. The will of God is mysterious; it cannot be explained by categories or as consequences. It is above and beyond human reasoning and imagination. It can be comprehended only by those who have known Him, and not by those who have acquired scholarship or sharp intellect. The cause and the consequence are integrally related.

"One day, when Brahma was resting on His seat, a boar as small as one's thumb-tip fell from His nose!

Brahma, who had assumed the human form in sportive exuberance, knew the

why and wherefore of everything, but He pretended not to and looked upon the tiny boar with astonishment. Meanwhile, it developed faster and faster into greater and greater size, like a frog, rat, and cat, and into the proportions of a monstrous elephant in rut.

Brahma smiled to Himself at its antics. Very soon, the boar grew so huge that it seemed to cover both earth and sky. It slid into the sea and emerged from it with goddess Earth (who had hidden herself under the waters through humiliation) borne aloft safe and secure, on its tusks.

"But a cry came from behind. 'You wretched swine! Where are you fleeing to? Stop where you are.' The boar paid no heed to the cry; He moved on as if He hadn't heard it. Then, Hiranyaksha, the evil-minded ogre-chief, confronted It like a terrible monster and challenged It to overcome his might. A mortal combat ensued between the two. Witnessing the frightful thrusts and counterthrusts, goddess Earth shivered in fear, but the boar consoled Her saying, 'O goddess, don't be frightened. I'll end this ogre's life immediately. I'll ensure your safety and peace in a moment.' Soon, the boar became terrible to behold. The goddess was greatly agitated with the encounter. The boar fell upon Hiranyaksha with overwhelming might, and the goddess closed Her eyes in sheer terror, unable to bear the sight of the boar's devastating form. The duel was fought with indescribable fury, but in the end, Hiranyaksha was torn to pieces and cast upon the ground.

"Thus, the Lord assumed various forms according to the needs of the situation, the forms best suited for the destruction of the wicked, evil-minded ogres (danavas), for the protection of the good and godly, and for the preservation of the scriptures that reveal the truth, the Vedas. In this manner, the Lord incarnated as a fish, tortoise, man-lion, and dwarf (Matsya, Kurma, Narasimha, and Vamana). Of all the incarnations, the most supreme and most blissful is the Krishna form. Still, you must realise that the chief purpose of all incarnations is the preservation of dharma (justice, righteousness, morality, virtue).

Creation is my task, my mission, my sacrifice

"Those who instruct must gauge the qualifications of the learners to receive the lesson. It would be vain effort to try to communicate the highest knowledge to a person belonging to the lowest level, for they can't comprehend it. So too, if instructions for the lower levels are given to those of the higher levels, they will derive no satisfaction from that teaching. To make this clear, I'll tell you about a discussion that ensued once between Brahma and Narada. Listen carefully." "Brahma once addressed Narada, 'O my mind-projected son! Creation is My task, the way in which I fulfil My mission, My sacrifice (tapas). I will, and creation happens. But I lay down certain rules and modes for each species and if they are properly adhered to, the wheel will turn aright in dharma. Instead if they neglect the modes and rules and toil for the satisfaction of their own wishes, along crooked and misleading paths, they will have to suffer various miseries.

"Day and night are willed by Me. The rulers of living beings are parts of Me. The urge that people have to increase and multiply is the reflection of My will. Sometimes, when the created worlds have to be sustained, I myself assume name and form, initiate the eras of Manu, and provide the Earth with appropriate divine personalities and sages, who set examples to be followed and indicate the paths for progress.

"I also end the unlimited increase of beings, when it happens. For this, I take on the form of Rudra. I create the bad in order to highlight and promote the good, and in order to protect the good, I set certain limits, both to the good and the bad, for they would otherwise stray into wrong ways and inflict great harm.

I am the inner core of every being

"I am immanent in every being. People forget Me, who is within and without them. I am the inner core of every being, but they are not aware of this. So they are tempted to believe the objective world to be real and true, and they pursue objective pleasures and fall into grief and pain. On the other hand, if they concentrate all attention on Me alone, believing that the Lord has willed

everything and everyone, I bless them and reveal to them the truth that they are I and I am they. Thousands have been blessed thus. They are the seekers, the aspirants, the great souls, the sages, the divinely inspired, the manifestations of the Divine, the guides who show the path. They have acquired the experience that truth is dharma.

I am the cause of all causes

"I shall tell you about some of them, listen. Sagara, Ikshvaku, Prachinabarhi, Rubhu, Druva, King Raghu, Yayathi, Mandhata, Alarka, Sathadhanva, Dilipa, Khali, Bhishma, Sibi, Pippalada, Saraswatha, Vibhishana, Hanuman, Muchukunda, Janaka, Satha-rupa, Prahlada, and many royal sages (rajarshis), highest sages (brahmarshis), princes, nobles - all these can be grouped under one category: the Godly (Bhagavathas). They all yearn for the chance to listen to the glories of God. They have all been blessed, regardless of cast, age, status, or sex.

Among them are women, brahmins, workers (sudras), and outcasts (chandalas).

"I am the Cause of all causes. I am eternal. I am Existence-knowledge-bliss (Satchidananda). I am also Hari and Hara, for I transform Myself into these manifestations as occasion arises. Creation, the universe, is but the projection of My Will; it has no basic reality. My son, I declared this truth to you as a result of My deep love toward you. Others won't be able to grasp the mystery of this creation. What I have just revealed to you is known as concise Bhagavatha.

God, the godly, and their interrelation

Bhagavatha connotes three sections of knowledge:

1. The glory and majesty of the Incarnations of God,

2. The Names of those who are fully devoted to God,
3. The intimate relationship between God and the Godly.

Where these three are found together, there we have the Bhagavatha. All that is visible is not beyond or outside God. Therefore, to put it succinctly, everything is Bhagavatha! Everything is worthy of being honoured so.' To escape delusion, be ever fixed in God "While Brahma was teaching Narada, with great joy, Narada asked Him a question, in amazement and anxious yearning. 'Lord, as directed by you, I'm engaged without intermission in singing the glory of God and enabling the world to derive bliss therefrom. But this insidious and powerful delusion (maya) may overpower me at any moment, plunge me into wrong, and create obstacles in the path of my mission. How I can escape this calamity? Kindly instruct me, show me this additional sign of your parental affection.' "Brahma laughed at this question. 'Son! Your words seem childish. The clouds of delusion cannot darken the inner consciousness of those who revel in the glory and majesty of God, who know and make known that God is the master of illusion and the wielder of the operative forces that both delude and destroy delusion, who are engaged in good deeds executed with faith and devotion, and who endeavour ever to maintain truth and righteousness."

"Therefore, move fearlessly all over the three worlds with the lute (veena) in your hands, singing in adoration of God. Listening to the recital and elaboration of the mystery of God and the godly, the inhabitants of the worlds will save themselves from the cycle of birth and death."

"Activity and deeds resulting from them (karma) are binding because they have consequences that must be suffered or enjoyed. But deeds of service are free from this handicap. Be ever fixed in the thought of God. There is no other means than this to turn the mind away from sensory pursuits and objective activities."

The Lord is immanent as well as transcendent

Suka said, "O Parikshith! Since this supreme wisdom can be communicated

only to those who have reached a high level of purity and understanding, Brahma taught only Narada. And Narada continued, as advised, to sing and adore God through his songs - the Lord who is immanent as well as transcendent. He didn't ignore or discard the teaching that Brahma gave him. You are also qualified to receive this sacred lesson; that is why I, who am inaccessible, have spontaneously come direct to you, to describe the Bhagavatha. I am no ordinary minstrel. I never approach a person who hasn't earned the right to listen to me. Imagine the height that Narada must have reached, to acquire the qualification needed for instruction in the attributes of the attributeless God!" While Suka was thus gravely assessing him, Parikshith interceded, "Master! You said that the ancient fourfaced sovereign Brahma directed Narada to sing the Bhagavatha. To whom did Narada tell it? Who are those highly favoured people? Tell me about them in detail."

Suka replied, "O King, why do you yield to hurry? Be courageous and controlled. I'll tell you everything in its own time. Be calm and collected."

The King explained, "Master! Pardon me. I'm not excited at all. I only yearn to fix my mind at the last moment of my life on the charming smile that dances on the lips of Lord Krishna, to drink deep the nectar of the Lotus Feet of the Lord at that moment. I have no other desire. If I am unable to establish in my mind the captivating picture of the Lord at the moment of death, I will have to be born again as one of the 84,000 species of living beings, won't I? Since that calamity shouldn't happen, and since I must remember the Dispenser of Life-Breath with my last breath, make my life worthwhile by telling me the divine characteristics and the divine activities of the Lord."

No distinction between God, His name, and attributes

Suka laughed. "King, how can the mind be established at the lotus feet of the Lord if the ears listen to the characteristics and activities of the Lord? What is your opinion on this point? Tell me." Parikshith said, "Master, I believe that there is no distinction between God, His name, and His attributes - is that correct? When the story of the Lord is told and listened to, the name of the Lord and the attributes enter the heart through the ears and disperse the

darkness of ignorance, right? When the lion enters the forest, the timid jackals flee with their tails between their legs, don't they? The sincere listener will certainly fix their mind on what they heard through the ear. While listening rapturously to the ravishing attributes of the Lord with the captivating smile, the mind will be so attached to the sweetness derived thereby that it can no longer be attracted by low and vulgar objects, right? The ear and the mind will both act in unison then. That alone will yield bliss (ananda)." The king thus enthusiastically extolled the benefits of listening intently to the activities and majesty of the Lord.

Suka interrupted his exultation. "O King! The mind has inconstancy as its very nature. How can it give up its nature and attach itself to the feet of the Lord? Isn't it an impossible feat?" Suka was attempting to gauge the feelings that filled Parikshith's mind.

Parikshith smiled and replied, "Master, I'll answer, if you kindly permit me and direct me to do so. The bee will hover around the flower, humming and droning, until it settles down to drink the nectar from it. Once it has entered the flower and tasted the nectar, it will hover, hum, and drone no more. It will have no extraneous thought to disturb its bliss. It will become so intoxicated with bliss that it won't heed its own safety, for when the petals close and the flower folds, it allows itself to be imprisoned inside. Similarly, when once the mind settles on the lotus feet of that embodiment of beauty and goodness, it can never more crave anything except the nectar of the lotus feet."

31. Doubts And Questions

When the sage Suka heard this answer, he said, "King! Since your heart is merged in Shyamasundar, the Lord Krishna, I'm pleased so much that you can ask me all the questions that trouble you. I'll give appropriate answers and explanations. I'll thrill you and heighten your yearning for Shyamasundar, the charming Lord with the complexion of dark rain-heavy clouds." Parikshith puts ten questions to Sage Suka. Parikshith was delighted at these words. "Illustrious preceptor, what qualifications do I have that entitle me to put questions to you? Instruct me as you think best; tell me what I most need during these critical days; teach me what is most beneficial, most worthy of attention, most important. You know this more than I. Discourse to me, regardless of my asking and desire. Of course, doubts pester me on and off, since I am bound by the temptations of delusion and ignorance. When such arise, I'll tell you my doubts and misgivings and receive from you curative explanations. Please don't attribute other motives to me. Don't weigh my attainments. Treat me with affection, as if I were a son; transform me into a quiet restful person.

"However, let me present before you one doubt that has been with me for a long time. Are the experiences of the individual in this body directed by one's own nature or are they directed by the sum of the consequences of deeds in the past? Then, there is another. You said that from the navel of the Primal Person, a lotus arose and bloomed, and that all creation originated from that lotus. Now, did God appear with limbs and organs like the individual soul (jivi)? Is there any distinction between the individual (jiva) and Brahma, the personified Absolute?

"Here's another question: On what basis are the past, present, and future differentiated? And a fourth: Which deeds of the individuals (jivis) lead to which results and consequences, which statuses, in the future? The fifth:

What are the characteristics of the great (the maha-purushas)? What are their activities? By what signs can we know them? The sixth: What are the stories

of the amazing and charming incarnations of God? The seventh: How are we to distinguish between the Kritha, Thretha, and Dwapara eras (yugas)? How can we name a yuga as such?

The ninth: What disciplines must one practise in order to merge in the inner Soul, which is the Over-soul, the Universal Soul? And finally the tenth: What are the Vedas and Upavedas? Which Upavedas are attached to which Vedas?

"Please tell me the answer to these as well as other topics that deserve attention. Master, I surrender to you.

No one else can enlighten me on these and other points. Therefore, save me from the perdition of ignorance." The King fell at the master's feet and prayed for grace.

With an affectionate smile, the sage said, "Rise up, oh King. If you pile up these many questions all in a heap, how can you understand the answers? Moreover, you haven't slaked your thirst or eaten any food for a long time.

Come, eat some fruits and drink a little milk, at least. They are the privileges, the rights of the physical body. With a famished body, you may pass away in the middle, with your doubts unresolved. So take some food." The King replied, "Master! Those whose last days have come shouldn't prefer the food that nourishes falsehood to the food that grants immortality, should they? How can I pass away in the middle, though the body may be famished, when I am imbibing the nectar of immortality and when you are filling me with the exhilaration of tasting sweet panacea for the illness of death? No! it won't happen. Even if the angry Sringi had not cursed me, even if the snake Takshaka had not been deputed to kill me after seven days, I would not pass away in the middle of listening to the stories of the Lord. I listen to them without thought of food and drink. My food, my drink, are the nectarine stories of Krishna. So don't think of my food and drink; make me fit for the highest bliss, the supreme stage of realisation. Save me from downfall. I prostrate at your feet." Tapas means one-pointed spiritual discipline The king shed tears of contrition and sat praying to the preceptor. The sage said,

"Listen. In the beginning, Brahma shed light on the world manifested by delusion (maya). Brahma willed creation to proliferate. But a voice from the void above (the akasa) warned, 'tapas is the essential base for everything.' Through tapas, delusion will disappear!" Parikshith intervened. "What is the meaning and value of tapas? Please enlighten me." Suka took this interruption kindly. "Son, tapas means discipline, spiritual exercise (sadhana). It is through tapas that the great processes of creation, preservation, and destruction happen. Tapas is the cause for the realisation of the Self. That is to say, when the mind, intellect, and senses are subjected to tapas or the crucible of disciplinary exercise, the Self will stand revealed. I'll tell you about this technique of tapas. Listen.

Tapas is purifying the inner consciousness

"The mind, intellect, and senses are ever bent toward exterior objects; they are perpetually turned outward.

When some sound from the external world strikes it, the ear hears it. As soon as the ear hears it, the eye attempts to see it. When the eye sees it, the mind desires it. Immediately, the intellect approves the idea and sets about to acquire it as quickly as possible. Thus, every sense runs after external objects one after the other, one supporting the other, restless and miserable.

"One must bring the mind, the reasoning faculty, and the senses under control, for they roam aimlessly after objective pleasures. One must train them to take on the task of concentrating all attention on the glory and majesty of God to follow one systematic course of one-pointed discipline. Bring them all and lead them toward the higher path. Their unlicensed behaviour has to be curbed. They must be educated by means of repetition of the name (japa), meditation (dhyana), good works, or some other dedicatory and elevating activity that purifies.

"This process of purifying the inner equipments of man in the crucible of single-pointed speech, feeling, and activity directed toward God is called tapas. The inner consciousness will be rid of all blemishes and defects.

When the inner consciousness has been rendered pure and unsullied, God will reside therein. Finally, one will experience the vision of the Lord Himself, within themselves.

"O King, what can one picture grander than this? The great sages all engaged themselves in tapas, and as a result they gained continuous and rare spiritual splendour. Why, even the wicked demons Ravana and Hiranyakasipu won mastery over the material world and acquired their tremendous powers of destruction through the arduous discipline of tapas, directed along aggressive channels. If only their efforts had been directed along pure (sathwic) paths, instead of the aggressive (rajasic) path they preferred, they could have attained the peace and joy of self-realisation.

Tapas is mastering the senses

"On the basis of the underlying urge, tapas is classified into three groups: dull, active, and pure (thamasic, rajasic, and sathwic). Of these, for visualising God, the pure is the most effective.

"Vasishta, Viswamitra, and other sages acquired amazing powers through their pure (sathwic) spiritual discipline performed with pure unselfish motives. They rose at last to the status of highest sage (brahmarshis).

Tapas is classified into another series of three: mental, physical, and vocal. You may ask which is the most important of these three. I must tell you that all three are important. Yet, if the mental tapas is attended to, the other two follow.

"People bound by objective desire will try in various ways to fulfil them. They are slaves to their senses and their pursuits. But if they withdraw the senses from the world and get control over their master, the mind, and engage that mind in tapas, then they can establish self-mastery (swa-rajya) or 'independence' over themselves. To allow the senses to attach themselves to objects - that is the bondage. When the mind that flows through the senses toward the outer world is turned inward and is made to contemplate on the

Atma, it attains freedom (moksha).

God is one's own unchanging reality through all the states

"O King! All things that are seen are transient, unreal. God alone is eternal, real. Attachment with objects ends in grief. God is one's own reality. That reality, the God in you, has no relationship with the changing, transitory objective world; He is pure consciousness only. Even if you posit some relationship for it, it can only be the type of relationship that exists between the dreamer and the objects seen and experienced in dreams." At this, the king started questioning. "Master! On this matter a doubt is bothering me. In dreams, only the things that have been cognised directly while awake appear, so there must be reality as the basis of the false appearances, isn't it? While experiencing the dream, all the objects are taken as real; on waking from sleep, it is realised that they are all unreal. But this is the experience of men. Can God also be deluded? Again, if objects are one and of uniform type, then it can be said that illusion (maya) deludes, and this is the effect. But they are manifold and of multifarious forms. They all appear real and true. How can they be compared to the dream experiences?" God is the Master of illusion and delusion Suka was induced to laugh at this question. "O King, illusion (maya) itself has caused the multifarious forms.

This is clever stage play, a kind of fancy dress. The objective world or nature assumes manifold forms through the manipulations of the deluding urge (maya). On account of the primary impulse of delusion or ignorance, the qualities (gunas) arose and got intermixed, and time manifested with the change, and all this multiplicity called the universe appeared. So, the individual (jivi) must dedicate themselves to the master of this delusion, the director of this play, the manipulator of this time, the actor who sports the types of behaviour, groups of qualities, bundles of attributes (gunas), the mother of all the worlds (Maya). The individual must fill themselves with the understanding of the immeasurable power and glory of the Imperishable Absolute. The individual must immerse themselves in the bliss derivable therefrom. Such an individual sheds all ignorance (a-jnana) and can be unattached, even when using the creations of Maya!" The king was struck

with wonder."Lord! How did this creation first happen? What original substance caused illusion (maya) to proliferate?" Creation is beyond the beginning of time Suka elaborated these points. "Creation is happening from beyond the beginning of time. First, the lotus arose from the navel of the Primal Person, called Narayana in the scriptures. From this lotus, the Lord Himself manifested as Brahma. Brahma felt an urge to look at all the four quarters, so he developed four faces.

"Brahma became aware that he must activate himself, so that creation can happen. He seated Himself in the lotus posture of yoga and entertained the idea of all this creation. Parikshith, the mystery of creation cannot be unravelled so easily or understood so quickly. There can be no cause-consequence chain in the activities of the Absolute. No one can examine or inquire successfully into the creative faculty and achievements of the Supreme, which is omnipotent and omniscient. King, when I was just attempting to answer the questions you had framed earlier, you came forward with another. Perhaps you felt that I might forget to give you the answers for the earlier ones in my eagerness to answer the latest. No, you will certainly be enlightened on all points during the ensuing narration of the Bhagavatha story. All your questions are within the bounds of the Puranas."

32. Puranas And Incarnations

When Parikshith heard Suka's consoling and satisfying words, he queried, "Master! what are the Puranas?

What are their contents? How many are there?"

Suka replied, "The texts that elaborate the terse truths that are enshrined in the Vedas are called Puranas.

They are numberless in extent. But at present, 18 of them are outstandingly famous. These were collated and edited by my father, Vyasa. They have ten common characteristics. The supplements to these Puranas, called Upapuranas, have only five.

The ten marks of the Puranas

"You may ask what those ten are. I'll tell you even before you ask! They are:

1. creation (sarga),
2. proliferation into manifold varieties of created beings (visarga),
3. setting of boundaries (sthana),
4. protection (poshana),
5. consequences of one's actions (uthi),
6. the ages of Manu (manvanthara),
7. the glories of the Lord (Isanukatha),
8. absorption (nirodha),
9. freedom (mukthi), and
10. support of the universe (asraya).

The support (asraya) is the most important of these ten."

"It would be hard to describe these ten characteristics of the Puranas in a few words, for each has to be indicated clearly, just as a description of the processes of butter making has to touch upon each item from the milking to the churning. Each step is important. The ten names relate to the attributes as marked out by their meanings.

But the purpose of all is the gaining of the 'butter', liberation. It is for the attainment of that liberation that the ten characteristics are assumed. The Puranas are all designed to confer on the eager and earnest listener the support and sustenance necessary for the pilgrim to proceed to liberation. What the Vedas, the sacred revelations (sruthis), indicate by means of a statement here or an axiom there, or by an implied suggestion in another context, or even by a direct description of the actual experience in some other section, is elaborated by the Puranas for better clarification and inspiration," said Suka.

A question arose in Parikshith's mind as he listened to these words, and he gave utterance to it. "Master! You said that you would be relating a Purana to me. Therefore, I would like to hear more of these characteristics. That will make the listening happier and more beneficial." Suka made ready to answer this question, starting the description of the ten marks of the Puranas. "Listen, O King! I have decided to tell you about the Bhagavatha Purana. It is saturated with answers for all the doubts that arise in your mind and all your questions. No Purana is higher than this one.

Creation, proliferation, and limitation

"Its first characteristic is creation (sarga). Here's what it means. The three energies (gunas) are purity, passion, and sloth (sathwa, rajas, and thamas). When they are in equilibrium, creation is called the primeval substance (prakriti or mula). The five elements are earth, water, fire, wind, and sky. They are produced by disturbances or unbalances in this equilibrium. Also produced are the subtle attributes of the five - smell, taste, form, touch, and sound - as well as the subtle senses that can cognise each - the nose, tongue, eye, skin, and ear. The mind and the ego also arise from the same principle.

This process of creation is what is meant by the expression sarga.

"The second mark of a Purana is proliferation (visarga), i.e. creation (sarga) in a special sense. By this is meant the proliferation into manifold varieties of beings through the interaction of various oddities and peculiarities in activity. This is intimately associated with the all-embracing Super-Person in whom the universe is immanent.

"The fixing of boundaries (sthana) is the third chief content of a Purana. Everything that is originated in the Universe must have some bounds, so that it can serve some purpose. The fixation of these limits and the processes by which the limits are honoured are all described in the section titled state (sthana). For example, a machine needs a key to start it. It also has devices by which its work is regulated and stopped. Otherwise, it would be a source of danger to itself and its users. The establishment of such regulatory devices is the subject this characteristic.

God's grace and man's nature

"The next distinguishing mark of a Purana is the inclusion of a section on protection (poshana) - guarding, fostering, preserving from harm, etc. To put the matter simply, all fostering, guidance, and preservation are included in the one comprehensive subject of divine grace. The sapling that is planted has to be fostered with love and care. All creation is thus fostered by the grace of the creator.

"The next sign of the Purana is consequence of activity (uthi), its impact on one's nature and career. The nature of each life is determined by the impact of the activities of the entity in previous lives. It is not assigned by a wayward God. God treats all alike, and people forge their fates differently, through their own waywardness and wilfulness. Uthi deals with this aspect.

Divisions of time

"Next is the chronology of Manu (Manvanthara), which every Purana contains.

The day is composed of 8 three-hour periods, 30 days make a month, and twelve months are called a year. One year for this world is just a day for the gods, and 360 such days form a year for them. The Kali age (yuga) is composed of 1,000 such years.

The previous Dwapara age had 2,000 such years, while the Thretha age, which preceded it, had 3,000 and the Kritha, the first of the four, had 4,000. Each age (yuga) has 200, 400, 600, or 800 contact periods (sandhya) periods. 12,000 such years comprise a great age (Maha-yuga), and 1,000 such great ages form a single day for Brahma! Every day of Brahma sees 14 Manus lording the universe. So, each Manu is master for more than 70 great ages (Maha-yugas). The story of these Manus and their lineage is named Manvanthara.

Divine manifestation and equipoise

"Another subject dealt with in the Puranas is the glories of God (Isa), or Isanukatha - and the manifold ways in which people have experienced the might and majesty, the sweetness and light, that the glory represents.

"Then, we find in the Puranas the aspect of absorption (nirodha). The Lord absorbs within Himself all the glory that He manifests; then He goes into the 'sleep of yoga' until the divine impulse to manifest again disturbs the divine equipoise.

The basic prop for achieving liberation

"Liberation (mukthi) is another subject all Puranas dilate upon. This means liberation of man from the bonds of ignorance (a-jnana), which keep him encased. That is to say, man has to be liberated from the awareness that he is the body in which he is encased. He must be made aware that he is the Atma; he is the soul that is the reality thus encased.

"The support, help, or prop (asraya) is the final aspect dealt with in Puranas. Without help, liberation can't be attained. The Absolute is the prop for the

universe. The Absolute (Paramatma) from which all this has emanated, in which all this exists, and into which all this merges is the prop for achieving liberation.

Matter, being, and spirit

He who knows the primordial matter (adi-bhauthika) the Supreme Divinity (Adi-daivika), and the Supreme Atma (Adi-atma) also knows the support (asraya) or the supreme Atma (Paramatma)." Parikshith interrupted the sage and pleaded, "Master! Tell me then, what the primordial matter, the Supreme Divinity, and the Supreme Atma are." Suka was happy with this question and prepared himself for answering it. "O King, I see a thing. That thing is the divine aspect of material objects (adi-bhauthika). But what exactly is seeing it? You may say that the eye sees it. But where does the eye get the capacity to see things? Think of that! The deity presiding over the eye is the Sun (Surya). He gives the eye the power of vision. Without the Sun, the eye can't see in the dark, can it? Therefore, the Sun is the Supreme Divinity (Adi-daivika).

"But there is one more basic factor in this process: the individual (jivi) behind all the senses, behind the eye, the ear, and the rest. That individual is the Supreme Atma (Adi-atma). The Atma, the deity, the senses that bring knowledge of things - without these, the process cannot continue. The Atma is the witness.

"Now, I have told you of the ten characteristics of the Bhagavatha and other Puranas. Tell me what else you want to know from me, and I'll gladly tell you the same. I am ever ready," said the sage.

The divine manifestations and advent

Parikshith said, "Master, I could understand the ten marks of the Purana; and I learned that the supreme Atma (Paramatma), who is in everyone as Atma, is the witness of time, space, and causation. This eternal witness has assumed many forms for the sake of the world and has upheld morality and

righteousness. I wish to listen to the divine narratives of these incarnations - of Rama, Krishna, and other manifestations and of the deeper mysteries of these appearances. Do not feel that time is short. Let me sanctify every moment that is available, intently listening to the inspiring narration of these incidents. I pray that my thirst may thus be quenched and that my heart may be gifted with contentment, by your grace." Suka replied, "O King, I was also entering upon that narrative. So listen. Every concrete manifestation of God is significant; there can be no higher or lower. The story of each one of them is elevating. Each is a full manifestation.

Listening to these stories may make you feel that one manifestation is grander and more sublime than another. It would appear as if you get more inspiration from one Avatar than another. But all are equally divine and mysterious. The manifestation is suited to the time, the task, the circumstance, and the need; its form is in accordance with the purpose.

"Listen, Oh King! God is omnipotent. He knows no distinction between the possible and the impossible.

His wizardry, His sport, His play, His pranks cannot be described with man's vocabulary. Though He has no form (rupa), He can assume the form of the Universal Person, embodying all creation in His form. He is one, but He makes Himself many. Matsya, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Kalki - people say that these are the divine forms that He has assumed. But that is not describing Him as vast as His magnificence.

We have to visualise all forms as His. The vitality of every being is His breath. In short, every bit in creation is He, the manifestation of His will. There is nothing distinct or separate from Him.

Avatars appear for the protection of the world

"But for the protection of the world, for the upholding of right action (dharma), for fulfilling the yearnings of devotees, He wills specially and assumes a special form and moves in the world; He confers joy on the

devotees by His divine acts, which convince them of His advent; they are thus confirmed in their faith and prompted to dedicate their activities to God and thus save themselves, and liberate themselves. Therefore, people consider the forms mentioned above, which were assumed with this end in view, as specially sacred, and they worship God in those incarnated forms. On certain occasions, for resolving certain urgent crises, God has incarnated with forms embodying part of His divinity, with some divine powers and potentialities. Examples of such incarnations for the protection of the world are plenty." Parikshith lifted up his face, lit with a strange joy, and exclaimed, "Ah, did the charming Lord assume such forms through a part of Himself? Of course, it is all play for Him. Tell me about these forms taken by Him for the preservation of the world. Make me happy, listening to those stories." And he prostrated before the preceptor.

Suka continued, "Listen, O King! Kapila, Dattatreya, Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara, Sanatsujatha, and other sages, Rishabha, Nara-Narayana, Vishnu, Druva, Hayagriva, Prithu, Kachchapa, Dhanvantari, Hamsa, Manu, Balarama, Vyasa, and many such divine personages - these are but name-forms assumed by the Lord for granting boons to devotees, for saving the world from ruin, for laying down the code of morality and right behaviour for humanity, and for the restoration of traditional and well-established ideals and mores among mankind.

Partial incarnations spread wisdom and peace

"There are many more such partial incarnations. But we have no time for the detailed description of each.

Moreover, they are not so important as to merit detailed consideration. I responded to your request because I felt a short review was enough." But Parikshith intervened. "Master! Tell me at least very briefly why the Lord incarnates so, even though only a part of Him incarnated as Kapila, Dattatreya, Hayagriva, Dhanvantari and so forth. Tell me about their achievements and the significance of each advent. That will afford me purifying enlightenment." So Suka said, "King! Devahuthi, the wife of

Kardama Prajapathi bore nine daughters, and her tenth child was the Kapila form. The Lord, appearing as Kapila, became the preceptor and spiritual guide to the mother, Devahuthi, herself! He taught her the secret of attaining liberation and vouchsafed to her the teaching that led to final release.

"The consort of sage Athri, Anasuya by name, prayed for the Lord to be born as the child of her womb, and the Lord replied, 'Granted (datta)'. Since the father's name was Athri, He was called Dattatreya. He showered on Karthaviryarjuna and Yadu, emperors of high renown, who were endowed with all glory, the great treasure of yogic wisdom. It is in this form that God, in the beginning of this age (kalpa), moved about as the four child sages Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara, and Sanathana. They were always five years old, so innocent that they wore no clothes, so divine that they spread wisdom and peace around them.

"The Lord was born as the twins Nara and Narayana. They lived in the forests around Badari in the Himalayas, practising austerities. Their mother was Murthidevi.

"The Lord appreciated the intensity of the austerity of the boy Druva and conferred on him the blessing of His vision in concrete form. He sanctified the lives of Druva's parents. He crowned him as the Lord of the polar regions and set him in the sky as the Pole Star.

"When the downward-falling wicked Vena was cursed and destroyed by the sages, and when his body was churned, the first sovereign ruler of the world emerged. Because the Lord took that form, he was Prithu, the first Lord (Iswara) of the Earth (Prithvi). By his austerity and good conduct, Prithu saved his father from hell. He restored prosperity and morality in the entire world. He built villages, towns, and cities on the earth and ordered men to dwell peacefully in them, each performing their assigned duties in loving cooperation with the rest.

"The Lord was born again as the child of Nabhaga and Sudeva. He manifested as a realised sage and taught the supreme remedy for all ills, viz.

renunciation (thyaga) and the ways of cultivating it.

"Later, the Lord took form as Yajna (a name for Hayagriva) in a special sacrifice. Since He had the form of a horse above the neck, He was called horse-head (haya-griva). Hayagriva's breath manifested as the Vedas.

"Meanwhile, the wily ogre Somaka stole the Vedas and hid them in the surging floods of the great dissolution (pralaya). So the Lord had to assume the form of a fish, search for the Vedas in the depths of the sea, destroy the ogre, and bring the Vedas over to be restored to Brahma - this reestablished on earth the ways of living laid down in the Vedas and the goal of life marked out therein.

Thus, the Lord has assumed many forms appropriate for each need, manifested Himself on countless critical occasions, and showered His grace on the world. He has destroyed the fear and agony of mankind and has rescued the good and the godly. Countless are the narratives of such advents. His will results in His advent, so it is foolish to investigate the reasons that prompted Him to incarnate.

"Those who seek to know or lay down the causes for the Lord willing one way and not another are really on an impertinent adventure. So also are those who assert that His power and plans have such and such characteristics, qualifications, and limits, those who claim to know that the Lord will act only in this particular mode, and those who declare that the divine principle is of this nature and not otherwise!

Lord's power and glory knows no bounds

"There can be no limit or obstacle to His will. The manifestation of His power and His glory knows no bounds. He fructifies all that He wills; He can manifest in whatever form He wills. He is unique, incomparable, equal only to Himself. He is His own measure, witness, and authority.

"Once, the Lord was so touched by the sincerity of Narada's devotion to Him

that He assumed the form of a Celestial Swan (Hamsa) and explained to him the nature of spiritual devotion (bhaktha), of Bhagavan, and of the relation between the two, so that all aspirants might be led and liberated. He placed the wisdom and the path on a foundation strong enough to survive the end of this present age, without any fear of defeat or decline. He rendered the seven worlds shining in purity through the splendour of His spotless renown.

"During the great churning of the Ocean of Milk, the Lord assumed the form of a tortoise, to hold up the Mandhara Mountain peak, which was the churning rod. At that very time, the Lord also took the form of Dhanvantari, to bring the divine vessel filled with immortality-granting nectar (amritha). As Dhanvantari, He taught how to conquer disease and enable men to cure their physical ills. He rendered many famous as physicians and doctors, skilled in diagnosis and cure.

"He did much more, O King! Until then, physicians and doctors were not entitled to receive a share of the offerings made to the gods in sacrifices. Dhanvantari laid down that they must be given a share, and thus He raised their status in society.

"Did you note the inscrutable sports of the Lord, which are so evident in these manifestations? God! God alone knows the ways of God! How can others gauge their grandeur and their glory? How can they successfully measure them with their poor equipment of intellect and imagination? Since men are bound by the shackles of ignorance (a-jnana), they argue and dilate long and loud on God and His attributes and flounder in the sin of sacrilege.

Instead, man would win the grace of God if he would only discard doubt when he sees divine manifestations and keep his picture of God untarnished by passing moods and acts and in conformity with the manifestations of God he is privileged to witness. If he acts otherwise, he cannot hope to win grace or taste bliss.

"Among these, the incarnations of Rama and Krishna are most meaningful to mankind, since man can grasp their example, follow their solutions to

problems, and derive spiritual bliss (ananda) through the contemplation of their excellences and teachings. These two have installed themselves in the hearts of mankind and are receiving the adoration of men. I'll tell you about the more noteworthy incidents in the careers of these two incarnations.

33. Rama Avatar

Sage Suka resumed his narration. "First, I'll describe the saumya quality of Sri Rama. By 'saumya', I mean his gentle, soft, and mild nature. He wore a leaf-green gown and had yellow cloth round his waist; he had on a golden diadem. But he walked with his eyes on the ground, as if he was ashamed to look up; the scene melted the hearts of all who saw. No one caught him in the act of casting his look on others. He had always the inner, not the outer, vision. Whenever anyone offered him anything, he didn't accept it entirely but just broke off a bit or took out just a portion, in order to please them. Or, he just touched the offering with his fingers and gave it back to the person who brought it.

"With his father-in-law and mother-in-law, he moved not as a son-in-law but as a son. He seldom opened his mouth to speak to his sisters-in-law or their maids. He never lifted his face and cast his eyes on them.

"He revered all women older than himself as he revered his mother, Kausalya. He considered all who were younger than him as his younger sisters; those of his own age he treated as his step-mothers.

"He stuck severely to truth. He surmised that if his father broke his word, the dynasty would earn great dishonour, so, in order to uphold the plighted word of his father and to maintain his reputation, he exiled himself in the forest for fourteen years. His father didn't ask him to do it; he learned of it from his stepmother, Kaika. He never argued or gave a reply; he gave up the kingdom and started straight to the jungle. He acted correctly according to the words spoken by him, and he suited the action strictly to the word.

Rama: embodiment of compassion and dharma

"Rama's heart was filled with compassion; he gave refuge to anyone who took shelter in him and surrendered to him. When the monkey (vanara) hordes and ogres (rakshasas) were engaged in deadly combat during the battle in Lanka

with the wicked Ravana, some ogres changed themselves into monkeys and penetrated behind the lines; they were promptly caught by the monkey scouts and brought before Rama, for drastic punishment. But Rama stopped the monkeys from torturing them. He told them that they had come to take refuge in him and declared that it was his vow to pardon all those who surrender to him, whatever their wrongs. He had thus given refuge to Ravana's brother and treated him as his own brother Lakshmana. 'If he says once, I am yours, he is mine forever,' Rama announced.

"Rama lived and taught right action (dharma) through his every act. He established right action by practice and precept. He fostered and guarded good men (sadhus). He removed the sufferings of the godly; he drew them near himself, and their lives were fulfilled through his grace. He recognised no distinctions of high and low. He was a master of all the scriptures (sastras), and he knew the meaning of all the Vedas.

"Rama transformed the world into a realm of righteousness through his varied activities and example. During the great horse sacrifice that he performed, all the sages and scholars of ritual who had assembled honoured him as a great upholder of tradition and culture. His compassion and softness of heart are beyond description; no words can convey their depth and extent. He placed the dying eagle, Jatayu, a bird, which no one will ordinarily honour, on his lap and wiped the dust that had enveloped it with his own flowing hair. And when Jatayu breathed its last, he performed the obsequies even as a son does when his father dies!

"His very appearance cast a charm on all who saw him. Love, beauty, and virtue emanated from him and spread to all around him. He treated the monkey tribals (vanaras) with as much affection as he had toward his brothers, Bharatha, Lakshmana, and Satrugna.

"Rama was the full manifestation of righteousness or right action (dharma). Sages extolled him, saying that dharma itself had taken that human form! There is no need to dilate and speak of a thousand details. For all householders, Rama is the ideal. His advent was for restoring spiritual values

and saving the world from moral disaster.

How affectionately he moved with his brothers!

Rama's sterling virtues and excellences

"Everything was ready for his coronation. At the last minute, when he was exiled to the forest, the populace of Ayodhya wailed in uncontrollable anguish, but Rama moved out of the city and kingdom with as much joy and equanimity as he had when he moved toward the throne for the coronation! What greater example is needed than this for the person whose consciousness is calm and beyond all agitations?

"Rama felt that the plighted word was worth the sacrifice of even life. He suffered grievous hardships with perfect equanimity in order to preserve his father's plighted word. His sincere persistence in carrying out the promise made by his father is an inspiration and example to every son of man.

"Sita insisted on accompanying her husband to the forest, since the true wife can keep alive only in the company of the husband. She had never before exposed herself to sun and rain, but she spent her days in the terrorstriking forest, since it was her duty, and in unsullied joy.

""He who is born with you is more worthy of affection than she who joined you later,' that was Lakshmana's view when he joined his brother, Rama, leaving his wife Urmila, back in Ayodhya.

"Bharatha could only obey Rama's wish, and he came back to the capital with a heavy heart, since Rama declined to come and enthrone himself. Bharatha created an artificial 'forest' for himself - that is to say, out of inner compulsion, he led an ascetic's life, since he felt he must live like his exiled brother.

"Dasaratha, the father, and Rama, the son were as different as earth and sky! To please his wife, to make her happy and contented, the father was

prepared to bear the utmost agony, and he even sent his dear son as an exile to the jungle! The son sent his wife into the jungle as an exile, in order to respect the opinion of a commoner in his empire! Think of the different ways in which the two carried out their duties to the people over whom they ruled.

Dasaratha was overwhelmed by the illusion that he was the physical body; Rama was moved by the realisation that he was the Atma.

"Ah! The virtues and excellences of Rama! I am incapable of describing them to you, O King! What greater task and mission in life can a man have than the contemplation of that Supreme Person? To save oneself from downfall, the only exercise needed is this: Listen to the glorious narrative of the lives of Avatars. When you do so, all sin is washed away," said Suka.

Parikshith was delighted; his face flushed with excitement. "Master, while your account of the life and activities, the virtues and charm of Rama - the embodiment of dharma - is bestowing on me such great spiritual bliss (ananda), I wonder how much greater would be my bliss if you described Krishna's career! He is dark-blue beauty personified. How sweet must be the account of Krishna's childhood pranks, His boyish adventures, His divine pranks (leelas), His Divine prattle! I pray to be kept immersed in the thought and contemplation of the might and majesty, the charm and beauty of Krishna Himself in my final days. I pray that I may thereby be saved from the cycle of birth and death."

34. Krishna Avatar

Suka said, "O King, truly, Krishna's pranks (leelas) are, as you said, amazing, wondrous, and yet sweet and meaningful. They aren't tainted by the desire to show off divine nature. The common man is drawn by external pomp and apparent motives. So he judges the divine sport (leelas) as common and even low. The inner meaning and purpose are not easily patent to all. But the Lord can never engage Himself in purposeless and paltry activities.

"His advent is for the uplifting of the world from the morass of wickedness and unrighteousness, for fulfilling the needs of those devoted to Him, for the reestablishment of right and morality, and for the revival of the Vedas; He has to take into account the merit acquired by each in previous lives and shower His Grace accordingly.

He makes Himself available through the granting of boons; His Divine activities are so shaped that they suit the time, person, aspiration, and compassion that cause each shower of grace. Therefore, who can comprehend correctly and interpret aright this divine play?

All activity of an Avatar is for the good of the world

"'The amazing plays (leelas) of Hari are known only to Hari,' it is said. He can be interpreted by Him alone, not by another. However, one observation can be made with confidence. The manifest incarnations of God won't engage in the least for their own sake or for the sake of fulfilling any personal likes! All activity is for the good of the world! Though the world cannot exist and survive without Them, They move and act as if the world has nothing to do with them. In every word and deed of Theirs, one can observe the underlying current of total renunciation.

For Them who hold the worlds in the palm of Their hands, what can the world give or withhold? They can shape it as they like.

"Fools, people without faith, persons who deny God, people caught in the coils of ignorance, those who don't learn anything - these may see the plays (leelas) of God as self-centred and even motivated by delusion, like the actions of ordinary mortals. But genuine spiritual devotees (bhakthas) will cherish them as significant and sustaining examples of grace. How can that (Thath) be grasped by those who are engrossed in you (thwam)?

Divine love for devotees prompted Krishna's leelas

"King, you should remember that the actions of Rama and Krishna are wide apart. When the wicked and cruel enemies of righteousness were about to overwhelm the good, the two brothers Krishna and Balarama were born, the one black and the other white (as a head of hair, both black and white), and by their acts that transcended the comprehension of man and astounded the world.

"Krishna's divine miraculous pranks (leelas) are beyond the comprehension of anyone, however scholarly or wise. His movement, his walk, his talk, his smile, his laughter, his gesture, his speech, his song - each is charming with a unique artistry.

"Wherever He went, He created some strange mischief or other. Like a typhoon sweeping over the land, He left behind a series of upheavals, quarrels, wailing, and tears in every home that He visited!

"There was no need to invite Him ceremoniously into any house; He would enter, uninvited, unannounced.

Every house belonged to Him; He would go in and take whatever He wanted from wherever it was hidden and eat to His heart's content.

"He was everyone's dearest kinsman and fastest comrade, so He could take anything from any house with impunity. But He wasn't content with that. He took away much more than His own need, for He gave away large quantities to His companions. And they were quite a large number! The owners might

bewail the loss and condemn the theft, but He didn't care; He gave the things away as if they were His own! No one could hinder His sport; no one could go against His word. If any dared oppose or threaten, the sufferings heaped on his head would be indescribable.

Krishna's smallest act was saturated with sweetness

"But the truth must be told. The smallest act of His was saturated with supreme sweetness. Even the sufferings He inflicted on those He wanted to punish were sweet. So no one felt the least anger toward Him. Instead, they yearned to meet Him more often, to play with Him longer, to talk with Him and stay with Him as much as possible. Whatever His pranks and practical jokes, the victims never felt annoyed at Him.

"The reason was the undercurrent of spiritual love (prema), that motivated all His words and acts. The cowherd maids rushed toward Him with sticks to beat Him off, but when they neared Him and cast their looks at Him, their hearts were filled with divine love, and they came away with a prayer on their tongues. Whatever He did appeared as divine sport (leela).

"And the manner of His speech! It was so pleasing and so clever. It was mostly intended to mislead! He put sand into His mouth before all His companions, but when His mother took Him to task for it, He denied it and put out His tongue to prove His denial! He rendered true statements false and false statements true!

"He went daily to Vrishabhendrapura, the village where Radha lived. Many people saw Him on the road while going and returning. His mother accosted and challenged Him, 'Why do you trek such long distances every day? Don't you have comrades here to play with?' He replied, 'I don't know that road at all!' He caused confusion in every home, created factions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, setting them one against the other, and enjoyed the fun. He was seldom stationary in one place, from dawn when He rose from bed till the hour when He went to sleep. This little bundle of mischief roamed from house to house, without rest.

"In spite of all this, the villagers couldn't bear His absence, even for an instant! If He didn't put in His appearance any day, the milkmaids watched for His visit, peeping at the road through the windows or looking into the distance from the terrace. Such was the charm of the divine love that Krishna showered on them and the love that the people had toward Him. His pranks were so heart warming, so inspiring and meaningful.

Even as an infant, Krishna was the protector

"The blue Boy was the master of subterfuge and diplomacy. He saw through every artifice, however cleverly camouflaged. When the ogress Puthana approached Him as mother to feed Him at her breast, He pretended to be taken in by that stratagem; He sucked her life out and felled her to the ground. Many a demon (asura) came near Him to destroy Him, some assuming the familiar forms of the cowherds and milkmaids of the village, but He discovered their identity and despatched them to the city of death. One demon took the form of a calf and moved among the calves and cows that Krishna was tending, waiting for an opportunity to kill Him. But the three-year-old divine infant saw through the device. He caught him by the tail, raised him, swung him around, and beat him on the ground, so that he breathed his last.

"Such strength and skill were quite out of proportion to that infant form. He demonstrated His divinity in a million ways, in order to convert and convince men. He taught everyone, whether they were elders, women, crooks, His own kinsmen, or well-wishers. He advised them into good ways. He entangled some of them in dilemmas.

His maternal uncle, Kamsa, was drunk with imperial power and heroic audacity. He caught him by the tuft of hair, pulled him down from the throne, fisted him to death, and dragged the body along the main thoroughfare right down to the bank of the Yamuna! The entire population of the city of Mathura saw in every act of His a wondrous mixture of the amazing, the astounding, the sweet, the charming, the enticing, the beautiful, and the simple.

"While yet an infant, He ended the lives of Puthana, Thrinarvartha, and Sakatasura, even though He was just a tiny thief in search of butter in every home! When His mother tied Him to a wooden mortar, He dragged it behind Him and, with it, pulled down two giant trees that were growing together. He curbed the conceit and fury of the serpent Kaliya, who had poisoned the waters of the Yamuna and made them disastrous for men and cattle.

When His mother attempted to tie Him up with a rope round His waist, he revealed His universal form to her, the form in which the entire universe was found to be but a part of Him. His parents and the people of Gokula were wonder-struck at the remarkable experience of His divinity. Through His yawn, He showed them both the macrocosm and the microcosm!

"He showed His dear cowherd comrades His paradise, which knew no grief or loss. He persuaded Nanda to stop the usual ritual worship (puja) for the rain god Indra and instead to worship the Govardhana Hill. When Indra, stung by this neglect, poured terrible rains on the village, Krishna held aloft the Govardhana Hill on his little finger, inviting the entire village to take shelter under it!

Krishna's play with the cowherd maids was divine

"He raised the cowherd boys and maids into ecstatic moods by His playful pranks and melodious music on the flute. To interpret this as low and sensuous is a sign of foolishness.

"Krishna's dancing in the moonlight with the maids, each maid having a concrete Krishna by her side, is interpreted by low-minded persons as laxity of morals and a vulgar pastime. There is no basis at all for such inference.

Krishna was only five or six years old when these miraculous incidents took place, so how can the experience be condemned as lascivious? The Lord has no attributes or qualities. The moonlight divine dance of Krishna (rasa-kreedā), as this incident is called, is but a means of rendering the cowherd maids (gopis) worthy of grace, an example of devotion and the fruit of

devotion, dedication. The Lord was showering on them the grace they had earned by their meritorious acts. It was a boon, a blessing.

"When that superhuman divine manifestation is taken to be merely human, lasciviousness and thievishness may be attributed to it, but what human can achieve even an iota of what He did? He saved the world from the harassment of such monstrous evildoers as Pralamba, Dhenuka, Kesi, Banasura, Arishta, Mushtika, Kuvalayapida, Kamsa, Naraka, Paundraka, Vividha, Jarasandha, Dantavakra, Kambhoja, Kuru, Matsyasura, Kalayavana, and many such powerful persons. Can it be said that all this is within the capacity of a mere man?

In Krishna Avatar, every act was an amazing miracle

"In this unique Avatar, every act is an amazing miracle. Even when angry, He could not but evince His overflowing love (prema). In Love, His compassion flowed unhindered. Through His sight, touch, and conversation (darshan, sparshan, and sambhasan), one could earn liberation. He granted immortality to those who remembered His name. The cowherds, among whom He lived and moved, tasted the nectar of ecstasy whenever they witnessed His deeds or remembered them.

"O King! The Bhagavatha is not merely the narrative of the Lord's story, in the background of Mathura, Brindavan, Gokula, the banks of the Yamuna, Nanda-Yasoda, Vasudeva-Devaki and others. Bhagavatha includes the stories of all the incarnations of the Lord (Bhagavan). All incarnations were the manifestations of the selfsame Gopala, or Krishna, from Vishnu's heaven (Vaikunta). The story of each is but the story of Vasudeva, emerging from Him and merging in Him. That Divine Power is the sustaining factor for all incarnations as well as all living beings." The sage's eyes closed. He was in a state of transcendent spiritual bliss (samadhi), tasting the sweetness of the Krishna incarnation. A beautiful smile beamed on his lips. Parikshith was astounded at the sight of the waves of joy that overpowered the great sage whenever he allowed his mind to dwell on Krishna's divine career. He too yearned with enthusiastic impatience to listen to the enrapturing incidents

and activities of the Lord.

When Suka resumed, Parikshith lost all consciousness of his surroundings. He was so struck with wonder that he couldn't believe that some of the incidents had ever happened! He got immense pain and unbearable agony at the thought of his own inconstancy. So he placed his problem before the sage and won peace of mind from his explanation and elaboration.

While proceeding thus, on one occasion the king developed serious doubts about the devotion (bhakthi) of the cowherd maids (gopis). He argued within himself and sought remedial assurances through his own understanding and faith. But the doubts wouldn't vanish. Nor had he the courage to ask the sage, who might consider them to be too childish. So, he was suffering and smothering the suffering.

This became evident to the sage, who asked the king with a smile, "Evidently some insane idea is distracting you. In this crisis, it is not beneficial to suffer from repressed emotions. If some doubt is simmering in you, or if a thirst to know about something is hurting you, don't hesitate to ask me. I'll resolve the doubt, I'll quench the thirst and ensure joy and contentment of mind." Thus encouraged, the king spoke. "Master! You know the past, present, and future. You have the vision and the capacity to cure me of the doubt that is pestering me. Therefore, please don't misunderstand me. Hear me and resolve the doubt. Cure me of the anguish I have on account of it. Restore the peace of mind I had before the doubt entered my heart." The king fell at the sage's feet and continued, "Master! I have heard much, in various versions, of the sport and pranks, of Krishna's Rasa Dance (rasa-kreeda) with the cowherd maids (gopis) of Brindavan. They appear to be sensual pastimes of ordinary mortals. If such incidents did indeed happen, how can they be interpreted as divine? Aren't they disapproved by the world? These incidents at Brindavan, on the Yamuna banks, where such loose sensual lascivious play was enacted, besmirch Krishna's divine nature, I am afraid. It is said that ultimate release (moksha) can be attained only by those who transcend the qualities (gunas). These cowherd maids were afflicted with qualities and the desires born out of them, mostly sensual and objective. It amazes me to hear that the maids

were able to attain freedom (moksha). Indeed, it appears ridiculous! However, if these immoral activities have some inner significance that justifies their being accepted as praiseworthy, please enlighten me." Suka laughed heartily. "O King! Don't think that you are afflicted by a doubt; it is much worse! For those who have realised that Krishna is the Lord Himself won't entertain such doubts. This is the final period of the Dwapara Age, and the Kali Age is beginning soon. The Spirit of the Age of Wickedness (the Kali spirit) has entered into you and has prompted you to lodge such ideas in your mind. Or else, you would have unshaken faith that Krishna is the sovereign supreme God.

Every incident in His career shines in your heart with divine brilliance. The moment you recollect His name, you are overcome by joy and your thoughts merge in Him. So these doubts can't arise in such as you! You are defiling your personality by them.

Exuberance of divine intoxication of gopis

"Consider what type of a person I am. You know that there is no place in my heart for activities born out of qualities (gunas) or the impulses created out of these qualities. Just consider how such a one as I is overpowered with supreme joy when I contemplate Krishna's divine sport with the cowherd maids (gopis)! Consider how I praise the good fortune of these maids, who had His precious companionship. Can this be ordinary sensual sport?

Or is it the pure and genuine exuberance of divine intoxication?

"Think a while. Sensual exultation and divine exhilaration might appear the same in their external manifestations to the untrained eye. But when the senses are transcended, when the individual and Universal have merged into one thought and consciousness, when all awareness of the body has been negated - then to interpret these activities as objective and sensual is sheer stupidity, to say the least.

"A knife in the hands of a murderer is fraught with danger to all, and a knife in

the hands of a surgeon confers freedom from pain. In both cases, a hand holds the knife. So too, the acts of one whose self is centred in the body are to be condemned, while those of one whose self is centred in the Atma or Inner Reality are highly beneficent and praiseworthy.

"It all looked so peculiar, so extraordinary. Very often, it resembled lawlessness and sheer mischief. While walking in the eastern direction, his attention was fixed in the western direction! He conversed through His eyes; the flash of His eye spoke out His plans and intentions. He didn't care for human limitations and disciplines. He didn't recognise the distinction between new and old acquaintances - He treated both alike. He didn't respect kinship or yield to the demands of convention.

Krishna's form was bliss personified

"Next, the mystery of the Krishna incarnation! That embodiment of sweetness is most captivating! Exquisite charm, unrivaled sweetness, incomparable love - the Krishna form was the concretisation of all these! That form was the treasure house of bliss, the Ocean of Virtue. Oh, what innocence! What superhuman excellence! The mere sight of Him is enough; listening to His words is enough; merely touching Him is enough - one's life will find its goal! All rituals, all sacrifices, all scriptural ceremonies have as their goal only this: this sight, this listening, this touch. The gain that accrues from rites are nothing compared to the gain from the sight and the touch and the listening to His voice. No, they are nothing at all. Ah! What immeasurable sweetness!" Contemplating on that form, recollecting the charm and the loveliness, the sage started shedding profuse tears of joy. He was so full of inward bliss that he stopped narrating and lost all consciousness of himself and his listeners.

The ascetics around him and the king himself were overcome with wonder at the rare sight of the sage's transcendental state (samadhi). The illumination on his face had an overpowering impact on all. They sat like statues, afraid to disturb the sage and immersed in their own amazement and joy.

The fruit of good deeds done in previous lives

After some time, Suka opened his eyes and exclaimed, "How fortunate were the herdsmen and maids (gopas and gopis) who lived then. How their bodies must have shone with the divine joy they experienced when they moved in His company, played with Him, talked with Him, sang with Him, and shared supreme bliss (ananda) with Him! Gods envied their luck, for it was a chance they could not secure. Those simple illiterate folk had the singular good fortune as a consequence of the merit acquired in many previous lives. Those herdsmen and cow maids weren't just common men and women. No. At first sight they struck one as simple, unlearned folk, that was all. But they had a vast treasure of revealed wisdom, which only a few could appreciate and understand. Or else, how could they have secured the bliss of the Lord's touch, which even Rukmini and Sathyabama couldn't win so easily! The herdsmen and maids can be said to be more fortunate than those queens. Their good fortune was the fruit of the good deeds done by them during not one but three previous lives!"

35. Gopala, Gopas, And Gopis

Sage Suka was keen on King Parikshith's seeing the Lord's divine sports in their proper prospective. "Maharaja!

Parikshith! Who can describe the supreme super-world charm of Krishna, whose lovely form was the very embodiment of sweetness? How can anyone describe it in words? You want me to tell you stories of Krishna, but they belong to a realm that is beyond the reach of human vocabulary. God incarnated often and demonstrated, during each advent, many superworldly miracles, but in this Krishna incarnation, He exhibited a unique attraction.

"Did He smile but once, revealing the pearly line of teeth? Those who had the spring of love in their hearts, those who had the spell of devotion in their hearts, and even those who had mastered their senses and overcome their inner reactions felt an upsurge of emotion rising in them, an upsurge of affectionate adoration! Did He but touch them softly with His tender Hand? They lost all consciousness of their bodies; they were so immersed in bliss that thenceforth they lived in tune with Him!

"Now and then, He made fun and told humorous tales. The listeners felt that few were more fortunate than they, few were superior in the entire world!

Only the pure in heart understand Krishna's sports

"The herdsmen and maids (gopas and gopis) and the people of Vraja might be engaged in their daily avocations, but let them but see Krishna once while so engaged, and they stood entranced by His loveliness, rooted to the spot, like images carved in stone. The women of Vraja had surrendered their minds, their very breath, to Krishna, whom they recognised as love and compassion personified. No scholar, however high his attainments, can find language adequate to describe their nature and experience. In fact, language has to be dumb; it can only fail.

"The devotion and dedication of the herdsmen and maids, filled with elevated emotions, knew no limit. No less a person than Uddhava exclaimed on seeing them, 'Alas! I wasted all these years of my life! Having been in the cool comforting presence of Krishna-chandra so long, so near Him, I haven't gained access to His love and His glory. My heart is not yet illumined by even a fraction of the devotion and love that these maids have for the Lord.

Truly, if one has to take birth, one must be born as a herdsman or maid (gopa or gopi)! Why be born otherwise and live a life without meaning, without significance? If I have no luck to be born as a herdsman or maid, let me become a green floral bower in Brindavan, or a jasmine creeper there, or, if I don't merit that fortune, let me at least grow as a blade of grass on the lawns frequented by the herdsmen, maids, and Krishna.' Uddhava yearned in devoted anguish, and his heart was filled with yearning. In fact, he was saved by that very anguish.

"Therefore, the statement that this relationship between Krishna and the cowherd maids was low and lascivious just reveals that the person is too easily led into wrong conclusions. Such statements are not worth attention.

"Maharaja! None but the pure in heart can understand Krishna's sport."

Parikshith was very happy when he heard this. He asked the sage with a smile on his lips, "Master! When did Uddhava go to Brindavan? Why did he go there? What prompted him to leave Krishna's presence and go? Please describe the incident to me." The living appeared lifeless; the lifeless, living Suka began the description. "O King! Uddhava could never be away from Krishna, even for a moment. He could never leave His presence. But Krishna sent him to Brindavan in order to give a message to the cowherd maids, so he had no option. He had to go; separation became inevitable. However, Krishna gave him just one day to fulfil his mission. He told him to stay no longer than a day. In spite of this, that one day of separation seemed an age for Uddhava, when he went to Brindavan.

"However, on reaching Brindavan, Uddhava was sorry that the hours were

flying fast and that he had to leave the place so soon. 'Alas, that I have to go away from these people so quickly! How happy I would be to spend my life in their company. Unfortunately, I haven't acquired that merit' - these sad thoughts worried Uddhava.

"Maharaja, did you note that there is really no difference between the Lord and the devotee? Uddhava felt more anguish when he had to leave the cowherd maids' presence than when he had to leave Krishna's presence!

His spiritual bliss (ananda) was the same in both places.

There is no distinction between cowherd maid (gopi) and Gopala, the devotee and Bhagavan. The hearts of the maids had been transformed into altars wherein He was installed. Their inner cravings were satiated by drinking the nectar of the essence of Krishna. Uddhava was able to realise their agony at separation from Krishna, the sincerity of their affectionate attachment to Him, their eagerness to hear about Him, their anxiety about Him, their earnestness to hear and obey His message.

"The herdsmen and maids never allowed their attention to wander from stories of Krishna, descriptions of His sports, and tales of His activities and achievements, even for a moment. The splendour of Krishna's sweetness cast such powerful influence on Vraja that the living appeared lifeless and the lifeless appeared living! Uddhava saw with his own eyes the boulders of Govardhana Mountain melt in tears of joy. He saw the maids transfixed like stone images when their hearts were filled with divine joy. His experiences as wonderful and illuminating." While describing these characteristics of the devotion of the cowherd maids, Suka was so overcome with joy that teardrops fell from his eye. He lost awareness of all external things and entered super-consciousness (samadhi) so often that the holy men and sages who were listening to and watching him were filled with ecstasy and an irrepressible yearning to visualise the Krishna moon (chandra) who thrilled Suka so deeply.

The gopis' agony of separation from Krishna

Finally, Suka opened his eyes. He said, "Maharaja! How lucky Uddhava was! While showing him the places where they sported with Krishna, the maids also showed him Govardhana Mountain. His wonder increased even more, for he could see on the rocks and the hard ground the footprints of Krishna, the herdsmen, and the maids as clear as when they walked long ago in that area. Nearing the Govardhana Mountain, the maids felt the agony of separation from Krishna so poignantly that they broke into sobs. They were aware only of Him; they merged in thoughts only of Him. When they called out 'Krishna!' in one voice, the nearby trees were so thrilled that they got goose pimples. They swayed their arms and began to moan in sadness. Uddhava observed with his own eyes how separation from Krishna had affected and afflicted not only the cowherd men and women of Brindavan but even its hills and trees. Maharaja! What more can I say? Uddhava saw scenes that transcend belief. He was overwhelmed with amazement, and he was humbled." The king was eager to know more. "Master! How did that happen? If there is no objection, please enlighten me on that point also." Suka answered, "King! the awareness of the cowherd maids had become one with the consciousness of Krishna, so they noticed nothing else and none else. They saw every stone and tree as Krishna; they held on to it, calling out Krishna, Krishna. That made the stones and trees feel the agony of separation from Krishna, and they also melted in the heat of that grief, so that teardrops fell from the points of the leaves. The stones softened with the tears they exuded. How amazing these scenes must have been! The axiom, 'All is alive' (sarvam sajivam) was proved true to Uddhava. The stones and trees of Brindavan demonstrated that nothing is devoid of consciousness and life.

"Those unable to grasp the glory of the cowherd maids and the spiritual devotion (bhakthi) that melted stone and drew sobs of grief from the trees have no right to judge and pronounce a verdict. If they do, they reveal only that their intelligence is more inert than rocks and boulders. Inert minds can never grasp the splendours of the moon Krishna (Krishna-chandra), who is the sovereign of the universe, who captivates the universe by His beauty and power. Only the clearest and purest intelligence can grasp it.

A gopi experiences Krishna in a flame

"Uddhava noticed a novel feature at Brindavan that evening. As brahmins and other twice-born people engaged at sunset in the worship of fire through ceremonial ritual, the cowherd maids lit the hearths in their homes, bringing cinders or live flames from neighbouring houses in shells or plates of clay. He saw that the first house to light the lamp and hearth was Nanda's, the house where Krishna grew and played. He saw that as soon as the light shone in Nanda's house, the maids went there, one after the other, with lamps in their hands, in order to have them lit auspiciously therefrom. They carried the lighted lamps to their own homes. Uddhava sat on the step of the village hall and watched the lamps go by.

"One maiden took too long to light her lamp at Krishna's house, and the others who waited behind her got impatient. Yasoda, who was in the inner apartments, came out and, seeing her, cried out, 'O, what a calamity this is!' and tried to awaken her with a pat on the back. But the maiden didn't open her eyes. Those around her dragged her gently away from the lamp and laid her down so that she could rest a while. Her fingers had got badly burnt and charred. With great effort, she was brought back into consciousness. On inquiry, she revealed that she saw Krishna in the flame of the lamp, and in that joyful experience, she didn't know that her fingers were in the flame and were being burnt; she had felt no pain at all.

"Uddhava was astounded at this incident, which was another wonderful instance of the devotion of the cowherd maids (gopis)."

36. Comrade And King

The pranks of Krishna the toddler

"Master! I'm eager to hear about the boyish pranks, games, and adventures of Krishna, as the cowherd lad (Gopala), and His comrades of the Vraja community in the groves and wilds during his eleven years in Brindavan - after reaching there from the Mathura Prison, where He chose to be born." Suka was very happy. He smiled and said, "It's not possible for me to describe to you all the pranks (leelas) of that divine Gopala, each of which fills the mind with sweetness. The Vraja cowherd boys who shared that joy were really blessed. The Lord doesn't pay any attention to external distinctions - an individual's name, nationality, caste, profession, attitude, etc. Whatever the attitude with which a person approaches Him, He will welcome him, draw him near, fulfil his wishes, and confer happiness. That was Gopala's nature.

"Ever since His father, Vasudeva, left Him in Nanda's home, Krishna granted great joy to Nanda, and grateful shouts of 'victory' echoed and reechoed in that home as a result of the child's divine prowess. He grew day by day, with increasing charm. He shone as the most endearing treasure of the mother and played on her lap.

He toddled and crossed the doorstep. Holding His father's and mother's finger, He venturesomely walked a few steps - although the parents tried their best to hide Him from view so that the many ambassadors of death that Kamsa despatched without respite could not get at Him, He would somehow make Himself available. He used to go forward to meet them and introduce Himself to them. Who could keep Gopala, the provider and protector of the universe, hidden - and where? Who could carry Him off - and how? O, Parikshith, it is all divine sport.

Cows and calves are entranced by Krishna's melody

"Growing day by day, He started going to the sacred sandbanks of the holy

Yamuna river to play with children of His age from the homes of the cowherds. The parents tried to stop Him but couldn't. Like His comrades, He drove cows to the pastures.

"Really, the eyes that saw the entrancing scene - when Gopala was in the midst of the herd of clean sleek happy cows and calves - are worthy to be called so, for they saw the sight of all sights. Picture to yourself, Oh King! The spotless white herd of calves and cows, and the dark divine boy! They were drawn close to Him, and they would not leave Him and stray away. Nor could Krishna, for He loved them as His own brothers and sisters - or as His own children! Let His hand touch their backs ever so lightly, and the calves and their mothers forgot all about themselves, opened their mouths, raised their tails, hung out their tongues, and lovingly licked His face and hands.

"Gopala often clasped their necks and swung to and fro, in great joy, with His eyes closed and His face beaming with a radiant smile. The calves playfully butted His soft body with their just-emerging horns. On the ever- fresh, ever-spring sands of the cool Yamuna, He played about gracefully and gladly, regardless of night and day, with His friends: the calves and the cowherd boys. The parents had to send servants to find them and bring Him with His followers, willy nilly, to their home.

"As the days passed at home and outside, He grew up into a charming boy. Though the parents didn't want Him to, He unleashed the cows and calves of the stall, drove them along the route taken by the village cattle, and put them also on the common road to the verdant pasture ahead. Like the other boys, He had a stick on His shoulder and a length of cloth around His head. Walking along with supreme self-confidence, He appeared as magnificent as a royal lion cub.

"He played in fun with His companions. He sang the sweetest tunes aloud, with the left palm covering the left ear. At this, the cows who were voraciously munching the green grass would stop as if too entranced to continue; they stared delightedly, listening to the divine melody. They stood with ears alert, lest they miss the message calling them to bliss, and with

eyes half closed, as if immersed in the depths of meditation (dhyana)! The calves that had been nuzzling at the udders, eager to have their fill, stood still, drinking instead the divine strains of Krishna's song. It was a thrilling scene for all who witnessed it.

Krishna's divine sports are full of spiritual bliss

"O King, I cannot tell you the number or nature of Gopala's divine plays (leelas). All were wondrous and awe-inspiring, all were full of spiritual bliss (ananda) and conferring bliss. Sometimes, He would challenge His comrades and swing the stick in His hand so fast that the eye couldn't see it! At this, the comrades, gathered around Him and prayed to be taught how to swing it also. For Him who turn the universe with all its contents so fast around, turning a stick is no special accomplishment; it is a feat that no teaching can impart. The poor fellows did not grasp this reality behind their playmate.

"Often, He played the game of the hunt for the thief in the trees! When the pursuers climbed behind Him, He took refuge on the topmost branch, a branch so thin and weak that it would swing when a squirrel walked on it!

He couldn't be captured! Yes, indeed! How could He be caught by one and all? Only the pure heart could capture Him.

"To all appearances, Gopala would be with His comrades in the woods and groves. He would be playing with them, making them happy with many a practical joke and hilarious game; He would move with them, His hands placed endearingly on their shoulders. But in a moment, he would disappear and be away from sight. Meanwhile, He would confront His companions in a clever disguise, so perfect that they would deem Him to be a stranger with whom they shouldn't talk. Then He would surprise them with a burst of laughter and the exclamation, 'It's Me, It's Me, you couldn't discover Me.' This threw the boys into amazement - and sometimes, even fright.

"The day passed thus. When dusk fell, He returned to the village with His friends, quite innocently, as if nothing had happened to disturb His

equanimity. On certain days, the mother insisted that He stay at home and not go to the pastoral groves. Then, the cowherd boys and cows and calves would walk slowly to the grove, heavy with grief. They would lay under the trees, listless and alone, not caring to eat or drink, but with eyes longing for the arrival of Bliss Krishna, who alone could put life into them.

Amazing feats of protection by boy Krishna

"Many a day, the wicked uncle, Kamsa, sent his emissaries, the ogres, in disguise, with playthings and delicious sweets. The boys gathered round the peddlers and asked the cost of the things they wanted. But the ogre was intent on the chance to catch Krishna; he was looking out for the moment when He would come near. Krishna did not cast his glance at the toys and sweets. Krishna used to wait until evening and then approach the wicked men, allowing them to believe that He had fallen into their trap but only to fall upon them, pull them to pieces, and throw the carcasses afar! Such adventures filled the village people with amazement, fear, and wonder, besides delighting them at the happy escape from danger.

"Another day, the village was packed with carts full of mangos! Krishna knew that this was another evil plan of the ogres, the emissaries of Kamsa. So, He took the fruits and killed those who brought them. He felt that it was not proper to refuse the fruits that the uncle had sent, so He accepted them. But He did not send anyone back alive to inform him what had happened. That was the fate of all whom the uncle despatched on his evil mission.

Krishna lifts the Govardhana peak

"O, King! From the day the Lord took residence in the Vraja region, the place was changed into a treasure house of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and welfare. It appeared as if She was scattering Her graceful smiles all over the place. There were thousands upon thousands of cows; there was no shortage of curds, milk, or butter. In fact, there was such a plenty that they didn't know how to consume all they had or how to preserve them for future consumption. Gopala loved the cows so much that He could not tolerate any idea of

throwing away the precious gift. That is why He was pleased to receive them into His own stomach. This act of grace is the basis for the appellation Milk and Butter Thief!

"Observing that He was being named as such, Indra decided to demonstrate to the world that Krishna was indeed God come on earth. So he manipulated a situation where Indra worship (puja) was canceled by the people of Vraja, where Indra retaliated with heavy downpours of rain, and where Krishna lifted up the Govardhana Peak in order to shelter the cowherds and cows from the onslaught of the downpour! It was all part of a play. Indra had no anger; nor did he entertain any idea of revenge or retaliation! Nor would Krishna ever advise people to give up worship (puja). Such miracles were decided upon in order to make them identify the Divine already amidst them.

Such incidents confirm the view that nothing can happen without an underlying purpose."

Parikshith intervened with his joyous exclamation. "O, how sweet are the sport and pranks (leelas) of the divine boy, Gopala! The more we hear, the greater grows the appetite. Master! Let me listen to a few more and attain the state of liberation."

37. The Fate Of Demons

Indeed, recollecting Krishna's boyish pranks and enabling others to listen to their descriptions gave Suka great delight! Therefore, as soon as he was asked, he began. "O King, there is no higher course for you during the few remaining days of life than contemplation of God, is there? The doings of the Lord are drops of nectar. Every one of them is a fountain of spiritual bliss (ananda). Tell me which of them you wish to hear about, and I'll describe the truth of each to you and the glory that I saw." King Parikshith replied, "Master! I want to hear of the wondrous way in which Gopala moved among the cowherd boys. That will give me such joy that I can liberate myself from the hold of death and birth." The Lord eats the leavings of his companions So, Suka said, "King! Gopala woke early, during the hours from 4 to 6 (Brahma-muhurtha). Soon, He finished bathing and went into the cowshed to select and separate the cows and calves that had to be taken to the pastures that day. He gave them water to drink and heaped grass before the animals that were to be left behind, so that they could feed their fill. He loosened the ropes from the posts to which the cows to be taken with him were tied and drove them out of the shed into the area in front of his home. Then, he went inside the house and collected 'his cold rice and curds packet, with a bit of pickles in it.' He cautioned his elder brother that it was time to start; and, in order to alert his companions to be ready to join him, he blew a horn, standing on the road. On hearing the call, the cowherd boys quite hurriedly finished their allotted tasks at home, picked up the bundles of noontime food packets, and hastened to Yasoda's house, ready for the task for which Krishna called.

"Then the boys went, playing on flutes and singing melodious tunes. Some of them responded to the cuckoos that sang on trees with echoing songs of their own. Others ran along the shadows of the birds that flew above.

Some lay flat on the backs of the cows and sang their favourite songs merrily, all the while watching with eagerness what Gopala was doing. Thus, they moved on into the forest.

"Gopala would then place the flute tight in his loins. Holding the noon-day meal packet in his left hand and raising His lovely silver voice, He would sing a charming song and slowly walk along. The cows stepped in unison with the song, as if their feet kept time and delighted in doing so. They pointed their ears to listen to the divine melody. They raised their heads in silent admiration and adoration. At last, they reached the banks of the tank.

"By then, it would be time eat. They sat under the trees and untied the cloth bundles, which contained cold rice mixed with curds, cream, and milk and other items, according to the taste and need of each. The boys waited until Gopala opened his packet and started eating. As soon as Gopala had taken a mouthful, each boy began eating.

"Once in a while, Gopala would give his companions a handful of food from his packet and receive from each of them a handful from out of their stock! He went to everyone and asked for a share from his packet. The boys were reluctant and even afraid to give Gopala the handful of food he asked for from their plates, for it had been rendered ceremonially impure by their eating out of them. Seeing this, Gopala assured them that the One resides in all of them, so they shouldn't feel that He was separate from them. 'How could ceremonial impurity arise when all are one?' He asked. Then he took the half-bitten pickle-fruit that they had kept aside and bit off a portion for his own chew. How could the Lord, who ate with relish the leavings of Sabari from her plate, in the Rama incarnation, desist from eating the leavings of the cowherd companions? Both were so intimately devoted to Him.

Krishna smashes a wicked ogre to bits

"One day, sitting on the rocks in the shadow of the hills, they ate their meal and washed their hands. Gopala then ran toward the group of cows grazing in the open pasture. His companions wondered what the matter was.

They noticed a huge, beautiful calf among the herd. Gopala went straight toward that animal, lifted it, holding both its hind legs, and rotated it fast over his head and finally brought it heavily down on a rock, smashing it. It made a

terrific noise and turned into an ogre (rakshasa), spouting blood and breathing its last. The boys were amazed; they ran in hot haste toward Gopala and asked him to tell them what the mystery was.

"Gopala beamed with a radiant smile on his lips. 'A wicked ogre assumed this form and came here, enjoined by Kamsa to kill me. He mingled among our herd of cows and was enacting this role in the drama he had decided on. I gave him due punishment.' "The boys extolled Gopala's strength, bravery, and foresight. 'Gopala! You gave him what he deserved!' They jumped around him excitedly, in great joy. They searched among the herd for any other strange calf or cow, suspecting other ogres who might have come in that disguise.

"They were also worried that their own cows might have come to harm or might have been swallowed alive by some wicked ogre in some shape. They vigilantly examined their own herds to discover, before it was too late, any sign of danger.

Boy Krishna destroys ogre Bakasura in disguise as a huge crane

"By noon, they reached a hill rich in pasture. The cows were driven into the shade, under the overhanging rocks, to be free from the scorching sun, and the boys rested a while, stretching themselves on the grass. It was soon afternoon, and when evening came on, one boy rose and approached the herd to collect the cows for the return to the village. He saw there a giant crane, picking up the animals and gulping them whole into its cavernous stomach. He cried out, 'Krishna! Gopala!' Hearing his desperate cry for help, Gopala reached there in a trice. He caught hold of the beak of that crane (which he knew was the ogre Bakasura in disguise), pulled the upper and lower parts apart, and tore the crane in two. The cows inside the stomach were freed.

"Thus, Gopala destroyed the messengers dispatched by Kamsa. Each day a new miracle, a novel wonder!

The cowherd boys came to feel it as supreme sport. They were no longer amazed. They realised deep in their hearts that His skills and powers were superhuman and incomprehensible, so they were ready to accompany Him anywhere, at any time, without any fear.

"Hearing that Gopala had killed his brother, who had planned to get near Him and swallow Him whole, Bakasura's brother got so incensed that he swore revenge and came as a python into the forest where the pastures lay. It lay across the jungle track, with wide open mouth, scheming to swallow the cows and the cowherd boys whole, as well as Balarama and Krishna. To all appearances, it looked like a long cave. Unaware of this, the cows and cowherds walked into it. Gopala recognised it as another wicked ogre. He also entered the python's body, only to hack it open and save the lives that had been entrapped. The boys lost all fear and moved on to their homes, secure under Gopala's protection.

"From that day, the cowherds had no trace of fear. They believed that Gopala would certainly safeguard them against all danger, for He was omnipotent. So they cared for nothing on the way. They never watched the sides of the road, but walked confidently on in whatever direction Krishna took.

"The sport of the boy Krishna was every moment a wonder, a miracle, an amazing event, an heroic adventure.

What can I describe about them? Can ordinary humans perform such wonders? Those who don't have faith, in spite of seeing such events, are but burdening the earth; they are fruits that have no taste and no kind of use." Suka's face was lighted by a deep inner smile as he said this. His eyes shone as if he saw the vision of the resplendent One, as he fixed them intently for a long time on one spot.

Krishna is not a cowherd boy but the world protector

Parikshith asked him, "Master! while even subhuman monsters (danavas) develop faith in God and worship him, how can human beings forget Him and

neglect to worship Him? They put trust in the ears that hear rather than eyes that see. I consider this to be the consequence of some great sin they have committed. Or, it may be the effect of some curse." Suka replied, "O King, your words are true. Monstrous individuals like Kamsa, Jarasandha, Salya, and Sisupala saw evidence of Krishna's superhuman powers with their own eyes, but the falsehood that he was just a cowherd boy echoed so overpoweringly inside their ears that they were always aware only of the voice they heard from the sky rather than what they saw with their eyes. As a consequence they ignominiously lost their lives. They ignored the miracles, the wondrous events, the amazing achievements that they witnessed, and the successive defeats that their emissaries suffered at His hands, so they neglected the duty to the God before them. What other explanations can we give for this, except that they were cursed so to behave. And that curse must have fallen upon them as a result of sin.

"Gopala is the protector of the world (Loka-pala), and not a cowherd boy. (Go means cow; pala, he who fosters and protects; loka, the world). The form he assumed is human, that of a cowherd boy; that is all. But, really speaking, He is the most auspicious form who liberates from bondage, having in His hands power (sakthi), means of attainment (yukthi), and freedom from bondage (mukthi)." Parikshith was supremely delighted at Suka's words. "My grandparents had the unique good fortune of being in Gopala's divine company. They played with Him, talked with Him, and had the bliss of His company and presence. Well, I am able to listen to the description of at least a fraction of His glory and enjoy the bliss (ananda) therefrom. This too is great good fortune. This chance of hearing about it from such a celebrated sage as you is also due to the blessings of those grandparents. Can such a chance be won without special good luck," said Parikshith, with tears of joy flowing down his cheeks.

He said, "Master! I have heard that Gopala trampled on the serpent Kaliya and humbled its pride. What is the inner meaning of this sport? What great truth underlies this miracle? Why was it considered to be an amazing sign of His glory? Please tell me and remove the doubt that afflicts me," he prayed.

38. Serpent Kaliya Humbled

Krishna takes human form in sheer sport

"Listen, O King, to this momentous event," said Suka. "The Divine Boy, Gopala, God, had taken human form in sheer sport. No one could know the significance of His movements, for He was never in the habit of telling others about His divine sports (leelas), either before or after. One could only observe and obey. No one could guess their nature or plumb their meaning, whoever he might be, whatever his attainments.

Krishna grew up like human children and attained the age of five. One day, He collected the cattle secretly, so that His parents didn't know anything about it. Even His elder brother, who generally would accompany Him, was unaware of these goings-on. Krishna got His comrades together, and they went with the cattle to the bank of the Yamuna river. He took them to a deep pool in the river, which people generally avoided.

The poisonous pool

"That pool had a sinister history. Such pools are naturally stagnant and slushy, but this one was blue in colour and boiling hot. The water bubbled ceaselessly, emitting steam into the upper air, and thus a cloud hung over it.

Whoever breathed that atmosphere, fouled by the fumes, breathed his last, to the consternation and amazement of all. Birds that innocently flew over that pool were so fatally poisoned that they flapped their wings violently in despair and rolled down dead into its depths.

"Everyone in Gokula knew all about this mortal trap, this deadly wonder. They avoided it. They warned their children against it and vigilantly prevented their cattle from grazing anywhere near it. Of course, Krishna's comrades protested vehemently and pleaded with Him not to go near the pool. They prayed, loud and long, but it was all in vain. He asserted that He had to go to that very

pool; that was His predetermined destination that day.

The boys drew Him back and did their best to prevent the inevitable 'disaster'. He shook them off and, removing His clothes, announced that He would delight in swimming in that poison pool!

"The boys couldn't muster enough courage to warn Him aloud against the terrors of that pool. He brushed aside their mild protestations. With a certain perverse will of His own, He climbed a tree on the bank and plunged into the horrid pool, by the side of the bank. He didn't surface for a long time. Krishna was the very breath of the cowherd boys' lives, and they were overwhelmed with fear. They gathered round the pool and started calling Him in unbearable agony, sobbing and shedding tears of extreme grief.

Krishna battles the poison-spitting serpent

"Meanwhile, Gopala appeared above the waters, shaking the pool (as if an earthquake was rocking it) with the strokes of His swimming. Suddenly, they saw a huge serpent following Him, spitting poison and belching fire through its glowing eyes, like a volcano. The boys could not look on at this dreadful scene without bawling out, in uncontrollable anguish, 'Krishna! Come on to the bank. Come this way. Come to this bank.' "Krishna swam about as if He didn't hear their prayers. He was happy in the pool, thrilled with excitement and joy. At last, the serpent succeeded in pursuing Krishna round the pool through the high tossing waves. It wound itself round His body, gradually tightening the grip. Seeing this, some boys ran as fast as they could to Gokula and broke the news to Nanda and Yasoda, Krishna's father and mother. They wept aloud while telling them what had happened.

"Nanda and Yasoda, with all the cowherd boys and girls and the entire population of Gokula, ran toward the poison pool, urged on by the fear that some dire calamity was about to overtake Krishna. Balarama, the elder brother, was among them. He knew Krishna's strength and skill, so he calmed the parents. He assured them that no calamity could befall Krishna. He consoled and conferred confidence in many ways.

"Within a short time, the bank of the river was packed thick with people. On all sides, the cry of despair, 'Krishna, Krishna!' resounded from every throat, steeped in grief. Many fainted and lost consciousness when they saw Krishna and the serpent. Oh, it was indeed a heartrending sight!

"Many maids couldn't bear to see Krishna caught in the coils of that mighty monster, dragged down into the blood-red waters one moment, pulling Himself up the next, struggling valiantly with the serpent, who was emitting fiery sparks of poison. Yasoda and many cowherd maids swooned and fell on the sands. They were nursed back to consciousness by others. When they came to, they wept plaintively and called out the name of their beloved Krishna.

Cowherd maidens pray for Krishna's victory

"'My dear child, where was this horrible serpent hiding all this while? Why did it emerge now?' lamented Yasoda, in despair.

"A few of His comrades sobbed, 'Why can't the serpent strike its fangs on us instead of wounding Krishna?

Can't it release Gopala?' Some cowherd maidens got ready to plunge into the pool so that the serpent might give up Krishna and attack them instead. 'We'll give up our lives to save Krishna,' they declared. But Balarama stood in their way. He assured them that Krishna would come out unscathed, that no harm could approach Him. He called out to Krishna to come to them soon, after triumphing over the monster.

"Many cowherd maidens (gopis) prayed ardently for Krishna's victory. 'Krishna's safety is the safety of all the worlds. Our Krishna is the sole sovereign of all worlds. Therefore, may Krishna be released quickly from the serpent's strangle hold.' Their prayers were addressed to the very Krishna whom they wished to save by means of the prayer! They opened their eyes even while praying, to find out whether He had released Himself already. The huge gathering on the riverbank was waiting the release of Krishna with eyes

that didn't even wink. They were overpowered by fear and anxiety, hope and faith.

"At that moment - O, how can I contemplate and describe the scene, to you, King?" Suka could not continue.

He couldn't suppress the flow of spiritual bliss (ananda), grief, wonder, and adoration that rose from his heart. He was so overcome that he covered his face behind his clasped palms in a vain effort to suppress his tears.

Parikshith saw this and exclaimed, "Master! Master! What wonder is this? What happened later? What calamity intervened that made you grieve like this? Please tell me quick." Suka recovered his composure, wiping the flow of tears with the end of his ochre robe. "Maharaja! No calamity took place, but another wonder happened. Krishna grew so fast, so big, and so tall every moment that the serpent had to uncoil from around Him, ring by ring. When the cowherd boys and girls saw the little child growing before their very eyes, they were struck with amazement and joy. At last, the serpent had to release its hold. It was too exhausted to do any harm. Still, its anger was unabated, and it vomited poison into the waters and the air. It lifted its hoods every few moments and fixed its glare on Krishna as if its desire to finish Him was still unquenched.

"Krishna caught it by its tail and whirled the serpent pretty fast. He beat the surface of the water with its body. This forced the serpent to hang down its heads, but with great effort it struggled to keep them erect over the waters. Then, Krishna jumped upon it and, holding the tail in one hand, decided to dance upon the line of hoods!

The serpent couldn't bear the weight of the Lord, stepping merrily from hood to hood. It bled profusely from nose and mouth and whined piteously through pain and shame. It could scarcely breathe. It was about to die.

The serpent's consorts pray to Krishna for pardon

"The people gathered on the bank shouted in joy and confidence, 'Krishna! Come over to the bank now. You saved us all from this monster. The crisis is over. You have won the victory. Our prayers have been answered. We have won the fruit of our good deeds.' While the cowherds were thus exulting over the amazing turn of events, the serpentesses, who were the consorts of the monster, rose from the depths of the pool, sobbing aloud and in great anguish. They fell at Krishna's feet and prayed, 'Lord! You have incarnated with the avowed object of punishing the wicked and the vicious, so your trampling on this monster and curbing his pride is right and proper. It is just. You have merely carried out Your task and mission. But, however cruel our husband was, we're sure that planting Your Feet on his heads transformed his nature. Pardon him, O Lord, and give us back our husband, with your gracious blessing. Save him and bless him that he will no longer cause harm to any living thing.' "The Lord condescended to grant their prayers. He pardoned the monster, Kaliya. He released him with the admonition: 'Henceforth, don't inflict injury on anyone without provocation. Be pure (sathwic) in nature. I bless you that no one will harm you and provoke you into vengeance. You carry My footprints on your heads, so even your natural enemy, the Garuda eagle, won't harm you anymore. Go and live in peace.'"

39. The Omniscient As Student

"Great Master! I never get satiated, no matter how many stories I hear about Krishna's boyhood sport! Really, this lovely boy Krishna is the Divine, who had within Him everything that exists. Even so, He played about as if He was an ordinary human child!

"O, what good fortune I have! When I think of it, I feel that it didn't accrue to me as a result of merit earned in this life. Ah! I'm spending these last days of mine listening to the exploits of Him, who has the hooded serpent as His couch! The sage's curse has helped cleanse me of the sin, through this means! Once again, I offer a thousand prostrations to the sage's ire for affording me this beneficent opportunity!

"As the final moment draws nearer and nearer, my yearning centres in the joyful quaffing of the sweet narrative of Krishna's sport. It intoxicates me. It makes me 'Insane'. Give me, who is burning with that desire, the cool comforting drink throughout the few hours that are left of my life." Parikshith, the king, fell at Suka's feet, overwhelmed by the burden of devotion in his heart, and prayed for more stories of the boy Krishna.

Universe is the stage for Krishna's play

The spring of compassion in the sage welled forth at this prayer. He asked, "O King! Which among the countless delightful divine incidents do you want to hear from me? Their number is so large that even if they were told continuously for millennia, many would remain untold. No one, however proficient, could compress the tales into a few hours." Parikshith replied, "Master! I have heard that our dearly beloved Krishna learned many skills and subjects, with Balarama as His companion, from a very fortunate preceptor, Sandipani. Does this mean that there was a need for an unlearned person to instruct Him, who is the master of all branches of knowledge, the master and sovereign of All? It must have been His play. Only that great play director Gopala knows who has to be blessed and saved, and by which means and

when. Perhaps He enacted this play to liberate Sandipani from the shackles of birth and death, through the merit of association with the Lord. Let me hear the incidents of the play, focusing on Sandipani. I'll be saved by listening to it." "O King! What you said is the indisputable truth. Yes, all is His play. For the drama that Krishna directs, the universe is the stage. There are countless screens (curtains), stage appurtenances, shelves, and compartments for enacting His various plots, devised to save and to liberate. Since the propitious destiny of Sandipani had ripened, He gave him that great chance and blessed him in that manner. Listen! I'll tell you about that divine drama.

Sandipani chosen as guru for Krishna

"Balarama and Krishna, the divine brothers, grew like the Sun toward the zenith and shone with increasing splendour. The parents, Nanda and Yasoda, were concerned about their future, since they were befogged by natural delusion. They decided that the children should be taught the arts and sciences, the skills and attainments appropriate to their status and condition. Garga, the family priest, was called in for consultation, and an auspicious day and hour were fixed for the necessary rites. With great pomp and ceremony, they celebrated the rite of initiation into Brahmic wisdom, called 'the rite of leading the pupil to the preceptor (upanayana)'. That day, numerous acts of charity were done and many valuable things were given away, according to scriptural injunctions. The people of Gokula were rendered happy by folk entertainments that were provided for them.

"Then the parents invited many pundits and conferred with them and Garga to discover the preceptor who was most proficient and desirable for the children's education. Garga thought for a while and declared that it was best to send the children to the great Sandipani, a pundit from Avanthi, living in Kasi, the holy city on the sacred Ganga. Sandipani, he said, was a saintly person.

Krishna and Balarama master the 64 arts and sciences in 64 days

"The parents couldn't send their loved ones to such a distant place, but they

were aware of the fact that learning without a preceptor is only blind learning. So they agreed, and traveled to Kasi with Balarama and Krishna.

Reaching the holy place, they entrusted the brothers to Sandipani and made arrangements for their stay with the famous preceptor. They returned to Gokula, with a heavy heart.

"From that day, Balarama and Krishna studied under Sandipani, offering him the tribute of obedience and reverence. O King, thousands, tens of thousands, millions of children study under teachers, but students who behave in a manner that gives satisfaction and joy to the teacher are very rare - not even one in a hundred! Satisfying the teacher, studying well what has been taught, avoiding the pursuit of sensory pleasure, and attaching oneself only to the pursuit of knowledge, ever in the consciousness that study is the task and the duty - that is how a student should be. That is what Balarama and Krishna were.

"Never, on any occasion, did they interrupt the discourse of the preceptor or interpose their will against his.

They didn't overstep his will or direction in any instance. They never challenged his authority or disobeyed his instructions. Though they were the repositories of supreme authority over Earth and Heaven, they gave their preceptor the respect and obedience that was due to his eminence and position.

"They were full of earnestness and devotion and didn't allow anything to distract their lesson. Observing their discipline and enthusiasm to learn, Sandipani felt great joy surging in his heart. When he saw them, he got irrepressible yearning to train them in many more branches of learning. He made them masters of the four Vedas, the Vedantas, the science of logic, grammar, jurisprudence, and economics. He taught them all that he knew.

"King! what can I say? How can I describe them? The world may have known of geniuses who could master one subject in five years or in one year or in a

single month. But Balarama and Krishna were with Sandipani for only sixty-four days, and in that short time, they mastered the sixty-four arts and sciences! That was how they enacted this drama of study. It was just a sport for them. How can we explain this amazing make-believe, this divine play (leela)? Can ordinary mortals learn so quickly? Can they master so much in so few days?

Sandipani's son was drowned in the sea

"While exulting over the humility and loyalty of the brothers, while accepting their salutations and homage so genuinely offered, and while engaged in delightful conversation with them, Sandipani used to shed tears. In spite of his persistent efforts to curb the grief that was surging within him, Balarama and Krishna observed this but hesitated to question him about the reason. At last, one day, Krishna stood before the preceptor with folded hands and addressed him, 'O greatest of teachers! While we are conversing with you, we find your eyes are occasionally filled with tears, whenever you contemplate some incident. If you consider it appropriate to tell us the reason for this grief, please do so.' "When he heard this prayer, the pent-up sorrow in his heart gushed forth. Overcome by unbearable grief he clasped Krishna with both hands and wept aloud in uncontrollable anguish.

"Krishna knew the whole story but pretended not to. He said, 'Dear teacher! Tell us the reason for this agony.

We'll try our best with all our strength and skill to alleviate it. No mission can be so holy and so important for us as this - to restore joy in the heart of the guru. Inform us without entertaining any doubt. Don't consider us as boys and hesitate.' "When Krishna remonstrated with him thus, Sandipani was much relieved. He recovered himself and drew the brothers near, making them sit close to him on his right and left.

"'Dear ones, it is indeed my good fortune that I secured you. I already derive from your very words the joy of realising my desire. My conscience is telling me that you are no ordinary children, I feel that it may be possible for you to

fulfil this mission. That faith is prompting me, but sometimes I'm shaken by doubt. I don't know what's in store for me.' He stopped, and the tears flowed again.

Balarama fell at his feet again, saying, 'Guruji! Why do you doubt us and refrain from trusting us? We are as your own sons. We are prepared to sacrifice our very lives in order to give you spiritual bliss (ananda).' The earnestness of the boys and the firmness of their resolution caused a sense of shame in the preceptor, so he kept back from them the reason for his sorrow. 'Children, I got a son, after many years of married life. I brought him up lovingly and with as much care as I guarded my own life. One day, he went to Prabhasa-kshetra, on the sea. While taking the holy dip in the waves, he drowned. I was deriving great consolation and even joy, looking at you two and watching your humility and sense of discipline. I almost forgot the loss. You have learned all that has to be learned, and very quick. Now, even you cannot stay with me any longer. Whom am I to watch and love after you leave?' The preceptor burst into inconsolable sobs.

Ogre Panchajana swallowed Sandipani's son

"Krishna stood before him, strong and straight. He said, 'O best of masters! We have to offer you gratitude for teaching us in an incomparable manner all the rare arts and sciences. That is only our dharma, isn't it? We will go immediately and fight the sea that swallowed your precious son and recover him. We'll bring him back to you and give you joy. Let us dedicate this act as our ceremonial presents made by the pupil to the preceptor. Bless us, so that we can start on this expedition. Bless us and give us leave to start.' They fell at his feet, rose and stood expectant.

Sandipani was confident that the boys were not of ordinary mould, and he had faith that they would succeed.

He embraced them, stroked their hair, and blessed them.'"

Parikshith said, "Master, O, how fortunate were my grandparents to witness

these acts! Krishna was the Divine, which was acting the role of a human being, though all that there is, was, and will be was immanent in Him." "O King, receiving the acceptance and blessing of the preceptor, Balarama and Krishna hastened to the sea.

Standing majestically on the shore, they commanded in a compelling voice, 'Ocean! Give back the son of our guru. Do this immediately or suffer the punishment we intend to give you.' The ocean shook in fear as soon as he heard these words. He touched the feet of Balarama and Krishna and said, 'Pardon! It is no fault of mine! When the boy was bathing, destiny drew him into a vortex and brought him into the depths. The ogre, Panchajana, who has been living in the caverns there, swallowed him and had him in his stomach. This is the truth. I leave the rest to you.' Krishna rescues guru's son from God of Death "When the sea had spoken, Krishna nodded, 'Right! I have heard your account.' He plunged into the depths of the sea, to the cavern of that ogre. He attacked him in mortal combat. The ogre handed over the boy to the God of Death before he himself died, so Krishna couldn't recover him when He tore open the stomach. While searching his intestines in great anger to discover whether the boy was anywhere there, a huge conch came into His hands. Securing this, Krishna emerged from the sea and went straight to the City of Death. Standing at the entrance, Krishna blew the conch that he had gotten from Panchajana. The sound it produced was as a thunderbolt to the ear.

"Yama, the God of Death, rushed up to the gate in terror. He saw Balarama and Krishna and asked, politely, why they had come so far. The Brothers commanded him to bring the 'son of the guru' and place him in their custody.

'As you order,' replied Yama, with folded hands. He directed his minions, and within seconds, the consecrated son of the preceptor was placed in the divine hands.

They brought him immediately to the hermitage. Placing him by Sandipani's side, they stood on one side, 'This is our present to the guru; please accept this act as such,' appealed Krishna.

"The parents' joy was beyond words; they were overcome with the sudden gush of happiness. No one who contemplates such divine achievements - the bringing back into life the son of the guru, who was in the arms of Death, and similar miracles - can entertain the belief that they are mortal and not divine. What then are we to speak of Sandipani? He knew; he realised that they were the twins Nara-Narayana.

"He was overwhelmed with exhilaration when he reminded himself that he had the fortune to have such divine beings as his pupils and that he could call himself their guru. He prostrated mentally before them. With tears streaming down his cheeks, he embraced them and arranged for their leave-taking from the ashram.

Krishna and Balarama as ideal pupils

"After taking leave of the guru and his wife, Balarama and Krishna rode on their chariot and reached the city of Mathura. The inhabitants of that city, on hearing how the brothers demonstrated their gratitude to their guru, extolled them for their divine compassion and capabilities. They felt immensely happy that they had returned.

"O King, reflect for a while how inspiring the example of Gopala Krishna was, while he was undergoing his education, and how much his conduct and earnestness contributed to the joy of the elders. Every act of Krishna, however tiny and unimportant on the surface, had a deep significance and meaning. Fools cannot discover it, so they treat these acts as insignificant. Is there in this world anyone who can affirm that he can teach the art of swimming to a fish? Similarly, who can teach and become the preceptor of God?

"Though all learning emanates from Him and is to be earned through His grace, He plays the role of a pupil, as a representative of the ideal pupil, in order to show the world, by His own example, the way in which a guru is to be chosen and served, the quality of humility that education must instil, and the gratitude and respect that the pupil has to offer to the teacher. It is with the

intention of guiding and prompting today's students that Krishna Himself went through the educational process and lived the ideal. Notice how subtle the mystery of God and His divine play (leelas) are!" While Suka said these words, tears of joy flowed down his cheeks in streams.

40. From Death To Immortality

The King, who was listening to the thrilling narrative of Krishna's gratitude toward His guru, suddenly opened his eyes. Seeing the sage before him, he said, "Ah the miracles (leelas) of Krishna! His wonder-filled acts exceed each other in miracle and mystery. God is prepared to assume any burden in order to correct and improve the world. By this means, He proclaims His genuine majesty and might. But the dark smoke of illusion (maya) settles hard on man's eye and renders him incapable of recognising divinity. Thus, he misses the inner significance of these 'miracles'." Faith in God is the harvest from previous lives Suka understood the working of the King's mind, "King! The confusing influence of illusion (maya) is the consequence of accumulated activities in previous lives. One can escape illusion through good consequence; one succumbs to it through deleterious consequence. If good activity has marked previous lives, any sinful tendency will be overwhelmed by virtuous tendencies in this life, and one will have faith in divinity. One will attach himself to the divine and spend his life on the basis of the divine.

"On the other hand, those who have committed horrible crimes in past lives have dreadful darkened visions, which prevent them from seeing the divine. Such a one never reminds himself of God and His handiwork, never yearns for his own 'good' and the good of others. He sees things in false perspective; he revels in wickedness and engages in vicious acts. Faith in God is the harvest of the seeds planted in previous lives. It cannot be grown and harvested on the spur of the moment." Hearing these words, the king grew anxious to know more about the merit acquired by means of good activity (punya), the demerit acquired by means of evil activity (papa), and their impact on the lives of men. So he asked the Sage Suka to tell him one more incident from Krishna's career that dealt with a curse and its cure, illustrating the principle of destiny.

Suka laughed at this request. "King! Countless are the cures that Krishna effected on those affected by curses! The demons (rakshasas) whom He killed while He was yet a child, and later, as a boy, as I have told you, were all

cursed to be born so as punishment for some evil deed, and when they met with death at His hands, they were liberated from the curse." The king put in a suggestion. "I have heard that the 'uprooting of the tree' was an amazing incident of outstanding importance; I could derive deep joy from your elaboration of that." Mother exasperated by Krishna stealing butter Suka who was ever ready to oblige him, began the story. "King! Though there was no paucity of servants, it was Yasoda, the mistress of the house, who, according to traditional custom, did all the chores of the household.

Boiling the milk, curdling it, churning it, and preparing butter - all these activities were personally done by her.

One day, she woke up as usual at 4:30 A.M. (the beginning of the Brahma-muhurtha). She took her bath and did her early morning duties. Later, placing the milk pot before her, she started churning the contents, vigorously pulling the ropes that kept the churn-rod steady in the liquid - all the while singing sweet hymns on God.

"Meanwhile, Gopala (Krishna) came forward with slow but steady steps to where the mother was churning and singing and gave a sudden sharp pull at the end of her sari. Yasoda was startled at this unexpected pull. She turned around and was most pleasantly surprised when she found it was the mischievous child, Krishna! Putting a stop to the churning, she took Krishna into her arms and fondled Him. 'Dear son! 'It's not dawn yet! Why did you get up so soon? Go, my darling! Sleep again for a few minutes!' "But the divine child lisped most entrancingly that It was hungry and began sobbing pathetically, to confirm its yearning to be fed. The mother's heart melted. She placed the churning rod on one side and covered the pot with a lid. Then, she took Krishna on her lap, sitting just where she was. While feeding Him at her breast, she stroked His head gently and softly.

Just then, she heard the noise of a pot rolling down from the oven in the kitchen inside. She suspected it was the mischief of the cat. She lifted the child from her lap and placed it on the floor, for she had to run to the kitchen to examine what had happened!

When Yasoda disappeared into the next room, Krishna was incensed at her behaviour, dropping Him in the middle of His meal. He saw the pot and turned all His anger toward it. He gave it a hard blow with the churning rod, and when the curds flowed along the floor, He collected the butter, stuffed it into His mouth, and hastened out of the room, lest He be admonished. When Yasoda came into the room, she saw the broken pot, the curds on the floor, and the butter gone. And Krishna had made Himself scarce! Knowing this to be His handiwork, she searched for Him, in every nook and corner.

"She couldn't find Him anywhere. She went into the neighbouring houses and inquired whether He had been found by anyone there. Everyone declared that they had not seen the child; they didn't know where He was.

"Yasoda was really frightened. 'He must have run away, dreading punishment for having broken the pot and spilling its contents! Poor child! He ran out into the darkness!' she thought. She searched house after house.

" At last, she caught Him in the act of taking a pot of butter from a sling, where the mistress of the house had kept a series of pots full of milk, curds, and butter. Krishna was standing on an upturned mortar so that He could lift the butter pot and bring it down safely, to be shared with His comrades!

Krishna allows Yasoda to catch him

"Yasoda shouted, 'You thief! Do you behave like this in every house? When the poor cowherd maids (gopis) complained to me about your thefts, I used to blame them without verifying their charge and send them away. I have now seen it with my own eyes! Yes, I can scarcely believe my eyes! O, how mistaken I was all these days!

I cannot let you escape hereafter. No! If I let you off, on the plea that you are a child, later, it will lead you on to calamitous crime. I must punish you effectively now, and not pardon you at all. When the child of a great family turns thief, it is a disgrace to the entire clan. This ill fame can't easily be wiped off. The reputation of our family will suffer.' Her agony was beyond

expression. She had never before suffered so much humiliation. She yielded to a great rush of anger. She brought a long thick rope and went near Him, intending to tie Him to the heavy mortar.

"Gopala, knowing her intention, slipped in and out of every door and dodged her attempts to catch Him.

Yasoda ran behind Him, through every lane and street. She was well on the side of fat and had never before run so fast. She was soon exhausted. She slowed and gasped for breath. Men, women, and children began laughing at her vain pursuit of the little child. They enjoyed the fun and derived all the more merriment from Krishna's prank and His mother's foiled attempt to bind Him.

"Gopala is omniscient; nothing is hidden from Him. He realised that the mother was too tired to move, and He allowed Himself to be caught. Yasoda couldn't lift her hand to beat Him. She caught Him firmly by the hand, saying, 'Come home, you thief! It wouldn't be nice for me to beat you in the bazar. I'll teach you a lesson at home.' "She drew Him home. There, she dragged Him to the side of a huge stone mortar in order to bind Him to it with a strong rope. But the rope was too short, so she went in and brought another to tie it on to the first. She had to do this again and again, for however long the rope, Krishna seemed to grow so big that it wouldn't reach around Him. Just a bit more length was always needed to tie Him! The mother wondered at this amazing development.

To what was this miracle to be ascribed? She didn't know. At last, she somehow tied a knot, leaving Him bound to the mortar. Yasoda went into the house to do her regular household duties.

Krishna frees twin brothers from a curse

"Krishna drew the mortar along, went into the garden, with the mortar rolling behind him. There, a tree grew with twin trunks side by side, very near each other. The mortar caught between the twin trunks, and when the divine child

gave a slight pull to overcome the obstacle, the tree was uprooted! It fell with a great resounding noise. The noise attracted everyone to Yasoda's house, where the tree had fallen even though there was no storm!

"Yasoda hurried to see what had happened and was astounded at what she saw! Gopala was in the midst of the fallen foliage, between the enmeshed branches. Yasoda groaned aloud and went to Him. Unloosening the rope, she carried away the child and felt quite relieved that He had escaped another terrible calamity.

"My child! Were you frightened? O, how wicked I was!", the mother wailed aloud.

But while she was lamenting thus, two divine forms, both male, emerged from the tree! They fell at Gopala's feet. They stood with folded palms and said, 'O Lord! We are the sons of Kubera, the twin brothers Nalakubera and Manigriva. Through the curse of Sage Narada, we were turned into this tree and existed as such. This day has seen the end of that curse, through Your grace. If you permit us, we'll go back to our own place.' Then the two divine forms disappeared. At the sight of these strange divine forms, the people of Gokula were taken aback; they were filled with great joy.

"Though they listened to the glorification of Gopala as God, though they had concrete evidence of His Divinity, they relapsed into delusion (maya) and resumed their conversation about Gopala being the son of Nanda and Yasoda and felt He was their cowherd friend. They were caught up in the coils of illusion." Divine illusory power hides reality The king interposed with the question, "Master! How did this illusion (maya) acquire such overwhelming power? Who endowed illusion with the capacity to hide the glory of Madhava (God) Himself? What exactly is the real nature of illusion? Please tell me." Then Suka explained, "King! This illusion (maya) is not anything separate, with its own form. God is discernible only with the sheath of illusion; He is evident because He has worn the accoutrement of illusion. It is His disguise (upadhi). That is to say, illusion obstructs reality. Its nature is to hide reality and make it appear as unreal.

Only those who remove It, destroy It, beat It off, cut across It - only those people can have a vision of God. Only those can attain God. Illusion makes you feel that the nonexistent exists. It shows water in the mirage; it makes you see as truth what is imagined and desired. Delusion can't affect those whose are able to give up desire or imagining and planning.

"Or else, how could Yasoda, who has seen the divinity of Krishna on many occasions with her own eyes, slide back into the belief that He was her son? The imagining, the desire - that was the cause of this delusion. The body is of the son, and of the mother, but the real core, the embodied (dehi) - that has neither son nor mother! The mother-body is related to the son-body, but there is no embodied mother, no embodied son! If one gets this faith firm in themselves there can be no more desire for external pleasures. Inquire and investigate, and you will know this truth. Without this inquiry, delusion will grow and intellect will be slowly subdued." "Ah! The role that divinity takes upon Itself brings about results that are really momentous! Vedanta teaches that one should penetrate behind the role into the reality; this is its inner meaning. Deluded by the role, people pursue desire! Believing the body that is assumed to be real and true, people fall into illusion (maya).

"For those whose attention is concentrated on the body, the person within won't be visible, right? When ashes cover, the red cinders won't be visible. When clouds gather thick, the sun and the moon can't be seen! Moss floating thick upon the waters of a lake gives the illusion that it is hard ground, over which there is vegetation.

When the eye has a cataract over the pupil, one can't see anything at all. So too, when the notion of the body being the reality is predominant, the resident in the body isn't noticed at all." "Master! This day, in truth, the veil has fallen from my mind. Your teaching has, like a gust of wind, shaken off the ash over the live cinders. The illusion that this composite of five elements, namely, this body, is the reality has been totally exploded and exterminated. I'm blessed, I am indeed blessed." With these words, Maharaja Parikshith fell at the feet of the guru, Suka.

Mind is the cause of both bondage and liberation

The gathering of holy men, sages, and common citizens fell into animated conversation. When time clicks fast toward the end, the body has to get ready to drop, right? The body drops when the vital airs stop flowing in it, but the mind won't leave off. For this reason, newer and newer bodies have to be assumed until the mind is rendered empty, devoid of content, vacant of wants. "This day our Maharaja has differentiated the mind from the body! Now he is in such bliss that even vital airs can't make any impact. When the mind is merged ever in God (Madhava), the body will be all divinity; its humanness cannot be identified." The teaching conferred by Suka today is not directed at Parikshith alone. It is for all of us, they said; it is for all who are afflicted by the delusion that they are the body in which they are encased. This type of delusion is the cause of bondage, but the other type, the belief that we are the Atma, that is the means of liberation. This is what the Vedas and the scriptures (sastras) declare.

Mana eva manushyanam karanam bandha mokshayoh.

The mind that welcomes the delusion or that entertains the idea of the reality is therefore the instrument for either bondage or liberation.

This statement of the revealed scripture (sruthi) is the truth. Ruminating thus for some time, the people sat with eyes closed, lost in prayer. When the sun was about to set, the sages walked toward the bank of the sacred Ganga, holding the water pot and stick in their hands, so that they could perform the evening rites.

41. The Message About Krishna's Advent

Living in Krishna consciousness

The King, who had achieved the destruction of the agitations caused by desire and thus succeeded in eliminating the "mind", folded his palms together and prayed, with just one last desire urging him. "Master! Time is fast nearing its end, as far as this body is concerned. The culmination of the curse of the sage is rushing fast toward me. Of course, I'm prepared in every way to welcome it most gladly. Nevertheless, as long as I am resident in this physical habitation, I have vowed to engage myself in divine thoughts, in recapitulation of the divine, and in listening to the divine. Let that vow not be broken to the slightest degree.

"May the short balance of the allotted time be spent in imprinting the charming lotus face of Nandanandana on my heart - the lovely divine child that illumined the Nanda's home. May that sportive form fill my consciousness and overflow, conferring on me immeasurable spiritual bliss (ananda).

"Describe to me the shower of auspiciousness that must have marked the hour when He was born. What miraculous events and happenings revealed to the world that God had come to earth? How did Kamsa develop the cruel determination to kill the divine child, and how was this determination fanned into a raging flame as days passed? Tell me the stories of the births of Kamsa and the Lord as Krishna. May the final hour be blessed by that sacred story. It will certainly render my breath so holy that it will find consummation in Gopala." Suka became even more happy. "Maharaja. I'm also filled with joy at the prospect of spending the few remaining hours in reciting the wondrous birth and divine sports of Gopala. Gopala took birth for the sake of establishing righteousness (dharma). That birth is fraught with great mystery. Only those who have become ripe in wisdom, through the chastening process of divine activity, can unravel that mystery and grasp its meaning.

For others. the world is a whirlpool of vile sin. They revel in its depths. They sink and float and finally dissolve themselves in it. We're under no compulsion to spend a thought on such people.

Krishna's parents get married

"Maharaja! Long, long ago, the world was ruled by a king of the Yadu dynasty, named Ahuka. A large band of feudatories surrounded his throne and awaited his orders and paid him reverential homage, seeking peace and prosperity through his beneficent overlordship. He had two sons, Devaka and Ugrasena. When they grew old enough to assume the responsibilities of administration, the king had them married and placed a share of his own burden on their heads. Years slipped by. Devaka had seven daughters and Ugrasena had nine sons. Devaki is the eldest of Devaka's daughters, and Kamsa is the eldest of Ugrasena's sons. These two play vital roles in the story in which we're interested.

"In olden days, Mathura was the capital city of the Yadu dynasty. Within the precincts of this city lived a tributary ruler of Yadu, Prince Surasena by name. He had ten sons and five daughters. Vasudeva was his eldest son and Kunthi his eldest daughter. These princely families lived side by side, and the children grew. The flow of time sped fast, and, urged by the force of historic cause, produced epoch-making consequences.

"Devaki, the daughter of Kamsa's paternal uncle, was given in marriage to Vasudeva. The marriage was celebrated on a grand scale. Rulers, kings, emperors, scholars, sages, and saints assembled in large numbers. The city was packed with distinguished princes and personages. Kamsa took special interest in dealing out prolific and pompous hospitality to everyone. He had no sisters of his own, and he loved Devaki as his dearest self, so he dowered her with costly raiment, precious jewels, and all the paraphernalia of regal glory. Everyone was delighted at the grandeur of the festival.

Kamsa's death by his sister's eighth child predicted

"On the third day, the bride had to be sent to the groom's home with all the customary presents and gifts. So, Kamsa himself drove the newlyweds in a magnificent chariot. When they were driving in a colourful procession through the decorated streets of the city, suddenly there was a brilliant lightning flash over the chariot. There was a blast of terrific sound, as if the world was being destroyed by a deluge all in one gulp. The flash and the blast stunned prince and peasant into pillars of immobility. All music was silenced that very moment. That instant, the silence was broken by a few clear words exploding through the sky.

"The words were: 'O, Emperor Kamsa! You are behaving like a fool, unaware of coming events. This very sister, whom you love as your own self, whom you are now taking so affectionately in this chariot with so much pomp and pleasure, will bear as her eighth child the person who will deal you death! Reflect on that coming calamity.' Frightened Kamsa tries to kill his sister "The shining figure that spoke these ominous words disappeared from the sky. The populace, princes, and scholars who listened to the dreadful news of doom lost all trace of joy. Kamsa, on the chariot, was filled with the fury of fire. He lost control of himself and was overcome by confusion; the reins fell off his grasp. His heart was aflame with hate. His thoughts fled fast into fiercer and fiercer fears. At last, they took a decisive turn. With the sister alive, the killer would be born; if the sister's life were cut, she couldn't bring forth the person who would deal him death! Thinking in this strain, he lifted the sister from her seat at the back of the chariot, grasping her plaited hair. Forcing her to stand up, he pulled his sharp sword from its scabbard with the vile intention of slicing off her head.

"Even the hardest heart recoiled from the awful sight. What a frightful thing this was. It was such a stunning contrast for him to try to kill the very sister whom he loved so long and so deeply and whom he was escorting with such gusto, No one could do anything to avert the disaster.

Vasudeva promises to give his children to Kamsa

"The bridegroom, Vasudeva, rose and held Kamsa's hands tight in his grasp.

'Dear brother-in-law! I also heard the voice from the sky. If harm comes to you, we too are sharers, for we don't like any harm to affect you.

We pray for your welfare, without intermission. We shall never seek to inflict injury on you. It's not proper for a brother like you to indulge in grievous disaster when everyone is reveling in joy. Release your sister! If you have such firm faith in the voice that declared that you would suffer death from the child that is to be born, I solemnly assure you that I'll entrust every child that is born of her to your care. I swear I shall do so. Let me tell you that this will solve your fear. On the other hand, if you become a party to the slaughter of your sister, while my offer is here, it will bring about disaster to you and the kingdom as a reaction to this monstrous sin.' "When Vasudeva pleaded thus most piteously, Kamsa felt a little relieved, realising that there was some validity in what his brother-in-law was saying. He loosened his hold and let Devaki fall into her seat. He said, 'Well!

Be warned. Keep your word, which you just gave me.'

Kamsa told his younger brother to take charge of the reins and returned to his palace. Of course, he returned.

But he was torn between fear of death and affection for his sister. Though his bed was a soft bed of feathers, he suffered as if he lay on a bed of hot cinders. He had no appetite, no inclination to sleep. He was plunged in the terror of death. Kamsa spent one full year in this state. The brothers-in-law were in constant contact with each other.

The fate of the first six sons

"Meanwhile Devaki became pregnant, and the nine months drew to a close. She delivered a son. 'I gave my word to save your life,' said Vasudeva to Devaki, when he handed over the new born babe, rolled in warm clothing, to the tender mercies of Kamsa.

"However Kamsa had no mind to kill the tender baby and was delighted that

his brother-in-law had kept his word. He said, 'My dear brother-in-law. this babe can cause me no harm! The voice from the sky warned me only against the eighth child! Therefore, take back this child.' Thus, Vasudeva got the baby alive and placed it in Devaki's hands. The mother was happy that her firstborn was restored to her. She poured out her heart in gratitude to God for this blessing. She conceived again, and the parents were afflicted with grief at the fear of Kamsa and what he might do to the child. They wanted children but dreaded the fate that might befall them.

Narada warns Kamsa of his impending death

"Meanwhile, the sage Narada, who roams wide from world to world singing the praise of the Lord, appeared in Kamsa's court. He asked the emperor whether he was well and whether the kingdom was safe and prosperous.

During the conversation, Narada revealed that the Yadavas were gods come as men and that Kamsa was an incarnation of Kalanemi, a famous demon. He said that Devaki's eighth son would undermine the brood of demons and be the destroyer of Kamsa's life. This was pouring oil onto on fire. Not content with this, he said, while taking leave of Kamsa, 'Take every day that you manage to live as equal to a decade or more. Don't regard death only as a distant contingency!' "Hearing this warning, Kamsa was plunged into deeper anxiety. He feared that even little babes might bring about his death, and he sent word for Vasudeva to come to him. Poor Vasudeva came shivering in mortal dread, lest some dire calamity might descend upon his head. When he put in his appearance, Kamsa flew into a rage and roared the question at his face, 'How many children do you have now?' "Vasudeva had no tongue to answer. He was overpowered by the fear that something terrible might happen if he answered. His lips quivered as he replied, 'Now, I have six.' "Kamsa yelled, 'Well, tomorrow morning, at dawn, you better bring all six and hand them over to me!' "Vasudeva uttered no reply. He had to honour his word. But attachment to his offspring drew him back. He moved as if he was but a corpse that had managed to be alive. He came to Devaki, who was fondling the six sons on her lap. When he told her that Kamsa had asked for the sons to be given over to him, she held them in fast embrace and suffered

agony that passes imagination.

The agony of Devaki and Vasudeva

"Maharaja! For the sake of prolonging one single life, see how many innocent lives are sacrificed! You may wonder why this horrid sin! But who can unravel the mystery of the divine? To the outward eye, it appears to be unpardonable infanticide. The inner eye may perceive in it the fruition of the sins committed by those very babes in the past, or the culmination of some curse! It may well be their passing into a superior level of birth. Who knows what lies in the recesses of their past or the caves of their future? Who knows why they were born, why they live, and why they die? The world observes only the interval between birth and death, only with that limited period. But the master and sovereign of all the worlds - past, present and future - doesn't do that. He has more compassion than all men. He showers grace, weighing the three tenses of time, the three tiers of space, and the three traits of character. He knows best, more than any person, so the only recourse for people is to believe that everything is His will, to be at peace, and to immerse themselves in the contemplation of His glory and grace.

"Maharaja! The next day, as soon as the sun rose, Vasudeva took the children most unwillingly, with the help of attendants. With eyes firmly closed, he gave them to Kamsa and burst into tears. The ego-centred maniac caught hold of each of them by the leg and beat them out of shape on the hard floor! Helpless to interfere and prevent the killing, the unfortunate Vasudeva retraced his steps home with a heavy heart, lamenting over the gigantic sin that brought about this woeful recompense. The royal couple were wasted in body through the terrific agony they underwent and bore it silently together. Every moment of living was an unbearable burden. 'God's will must prevail; one has to live as long as life lasts,' they consoled themselves. Toughened by this feeling, they were dissolving their strength and physique in the streams of tears that grief engendered."

42. Consummation In Nanda-nandana

"Meanwhile, the seventh pregnancy came! And surprisingly, it was aborted in the seventh month! Should they inform Kamsa? If yes, how? They couldn't find the answer. When Kamsa learned about this, he suspected that the sister was capable of some stratagem to deceive him, so he put her and her husband in a closely guarded prison." The sage Suka started telling about the most glorious event, which revealed the reality of Krishna incarnation.

Krishna is born to Devaki in prison

"Devaki and Vasudeva, who spent their days in prison, were indistinguishable from mad people. They sat with unkempt hair, lean and lanky through want of appetite and the wherewithal to feed their bodies. They had no mind to eat or sleep. They were slowly consumed by grief over the children they had lost. When their prison life entered its second year, Devaki conceived for the eighth time! It was wondrous! What a transformation it brought about! The faces of Devaki and Vasudeva, which had drooped and dried up, suddenly blossomed like lotuses in full bloom. They shone with a strange splendour.

"Their bodies, which were reduced to mere skin and bone, as if they had been dehydrated, took on flesh, became round and smooth, and shone with a charming golden hue. Devaki's cell was fragrant with pleasing aromas.

It cast a wondrous light and was filled with inexplicable music and the jingle of dancing feet. Amazing sights and sounds indeed! Devaki and Vasudeva became aware of these happenings but were afraid to inform Kamsa, lest he hack the womb into pieces in his vindictive frenzy. They were anxious about the strange future of the son that would be born and restless with weird foreboding.

"And what of Kamsa? He knew his time was fast rushing toward its end. He was torn by the greed to continue as unquestioned emperor of the realm. He was overcome by conspiratorial inclination. He overran the territories of the

Yadu, Vrishni, Bhoja, and Andhaka and added them to his domain. He was so intent on establishing his dictatorial regime that he threw his own aged father, Ugrasena, into prison. Thereafter, his will was sovereign." Goal is determined by last thoughts of the dying When Suka told this story, Parikshith interrupted, "Alas! What folly is this? Knowing full well that his end was near, knowing that in the eighth pregnancy, the person who was to destroy him was growing fast, knowing that the voice that spoke from the sky could not be untrue, Kamsa still resolved upon these acts of inordinate greed and unspeakable wickedness! This is unbelievable!" Suka burst into laughter. "Maharaja! Evidently, you think that all those who know their end is drawing near will, like you, utilise the time at their disposal in seeking to realise the vision of Him who is the embodiment of time! But such yearning as yours can arise only as a consequence of a favourable balance of merit, acquired in previous lives. It cannot arise all of a sudden.

"Consider the vast difference between what you did when you knew that the allotted span of life was hastening to its end and Kamsa's undertakings when he knew that his end was in sight! These two attitudes are named god and demon, divine and demonic. Only thoughts of God and urges to do sanctifying deeds will emerge during the last days for those who are equipped with divine virtues of eagerness to do good acts and to have good thoughts, faith in God, compassion toward all beings, contrition for swerving from the straight path, truth, nonviolence, and love.

"On the other hand, those who are immersed in selfishness, egotism, greed, vice, violence, and unrighteousness will suffer in their last days from evil urges and will destroy themselves. The former attain beatitude (kaivalya); the latter achieve only hell (naraka).

"The onlooker sees the same consummation - death. But the goal reached is distinct and is invisible to those around them. The goal is determined by the thoughts that arise in the mind of the dying. Destruction of life is common; the sight (darshan) of God is something to be won, to be earned. That is unique. Hence the proverb,

Vinasha kale, vipareetha buddhih.

When disaster is imminent, the intellect is perverted.

"Only those who are about to be destroyed will get and welcome evil intentions. Those who are to be blessed with the vision of God will hold fast in their last thoughts to the pure and elevating."

When Suka spoke thus, in all sincerity, Parikshith said, "No, this isn't the result of my effort or the consequence of merit acquired by me in previous lives. The fruit of the goodness of my grandfathers and father is directing me along the correct path. More than all, the illumination shed by gems of wisdom like yours and the consecrating effect of the grace of Krishna - these are heightening the devotion and dedication that rise within me. Of course, the association one is privileged or compelled to share has a promotional (or adverse) effect.

"Luckily, since the moment of birth, God's grace has been my guide and guardian. I was shaped and sustained by association with good men, comradeship with just and moral people, acquaintance with great scholars, and inspiration of the magnanimous deeds of my illustrious grandfathers. I also acknowledge the help rendered by wise and discriminating ministers, who served as my right hand and earned and enjoyed the love and reverence of my subjects. This could never be the consequence of my efforts.

"However excellent the seed, if the field is infertile can the harvest be plentiful? However high my ideals are, if my kingdom had no high tradition laid down by my ancestors, no sages and scholars to instruct and inspire, no ministers to execute and elaborate in action, no subjects to appreciate and act the ideals, they could only be like the vessel of milk spoiled by drops of acid curd, right?

"Had it not been for them, my ideals would have evaporated, and I would have imbibed the vices of people who flatter me and become another hardhearted Kamsa! So, I conclude that Kamsa's sinful acts have to be attributed, to a certain extent, to the vices inherent in the scholars, elders, ministers, and subjects of Kamsa's kingdom.

Parikshith yearns to hear of Krishna's birth

"Of course, you are most competent to pronounce upon the correctness of this inference. Well, why should I waste the few remaining hours of my life in seeking faults in others or analysing their causes and consequences?

It is best that I sanctify every second. Tell me, Master, about the holy moment of birth, when my very breath, Gopala, appeared upon the earth." Praying thus, Parikshith fell at Suka's feet and sat up, with eyes closed, eager to listen. He was yearning in happy expectation to learn from Suka the amazing mystery of the birth.

Suka told the story "Maharaja! The foetus of the seventh pregnancy was taken and transferred to the womb of Vasudeva's other wife, Rohini by name, who was in Gokula under the protection of Nanda. This was done so that the child could grow into a companion and helpmate for Gopala. Rohini gave birth to a son, who was named Balarama by Garga, the family preceptor, since the child was extraordinarily strong in body and charmed everyone by his innocence and intelligence. Since he was transferred from Devaki's womb to Rohini's, he was also named Samkarshana (he who was attracted, drawn).

"Meanwhile, the nine months of the eighth pregnancy were completed. Devaki and Vasudeva held their lives in the grasp of their palms, for they were agonising over what might happen any moment - when would the delivery take place? What would Kamsa do to punish them or to destroy the enemy he feared? They sat helpless, in great anguish, without food or sleep. When Kamsa learned that the nine months had passed, he took extra precautions to see that the child did not escape him. He ordered Vasudeva and Devaki to be shackled with chains on hands and feet. He locked the doors

of the prison with even more formidable contrivances. He placed larger numbers of even more alert and able guards around the prison. He arranged that, once every five minutes, the guards must check and satisfy themselves that the inmates were within the prison walls. Kamsa was ceaselessly worried and anxious about the birth and what might happen to him.

"But who can hinder the inscrutable operation of the will of God? Can the divine mystery be penetrated and unraveled? Fools who cannot grasp the truth, who cannot recognise Divinity and measure the power of God, who have no faith in God, live in the delusion that their petty plans will save them and that they can triumph through their own efforts! The fact is that not even the smallest success can be won without God's grace.

"Though true, we shouldn't sit with folded hands, believing that a thing will accomplish itself if and when God wills. Human effort is essential, and man himself must make a trial. He must use the strength and skill with which he is endowed and resolve to go ahead with the work, laying the responsibility for success on God. For without the grace of God, every effort will be fruitless.

God enters Devaki as an orb of light

"One night, lying on the floor of the prison room, Devaki developed labour pains. She fixed her mind on God and looked intently at the flame of the little oil lamp, anxiously asking herself, 'What will happen to me? What lies in the future for me?' Suddenly, the flame went out and darkness filled the cell. She beheld an effulgent form, casting a strange splendour, standing before her. She wondered who it might be. She called on Vasudeva, afraid that it might be Kamsa in that shape. She was lost in confusion and doubt about the identity of the phenomenon before her.

"Suddenly the form became clear! It was armed with the conch, discus, the mace. The fourth hand was held in the have-no-fear (abhaya) pose. It said softly and sweetly, 'Don't grieve. I am Narayana. I am to be born in a few moments as your son, with the intent to wipe away all your travails, in answer to the promise I made when you visualised Me as a result of your earnest

asceticism. Don't be anxious about Me. Be but witnesses of the drama that is about to be staged. In all fourteen worlds, there is no one born or to be born who can inflict on Me the least harm. Be assured of that. Even when some little anxiety affects you as a consequence of affection for the child you bore and of delusion fogging the mind, you will be able to witness immediately miracles that will reveal My nature.

"No sooner am I born than the shackles will fall off your hands and feet. The doors of the prison will open by themselves. Take Me from here without anyone's knowledge to Nanda's home in Gokula and place Me by the side of his wife, Yasoda, who is having labour pains this very moment. Bring back to the prison the baby girl that she has delivered and keep her with you. Then send word to Kamsa. Until he gets the news, no one either in Mathura or Gokula will notice you or apprehend you; I shall arrange it.' He shone in divine splendour. Blessing Devaki and Vasudeva, He entered Devaki's womb as an orb of light. Within minutes, the child was born.

Switching Krishna with Yasoda's stillborn

"The time was 3:30 a.m., the auspicious hour of Brahma, Brahma's period (Brahma-muhurtha). The divine power to delude brought sleep, sudden and log-like, on all the guards and on all the watch. They fell in their places and were caught in sleep. The thick iron chains that bound Vasudeva's hands and feet fell off in a trice. The doors and gates flew open. Though it was the darkest hour of the night, the cuckoo cooed with a sudden spurt of joy; parrots announced the heavenly happiness they felt. The stars twinkled, for each of them was smiling in inner joy.

The Rain God showered flower drops of rain on the earth below. Around the prison, flocks of birds clustered in happy song, twittering sweet melody.

"Vasudeva realised that all this was the manifestation of the charm of God. He turned toward the newborn child and was astounded at what he saw. 'Was it true?' he asked himself. 'Or was it a mental illusion?' He was fixed to the spot, like a pillar. For, Maharaja! Encircling the babe was a brilliant halo of

light! The babe laughed outright, seeing the mother and father. It appeared that the babe was about to speak! Yes. They heard the words, 'Now, without delay, take Me to Gokul.' "Vasudeva did not tarry. He spread an old dhothi on a bamboo mat and placed the babe on it. He tore the scarf of an old sari of Devaki and covered the babe with it. Then, he moved out of the open doors and gates, past the sleeping guards.

"He noticed the little drops of rain that fell from the sky, and he was sad that the newborn child would soon be soaked. But when he turned back, he found the snake, Adishesha, following his footsteps, preventing the rain from wetting the babe, holding the ribbed umbrella of its broad hoods over the child! At every step along the road, Vasudeva noticed auspicious and favourable signs. The sun had not yet risen, but the lotuses bloomed in all the tanks and leaned toward Vasudeva on their stalks. Though it was a night, with no expectation of moonlight, perhaps through the yearning to have a look at the divine babe, the full moon peeped through the clouds, its cool rays illumining only the bamboo mat on which the babe lay, along the entire route! The babe that attracted all this auspiciousness was placed in Nanda's home, and the child that had just been born there was brought and placed into Devaki's hands. No sooner was this done than Vasudeva burst into tears. He couldn't stop crying." Parikshith dies of snake bite with Krishna's name on his lips Even while these words came from his lips, Parikshith exclaimed, "Krishna! Krishna!" Everyone turned and hastened toward him. They saw a snake crawling away fast, after biting the Maharaja's right toe.

It was clear to all that the end had come. Everyone echoed Parikshith's words and repeated, "Krishna!

Krishna! Dwaraka-vasa! Brindavana-vihara!" The vast gathering had no other thought than that of God, no other word than the name of God.

The Maharaja fell on the ground, repeating "Krishna! Krishna!" Men who were learned in the Vedas recited Vedic prayers. Devotees sang the glory of God in chorus. Ascetics and sages were sunk in repetition of the name and meditation.

Suka shed tears of inner bliss. He said, "The Maharaja has reached Gopala!" He asked for the funeral rites to be undertaken and went away, without being noticed.

The word Suka means a parrot. Yes; he was the parrot that plucked the ripe, nectar-filled fruit called Bhagavatha from the tree of the Vedas and enabled the world to taste it and be nourished by it. May the world relish the fruit, strengthen itself through it, and derive the Atmic bliss that it can confer.

May humanity attain the Lord (Nandanandana).