

## Chapter 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, Vaasudeva, 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, vaak, 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 Vaasudeva 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 short-lived. 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 ‘myself’ 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.