

Chapter 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.”