

Chapter 5. Sacrifices and Penance of Elders

Obtaining the gold for the horse sacrifices

Dharmaraja accepted Vaasudeva'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 Vaasudeva'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. Vaasudeva 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 Vaasudeva 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.