

Chapter 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 have I 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 Hiran-yakasipu 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 himself 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 himself with the understanding of the immeasurable power and glory of the Imperishable Absolute. The individual must immerse himself 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*.”