

Chapter 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 initia-

tion 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 oc-

asionally 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.