

Bhagavata Purana

abridged translation by

Parama Karuna Devi

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Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Center

phone: +91 94373 00906

E-mail: paramakaruna@aol.in

Blog: www.jagannathavallabhavedicresearch.wordpress.com

Website: www.jagannathavallabha.com

Correspondence address:

Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Center

At Piteipur, P/O Alasana, PS Chandanpur,

752012 Dist. Puri Orissa, India

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Preface

The *Bhagavata Purana*, also known as *Srimad Bhagavatam*, is the most famous among 18 main ancient Sanskrit texts (*purana* precisely means "ancient") handed over from teacher to student along the millennia in Hindu tradition. Typically structured in the form of dialogues (questions and answers) between various protagonists of the sacred histories, the *Puranas* elaborate on the knowledge of the universe, creation, the various dynasties of kings, the purpose of life and the science of God.

The present work is aimed at giving a complete view of the *Bhagavata Purana* (all its 12 cantos) and its thread of narration, and translates almost word to word those passages that report the events and the general information among the 18,000 total verses of the entire text, merely avoiding repetitions. The sequence of the stories has been altered only very slightly, to help the flow of the stories and the logical connection between them.

In this volume there are no commentaries or added philosophical or theological explanations. Also, the vocabulary has been kept as simple as possible to facilitate understanding. For the explanation of the Sanskrit words (usually in italics) the readers are recommended to consult our glossary/ dictionary, published separately as an instrument for the study of all our publications and in general for the study of Vedic tradition.

To avoid long and possibly confusing interruptions in the thread of the narration, we have chosen to summarize the passages that contain the prayers offered to God by great personalities such as queen Kunti, Brahma, Shiva, Daksha, Gajendra, the *gopis* and the *Vedas* personified.

We have also summarized some of the major stories, such as the instructions of Kapila, and the adventures of Prahlada and Dhruva, the text of the Narayana kavacha and the story of Vamana, as well as famous prayers recommended for personal sadhana. We are planning to describe these passages in greater details in separate publications.

These are some of the titles in the series "*Jewels from the Bhagavata Purana*", in order of importance:

Uddhava gita (from canto 10)

Gopika gita (canto 10)

Shankara gita (canto 4)

The teachings of Prahlada (canto 7)

The prayers of Gajendra (canto 8)

The Hamsa gubhya prayers (canto 6)

Prayers to Shiva (canto 4)

Narayana kavacha (canto 6)

Teachings of Kapila (canto 3)

Teachings of the nine Yogendras (canto 10)

Teachings of the four Kumaras (canto 4)

Teachings of Rishabhadeva (canto 5)

Krishna's instructions to Vasudeva (canto 10)

We also recommend to our readers to become acquainted with the fundamentals of Vedic civilization and knowledge by going through our other publications, including:

Introduction to Vedic knowledge

Bhagavad gita (19 volumes)

The 108 Upanishads

The real meaning of Yoga

The global Dharma for the third millenniu

India, caste and birth prejudice

Hindu awakening

The questions of the sages

At the beginning of the Kali yuga, a number of sages had gathered in the Naimisharanya forest to perform a great religious ceremony. One morning, after completing the fire sacrifice and the other rituals, Sanaka Rishi (the sage presiding the assembly) offered a seat of honor to the old saint and scholar Suta Gosvami, and invited him to give a speech.

"Please tell us about God", said the sages, "and his many appearances, including the most recent as Krishna, the son of Devaki and Vasudeva. Explain to us, in a simple way, what is the purpose of the Vedic scriptures, and the highest benefit that can be obtained by human beings. In the age of Kali people live short lives, full of problems and disasters, and there is no time to study all the various sacred texts. Therefore, please summarize for us the essence of the scriptures and tell us about God and the teachings of the great spiritual masters of history."

Suta was the son of Romaharsana, the great scholar to whom Vyasa had entrusted the teaching of the *Puranas*, a narrative form of texts that are most suitable to convey positive messages to the mass of people who have scarce intellectual and philosophical abilities. After paying his respects to his *guru* Sukadeva, to the Supreme Lord who manifests in the form of Nara and Narayana, to Mother Sarasvati who blesses the human beings with wisdom, and to Vyasa the author of the *Bhagavata*, Suta began to speak of the knowledge contained in this extremely valuable work.

"The most important occupation for a human being," he said, "is that which leads him to know and serve God in its various aspects - impersonal, localized and personal, respectively defined as Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan. Every human being should sincerely engage in his or her professional, social and family duties, with the purpose of pleasing God; in this way one remains free from *karma* and becomes gradually purified from all negativity."

"Since the beginning of creation, the Supreme Lord manifests in various forms to bless the living beings. The first incarnation, called Purusha *avatara* or Maha Vishnu, generates all the universes and penetrates within each one of them.

The *avataras* of Vishnu are innumerable. For example, there are the four Kumaras who, at the beginning of creation, engaged in great austerities, Varaha the boar *avatara* who lifted the Earth up from the lower region of the universe, Narada Muni, who compiled the teachings on *bhakti*, Nara and Narayana who retired to meditate on the Himalaya, Kapila who revealed the Sankhya philosophy, Dattatreya who instructed many great personalities about transcendental knowledge, Yajna the son of Ruci and Akuti, Rishabha who demonstrated the way of renunciation, king Prithu who made the Earth prosper, Matsya the fish *avatara* who saved Manu from the inundation of the world, Kurma the tortoise *avatara* who held the Mandara hill, Dhanvantari who revealed the science of medicine, Mohini who mesmerized the *asuras* with her female beauty, Nrisimha who destroyed the *rakshasa* Hiranyakasipu, Vamana the dwarf who asked Bali as much land as he could cover with three steps, Parasurama who killed the corrupt rulers, Rama who built a bridge over the ocean and defeated the demonic Ravana, and Rama and Krishna who alleviated the burden of the world. During the present age, Buddha and Kalki will appear, with the mission of fighting against increasing degradation.

All these divine personalities are in fact manifestations of one God only, and remain transcendental unlike the conditioned souls who take birth in this world under the control of material nature. These topics were elaborated by the writer *avatara* Vyasa, who compiled the Vedic scriptures. In turn Vyasa's son Sukadeva narrated the *Srimad Bhagavata Purana* to king Parikshit, who had gone to the bank of the Ganges waiting for his own death."

Saunaka wanted to know in which circumstances and on which inspiration Vyasa had composed the *Bhagavata*, how the great emperor Parikshit had abandoned the throne while he was still young, and how he had met Sukadeva.

Suta obliged with good grace. "After compiling the various divisions of Vedic knowledge in a form suitable to the age that had started, Vyasa had

been wondering whether his work was really complete. Suddenly his *guru* Narada appeared to answer his doubts. Narada explained to Vyasa that in his writings he had neglected the most important thing: the detailed description of the glories of the Supreme Lord, Bhagavan Vishnu, of his forms and his activities. These transcendental stories have the power to transform the lives of those who hear them, as Narada himself had directly experienced.

In his previous lifetime, Narada had been born from a maidservant of humble origins, and as a child he had helped his mother to serve a group of *sadhus* during a period of various months covering the rainy season and autumn. Those great sages were pleased with the boy and allowed him to listen to their discourses, that were specifically centered on the activities of the various divine manifestations. The company of the devotees had purified the child's consciousness to the point that he had lost all material attachments and he only wanted to engage in the search for the Lord. So when he left his body he obtained the blessing of taking a new birth as the direct son of Brahma, the creator.

After Narada's visit, Vyasa focused on working on the *Bhagavata* and later he transmitted it to his son Sukadeva, another great spiritual personality who had already attained the level of complete liberation from all material attachments."

The narration of the *Bhagavata* begins right after the battle of Kurukshetra, when the few survivors were resting in their tents. The five sons of Pandu (Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva) were camping at the margins of the battlefield, together with their family.

Drona's son, Asvatthama, was determined to avenge his master, the evil Duryodhana who had been defeated in battle, and in the middle of the night he sneaked into the tent of the five sons of Draupadi, the queen of the Pandavas. Then he beheaded them in their sleep. Caught red-handed, Asvatthama fled but was pursued by Arjuna, and when he realized he had no way to escape, he launched the terrible nuclear weapon called *brahmastra*. Arjuna destroyed the missile and captured Asvattham, taking him back to the camp in front of Krishna, Draupadi and the other Pandavas, for them to decide about his punishment.

Asvatthama was stripped of the wealth and dignity he had inherited from his family, and was exiled forever from the kingdom. While Krishna was preparing to leave, however, the wretched Asvatthama returned to attack the Pandavas, this time aiming a *brahmastra* against Parikshit, the last descendent of the Pandavas, who was still in his mother's womb. Krishna intervened timely to protect the child, saving him from death, to the great joy of the Pandavas and their mother Kunti, who offered beautiful prayers of gratitude to the Lord.

After the funeral rites for the deceased heroes, King Yudhisthira was overcome by despair, thinking about all those who had perished in the battle. He felt responsible for the war and its terrible results, and he wanted to visit the battlefield. There lay the old warrior Bhishma, reclining on a bed of arrows, already close to death, and offered his respect, in the presence of many *rishis* and great personalities.

In spite of his many wounds and uncomfortable position, Bhishma was anxious to comfort Yudhisthira and patiently answered all his questions on Dharma, social organization and the duties of the various categories of persons, and especially on the duties of the King and the protection of the kingdom, for which Yudhisthira and the Pandavas had become responsible. Finally, when the auspicious moment arrived, Bhishma offered his respects and prayers to Lord Krishna, who was present in front of him, and surrendered to death.

Then Lord Krishna accompanied the Pandavas to their capital Hastinapura and stayed with them for a few months before returning to Dvaraka. At the time of his departure he was affectionately met by his sister Subhadra, who had married Arjuna, and by the other ladies of the family - Draupadi, Kunti, Uttara, Satyawati and Gandhari. All the Pandavas were present, and also Dhritarastra, Kripacharya, Dhaumya and Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarastra who had allied with the Pandavas in the war. After traveling through various provinces, Krishna happily arrived at Dvaraka and was triumphantly welcomed by his parents and by all the inhabitants of the city."

After listening carefully to the narration of these events, Saunaka Rishi presented more questions to Suta, asking him to tell more about the emperor Parikshit, who was a great devotee, and about the circumstances of his death.

Suta then narrated the events in the Pandavas' family after the war. "When Asvatthama launched the *brahmastra* against little Parikshit, who was still in his mother's womb, the child saw Krishna coming to save him, and from that time onwards, he felt a deep desire to find the Lord. Therefore he was called Parikshit ("he who examines") because every time he met a person he watched him intently in the hope of recognizing the Lord who saved him. Parikshit was the heir to the throne, and his birth was celebrated with great festivities. The learned *brahmanas* calculated his horoscope and praised his wonderful natural qualities.

Yudhisthira had now become the emperor of a vast kingdom, and performed another three great *yajnas* for the benefit of the subjects, also inviting Krishna and other relatives from the Yadu dynasty. In that period, uncle Vidura - brother to Pandu and Dhritarastra - returned from his long pilgrimage and was welcomed by great affection and joy by all his relatives. Vidura had left Hastinapura before the war, disgusted by the evil stubbornness of Duryodhana and by his plans to destroy the Pandavas. Now the circumstances had changed, and Vidura saw the possibility to convince Dhritarastra, Duryodhana's father, to raise his consciousness above the material attachments, greed and pride that had ruined his entire family, and to properly prepare for his imminent death.

Vidura's words were in perfect timing: the old regent, who had been born blind, was increasingly fragile in health. He had also lost all his children and was in a very embarrassing situation, honored and royally maintained by those he had persecuted and tried to kill for many years. So Dhritarastra took a decision, and without saying anything to anyone he left the palace together with his faithful wife Gandhari, to retire to the Himalaya and engage in austerities to control his senses. When Yudhisthira found that his uncle Dhritarastra had gone, he felt a great pain and guilt, thinking that the old regent had lost all his sons because of him. At that time Narada Muni arrived to pacify him, and after reminding him that everything happens according to God's plan, he informed him that Dhritarastra and Gandhari had left with Vidura to go to Saptasrota, where the sacred Ganges divides into seven streams, to engage in the austerities of *yoga* and become free from bodily attachments.

During his brief visit to the court, Vidura had preferred not to give the Pandavas the bad news of Krishna's death and the destruction of his city, Dvaraka, because the tragedy would be soon discovered anyway. Arjuna went to Dvaraka to see Krishna, but was absent for seven months. Yudhisthira started to become worried, also because he had observed some bad omens - irregularities in the cycle of seasons, sudden cyclones, increased pollution due to dust and smoke, and a general degradation of the environment in inhabited areas and even in the water reservoirs. Degradation was also visible in the way of life among the people, with spreading depression and a growing tendency to quarrel and cheat. Even the animals seemed to suffer: the cows did not give milk any more, dogs and jackals howled all the time, and the crows were everywhere.

Finally Arjuna returned, full of grief and tears, and to Yudhisthira's inquiry he revealed the tragic end of the Yadu dynasty and his own despair for the disappearance of Krishna, who had been the source of all blessings and protection for the Pandavas. Recalling the many occasions when he had shared Krishna's activities and the teachings he had received from the Lord, Arjuna found consolation and new inspiration to become detached from all material thoughts. Yudhisthira and the other brothers too were deeply touched by the news.

After enthroning his grandson Parikshit and putting Vajra (son of Aniruddha and grandson of Krishna) in Mathura as king of Surasena, Yudhisthira performed the Prajapatya yajna to become free from the responsibilities of the kingdom. Abandoning all luxuries, Yudhisthira dressed in rags, loosened his hair and started to consume only liquid foods, giving up all interest for whatever happened around him. Then he started walking towards the Himalaya to become an ascetic, followed by his brothers. In the meantime Vidura, too, had left his body while he was on a pilgrimage at Prabhasa. Draupadi and Subhadra - the wives of the Pandavas - also retired to engage in meditation on the Lord and soon they also left this world.

Young Parikshit Maharaja proved himself to be worthy of his grandparents' trust and ruled following the advice of the best ministers, choosing Kripacharya as court priest. He married the daughter of king Uttara and had four sons, the eldest of whom was named Janamejaya.

He performed three Asvamedha yajnas on the bank of the Ganges, and to make sure that everything was well in the kingdom, he often patrolled around on his chariot pulled by black horses and decorated with the Lion flag. One day he saw a totally unqualified man, disguised as a king, who was beating a cow and a bull. The bull was already standing on one leg only, and the cow was crying - and Parikshit realized that they were the personifications of Dharma and Earth. The legs of Dharma are the four principles of religion - austerity, cleanliness, compassion and truthfulness. Truthfulness is the last divine quality that can still resist somehow in the age of Kali, and without which, religion has no more meaning.

The Earth was crying because of the sufferings of innocent people, for all the abandoned women and children, for the brahminical class who had become awfully neglectful, for the ruthless rulers, for the increasing consumption of non-vegetarian foods, for famines and droughts, and for the general degradation of society. But above all, she was crying for the disappearance of Lord Krishna, who had descended to alleviate the burden of the earth, consisting of the uncontrolled growth of armies and weaponry.

Parikshit was angered by the sight of the personification of Kali yuga, who was tormenting the cow and the bull so cruelly, and challenged the criminal to a fight, as this was the duty of a good king. Terrified, the Kali purusha immediately abandoned all pretence of arrogance and surrendered, begging the emperor for mercy. Because the evil doer had surrendered, Parikshit permitted him to remain in the kingdom, but only in those places where people chose to engage in slaughtering and eating animals, consuming liquors, spread prostitution and gambling, and where gold was hoarded. In this way, if the leaders of society - the rulers and the members of the government, the *brahmanas* and religious persons - remain away from these sources of contamination, society can stay healthy.

However, the effects of the bad times started to show. One day, during his traveling, Maharaja Parikshit was alone, fatigued, tormented by hunger and thirst, in the middle of a forest. Looking for a water reservoir, he entered the hermitage of Samika Rishi, where he saw the Rishi sitting in silence with eyes closed, deeply immersed in meditation. The king asked for some water, but the Rishi did not answer or move at all. Annoyed, Parikshit retaliated against the apparent lack of respect of the Rishi with a prank in very bad

taste, hanging a dead serpent around his neck - in a mock imitation of the great ascetic Shiva, the Lord of yoga.

Samika Rishi's son was a young and inexperienced boy. Entering the *ashrama* he saw the offense against his father and he was filled with rage. To show his great powers to his young companions, the boy cast a curse against Parikshit, condemning him to die within seven days for the bite of a winged serpent. Shaken from his meditation, Samika Rishi realized what had happened. He was very sorry for the turn of events, and scolded his son for behaving childishly in sentencing the protector of the kingdom to death because of a mere prank.

From his side, Parikshit soon realized he had acted like a fool and uncivilized person in offending the Rishi, who had simply been unaware of his arrival. When he heard about the curse, he calmly accepted his destiny, and retired to the bank of the Ganges to prepare for imminent death. The news spread and all the great Rishis assembled around Parikshit to assist him in such a delicate moment. There arrived Narada, Vyasa, Atri, Vasistha, Visvamitra, Parasara, Angira, Parasurama, Bharadvaja, Gautama, Maitreya, Devala, Cyavana and many others. The king immediately took advantage of the opportunity, and after offering them his homage, asked their advice on what he should do. At that time also Sukadeva, the son of Vyasa, arrived in that place, and the glorious assembly of saints and sages offered him the seat of honor.

The teachings of Sukadeva on yoga

Sukadeva serenely took the seat he had been offered, and Parikshit went to offer him his homage with folded hands. "O *brahmana*," Parikshit said, "you know Brahman and you live and act as Brahman. Your presence sanctifies this place and our lives, and we consider your arrival as a special blessing from Lord Krishna, who is very dear to the sons of Pandu. I pray you, teach me the path of perfection for the human being, and especially for one who is about to die. Tell me about what is to be listened to, recited, remembered and worshiped, and also what should not be done."

The young saint, only sixteen years old, had already overcome all attachments and identifications with the material body, and his awareness was firmly established on the spiritual level. All the people present were extremely interested in listening to his explanations.

"My dear king," said Sukadeva, "your question is glorious, because it is beneficial for everyone, whatever is their level of evolution. Nobody knows when the time of death will come for them, and too often people waste the valuable time of human life in activities that do not give any real benefit, in mere survival at the animal level, such as sleeping, mating, finding food and shelter, and maintaining one's family.

The really important thing is to achieve the perfection of human life, that consists in spiritual realization, the knowledge of God. Even one single moment of divine consciousness is worth more than one entire life wasted in ordinary occupations that do not give any lasting benefit - a benefit we will be able to take with us even after death.

We should not fear death. In fact, we should prepare with the utmost care for the last moment of life, leaving one's home and living in a pure and solitary place, controlling the mind and focusing it on meditation on Lord Vishnu."

Thrilled by the perfect answers of the great sage, Parikshit was very eager to apply the instructions he had just received. "I beg you," he said, "please explain to me in details what I should do, how I must focus my mind in order to purify it."

Then Sukadeva explained him the practice of *astanga yoga*: "One should control the posture of one's body and breathing. This will help to control the mind, senses and intelligence, in order to apply them to the contemplation of the universal form of the Lord, the cosmic manifestation called Virat rupa, in the following way.

The lowest planets, Patala, are the soles of the feet of the universal form, while the heels and toes are the Rasatala planets, the ankles are the Mahatala planets and the shins are the Talatala planets. His knees are the Sutala planets, the thighs are the Vitala and Atala planets, the hips are Mahitala and the outer space is the navel. The chest of the Universal Form consists

of the luminaries, the neck is the Mahar planets, the mouth is the Janas planets, the forehead the Tapas planets. The highest planetary system, known as Satyaloka, is the head. His arms are the celestial beings led by Indra, the ten directions (the 8 cardinal points, plus above and below) are the ears, and the sound is hearing. His nostrils are the Asvini kumaras, and scent is his sense of smell. His mouth is blazing fire.

The external sphere of the universe constitutes his eye socket, his eye is the Sun and the faculty of sight. His eyelids are the day and the night, and the Devas such as Brahma reside in the movements of his eyebrows. His palate is Varuna, and the essence of everything is his tongue. The Vedic hymns are his brain and his jaws are Yama. Affection is his teeth, and the mesmerizing illusory energy is his smile. Modesty is his upper lip, desire is his chin, religion is the chest and irreligion the back. Brahma, who generates all beings, is his penis and the Mitra-Varuna are his testicles. The ocean is the waist, and the hills and mountains are his bones. The rivers are the veins, the trees the hair on his body, and air is his breath.

The ages are his movements and his activities are the reactions of the three *gunas*. The raincloud are the hair on his head, the passage between the day and night is his clothing, and the supreme cause of material creation is his intelligence. His mind is the moon, and Rudra his ego. His face is represented in human society by the *brahmanas*, his arms by the *kshatriyas*, his legs by the *vaisyas* and his feet protect the *sudras*. All the worshipable Devas are parts of his body. One who sincerely wants to obtain liberation must meditate on this universal form of the Lord."

"Instead of dreaming about the heavenly pleasures of the celestial planets, we should minimize our needs and meditate on the Supreme Lord. While some people meditate on the universal form of the Lord, others contemplate him in his form of Paramatma or Supreme Soul, the four-armed form of Vishnu who resides in the heart of each living being - starting from the Lord's feet and going up towards his smiling face, where one can find the true happiness of the soul. This meditation is in fact a scientific procedure, by which we can control the life air and the mind, and leave our body in full awareness.

God manifests in many forms through the functions of the personalities of the Devas, each one personifying a particular quality or blessing. However,

the worship of the supreme form of Vishnu bestows the blessing of transcendental awareness."

Parikshit was very eager to hear more about Lord Vishnu, and he prayed Sukadeva to talk to him about the activities of Vishnu in this world. Sukadeva immersed himself in meditation on the Lord and offered him his respects before answering to the questions. "God is the Supreme Soul of all souls, the personification of the *Vedas*, worshiped by all those who are free from false identification.

This is the teaching that Brahma, the first living being and creator of the universe, offered his son Narada, who had asked him how the material world is created and preserved, and who controls it.

Brahma replied that his work of creation is subordinate and subsequent to the primary creation, that directly emanates from Vishnu in the form of his radiance. This original Purusha is called Mahavishnu or Karanarnavasayi Vishnu because he remains reclining on the Causal Ocean, that *mabat tattva* or non-differentiation great Reality that contains the germ of all existence. Then time comes into existence, and the three *gunas* or qualities of matter - *sattva* or goodness, *rajas* or passion, and *tamas* or ignorance.

The movement of these qualities creates material identification and the necessity to act on the manifested level, which in turn produce the subtle and gross material elements - space, the gaseous elements, the liquid elements and the solid elements. Then the archetypes or personifications of the various universal manifestations appear, in the form of the various Devas."

From the inconceivable and transcendental body of Mahavishnu the universes emanate like innumerable bubbles, and within each evolving universe the Lord manifests as Garbhodakasayi Vishnu, also called Hiranyagarbha, the radiant fetus inside the universal uterus, sleeping within the amniotic waters of creation. From this transcendental form of the Virat Purusha originates the particular Brahma who is in charge of the physical construction of the universe under his control. But apart from the manifestation of the Purusha *avatars*, the Lord also appears in the material world in other specific forms, according to the precise functions that constitute his divine mission. For example Varaha, Suyajna the son of

Akuti, Kapila the son of Devahuti, Datta the son of Atri, the four Kumaras, Nara and Narayana the sons of Murti, king Prithu, Rishabha, Hayagriva, Matsya, Kurma, Nrisimha, Vamana, Hamsa, Dhanvantari, Parasurama, Ramachandra and Krishna. The Lord also descends as Vyasa, Buddha and Kalki."

Parikshit had other questions. "Narada Muni had the great fortune of hearing the glories of the Lord directly from his father Brahma. In what occasions did he transmit these teachings? I sincerely wish to hear more about this deep knowledge. I have understood that the transcendental spirit soul is different from the material body. How does it acquire a body, and for what purpose?

You have said that the Supreme Lord manifests in the universal form, that is made of matter; so what is the difference between the body of the Lord and the body of the ordinary living being? I am also eager to hear more about the Supreme Soul, who resides in every heart without being touched by the external energy.

I have heard your explanation on how the planets of the universe and their rulers are situated in the various part of the gigantic body of the Virat Purusha. However, I do not understand their functional position: can you explain better? I also want to understand the duration of time between the creation and the destruction of the universe and the subsequent creations, the nature of time constituted by past present and future, the duration and measure of life on the various planets of the universe, and why they are different.

I would also like to know about the process of accumulation of the karmic reactions that cause the movements of the beings among the many species of life, from the celestial beings to the most insignificant creatures. What is the process of creation of the planets, of earth, of the mountains, rivers and seas, and their inhabitants? How is the interplanetary space divided? What are the characteristics of the various social categories? And what rules should one observe in case of emergency?

I am also interested in hearing about the elementary principles of creation, of the mystic powers of yoga, of the subjects of Vedic literature, and the way in which the beings are born and develop. And above all, I want to

hear about the benefits of devotional service to the Lord, in relation to the Vedic ritual, the procedures that enable one to attain success in *dharmā*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* - or ethical integrity, acquisition of valuable things, satisfaction of the senses and liberation from material conditionings.

How do the living beings appear? And how the Asuras - the demonic beings - come to existence? And how do liberated beings live?"

Sukadeva was very pleased by the sincerity of Parikshit, who was thirsty with knowledge and asked so many questions. "It is only because of the influence of the illusory energy," he said, "that one comes to believe he is the material body. The idea of 'I' and 'mine' is simply a misconception, that dissipates as soon we attain transcendental realization.

At the beginning of creation, Brahma was trying to understand how to proceed in his work. While meditating, he heard the two syllable '*ta*' and '*pa*', that form the Sanskrit word *tapā* ('austerity'), and although he could not understand where the sound had come from, he decided to follow that instruction and engaged in a very long meditation to control the self. The Lord was very pleased by Brahma's sincere service and granted him the vision of his wonderful spiritual abode, Vaikuntha, where Vishnu lives surrounded by his devotees. Besides, he revealed that he had given him the instruction to practice austerity, because the intensity in the engagement in one's duty is non-different from the Lord himself.

On that occasion, Brahma asked the Lord questions that are similar to the ones you asked me, and in reply he obtained the four verses that are considered the heart of the *Bhagavata*. Vishnu told Brahma that his existence is eternal - it exists before the manifestation of the universe, in the present moment, and even after the destruction of the cosmos. Nothing exists without the Lord, who is in every thing as well as beyond all created things, just like the elements of the universe enter into the cosmos and at the same time they remain distinct from it. Those who seek the Absolute Truth must understand this secret knowledge in all circumstances, both directly and indirectly."

Later, Brahma gave this knowledge to his son Narada, who taught it to his disciple Vyasa in the form of the *Bhagavata*, that deals with ten subjects: the creation of the universe, the secondary creation, the structure of the

planetary systems, the manner in which the Lord protects the universe, the creative impulse, the series of the Manus, the science of God, how to go back to God, and what is the most valuable treasure.

The fundamental or primary creation, called *sarga*, consists of the sixteen elements of matter - the five gross elements called earth, water, fire, air and space; the subtle elements called sound, form, taste, smell and touch; and the senses that are eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin and mind. The secondary creation follows, from the interaction of these sixteen primary elements, and it is called *visarga*.

The Lord's protection is obtained by obeying his laws, and the succession of the Manus has the purpose to express such laws to give the proper direction to the life of human beings. The creative impulse consists in the desire of obtaining the result of the action. The science of God describes the *avatars* of the Lord and the various activities performed by these incarnations together with his devotees.

The dissolution of the cosmic manifestation occurs when the Lord withdraws all the universes into himself and the living beings merge again into his body together with their conditioned tendencies, while liberation is the permanent nature of the being when he leaves the subtle body besides the gross body.

The Supreme is the source and the reservoir of the cosmic manifestation, that gives shelter to the physical manifestation called *adbibhantika*, to the archetypal manifestation called *adhidainika*, and to the manifestation of the individuals called *adhyatmika*. In other words, these are the material bodies, the beings who control them and the beings that are controlled. All beings are created by the Supreme Lord and receive a body according to their past actions - including Brahma and his sons such as Daksha and the other Prajapatis, the Manus, Indra, Chandra and Varuna, the Rishis, the inhabitants of the higher planets such as Pitriloka, Siddhaloka, Charanaloka, Gandharvaloka, Vidyadharaloka, Kinnaraloka, as well as the Apsaras, Yakshas and Rakshasas, Kimpurushas, human beings, ghosts, animals, plants and so on.

Conversation between Maitreya and Vidura

Parikshit Maharaja then asked Sukadeva to tell him about the circumstances in which Vidura, the brother of Pandu and Dhritarastra, had met the sage Maitreya and had discussed important spiritual topics with him. Sukadeva continued to narrate: "The blind regent, Dhritarastra, had been degraded by his desire to please his evil sons, and allowed them to commit many offenses against the Pandavas. Duryodhana and his brothers tried many times to murder their cousins, mistreated Draupadi in public, and stripped Yudhisthira of all his possessions with a fixed dice game.

Vidura had admonished his brother and nephews many times, warning them that such crimes would bring terrible consequences, also because the Pandavas were powerful *kshatriyas* and were personally supported by Lord Krishna. Instead of heeding his uncle's wise advice, Duryodhana insulted him too, calling him the son of a maidservant, and ordering the guards to throw him out of the palace.

Pained by those unwarranted offenses, Vidura did not wait to be mistreated further, and he immediately left the court to visit many pilgrimage places, such as Ayodhya, Dvaraka and Mathura. He traveled alone as a humble beggar, without depending on anyone, crossing through pure and sacred regions. When he reached Prabhasa he learned about the death of all his relatives in the battle and he turned west, towards the Sarasvati river, and went to the eleven *tirthas* on her banks - Trita, Usana, Mahu, Prithu, Agni, Asita, Vayu, Sudasa, Go, Guha and Sraddhadeva - visiting many temples dedicated to the Lord.

Then he traveled through the wealthy western provinces of Surat, Sauvira, Matsya and Kurujangala, and he finally came to the bank of the Yamuna river, where he met Uddhava, the great devotee of the Lord, and asked him for news about Krishna and the Yadu dynasty.

Remembering the Lord, Uddhava was overwhelmed by an intense sentiment of love, and wiping the tears from his eyes, he informed him about the disappearance of Krishna and the destruction of his dynasty. The two great devotees found comfort in discussing between themselves about Lord Krishna and his activities during his mission.

Uddhava recalled the various stages of Krishna's life, up to the moment when he had left his family and had gone to the bank of the river Sarasvati. Sitting under a young banyan tree, Krishna appeared completely peaceful, although he had abandoned all the comforts of his palaces. Uddhava had followed him because he could not stay away from him, and this was how Maitreya found them during his pilgrimage, and he remained in their company to discuss about transcendental knowledge. So Uddhava advised Vidura to search for Maitreya, who was a friend of Vyasa and thus older than Vidura, to learn from him that same knowledge that had been explained by Lord Krishna."

After spending some days in the company of Uddhava, talking about the disappearance of Lord Krishna and his dynasty, Vidura traveled towards the Ganges in search of Maitreya, who resided in Haradvara. When he arrived in the presence of the great sage, Vidura asked him to explain how the Lord incarnates in this world, and how we can serve the Lord with devotion. Maitreya welcomed him affectionately, accepting him as the worthy son of Vyasa and especially as the incarnation of Yamaraja, the Lord of Death, the eternal companion of God.

He immediately started to explain how at the beginning of creation, Lord Vishnu awakens material energy, manifesting the universal form. He first created Brahma and the Devas - Agni, Varuna, the Asvini kumaras, Surya, Vayu and the directions of space - as manifestations of his own divine being, and gave them the knowledge and power to manifest and rule the universe. After one thousand celestial years, material energy generated the living beings according to their tendencies and identifications.

Vidura asked: "In what way the unchangeable Lord, who is transcendental and always satisfied in himself, comes into contact with the material nature and her activities without being touched by the influence of the *gunas*? How does the individual soul, who is pure awareness, slide into ignorance and remains trapped there? And since the Lord resides in the heart of all living

beings, why do living beings engage in activities that lead to sufferings and disaster?"

Maitreya replied: "The Supreme Lord is never overcome by illusion, but the individual beings are small enough to fall under her power, as in a temporary dream. The misconception of identification with matter can be gradually dissipated by meditating on the Lord, the transcendental Reality, just like when we awaken from sleep we can return to the awareness of the waking state by focusing on what really exists."

Vidura asked again: "Please tell me more about the secondary creation of Brahma, of the Manus and their descendants, of the planets, the various species, the divisions of society, the different methods of spiritual realization, the prescribed rituals and the activities of the Lord when he manifests in this world."

Maitreya congratulated Vidura for his excellent question and said that the same subjects had been explained by Ananta Sankarshana to Sanat Kumara and his three brothers, sons of Brahma. In turn, the Kumara handed down the same teachings to Sankhyayana Muni, who gave them to Brihaspati and Parasara, Maitreya's *guru*.

The Lord, the Supreme Soul of the universe, appears to be sleeping in the water of the Ocean and generates the living beings through the power of the external energy, the Kala shakti ("the black Power" or "the Power of Time"), therefore his transcendental body has a dark blue complexion. The aggregate of the selfish activities of the living beings manifests in the form of a lotus bud growing from Vishnu's navel. Again the Lord enters that lotus flower as Kshirodakasayi Vishnu, the Supreme Soul of all beings, and generates the personification of the Vedic knowledge, Brahma. After meditating for a long time, Brahma became able to see the Lord and offered him beautiful prayers. With the Lord's blessing, Brahma established himself firmly in spiritual consciousness, that enabled him to perceive the presence of the Godhead in each being, and he started to shape the fourteen inhabited planetary systems and the bodies of the various living beings according to the different species.

There are nine subsequent stages in creation: the first is the *mabat-tattva* (the total aggregate of matter), the second generates the sense of identification

with matter, the third manifests sense perception, the fourth manifests the sense of cognition and action, the fifth manifests the archetypes of the universal reality known as Devas, and the sixth manifests the sense of ignorance. The secondary creation by Brahma starts from the seventh phase, in which he manifests the immovable beings, such as the plants. The eighth phase manifests the lower animals, including mammals and birds, who are listed in 28 wide categories. The ninth and last phase of creation manifests the human beings, the heavenly beings, the Rakshasas and Yakshas, Gandharvas and Apsaras, Siddhas and Charanas and Vidyadharas, and the various types of goblins and ghosts.

The most elementary particle that is at the base of creation is the atom, almost invisible even after the dissolution of the bodies. The calculation of time is therefore based as a fundamental measure by reference to atomic time - the time in which an atom covers a particular space. An aggregate of six atoms is large enough to be seen in the sunlight that penetrates through a screen.

The time required for the integration of three of these aggregates of six atoms (called *trasarennu*) is called *trutis*, and is the shortest unit of time. One *vedha* is composed by 100 *trutis*, while one *lava* consists of three *vedhas*, one *nimesa* corresponds to three *lavas*, one *ksbana* to three *nimesas*, one *kastha* to five *ksbanas*, one *laghu* to fifteen *kasthas*, one *nadika* or *danda* to fifteen *laghus*, one *muhurta* to two *dandas*, and six or seven *dandas* form a quarter of the day or night, according to the season. The instrument to measure one *danda* is prepared with a copper container of six *palas* in weight: we make a hole with a gold lancet weighing four *masas* and four *angulas* long. When the container is put over water, it sinks in exactly one *danda*.

In each day and night of the human beings there are four *praharas*; fifteen days and nights form one *paksha*, and a month is composed by two *pakshas* - a white one and a black one. One human month equals to one day and night on the Pitri planets. Two months of Earth's time constitute a season, while six months are a complete movement of the sun from south to north and vice versa. Two of these complete movements, that constitute one complete cycle of the sun, correspond to one day and night of the heavenly beings, but an entire year of the earth calendar. The human beings have a duration of life of 100 of these years.

There are five different definitions for the orbits of the sun, the moon, the stars and other celestial bodies, and all have specific cycles. A cycle of four earth ages - Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali - constitutes 12,000 years of the heavenly beings. Satya yuga lasts 4,800 heavenly years, Treta 3,600, Dvapara 2,400 years, and Kali 1,200. In the age of Satya the human beings follow the principles of religion perfectly, but in each of the three subsequent ages, one fourth of these principles become lost.

One thousand cycles of four ages constitute one day and one night for Brahma; when his day is over there is a partial destruction of the universe, in which the sun and the moon lose their radiance and the inhabitants of the highest planets move to Janaloka because the rest of universe is devastated by fire. When Brahma gets up in the morning, a new cycle of creation begins. Within one day of Brahma there is a series of fourteen Manus, each living a little more than 71 cycles of four ages. At each new Manu there is a renovation of the seven Rishis, Indra and other celestial beings and the residents of the higher planets. Brahma lives for 100 of his years, 50 of which have already passed; the first cycle of ages in the second half of Brahma's life was characterized by the appearance of the Lord in the form of Varaha, the boar *avatara*.

At the beginning of creation Brahma generated the four great sages called Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatana and Sanat Kumara. Brahma expected them to generate descendants in turn, but the Kumaras were not interested in procreation and chose to remain small boys forever, to avoid being involved in the complications due to the fact of being older than others. Brahma was not happy about this disobedience, and from his anger, concentrated between his brows, Rudra appeared manifesting in eleven forms that have the purpose to destroy the universe at the time of dissolution.

Later Brahma generated, from various parts of his body, the Rishis named Marici, Atri, Angira, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Bhrigu, Vasistha, Kardama, Daksa and Narada. In the same way he generated the four *Vedas* (*Rig, Yajur, Sama* and *Atharva*), the secondary *Vedas* (*Ayur, Dhanur, Gandharva*, and so on) and the fifth *Veda* (*Puranas* and *Itihisas*), together with the other forms of knowledge and ritual ceremonies. Finally, he generated the first couple of human beings - Svayambhuva Manu and Satarupa - who started to produce

a descendance through sexual union. Manu had two sons (Priyavrata and Uttanapada) and three daughters (Akuti, Devahuti and Prasuti). He gave Akuti in marriage to Ruci Rishi, Devahuti to Kardama Rishi, and Prasuti to Daksha Prajapati.

The story of Varaha

Sukadeva continued to narrate the teachings of Maitreya to Vidura about the creation of the universe. Maitreya said, "Svayambhuva Manu received from Brahma the task to populate the earth and rule it, but there was a problem. Earth had sunk into the Garbha Ocean, that is at the bottom of the universe, and it had to be restored to its proper orbit."

While he was pondering this problem, Brahma sneezed and from his nostril appeared a tiny boar, who soon grew so big that his body occupied the entire sky. Immediately Brahma, the Rishis and Manu realized that it could not be an ordinary creature; when Brahma guessed that it might be Vishnu, the boar roared his approval and the echo of that powerful sound was accompanied by the reciting of Vedic hymns by all the great Rishis.

The boar *avatara*, Varaha, flashed across the sky, bristling his hair and scattering the clouds with his hooves and sparkling tusks. Then, running merrily like an elephant, he entered into the waters, creating two enormous waves, that seemed like arms of the ocean raised in prayer. Using his long white tusks, he furrowed into the ocean bed searching for the earth, and finally he found her and lifted her up. While he was restoring the earth to her proper orbit, he was confronted by the *asura* Hiranyaksha and engaged in battle with him, finally killing him with his divine mace. Happy at having witnessed that wonderful adventure, all the Rishis contemplated the form of Varaha with devotion and offered their respects and prayers to the Lord, who had accepted earth as his beloved consort.

Vidura had listened carefully to Maitreya's discourse, and wanted to hear more. "O great Rishi," he said, "why had the Asura Hiranyaksha appeared to challenge Lord Varaha while he was rescuing Earth?"

"The story of Hiranyaksha begins with his birth from Diti, the daughter of Prajapati Daksha," Maitreya replied. "Diti strongly desired to have a child, and she prayed her husband Kasyapa, son of Marici, to unite with her even if the moment was inauspicious. Sunset is a moment of the day when the forces of darkness stir and become more powerful - therefore it is better to engage in religious ceremonies that will protect our awareness, keeping it from sliding into the lower influences of matter. Kasyapa was sitting in meditation after completing the fire ceremony and was offering homage to Lord Shiva, who at that time travels around, accompanied by his retinue."

Diti, however, was agitated by sexual desire and had no intention to wait any longer. Kasyapa consented to perform his conjugal duty, but warned her that there would be negative consequences: the two children conceived at that inauspicious time would be evil Asuras, tormentors of the universe, and for this reason they would be killed by the Supreme Lord, Vishnu.

Later Diti repented for her lack of discipline, and Kasyapa said that the son of one of those sons would be a great devotee of the Lord, blessed and loved by all. Diti also tried to delay the birth of the two Asuras, but already during the pregnancy the universe was gradually covered by a great darkness, so that the Devas went to Brahma to ask him what was happening.

Brahma explained that the problem had started when the four Kumaras had gone to Vaikuntha to meet Lord Vishnu. After crossing the first six gates and meeting many of the residents of Vaikuntha, who traveled in airplanes together with their consorts, the Kumaras came to the seventh gate and its two doormen Jaya and Vijaya. The two guards saw the Kumaras enter without hesitation and stopped them, treating them as ordinary children. Annoyed, the Rishis scolded the two guards for their narrow mindedness. Such a mentality was characteristic of the material world, and that was the place where they would soon end up.

At that very moment, Vishnu arrived personally to solve the controversy. After graciously accepting the prayers of the Kumaras, he declared he approved the punishment that had been given to his servants. Directly taking responsibility for the offense, he asked the Kumaras to allow the doormen to return to his presence in Vaikuntha after expiating their mistake by taking birth in the material world. The Kumaras replied

acknowledging the fact that everything always happens according to the Lord's plan and that the curse against the two innocent doormen was due to the influence of his illusory energy.

Thus Jaya and Vijaya fell from their positions and entered Diti's womb as her two sons, Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu.

The birth of the two twins was accompanied by many bad omens: earthquakes, great fires, comets, meteorites, hurricanes and cyclones that hid the light of the sun and the moon, immersing the entire universe in deep darkness. The planets moved inauspiciously, often in retrograde path, and there were many eclipses. Mars and Saturn became more powerful than the other more peaceful planets such as Mercury, Jupiter and Venus. The ocean moaned, agitated by huge waves. Dogs and jackals were restless and continued to howl, wild donkeys ran around the land in herds, scaring the birds and the cows.

Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu were born already fully grown, with bodies as strong as steel, decorated with crowns and other ornaments. They did not fear anyone, and before them Indra and the other celestial beings fled and went into hiding. Not finding any opponents to fight with, Hiranyaksha ventured into the ocean and went to challenge the Deva Varuna in his capital, Vibhavari. Not desiring to fight against the arrogant Asura, Varuna convinced him to seek Vishnu, the Supreme and most powerful Being, and fight with him.

Immediately Hiranyaksha went to search for Vishnu, and learning that he was rescuing earth from the waters, he hastened to challenge him, insulting and threatening him. Hiranyaksha had golden hair and terrifying tusks, and wore a golden armor and other beautiful ornaments. He was equipped with a huge mace and he rushed against the Lord without hesitation. Varaha patiently tolerated the insults and first of all focused on rescuing the earth, lifting her out of the water, like an elephant that is attacked by a crocodile first of all thinks about his female's safety. Then he turned to face the challenge, crushing the Asura's pride and threatening him.

The fight was terrible, and all the Devas and Rishis and the inhabitants of the heavenly planets watched it anxiously. Both the opponents dealt many heavy blows on one another and intoxicated by the smell of the blood, they

became even more engrossed in the fight. Suddenly Varaha's mace slid off his hand, and the Asura showed his chivalry by holding his attack.

Brahma was scared, and offering his prayers to the Lord, he asked him not to play too long with his enemy, but to end the fight quickly. Then Varaha smacked Hiranyaksha's mace off his hand and again offered the weapon back to him. The Asura felt humiliated and grabbed a trident, that was soon shattered to pieces by the Lord's disc. Enraged, Hiranyaksha tried all the magic tricks he knew, evoking violent winds, darkness, hailstorms and a rain of sand and stones. There was a shower of pus, hair, blood, excrements, urine and bones, and armies of demons marched in full war gear. But the Lord's Sudarshana disc dissipated all those terrifying illusions and Varaha ended the fight with a hard slap just below the Asura's ear - and he fell dead.

The teachings of Kapila

On Vidura's request, Maitreya continued to narrate the *Bhagavata*, speaking about the descendants of Manu and especially of Devahuti and Ruci, who married respectively Kardama and Daksha.

On Brahma's order, Kardama engaged in a long meditation on the bank of the Bindu Sarovara, a wonderful lake surrounded by the Sarasvati river: it was a very beautiful place, the abode of noble Rishis, in the middle of scented forests full of flowers and resounding with the songs of auspicious bird as well as deer, elephants, monkeys, lions and mongooses. When finally Vishnu appeared to grant him a boon, Kardama offered him beautiful prayers and asked him for a suitable bride. The Lord blessed him, and told him that Svayambhuva Manu and his wife Satarupa were coming to that place, traveling with their daughter Devahuti, in search of a good husband for her. In the future, Devahuti would have nine daughters and Vishnu himself would appear as her son Kapila.

As Vishnu had predicted, as soon as Kardama had completed his austerities, Svayambhuva Manu arrived at the ashrama, accompanied by his wife and daughter, and was greeted with much honor. Svayambhuva told the Rishi that his daughter Devahuti had heard much about him and had decided to become his wife. Kardama was happy to accept the proposal, on the condition that - after giving children to Devahuti - he would be free to retire from family life to engage completely in spiritual meditation. Devahuti accepted and the marriage was solemnized. Her parents bade her farewell, leaving many gifts for her, and then returned to their capital, Barhismati.

Devahuti lived in the ashrama of Kardama Muni, sincerely engaged in taking care of her great husband, observing all the religious rituals and working hard, even neglecting her own well-being and health. After some time, Kardama noticed that the princess had neglected the proper care of her own body, and so he became worried and saddened.

Comforted by her husband, Devahuti reminded him about his promise to give her children, and also asked for a suitable house where she could raise them. Immediately Kardama Muni created, out of his own mystic powers, an airborne palace of wonderful beauty, and filled with all sorts of wealth. The castle was seven stories high, had floors made with emeralds with motifs of coral daisies, and was equipped by very valuable furniture, decorated with all types of gems and garlands of scented flowers. There were gardens and courtyards with swans and doves - both real and artificial - and many works of art. Kardama's power also created one thousand maidservants who bathed Devahuti in the Bindu Sarovara, massaging her with costly oils and dressing her with wonderful clothes and royal ornaments. Refreshed with delicious foods and tonic drinks, Devahuti traveled with her husband in her flying mansion for many years, visiting the valleys of mount Meru and those around the Manasa Sarovara lake, as well as the gardens called Vaisrambhaka, Surasana, Nandana, Puspabhadra and Caitrarathya. They also traveled to various other planets, freely and without any difficulty.

Devahuti gave birth to nine daughters, but as these would leave their home to marry, she asked her husband for a son who could stay and take care of her. After worshiping the Supreme Lord, Devahuti gave birth to Kapila, the

avatara of Vishnu who expounded the teachings known as the Sankhya philosophy.

Brahma came to see the divine newborn and Kardama offered him respects. Then Kardama gave his daughters in marriage to great Rishis: Kala to Marici, Anasuya to Atri, Sraddha to Angira, Havirbhu to Pulastya, Gati to Pulaya, Kriya to Kratu, Khyati to Bhrigu, Arundhati to Vasistha and Santi to Atharva. He then offered prayers to the Supreme Lord, who had incarnated as his son Kapila, and asked his permission to retire from family life and go to the forest to meditate alone and then to roam around the world following the strict rules of renunciation of *sannyasa*. Free from all identifications and material attachments, from all desires and repulsion, Kardama finally attained the supreme liberation.

Kapila stayed with his mother Devahuti, and on her request he explained the method of devotional service to the Supreme Lord, that constitutes the supreme form of yoga. The mind becomes purified when it is completely free from the desires produced by the false identifications with the body and by material attachments. Awakened to its true spiritual nature, the soul transcends the joys and sorrows of this world and by practicing knowledge and renunciation it only accepts the company of the realized sages - who are tolerant, compassionate, peaceful and friendly towards all living beings. The *sadhus* live by practicing the teachings of the scriptures and do not see anyone as their enemies, but renounce all material ties because they only seek pleasure in the meditation on the Lord's activities. The company of such saintly people helps one to overcome material attachments and become firmly established in divine consciousness.

To help Devahuti to better concentrate on this meditation, Kapila explained to her the Sankhya yoga, that is a combination of devotional service and mystic realization, that considers the senses as the symbolic representations of the Devas and the mind as the representative of the Supreme Lord. The natural tendency of the senses is to act according to the instructions of the *Vedas* and the tendency of the mind is to serve. The supreme service is the service offered to the Lord, in full knowledge and awareness of the Divine is the supreme perfection of self realization.

The Supreme Lord is the Supreme Soul, who has no beginning or end; he transcends the world of matter but can be perceived everywhere in the

universe because he is omnipresent. Entering the material energy, the Lord starts the creation of the universe. The static combination of the three *gunas*, the three influences of nature, is the aggregate of the elements that compose nature, and is called *pradhana*. These elements are the five gross elements, the five subtle elements, the four internal senses, the five senses of perception and the five organs of action.

The five gross elements are earth (energy in the solid form), water (energy in liquid form), fire (energy in the form of heat and light), air (energy in the form of gas) and space. The five corresponding subtle elements are smell, taste, color, touch and sound. The senses of perception are the sense of smell, taste, sight, touch and hearing, while the senses of action are those that enable us to speak, move, work, generate and evacuate. The internal subtle senses are the mind, intelligence, ego and material awareness. The 25th element is time, the eternal manifestation of God that starts and ends creation, while the 26th element is the presence of the soul.

In the beginning, the soul has a pure, clear and peaceful awareness, free from all distractions, but when it identifies with matter, the principles of creation manifest the various material elements. The false perception of the self is controlled by Ananta Sankarshana: this false perception, focused in goodness, manifests the mind, controlled by Aniruddha. Material identification focused in passion manifests intelligence, with its functions such as doubt, correct understanding, incorrect understanding, memory and sleep, as well as the senses of perception and action, that depend respectively on intelligence and life energy.

Material identification focused in ignorance produces the material elements, beginning with the subtle element of sound, that in turn produces space and the sense of hearing. Sound is that which transmits the idea of an object and indicates the presence of a person even if we cannot see him or her. The characteristics of space are the power to contain the external and internal existence of all beings, as the field of action of *prana*, senses and mind.

From the existence of space the element of touch develops, and then air. Touch is characterized by the feeling of hardness and softness, heat and cold, while the function of air is to move, mix, and enable access to the object of the sense of hearing and the other senses.

The interaction of air with the sense of touch produces the forms of the bodies, determined by the destiny of each individual. The evolution of the forms generates the fire (light and heat) and the eyes become able to perceive forms and colors. The characteristics of form are size, quality and individuality. The form of fire is perceived by its radiance; fire is appreciated for its light, for the power to cook, digest, evaporate, destroy cold and stimulate hunger and thirst - the desire and the action to eat and drink.

The interaction of fire with the visual perception evolves the element of taste, that produces water and the sense that perceives taste (the tongue). Although taste is originally one, it develops in various categories such as astringent, sweet, bitter, pungent, acid and salty, because of its contact with different substances.

The characteristics of water are the power to drench other substances, to coagulate various mixtures, destroy thirst, give satisfaction and sustain life, soften things, fight heat and constantly return to the water reservoirs.

The interaction of water with the perception of taste develops the subtle element of odor, that manifests earth and the sense of smell. Odor is one, but it manifests in many ways - mixed, disgusting, fragrant, sweet, strong, acid and so on - according to the proportions of the associated substances.

The characteristic functions of earth can be perceived by fashioning forms of the Supreme Brahman, building residences, preparing pots and containers for water and other substances and so on. In other words, earth is the support for all other elements.

The sense that perceives sound is called hearing, the sense perceiving touch is called tact, the one perceiving form (the characteristic of fire) is called sight, the one perceiving taste (the characteristic of water) is called taste, the one perceiving odor (the characteristic of earth) is called smell. Because cause also exists in the effect, the characteristics of the cause are also found in the effect: therefore in earth we can find the characteristics of all other elements.

When all these elements become differentiated, the Supreme Lord personally enters the creation together with time, action and the *gunas* (the fundamental qualities of nature, namely goodness, passion and ignorance),

giving birth to the Cosmic Egg. The universe has the shape of an egg, with layers of elements each 10 times thicker than the previous one, and it surrounded by non-manifested nature.

Within the Cosmic Egg, Vishnu, Hari, divides it in fourteen planetary systems that compose its body. The parts of the body of the Virat Purusha, the universal Lord, manifest as the various components of nature - the mouth is the power to speak and the Deva of fire, the nostrils are the sense of smell and the *prana*, and so on.

In this way we contemplate God as present in our own body and in the universe and simultaneously distinct from them. When the living being is in this position, he is not subject to the influence of the *gunas*, of the temporary identifications and of the sense of possession, just like the sun remains detached from its own reflection in the water.

If, on the other hand, he falls under the illusion of false material identification, believing himself to be the body, he focuses on material activities and considers himself as the owner of everything. In this conditioned state, he transmigrates into different species of life, higher or lower according to his association with the three influences of nature, and it forced to suffer the consequences of his actions.

Actually the living being always transcends material energy, but because of his hunger for power and dominion on nature he is forced to remain in the material existence and suffer all its disadvantages, just like a sleeping man remains in his own nightmares and suffers because of them. By practicing the system of yoga, that is aimed at controlling the mind and the senses, one can rise to the level of pure devotional service, hearing and speaking about God.

The liberated soul is aware of the absolute Personality of God, that is transcendental and manifests as reflection also in false identification. The presence of the Lord is perceived like the reflection of the sun on the water, projected on a wall in a room or situated in the sky. Similarly the realized soul perceives itself as reflected in the ego, in the senses and in the mind, although it always remains conscious and free from false identification. The illusion of material identification is like sleep, that confuses the nature and the identity of the dreamer and creates suffering and anxieties.

In spite of its attraction for material nature, the living being can become liberated by regularly hearing about divine knowledge and performing his prescribed duties in a spirit of renunciation towards the results of action. He becomes independent and glorious by renouncing the idea of dominating matter, and cannot be touched by the influence of matter because he knows the reality of the Absolute, the nature of Brahman. After living many years and many lifetimes in this spiritual practice, one loses all desires to enjoy matter and any attraction for the mystic powers of yoga or even for the heavenly planets of this world. Thus he finally attains the transcendental position and never returns again to the material world.

In order to engage in devotional service, one needs to see all living beings equally, without hostility or intimate relationships with anyone. One must be sincere in external activities and offer their results to God, be content with that income that can be obtained without too much difficulty, only eat what is strictly required and constantly live in a solitary place avoiding mundane social interactions.

One should be always truthful, attentive, clean, peaceful, friendly, non-violent, compassionate and focused on one's spiritual nature. One should abstain from appropriating what does not belong to him and be satisfied with what he has. He must cultivate the ability to see and understand things through the knowledge of matter and spirit, but always avoid identifying with the body and being attracted to relationships based on the body.

One should abandon conventional religious practices and focus only on those that lead to liberation, such as studying Vedic scriptures and worshipping the Deity, observing silence, controlling breathing, detaching the senses from the sense objects and focusing the mind on the heart. Fixing the *prana* and the mind on one of the six *chakras* of the body, he must focus the mind on the transcendental activities of God: this is called *samadhi*.

When one has learned to control the mind and the body, he must sit comfortably in a solitary and sanctified place, keeping the body erect, and practice breathing control. He begins with deep breathing, holding the air between inhalation and exhalation, and then the other way around. The purpose of this practice is to stabilize and calm the mind, and to become free from the identification with the material body.

When the mind is perfectly purified by the practice of yoga, one should meditate on the form of the supreme Personality of God, who resides in the heart of his devotee. His charming ever-youthful face is smiling, his eyes are like the inner petals of the lotus flower, and his body looks like the petals of the blue lotus. His hands hold the conchshell, the disc and the mace.

His hips are wrapped with a shining cloth, yellow like the center of the lotus flower, and on his chest one can see a small curl of white hair - the mark of Srivatsa - and the radiant Kaustubha jewel. His neck is decorated with a garland of forest flowers, surrounded by buzzing intoxicated bees. He wears a necklace of pearls, a crown and couples of bracelets, armlets and anklets.

Meditating in this way on the Lord who resides in the heart, the yogi sees him reclining, moving and sitting with him, and contemplates the various parts of his body, starting from the lotus feet and the beautiful toenails, that are red like rubies. The Lord's feet, massaged by Lakshmi Devi, are like bolts of lightning that can shatter mountains of negative reactions accumulated in the mind of his devotee.

His legs have a light blue complexion and appear particularly beautiful when the Lord rides on Garuda. His hips are surrounded by a golden belt gathering the wonderful yellow silken cloth that reaches down to his ankles. The Lord's navel, similar to the moon, is the place of birth of the lotus flower that contains all the planetary systems of the universe and is the abode of Brahma, the first created being.

The Lord's chest is the resting place of Mahalakshmi, his nipples are like emeralds illuminated by the necklace of milk-white pearls. The four arms of the Lord are the source of the power of all the Devas. His disc, the Sudarshana chakra, has one thousand rays and shines dazzlingly, and his conchshell looks like a swan resting in his lotus hand. His Kaumodaki mace is very dear to him, and is covered with the blood of the Asuras. The pearl necklace on the Lord's neck represents the pure souls who are constantly engaged in his service.

The Lord's face is surrounded by his dark curly hair and his eyebrows move like two fishes swimming in a pond. His glance is compassionate and affectionate, and dissipates all anxieties and sufferings in his devotees. His

smile dries out the tears of anguish in those who bow to him. When Vishnu laughs, his teeth, similar to jasmine buds, shine with a rosy hue from his lips.

Thus meditating intimately on the Person of the Lord, the yogi develops pure love for him and manifests ecstatic symptoms, such as the raising of hairs and tears of joy. Focused on the Lord, the mind remains free from all contamination, firm like the flame of a lamp that is not disturbed by the wind, and does not care any longer for the material body. There is no more sense of possession towards the relationships of the body, and the bodily activities are felt as if performed in a dream.

There are three types of devotional service, according to the personal qualities of the devotee. Service performed by an envious, arrogant, violent and angry person, who has a sectarian mentality, is under the influence of ignorance. Service offered in hope to obtain pleasure, fame and wealth for oneself is under the influence of passion. When a devotee worships the Lord offering him the result of his activities, to become free from attachments, his service is under the influence of goodness.

Pure devotional service, that is above the *gunas*, is recognized by the spontaneous and joyful attraction towards the Lord, that can be compared to the flow of the Ganges, spontaneously rushing to the ocean because of its own nature.

The pure devotee offers worship and prayers to the Deities in the temples, but treats all living entities with equal benevolence, only considering their spiritual nature. He must be compassionate to the needy, friendly with his peers and respectful to the great souls. He must engage as much as possible in listening about spiritual thing and in reciting the name of the Lord, avoiding the company of materialists.

One who offers worship to the Deity in the temple but does not perceive the Supreme Soul in the hearts of all beings and is hostile or offensive towards the bodies of others is immersed in ignorance and his service is compared to pouring oblations of clarified butter into ashes rather than in the fire. The Lord is never pleased by such service and does not accept it even if it is performed with technically perfect rituals and using all the required ingredients. Actually, the Lord puts a terrible fear of death in the

heart of anyone who makes even the smallest discrimination based on bodily differences between himself and other living beings.

According to their species, the living beings have different degrees of sensitivity, and among the human beings the best are those intelligent persons who have studied the *Vedas* and understood their meaning, especially if they are able to dissipate the doubts of those who ask them questions, and if they sincerely follow the brahminical principles. These great souls attain perfection by liberating themselves from material contamination and by performing devotional service without desiring any reward. The Lord is known as Brahman and Paramatma and also as Time, that transforms the various material manifestations. He does not consider anyone as enemy or friend, but he encourages those who remember him and destroys those who forget him.

To better understand the extent of the sufferings connected to birth and death, Devahuti asked Kapila to describe them in detail and to tell also about eternal time, that impels people to perform virtuous activities. The *avatara* Kapila continued to explain: just like the clouds are not aware of the strength of the wind, a person immersed in material consciousness does not realize the power of Time, that destroys everything that a materialist builds with so much effort and pain, and even his body. In his illusion, the materialist forgets Time and deludes himself into believing that everything will last forever. Pushed by anxiety, he commits criminal acts for the purpose of obtaining and preserving the feeling of satisfaction he feels in family and society, although such relationships are based on hypocrisy and power games.

He is enthralled by his wife and by the sweet voices of his children, but when he is unable to fulfill their requests he is neglected, like an old and tired ox receives a poor treatment from a stingy farmer. In spite of all that, he is afflicted by attachment and identification, and therefore he remains in the family even when his life has become miserable because of old age, invalidity and many diseases. Finally he dies in a pathetic way, surrounded by crying relatives and friends, and is unable to speak with them in spite of his ardent desire - something that gives him immense sufferings.

As during his life he has committed questionable actions, he sees the Yamadutas, the servants of Yamaraja, who are coming to arrest him. He is

bound and dragged away for the proper punishment, and while he is walking along the road under a scorching sun and between forest fires, he is attacked by dogs and whipped. There is no respite for him, no shelter, no food or drink that can alleviate hunger and thirst. And this is just the beginning of his sufferings, because in the dimensions of hellish existence he suffers much torment in his subtle body. After his punishment is over, the materialist takes birth again and again in various bodies in the lower forms of life, until he obtains the precious opportunity of human birth.

To take birth in a human body, the living being must first enter a father's sperm and be inserted in a mother's womb. During the first night after conception the sperm fertilizes the egg, and in the fifth night the embryo starts forming. In the tenth night it has the shape of a plum, and within one month the head becomes distinct from the rest of the body. At two months the hands and feet are formed, at three months the fingers and toes, the bones and the skin, the genitals and the other openings of the body become distinct. At four months from conception all the elements of the body are formed, at five months the fetus begins to feel hunger and thirst, and at six months it starts moving, leaning to the right side of the abdomen.

The unborn child subsists on the food and drink consumed by the mother and lives in the abdominal cavity together with blood, urine and excrements, where germs and sometimes even parasites multiply. The fetus' body is very delicate and suffers when the mother eats food that is too bitter or spicy, salty or acid. It is also forced into an uncomfortable position, its back arched, and cannot move freely.

In the seventh month of pregnancy the child becomes conscious; if he is lucky he is able to remember his previous lifetimes and repents about the mistakes he has committed. His position in his mother's womb becomes more and more precarious, because of the descending life air that forces him to move often, and in his pain, the child who has become conscious starts to pray the Lord to deliver him from that suffering.

However, the closer he comes to the moment of birth, the more the child becomes anxious at the idea that after birth he will again fall in the trap of material existence, constituted by the illusion of being the body. But naturally the moment has come for him to take birth, therefore the descending life air in his mother's body inexorably pushes him down

through the small opening in mother's body, and he comes into the world with much pain, breathless and devoid of memory. Covered in blood and excrements, he falls to the ground and wriggles faintly and vainly like a worm, crying and screaming.

After birth, the child is given to the care of people who are unable to understand what he wants or needs, and he is fed and handled by them. Unable to refuse what is given or done to him, he must lie in a contaminated bed, damp with sweat, urine and stool, full of germs, and is at the mercy of mosquitoes, flies, fleas and other insects from which he cannot defend himself. Without memory or intellect, the child can only cry in bitterness.

Childhood is spent in disease, sufferings and frustration. The child cannot obtain what he wants, and in his ignorance he is overwhelmed by anger, despair and sadness. Growing up, he develops greed and lust, and quarrels with other people who have the same defects, falling under the control of those who are interested only in the pleasures of tongue and sex. In such a disastrous situation he loses truthfulness, the sense of cleanliness, compassion, gravity, spiritual intelligence, modesty, self-control, good name, fortune and good opportunities in life.

Those who were strongly attracted to women in previous lifetimes take a new birth as females to become attracted by males, foolishly believing that the purpose of their life consists in finding a husband who will give them a home, children, nice clothes and ornaments, and other wealth. Actually all these things are a deathly trap for her, like the song of the hunter who attracts the doe only to kill her.

The conditioned soul who lives in the center of a family performs the prescribed rituals for the purpose of obtaining material benefits and enjoys the acquisition of wealth and sense gratification, but as long as such religious activities are performed with a materialistic mentality, they can at most propitiate the Devas and the ancestors and elevate one to heaven, to the moon or to Pitriloka, but these are temporary positions. After exhausting their merits, these people must again take birth on earth, and at the end of the cycle of creation and manifestation of the universe, they lose everything.

On the other hand, one who becomes detached from the attraction to material benefits attains enlightenment and can easily enter the personal realm of God, who is the owner of all worlds, material and spiritual. For this purpose, a person who has understood the various methods of self realization serves the Supreme God, fulfills his or her own professional and family duties, observes the rituals of sacrifice, distributes charity, engages in austerities, controls mind and senses, accepts the order of renunciation, practices yoga, offers devotional service and makes efforts to understand the science of self realization.

These instructions should not be offered to those who are envious, unfaithful or addicted to degraded practices, to hypocrites or those who are very proud of their material possessions, greedy or attached to family life. They are meant for those who are respectful towards spiritual science, friendly to all beings and sincerely eager to serve.

After listening to Kapila's teachings, his mother Devahuti attained the perfect understanding of devotional service and transcendental knowledge, and offered loving prayer to her divine son, the *avatara* of Vishnu. Kapila's mission was now complete: he took leave from his mother and left home. Devahuti, too, engaged in austerities and meditation on God in the house of Kardama at Siddhapada, only accepting what was strictly required for her maintenance even among the great wealth and comforts at her disposal. Finally she established herself in *samadhi* and the elements of her body dissolved into water, becoming part of the most sacred of all rivers. Anyone who takes bath in those blessed waters attains perfection.

After leaving his mother's house, Kapila traveled on towards north-east to the shore of the ocean, where he established his own ashrama.

The sacrifice of Daksha

Maitreya continued to speak about the descendants of the daughters of Svayambhuva Manu: after telling the story of Devahuti, he spoke about Akuti and Prasuti.

Although he already had two sons, Svayambhuva Manu consulted with his wife Satarupa and then gave her daughter Akuti in marriage to Prajapati Ruci, on the condition of adopting their son. Akuti had a son, Yajna, who was an *avatara* of Vishnu, and a daughter, Dakshina, who was a partial incarnation of Lakshmi. According to the agreement, Yajna was adopted by Manu and became his son; later he married Dakshina, who had a strong desire to get him as a husband. The couple had twelve children, named Tosha, Pratosha, Santosha, Bhadra, Santi, Idaspati, Idhma, Kavi, Vibhu, Svahna, Sudeva and Rochana. Yajna took the position of Indra and his children became known as the Tushita Devas.

As we have seen, the nine daughters of Devahuti married various Rishis. Kala married Marici, the first of the seven Rishis, and had twin sons, Kasyapa and Purnima. Purnima generated Viraja, Visvaga and Devakulya, the water that washed the feet of the Supreme Lord and later became the Ganga of the heavenly planets.

Anasuya married Atri Rishi and had three sons: Soma, Dattatreya and Durvasa, partial manifestations respectively of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, who were attracted to take birth from Atri Rishi by watching the powerful austerities performed by the sage - so intense that his head emanated a blazing fire. When he saw Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma arriving in his ashrama, Atri was honored and delighted, and he rushed to welcome them. After graciously accepting his prayers, the three Devas appeared as his sons.

Another of Devahuti's daughters, Sraddha, married Angira Rishi and had four daughters, named Sinivali, Kuhu, Raka and Anumati, and two sons named Utathya and Brihaspati. Havirbhu married Pulastya and had two sons: Agastya, who in his next life became Dahragni, and Visrava, who became a great saint. Visrava had two wives - Idavida who became the wife of Kuvera, and Kesini, who gave birth to three sons: Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Vibhisana. Gati married Pulaha Rishi and had three sons, named Karmarestha, Variyan and Sahisnu.

Kriya, who married Kratu, generated the 60,000 sages known as the Valakhilyas. Urja, also called Arundhati, married Vasistha and gave birth to seven great sages: Citraketu, Suroci, Viraja, Mitra, Ulbana, Vasubhrdyana and Dyuman. Citti, the wife of Atharva Rishi, had a son named Asvasira, due to performing the vow called Dadhyancha.

Khyati married Bhrigu Rishi and had two sons named Dhata and Vidhata, and a daughter named Sri. Dhata and Vidhata married Ayati and Niyati, the two daughters of Meru Rishi, and gave birth to Mrikanda and Prana. Mrikanda gave birth to Markandeya Rishi and Prana gave birth to Vedaira, the father of Ushana, also known as Sukracharya or Kavi. Sukracharya therefore belongs to the descendance of Brighu Rishi.

The other daughter of Svayambhuva Manu, Prasuti, married the son of Brahma named Daksha, who was one of the most important progenitors of all the living beings, and had sixteen beautiful daughters. Of these, thirteen married Dharma: Sraddha, Maitri, Daya, Santi, Tusti, Pusti, Kriya, Unnati, Buddhi, Medha, Titiksha, Hri and Murti.

Sraddha gave birth to Subha, Maitri gave birth to Prasada, Daya gave birth to Abhaya, Shanti gave birth to Sukha, Tusti gave birth to Muda, Pushti gave birth to Smaya, Kriya gave birth to Yoga, Unnati gave birth to Barpa, Buddhi gave birth to Artha, Medha gave birth to Smriti, Titiksha gave birth to Kshema, and Hri gave birth to Praraya. Murti gave birth to the *avatara* of Vishnu as the two twins Nara and Narayana, whose birth was celebrated all over the universe and was accompanied by many good omens. After blessing the Devas for their prayers, Nara and Narayana went to the Gandhamadana hill, where they engaged in meditation and sense control to establish a good example for human beings. Nara and Narayana appeared again in this age as Krishna and Arjuna respectively in the Yadu and Kuru dynasties.

Another daughter of Prasuti and Daksha, Svaha, married Agni and had three sons named Pavaka, Pavamana and Suci, who in turn fathered 45 descendants, all archetypal manifestations of fire. Together with their fathers and grandfather, these forms of fire are 49 in number, and the oblations of sacrifice are offered for them.

Another daughter of Prasuti and Daksha, Svadha, married the Pitas named Agnisvatta, Barhisada, Saumya and Aiyapa, and gave birth to two daughters, Vayuna and Dharini, both very expert in Vedic knowledge and transcendence. The last daughter of Prasuti and Daksha, Sati, became the faithful wife of Lord Shiva, but she did not have children because she left her body at a very young age.

Vidura wanted to know why Sati had left her body and Maitreya told him the story of the ritual sacrifice performed by Daksha, in which Prajapati Daksha offended Lord Shiva and Sati became so annoyed that she gave up the body she had received from him.

All the Devas, Rishis and Prajapatis had organized a grand ritual sacrifice, to which all the most important personalities of the universe were invited. When Daksha arrived at the arena of the celebrations, he was so radiant that all the persons present, except Brahma and Shiva, stood up to offer their respects.

Daksha was not expecting to be honored as a superior by Brahma, who was his father, but he felt offended in seeing that Shiva - who having married his daughter Sati had become his son in law - had not risen to greet him. In his pride, Daksha started to publicly insult Shiva, then becoming overwhelmed by anger, he cursed him and left the assembly, going back home.

These unwarranted offenses angered Nandisvara, one of the most prominent companions of Lord Shiva. In turn, Nandisvara cursed Daksha and his followers, arrogant family men who perform rituals for materialistic purposes and behave like goats because they are attached to sex above all else. Stung by that attack against the ritual ceremonies of the Karma kanda, Bhriгу Muni too turned against the followers of Lord Shiva who imitate him externally without understanding the Vedic principles and the rules of civilized society. Saddened by that bickering and insults, and by the cursing and counter-cursing, Lord Shiva left the arena of the sacrifice, followed by his devotees. After that, Daksha did not make any effort to reconcile with Shiva and the situation remained tense.

When Brahma appointed him as leader of all the Prajapatis, Daksha became even more arrogant and started to perform great rituals, such as the Vajapeya and the Brihaspati sava, to which he invited all the Devas, Rishis, Pitras and the other prominent personalities of the universe together with their consorts - all of them, except Lord Shiva and his wife Sati.

Eager to participate to that important social occasion and to see her own family, Sati said she wanted to go to the celebrations, but Shiva knew that they would not be properly welcomed by Daksha, and tried to dissuade her.

True, there is nothing wrong in going to visit one's family even without being invited, but if the people we are going to meet are immersed in the identification with the body and find some reason of hostility against us, we will only be able to irritate them even more. The unkind actions of those we love can hurt us much more deeply and painfully than the arrows shot by enemies. Although she was the youngest of his daughters, Sati could be insulted and mistreated by her father simply because of her loyalty to Shiva. Sati was torn between the wise instructions of Shiva and her intense desire to see her relatives, and finally her attachment to her birth family prevailed.

Sati departed to go to the great ceremonies, accompanied by a royal retinue organized by Shiva's followers, but when she entered the arena of the sacrifice she was greeted only by her mother and sisters, while Daksha totally ignored her. The other participants, too, pretended they had not even seen her, because they feared Daksha's anger. Sati looked around and noticed that no oblation had been prepared for Shiva. Daksha's offensive behavior against Shiva had not toned down with time, but it had rather worsened. Then Sati's anger exploded. Directly addressing her father in front of all the participants to the ritual, Sati firmly defended Shiva, who is so kind that he only finds the best qualities in people, without caring for their defects, and he fulfills the prayers of everyone, from the simplest persons to the greatest spiritualists. Only an envious materialist like Daksha - Sati said - could insult and mock a great, pure and merciful soul such as Shiva. Only a fool identified with the material body is unable to understand the glory of renunciation and detachment in those who are situated on the transcendental level.

Disgusted by her own birth relationship with Daksha, Sati decided to renege the body she had received from her father, and through the practice of mystic yoga she evoked the inner fire and instantly left her body, meditating on Lord Shiva. The followers and attendants of Shiva, who had accompanied Sati in procession to the sacrificial arena roared with anger and despair at the sight of the suicide of their Lord's spouse, but Bhrigu, reciting some *mantras* from the *Yajur Veda*, evoked thousand of celestial beings known as Ribhus and ordered them to protect the ritual ceremonies. Brandishing fire weapons, the Ribhus attacked Shiva's followers, who fell back and scattered in all directions.

When Shiva heard that his wife Sati had killed herself because of Daksha's insults and his own army had been attacked by the Ribhus, he manifested a terrible anger. He tore a strand of his own hair, radiant like fire, and threw it to the ground evoking Virabhadra, the personification of God's anger: a terrifying being, as tall as the sky and radiant like three suns, with thousands of arms and innumerable weapons.

On Shiva's order, Virabhadra moved towards the arena of the sacrifice, followed by many other warriors in Shiva's army, similar to a dust storm that obfuscates the sky in all directions. They fell upon the Rishis, the Prajapatis and the heavenly beings attending the ceremonies who had taken Daksha's side, and punished them severely in accordance to their offenses. Virabhadra himself ripped off Bhrigu's mustache, gouged Bhaga's eyes and knocked off the teeth of Daksha and Pusha. Then, brandishing the sacrificial knife, he decapitated Daksha and threw his head into the fire as if it was an oblation. After torching the seating arrangement and the other structures prepared for the ceremonies, Virabhadra and Shiva's *ganas* returned to mount Kailash to their Lord.

Terrified and humiliated, the Rishis and the heavenly beings went to Brahma to inform him of what had happened. Neither Brahma nor Vishnu had gone to attend the sacrificial ritual, because they were expecting trouble to break out, and Brahma said it very clearly: "A religious ceremony where a saintly person is offended cannot have any success. You have no choice but to sincerely beg forgiveness from Lord Shiva, who is kind and compassionate by nature. You need to understand that Shiva is immensely powerful, and at any time he is able to destroy all the planets in the universe."

Followed by all the Rishis, Pitris, Prajapatis and heavenly beings, Brahma himself went to Kailasa, the abode of Lord Shiva, who holds court among many divine beings, Kinnaras, Gandharvas and Apsaras. Mount Kailasa is a wonderful place, filled with forests and gardens, waterfalls and grottos, decorated by lake Alakananda, where Sati used to bathe, and by the two rivers Nanda and Alakananda, with *ghats* paved with diamonds.

The forest Sugandhika is filled with a great variety of virtuous trees and plants, heavy with sweet smelling flowers and fruits such as *mandara*, *parijata*, *sarala*, *tamala*, *tala*, *kovidara*, *asana*, *arjuna*, *kadamba*, *dbuli-kadamba*,

naga, punnaga, champaka, patala, asoka, bakula, kunda and *kurabaka*, mango and banana trees, banyans, cinnamon trees, jasmine of various kinds, blackberries, bamboos, and the plants known as *malati, kubja, mallika, madhavi, kata*, jackfruit, *julara, plaksa, nyagrodha*, betel, *bhurja-patra, rajapuga, priyala, madhuka, inguda* and *kichaka*, and many varieties of lotus flowers. In its groves there are many deer, monkeys, boars, lions, tigers, buffaloes, elephants and other animals, as well as many varieties of birds, whose musical calls are mixed with the happy buzzing of bees.

After arriving in the presence of Shiva, who was sitting under a gigantic banyan tree together with Kuvera, Narada and the four Kumaras, discussing about the Absolute Truth, the heavenly beings offered him their respects with folded hands. Shiva also stood up to greet Brahma, who offered him very meaningful prayers, meant to educate the heavenly beings who had come with him. Brahma addressed Shiva recognizing him as the Supreme Brahman, the father and mother of the entire cosmic manifestation, the creator of the system of sacrificial ceremonies and Vedic civilization. "Shiva, the source of all auspiciousness and blessings, is the Paramatma, and one who has obtained his *darshana* sees all living beings equally, without making foolish discriminations based on the material body."

Appealing to his compassion, omniscience and omnipotence, Brahma prayed Shiva to accept the sacrificial oblations and allow the rituals to be completed successfully.

Shiva explained that he had punished the heavenly beings simply to correct them and not because he had been hurt by their offenses, committed out of immaturity and lack of intelligence. To restore order in the universe, the Prajapatis must return to functionality: Daksha would receive a new head to replace the one burned in the fire, but it would be a goat's head. Bhrigu would be given the goat's moustache and beard, Bhaga would use Mitra's eyes, Pusha would use the teeth of his disciples, while Pusha and the Asvini kumaras would give their hands to those who had been mutilated, but all those who had wanted to offer oblations to Shiva would be completely healed from all wounds.

Brighu and the other Rishis solemnly invited Lord Shiva to preside the sacrificial ceremonies, and as soon he had received his new goat head,

Daksha awakened to life. Seeing Shiva in front of him, Daksha offered his sincere prayers because he had been purified from all offenses, and bitterly repented having caused the death of his beloved daughter Sati. The sacrificial arena was purified and the offering of oblations in the fire was resumed: this time, Lord Vishnu appeared to bless the ritual. Vishnu was sitting on Garuda's back and accompanied by the Goddess of fortune; his transcendental body was wrapped in a yellow cloth brilliant like gold, and decorated with many wonderful ornaments. Respectfully worshiped with beautiful prayers by Daksha and the other participants to the ceremony, Vishnu graced the rituals with his presence, thus ensuring their success.

The story of Dhruva

Maitreya had finished the description of the descendants of Manu's daughters. "I will now tell you about the descendants of the two sons of Svayambhuva Manu - Uttanapada and Priyavrata," he told Vidura. "Uttanapada had two queens, named Suniti and Suruci."

Suruci, the king's favorite, had a son named Uttama, while Suniti's son was named Dhruva. One day Uttanapada, sitting on the royal throne, took Uttama on his lap but he did not treat Dhruva in the same way. Suruci wickedly rejoiced in the humiliation of little Dhruva and started to insult him, pretending to give him good advice.

"Dear child," she said, "you cannot sit on the king's lap because you were not born from me, but from another woman, and therefore you are not qualified enough. If you want to sit on the throne you will have to perform many austerities and please the Supreme Lord with sincere worship, so that he will grant you the blessing of taking birth from me in your next life."

Deeply wounded by those offensive words, little Dhruva - who was only five years old - ran to his mother to tell her what had happened. Even as she tried to pacify the child, Suniti herself was very much pained by that

injustice, but instructed Dhruva never to wish ill to anyone, because everyone will have to suffer the reactions of the sufferings they inflict on others.

"Your stepmother Suruci told you very unpleasant things, but she is correct: if you wish to sit on the same throne of your brother Uttama you must immediately start to pray the Supreme Lord. The Lord is so powerful that simply by worshiping his lotus feet, your ancestor Brahma acquired the qualities needed to create the universe, and your grandfather Svayambhuva Manu obtained great success in his enterprises, both material and spiritual. You too should engage in worshiping the Lord, because only the Lord can alleviate your sufferings."

Little Dhruva deeply pondered his mother's instructions and immediately left home to go and worship Vishnu.

When he heard what had happened, Narada Muni went to search for Dhruva and, amazed at the acute sensitivity of the *kshatriyas*, tried to pacify the child and convince him to go back to his mother. "You are so young," he said, "you should think about playing instead of being concerned about honor. Besides, the sufferings of living beings are due to the reactions caused by their previous activities, and constitute an aspect of the illusory energy of God. Your mother advised you to worship the Lord through the method of mystic yoga, but this is an extremely difficult task even for grown-ups, and many have failed even after many lifetimes of practice."

However, Dhruva was determined. He thanked Narada for his good advice, but he said he was unable to oblige because of his own shortcomings and the seriousness of what had happened.

Narada felt compassion for Dhruva and taught him how to worship Vishnu. Grateful, the child offered him respects and left towards the forest called Madhuvana, on the bank of the Yamuna river, where he engaged in great austerities. Three times a day he took bath and then sat to meditate on God, practicing *pranayama* to control the senses and the mind.

Following Narada's instructions, Dhruva fashioned an image of the Lord using the river clay and, contemplating the wonderful form of Vishnu, he faithfully recited the *mantra* he had received from Narada, offering pure

water, flowers, fruits and other ingredients that could be found in the forest - freshly sprouted grass, flower buds or even tree bark, and whenever possible, *tulasi* leaves.

While Dhruva was engaged in worshipping the Supreme Lord and meditating on his transcendental activities, Narada went to see king Uttanapada and found him sorry about having mistreated Dhruva and Suniti, and worried about the child, who had gone alone into the forest that is full of dangers. He reassured the king, saying that Dhruva was no ordinary person, and that he would soon attain success and return home.

During the first month Dhruva only ate fruits and berries once every three days, in the second month he only ate grass and dry leaves once every six days, in the third month he only took water once every nine days, and in the fourth month he attained perfection in controlling breathing and life energy, keeping his body perfectly still and the mind totally focused on God. Because he had stopped breathing completely, Dhruva became so heavy that he compressed the earth and the entire universe started to choke. Scared, the Devas rushed to seek help from Vishnu, and to alleviate the sufferings of the Devas, Vishnu appeared in the Madhuvana forest and roused Dhruva from his intense meditation.

Perceiving the Lord's personal presence, Dhruva immediately offered his respect and embraced him, and wanted to offer him suitable prayers. Vishnu blessed Dhruva by touching his forehead with his conchshell, which gave the child the perfect understanding of Vedic knowledge and success for all future ventures.

Suddenly, Dhruva realized the futility of the reason for which he had searched for God, and he understood that for one who attained God, all issues of sense gratification, material success and possessions become insignificant. He felt like a beggar who, after obtaining the favor of a great emperor, had asked for a handful of broken rice.

Besides perfect spiritual realization, Vishnu granted Dhruva the blessing to sit on Uttanapada's throne for 36,000 years in perpetual youth, ruling over the entire world. In the future Uttama would be killed while hunting in the forest, and his mother Suruci would lose her mind and perish in fire while searching for him. Vishnu also offered Dhruva the luminous planet known

as the Pole Star, that continues to exist even after the destruction of the rest of the planets at the end of Brahma's day. All the luminaries in the sky revolve around Dhruvaloka as a mark of respect, and nobody had ruled on it before. And at the end of his life, Dhruva would be able to remember the Lord and attain liberation in his personal association.

When he heard that Dhruva was returning home, Uttanapada rushed to meet him and gave him a grand welcome with all his retinue. As soon as he saw Dhruva, the king got down from his chariot to go and embrace him, crying many tears, but Dhruva had deeply changed, because he had attained the perfection of spiritual realization. Not only Uttanapada and Suniti, but also Suruci and Uttama welcomed Dhruva with affectionate tears, and all the inhabitants of the capital decorated the city to celebrate the return of the prince, and presented auspicious offerings while he was walking by in procession.

After many years of happy life in the palace with his family, Dhruva was installed on the throne, while Uttanapada retired to the forest to prepare himself for the passage of death. Dhruva married Brahmi, the daughter of Prajapati Sisumara, from whom he had two sons (Kalpa and Vatsara), and Ila, daughter of the Deva Vayu, who gave birth to a son named Utkala and to a beautiful daughter.

Dhruva's younger brother, Uttama, left in a hunting expedition before getting married and was killed by a powerful Yaksha while he was roaming across the Himalayas. As it had been foretold, his mother Suruci perished while she was looking for him. When Dhruva heard the news of Uttama's death he felt a great anger and sadness, and immediately he marched into war against the capital of the Yakshas, Alakapuri. As he came in view of the city, he blew his conchshell in a challenge, and soon a terrible fight began.

The Yaksha army was immense, equipped with many conventional weapons such as bows and feathered arrows, swords, tridents, spears, pikes, maces and *bhusundis*, as well as with magic weapons that caused storms, rains of blood and other impure substances, hailstorms of stones and visions of many ferocious animals and huge waves rising from the ocean. The great Rishis came to help Dhruva, reminding him that simply by chanting the name of Lord Vishnu one can neutralize all evil influences. Dhruva fixed the Narayana weapon to his bow, and as soon as the arrow was released, all

illusions immediately dissipated. The Yaksha army was defeated and the battle became a massacre. Seeing that Dhruva was killing a great number of innocent Yakshas, Svayambhuva Manu decided to ask his grandson to stop attacking them. Reminding him about the purpose of life and the presence of the Supreme Lord, who controls everything and resides in the hearts of all beings, Manu was able to appease Dhruva's anger. The Lord of the Yakshas, Kuvera, came forward to meet Dhruva Maharaja, accompanied by a respectful retinue of Yakshas, Kinnaras and Charanas, and offered him a boon. Dhruva asked for the blessing to be always able to remember the Supreme Lord in full faith, then he returned to his capital.

During the period of his reign, Dhruva Maharaja performed many great sacrifice rituals and regularly offered devotional service to the Lord, exhausting the reactions of his pious activities by accepting the joys of life and at the same time exhausting the reactions of his negative activities through the practice of austerity. Finally after 36,000 years he retired to the forest of Badarikashrama, on the Himalaya, where he completely concentrated on the contemplation of God. When Dhruva was ready to leave his body, the two beautiful Vishnudutas named Nanda and Sunanda arrived on a divine spaceship to take him to the spiritual world, Dhruvaloka. Conquering death, Dhruva ascended the spacecraft in his spiritual body and attained his final destination, followed closely by his mother Suniti, who was traveling on a similar airplane.

The story of king Prithu

Maitreya continued to speak about the descendants of Dhruva Maharaja. Dhruva's eldest son, Utkala, had no attraction for the material world or interest for the matters of the kingdom, therefore the throne went to Vatsara, the son of Brahmi. Vatsara had six sons, and the eldest, Pusparna, also had six sons. One of them, Vyusta, became the father of the great king Sarvateja. Sarvateja's son, Chaksusha, became the next Manu and had twelve sons.

One of them, Anga, was very worried because he had no heirs, and the sacrificial ritual he had arranged to propitiate the Devas seemed to be unsuccessful. Finally prince Vena was born, but he was a great disappointment: the boy was cruel and killed unnecessarily both animals and human beings, including his playmates. When he saw that all efforts to reform his son's behavior had failed, king Anga was disgusted and lost all interest for family or kingdom. So he retired to the forest to meditate on the vanity of material attachments.

As there was no other successor, the Rishis installed prince Vena on the throne against the advice of the ministers. The reputation of great cruelty that had made Vena famous sent all the criminals running away from the kingdom, but his newly acquired power made Vena even more arrogant and tyrannical, until he prohibited the performance of all sacrifices and religious ceremonies. The great Rishis assembled in council and decided that immediate intervention was necessary: if the king refused to follow their instructions, he would have to be eliminated without hesitation.

Controlling their anger, the Rishis approached Vena with smiles and kindly asked him to act favorably for the material and spiritual progress of his subjects. However, Vena insulted them, saying that they did not understand anything. "There is no need to offer worship and respect to the Devas," Vena said, "because all the Devas reside in the body of the king, who is therefore God himself, the Supreme Personality of the Godhead. You should stop being envious of me, and you should worship me, because I am the Lord of all subjects and the source of your maintenance."

Vena considered himself a great scholar, but his arrogant ignorance enraged the Rishis, who killed him with a mere curse. Vena's mother, Sunita, preserved his body by using a combination of ingredients and *mantras*. The Rishis gathered again to find a solution to the power void caused by king Vena's death, because criminals were taking over society.

It would be inappropriate for them to directly engage in fighting against crime, but a *brahmana* who does not care for the sufferings of those who need help quickly loses his spiritual power, like a cracked pot loses the water it contained. Finally the Rishis decided to extract the genetic code from Vena's body by using a specific technique. From the lower part of Vena they obtained Bahuka, a being who was as black as a crow and had

very short limbs. He had large jaws, a flat nose and reddish eyes, but he was very humble and respectful. The Rishis told him to sit down ("*nishida*"), so the race that descended from him was called Nishada. Bahuka and his descendants accepted to bear the cruel tendencies of Vena, therefore they usually live by hunting, robbing and plundering, and therefore they are only allowed to live in forests and on hills. From the higher part of Vena's body the Rishis obtained a male who was an incarnation of Vishnu and a female who was an incarnation of the Goddess of fortune, the eternal consort of Vishnu.

All the Rishis, the Devas and the heavenly beings welcomed the Prithu *avatara* with great joy, offering prayers, dancing and playing musical instruments. Brahma arrived, too, to confirm Prithu's identity and to arrange for his coronation. Together with his spouse Arci, Prithu sat on a golden throne offered by Kuvera.

Varuna offered him a royal parasol that constantly sprayed tiny water particles and shone like the moon. Vayu offered two *chamaras*, Dharma a garland of great fame, Indra a valuable crown, and Yama a sceptre to rule the world. Brahma gave him a protective suit made of spiritual knowledge and Sarasvati a transcendental necklace, Vishnu gave him a Sudarshana disc, and Lakshmi everlasting wealth. Shiva gifted him with a sword and a sheath decorated with ten moons, and Durga gave him a shield decorated with one hundred moons. Agni gave him arrows blazing like the sun rays, the Earth gave him magic sandals, and the Devas who travel in space gave him the power of arts and the ability to disappear at will. The ocean gave him a conchshell. Seas, mountains and rivers gave him the blessing of being able to drive his chariot everywhere without obstruction, and the royal attendants came ready to perform their duties.

Prithu accepted all these offerings with humility and affection, and the poets were inspired to compose and recite even vaster glorification for the king.

Very soon, king Prithu proved to be an excellent monarch. He encouraged ritual ceremonies and procured sufficient rains, coming to the aid of all those who needed help, and he was always kind and tolerant towards all his subjects. Keeping all criminals and aggressors at bay like fire keeps ferocious beasts away, the king was indifferent to adulation and slandering

against his person, and administered justice with perfect equanimity. He was always ready to punish bad deeds even if performed by his own children or supporters, and to reward good deeds or innocence even in his enemies' children.

The king treated all women respectfully like his own mother, and his wife like the better half of his body. He treated all living beings like he would treat himself, and made close friendship with liberated souls. He leveled the hills and made the land prosper, so that under his protection Earth gave abundant food to everyone, like a cow who gives lots of milk. He performed one hundred Asvamedha yajnas, but during the last sacrifice, Indra stole the horse.

Vidura became curious and asked Maitreya why king Prithu had decided to level the hills, and the earth had been compared to a milk cow. And especially why Indra, the king of the heavenly planets, had acted like an ordinary horse thief?

Maitreya was happy to continue telling the story of Prithu. When king Prithu ascended the throne, people had been suffering for a long famine and everybody was hungry. Angered at the earth for not giving any harvest, Prithu threatened her by aiming his bow and the earth started running in the form of a cow, but Prithu followed her everywhere, until earth surrendered. "You cannot punish me," said the earth. "I have done nothing wrong, but even if I had, nobody should attack a woman, even to punish her for some crime. Besides, I support everything: if you damage me, who will save you and your subjects from disaster?"

Prithu replied that he had no intention to harm her, but that he would punish her for her disobedience. She had been offered the prescribed sacrifices, and if she did not agree to produce sufficient grains for everyone, he would cut her to pieces and feed her flesh to his subjects. Earth agreed to supply the required foods, on the condition that such food would be properly used and not wasted. Also, the king had to provide a calf, whose affection would stimulate her lactation, and a container for the milk. Bhumi - Mother Earth - told the king to level the hills to create new fields for agriculture that could be irrigated all year long and not only during the rainy season.

King Prithu brought Svayambhuva Manu as the calf for earth and personally milked Bhumi, obtaining grains and various vegetables, and collecting them in his hands. His example was followed by the Rishis, who presented Brihaspati as the calf and milked Vedic knowledge to purify words, mind and sense of hearing, using the senses as a container. The Devas brought Indra as the calf and milked the drink known as *soma*, that strengthens the mind, the body and the senses. The Daityas (the sons of Diti) and the Asuras brought Prahlada (who was born in their race) as the calf and milked various kinds of liquors, wine and beer, collecting them in an iron bucket.

The Gandharvas and Apsaras brought Visvvasu as the calf and milked beauty and musical arts, using a lotus flower as a container. The inhabitants of Pitriloka, the Pitris, brought Aryama as the calf and milked the offerings for the ancestors, collecting them in a clay pot. The Siddhas and Vidyadharas brought Kapila as the calf and milked the powers of mystic yoga, especially the art of flying in the sky.

The Kimpurushas brought Maya as the calf and milked their specific mystic powers, that enable them to disappear and reappear in any form at will. Yakshas, Rakshasas, Bhutas and Pishachas, who like eating meat, brought Shiva Bhutanatha as the calf and obtained blood-based drinks, collecting them in a skull.

Snakes, scorpions and other poisonous animals brought Takshaka and milked the poisons they needed, collecting them in their nests. The quadrupeds brought Vrishabha, the bull carrier of Shiva, and using the forest as container they obtained a wealth of green and fresh grass. The ferocious beasts brought the lion as the calf and milked the animal flesh they ordinarily eat. The birds brought Garuda as their calf and obtained insects and many plants as their food. The trees brought the banyan as their calf and obtained many delicious juices and saps. The mountains transformed the Himalayas into a calf and milked a great variety of minerals in a container made with hill tops.

Earth thus produced everything that was required for the sustenance and the pleasure of the various species of life, whatever represented for them Mother Nature's milk. Prithu leveled the hills and gave housing and jobs to everyone, ensuring that everyone got all the food they needed. Before king

Prithu nobody had made specific plans to build cities, villages, pastures and agricultural fields: everything had been done according to the moment's needs from time to time.

To please and propitiate the Devas, Prithu began the celebration of one hundred horse rituals at Brahmavarta, the residence of Svayambhuva Manu, who is where river Sarasvati turns east. The Supreme Personality of God, Vishnu, appeared in king Prithu's sacrificial arena, accompanied by all the Devas and the residents of the heavenly planets, as well as by the Daityas, Asuras and Yakshas. Also present were all the great Rishis and the personal companions of Vishnu at Vaikuntha, such as Nanda and Sunanda. The prosperity created by these sacrifices was immense, and everyone was enthusiastic.

Indra started to become worried, thinking that due to that great number of sacrifices king Prithu would become more powerful than him, and so he disguised himself as a *sannyasi*, sneaked into the compound and, becoming invisible, stole the horse that was supposed to carry the king's insignia around the earth. Atri Rishi saw him and went to inform Prithu's son, who immediately started in pursuit, but without aiming any arrows at him, because Indra was dressed as a *sadhu*. Atri told him that there was nothing wrong in punishing a false *sannyasi*, and Prithu's son, reassured, engaged the thief in a fight. Seeing his fraud exposed, Indra gave up the sacrificial horse and fled. For that valiant deed, from that day on Prithu's son was called Vijitasva, "the winner of the horse".

Indra, however, had not given up the idea of disturbing the ceremony. As soon as he could, he created a dense cloud of darkness over the sacrificial arena and again he stole the horse that was fastened to a golden chain. Again Vijitasva ran after the thief, and again Indra abandoned the horse to escape. Angry at Indra for that wicked and cowardly action, that started the bad habit to exploit a religious dress for committing criminal activities, the Rishis decided to ensnare Indra with some special *mantras* so that they could punish him severely, but Brahma stopped them. "Indra has important duties to perform," Brahma said, "and killing him would create great disturbances to the universe. Besides, in his despair he has already resorted to unfair means, and he could introduce more immoral activities if we put him under more pressure." Then he told Prithu that 99 Asvamedha yajnas

were sufficient, and that he should be content and keep a good relationship with the Devas. After all, that was precisely the purpose of the rituals.

When Prithu agreed not to complete the last ritual, for the sake of universal harmony, Vishnu appeared personally accompanied by Indra, who wanted to apologize for the offense he had committed. Interceding for the king of the heavenly planets, Vishnu offered his blessings to Prithu in return for his good will. The king readily forgave Indra, who had fallen to his feet begging forgiveness, and embraced him affectionately. Then he offered beautiful prayers to Vishnu, asking him the boon of the company of God's pure devotees, who could discuss with him about the glories of God.

After granting his blessings to the king, Vishnu returned to his abode, and all other participants did the same. King Prithu, too, returned to his beautiful city, wonderfully decorated, and was triumphantly greeted by his subjects. There, in the tract of land between the Ganges and the Yamuna, Prithu lived a long life, ruling on all the seven continents of the planet, and performed more religious ceremonies for the prosperity and the happiness of his subjects.

On those occasions, he eagerly gave speeches offering his teachings to the people, because the king has the duty to instruct people in the activities of the *varnas* and *ashramas*. If he merely collected taxes, he would be responsible for the wrong actions performed by his subjects. On the other hand, when the subjects perform good actions and progress materially and spiritually, the king shares their merits, therefore for his own good, the king should help the subjects to engage in devotional service to God - each according to their own abilities - and cooperate with the *brahmanas*, the preceptors of society.

During one of the king's discourses to his subjects, the four Kumaras arrived to meet him. Radiant like the sun, the four young sages inspired respect and worship in all the people, and after honoring them adequately, the king offered beautiful prayers and asked them how one could attain the supreme goal of life in the shortest possible time.

Sanat Kumara was very pleased by Prithu's welcome and prayers, presented for the benefit of his subjects. He replied that the highest benefit can be attained by leaving the company of materialists and making efforts to

develop a genuine attachment for God. Then he explained that one who wants to make spiritual progress should renounce violence, follow the example of the great spiritual personalities, always remember God's activities, follow the rules of ethics, and avoid committing offenses to other living beings. He should live in a very simple way and tolerate dualities, transcending matter with its identifications and attachments and desires. In this way, he will not make any difference between himself and others, or between one condition of life and another, and he will completely rely on the Supreme Soul. The four Kumaras concluded their explanation on spiritual progress, accepted the king's thanks and praised him in turn, and then they disappeared.

King Prithu lived a long life and had five sons, named Vijitasva, Dhumrakesa, Haryaksa, Dravina and Vrika. He was a perfect monarch under all aspects, and he became famous for his wonderful qualities. Towards the end of his life, when he felt he was becoming old, he distributed the wealth he had accumulated and arranged for the future maintenance of all his subjects. Then, accompanied by his wife, he left the capital to go to the forest and engage in austerities, fulfilling those duties with the same seriousness he had shown in managing the kingdom.

Controlling his breathing and eating roots, fruits and leaves, he gradually reduced his food to simply consuming water, and then simply breathing air. Totally free from all bodily identifications, Prithu was constantly in touch with the Paramatma in his heart, and directly receiving his instructions, he also became detached from the practices of yoga and *jnana*. Finally he left his body, raising the life air to the top of the head, through the various *chakras*. He dissolved his life air in the totality of air, his body in the totality of earth, and the heat of his body in the totality of the fire element. Thus dissolving the elements of his body in the primordial form of the elements, he left the subtle body as well as the gross body.

His wife Arci was not used to austerity, but she had faithfully followed her husband in the forest, and she was very happy in spite of the apparent difficulties. When she saw that her husband did not show any sign of life, she built a funeral pyre and cremated his body. After completing all the required rituals, queen Arci followed her husband in death, joining him on the spiritual planet where they lived forever.

The parable of Puranjana

After narrating the story of Prithu Maharaja, Maitreya continued to speak of his descendants.

Prithu's eldest son, Vijitasva, ascended the throne and distributed the Earth among his brothers: the east to Haryaksha, the south to Dhumrakesha, the west to Vrika and the north to Dravina. As for himself, he preferred to engage in the celebration of religious rituals. Vijitasva, also called Antardhana, married Sikhandini and had three sons named Pavaka, Pavamana and Suci, who previously had been personifications of fire. From his second wife he had another son, Havirdhana, who married Havirdhani and had six sons; the eldest, Barhishat, was very expert in performing many sacrifices and in the practice of yoga, so that he became known as one of the Prajapatis with the name of Pracinabarhi.

On Brahma's order, Pracinabarhi married Satadruti, the daughter of the Ocean; she was so beautiful that during the marriage ceremony she enchanted all the Devas including Agni. From Satadruti, Pracinabarhi had ten extraordinary sons called the Pracetas, who followed their father's instructions and went to perform austerities by meditating under water. The Pracetas arrived at a great peaceful and clean lake, filled with many varieties of lotus flowers and surrounded by wonderful forests. They were amazed to see Shiva emerging from the water in the company of his retinue. The Lord's complexion was like molten gold and his throat was bluish. Immediately the Pracetas offered their respects to Shiva by falling at his feet, and the Lord blessed them, knowing that they were determined to engage in deep meditation on God. In fact, he gave them special *mantras* for worshipping Vishnu, the Supreme Personality of God. These *mantras* are known as "The song of Shiva".

The Pracetas remained under water to meditate for 10,000 years. In the meantime, Narada Muni went to see their father, Pracinabarhi, to help him become detached from the material activities he was engaged in, and for this purpose he told him the parable of king Puranjana.

Puranjana ("he who lives in the city") was a king famous for his great deeds. He had a faithful friend named Avijnata ("he who is not known"), of whom nobody could understand the activities. Puranjana traveled all over the world seeking a suitable residence, but because he had unlimited desires for sense gratification he had problems in finding a place where he could fulfill them all; in fact, wherever he went, he found that something was missing.

Finally, in his wanderings he found a city with nine gates, that offered many important advantages. The city was located south of the Himalayas, in the land called Bharata varsha, and had towers, canals, windows, streets, markets, restaurants and houses, all lavishly decorated. While he was roaming around that wonderful place, Puranjana met Pramada ("material illusion"), a young and beautiful woman who seemed free from all other engagements, and willing to find a suitable husband. She was accompanied by ten servants (the ten senses of perception and action) and each of these servants was followed by hundreds of wives (the sense activities). The woman was protected from all sides by a snake with five heads (the *prana* in its five forms) and eleven body guards (the ten senses and the mind).

Enchanted by her graceful forms and sweet behavior, Puranjana offered her gentle words and many compliments, and the lady seemed to appreciate his company. However, she was unable to answer Puranjana's questions - who had generated her and who were her followers. The woman only knew that the snake never slept, and protected the city night and day. "I prepared this city of the nine gates especially for you," she said, "so that you can live here for 100 years and enjoy all possible pleasures. If we marry, we will be able to live together in this wonderful place."

Puranjana joyfully accepted her proposal and lived in the city, discovering all its wonders. Seven of the gates were on the surface and two were underground; five (two eyes, two nostrils and one mouth) opened to the east, one to the north (right ear), one to south (left ear) and two to the west (anus and genital orifice). The two gates opening to the east, Khadyota ("glow-worm") and Avirmukhi ("torchlight"), were next to each other, and the king used them to go to the city called Vibhrajita ("clear vision") accompanied by a friend named Dyuman (the sunlight). Again to the east there were two more twin gates, named Nalini and Naalini (the nostrils), through which the king went to the city of Saurabha (smell) accompanied

by Avadhuta (air, that goes everywhere). The fifth gate to the east was called Mukhya ("principal"), and the king used it to go to the places called Bahudana (the varieties of foods) and Apana (speech), accompanied by his friends Rasajna (the sense of taste) and Vipana (the faculty of speech).

The gate to the south (right ear) of the city was known as Pitru, and the king used it to visit the city of Dakshina panchala (the instructions on *pravritti*, the path to enjoy the senses and attain Pitriloka), accompanied by Srutadhara ("who brings hearing"). To the north, the king went with Srutadhara through the gate called Devahu to visit Uttara panchala (the teachings on *nivritti*, the path to acquire knowledge and liberation, through which one attains Devaloka or God's abode).

To the west there was a city called Asuri, through which the king passed with his friend Durmada (the faculty of procreation) to visit the city of Gramaka (sexual intercourse). Also to the west there was another door, known as Nirriti (anus), that the king crossed with his friend Lubdhaka to go to Vaisasa (the hellish worlds - as the souls conditioned by a very low consciousness generally leave their bodies through the anus).

Among the many inhabitants of the city, Puranjana chose the company of two blind men, Nirvak and Pesaskrit (the hands and the feet). Sometimes he went into his private apartments (*antah pura*, the heart) with one of his main servants, Visucina (the mind), to enjoy the company of his wife and children, and he engaged in satisfying all the queen's desires. If she drank liquors, he also did. If she dined, he dined with her, and if she sang, he sang with her. Similarly when she laughed or cried, lamented or rejoiced, walked or stood still, lay down in bed or sat up, or she watched, heard or touched something, the king would do the same.

One day king Puranjana, who strongly desired to go hunting, took his great bow, a golden armor and a quiver with unending arrows, and accompanied by eleven generals he sat on his chariot and went to the forest called Pancha prastha. The chariot (symbol of the body) had five horses (the senses), two wheels (the good and bad deeds), three flags (the *gunas*), a charioteer (intelligence), a sitting place (the heart) and seven covers (the *dhatus*, the elements that compose the body). He carried five weapons (the senses of perception), he moved in five different ways (the senses of action) and had to face five types of obstacles (the five types of sense objects).

On that day the king felt ruthless and killed many innocent animals in the forest. According to the rules prescribed by Vedic civilization, one can only hunt some types of animals, and in numbers limited by actual needs. The king, however, continued to kill without hesitation until he was very tired, and then he returned home, took bath and had a great dinner.

When he went to look for the queen to enjoy her company, he found out she was very angry. The king did his best to pacify Puranjani's anger and getting into her good graces again, and she consented to forgive him, on condition that he would always remain under her control. With his queen, Puranjana generated 1,100 sons and 110 daughters and arranged their marriages consequently, until the city of Panchala was crowded by all the king's children and grandchildren, who consumed and looted his wealth.

One day Puranjana's city was attacked by Chandavega (time), the king of the Gandharvas, who commanded 360 powerful warriors (the days in the year) and as many Gandharva women (the nights in the year). This army entered the city and started pillaging it, and the five headed snake came to defend it, fighting by himself for 100 years and finally becoming very weak.

Another imminent danger was the arrival of the formidable daughter of Time, Kalakanya ("black girl"), also called Jara ("old age") and Durbhaga ("misfortune"). Jara had approached the Yavana king Bhaya ("fear") and proposed a marriage, but Bhaya had introduced her to his brother Prajvara ("fever") and together they had started traveling around the world, followed by a fearsome army. When Kalakanya attacked the city, her soldiers entered through the various gates and inflicted many sufferings to the inhabitants. Finally Kalakanya captured the king, who had lost all radiance, and the city was defeated.

The king was overcome by a great anxiety, seeing that his queen, his family, relatives, friends and all others had turned against him and neglected him. All pleasures lost their attractiveness, and only a deep dissatisfaction and many regrets lingered. Finally, forced by Kalakanya, king Puranjana had to leave the city, that was destroyed and torched by Prajvara, the brother of the king of the Yavanas. Dragged away by the Yavana king, Puranjana was attacked by the many animals he had killed for his own selfish benefit, but above all he was very worried for his wife and thought about her very intensely, remembering their life together. So it happened that Puranjana

died while he was remembering his wife, and in his subsequent life he took birth as Vaidharbhi, the daughter of king Vidarbha. In that new birth she married Malayadvaja, a powerful man who lived in the land of Pandu.

King Malayadvaja had a daughter and seven sons, who became the rulers of the lands known as Dravida. In turn, the sons of Malayadvaja had thousands of children. Malayadvaja's daughter married the great sage Agastya and begot Dridhacyuta, who became the father of Idmavaha. After dividing his kingdom among his sons, Malayadvaja retired in Kulachala (among Chandravasa, Tamraparni and Vatodaka) to meditate on God, and he was followed by his faithful wife, who continued to serve him with devotion even in the forest. When finally she realized that her husband was dead, Vaidarbhi was overcome by a great anxiety, feeling alone and abandoned.

A *brahmana*, who had been an old friend of king Puranjana, happened to be walking by, and revealed to Vaidarbhi her real identity, trying to help her remember her previous lifetime. The *brahmana* said, "Don't you recognize me? I have always been your friend and in the past you have consulted me many times. Unfortunately one day you chose to give up my company because you wanted to enjoy the material world. You and I are like two swans who live together in the same heart, that is like the lake Manasa, but you have gone away to live in a city created by a woman - a city with five gardens (the five objects of the senses), nine gates (the openings of the body), a protector (the *prana*), three apartments (fire, water and earth), six families (the five senses and the mind), five store rooms (the five organs of action), five material elements and a woman who is the owner of the house (material desire). Entering that body to fulfill your material desires, you have forgotten that you are neither a woman nor a man, but in fact you are pure spiritual identity, just like me. I am the Paramatma, the Supreme Soul, and you belong to my same nature."

King Pracinarbhi had already guessed that the story was actually a parable and gladly accepted the instructions of Narada, who encouraged him to rise above the level of ritual sacrifices to focus on the study of transcendental knowledge to please God and attain liberation. Narada explained that the most important thing is to stop identifying with the material body, the subtle one as well as the gross one. "The subtle body carries the memories

of previous lifetimes," Narada said, "and contains the germs of future lifetimes, so we can understand them by observing the mental condition or consciousness of a person. In order to attain liberation it is therefore necessary to become detached from the subtle body as well as from the gross one."

After enlightening king Pracinabarhi with his transcendental teachings, Narada returned to Siddhaloka. Pracinabarhi decided to retire to meditate in the place known as Kapilashrama and gave his ministers instructions so that his sons would engage in ruling the kingdom and protect the subjects when they came back.

After 10,000 years of intense meditation and austerity, the sons of Pracinabarhi, the Pracetas, obtained the vision of the Supreme Lord, who personally appeared to bless them. Vishnu instructed them to marry Marisa, the daughter of the Apsara Pramlocha and Rishi Kandu. She had been taken in by the trees and fed by the Deva of the Moon. After offering their respects and prayers to Vishnu, the Pracetas emerged from the ocean, where they had been performed their austerities, and saw that the land had been completely covered by very tall trees.

Then they started to clear the ground by burning the trees with their mystic powers, until they found the daughter of Pramlocha. From the Pracetas, Marisa gave birth to Daksha, who in his previous life had disrespected Shiva Mahadeva. Now purified from his offenses, Daksha acquired a resplendent body and because he was very expert, he was again appointed as the first of the Prajapatis by Brahma.

Finally, after ruling for thousands of years, the Pracetas left Marisa in the care of Daksha and retired to the ocean beach in the west, in the ashrama of the great Jajali Rishi. There Narada went to meet them to discuss about spiritual knowledge.

"A civilized human being," said Narada, "goes through three births. The first is the physical birth, that comes through the fertilization of the egg by the sperm. The second birth, called *savitra*, is the initiation that one receives from the Guru, and the third birth happens when we obtain the opportunity to worship Vishnu. This is the most important birth, that gives the deepest meaning to the other two births. Without attaining the

realization of God, all other practices - the mystic yoga, the analytical study of matter, austerities, renunciation and the study of Vedic literature - remain useless."

The story of Rishabha

Svayambhuva Manu had two sons: Uttanapada and Priyavrata. Uttanapada was the father of Dhruva. Priyavrata, the second son of Manu, was instructed by Narada Rishi but because his father had asked him to stay back and take care of family and kingdom, he had to reconcile two important but apparently opposed duties. To help Priyavrata to solve his dilemma, the father of Narada, Brahma, left his abode and went to see the prince to enlighten him. Priyavrata was sitting in conversation with Narada, in the presence of Svayambhuva Manu, and everyone stood up to offer respects to the first being of the universe.

"Everyone must follow the orders of the Supreme Personality of God," said Brahma, "and under his command the living beings acquire different types of bodies, connected to specific types of activities. According to the Vedic system, each human being must perform his duty within the *varnasbrama*, utilizing the body he has received for that purpose. Even a liberated person must use the body he has received, but with a higher level of awareness, by which he sees material activities as a dream, compared to spiritual consciousness. In this way he will not have to take another birth again in a material body.

One who does not control his mind may travel from forest to forest, but he will always be tied by the chains of matter, because he still lives with six wives - the mind and the senses of perception. On the other hand, not even family life can hurt a man who has controlled his senses and remains on the proper level of awareness. This man is like a king in his fortress, defeating his powerful enemies from a safe and protected position."

Following Brahma's orders, Maharaja Priyavrata agreed to rule the world while remaining totally free from all material contamination. He married

Barhismati, the daughter of Prajapati Visvakarma, begetting ten sons - Agnidhra, Idhmajihva, Yaj nabahu, Mahavira, Hiranyareta, Ghritaprstha, Savana, Medhatithi, Vitihotra and Kavi - and a daughter named Urjasvati. Three of these sons - Kavi, Mahavira and Savana - chose to remain celibate and lived in the *paramahansa ashrama*, the highest perfection of spiritual awareness.

With the wheels of his great chariot, Priyavrata divided the earthly planetary systems into seven islands known as Jambu, Plaksa, Salmali, Kusa, Kraunca, Saka and Puskara - creating seven oceans respectively of salty water, sugarcane juice, liquor, clarified butter, yogurt and sweet water. Each subsequent island is twice as large as the previous one, and each ocean is as large as the island it surrounds.

Priyavrata assigned the government of each island to one of his sons Agnidhra, Idhmajihva, Yaj nabahu, Hiranyareta, Ghritaprstha, Medhatithi and Vitihotra. Then he gave his daughter Urjasvati in marriage to Sukracharya, who gave her a daughter named Devayani. After successfully performing his duties as a king, Maharaja Priyavrata happily returned to the life of renunciation to which he had always aspired for, thanks to the teachings he had received from Narada.

Priyavrata's eldest son, Agnidhra, ruled successfully on Jambudvipa protecting his subject as his own children. To obtain Brahma's blessings he went to the valley of Mandara hill, where he engaged in meditation and austerities.

Pleased, Brahma sent him an Apsara named Purvacitti, an extraordinarily beautiful woman, but at first Agnidhra mistook her for the young son of some Rishi who lived in the valley. When the misunderstanding was cleared, Agnidhra married Purvacitti and gave her nine sons, who were named Nabhi, Kimpurusa, Harivarsa, Ilavrtta, Ramyaka, Hiranmaya, Kuru, Bhadrasva and Ketumala. Agnidhra distributed the land of Jambudvipa among his sons, then he left his body to join Purvacitti who had returned to the heavenly planets, to Pitriloka.

After Agnidhra's disappearance, his sons married the nine daughters of Meru named Merudevi, Pratirupa, Ugradamstri, Lata, Ramya, Syama, Nari, Bhadra and Devaviti. The most prominent of these sons, Maharaja Nabhi,

married Merudevi, and both sincerely engaged in worshiping the Supreme Personality of God with ritual sacrifices to obtain a good son.

The seven important factors in the performance of ritual sacrifices are the offering of valuable ingredients, the auspicious moment, the suitable place, the chanting of *mantras*, the presence of a qualified priest, the gifts to the priests and the observance of rules. Vishnu was pleased by the sincere efforts of Nabhi, who was performing the ceremonies with a pure and selfless mind, and appeared in front of him in his four armed form, dressed in yellow cloth and decorated with many valuable ornaments. The king, the officiating priests and all the people attending the sacrifice offered their respects. The priests offered praise and respectful prayers on behalf of the king, and asked the blessing of a son for the king - a son who would be as glorious as God himself.

Vishnu granted that request literally, and announced that he would personally appear as an *avatara* from the womb of Merudevi, the wife of Maharaja Nabhi. At birth, the child showed all the characteristics of the Deity, including the special marks on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. He was called Rishabha ("the best") and from earliest childhood he was deeply admired and loved by all his subjects. After putting Rishabha on the earth's throne, Nabhi and his wife Merudevi retired to Badarikashrama, on the Himalaya, to engage joyfully in austerities and meditation worshiping the Supreme Personality of God in the form of the *avatara* Nara Narayana Rishi who resided in that place.

After spending the usual training period in the ashrama of his Guru, Rishabha married Jayanti, who had been offered to him by the king of the heavenly planets, Indra, and had 100 sons, of whom the eldest, Bharata, was an enlightened king and a great devotee of God. In his honor the earth, that had previously been known as Ajanabha varsha, was called Bharata varsha.

Among the other 99 sons of Rishabha, some became particularly famous - Kusavarta, Ilavarta, Brahmavarta, Malaya, Ketu, Bhadrasena, Indrasprik, Vidarbha, Kikata, Kavi, Havi, Antariksa, Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avirhotra, Drumila, Camasa and Karabhajana - became great sages and preachers of the transcendental knowledge. The other 81 sons, too, followed into Rishabha's footsteps and became all perfectly qualified as *brahmanas*.

Rishabha carefully observed the duties of a king, and also performed many ritual ceremonies according to the instructions of Vedic scriptures, but he had a great love for the discussion of spiritual topics. One day, while he was traveling around the world, Rishabha arrived at a great assembly of *brahmanas* in Brahmavarta, and took the opportunity to offer important instructions to his sons, in the presence of all the subjects.

"A being who has obtained a human form in this life," said Rishabha, "should not waste it by merely working day and night to acquire some sense gratification, that is also available to lower animals. One should rather engage in self control to purify one's heart and attain spiritual awareness."

One who wants to attain liberation should render service to those who are very advanced spiritually and do not make discriminations among living beings. These *mahatmas* are peaceful and work for the benefit of all, without ever committing any abominable action. They are not attached to home or family, although they continue to carefully perform their duties to family and society and collect the necessary funds to live decently.

The attraction between male and female constitutes the fundamental principle of material existence and ties the two hearts together, creating a desire for home, properties, children, relatives and wealth. This bondage strengthens the illusions based on the concepts of "I" and "mine". On the other hand, when the knot is loosened, it is possible to become detached from illusion and established in the transcendental world.

One should seek the direct guidance of a *paramahansa*, a genuine spiritual teacher, and listen to the science of God to learn to see the spiritual soul in each individual. Abandoning the identification with the body, we will be able to easily give up the sense of hostility, anger and regret. One should live alone, in an isolated and peaceful place, avoiding unnecessary talking and acquiring knowledge from the suitable sources. When we become spiritual teachers, fathers or kings, we must continue to give instructions without getting angry even if the disciple, child or subject is unable to follow the instructions. Ignorant persons must be engaged in God's service by all means. In fact, one should never become spiritual teacher, father, husband, mother, king or Deva, if one is not able to skillfully guide one's subordinates to liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.

Brahmanas are worthy of being honored because they have studied and absorbed the *Vedas*, that are the sound incarnation of the Godhead. They are established in *sattva guna*, they control their own minds and senses and are dedicated to truthfulness. They are always willing to explain the original and deep sense of the *Vedas* to all conditioned souls, they practice austerity and tolerance, and they are always aware of the position of the Atman in relationship with the Brahman. They do not want to possess anything, because they are very pure, and only engage in service to God."

After installing his eldest son Bharata on the throne, Rishabha became free from all responsibilities and began living like an *avadhuta*, a renounced person who does not care at all for his body. Naked, dirty and with matted hair, Rishabha started to roam around the world without bothering about what people said about him or even about those who hanged around him to insult and provoke him, just like flies buzz around an elephant that comes out from the forest. Sometimes people threw stones at him, sometimes they pelted him with excrements or dirt, spat or urinated on him, threatened or hit him, insulted him or created some other kind of problems, but Rishabha always remained serene, in the awareness that the material body is anyway destined to perish. Finally he adopted the way of life of the python: lying down on the ground, smeared with the urine and excrements produced by his body so that nobody would come to disturb him any more. Rishabha disappeared in a forest fire in the province of Karnata in south India. The king of Konika, Venka and Kutaka in Karnata, named Arhat, heard about the activities of Rishabha and decided to imitate him, starting a tradition of renunciates that unfortunately lacked the spiritual knowledge and awareness of Rishabha.

The story of Jada Bharata

Bharata, the eldest son of Rishabha, followed his father's orders and ruled the earth assisted by his brothers. He married Panchajani, the daughter of Visvarupa, and had five sons - Sumati, Rastrabhrta, Sudarsana, Avarana and

Dhumraketu. He performed the sacrificial ceremonies known as *agni-hotra*, *darsba*, *ṣurnamasa*, *chaturmasya*, *pasu-yajna* and *soma-yajna*, but offering their results exclusively to the pleasure of God, considering the various Devas as the limbs of God's body.

At the end of his reign, Bharata Maharaja retired from family life, dividing his properites among his sons and settling in the ashrama of Pulastya, at Hardvara on the river Gandaki, where one can find the *salagrama silas*. Collecting flowers, herbs and *tulasi* leaves, water from the Gandaki river, roots and fruits, he engaged in the worship to the Supreme Personality of God, free from all desires for sense gratification. Gradually he started to feel symptoms of devotional ecstasy, until he became situated in meditation on the lotus feet of Lord Narayana.

One day, Bharata was sitting as usual on the bank of river Gandaki to meditate and chant the *mantra* after completing his morning duties. A doe arrived to drink water from the river, and frightened by the sudden roaring of a lion, jumped into the river to cross it. However, she was nearing the end of her pregnancy and in her rush she lost the baby, who was carried away by the current. Soon afterwards, the doe succumbed to her bleeding and died.

Bharata saw the newborn deer in such a desperate situation, and out of compassion he rescued it from the river and took it into his ashrama. For several days he personally took care of the baby, feeding and protecting it, and he developed a strong attachment for the little animal. Bharata felt responsible for the baby, who trusted him, and he also knew that lack of compassion was a serious sin, even if his new role as a foster parent for the deer was distracting him from his spiritual consciousness and he was neglecting his meditation on God.

His affection for the little animal soon became an obsession. He ate and slept with it, and never left it alone even when he went into the forest to collect food.

Charmed by the deer's childish behavior, he was often carrying it in his arms as if it was his son. Always worrying for its safety and well being, he was interrupting his worship to the Deity to check on it, and if he could not find it he became very upset.

At the time of his death, Bharata saw the young deer sadly sitting next to him, like a mourning son, and because he was intensely thinking about the deer, he took a new birth as a deer himself, on mount Kalanjara. Thanks to his spiritual practices, Bharata retained the memory of his previous lifetime and realized the mistake he had committed, so he immediately detached himself from all material thoughts.

Leaving his mother, he returned to the Salagrama forest in the ashrama of Pulastya and Pulaha to resume his austerities. Eating only dry leaves and bathing often in the sacred river, he carefully avoided the company of other deer, and after a short time he died and took another birth as a human being, in the family of a qualified *brahmana* in the dynasty of Angira.

The Rishi had nine sons from his first wife and two children - a son and a daughter - from his second wife. This son was named Bharata just like in his previous lifetime as a king. Although he had obtained a human body in the family of a *brahmana*, he had been so traumatized by his life experience as a deer (due to his mistake of developing a material attachment) that now he was extremely careful to avoid any relationship based on the body.

For this reason, he decided to behave like a stupid and crazy person, so that nobody would be interested in him. He was always doing the opposite of what he was taught, and pretended he did not understand the *mantras* and ritual ceremonies that his father tried to teach him. After father's death, his brother started to mistreat him, insulting him and denying him proper food, but Jada Bharata ("Bharata the idiot") ate whatever he was given, without concerning himself about the taste or the quality of the food. Nonetheless, and although he never cared about his own body, Jada Bharata grew up strong and stout, and he often worked in the fields in exchange of some food.

In these days, the chief of a gang of robbers decided to offer a sacrifice to Bhadra Kali to propitiate the birth of a son. He heard that for a human sacrifice one should choose a very degraded individual, who is no better than an animal, and when his servants found Jada Bharata, they believed they had found the perfect victim.

The outlaws captured the young man and returned to their boss, who had invented his own sacrifice ritual that had no reference to the scriptures.

They bathed Jada Bharata, smeared him with scented oils and dressed him in new clothes, decorating him with sandalwood paste and flower garlands. They fed him delicious foods and then took him in front of the Deity, they performed a ritual worship with incense, lamps, garlands, fruits and flowers, prayers, songs and musical instruments. Finally they seated Bharata in front of the Deity and the thief who acted as a priest prepared to behead him to offer his blood as a drink.

Because they did not have true knowledge and understanding, the thieves had not realized that Jada Bharata was a pure and elevated soul, but Bhadra Kali was perfectly aware of the situation, and could not tolerate the idea that Bharata would be killed in that way. Suddenly the image of the Deity exploded, revealing Bhadra Kali in person, terribly angry and radiating a blazing light. Jumping on the thieves, she killed them instantly and drank their blood, distributing it also to the Dakhinis who are her servants.

After that adventure Jada Bharata continued to live like he had always done. One day he found himself on the path of king Rahugana, the ruler of Sindhu and Sauvira, who was traveling on a palanquin along the bank of river Ikshumati. His porters decided to get one more man to share the weight, and because Jada Bharata looked strong and stout, they immediately put him to work.

However, in his new role as a palanquin carrier Jada Bharata was unable to keep pace with his co-workers, and at each step he paused to check if there were any ants on the path, because he did not want to step on them. Thus the king was tossed back and forth in his palanquin, and loudly complained about that weird way of walking. When the other carriers explained that Jada Bharata was disrupting the pace, he became very angry. Talking sarcastically to his new employee, he said, "Poor thing, you must be very tired, because you have to do everything by yourself, and you are so old and weak."

Jada Bharata was not touched by the king's offensive attitude because he had no sense of identification with the material body, and after pacifying the temporary waves of displeasure for that unjust treatment, he continued to walk in the same way. Getting angrier and angrier, king Rahugana verbally attacked Jada Bharata, reminding him that disobeying the king entails severe punishments.

Then Jada Bharata, in a sweet and peaceful tone, replied, "My dear king, you have spoken sarcastically, but what you said is actually true. I am making no efforts in carrying the palanquin, because it is only the body that does such work. In the same way I am not strong or sturdy or young, because such definitions only apply to the body. Certainly the soul is neither fat nor thin, or touched by the sufferings of the body and the mind, by hunger or thirst, by fear, dissent or desire for material happiness, by old age, by sleep, by attachment to material possessions, or by the illusion and identification with the body. As far as you are concerned, you believe you are the king and therefore my master, but these are simply temporary circumstances, and by inflicting a punishment on me, you will not obtain any true benefit."

Rahugana was astonished to hear such words of transcendental wisdom from the man he had engaged as a humble porter. He realized his own mistake and rushing down from the palanquin, he threw himself at the feet of Jada Bharata, begging to be forgiven for his offenses. Then he humbly entreated Jada Bharata to reveal his true identity and instruct him in the spiritual science.

Jada Bharata said, "The relationship between master and servant is merely an external activity, and those who are interested in material activities certainly cannot progress on the spiritual path. As long as the mind of the living being is contaminated by the three *gunas* - goodness, passion and ignorance - it remains uncontrollable like a wild elephant, and can only multiply the good and bad actions that bind one to the material world through joys and sufferings.

On the other hand, when the mind becomes detached from material pleasures, it becomes an instrument for liberation. An uncontrolled mind is the greatest enemy of the living entity, and when it believes in the bodily identification it becomes the cause of all sufferings, creating diseases, illusion, depression, attachment, greed, hostility, and a false sense of intimacy with this world. All existing bodies are nothing but combinations of the earth element, and they will again become dust. Even the universe appears real only temporarily and will finally be dissolved, therefore all the differences between the bodies inside it are merely imaginary, as with pots made from the same clay.

The only reality is spirit, that continues to exist eternally and is subsequently realized as Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan. To attain this realization we require the company of the great devotees. It is not sufficient to observe celibacy, strictly follow the rules of family life, accept the order of renunciation or engage in great austerities, such as remaining immersed in water during the winter or surrounding oneself with fire during the summer. On the other hand, the company of materialistic persons is as dangerous as a wild jungle, where one becomes lost and meets all kinds of troubles and sufferings."

Jada Bharata forgave Rahugana as the king had humbly begged for his mercy. After offering the gift of transcendental knowledge, he resumed his usual free wanderings.

Maharaja Parikshit, who was listening to the narration of these events from Sukadeva, asked him to elaborate more about the example of the material life compared to a forest, and Sukadeva obliged.

"Merchants often travel to jungles, to collect wood and clay they will sell in the cities with a good profit. In the same way the conditioned soul, pushed by greed, enters the deep forest of the material world, where he becomes lost and remains deprived of the company of the wise people. The uncontrolled senses are like outlaws hiding in the forest, who will snatch away the wealth accumulated with so much effort by the living entity for the purpose of engaging it in the service of the religious principles - instead they will force him to spend his money for things to taste, smell, see, touch and so on."

In the material world one's family members and relatives are like tigers and jackals, who devour the wealth of the conditioned soul even under his very eyes. The disturbing sounds of the crickets and owls that fill the forest are compared to the insults and threats of enemies. A shallow water reservoir is compared to the help we are trying to obtain from materialists - to escape the heat we jump in the water and crash on the stones that are just below the surface.

This forest is also full of wild creatures, whose hostility is born from the fear of being attacked or robbed, and of shameless people who are only interested in sex and therefore jump from one body to the other like

monkeys leaping from one tree to the next, until they are caught by the hunter. Sometimes one hears the melodious singing of happy birds - the materialists who are elated because they have obtained something pleasurable, and remain unable to see the snares waiting for them. However, the path of total renunciation shown by Jada Bharata is extremely difficult compared to the actual capabilities of ordinary persons, just like the path traced by Garuda soaring in the sky cannot be followed by ordinary flies. Jada Bharata was an extraordinary person, and even while living in a deer body he was able to maintain a clear remembrance of the Lord, and at the time of death he offered sublime prayers.

Sukadeva continued to speak about the descendants of Priyavrata. One of the sons of Maharaja Bharata, Sumati, married Vriddhasena and had a son named Devatajit. Sumati followed the example of Rishabhadeva in becoming an *avadhuta*. His son Devatajit became the father of Devadyumna, father of Paramesthi, father of Pratiha, who became a great devotee of God. Pratiha had three sons - Pratiharta, Prastota and Udgata - who became very expert in the performance of ritual ceremonies.

Pratiharta had two sons, named Aja and Bhuma; Bhuma was the father of Udgata, who became father of Prastava, father of Vibhu, father of Prithusena, father of Nakta, father of the great king Gaya.

King Gaya earned the title of Mahapurusha because he gave full protection to all his subjects, making sure that everyone had sufficient food and often distributing gifts to everyone, calling people to praise them and offer good advice and recommendations. He made the land prosper by celebrating many sacrificial ceremonies producing a huge quantity of *soma rasa*, so that once Indra drank too much of it. Vishnu, too, appeared in the arena of the sacrifice to express his satisfaction for the success of those ritual ceremonies.

Maharaja Gaja married Gayanti, from whom he had three sons named Citraratha, Sugati and Avarodhana. Citraratha became father of Samrat, who was the father of Marici, father of Bindu, father of Madhu, father of Viravrata, who had two sons named Manthu and Pramanthu. Manthu had a son named Bahuvana, who became father of Tvasta, father of Viraja, who had one hundred sons and one daughter. Among the sons, Satajit was the foremost.

The structure of the universe

After listening to the genealogy of the descendants of Svayambhuva Manu, Maharaja Parikshit asked Sukadeva to speak about the structure of the universe.

Sukadeva replied, "My dear king, the material energy of God has no limits. We will now describe only the planetary system known as Bhu-mandala or Bhu-goloka, that is similar to a lotus flower, in which the seven islands are compared to the center. Among these, Jambudvipa sits in the middle. It is round like a lotus leaf, and its diameter is one million *yojanas* (about 13 million kilometers).

Within this island there are nine continents or *varshas*, each measuring 9,000 *yojanas* (120,000 km), and mount Sumeru, that is made of gold and as tall as the highest reach of Jambudvipa, that is 100,000 *yojanas* (1,300,000 km). Of these, 16,000 *yojanas* are underground, therefore the height from the ground is 84,000 *yojanas*. This mountain is 32,000 *yojanas* wide at the top and 16,000 *yojanas* at the base."

To the north of the continent named Ilavrita varsha there are the mountains called Nila, Sveta and Sringavan, marking the boundary with the *varshas* named Ramyaka, Hiranmaya and Kuru. These mountains are 2,000 *yojanas* wide each, and extend in length to east and west to the shore of the salt ocean. From south to north, the length of each mountain range is one tenth of the previous one, but the height is the same.

To the south of Ilavrita varsha, ranging from north to south, we find the mountains called Nishada, Hemakuta and Himalaya, each 10,000 *yojanas* high, marking the boundary with the three continents called Hari varsha, Kimpurusha varsha and Bharata varsha. To the east and west of Ilavrita varsha are the two great mountains called Gandhamadana and Malyavan, each 2,000 *yojanas* high, extending to the mount Nila at north and Nishada at south, marking the boundary to the *varshas* known as Ketumala and Bhadrasha.

To the four sides of the great mount Sumeru there are four smaller mountains known as Mandara, Merumandara, Suparsva and Kumuda, each 10,000 *yojanas* high. On the top of these mountains there are four trees, respectively a mango tree, a *jambu* (rose apple tree), a *kadamba* tree and a banyan tree, each 100 *yojanas* wide and 1,100 *yojanas* tall, with branches extending for a radius of 1,100 *yojanas*.

In the valleys between these mountains there are four great lakes; their waters taste respectively like milk, honey, sugarcane juice and fresh water. The mango tree on the Mandara mountain is called Devachuta and is 1,100 *yojanas* tall; the ripened fruits fall from its branches releasing a fragrant juice that flows into the river Arunoda, running on the eastern side of Ilavrita. The Yaksha women are the maidservants of the consort of Shiva, and because they drink the water of the Arunoda, their bodies become wonderfully fragrant. The fruits of the *jambu* tree have very small seeds and their plump flesh produces, while falling from the Merumandara, a flow of juice that enters the river Jambunadi. This river runs for 10,000 *yojanas* from the mountain to the southern side of Ilavrita, and its clay produces great amounts of gold, used by the heavenly beings for all sorts of ornaments.

The Maha Kadamba tree growing on the Suparsva mountain has a hollow from which five rivulets of sweetly scented honey flow towards the western side of Ilavrita varsha. Finally, the great banyan tree of mount Kumuda, called Satavalsa because it has one hundred main branches, has miraculous water flowing from its roots. Because they drink this water, the residents of the heavenly planets never become fatigued or sick, and they never die prematurely. Their sweat has no bad odor, their hair never becomes grey, and their bodies never wrinkle.

On the eastern side of the Sumeru, that mountain made of solid gold and radiant like fire, there are two mountains called Jathara and Devakuta, extending north and south for 18,000 *yojanas*, while the mountains Pavana and Pariyatra, on the western side, extend from north to south for the same length. South of the Sumeru, the two mountains called Kailasa and Karavira extend from east to west for 18,000 *yojanas*, while at north the mountains Trisinga and Makara are 2,000 *yojanas* wide and tall.

On top of the Meru sits Brahma's city, Brahmapuri, surrounded in all directions by the capitals of the Lords of the different planetary systems,

starting from Indra. These cities are similar to Brahmapuri but only one quarter in size.

The Ganges river, that flows through the entire universe, originated when the Vamana *avatara* put his foot through the roof of the universe, causing a leak of the water from the Karana Ocean. Because this water touched the feet of the Lord, it became particularly sacred and pure.

Descending in this way, the Ganges first reaches Dhruvaloka, the pole star, and then the planets of the seven Rishis, that are directly under the pole star. Then it touches Chandraloka (the Moon) and finally the abode of Brahma on the top of the Meru, where it splits into four branches known as Sita, Alakananda, Chaksu and Bhadra, each flowing in a different direction. The Sita flows from Brahmapuri to the Kesarachala mountain, then to Gandhamadana and into the land of Bhadrasha varsha, to end in the salt ocean in the west.

The branch of the Ganges known as Chaksu falls on the Malayavan mountain and descends into the lands of Ketumala varsha, flowing to the western ocean as well. The branch known as Bhadra flows on the northern side of the Meru and falls on the mountains named Kumuda, Nila, Sveta and Sringavan one after another, then it runs into the Kuru province and finally merges into the salt water ocean in the north. The Alakananda flows from Brahmapuri through many mountain peaks to Memakuta and Himakuta, and then runs into the lands of Bharata varsha and reaches the salt water ocean in the south.

The land of Bharata varsha is particularly fortunate, and it is considered the field of fruitive activities for very virtuous people; from this place it is possible to achieve liberation by performing the proper activities to become free from the consequences of one's deeds in previous lifetimes.

During Treta yuga, in these eight *varshas* people live 10,000 earth years and are not very different from the Devas. They enjoy a very long youth and use it to engage in sexual relationships; after many years of pleasure, when they only have one year left to live, the woman conceives a child, who is born already an adult. The Supreme Personality of God blesses the inhabitants of this *varsha* in the form of the Chatur-vyuha, the four-fold emanation of Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha.

The land known as Ilavrita varsha is the residence of Shiva and his consort Durga, who are served by 10 billion maids. No other male except Shiva is allowed to enter this region, unless they want to be immediately turned into a woman. There Shiva meditates on the form of Vishnu known as Sankarshana, Ananta Sesha.

The land known as Bhadrasva varsha is ruled by Bhadrasrava, the son of Dharmaraja. Bhadrasrava meditates on the divine form of Vasudeva, known as Hayasirsha or Hayagriva, who saved the *Vedas* by rescuing them from the planet Rasatala, where they had been hidden, and returning them to Brahma. The land known as Hari varsha is the residence of Lord Nrisimha, worshiped by Prahlada Maharaja and his subjects. In the land known as Ketumala varsha, God resides in the form of Kamadeva or Pradyumna, worshiped by Lakshmi, by Prajapati Samvatsara and all his 36,000 sons and daughters, considered as the archetypes that control respectively the days and the nights.

In Hiranya varsha God resides in the form of Kurma, the tortoise *avatara*, worshiped by Aryama and the other inhabitants of that land. In the northern region of Jambudvipa, known as Uttarakuru varsha, God resides in the form of Varaha, the boar *avatara*, worshiped by all the residents with wonderful hymns and prayers. In Kimpurusha varsha the great Hanuman is engaged, together with the king of those lands, Arstisena, and his subjects, in the worship of Ramachandra, the elder brother of Lakshmana and beloved husband of Sitadevi.

In the land of Bharata varsha, in the place known as Badarikashrama, God appeared in the form of Nara and Narayana to teach renunciation, spiritual power, knowledge, religion, control of the senses and freedom from ego. Narada Muni instructed Savarni Manu to guide his subjects in the performance of their duties in the *varnashrama dharma* and also wrote important texts on *bhakti*. Meditating on Nara Narayana, Narada sings his glories and offers prayers.

Bharata varsha has many other mountains, among which we may remember Malaya, Mangala-prastha, Mainaka, Trikuta, Rishabha, Kutaka, Kollaka, Sabya, Devagiri, Rishyamuka, Sri Saila, Venkata, Mahendra, Varidhara, Vindhya, Suktiman, Rikshagiri, Pariyatra, Drona, Citrakuta, Govardhana, Raivataka, Kakubha, Nila, Gokamukha, Indrakila and Kamagiri.

The two most prominent rivers, Brahmaputra and Sona, are called *nadas*, or masculine rivers. The other important rivers are named Chandravasa, Tamraparni, Avatoda, Kritamala, Vaihayasi, Kaveri, Veni, Payasvini, Sarkaravarta, Tungabhadra, Krishnavenya, Bhimarathi, Godavari, Nirvindhya, Payosni, Tapi, Reva, Surasa, Narmada, Charmanvati, Mahanadi, Vedasmriti, Rishikulya, Trisama, Kausiki, Mandakini, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Drisadvati, Gomati, Sarayu, Rodhasvati, Saptavati, Susoma, Satadru, Chandrabhaga, Marudvridha, Vitasta, Asikni and Visva. The residents of those lands become purified by bathing in their waters, by touching them, and even simply by remembering them and reciting their names.

It is said that Jambudvīpa is surrounded by eight smaller islands, called Svarnaprastha, Candrasukla, Avartana, Ramanaka, Mandara-harina, Pancajanya, Simhala and Lanka.

Around Jambudvīpa there is the ocean of salt water, beyond which is the land of Plakshadvīpa, that is 260,000 *yojanas* wide. In that land there is a *plaksha* tree as tall as the *jambu* tree in Jambudvīpa, and at its roots there is a fire with seven flames. Plakshadvīpa is ruled by Idhmajihva, one of the sons of Maharaja Priyavrata, who divided its seven islands among his seven sons Shiva, Yavasa, Subhadra, Shanta, Kshema, Amrita and Abhaya.

In Plakshadvīpa there are seven mountains - Manikuta, Vajrakuta, Indrasena, Jyotisman, Suparna, Hiranyasthiva and Meghamala - and seven rivers - Aruna, Nrimna, Anghirasi, Savitri, Suptabhata, Ritambhara and Satyambhara - whose contact immediately washes off all material contamination. The inhabitants are divided into four social categories called Hamsa, Patanga, Urdhvayana and Satyanga, and live 1,000 years enjoying the same pleasures of the heavenly beings and worshipping the Supreme Personality of God in the form of the Sun.

Around Plakshadvīpa lies the ocean of sugarcane juice, then the island of Salmalidvīpa, that is 400,000 *yojanas* wide and takes its name from the *salmali* tree, 100 *yojanas* wide and 1100 *yojanas* high. This tree is said to be the abode of Garuda, the great eagle that carries Vishnu. The ruler of this island is Yajñabahu, son of Priyavrata. He divided the island into seven territories, assigning one to each of his sons Surochana, Saumanasya, Ramanaka, Devavarsha, Paribhadra, Apyayana and Avijnata. Here, too, there are seven mountains - Svarasa, Sata-sringa, Vamadeva, Kunda, Mukunda, Pushpa-

varsha and Sahasra-sruti - and seven rivers - Anumati, Sinivali, Sarasvati, Kuhu, Rajani, Nanda and Raka. The inhabitants strictly follow the system of *varnas*, that are called Srutidhara, Viryadhara, Vasundhara and Isandhara, and worship the Supreme Personality of God in the form of Soma, the Moon.

Beyond the lands of Plakshadvipa there is an ocean of liquor, called Surasagara, and then the land of Kushadvipa, 800,000 *yojanas* wide, surrounded by an ocean of liquid *ghi*. The island takes its name from the tufts of *kusha* grass growing there, radiant like fresh fires. The ruler of those lands is the son of Priyavrata named Hiranyareta; he, too, divided his kingdom among his seven sons Vasu, Vasudana, Kridharuci, Stutyavrata, Nabhigupta, Vivikta and Vamadeva. The seven mountains are called Chakra, Chatuh-sringa, Kapila, Citrakuta, Devanika, Urdhvaroma and Dravina, and the seven rivers are Ramakulya, Madhukulya, Mitravinda, Srutavinda, Devagarbha, Ghritacyuta and Mantramala. The four social categories of the inhabitants are known as Kusala, Kovida, Abhiyukta and Kulaka, and they all worship the Supreme Personality of God in the form of the fire by performing the sacrifices prescribed in the *Vedas*.

Beyond the ocean of clarified butter there is Kraunchadvipa, 1,600,000 *yojanas* wide and surrounded by the ocean of milk. The island takes its name from the mountain Krauncha, protected by Varuna. The ruler of this island is the son of Priyavrata named Ghritapristha, who is a great scholar and has divided the lands among his seven sons Ama, Madhuruha, Meghapristha, Sudhama, Bhrajistha, Lohitarna and Vanaspati. The seven mountains are called Sukla, Vardhamana, Bhojana, Upabarhina, Nanda, Nandana and Sarvatobhadra, while the seven rivers are Abhaya, Amritaughra, Aryaka, Tirthavati, Rupavati, Pavitravati and Sukla. The inhabitants are divided into the four *varnas* called Purusha, Rabha, Dravina and Devaka, and worship the Supreme Personality of God in the form of Varuna by offering water contained in their palms.

After the ocean of milk there is Sakadvipa, 3,200,000 *yojanas* wide, which in turn is surrounded by an ocean of yogurt. The island takes its name from the *saka* tree whose scent spreads everywhere. The ruler of these lands is another son of Priyavrata, named Medhatithi, and has divided the kingdom among his seven sons Purojava, Manojava, Pavamana, Dhumranika,

Citrarepha, Bahurupa and Visvadhara. The seven mountains of the island are Isana, Urusinga, Balabhadra, Satakesara, Sahasra-srota, Devapala and Mahanasa, and the seven rivers are Anagha, Ayurda, Ubhayaspristi, Aparajita, Panchapadi, Sahasra-sruti and Nijadhrti. The social *varnas* there are called Ritavrata, Satyavrata, Danavrata and Anuvrata, and worship the Supreme Personality of God in the form of Vayu by practicing the *pranayama* and mystic yoga.

The last island, Pushkaradvipa, is 6,400,000 *yojanas* wide, and is surrounded by an ocean of fresh water of a wonderfully sweet taste. The island takes the name from a great lotus flower with 100 millions of petals of pure gold, radiant like fire, that is considered the seat of Brahma. In the middle of the island there is the great mountain Manasottara, 10,000 *yojanas* wide and tall, and on it there is the abode of Indra, called Devadhani, which is the basis on which the Sun's chariot rotates on its path through the universe. The ruler of the island, a son of Priyavrata named Vitihotra, has two sons called Ramanaka and Dhataki, and has given each of them a half of the kingdom - one of which (Uttarayana) represents the day and the other (Dakshinayana) the night of the Devas. The inhabitants of the island worship the Supreme Personality of God in the form of Brahma, the personification of ritual ceremonies and the *Vedas*.

After the fresh water ocean there is a mountain called Lokaloka, that divides the lands illuminated by the sun and those that always remain in the dark. Then there is Aloka varsha, a golden region that reflects light like a mirror and where nobody lives. It has been calculated that the distance between the Sumeru and Lokaloka is 125,000,000 *yojanas* (more than 1.5 billion kilometers). On the Lokaloka live the four lords of the elephants - Rishabha, Pushkarachuda, Vamana and Aparajita - who are in charge of keeping the position of the planetary systems. Beyond Aloka varsha, that is 125,000,000 *yojanas* wide, there is the border of the material universe.

The sun, situated in the center of the universe, in the space called Antariksha between Bhurloka and Bhuvraloka, is also called Vairaja, the total manifestation of all living beings, and also Martanda, because it entered the egg of the universe at the beginning of creation, and Hiranyagarbha, the golden embryo. The movements of the Sun in its orbit, called *samvatsara*, are observed from earth as passages between zodiacal

signs. When the sun, traveling to north, enters Vrishabha (Taurus) the days lengthen until it enters in Karkata (Cancer), then it gradually shortens half an hour every month, until the day equals the night in Tula (Libra). Then the sun turns south, entering the sign of Vriscika (Scorpio) and the days shorten even more until Makara (Capricorn), and then day and night become equal again in Mesha (Aries). The orbit of the sun is 95,100,000 *yojanas*, and is covered at a speed of 2,000 *yojanas* and 2 *kerosas* (for a total of 25,606 km) in a single moment.

Just like east of the Sumeru there is Devadhani, the abode of Indra, to the south there is Samyamani, the capital of Yamaraja, to the west there is Nimlochani, the capital of Varuna, and to the north there is Vibhavari, the capital of Chandra. Each of these heavenly kingdoms rules over the passages of the day, namely sunrise, noon, sunset and midnight. Those who live in lands that are diametrically opposite experience respectively sunrise and sunset at the same time, and the same is for midday and midnight.

The sun travels from Devadhani to Samyamani in 15 *ghatikas* (6 hours) covering a distance of 23,775,000 *yojanas*, and then similarly from Samyamani to the other capitals, and then returns to the city of Indra. The same movement is observed in the moon, the stars and the planets, that rise and set from east to west and disappear from sight.

The chariot of the sun has only one wheel, called Samvatsara ("orbit"), and its spokes are the twelve months. The six seasons are the edges, and the three periods called *chatur-masya* ("four months") are the hub of the wheel. One end of the axis rests on the mount Sumeru and the other on mount Manasottara, and the chariot keeps turning like an oil press. The second axis is fixed at Dhruvaloka with a rope made of wind. It is said that the chariot of the sun is 3,600,000 *yojanas* wide and 900,000 *yojanas* long. The horses are named after the Gayatri and the other poetic meters of the *Vedas*, and are driven by Aruna, who sits in front of Surya to control the horses but looks backwards to contemplate his master.

There are also 60,000 Rishis called Valikhilyas, each as big as a thumb, who stand in front of Surya to offer praise and prayers. Also two representatives each of the Devas, Rishis, Gandharvas, Apsaras, Nagas, Yakshas and Rakshasas take different names and constantly perform various ritual ceremonies in honor of the Sun.

The Sun, who is Narayana, Vishnu, the soul of all the worlds, travels in his orbit by keeping mount Sumeru and Dhruvaloka on its right, yet at the same time it faces the signs of the zodiac, and this seems to put Sumeru and Dhruvaloka on its left. But this is not a fact, because the movement of constellations, fixed on the great Wheel of Time, is different from the movement of the sun and the planets, just like the movement of a potter's wheel is different from the movement of ants sitting on it, and that will find themselves subsequently on either side of the wheel. According to the calculation of the stars, one earthly month corresponds to two and a quarter constellations, while on Pitriloka one earthly month corresponds to one day and one night.

Above the sun rays, at a distance of 100,000 *yojanas*, the Moon travels at a speed greater than the Sun's. In two *pakshas* (lunar fortnights), the Moon covers the equivalent of one *samvatsara* (annual orbit) of the Sun, and in two days and a quarter it goes through a solar month. The waxing moon shows an increasingly luminous sickle, creating the day for the Devas and the night for the Pitris, and vice versa the waning moon creates the night for the Devas and the day for the Pitris. The Moon is the source of the nectarine coolness that nourishes the growth of grains, therefore it is also called Jiva, the most vital being in the universe. Furthermore, it influences the mind of the human beings, and so it is called Manomaya. It is called Annamaya because it gives life to all beings, and Sarvamaya and because it is pleasing to everyone.

Besides the Moon and the Sun there are many stars, of which the most important is Abhijit; the stars are fixed to the wheel of time and rotate with a different motion from the Sun's. The planet Sukra (Venus) moves together with the Sun, but at different speeds, sometimes getting before the Sun, sometimes behind, and sometimes aside. Its presence facilitates rains. The planet Budha (Mercury) is similar to Sukra in its movement in respect to the Sun; generally it is considered auspicious, but when it does not move harmoniously with the Sun, it is said to bring cyclones and irregularities in rains.

Beyond Budha there is Mangala (Mars), that normally travels through each sign of the zodiac in three *pakshas*; its influence is generally negative. Above Mangala there is Guru (Jupiter), that generally favors the *brahmanas* in the

universe, when its movement is direct. Above Guru there is Sani (Saturn), that moves through a zodiac sign in 30 months, and is always a very inauspicious planet.

Above Sani there are the planets of the seven Rishis, who are always concerned about the benefit of the inhabitants of the universe, and together with the Sun and all the planets, circumambulates the supreme abode of Vishnu, known as Dhruvaloka, the pole star. Dhruvaloka is also the residence of Dhruva Maharaja, who is honored by Agni, Indra, Prajapati, Kasyapa and Dharmā.

The entire universe, with all its stars and planets, has the shape of a dolphin (*sisumara*), with its head downwards and the body spiraling towards the right side; the tip of the tail is Dhruvaloka, the middle part of the tail is the group of planets belonging to Prajapati Brahma, Agni, Indra and Dharmā, and at the base of the tail there are the planets of Dhata and Vidhata. On the sides of this dolphin there are the seven Rishis. On the right side there are the 14 constellations from Abhijit to Punarvasu, on the left side there are the 14 constellations from Pusa to Uttarasadha. On its back there is the constellation Ajavithi, and on its belly there is the Ganges that runs in the sky (the Milky Way). At the height of its chin there are Agasti and Yamaraja, at the mouth Mangala, at the genitals Sani, at its head Guru, at its chest Surya, and at the center of the heart, Narayana. At its navel there is Sukra, in his mind Chandra, on its breasts the Asvini kumaras; in its *prana* Budha, in its neck Rahu, and its entire body is full of stars and comets.

Sometimes yogis meditate on this form as a manifestation of Vasudeva, the Supreme Personality of God, that has become visible to material eyes in the form of Time.

It is said that 10,000 *yojanas* under the Sun there is the planet known as Rahu, that moves like one of the stars. The Deity presiding over this planet is an Asura, the son of Simhika, who acquired that position for the grace of the Supreme Personality of God. Once, when the nectar was being distributed, Rahu tried to create enmity between the Sun and the Moon by sneaking between them, and still he tries to overcome them in what we observe as eclipses in the full moon nights and in the new moon days. Under Rahu there are the planets known as Siddhaloka, Charanaloka and Vidyadhara-loka, and even lower in space, in the region called *antariksha*, 100 *yojanas*

(1,300 km) above Earth, there are the subtle dimensions there are the abodes of Yakshas, Rakshasas, Pisachas, etc, which extend down to the limits of the atmosphere. The boundary of Earth is defined at the limit at which the great birds can fly - eagles, hawks, swans and so on.

Below the Earth there are seven other planets known as Atala, Vitala, Sutala, Talatala, Mahatala, Rasatala and Patala, that are of the same size as Earth and are called *bila svarga* ("subterranean heavenly planets") because the Daityas, Danavas and Nagas who live there enjoy a very high level of life, possess great wealth and have many pleasures. The houses, gardens, lakes, parks and pleasure places are even more wonderful than the ones on the higher planets, but they never see the sun because they are subterranean. Their time is not divided into days and nights, and the main lighting comes from the valuable gems decorating the heads of the great serpents who live there.

Those artificial cities have been built by Maya Danava, an extraordinary architect who can make excellent dwellings, walls and gates, assembly halls, temples and hotels for tourists. The residents drink and bathe from juices and elixirs made with wonderful herbs, so they do not suffer from diseases or anxiety, and their bodies always remain young and strong. Like in heavenly beings, their sweat does not smell bad.

The planet Atala is the residence of Bala, the son of Maya Danava, who created 96 types of mystic powers. On that planet there are three types of women, categorized as *svairinis*, *kaminis* and *pumschalis*. *Svairinis* marry men of their own group, *kaminis* marry men of all origins and *pumschalis* change husbands frequently. When a man arrives in Atala, these women immediately entice him and give him *hataka* (also called *bhanga*, the juice of *Cannabis indica*) to drink to increase their sexual power.

Under Atala there is Vitala, where Shiva drinks *hataka* and resides with his army of Bhutas. There Shiva unites with his consort Bhavani, and from their power the river Hataki is created; when that river is devoured by fire and wind, it produces the gold called *hataka*, used by the inhabitants of that planet to manufacture their many ornaments.

Under Vitala there is Sutala, the abode of Bali Maharaja, the son of Virochana and grandson of Prahlada. Bali is always engaged in the worship

of the Supreme Personality of God in the form of the Vamana *avatara*, who begged him for the gift of three paces of land.

Under Sutala there is Talatala, ruled by Maya Danava. Shiva set fire to the three cities (Tripura) of Maya Danava to protect the universe, and then restored them to him when the Asura became his devotee. Under Talatala there is Mahatala, the abode of many-headed serpents, descendants of Kadru, who are always angry and anxious because they fear the arrival of Garuda. The dignitaries of the planet are Kuhaka, Takshaka, Kaliya and Susena.

Under Mahatala there is Rasatala, abode of the Asuras sons of Diti and Danu, named Pani, Nivata kavacha, Kaleya and Hiranya-puravasi. These Asuras live in underground lairs like snakes, are enemies of the Devas and fear the Sudarshana disc and also Sarama, Indra's messenger, who recites special *mantras*. Under Rasatala there is Patala or Nagaloka, the abode of Vasuki and his Naga subjects, among which the most prominent are Sankha, Kulika, Mahasankha, Sveta, Dhananjaya, Dhritarastra, Sankhachuda, Kambala, Asvatara and Devadatta. All of them have many heads, decorated with valuable gems that illuminate the darkness of Bila svarga.

Under Patala lives Ananta Sesha, also called Sankarshana, who is another incarnation of the Supreme Personality of God. On one of his heads the entire universe rests - compared to the body of Ananta, it is as small as a mustard seed. At the time of the dissolution of the universe, Ananta manifests Sankarshana Rudra, the incarnation of Shiva as the aggregate of the eleven Rudras.

Lord Ananta, thus called because his spiritual qualities are unlimited, has a white complexion like polished silver and is served by the princesses, daughters of the kings of serpents, who smear his body with the pulp of *aguru*, sandalwood paste and *kunkum*. Ananta wears blue clothes, is decorated with a golden belt, sports one single ear-ring and holds a plow on his shoulder. He has a *vaijayanti* garland of ever-fresh *tulasi* blossoms, with a scent as sweet as honey.

The remembrance of Ananta wipes away all impurities from the hearts of those who meditate on him, and is constantly glorified by Narada Rishi in

the assembly hall of Brahmaloaka. The sound of his name, even pronounced by jest or chance, removes all sins from those who are listening.

Besides these planets there are also subtle dimensions of a hellish nature called Naraka, situated in the intermediate space between the three worlds and the Garbhodaka ocean, on the southern side of the universe together with Pitri-loka, the planet of the ancestors.

All the residents of Pitri-loka, headed by Agnisvatta, meditate on the Supreme Personality of God and are always benevolent towards the families of their descendants who live on earth. The king of the Pitris is Yamaraja, the powerful son of Surya. His messengers the Yamadutas are sent to earth to capture evil people at the time of death and drag them to justice and proper punishment.

The Narakalokas are hundreds of thousands of planets; the most prominent are Tamishra, Andhatamishra, Raurava, Maharaurava, Kumbhipaka, Kalasutra, Asi-patravana, Sukaramukha, Andhakupa, Krimibhojana, Sandamsa, Taptasurmi, Vajrakantaka-salmali, Vaitarani, Puyoda, Pranarodha, Visasana, Lalabhaksha, Sarameyadana, Avici, Ayahpana, Ksharakardama, Rakshogana-bhojana, Sulaprotta, Dandasuka, Avatanirodhana, Paryavartana and Sucimukha.

These planets are like prisons to punish those who deprived others of wife, children or legitimate wealth, those who cheated and betrayed others, those who regularly committed violence against other beings as a means of livelihood, those who ate animals or killed wise and benevolent persons. Punishments are also given there to those kings and government representatives who caused sufferings to innocent people, those who neglected their social and religious duties, who had sex indiscriminately or had sex with unworthy persons, and also the *sudras* who did not make any effort to purify themselves and evolve.

Other crimes that deserve a sentence on these planets are the pride for an important position, the unnecessary killing of animals during hunting and the practices meant to force a woman to sexual allegiance. Also punished are the rulers who oppressed the people with excessive taxes, the street robbers, those who bore false witness or committed frauds, those who drunk liquors indiscriminately, those who imprisoned animals for their own

pleasure, those who delighted in creating problems to others, those who did not treat guests well, and all those who committed violence and caused sufferings to other living beings for their own pleasure or profit.

The story of Ajamila

After hearing Sukadeva describe the hellish planets, Maharaja Parikshit felt a great compassion for those who stupidly fall into the trap of illusion and commit crimes in their lifetime. "O great sage," he said, "please explain how a human being can avoid falling into those hellish conditions."

"One must repent and make amends for any damage before the time of death comes," Sukadeva replied. "Therefore one must follow the methods prescribed by *Manu sambhita* and other scriptures, and carefully avoid falling into the same mistake again, otherwise atonement has no value - it would be like an elephant who takes bath and then, as soon as he gets back on the river bank, covers his body with dust again. This tendency to fall back into the same inauspicious activities is due to the desire to pursue happiness on the material level, therefore mere atonement does not eliminate the root of the problem. One should rather cultivate true knowledge, that is the purpose of the *Vedas*, and realize the absolute transcendental Truth. Only a person who has reached the level of spiritual awareness and pure devotion to God, through the direct contact with a perfectly realized guide, can eradicate the primary cause of bad actions. Pure devotion for the Supreme Personality of God destroys all sins. In this regard, I want to tell you the story of a *brahmana* named Ajamila, who lived in the city called Kanyakubja."

Young Ajamila was a qualified *brahmana*, full of good qualities and with a spotless behavior. He observed all the rules in the scriptures, studied sincerely and was very respectful to his teachers, to fire, guests and the family elders. He was benevolent towards everyone, did not waste time in useless discussions and carefully controlled his senses and mind. One day,

on the order of his father, Ajamila went into the forest to collect fruits, flowers and the two types of grass called *samit* and *kusha*. While walking down the street, he saw a *sudra* engaged in sexual intercourse with a prostitute; both of them were drunk, and seemed to be having a great time.

Ajamila tried to remove all lusty thoughts from his mind, but just like the sun and the moon are eclipsed by a lower planet, his awareness was covered by an overwhelming sensual desire. On returning home, he immediately hired the prostitute as a housemaid and he quickly forgot all the religious knowledge and the rules he had learned and practiced. He unjustly abandoned his own good wife and old parents, and became a drunkard. He also took to cheating money out of people through gambling and frauds, and even to robbing people on the street.

Thus he spent his entire life engaged in criminal activities to maintain the prostitute and her ten children. At the age of 88 he fathered one last son, Narayana, who became his favorite child. Totally absorbed in his attachment for the little boy, Ajamila did not realize that death was approaching, and when three Yamadutas came to take him away, Ajamila started to call out for little Narayana. Because Ajamila had pronounced the name of God in perfect sincerity, the messengers of Vishnu, the Vishnudutas, arrived to save him.

"You are the servants of Yama, who is Dharmaraja," they told the perplexed Yamadutas, "and therefore you should be able to understand the principles of religion, and recognize what kind of people must not be subject to punishment."

The Yamadutas replied, "The principles of religion are the instructions contained in the Vedic texts, which are the incarnation of the Supreme Personality of God. Narayana is situated on the transcendental level, but through the three *gunas* of material nature he controls the cosmic manifestation, assigning different qualities and names to living beings. The people to be punished are those who, according to many witnesses, have abandoned their prescribed duties and committed sinful actions in order to obtain personal benefits."

The Vishnudutas replied, "Punishing a person who has already surrendered with sincerity is an act of injustice. This Ajamila has called the name of

Narayana in good faith and deep love. One who sincerely takes shelter in the name of the Supreme Personality of God is immediately purified from all sins he may have committed and is protected by the Lord."

After listening to the wonderful conversation between the Vishnudutas and the Yamadutas, Ajamila realized his mistakes and repented sincerely. Abandoning all illicit activities, he saw he had been saved at the last moment by the beneficial results of the auspicious activities he had performed in his youth, and renouncing his bodily identifications and material attachments, he fully engaged in meditation on Vishnu. He went to live alone in a Vishnu temple at Hardvara, on the banks of the Ganges, and after some time the Vishnudutas came back to take him to Vaikuntha.

In the meantime the messengers of Yama had returned to their Lord, and complained to him, saying that the good administration of justice requires one single supreme judiciary authority, otherwise they might be differences of opinion. "We believed you were the supreme magistrate," the Yamadutas said, "but now we have seen that Ajamila was saved by four men coming from Siddhaloka."

"The supreme authority rests in the Supreme Personality of God, Vishnu, who is above all the Devas engaged in the administration of the universe," replied Yamaraja. "The messengers of Vishnu, the Vishnudutas, are honored by all Devas and possess the power to protect the devotees of the Lord from all dangers. The arguments they presented to you are perfectly valid, because the highest religious principle consists of the personal relationship of love and devotion to God, beginning with calling the holy name of God. Ajamila had pronounced the name of Narayana to call his son, but at that time he remembered the Lord with love and sincerity, and this immediately saved him from disaster."

The descendants of Daksha

After listening to the story of Ajamila, Maharaja Parikshit asked Sukadeva to tell him about the secondary creation of the universe, in which all the

bodies of the living beings were created during the reign of Svayambhuva Manu.

Sukadeva replied, "I have already told you how the ten Pracetas, the sons of Pracinabarhi, emerged from the ocean where they had meditated for long years, and after clearing many lands from the great forests that had covered them, they married Marisa, the daughter of the Apsara Pramlocha, who gave birth to Prajapati Daksha."

Sukadeva continued by narrating how Daksha had created, from his own mind, all the forms of the heavenly beings, the human beings and the demonic beings, and the various types of animals as well. To become more efficient in that work, Daksha went to perform difficult austerities and ritual ceremonies for the worship of God in the place called Aghamarshana, in the Vindhya mountains. The prayers and praise offered to God by Daksha became famous as the *Hamsa gubhya* prayers.

Pleased by his faith and sincere desire to engage in service, Vishnu went to bless Daksha and suggested him to marry Asikni, the daughter of Prajapati Panchajana. Following the order of Vishnu, Daksha generated 10,000 sons, who became known as the Haryasvas. When Daksha ordered them to produce a progeny in turn, the Haryasvas traveled west, to the holy place called Narayana sara at the estuary of river Sindhu, and there they engaged in deep meditation to acquire the power needed to perform their task.

Narada Rishi had observed them thus engaged in austerity, and went to speak to them. "Your father knows everything," he said, "but you are still young and inexperienced, and you did not understand his order correctly. You have not travelled much, and so you do not know that there is a land where only one man lives, and where is a tunnel to a place from which, once entered, one can never get out. This man is the husband of a woman who likes to dress in many attractive clothes. In that land there is a river flowing in both directions, a wonderful house made of 25 materials, a swan singing in many ways, and an object made of thunderbolts and sharp razors that automatically revolves on itself."

The Haryasvas understood the parable offered by Narada. There is only one male in the universe - God - and the place from which one does not return is Vaikuntha, the spiritual world. The restless woman is material

nature, that always creates and destroys at the same time, and the house made of 25 elements is the material body. The swan represents the Vedic scriptures, while the sharp cutting object is Time. Without knowing these things, engaging in family life is very dangerous.

The Haryasvas offered their homage to Narada, recognizing him as their *guru*, and turned to the spiritual existence, thus disobeying their father.

Daksha generated 1,000 more sons, who became known as Savalasvas, and gave them the same orders. The Savalasvas too went to the Narayana saras to engage in austerities by offering their homage to Narayana. Again, Narada approached these sons of Daksha and convinced them to follow the example of their elder brothers.

When he learned that the second group of his sons had also disobeyed his orders because of Narada's preaching, he became very angry and cursed him for interfering with his service, pushing inexperienced boys on to the path of renunciation without having fulfilled their duties or really acquired the necessary knowledge. Because of Daksha's curse, Narada cannot reside in any place, although he can travel all around the universe. Narada serenely accepted that restriction and did not even try to protest.

On Brahma's request, Prajapati Daksha generated 60 daughters, of which 10 married Yamaraja, 17 Kasyapa, 37 Chandra, and 2 each went to Bhuta, Krishasva and Angira. The wives of Yama were Bhanu, Lamba, Kakud, Yami, Visva, Sadhya, Marutvati, Vasu, Muhurta and Sankalpa.

Bhanu gave birth to Deva Rishabha, who became father of Indrasena, and Lamba had a son named Vidyota, who is the origin of all the clouds. Kakud gave birth to a son named Sankata, the father of Kikata, who generated the group of heavenly beings called Durga. Yami gave birth to Svarga, who became the father of Nandi. Visva became the mother of the heavenly beings called Visvadevas, who did not have a progeny. Sadhya gave birth to the heavenly beings called Sadhyas, who had a son named Arthasiddhi. Marutvati gave birth to the twins named Marutvari and Jayanta, who is also called Upendra and is an emanation of Lord Vasudeva. Muhurta gave birth to the heavenly beings known as Mauhurtikas, in charge of assigning the proper time to the results of the actions of living beings. Sankalpa had a son named Sankalpa, who became the father of Kama.

The sons of Vasu are known as the Vasus - Drona, Prana, Dhruva, Arka, Agni, Dosa, Vastu and Vibhvasu. Abhimati, the wife of the Vasu Drona, gave birth to many sons, including Harsha, Soka and Bhaya. Urjasvati, the wife of Prana, gave birth to Saha, Ayus and Purojava. Dharani, the wife of Dhruva, gave birth to many sons, who founded many cities. Vasana, the wife of Arka, gave birth to many sons including Tarsha. Agni generated many sons including Dravinaka with Vasana, and with Krittika he fathered Skanda (Karttikeya), who had many sons including Visakha. Sarvari, the wife of Dosa, gave birth to Sisumara, who was a divine manifestation. Angirasi, the wife of Vastu, gave birth to the great architect Visvakarma, who married Akriti and gave birth to the Manu named Chakshusa. In turn Chakshusa Manu fathered the Visvadevas and the Sadhyas. Usha, the wife of Vibhvasu, gave birth to Vyusta, Rocisa and Atapa, who became the father of Panchayama, who awakes the living beings to material activities every morning.

Among the other daughters of Daksha, Sarupa, the wife of Bhuta, gave birth to 10 millions of Rudras, of whom the most prominent are Raivata, Aja, Bhava, Bhima, Vama, Ugra, Vrishakapi, Ajaikapat, Ahirbradhna, Bahurupa and Mahan. The other wife of Bhuta gave birth to their companions, the Pretas and Vinayakas. Prajapati Angira had two wives, named Svadha and Sati. Svadha accepted all the Pitris as her own children, and Sati gave birth to the Atharva Angirasa. The daughters of Daksha who married Kasyapa were Aditi, Diti, Danu, Kastha, Arista, Surasa, Ila, Muni, Krodhavasa, Tamra, Surabhi, Sarama and Timi, and became the mothers to almost all beings in the universe.

Aditi gave birth to the twelve Devas called Adityas. Diti gave birth to the Daityas. Arista gave birth to the Gandharvas; Muni gave birth to the Apsaras; Surasa gave birth to the Rakshasas. Kadru gave birth to Garuda (the eagle carrier of Vishnu) and Aruna (the charioteer of the Sun). Kadru gave birth to many varieties of serpents, Yamini to the locusts and Patangi to the birds.

Surabhi gave birth to cattle such as cows, buffaloes and other animals with a split hoof; Kastha gave birth to the quadrupeds with an unsplit hoof, such as horses; Tamra gave birth to the eagles, the vultures and the other great prey birds; Timi gave birth to the aquatics; Sarama gave birth to the fierce

predators such as lions and tigers; Krodhavasa gave birth to the snakes known as *dandasukeas* and to mosquitoes; Ila gave birth to the various types of trees and creepers.

Danu had 61 sons, of which the most prominent are Svarbhanu, Vrishaparva, Vaisvanara, Dvimurdha, Sambara, Arishta, Hayagriva, Vibhavas, Ayomukha, Sankusira, Kapila, Aruna, Puloma, Ekachakra, Anutapana, Dhumrakesha, Virupaksha, Vipracitti and Durjaya.

The daughter of Svarbhanu named Suprabha married Namuci. The daughter of Vrishaparva named Sarmistha married the powerful king Yayati, son of Nabusa.

Vaisvanara, son of Danu, had four beautiful daughters: Upadanavi, Hayasira, Puloma and Kalaka. Upadanavi married Hiranyaksha, Hayasira married Kratu, then on the request of Brahma, Puloma and Kalaka married Kasyapa and gave birth to 60,000 sons, known as the Paulomas and the Kalakeyas, of whom the most prominent was Nivatakavacha. These very powerful beings used to disturb the ceremonies performed by the great Rishis, and were killed by the Pandava Arjuna when he visited the heavenly planets.

The text follows with the progeny of the twelve sons of Aditi, known as Vivasvan (Surya), Aryama, Pusha, Tvasta, Savita, Bhaga, Dhata, Vidhata, Varuna, Mitra, Satru and Urukrama (the *avatara* Vamana). Vivasvan had two wives: the first, Samjna, became the mother of the Manu Sraddhadeva and the twins Yamuna and Yamaraja. Then, roaming the earth in the form of a mare, she gave birth to the Asvini kumaras. The second wife of Vivasvan, Chaya, gave birth to two sons Sanaischara (Sani) and Savarni Manu, and a daughter, Tapati, who married Samvarana.

Aryama married Matrika and fathered many great scholars, who became the progenitors of the human dynasties. Pusha did not have children and lost his teeth when Daksha's sacrifice was interrupted by the servants of Shiva. Prajapati Tvasta married Rachana, the daughter of the Daityas, and fathered two extremely powerful sons: Sannivesa and Visvarupa. Although Visvarupa was a descendent of the Daityas, mortal enemies of the Devas, Indra chose him as the officiating priest for the Devas when Brihaspati abandoned them because of their lack of respect.

Indra and Vritrasura

Maharaja Parikshit asked Sukadeva why Brihaspati, the priest of the Devas, had abandoned them, and what offense had been committed. "The king of the heavenly planets Indra had become very proud of his immense wealth and glory," Sukadeva replied. "One day he was sitting with his consort Saci in the royal hall, surrounded by the greatest heavenly beings and served by his court."

When Brihaspati, priest and *guru* of the Devas, entered the hall, Indra neglected to stand up to offer respect, and rather pretended he had not even seen him. Brihaspati was saddened but returned home in silence, without throwing any curse. Soon Indra realized that he had committed a serious mistake and decided to go and beg forgiveness from his *guru*, but Brihaspati made himself invisible and Indra was unable to find him. The Daityas came to know about it, and on the instructions of their priest Sukracharya they immediately went to war against the Devas, defeating them in battle.

Sukadeva continued to say that the Devas, terrified at that bad turn of events, had gone to ask help from Brahma, and Brahma had recommended them to take shelter in Visvarupa, the son of the Aditya Tvasta, accepting him as *guru* even though he was younger than them. In fact seniority is not determined by the age of the body, but by the amount of knowledge possessed by a person. Visvarupa granted the request of the Devas, although he knew well that by taking up the role of priest and *guru* one loses his previously accumulated brahminical power. To protect the Devas, Visvarupa composed a *mantra* armor called Narayana kavacha, explaining in details how it should be donned and used in times of danger. After installing the syllables of Vishnu's names on one's body, one must evoke the manifestations and the weapons of the Lord. The mystical armor of Narayana is so powerful that it always remains installed in the body of one who wears it, protecting from all dangers and extending such protection also to those who come in contact with such person.

But not everything went well. Visvarupa loudly offered oblations to the Devas because he was related to them on his father's side, but as he was also related to the Daityas on his mother's side he was also secretly offering murmured oblations for the Daityas, the enemies of the Devas. When Indra found out, he became very angry and scared, and he beheaded Visvarupa. Immediately Indra was hit by the reaction of the killing of his *guru*, and he had to suffer immensely for one entire year. Finally he decided to offer blessings to anyone who accepted to take up a part of that karmic load.

Earth obtained the blessing by which its holes fill up by themselves, and discharged one fourth of Indra's karmic load by creating the deserts. The trees obtained the blessing by which their branches grow back after being cut off, and discharged one fourth of Indra's sin in the form of sap, that is often poisonous and cannot be drunk. Water obtained the blessing of increasing the volume of any substance to which it would be mixed, and discharged one fourth of Indra's sin in the form of the foam and bubbles that appear in dirty water. Women obtained the blessing to be able to have unlimited sexual intercourses, and discharged one fourth of Indra's impurity through the menstrual fluids.

However, Indra's troubles were not over. Visvarupa's father, Tvasta, celebrated a ritual sacrifice to cause the death of the king of the heavenly beings, evoking a terrible and gigantic Asura who was named Vritra. This sacrificial son of Tvasta had a black complexion, hair and beard of the color of molten copper, and resplended like the clouds at sunset. Dancing and screaming, he shook his trident and looked ready to devour the sky and the stars. And in fact he swallowed all the weapons of the Devas when they faced him in battle.

Overwhelmed and despairing, the Devas gathered in meditation to ask Vishnu's help and soon Vishnu appeared, pleased by their prayers and praise. Vishnu recommended them not to forget that material possessions are only temporary and illusory, and that the best boon they could ask from God was simply to get the opportunity to engage in divine service. Then he advised them to approach Dadhici Rishi, also called Dadhyancha, who had instructed the Asvini kumaras in the powerful *mantras* known as Asvasira. Those same *mantras* had been given to Tvasta, who had taught them to Visvarupa in the form of the Narayana kavacha. Dadhici would gladly offer

his body for the cause of the Devas, and from his bones Indra would be able to create a divine thunderbolt, charged with the power of the Narayana kavacha, that could defeat Vritrasura.

As Vishnu had foretold, Dadhici Rishi graciously accepted to help the Devas in their mission to protect the universe. Armed with the thunderbolt produced by the bones of the Rishi and riding his elephant Airavata, Indra engaged in battle against Vritrasura, while all around them the Devas clashed with the Daityas. The battle was terrible and the valiant Vritrasura had the opportunity to show his great qualities, encouraging the Daityas to fight bravely to obtain a higher reward in their next lifetime, and rebuking the Devas for the immoral action of attacking their enemies' back while they retreated.

"You killed your *guru*, who was a qualified *brahmana*," said Vritra to Indra, "after appointing him as your officiating priest, and therefore you have lost all glory and good fortune. You have become a lowly butcher, who cuts his victim's head shamelessly. After I kill you with my trident, your body will be only fit as a meal for vultures, because it is too impure for fire. If on the other hand I will be killed by you on the battlefield, I will be happy to offer my body as food to other beings, because by doing so I will fulfill my duty towards my brother Visvarupa and consume my karmic reactions. So throw your powerful thunderbolt, charged with the austerities performed by Dadhici Rishi, and I will be happy to die according to the plan recommended by Vishnu, because in this way I will be free from material conditionings and I will obtain the valuable opportunity to serve God."

After saying these words, Vritra rushed against Indra, who just had the time to deal a blow with his thunderbolt, cutting off one of the Asura's arms. Vritra did not stop, and with his remaining arm he struck a terrible mace blow to Indra's jaw, so that Indra dropped his weapon, to the great shock of all the heavenly beings who watched the duel.

"Take courage and fight, Indra," Vritra said. "Look at me, I continue to fight without respite, although I have lost one arm and my main weapon. Nobody is sure to win a battle, because everything depends on God's will. Our independence is similar to that of straw dolls or wooden puppets: it is only the desire of the Supreme Personality of God that makes us move, and that creates and destroys all bodies."

Amazed, Indra recognized the deep transcendental knowledge and devotion to God demonstrated by Vritra, and started again to fight in a spirit of duty and service for the good of the universe. Throwing his Sataparvana thunderbolt again, he destroyed the other arm of the Asura and the mace in it. Deprived of both arms, Vritra fell to the ground, and opening his mouth wide like a python he advanced against Indra by pushing on with his legs, and was able to swallow him and his elephant. However, Indra was protected by the Narayana kavacha and remained unhurt although he had been devoured by Vritra; by using his thunderbolt he cut his enemy's stomach open and then beheaded him.

All the heavenly beings rejoiced at the death of the extremely powerful Asura, but Indra was obsessed by the guilt of having killed such an evolved soul. The Rishis comforted him, saying that they would perform a great sacrificial ceremony for his benefit, but immediately the karmic reaction started to harass Indra, and he had to hide in the Manasa lake inside the stem of a lotus flower, and remained without food because fire refused to enter the water to deliver him the sacrificial oblations. During Indra's absence, his place was occupied by Nahusha, who soon became very proud for that exalted position and even went to the point to making inappropriate proposals to Sachi, the wife of Indra.

From his part, Indra purified himself from the consequences of Vritra's killing only by long austerities and by offering a sincere worship to Vishnu. Finally he was able to return to his capital to resume his functions, and Marici and the other Rishis celebrated for him the rituals of the Asvamedha sacrifice.

Maharaja Parikshit had been very surprised hearing that an Asura had manifested such virtuous and devotional qualities, showing his nature of a highly realized soul and a devotee of God. "The explanation for these extraordinary facts," Sukadeva said, "is in the story of Vritra's previous lifetimes, that I heard as told by Vyasa, Narada and Devala. The story begins when Citraketu, the king of Surasena, had established his kingdom on the entire earth."

Sukadeva continued by narrating how Citraketu was very unhappy about having no heirs, although he had married 10 million women. All his wealth, his learning and the other blessings were unable to console him about the

fact that he was unable to have children, so when he received the visit of Angira Rishi, he begged help for getting a son. Angira, son of the mind of Brahma, performed a sacrifice offering oblations of rice pudding to Tvasta, and recommended the king to feed the leftovers of that sweet rice to his first queen Kritadyuti. However he warned the king, saying that the child who was going to be born would bring both joy and sorrow.

Soon the queen gave birth to a child, and Citraketu manifested his great happiness by distributing gifts to all the *brahmanas* who had participated in the ceremonies. The fulfillment of his greatest desire created a deep attachment in the heart of Citraketu, and he spent almost all his time with the child and his mother, queen Kritadyuti. The other wives of the king were displeased and worried, because Citraketu's loss of interest towards them further reduced their chances of having a child of their own and thus regain their dignity. Finally, out of despair, they conspired to secretly poison the child.

Citraketu was devastated by the news of his heir's death, and the entire court cried for the queen's mourning, including the other wives of the king, who had to pretend to be aggrieved so that their crime would not be discovered. Out of compassion for the deep sufferings of the king and his consort, Angira and Narada went to comfort them, offering words of eternal and transcendental wisdom.

The sages said, "The living entities take bodies and meet each other in temporary relationships, but inevitably they will have to separate and continue in their journey, lifetime after lifetime. Sometimes seeds sprout and grow and sometimes they do not, or the plant dies prematurely. But the soul that appears in the various bodies is eternal, just like the material elements that keep gathering and dispersing. Nothing is really lost."

Angira Rishi reminded Citraketu that when performing the ritual for the birth of his heir, he had warned him that he would experience both great joy and great sorrow. "Already at that time I could have offered you the supreme and transcendental knowledge, but because you were so anxious to engage in material life, I helped you to fulfill that aspiration. Now you know that material identification and its attachments are cause of sorrow, fear and illusion, because nothing of this is permanent. In fact, the body is the source of all sufferings, both when the pain is caused by the body itself or

by the mind, and when it is caused by other living beings or by external circumstances. Now, o king, you should meditate on your real identity. You are not this material body, but the *atman*, the eternal spirit, that existed before your birth and will continue to exist even after the death of this body. By realizing your true spiritual and transcendental nature, you will become free from all unnecessary attachments and will attain peace."

Narada gave the king a *mantra* and said that by reciting it, within seven days he would obtain the blessing of seeing the Supreme Personality of God, Ananta Sankarshana.

As the king was still overwhelmed by grief for the loss of his son, Narada called back the soul of the dead child and asked it to return into the body it had abandoned, to pacify his parents. "Because you died prematurely and unjustly," Narada said, "I am now giving you the opportunity to come back to live with your family and ascend the throne as everybody expected you to do."

The child replied, "Who are truly my father and mother? In my many lifetimes I had several fathers and mothers, sometimes as a heavenly being, sometimes as a human being, and sometimes as an animal or a plant. This world is like a flowing river, in which we all travel in one body or another. But because our true nature is spiritual, non-different from God's nature, we have never been really touched or bound by the chains of conditionings and illusion."

When his mind was purified from all sufferings caused by attachment, the king found the strength and determination to engage in transcendental meditation according to the instructions of Narada, and worshiped the Supreme Personality of God by offering the prayers he had learned from his spiritual master and by fasting for one entire week. Within a few days he was thus able to see the Lord, who has a complexion as white as a flower, and is dressed in blue clothes. Decorated with a radiant crown and other valuable ornaments, and surrounded by great liberated sages such as Sanat kumara, the Lord smiled accepting the king's homage and prayers, and blessed him.

Thus Citraketu forgot his disappointment for the loss of his son, and continued to live for many years, wisely utilizing the blessings he had

received and keeping his kingdom happy and prosperous. One day, while he was traveling on his airplane, he crossed the aircraft of Shiva, who was surrounded by his companions. Shiva's consort Parvati was sitting on the Lord's lap, and that sight deeply amazed Citraketu. Lord Shiva is the spiritual master for all, the highest authority on the principles of religion: how could he remain sitting in assembly with so many saints and sages, and at the same time embrace his wife like an ordinary man?

Shiva heard the playful words of Citraketu and smiled, but Parvati became very angry and cursed him to become an Asura as a punishment for his offensive and arrogant comments. Immediately Citraketu bowed to Parvati and begged her forgiveness, graciously accepting the curse he had received, because he was aware that joys and sufferings are a result of one's past activities, and in any case they are both temporary and one should not get too anxious about them. This Citraketu, who had become already free from material attachments and perfectly realized in his own transcendental identity, was born again as the Asura Vritra.

Diti decides to kill Indra

Continuing the description of the descendants of the Adityas, Sukadeva spoke about Savita, the fifth of the twelve sons of Aditi, who married Prishni and had three daughters and nine sons. The daughters were named Savitri, Vyahriti and Trayi, while the sons were Agnihotra, Pashu, Soma, Chaturmasya and the five Mahayajnas.

Bhaga's wife, named Siddhi, had three sons - Mahima, Vibhu and Prabhu - and a beautiful daughter named Asi. Bhata, the sixth son of Aditi, had four wives named Kuhu, Sinivali, Raka and Anumati, who gave birth respectively to Sayam, Darsha, Pratah and Purnamasa. Vidhata, the seventh son of Aditi, married Kriya and fathered the five Devas of fire called Purishyas.

Varuna, the eighth son of Aditi, married Charshani and became the father of Bhrigu. The other son of Varuna, Valmiki, was born from an anthill. Agastya and Vasistha were sons both of Varuna and Mitra, the ninth and

tenth of Aditi's sons, because they were born from the sperm of Mitra and Varuna, ejaculated at the sight of the Apsara Urvashi and preserved in a vase.

Mitra married Revati and had three sons from her: Utsarga, Arishta and Pippala. Indra, the eleventh son of Aditi and king of the heavenly planets, married Paulomi (also known as Saci) and became the father of Jayanta, Rishabha and Midhusa. The Supreme Personality of God, Vishnu, appeared as Urukrama, the twelfth son of Aditi; he was also called Vamana because he was very short. Urukrama married Kirti and became the father of Brihatsloka, who had many sons including Saubhaga.

Another of the wives of Kashyapa, Diti, gave birth to the Daityas, known as Asuras or demonic beings. The first two were Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu. Hiranyakashipu married Kayadhu, daughter of Jambha and descendant of Danu. Kayadhu gave birth to four sons - Samhlada, Anuhlada, Hlada and Prahlada - and a daughter, Simhika, who married the Asura Vipracit and gave birth to the Asura Rahu, who was beheaded by the Lord when he disguised himself as a Deva to drink the nectar of immortality.

Samhlada married Kriti, who gave birth to Panchajanya. Hlada married Dhamani, who had two sons, named Vatapi and Ilvala; these two amused themselves by killing people in a very original way. Vatapi took the form of a ram and had himself butchered, cooked and served to traveling guests, then from the stomach of the unfortunate victim he returned to life in his original form. The trick did not work with Agastya Muni, whose power was greater than Vatapi's and quickly digested his meal before Vatapi was able to resurrect himself and rip Agastya from within.

Anuhlada married Surya, who had two sons, Baskala and Mahisha. Prahlada had one son only, Virochana, who became the father of Bali Maharaja. Bali married Asana and had 100 sons, the eldest of whom was Bana, a great devotee of Lord Shiva. Diti also gave birth to the 49 Maruts. None of them had children, but they obtained from Indra the position of controllers of the winds, due to their affinity for the time they spent together in the womb of Diti.

The story of how Indra entered the womb of Diti is very interesting. When her sons Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu were killed by Vishnu, Diti

became angry with Indra because Vishnu always intervenes to protect the Devas, the administrators of the universe, against the attacks of the Asuras. Thus Diti decided to find a way to kill Indra, and first of all she tried to obtain that power by earning a special blessing from her husband Kasyapa, who was a great and powerful Rishi. Moved and pleased by Diti's service, Kasyapa promised her any boon she wished for, but he was shocked when she asked for a son who would be able to kill the king of the heavenly planets. "Alas," Kasyapa lamented, "in my delusion and attachment I convinced myself that my position as husband gave me the legitimate right to be devoutly worshiped like God himself by my wife and the absolute power to grant boons to reward her faithfulness and service. This atrocious situation is my fault, and is due to my ignorance."

Then he told Diti: "For one entire year you will have to observe a special *vrata*, and if any imperfection will happen, instead of a son who will kill Indra you will obtain a son who will be favorable to Indra. For the entire duration of the *vrata* you will carefully avoid committing any physical or verbal violence, pronounce curses or tell lies. You will avoid the company of bad people. You will not touch any impure object, cut your hair or nails, or eat foods contaminated by impure substances. Do not drink water from your hands and do not enter the water while taking bath. Do not go out in the night, do not go out with your hair untied or without the required ornaments - indeed do not go out of the house at all, except in cases of important emergencies. Do not lie down with your head towards west or north, at sunrise or sunset, and do not go to bed without washing and drying your feet, without wearing any clothes or in the company of other women.

Every day before dawn you will take bath, wear freshly cleaned clothes and suitable ornaments, and before breakfast you must offer worship to the cows, the *brahmanas*, Lakshmi Devi and Lord Vishnu, as well as to women who have children and are not widowed."

Thus Diti became pregnant and went to live in an ashrama to better concentrate on her *vrata*. Indra was informed about it, and prepared a plan to neutralize Diti's efforts. He went to visit his aunt (as Diti is the sister of Aditi, Indra's mother) and remained with her, offering daily service: he brought flowers, fruits, roots, wood for the sacrificial fire, *kusha* grass,

leaves, sprouts, clay and water from the forest, always hoping she would break her vows at least once, which would afford him a valuable opportunity for action.

One day Diti was feeling very tired and went to bed at sunset, immediately after eating and without washing her feet. Indra took advantage of the situation and while Diti was sleeping he entered her womb in a subtle form, determined to kill her unborn child. By using his thunderbolt, Indra chopped the golden and radiant embryo in seven parts, but he only obtained seven smaller children who immediately started to cry. Again Indra used his thunderbolt to cut each of those embryos in seven parts, but again each piece continued to live independently. Then the 49 Maruts addressed Indra by calling him brother, because they were together in Diti's womb, and Indra happily accepted their friendship.

Diti's son was able to survive Indra's thunderbolt by dividing himself in 49 embryos because Diti had purified herself through the meditation and worship offered to Vishnu for almost one year. Seeing that the Maruts were safe and sound, and had acquired the position of administrators of the universe due to Indra's friendship, Diti was very pleased and accepted the king of the heavenly planets as her own son.

The story of Prahlada

Parikshit Maharaja had been very impressed by the fact that Vishnu, the Supreme Personality of God, is impartial and benevolent towards all, yet he comes to the rescue of Indra and the Devas against the Asuras. To expand on this interesting issue of God's impartiality, Sukadeva repeated the explanation offered by Narada Rishi to Yudhisthira Maharaja on the occasion of the Rajasuya sacrifice he performed, and during which Sishupala had achieved liberation.

Yudhisthira was amazed to see that Sishupala had merged into Krishna's body, because both Sishupala and Dantavakra had committed many offenses against Krishna, who was their cousin. Narada explained,

"Conditioned souls obtain a body to experience joys and sorrows in material life, and because of the influence of ignorance they identify with this body and become attached to its relationships, as well as to the dualities constituted by insults and praise. On the contrary, God does not have such problems, because he is never touched by ignorance. He does not rejoice when he is praised and he does not suffer when he is insulted, and he has no friends or enemies. When he punishes the demons, it is only for the benefit of the universe and all the living beings."

Narada revealed to Yudhisthira that Sishupala and Dantavakra originally were two door guards at Vaikuntha, named Jaya and Vijaya, and had already appeared as Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu, killed respectively by the *avatars* Varaha and Nrisimha. Later they had appeared again as Ravana and Kumbhakarna to be killed by the Ramachandra *avatara*. Finally they had appeared as Sishupala and Dantavakra, and in that life they had been liberated by Krishna, who had killed them with his Sudarshana disc.

The influence of goodness, called *sattva guna*, is favorable to the protection and preservation of the universe, which is the function of the Devas. Such protection is required to allow the evolution of the living beings. The very existence of the universe rests on the three *gunas*, the three qualities of material nature: *sattva* is needed to maintain and protect, *rajas* to create, and *tamas* to destroy. *Sattva* favors the Devas, *rajas* favors the Asuras and *tamas* favors Yakshas and Rakshasas, although all these are actually spiritual beings who are wearing different types of bodies.

Narada then told the story of how Vishnu had appeared as the man-lion *avatara* to kill the Asura Hiranyakashipu and protect little Prahlada, who had been severely persecuted because of his devotion to God. Full of anger on the account of the killing of his brother Hiranyaksha, Hiranyakashipu had called all the Danavas and Daityas to assembly and declared that he would kill Vishnu, who had become partial towards the Devas because they worshiped him. Hiranyakashipu said, "When the root of a tree is destroyed, the entire tree perishes. In the same way by defeating Vishnu we will be able to destroy the Devas. While I go pursuing Vishnu, you will descend to earth and eliminate all those who feed Vishnu through the performance of sacrifices and austerities, the study of Vedic scriptures and the furthering of brahminical culture. Devastate all those places where the cows and the

brahmanas are protected, where the *varnasrama dharma* is sincerely followed and where vegetarian foods are produced."

Thrilled with enthusiasm, the Asuras fondly engaged in their destruction campaign and rampaged over cities, agricultural fields, forests, gardens, mines of useful metals and bridges, so that the lives of people became completely upset and the ritual ceremonies for Vishnu and the Devas were abandoned.

Hiranyakashipu pacified his mother Diti and the wife of Hiranyaksha, named Rushabhvanu, as well as his sons Sakuni, Sambara, Dhrishti, Bhutasantapana, Vrika, Kalanabha, Mahanabha, Harismashru and Utkacha, reminding them that it is a glorious death to fall fighting against a worthy opponent, and that the soul never dies but continues its journey after a brief period in one particular body. The soul feels that it is going through changes, but that is merely an impression, just like when we see the trees move along the river bank while we travel in a boat. Because of this illusory impression, the eternal and transcendental soul believes it is the temporary body it is wearing, and makes distinctions between those it sees as relatives and all the others. But such illusion is not harmless, and in fact it creates much suffering. To better illustrate these points, Hiranyakashipu narrated the story of Suyajna, the king of Usinara, who had been killed in battle. All his relatives had come to the battlefield to mourn him, especially his wives, and the queens were so desperate that Yamaraja himself appeared in the form of a child to offer them the transcendental knowledge that goes beyond death.

Yamaraja said, "I am only a little boy, but you adults are more confused than me, yet you should have more experience about the world. Everyone, without exceptions, is born and dies, so why lament so much? In spite of my young age and my poor strength, I was able to survive even after the death of my parents, because God can protect us everywhere as he is omnipotent. Sometimes we happen to lose some money in the street, where everybody can see it, yet we are able to find it again. However, when destiny wants us to lose that money, we will lose it even if it is locked inside the house. In the same way, according to the will of God, we can survive in the jungle without any protection, or die in our own home surrounded by friends and family who are willing to do anything to save us.

The body we have is not different from the house where we live, and with which we identify ourselves. It is made of material elements, too, and therefore it is destined to fall apart. This person you are mourning and calling Suyajna used to hear your voices and reply, but he cannot do that any more. Why? In truth, you have never really seen the person who was hearing and replying, and who has gone away now. What you are accustomed to see is the body, and the body is still here in front of you - it has not gone anywhere. Those who have the knowledge of spiritual realization know that the soul is eternal, and therefore they are not overwhelmed by grief in front of death, but it is very difficult to give good advice to those who are deeply immersed in illusion.

In the forest, a hunter caught the female of a *kulinga* bird. Her companion saw her cry, entangled in the mesh, and realized he was unable to help her. He remembered their helpless and hungry children waiting in the nest, and cried with his wife until the hunter killed him with an arrow. What is the point of crying? You can sit here and lament for hundreds of years, yet you will not be able to bring your relative back to life, and in the meantime your life will be wasted as well."

After pacifying his family, Hiranyakashipu busied himself planning his battle against Vishnu. To begin with, he had to protect himself from death and physical decay due to old age, and to conquer the entire universe up to Brahmaloaka. So he went to the valley of mount Mandara and started to perform great austerities in a very uncomfortable position, standing perfectly still with arms raised to the sky. Soon the power of his determination produced a great heat, fire and smoke that suffocated the planets. Disturbed, the Devas went to seek help from Brahma, who decided to offer a boon to Hiranyakashipu to put an end to his austerities.

When Brahma arrived on the spot, Hiranyakashipu's body had been covered by an ant-hill and the insects had devoured his flesh. For the grace of Brahma, Hiranyakashipu's body was regenerated, stronger and more powerful than before, and after offering his prayers to the highest administrator of the universe, the Asura asked him for the boon of immortality. Brahma granted him that he would not be killed by any of his creatures - human beings or animals - or by any weapon, indoors or outdoors, during day or night, on land or in the sky.

Emboldened by his success, Hiranyakashipu focused on the conquest of the universe. He installed himself in the wonderful palace of Indra and forced all the Devas (except Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma), the Gandharvas and the Rishis to offer him homage and worship. The only one who could not be convinced in any way to worship Hiranyakashipu was one of his own sons, Prahlada, who was a great devotee of Vishnu. During the time when Hiranyakashipu was engaged in his severe austerities, his wife, already pregnant with little Prahlada, had escaped from the palace out of fear of an attack by the Devas, and had taken shelter with Narada Muni until her husband came back. While she was in the ashrama, the queen had often listened to the spiritual discourses by Narada, and the child in her womb had developed a deep devotion for the Supreme Personality of God.

At the age of five, little Prahlada was sent to the school of the two sons of Sukracharya - Sanda and Amarka - who made all efforts to educate him in the life ideals of the Asuras, but without any success. In fact, Prahlada often took advantage of the temporary absence of the teachers to instruct his school friends on devotional service to God and transcendental science, encouraging them not to waste even a moment of their short lives in sense gratification and the accumulation of possessions.

Hiranyakashipu was not happy at all to see that Prahlada had become a devotee of his greatest enemy, Vishnu, and tried in many ways to kill him, but without success. The weapons used against the child's tender body had no effect, the elephants that were meant to crush him simply stepped over him, the poison administered to him turned into nectar, and when they threw him from a precipice, Prahlada gently floated down to the ground without any damage.

Frustrated at the sight of the serenity and determination of that child, Hiranyakashipu finally asked him how he could become so powerful, and from where his strength was coming. Prahlada answered that all powers in the entire universe derive from Vishnu, who is omnipresent.

When Hiranyakashipu challenged him, asking whether Vishnu was also present within the pillars of his royal hall, Prahlada candidly confirmed so. Furious, the king of the Asuras hit one of the pillars to vent his anger, but from inside the pillar came a terrifying sound, that seems to crack the very covering of the universe. Then from the pillar emerged a wonderful form,

half man and half lion - the *avatara* of Vishnu known as Nrisimha. Vishnu roared again: his gigantic and terrible form expressed immense anger, his open jaws showed pointed fangs; he had a resplendent mane and thousands of arms holding innumerable weapons.

Hiranyakashipu rushed to fight against Vishnu like a moth rushes towards the fire, but after playing a bit with the Asura, Vishnu carried him to the threshold of the palace - which was neither indoors nor outdoors - and holding him on his lap, he tore him apart with his own fingernails. It was dusk, therefore it was neither day nor night, and the amazing form of the Lord was neither man nor animal or any other creature of Brahma's.

After dispersing the armies of the Asuras, Nrisimha Vishnu received the prayers and praises of all the Devas, and blessed his devotee Prahlada.

The varnashrama dharma system

Sukadeva continued to narrate to Parikshit the conversation between Narada Rishi and Yudhisthira (Parikshit's grand uncle) on the occasion of the Rajasuya sacrifice performed by the king. Maharaja Yudhisthira took the opportunity of Narada's visit to ask him how society should be organized, and Narada explained him in detail the *varnashrama dharma* system and the specific duties of each category of people.

The general principles that all human beings should observe are, in order of importance: truthfulness, compassion, austerity, cleanliness, tolerance, ability to distinguish good from evil, control of one's mind and senses, benevolence towards all beings, charity, study of the scriptures, simplicity and gradual detachment from all unnecessary things, both at physical and verbal level. Furthermore, one should see all beings as parts of God and make efforts to overcome one's identification with the material body, remember God's instructions and develop a spiritual relationship with God through worship and loving service.

Those who are twice born, who have received the initiation to the three highest social categories such as *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaiśyas*, have the precise duty to perform the prescribed *samskaras* and actively practice religious activities, going through the four stages of personal life called *ashramas*.

A *brahmana* has six specific duties: to accept charity and distribute it to those who need it, to study and teach the knowledge contained in the scriptures, and to perform the ritual ceremonies both for himself and for others. A *kshatriya* does not beg for alms, but can perform the other five activities mentioned before; besides, he can collect taxes (but not from *brahmanas*). *Vaiśyas* engage in trade, agriculture, protection of cows and general entrepreneurship, while *sudras* can become servants of someone who is a *brahmana*, *kshatriya* or *vaiśya*.

In case of need, a *brahmana* can earn his livelihood with the activities that are characteristic of the *vaiśyas*, or beg alms or collect the agricultural products left behind in the fields or in the market places at the end of a work day. This activity is much more respectable than entering the service of *sudras* or materialistic and degraded persons. The characteristics by which one can recognize a *brahmana* are truthfulness, knowledge, cleanliness, self-control, austerity and simplicity of life, compassion and kindness, and complete surrender to the Supreme Personality of God.

The characteristics by which one can recognize a *kshatriya* are valor in battle, determination and courage, patience, charity and forgiveness, the ability to control the needs of one's body, truthfulness and sense of humor. The characteristics by which one can recognize a *vaiśya* are sincere effort and sense of responsibility in working, the ability to learn, the ability to develop natural resources making them fructify. A *vaiśya* is respectful towards the Devas, the *guru* and the Supreme Lord, and always strives to support the religious principles.

A good *sudra* is respectful, clean, sincere and honest. He does not steal and always tries to protect the cows and the *brahmanas* from any aggression. A faithful wife assists her husband in his material and spiritual duties and is kind with the husband's family and friends. She engages in keeping the house clean and tidy, and creating a pleasing environment for the family.

The four stages of personal life, called *ashramas*, start with the celibate student life in the family of the Guru. The student, called *brahmachari* ("one who acts as Brahman"), must practice controlling his senses, carefully follow the instructions and humbly serve the teacher. At the two main passages of the day - sunrise and sunset - he must meditate on Guru, Fire, Sun and Vishnu, reciting the Gayatri *mantra*. Under the guidance of the *guru* he must sincerely study the Vedic scriptures, go out collecting donations, and eat only when the *guru* gives him permission to do so. He must also observe the vow of sexual continence, by which one restricts the opportunities of company with women and people interested in women, he avoids to pamper and decorate one's body attractively, and follows a specific diet to help control his senses. These rules also apply to the subsequent *ashramas*, except for the *grihastha* ("who lives at home") *ashrama* or family life, by which a married man has a license to indulge in material pleasures for the purpose of generating worthy children.

The *ashrama* by which one leaves family life to engage in austerity is called *vanaprastha* ("who resides in the forest"). A *vanaprastha* must follow celibacy rules and an even stricter diet than a *brahmachari*. He can build a hut of mud and straw for himself or use a natural cave as a shelter, but only to maintain the sacrificial fire, and he should be ready to expose himself to the harsh weather as a form of austerity. He must never take care of his body, and he will let hair, beard and fingernails grow. He can wear clothes made of tree bark or a simple dress of the color of the fire. He must retire in the forest in a solitary place for a period of 12, 8, 4, 2 years or at least one year, and engage in austerity as much as possible. When old age or disease make him incapable of performing the prescribed spiritual activities, he must observe fasting. In this way the *vanaprastha* gradually attains detachment from the material body.

A person who is expert in spiritual knowledge may enter the *ashrama* known as *sannyasa*, that consists in abandoning all material relationships and totally neglecting one's body and attire. A *sannyasi* ("who is renounced") can only own a walking staff and a water container, although it is not compulsory to keep them. He must renounce all residence, constantly traveling all over the world and stopping only for one night in each village, living on alms without depending on any particular person or place, but behaving in a benevolent way towards all beings. He must not try to get disciples or give

lectures or courses for a fee, or accumulate money in any way. A *sannyasi* who returns to materialistic activities and sense gratification, who gives importance to the body and identifies with it, is considered a rascal and an extremely degraded person. Similarly, it is abominable for a *brahmachari* not to follow the rules established by the *guru*, for a *grihastha* not to sincerely perform his duties, and for a *vanaprashtha* to live in a city or a village engaging in social life.

During his journeys, Prahlada Maharaja met a great saint who had renounced everything. On the bank of the Kaveri river, near the mount Sahya, lived this python sage, who always remained lying on the ground, covered with dust. Nobody among his previous friends and relatives would be able to recognize him. After offering his homage, Prahlada expressed his surprise in seeing that the body of the sage was definitely fat, like the body of a materialist who engages in sense gratification, eating, drinking, sleeping and not doing any work.

The python sage gladly answered that question. "In the course of evolution, the soul obtains a human body, that enables us to attain the heavenly planets or liberation, and also to give us another human birth or to precipitate us into the lower species. In the human form of life, men and women unite because they seek sense pleasures, but in my experience nobody finds happiness in this way, and so I have given up participating to materialistic activities.

All living beings constantly try to attain happiness and become free from the causes of suffering, but because they ignore that true happiness and satisfaction can be found only at the spiritual level, sooner or later all their plans fail. Even if for a certain period of time they attain success, they nonetheless remain subject to disease, old age, death, rebirth, and the consequences of their own actions. Think of a wealthy man, who has accumulated a lot of money to gratify his senses: he has trouble sleeping at night because he is tormented by the fear that his possessions will be taken away by someone - thieves, enemies, animals, or even his own family members. And in the end he will lose his possessions anyway because of the time factor. Why then one should take so much pain in trying to acquire prestige and money that we do not really need? That is the surest way to come to fear, anger, attachment, fatigue and sadness.

I have learned from the bumblebees and the pythons to be content with whatever I find without too much effort. Sometimes I eat very little, sometimes I eat much, depending on what destiny brings me. Sometimes the food is delicious, sometimes it is old and stale, sometimes it is offered respectfully, and sometimes I pick up what has been discarded by others. Sometimes I eat in the day, sometimes at night, without worrying too much. To cover my body I use whatever I can find - silk, cotton or tree bark - and I am always happy about it. Sometimes I sleep on the ground, sometimes on leaves or grass, on stones or ashes, and when it happens, even on costly beds with soft pillows. Sometimes I travel like a king, sometimes I walk alone and naked like a person possessed by a ghost. Different people have different mentalities: it is not my job to praise or criticize them. I only wish them well."

The conversation between Maharaja Yudhisthira and Narada Rishi then turned on how a family man can attain liberation and the perfection of life while still living in his own home. "A family man must honestly work to earn a livelihood," Narada explained, "and offer the results of his work to the Supreme Personality of God. To learn how to practice this principle, one needs to keep company with saintly persons and regularly listen to the activities of the Lord and his *avatars* described in the *Bhagavata* and in the other *Puranas*. In this way one becomes gradually free from attachment to one's wife and children, although externally he continues to carefully perform all his duties."

A family man is kind with animals because they are innocent like children, and refrains from committing any bad action. He is also concerned about the well being of the degraded and untouchable people and the street dogs, and so much more he cares for guests and travelers. Every day he must perform the five sacrifices, offering respect and worship to the Supreme Lord in the form of the Devas, saints, human beings and all the other living beings in general, because the Supreme Soul resides in the hearts of everyone. This is done most prominently through the distribution of *prasada*, strictly vegetarian food that has become sanctified by offering it to the Deity. According to his financial possibilities, a family man must offer oblations to the ancestors in the waning moon fortnight of the month of Bhadra, and to the relatives of the ancestors during the rituals of Mahalaya in the month of Asvina. He must perform the *sraddha* rituals at Makara

sankranti or Karkata sankranti, Mesha or Tula sankranti, during a solar or lunar eclipse, on the day of *dvadasi*, on the day of Akshaya tritiya, in *sukla navami* in the month of Kartika, on the full moon day and in other auspicious days. Ritual ceremonies may be performed in any place where a devotee of Vishnu lives, and especially in a temple where the Deity of the Lord is installed. Auspicious are all those places where expert *brahmanas* observe the Vedic principles of austerity, study and compassion, and near the sacred rivers described in the *Puranas* - at Pushkara, Kurukshetra, Gaya, Prayaga, Pulaha ashrama, Naimisharanya, Setubandha, Prabhasa, Dvaraka, Varanasi, Mathura, Bindu-sarovara, Badarika ashrama, and in the places where Ramachandra and mother Sita lived during their exile.

One who wants to learn to control his mind and senses must abandon the luxuries of family life and settle in a sacred place to practice yoga. Sitting in a comfortable posture, his back straight, the yogi must practice gradual control of breathing, until he is able to stop it. This will enable him to detach himself from material desires and control his mind, making it stable and peaceful like a fire without flame and smoke. According to the *Vedas*, there are two types of activities, defined as *pravritti* and *nivritti*. *Pravritti* is the action that elevates the human being to a better condition, while *nivritti* leads to the extinction of material desires. *Pravritti* includes the performance of ritual ceremonies and the sacrifices known as *agni hotra*, *darsha*, *punamasa*, *chaturmasya*, *pashu*, *soma*, *balibarana*, as well as the building of temples, resting homes and gardens, public wells to draw water, centers for the distribution of food and so on. When such virtuous activities are purified by the offering of their results to the Supreme Personality of God, they become instruments to attain liberation and the perfection of life.

After explaining all this to Yudhisthira Maharaja, Narada Rishi took leave and started again to travel around the universe.

The story of Gajendra

Sukadeva had already described to Maharaja Parikshit the dynasty of Svayambhuva Manu, and then he started to speak about the other Manus.

In this present day of Brahma there have already been six Manus, of whom the first was Svayambhuva. The two daughters of Svayambhuva, Akuti and Devahuti, gave birth respectively to Yajna and Kapila, two manifestations of the Supreme Personality of God, who is eternal and transcendental, and has no beginning or end. Yajna protected Svayambhuva from the attack of the Rakshasas and took the position of Indra as king of the heavenly planets.

The second Manu was Svarocisha, the son of Agni. He had many sons, among whom Dyumat, Sushena and Rocismat. During his reign, the position of Indra was assigned to Rochana, son of Yajna, the Tushitas became the main Devas and the position of the seven Rishis was taken by Urja, Stambha and their companions. In this period there was the appearance of the *avatara* Vibhu, son of Vedashira Rishi. Vibhu remained a *brahmachari* for his entire life and became the spiritual guide of 88,000 sages, who learned self-control and austerity from him.

The third Manu, Uttama, was the son of Priyavrata. He had many sons, including Pavana, Srinjaya and Yajnahotra. During the reign of this Manu, Satyajit was chosen as Indra, the king of the heavenly planets; the Satyavratas, Vedasrutas and Bhadras became the Devas, and the sons of Vasistha became the seven Rishis. In this period there was the appearance of the *avatara* Satyasena, son of Dharma, to cooperate with the Devas (then called Satyavratas) to defeat the Asuras.

The fourth Manu was Tamasa, brother of the previous Manu, Uttama. He had ten sons, including Prithu, Khyati, Nara and Ketu. During his reign, Trishika became Indra; the Satyakas, Haris, Viras, and Vadhris became the Devas, and the seven Rishis were the companions of Jyotirdhama. In this period there was the appearance of the *avatara* Hari, the son of Harimedha and Harini. Hari saved Gajendra, the king of the elephants, who had been attacked by a crocodile.

The mentioning of that story awakened the interest of Maharaja Parikshit, and Sukadeva agreed to branch out the conversation again, to narrate how Gajendra had been saved by Vishnu.

Sukadeva said, "On the heavenly planets, in the middle of the milk ocean, there is a mountain 10,000 *yojanas* high, called Trikuta because it has three

main peaks, made respectively of iron, silver and gold. Also the other mountain peaks are rich in minerals and valuable gems, and decorated with trees, bushes and creepers, waterfalls and beautiful caves that are the playing grounds of the heavenly beings. Their valleys are delightful gardens with many animals and especially birds. There are many lakes and rivers, with beaches covered with small gems that look like sand grains. The water is crystal clear, perfumed by the scent of the bodies of the Apsaras who bathe there. In one of these gardens, called Ritumat and belonging to Varuna, there is a veritable collection of trees and bushes carrying flowers and fruits, and a great lake full of golden lotus flowers and other rare and wonderful plants, that are the joy of many honey bees."

There lived Gajendra, a great and powerful king of elephants. One day Gajendra was attacked by a crocodile while he was taking bath in the lake. In spite of his huge strength, the elephant was unable to free his leg, that had been bitten, and struggled in vain for a very long time. Gradually his strength started to wane, while the crocodile, who was in its element, became even more determined to drag his big victim into the deep water. Realizing that he had no more hopes, Gajendra called out for Vishnu, the Supreme Personality of God, completely surrendering to him, and stopped fighting. With his trunk, he picked up a lotus flower and offering it to the Lord together with beautiful prayers. Lord Vishnu, carried by Garuda, instantly appeared in front of Gajendra, and pulled both the elephant and the crocodile out of the water, then by his Sudarshana disc he cut off the crocodile's head, thus delivering Gajendra. All the heavenly beings celebrated the rescuing of Gajendra and the appearance of the Lord, including the crocodile who had returned to his original form as the king of Gandharvas. Gajendra, too, became free from his elephant's form and attained the liberation called *sarupya mukti*, taking a spiritual form similar to Vishnu's, in which he was elevated to Vaikuntha.

In his previous lifetime, Gajendra had been a king in the Pandya province in south India, and was known as Indradyumna Maharaja. When he had retired from family life, the king had gone to the Malaya hills to engage in meditation on Vishnu. One day, while the king was engaged in a silence vow, Agastya Muni arrived with his disciples, and because the king failed to welcome him according to the custom, the Rishi cursed him to take a new birth as a stupid elephant.

After narrating this story, Sukadeva continued to speak about the series of the Manus. The fifth Manu was Raivata, brother of Tamasa, who had many sons including Arjuna, Bali and Vindhya. Under his reign, Vibhu became Indra, the Bhutamyas became the Devas, and among the seven Rishis the most prominent were Hiranyaroma, Vedasira and Urdhvabahu. Lord Vishnu appeared as Vaikuntha, the son of Subhra and his wife Vikuntha, and created a new Vaikuntha planet in this universe.

The sixth Manu was Chakshusa, son of Chakshu. He had many sons, including Puru, Purusha and Sudyumna. Under his reign, Mantradruma became Indra and the Apyas became the administrator Devas of the universe, while among the seven Rishis the most prominent were Havisman and Viraka. In this period Lord Vishnu appeared as Ajita, son of Vairaja and his wife Devasambhuti, and produced the nectar for the Devas. The Lord took the form of a tortoise (Kurma) and supported mount Mandara on his back to be used as a churning stick for the milk ocean. This also awakened a keen interest in king Parikshit, who begged Sukadeva to elaborate on the story, explaining in details what had happened.

"This story begins when, during a battle between Devas and Asuras, many of the Devas fell and perished, having lost their stamina and power because of a curse by Durvasa Muni. Indra, Varuna and the other Devas were worried, so they approached Brahma to ask for his help, and accompanied by him they went to Svetadvipa, the abode of Vishnu, situated within the milk ocean called Kshirodaka. Brahma and the Devas offered praise and prayers to the Lord, who is the origin of everything and lives in the hearts of all beings.

"All the Devas are limbs of your transcendental body," Brahma said. "The entire universe is God's body. Chandra is his mind, and gives the life juices to plants. Agni is his mouth, and carries the oblations to the Devas, and he also exists in the depths of the ocean and in the abdomen of the living beings, where he digests the foods. Surya is God's eye, and shows the path to liberation. Vayu is his breath, and supports all beings in the form of their life air. Indra was created from the power of God, Shiva from his wrath, Brahma from his intelligence, and Lakshmi from his breast."

Lord Vishnu, evoked by the prayers of Brahma and the Devas, appeared before them in his resplendent and wonderful form, and advised the Devas

to arrange a truce with the Asuras, because the time was not favorable for a victory. As they needed to obtain the nectar of immortality to bring back to life their fallen warriors, the Devas had to churn the milk ocean with the help of the Asuras.

The nectar of immortality

Thus the Devas approached Bali Maharaja, the powerful king of the Asuras, to ask for truce, and Bali accepted the proposal. Bali, the son of Virochana, son of Hiranyakashipu, had already conquered the entire universe and therefore he had nothing to fear and nothing to lose. Even Sambara and Aristanemi, the main dignitaries of the city of Tripura, voted in favor of the truce, and everybody got busy to produce the nectar of immortality.

First of all they uprooted mount Mandara and started to carry it to the ocean of milk, with great effort because it was very heavy. At some point the mountain slipped and fell, crushing many of those who were supporting it. Vishnu himself immediately healed all those who had been wounded, and by raising the mountain with one hand, he put it on Garuda's back and carried it to destination. As soon as Garuda had taken leave from the Lord, the Asuras called the king of the serpents, Vasuki, to become the rope for churning the mountain around.

Lord Vishnu, in the form of the *avatara* Ajita, grabbed the head of Vasuki, followed by all the Devas. The Asuras complained, saying that they had been assigned to the tail, which was the lower part of the serpent, so they wanted to switch. Immediately the Lord granted their wish, knowing that the flames and smoke emitted by Vasuki's mouth under the immense effort would cause much suffering to anyone who was holding the head.

Next they needed a support on which mount Mandara could rotate freely without sinking into the ocean; the Lord then took the form of Kurma, the *avatara* tortoise, and supported the mountain on his own shell, enjoying the movement that gently scratched its back. Then the Lord manifested in the Devas as *sattva*, in the Asuras as *rajas* and in Vasuki as *tamas*, inspiring

everyone to engage in that amazing work. He also took a form with thousands of arms, and sat on the top of the mount Mandara to keep it in position with one hand. Then Devas and Asuras began to churn the great ocean of milk, and Ajita descended to help them. That movement disturbed all the aquatic animals and produced at first a very powerful poison called *balahala* or *kalakuta*. Scared, the Devas approached Lord Shiva begging for his help.

They said, "O Lord, you are the Supreme Soul of all the living beings and can grant them liberation, therefore those who are evolved in spiritual awareness surrender to you. O Sadashiva, you have produced this material world through your personal energy, and you take the names of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesvara for its creation, maintenance and destruction. O cause of all causes, you are the imperishable Brahman, that cannot be comprehended even by Brahma, Vishnu or Indra. You are the original source of the Vedic scriptures, eternal time, determination and the path of religion that consists in truthfulness. You are the shelter of the sacred syllable Om. We pray you, please save us from this poison."

Lord Shiva agreed to help the Devas, and because there was no other way to eliminate the poison, he decided to swallow it. The terrible power of the poison merely left a bluish discoloration on the Lord's throat, and this became one of his most glorious ornaments because it reminds us of his compassion towards all beings and of his spirit of sacrifice. Some drops of the poison fell on the ground and were in turn drunk by cobras, scorpions and other venomous animals, and absorbed by toxic plants.

Devas and Asuras again started to churn the milk ocean enthusiastically, and at that time appeared the cow Surabhi, who produces unlimited quantities of milk, yogurt and clarified butter, that are required for the oblations to the fire. The great sages took Surabhi under their protection.

Next appeared the horse Uchhaihsrava, as white as the moon, who was claimed by Bali Maharaja, and the elephant Airavata, who went to Indra, the king of the heavenly planets together with his eight female elephant companions. Then the ocean produced the two valuable gems known as Kaustubha and Padmaraga, that were claimed by Vishnu. The milk ocean also produced the heavenly tree called Parijata and the dancers of the heavenly planets called Apsaras.

Next appeared Lakshmi, the Goddess of fortune, who was welcomed with great honor and worshiped by all the Devas. All the holy rivers brought water for her installation, earth brought all the required medicinal herbs, the cows contributed their products and spring itself offered all the flowers. The Rishis performed the bathing ceremony, while Gandharvas and Apsaras sang and danced, and the clouds themselves played drums, horns and conchshells to express joy. The elephants who protect the four directions of the world carried great pots of water from the Ganges, the Ocean offered a dress consisting in two pieces, Varuna gave wonderful garlands, Visvakarma many ornaments, Sarasvati a necklace, Brahma a lotus flower, and the Nagas gave earrings. After the welcome ceremony, Lakshmi chose Vishnu as her consort, placing the garland around his neck. The Asuras were disappointed, but they consoled themselves when Varuni appeared and accepted their company.

After Varuni, Dhanvantari appeared, with a black complexion and holding a pitcher full of nectar. Dhanvantari, emanation of Vishnu, is the father of medicine, and as a Deva, he is offered oblations in sacrifice. On seeing the nectar, the Asuras rushed to grab the pitcher and snatched it from Dhanvantari. The Lord reassured the Devas, saying that the Asuras would soon start to quarrel among themselves to decide who would drink the nectar first.

Then Lord Vishnu took the form of a woman of an overwhelming beauty, named Mohini. Her complexion was as radiant as a fresh blue lotus flower, and her voluptuous body emanated a very sweet scent that attracted honey bees. Dressed and decorated attractively, Mohini smiled at the Asuras, who forgot everything else, and when they approached her, she started to play and tease them in a coquettish way. In the end the Asuras, completely conquered by her charm, decided to hand over the nectar pitcher to Mohini, asking her to choose how to distribute its content.

All the Devas and Asuras went to purify themselves before sitting down in a row to receive their share. Mohini had no intention to distribute the nectar to the Asuras, because they are always engaged in creating problems to the universe, therefore she asked Devas and Asuras to sit in two separate rows, and started to pour the nectar for the Devas. Afraid of irritating her, the Asuras did not protest and did not try to prevent her actions. Only

Rahu, the son of Simhika, the Asura who causes the solar and lunar eclipses, disguised himself as a Deva and went to sit between Surya and Chandra. However, the Sun and the Moon recognized him, and Mohini called the Sudarshana disc and cut off Rahu's head. Because the nectar had not gone beyond the throat of the Asura, only the head survived, and became one of the planets. When the Devas had finished drinking the nectar, Mohini again manifested the form of Vishnu and the Asuras realized they had been tricked. Full of anger, they immediately rushed into battle against the Devas. The king of the Asuras, Maharaja Bali, was fighting from his wonderful airplane called *Vaihayasa*, that had been built by Maya Danava and equipped with all kinds of weapons and an optical dissimulation device that made it invisible. All the Asuras came to fight, eager to avenge themselves of the bad turn they had suffered; some were riding buffaloes, *sarabhas*, *arunas*, rhinoceroses, bulls, jackals, boars, deers, rams, vulture, eagles or *timingilas*.

Indra was riding on his elephant *Airavata*, who has the power to go anywhere and always carries a store of water. The other Devas were fighting from their airplanes and decorated vehicles. In the melee, the warriors clashed in couples and groups, using maces, swords, spears, and the weapons known as *bhusundi*, *chakra*, *rishti*, *pattisha*, *shakti*, *ulmuka*, *prasa*, *parasvadha*, *nistrimsba*, *parigha*, *mudgara* and *bbindipala*.

The ground trembled under the feet of the fighters, and the dust raised by them was so high as to obscure the sun. The battlefield was scattered with severed limbs and fallen bodies, and many ornaments dropped in the clashes. Bali launched ten arrows simultaneously against Indra and three more against his elephant, four against the horsemen who protected the elephant's legs, and one against his driver. Indra counterattacked with as many arrows of the *bhalla* type, extremely sharp, and destroyed Bali's weapons while they were still soaring. Then Bali grabbed a *shakti*, a fire weapon that burns like a torch, but Indra destroyed it instantly. Every time Bali chose a new weapon, Indra cut it to pieces even before he could throw it.

The king of the Asuras then decided to resort to magical weapons. First he created a huge mountain that appeared directly over the heads of the Devas, showering them with burning tree trunks, razor-sharp rocks, snakes, big

scorpions, elephants, lions, tigers and boars that devastated the ranks of the heavenly army. Hundreds of cannibal Rakshasas, naked and armed with tridents, appeared on the battlefield screaming in rage and accompanied by a roaring fire, as terrible as the Samvartaka that destroys the entire universe at the end of its manifestation cycle. Then gigantic waves appeared to sweep everything away.

The Devas were unable to neutralize those phenomena, and despairing before the imminent defeat, they approached Vishnu begging for help. As soon as the Lord appeared on the battlefield, the magical tricks created by the Asuras disappeared. One of the Asuras, Kalanemi, attempted to attack Vishnu by throwing his trident against Garuda, but Vishnu immediately snatched the weapon and threw it back against his aggressor, killing Kalanemi and his lion carrier. Then Vishnu used his disc to kill the Asuras named Mali, Sumali and Malyavan, encouraging the Devas to resume fighting valiantly.

Bali Maharaja appeared again on the battlefield and Indra attacked him with his Vajra, the thunderbolt weapon, throwing him to the ground. Jambhasura rushed to help his king and dealt two powerful blows with his mace, one to Indra's shoulder and one to his elephant, who collapsed to the ground senseless. Indra's charioteer, Matali, rushed in bringing his chariot in spite the wound he suffered from the fire trident thrown to him by Jambhasura, and then Indra hurled the thunderbolt against Jambhasura, beheading him. The friends of Jambhasura - Namuci, Bala and Paka - rushed to avenge him: Bala threw 1,000 arrows simultaneously against Indra's horses, Paka sent 200 arrows against Matali and the chariot, and Namuci was able to wound Indra with 15 very powerful arrows with golden feathers, that roared like hurricanes. Disentangling himself from the cage of arrows, Indra replied by killing Bala and Paka with his thunderbolt, cut Namuci's wonderful spear to pieces and then hit his neck to decapitate him. However, to his great surprise, he found that the mighty Vajra that had killed Vritrasura easily could not even scratch Namuci's neck skin. After reflecting on the problem, Indra followed a divine inspiration and used a foam weapon that was able to knock down the Asura.

Now the Asura army was retreating, and on Narada's request the Devas stopped their pursuit, allowing them to take Maharaja Bali to safety to the

Astagiri hill. There Sukracharya, the priest of the Asuras, used the Sanjivani *mantra* to bring back to life Bali and all the Asuras who had fallen on the battlefield but had not been seriously mutilated.

At the end of the battle Shiva went to meet Vishnu, eager to see his feminine form. After offering his homage and praise, recognizing his supreme power and totally transcendental position, Shiva asked him to manifest the form of Mohini, as she must have been the most charming woman that ever existed. Vishnu smiled and granted that wish.

Looking around, Shiva saw some movement in a nearby forest: suddenly a most beautiful woman came out, playing with a ball. Mohini's breasts slightly moved while the ball bounced, and seemed to fatigue her tiny waist and her soft coral-pink little feet. Her large wonderful eyes also followed the ball's movements, and her hair fell around her face in the enthusiasm of playing. Suddenly her dress slackened and her hair came loose - Mohini tried to gather her tresses with a hand while continuing to bounce the ball with her other hand. She shot a smiling shy glance at Shiva, who was watching her. On a gust of wind, the cloth that covered Mohini's bountiful graces slid off, revealing perfect beauty in all her body parts.

Confused and overwhelmed by desire, Shiva approached Mohini and pursued her when she ran to hide among the trees. Grabbing her tresses, Shiva pulled her close and embraced her, but Mohini was able to sneak off gracefully and escape laughing. Shiva ran after her everywhere, dropping sperm on the way and thus creating mines of gold and silver. When his desire was exhausted, Shiva became calm and was able to fully appreciate the inconceivable power of Yogamaya, the illusion by which the Supreme Personality of God binds his devotees with a variety of very strong sentiments and emotions. Seeing that Shiva had appreciated the experience and was now free from agitation and shame, Vishnu was very pleased and blessed him.

After narrating the story of the nectar of immortality, Sukadeva returned to the subject of the various subsequent Manus in the administration of the universe.

"The present Manu, Sraddhadeva, is the son of Vivasvan (Surya) and the seventh of the series. His sons are Ikshvaku, Nabhaga, Dhrista, Saryati,

Narishyanta, Nabhaga, Dishta, Tarusha, Prishadhra and Vasuman. Under his reign the Devas are the Adityas, Vasus, Rudras, Visvedevas, Maruts, the two Asvini kumaras and the Ribhus. The position of Indra, king of the heavenly planets, is occupied by Purandara. The seven Rishis are Kasyapa, Atri, Vasistha, Vishvamitra, Gautama, Jamadagni and Bharadvaja. In this age the Supreme Personality of God appears as the youngest of the Adityas, Vamana, son of Kasyapa and Aditi. Now I will speak about the future Manus. I have already explained that Vivasvan married Samjna and Chaya, the two daughters of Visvakarma. Samjna's children are Sraddhadeva Manu, Yama and Yami (the river Yamuna). The children of Chaya are Savarni Manu, Tapati (who married king Samvarana) and Sanaischara (planet Saturn). Vivasvan has a third wife, named Vadava, who became the mother of the Asvini kumaras."

Savarni will become the eighth Manu. Under his reign, the Devas will be the Sutapas, Virajas and Amritaprabhas. Indra's post will be taken by Bali Maharaja, the son of Virochana, who has been the king of the Asuras. Vishnu went to Bali to seek an alm of three paces of land, and in this way he took away all the three worlds from him. Pleased by the sincere surrender and devotion of Bali, Vishnu blessed him and agreed to reside with him in Patala, that became even more wonderful than the heavenly planets. During the eighth Manvantara, the seven Rishis will be Galava, Diptimari, Parasurama, Asvatthama, Kripacharya, Rishyashringa and Vyasadeva, who presently lives on Earth. The Supreme Personality of God will appear as Sarvabhauma, the son of Devaguhya and Sarasvati, and will take the throne away from Purandara (the present Indra) to give it to Bali Maharaja. The ninth Manu will be Daksha savarni, the son of Varuna. Under his reign the Devas will be the Paras and Maricigarbhas, while the position of Indra will be occupied by Adbhuta and the seven Rishis will be headed by Dyutiman. The incarnation of the Supreme Personality of God for this age will be Rishabhadeva, the son of Ayushman and Ambudhara, who will assist Indra in ruling over the three worlds. The tenth Manu will be Brahma savarni, the son of Upasloka. Under his reign the Devas will be the Suvasanas and Viruddhas, the post of Indra will be taken by Sambhu, and among the seven Rishis there will be Havisman, Sukrita, Satya, Jaya and Murti. The Supreme Lord will take birth as Visvakshena, the son of Visvashrasta and Visuci, and will become the companion of Sambhu.

The eleventh Manu, Dharma savarni, will be very learned in spiritual knowledge. He will have ten sons, headed by Satyadharma. The Devas will be the Vihangamas, Kamagamas and Nirvanarucis; Indra's post will be occupied by Vaidhrita, and the seven Rishis will be headed by Aruna. The Supreme Lord will then appear as Dharmasetu, the son of Aryaka and Vaidhrita, and will rule over the three worlds. The twelfth Manu will be Rudra savarni; among his sons will be Devavan, Upadeva and Devashrestha. The Devas will be the Maritas and Ritadhama will be Indra. The Rishis will be headed by Tapomurti, Tapasvi and Agnidhraka. The Lord will appear as Svadhama, the son of Satyasena and Sunrita.

Also the thirteenth Manu, Deva savarni, will have a deep spiritual knowledge; his sons will be headed by Citrasena and Vicitra. The Devas will be the Sukarmas and Sutramas, and Divaspati will be Indra. Nirmoka and Tattvadarsha will be among the seven Rishis. The Lord will appear as Yogesvara, the son of Devahotra and Brihati, and will help Indra Divaspati to rule the universe. The fourteenth and last Manu, Indra savarni, will be the father of Uru, Gambhira and Budha. The Devas will be the Pavitras and Chakshusas, and Suci will be Indra. The seven Rishis will be headed by Agni, Bahu, Suci, Suddha and Magadha. The Lord will appear as Brihadbhanu, the son of Satrayana and Vitana, and will teach the principles of religion. The total duration of the reigns of these fourteen Manus is one *kalpa* or day of Brahma, that consists of 1,000 cycles of *yugas*. All the Manus, the Devas and the Rishis obtain their position by the order of the Supreme Lord and are engaged in re-establishing the principles of Dharma at the end of each *yuga* cycle. The Supreme Lord, too, directly participates to this mission by taking birth among the Siddhas, the human beings, the yogis and the Prajapatis, as for example in the case of Sanaka, Yajnavalkya, Dattatreya and Marici.

The story of Vamana

Parikshit was impressed by what Sukadeva had said regarding Bali Maharaja and the dwarf *avatara*, Vamana. "Why did the Lord, who owns the entire

universe, go to beg three paces of land from Bali, and why did he force Bali to remain in Patalaloka even after obtaining from him what he had asked? It seems strange to me."

Then Sukadeva started to narrate in details the story of the appearance of the Vamana *avatara*.

When Bali Maharaja had crashed with his airplane during the battle against the Devas, the Asura's priest Sukracharya, descendant of Brighu, had restored him to life and pleased with his gratitude he helped him to perform the ritual sacrifice known as Visvajit. From the sacrificial fire appeared a wonderful chariot, horses similar to Indra's, a flag with the effigy of the lion, a celestial armor, a bow and a quiver of infallible arrows. Bali's grandfather Prahlada gave him a garland of never-fading flowers, and Sukracharya gave him a war conchshell. Thus equipped with invincible weapons, Bali Maharaja gathered his army and marched on the splendid capital of Indra, full of wonderful gardens, palaces built with valuable gems and very powerful fortifications, protected by 100 million aircrafts. The residents of the heavenly planets, all very virtuous and well-mannered people, were immersed in the celestial pleasures of singing and dancing, enlivened by the scent of incense and the sweet breezes. On his arrival, Bali Maharaja blew his challenge into the war conchshell. Indra looked on the Asura king and his armies, and realized it would be impossible to defeat him. Brihaspati confirmed that the Devas would certainly lose the battle and advised him to immediately evacuate the city. Thus Bali triumphantly entered Indra's palace and performed more sacrifice rituals, becoming the most powerful monarch of the universe.

The mother of the Devas, Aditi, became very sad in learning that his sons had been forced to exile, and asked her husband Kasyapa for advice on how to help them recover their homes and wealth. Just like he had recommended the Pumsavana vrata to Diti, Kasyapa told Aditi to follow the vow called Payovrata or *sarva yajna*, also meant to please the Supreme Personality of God. The ritual lasts twelve days, starting from the first day of the waxing moon in the month of Phalguna (February-March) and consists in only consuming milk and engage in the worship of Vishnu.

The day before the beginning of the *vrata*, on the new moon day, one should offer homage to Mother Earth by smearing one's body with the

earth dug by a boar, and then take bath in a river. After completing the morning duties, one should offer respect to the Lord's Deity, to the altar, the sun, the water, the fire and the preceptor. One should meditate on the Supreme Personality of God as having two heads, three legs, four horns and seven hands, that represent respectively *prayaniya* and *udaniya* (the initial desire and the end of the desire), the *savana traya* (the three movements - creation, maintenance and destruction), the four *Vedas* and the seven metrics of the Vedic hymns. His heart consists of the three *kandas*, that are *karma* (action), *jnana* (knowledge) and *upasana* (worship), that manifest in the form of the ritual ceremonies of sacrifices.

The *mantra* that Aditi received from Kasyapa for this worship then offers homage to Shiva, Rudra, the source of all powers and knowledge, the *guru* of everyone, who manifests as Hiranyagarbha, the source of life and the Supreme Soul of all living beings. His body is the source of all mystic powers, and has appeared as Nara Narayana. Then Aditi would offer homage to Vishnu, also called Keshava, the consort of the Goddess of fortune, who can give all blessings and satisfies the desires of everyone.

Then, reciting the 12 syllable *mantra*, that is *om namo bhagavata vasudevaya* ("I offer my homage to the Supreme Lord, who is omnipresent"), one should offer garlands, incense and other worship articles, bathe the Deity in milk and dress it in appropriate clothes, also offering the sacred thread and ornaments. After offering again water to the feet of the Deity, one should repeat the offering of flowers, incense and so on. If possible, one should present the Deity with good quality rice boiled in milk, with butter and molasses, and then offer these articles as oblations into the fire with the same *mantra*. Finally one should give the *prasada* to a *vaishnava*, consume some oneself, and then offer again water for the hands of the Deity and a complete worship. Then, after silently reciting the *mantra* for 108 times and offering prayers to praise the Lord, one should circumambulate the Deity as a mark of respect and prostrate oneself. The offered water and flowers should be respectfully held on one's head and then disposed of in a sacred place, then one should offer the rice pudding very respectfully to at least two *brahmanas*.

These rituals should be repeated every day, in the meantime one should observe continence and avoid unnecessary conversations. One should sleep

on the ground, take bath three times a day and subsist on milk only, regularly offer oblations to the fire and food to the *brahmanas*, sing devotional hymns to the Lord and recite his glories.

On the 13th day of the moon one should bathe the Deity with five sweet substances called *panchamrita* (milk, yogurt, clarified butter, sugar and honey), offer oblations of rice boiled in milk and clarified butter, and recite the Purusha sukta *mantra*. The worship to the Deity on the last day of the *vrata* should be particularly lavish, with the offering of many different types of foods, followed by a distribution of clothes, ornaments and cows to the *guru* and the officiating priests, and by a great banquet for everyone.

Aditi carefully followed the instructions of Kasyapa and her sincere devotion attracted the attention of Lord Vishnu, who appeared before her and agreed to take birth as her son to help the Devas recover their appropriate positions. Aditi, however, would keep the secret on the true identity of her last son.

On the auspicious day of Vijaya Dvadasi, according to the blessing received from Vishnu, Aditi gave birth to Vamana, who immediately manifested in the four-armed form of Vishnu, and then he appeared as a young *brahmachari*, of very short height. All the Devas celebrated the appearance of the dwarf *avatara* and performed the initiation ceremony by offering him various gifts.

Surya himself gave him the Gayatri *mantra*, Brihaspati gave him the sacred thread and Kasyapa the belt of *kusha* grass. Mother Earth offered him a deer-skin, Chandra gave him the *brahma danda* (the staff of a *brahmana*) and Indra an umbrella. Brahma gave him a *kamandalu* (water pot), the seven Rishis gave him some *kusha* grass and Sarasvati a necklace of *rudraksha* seeds. Kuvera gave him a begging bowl and Durga offered him his first alms. After performing the fire ritual, Vamana went to visit Bali Maharaja, who was engaged in performing the Asvamedha ritual in the holy place of Brighukaccha, on the northern side of the Narmada river.

When Vamana arrived in the sacrificial arena, everyone was impressed by his radiance, and Bali Maharaja himself got up gladly to offer him a honored seat and a foot wash. After the appropriate welcome, Bali asked Vamana what he could do for him, and offered him anything he wanted.

Vamana was very pleased with the welcome offered by Bali, the worthy grandson of the glorious Prahlada Maharaja, and replied that he would content himself with three paces of land. The Daitya king, surprised with such a modest request, said that as the ruler of all the three worlds he was in a position to give Vamana even one entire island for his maintenance, so that he would never have to beg alms again. Vamana smiled and repeated that three paces of land would be more than sufficient. Bali Maharaja agreed to deliver the gift and officially consecrated his promise with the ritual offering of water. At that time Sukracharya realized the danger and warned Bali that the young *brahmachari* was none other than Vishnu, the Supreme Personality of God, who had appeared to take away everything from the Daityas. Bali Maharaja carefully listened to the words of his priest, who advised him to break the promise made to Vamana, but decided to act against such advice.

Bali Maharaja said, "No sin is worse than the violation of truthfulness. This is why Mother Earth has declared that she can bear any weight except for a liar's. I do not fear poverty, disgrace or even hell, but I cannot betray the promise to a *brahmana*. And what is the use of wealth anyway? At the time of death one must abandon everything. Great personalities such as Dadhici and Sibi readily sacrificed even their own lives for the benefit of the people, and how many people lose their lives on the battlefield? I am now offered the opportunity to sacrifice my possessions to serve a holy person, and it is even more extraordinary if this young *brahmana* really is Vishnu himself as you say, because that is more reason to serve him without reservations if he comes begging for alms."

Daring the curse of his *guru*, Bali proceeded with the gifting ritual and as soon as the ceremony was completed, Vamana started to expand his own body, manifesting the vision of the universal form before the Daitya king. Then, with one single step, he covered all the lower planetary systems up to Earth, and with a second step he covered all the heavenly planetary systems, so that his big toe perforated the external covering of the universe. Furious, the Asuras tried to attack Vamana, but immediately from Vaikuntha arrived the companions of Lord Vishnu - Nanda, Sunanda, Jaya, Vijaya, Prabala, Bala, Kumuda, Kumudaksha, Visvakshena, Garuda, Jayanta, Srutadeva, Pushpadanta and Satvata - who drove the Asuras back. Bali Maharaja intervened, ordering his subjects to stop fighting and to retreat.

"With two steps only I have covered the entire universe," Vamana said, "so I find you unable to keep your promise of giving me a third step of land. As a punishment for breaking your oath, you will remain confined to the lower planets."

Bali Maharaja replied, "I do not care about losing everything I possess, or about being imprisoned in the lower planets, but I want to keep my promise. Therefore I pray you put your foot on my head to take your third step: I offer myself to you as a gift."

At that time Bali's grandfather, Prahlada, appeared, resplendent like the moon at night, to offer his homage to the Lord. Also Bali's wife Vindhyavali and Brahma himself came forward to offer their prayers to Vishnu. The Lord replied, "Foolish people become proud and arrogant when they possess great wealth, are born in some aristocratic family, obtain a high position, perform extraordinary activities, or even when they are young and attractive, while a person who remains humble in spite of all these blessings is truly worthy of God's favor. Bali Maharaja has shown his extreme detachment and tolerance, as well as his love for the principles of religion, starting with loyalty. Because of these great qualities, Bali will become the king of the heavenly planets under the reign of Savarni Manu. In the meantime Bali will live with all his relatives and friends on planet Sutala, that has been prepared by Visvakarma according to my direct instructions, so that his residents will always be free from all physical and mental sufferings. Nobody will be able to defeat him or defy his authority, because Bali will be directly under my protection and I will permanently reside there with him, so that he will be able to see me every day."

Happy with such blessings, Bali and Prahlada offered their homage to Vamana and gladly descended to Sutala.

The descendants of Sraddhadeva Manu

Maharaja Parikshit had listened to the story of Vamana with great interest. He said, "It is wonderful to see how the Supreme Personality of God

always remains on the transcendental level, yet he descends into this world in the form of the *avatars*. For example, I heard that the first Vishnu *avatara* was the fish, a lower form of life in which a conditioned being suffers very much. What was the purpose of that incarnation?"

Sukadeva gladly replied telling the story of the Matsya *avatara*. "The Lord appears to protect Dharma, the eternal and universal principles of religion, Vedic scriptures, the devotees, the Devas, the *brahmanas* and the cows. He is not conditioned by the form he takes, because he is always above the qualities of material nature."

The fish *avatara* appeared at the end of the last day of Brahma, when all the three worlds were covered by the waters of the ocean. At that time king Satyavrata (who in the next age would become Sraddhadeva Manu, the son of Vivasvan) was engaged in performing austerities on the bank of the river Kritamala. One day, while he was collecting water in his hands to offer oblations, he found a tiny fish and put it back into the river water. "Dear king Satyavrata," the little fish begged him, "you protect all those who need your help. Do not leave me here in this big river, where there are so many bigger fish who want to eat me."

The king picked up the little fish in his water pot and took it home, but during the night the fish grew so large that he was unable to move freely. "I am very uncomfortable here," said the fish. "Please find me a bigger place where I will be able to live peacefully."

Satyavrata put the fish in a well, but immediately the size of the fish increased: he had to pull it out again and find a lake where it could swim comfortably. However, as soon as he had entered the lake, the fish grew in size more and more, until it filled up the entire lake. Perplexed, Satyavrata carried the fish to the ocean, but when he pushed it into the water, Matsya ("the fish") spoke again. "Do not leave me here," he said, "there are so many sharks infesting the ocean..."

At that point Satyavrata could understand that the fish was certainly not an ordinary creature, but the Supreme Personality of God who was manifesting a wonderful adventure for some mysterious purpose. Thus he offered his homage to God. Then Matsya revealed to him that in seven days the three worlds would be submerged by the waters of devastation and

instructed him to prepare a big ship, on which he had to load a sample of all the herbs and plants and all animals. Then he was supposed to get on the boat with the seven Rishis. The ship would be tied to the horn of the fish with the help of serpent Vasuki, and would travel protected by Matsya during the entire period of Brahma's night.

Satyavrata followed the instructions of the Lord and during the journey he listened to the Lord teaching him Vedic knowledge, from Sankhya to Bhakti, to the stories of the *Puranas* and the contents of the *Sambhitas*.

On the request of Parikshit, Sukadeva continued to speak about the descendants of king Satyavrata, who had appeared in the subsequent Manvantara as Sraddhadeva Manu, the son of Vivasvan. A sacrifice was performed to propitiate the birth of his first child. Sraddhadeva wanted a son, but his wife Sraddha wanted a daughter. When a daughter was born, she was called Ila, and Manu approached Vasistha, who directed the rituals, asking what happened. Vasistha decided to please the king by turning the baby girl into a male, who was named Sudyumna.

One day, while he was traveling around the kingdom, prince Sudyumna entered a forest to kill the dangerous wild animals that lived there, without knowing that it was the Sukumara forest, a place sacred to Shiva where no male except Shiva is allowed to enter, unless he wants to be turned into a woman. This law had been established when Parvati became irritated for the intrusion of some Rishis who had entered the forest while Shiva and Parvati were immersed in their playful love exchanges.

Suddenly the prince became a princess, and saw that also the horse and all the members of his retinue had changed sex. Surprised and confused for that unexpected development, the princess and her maidservants continued to travel through many forests. Budha, the son of Chandra, immediately fell in love with that beautiful lady and decided to marry her, fathering a son named Pururava. Finally Sudyumna arrived at Vasistha's ashrama and asked his help to become a man again. Under the guidance of Vasistha, Sudyumna offered worship to Lord Shiva and obtained his blessings. However, Shiva did not want to upset Parvati, so he decreed that the change of sex would happen every month: Sudyumna and his retinue would be males for one month and females for the next month, and so on.

Besides Pururava, of whom he was the mother, Sudyumna had three more sons, named Utkala, Gaya and Vimala, who became kings in the Dakshina patha, south India. When the proper time came, Sudyumna retired into the forest to engage in austerities, leaving the kingdom to Pururava.

Later Sraddhadeva Manu fathered ten more sons: Ikshvaku, Nriga, Saryati, Dishta, Dhrista, Karusha, Narishyanta, Prishadhra, Nabhaga and Kavi.

Prishadhra was in charge of protecting the cows. During a rainy night, a tiger entered the area where the cows were grazing and attacked one of them. Hearing the screams of the pained cow, Prishadhra rushed in, sword in hand, but because the night was very dark his blow failed and he mistakenly decapitated the cow instead of killing the tiger. The predator was scared and ran away, but the next morning at sunrise Prishadhra saw what had happened, and to atone for the crime of killing a cow, the prince entered a life of severe austerities, abandoning all other occupations. Soon he became a great saint, and in the end he left his body in a forest fire.

The youngest of Manu's sons, Kavi, also decided to renounce the kingdom while he was still in his full youth, and he retired into the forest to perform austerities and offer worship to the Deity. Karusha became the ancestor of a dynasty of *kshatriyas* who ruled the northern region and were loyal protectors of Vedic culture. On the other hand, Dhrista became the progenitor of a dynasty of *brahmanas* known as Dharstas.

Nriga became the father of Sumati, the father of Bhutajyoti, the father of Vasu, the father of Pratika, the father of Oghavan. Oghavan's son was named after his father and had a daughter called Oghavati, who married Sudarshana.

Narishyanta became the father of Citrasena, the father of Riksha, the father of Midhavan, the father of Purna, the father of Indrasena, the father of Vitihotra, the father of Satyasrava, the father of Urusrava, the father of Devadatta, the father of Agnivesya - a direct incarnation of the Deva Agni, who became famous also as Kanina and Jatukarnya. Agnivesya was the progenitor or a dynasty of *brahmanas* known as Agnivesyana.

Dishta had a son, Nabhaga, who became a *vaisya*. Nabhaga's son was Bhalandana, the father of Vatsapriti, the father of Pramsu, the father of

Pramati, the father of Khanitra, the father of Chakshusa, the father of Vivimsati, the father of Rambha, who was the father of the great king Khaninetra. Khaninetra became father of king Karandhama, the father of Avikshit, the father of emperor Marutta.

Marutta performed a sacrifice ritual with the help of the great mystic Samvarta, the son of Angira: all the utensils of the ritual were made of pure gold and Indra, the king of the heavenly planets, drank so much *soma rasa* that he lost control of himself. Marutta became the father of Dama, the father of Rajyavardhana, the father of Sudhriti, the father of Nara, the father of Kevala, the father of Dhundhuman, the father of Vegavan, the father of Budha, the father of Trinabindhu, who became the ruler of the entire earth and married the Apsara Alambusha. From her, Trinabindhu had three sons (Visala, Sunyabandhu and Dhumraketu) and a daughter named Ilavila. Ilavila married the great mystic Visrava and became the mother of the Deva Kuvera.

Of the three sons of Trinabindhu, Visala became the progenitor of a dynasty and built the palace known as Vaisali. He also became the father of Hemachandra, the father of Dhumraksha, the father of Samyama, the father of Devaja and Krishasva. Krishasva was the father of Somadatta, who by his worship to Vishnu obtained residence on a very high planet. Somadatta became the father of Sumati, the father of Janamejaya.

Another of Manu's sons, Saryati, had a very beautiful daughter named Sukanya. Together they journeyed to visit the ashrama of Cyavana Muni. During a stop in the journey, Sukanya and her young friends entered the forest to collect some fruits and found an ant-hill with two holes, inside which they could see two tiny lights. Intrigued, Sukanya used a pointed twig to try to take those little lights from the ant-hill, but to her horror she saw that the holes started leaking blood as they were the Rishi's eyes.

Immediately all the royal retinue of Saryati became afflicted by a bodily blockage by which they were unable to pass urine or stool. The king suspected that the problem was due to the reaction of some offense committed against Cyavana Muni, and princess Sukanya confessed her unwitting action. King Saryati went to beg the Muni to forgive that foolish and ignorant action, and Cyavana replied that now he was blind and needed to be taken care by someone. Sukanya agreed to remain with Cyavana

becoming his wife, and the Muni immediately healed the king and all the members of his retinue.

Cyavana was a grouchy old man, but Sukanya served him sincerely and developed a deep affection for him. Some time passed. One day the Asvini kumaras, the physicians of the Devas, went to visit Cyavana Muni. Cyavana welcomed them respectfully and asked them the boon to give him youth and handsome looks, because he wanted to please and attract Sukanya. In exchange, he promised the Asvini kumaras a pot full of *soma rasa*, that is generally is not offered to them during the sacrifices.

The Asvini kumaras instructed Cyavana to immerse himself in the lake in their company and Cyavana emerged totally renewed, with a divine body, so much that Sukanya was unable to distinguish him from the Asvini kumaras. Seeing her embarrassment, the Asvini kumaras revealed themselves and showed her Cyavana, after which they returned to the heavenly planets.

Some time later king Saryati went to visit Cyavana, and was surprised and angry to see that his daughter Sukanya was in the company of a man who was young and handsome like the sun. Thinking that Sukanya had abandoned her respectable husband who was old, wrinkled, sick and blind, to find a more attractive lover, the king scolded her, but Sukanya laughed and told him the entire story. Cyavana Muni later helped the king to perform a sacrificial ceremony, and as promised he offered a pot of *soma rasa* to the Asvini kumaras as a token of gratitude for their favor. Indra felt offended because usually the *soma rasa* is offered only to him, while the Asvini kumara are not entitled to receive it. However, the powerful Cyavana Muni paralyzed Indra's arm while he was trying to attack him with this thunderbolt.

Saryati had three sons, named Uttanabarhi, Anarta and Bhurisena. Anarta became the father of Revata, who built a kingdom called Kusasthali in the depths of the ocean, and had 100 sons, of whom the elder was named Kakudmi. Kakudmi approached Brahma to ask advice for the marriage of his daughter Revati, but he had to wait to be received because Brahma was listening to a Gandharva concert. When Kakudmi presented his request, Brahma said that all the prospective husbands he had considered for Revati had died and their descendants as well, because in the meantime on Earth 27 cycles of four ages had passed.

Therefore he recommended him to give Revati in marriage to Baladeva, the Supreme Personality of God, who had appeared in the Yadu dynasty.

Back to his kingdom, that in the meantime had been abandoned by all the residents, Kakudmi gave his daughter to Baladeva as suggested by Brahma, and then retired to Badarikashrama to meditate on God.

The story of Ambarisha

Nabhaga, the son of Sraddhadeva, had a son who was named after him. This Nabhaga remained in the house of the Guru for a very long time and his brothers thought that he had no intention to return home and marry, so without consulting him they divided the properties of the father among themselves. When finally Nabhaga arrived home, he asked his brothers what share of the inheritance they had kept for him, and they replied that he should get the father himself.

Nabhaga went to his father to ask for explanations, and his father advised him to go to the arena of the sacrifice performed by Angira's descendants and assist them, because on the sixth day they would become confused about the procedures of the ritual. For that assistance, the sages would reward him by giving whatever was left from the funds collected for the performance of the sacrifice.

Nabhaga followed the advice, but as soon as the Rishis had left, a black person appeared to claim all the wealth remaining after the completion of the rituals. To solve the controversy they all went to Nabhaga's father, who recognized Lord Shiva and confirmed that whatever is offered in sacrifices belongs to Shiva. Thus Nabhaga offered his respects to the Lord, who was pleased by his sincerity and gave him all the wealth he wished for. Later, Nabhaga married and had a son named Ambarisha. This Ambarisha was a great and famous devotee, and the Lord completely protected him from the curse of a powerful sage.

Intrigued by that information, Parikshit asked Sukadeva to tell him the entire story.

Sukadeva said, "Maharaja Ambarisha became the ruler of the entire world, and possessed unimaginable wealth, but he never became proud because he knew that all positions or material assets are temporary. He rather wanted to serve the Supreme Personality of God and engaged all his senses in such service. With his mind, he meditated on the Lord's lotus feet, with his ears he listened to the teachings and the stories about the Lord, with his mouth he described the glories of the Lord and with his hands he cleaned his temple. He used his eyes to contemplate the Deity and the holy places, his touch to embrace the saintly people, his smell to absorb the scent of the *tulasi* leaves that had been offered to the Lord, and his tongue to savor the *prasada*, consecrated food. He used his legs to walk to the holy places and temples, his head to offer respects to the Deity, and all his desires to further the various activities connected with the service to the Lord."

Maharaja Ambarisha offered the Lord the results of his duties as a ruler as well, and always followed the advice of the *brahmanas*. On the bank of river Sarasvati he performed great sacrificial rituals such as the Asvamedha yajna and distributed charity to the great personalities who participated in it. The subjects of Ambarisha were happy because they used to listen to the glorious activities of God and did not even desire to attain the heavenly planets.

On one particular occasion Ambarisha and his queen observed the Ekadasi fasting for one entire year. The vow was completed in the month of Kartika, and after having made his ablutions in the river Yamuna, Ambarisha performed a lavish ceremony to worship the Deity, with the solemn bathing ritual called *abhisheka*, the offering of clothes and ornaments and other similar articles. Then he distributed food to all guests and gave in charity a great number of well-decorated cows, accompanied by their calves.

After completing all the rituals of the *vrata*, Ambarisha was going to break his fast, when the great mystic Durvasa Muni appeared together with his many disciples. Ambarisha welcomed Durvasa with great respect and invited him to lunch; the Muni accepted but said that he needed to take his bath in the river before sitting for lunch.

Durvasa and his disciples went to the river, took bath and sat down to meditate. In the meantime Ambarisha was in a difficult spot, because the fasting needed to be broken at a precise time, and the window of opportunity was going to close. The king did not want to offend Durvasa by consuming food before the guest had eaten, but at the same time he did not want to destroy all the benefit of the rituals that he had performed to observe the *vrata*. To solve his quandary, Ambarisha decided to break his fast by simply consuming some water, an action that could be considered eating and non-eating at the same time. After breaking his fast in this way, Ambarisha patiently remained waiting for Durvasa's return. Arrived at court, the Muni came to know that the king had taken some water without his permission, and he became extremely angry. Although he had been respectfully welcomed by Ambarisha, who stood humbly before him waiting with folded hands, Durvasa created from his anger a demon of fire that rushed against the king to kill him.

Ambarisha did not try to defend himself or even to flee, but the demon was immediately stopped and destroyed by the Sudarshana, the sacred disk that is the weapon of Vishnu, always ready to protect his sincere devotees. Seeing that the demon created by him had perished miserably, Durvasa became scared and started to flee, but he was pursued by the Sudarshana disc. The Muni sought shelter everywhere - in the sky, in caves, inside the ocean, on various planets including the heavenly planets - but he was still always pursued by the shining fire of the Sudarshana.

So he ran to Brahma and begged for his help. "I do not have the power to stop the destruction ordered by Vishnu," Brahma told him. "At the end of the cycle of creation, by the order of Vishnu the entire universe is destroyed, and my abode with it. When this happens, I can only offer my respects to the Supreme Personality of God and surrender."

Then Durvasa ran to take shelter in Shiva. "Nobody," said Shiva, "has the power to oppose the will of the Supreme Personality of God. Not even I. The only thing that remains to be done is to approach Vishnu and ask for his protection."

So Durvasa started to run again and reached Vaikuntha, where he threw himself to the feet of Vishnu, begging forgiveness for his offenses and protection from the fire of the Sudarshana chakra. "I am not independent,"

Vishnu replied. "I am under the control of my devotees, who have abandoned all selfish desires to serve me with love. You have committed a serious offense against Maharaja Ambarisha, who is completely innocent. So I suggest you go to ask forgiveness from him and seek his protection, because this is the only way you can be saved."

Durvasa returned to Ambarisha and threw himself to his feet, and the king felt very embarrassed. Immediately Ambarisha approached the Sudarshana disc and offered his respect and prayers. "O Sudarshana chakra, you are fire, sun, moon, all the elements of matter, the objects of the senses and the senses themselves. O Lord of the material world, you can destroy every weapon. You are religion and truth, words of encouragement, sacrifice and the supreme power in the hand of Vishnu. By your radiance, you terrorize the demoniac beings, dissipate the darkness of the universe and manifest the knowledge of the sages. I pray, grant your favor to this *brahmana*. I ask this as a personal favor in grace of the charitable and religious activities performed by our family and in the name of our beloved Lord."

Sudarshana listened to Ambarisha's prayers and ceased to pursue Durvasa, who became very grateful to the king and offered all his blessings. Finally Durvasa was able to take lunch and Ambarisha, who had waited for another year subsisting with water only while Durvasa was running around the universe, also took his meal.

Ambarisha retired from family life when he was still young, leaving the kingdom to his three sons Virupa, Ketuman and Sambhu. Virupa had a son named Prishada, who became the father of Rathitara. Rathitara did not have children, so he asked the great Angira Rishi to generate for him; these sons were great *brahmanas* and became known as descendants both of Rathitara and Angira.

The descendants of Ikshvaku

The first son of Manu, Ikshvaku, was born from a sneeze. King Ikshvaku had 100 sons, among whom the most prominent were Vikukshi, Nimi and

Dandaka. Among the sons of Ikshvaku, 25 became kings in the western territory of Aryavarta between the Himalaya and the Vindhya mountains, while 25 others reigned on the eastern territories of Aryavarta, and the most prominent 3 ruled the central territories. The others became kings in various other regions.

In those times people performed ritual ceremonies for the deceased ancestors, called *astaka sraddha*; during the waning fortnights in the months of January, February and March the spirits were offered oblations with the flesh of wild animals, as the *kshatriyas* killed some of them. On the request of his father Ikshvaku, Vikukshi went hunting to gather the required offerings, but because he was tired and hungry, he took a share of the meat for himself.

When he returned to the capital, Vikukshi delivered the rest of the kill but Vasistha, the court priest who was supposed to purify the animals for the offering, perceived that there had been some serious irregularity. Informed by Vasistha about the facts, Ikshvaku became angry and banished his son from the kingdom because of that violation. When Ikshvaku retired to the forest to engage in austerities for the last period of his life, Vikukshi returned home and ascended the throne with the name of Sasada. He became a good king and performed many ritual ceremonies for the worship of the Supreme Personality of God.

Vikukshi had a son, Puranjaya ("conqueror of the city"), who also became famous as Indravahana ("who is carried by Indra") and Kakutsha ("sitting on the hump"), names that he was given to celebrate his deeds. Puranjaya fought on the side of the Devas against the Asuras and conquered their cities, but as a condition he asked to be allowed to ride Indra.

After much protesting and a direct order from Vishnu, the king of the heavenly planets consented to be transformed into a great bull and allowed Puranjaya to ride him, sitting on the typical hump that is behind the neck of the Indian race of bulls. After defeating the Asuras, Puranjaya gave Indra all the conquered cities and all their wealth.

Puranjaya became the father of Anena, the father of Prithu, father of Visvagandhi, father of Chandra, father of Yuvanasva, father of Sravasta, who built a city known as Sravasti Puri. Sravasta became father of

Brihadhasva, father of Kuvalayasva, who was helped by his 21,000 sons to kill a powerful Asura named Dhundhu and protect the sage Utanka. Because of this deed, Kuvalayasva is also known as Dhundhumara. After the battle against the Asura, of the 21,000 sons of Kuvalayasva only Dridhasva, Kapilasva and Bhadrasva remained alive.

Dridhasva became the father of Haryasva, father of Nikumbha, father of Bahulasva, father of Krisasva, father of Senajit, father of Yuvanasva, who had no children and retired to the forest to engage in austerities with his 100 wives. Moved to compassion by the sadness of the queens, the Rishis of the forest organized a ritual ceremony called Indra yajna to propitiate the birth of an heir, but there was some unexpected incident.

The king got up at night terribly thirsty, and by mistake he drank the sanctified water that was supposed to be consumed by the queens to give birth to a child. As a consequence, king Yuvanasva became pregnant and gave birth to a child who had developed in the lower right side of his belly. The newborn cried to be fed, but who would suckle him? Indra, who had been honored in the ritual ceremonies, personally came to pacify the baby and put a finger in his mouth for him to suck.

Personally protected by the king of the heavenly planets, the son of Yuvanasva became a powerful king, known as Mandhata or Trasaddasyu because all criminals were terrified of him. Mandhata ruled over all the seven continents of Earth, from east to west. He married Bindumati, the daughter of Sasabindu, and had three sons - Purukutsa, Ambarisha and the great mystic Muchukunda - and 50 daughters, all of whom became the wives of the great Saubhari Rishi.

Saubhari had spent many years in deep meditation immersed in the water of the Yamuna river, until one day, opening his eyes, he had seen a couple of fish engaged in sexual intercourse. Agitated by that sight, he desired to get a wife and went to king Mandhata to ask for one of the princesses. The king did not have objections and told the sage that his daughters were free to marry anyone they liked.

The old yogi was aware that his looks were not particularly attractive for a young woman, so he engaged seriously in transforming his body, so that when he returned to the palace to see the princesses, all of them were so

anxious to marry him that they started to quarrel among themselves to establish which of them was to become the fortunate wife. In the end Saubhari married them all, and by the mystic powers he had developed through the practice of yoga he was able to maintain them on a royal level, with palaces, gardens, parks, many servants and maids. Saubhari gave 100 children to each of the princesses. After some time Saubhari Muni realized he had fallen into material gratification and entered the order of life called *vanaprastha*, retiring into the forest to resume his austerities. The princesses loyally followed him and in turn they, too, attained liberation from material conditionings.

The most famous among the sons of Mandhata was Ambarisha, who became the adopted son of his grandfather Yuvanasva. Ambarisha became the father of Yauvanasva, the father of Harita. Another son of Mandhata, Purukutsa, married Narmada, a Naga princess who took her husband to Rasatala, in the lower regions of the universe, where by the power he had received from Vishnu, he was able to kill all the rebellious Gandharvas. Purukutsa became the father of Trasaddasyu, father of Anaranya, father of Haryasva, father of Praruna, father of Tribandhana, father of Satyavrata, who became famous by the name of Trishanku. This Trishanku kidnapped a girl on her marriage day and her father cursed him to become a *chandala*, an uncivilized degraded human being who lives outside the regulated social system of the *varnashrama*. Trishanku asked for help from Visvamitra, who promised he would not only restore him to the position of royal *kshatriya*, but even to raise him to the heavenly planets in that very same body he had at that time. A quarrel followed between Visvamitra and the heavenly beings, and Visvamitra displayed his mystic power by creating a heavenly planetary system especially for him, where Trishanku still remains suspended.

Trishanku became the father of Harischandra, who was the object of a serious controversy between Visvamitra and Vasistha. Harischandra was aggrieved because he was unable to get a child, so on the advice of Narada he went to ask help from Varuna, promising to repay the favor by sacrificing his son in a ritual ceremony. When Rohita was born, Varuna went to Harischandra to reclaim what had been promised to him, but Harischandra kept buying time and was able to postpone until Rohita grew up and could escape to the forest, armed with bow and arrows.

When he learned that his father Harischandra had fallen ill because of Varuna's punishment, Rohita wanted to return to him, but Indra forbade him, telling him he should rather travel to pilgrimage places and perform virtuous activities. After six years of traveling, Rohita found a substitute to offer to Varuna: it was Sunahshepa, the son of Ajigarta. Rohita took Sunahshepa to his father Harischandra, who finally performed the ritual and was healed from his disease.

Later Rohita became the father of Harita, father of Champa, who built the city of Champapuri. Champa became the father of Sudeva, father of Vijaya, father of Bharuka, father of Vrika, father of Bahuka, who lost all his possessions when he was defeated by his enemies and retired to the forest with all his wives.

One of them gave birth to a posthumous son of Bakula, named Sagara, who became the emperor of the entire earth. Sagara married Sumati and Keshini. Following the instructions of Aurva Rishi, who had become his preceptor while he was living in the forest, Sagara organized various non-civilized tribes known as Talajangha, Yavana, Saka, Haihaya and Barbara, introducing different styles of attire and decorations. To worship the Supreme Lord, Sagara performed the sacrifice ceremony known as Asvamedha, but Indra stole the horse that was meant to play an important role in the rituals.

The sons of queen Sumati left in search of the lost horse, and finally reached the hermitage of Kapila Muni, where the horse had escaped. Seeing Kapila sitting in meditation with closed eyes, the princes convinced themselves they had found the thief, and rushed to kill him.

The seriousness of such action immediately reduced them to ashes. The other wife of king Sagara, Keshini, had a son named Asamanjasa, who became the father of Amsuman. In his previous lifetime, Asamanjasa had been a great mystic yogi, but because of bad companies he had fallen from his position. Thanks to the power of his past austerities he had taken birth in a royal family and enjoyed the special advantage of remembering his previous lifetimes, therefore he decided to act in such a way that he would be exiled from the kingdom. Because of the absence of Asamanjasa, Amsuman became very dear to his grandfather Sagara.

As the sons of Sumati had not returned from their mission to recover the sacrificial horse, Amsuman also left to search for them, and following their track he arrived at Kapila's ashrama, where he found the ashes of his uncles, not far from the place where the horse was still staying. Amsuman humbly offered his respects to Kapila Muni and Kapila informed him of what had happened, also telling him that his dead relatives could be purified and liberated only by the contact with the sacred waters of the Ganges.

Prince Amsuman returned to his capital, Ayodhya, bringing the horse for the ritual and news about the death of Sumati's sons. Following the instructions of Aurva Muni, emperor Sagara gave the throne to his grandson and retired into the forest. Amsuman then became the father of Dilipa, father of Bhagiratha. In spite of many austerities, neither Amsuman nor Dilipa were able to bring the river Ganges to Earth.

Dilipa's son Bhagiratha continued his father's mission, engaging in great austerities to obtain the descent of the Ganges. Finally, Mother Ganges appeared before him to grant her blessing. She said, "I will descend to earth as you wish, but when arriving, the impact of my waters will be powerful. If nobody will be there to sustain it, earth will be perforated and my waters will fall into the lower regions of the universe. Besides, when I will be on earth, people will take bath in my waters to become purified from the reactions of their crimes: how will I be able to eliminate all that contamination?"

Bhagiratha replied, "Your waters will also be touched by people who deeply love God and are free from all material desires and therefore have the power to purify the degraded souls - these great saints will also take bath there and their contact will neutralize all negative reactions. And the impact of your descent will be sustained by Shiva, who is the Supreme Soul in the hearts of all beings."

After receiving the blessings of the Ganges, Bhagiratha continued his austerities begging Shiva for his help, and the Lord gladly obliged. Thus Bhagiratha mounted a chariot and drove before the Ganges, guiding her waters to the place where his ancestors, the sons of Sagara, had been reduced to ashes, and they were immediately purified. Since then, that place is known as Ganga Sagara.

The story of Rama

Bhagiratha had a son named Sruta, who became father of Nabha, the father of Sindhudvipa, father of Ayutayu, father of Rituparna, father of Nalaraja, father of Sarvakama, father of Sudasa, father of Saudasa (Kalmasapada), who married Damayanti and was unjustly cursed by Vasistha to become a Rakshasa.

Vasistha was tricked by an enemy of Saudasa, who had infiltrated into the king's palace becoming his personal cook and contaminating the food that the king was offering to Vasistha. When he realized what had really happened, Vasistha regretted having lost his temper and started a ritual that would neutralize the curse in twelve years.

Unfortunately in the meantime Saudasa was left to struggle with his new cruel and violent tendencies, and one day in spite of himself he devoured a *brahmana* who had gone to a solitary place in the forest with his wife in order to generate a child. Thus Saudasa got a fresh curse from the *brahmana's* wife, who condemned him to death if he had ever approached his own wife for sex; this curse continued to affect him even after Vasistha's original curse was neutralized, so that in order to get a child from the queen, Saudasa had to request Vasistha's personal assistance.

This son was named Asmaka, who became father of Balika - also called Narikavacha because he escaped Parasurama's anger by surrounding himself with women. Later, Balika became the progenitor of a new generation of *kshatriyas* as he was one of the very few survivors of Parasurama's military campaigns. Balika became father of Dasaratha, father of Aidavidi, father of Visvasaha, father of the famous Maharaja Khatvanga, who was invincible in battle. Even the Devas asked for his help in the wars against the Asuras, and to reward him, they offered a boon. King Khatvanga wanted to know how much longer he would live and learned that he had very little time left, so he returned home, where he immersed himself deeply in meditation and service to God, thus attaining liberation.

Khatvanga became father of Dirghabahu, who was the father of the famous Maharaja Raghu, the ancestor of Ramachandra, who is also called Raghupati. Raghu became father of Aja, who was the father of Dasaratha, the father of Ramachandra, the *avatara* of Vishnu who appeared in Treta yuga together with his emanations in the form of his brothers Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrughna, and married Sita, the manifestation of Lakshmi Devi.

To protect the sacrificial rituals performed by Visvamitra, Rama killed many Asuras and Rakshasas and other criminals. When he entered the assembly of the princes who aspired to the hand of Sita, Ramachandra picked up Shiva's bow and snapped it in the middle, like a young elephant breaks a sugar cane. Then he faced the *avatara* Parasurama and defeated him in battle.

To honor the promise of his father, Ramachandra left the kingdom and went into exile, accompanied by his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana, and they faced many difficulties and tribulations. One day they were attacked by the Asura Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, who was defeated by them, together with the local Rakshasa garrison. Then Surpanakha took revenge by convincing Ravana to abduct Sita.

The Rakshasa king hatched a clever plan: he lured Ramachandra and Lakshmana away from their cabin by using a fake golden deer, and disguised himself as a *sannyasi* beggar to approach Sita more easily. The king of the vultures, Jatayu, tried to rescue Sita because of his friendship with Rama, but was killed by the powerful Rakshasa. The Lord honored Jatayu by personally performing his funeral rites before rushing to pursue the kidnapper. While he was traveling in search of news about Sita, Ramachandra killed the Asura Kabandha, liberated Anasuya, and met Hanuman and Sugriva, the exiled king of the Vanaras, who helped him to build a bridge of floating stones over the ocean.

How did that happen? For three days the Lord had remained on the beach, fasting and praying the Deva of the Ocean, Varuna, to grant him passage over his waters, and when he received no reply, he took his bow and arrows, threatening the Ocean. Terrified, Varuna hastened to present himself and granted passage to the island of Lanka, the capital of Ravana.

Accompanied by his army of monkey-men and bear-men, Rama went to war against the wonderful kingdom of Ravana, and received the help of Vibhishana, the virtuous brother of the Rakshasa king. The great generals of Ramachandra's army were Hanuman (an incarnation of Vayu), Sugriva (the king of the Vanaras), Angada, Nila, Gandhamada, Jambavan and Panasa. Ravana's army included his son Indrajit, his brother Kumbhakarna and other powerful Rakshasas such as Nikumbha, Kumbha, Dhumraksha, Durmukha, Surantaka, Narantaka, Prahasta, Atikaya and Vikampana.

The battle was terrible, and finally Rama killed Ravana, the ten-headed Asura, with an arrow that hit him directly in the heart. Sita was liberated from captivity and returned with Rama to their capital Ayodhya, to the great happiness of all the subjects and especially of Bharata, Rama's brother who in the meantime had agreed to take care of the kingdom but simply as a representative of Ramachandra, without accepting any of the royal privileges and insignia. After being welcomed by his three mothers, the widows of king Dasaratha, Ramachandra was crowned king by the family priest, Vasistha.

Lord Ramachandra ruled the world from his capital Ayodhya for many years. He had taken the vow to marry once only, without ever having any relationship with other women, yet he did not hesitate to sacrifice his own matrimonial life for the benefit of his subjects. Ramachandra had two sons, Lava and Kusha, who were born in the ashrama of Valmiki Muni because Sita had retired to the forest.

Lakshmana had two sons, named Angada and Citraketu; Bharata became the father of Taksha and Puskala, and Satrughna was father of Subahu and Srutasena. While Ramachandra remained in the capital to take care of the subjects and personally engage in the administration of the government, Bharata went to battle against the Gandharvas and offered Ramachandra their wealth as war booty. Satrughna killed a Rakshasa named Lavana, son of the Rakshasa Madhu, and founded the city of Mathura within the great forest called Madhavana. The son of Ramachandra named Kusha became the father of Atithi, father of Nishadha, father of Nabha, father of Pundarika, father of Kshemadhanva, father of Devanika, father of Aniha, father of Pariyatra, father of Balasthala, father of Vajranabha, who is said to have been born from the radiance of the Sun.

Vajranabha became the father of Sagana, father of Vidhriti, father of Hiranyanabha, who became a disciple of Jaimini Rishi and a great Yogacharya. It was indeed from Hiranyanabha that the great Yajnavalkya learned the *adhyatma yoga*, that dissolves the knot of the attachments in the heart.

Hiranyanabha was father of Pushpa, father of Dhruvasandhi, father of Sudarshana, father of Agnivama, father of Sighra, father of Maru, who achieved perfection in mystic yoga and still lives in his ashrama at Kalapa grama; at the end of the Kali yuga he will revive the Surya Vamsa, the dynasty of the Sun, generating another son. Maru became the father of Prasushruta, father of Sandhi, father of Amarshana, father of Mahasvan, father of Visvabahu, father of Prasenajit, father of Takshaka, father of Brihadbala, who was killed in battle by Abhimanyu, the father of Maharaja Parikshit.

Sukadeva said, "I will now tell you the names of the future descendants of the dynasty of Ikshvaku. Brihadbala has a son named Brihadrana, who will become father of Urukriya, who will become father of Vatsavridha, who will become father of Prativyoma, who will become father of Bhanu, who will become father of Divaka, a great military general. Divaka will become father of Sahadeva, the future father of the great hero Brihadasva, father of Bhanuman, father of Pratikasva, father of Supratika, father of Marudeva, father of Sunakshatra, father of Puskara, father of Antariksha, father of Sutapa, father of Amitrajit, father of Brihadraja, father of Barhi, father of Krtanjaya, father of Rananjaya, father of Sanjaya, father of Sakya, father of Suddhoda, father of Langala, father of Prasenajit, father of Kshudraka, father of Ranaka, father of Suratha, father of Sumitra, who will be the last of his dynasty."

Sukadeva continued to speak to Parikshit, "As I have already explained, Sraddhadeva Manu had ten sons, headed by Ikshvaku. One of Ikshvaku's sons, named Nimi, became the progenitor of a long dynasty. Maharaja Nimi asked Vasistha to superintend over his sacrificial rituals, but Vasistha was already engaged in the ceremonies started by Indra and asked him to wait until their completion. Nimi thought that life is too short to postpone the performance of auspicious activities and decided to turn to other priests to proceed with his rituals. However, when Vasistha returned and found that

Nimi had taken steps without his permission, he cursed him to die immediately. In turn, Nimi replied with a counter-curse of the same kind. Vasistha took a new birth from the sperm of Mitra and Varuna, while the body abandoned by Nimi was preserved in valuable ointments, so that at the end of Satya yuga the *brahmanas* asked the Devas to restore Nimi to his old body. The Devas granted such permission but Nimi was not happy with such course of action, therefore the Rishis extracted the genetic code from the body of the deceased king and cloned a son who was named Janaka, also known as Vaideha. This Janaka built the great city known as Mithila and had a son named Udavasus."

Udavasus became the father of Nandivardhana, father of Suketu, father of Devarata, father of Brihadratha, father of Mahavirya, father of Sudhrti, father of Dhristaketu, father of Haryasva, father of Maru, father of Pratipaka, father of Kritaratha, father of Devamidha, father of Vishruta, father of Mahadhriti, father of Kritirata, father of Maharoma, father of Svamaroma, father of Hrasvaroma, father of Siradhvaja. Siradhvaja was also called Janaka, like his great ancestor the founder of Mithila. This Janaka became father of Sitadevi (appeared from earth during tilling, and who married Ramachandra) but he also had a son named Kusadhvaja. Kusadhvaja became father of Dharmadhvaja, who had two sons named Kritadhvaja and Mitadhvaja. Kritadhvaja became the father of Kesidhvaja, who was very expert in spiritual knowledge, while Mitadhvaja became the father of Khandikya, who was expert in the performance of ritual ceremonies. Kesidhvaja ascended the throne and became the father of Bhanuman, father of Satadyumna, father of Suci, father of Sanadvaja, father of Urjaketu, father of Aja, father of Purujit, father of Aristanemi, father of Srutayu, father of Suparsvaka, father of Citraratha, father of Kshemadhi, who became the king of Mithila. Kshemadhi was father of Samaratha, father of Satyaratha, father of Upaguru, father of Upagupta, a partial emanation of the Deva of fire. Upagupta became father of Vasvananta, father of Yuyudha, father of Subhasana, father of Sruta, father of Jaya, father of Vijaya, father of Rita, father of Sunaka, father of Vitahavya, father of Dhriti, father of Bahulasva, father of Kriti, father of Mahavasi. All the kings of the Mithila dynasty were liberated souls who continued to perform their social and familiar duties while remaining completely conscious of their true spiritual identity.

The dynasty of the Moon

Sukadeva told to Parikshit, "Until now I have spoken about the Surya Vamsa, the dynasty descending from the Deva of the Sun, Vivasvan. Now I will tell you about the dynasty descending from the Deva of the Moon, called Soma Vamsa. This dynasty begins from Vishnu, from whose navel sprouts the mystic lotus flower on which is born Brahma, the creator of the universe. One of Brahma's son, Atri, became the father of Soma, the Deva of the Moon, also called Chandra, who was instructed by Brahma to take care of *brahmanas*, medicines and stars."

Sukadeva continued by saying that after performing the Rajasuya sacrifice, Soma became enamored by Tara, the wife of Brihaspati, and eloped with her in spite of the complaints of her husband. In the ensuing war, Sukracharya, the priest of the Asuras who is the rival of Brihaspati (the priest of the Devas) took sides with Soma, while Shiva came to defend Brihaspati. Informed by Angira Rishi, Brahma intervened to stop the hostilities and scolded Soma for his escapade. Tara returned to his husband, but she was already pregnant with Soma's son, a very handsome youth with a golden complexion and immense intelligence, who was named Budha.

Budha married Ila and became father of king Pururava, whose qualities and activities were described by Narada in the heavenly court of Indra, the king of the higher planets. One of the Apsaras in the court of Indra, named Urvasi, developed a strong desire to meet Pururava and married him, on the condition she would eat only foods prepared with clarified butter, and she would never have to see him undressed except in the moments of sexual intimacy. Besides, Pururava was to guarantee the protection of the two lamb pets that Urvasi had brought from the heavenly planets, as she loved them as her own children.

King Indra noticed the absence of Urvasi in his assembly hall, and instructed the Gandharvas to bring her back to court. Indra's emissaries decided to sneak into Pururava's palace in the night to abduct the two lambs, knowing that the king would be forced to rush out to retrieve them,

without having the time to dress up. And so it happened. Running out in a hurry, Pururava was wearing nothing but his sword, and while he returned carrying the two little animals in his arms, the clever Gandharvas illuminated the night with a lightning, and Pururava appeared naked in front of Urvasi, thus violating a fundamental condition of their marriage agreement.

Abandoned by Urvasi, Pururava wandered around the entire earth like a madman, begging the Apsara to return to him, and finally he found her at Kurukshetra, on the bank of the Sarasvati river. When Pururava told her that he would not be able to continue living without her and he preferred to die, Urvasi gratified him with a virtuous sermon about the defects of women, and agreed to spend with him one single day each year, giving him glorious children. To pacify the despairing king, the Gandharvas sent him another Apsara, Agnisthali, who looked very much like Urvasi, but after some time Pururava realized he had been tricked and he left her.

In the meantime the Treta yuga began, and Pururava was inspired to engage in the ritual ceremonies that constitute the religious system prevailing in that age. In the place where he had left Agnisthali he found an *asvattha* banyan tree that had grown inside a *sami* tree, and from that wood he made two *aranis* (instruments for the fire). Since he wanted to attain the heavenly planets where Urvasi resided, Pururava started to rub the two *aranis* to make the fire, visualizing them as himself and Urvasi. This is why it is said that the fire is the son of Pururava.

In Satya yuga all the Vedic *mantras* were contained in the *pranava omkara*, the root of all *mantras*, and the *Atharva Veda* was the source of all knowledge. The Deity was worshiped only in the supreme form, there was one fire only, and human society consisted of one single category of persons, called *bamsas* ("swans"). It was Pururava who started the Treta yuga by introducing the ritual ceremonies called *karma kanda* meant to attain the heavenly planets.

From Urvasi, Pururava had six sons, named Ayu, Shrutayu, Satyayu, Raya, Vijaya and Jaya. Shrutayu became father of Satyayu; Raya became father of Shrutanjaya; Vijaya became father of Bhima. Bhima became father of Kanchana, father of Hotraka, father of Jahnu, who drank the water of the entire Ganges in one gulp.

Jahnu became father of Puru, father of Balaka, father of Ajaka, father of Kusha, who had four sons: Kushambu, Tanaya, Vasu and Kushanabha. Kushambu was father of Gadhi, who had a daughter named Satyavati and a son named Visvamitra.

The *brahmana* Richika asked Gadhi for the hand of Satyavati, but Gadhi did not consider him a good candidate and therefore he asked for an impossible gift - at least 1,000 horses as radiant as moonlight, each with one black ear. Richika did not become irritated and obtained the horses from Varuna, thus succeeding in marrying the princess.

Later, Richika performed a ritual to propitiate the birth of a son, both for his wife and for his mother in law. The Rishi prepared for his wife an oblation that would produce a *brahmana* son, and for the mother in law another oblation that would produce a *kshatriya* child, but Satyavati's mother, convinced that the oblation prepared for the young lady was better, asked to swap the two preparations. When Richika came to know what had happened, he told Satyavati what would happen, and Satyavati begged him to put some remedy to the embarrassing situation, so the Rishi moved the *kshatriya* spirit one generation further, assigning it to Satyavati's grandson. After the birth of his son Jamadagni, Satyavati became the sacred river known as Kaushiki. Jamadagni married Renuka and had many sons, of whom the eldest was Vasuman and the youngest was named Rama or Parasurama.

Parasurama is considered an *avatara* of Vishnu, appeared to exterminate the *kshatriyas* who had rebelled against Vedic culture. The 21 war campaigns of Parasurama against the kings of the earth started with the offense committed by Kartavirya Arjuna, the king of the Haihayas. This Kartavirya Arjuna had offered worship to the *avatara* Dattatreya and received from him great mystic powers, 1,000 arms and other boons that made him invincible and extremely powerful. One day Kartavirya Arjuna was taking bath in the Narmada river in the company of very beautiful women, and to amuse himself he blocked the current of the river with his arms, forcing the waters to flow backwards and inundating the camp of Ravana, the king of the Rakshasas, who was in the region of Mahismati Puri, the capital of Kartavirya Arjuna. When Ravana tried to stop him, Kartavirya Arjuna captured him very easily and then released him with great indifference.

Another day Kartavirya Arjuna was hunting in the forest and arrived at the ashrama of Jamadagni, the son of Richika Rishi. Jamadagni welcomed the king and his retinue with full honors, using the supplies provided by the *kamadhenu* cow who lived with him in the ashrama. The king was impressed by the value of the *kamadhenu* and thought she would be perfect to supply all the provisions he needed for the Agnihotra sacrifice he wanted to perform. So he decided to snatch the *kamadhenu* and took her to Mahismati Puri aided by his men.

When Parasurama, the youngest son of Jamadagni, came to know what had happened, he became extremely angry and taking many weapons pursued the king to his capital. Parasurama was radiant like the sun - he was dressed with a black antelope skin and kept his hair matted like the Rishis, but he was armed with his famous axle (*parasu*), a shield, and bow and arrows.

Kartavirya Arjuna launched the attack with 17 *aksbauhini* battalions, composed by elephants, chariots, horsemen and infantry, all equipped with many weapons, but Parasurama annihilated them all, cutting all the warriors into pieces and soaking the earth with blood. The king himself came to the battlefield, simultaneously raising 500 arrows on as many bows, but with one single bow, Parasurama shot enough arrows to neutralize all the king's arrows. Then Kartavirya Arjuna resorted to tree trunks and big rocks uprooted by his arms, and Parasurama replied by pruning off those arms with his axle. Then finally he beheaded him and took the *kamadhenu* cow back to his father's ashrama.

Jamadagni was not very happy at the news that the king had been killed, and ordered Parasurama to purify himself from the consequences of such action by visiting the holy places for one entire year, and Parasurama immediately obeyed his order.

One day Renuka, Jamadagni's wife, had gone to the bank of the Ganges to fetch water, but had remained fascinated by watching Citraratha, the king of the Gandharvas, who had descended to play in the river with the Apsaras. Renuka totally forgot her duties and came back to the ashrama carrying the water only when it was too late for the ritual ceremony. Jamadagni was very displeased and ordered her to be punished. Parasurama understood the reason of his father's anger and immediately killed his mother and his brothers too, who had remained indifferent to the father's orders.

Immediately afterwards, Parasurama asked his father to bring them all back to life without any memory of what had happened, and Jamadagni obliged.

In the meantime the sons of Kartavirya Arjuna had not forgotten their defeat; they sneaked into the ashrama of Jamadagni and killed him while Parasurama and his brothers were in the forest. After returning to the ashrama and mourning his father's death, Parasurama decided to personally exterminate all the rebellious *kshatriyas*, beginning with the heirs of Kartavirya Arjuna. He went to Mahismati Puri and made a hillock in the middle of the city with the severed heads of the sons of Kartavirya Arjuna, then he went to war against all the *kshatriya* rebels, creating nine lakes with their blood in the place known as Samanta panchaka. Finally he returned to the ashrama and performed the ritual ceremonies to bring back his father to life and raise him to the position he still occupies among the seven Rishis. In the next *manvantara*, under the reign of the next Manu, Parasurama will also become one of the seven Rishis. In the meantime he still lives on Earth, in the hilly region known as Mahendra.

Due to the exchange of oblations caused by his mother, Visvamitra (son of Gadhi and brother of Satyavati, the mother of Jamadagni) was born with the tendency to be a *brahmana*, and in fact from the position of *kshatriya* he attained the position of Brahma Rishi by performing powerful austerities. Visvamitra had 101 sons, of whom the eldest was Madhucchanda, but he adopted Sunahsepa, the son of Ajigarta born in the Bhrigu dynasty and also known as Devarata. This Sunahsepa had been meant to become the sacrificial victim in the *yajna* of Harischandra, but he was released by the Devas. When Visvamitra asked his sons to accept Sunahsepa as their eldest brother they refused, thus earning the curse that turned them into *chandalas* (uncivilized people who do not follow the rules of Vedic society). Half of them later decided to accept Visvamitra's order and were blessed to continue the dynasty.

Pururava became the father of Ayu, who fathered Nahusha, Kshatravridha, Raji, Rabha and Anena. These are the descendants of Kshatravridha: his son Suhotra had three sons, named Kasya, Kusha and Gritsamada. Gritsamada became father of Sunaka, father of Saunaka, the great saint expert in the hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Kasya became father of Kasi, father of Rastra, father of Dirghatama, father of Dhanvantari, the

incarnation of the Lord who started the science of medicine. Dhanvantari became father of Ketuman, father of Bhimaratha, father of Divodasa, father of Dyuman, also known by the names of Pratardana, Satrujit, Vatsa, Ritadhvaja and Kuvalayasva. Dyuman became father of Alarka, who ruled earth for 66,000 years. Alarka became father of Santati, father of Sunitha, father of Niketana, father of Dharmaketu, father of Satyaketu, father of Dhristaketu, father of Sukumara, who was the emperor of the entire world. Sukumara had a son named Vitihotra, father of Bharga, father of Bhargabhumi.

Pururava's grandson named Rabha (son of Ayu) became father of Rabhasa, father of Gambhira, father of Akriya, father of Brahmavit. Another grandson of Pururava named Anena (also son of Ayu) became father of Suddha, father of Suci, father of Dharmasarathi, also called Citrakrit. This Citrakrit had a son named Santaraja, a realized soul who performed all kinds of Vedic sacrifices and had no sons. The grandson of Pururava named Raji (also son of Ayu) had 500 extremely powerful sons. On the request of the Devas, Raji battled against the Asuras and killed them, restoring the kingdom of the heavenly planets to Indra. However, Indra feared the power of Prahlada, and asked Raji to personally take care of the heavenly kingdom. At the death of Raji, Indra went to Raji's sons to ask them to return the kingdom, but they refused. Then Indra turned to Brihaspati, who performed a ritual to cause the downfall of Raji's sons, who became degraded and abandoned the principles of ethics, thus becoming vulnerable - and Indra was able to kill them all.

The grandson of Pururava named Kshatravridha (also son of Ayu) had a grandson named Kusha, father of Prati, father of Sanjaya, father of Jaya, father of Krita, father of Haryabala, father of Sahadeva, father of Hina, father of Jayasena, father of Sankriti, father of Jaya, who was a very great warrior. The grandson of Pururava named Nahusha (also son of Ayu) had six sons named Yati, Yayati, Samyati, Ayati, Viyati and Kriti. The eldest of them, Yati, renouced the throne offered by his father and chose instead to engage in spiritual life. Yati's father Nahusha molested Saci, Indra's wife, and was cursed by the Rishis to become a python. Then his second son, Yayati, became king and married Devayani (the daughter of Sukracharya) and Sarmistha (the daughter of the Asura Vrishaparva).

Because it is usually the daughters of *kshatriyas* who marry *brahmanas* and not the other way around, Maharaja Parikshit asked Sukadeva to tell how it happened that the daughter of the great Sukracharya had become the wife of king Yayati.

Sukadeva explained, "Devayani was the friend of Sarmistha, and one day they went together to take bath in the river. Suddenly they saw Shiva and his consort Parvati arriving, seated on the bull Vrishabha, and they quickly came out to the water to dress up. In the confusion, Sarmistha mistakenly put on Devayani's clothes and Devayani got very angry. She considered Sarmistha's father as a mere disciple of her own father, Sukracharya, so Devayani insulted her companion for committing such a disrespectful action, but Sarmistha replied harshly, and in a fit of rage she even tore Devayani's clothes off and threw her into a well.

Not long afterwards, king Yayati arrived there and found that a beautiful girl without clothes was trapped in the well. Immediately he rescued her and gave her his own shawl to cover herself. After helping her to come out of the well, he saluted her with kind and affectionate words. Fascinated by the young and handsome king, Devayani immediately decided to marry him, and reassured him by saying that she would never marry a *brahmana* anyway because of a curse she had received from Kacha, the son of Brihaspati. Then she returned to the house of her father Sukracharya and complained about how she had been treated by Sarmistha. Weeping with anger, she asked him to order Sarmistha's father to send the girl to become one of thousands of maidservants when she went to marry the king.

After avenging herself in this way, Devayani warned Yayati that he should never have sexual relationship with Sarmistha, but when Sarmistha saw that Devayani had given birth to a child, she decided to approach Yayati and convince him to give a child to her, too. Thus Devayani became the mother of Yadu and Turvasu, while Sarmistha gave birth to Druhyu, Anu and Puru. When Devayani came to know that Yayati had fathered the children of her rival Sarmistha, she was overwhelmed by a furious anger and abandoned her husband to return to her father's house. Yayati was very attached to her and he pursued to beg her to come back, but in vain. Furthermore, he was cursed by Sukracharya, who condemned him to become prematurely old and invalid. When Yayati reminded him that such a curse would also create

problems to Devayani, Sukracharya agreed to allow him to exchange his invalidity with the youthful strength of another person who would be willing to give it to him.

Yayati asked help from his various sons, and it was the youngest son of Sarmistha, Puru, who agreed to the exchange. So the king was able to enjoy one thousand years of material pleasure in the company of his wife Devayani and ruled wisely, also performing many sacrifices to worship the Deity. Finally he became free from material desires and took leave from Devayani, restoring his youth to Puru and accepting old age. After giving kingdoms to all his sons, he put Puru on the imperial throne over all his other brothers, who were older than him.

The emperor Puru became father of king Janamejaya, father of Pracinvan, father of Pravira, father of Manusyu, father of Charupada, father of Sudyu, father of Bahugava, father of Samyati, father of Ahamyati, father of Raudrasva, who married the Apsara Ghritaci and had from her ten sons named Riteyu, Kaksheyu, Sthandileyu, Kriteyuka, Jaleyu, Sannateyu, Dharmeyu, Satyeyu, Vrateyu and Vaneyu. Riteyu became father of Rantinava, who had three sons named Sumati, Dhruva and Apratiratha. Apratiratha had only one son, Kanva. Kanva was father of Medhatithi, who became father of many *brahmanas* including Praskanna. The son of Riteyu called Rantinava became father of Sumati, father of Rebhi, father of the famous Maharaja Dusmanta.

One day king Dusmanta was hunting in the forest, and while searching for a place to rest he arrived at the ashrama of Kanva Muni. There he saw Sakuntala, a girl of incredible beauty, who was the daughter of Visvamitra and the Apsara Menaka; she had been abandoned at birth by her mother and adopted by Kanva Muni. Completely fascinated by the beauty of the girl, Dusmanta immediately married her with the Gandharva ritual and the next morning he returned to his capital. In due time Sakuntala gave birth to a son, Bharata, who was a partial emanation of God, and who grew up in the forest becoming so strong that he used lions as toys. Later Sakuntala went to the court of Dusmanta to present his son, and when Dusmanta died, Bharata ascended the throne.

Maharaja Bharata, the son of Dusmanta, carried the mark of the Sudarshana on his right palm and lotus flowers on the soles of his feet. Assisted by

Bhrigu Muni he performed 55 Asvamedha yajnas in various places along the bank of the Ganges, from the estuary to the source, and another 78 along the river Yamuna, from the confluence of Prayaga up to the source. He fought successfully against the various uncivilized populations known as Kirata, Huna, Yavana, Paundra, Kanka, Khasa and Saka, and rescued the wives and daughters of the Devas who had been kidnapped and imprisoned on Rasatala.

Maharaja Bharata married the three daughters of the king of Vidarbha, but because their sons did not look like the father, the queens killed them. To obtain a worthy heir, Bharata performed the sacrifice known as Marut stoma, and from the Maruts he obtained a son called Bharadvaja. Actually this son had been fathered by Brihaspati with Mamata, his brother's wife, and had been taken in by the Maruts. Bharadvaja, also known as Vitatha, became father of Manyu, who had five sons: Brihatkshatra, Jaya, Mahavirya, Nara and Garga. Among these, Nara became father of Sankriti, who had two sons, named Guru and Rantideva.

Rantideva became famous among the human beings and the heavenly beings for his complete freedom from attachments and his generosity towards guests. One day, after remaining without food for 48 days, Rantideva received water and some food prepared with milk and clarified butter, but just as he was starting to eat together with his family, a *brahmana* guest arrived at his door. After offering a share of the food to the *brahmana*, Rantideva and his family again sat for dinner, but just at that moment a *sudra* arrived. The *sudra*, too, received his share, and after him a *chandala* who came accompanied by his dogs. Rantideva gave up all his food and water to please the last guest, and declared that his greatest ambition was to live to alleviate the sufferings of others.

Among the sons of Manyu (son of Bharadvaja), Garga became father of Sini, father of Gargya, who was a *kshatriya* but had many *brahmana* sons. Mahavirya, brother of Garga, became father of Duritakshaya, who fathered Trayyaruni, Kavi and Pushkararuni. Also these descendants of *kshatriyas* became *brahmanas*. Brihatkshatra, brother of Mahavirya and Garga, became the father of Hasti, who founded the city of Hastinapura. King Hasti had three sons named Ajamidha, Dvimidha and Purumidha. Dvimidha became father of Yavinara, father of Kritiman, father of Satyadhriti, father of

Dridhanemi, father of Suparsva, father of Sumati, father of Sannatiman, father of Kriti, who obtained from Brahma mystic powers and taught six *Sambhitas* from the Pracyasama verses of *Sama Veda*. Kriti became father of Nipa, father of Udgrayudha, father of Kshemya, father of Suvira, father of Ripunjaya, father of Bahuratha. The third son of Hasti, Purumidha, had no sons.

All the descendants of Ajamidha became *brahmanas*. Ajamidha was father of Brihadishu, father of Brihaddhanu, father of Brihatkaya, father of Jayadratha, father of Vishada, father of Syenajit, father of Rucirasva, Kridhahanu, Kasya and Vatsa. Rucirasva became father of Para, father of Prithusena and Nipa, who had 100 sons. One of these, Brahmadata, became a great yogi and was the father of Visvakshena, who following the instructions of the great Rishi Jaigisavya compiled an elaborate description of the system of mystic yoga. Visvakshena became father of Udakshena, father of Bhallata.

Another son of Ajamidha, Nila (the son of queen Nalini), became father of Shanti, father of Sushanti, father of Puruja, father of Arka, father of Bharmyasva, who had five sons: Mudgala, Yavinara, Brihadvisva, Kampilla and Sanjaya. These sons became known as the Panchalas, and the regions where they ruled became known as Panchala desha. Mudgala was the progenitor of a dynasty of *brahmanas* known as Maudgalyas. He fathered two twins - a boy named Divodasa and a girl named Ahalya. Ahalya married Gautama and gave birth to Satananda, who became father of Satyadhriti, the famous archer. Satyadhriti became father of Saradvan, who by meeting the Apsara Urvashi had an ejaculation of sperm, which fell on a tuft of *sara* grass, and from which two children were born - a boy called Kripa and a girl called Kripi. The two children were adopted by Maharaja Santanu and later Kripi became the wife of Dronacharya.

Divodasa (son of Bhimaratha, one of the descendants of Pururava that we have already mentioned) fathered Dyuman and also Mitrayu, who had four sons named Cyavana, Sudasa, Sahadeva and Somaka. Somaka became father of Jantu and other 99 sons, the eldest of whom was Prishata, who became the father of king Drupada. Drupada became the father of Draupadi and several sons, including Dhristadyumna, father of Dhristaketu. Another son of Ajamidha, Riksha, became father of Samvarana, who

married Tapati, the daughter of the Deva of the Sun and fathered Kuru, the king from whom Kurukshetra takes its name. Kuru had four sons: Parikshi, Sudhanu, Jahnu and Nishadha. Sudhanu became father of Suhotra, father of Cyavana, father of Kriti, father of Uparicara Vasu, who had many sons including Brihadratha, Kushamba, Matsya, Pratyagra and Cedipa. All the sons of Uparicara Vasu ruled over the kingdom of Cedi.

Brihadratha became father of Kushagra, father of Rishabha, father of Satyahita, father of Pushpavan, father of Jahu. From another wife, Brihadratha fathered a son who was born in two pieces. Because he seemed stillborn, the baby was thrown into the forest, where a Rakshasi called Jara picked him up and brought him back to life. For this reason the child became known as Jarasandha. Jarasandha became father of Sahadeva, father of Somapi, father of Shrutashrava.

The son of Kuru named Parikshi did not have any children, but his brother Jahnu had a son named Suratha. Suratha became father of Viduratha, father of Sarvabhauma, father of Jayasena, father of Radhika, father of Ayutayu, father of Akrodhana, father of Devatithi, father of Riksha, father of Dilipa, father of Pratipa, who fathered Devapi, Santanu and Bahlika. Because of a conspiracy plotted by a minister of Santanu, Devapi left his father's kingdom to go to the forest and the throne went to Santanu, who in a previous lifetime was known as Mahabhisa and had the power to restore youth to people simply by touching them with his hands.

At some point the kingdom was hit by a terrible drought, and for twelve years there were no rains. The *brahmanas* consulted by the king said that the disaster was due to the condemnable action committed by Santanu in usurping the throne belonging to his elder brother, and they recommended to re-establish the proper order by asking Devapi to become king. However, when Devapi was presented with the proposal, he refused. Santanu then became the king again and the drought was ended by the blessing of Indra. On the other hand, Devapi took the path of mystic yoga and went to live at Kalapagrama, where he still resides waiting for the Kali yuga to end and for a new Satya yuga to start, for the renovation of the Moon dynasty.

Santanu married Ganga and fathered Bhishma, the great devotee and scholar and the most famous among all warriors, who defeated Parasurama

in battle and received his blessings. From Satyavati, the daughter of a fisherman, Santanu fathered Citrangada and Vicitravirya. Citrangada was killed by a Gandharva who had the same name. Before marrying Santanu, Satyavati had given birth to Vyasa from Parasara Rishi.

"Vyasa is my father," Sukadeva told Maharaja Parikshit, "and I learned the *Bhagavata Purana* from him. He taught it to me rather than to his disciples because I was free from material desires.

Vicitravirya married the two daughters of the king of Kasi, named Ambika and Ambalika, but he died before he could have any children. On the request of his mother Satyavati, Vyasa fathered Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura respectively from Ambika, Ambalika and their maidservant. The wife of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, gave birth to 100 sons - the eldest being Duryodhana - and one daughter, Duhsala.

Because of the curse of a *brahmana*, Pandu was not able to have children, therefore his three sons Yudhisthira, Bhima and Arjuna were generated by his wife Kunti respectively with Dharmaraja, Vayu and Indra. Pandu's second wife, named Madri, gave birth to Nakula and Sahadeva from the two Asvini kumaras.

The queen of the Pandavas, Draupadi, gave birth to five sons, who are your uncles. From Yudhisthira she had Prativindhya, from Bhima she had Srutasena, from Arjuna she had Srutakirti, from Nakula she had Satanika, and from Sahadeva she had Srutakarma. The Pandavas also had other sons from other wives. Yudhisthira married Pauravi and fathered Devaka. Bhima fathered Ghatotkacha from Hidimbi and Sarvagata from Kali. Sahadeva married Vijaya, daughter of the mountains, and fathered Suhotra. Nakula married Karenumati and fathered Naramitra. Arjuna married Ulupi, princess of the Nagas, and fathered Iravan. He also married Chitrangada, princess of Manipura, and fathered Babhruvahana, who was adopted as son and heir by the king of Manipur. Arjuna also married Subhadra, who gave birth to your father Abhimanyu, who married your mother Uttara, the daughter of king Viraja. The Kuru dynasty was annihilated in the battle of Kurukshetra and even you were going to be killed by the *brahmastra* nuclear weapon shot by Dronacharya's son, but you have been saved by the Supreme Personality of God."

Sukadeva continued, "My dear king, of your four sons - Janamejaya, Shrutasena, Bhimasena and Ugrasena - Janamejaya is the eldest, your heir and successor. Angered by your death due to the Takshaka serpent, he will perform a ritual to exterminate all the snakes of the world. Assisted by the priest Tura, son of Kalasa, Janamejaya will perform many Asvamedha yajnas, therefore he will be known as Turagamedhasat. Satanika, the son of Janamejaya, will learn the three *Vedas* from Yajnavalkya and became expert in the performance of sacrifices. From Kripacharya he will learn the military arts, and from Saunaka Rishi he will learn the transcendental science. Satanika will become father of Sahasranika, who will be father of Asvamedhaja, father of Asimakrishna, father of Nemichakra, who will move the capital from Hastinapura to Kausambi because of a great flood.

Nemichakra will be father of Citraratha, father of Suciratha, father of Vristiman, father of Sushena, who will rule over the entire world. Sushena will become father of Sunitha, father of Nrichakshu, father of Sukhinala, father of Pariplava, father of Sunaya, father of Medhavi, father of Nripanjaya, father of Durva, father of Timi, father of Brihadratha, father of Sudasa, father of Satanika, father of Durdamana, father of Mahinara, father of Dandapani, father of Nimi, who will be father of Kshemaka, the last king in Kali yuga."

Sukadeva continued by describing the future of the Magadha dynasty: Shrutadeva, the son of Jarasandha, would become father of Marjari, father of Shrutasrava, father of Yutayu, father of Niramitra, father of Sunakshatra, father of Brihatsena, father of Karmajit, father of Sutanjaya, father of Vipra, father of Suci, father of Kshema, father of Suvrata, father of Dharmasutra, father of Sama, father of Dyumatsena, father of Sumati, father of Subala, father of Sunitha, father of Satyajit, father of Visvajit, father of Ripunjaya. Their dynasty would rule for 1,000 years.

Among the sons of Yayati, the fourth was named Anu and had three sons: Sabhanara, Chakshu and Pareshnu. Sabhanara became father of Kalanara, father of Srinjaya, father of Janamejaya, father of Mahasala, father of Mahamana, who had two sons, named Usinara and Titikshu. The four sons of Usinara were Sibi, Vara, Krimi and Daksha, in this order. Sibi, too, had four sons - Vrisadarbha, Sudhira, Madra and Kekaya, who was a realized soul. Titikshu became father of Rushadratha, father of Homa, father of

Sutapa, father of Bali. Bali became emperor, and with the help of Dirghatama he had six sons named Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Suhma, Pundra and Odra - each of them became the ruler of one kingdom to which they gave their names. Anga became father of Khalapana, father of Diviratha, father of Dharmaratha, father of Citraratha, who became famous as Romapada. Romapada had no children and adopted Santa, the daughter of Maharaja Dasaratha, who was his friend. Santa married Rishyasringa, a Rishi who lived in the forest.

In those times, the kingdom suffered from a serious drought and on the advice of the *brahmanas* the king put Rishyasringa in charge of the sacrificial ceremonies, attracting him out from the forest by a group of beautiful women who danced and played re-enactments for him. The arrival of the Rishi immediately brought the rains. Later, Rishyasringa performed a sacrifice for Dasaratha, who became father of Chaturanga, father of Prithulaksha, who had three sons: Brihadratha, Brihatkarma and Brihadbhanu. Brihadratha became father of Brihanmana, father of Jayadratha, father of Vijaya, father of Dhriti, father of Dhritavrata, father of Satkarma, father of Adhiratha.

While he was on the bank of the Ganges, Adiratha found a baby in a floating basket - that was the son of Kunti, abandoned by his mother because he had been born before her marriage. Adiratha did not have any children and so he adopted the child, who became famous as Karna. Karna had only one son, Vrishasena.

Druhyu, the third son of Yayati, became father of Babhru, father of Setu, father of Arabdha, father of Gandhara, father of Dharmaratha, father of Dhriti, father of Durmada, father of Praceta, who had 100 sons who settled in the north, where there were no civilized human habitations. Turvasu, the second son of Yayati, became father of Vahni, father of Bharga, father of Bhanuman, father of Tribhanu, father of Karandhama, father of Maruta, who did not have children and thus adopted Dushmanta, descendant of the dynasty of Puru. Although he had been adopted by Maruta, Dushmanta returned to his original dynasty because he wanted to become emperor.

Yayati's eldest son was Yadu, whose descendance became famous as Krishna, the Supreme Personality of God, appeared in this dynasty.

The advent of Krishna

Sukadeva said, "The Supreme Personality of God appears in this world when the universal principles of religion and ethics deteriorate and people are degraded. No one forces him to appear or to perform any other action, because he is perfectly independent. Sri Krishna descended together with Sankarshana, also called Balarama, to manifest fascinating activities that are beyond the understanding of the most intelligent persons. I will now describe to you the descendants of Yadu, the ancestor of Krishna."

Yadu had four sons: Sahasrajit, Krosta, Nala and Ripu. Sahasrajit, the eldest, became father of Satajit, who had three sons: Mahahaya, Renuhaya and Haihaya. Haihaya became father of Dharma, father of Netra, father of Kunti, father of Sohanji, father of Mahisman, father of Bhadrasena, who had two sons - Durmada and Dhanaka. Dhanaka became father of Kritavirya, Kritagni, Kritavarma and Kritauja.

Kritavirya became the father of emperor Kartavirya Arjuna, who obtained the eight perfections of the mystic powers from the *avatara* Dattatreya and ruled for 85,000 years. Of the 1,000 sons of Kartavirya Arjuna only five survived the massacre by Parasurama: Jayadhvaja, Surasena, Vrishabha, Madhu and Urjita.

Jayadhvaja became father of Talajangha, who had 100 sons, of all whom perished because of the great power that Maharaja Sagara had received from Aurva Rishi. The eldest son of Talajangha, Vitihotra, became father of Madhu. Madhu had 100 sons, of whom the eldest was Vrishni. Yadu, Madhu and Vrishni were the progenitors of the dynasties known as Yadava, Madhava and Vrishni.

Krosta, the son of Yadu, became father of Vrijinavan, father of Svahita, father of Vishadgu, father of Citramitha, father of Sasabindu, who was a great mystic yogi and possessed fourteen great magic jewels that enabled him to become the emperor of the entire world. Sasabindu had 10,000 wives and 100,000 sons.

The most important were Prithushrava and Prithukirti. Prithushrava became father of Dharma, father of Usana, who performed 100 Asvamedha yajnas. Usana became father of Ruchaka, who had five sons: Purujit, Rukma, Rukmeshu, Prithu and Jyamagha.

Jyamagha had no sons, but he could not take another wife as he was afraid of his first queen Saibya. One day he brought home a prostitute, and when Saibya threateningly asked him who that woman was, Jyamagha answered she was a bride for their son. To honor his word, Jyamagha performed sacrificial rituals to the Pitris and with their blessings Saibya became the mother of Vidarbha, who actually later married the girl and had three sons known as Kusha, Kratha and Romapada.

Romapada became father of Babhru, father of Kriti, father of Ushika, father of Cedi. Kratha became father of Kunti, who was father of Vrishni, father of Nirvriti, father of Dasarha, father of Vyoma, father of Jimuta, father of Vikriti, father of Bhimaratha, father of Navaratha, father of Dasaratha, father of Shakuni, father of Karambhi, father of Devarata, father of Devakshatra, father of Madhu, father of Kuruvasa, father of Anu, father of Puruhotra, father of Ayu, father of Satvata.

Satvata had seven sons: Bhajamana, Bhaji, Divya, Vrishni, Devavridha, Andhaka and Mahabhoja. Bhajamana had two wives, who gave birth to three sons each, respectively Nimloci, Kinkana, Dhristi and Satajit, Sahashrajit and Ayutajit. Devavridha was father of Babhru; both of them became very famous for their great spiritual qualities, and in fact it is said they earned liberation for all their descendants.

Vrishni became father of Sumitra and Yudhajit. Yudhajit was father of Sini and Anamitra, who was father of Nighna, who had two sons, Satrajita and Prasena. Another son of Anamitra and brother of Nighna was Sini, father of Satyaka, father of Yuyudhana, father of Jaya, father of Kuni, father of Yugandhara. Another son of Anamitra, Vrishni, became father of Svaphalka and Citraratha. Svaphalka married Gandini and became father of thirteen sons, of whom the eldest was Akrura. The brothers of Akrura were Asanga, Sarameya, Mridura, Mriduvit, Giri, Dharmavridha, Sukarma, Kshetropeksha, Arimardana, Satrugna, Gandhamada and Pratibahu. They also had a sister, named Suchara. Akrura had two sons: Devavan and Upadeva.

Among the seven sons of Satvata, Andhaka had four sons named Kukura, Bhajamana, Suci and Kambalabarhisa. Kukura was father of Vahni, father of Viloma, father of Kapotaroma, father of Anu, the friend of Tumburu. Anu was father of Andhaka, father of Dundubhi, father of Avidyota, father of Punarvasu. Punarvasu had a son and a daughter named Ahuka and Ahuki. Ahuka had two sons, Devaka and Ugrasena.

Devaka had four sons named Devavan, Upadeva, Sudeva and Devavardhana, and seven daughters named Dhritadeva, Santideva, Upadeva, Srideva, Devarakshita, Sahadeva and Devaki. All seven of them married Vasudeva, the father of Krishna.

Ugrasena, brother of Devaka, had nine sons named Kamsa, Sunama, Nyagrodha, Kanka, Sanku, Suhu, Rashtrapala, Dhristi and Tushtiman, and five daughters named Kamsa, Kamsavati, Kanka, Surabhumi and Rastrapalika, who married Vasudeva's younger brothers.

Citraratha, brother of Svaphalka and son of Vrishni, had many sons including Prithu and Viduratha. Viduratha was father of Sura, father of Bhajamana, father of Sini, father of Bhoja, father of Hrdika, who had three sons: Devamidha, Satadhanu and Kritavarma. Devamidha was father of Sura, who married Marisa and fathered Vasudeva, Devabhaga, Devashrava, Anaka, Srinjaya, Syamaka, Kanka, Samika, Vatsaka and Vrika. The eldest of these ten sons, Vasudeva, was also known as Anakadundubhi because his birth was celebrated by the heavenly beings who played their drums.

Furthermore, Sura had five daughters named Pritha, Shrutadeva, Shrutakirti, Shrutasrava and Rajadhidevi. King Kunti, a friend of Sura, had no children and so he adopted Pritha, who became known also as Kunti. One day Durvasa was guest in the house of Kunti's father and the girl engaged sincerely in the Muni's service. To reward her, Durvasa gave her the power to call any Deva.

A bit skeptic and in a playful mood, young Kunti decided to make an experiment and called the Deva of the Sun, without being aware that all her encounters with a Deva would produce a son. Immediately a child was born, radiant like the sun, but Kunti did not dare keep him because she was ashamed of her superficial action, so she put the child in a tarred basket and floated him down the river.

Later Kunti married Pandu, while her sister Shrutadeva married the king of Karusha, Vriddhasharma, and gave birth to Dantavakra, who in a previous lifetime had appeared as Hiranyaksha, the son of Diti.

Another sister of Kunti, Shrutakirti, married the king of Kekaya, Dhristaketu, and had five sons, of whom the eldest was Santardana. Rajadhidevi married Jayasena and had two sons, Vinda and Anuvinda. Shrutashrava married the king of Cedi, Damaghosha, and gave birth to Sishupala, who in a previous lifetime had appeared as Hiranyakashipu, brother of Hiranyaksha and son of Diti.

The daughters of Ugrasena who married the brothers of Vasudeva also had children. Kamsa the wife of Devabhaga had two sons, Citraketu and Brihadbala. Kamsavati, the wife of Devashrava, had two sons, Suvira and Isuman. Kanka married Kanka and gave birth to Baka, Satyajit and Purujit. Rashtrapalika married king Srinjaya and had several sons, including Vrisha and Durmarshana. Surabhumi married king Syamaka and had two sons, Harikesha and Hiranyaksha. Among the brothers of Vasudeva, king Vatsaka married the Apsara Misrakeshi and had many sons, of whom the eldest was Vrika (who was named after his uncle). Vrika (the brother of Vasudeva and Vatsaka) married Durvakshi and had many sons, headed by Taksha, Pushkara and Sala. Samika married Sudamani and had many sons, headed by Sumitra and Arjunapala. Anaka married Karnika and had two sons, Ritadhama and Jaya.

Vasudeva had many wives, headed by Devaki, Pauravi, Rohini, Bhadra, Madira, Rochana and Ila. Rohini, the eldest, had many sons, including Bala (Balarama), Gada, Sharana, Durmada, Vipula, Dhruva and Krita.

Pauravi had twelve sons, of whom the most famous are Bhuta, Subhadra, Bhadrabahu, Durmada and Bhadra. Madira had many sons, including Nanda, Upananda, Kritaka and Sura. Bhadra, also called Kausalya, had only one son named Kesi. Rochana gave birth to many sons, including Hasta and Hemangada. Ila had many sons including Uruvalka. Dhritadeva had one son only, named Vipristha. Santideva had many sons including Prasama and Prasita. Upadeva had ten sons, including Rajanya, Kalpa and Varsha. Srideva had six sons, including Vasu, Hamsa and Suvamsa. Devarakshita had nine sons, headed by Gada. Sahadeva had eight sons, headed by Shruta and Pravara, who were incarnations of the heavenly beings known as Vasus.

Devaki had eight sons: Kirtiman, Sushena, Bhadrasena, Rijju, Saminardana, Bhadra and Sankarshana, who is the *avatara* of Sesha Naga. The eighth son of Devaki was Krishna, the Supreme Personality of God. Devaki also had a daughter, Subhadra, who was Parikshit's grandmother.

Krishna performed many activities, assisted by the descendants of Bhoja, Vrishni, Andhaka, Madhu, Surasena, Dasarha, Kuru, Srinjaya and Pandu. He appeared as the son of Vasudeva, but immediately he left for Vrindavana to manifest loving relationships with his most intimate devotees. There he killed many demons, then he moved to Dvaraka, where he married many women, gave them many sons and performed ritual ceremonies. The Lord participated to the battle of Kurukshetra, in which many evil people were annihilated, and finally he instructed Uddhava on transcendental life and devotion before returning to his eternal abode.

Maharaja Parikshit was very eager to hear about all these activities of Krishna, who was his benefactor and the friend and protector of his family, and Sukadeva obliged. Before the advent of Krishna, Mother Earth was burdened by the weight of the immense armies of many demoniac persons who occupied the positions of king without having the required qualities. In the form of a cow and accompanied by Brahma and all the other Devas, Bhumi Devi went to ask for help from Vishnu, who was resting on the milk ocean. Brahma offered worship to Vishnu reciting the *Purusha sukta*, then he relayed the Lord's answer to the Devas.

"Sri Vishnu was already aware of the situation and has decided to descend to the earth as the son of Vasudeva to personally take care of the problem. All you Devas should take birth in the Yadu dynasty together with your wives, to assist his mission."

The city of Mathura, founded by the son of Ramachandra, had become the capital of the Yadu dynasty as Surasena had settled there.

Vasudeva, a descendant of Surasena, had just married Devaki and climbed into the chariot to take her to her new home. To please her sister, Kamsa had volunteered to drive the chariot, but suddenly he heard a mysterious voice that said, "Kamsa, beware! The eighth son of the woman you are driving will kill you!"

Immediately Kamsa grabbed her sister's hair and took up his sword to kill her, and only the timely intervention of Vasudeva stopped him from committing that crime. "Dear brother in law," Vasudeva said, "we all must die because the body is temporary, but a great hero like you should not degrade himself by slaughtering an innocent woman, your younger sister, and on her marriage day."

Realizing that the argument was not sufficient, Vasudeva decided that first of all he would have to save his wife before thinking about the future. Maybe Kamsa would die before the birth of Devaki's children, or maybe he would change his mind in the course of time. So he hastened to add, "The prophecy does not say that Devaki is a danger for you, so you have no need to kill her. I promise that I will personally deliver to you all Devaki's children as soon as they are born."

When Devaki's first son was born, Vasudeva was compelled to take him to Kamsa, but Kamsa was so pleased by the loyalty shown by his brother in law that he spared the life of the baby. "Only the eighth son of my sister is a danger to me," he said, "so you can take your child back home."

The relief for Vasudeva and Devaki did not last long. Narada Muni went to see Kamsa and explained to him that all the people of demoniac mentality would be eliminated by the Supreme Personality of God, who was going to appear from Devaki, and that all the Devas had already appeared in the Yadu dynasty to assist him in that mission. Because in his previous lifetime Kamsa had been the Asura Kalanemi and was killed personally by Vishnu, Devaki's brother was overwhelmed by a great fear and great anger.

So Kamsa decided to seize the throne without any further delay, and get prepared against any attack. He imprisoned his own father, Ugrasena, who was the king of the dynasties Yadu, Bhoja and Andhaka, and locked him up. Then he made an alliance with Jarasandha, the powerful king of Magadha, and he obtained the cooperation of many Asuras and Rakshasas, such as Pralamba, Baka, Chanura, Trinavarta, Aghasura, Mushtika, Arishta, Dvidida, Putana, Keshi, Dhenuka, Banasura and Narakasura.

Many Yadavas were forced into exile and took shelter in the neighboring kingdoms, such as Kuru, Panchala, Kekaya, Salva, Vidarbha, Nishadha, Videha and Koshala, while those who wanted to remain in the kingdom of

Mathura had to bend to the cruel orders of Kamsa. The six sons who were born from Devaki in the meantime were killed mercilessly, and Devaki and Vasudeva were imprisoned in the expectation of the birth of more children, who would get the same fate of their predecessors.

At that time Devaki was going to have her seventh son, the incarnation of Ananta Sesha. By the power of Yogamaya, the internal illusory energy of God, Ananta was transferred to the womb of another of Vasudeva's wives, Rohini, who had gone into hiding outside the city, in the house of Nanda Maharaja, who was the friend of Vasudeva. Born as the son of Rohini, Ananta Sesha would be known also with the names of Sankarshana, Rama, and Balabhadra. Yogamaya herself, known with many names such as Durga, Bhadrakali, Vijaya, Vaishnavi, Kumuda, Chandika, Krishna, Madhavi, Kanyaka, Maya, Narayani, Ishani, Sarada and Ambika, would take birth in the house of Nanda.

The people of Mathura believed that Devaki had suffered a miscarriage due to the stress and sufferings she had to endure. Not much later, Devaki found she was expecting the fatal eighth son, and immediately she realized that it was a really extraordinary personality. Like a bright flame hidden by the walls of a house, like a person who has knowledge but is not allowed to distribute it to the people for the benefit of the world, Devaki resplended with a happy divine light that illuminated the gloomy prison where she was confined, but she was often visited secretly by the Devas who offered respectful prayers to the unborn child and her mother. Kamsa noticed that, and understood that his enemy was soon going to appear: obsessed, terrified and fascinated at the same time by that idea, he had no more peace of mind. Day and night, he was unable to think of anything else.

Finally, at the most auspicious moment, precisely at midnight, Vishnu appeared before the parents he had chosen - Vasudeva and Devaki - and who had already had him as a son twice in their previous lifetimes as Kasyapa and Aditi, and as Sutapa and Prishni. Vishnu appeared in his four-armed form, holding his sacred symbols, dressed in yellow silk and decorated with beautiful ornaments.

All the Devas celebrated the happy event, scattering a shower of flowers and playing the celestial drums. Kinnaras and Gandharvas sang, Siddhas and Charanas offered prayers, and Vidhyadharas and Apsaras started

dancing. The residents of the Earth felt a great peace and happiness they could not explain.

Vasudeva mentally offered gifts to the *brahmanas* to celebrate the birth of Krishna, and bowed to the child to pay his homage. Krishna's parents offered him beautiful prayers, recognizing his divine nature, that is transcendental and eternal, but asked him to manifest a form that looked more ordinary, not to alarm Karma too much.

By the power of Yogamaya, all the people in the palace including the guards had fallen into a deep sleep and all the door locks opened automatically. Vasudeva put baby Krishna in a basket and quickly traveled to Gokula, the home of Nanda Maharaja and his wife Yasoda, where the child would be safe. He easily crossed the Yamuna river, that was in spate due to abundant rains, and after reaching the house of Nanda, where everybody was sleeping, he switched Krishna with the child that had just been given birth by Yasoda. The mother was very tired because of delivery, and she did not remember clearly if she had had a son or a daughter.

As soon as Vasudeva had returned to Kamsa's prison, the doors clicked closed again and the people in the palace were roused by the baby's crying. Kamsa jumped out of bed and rushed to face what he had been fearing for so many years, and although very surprised to see that it was a girl and not a boy, he grabbed her and tried to smash her against a stone. The baby slipped out of his hands and manifested in her glorious form of Mother Durga, with eight arms holding weapons, and dressed in wonderful clothes and ornaments. Before disappearing from his sight she said, "How stupid you are, Kamsa! Your old enemy, Vishnu, has already taken birth somewhere else and certainly he will kill you sooner or later. What will you gain by slaughtering innocent babies?"

Shocked, Kamsa immediately set Devaki and Vasudeva free from their prison, and begged them for forgiveness. Then he called for a meeting with his ministers and allies, to study a new strategy in the light of Durga's revelations. Thus they decided that the safest course of action was to slaughter all the children born in that period and strike against all religious activities, persecuting *brahmanas* and saints, for the purpose of weakening Vishnu and the Devas.

Krishna in the house of Nanda

In the town of Gokula, among the sweet forests of Vrindavana on the bank of the river Yamuna, Nanda Maharaja was celebrating the birth of little Krishna, whose dark complexion was exactly the same as Mother Yasoda's. All the inhabitants, who were mostly occupied in the care of the cows, decorated the streets, the courtyards and passages, cleaned everything carefully, dressed themselves in their best clothes and ornaments, and decorated cows, bulls and calves. Then they went to the house of their chief, Nanda, carrying many gifts.

The king of the cowherd men reciprocated with a generous distribution of cows, grains and valuable clothes to the *brahmanas*, the cowherds and all the guests. The people had a lot of fun at the feast and sprayed one another with an auspicious mixture of water, yogurt and butter.

Some days later Nanda traveled to Mathura with a small retinue to pay the annual tax to king Kamsa, and on that occasion he met his friend Vasudeva. Naturally Vasudeva inquired about the well-being of his own wife Rohini and her child, who was already looking to Nanda and Yasoda as his own parents. Then he congratulated Nanda for the birth of Krishna and recommended him to return home quickly, because the cruel plans of Kamsa and his companions would probably cause some troubles.

The Rakshasi Putana was a member of the group of demoniac individuals who had allied with Kamsa, and she was specialized in killing new born babies by poisoning them under the pretense of suckling them. She had already left for Gokula, and reached there quickly. As she has taken a beautiful and virtuous looking form and a very motherly expression, nobody stopped her even when she entered Nanda's house and affectionately picked up Krishna from his crib to nurse him.

Krishna, however, would not be duped by her looks, and he suckled out not just the poison but her life as well. Screaming in fear and unable to keep her disguise in that difficult predicament, Putana returned to her normal

gigantic form of cruel Rakshasi, then she fell to the ground with a crash. Yasoda and the other adult *gopis* rushed to rescue Krishna, who was playing merrily on the Asura's body, and performed the traditional rituals of purification and protection from all evils. When he returned from Mathura, Nanda found the gigantic corpse of Putana and realized Vasudeva had been perfectly right. The Asura's body was hacked to pieces and burned on a great fire, and everyone was amazed about the celestial scent coming from the pyre, that smelled like *aguru* incense. Putana had attained liberation because she had been personally killed by Vishnu and was elevated to the position of mother of the Lord in Vaikuntha because Krishna had allowed her to nurse him.

Three months later they celebrated for Krishna the ritual called *utthana*, that consecrates the moment when the child tries to get up and turn over by himself, signifying he is ready to go out of the house for the first time. At the end of the traditional ceremonies Krishna seemed to be sleepy and Yasoda put him down on a small bed in a corner of the courtyard, under the shade of a small cart, and then went back to take care of the guests. Suddenly Krishna woke up and started to cry for mother's milk. Yasoda did not hear him immediately, so the baby got angry and kicked his feet. As soon it was touched by Krishna's little feet, the cart was thrown into the air, smashing to the ground and upsetting all the utensils it contained. One of the servants sent by Kamsa, named Satakasura, had been hiding nearby, so he was crushed under the cart and died on the spot. Nanda and the other cowherd men came running to see what caused all that noise but could not understand what had happened.

Several more months passed and one day when Krishna was one year old Yasoda put him on the ground to take some rest. Another of Kamsa's servants, the Asura Trinavarta, took advantage of the opportunity and after taking a tornado form he lifted up the child and took him away, covering the entire region with a dust storm. Yasoda collapsed in despair, crying and calling the child's name because she was unable to find him, but Krishna was enjoying his sky tour. When he got tired of the outing, he became so heavy that Trinavarta could not hold him any more and crashed to the ground, suffocated, eyes popping out. From his part, the child was perfectly unharmed, and Nanda and Yasoda rejoiced about their incredible good luck, together with all the *gopas* (cowherd men) and *gopis* (cowherd women).

Nobody ever thought that Krishna was Vishnu himself, not even when one day Yasoda, looking into Krishna's mouth while he was yawning, could see the entire universe with all the planets. This was because Vishnu's internal energy, known as Yogamaya, was influencing Krishna's family and friends to continue to show all their love for him, without being intimidated by the feeling of his divine nature.

Nanda and Yasoda had the immense fortune to participate directly to the wonderful childhood activities of Krishna and Balarama because in a previous lifetime, as Drona (the eldest of the Devas known as Vasus) and his wife Dhara, they had obtained from Brahma the blessing of assisting Vishnu in his mission on Earth.

Some time later Vasudeva sent the priest of the Yadu dynasty, Garga Muni, to Gokula to calculate the horoscope of little Krishna. Nanda asked the Muni to bless Krishna and Balarama by performing the purification rituals to give the name to a child, but Garga decided to do so secretly to avoid alerting Kamsa, who would suspect that the two children were actually the sons of Devaki.

On that occasion the Muni revealed the nature and the names of Balarama, the eldest, also called Rama, Bala and Sankarshana, and of Krishna, who manifests forms of different color in various ages. After a brief surprise for the revelation of his own extraordinary fortune, Nanda immediately forgot the words of Garga Muni and continued to treat Krishna and Balarama like two perfectly normal children. And this was precisely the intention of the two brothers: they had a lot of fun crawling around Nanda's courtyard, in mud and cow dung, and eagerly listened to the sound of the *gopis'* anklebells, following them until suddenly they showed fear and rushed back to Yasoda and Rohini, who embraced them affectionately and suckled them.

Sometimes the two toddlers grabbed the tail of calves to try to stand up and were dragged around the courtyard. Yasoda and Rohini were always worried thinking about the dangers in the cows' horns, in fire, in biting animals such as monkeys and dogs, in thorns and weapons that might have been lying around, and always meditated intensely on Krishna and Balarama.

Thus Krishna and Balarama happily spent their childhood among the cowherds of Gokula, manifesting many extraordinary activities, but always enjoying the intimate and unconditional love of Nanda and Yasoda. Sometimes Yasoda or Nanda asked Krishna to fetch some object, such as sandals, a piece of wood or a small pot, and Krishna put them on his head to carry them. Sometimes he merely touched the objects and remained standing nearby, as for saying that they were too heavy for him. Yasoda was deeply attached not only to Krishna but to Balarama as well, and in fact Balarama listened to her more than he listened to his own mother Rohini.

"Krishna, my child," Yasoda called when Krishna and Balarama stayed out late playing with their friends, "come and drink my milk. You must be tired, you have been playing for so many hours. Aren't you hungry? Dear Baladeva, joy of your family, please bring home your little brother. You have not had any food since this morning and Nanda, the king of Vraja, is waiting at the table for you to come and dine with him. Your friends, too, should go home, it is so late. My children, you are all covered with dust and sand. Come back home, take a nice bath. Today is an auspicious day and to distribute charity to the *brahmanas*, you need to purify yourself properly. Wash up, eat, and then after dressing nicely you can go back to play with your friends."

When the two children started to walk on their own, they played all sorts of pranks to the *gopis*, sneaking into their homes and untying the calves before the milking, stealing yogurt or butter or milk and giving to the monkeys whatever they were unable to eat themselves. If the *gopis* scolded them, Krishna and Balarama went to pinch their children until they started to cry, or they peed on the freshly washed floors.

One day Balarama went to Yasoda to warn her that Krishna was eating dirt. Alarmed, Yasoda rebuked Krishna, who denied the accusation and said that she should look into his mouth if she could find any trace of dirt. Krishna opened his small mouth and Yasoda, looking into it, had another vision of the universal form of Vishnu. Confused and amazed, she thought she was dreaming, and then she forgot what she had seen.

Another day, Yasoda was churning yogurt to make butter and Krishna became angry as she was not immediately ready to nurse him as usual. He went to grab the churning rod to stop her, and Yasoda left her work to pick

up the child. Soon, however, she realized the milk in the pot was starting to boil over, and she ran to remove it from the fire. Interrupted when he was still hungry, little Krishna became furious and broke the yogurt container, then he took the freshly made butter and went to hide to eat it, sitting on a mortar to grind spices. Yasoda soon found him and saw that the child was looking around anxiously, as he was aware he had done something wrong. When Krishna saw Yasoda arriving with a stick in her hand, he ran away in fear. Finally Yasoda caught him and Krishna started to weep, rubbing his eyes and smearing the black eye-balm that was moistened by his tears.

Overwhelmed by her maternal love for Krishna, Yasoda took him by the hand and scolded him gently, then she decided to tie him up to the mortar so that he would remember his lesson. She found a rope and started to bind Krishna, but the rope was a few inches too short for the purpose; searching around she got another piece but after adding it to the first, the rope was still a few inches short. One piece after another, Yasoda used up all the pieces of rope of the house but still it was not enough. Yasoda was perplexed and a bit tired: after running around to catch the naughty child she had also rummaged everywhere for rope, and now she was perspiring copiously, and her hair was coming loose. Moved by the hardships faced by his mother for his own good, Krishna then allowed Yasoda to tie him up.

While he was there alone, tied to the mortar, Krishna looked at the two *yamala arjuna* trees that were growing in Nanda's courtyard, and who in their previous lifetime had been two powerful sons of Kuvera, the Deva of wealth.

Nalakuvara and Manigriva, the sons of Kuvera, had become very proud because of their high position, also because they belonged to the retinue of Shiva. One day they were in a garden on mount Kailasa, on the bank of the Mandakini river, and after drinking the liquor called Varuni (made with honey) they were having fun with some Yaksha girls. Suddenly Narada Muni arrived; the girls withdrew and covered up as a mark of respect, but the two sons of Kuvera did not bother to take notice. Narada realized that Kuvera's sons were drunk, but that inebriation was due more to the pride of their aristocratic birth and wealth than to the liquor, and to sober them up, he cursed them to become trees, as trees are not ashamed to remain naked in front of everyone.

Krishna knew all the facts perfectly and decided to set Kuvera's sons free, as they had remained long enough in a tree body, so he walked to them, dragging along the heavy mortar to which he was tied, and that became stuck between the two trees. Pulling the mortar strongly to disentangle it, little Krishna uprooted the two great trees, that immediately crashed to the ground with a loud noise.

Nalakuvara and Manigriva appeared in that same place, happy about having returned to their Yaksha form, and offered their prayers to the Lord, who blessed them and gave them leave to go. When the *gopis* and *gopas* rushed to the spot they only found Krishna tied to the mortar and could not understand what had happened. Krishna's little playmates, who had witnessed the liberation of the two sons of Kuvera, tried to tell the facts, but nobody believed them.

Another day, at Nanda's house came a woman selling fruits. Krishna took a handful of grains and ran to buy some fruits, but in his impatience he dropped part of the grains. Even so, the fruit seller put a load of fruits in the toddler's arms, and to her great surprise, she found that her basket had instantly become filled with valuable golden jewels and gems.

Nanda Maharaja and the cowherd men of Gokula were amazed at the extraordinary events they had seen or heard about, but above all they were worried, because it seemed that the Asuras had been targeting their settlement, just like Vasudeva had foreseen. So they gathered in assembly and decided to shift their residence into the thickest forest, between Nandesvara and Mahavana, in the place known as Vrindavana, that had excellent pastures and was more protected from sight.

They uploaded all the luggage and provisions on the carts, organized the transportation of women, children and old people, and by keeping the cows in front, they moved all together. The first encampment was created by setting the carts in a semi-circle, and gradually they built their new homes.

Krishna and Balarama grew up quickly and they were soon able to help in the work of the cowherds, taking care of the youngest calves. It was not heavy work: they just had to keep an eye on the animals while they amused themselves with the other little cowherd boys, playing the flute and the horn, having ball games, and dancing.

Sometimes they pretended to be bulls fighting each other, or imitated the sounds of the animals, like bumblebees, cuckoo birds and other birds, or shouting to the echo. They raced each other, leaped from one branch to the next like monkeys and grimaced, sat silently with the herons, or ran around with wide-spread arms, following the shadows of the birds that were flying above. They jumped around like frogs, or they went swimming or looking at their reflections in the water of the river. Often they went for picnic in the forest, and playfully snatched the food bag from each other, throwing it around until the owner started to cry - and then they gave it back.

They also collected fruits, flowers, green leaves, twigs, peacock feathers and minerals, and used them to play and decorate themselves. Although they behaved innocently like normal children, the little cowherd companions of Krishna were actually great Devas and Rishis, saints and *bhaktas* who had earned a place in that extraordinary adventure thanks to the innumerable pious activities they had performed in many lifetimes.

One day, while the boys were engaged in this way, the Asura Vatsa came sneaking to approach them, taking the shape of a calf to mix with the other animals, but Krishna saw it and catching him by the hind legs he whirled it around and on to the top of a tree. Immediately the Asura resumed its normal gigantic form, and the trick was exposed to everybody's eyes.

Another Asura, named Baka, took the form of a gigantic crane with an extremely sharp beak, and attacked Krishna swallowing him up in one go, while the cowherd boys were watering their animals. In the crane's stomach, Krishna became like burning fire and the huge bird was forced to regurgitate him, then it tried to stab him with its long pointed beak. Krishna grabbed the two halves of the beak and bifurcated them, tearing the jaws as easily as if they were a blade of grass.

Aghasura, the younger brother of Putana and Bakasura, took the form of a great serpent, with a body that was 10 km long and a gaping mouth that gave forth a hot wind. Intrigued, the cowherd boys entered the mouth of that python; as it looked like a strange cave, they thought it might be a cleverly carved image of a snake. Even if it really was a dangerous living Asura, they thought, Krishna would immediately kill it like he had done with Bakasura and the other Rakshasas.

Agha remained still, mouth open, waiting for Krishna and Balarama, who were walking behind everybody else. After some reflection, Krishna entered the mouth of the huge snake and when he was in its throat, he started to expand and grow so much that Aghasura was suffocated and died. Krishna revived all the boys and calves that had been swallowed by the Asura, then he led them outside, to the great happiness of the inhabitants of the heavenly planets, who were watching all his adventures. Aghasura's episode happened when Krishna was five years old, but the boys informed their parents only one year later.

Just after killing the Asura, Krishna and Balarama went to the river bank with all their friends to take lunch. While they were all sitting together enjoying the food packed by their mothers, they found that the calves had walked deeply into the forest and could not be seen any more. Krishna reassured his friends, "Do not be afraid, I will go to get them back. There is no need for you to stop eating."

So Krishna, carrying his bowl of curd rice, wandered off searching for the calves but in vain, because the calves had been stolen by Brahma, the creator of the universe, who had been watching the amazing activities of little Krishna and wanted to verify to which extent the Lord would manifest his divine powers. While Krishna walked around the forest, calling for his calves, Brahma quickly stole the cowherd boys as well, so when he returned to the river bank, Krishna found they had disappeared, too.

Reflecting on the events, Krishna could understand that Brahma was responsible for those mysterious facts, and he decided to solve the problem by expanding himself and manifesting as many forms as the missing calves and boys, each with their particular looks and characteristics, down to the details of their clothing and ornaments. So perfect was the transcendental illusion created by Yogamaya, the internal energy of the Lord, that not even the mothers of the boys and the calves were able to notice any difference, and rather their affection towards their children increased, together with their happiness.

A few days before the completion of one entire year from the abduction of the calves and calves by Brahma, Balarama began to suspect something. One day, while pasturing their calves near the Govardhana hill, they came upon a herd of cows held by the cowherd men. Those cows had already

had new calves, but as soon as they saw their older children in the company of Krishna they rushed down the hill in their anxiety to nurse them, and licked their bodies eagerly and happily. The cowherd men ran after the cows, irritated for that unexpected behavior of their animals, but as soon as they came in sight of their children they forgot everything else and rushed to embrace them with great affection and emotion.

Balarama was mystified. "What is going on here? Our calves have been weaned quite some time ago, and their mothers now have newborns. They should not be so eager to suckle them again! And how extraordinarily intense emotions are shown by the cowherd men for their own sons, as if they were seeing them for the first time after a long separation! I thought these children and calves were Devas and Rishis, but now I realize they must be direct manifestations of Vishnu. Krishna, tell me what happened."

Just at that time Brahma returned, after a moment of his time had passed, to verify how Krishna had coped with the absence of the boys and calves, and heard Balarama's questions and Krishna's explanation. He knew perfectly well that the original boys and calves were still sleeping under his power, but he was unable to tell the difference from the copies.

Suddenly, while he was watching the new group of cowherd boys and calves, Brahma saw them turn into as many forms of Vishnu, each with four arms, clothed in yellow silk and with a complexion as dark as the monsoon clouds, decorated with divine jewels and the characteristic signs of Vishnu including the Srivatsa and Kaustubha. Struck with the realization of the events, again Brahma saw before him little Krishna, apparently alone and confused while he wandered in the forest with his bowl of curd rice, calling for his lost little friends.

Brahma threw himself at Krishna's feet, begging forgiveness for his own arrogance and offering wonderful prayers to the Lord, in which he acknowledged the inconceivable power of Yogayama, the internal illusion energy of the Lord. Immediately he restored all the children and calves he had stolen one year earlier: neither children nor calves had any idea of what had transpired, and because they found themselves again sitting on the river bank enjoying their lunch like on the day they had disappeared, they did not feel that any time had passed at all. Happy to see that Krishna had come back so quickly with the calves, they called him to eat with them, and when

they returned home in the evening they told their families how Krishna had killed the great snake Aghasura.

Some time later, the cowherd men allowed their children to start taking care of the cows. Krishna and Balarama led them grazing into the forest as they had done previously with the calves, but their own interest had moved from the childish playing and frolicking of their earlier years and they were now enjoying the beauty of the forest, music, friendship with wild animals such as peacocks and deer, and attraction for the young cowherd girls.

Sometimes Krishna danced like a peacock or cried out with the sounds of cuckoos, swans, peacocks and the birds known as *chakora*, *krauncha*, *chakrahva* and *bharadvaja*. Sometimes Balarama stretched out on the ground, his head resting on the legs of a boy, and Krishna massaged his feet to alleviate his fatigue. Sometimes Krishna received massage in the same way, while the boys sung about their love for the Supreme Lord.

The Asuras who had allied with Kamsa were still eager to try and kill Krishna, because they realized that the child was very powerful as he had already killed many strong demoniac beings. One of such Asuras, Dhenuka, had taken the form of a donkey and went to live in the Talavana forest with some companions, preventing anyone else from getting into that place.

So one day Krishna was approached by his friends Sridama, Subala and Stokakrishna, who told him, "Those sweet *tala* fruits are falling from the tall palms and rot on the ground because nobody is allowed to collect them. This demoniac Dhenuka eats people and even the birds are afraid of entering that forest. But the scent of those fruits is so intense that it would be wonderful to taste them. Why don't we go to Talavana?"

Balarama and Krishna had a hearty laugh, then without hesitation they walked to Talavana and started to shake the trees to make the fruits fall down. Alerted by the noise, Dhenukasura rushed in and attacked Balarama with a tremendous kick in his chest, but Balarama grabbed the Asura by its hind legs and with one hand only he whirled it in the air and threw it on top of one of the palms, the tallest in the forest, that snapped under the weight. When the body of the Asura returned to its normal gigantic size, all the trees of the forest trembled and swayed against one another, as in a hurricane, and many palms broke down.

Dhenuka's friends also rushed in to fight, but they soon suffered the same fate, because Krishna and Balarama were ready to tackle them. Very soon the palm fruits were heaped on the ground, while the tops of the trees were decorated with the lifeless bodies of the Asuras, and the forest once again was open to the people and the cows.

In the evening Krishna returned home with Balarama, accompanied by the cows and calves. His hair, powdered with the dust raised by the hooves of the cows, was decorated with peacock feathers and forest flowers, and he smiled while playing the flute, surrounded by friends singing his glories. The girls of Vrindavana watched him intently, completely fascinated, and went to greet the cowherd boys with shy and happy smiles. Yasoda and Rohini immediately arranged for the bath of the two boys, and after washing and massaging them properly, they dressed and decorated them lavishly and served a dinner of delicious dishes.

One day, in the summer, Krishna went to the Yamuna river with the cowherd boys to water the cows in a place where the current slowed down and formed a small lake. The boys were very thirsty too and everyone drank from the river water, without knowing that it had been poisoned by Kaliya, a huge black Naga who had taken residence there. The water in that spot of the river had become so toxic and polluted that the vapors and fumes rising from it stunned and killed the birds flying above, and caused them to fall into the water. Krishna saw their friends die on the spot because of the powerful poison and revived them by his merciful glance. Then he climbed to the top of a very tall *kadamba* tree, tightened his belt in preparation for the fight and dived into the river to find the serpent. Kaliya heard the noise of Krishna swimming in its small lake and rushed to kill him, biting his chest and squeezing his body.

Alarmed by the screams of the cowherd boys, all the people of Vrindavana ran to the river and their hearts faltered at the sight of Krishna in that apparently desperate situation. Even the cows, the bulls and the calves cried anxiously to call him, but nobody suffered more than Mother Yasoda, who had to be forcibly restrained because she wanted to enter the river, too. Nanda Maharaja and the other elder *gopas* were getting ready to fight against the evil snake, but Balarama convinced them to stop, explaining that Krishna was in no danger at all.

Before the shocked eyes of everyone, Krishna began to expand his body to rid himself from the squeeze of the huge serpent, and to alleviate the sufferings and anxiety of his devotees. Forced to let go, Kaliya spread its many necks and remained still, breathing heavily and licking its lips with the forked tongue, while Krishna swam merrily around to attract pursuit.

Then Krishna jumped on Kaliya and began to dance, leaping from one head to another, while his feet, as delicate as lotus flowers, were illuminated by the red radiance of the gems decorating the snake's heads. That extraordinary event immediately attracted all the heavenly beings and their wives, who accompanied Krishna's dance by playing various musical instruments, singing and throwing flowers. The pressure of Krishna's feet on its heads squashed all the poison from Kaliya, and the snake started to feel sick, and vomited blood. Worried, the Naga wives approached Krishna accompanied by their children, and begged him to forgive their evil husband, who had been punished enough. They said, "The touch of your lotus feet is a very rare blessing, and we thank you for offering us the special favor of correcting the evil tendencies of Kaliya."

Offering praise and respect, with prayers filled with jewels of spiritual realization, the Naga patnis begged the Lord to liberate Kaliya and allow it to breathe. Released by Krishna, Kaliya slowly recuperated its strength, and in turn it offered its respect and prayers to the Lord. It said, "Because of the body I obtained by birth, I am afflicted by a very bad temper, and I am ignorant and easily angered. Please forgive me and help me to reform myself."

Then Krishna ordered Kaliya to settle in the Ocean with all its wives and children, friends and relatives, forever leaving the river Yamuna. He said, "I know you had to flee from the island Ramanaka and came here in hiding out of fear of Garuda, but now your heads bear the mark of my feet and Garuda will not bother you any longer."

Kaliya was originally from the Ramanaka island, and had attracted the anger of Garuda because it encroached on the offerings destined to Vishnu's carrier. As an eagle, Garuda gets its food by hunting snakes and it often went to the island Ramanaka, which was full of them. Tired of the constant anxiety for the danger of its attacks, the Nagas of that island proposed a monthly offering that would be put at the foot of a tree. In its arrogance,

Kaliya the son of Kadru decided to challenge Vishnu's carrier and ate the offerings destined to it; when Garuda came to punish it, Kaliya bit the great eagle and tried to poison it. A fierce fight had ensued, and Kaliya was forced to flee to the only place that could be considered safe, that peaceful bend of the Yamuna river. Garuda could not approach that place because of a curse of Saubhari Muni, who had been angered by the death of a fish that had been captured by the great eagle, and threatened Garuda with death if it dared come again to that lake.

The people of Vrindavana spent the night camping on the river bank and went to sleep there, because they were all exhausted for the emotions and the fatigue of the day. While they were sleeping the forest caught fire and soon the cowherds were surrounded by flames. Terrified, the people of Vrindavana approached Krishna, who was their only hope, and Krishna immediately swallowed all the flames, extinguishing the trees and eliminating all danger.

The *gopis* fall in love with Krishna

Krishna and Balarama had grown up considerably and their activities with the cowherd boys had become more quiet. Krishna's favorite pastime was now flute playing, and in general the boys liked to dance and sing, playing small cymbals and buffalo horns, praising and encouraging one another in that artistic pursuit. Sometimes they had mock fights or played the king and court, tried to recognize each other while keeping their eyes closed, or enjoyed themselves on swings.

One day the Asura Pralamba sneaked among them, taking the form of a cowherd boy, with the intention of abducting Krishna and Balarama. Krishna immediately detected him but decided to play along and suggested the boys to divide in two teams, headed by himself and Balarama, and the winners of the various games would ride on the shoulders of the losers to be carried around. Balarama's team, that included Sridama and Vrishabha, won the games and so Krishna took Sridama on his shoulders, Bhadrāsena climbed on Vrishabha's back and Balarama was carried by Pralamba.

Balarama's weight, however, was too much for the Asura's strength as Pralamba was totally devoid of *bhakti*, so he was forced to resume his true gigantic form with fiery hair and eyes, dreadful fangs and many valuable ornaments. Balarama could understand the situation and he punched the Asura's head, splitting it and causing Pralamba's instant death. The Asura crashed to the ground while the boys cheered.

The summer's heat had dried many trees, and one day the cowherd boys found themselves again in the middle of a fire when they tried to rescue the cows that had got lost after entering the Munja forest to graze. Flames suddenly surrounded them, swiftly running with the wind, and the sparks were flying everywhere. Scared, the boys approached Krishna and Balarama to be saved again, and Krishna instructed them to close their eyes while he again swallowed all the fire. When the cowherd boys opened their eyes again, they were amazed to find out that the fire had disappeared and they were standing again outside the forest, just like before they had started pursuing the cows.

Finally the heat of summer was broken by the first rains, the sky started rolling with thunder and the lightning resplended on the horizon. The dense black clouds covered the light of the sun, reminding one how the soul is covered by the influences of material nature, but the manner in which they dissolved, offering their life to distribute the vital water to ground and plants, was similar to the attitude of charitable people who live for the good of others. Dried by the summer heat, the earth was revived by the touch of the beneficial rains, just like a person who has engaged in long and strict austerities blossoms again when he has obtained the purpose of his efforts. During the rainy season, twilight is illuminated by light-worms rather than by the stars, just like in Kali yuga false doctrines appear to be more luminous than true Vedic knowledge.

At the sound of thunder, all the frogs that had remained quiet began to croak all together, like *brahmana* students start to recite their lessons after silently completing their morning duties. The small creeks that had become shallow and dry in summer swelled in spate and ran around, just like the money, possessions and health of a man who is not able to control his senses. The freshly grown grass, of an intense emerald green, gave a stark contrast with the white mushrooms and the red of the *indragopa* insect (the

lady bug), and those colors were bright like a person who has suddenly become rich. All creatures prospered in happiness, like devotees whose beauty is amplified by the engagement in the service to the Lord.

The sea rose under the impact of the mighty rivers in spate, like a neophyte yogi whose mind is still perturbed by the objects of sense gratification, unlike the devotees who are totally immersed in the contemplation of the Deity, and who are similar to mountains, peaceful and immovable even under the impact of the running clouds.

Roads and paths became filled with weeds, and because they were not cleared regularly they made difficult walking, just like the ancient scriptures that are not studied by *brahmanas* are covered by oblivion and become damaged. The clouds are the benevolent friends of all beings, but the lightning, so restless, jumps from one to the other, like a superficial woman who is not able to remain faithful to a virtuous husband. The rainbow is also called "Indra's bow" and is special, because it does not need a rope to bind it. Similarly, God appears in this world but not as an ordinary person, and remains independent from all material conditions.

During the rainy season, the moon does not appear directly, but illuminates the clouds that appear to be lighter in color... just like the soul is not directly visible in the material world because of the false identification with the body veiling its true nature, but it gives light to the body itself. Peacocks dance and cry out for joy when they see the clouds coming, just like the people who suffer for the troubles of family life become immediately happy when they are visited by those who are dedicated to the service of the Supreme Personality of God. Like rulers properly instructed by *brahmanas* to distribute charity to the subjects, under the pressure of the wind the clouds shower their sweet water for the benefit of all beings.

In this way the forest of Vrindavana prospered and became radiant, blessed by the rainy season. The cowherds collected the ripened dates and the other sweet and juicy fruits, and the cows walked slowly because of the weight of their udders full of milk, but they immediately came when Krishna called out their names. The trees dripped sap, and the tribal girls living in the forest were full of happiness. The waterfalls in the mountains echoed particularly loud when there was some cave behind them. When it rained, Krishna entered a cave or the hollow of a tree for shelter, to play or eat

fruits or fresh roots. Together with Sankarshana and the other boys he enjoyed the curd rice brought from home, usually sitting on some big stone near the river.

Finally the rains stopped and autumn came, with its blue skies without clouds, its clear and fresh waters, and the gentle breezes. The lotus flowers started to blossom again under the sun, like a fallen yogi returns to his original purity when he resumes his practices to control the mind, but the fish in the shallow ponds suffered under the intense rays of the autumn sun, just like the poor materialists immersed in family life because of their attachment to sense gratification, who see their life becoming shorter and death coming closer. The farmers built strong clay banks to keep the water inside the rice fields, far-sighted like those who practice yoga to control their senses and preserve their energies, engaging them to produce the evolution of awareness.

After a day of scorching sun, the rising of the autumn moon brought relief to all creatures, just like the wisdom of spiritual realization relieves the sufferings caused by the identification with the body. In the same way Krishna alleviated the anxiety of the girls of Vrindavana, who were consumed by the desire to see him. Thus Krishna resplended on earth, surrounded by his friends, just like the moon shines surrounded by one thousand bright stars. The *gopis* who had given their hearts to Krishna were feeling unsatisfied by the embrace of the gentle breezes blowing in the forest and carrying the scent of the flowers. Like the cows, does, and females of the various bird species, the girls felt stirred by the sweet atmosphere of autumn, that favors fertility because it is the mating season.

All around the cities and villages there were great festivals to perform the fire ceremonies and offer the first grains of the new harvest according to the ancient traditions. Finally free to travel, merchants, *sannyasis*, kings and *brahmacharis* started to go around again, just like those who have achieved perfection in this lifetime leave their bodies at the appropriate time to attain the final destination. The forest of Vrindavana was dazzling with beauty. Its clear waters were decorated with lotus flowers, its fresh breezes carried the scent of flowers and fruits, and the bees buzzed pleasantly.

Krishna and Balarama walked through the forest every day together with the other boys and the cows, but in the village of Vraja the girls could only

talk about the sweet flute of Krishna. Sitting in a secluded place to avoid being overheard by the elders of their families, the young *gopis* were discussing about Krishna, but the intensity of their feelings prevented them from speaking as much as they would have liked to.

"Friends, it is a great fortune to be able to contemplate the two sons of Maharaja Nanda. They always dress so elegantly, and decorate themselves with peacock feathers, garlands of forest flowers, lotus flowers, budding mango twigs, and *karnikara* flowers for their ears. They look like dancers who enter on stage, and when they take the flute to their lips to fill it with the nectar of their lips, we are filled with envy and wish we were in the place of that flute! How proud must be the bamboos growing along the river, knowing that their child enjoys such honor!

The wonderful song of that flute stirs the peacocks, who begin dancing madly, while all the other beings remain still and silent to listen... even the calves stop sucking their mothers' teats and remain still with their mouth full of milk, while in their hearts they are embracing Krishna, Govinda, the Lord of the cows. The birds remain sitting on the branches, with closed eyes, fascinated by that melody, without caring for any other sounds, because they are great sages and saints. Even the rivers are agitated and their current jumps around in whirlpools to remain there and listen to that song, then they raise their arms to offer worship to Krishna by presenting their lotus flowers. The girls of the forest tribes are filled with desire when they see the grass stained with red drops of *kunkum*, that have the same color of the soles of Krishna's feet. By smearing their faces and breasts with that *kunkum*, those tribal girls find relief to their anxiety."

All the young *gopis* of Vrindavana were completely in love with Krishna and dreamed of being able to marry him. When the first month of winter came, they observed a vow in honor of Durga, also called Katyayani, to ask for that blessing. For one entire month they only ate *havisyanna*, a special preparation of rice and pulses without spices that is offered during the ritual sacrifices. After taking bath in the river, they collected some clay from the Yamuna and shaped an image of Durga, then worshiped her on the river bank by offering sandalwood pulp, lamps of clarified butter, fruits, betel nuts, freshly sprouted leaves, scented garlands and incense. Offering their respects to the Mother Goddess, they prayed to become married to

Krishna, the son of Nanda Maharaja. Every day they got up at dawn and holding hands they went to take bath on the river bank, singing the glories of Krishna. After undressing, they left their clothes on the bank and entered the water, also taking some time to play among themselves.

One day, Krishna, who had heard their prayers, wanted to fulfill their wish by developing a conjugal relationship with them. While the girls were engaged in playing in the river, he picked up their clothes and took them to the top of a *kadamba* tree. From there he called the girls, saying that he would give back the clothes to those who would come and claim them personally. The *gopis* were very excited at the idea that Krishna wanted to contemplate their beauty in that way, but they pretended to get angry. "Dear Krishna, do not be naughty. We know you are a very respectable boy, the son of Maharaja Nanda, and in Vrindavana everyone has a very good opinion of you. Why are you behaving with us in this way? Give our clothes back, the water is cold and we want to go home."

Finally the *gopis* resolved to come out from the river, trying to cover themselves with their hands as much as possible to save the appearances, but Krishna was not satisfied yet. "It is not nice to take bath naked while engaged in a sacred vow," he told the girls. "It is disrespectful to the Devas, so you need to ask forgiveness. Now offer your respects to the Devas, then I will give your clothes back." Others would have become angry and offended for such a treatment, but the young *gopis* of Vrindavana were crazy for that clever naughty boy and felt a great joy and excitement in the company of Krishna in such intimate circumstances. "I know the desire of your heart," Krishna told the *gopis*, "and it is a perfectly legitimate, pure and commendable desire, therefore I have decided to fulfill it. In the coming nights we will meet in the forest and will enjoy each other's company."

After giving leave to the young *gopis*, Krishna went back to take care of the cows and led them farther than usual. Krishna, Balarama and their friends the young cowherds, such as Stoka Krishna, Amsu, Sridama, Subala, Arjuna, Vrishabha, Ojasvi, Devaprastha and Varuthapa all sat in the shade of the trees, praising the generosity of those creatures, who offer fruits, leaves, flowers, roots, bark and wood, scent, sap, and even give their shade against heat. They soon began to feel hungry, and Krishna suggested they go to beg some food from the *brahmanas* who were sitting nearby

performing the Angirasa yajna to be elevated to the heavenly planets. "Mention my name and the name of my elder brother Balarama, and say we sent you."

The young cowherds respectfully approached the *brahmanas* and presented their request with folded hands, adding that gifting food during the ritual does not constitute a violation of the rules. However, the *brahmanas* were too attached to their material desires and so they did not listen to the young cowherds. Disappointed, the boys returned to tell what happened, and Krishna smiled. "Try again," he said, "but this time approach the wives of the *brahmanas*, who will give you all the food you want."

Following Krishna's instructions, the boys went to the *brahmanas'* wives, who filled big containers with all the different types of foods they had, and rushed to meet Krishna and Balarama like rivers run to the ocean, and in fact they expressed the wish they could always remain with him without having to go back home ever again.

When they understood what had happened, the *brahmanas* regretted having been so mean and greedy. "The Supreme Personality of God, in the garb of young cowherd boys, asks for food and we deny them. We have been fooled by our threefold birth, our great learning, our aristocratic background and our expertise in the sacrificial rituals. Now we realize that all this has been a damage rather than a benefit for us, because we have become arrogant and unable to see what our wives - sincere and simple women - could easily attain: pure love for God, that is the true purpose of life. We had already heard that Lord Vishnu, the husband of Lakshmi, who everyone wants to worship, had manifested by taking birth in the Yadyu dynasty, but we did not recognize him."

One day Krishna observed that the cowherd men were organizing a great sacrificial ceremony in honor of Indra, the king of the heavenly planets. Although he knew perfectly well what it was about, he approached the village elders and asked them the purpose of the celebration and how it would be performed.

Nanda Maharaja replied, "Lord Indra is the Deva of rains, and we honor him because he supplies the water required for the sustenance of all creatures. We offer him grains and other worship articles, and by accepting

the leftovers of this sacrifice we obtain the purpose of religiousness, the acquisition of valuable goods and the satisfaction of the senses. Those who neglect these principles due to envy, greed or lust cannot have an auspicious life."

Krishna objected, "The living beings are born and destroyed, and obtain happiness, sorrow, pleasure, fear and safety as a karmic reaction to their previous activities. Even if there was a Deva who assigns the results of such activities, he cannot grant anything if the appropriate activities have not been performed in such a way that they can produce the desired results. Indra cannot change the destiny of people or their nature: so what is the use of worshiping him? All living beings are controlled by their particular nature and therefore *karma* remains the main factor. So we should worship our own work, action in goodness, the prescribed duty, that gives us a livelihood and training for progress and to which we should be faithful.

Each social category has religious duties towards its particular activities, that are meant to sustain the entire society. The *brahmanas* study and teach, the *kshatriyas* protect the people, the *vaisyas* produce wealth and the *sudras* work with their hands. Specifically, the *vaisyas* are entrepreneurs who work in agriculture, trade and animal farming - and among such enterprises, our community is traditionally engaged in the protection of the cows. What has Indra to do with all this? We live in the forest and depend on the hills, so we should celebrate by performing a festival in honor of the cows, the Govardhana hill and the *brahmanas*! Let us prepare many different types of foods, such as rice pudding, vegetable soups, fried cakes, and all the milk sweets. The *brahmanas* will perform the fire ceremony, then we will give food and many gifts to the priests and distribute the *prasada* to everyone. We will feed lots of fresh hay to the cows and offer our respects to the Govardhana hill."

Nanda and the elders decided to follow Krishna's advice, and by using the materials that had been collected for the worship to Indra, they celebrated the festival of Govardhana hill, feeding the *brahmanas* and the cows with the appropriate foods, and then all together they circumambulated the hill as a mark of respect. Krishna manifested a gigantic form and, declaring himself to be the personification of Govardhana hill, he ate the offerings that had been prepared. Amazed, the cowherd men and their wives bowed to the

hill, asking for protection for themselves and their animals, and finally returned home in great happiness. Indra, however, was not happy at all. The king of the heavenly planets felt offended by the cancellation of the festival dedicated to him, and wanted to teach a lesson to Nanda Maharaja and the people of Vrindavana, sending Samvartaka, the deluge cloud that inundates the planets at the time of the partial destruction of the universe. Indra said, "That Krishna is a good speaker, but in his foolish arrogance he disrespected me, the king of the Devas, and now he will get what he deserves."

Soon the sky over Vrindavana was covered by the dreadful cloud, a violent wind began to blow and torrential rain fell mixed with hail, the waters ran and leveled everything submerging the ground. Wet and cold, the cowherd men, their families and their animals approached Krishna for protection. That terrible storm was totally out of season, and Krishna immediately understood that it was due to Indra's wrath, so he decided to give a practical demonstration to the king of the heavenly planets to destroy his vain pride and bring him back to the correct path. So with one hand only he lifted the great Govardhana hill and used it as an umbrella to shelter all the people of Vrindavana, together with their cows and calves. For seven days and nights Krishna protected the people of Vrindavana, who were so amazed that they totally forgot hunger, thirst and fatigue, and simply gazed at the wonderful son of Nanda. Indra was astonished, too. He realized he had made a big mistake and recalled his clouds, stopping rains and floods. Then Krishna told his relatives and friends that they could return home safely, and when everyone had cleared the place he again put the hill down to the ground, before the amazed eyes of everyone. Immediately the people of Vrindavana rushed to Krishna again, hugging him, offering respect and presenting gifts that expressed their love and veneration.

While the cowherds still in awe were discussing about the extraordinary activities of young Krishna, wondering whether he really was Vishnu himself descended into their family, Indra, the king of the heavenly planets, approached the Lord accompanied by Surabhi, the Mother of all cows. Throwing himself at Krishna's feet, Indra acknowledged his mistake and begged for forgiveness. Saluting him as the father and teacher of the entire universe, the eternal and transcendental Lord, he thanked him for curbing his vain pride and correcting his ignorance.

Surabhi, too, offered prayers and praise to Krishna, and together with Indra she performed the ceremony of *abhisheka*, bathing the Lord with milk and water from the celestial Ganges river, and calling out his name as Govinda. The people from the heavenly planets also participated in the ceremony by playing various musical instruments, showering earth with wonderful flowers and singing the glories of the Lord.

Krishna dances with the *gopis*

The moon was rising on the horizon, coloring it with a rosy hue, like a husband who coming back home after a long journey decorates the face of his beloved spouse with the red *kumkum* powder. Krishna glanced on the *kumuda* lotus flowers blooming under the bright and cool rays, and thinking about the beautiful eyes of the *gopis*, he began to play his flute.

In their homes, the girls of Vrindavana heard that wonderful music and recognized the call of the Lord they adored so much. Their lover was waiting for them: so they rushed into the forest, abandoning all other thoughts and all duties. Some of them had been milking the cows, others had been boiling the milk or cooking. Some had been dressing up or nursing a child or serving their husband, others were having dinner, but immediately all of them forgot whatever they were doing and ran off, into the forest, towards their love.

Krishna welcomed them with a smile. "Beautiful ladies, what are you doing in the forest at this time of night? Is there any problem at the village? This is not a place for girls: the woods are always full of strange and wild creatures, and the night is dark. Your families must be worried for you: please, go back home. Maybe you wanted to contemplate the beauty of the blossoming forest in the moonlight... well, now you have seen it, and you can return home. Or maybe have you come to see me? Of course, your desire is completely natural, but a woman's duty is to be faithful to her husband, take care of the children and the house. Your love for me can be

expressed simply by hearing and talking of my activities, meditating on me and contemplating my image - there is no need to meet me personally. Please go back home."

Deeply disappointed and saddened, the *gopis* were at a loss about what to do. Their heads bowed, embarrassed, the tears running down their cheeks melting the black ointment on their eyes, they remained there in silence, feeling rejected although they had abandoned everything to go to Krishna.

Finally they wiped their eyes and replied, "You should not talk so cruelly to us. You should not reject us, because we have renounced all material pleasures for the service to your lotus feet. You say we should serve our husbands faithfully, and it is right, but you are the one legitimate husband, friend and master of all beings. The great sages renounce all other relationships to search for you only, and so you have stolen our hearts and minds and we cannot go back. The presence of other men displeases us, because we are completely satisfied in you and in your amazing smile. All we want is to serve you. Please alleviate our suffering and allow us to fulfill our desire."

Thus Krishna, who is always perfectly satisfied in himself, went with the *gopis* to the bank of the Yamuna river, where the breeze is scented with the fragrance of the lotus flowers. He embraced them and played with them, laughing and pleasing their desires. Proud with having won the special attention of the Supreme Personality of God, the *gopis* started to think they had attained that position because of their personal qualities. Immediately Krishna decided to bless them by correcting their pride and removed himself from their sight. Krishna's sudden disappearance threw all the *gopis* into complete despair. They started to run around looking for him everywhere, begging for news from the animals and plants they met, and totally immersed in his remembrance, they unconsciously imitated their smile and his way of moving. Indeed, because they were losing their minds, they told each other, "but I am Krishna!"

Remembering the wonderful activities manifested by Krishna, they started to re-enact them. One *gopi* imitated Putana, while another played Krishna and pretended to suck her milk. Another *gopi*, crying like a baby, kicked her feet against a friend, who pretended to be the cart destroyed by Krishna when he was a small baby. Two *gopis* impersonated Krishna and Balarama,

while others sat around them like the young cowherds do, and others still grazed on all fours like cows. The *gopi* who was playing the role of Krishna called the cows and the others replied by mooing in happiness. In the same way, the young *gopis* re-enacted the punishment of the serpent Kaliya, the episode in which Krishna had lifted the Govardhana hill, and when Yasoda had tied little Krishna to the mortar to teach him not to steal butter.

Suddenly one of the *gopis* saw the tracks of Krishna's feet on the ground, walking away accompanied by a girl, and they fell into an even deeper despair. The *gopi* cried out, "Look here! Krishna's footprints get deeper, while the girl's disappear: evidently he picked her up in his arms or on his shoulders, abandoning us to go with her in a secluded place. And there he stopped to collect flowers for his beloved... here is where he stood on his toes to reach the tallest branches, because the imprints of the toes are more distinct than the heels'. And here they have been sitting down, see! Krishna must have entwined flowers in her hair!"

This was exactly what had happened. The *gopi* that Krishna had taken with him while distancing himself from the others also started to become proud because of the special attention she was receiving. So she told Krishna, "I can't walk any longer. Please Krishna, carry me wherever you want."

However, as soon as she tried to climb his shoulders, Krishna had suddenly disappeared to her great consternation. And in that piteous conditions her companions found her, weeping in despair just like them. When the forest became too thick and dark, the distraught *gopis* returned to the river bank to sing about Krishna and pray him to come back. "We pray you, Lord and master of our souls, Lord of our love, please show yourself again to us, because otherwise we will soon die, and you will be responsible for that. Many times you have saved us from great dangers, because you are the witness who lives in the hearts of all living beings, appeared in the Satvata dynasty to fulfill the prayers of Brahma. Just like you put your lotus feet on the heads of the serpent Kaliya to purify him from his anger, please touch our heads too, to liberate us from this tearing desire and restore our lives with the nectar of your lips that alleviates all sufferings.

Dear love, when in the morning you leave the village to take the cows out grazing, our mind is agitated by the thought that your feet, so delicate and wonderful like lotus flowers, can be wounded by the coarse grass and the

sharp pebbles on the path, and each moment of the day we spend without seeing you seems to last forever. And when we see you returning in the evening, all covered with dust and with ruffled hair, our hearts burn with desire for you, and our eyelids become an obstacle because by moving they deprive us of your sight for some fractions of a second. Our only ambition is the happiness to feel the touch of your feet on our breasts, and to taste the nectar of your lips."

Then Sri Krishna appeared in the middle of the crying *gopis* and pacified them, alleviating the pain of their separation. Surrounded by the *gopis* who worshiped him with their love, Krishna was shining like the autumn moon among the brightest stars, but each of the *gopis* had the impression of being alone with Krishna and to enjoy his full attention, because the Lord multiplied into as many identical forms as were the young cowherd girls. Sitting with them on the soft sand on the bank of the river, exchanging smiles and affectionate gestures, Krishna engaged in sweet conversations with his lovers, reassuring them and telling them that their totally unconditional love would bind him to them forever. "I just wanted to test you," he said, "and the demonstration of love you have given me exceeds all expectations. I am eternally indebted to you."

The *gopis* played and danced each with her own Krishna for the entire night, while the heavenly beings, amazed by such wonderful event, showered flowers on the circle of the *rasa* dance. Then, to refresh themselves from the fatigue of dance and love, Krishna and the *gopis* entered the waters of the Yamuna river and began to merrily throw water on each other, just like an elephant plays with his female companions. For one entire month, during the period of Kartika, Krishna went every night into the forest to dance with the *gopis*, but their husbands were convinced that the girls were sleeping next to them in their beds.

Krishna kills more Asuras

Krishna and Balarama spent their days taking out the cows grazing, and the nights playing, singing and dancing with the *gopis*, but the Asuras allied of

Kamsa were always trying to get the opportunity to attack them. And they were not the only danger.

One night Vrindavana was visited by a Guhyaka servant of Kuvera, named Sankhachuda, who saw all those gorgeous young women and overwhelmed by lust, he tried to abduct them. Krishna and Balarama heard the *gopis* screaming and calling their names and rushed to the rescue. Sankhachuda had been under the impression that Krishna and Balarama were too drunk to react and was surprised and scared by their immediate reaction, so he let the girls go and fled. Balarama stayed with the *gopis* to reassure them and Krishna went after Sankhachuda in quick pursuit, and finally he decapitated him. As a trophy of his victory, Krishna took the jewel that decorated the Asura's head as a gift for his brother Balarama.

Immersed in infinite happiness, the *gopis* sang the glories of Krishna.

"When Mukunda, Krishna, takes the flute to his lips to play it, he rests his left cheek on his arm and moves his eyebrows, to the great amazement of the wives of the heavenly beings, who are immediately overwhelmed by desire. The cows stop grazing and prick their ears up to listen, as still as if they were sleeping or painted pictures. Even the rivers stop their flow to hear that wonderful song. When Krishna walks through the forest, calling the cows, surrounded by friends who sing his glories, the trees and creepers blossom and bend under the weight of flowers and fruits, anxious to offer him worship. Their stems stand out in ecstasy and a sweet sap runs along their trunks, the bees become maddened around his *tulasi* garland and sing his glories aloud. The clouds shower flowers and spread an umbrella over Krishna to shade him from the sun.

Sometimes Krishna dresses as a wrestler and moves with the grace and elegance of a young royal elephant, and by contemplating him we feel swooning with desire. Even the does are fascinated by the song of his flute and come to sit next to him to listen better: just like us, they have abandoned all hopes of happiness in family life. When Krishna comes back home in the evening, the great Devas wait for him on the dusty path to offer their respects to his lotus feet, while his companions sing his glories. While he respectfully accepts the greetings from his friends, his eyes roll slightly as if he was drunk, and his smile is like a necklace of valuable jewels."

One day the village of Vraja awakened to the ground shaking and to a roaring challenge from a gigantic bull, that pawed the soil of the river bank with a terrifying fury. All the domestic animals fled from the pasture grounds and the pregnant cows had miscarriages. Responding to the terrified cries of the people of Vrindavana, Krishna went to face the Asura and standing in front of him, he scolded it severely for having caused so much havoc. When the bull charged, head down and bloodshot eyes, Krishna grabbed its horns and threw it aside, like an elephant would do with a rival in a fight. Arishta charged again, and again grabbing its horns Krishna threw it to the ground by kicking it, then he tore one horn out and used it to hit the Asura until it was unable to get up again.

After Krishna had killed Arishta, Narada Rishi went to Kamsa and revealed him that Vasudeva had switched the babies, and that in fact Krishna was the eighth son of Devaki. Furious, Kamsa again threw his sister and brother in law into jail, then studied new attack strategies, all focused on Krishna and Balarama.

First of all he sent to Vrindavana his most trusted ally, the Asura Keshi, and anticipating a possible failure like the previous ones, he organized a grand festival to attract Krishna and Balarama to Mathura, so they could be killed more easily. He gave detailed instructions to his elephant handler and to the wrestlers Chanura, Mushtika, Sala and Toshala, and alerted his allies Jarasandha, Dvidida, Sambara, Naraka and Bana. Then he summoned Akrura, the most respected Yadava among those who had remained in the capital, and ordered him to go to Vrindavana to bring the two brothers to Mathura for the festival.

The Asura Keshi arrived in Vrindavana, assuming the form of a huge horse, whose hooves made the ground tremble. Krishna came out to challenge it. Immediately Keshi attacked, but it was grabbed by the hind legs and whirled through the air for about one hundred meters. Keshi got up and attacked again, opening its jaws wide, and Krishna coolly stuck his left arm into its throat, knocking its teeth out and suffocating it. After the Asura's death, Narada Rishi approached Krishna and while they were alone he informed him about Kamsa's plans. Foretelling the upcoming glorious activities of the Lord, Narada bowed to him to offer his homage and prayers.

Some time afterwards another Asura arrived in Vrindavana. It was Vyoma, a son of Maya Danava and a powerful sorcerer. Vyoma took the form of a young cowherd and sneaked among the others, while they were playing sheeps and thieves, and kidnapped many of the boys, hiding them in a cave and blocking the opening with a big boulder. Krishna saw that only very few boys were remaining, and caught Vyoma while it was trying to take away more. Then Vyoma was forced to resume its true form, but it realized that it had lost all powers in Krishna's lethal grip. After killing the Asura, Krishna immediately set his friends free by shattering the boulder closing the cave, and they all returned home safe and sound.

Nanda Maharaja had observed the Ekadasi fast, and before completing the ritual, on the next morning (Dvadasi), he went to take bath in the river very early. Actually he had miscalculated the time and immersed himself in the water while it was still night, at an inauspicious moment, and he was taken prisoner by a servant of Varuna, the Deva of the waters. Informed that his father was missing, Krishna immediately went to the court of Varuna to obtain his release. The Deva of the waters, Varuna, was very happy to receive Krishna's visit and welcomed him with all honors, then he immediately set Nanda Maharaja free and apologized for the inconvenience caused by his own foolish servant.

Doubly amazed for having seen the immense opulence of the water-world of Varuna and the extraordinary welcome that the powerful Deva had given to young Krishna, Nanda described the events to the other cowherd men, and everybody was wondering whether Krishna would take them to his supreme and transcendental realm. To reassure his father and the other *gopas*, Krishna asked them to immerse themselves in the Brahmahrada and manifested to their eyes the eternal glory of Vaikuntha, where they saw Krishna in the form of Vishnu, surrounded by the *Vedas* personified engaged in offering their respect.

Another similar episode happened a few days later. Nanda and the cowherd men had gone to the Ambika forest to offer worship to Shiva and his consort Parvati. After completing the prescribed rituals, they camped on the bank of the Sarasvati river, going to sleep without dining. In the night, a huge snake crawled out of the nearby thickets and started to swallow Nanda Maharaja, who screamed calling for Krishna's help, while the men tried to

kill the snake by hitting it with flaming torches, but without much effect. Finally Krishna arrived there and touched the serpent with his foot: immediately the negative karmic reactions of the snake were destroyed and it took the form of a radiant Vidyadhara decorated with valuable jewels. Offering his respects to the Lord, the heavenly being explained, "My name is Sudarshana and I am a famous Vidyadhara. In my foolish pride for my own beauty and power, one day I derided some sages descendants of Angira Rishi, and they cursed me to take the disgusting form of a snake. Now I realize that such curse was in fact a blessing, because it enabled me to obtain the rare opportunity to meet you and become liberated by you."

After obtaining Krishna's permission, the happy Vidyadhara returned to the heavenly planets.

Krishna goes to Mathura

Akrura, the son of Svaphalka and Gandini, went to Vrindavana on the order of Kamsa, but his mind was overwhelmed by joy at the thought he would finally be able to meet the Lord. He knew that the evil Kamsa would never succeed in killing Krishna and he was anxious to see the defeat of the tyrant. While traveling, he imagined the happy moment when, arriving in the presence of the Lord, he would leap from the chariot to throw himself to the ground as a mark of respect.

He was certain that the Lord would understand his real intentions and would bless him by touching his head and smiling to him - a glorious moment that would purify all his old sins or negative actions that still contaminated his mind. He arrived at Vraja as the sun was setting. Immediately Akura recognized the imprints of the Lord's feet in the dust of the road and was overwhelmed by devotional ecstasy.

Krishna welcomed him warmly, embracing him, then he took him home, where Balarama looked after the comfort of the guest offering a seat, washing his feet, and presenting milk sweetened with honey and many delicious foods.

Nanda Maharaja addressed Akrura, "O descendant of Dasarha, it is a pleasure to see you. How do you manage to survive under the heel of cruel Kamsa, that wicked selfish man who slaughtered the sons of his sisters in front of her eyes? I do not ask you if you are well, because it would be like asking such question to sheep in the hands of a butcher. Tell us, what can we do for you? What is the purpose of your visit?"

Comforted by the sweet words of Nanda and Krishna, Akrura told them about the situation in Mathura and Kamsa's plans, also saying that Narada Rishi had revealed to Kamsa the true identity of Krishna and Balarama.

The two brothers simply laughed. Nanda sent word to the village people that everybody would go to Mathura for the festival, with all their carts and luggage. Everybody except the young *gopis*, who were to remain in the village and fell into the deepest despair, realizing that Krishna and Balarama would not come back from Mathura, but would stay there to live with their relatives, the descendants of Dasarha, Bhoja, Andhaka, Vrishni and Satvata. They cried, "This Akrura ('without cruelty') should rather be called Krura ('cruel'), because he is tearing out our hearts and our very lives, taking away Krishna and Balarama!"

At the end of a sleepless night, all the young *gopis* went to the house of Nanda while the sun was about to rise, and saw that Akrura was preparing to leave with the two divine brothers. Forgetting all modesty, they called out loudly to Krishna, begging him to remain with them. Krishna tried to pacify as much as possible, and promised that he would come back - but now they had to let him go, because he had an important mission to perform, for the benefit of everyone.

On the way to Mathura, Akrura stopped by the bank of the Yamuna river, and after drinking from its waters, Krishna and Balarama went to sit on the chariot again while Akrura took his bath in the sacred river, reciting Vedic *mantras* as prescribed in such situations. He was immersed in the water, when suddenly he saw Krishna and Balarama in front of him and was amazed, because he knew they were on the chariot. He went to check and they were still sitting in the chariot. Again Akrura returned to the river and saw Krishna and Balarama appearing in their form of Narayana and Ananta Sesha, surrounded by a crowd of Vishnudutas, saints and heavenly beings who offered their respects and prayers. The Lord was accompanied by his

main potencies called Sri, Pushti, Gur, Kanti, Kirti, Tushti, Ila, Urja, Shakti, Vidya, Avidya and Maya.

Overwhelmed by the ecstasy of revelation, Akrura threw himself to the ground in front of the Lord and offered prayers of praise, recognizing him as the Supreme Personality of God, omnipresent and omnipotent and omniscient, who descends out of his sweet will in this world to fulfill the divine mission to protect the good people, annihilate the evil doers and re-establish the eternal principles of religion. Suddenly the vision disappeared and Akrura completed his ablutions and returned to the chariot. Krishna affectionately teased him, saying, "Dear uncle, it looks like you have seen something extraordinary, isn't it?"

Full of happiness from that wonderful experience, Akrura replied, "I have seen you, and this surpasses any other thing that one could see on earth, in the sky or in the water."

At the end of the day Krishna and Balarama arrived at Mathura, after a comfortable journey during which all the villagers along the road had been coming out to watch them with great pleasure. On Krishna's request, Akrura stopped the chariot outside the city, leaving the two brothers to rest in a garden while waiting for the cowherd men's caravan. Akrura protested that he could not leave without taking them to visit his home, so that it would be purified by their presence, and Krishna reassured him, "We will come to see you soon."

Thus Krishna and Balarama entered Mathura by themselves and contemplated its wealth and beauty - the high gates, the portals made of solid gold, the thresholds of the houses in carved crystal, the lavish *gopuras* over the roads, the granaries, the shops of copper and brass utensils, the enchanting parks and gardens, the balconies studded with valuable gems, on which domesticated peacocks and doves were sitting. The streets had been sprinkled with perfumed water and scattered with roasted cereals and sprouts as auspicious offerings for the animals. The doors of the houses were flanked with pots full of water, decorated with mango leaves, ribbons and flowers, and smeared with yogurt and sandalwood paste, together with rows of burning lamps, trunks of young banana trees, bouquets of flowers and flags.

The women of Mathura rushed to their terraces to see the two sons of Vasudeva, abandoning all other activities, and the Lord smiled to them while he strolled around with the majestic stride of a young king of the elephants. The ladies of Mathura had heard much about Krishna, and in their joy they showered the two brothers with many scented flowers, praising the *gopis* who had the great fortune of enjoying his personal company regularly. The *brahmanas* welcomed Krishna and Balarama in the traditional way, presenting auspicious ritual substances - yogurt, whole barley grains, pots of water, garlands, sandalwood paste and other articles of worship.

Krishna and Balarama saw a washerman coming with a load of clothes that had just been dyed and asked for some, but the man insulted them and threatened dire punishment if the two brothers had dared try to appropriate those clothes, that belonged to the king. Without much discussion, Krishna quickly detached the washerman's head by using the tips of his fingers, and the servants carrying the clothes dropped the load and fled precipitously. Krishna and Balarama took their time to choose the clothes they liked best and put them on, while a weaver approached them and offered decorations suitable for those clothes.

Walking on, Krishna and Balarama arrived at the house of the florist Sudama. Immediately the man offered his homage and worshiped them with various ritual articles and prayers of praise. Recognizing them as the Supreme Personality of God, Sudama offered himself as their servant, and when Krishna and Balarama granted him a boon, he asked to obtain a firm devotion to God. After taking leave from the florist, Krishna and Balarama continued to walk down the street. They met a hunchbacked woman named Trivakra, who was carrying a tray with ointments. "Pretty girl," said Krishna, "whose are these ointments? If you give us some, you will get a great blessing."

Impressed with the beauty of those two boys, their sweet and kind words and their smiles, Trivakra happily gave them all the ointments they wanted. Pleased, Krishna decided to give a special treat to the girl: placing his own feet on hers, he lifted her chin with two fingers, straightening her back. Now the girl was really very beautiful, as her body was well shaped and attractive. Fascinated by that handsome boy, Trivakra grabbed him by his

cloth and begged him to go home with her, because she wanted to enjoy his company. Laughing, Krishna promised to go to her without delay, as soon as his mission was fulfilled.

Finally arrived at the sacrificial arena, Krishna and Balarama saw the great bow, similar to Indra's, protected by a garrison of soldiers. Making his way through the crowd, Krishna went to seize the bow and lifted it, then he pulled its string so strongly that the bow snapped in two pieces with a great noise. When the guards rushed in, Krishna and Balarama fought them off by using the two halves of the bow, and then they also defeated the reinforcements sent by Kamsa who had been informed about the situation.

Krishna and Balarama left the arena through the main gate and continued to walk around the city undisturbed, then they took bath, consumed some rice with milk and went happily to sleep. On his part, Kamsa was unable to sleep, obsessed by the worrisome news that he had received, and continued to see inauspicious signs. When finally the morning arrived, the king went to sit on his dais in the sacrificial arena, tormented by doubts and fear, and waited for the events to develop.

The first obstacle that Krishna and Balarama had to overcome to enter the arena was the gigantic Kuvalayapida, the most ferocious among Kamsa's war elephants, who tried to crush them as soon as it saw them, goaded by its driver. Krishna tied his hair back and tightened his belt, then replied to the elephant's challenge. Kuvalayapida charged, grabbing Krishna with its trunk, but Krishna easily disentangled himself, then punched the animal and sneaked between its legs to get behind it. He grabbed its tail and dragged the pachyderm merrily for about 90 feet, while the animal tried to pull away left and right. Finally he released it, ran around and slapped its face, and then ran off.

Furious, Kuvalayapida pursued him, trying to catch him but in vain. Krishna tripped the animal, rolled merrily on the ground and got up again, while the elephant dug its tusks into the ground trying to gore him. Goaded by its handlers, Kuvalayapida got on its feet and charged again, and this time Krishna grabbed its trunk and killed the beast on the spot. Then he tore a tusk away from the elephant's body and used it to fight off the guards.

Finally Krishna and Balarama entered the arena, each carrying a tusk on his shoulder like a weapon. All those who were there looked at them in awe, but each individual saw them in a different way, according to their particular sentiments. Good people rejoiced, recognizing them as the Supreme Personality of God and remembering their activities in Vrindavana.

Chanura was not afraid, and invited Krishna and Balarama to a fight: "We have heard that at your place, in Vrindavana, you boys do some wrestling. Do not try to avoid this fight, because we know that you are not ordinary boys or men: we have seen how you faced the mighty elephant Kunalayapida."

The two sons of Vasudeva accepted the challenge. Krishna faced Chanura and Balarama faced Mushtika. Hand to hand, leg to leg, the wrestlers engaged each other with full strikes, dragging one another through the arena, pushing and pulling, and throwing one another to the ground. They stood up and pinned one another to the ground in turn, without caring for possible damage, and the ladies in the public were horrified and terribly anxious for the two boys, who appeared so young and delicate.

To relieve the anxiety of the people and especially of his parents Vasudeva and Devaki, Krishna decided to end the game, and grabbing Chanura's arms, he whirled him around so powerfully that the man died. In turn, Balarama felled Mushtika with one single slap. Then the other wrestlers in Kamsa's employ - such Sala, Toshala, Kuta - came forward all together and they were killed immediately in a few moments, while their friends took to flight.

Furious, Kamsa jumped from his seat, ordering the immediate arrest of Nanda and all the cowherd people, and the execution of Vasudeva and Ugrasena. At that point Krishna became angry and leaped on the royal dais: rushing against the king like a lion attacks an elephant, Krishna knocked the crown off his head, then grabbed him by the hair and threw him into the arena and killed him immediately with his bare hands. Kamsa had spent many years intensely meditating on the Lord, obsessed by the fear of being killed by him, and although his meditation was unfavorable, he was blessed and purified from his crimes.

Balarama seized and killed the eight younger brothers of Kamsa, who had rushed towards Krishna to avenge the king, and while the wives of Kamsa and his brothers descended into the arena to mourn the death of their husbands, Krishna and Balarama ran to set Vasudeva and Devaki free. Krishna said, "Forgive our, dear parents, because we were unable to stay with you in these past years, serving and protecting you as it was our duty to do. Destiny decreed that we would be deprived of the affection of our family and the comfort of our home."

Then Krishna restored Ugrasena on the throne and sent for all the relatives who had been exiled or had fled in foreign lands because they did not want to submit to Kamsa. Finally he pacified Nanda Maharaja, who was in despair at the thought he was going to return to Vrindavana without Krishna and Balarama. "Dear father, now you should go back home. We will soon come to see you, after we have fulfilled our duty by comforting the relatives and friends who have suffered so much because of us. We will never forget your love, because you and Yasoda have really been our father and mother, taking care of us when we had been abandoned."

After the departure of Nanda and the cowherds, Vasudeva sent for the *brahmanas* and Garga Muni to perform the initiation ceremony for his two sons and distributed many cows and other gifts as he had wanted to do in the past. Then he went with his sons to the ashrama of Sandipani Muni, who had moved from Kashi to the city of Avanti (Ujjain).

Krishna and Balarama remained in the Gurukula of Sandipani, who happily took care of their education. They quickly learned all the Vedic scriptures and commentaries, the six *darshanas*, and the secondary scriptures such as the *Dhanur Veda*, *Niti shastra*, political sciences, logic and philosophy, and the 64 arts. When their education was complete, they offered their respects to the teacher, asking how they could serve him. As *guru dakshina* (gift of reciprocation to the *guru*) Sandipani asked for the return of his own son, who had drowned in the sacred place of Prabhasa, and immediately Krishna and Balarama went to the ocean. Varuna welcomed them with great honors, but when Krishna and Balarama asked for the return of Sandipani's son, he revealed that the boy had not been taken away by its waves but by an Asura named Panchajanya, a son of Diti who roamed in the ocean in the form of a conchshell.

After tracking down and killing the Asura, Krishna searched for his teacher's son, but in vain. Then he decided to go to Samyamani, the abode of Yama, who is the Lord of death. Hearing the sound of Krishna's conchshell, Yama hastened to meet him and offered his respects, and at Krishna's request, the Lord of death returned Sandipani's son without hesitation. Overjoyed in seeing his child coming back, Sandipani blessed Krishna and Balarama, and gave them leave to return home.

Krishna had not forgotten the people of Vrindavana, and immediately upon reaching the capital city he asked Uddhava, disciple of Brihaspati and advisor to the Vrishni dynasty, to go to the cowherds to alleviate their feelings of separation, and deliver a message to thank them and reassure them of his eternal affection. Uddhava arrived at Vrindavana after a long day of traveling. Gokula was filled with the calls of the cows returning from the pastures, the music of the flutes and the songs of the cowherds praising Krishna and Balarama. Nanda and Yasoda welcomed him with joy and honored him as a representative of Krishna. After offering him refreshments and a resting place, foot massage and other services, they inquired about the well-being of the two boys and their family, that was now freed from the oppression of Kamsa.

Nanda asked, "Does he still remember us, Krishna? Does he still think about his mother and his friends, the cowherd people of Vraja, the cows, the forest and the Govardhana hill? Will he ever come back to visit us? It would be wonderful for us to be able to see his face again, his eyes, his smile. He saved us from so many dangers and we have witnessed his amazing deeds, here in our village, and every time we see the places where Krishna has been, we forget everything else."

Listening to Nanda's words, mother Yasoda melted into tears, and the milk from her breasts dampened her dress because of the maternal affection she felt in remembering her Krishna. Uddhava pacified Nanda and Yasoda by talking about Krishna, the Supreme Personality of God, who enters into the hearts of all living beings and controls their awareness. Anyone who meditates on him, even for one single moment, even on his deathbed, is immediately purified from all sins and attains the supreme abode in a pure, spiritual, and eternal form, as radiant as the sun. He told them, "The infallible Lord, Krishna, sends you a message. He will come back very soon,

to fulfill his promise to you. However, you must remember that, although he has no mother, father, wife, children or other relatives - as he has no material body - nobody is a stranger to him, and at the same time he is the child, the father, the mother and the soul of everybody."

Uddhava had been talking with Nanda and Yasoda for the entire night. At dawn the *gopis* got up, and after offering worship to the Deity in their homes, they began churning the yogurt to make butter, singing loudly about Krishna's activities. The people of the village noticed Uddhava's chariot outside the house of Nanda, and wondered if Akrura had returned to torment them, stealing their lives away after taking Krishna from them.

When Uddhava came out from the house, the *gopis* saw him and were amazed to see how much he resembled Krishna, even in the dressing style. They had him sit in a quiet and secluded place, because they had immediately guessed that he was a servant of Krishna, and they were anxious for news. "We know you are the envoy of Krishna, the Lord of the Yadus, and you have come to comfort his parents. But evidently there is nothing else that he cares to remember, here in Vrindavana. The interest of a person towards those who are not his parents is temporary and unstable, like the interest that a man has for a woman, or a bee for a flower. A prostitute abandons her penniless customer, the subjects abandon an incompetent king, the students leave the teacher when they have completed their education, the birds abandon the tree at the end of the fruit season, and a lover abandons the woman he enjoyed, even if she is in love with him."

The *gopis* wept openly and started talking among themselves, remembering the activities of Krishna. One of the *gopis*, seeing a bumblebee approaching, addressed him, "Ah! Friend of a cheater! Do not try to touch my feet with your mustache - that is reddened by the *kunkum* that Krishna's garland has collected from the breasts of our rival in love. Krishna is certainly busy with the women of Mathura... after allowing us to drink once the nectar of his lips, Krishna has abandoned us, throwing us aside like wilted flowers. Why are you coming here to sing about him, the friend of Arjuna? You should rather go to his new lovers, because they will give you the gifts you desire. I have nothing to give you. And why should I make peace with that ungrateful boy? Because of him we have left our homes, husbands,

children, everything. And many others have done the same thing, as after hearing about Krishna, they have become totally destitute and now they live as beggars here in Vrindavana." Suddenly, horrified by what she had said, the *gopi* spoke again to Uddhava. "O friend of our beloved Krishna! Thank you for coming. Does Krishna ever speak about us, his humble servants? Will he ever come back to grace our heads with his hand, that carries the scent of the *aguru*?"

Amazed at the deep ecstatic meditation of the *gopis*, Uddhava tried to pacify them. "I bring you a message from your beloved. The Lord said, I am never really separated from you, because I am the soul of the entire creation and therefore I am present everywhere, in all created things, in the minds of all beings and in the elements of the universe. The true purpose of my leaving was to intensify your meditation on me. When her lover is away, a woman thinks about him more intensely, and through your contemplation you will be able to remain constantly in my company."

Uddhava stayed in Vrindavana for many months, talking with the *gopis* and the other villagers, alleviating their sufferings and anxiety, and constantly speaking about Krishna. Finally, after praising the love of the *gopis* for the Lord, he took leave from Nanda and the other cowherds and returned to Mathura, to report his experience to Krishna.

Krishna builds the city of Dvaraka

Krishna had not forgotten young Trivakra either, and his promise to go and visit her. One day, accompanied by Uddhava, he went to the house of the young woman, who lived in a very beautiful building with some other courtesans. When she learned that Krishna had arrived, Trivakra quickly prepared herself, taking a bath and putting on make-up, chewing fragrant substances and choosing the most elegant clothes and ornaments. Then she went to meet him, affecting shyness in a very coquettish way, and Krishna took her hand and led her to the bed.

Then Krishna went with Uddhava and Balarama to the house of Akrura, who welcomed them with great joy, offering them the traditional worship for honored guests and prayers of praise that acknowledged his supreme transcendental position. After accepting his devotion and respect, Krishna asked Akrura to go to the city of Hastinapura to give a message to his cousins the Pandavas, who lived there with Dhritarashtra, the regent of the throne.

In Hastinapura, Akrura met Bhishma, Vidura and Kunti, Bahlika and his son Somadatta, Dronacharya, Kripacharya, Karna, Duryodhana, Asvatthama and the five sons of Pandu. Kunti and Vidura explained clearly the situation to him: the sons of Dhritarashtra could not tolerate the great qualities of the sons of Pandu and their popularity among the subjects, so they had been trying to kill them in various ways. While narrating their misadventures and the dangers to which her children were constantly exposed, Kunti started to weep, invoking Krishna and his help.

Before returning to Mathura, Akrura approached Dhritarashtra and tried to convince him to change his attitude towards his innocent and qualified nephews, to behave with justice without allowing himself to be influenced by the attachment to the temporary ties of the material body, because only a foolish man will identify with something he will soon lose. Dhritarashtra thanked him for the good instructions, but replied that his attachment was too strong and could not be overcome. He said, "And who am I to oppose the plans of the Supreme Lord? Vishnu has appeared to alleviate the burden of the world, and I must play my part as well."

In the meantime the two widows of Kamsa, named Asti and Prapti, had returned to their father's house - the king Jarasandha of Magadha - and begged him to avenge them. So Jarasandha collected 23 *akshaubhinis* - 503,010 war chariots and as many war elephants, 1,509,030 horsemen and 2,515,050 foot soldiers - and together with his allies he went to besiege Mathura. The immense army surrounded the city like an unsurmountable ocean and created great fear in its inhabitants. Krishna evoked two wonderful divine chariots that descended from the sky loaded with extraordinary weapons, and accompanied by Sankarshana he went to war, followed by a small battalion. Just outside the city, he blew his conchshell as a challenge to the aggressors, but Jarasandha derided him, calling him

"young boy" and refusing to engage him in fight. "Real heroes do not just prattle," Krishna replied, "but show their valor by their deeds."

Furious, Jarasandha moved against the two brothers, covering them with a shower of arrows, but Krishna twanged his Saringa bow and retaliated by shooting a veritable hurricane of weapons, that massacred the enemies easily. Hundreds of rivers of blood ran through the battlefield, among the severed limbs of the fallen warriors - human arms and heads and carcasses of elephants and horses, that appeared respectively like snakes, tortoises, islands and crocodiles. The wheels of the destroyed chariots appeared like whirlpools, the severed hands and feet looked like fish, human hair floated like seaweeds, and the weapons seemed like reed thickets. The terrible scene inspired fear in cowards and joy to the wise. Soon Jarasandha remained alone, deprived of his immense army and even of his chariot, and he was going to be tied up as a prisoner by Balarama, when Krishna intervened and let him off. Humiliated by that hard defeat and even more so by the clemency of his victorious enemies, Jarasandha the son of Brihadratha returned home to meditate on revenge, while Krishna and Balarama triumphantly entered the city.

For 17 times Jarasandha marched into war against Mathura, and each time he was defeated and his armies were annihilated. On his 18th attempt he allied himself with a barbarian king, named Kalayavana, who had been recommended by Narada Rishi. That Yavana king arrived with an army of 30 million soldiers, and Jarasandha with his new army were expected any moment. Krishna evaluated the situation and thought that while they were engaged in fighting against Kalayavana, Jarasandha could take advantage of the situation and enter the city to kill the people or capture them. Therefore he decided to build an impregnable fortress in the ocean, surrounded by walls 12 *yojanas* long, and ordered Visvakarma to complete the project. Each house would have a temple and a watch tower, and all the Devas would offer wealth and special blessings for the new city.

After transferring all the inhabitants of Mathura to Dvaraka, Krishna and Balarama decorated themselves with garlands of lotus flowers, and without carrying any weapon they stepped out of the main gates of the city. Kalayavana saw them rising from the gates, resplendent like twin moons. Krishna had taken the four-armed form of Narayana and Kalayavana

recognized him from the description made by Narada, so he rushed towards the Lord, but Krishna ran off to invite the Yavana king to pursuit.

Always running within a short distance, Krishna led Kalayavana to a mountain cave without caring for his insults, and then he disappeared into the opening. Kalayavana followed him into the cave, and in the dim light he saw a shape lying on the ground. Believing it to be Krishna, resting after the long pursuit, Kalayavana kicked him with all his might, shouting and calling for a fight.

The man sleeping in the cave, however, was not Krishna. It was king Muchukunda, the son of Mandhata of the dynasty of Ikshvaku. Many ages earlier, he had been summoned by the Devas to assist them in their war against the Asuras. When after a long fight he had been relieved by the arrival of Kartikkeya to the lead of the army, Muchukunda asked for the favor of being left undisturbed for some time, so that he could sleep in peace. This was the man that the unfortunate Kalayavana had kicked. The great Muchukunda awoke, and opening his eyes he manifested such anger against his maladroit aggressor, that the Yavana king was reduced to ashes on the spot. Then Muchukunda looked around and saw Krishna, resplendent before his eyes, in the four-armed form of Vishnu.

He asked who he was and Krishna replied, "My dear friend, I have appeared in thousands of births, I have lived thousands of lives and taken thousands of names. In fact, my names and activities are unlimited and cannot be counted even by me, because they are more numerous than the grains of dust on earth. But I can tell you about my present life. Some time ago Brahma asked me to descend to this earth to protect the principles of religion and destroy the demoniac beings who burdened the world. Therefore I have appeared in the house of Vasudeva and killed Kalanemi - in his new incarnation as Kamsa - and Pralamba and other enemies of the good people. I have come to seek you in this cave because in the past you offered me your prayers, and now I want to grant you a boon."

Muchukunda realized he was in the presence of Vishnu, and bowing to him, he offered beautiful prayers of praise. Muchukunda said, "The men and women of this world are confused by your illusory energy and therefore they neglect the true benefit offered by human life and instead of serving and worshipping you, they seek happiness by engaging in family life. I was

among those fools, and because of my false identification and attachments I suffered much. Puffed up with pride for my body, that is nothing but a material object like a vase or a wall, I was strutting around leading my armies, forgetting that death is always on the prowl, and that which is today called 'king', tomorrow will be called 'excrements' or 'worms' or 'ashes'. My Lord, I believe you have already blessed me, because I find that my old attachments have now disappeared and I only desire to obtain the shelter of your lotus feet."

After offering again his homage to the Lord, Muchukunda took leave from him, and coming out from the cave where he had slept so long, he walked towards the mountain Gandhamadana at Badarikashrama, where he engaged in austerities worshiping Nara Narayana.

Krishna and Balarama returned to Mathura, where they annihilated the Yavana army and collected their spoils of war. Then Jarasandha arrived with a new army, and Krishna and Balarama pretended to flee, luring Jarasandha to the pursuit. Finally, Krishna and Balarama climbed the mountain Pravarshana. As he had not been able to find them, Jarasandha decided to torch the entire mountain, and gave fire to the woods around. Krishna and Balarama jumped from the mountain top, 11 *yojanas* tall, and went to Dvaraka without being spotted by Jarasandha. Convinced he had succeeded in killing the two brothers and finding the city of Mathura empty, Jarasandha gathered his army and returned home.

Krishna marries Rukmini

The king of Anarta, Raivata, gave his daughter Revati to Balarama as a bride, and Krishna married Rukmini, also called Vaidarbhi, the daughter of Bhisimaka, who was a direct expansion of Lakshmi Devi. Bhisimaka had five sons - Rukmi, Rukmaratha, Rukmabahu, Rukmakesha and Rukmamali - and a gorgeous daughter named Rukmini. Rukmini had heard much about Krishna and decided to become his wife, but her brother Rukmi, who did

not like Krishna at all, was planning for her to marry Sishupala. Very upset, Rukmini secretly sent a *brahmana* to Dvaraka with a letter addressed to Krishna.

The letter said: "Wonderful Lord, I have heard so much about you and your qualities, that alleviate the sufferings of anyone who listens to them, and I am shamelessly in love with you, because you have no equals in birth, character, knowledge, wealth and power. O lion among men, which well-born girl would not want to marry you, when the proper moment has come? My dear Lord, I have chosen you as my husband, and I am relying on you. Tomorrow is the day for my marriage ceremony, organized by my brother against my will. I beg you to come and take me away, so that Sishupala jackal will not touch what naturally belongs to the lion. I desire that only the younger brother of Balarama will have my hand, and not the son of Damaghosa or anybody else. If you reach Vidarbha tonight with your army without being announced, you will be able to crush the forces of the kings of Cedi and Magadha and marry me as the Rakshasas do, by forcibly abducting me, while I am going in procession to the temple of the Mother Goddess, Durga, who is the Deity protecting our family."

After reading Rukmini's request, Krishna reassured the *brahmana* messenger, revealing that he, too, desired to marry Rukmini and that he would take action according to the proposed plan. He immediately ordered Daruka to prepare his chariot and left, reaching Vidarbha in one night only.

Under Rukmi's orders, everything had been organized for the marriage, and the city was decorated and ready for the festivities. Sishupala and his father, Damaghosha the king of Cedi, arrived accompanied by a powerful army and many *brahmanas* engaged in the traditional rituals. Sishupala's retinue also included his friends Salva, Jarasandha, Dantavakra and Viduratha, together with Paundraka and many other allied kings. Bhismaka, the king of Vidarbha, came out of the city to welcome them, and took them to a residence that had been specifically prepared for them.

Balarama came to know about the situation and rejoined Krishna bringing a large army, because he knew that the kings who were enemies of Krishna were expecting a move from him. In the meantime Rukmini was anxious, because dawn was approaching and yet she had not had any news about the arrival of Krishna or the messenger *brahmana*. She was tormented,

wondering if Krishna had maybe found some defect in her and decided not to consider her proposal. Or maybe Shiva and Durga were displeased with her and had not blessed her desire. Suddenly she felt a small quiver in the left side of her body, in her eye, arm, and leg: an auspicious sign, that indicated some happy event was imminent. Just then she saw the messenger *brahmana* coming, merry and smiling, and she realized he was bringing good news.

The king of Vidarbha heard that Krishna and Balarama had come to see the wedding and went to welcome them, arranging for a residence for them and their retinue as well. The inhabitants of the city were anxious to see the Lord; knowing the wishes of Rukmini, they prayed for their fulfillment, and praised that appropriate choice.

Princess Rukmini walked out of the palace, accompanied by her mother and surrounded by her friends and maids and by their escort, while many musical instruments played festively. The procession was followed by thousands of *ganikas* and wives of *brahmanas*, who carried beautiful offerings for the Goddess. Before entering the temple, Rukmini washed her hands and feet and purified her mouth, then she went to offer homage to Mother Durga and presented the ritual worship with water, scents, whole grains, incense, clothes, garlands, ornaments and many lamps.

The *brahmana* wives, too, offered worship and presented many delicious foods, betel nuts, sacred thread, fruits and sugarcane juice. Rukmini bowed to them, received the *prasada* (the sanctified leftovers from the offerings) and left the temple with their blessings, holding a maid's hand and walking before the kings who had gathered for the festivities. Everyone was in awe contemplating the beauty of Rukmini, whose breasts were just beginning to blossom. The princess walked with the graceful movements of a royal swan, her hips decorated by a belt studded with jewels, that set off her small waist, and her sweet smile slightly showed her teeth, similar to jasmine buds.

Moving a lock of hair from her face, she looked around avidly searching for Krishna among the crowd of enthralled princes, and as soon as their eyes met, Krishna stepped forward and lifting the princess, he put her on his chariot, that carried the flag with the effigy of Garuda. Without hurrying, like a lion that takes his prey from a circle of jackals, Krishna moved away together with Balarama and their escort. The princes and kings who saw

that scene became furious and rushed to don their armors; they climbed into their vehicles to run in pursuit of Krishna, armed with many weapons. The generals of the Yadu army saw them arriving, so they turned their chariots waiting for the attack, facing the shower of arrows shot by the enemies. Rukmini looked at the Lord with her large eyes filled with fear, but he reassured her: "Do not worry, your soldiers will protect you."

Responding to the attack, the Yadu warriors shot their arrows on the pursuing army, quickly routing them. The other kings approached Sisupala, whose promised bride had been snatched away, and tried to comfort him. Jarasandha told him how he had personally been defeated seventeen times by Krishna, and encouraged him to be patient, because maybe they could take revenge in the future. Rukmi did not want to listen to anyone and continued his pursuit with an entire battalion, swearing in front of all the kings that he would never return to his own city unless he had killed Krishna and recovered Rukmini from her kidnapper.

Arrived in view of Krishna's chariot, he challenged him with insults and threats, but Krishna smiled and with a shower of arrows he broke Rukmi's bow and flag, and killed his charioteer and horses. Rukmi hit Krishna with five arrows, but Krishna replied by breaking a second bow and all the other weapons of Rukmi. Seeing that Krishna was going to kill her brother, Rukmini intervened, begging with tearful eyes Krishna to spare him. Then Krishna merely tied up his brother in law with a strip of cloth and punished him by cutting off tufts of hair, beard and mustache.

In the meantime Balarama came to release poor Rukmi and scolded Krishna for having derided him so cruelly, but he also explained to Rukmini that the *ksatriya* code requires them to fight to support *dharma* even against their own relatives, and if needs be, even to kill them. So by addressing Krishna and Rukmini one after the other, Baladeva tried to minimize the seriousness of the events. After being released, Rukmi did not have the courage to return home and went to found a new city, that he named Bhojakata. All obstacles removed, Krishna and Balarama returned to Dvaraka, taking Rukmini with them, and immediately the marriage was solemnized with great festivities, to the joy of all inhabitants. All the dynasty members participated to the ceremony and the minstrels composed songs to celebrate the love of Rukmini and Krishna.

Rukmini's first son, Pradyumna, was an incarnation of Kamadeva, who had been burned to ashes by the angry glance of Shiva. The Asura Sambara kidnapped Pradyumna from his crib when he was less than ten days old, and he threw him into the sea to kill him. The baby was swallowed by a large fish, that was immediately captured by the fishermen and sold right to the kitchen of Sambara. When the cooks opened the fish they found the baby was still alive and entrusted him to a palace maid, named Mayavati.

Narada Rishi appeared to unveil the mystery and explained that actually Mayavati was none other than Rati, the consort of Kama, who had become a servant in the kitchen of the Asura while she was waiting for the reappearance of her husband. Soon Pradyumna became a very handsome youth and realized that Mayavati had for him feelings that one could not consider maternal.

Mayavati explained everything and encouraged him to punish the evil Asura Sambara, who had kidnapped and tried to kill him as a baby. Then she taught him the mystic knowledge known as Mahamaya, that overcomes all other spells and was required for the fight, because Sambara had learned the black magic of the Daityas from Maya Danava. Pradyumna went to challenge the Asura and after a fierce battle with the mystic weapons of the Guhyakas, Gandharvas, Pisachas, Urugas and Rakshasas, the son of Krishna decapitated the Asura with his sharp sword.

While the Devas praised him for that amazing deed, Pradyumna flew with his wife Mayavati to the palace of Krishna in Dvaraka. All the women of the palace were fascinated by young Pradyumna, that looked exactly like his illustrious father, and Rukmini felt overwhelmed by a strong emotion.

She said, "If my poor son was still alive, today he would be of the same age, and probably also have the same looks of this young man". Feeling an auspicious shiver in the left side of his body, Rukmini realized that he could indeed be her son Pradyumna. Once again Narada Rishi intervened to explain everything that happened and the news spread, to the great joy of all the inhabitants of the city.

The other wives of Krishna

Satrajit was a devotee of Surya, the Deva of the Sun. As a mark of affection, Surya had gifted him a jewel endowed with great powers, called Syamantaka. Every day the jewel produced eight measures of gold, and furthermore it kept away all diseases, poisonous snakes, famine and cheaters.

One day Satrajit went to Dvaraka wearing that jewel, and because of the great radiance that emanated from it, people thought that he was Surya himself. Krishna asked him to donate the jewel to king Ugrasena for the benefit of the entire kingdom, but Satrajit refused. Later Prasena, the brother of Satrajit, took the jewel on himself to go hunting in the forest and was killed by a lion. The beast dragged the young man's body into a cave to devour it with ease, but the cave was the abode of Jambavan, a bear warrior of the tribe that had assisted Ramachandra in his war against Ravana. Jambavan killed the lion and appropriated that beautiful jewel, that he saw as the ideal gift for his youngest son.

Satrajit waited in vain for his brother's return, and after a few days he started to suspect that he had been robbed and killed by Krishna. The rumor spread around the city and Krishna was informed. To wash that unjust spot from his reputation, he gathered a small group of citizens and went to search for the disappeared Prasena, following his tracks to the forest. Very soon they found the horse killed by the lion and the blood trail leading to the cave, then they also found Prasena's body and the dead lion.

Krishna left his companions outside the cave and entered alone into the darkness, finally arriving in the place where Jambavan's son was playing with the jewel. The maidservant who was taking care of the boy became scared and started to scream, and immediately Jambavan rushed in to repel the intruder. After a fierce fight, similar to that of two hawks wrestling for the same prey, and that lasted several days, Jambavan began to wonder about the identity of that extraordinarily powerful opponent. Then he

realized it was Vishnu himself, who had already appeared in the form of Ramachandra, and falling to his feet he offered the Syamantaka jewel and the hand of his daughter Jambavati as well. Pleased by Jambavan's devotion, Krishna blessed him and accepted his offering.

In the meantime the citizens of Dvaraka who had remained waiting outside the cave felt discouraged and returned to town tired and depressed, spreading the news of Krishna's disappearance. All the people, extremely worried, went to pray Chandrabhaga, Mother Durga, so that their beloved Krishna could return safe and sound. Mother Durga heard their prayers and replied they would be fulfilled. Just at that time Krishna entered the town again, accompanied by his new bride, to the great happiness of everyone. Then Krishna summoned Satrajit in the presence of the entire assembly, and in front of king Ugrasena announced that Prasena's body had been found and officially restored the Syamantaka jewel to Satrajit. Deeply ashamed for having defamed Krishna so unjustly, Satrajit meditated on the best way to remedy his mistake, and finally decided to present the Lord with the jewel and the hand of her own daughter Satyabhama. Krishna accepted Satyabhama but asked Satrajit to keep the jewel in the name of the king, and to pray Surya for the benefit of the entire kingdom.

After that, Krishna and Balarama departed for Hastinapura because they had heard that Kunti and the five Pandavas had been killed in a fire. There they met Bhishma, Kripa, Vidura, Gandhari and Drona, who were distraught because of the news. In the meantime at Dvaraka, Akrura and Kritavarma went to Satadhanva and together they plotted to kill Satrajit and appropriate the jewel. Satadhanva took action and broke into the house of Satrajit, killed him treacherously and stole the Syamantaka. Satyabhama preserved her father's body in an oil tub and went to give the sad news to Krishna and Balarama. Out of consideration for Satyabhama, the two brothers expressed grief and wept, like ordinary human beings.

Returning immediately to Dvaraka, Krishna prepared to punish Satadhanva and recover the jewel. After learning that Krishna was determined to kill him to avenge the death of his father in law, Satadhanva was overwhelmed by terror and went for help from Kritavarma and Akrura, but they did not dare oppose Krishna and Balarama. Satadhanva then entrusted the jewel to Akrura and fled from Dvaraka, but Krishna and Balarama pursued him and

caught up with him in the vicinity of Mithila, where Krishna beheaded him with the Sudarshana disc.

Krishna returned to Dvaraka, and after performing the funeral rituals for Satrajit he continued the investigation to recover the jewel, but Akrura and Kritavarma too, had fled from the city, carrying away the Syamantaka. Krishna then sent a message to Akrura asking him to return to the city and hand over the jewel to Satyabhama, who was the heir of Satrajit. Terribly ashamed, Akrura returned the jewel in the presence of the city assembly, and the defamatory rumors against Krishna immediately ceased.

After some time the Pandavas reappeared at Hastinapura, belying the rumors of their death, and Krishna went to see them, accompanied by Satyaki. According to social etiquette, Krishna bowed to Yudhisthira and Bhima, who were older than him, then he warmly embraced Arjuna who was of his same age, and accepted the respects of Nakula and Sahadeva and of the new bride of the Pandavas, Draupadi. Finally Krishna went to greet his aunt, queen Kunti, who hugged him with much affection.

During his stay at Hastinapura, Krishna traveled with Arjuna in forest expeditions, where he hunted ferocious animals as the *kshatriyas* are expected to do. Tired and thirsty, the two friends went down to the bank of the Yamuna river to drink from its crystal clear waters, and they saw a wonderfully beautiful girl strolling along. When Arjuna inquired, the young woman said she was the daughter of the Sun and her name was Kalindi. She said, "I live here, in the home built inside the river by my father, and I engage in austerities for the purpose of obtaining Sri Vishnu as a husband."

Then Krishna accepted Kalindi's hand and took her on her chariot to Hastinapura and to Dvaraka as his bride.

On the request of the Pandavas, Krishna summoned Visvakarma and ordered him to build them a new city, that would be called Indraprastha. To clear the grounds, Krishna offered the Khandava forest to the Deva Agni. To repay the favor, Agni offered Arjuna a wonderful chariot, together with white horses, a bow and a quiver that was always full of arrows, and an invincible armor. Maya Danava was in the forest when the fire started, and because he was saved by Arjuna he showed his gratitude by building for him a very special assembly hall, rich in optical illusions.

Krishna's friendship for the Pandavas also had other effects. The two kings of Avanti (Ujjain) were allied with Duryodhana, but their sister Mitravinda wanted to marry Krishna. So Krishna challenged the royal suitors, including Duryodhana, and took off with Mitravinda, the daughter of his aunt Rajadhidevi.

Another of the main wives of Krishna, Satya (also called Nagnajiti), was the daughter of king Nagnajit of Kausalya. The king had established a special test for those who aspired to the hand of the princess: they had to tame seven very ferocious wild bulls. When the princess saw Krishna, she immediately fell in love with him and fervidly prayed for his victory.

Krishna immediately manifested seven duplicates of himself, easily faced the seven bulls and subjugated them, earning Satya's hand. The other suitors attacked Krishna while he was leaving the city with his new bride, but just like he had tamed and tied the seven bulls, Krishna easily defeated the rival princes, routing them.

Bhadra, princess of the kingdom of Kaikeya, was the daughter of Krishna's paternal aunt Srutakirti. The brothers of Bhadra were happy to offer her in marriage to Krishna. Lord Krishna also married Lakshmana, the daughter of the king of Madra, winning her hand during the traditional ceremony called *svayamvara*.

When the Asura Bhauma had stolen the earrings of Aditi, the mother of the Devas, and the umbrella of Varuna, Indra went to Dvaraka to ask Krishna's help. Then Krishna summoned Garuda and together with his wife Satyabhama flew to the capital city of Bhauma, called Pragjyotishapura ("the city where the sun rises first"), that is east of the Himalaya.

Krishna demolished the massive rock fortifications and the other defences of the city constituted by fire, air and wind, then blowing into his conchshell, he broke the spells that protected it. The Asura named Mura, who had five heads and was sleeping on the bottom of the city trench, rose to face his challenge, throwing his dreadful trident against Garuda, but Krishna used two arrows to break that weapon and a shower of other arrows against Mura himself. The Asura hurled a mace, but Krishna shattered in thousands of pieces, then he beheaded Mura, who fell back into the trench. The seven sons of Mura - Tamra, Antariksha, Shravana,

Vibhasu, Vasu, Nabhasvan and Aruna - came forth to battle to avenge their father, accompanied by Pitha, the general of Bhauma's army, but they were soon hacked to pieces.

Finally Bhauma, who was also called Naraka, left his fortress to fight against Krishna personally, but Krishna cut down all the weapons and missiles thrown at him, while Garuda used his beak and claws to attack the elephants of the Asura's army.

Bhauma was able to strike a blow with his spear wounding Garuda, but Garuda did not care at all. Then Krishna beheaded Bhauma and after entering the city he recovered the divine objects that had been stolen by the Asura and released the 16,000 princesses that had been kept captive in the city. All those aristocratic young women fell in love with their savior and wanted to marry him, so Krishna arranged for them to be carried in palanquins to Dvaraka, together with the great treasures amassed in Pragjyotishapura, including 64 white elephants descendants of Airavata, each having four tusks.

Then, accompanied by Satyabhama, Krishna journeyed to the abode of the king of the heavenly planets Indra to restore Aditi's earrings, and graciously accepted his thanks. While they were visiting the city, Satyabhama saw the wonderful *parijata* tree that decorated the gardens of Indra's capital and asked Krishna to take one for their palace in Dvaraka. To please his wife, the Lord uprooted a small tree and kept it on Garuda's back, but Indra felt offended and in spite of having received so many favors, he protested against Krishna's action and pursued him to get the tree back, but in vain.

So Krishna had 16,108 queens, each of them with her own private palace, where she lived with one of the emanations that Krishna manifested to remain in their company simultaneously. Because they saw that Krishna never left their palaces, each one of them was convinced she was his favorite, and all of them were fascinated by his handsome face, his arms, his loving and smiling glances, and his conversation.

Each queen had hundreds of maids, but was anxious to personally serve the Lord, welcoming him, offering him a seat, worshiping him with the traditional ritual articles, bathing him and massaging his feet, fanning him, smearing his body with sandalwood pulp, offering flower garlands, combing

his hair, preparing his bed and presenting gifts. Each queen had ten sons, all resembling their father. Here are the names of the main queens and their children:

Rumini gave birth to Pradyumna, Charudesna, Sudeshna, Charudeha, Sucharu, Charugupta, Bhadracharu, Charuchandra, Vicharu and Charu.

The sons of Satyabhama were Bhanu, Subhanu, Svarbhanu, Prabhanu, Bhanuman, Chandrabhanu, Brihadbhanu, Atibhanu, Sribhanu and Pratibhanu.

The sons of Jambavati were Samba, Sumitra, Purujit, Satajit, Sahasrajit, Vijaya, Citraketu, Vasuman, Dravida and Kratu. These, and especially Samba, were most deeply attached to their father.

The sons of Nagnajiti were Vira, Chandra, Ashvasena, Citragu, Vegavan, Vrisha, Ama, Shanku, Vasu and Kunti.

The sons of Kalindi were Shruta, Kavi, Vrisha, Vira, Subahu, Bhadra, Shanti, Darsha, Purnamasa and Somaka.

The sons of Madra were Praghosa, Gatravan, Simha, Bala, Prabala, Urdhaga, Mahashakti, Saha, Oja and Aparajita.

The sons of Mitravinda were Vrika, Harsha, Anila, Gridhra, Vardhana, Unnada, Mahamsa, Pavana, Vahni and Kshudhi.

The sons of Bhadra were Sangramajit, Brihatsena, Sura, Praharana, Arijit, Jaya, Subhadra, Vama, Ayur and Satyaka.

The family of Krishna was constituted by the Devas who had descended on Earth to assist the Lord's mission. All together, they were 101 clans, and nobody could count all the great personalities who appeared in the Yadu dynasty and their wonderful deeds. It is said that 38 million teachers were engaged in the education of the children of the Yadus.

Among all the queens, Rukmini was the first and foremost. One evening, Krishna was resting on his bed, covered by a canopy with strings of pearls and garlands of scented flowers, while the sweet moonlight filtered from the windows, together with the perfume of the *aguru* incense. Queen Rukmini was near the bed and fanning Krishna with a bejeweled *chamara*, when Krishna decided to play a game to her.

"My dear princess," he told her seriously, "many kings wanted to marry you, all of them very wealthy, strong, powerful, generous and handsome, and

above all, deeply in love with you. I do not understand why you instead chose me, as I am so much below your level. As you know I am a coward, who renounced the throne and took shelter in the ocean out of fear of those kings. I do not possess any material assets, and I am always in the company of mendicants who have abandoned all possessions, while wealthy people rarely bother about me. I believe you should search for a better husband than me, someone who will truly make you happy. I am not interested in wives, children and material assets, and I do not even have a professional occupation."

At those incredible words, Rukmini was struck as by lightning, because she took Krishna's speech seriously. Her cheeks streaked with tears, her voice choked, her eyes lowered in fear and unhappiness, she was trying to say something, but she fainted due to the excessive emotion. Concerned, Krishna leaped to his feet to raise her, and after embracing her, he arranged her hair and caressed her face, wiping her tears. "My love," he said, "please do not be angry with me. I was just joking. I was curious to find out what you would reply, that is all. And then, you know that I like you when you are a little angry, when you frown your beautiful eyebrows and shoot those sidelong glances."

Rukmini was relieved and forgot the terrible fear that had overwhelmed her at the idea of being abandoned by Krishna.

Then she said, "My dear husband, your arguments are very good. You and me - we are certainly not an equal match. You are the Supreme Personality of God, and if you sleep in the ocean, it is to appear in the hearts of all living beings as the Supreme Soul. You have no need for material possessions, and this also applies to your devotees, who are not attracted even by a position of monarch. In fact, the greatest among the kings, such as Anga, Vainya, Jayanta, Nahusa, Gaya and still others, have abandoned everything to go in search of you. You do not possess anything because there is nothing outside you, and you are the purpose of life itself. I remember very well when the mere sound of your bow string chased away all the miserable kings of this earth, who live like animals attached to activities that can be interesting for donkeys, dogs and cats. I know that you have no attachment for me or your other wives, because you are always balanced and happy in yourself."

Krishna was very happy to hear his wife's answers and praised her pure love, remembering how she had organized her own abduction to marry him.

The descendants of Krishna

Pradyumna, the son of Krishna, married his cousin Rukmavati and became the father of the powerful Aniruddha. Rukmavati, the daughter of Rukmi (Rukmini's brother) saw Pradyumna enter the arena of the *svayamvara* and immediately fell in love with him and decided to marry him. From his part, Pradyumna easily defeated all the princes and kings who had gathered for the ceremonies and took away Rukmavati just like his father had done with Rukmini. After some hesitation, Rukmi finally gave his consent to the marriage, to please his sister Rukmini.

Rukmini also had a daughter, Charumati, who married Bali, the son of Kritavarma. Later, Rukmi gave his grand-daughter Rochana to his daughter's son, Aniruddha. For the happy celebration of that marriage, Krishna and Balarama went to Rukmi's city, Bhojakata, together with many of their youngsters, such as Samba and Pradyumna.

At the end of the rituals some arrogant monarchs, including the king of Kalinga, suggested Rukmi to challenge Balarama to a game of dice, because Balarama was not very expert but he liked to play. In that way he would take some revenge by humiliating Balarama. Balarama lost 100 coins first, then, 10,000, with great pleasure of the king of Kalinga, who burst out openly with laughter, showing his teeth - and Balarama was very annoyed. Then Rukmi accepted a bet of 100,000 coins and this time Balarama won, but Rukmi refused to accept defeat and declared himself the winner, in spite of the evidence. Then Balarama raised the stakes to 100 million coins: he won this time, too, and again Rukmi protested, claiming to be the real winner, and calling for witnesses.

"You are nothing but cowherds," said Rukmi, amidst the laughter of the other people present, "and you roam around the forest without knowing

anything about the game of dice. Dice and arrows are made for kings, not for the rabble like you people."

At that point Balarama could not restrain himself any more, and raising his mace, felled Rukmi with one single stroke. He smote down the teeth of the king of Kalinga, who had shown them in laughter to insult him. All the others fled precipitously, although many of the strokes of Balarama's mace hit the targets, breaking arms, legs and skulls. Krishna came to know about it but he did not say anything, because he did not want to displease Balarama or Rukmini.

Aniruddha also married Usha, the daughter of the Asura Bana, the eldest of the 100 sons of Bali Maharaja, who had donated the entire world in charity to the Vishnu *avatara* called Vamana. Banasura, the king of the beautiful city of Sonitapura, was a great devotee of Shiva. Always respectable, he honored his promises, and he was generous and intelligent. Once he offered a very pleasing service to the Lord by creating a musical accompaniment with his 1,000 arms, while Shiva danced.

When Shiva offered him a boon, Banasura bowed and said that the 1,000 arms he had received had become a burden, because he was not able to find a worthy opponent in a fight. "If this is the boon you desire," said Shiva, "so be it. Very soon you will find an opponent that is as powerful as me, and who will defeat you in battle."

One night Usha, the daughter of Bana, had a strange dream in which she saw Aniruddha, the son of Pradyumna, of whom she had never heard about. In the dream, Usha and Aniruddha were in love and enjoyed each other's company, but then Aniruddha disappeared. Awakening suddenly, Usha cried, "Where are you, my love?" and when she realized what had happened, she felt very embarrassed and perturbed.

The princess had a very intimate friend, Citralekha, the daughter of Kumbhanda, a minister of Bana. Citralekha slept in the same apartment and when she heard Usha crying, she rushed in to see what had happened, and wanted to know who was Usha's lover, because she had never seen Usha in the company of men or boys. Usha said, "I was dreaming, and I saw a man with a dark complexion, almost blue, dressed in yellow. His arms were very strong and he was extremely handsome. I immediately fell in love with him.

I drank the nectar from his lips, but he suddenly disappeared, and I was overwhelmed by despair."

Citrlekha knew many magical arts and pacified her friend. "I will find him for you, do not worry. Now I will draw some portraits: if you recognize your mysterious lover, point him out for me and I will go and fetch him for you."

Usha remained indifferent in front of many portraits of Devas, Gandharvas, Siddhas, Charanas, Pannagas, Daityas, Vidyadharas and Yakshas. Then Citrlekha drew the portraits of human beings and especially of the Vrishnis; seeing Pradyumna, Usha blushed a little. When she drew Aniruddha, the son of Pradyumna, Usha recognized him instantly and begged her friend for help. Citrlekha precisely knew where to find Aniruddha, so she flew to Dvaraka, where she lifted Aniruddha in his sleep and carried him to Sonitapura, presenting him to her friend Usha. Happy, Usha took Aniruddha's hand and led him to her private apartments, where no man was allowed to enter, and there they enjoyed each other's company.

Usha was very much in love and constantly concerned about Aniruddha's well being, offering valuable clothes, garlands, scents, incense, lamps as well as drinks, delicious foods and sweet words. After some time the guards stationed outside Usha's apartments noticed that the girl was showing peculiar symptoms, and they went to report to Bana.

Furious, Banasura rushed to his daughter's apartments and found Aniruddha serenely engaged in a game of dice with Usha. Leaping to his feet, Aniruddha grabbed a mace and prepared to fight, fending off all the guards who were trying to capture him. In the end Banasura himself caught Aniruddha with the magic ropes called *naga pasa* and he threw him in a dungeon.

At Dvaraka, Aniruddha's relatives became worried about his absence. Narada came to bring the news that Aniruddha had been made captive by Banasura and immediately they organized a rescue mission, headed by Krishna and Balarama, and including Pradyumna, Satyaki, Gada, Samba, Sharana, Nanda, Upananda, Bhadra and the other chiefs of the Satvata clan, together with an army composed by 12 *akshaubhinis*. The city of Sonitapura was besieged and Banasura came out to the field with as large an army.

Shiva had come to assist Bana, sitting on the bull Nandi and accompanied by Kartikkeya and his Pramatha followers. In the ensuing battle Shiva fought against Krishna, Pradyumna against Kartikeya, Balarama against Kumbhanda and Kupakarna, Samba against the son of Bana and Satyaki against Banasura himself. Brahma and all the heavenly beings came to watch this amazing event as Krishna and Shiva played fighting, manifesting their respective heroic qualities.

Soon Banasura's army was routed and the Asura himself rushed on to fight personally against Krishna, the rival that had been predestined for him, but he was immediately pushed back. Then he resorted to the ultimate Shiva weapon, called Shiva-jvara, that has three heads and three feet. Krishna responded by shooting the Vishnu-jvara and the two weapons clashed. Unable to tolerate the radiance of the Vishnu-jvara, the Shiva-jvara surrendered to Krishna, offering prayers of praise and acknowledging his supreme power, and was liberated. Then Banasura attacked again riding his chariot equipped with many weapons, but Krishna replied systematically cutting off the 1,000 arms of Banasura, as if they were branches to prune off from a tree. Finally Shiva approached Krishna to intercede in favor of Bana, and Krishna stopped, leaving two only arms to the Asura. He said, "I promised Prahlada not to kill his descendants, and now Bana will be immune from old age and death, and will become one of your most prominent attendants. He has nothing to fear."

Pacified, Bana went to get Aniruddha and his wife Usha, and seating them comfortably on his chariot, he took them to Krishna's presence, blessing their union.

One day Samba, Pradyumna, Charu, Bhanu, Gada and the other boys of the Yadu dynasty went to see a forest, and as they were thirsty they searched for a well that contained some water. In a dry well they saw a very strange creature, a large lizard, and feeling compassion they tried to set it free. In spite of their efforts they were unable to take it out of the hole, so they ran to call Krishna. Krishna came, and by his left hand he took the big lizard and lifted it, but at his touch the animal immediately changed his form and appeared as a heavenly being, dressed in rich clothes and ornaments.

Questioned by Krishna, the heavenly being replied, "I am king Nriga, son of Ikshvaku. I was famous for my generosity, because I gifted as many cows

as there are grains of sand on this earth, the stars in the sky, or the water drops in the rain. They were all young cows, brown colored, full of good qualities, acquired honestly, and they were decorated with gold and garlands and accompanied by their young. I gifted them very respectfully to young *brahmanas* who were perfectly qualified and needed support for their families, and I accompanied the gift with lands, houses, gold, jewels, silver, comfortable beds and other furniture, carts, clothes and sesame seeds.

One day a cow that had been gifted to one of such *brahmanas* strayed from her group to return to my herd, and without realizing it, I gave her in charity to another *brahmana*. This accident caused a controversy and I offered to replace the contended cow with 100,000 others that I would give to each of the two *brahmanas*, but they refused and went away, leaving me in a very embarrassing situation. At my death, Yamaraja asked me if I preferred to receive first the reactions of my bad actions or my good actions, and I chose the bad ones. I was compelled to take birth as a lizard, but I always preserved the memory of my previous lifetime, anxiously waiting for your arrival so that I could be released."

After offering his homage to Krishna, Nriga happily ascended to the heavenly planets to enjoy the merits he had accumulated through his munificence during his life on earth. Krishna took advantage of that opportunity to explain to the boys that the property of a *brahmana* is sacred, and anyone who tries to appropriate it to his own advantage becomes poisoned by such act, and all his family is destroyed. Also severely punished is the indirect action of those who use the government or other people's help to deprive a *brahmana* of his sustenance, even if the culprit was the same person who had given the property to the *brahmana* as a gift.

Other battles

One day Balarama went to visit his friends and relatives who lived in Vrindavana, because he missed their company. Arrived at Vrindavana he offered his respects to Nanda and Yasoda, who welcomed him with tears of joy, hugged him and made him sit on their laps, as if he were still a child.

Then he went to meet the cowherd men, from the eldest to the youngest, saluting each one of them according to their seniority and the degree of friendship, with respectful homage, hand shakes, smiles and kind words. The *gopas* were anxious to get news about Krishna and all his relatives, and discussed about the wonderful things they had seen and those they had heard about, such as the death of Kamsa the tyrant and the building of the great fortress at Dvaraka.

The *gopis* were depressed as they had been abandoned by Krishna. They asked whether Krishna still remembered them and their service, but soon they became silent, deeply absorbed in their contemplation, and Balarama consoled them by delivering a message from Krishna.

Balarama remained for two months in Vrindavana and spent many nights with the *gopis*, especially in a beautiful garden on the bank of river Yamuna, where the personification of honey, Varuni, flowed from a tree hollow and perfumed the entire region with its sweet scent. Balarama and her companions drank deeply of this honey, then they played together like the king of the celestial elephants Airavata plays with his female companions.

At some point Balarama was tired and sweaty, and wanted to bathe in the river. So he called the Yamuna, but the river ignored his summons, believing him to be drunk. Irritated, Balarama threatened to use his plow to dig deep trenches in the river bed and force it to come to him in a thousand streams, and the terrified Yamuna immediately came to him to offer homage.

On another day, during his stay in Vrindavana, Balarama fought against Dvidida, a wicked man-ape who was an ally of Narakasura, and roamed around causing devastation merely to amuse himself, and imprisoned men and women by locking them up in caves. Dvidida found Balarama in the company of many girls and started a disturbance by playing buffoon, breaking the pot of the Varuni and pulling at the girls' clothes.

At first Balarama threw some stones at him to chase him away, but Dvidida's behavior only became worse. Then the Lord picked his mace and plough, deciding to kill the aggressor, and a big fight ensued. Dvidida uprooted a tree and used it as a weapon, but Balarama grabbed that trunk with one hand and replied by striking his mace on the head of his adversary.

Furious, Dvidida uprooted many more trees and boulders to throw them, one after another, against Balarama, but always in vain. Finally Balarama killed him by punching his collar bone.

While Balarama was in Vrindavana, the king of Karusha, Paundraka, challenged Krishna to a battle. Confused by the adulation of some of his courtiers, Paundraka had actually started to believe he was God and dressed exactly like Vishnu, with the four characteristic symbols, and also carried weapons imitating Vishnu's and similar jewels. He also had a flag made with the effigy of Garuda.

Paundraka's messenger approached Krishna in the royal assembly of the Yadus and conveyed the words of his master: "I am the only God, Vishnu, the Supreme Lord, descended into this world to show my compassion to the living beings. You, o descendant of the Yadus, are merely a vulgar imitation. Therefore you must abandon your deceitful act, leave the weapons you are carrying without any rights, and take shelter in me, otherwise I will punish you on the battlefield."

King Ugrasena and the other people present burst out in great peals of laughter, exchanging jokes. Krishna replied, "I will certainly let my weapons go, but only to throw them against that impostor. When Paundraka will be lying dead on the battlefield, he will be in a position to give shelter to all the vultures and dogs he likes."

Preparing for battle, Krishna went to Kasi, where Paundraka lived with his friend, the king of Kasi, and announced his challenge by blowing into his war conchshell. The two allies launched an army of 3 *akshaubhinis* against Krishna, but Krishna wiped it away easily, fending off all the various weapons shot against him, and slaughtering the warriors and their mounts. Finally he decapitated both Paundraka and the king of Kasi, throwing their heads into the city, and then he returned to Dvaraka.

The son of the king of Kasi, Sudakshina, became furious and decided to avenge his father's death. After completing the funeral rituals, he began a special ceremony to evoke an Avenger, and from the sacrificial fire there arose a gigantic and terrifying being, with hair and beard of a coppery red, pointed fangs and a fiery trident. Sudakshina sent this demon towards Dvaraka, ordering him to destroy it, but as soon as it had come near the

Lord's city, Krishna responded with the Sudarshana disc, that fought the demon back. Frustrated in his mission, the huge Avenger turned back pursued by the Sudarshana disc and razed the city of Kasi to the ground, burning it with its raging fire.

Samba, son of Krishna and Jambavati, had fallen in love with Duryodhana's daughter, Lakshmana, and kidnapped her during the *svayamvara* ceremony, in which a *kshatriya* princess chooses her husband by comparing the valor of the various suitors. The Kurus became very angry and a number of prominent warriors went to pursue him. Karna, Sala, Bhuri, Yajnaketu and Suyodhana caught up with him and he turned to face them without any fear. Although he had battled valiantly, Samba was finally deprived of his chariot and captured. When the news reached Dvaraka, the Yadus were outraged and demanded war against the Kurus. Only the intervention of Balarama, who had in the meantime returned from Vrindavana, could pacify them a little.

Balarama himself went to Hastinapura together with Uddhava to try and solve the dispute amicably. Balarama remained in a garden in the outskirts of the city and sent Uddhava to test the intentions of king Dhritarastra, and when the news of Balarama's arrival spread, all the main members of the Kuru dynasty happily went to greet him. Immediately addressing the issue, Balarama clearly mentioned the unequal fight in which the great Kuru warriors had engaged young Samba. At those words, the Kurus became furious and started to insult the Yadus and Balarama, too. "The Yadus are good for nothing, and we have allowed them to use the royal symbols only because they are our relatives. But now that we have favored them, they want to give orders to us, who are their superiors in every way and allowed them to live out of our charity."

At those words Balarama started to laugh. He let the Kurus go back to the city, then he lifted his plough, deeply dug it into the ground, and began to drag off the entire city with the intention of throwing it into the Ganges. Terrified, the Kurus repented their arrogance, and immediately set Samba free and drove him and Lakshmana to the presence of Balarama, begging him to forgive them. Duryodhana gave his permission to the marriage and gifted her only daughter with a rich dowry, then the marriage procession departed for Dvaraka for the festivities there.

Narada Muni had heard how Krishna had defeated Narakasura and married many princesses, and desired to go and visit the Lord in Dvaraka to contemplate the wonders of his daily family life.

After entering the city, Narada gazed at the beautiful gardens and parks, filled with small lakes decorated with many varieties of lotus flowers. The city had 900,000 royal palaces, all made of crystal and silver, studded with huge emeralds and fitted with jeweled golden furniture. The traffic of vehicles moved along a rational system of avenues, streets, crossings and market places. There were many assembly halls and temples, and all the roads were regularly sprinkled with perfumed water and decorated with flags and banners shading the sun.

The 16,000 palaces of Krishna's queens had coral pillars with diamond designs, walls studded with sapphires and shining floors. There were canopies decorated with strings of pearls and ivory seats, and lamps of gems that amplified and reflected light. Clouds of incense filtered from the latticed windows and delighted peacocks danced on the terraces.

Seeing Narada arriving, Krishna hastened to welcome him, he seated him on his own couch and washed his feet, then he offered various articles of ritual worship. After staying for some time, Narada took leave to enter another palace, where the scene was repeated in exactly the same way, although at Narada's arrival in each palace Krishna was engaged in different activities: in the first palace Krishna had been resting on a bed with her wife, in the second palace he was playing dice with his wife and his friend Uddhava, in the third he played with his children. In the fourth palace he was taking bath, in the fifth he was offering oblations in the sacrificial fire, in the sixth he was performing other rituals, in the seventh he was serving food to the *brahmanas*, in the eighth he was sitting at lunch, and in the ninth he was practicing with weapons.

In another palace he was consulting with ministers, in another still he was in the swimming pool playing with many girls, and in another he was listening to the recitation of the *Puranas*, in another he examined the accountings, in another he was sitting alone in meditation, or conversing with the family elders, or studied battle strategies or peace alliances, or organizing social activities for the public good, such as the construction of wells, parks and homes for the travelers.

The queens of Krishna, deeply and love with their Lord, composed poems talking about Krishna to the moon, the clouds, the sweet breezes, the ocean, the rivers, the swans and the *kurari* and *chakravaki* birds, reading their behavior as symptoms of ecstatic love for their husband. It is very difficult to understand the austerities that those women had performed in their previous lifetimes to obtain the Supreme Personality of God as their beloved husband, who lived with them every day in the intimacy of their loving relationship. At dawn the queens awakened to the songs of the birds, but they were sad because the Lord would soon get up, leaving their company to engage in his daily duties.

And indeed Krishna got up a little before dawn, at the moment of the day called *brahma muhurta*, and performed the ritual purification by touching the water. Then he sat down to meditate on Brahman. After taking a complete bath, he dressed and offered oblations to the sacred fire, silently recited the Gayatri *mantra*, offered worship to the rising Sun and to the Devas, the Rishis and the Pitris, then he went to offer homage to the family elders and the *brahmanas*.

Every day he donated many sets of 13,084 cows to as many *brahmanas*, accompanying the gift with clothes and sesame seeds. Then he went to verify that all his subjects were happy and not wanting for anything, and distributed to everyone whatever they needed. After honoring friends, ministers and wives, he had breakfast and went out to the assembly hall, the Sudharma, where he sat with the greatest of the Yadus, surrounded by a court of comedians, dancers, poets and panegyrists, while the *brahmanas* recited the Vedic hymns.

The conversation between Nimi and the Yogendras

Narada remained for some time in Dvaraka to be near the Lord and his family. One day he went to see Vasudeva and had a conversation with him about what one should do in order to become free from material existence. To answer Vasudeva's questions, Narada related a conversation between

king Videha, also called Nimi, and the nine sons of Rishabha called Yogendras - Kavi, Havir, Antariksha, Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avirhotra, Drumila, Chamasa and Karabhajana.

We remember here that Svayambhuva Manu became the father of Maharaja Priyavrata, who was father of Agnidhra, father of Nabhi, father of Rishabhadeva, considered a manifestation of God. The elder among the sons of Rishabha, Bharata, became so famous that the Earth took its name from him. Bharata left his family to engage in austerities and in only three lives he attained the abode of the Supreme Lord.

Nine of the sons of Rishabha became the monarchs of the nine continents of Bharata varsha, while the other 81 became *brahmanas* and dedicated themselves to develop the path of ritual ceremonies known as *karma kanda*. Nine other sons of Rishabha became Rishis, renouncing all identifications and material possessions; these nine Yogendras - Kavi, Havir, Antariksha, Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avirhotra, Drumila, Chamasa and Karabhajana - are liberated souls who freely travel from one planet to another.

One day the Yogendras arrived in the place where Maharaja Nimi was performing an important ritual under the direction of great sages. Seeing all those powerful spiritual personalities arriving, all the people present stood up respectfully to welcome them. King Nimi thanked the nine Yogendras for blessing him with their presence and asked them to instruct him on the best way to achieve the supreme benefit, divine service to the Lord.

Kavi said, "A person confused by false identification with the material world can attain the level of true freedom from fear by offering worship to the lotus feet of the Supreme Personality of God, following the method prescribed by the Lord and known as *bhagavata dharma*. It is a very simple process.

According to the particular nature that the individual soul has acquired due to his past actions, he must engage body, words, mind, senses, intelligence and awareness by offering all actions solely to the pleasure of the Supreme. Fear starts when the living being mistakenly identifies with the material body because of the external illusory potency of the Lord, and lives in the duality of attraction and repulsion towards the various objects of the senses, based on the perspective of his own personal gratification.

Therefore it is essential to control the mind, learning to see everything as connected to God. This will dissipate all fears. Constantly immersed in the meditation on the Lord, reciting his holy names, a liberated person will experience the symptoms of devotional ecstasy and will not care any more for what people think. The direct experience of the Lord is accompanied by pure devotion and by the detachment from all other things, just like a person who eats some food simultaneously experiences pleasure, nourishment and freedom from hunger."

King Nimi asked how it was possible to recognize a person who has reached such a level of spiritual realization. Havir replied, "The devotees of the Lord who are on this level, called *uttama adbhikari*, see the Supreme Soul in everything. Less advanced devotees, called *madhyama adbhikaris*, worship the Supreme Personality of God, are friendly with all devotees, compassionate towards ignorant but innocent people, and avoid all contacts with those who are envious of God. On the other hand a *kanistha adbhikari*, also called *prakrita bhakta* ("materialistic devotee"), faithfully engages in the worship of God in the temple but he does not behave appropriately towards other devotees or the people in general.

In all conditions of life, the material body is subject to birth and decay. The life airs are subject to hunger and thirst, the mind is subject to anxiety, intelligence to the desire of what we cannot obtain, and the senses to the continued struggle in material nature. A person who remains stable in awareness in spite of all these inevitable problems, is considered a great devotee of the Lord. In his mind there is no more space for obtaining social prestige, benefits or profit, or even for sexual pleasure.

Often, birth in an aristocratic family and the performance of austerities and pious activities create a sense of pride; especially those who have been born in families that are highly respected in the system of the *varnas* risk becoming arrogant. Those who, in spite of such material advantages, remain very humble, detached and ready to serve to alleviate the sufferings of others, without being discouraged by difficulties, are considered the dearest devotees of the Lord."

King Nimi asked the sages to speak about the illusory potency of the Lord, that confuses even the greatest personalities. Antariksha said, "By activating the material energy, the Lord manifests all the living beings in the various

species, so that they can cultivate sense gratification and finally arrive at liberation. The Supreme Soul enters the bodies of the created beings and guides them in their evolutionary journey, until the time of the dissolution of the universe, when the sun becomes increasingly hot and the various planetary systems are consumed by the fire emanated by Lord Ananta Sesha. In the end the Samvartaka clouds pour a torrential rain over all the planets, completely flooding the universe and extinguishing the fire. Then Brahma leaves his body and all the material elements enter again into their matrix, one after the other, until the fundamental identification with matter dissolves in the *mahat tattva*, the non-manifested form of existence."

When king Nimi asked how foolish materialists would be able to overcome the illusion of material identification, Prabuddha answered, "The root of the identification with the body consists in the roles of males and females in human society, that entice the conditioned souls to unite in sexual relationships. On this level, the conditioned soul constantly tries to eliminate unhappiness and increase pleasure unlimitedly, but he inevitably obtains the opposite result. The wealth that is required for sense gratification is very difficult to obtain, and in fact does not give any real satisfaction. The happiness sought by the conditioned souls in the material world cannot be found even on the higher planets, that are afflicted by quarrel, enmity and fear, because even in paradise, life is interrupted by death. One who wants to attain true happiness must therefore find a genuine spiritual master, who has truly realized the teachings of the scriptures and is able to explain them adequately to others, and is focused only on God, without being concerned about anything else.

A genuine spiritual master teaches the disciple how to worship God and serve the Lord to obtain his mercy. He trains the disciple to become clean, austere, tolerant, quiet, simple and non-violent, to study Vedic knowledge, to observe celibacy and equanimity before the many difficulties of life. A disciple must constantly practice meditation by living in an isolated place, leaving all attachments to the comforts of home, and avoid decorating and caring for his body. He should wear discarded rags or tree bark. He must abstain from criticizing other genuine methods of spiritual realization, always tell the truth and control the senses, the mind and the activities of the body. Engaging in hearing and reciting the wonderful transcendental activities of the Lord, he should dedicate everything to the Lord - all

actions, sacrifices, austerities, charity, by offering everything to his lotus feet. Those who walk on the spiritual path should try to meet together to speak about the glories of the Lord, encouraging and supporting each other in a transcendental friendship that will give them a great happiness."

King Nimi again asked the sages to speak about the transcendental position of the Supreme Personality of God. Pippalayana answered, "The Supreme Personality of God is the origin of creation, preservation and destruction of the universe, and has no other cause except himself. He pervades the states of awareness called wakefulness, dream and deep sleep, and exists beyond them. Neither the mind or the words, eyesight, intelligence, life air or senses are able to penetrate the Supreme Brahman, more than fire sparks can influence the fire that has produced them. Not even the authoritative descriptions of the *Vedas* can define him perfectly, because the *Vedas* themselves state that Brahman is beyond words - however they are useful as an indirect reference to Brahman.

Originally One, the Brahman manifests in a threefold form, that gives origin to all the manifestations of the universe. It is the eternal Spirit, that is never born and will never die, does not grow and is not subject to decay. Thus the individual soul is never touched by the bodies it wears and by the material conditions it experiences. We can have a very similar feeling when we awaken from a deep and dreamless sleep, in which the senses, the mind and the identification were not active, and yet we are conscious that we existed even during sleep. When the heart is purified, we become able to perceive both the Supreme Lord and our individual self as transcendental existence, just like it is possible to directly experience sunlight when we keep our eyes closed."

When Nimi asked explanations about the method of *karma yoga*, or practical action dedicated to God, Avirhotra replied, "*Karma* is prescribed activity, *akarma* means abstaining from action, and *vikarma* is prohibited action. The science of action is a very difficult subject to understand through material logic, and this is why we need to resort to Vedic knowledge.

Foolish and childish persons are attached to selfish activities although the very purpose of life is to become free from them, so the teachings of the *Vedas* trace a path that leads gradually to liberation through the performance of the prescribed virtuous activities, just like a father promises

sweetmeats to a child if he will take his medicine. If an ignorant person who does not control his senses neglects to perform the duties prescribed in the *Vedas*, he will certainly engage in irreligious and criminal activities, and will have to suffer the bad consequences.

On the other hand by performing the regulated activities prescribed in the *Vedas*, but without selfish attachment, and offering the merit of such actions to the Lord, one attains liberation from the ties of action. Therefore the actions prescribed in the *Vedas* constitute a stimulus to attract materialists towards goodness and knowledge. The prescribed rituals require the purification of the body through *pranayama*, *bhuta suddhi* and so on, the application of *tilaka* or sacred marks, the purification of the sitting place and the articles of worship that will be offered. Then follows the worship proper, with the presentation of water to wash the feet, scented water to rinse mouth and hands, a complete bath, clothes and ornaments, perfumed oils, flower garlands, grains of cereals, incense and lamps."

To answer another question by king Nimi, Drumila summarized the various manifestations of God in this way: "Anyone who tries to make a complete list of the *avatars* of the unlimited Lord is just a fool, because they are more numerous than the particles of dust on earth. However, it is possible to speak about his most famous incarnations. Lord Vishnu enters the universe firstly in the form of the three Purushas (Karanodakashayi, Garbhodakasayi and Kshirodakasayi) and in the form of the three Lords of the *gunas* (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva). Another important *avatara* is Nara Narayana Rishi, who descended to teach the path of meditation to the human beings by his own example. Indra feared that the Lord was engaging in austerities in Badarikashrama because he wanted to take his place, and sent Kamadeva with most beautiful Apsaras to distract him. Instead of being disturbed or getting angry, the Lord kindly welcomed his visitors and dissipated all the fears of the Devas. Furthermore, through his Yogamaya the Lord manifested a host of even more attractive women, who eclipsed the beauty of the heavenly society girls.

The Lord also appeared as Hamsa, Dattatreya, the four Kumaras, Rishabhadeva and Hayagriva, who killed the Asura Madhu and recovered the *Vedas* that had been hidden in Patalaloka. In the form of Matsya, the Lord protected Satyavrata Manu from the universal flood, as Varaha

protected the Earth and killed Hiranyaksha, as Kurma supported mount Mandara so that the ocean of milk could be churned. Then the Lord saved elephant Gajendra and the tiny Rishis named Valakhilyas, who had fallen into the water contained in the imprint of a cow's hoof and were going to drown. He saved Indra who had been covered by the darkness as a reaction to the killing of Vritra, and the wives of the heavenly beings who had been taken captive by the Asuras. As Nrisimha, the Lord killed Hiranyakashipu to protect the devotees. As Vamana, he took the entire world from Bali Maharaja with the pretext of asking him three paces of land in charity, as Parashurama exterminated the rebellious *kshatriyas*, as Rama he killed the Asura Ravana, and as Krishna he has appeared in the Yadu dynasty. As Buddha, the Lord will appear to confuse those who perform the Vedic sacrifices without being qualified to do so, and as Kalki he will exterminate all the degraded people who pass as rulers."

Nimi asked again, "What is the destination of those who never worship God and continue to pursue material desires"?

Chamasa replied, "All the four *varnas* of Vedic society have the duty to worship the Lord according to their possibilities. Those who have a simpler intellect, such as *sudras* and superficial women, need more help in the performance of their duties, while the *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaiśyas* have greater responsibilities, symbolized by the second birth that is initiation. If these people abandon Vedic knowledge and their prescribed duties because of lust, pride and greed, utilizing the Vedic rituals to attain materialistic purposes, they fall prey to their own arrogance and deceit, and slide into material identification with the body, arriving to the point of sacrificing innocent animals in unauthorized rituals without understanding the terrible consequences of their actions.

Such cruel and selfish people are blinded by the pride deriving from a high birth, wealth, education, physical strength and success in the performance of ceremonies, to the point of becoming offensive towards God and his true devotees. In the material world conditioned souls have a tendency to seek sexual pleasure, consume intoxicating substances and eat non-vegetarian foods, therefore Vedic ritual ceremonies offer the opportunity to obtain sense gratification in the most virtuous way, so that one can gradually purify his awareness and guide it to liberation."

Karabhajana continued to explain in which forms and colors the Lord appears in different ages. "In Satya yuga he appears with a white complexion and four arms; he has matted locks and he looks like a renounced *brahmachari*. He is known by the names of Hansa, Suparna, Vaikuntha, Dharma, Yogeshvara, Amala, Isvara, Purusha, Avyakta and Paramatma. In that age people are peaceful, friendly, and worship God through austerity, meditation and sense control. In Treta yuga the Lord appears with a red complexion, four arms and golden hair, and wears the triple belt symbolizing initiation to the three *Vedas* - *Rig*, *Sama* and *Yajur*. His symbols are the instruments used for the fire ceremony, such as the ladle and so on. He is known with the names of Vishnu, Yajna, Prishnigarbha, Sarvadeva, Urukrama, Vrishakapi, Jayanta and Urugaya. In that age, people worship the Lord through the ritual sacrifices described in the *Vedas*.

In Dvapara yuga the Lord appears with a dark blue complexion and yellow clothes; his transcendental body carries the marks of Srivatsa and Kaustubha and his personal weapons. He is known as Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, Aniruddha and Narayana Rishi, and is worshiped by the offering of the articles usually presented to a king or honored guest. In the age of Kali intelligent people worship the Lord by assembly together to sing his glories. This age can be very auspicious because it offers the opportunity to achieve perfection in life simply by applying this easy method, therefore even heavenly beings aspire to take birth on earth in this period. In Kali yuga the Lord appears in the form of his companions, servants and devotees, and religious sentiments will be particularly strong in the lands called Dravida desha, around the rivers Tamraparni, Kritamala, Payasvini, Kaveri and Pratici Mahanadi."

Very pleased by the wonderful instructions received from the nine sages, king Nimi offered his homage, and the Yogendras disappeared.

The Rajasuya sacrifice

One day a foreigner arrived in the assembly hall in Dvaraka, and standing humbly before king Ugrasena, he declared he was a messenger; He said that

20,000 kings had been taken prisoner by Jarasandha, who had locked them up in the fortress called Girivraja. Those kings had refused to submit to the wicked tyrant of Magadha and were now begging Krishna, who had already defeated Jarasandha seventeen times, to go and set them free.

At that time Narada Muni arrived and Krishna asked him what was the Pandavas' opinion about that situation. Narada offered his respects to the Lord and replied that Maharaja Yudhisthira was planning to perform a great Rajasuya sacrifice, a plan that seemed to be in contrast to the mission of the campaign against Jarasandha. Krishna asked Uddhava's advice, and Uddhava replied that the two things could be reconciled with an alliance between the Yadus and the Pandavas. The Pandavas could disguise themselves as *brahmanas* to approach Jarasandha and ask for a single combat. Bhima was strong enough to defeat Jarasandha, especially if he was supported by Krishna's advice. So Krishna organized the journey to Indraprastha, an event to which also the wives and children of Krishna would participate. The queens were carried in golden palanquins and protected each by a strong escort. The caravan also had many carts with luggage and provisions, blankets and extra clothing, and included many maidservants and practically the entire Yadu army.

When they arrived in the new city of the Pandavas, Krishna and his family were merrily welcomed by Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, accompanied by friends and subjects. At the palace, Krishna was saluted by Kunti, who was sitting with her daughters in law, Draupadi and Subhadra. Draupadi greeted Krishna's queens by honoring them with many gifts of clothes, flower garlands and ornaments. Yudhisthira arranged a residence for all the guests, who stayed for several months, then on Krishna's advice sent his brothers into the various directions to collect tributes in neighboring kingdoms. Finally Bhimasena, Arjuna and Krishna dressed as *brahmanas* and went to Girivraja, the residence of Jarasandha.

They approached the king at the time when he was receiving his guests and the *brahmanas* and asked for a favor, reminding him about the great personalities of ancient times, who had become famous because of their generosity - Harischandra, Rantideva, Unchavritti Mudgala, Sibi and Bali.

Observing their posture, stature and body structure, and the marks left by the bow string on their arms, and hearing their deep and strong voices,

Jarasandha immediately realized that his guests were no *brahmanas*, but *kshatriyas* of the royal order. However he decided that circumstances did not leave him any choice, so he promised to give them anything they would ask for.

Then Krishna revealed his own identity and that of Bhima and Arjuna, and asked for single combat. Jarasandha said, "I will not fight with you, Krishna, because you are a coward. I will not fight with Arjuna, who is too young and frail. But I can fight with Bhima, who is as strong as me." Jarasandha and Bhima went outside the city and started to fight with maces, walking around each other like dancers and striking at each other, while the clash of their weapons sounded like the tusks of two fighting elephants or the roll of thunder. When the maces became too damaged, they started to use their own fists, but the fight continued for a long time without either combatants prevailing.

Krishna was aware of the secret of the invulnerability of Jarasandha, whose body had been joined by the Rakshasi Jara, and knew how to defeat him. Tearing a twig into two halves, he indirectly showed Bhima to separate the two halves of Jarasandha's body. Bhima immediately got the clue and pushed his opponent to the ground, then pinning his leg with a foot, he caught hold of the other leg and tore upwards, thus separating the two halves of his enemy's body.

After killing Jarasandha, Krishna and the two Pandavas went to deliver all the kings who had been defeated and imprisoned by the tyrant. The poor fellows emerged from Giridroni dungeons emaciated and weakened for their imprisonment, and offered their homage and gratitude to the Lord who had set them free. Krishna received the respect and tribute of Jarasandha's successor and then returned triumphantly to Indraprastha with Bhima and Arjuna, and Yudhisthira chose an auspicious day for the Rajasuya sacrifice. Yudhisthira appointed the various priests for the ceremonies: Vyasa, Bharadvaja, Sumantu, Gotama, Asita, Vasistha, Cyavana, Kanva, Maitreya, Kavasa, Trita, Visvamitra, Vamadeva, Sumati, Jaimini, Kratu, Paila, Parasara, Garga, Vaisampayana, Atharva, Kashyapa, Dhaumya, Parasurama, Asuri, Vitihotra, Madhucchanda, Virasena and Akrtavrana. Then he sent invitations to Drona, Bhishma, Kripa, the wise Vidura, Dhritarastra and his sons, and a great number of neighboring kings.

On the day when the *soma juice* was to be extracted, Yudhisthira offered his homage to all participants. The ritual required a formal worship to the most respectable person present in the assembly. Sahadeva stood up to speak, stating that without any doubt such honor belonged to Krishna, the Supreme Personality of God, who was present among them as their benefactor and protector. The proposal was approved and to the general satisfaction, Yudhisthira performed the special worship called *agra puja*. Only one person in the crowd seemed to be annoyed by the respect shown to Krishna: it was Sishupala, the son of Damaghosha, who had always been hostile and envious of Krishna.

He cried out, "It is a shame that the silly proposal of a boy was accepted with such favor by wise and respectable people. When so many saintly and powerful personalities are here in your presence, you choose to honor a cowherd who is the disgrace of his family! This Krishna you are honoring does not even follow the principles of the *varna* system, he behaves whimsically and has no good qualities. His entire dynasty, cursed by Yayati, is addicted to alcoholic drinks. The Yadus have abandoned the civilized lands where saints and sages reside, to hide in a fortress in the middle of the sea, where brahminical principles are not observed and the subjects are constantly mistreated."

Many people present started to shout, insulting Sishupala and trying to silence him, but Krishna did not say anything. The Pandavas breathed heavily in their anger, and together with the warriors of Matsya, Kaikaya and Srinjaya they jumped to their feet, ready with weapons for a fight. Then Sishupala grabbed sword and shield, preparing to fight, and poured more insults against Krishna and all those who were supporting him. Suddenly Krishna evoked his Sudarshana disc and hurled it, decapitating Sishupala in the middle of the assembly. To the great surprise of everybody, a radiant light emerged from the body of Sishupala and went to merge into the body of Krishna: Sishupala had achieved liberation.

After that, the Rajasuya sacrifice was completed without further problems, and when Yudhisthira had distributed gifts to all participants, Krishna took leave from him to return to his capital. Everyone was pleased and praised the king of Indraprastha - everyone except Duryodhana, who was very envious and could not tolerate the idea that his cousin Yudhisthira, exiled

from the Kuru capital Hastinapura, had made himself a new kingdom, so prosperous and happy.

There was also another reason why Duryodhana was so angry. During the festivities, each member of Yudhisthira's family had been entrusted with a task in the event organization. For example, Sahadeva welcomed the arriving guests, Krishna washed their feet, Arjuna took care of the elders, Nakula went collecting the requirements, Bhima cooked and Draupadi served food to the guests. Duryodhana had been put in charge of the treasury and Karna distributed the gifts.

Spellbound at the sight of the immense wealth collected by the Pandavas, Duryodhana wanted to visit their palace. Also, queen Draupadi lived there, and Duryodhana had always been attracted to her. Striding proudly into the atrium, Duryodhana was fooled by the optical effects created by the architect, and mistaking the floor for a sheet of water, he lifted his clothes to get through it. A bit further he came to an actual pool imitating a normal floor and fell into it, totally unprepared. The situation was rather comical, and several people laughed, especially Bhima, Draupadi and other ladies. Yudhisthira tried to stop them, but Krishna told him to let it go. Duryodhana felt deeply humiliated and returned to his capital without saying another word.

When he received the news of Sishupala's death, his friend Salva became very angry and decided to avenge him by waging war against Krishna's city. So he obtained a wonderful spacecraft, named Saubha, built by Maya Danava, and followed by a large army he reached Dvaraka and besieged it, while Krishna was in Indraprastha for the Rajasuya sacrifice of Maharaja Yudhisthira. From the spacecraft, Salva dropped a shower of weapons, rocks, tree trunks, lightnings, snakes and hailstorms, and swept the city with violent winds carrying dust, just like the spaceship of the Asura Tripura had tormented Earth in ancient times.

Pradyumna had been left to defend the city, and together with other Yadu warriors - Satyaki, Charudesna, Samba, Akrura and his brothers, Hardikya, Bhanuvinda, Gada, Suka and Sharana - he led the counter-attack. Pradyumna's divine weapons immediately dispelled the magical tricks of Salva, then with 25 golden arrows with iron tip, Krishna's son felled Salva's general Dyuman, and shot 100 arrows against Salva himself. Then he also

shot one arrow against each of the officers of the army, ten each against the chariot drivers and the horses, and three against the other fighters.

The spacecraft activated its power of optical illusion, by which it produced many reflections of itself in the sky, so that one could never be certain of its true position. It also began to appear and disappear, and re-appear again sometimes on land, sometimes in the sky and sometimes in the water, moving constantly, but the Yadu warriors kept covering it with a shower of arrows immediately on spotting it. The Yadus continued to fight valiantly, not bothering about the weapons shot by the enemy. At some point Pradyumna was attacked by Dyuman, the general of Salva's he had wounded with an arrow, and was hit on his chest with a tremendous mace blow. Pradyumna's charioteer (who was the son of Daruka, the charioteer of Krishna) thought that his master was dead and took him away from the battlefield, but soon Pradyumna returned to consciousness and scolded him, fearing that his own reputation had been stained by a suspicion of him fleeing, and ordered him to return immediately into the battle. Rushing again into the fight, Pradyumna shot a cloud of *naracha* arrows against Salva's general and finally killed him. However, the result of the battle was still uncertain, so that the fight continued for 27 more days and nights.

In the meantime in Indraprastha the Rajasuya sacrifice had been completed, and Krishna started to notice inauspicious omens. He immediately suspected that some of Sishupala's allies had taken advantage of his absence from Dvaraka to attack the city, and hurried back. When he reached Dvaraka - not a moment too soon - he saw Salva and the slaughtering on the battlefield. He quickly went to Salva and engaged him in fighting. Salva succeeded in shooting an arrow into Krishna's left arm, and emboldened by that success he started to insult the Lord.

He shouted, "Miserable fool! You believe you are invincible! Relying on your own power, you have treacherously abducted the wife of my cousin Sishupala and then you have killed him unfairly, in a sacred assembly, while he was distracted during the Rajasuya sacrifice. Today I will kill you, avenging my relative!"

Krishna responded to those insults by inviting him to put al that chattering to practice, then he struck him so powerfully with his mace that Salva vomited blood. Soon afterwards, however, Salva disappeared from sight,

and Krishna was approached by a sobbing man, who claimed he had been sent by Devaki, Krishna's mother. He said, "Salva has taken your father captive, and dragged him away like a butcher with an animal."

Just at that moment Salva appeared again, seemingly dragging Vasudeva along. When he was in front of Krishna, he challenged him, "Here is your dear father, who has given you life... now I will kill him before your eyes! Save him if you can!" And Salva swung his sword cutting his prisoner's head, then he took it inside the spacecraft.

For one moment Krishna remained immersed in his feelings of love for his father, then he realized it was a magical illusion and focused his anger on Salva's spacecraft. He hit it with his mace, breaking it into pieces and sinking it within the ocean waters. Salva abandoned the ship by jumping to land, and rushed to fight on foot. Krishna shot a *bhalla* arrow, cutting Salva's arm that held the mace, then he beheaded him with his Sudarshana disc. Dantavakra hastened on to avenge his friend and relative. Furious at the idea that Krishna had killed all his companions - Paundraka, Sishupala and now Salva as well - he rushed against Krishna holding his mace high. He shouted, "You may be my cousin, but you have killed all my friends and now you would like to kill me too. So I will destroy you."

Krishna took up his mace and faced his aggressor, like the ocean shore stands before the waves. Dantavakra struck Krishna's head, but the Lord did not budge an inch and replied by hitting his enemy on the chest with the Kaumodaki. Dantavakra's heart was smashed and he collapsed to the ground, vomiting blood, spreading arms and legs, and a spark of light rose from his body to merge into Krishna, just as it had happened for Sishupala.

The eclipse at Kurukshetra

While Krishna and Balarama lived in Dvaraka, there was a rare solar eclipse. Many pilgrims went to Samanta panchaka, the holy place established by Parasurama, to perform austerities at that auspicious time, and the Yadus, too, decided to go. Leaving Aniruddha to defend the city together with

Suchandra, Suka, Sarana and Kritavarma, the supreme general of the Yadu army, all the others traveled to Kurukshetra to observe the prescribed rituals.

Arrived at Samanta panchaka they took bath and started fasting, then they offered many gifts to *brahmanas*. Finally after the end of the eclipse, they again took bath and distributed food to everyone. Many other pilgrims had come from the neighboring kingdoms - Matsya, Usinara, Kaushalya, Vidarbha, Kuru, Srinjaya, Kamboja, Kaikaya, Madra, Kunti - and also the kings of Anarta and Kerala were present. Queen Kunti was very happy to see her brothers and sisters again, with their children, parents and all the other relatives, especially Vasudeva, who had been under Kamsa's oppression for such a long time.

At Samanta panchaka came also the inhabitants of Vrindavana, headed by Nanda Maharaja, and their meeting with Krishna's family was very emotional. They immediately searched for Krishna and hugged him affectionately, their throats choked with tears. Rohini and Devaki embraced mother Yasoda, the queen of Vraja, thanking her for her generosity and for the love she had always shown to Krishna and Balarama.

The *gopis* were drinking Krishna with their eyes, cursing the creator that had made eyelids preventing them to look at him without interruption. The Lord left his relatives and sat with the *gopis* in a secluded place, embracing them and smiling to them. He said, "My dear friends, I hope you are not angry with me. Unfortunately I had to remain away from you for such a long time because I had serious duties to perform for my family, and I had to fight against my enemies. Maybe you are thinking that I am ungrateful and that I abandoned you, but all our fortunes and misfortunes are decreed by Destiny, and we cannot stop what must happen. All beings meet and separate again like leaves in the wind, and rarely they can go where they like. You, however, with your love and service, have conquered my heart eternally and I am always present in your hearts."

In the meantime Draupadi, the queen of the Pandavas, was meeting Krishna's wives and asked them to tell their stories. One after the other, Krishna's queens narrated how they had married the Lord. Rukmini had herself abducted on the day of her marriage to Sishupala, Satyabhama had been presented by her father together with the Syamantaka jewel, and so

had Jambavati the daughter of Jambavan, while Kalindi had met Krishna while he was traveling in the company of Arjuna.

Krishna had won the hand of Mitravinda during the *swayamvara* ceremony and the same had happened to Satya, while Bhadra and Lakshmana had specifically asked to marry him. The *swayamvara* of Lakshmana had been very similar to Draupadi's, but the golden fish used as a target was hidden, and one could see only its reflection in a water pot. The many suitors - including Arjuna, Bhima, Jarasandha, Sishupala, Duryodhana, Karna and the king of Ambastha - had failed, some by little, others by much, and only Krishna had been able to complete the test. Also Rohini, the wife of Krishna who spoke representing the 16,000 princesses delivered from Bhaumasura's captivity, told their story, and all the wives of Krishna agreed on the point that the Lord had married them only to show them kindness, and from their part they only considered themselves his humble servants.

While the ladies were discussing among themselves in this way, many Rishis and saints arrived at Samanta panchaka, all anxious to see Krishna and Balarama. Among these great personalities there were Vyasa, Narada, Cyavana, Devala and Asita, Visvamitra, Satananda, Bharadvaja and Gautama, Parasurama with his disciples, Vasistha, Galava, Bhrgu, Pulastya and Kasyapa, Atri, Markandeya and Brihaspati, Dvita, Trita, Ekata and the four Kumaras, Angira, Agastya, Yajnavalkya and Vamadeva. All the kings and the other people present stood up to greet them respectfully, and when the sages had been honored properly according to tradition, everyone sat down to listen to the Lord.

Krishna said, "Now we can say that our lives have been crowned by success, because we have obtained the blessing of meeting so many great masters of yoga. Many recognize God only in the temples but remain incapable of seeing you, who are the true places of pilgrimage, more than any water reservoir or any image made of stone or metal, because they can purify only after a long time, while your presence gives purity immediately.

One who identifies with the body - made of material elements - who believes that his wife and family permanently belong to him, who thinks that the land of his birth is worthy of worship, who thinks that a pilgrimage place simply consists in a water reservoir, but does not seek those who are wise and know spiritual truth, is not better than an animal."

The great sages reflected on the Lord's words and understood that he was giving instructions for human society. So they replied, "Your illusory power, your Yogamaya, had confused us completely, although we are the greatest experts in knowledge, and prominent creators of this world. The activities of God are mysterious, especially when he takes a human form and descends among us, pretending to be under superior control. In this way you protect and preserve the social order, demonstrating by your example how a human being should behave. We are the ones honored by your presence and we offer you our homage. Neither these kings or your relatives the Yadus can perceive your greatness, because this is concealed by the veil of your Maya."

After offering their prayers to the Lord, the Rishis prepared to return to their ashramas. However, Vasudeva still wished to speak with them, and begged them to give some instructions regarding *karma*. Surprised, Narada Muni commented: "Vasudeva is asking us how he needs to behave, because he sees Krishna simply as his boy. The people who live on the bank of the Ganges often goes to pilgrimage to other places, embarking in tiresome journeys, because familiarity and habit create a lack of appreciation for what is already near to us."

The Rishis consented to answer Vasudeva's questions in the presence of Krishna and Balarama. They said, "Action or *karma* is neutralized by further actions, when Vedic sacrifices are performed for the purpose of worshiping Vishnu, the Lord of the sacrifice, investing in his service the wealth one has earned honestly. This is the simplest method to control one's mind and attain liberation. It is a sacred duty that enlivens the heart and the auspicious path for family men.

An intelligent person can renounce the desire for wealth by distributing charity and performing sacrifices. He must learn to renounce sexual desire by experiencing family life, and must learn to renounce the desire to attain the heavenly planets by studying the effects of time. The sages who have thus renounced attachment for family life go to the forest to engage in austerities.

The twice born - *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* - must repay the debt they have to the Devas, the Rishis and Pitris, the virtuous ancestors. To repay such debts they must perform sacrifices and rituals, study the scriptures and

beget children; if they die before having fulfilled these three duties, they fall into a hellish condition. You, Vasudeva, are a great soul and have already fulfilled two of such debts, towards the Rishis and the Pitris. Now you have to pay your debt towards the Devas by performing the Vedic rituals, and then you will be perfectly free from all responsibility."

Vasudeva offered his homage to the Rishis and under their direction he performed the prescribed rituals in the holy place of Kurukshetra, in the presence of all the great kings and their wives. His eyes decorated by black ointment and the body smeared with fresh butter, Vasudeva received the initiation to the sacrifice according to the rules of the scriptures, and surrounded by his eighteen wives he appeared like the moon among the stars. The wives of Vasudeva were wearing silken saris and were decorated with bangles, necklaces, anklets and ear-rings, and the officiating priests, too, were dressed in silk and wore valuable ornaments.

At the end of the ritual ceremony of worship, Vasudeva and his wives took bath in the lake and distributed in charity the clothes and ornaments they had been wearing. Then they donned new clothes and after honoring with gifts all the relatives and the other participants to the ceremonies, Vasudeva felt perfectly satisfied. Bound by a deep reciprocal affection, the Yadus and the inhabitants of Vrindavana remained at Kurukshetra for three months, because they were unable to leave each other's company. Finally, after another exchange of gifts and show of affection, Nanda returned to Vrindavana and the Yadus returned to Dvaraka.

Krishna instructs Vasudeva

One day Krishna and Balarama went as usual to visit their father Vasudeva. Remembering the words of the Rishis during the celebrations at Kurukshetra, Vasudeva addressed them recognizing them as the Supreme Personality of God. "I now believe that you are the source of the universal creation and the Supreme Soul in the hearts of all beings. I want to give up the illusion that makes me identify with this body and makes me think that you are simply my children."

Krishna smiled, bowed to Vasudeva and replied kindly, "What you said is true, but you too, as my brother and all the inhabitants of Dvaraka, as also all moving and non-moving beings, should be considered as parts of the same supreme existence, the eternal and omni-present Brahman. The Supreme Soul is this Brahman who, although one, manifests in so many forms, through the qualities of nature that he created himself."

Devaki listened in awe to her son speaking about such high realizations, and thinking about her six sons who had been cruelly killed by Kamsa, she felt a great pain and addressed Krishna and Balarama.

"O Rama, supreme and immeasurable Soul! O Krishna, Lord of all the masters of yoga! Now I know that you are the Supreme Personality of God, descended in this world with the mission of eliminating the degraded people who defy the authority of the genuine scriptures and increase the burden of the earth. With a mere expansion of an expansion of your expansion, you take care of the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe. So I take shelter in you, because you are omnipotent. I heard that when your Guru asked you to bring back to life his son, who had been long lost in the realm of the ancestors, you fulfilled this extraordinary task to reciprocate his teachings. I beg you, do the same thing for me. Bring back my sons who were killed by the king of the Bhojas, so that I can see them again."

To this heartfelt request of their mother, Krishna and Balarama immediately entered the Sutala region through their Yogamaya and went to see Bali Maharaja who lives there. Bali was very happy to see them, and honored them with the traditional rituals to welcome important guests, offering a complete worship and anything else they desired. Immersed in devotional ecstasy in the presence of his beloved Lord, Bali offered his homage to Ananta Sesha, Balarama, and to Krishna, who appears to teach the principles of sankhya and yoga. Then he prayed he could be freed from the ignorance of the attachment to familiar and social life, compared to a dry well, and to find shelter only in the Lord. Krishna replied, "During the period of the first Manu, Marici Rishi had six children from his wife Uma. Once these heavenly beings derided Brahma and therefore they were condemned to enter a demoniac life form, and were born again as the sons of Hiranyakashipu. Later they were born as the six sons of Devaki and were

killed by Kamsa. Devaki still suffers for their loss, thinking of them as her children. I know they are now living with you, and we would like to take them to earth to alleviate the sufferings of their mother. Then they will be free from all curses and sufferings, and will be able to return to their heavenly abode. Now send for Smara, Udghitha, Parisvanga, Patanga, Kshudrabhrit and Ghrini, so that we can leave."

Immediately, Krishna and Balarama reappeared with the six children in front of Devaki, who was overwhelmed with joy and maternal love. She hugged the children, sat them on her lap and nursed them, and because of the contact with the milk that had fed Krishna himself, the six boys were purified and instantly returned to their form of heavenly beings. Bowing to their mother and father, and to Krishna and Balarama, they ascended to heavens. Having experienced the return and final departure of her six children, Devaki was amazed and concluded that everything was caused by the illusion created by Krishna.

During the period when he was traveling around many places of pilgrimage, Arjuna arrived at Prabhasa (Somanatha) and learned that Balarama had been thinking of giving Subhadra in marriage to Duryodhana, but that nobody else in the family was happy with that idea.

Arjuna thought that maybe he could marry Krishna's sister, so he disguised himself as a *sannyasi* and went to Dvaraka incognito. Arjuna remained in the city during the four months of the rainy season and was honored guest of the Yadus. One day Balarama invited him for lunch, and on that occasion Arjuna was able to see the beautiful Subhadra, and he immediately fell in love with her. He saw his love was reciprocated: from that day, he could not think of anything else and continued to meditate on how he would be able to fulfill his dream.

The abduction was organized with the approval of Krishna and the other relatives. Subhadra left the city on a chariot on the occasion of a great festival in a temple, and Arjuna approached, armed with bow and arrows. After easily fending off the security guards, Arjuna lifted Subhadra and carried her away to Dvaraka. Balarama became very angry when he was informed, but Krishna pacified him, explaining fully what had happened, and that Subhadra preferred to marry Arjuna. Then Balarama relented and sent many presents to the happy couple, with his blessings for the marriage.

Shrutadeva was a *brahmana* who lived in the city of Mithila, in the kingdom of Videha. He was very qualified, peaceful, learned and free from all attachments to sense gratification, and he was content with whatever destiny had sent him from day to day. Another great devotee who lived in the same city was king Bahulasva, a descendant of Janaka, king of the dynasty of Mithila.

One day Krishna decided to go visit them and left, accompanied by a group of Rishis - Narada, Vamadeva, Atri, Vyasa, Parasurama, Asita, Aruni, Brihaspati, Kanva, Maitreya, Cyavana and Sukadeva. During the journey people came forward to Krishna's chariot with many offerings and words or praise. In this way the travelers went through the kingdoms of Anarta, Dhanva, Kuru-jangala, Kanka, Matsya, Panchala, Kunti, Madhu, Kekaya, Koshala, Arna and others still, blessing their inhabitants with their divine presence.

Finally they reached Videha. Bahulasva and Shrutadeva hurried forward, followed by the people of the city, to offer their homage to the Lord, and both invited him in their homes. So Krishna simultaneously went to both the houses, but both his hosts believed they were having him exclusively in their home. Bahulasva welcomed the Lord with great devotion, offering the ritual worship and then sitting at his feet to massage them, after serving a rich meal, and praising him with many prayers.

At the same time, Shrutadeva welcomed the Lord in his home, and he was so happy that his heart was swelling with joy and he was jumping up and down, waving his shawl. Then he washed the Lord's feet and with that water he sprinkled himself, his wife and all his house to purify it. The ritual worship he presented to Krishna included the offering of flowers, *usira* roots, fresh water, fragrant clay, *tulasi* leaves, *kesha* grass and flowers. The meal he served was made of perfectly sattvic ingredients.

Shrutadeva too sat at the Lord's feet to massage them, and spoke at length about Krishna's glories, recognizing him as the Supreme Soul and the Supreme Personality of God. After listening affectionately to him, Krishna also praised the qualities of the *brahmana* and invited him to offer worship to the great Rishis who accompanied him. Krishna stayed in Videha for several months, enjoying the company of his devotees.

Balarama's pilgrimage

When Balarama knew that a great battle was being prepared between the Pandavas and the Kurus, he decided to leave in a pilgrimage because he did not want to take either side.

He went first to Prabhasa (Somanatha), where he honored the Devas, the Rishis and Pitris, then in the company of some *brahmanas* he traveled along the branch of the Sarasvati that flows to the west, visiting the great lake Bindusara, Tritakupa, Sudarshana, Vishala, Brahma-tirtha and Chakra-tirtha, then he went along the east-bound branch. He also visited all the holy places on the banks of the Yamuna and Gange, and finally he reached the forest called Naimisharanya, where the great Rishis were performing a complicated sacrifice.

All the Rishis present stood up to welcome him - all of them except Romaharshana, who remained sitting without taking notice. Romaharshana had been born in a *sudra* family but was accepted as a disciple by Vyasa, who had elevated him to the position of *brahmana*. However, it seemed that all his studies had not taught him much, because he had become arrogant and evidently he considered himself superior to Balarama and to all the other sages that had risen to welcome the Lord. So Balarama picked up a blade of *kusha* grass and poked Romaharshana, who died on the spot.

All the Rishis were shocked by such an action and scolded Balarama: "The action you have performed is against the principles of religion. We had given Romaharshana the position of *acharya* in this sacrifice, guaranteeing him longevity and health for the entire duration of the ceremonies, therefore you have become guilty of the killing of a *brahmana*. Of course we know you are the Supreme Lord and nothing affects you, even the rules of the scriptures, but because you have chosen to take the role of a human being to accomplish your mission, if you accept to submit to the purification required for such an action, human society will be greatly benefited."

Balarama accepted the deep truth of those words and asked the *brahmanas* for instructions on how to proceed. Finally it was decided that Romaharsana's son would become the authority on the *Puranas*, receiving all the blessings and honors that had been conferred to his father. Besides, the *brahmanas* asked Balarama to kill the Asura Balvala, son of Ilvala, who lived in that forest and once a month, in the days of new moon, came to contaminate the sacrificial arena by throwing blood, excrements, urine, wine and flesh. After eliminating that cause for disturbance for the ceremonies, Balarama would be allowed to continue his pilgrimage for another twelve months.

That was indeed a new moon day, and Balvala announced his arrival with a dust storm, a violent wind that smelled of pus. The sacrificial arena was submerged with all sorts of abominable substances, then Balvala himself appeared, holding a trident. His immense body was black as coal, his hair and beard were red like molten copper, and he had terrifying fangs.

Balarama evoked his mace and plough, that appeared immediately, and he used them to hook and drag the demon closer and throw it on the ground, after which he smashed its forehead. The Rishis praised Balarama for that amazing deed and performed his ritual bathing, just like the Devas had done for Indra when he killed Vritrasura. Then they offered him a *vaijayanti* garland made of lotus flowers, new clothes and ornaments, and blessed him.

After taking leave from the Rishis, Balarama went to the Kaushiki river, then to the lake from which the Sarayu river flowed. Following the course of the Sarayu he came to Prayaga, where he bathed and performed auspicious rituals. Then he visited the ashrama of Pulaha Rishi. Balarama also bathed in the rivers Gomati, Gandaki, Vipasha and Sona. He went to Gaya, where he offered worship to the ancestors, and to the mouth of the Ganges, where he performed his ablutions.

He met Parasurama on mount Mahendra and offered his homage, then he bathed in the seven branches of river Godavari and also in the rivers Vena, Pampa and Bhimarathi. He met Kartikeya and visited Sri Saila, the abode of Lord Shiva. In the southern provinces of Dravida desha, the Lord visited the sacred hill Venkata and the cities of Kamakoti and Kanchi, the famous river Kaveri and the sacred Sri Ranga. Then he went to mount Rishabha,

that is sacred to Krishna, and then to the southern Mathura, called Madurai. Finally he arrived at Setubandha, also known as Ramesvaram, where all sins are destroyed. There Balarama distributed 10,000 in charity to the *brahmanas*.

Then he visited the rivers Kritamala and Tamraparni, and the great mountains Malaya, where he found Agastya Rishi sitting in meditation and received his blessings. Finally he reached Kanyakumari, where he saw Goddess Durga. Then he traveled to Phalguna tirtha, bathing in the sacred lake Panchapsara, where Vishnu had manifested, and in that place he gave 10,000 more cows in charity. Then he traveled through the kingdoms of Kerala and Trigarta, visiting the city of Gokarna, sacred to Shiva, where the Lord manifested spontaneously and where Parvati resides on its island. He also visited Surparaka and bathed in the rivers Tapi, Payoshni and Nirvindhya, he entered the Dandaka forest and visited the Reva river, near the city of Mahismati. After taking bath at Manu tirtha, he finally returned to Prabhasa.

There he heard that the battle of Kurukshetra had ended, and all the kings who had participated had died. Only Bhima and Duryodhana continued to fight, and Balarama wanted to go there and stop them. Arriving at Kurukshetra, he was respectfully greeted by the Pandavas, but nobody wanted to talk, even when Balarama directly addressed Bhima and Duryodhana, asking them to end that useless fight. But to no avail: the two opponents continued to clash, one strike after another, impelled by destiny, so Balarama returned to Dvaraka, where he was warmly welcomed by Ugrasena. After some time Balarama decided to go back to Naimisharanya, where the Rishis welcomed him with joy. He was accompanied by his wife, and it was clear that he had retired from all battles and from life at court.

One day at Dvaraka Krishna received the visit of an old friend, Sudama, who had lived with him in Sandipani Muni's Gurukula in their youth. Sudama was a *brahmana*, very expert in Vedic knowledge and detached from all gratification and sense of possession; his mind was always peaceful and his senses were controlled. He maintained his family with whatever little he obtained spontaneously and he was perfectly satisfied.

Sudama's wife, emaciated by hunger and dressed in rags, tolerated those hardships as serenely as she could, but one day she asked him why he could

not go and ask for help from his old friend and companion Krishna, the husband of the Goddess of fortune, who lived in Dvaraka among unimaginable wealth.

Sudama listened to his wife's request and thought that in fact it would be wonderful to be able to see Krishna again, therefore he decided to leave for Dvaraka. He wanted to carry a present for his old friend, so he asked his wife what they had in the house. Sudama's wife went to the neighboring houses and begged for a few handfuls of broken rice, then she made a small package wrapped in cloth and handed it to her husband. The journey to Dvaraka required many days of walking, but finally Sudama arrived in Krishna's wonderful city. After finding the palace where his old friend lived, Sudama entered and found him sitting on his wife's bed.

On seeing him entering, Krishna instantly leaped to his feet and rushed to greet him. He seated him on a beautiful coach and affectionately washed his feet, then he offered some cooling sandalwood paste, *aguru* and *kunkum*, and presented incense and lamps. Rukmini personally engaged in serving the guest, fanning him with her *chamara*. That royal welcome astonished the palace servants, because the *brahmana* was dirty, dressed in horrible rags and so skinny that all his bones showed.

Krishna took Sudama's hand and they talked together about the days they spent in the school of the Guru and what they had done since then.

Krishna said, "You are certainly free from all desires of material pleasure, but I think that after completing your education and reciprocating the Guru's kindness with your gifts, you returned home to marry a good girl. Do you remember that time that our Guru's wife sent us to the forest to collect firewood, and that storm broke out, and we were lost? Confused by the rain and wind, we could not find the path and we spent the night in the dark forest, keeping hands and looking for the way to go back. At dawn, Sandipani Muni himself came to look for us and blessed us for the sufferings we had endured to serve him."

Sudama smiled and replied that Krishna, the Supreme Personality of God, had recited the role of the student only to give a good example to human society, and had no need for blessings from anyone. Then Krishna laughed and, noticing the little bundle that Sudama was carrying on his shoulder,

asked him, "What do I see here? Have you brought me a present? Let me see!"

Extremely embarrassed, Sudama realized the futility of that paltry gift, but Krishna snatched the parcel from his hand and opened it, showing great happiness. "Ah! Broken rice! Wonderful!", and immediately started to eat it. He already had swallowed a handful, when Rukmini stayed his hand. "That is enough, Krishna! What you have eaten is sufficient to guarantee Sudama all kinds of wealth in this life and in the next."

The *brahmana* spent the night as a guest in Krishna's house, after eating and drinking his fill, and he felt as if he had arrived in Vaikuntha. The next day, after being again honored by Krishna, Sudama left to return home, immersed in the greatest happiness, unable to think of anything else except his wonderful friend. "The Supreme Lord is so kind that he treated me like a Deva, although I am a wretched man, a *brahmana* without qualifications. He sat me on his wife's bed, washed and massaged my feet, and hugged me like a brother. He did not give me anything to bring back home, but that is because he knows very well that the arrogance created by the possession of material wealth would soon cause me to forget him." Contemplating these thoughts, Sudama finally reached home.

But instead of the hut where he used to live, he found a gorgeous palace, surrounded by gardens, parks and other beautiful buildings. At the news of his return, Sudama's wife rushed to meet him. She, too, was unrecognizable: dressed in valuable clothes and beautiful ornaments, she was surrounded by a number of maids and appeared as radiant as a Goddess. Accompanied by his wife, Sudama entered the palace and was astonished in seeing how much wealth it contained. The beds had mattresses and linen as white as milk foam, and the crystal walls were decorated by jeweled lamps. Sudama realized that such an incredible change was due to the kindness of his friend Krishna, and accepted his new life as a blessing from the Lord, enjoying the pleasures that he had been granted, but without remaining attached to them.

One day at Dvaraka the wife of a *brahmana* gave birth to a child, but the newborn died as soon as he touched the ground. The *brahmana* took the little lifeless body and went to king Ugrasena; in his agitation he accused the king of having caused the death of his son by failing somehow in his duties

as a monarch. When a king is virtuous and carefully performs his duties, all the inhabitants of the kingdom are perfectly protected from all evils. There are no premature deaths, famines or drought, there is no poverty, there are no crimes and sufferings are reduced to a minimum.

The same tragedy happened again with the second and third child and so on, and each time the *brahmana* went to cry at the king's door. Arjuna was present when the *brahmana* arrived crying for his ninth dead child; immediately he offered to help him, swearing that if he failed in that sacred task, he would commit suicide by entering the fire.

The *brahmana* was uncertain and commented that neither Balarama, nor Vasudeva, Pradyumna or Aniruddha had been able to help him, but when Arjuna reassured him, he went back home with some hope. In due time the *brahmana's* wife got into labor to give birth to her tenth child, and Arjuna rushed in, bow in hand to protect the child and built a protective cage all around the house. But as soon as the baby was born, it disappeared from sight, to the great dismay of Arjuna, while the *brahmana* became mad with grief and started to openly insult the great warrior.

Arjuna used a special *mantra* to immediately attain Samyamani, the abode of Yamaraja, but he could not find the child. It was not even in the abodes of Agni, Nirriti, Soma, Vayu or Varuna, and Arjuna began to lose hope. He was going to keep his word and commit suicide, when Krishna came to stop him. Krishna said, "I know where the *brahmana's* children are. Now we will go to recover them, so nobody will be able to speak ill of us."

Krishna mounted on his divine chariot and had Arjuna sit with him, then they started to travel and soon went beyond the seven islands of the middle part of the universe, then they crossed the region of Lokaloka and entered the darkness of the external space, where Krishna's horses - Saibya, Sugriva, Meghapushpa and Balahaka - stopped in confusion, not knowing where to go. The Lord evoked his Sudarshana disc, that illuminated all directions shining like thousands of suns, and the chariot started forward again, like an arrow shot from Rama's bow penetrates the army of the enemies.

Beyond the darkness of outer space, Krishna's divine chariot reached the eternal radiance of the *brahmajyoti* and then entered a great ocean of luminous waves, where they found an amazing palace, unlike any Arjuna

had ever seen. That was the residence of Ananta Sesha, as white as the Kailasa mountain covered with snow, and the gems decorating his thousand heads reflected the light from his eyes. Maha Vishnu was reclining on the soft body of Ananta with a blue complexion, dressed in silken yellow clothes, with eight wonderful arms. The Lord was surrounded by his personal servants and consorts, the various manifestations of power. Krishna and Arjuna offered their homage to Maha Vishnu, who smiled and told them, "I took away the sons of the *brahmana* in Dvaraka because I wanted to see you. You are my emanations, descended to the earth to save the principles of religion, and you will soon come back in me after completing your mission." So Maha Vishnu presented them the ten children of the *brahmana*, and Arjuna happily returned to Dvaraka with Krishna, amazed by everything he had seen.

The glories of Sri Vishnu

Maharaja Parikshit said, "I have noticed that those who desire to get wealth and material pleasures tend to offer worship to Lord Shiva, who is a great ascetic, while Lord Vishnu, the husband of the Goddess of fortune, is worshiped by those who have renounced all material attachments."

Sukadeva replied, "Lord Shiva is engaged in the material manifestation, while Lord Vishnu is completely transcendental. I remember that your grandfather, king Yudhisthira, asked a similar question from Krishna while they were talking after the completion of the rituals of the Asvamedha yajna."

Krishna said, "When I want to show special favor to a devotee, I take away everything he has, and then his relatives and friends abandon him, and he is forced to face great sufferings until he becomes humble, realizes the temporary and illusory nature of this world and focuses his efforts on spiritual realization. When a person obtains material blessings from God, he often becomes arrogant and neglects his duties, even going to the point of

offending those same benefactors who had blessed him. In this regard there is a very interesting story, about how Shiva had to face the unpleasant results of a boon he had granted to an Asura."

Vrika, the son of Sakuni, was a very arrogant Asura and wished to obtain lots of power. One day he met Narada and asked him which form of God was easier to worship, and Narada replied, "By worshiping Shiva one quickly attains success, but his blessings often work in mysterious ways, and may create difficulties in the long run. For example Ravana and Banasura obtained great powers from him, but the results were not very good."

Without caring for Narada's mysterious warning, Vrikasura went to Kedarnatha and started to offer worship to Shiva, cutting off pieces of flesh from his own body and offering them as oblations into the fire, that is the mouth of Shiva. Because by the seventh day he had not yet been able to evoke the presence of the Lord, he decided to cut his own head off. At that time Shiva appeared from the sacrificial fire to stop him from committing that action, and at his touch, Vrika's body was completely healed. Shiva said, "Stop this nonsense. I will give you the boon you desire. You have tortured your body unnecessarily, because I am pleased even by the simple offering of water by those who take shelter in me."

The wicked Vrika asked for a terrible power: his hand would instantly kill anyone whose head was touched. Shiva was very perplexed, but as he had given his promise, he granted that strange boon, smiling ironically like one who is feeding milk to a snake. Immediately the Asura wanted to experiment his new power by touching the head of Shiva himself.

Shiva rushed to Vaikuntha to ask for Vishnu's help. Vishnu had already observed the events and was ready to solve the problem: he took the form of a young *brahmachari*, dressed in the traditional way, and he went to meet the Asura. He said, "Dear son of Sakuni, you seem to be very tired. What happened to you? Please take some rest. It seems you are trying to get something that is escaping from you: how can we help you?"

Comforted by the kind words of that sympathetic boy, Vrika told him everything, and said he was pursuing Shiva. "Bah," the *brahmachari* replied, "all this situation seems to be rather strange. Shiva is always in the company of ghosts and crazy people, and in your position I would suspect some trick

from his part. Very likely, the boon he gave you is fake and is not working at all. You will be able to see that easily, if you touch your own head."

Confused by the illusory potency of the Lord, Vrika foolishly put a hand on his own head and he instantly fell dead, his head shattered as if it had been stricken by lightning. The evil Asura had been killed by the reactions of his own crimes. What living being can hope to be lucky if he offends good and innocent people? Even more so, punishment awaits those who offend Shiva, who is the Lord and the spiritual master of the entire universe.

Another time, a group of Rishis had gathered on the bank of river Sarasvati to perform a Vedic sacrifice, when the theological discussion came to a halt, with different opinions on which one among the three most prominent Personalities of God was most generous. Bhṛigu Rishi was asked to test the behavior of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu, so he went to them, one after the other, to see how they would react to a lack of respect from his part.

When he arrived in the presence of Brahma and stood before him without bowing and offering prayers, Brahma got quite angry but he did not show it. Then Bhṛigu went to Shiva, who stood up to greet him in a friendly way; Bhṛigu insulted him openly by rejecting his welcome, and Shiva flared up and lifted his trident to kill him, but Devi intervened to pacify him. Finally Bhṛigu went to Vishnu, who was lying down, his head in the lap of his consort the Goddess of fortune, and attacked him by kicking his chest. The Lord immediately rose from the bed, bowed to the Rishi and begged his forgiveness for failing to greet him immediately. Vishnu told the Rishi, "Please, make yourself comfortable and rest for a little. I wish to purify myself and my home with the water that washed your feet, that are a source of sanctity for all the places of pilgrimage. Thanks to the touch of your feet, my chest has now become the worthy residence of the Goddess of fortune." Moved by that extraordinary manifestation of affection, generosity and tolerance by the Lord, Bhṛigu returned to the assembly of the Rishis and told them what had happened.

Maharaja Pariskhit had carefully listened to Sukadeva narrating the wonderful activities of the Supreme Personality of God, Krishna, who had descended in this world to fulfill his mission - to relieve the burden of earth, protect good people and re-establish the knowledge of the self and the principles of religion.

Parikshit told Sukadeva, "Sri Krishna has been recognized as the Absolute Truth, the Supreme Brahman, by all the great sages present during his incarnation. Yet, to give the example to the individual souls, he meditated on Brahman and God, and recommended the study of the scriptures to understand Brahman. But there is one thing I do not understand: as the nature of Brahman is transcendental, it cannot be described in words or understood intellectually. On the other hand, Vedic texts consist of words and are studied through the intellect."

Sukadeva replied, "Material intelligence and the senses have been specifically created to enable the conditioned soul to engage in gratification, through a gradual process of personal evolution that culminates in liberation from conditionings. Thus the scriptures have been composed in the awareness of the needs and the understanding capabilities of the conditioned souls. However, because the confidential knowledge of the Supreme Personality of God transcends the material level, by meditating on the Supreme Lord, Bhagavan, people can attain the ultimate purpose of life. In this regard, I remember a conversation between Narayana Rishi and Narada Muni, where this very topic was discussed.

One day Narada visited the ashrama of Nara and Narayana Rishi at Kalapa, on the Himalaya, and Narayana Rishi spoke of a discussion about Brahman that had taken place on Janaloka among Sanandana Kumara and other Rishis. According to Sanandana, the personified *Vedas* had appeared as the first emanation from the breath of Lord Narayana and recited prayers to praise him before the beginning of creation.

"Victory to you, o invincible Lord! As you are omniscient, we beg you to dissipate the eternal power of illusion, that through the three influences of material nature creates troubles to the conditioned souls. The world that can be perceived through the senses is seen as the supreme truth, because the Brahman is the foundation of all creations, that remains eternally unchanged.

You are that Supreme Brahman, o Lord, and therefore the sages always meditate on you, on your teachings and your activities, that purify all contamination in the universe. What to say of those who are serving you after attaining the transcendental level?

Because of your mercy, the material elements create the egg of the universe, and you enter it, to bless all beings and guide them as the Supreme Soul that resides in all hearts. The yogis meditate on you as Surya, who resides in the solar plexus in the microcosm of the human body, and when they progress in their spiritual practice they become able to perceive you as Paramatma, who resides in the *chakra* of the heart, the subtle center from which all the *prana* channels emanate. From the heart, the most advanced yogis rise with you up to the crown *chakra*, where they can perceive you even more clearly, and where they leave their bodies, not to return to this world any more.

To inspire the living beings to action, you appear in the various species of life that you have created yourself, just like the fire takes various forms according to the materials it burns. The individual being, too, remains free from the subtle and gross coverings while inhabiting the material bodies it has created through its own actions, because it is a part of you. This is why the great sages know that by meditating on you, one attains liberation. These fortunate souls taste the nectar of your activities, and are indifferent even to liberation; they renounce the joys of home and family to remain in the company of those who only seek the transcendental nectar.

When the human body is used in divine service, it finds its proper engagement and becomes a great advantage, while when it is used to engage in the illusory search for material happiness, it binds the being to an increasingly degraded existence. Simply by meditating constantly on the Lord, even his enemies attained liberation; what to speak then of those who constantly think of God with love and devotion? We, too, aspire to the nectar tasted by your wives, who are fascinated by your arms. O transcendental Lord, for you there are no close friends or enemies, just like the space of the sky has nothing to do with the qualities that can be perceived through the senses, and therefore it is considered empty. Thus the beings who become liberated from their conditionings return to merge into you, like the rivers flow into the ocean, or like the nectar of many flowers goes into the bees' honey.

Although it is real and valuable, like the various golden ornaments are desirable because they are made with that pure metal, the manifestation of this material world is not real in a permanent way, just like the bubbles of foam that are created by the meeting of the waters of the eternal ocean with

the ever-moving air. The *sannyasis* who are unable to uproot the last traces of material desire from their hearts remain impure, and thus they are unable to understand you truly. Although you are always present in the hearts of everyone, one who is covered by illusion forgets your presence, just like one forgets a valuable gem closed in a medallion that is always worn on one's neck.

There are also people who practice yoga with the purpose to obtain greater sense gratification: these people will be punished in this life and in the next, and will remain unable to attain you. On the other hand, those who have realized you are not concerned about the reactions to their past actions, or about what other people may say about them, but concentrate all their attention on meditating about your glories, that are recited in each age by the descendants of Manu."

The destruction of the Yadu dynasty

Krishna remained in Dvaraka living among his relatives and friends, the descendants of Yadu, for many years. The main queen of Krishna, Rukmini, gave birth to Pradyumna, who became father of Aniruddha, who became father of Vajra, who was one of the few survivors of the destruction of the Yadu dynasty. Vajra became the father of Pratibahu, the father of Subahu, father of Santasena, father of Satasena.

Krishna and Balarama had descended to earth to alleviate its burden, eliminating many Asuras and the vast armaments of the materialistic kings. When that work was completed, the time came to end the mission, so that the various heavenly beings could return to their normal position, therefore Krishna organized the disappearance of his great dynasty and of the Pandavas, who had helped him in his work. As no external force would be able to destroy the Yadus, Krishna arranged for the annihilation to be caused from inside the dynasty itself, like a bamboo forest is reduced to ashes by the fire caused by the friction of the dry reeds.

One day Vasudeva had invited many great sages, including Narada, Visvamisra, Asita, Kanva, Durvasa, Bhṛigu, Angira, Kashyapa, Vamadeva, Atri and Vasistha, to perform some ceremonies in his house. When the rituals were completed, the sages went to the holy place known as Pindaraka. The boys of the Yadu dynasty were in a mood to have fun, so they chose Samba, the son of Jambavati, and dressed him up as a woman. Then they approached the great sages and begged them, pretending to be serious and humble, to reveal what that woman would give birth to - a boy or a girl. The sages immediately understood the trick, and angered by that lack of respect, replied with a curse. "You fools! This person you call a woman will give birth to an iron mace, that will be the doom of your entire dynasty."

Terrified, the boys discovered that in fact Samba immediately gave birth to a deathly mace. Not knowing what else to do, they carried the mace to king Ugrasena who was sitting in assembly and told him what had happened. Ugrasena ordered the mace to be ground to dust and thrown into the ocean. So they did. The iron dust and the last small piece of iron remaining were thrown into the waters, but the iron bit was swallowed by a fish, that was later caught by Jara the hunter. Jara used it to make an arrow tip, while the iron dust was brought back to the beach by the waves and it grew into a thicket of bamboos that were as hard as iron. Krishna did not say anything and did not intervene, because everything was going according to his plan.

When they learned that Krishna was going to close his mission on earth, all the heavenly beings went to Dvaraka to offer their homage, recognizing that in fact the Lord had kept his promise. Then Krishna went to the royal assembly of the Yadus and explained the inauspicious omens that were manifesting in the city: "Our dynasty has been stricken by the curse of the *brahmanas*, and there is nothing we can do to avoid destruction. We should go immediately to the holy place of Prabhasa (Somanatha), where the Deva of the Moon performed austerities to find relief from Daksha's curse. By bathing in the waters of the ocean and offering oblations to the ancestors and the Devas, and by distributing rich gifts to the *brahmanas*, we will be able to face this danger in the best possible way."

Uddhava observed the preparations for the departure and approached Krishna to express his perplexity. "Lord, you are the God of all Devas and

know very well that simply by hearing and reciting your transcendental glories one can neutralize any evil. Furthermore, although you have the power to annihilate the curse, you have no intention to do so. I must therefore conclude that you have decided to cause the disappearance of your dynasty and your departure from this world. So I am begging you, Lord, I cannot remain separated from you even for one moment: please take me with you, wherever you go."

Krishna smiled, confirming Uddhava's words. "I have completed my mission here, and now the Devas have asked me to return to my residence in Vaikuntha. The Yadu dynasty will be almost completely destroyed and in seven days the ocean will rise to reclaim the city of Dvaraka. I, too, will disappear soon and the earth will fall into the darkness of Kali yuga. You should leave these places and roam the earth, abandoning all attachments to friends and relatives. Firmly established in the awareness of the spiritual self, you will see I am everywhere and in everything, and you will always remain free from all conditionings." |

Uddhava replied, "O Supreme Soul, for those who have no devotion for you it is very difficult to renounce material pleasures, because they are attached to the body and the relationships of the body. Nobody in this world can help those poor wretches, because you are the only perfect teacher."

Krishna said, "A little intelligence is sufficient. By observing the world around himself, a sober person can make logical conclusions and act as his own spiritual master. The human form of life provides the instruments that are required to seek the transcendental Truth that is beyond the perception of the senses. In this regard I will tell you the story of the meeting of Maharaja Yadu with an *avadhuta brahmana*, who in spite of being young and learned, did not engage in the religious rituals, but roamed free like an innocent child, without fear and without company."

To answer Yadu's questions, the *brahmana* explained that he had many spiritual teachers: earth, the mountain, the tree, air, the sky, water, fire, the moon, the sun, the pigeon, the python, the sea, the moth, the bee, the elephant, the honey thief, the deer, the fish, Pingala the prostitute, the *kurara* bird, the child, the girl, the arrow maker, the snake, the spider and the wasp.

From the earth he had learned that a sober person will not be agitated even when put in difficulties by others, because he knows that everyone acts under God's control. From the mountain and the tree he had learned to dedicate all efforts to the benefit of others, without being attached to one's own advantage, and without being distracted from spiritual contemplation. From the air he had learned to remain always detached from everything, even when coming in contact with the good and bad qualities of the various objects. Like air, a sage lives in various material bodies but never identifies with them, just like air penetrates all bodies but always remains distinct from them. This is also demonstrated by the sky or the space: the soul is omnipresent like space and cannot be divided.

From water, he had learned to remain always free from all contamination, to be always sweet and gentle, and produce pleasurable sounds. Like water purifies everything, so a sage purifies all those who come in contact with him. From fire, he had learned to consume what was offered to him, burning all contaminations, and to manifest or not manifest according to the circumstances. From the moon he had learned that there are phases in life, by which one grows or declines, but our eternal nature remains untouched. From the sun he had learned that a saintly person accepts various types of material objects by utilizing his senses and gives them back at the proper time, without being affected in accepting or rejecting, just like the sun evaporates great quantities of water and then restores it to the earth in the form of rains. Furthermore, like the sun is never divided although it appears reflected in many objects, the soul always remains one and transcendental.

From the pigeon, he had learned that excessive attachment to family leads to disaster, as it happened to that couple of pigeons who had made their nest in the forest, and saw their young ones carried away by the hunter. From the python he had learned to have patience and to content himself with whatever he obtained, and if necessary, to go without food. From the sea, he had learned to remain soberly within his boundaries, no matter how many rivers in spate rush their waters after the rainy season, and not to dry up during the summer. In the same way the sage accepts prosperity and deprivations without being distracted from the transcendental awareness. From the moth, he had learned not to yield to the temptation of rushing into sense gratification, and not to lose one's head at the sight of womanly

beauty. From the bee, he had learned to collect only the small quantity of food required to remain in life, without depending on one benefactor only. When the bee collects more than what is strictly necessary, it ends up accumulating honey, which becomes its doom. Furthermore, like the bee collects nectar from many flowers, the sage must learn to take the essential meaning from all the sacred scriptures.

From the elephant, he had learned to be wary of physical contact, because the desire to rub one's body with the bodies of females creates rivalry among the males and causes furious clashes. From the honey thief, he had learned to remain free from guilt while accepting the gifts of family men, who accumulate more than what they really need. From the deer, he had learned to live in the forest, avoiding the materialistic songs and music that speak of sense gratification. From the fish, he had learned not to be caught on the hook lured by tasty morsels: fasting controls all senses except taste, that becomes even more powerful.

Pingala was a prostitute who lived in the city of Videha; one evening she was sitting in front of her door waiting for customers, watching all the men who passed by, but nobody came to her. So she spent the night uselessly and in the end she became disappointed with material life: thus she attained the required detachment to find true happiness, that already exists in the heart of each being. The *kurara* bird or falcon is a fierce predator, and when it does not find food directly, it tries to snatch it away from other falcons; from that he learned that when an enterprise becomes too difficult, it is better to abandon it and save oneself. From the child, he had learned not to care about honor or dishonor, and to remain always innocent and free from worries.

The girl was alone in the house, because parents and other relatives had gone out. Suddenly some people came bringing a marriage proposal, and she welcomed them with all honors. She went to the kitchen to prepare some food for the guests, but while she was beating the rice, her bangles clashed noisily. Fearing that the guests would think that her family was extremely poor and not able to afford any servants so that the daughter was compelled to engaged in the humblest chores, the girl removed most of her bangles, leaving only one on each wrist, so that they would not make noise. In the same way, when many people live together there will certainly be

frivolous conversations, quarrels and a lot of noise, therefore it is always better to live alone and to be really at peace.

From the arrow maker, he learned how to focus on important things: that craftsman was so immersed in his work that he did not notice the royal procession that was passing in front of his shop. From the serpent, he had learned to live happily and without worries, using the holes dug by others or the houses built by others, without giving importance to the desire of building one's own house according to one's specific wishes. From the spider, he had understood how the Supreme Lord, Vishnu, manifests the universal creation from himself and then reabsorbs it within himself at the moment of the cosmic destruction, because the spider builds its web with the saliva of its own mouth, it adjusts it constantly to keep it in good conditions, and in the end it swallows it again. Once a wasp had imprisoned a small insect in its lair; the small insect constantly meditated on the wasp because of fear, and ended up taking birth as a wasp itself.

Furthermore, from his own body he had learned detachment: he used it to acquire knowledge but he knew very well that he would have to leave it soon. Like many anxious wives, the senses pull the mind here and there, constantly demanding satisfaction - delicious foods, refreshing drinks, sexual pleasures, soft and smooth objects, the feeling of a full stomach, pleasing sounds to hear, scents to smell, beautiful views to see. But the human body can transcend all this and engage in search of the realization of the transcendental self.

The great king Yadu understood the teachings of the *avadbuta brahmana* and offered his homage.

The methods of spiritual realization

Krishna continued to summarize the spiritual science for Uddhava. After demonstrating, through the story of the *avadbuta brahmana*, that it is possible to learn and evolve even simply by looking around oneself with sufficient attention, he illustrated the essence of the Vedic teachings on *varnashrama*

dharmā, that enables one to serve God through the performance of one's own duty, remaining free from selfishness and desire for personal advantages.

The material world is full of promises for sense gratification, created by the illusory energy as mirages that only offer a temporary relief from suffering. For those who cannot fully engage in transcendental awareness, the *varnashrama* system offers the possibility of enjoying sattvic pleasures in a regulated way and to develop at the same time qualities and activities that take us closer and closer to liberation, from the *sudra* level to the *brahmana* level.

The system starts at the Gurukula, the residential school or "family" of the Guru, where all children live for a period in order to be educated in the fundamental principles of spiritual science and *dharmā*, and trained in the professional duties they will perform later in life, according to their natural tendencies and their potential. The student, called *brahmachari*, should never be arrogant or lazy, and he must learn to work sincerely while remaining detached from the sense of possession and dominion, from the identification with family, social class, home, and so on. He must always think about progressing in the understanding of spiritual science, abandon all sense of envy and avoid all silly and useless conversations.

The material bodies, both the gross and the subtle one, are created by the influences of nature, and the student must learn to observe them, developing the awareness of being distinct from them: through the knowledge of the self he must approach God who is situated in the heart of everyone, and establish himself on the level of transcendental awareness. By hearing and humbly trying to understand the instructions of the teacher, who is expert in knowledge, it is possible to overcome the three influences of matter and finally move from theoretical to practical and applied knowledge, that is direct realization.

The Guru trains the disciples also in the performance of ritual ceremonies, that are simply a means to gradually arrive at spiritual knowledge. By perfectly performing the rituals one obtains the friendship of the Devas, their help in the daily work in this world and the elevation to heavenly planets. However perfect material happiness does not exist on the heavenly planets, just as it does not exist in this earthly world, because the Devas,

too, can fall victim to envy, hostility, decay and death, just like all agricultural harvests are constantly threatened by pests and drought, and must finally be reaped and consumed. Similarly a virtuous person who has attained the heavenly planets for the merits accumulated on earth will earn a wonderful body and a very wealthy home, surrounded by flower gardens, and travel in the company of beautiful women in a resplendent airplane, free to go wherever he likes. The day when his karmic credit is exhausted, however, he will have to return to earth to begin again the hard work to earn some more credit.

The path of ritual ceremonies also has other dangers. One who follows it without having learned to control his senses, and yields to the temptation of actions that are opposed to the principles of religion, will obtain the result of amplifying his own defects and become greedy, arrogant, violent and lusty. By persisting on this path one even comes to the point of slaughtering harmless animals for his own gratification and to resort to evil ghosts instead of interacting with the Devas, who are virtuous. Thus, instead of rising to the heavenly planets, one sinks down into the levels of demonic existence.

Uddhava said, "Lord, there is something I do not understand. The living being is always in the middle of the action of the influences of material nature: how can he become free from them? And then, if the soul is transcendental by nature, always pure and never touched by matter and illusion, how can it be conditioned?"

Krishna replied, "This is not easy to understand. The soul - the self - is at the same time liberated and conditioned, and at the same time it is never liberated or conditioned. A dream is a creation of our own intelligence but it effectively exists, and in the same way the conditions of material nature are created by the illusory energy. Both knowledge and ignorance are without beginning and eternally offer both liberation and slavery to the embodied beings.

The individual being, called *jiva atman*, is integral part of the Brahman, but he allows himself to be covered by ignorance and therefore he suffers because of his material conditionings, although they are illusory. Knowledge, however, can liberate him instantly. In the same body we find both happiness and suffering, because both the supreme self and the

individual self reside there - one liberated, the other conditioned. They are like two birds sitting on the same tree: one eats the fruits and the other simply observes, because he is not attracted by the fruits.

The realization of the self leads to perceive, clearly and directly, one's own transcendental and spiritual nature even while living in the material body, just like in a lucid dream we realize that we are dreaming, and that the body we seem to possess is not real. In this way it is possible to perform all the various types of activities without ever identifying with them, but remaining detached witnesses of the functions of body and mind, even in the performance of one's duties. This is perfect liberation.

Sometimes the body is attacked by ferocious animals or cruel persons, at other times it is treated with care and respect, but the wise is never confused by these apparently different situations. Even at the cost of seeming stupid to the eyes of those who look at him superficially, the sage remains detached from external activities and only seeks happiness in the soul. This is the purpose of the entire Vedic system. One who meticulously studies and practices all the details of the rituals and scriptures, but does not attain transcendental awareness, cannot really attain the results of the Vedic system and can be compared to a man who is trying to milk a cow that has no milk.

A saintly person is always tolerant and compassionate, and does not hurt anyone. He invests his time and energies for the good of the people, is not greedy or rude, or confused by the material desires of the senses. He strictly controls his diet, is always meditative, peaceful and balanced, and only trusts in God. He does not want personal honors and is friendly and respectful to everyone, he perfectly understands the purpose of the scriptures and of ordinary religious duties and he knows that neglecting such duties leads to degradation. He is expert in awakening spiritual awareness in others and he never cheats anyone."

Krishna continued to explain to Uddhava: "There are many devotional practices that help to overcome the false material identification. For example, the worship and personal service offered to the Deity, the study and recital of my qualities, my teachings and my glories, my appearances and adventures, especially during the celebration of festivals in the various seasons of the year.

Also offering to the Deity whatever one obtains, singing devotional songs with accompaniment of musical instruments and dancing, visiting sacred places of pilgrimage, observing religious vows such as Ekadasi, participating to the construction of temples and gardens to grow flowers and fruits for the Deity, keeping the temple clean and in general working in the spirit of service to the Deity.

A devotee should not use his service to become famous or respected, or put to other uses the lamps or other articles that are destined to the service of the Deities, or offer something that has already been used by others. On the other hand, it is good to offer the Deity the things one likes best in this world personally, according to one's personal tastes.

Besides the ritual worship offered to the Deity, it is possible to honor God in the Sun, the Fire, the *brahmanas*, the cows, the *vaishnavas*, the Space, the Wind, the Water, the Earth, and also in all living beings and in the individual soul. One who worships me in the Sun recites the Vedic *mantras* by offering his homage, while one who worships me in the Fire offers oblations of clarified butter.

One can worship me in the *brahmanas* by greeting them respectfully as honored guests even when they come without being invited. One can worship me in cows by offering grass and other suitable foods, such as grains or jaggery or things that are good for nourishment and health. One can worship me in *vaishnavas* by making friends with them and respecting them. One can worship me in the inner Space of the heart and in the Wind through the knowledge of *prana*, the life air. One can worship me in Water by offering water with flowers and *tulasi*, and in Earth by properly applying the secret *bija mantras*. One can worship me in the living beings by offering food and other pleasurable things, and in the individual soul by contemplating the Supreme Soul in all souls.

It is also recommended to practice *astanga yoga*, engage in the philosophical analysis of the elements of matter, practice non-violence and the other principles of goodness, recite the *Vedas*, engage in austerities, accept the renounced order, perform sacrifices, dig wells, plant trees and engage in other works of public welfare, distribute charity, observe vows, worship the Devas, recite secret *mantras* and visit pilgrimage places, but all these activities by themselves are not sufficient to conquer me.

On the other hand, the company of persons who have a deep devotional love for me can help anyone reach me - even those who are less intelligent, who never studied the scriptures or performed vows or austerities, as we can see from many examples in history. Even women who have a simple and naive mentality, laborers who have no academic education or knowledge of the scriptures, materially engrossed merchants and even Asuras such as Bali, Bana, Maya, and son on, have attained this success. The *gopis* of Vrindavana are the most glorious example, because their immense love for me overcomes all other considerations and absorbs all their awareness.

The functions of the senses constitute the manifested form of God, just like a tree that is born from a seed and develops with various branches and roots. The living being must first try to become established under the influence of goodness, to facilitate the cultivation of religious principles and the knowledge that destroy ignorance and passion. The sages who understand Vedic knowledge praise those who are controlled by goodness, criticize those who are in ignorance and show indifference to those who are in passion.

Gradually one should rise also above material goodness and attain the transcendental level with the direct knowledge of the spirit soul. By using body and mind to cultivate knowledge and goodness, one attains enlightenment, that dissolves the power of the material influences. The genuine system of yoga enables one to attain these results: it simply consists in withdrawing the mind from all other sense objects and focusing it only on the contemplation of God. With attention and seriousness, with a joyful and dedicated mind, one should control breathing and consciousness, and meditate on God three times a day - at sunrise, noon and sunset."

Uddhava said, "Please, Krishna, speak to me about the origin of the science of yoga."

Krishna replied, "The four Kumaras were the first sons of Brahma. Because they wanted to practice yoga, they approached Brahma and asked him how to detach the senses and the mind from sense objects and meditate on God. Brahma was meditating on that difficult question, when Hamsa, the *avatara* of Vishnu, appeared there. After being respectfully greeted by Brahma and the Kumaras, Hamsa instructed them on the science of yoga.

The first step consists in reflecting on one's true nature and identity, applying the teachings of Sankhya, that is the analysis of the elements of the universe. All material bodies are composed by the five gross elements, therefore there are no important distinctions between one body and another. The material mind and the sense objects too are nothing but designations that cover the spirit souls, that is part of the Brahman.

When one understands that Brahman is the true nature of the soul, he can easily become detached from the body, the mind and the sense objects. Wakefulness, sleep and dreamless sleep are the three functions of intelligence caused by the three influences of material nature, but the living being always remains separated from these three types of experiences. There is also a fourth state of awareness, that is the original state of the spirit and that we could call 'super-consciousness'. This is the only true existence, while the other three experiences are illusory, like the red line that we perceive when we quickly rotate a burning torch.

The most powerful and elevated yoga system is certainly Bhakti yoga, by which one develops a deep attachment for the divine and an ecstatic happiness that cancels all other thoughts, purifying the awareness and healing it from the attachment to sense gratification.

Meditation means fully concentrating one's awareness on God. Abandoning lust and fear, one should sit in a secluded place and focus his mind on God. The place where one sits should be level, not too low or too high, and one should keep the body comfortable and erect, resting one's hands in the lap and focusing the gaze before the eyes, at the level with one's nose. One should purify the respiratory system by practicing the mechanical exercises called *rechaka*, *kumbhaka* and *puraka*, that consists in stopping breath between inhaling and exhaling, and vice versa. The subtle life air must be raised from the *muladhara chakra* along the stem of the lotus flower that constitutes the subtle equivalent of the spine, up to the heart, where the sacred syllable *om* is situated in the form of sound of a bell.

Then one keeps raising the sacred syllable for 12 *angulas*, to the place where the *omkara* is united to the 15 vibrations produced with the *anusvara*. Remaining focused on the *omkara*, carefully practicing *pranayama* ten times a day at sunrise, noon and sunset, within one month one comes to control the life air.

Keeping one's eyes half-closed and fixed before him, well alert and attentive, he should meditate on the 8-petaled lotus flower that is inside the heart. Meditating on the Sun, the Moon and Fire, one must evoke them in the center of the lotus and within this radiance, he must visualize the form of the Supreme Personality of God, who is the purpose of all meditation. This form is perfectly proportioned, sweet and smiling, with four beautiful arms, an exquisite face and ear pendants in the shape of sharks. His complexion is the color of the black clouds full of rain, he wears silken clothes of a golden yellow color, and many wonderful ornaments. After contemplating the body of this form, one should concentrate only on his face, then focus one's awareness on space and merge it into the Lord himself. This is the perfection of yoga.

The practice of yoga also produces eighteen perfections, ten of which are secondary because they are produced by goodness and eight are primary because they are produced by meditation on God.

The secondary *siddhis* or perfections are the ability to become free from hunger, thirst and other problems that are characteristic of the body; to see and hear things that are distant in space and time, including the past and the future; to control fire, sun, water, poisons and so on; to move one's body at mind speed; to take any form one wishes; to enter the body of someone else and read the mind of others; to choose the moment of one's death; to observe the activities of the Devas and the Apsaras; to complete what one had decided to do and give orders that are executed. Among the primary *siddhis*, three have the power to modify the yogi's body: they are called *anima* (becoming extremely small), *mahima* (becoming extremely big) and *laghima* (becoming extremely light). *Prapti* consists in being able to take anything one desires, and *prakamya* consists in being able to enjoy anything one desires. *Isita* is the ability to control the secondary powers of *maya* (such as the minds of other people) and *vasita* or the power of not being controlled by the primary influences of nature. *Kamavasayita* enables one to obtain anything in this world. *Anima siddhi* is attained by meditating on God in his atomic form that pervades all the subtle elements, while *mahima siddhi* is obtained by meditating on the form of God as the *mahat tattva*, the Supreme Soul of material existence. By absorbing the mind in the essence of individual elements - space, air, fire, and so on, one acquires the powers of each one of them.

By meditating on God as the essence of the atomic components of the various elements, one realizes the subtle atomic substance of time, that confers *laghima siddhi*. *Prapti siddhi* is acquired by focusing the mind on God in the element of identification with matter, the *ahankara* created by *sattva guna*; this gives possession of the senses of all living beings. *Prakamyā siddhi* is obtained by focusing all mental activities on God as the Supreme Soul of that phase of *mabat tattva* that manifests fruitive activities. *Isita siddhi* is attained by merging one's awareness in Vishnu, the Supreme Soul in the hearts of all beings, who controls material energy; this gives control over the conditioned souls, their identification and the bodies they wear. *Vasita siddhi* is obtained by meditating on the form of Narayana, the fourth factor of existence, and acquiring his same nature. One who completely concentrates on God in the form of Brahman will get all his desires satisfied.

One who meditates on God as the Lord of Svetadvipa, who protects the principles of religion and personifies purity, attains the level of pure existence where one is not disturbed any more by the six waves of matter - hunger, thirst, decay, death, pain and illusion. One who meditates on the extraordinary sound vibrations that exist in God as the personification of space becomes able to hear all the conversations of living beings in space. By merging one's sense of sight into the Sun planet, and the Sun in one's eyes, and meditating on God existing in the connection between Sun and eyesight, one obtains the power of seeing distant things. By absorbing one's consciousness in God and using the wind that follows the mind to merge one's material body in God himself, becomes able to take his body anywhere the mind goes. Entering someone else's body is possible by meditating on oneself within that body and then leaving his present body, like a bee goes from one flower to another.

To leave one's body at one's chosen time, one must block the anus with the heel and raising the awareness from the heart to the throat and then the head; from the *brahma randbra* (the crown *chakra*) the yogi can leave the body and go wherever he likes. A person who perfectly meditates on God acquires his same nature and power, therefore his orders will be followed and he will obtain the success he desires. Just like the body of a fish cannot be damaged by water, one who has established his awareness in God cannot be damaged by fire, sun, water, poison or other things.

These mystic perfections however can be an obstacle and a waste of time for those who are interested in the true purpose of yoga, that is transcendental liberation. The effort of perfecting one's material body, immensely increasing its powers or even just gaining freedom from disease and old age, constitutes a very serious danger because it reinforces identification and attachment to the material body rather than weakening them.

One who engages in yoga must avoid praising or criticizing the behavior of others, because that is a distraction from the practice of meditation, that is meant to dissipate material identification based on duality. Spiritual knowledge is based on the factual discrimination between spirit and matter, not on the illusory distinction between one spirit and another, or between one matter and another. It is based on the teachings of the scriptures, on the application of austerity in the sober observation of reality, on direct perception through purified senses, on listening to the examples contained in the stories of the *Puranas*, and on logical reasoning.

Sometimes progress in yoga is obstructed by attachment for family members or disciples, or by some other material condition, or by disturbances created by envious Devas, but even if someone abandons regular practice, it can be resumed at any time, in this lifetime or in the next. The yogi should observe the activities of the body as detached from his true nature and identity; it is the body that moves, walks, sits, lies down, eats or performs other physical activities, and this happens automatically, without our specific attention. The same applies to impure objects or activities: the yogi does not consider them as real, but merely as temporary manifestations of nature, mirages created by the mind and senses.

It may happen that the yogi faces some difficulties in his meditation, that his mind and senses become agitated for some reason, but it is like clouds that come and go, and can never really affect the sun. Space can manifest the qualities of air, fire, water, earth that it occupies, and also the qualities of heat and cold according to the seasons, but all this does not affect it. Disturbances can be neutralized with *mantras*, medicinal herbs or special techniques, and by constantly meditating on God."

Krishna continued, "As I have explained to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, God is the Supreme Soul of all existence, and is represented

by whatever is extraordinary in its particular category - such as Time among the dominators, the *omkara* among all the *mantras*, the A among all the letters of the alphabet, Indra among the Devas, Agni among the Vasus, Vishnu among the Adityas and Shiva among the Rudras. Among the Yakshas and Rakshasas, God is represented by Kuvera, the Lord of wealth, among the elephants he is Airavata, among the horses Uchchaishrava, among the Kimpurushas he is Hanuman, and among the plants he is the grains. Everything that is powerful, beautiful, famous, strong, pleasing and wonderful simply constitutes a fragment of the glories of God.

In Satya yuga there is only one *Veda*, expressed simply as the sacred syllable Om, and human beings only meditate on God, worshiping him in the form of Hamsa. At the beginning of Treta yuga the *Veda* becomes divided in three parts - *Rig*, *Sama* and *Yajur* - and creates the sacrificial rituals. As a consequence, these manifest the four *varnas* or social orders, that appear as the various parts of the body of God: the *brahmanas* as the face, the *kshatriyas* as the arms, the *vaisyas* as the legs and the *sudras* as the feet. The *ashramas* also appear: the *brahmacharya* as the heart, the *grihastha* as the loins, the *vanaprastha* as the chest, and the *sannyasa* as the head."

The human beings work in the *varnas* according to their individual qualities and natural tendencies. *Brahmanas* are characterized by austerity, self-control, cleanliness, peacefulness, tolerance, truthfulness, simplicity, devotion to God and compassion. The *kshatriyas* are characterized by dynamicity, physical strength, determination, heroism, endurance, generosity and leadership. *Vaisyas* are recognized because they have faith in Vedic civilization, are generous, sincere and straightforward, free from hypocrisy, and always eager to produce wealth. A good *sudra* is honest and sincere, satisfied with whatever he receives.

All the worthy members of society should practice non-violence, truthfulness, honesty; they should be eager to help others achieve happiness and well-being, and to become free from lust, anger and greed. Those who are dirty or dishonest, who have no faith in the scriptures, who quarrel unnecessarily, who allow themselves to be controlled by lust, anger and greed are on a degraded level, below the *varnas*.

A *brahmachari* must reside in the ashrama of the *guru* and following his orders, control the mind focusing it on the careful study of Vedic

scriptures. He should dress in deer skin, with a straw belt, grow matted hair and avoid clipping his nails; he should carry *kusha* grass in his hand and have a staff and a water pot. He should not bleach or press his clothes, and he must keep silent when he takes bath, eats, takes part in rituals and recites *japa* mentally.

At dawn and sunset, reciting the appropriate *mantras*, he should offer worship to the Fire, the Sun, the Acharya, the cows, the *brahmanas*, the teachers, respectable persons and Devas. He must honor the Acharya deeply and collect donations for him morning and evening, accepting whatever the *guru* allows him to keep for himself, and always behaving humbly towards him. For example he should walk behind him, go to lie down when the *guru* goes to sleep, get up when the *guru* awakens.

The vow of *brahmacharya* requires complete sexual continence, even on the mental level, and should be followed by all those who are not in the *grihastha* order. All the members of society must observe the fundamental rules of cleanliness and hygiene, washing their hands often and taking bath, perform the *sandhya* meditations at the junctions of day and night, visit the sacred places and worship the Deity, chant the *japa*, avoid what should not be touched or eaten, abstain from speaking of what should not be discussed, and remember God who is always present in the hearts of each being as the Supreme Soul.

When the *brahmachari* has completed his basic education, if he wishes so he can go back home, after cutting nails and hair, taking a bath and wearing appropriate clothes, and thanking the teacher with suitable gifts. If he wants to marry, he should choose a girl of a similar nature, and if he wants to marry more than one wife, each one should be less qualified than the previous one. However, he will have sexual intercourse with his wife or wives only if he wants to have a child, and always maintain purity, cleanliness and benevolence to all beings, giving shelter and protection to all those who need them.

A family man is responsible for the proper maintenance of all the family members including the servants, and must perform the rituals according to his possibilities. He must always remain free from arrogance and sense of possession and dominion, and in fact consider himself merely a temporary guest of the Lord, who is the real owner of everything.

One who wants to enter the order of *vanaprastha* must leave his home and live in the forest, preferably entrusting his wife to the care of his adult children. A *vanaprastha* lives on fruits, roots and tubers he collects in the forest, smashing them with a stone to soften them, and occasionally he can cook wild grains. His clothes are made with tree bark, grass or leaves, he must not take care of his hair or beard, clip his nails or give special attention to the care of his teeth. He must take bath three times a day, sleep on the ground and perform austerities, for example remaining under the sun in the summer or under the rain or immersed in water during the winter, for the purpose of realizing the difference between the soul and the body, and to detach himself from the body. He must continue to perform the rituals called *agnibotra*, *darsha* and *purnamasa* as he used to do in his home, and also observe the *chaturmasya*. When he becomes too weak to perform the rituals he should meditate on the sacrifice within his own body, and entering the fire he should leave the body.

A *vanaprastha* who wants to attain complete renunciation can enter the order of *sannyasa*, that consists in abandoning all possessions and concerns, patiently tolerating even the difficulties sent by the Devas. If he wants to wear something more than a loin cloth, he can wrap a piece of cloth around his hips, but he can also renounce everything and just keep a staff and a water pot. While walking, he must watch the ground carefully to avoid stepping on some insects, and for the same reason he must filter the water with a piece of the cloth he wears: non-violence is in fact a stringent obligation.

All his words must be perfectly truthful, each physical and mental action must be pure, and he must be equally disposed towards all beings, without making discriminations based on the body or on birth. To sustain himself, he can beg alms from seven families, chosen at random among those that observe the Vedic rules of cleanliness, then he should take the food collected and go to a river bank, in a peaceful place, wash his hands, distribute food to those who may ask for it, without saying anything, then he must clean what is left and consume everything, without leaving anything for later.

A *sannyasi* must travel always alone, roaming the earth without attachment for any particular place, stopping from time to time in peaceful and

sanctified places along the rivers, on mountains and in forests. He may enter in cities and villages and approach ordinary people only to beg what is strictly required to survive.

Brahmanas, *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* receive initiation, and therefore they are expected to study the scriptures, perform the sacrificial rituals and distribute charity, while only *brahmanas* may receive charity, teach Vedic knowledge and perform rituals in the name of others. If a *brahmana* does not wish to live on charity because he wants to protect his spiritual progress, he can earn a livelihood by teaching or performing rituals, or collect the grains left in the fields and in the markets after hours. Helping a *brahmana* who is facing difficulties for his own maintenance and the care of his family constitutes the best act of charity, that brings enormous benefits for those who perform it, and it is a precise duty for kings, who are responsible for the well-being of all the subjects.

In case of emergency, if he cannot find financial support or abandoned grains, a *brahmana* may earn a livelihood by trade or take up the profession of a *kshatriya*, but under no circumstances he may become a servant of others. Not even a *kshatriya* can take up the profession of *sudra*; in case of emergency he can work as a *vaiyya*, live on hunting and gathering in the forest, or become a teacher. A *vaiyya* who is unable to maintain himself may temporarily take up the occupation of *sudra*, and a *sudra* who cannot find an employer may engage for survival in manual activities such as handicrafts, for example manufacturing baskets and mats.

The perfection of spiritual knowledge

Uddhava had carefully listened to Krishna's instructions on the various methods for spiritual realization, and especially on the regulated life of the *varnashrama dharma* system, that enables one to purify his existence to the point of realizing God. Krishna continued, "My dear Uddhava, you know me as the Supreme Personality of God. All these methods that I have described for you have only one supreme purpose: to attain the level of the service of pure love and devotion to me, God.

I am the Supreme Lord of all worlds and their original cause, therefore I am the Absolute Truth. By performing one's duties in the *varnasbrama* with the purpose of offering to me the results of those actions, one remains established in the perfection of spiritual knowledge, that cannot be attained in any other way, by performing austerities or visiting the holy places or chanting *japa* or distributing charity. This supreme path of Bhakti yoga was explained to Maharaja Yudhisthira by Bhishma, the great warrior of the Kuru dynasty, at the end of the war."

The vision of *bhakti* is above the 28 categories of the elements of the universe, and only focuses on their cause, the Personality of God, through the specific practices of *bhakti*: faith in the narration of my activities, the constant chanting of my glories, the deep and solid attachment for my worship, the recitation of hymns glorifying my person, a great respect for my devotional service, the offering of homage, the service offered to my devotees, the perception of my presence in all beings, the performance of some humble work for my pleasure, the concentration of the mind on my person and the offering of all auspicious activities as an offering to me, abandoning all material pleasures.

The twelve primary regulative principles of the *bhakti path* are non-violence, the absence of selfish desires and abstaining from stealing the property of others, detachment, humility, the freedom from the sense of possession, trust in the principles of religion, sexual continence, silence, stability, forgiveness, and fearlessness. The twelve prescribed duties are internal and external cleanliness, the chanting of the holy names of God, austerity, sacrifice, faith, hospitality, worship to God, visiting the holy places, acting only for the supreme good, and service to the spiritual master.

Tolerance means patiently enduring difficulties, and stability is attained when one controls one's tongue and genitals. The greatest form of charity consists in abandoning aggressiveness, real austerity consists in renouncing lust, and real heroism is about conquering one's natural tendencies for the search of pleasure. Real education consists in dissipating the false perception of duality in the soul, while stupidity consists in identifying with the material body and mind. True modesty consists in feeling disgust for inappropriate activities, and paradise is predominance of goodness.

God is the true friend and spiritual master of all beings, and the only true

home in this world is the human body. A poor man is one who is never satisfied with what he obtains from life, and always runs after sense gratification.

The three paths that lead to perfection are called *jnana* or knowledge, *karma* or action, and *bhakti* or devotion. The path of knowledge is preferred by those who are tired of ordinary fruitive activities, while the path of action is suitable for those who still have some desires to fulfill. On the other hand, the path of devotion is perfect for everyone.

An intelligent person does not wish to rise to the heavenly planets or live very long on this earth, but rather seeks the permanent benefit of liberation from the material conditions of life. The human body can be compared to an extraordinary ship that, steered by the spiritual master and pushed by the winds of divine instructions, can carry the living being across the ocean of material existence. An expert person who wants to tame a stubborn horse at first lets it run wild for some time, and then gradually pulls the reins to lead it on the proper path. In the same way the yogi carefully observes the movements and the desires of the mind, and gradually brings them under control.

The true virtue of the yogi consists in remaining fixed in his spiritual position, while sin consists in abandoning one's prescribed duty and losing transcendental awareness to engage in sense gratification. Such downfall causes one to take birth repeatedly in the world. One should also be careful about choosing his place of residence. One should avoid the places where there are no *brahmanas* or respectable people, where people neglect cleanliness and purification rituals, where many people eat non-vegetarian foods, or where the land is not very fertile. The auspicious moments are those appropriate to perform one's duty, because of their nature or because one obtains what is required for such activities.

Impure objects can contaminate a person according to the strength or weakness of that individual, of his intelligence, of his wealth, of the place where he stays or his physical conditions. The purity of an object is established by applying another object, or words or a ritual, for the effect of time or in virtue of their greatness. For example grains, wooden utensils, objects carved from bone, thread (for stitching), liquids, objects derived from fire, hides and objects made from clay are purified by time, wind, fire,

earth and water, separately or by a combination of these elements. The application of the elements of purification is appropriate when it removes unpleasant smells or the covering of dirt of the contaminated object and restores it to its original nature.

A person is purified by taking bath, distributing charity, performing austerities, attaining the suitable age or the required strength, performing the purification rituals and the prescribed duties, and especially by remembering God. All the twice born men must purify themselves adequately before engaging in their specific activities. Religiosity requires purity of the place, time, substance, performer of the action, *mantras* and action itself. A *mantra* is purified when it is recited with the proper knowledge, and action is purified when offered to God. By neglecting these six factors one falls into irreligiosity, and even activities that superficially appear to be pious become negative and degrading. However, the same activities that would degrade an elevated person do not cause problems to someone who is already fallen, and when one stops engaging in materialistic or negative activities he becomes free from its karmic ties and starts evolving.

Because of material birth, human beings develop attachment for sense pleasures, survival or longevity, sense activities, physical strength, sexual potency and interaction with relatives and friends: all these are opposed to the true interest of the soul, and in fact they lead to darkness. Foolish people, controlled by greed and lust, choose the flower mistaking it for the fruit, and the smoke mistaking it for the fire. Thus they let themselves be lured by the mirage of the heavenly planets and neglect to utilize the valuable human life to obtain that transcendental liberation that is the true purpose of existence.

I am the only one who knows the secret purpose of Vedic existence in its three branches - the ritual ceremonies of *karma kanda*, the ritual worship of *upasana kanda* and the acquisition of knowledge of *jnana kanda*. I create the *Veda* in their various metric forms - Gayatri, Ushnik, Anushtup, Brihati, Pankti, Trishtup, Jagati, Aticchanda, Atyasti, Atijagati and Ativirat - each having four syllables more than the previous one. From my will the different perceptions of knowledge are created, and therefore they can be reconciled perfectly by one who had attained the awareness of my person.

Creation is caused by the movements of matter - the *mahat tattva* - that manifests the three modes of being - the *gunas* - and from these all the sense objects, the senses and the mind, the material elements and so on.

Some say that the supreme soul and the individual soul are in the same category, some put the material self and the spiritual self together, and others yet keep the subtle elements in one category. Among these classifications there is not much difference. The real difference is rather between matter and spirit.

Material energy, composed by the three *gunas*, manifests the variety of creations in three aspects, called adhyatmic (the identification of the being), adhidaivic (the archetypal principles that govern the laws of matter and adhibhautic (the gross elements). These can be compared to eyesight, to the visible form and to the reflection of the sun, that continues to exist independently from these three existences. All the sense organs of the gross body and even the functions of the subtle body can therefore be analyzed according to the three distinctions of sense organ, object of perception and archetype (or the Deity that presides to that particular manifestation).

The endless discussions of philosophers that argue to determine whether this world is real or unreal are due to a lack of understanding of the Supreme and are based on a dualistic mentality, therefore they cannot bring any benefit.

The soul moves from one body to another, transported by the mind, that is tied to the reactions of the fruitive action, and meditates on the sense objects. The attachment for the new body causes the soul to forget everything that pertained to the previous body: this condition is called death. In fact each human being dies gradually, even along the course of a particular lifetime, because he changes many bodies. The different stages of transformation of the bodies can be compared to the flame of a candle, to the current of a river or to the fruits of a tree.

The light of a lamp consists of innumerable rays or waves that are emitted and disappear constantly, yet a person who has a limited intelligence will just see a lamp. When one looks at a river flowing, he understands he is watching at ever new water that comes and goes, but for a foolish person there is no difference: it is all water of the river. A seed germinates,

becomes a sprout and then a tree with many leaves, then it blossoms and produces fruits: similarly, a human being develops as an embryo, he is born, grows through childhood and youth, then becomes an adult and ages until the moment of death. Only a fortunate person can perceive his true nature and identity beyond this phantasmagoria of bodies in constant transformation.

Spiritual awareness is the greatest treasure, to be preserved carefully regardless of the mistreatment and difficulties caused by people who are ignorant, envious or wicked. However, it is certainly very difficult to control one's mind when one is disturbed by the insults of uncivilized people, that cause greater pain than arrows hitting the body.

In the kingdom of Avanti there lived a so-called *brahmana* who had been blessed with all opulences, but had a bad temper, he was full of greed and lust, and ready to anger. He engaged in trade and neglected religious duties, guests were not received kindly in his house, and even family members were neglected. So miserly was this man, that he even denied his own body the necessary pleasures at the proper time. All his relatives hated him and responded with similar coldness and lack of care, therefore the Deities of the five family sacrifices were displeased with him and his future was dark, both in this life and in the next.

At length his wealth was finally lost - partly consumed by his relatives, partly stolen by thieves, taken away by the government or damaged by time or neglect. Because he had lost all his karmic merits and the joy of life and affectionate relationships, too, his life became intolerable. Finally he became disgusted with himself and realized that the wealth of misers does not give any joy, but it is simply a cause of suffering in this life and leads to hell in the next. Greed destroys the good name of a person and all his good qualities, just like physical beauty is destroyed by leprosy, even if it appears in a small measure. Wealth causes great fatigue, fear, anxiety and disappointment both when one tries to earn it, and when one tries to collect it, protect, spend or utilize it.

Wealth is also subject to fifteen types of contaminations: theft, violence, lies, hypocrisy, lust, anger, confusion, pride, disputes, hostility, mistrust, envy, and the dangers connected with prostitution, gambling and intoxicants. Even one's near and dear - brothers, wife, parents, friends -

become dangerous and can behave in hostile way when money is involved. If one has obtained the rare blessing of human life, it is stupid to waste it by attachment to wealth. One should rather utilize the money for the benefit of worthy persons - the Devas, Rishi, Pitris and human beings in general, besides taking care of one's family and oneself. By wisely utilizing money, youth and strength one can attain perfection, but when youth and strength are wasted just to accumulate money, as a Yaksha would do, what shall one do in old age?

Realizing these bitter truths, the so-called *brahmana* of Avanti finally came to wisdom and decided to engage in austerities in a conscious way, meditating on the Supreme Lord and renouncing all desire for possessions. By following a strict vow of silence he patiently endured the mistreatment of stupid people who mocked and tormented him, insulting him mercilessly.

Remaining fixed in his transcendental determination, he composed this song: "Those people are not the cause of my happiness or distress, and neither are the Devas, my own body, the planets, my previous activities or time. It is simply the mind that causes joy or pain and perpetuates the cycle of material life, activating the functions of the qualities of matter and creating the various activities in goodness, passion and ignorance, as well as the corresponding conditions of life. The Supreme Soul does not make any effort and does not suffer, because it is always on the level of transcendental enlightenment, while I, as an infinitesimal soul, have accepted to follow the mind, that reflects like a mirror the images of the material world. In this way I have fallen into the trap of enjoying the objects of desires. All the religious activities, such as the performance of the prescribed duties, the observance of primary and secondary regulative principles, charity, the study of scriptures and ritual purification, are meant to help control the mind and focus it on God. When the mind is perfectly stable and peaceful, what is the need of performing ritual ceremonies and distributing charity? And if the mind remains out of control, lost in ignorance, what is the value of such virtuous activities? One who controls the mind becomes master of all senses, but one who allows himself to be controlled by the mind lives a miserable life, quarreling with others and dividing the world into friends and enemies. Those who identify with the body - which is a mere product of the mind - are confused and think in terms of me and mine, constantly wandering in the darkness of illusion.

Joys and sufferings have nothing to do with the soul, because they only refer to the interactions between bodies, therefore the true root of suffering is in one's body. On the other hand, the soul is always transcendental to matter and is never touched by material joys or sufferings."

Krishna continued to instruct Uddhava: "In Satya yuga everybody had proper spiritual discrimination. Even before that, during the period of the destruction of the universe, there was no differentiation between the observer and the observed. Then the One Absolute Truth, that is always free from material dualities, separated into two categories - material nature and the living beings who try to enjoy the manifestations of matter. Agitated by the glance of Vishnu, material nature manifests the three *gunas* to satisfy the still unfulfilled desires of the conditioned souls. From the *gunas* the primordial *sutra* rises, together with the *mahat tattva*, that produces the false identification with matter, which in turn causes the illusion of the living beings and produces physical sensations, the senses and the mind.

False identification in ignorance gives rise to the subtle physical perceptions, from which the gross elements develop. From false ego in passion, the senses rise, and from false ego in goodness the eleven Devas appear. All together, these factors contribute to form the universal egg, where God resides in the form of Garbhodakasayi Vishnu, from whose navel Brahma is born. Brahma creates the three planetary systems - Bhur, Bhuvar, Svar - and the Deities that preside over them. Bhur is the earthly dimension of the human beings, Bhuvar is the dimension of ghosts and spirits, and Svar is the residence of the heavenly beings. One who aspires to liberation overcomes all these three dimensions.

During the period of its preservation, the universe continues to transform by moving around its constituents, like clay continues to produce so many different objects, and is dissolved again and again to create various ornaments. At the time of destruction, the mortal bodies of the living beings become food, food turns into grains, grains become earth again, and earth merges into its subtle feeling - smell. The sense of smell merges into water, and the water into its subtle quality - taste. Taste dissolves into fire, that dissolves into form, that merges into touch, that merges into space, which in turn dissolves into the feeling of sound. All the senses then dissolve into their origin, the heavenly beings, who dissolve into the mind,

which in turn merges into material identification in goodness. Sound merges into material identification in ignorance, and material identification itself dissolves into the *gunas*, that re-enter the totality of nature, which dissolves into time. Time is withdrawn into the Supreme Lord, the omniscient Maha purusha, who remains established in himself.

The characteristics of goodness are control of senses and mind, tolerance, intelligent discrimination, dedication to one's duty, truthfulness, compassion, careful study of past and future, contentment in any condition of life, generosity, renunciation to sense gratification, faith in the spiritual master, embarrassment before inappropriate actions, charity, simplicity, humility and self-satisfaction. The characteristics of passion are material desires, great effort, audacity, dissatisfaction even after obtaining something, false pride, the desire to advance in career, the idea of being different and better than others, sense gratification, the desire to fight, the desire to be glorified, and the tendency to ridicule others, highlight one's qualities and justify one's actions by force. The characteristics of ignorance are intolerant rage, greed and avarice, speaking without reference to the scriptures, violent hatred, living at the expenses of others like a parasite, hypocrisy, chronic fatigue, quarreling, complaining, illusion, sadness, depression, sleeping too much, illusory expectations, fear and laziness.

The interaction between the three influences pervades the entire universe and is the foundation of the concept of me and mine. It affects religious practices, economic development, sense gratification, personal beliefs and so on. For example, a person who worships God with love and offering the performance of his prescribed duties, without material attachments, is in goodness. On the other hand, one who offers worship to God or performs his duty with the hope of obtaining some material benefit is in passion. One who worships God with the intention of committing violence or creating problems to others is in ignorance. Goodness brings light, purity and auspiciousness and produces happiness, kindness, knowledge and all other good qualities. Passion causes attachment, duality and hard work to acquire prestige and fortune, and brings anxiety and difficulties in life. When ignorance defeats goodness and passion, it covers the awareness making the mind stupid and obtuse, throwing the living being into lamentation and illusion, excessive sleep, false hopes and violence against others.

When the consciousness is purified and the senses become detached from matter, one becomes free from fear and capable of realizing God. The influence of passion distorts intelligence because of excessive activity, inability to detach the senses from material objects, bad health of the sense organs and confusion of the mind. The symptoms of ignorance are the disappearance of higher awareness, inability to focus one's attention, depression and loss of mental faculties.

The learned persons dedicated to Vedic knowledge are raised to higher and higher positions due to the influence of goodness, while ignorance precipitates one into lower and more degraded positions, and the influence of passion makes one take another birth at the human level. One who overcomes all the three influences of matter attains the transcendental and divine level.

Integrated knowledge is in goodness, knowledge based on duality is in passion, and merely materialistic knowledge is in ignorance. Living in the forest belongs to goodness, living in a city belongs to passion, and living in a gambling house belongs to ignorance - while living in a place where the Deity resides is on the transcendental level. Action free from selfishness is in goodness, action dictated by personal advantage is in passion, and the mechanical action of one who is unable to tell what is right from what is wrong is in ignorance - while action that is purely dedicated to God transcends all the influences of matter.

Faith directed to spiritual life is in goodness, faith in fruitive action is in passion, and faith in the activities that are opposed to the principles of religion is in ignorance - but faith in the loving service to God is purely transcendental. Healthy, clean food, that is obtained without too much difficulty is in goodness, food that gives immediate pleasure to the senses is in passion, and food that is dirty and causes suffering is in ignorance. Happiness derived from the inner self is in goodness, happiness derived from sense gratification is in passion, and happiness based on illusion and degradation is in ignorance - while happiness found in God is transcendental.

Birth in a human body offers the opportunity to realize God and attain the divine level through devotional service. By abandoning false identification with the products of the material influences, a human being becomes firmly

established in transcendental knowledge and does not remain tied to matter, although he continues to live in the material world. One should never keep company with materialists, who are only interested in gratifying their bellies and genitals, because this is the surest path to degradation.

The famous emperor Pururava, also called Aila, composed a song when he was abandoned by his wife Urvasi.

"Alas, how deep is my illusion! My heart was so full of lust that I did not realize the passing of time, and while that terrible woman held my neck, I could not see either sunrise or sunset, and I wasted my days without any benefit. And in spite of my high position as a king of the entire earth, I have been dumped without regrets, like one throws away a piece of straw, and yet I pursued her desperately, naked and screaming like a madman.

I considered myself so intelligent and learned, but I did not behave better than a donkey that passively endures the kicks of a female that does not like his advances. Fire can never be extinguished by oblations of clarified butter, and similarly the taste of Urvasi's lips never gave me permanent satisfaction, even after many years dedicated to her pleasure. But whose fault is this, if not mine only? Urvasi had warned me. I am the cause of all my troubles, because I was unable to control my own senses and I gave supreme importance to this material body, that is dirty and foul smelling by nature.

To whom does this body belong? To the parents who gave birth to it, to the wife who cares for it, or to the employer that engages it in various activities? Does it belong to the fire of cremation, to the dogs and jackals that will devour it, or to the friends who help and support it? Or is it property of the soul, who shares its joys and pains? Thus the solution lies in avoiding the company of materialists, of those who are attached to sense gratification."

On Uddhava's request, Krishna also explained how one should offer worship to the form of the Deity.

"There are three main methods: the Vedic one, the Tantric one, and the mixed one. The Vedic method consists in offering suitable objects to worship the Deity that appears in earth, fire, sun, water or in the heart of the devotee. First of all one must purify oneself by brushing one's teeth and

taking bath, then one smears his body with clay reciting *mantras* for purification. Worship proper is performed while reciting the Gayatri *mantra* at the three junctions of the day (sunrise, noon and sunset). The image of the Deity can be shaped in stone, wood, metal, clay, paint, sand, mind or gems, and be installed in a temporary or permanent way.

With the temporary installation one calls the Deity and then uninstalls him at the end of the worship, something that is specifically required when the ritual is performed on the ground, as in the case of the *yantras*. The Deity is offered a water bath, except when the image is made of clay, paint or wood - as the cleaning is done without water. The articles and ingredients offered in the ritual should be of best quality, but devotion is more important than the price, and a sincere devotee can offer whatever he can obtain without too much difficulty, or even simply perform it in meditation, without using material objects.

In temple ceremonies, the two most pleasing offerings are bathing and decorations. For the Deity drawn on the sacred ground, the best method is the *tattva vinyasa*, the acknowledgment of the various expansions of the Deity in the different parts of the *yantra*, installing them with *mantras*. For the worship to the sacrificial fire, the best offering is of sesame and barley soaked in clarified butter, while for the worship to the Sun the best offering is of homage and consecrated water, and for the worship to water, one offers pure water. Actually even just a small offering of water to God is sufficient: great solemn ceremonies with many articles of worship remain unsatisfactory when they are presented by people who are devoid of devotion, while even a small offering presented with love is very dear to me.

The best and simplest form of worship consists in presenting scented oil, incense, flowers and tasty foods. After taking bath and collecting whatever is required, the devotee sits facing east or north, on a mat made with *kusha* grass pointing east. Then he sanctifies the various parts of his body by touching them with *mantras* and performs the same procedure with the body of the image of the Deity.

By directly using his hands, he removes the old flowers and the leftovers from the previous offerings, then he sprinkles some water from the container to purify the area where the worship will be offered, the offerings to be presented, and his own body as well. By using the water from the

largest container, he must purify the water to wash the Deity's feet, hands and mouth, and chant the Gayatri *mantra* for all the three containers. Then he must meditate on the subtle form of the Deity, situated now within the body of the devotee himself, purified by air and fire, like the origin of all living beings and the final sound of the sacred syllable Om.

By touching the various parts of the body of the Deity with the proper *mantras*, he must invoke the divine presence in that image and present the articles of worship. He must visualize the seat of the Deity, as a lotus flower with eight petals, decorated by *dharma* and other religious qualities, and by the nine spiritual energies. Then he offers *padya*, *achamaniya*, *arghya* and the various articles he has collected, worshiping subsequently the Sudarshana disc, the Panchajanya conchshell, the Kaumodaki mace, the Nandaka sword, the Sarnga bow, Vishnu's arrows and quiver, the Kaustubha gem, the Vaijayanti garland, and the Srivatsa mark on his chest. He also offers worship to the companions of Vishnu - Nanda and Sunanda, Garuda, Prachanda and Chanda, Mahabala and Bala, Kumuda and Kumudekshana, then Durga, Ganesha, Vyasa, Visvakshena, the various spiritual masters and the Devas.

The image of the Deity must be offered a daily bath, if possible by using water perfumed with sandalwood pulp, *ushira* root, camphor, *kunkum* and *aguru*, reciting various Vedic *mantras* such as Svarna gharma, Mahapurusha vidya, Purusha sukta, Rajana and other hymns from the *Sama Veda*. Then one must offer a change of clothes, the sacred thread, various ornaments, garlands and scents in the prescribed way, then again *padya* and *achamaniya*, perfume oil, flowers and whole grains, incense and lamps.

The offering should also include delicious foods such as *gur* (brown sugar), *payasa* (rice pudding), *saskuli* (sweet fritters made with rice flour and sesame seeds), *apupa* (sweet pancakes), *modaka* (steamed rice flour dumpling filled with sweet coconut), *samyava* (sweet fritters made with wheat flour), yogurt, vegetable soups and other tasty preparations. On special occasions, one can offer the Deity a massage, a mirror, a stick to clean the teeth, songs and dances, special foods and any other particular offering the devotee can afford.

The fire sacrifice must be performed in a place prepared according to the instructions of the scriptures, delimited by the sacred rope, with the

sacrificial well and the altar mound. The officiating person must pile the firewood personally and light it according to the ritual. After placing *kusba* grass on the ground and sprinkling it with water, he must perform the *anvadhana* (preliminary feeding of the fire), then prepare the oblations to be offered and purify them by sprinkling with water. Then, meditating on the Deity of Vishnu present in the fire, the devotee should perform the *aghara*, soaking small pieces of wood in clarified butter and offering them to the fire, and with the *svasti* ritual offer oblations to the Devas, starting with Dharma, through the *mula mantras* for each Deity. Worshiping Lord Vishnu and his companions with adequate offerings, he must then silently recite the *japa* of the *mula mantra*. After completing the fire sacrifice, the devotee should again offer the Deity the *achamana* and *tambula* (a scented preparation for chewing, made with betel nuts).

A festival should then follow, with songs and dances, dramatic re-enactment of the Lord's activities, narration of the sacred stories, recitation of the hymns and prayers contained in the *Puranas* and in other ancient scriptures and popular stories. After offering his homage, bowing down with his head to the feet of the Deity, the devotee must stand up, and with folded hands in front of the Deity, must pray the Lord for protection.

If the installation of the Deity was temporary, the devotee should then recall the presence of the Lord within the light of the lotus flower in his own heart. If the installation was permanent, the devotee should build a solid temple and surround it with nice gardens to produce flowers for daily worship, and space for the processions and other special rituals during festivals. One who offers the Deity gifts of land, markets, cities and villages to provide ingredients and wealth for the daily worship and the celebration of festivals for the Deity will obtain the Lord's blessings, whether he desires to get great wealth, a kingdom, elevation to the heavenly planets, liberation, or pure love for God. On the other hand, one who takes away the property of the Devas or *brahmanas*, even if he had gifted it himself or was gifted by others, will be severely punished together with all those who have contributed to the crime, actively or even passively, simply by approving it.

Uddhava was perplexed. "My Lord, I am afraid that the method you have described is rather difficult for those who are unable to control their minds. Success in yoga and karma feeds false pride and reinforces material

identification and attachment to this world, which take one away from the true purpose of spiritual realization. One who practices yoga to perfect one's body and obtain mystic powers, abandoning the service to the lotus feet of the Supreme Personality of God, is showing stupidity and ungratefulness, because he does not appreciate the valuable gifts he has received."

Krishna replied, "This is true. The path of *bhakti* is much safer and simpler. It is sufficient to always remember me, while performing one's duty seriously and in a detached way. It is also useful to live in the holy places and follow the example of great devotees, who appear among the Devas, the Daityas and the human beings, participate to the celebrations in my honor both privately and in public, and especially remember that I am present in the hearts of all living beings. In this way my devotee does not make distinctions based on birth and is equal to everybody, therefore he conquers false material identification, pride, envy and rivalry, and becomes indifferent to what other people may think. This is the absolutely best method to attain spiritual enlightenment: to use one's mind, body and activities to realize my presence in all living beings.

The teachings I have offered to you are a special facility to understand the science of Absolute Truth, that is difficult even for the heavenly beings. One who understands it attains liberation and fulfills the true purpose of Vedic knowledge. One who disseminates it among those who are favorable to devotional service earns my eternal gratitude. One who regularly recites these sublime teachings becomes purified, day after day, and who regularly listens to this knowledge will always remain free from karmic reactions.

In this sacred task there are no birth considerations - even the mere uneducated laborers and superficially minded women can engage in it. However, one should avoid revealing this knowledge to those who are dishonest, hypocrites, atheists, or lack humility."

After listening to these wonderful teachings of the Lord, known as *Uddhava Gita*, Uddhava offered him his homage and thanked him for his mercy, recognizing that transcendental knowledge had been able to cut the ties of his deep attachment for his relatives and friends, the Yadus. He also asked the Lord for personal instructions on how to engage the rest of his life.

Krishna said, "My dear Uddhava, I recommend you to go to Badarikashrama, on the Himalaya. Purify your body and mind with the sacred waters of river Alakananda that flows there and that emanated from my lotus feet. Clothe yourself in tree bark and eat what is easily found in the forest, always remaining satisfied and free from desires, tolerating dualities, and constantly meditate on the transcendental knowledge that I have given you, focusing your thoughts and words on me. In this way you will be able to overcome the realm of the *gunas* and attain me."

Uddhava again offered his homage to the Lord, and with much difficulty and suffering he left him to execute his orders.

Kali yuga

After Uddhava had gone to Badarikashrama, Krishna went to the assembly of the Yadus to warn them about the imminent destruction.

"Please observe the signs of destiny. In Dvaraka we have seen many deeply inauspicious omens. You must immediately leave the city, without even one moment of hesitation. Women, children and elders should take shelter at Sankhoddhara, and we will go to Prabhasa kshetra (Somanatha), where the Sarasvati flows towards west. There we will purify ourselves with ritual ablutions, we will fast and meditate on God, then we will offer the prescribed worship to the Devas, presenting them various offerings, and we will distribute our wealth to the *brahmanas*."

The Yadus accepted Krishna's order and left the island on many boats, then they proceeded by chariots to Prabhasa, where they performed all the traditional rituals. They took breakfast, accompanying the food with an intoxicating beverage, and unfortunately they drank too much. Their minds became clouded by intoxication, they started to quarrel among themselves, and then to fight fiercely with all sorts of weapons. Finally, because they had exhausted normal weapons, they grabbed the bamboo canes that had grown on the beach from the iron dust produced by the fatal mace, and with renewed fury they clashed, killing one another. When Krishna and

Balarama tried to stop them, the Yadus attacked them too, involving them in the fight.

In the end only Krishna and Balarama remained. Balarama sat on the ocean beach and left this mortal world, and Krishna sat under a banyan tree, resting his left foot on his right thigh, immersed in meditation. Just at that time the hunter Jara, who had used the iron bit remaining from the fatal mace to make the tip of an arrow, came to that place and while he was hiding in the bushes he saw Krishna's foot and mistook it for a deer's face. So he shot his arrow, and remained shocked and terrified when he realized what had happened; Jara threw himself to Krishna's feet begging forgiveness and expecting punishment, but Krishna comforted and reassured him, explaining that everything had been organized by himself to close his mission on earth.

Daruka, the charioteer of Krishna, was searching for his master, and found him resting at the feet of the banyan tree, surrounded by his weapons. Seeing him in such conditions he was taken by despair, but Krishna reassured him and asked him to return to his family and tell them what had happened. While they were talking, Krishna's chariot and weapons rose to the sky, disappearing from sight.

Krishna told Daruka, "Do not return to Dvaraka, because the city will be submerged by the ocean. You should instead gather all the survivors, including my parents, and go to Indraprastha under the protection of Arjuna."

Warned by Daruka, the Vrishnis rushed to Prabhasa. Devaki, Rohini and Vasudeva were unable to find their sons, Krishna and Balarama, and in the pain of separation they immediately left their bodies. Also the other wives of Vasudeva, the wives of Balarama, the wives of Krishna and his sons left their bodies, because they did not tolerate the idea of being separated from their husbands. Arjuna performed the funeral rituals for Krishna's family, in which no adult males had remained, then he took the survivors to Indraprastha, where he crowned Vajra, Krishna's grandchild, as the king of the Yadus.

After describing the last days of the Yadu dynasty, Sukadeva continued, "I have already mentioned the descendants of the various dynasties during

Kali yuga. In the Magadha dynasty, Puranjaya will be born as the descendant of Brihadratha. His minister Sunaka will murder him to enthrone his own son Pradyota, who will be father of Palaka, father of Visakhayupa, father of Rajaka, father of Nandivardhana. The dynasty of Pradyota will have five kings and rule for 138 years."

Nandivardhana will start a new dynasty called Sisunaga, that will have ten kings and will rule for 360 years. Nandivardhana's son, Sisunaga, will become the father of Kshemadharna, father of Kshetrajna, father of Vidhisara, father of Ajatasatru, father of Darbhaka, father of Ajaya. Ajaya will be father of a second Nandivardhana, father of Mahanandi, who will have a very powerful son from a *sudra* woman. This son will be named Nanda and will become the master of millions of soldiers and fabulous wealth, but he will bring chaos among the *kshatriyas*: from that moment on, practically all kings will be simply *sudras* without real qualifications, dedicated to irreligious practices.

Nanda will have eight sons, including Sumalya, who will rule the entire earth for 100 years. The disappearing of Nanda's dynasty will be caused by a *brahmana* who will install instead the Maurya dynasty, inaugurated by the emperor Chandragupta, who will be father of Varisara, father of Ashokavardhana, father of Suyasa, father of Sangata, father of Salisuka, father of Somasharma, father of Satadhanva, father of Brihadratha. These ten kings of the Maurya dynasty will rule for 137 years.

After them the rulers will be Agnimitra, Sujyestha, Vasumitra, Bhadraka and his son Pulinda. After Ghosa, the son of Pulinda, the next kings will be Vajramitra, Bhagavata and Devabhuti. These ten kings will rule for over 100 years; the last one will be a lustful wretch, who will be killed by his intelligent minister Vasudeva, a member of the Kanva dynasty.

Vasudeva will be the first of the Kanva dynasty and will be followed by descendants devoid of qualifications - his son Bhumitra, his grandson Narayana, and so on. The last of the Kanvas, Susharma, will be assassinated by one servant, a *sudra* of the Andhra race, who will ascend the throne with the name of Bali Maharaja. Bali's brother, named Krishna, will succeed him on the throne. This Krishna will be father of Santakarna, father of Paurnamasa, father of Lambodara, father of Cibilaka, father of Meghasvati, father of Atamana, father of Anistakarma, father of Haleya, father of

Talaka, father of Purishabhiru, who will be succeeded by Sunandana. After Sunandana there will be Chakora and the eight Bahus, including the great warrior Sivasvati. Sivasvati will be father of Gomati, father of Puriman, father of Medashira, father of Shivaskanda, father of Yajnasri, father of Vijaya, who will have two sons: Chandravijna and Lomadhi. These 30 kings will rule for a total of 465 years.

After them, there will be seven kings of the Abhira race from the city of Avabhriti, then ten kings of Gadarbhi and sixteen of Kanka, who will become famous for their great greed. They will be succeeded by eight Yavanas, fourteen Turuskas, ten Garundas and eleven kings of the Maula dynasty, for a total of 1399 years. When these will have disappeared, there will be a dynasty of kings in the city of Kilakila, that will reign for 106 years: Bhutananda, Vangiri, Sishunandi, his brother Yasonandi and Praviraka. After them there will be thirteen Bahlikas, their descendants, then the king Pushpamitra and his son Durmitra, then seven Andhras, seven Kaushalas and the kings of the Viduras and Nishadhas, who will dominate on various regions of the world.

In the kingdom of Magadha there will be a king named Visvasphurji, who will rule from the capital Padmavati on a territory from the source of the Ganges to Prayaga, and will cause the degradation of society by lowering even civilized families to the same level of Pulindas, Yadavas and Madrakas. In the provinces of Saurashtra, Avanti, Abhira, Sura, Arbuda and Malava the *brahmanas* will forget the rules of progressive civilization and royal families will not be better than *sudras*. The lands along the Sindhu, as well as the regions of Chandrabhaga, Kaunti and Kashmira will be ruled by *sudras*, false caste *brahmanas* and meat-eaters, who will lose all their spiritual power because they have abandoned the path of Vedic civilization. These kings will become barbarians in spite of their noble ancestry, and because they are devoid of qualifications, they will exploit their subjects, killing *brahmanas*, cows, innocent women and children, and will engage in irreligiousness and falseness. Their bad example will corrupt the subjects, who will adopt similar behaviors thus creating a hellish situation for the entire society.

Because of the influence of Kali yuga all the good qualities of the people will decrease - religiosity, truthfulness, cleanliness, compassion, tolerance, longevity, physical strength and memory. Wealth will be the only proof of

the value of a person, and justice and laws will be applied only to facilitate the powerful. A person will be deemed good if he earns sufficient money, while those who do not have money will be treated as impure, and the purpose of life will be reduced to being able to fill one's belly. One who can maintain a family will be considered a very successful man.

Men and women will live together only on the basis of superficial attraction, and women will pass whimsically from a man to another, they will eat too much and have more children than they can care for adequately. They will become shameless and immoral, selfish and cruel. From their part, men will be easily controlled and misled, they will abandon their family and establish deeper relationships with their wife's family. They will stop protecting their elder parents, their children and respectable wife, and they will only be concerned about their own selfish satisfaction, based on the tongue and genitals.

Masculinity and femininity will simply be judged from sexual skills. Marriage will be merely a verbal contract, and the principles of religion will be observed only for the purpose of getting a reputation. To be considered a *brahmana*, it will be sufficient to wear a sacred thread, and the spiritual position of a person and his belonging to one of the stages of life (*brahmacharya*, etc) will be judged only from external appearance. The system of *varnashrama* will be totally forgotten and distorted, and religion will be based on atheistic principles.

Hypocrisy will be considered a virtue, impudence will be considered a proof of sincerity, and one who is expert in word jugglery will be considered a great scholar. Persons devoid of culture and knowledge, who do not know anything about *dharmā*, will sit on honored seats and speak about religious principles, they will accept charity in the name of God and use the *sannyasi* dress as a professional instrument to earn a livelihood, making a false show of austerity. Any water reservoir that is distant enough will be considered a holy place.

The so-called priests and intellectuals will be devoted mainly to their own belly and genitals. Nobody will offer homage or sacrifices to the Supreme Personality of God, who is the supreme spiritual master of the universe. *Brahmacharis* will neglect cleanliness and the rules of their training, family men will become beggars, *vanaprasthas* will live in cities and *sannyasis* will be

avid of wealth and material luxuries. Even hermitages will be no better than ordinary houses, and the beauty of a person will depend on his or her hairdo. The bodies of creatures will be shrunk in size - cows will be as small as goats, and trees will not grow adequately.

Vaisyas will make their profit on cheating and everyone will accept degrading occupations even without considerations of emergency. The *sudras* will abandon an employer that is in financial difficulty, even if he is a good person, honest and knowledgeable. Employers will dismiss servants who have become invalid, even if they have been in the family for generations. The cows will be neglected or killed when they are unable to give milk any longer.

With the increasing degradation of society, anyone who shows greater strength will obtain political prominence, and will use it to loot and torment the people, directly or indirectly. The cities will be dominated by thieves and criminals, the population will be afflicted by taxes and unjust laws, drought and famine, and will be deprived of the basic necessities to eat and drink, clothe themselves, rest adequately, satisfy their sexual needs or wash, and will have no ornaments to decorate their bodies.

Men will kill one another for a few coins and forget friendship and relations, always ready to kill or be killed. They will be disturbed by deep anxieties, scarcity of water, floods, excessive heat and cold, violent winds, diseases, hunger and thirst, and the maximum duration of life will fall to 50 years. Abandoning family and properties, men will flee to the mountains and forests, where they will survive by eating wild animals, roots, leaves, fruits, flowers, seeds and wild honey.

In the end the Lord will appear as Kalki, the son of Vishnuyasha in the village of Shambhala, and on his horse Devadatta he will roam the earth killing millions of those who have dared to take the position of rulers without having the required qualities. After all the false leaders have been eliminated, the people will feel free and will start again to live happily, multiplying and spreading over the earth and inaugurating a new Satya yuga. That time will be marked by the conjunction of the Moon, the Sun and Brihaspati (Jupiter) in the constellation of Karkata (Cancer), that will simultaneously enter the lunar house of Pushya.

Devapi (the brother of Maharaja Santanu) and Maru (a descendent of Ikshvaku) are still living in the village of Kalapa, and at the end of Kali yuga they will reappear in human society according to the instructions of the Supreme Personality of God, and will re-establish the original system of the *varnasrama dharma*. All the power-thirsty people who are trying to rule the earth during Kali yuga are ignorant of their true interest, because they create damage to others in order to get some personal profit. They will all be destroyed.

Observing their stupid and wicked activities, Mother Earth will laugh at them. Bhumi says, "These wretches are toys in the hands of Death, yet they strive to possess me. Even those who are truly great and have knowledge may sometimes face frustration and failure because of their material lust, what to speak of these poor fools who have no qualities! In their ignorance they think, I will control my mind to become determined, then through political tricks I will gradually subjugate my ministers, my advisors and finally I will achieve total control on the entire earth. And when they have covered all the dry land, they even venture into the ocean to conquer that too.

The real purpose of controlling the mind and senses is to seek spiritual liberation. But because these deluded people put their hopes in the material body - a mere bubble of foam among the waves of life - even the austerities they perform by controlling their senses and mind are wasted. Inevitably they are forced to leave their bodies and the world, as impotent as they have entered it, even if they are kings who became famous all over the world. Yet during their short span of life they insist in fighting one another, causing great sufferings to themselves and others, and further shortening the time that destiny assigned to them."

In Kali yuga this illusion becomes even more powerful. In Satya yuga, *dharma* is strongly established on its four legs - truthfulness, compassion, austerity and charity. Due to the influence of goodness, the general tendency is towards knowledge and austerity; people are peaceful, sober, tolerant, friendly, they find happiness in inner life and always strive to achieve spiritual perfection.

In Treta yuga, *dharma* is reduced by a fourth because of the growing influence of the four pillars of *adharma* - deceit, violence, dissatisfaction and

quarreling. Because of the influence of passion, the general tendency is towards personal prestige and interest. People perform ritual ceremonies and austerities, and is interested in developing religiousness, economic prosperity and regulated sense gratification by following the instructions of the *Vedas*. Society is composed mainly by *brahmanas*, but some other less qualified people appear with the characteristics of the other three social classes.

In Dvapara the four principles of *dharma* are reduced to half their potency and the four principles of *adharma* acquire an equal power. People are interested in glory and nobility, engage in the study of the *Vedas*, own great wealth, maintain numerous families and vigorously enjoy life. Among the four social classes, the *kshatriyas* and *brahmanas* are the most numerous. Because of the mixed influence of passion and ignorance, there is a gradual increase of arrogance, hypocrisy, envy, vanity and greed.

In the age of Kali only one fourth of the *dharma* principles remain, and even this small percentage continues to decline until it disappears completely. People are greedy, rude, cruel, devoid of compassion, unfortunate and obsessed by material desires, and quarrel unnecessarily. Almost all people are *sudra* or even uncivilized, and because of the predominant influence of ignorance, the general tendency is to cheat, lie, sleep too much and complain. People are lazy, aggressive, violent, depressed, confused, afraid, destitute, unable to anticipate the future, unfortunate, lusty and greedy for food. In Kali yuga everything becomes polluted - objects, places and people - but the Supreme Personality of God can eliminate this contamination from the lives of those who meditate on God.

By hearing, glorifying, worshiping the Lord, meditating on him and offering one's homage, one can destroy the impurities accumulated during many thousands of lifetimes. Just like fire eliminates all impurities from gold, the Lord who resides in the hearts of all beings destroys the contamination in the minds of his devotees and enables them to achieve the supreme destination. By always focusing one's mind on the Lord, at the time of death one is blessed with his presence.

Although Kali yuga is full of defects, it has one big advantage: simply by chanting the names of the Lord one can become free from material bondage and rise to the transcendental realm. The results obtained in Satya

yuga with meditation, Treta yuga with the performance of sacrifices and Dvapara yuga with the worship to the Deities, can be obtained in Kali yuga simply by chanting or reciting the name of the Supreme Personality of God.

As we have seen, the end of Kali yuga marks the beginning of a new Satya yuga. In the same way, the entire universe and its duration are subject to minor cycles of destruction: to be precise, there are four categories of destruction of the universe.

One thousand cycles of four ages constitute one day of Brahma, during which there are fourteen Manus. Brahma's night is equally as long, but everything stops and all the three planetary systems are destroyed. During this destruction (called *naimittika*) Garbhodakasayi Vishnu remains reclining on Ananta while Brahma sleeps. Brahma lives 100 of his years, but then his life ends and the cosmos is dissolved too. This destruction of the universe, called *prakeritika*, includes the seven fundamental elements of creation. On earth there will be a 100 years drought that will cause terrible famine and people will eat one another. Then the sun will become extremely hot and will dry the waters from the oceans, from the bodies of living beings and from earth itself, but without returning moisture in the form of rains.

Then from the mouth of Ananta Sankarshana will come the great fire of destruction, and carried by violent winds, it will consume the entire universe. Smoke and dust will turn space grey, until the entire universe is flooded and the water dissolves the quality of earth. Fire will consume the water and its characteristics, dissolving it into air or gas, in which the subtle elements and the archetypes will dissolve, and finally only the *pradhana* will remain - the non-differentiated state of matter.

Sukadeva concluded, "Thus everything will be destroyed, but the soul will always remain intact, because it cannot be affected even by the total annihilation of matter. Therefore, dear Parikshit, you should abandon the identification with the material body and stop thinking that you, the eternal soul, are subject to death, because this is not a fact. Unlike the body you are wearing, you were never born and therefore you will never die. There has never been a moment in time when you did not exist, and similarly you will never be destroyed. When a pot is broken, the space that existed inside the pot continue to be exactly as it was before. Therefore you should become conscious of your true identity, by focusing your attention on the Supreme

Personality of God, and you will not even notice what is happening to the body."

The death of Parikshit

Maharaja Parikshit offered his homage to Sukadeva, thanking him for the teachings he had imparted to him and the answers to his many questions. Parikshit said, "I consider myself very lucky for having obtained the blessing of your company and your compassion. I am not afraid of Takshaka or anyone else and even of death itself, because now my mind is perfectly fixed on the absolute and transcendental Truth. Now please allow me to become silent and leave this body."

Then Sukadeva blessed Parikshit and took leave. Parikshit sat in silence, facing north, on the bank of the Ganges, on a mat made from *darbha* grass, its points facing east. Deeply immersed in the meditation on the Lord, he became as still as a tree and his life airs stopped circulating.

At that time Takshaka arrived, the winged snake that had been sent by the son of the *brahmana* to kill Parikshit. After ensuring that there were no antidotes available, the snake bird took the form of a *brahmana* and approached the king without difficulties, then he bit him. Immediately Parikshit's body was reduced to ashes by the fiery venom, to the great pain and anguish of all beings.

When he learned that his father had been killed by Takshaka's bite, Maharaja Janamejaya became extremely angry and asked the *brahmanas* to organize a great sacrifice to exterminate all the snakes of the world. The rituals had already begun and Takshaka, who saw even the strongest snakes reduced to ashes by the power of the sacrifice, became scared and went to ask protection from Indra.

Janamejaya, who was observing the procedures, realized that his father's killer was missing and when he asked an explanation from the *brahmanas*, they told him what had happened. Then Janamejaya asked the *brahmanas* to

evoke Indra together with Takshaka, so that both would be consumed by the sacrificial flames, together with all the Devas.

The power of the sacrificial *mantras* actually hit Indra, destabilizing his aircraft and making it crash. Worried, Brihaspati, approached Janamejaya to make him stop that action, that was dangerous for the entire universe. He said, "O king of men, Takshaka is the king of the snakes and has drunk the nectar of the heavenly planets, therefore you should not try to kill him. Everyone has to face death in their own time, because of the reactions of their previous activities, and not because of someone else's fault - snakes, robbers, fire, and so on. Please stop these rituals, that are aimed at causing damage to other beings: many innocent snakes have already died because of them."

Honoring the request of the Devas' priest, Maharaja Janamejaya stopped the sacrifice and offered his homage.

"This is the conclusion of the story of the *Bhagavata Purana*," Suta told the sages gathered in the Naimisharanya forest. "Vyasadeva, who is an *avatara* of Vishnu, compiled the Vedic knowledge for this age of Kali, dividing it into four sections called *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Atharva*, just like one divides jewels in four heaps. Then he entrusted the first *sambhita*, the *Rig Veda*, to Paila Rishi and gave the second, the *Yajur*, to Vaisampayana; he taught the *mantras* of the *Sama Veda* to Jaimini and the *Atharva Veda* to Sumantu.

Paila divided the *Rig Veda*, also called *Babricha sambhita*, in two parts, entrusting them respectively to Indrapramiti and Bashkala. Bashkala divided his part in four sections, transmitting them to his disciples Bodhya, Yajnavalkya, Parasara and Agnimitra. Indrapramiti taught the text committed to him to Mandukeya, whose disciple Devamitra transmitted it to Saubhari and others. Mandukeya's son Sakalya divided the text entrusted to him into five sections, distributing them to Vatsya, Mudgala, Saliya, Gokhalya and Sisira. Another disciple of Sakalya, named Jatukarnya, divided his text in three parts and added a glossary, entrusting these divisions respectively to his disciples Balaka, Paila, Jabala and Viraja.

From the various texts of the *Rig Veda*, Baskali compiled an anthology entitled *Valakbhilya-sambhita*, and transmitted it to Valayani, Bhajya and Kasara. The disciples of Vaisampayana became the recognized authorities

on the *Yajur Veda*. One of them, Yajnavalkya the son of Devarata, abandoned Vaisampayana and returned the hymns that had been given to him; the other disciples immediately took them, like quails (*tittirah*) do when they eat what has been regurgitated by other animals. So that particular collection of *Yajur Veda* hymns has been called *Taittiriya sambhita*.

From his part, Yajnavalkya directly approached Surya, the Deva of the Sun, begging him to reveal the secret *mantras* of the *Yajur Veda*. Taking the form of a horse, Surya appeared to Yajnavalkya and gave him fifteen new chapters of Vedic knowledge, that are known as *Vajasaneyi-sambhita* (because they emanated from the mane of Surya). These new chapters were entrusted to the disciples of Kanva, Madhyandhina and other Rishis. Jamini Rishi, the authority on the *Sama Veda*, had a son named Sumantu, who was the father of Sutvan; to both - son and grandson - Jaimini entrusted one of the divisions of the *Sama Veda sambhita*. Another disciple of Jaimini, named Sukarma, divided his text of the *Sama Veda* in 1,000 *sambhitas*, that were entrusted to Hiranyanabha (the son of Kushala), Paushyanji and Avantya. The 500 disciples of Paushyanji and Avantya became known as the northern reciters.

Other five disciples of Paushyanji - Laugakshi, Mangali, Kulya, Kushida and Kukshi, received 100 *sambhitas* each. Krita, disciple of Hiranyanabha, transmitted 24 *sambhitas* to his own disciples, and the remaining text was given to the sage Avantya. Sumantu Rishi, the authority on the *Atharva Veda*, taught his *sambhita* to his disciple Kabandha, who in turn gave it to Pathya and Vedadarsha. The main disciples of Pathya were Kumuda, Sunaka and Jajali, while those of Vedadarsha were Sauklayani, Brahmabali, Modosha and Pippalayani.

Furthermore, the *Atharva Veda* was commented by two disciples of Sunaka, named Babhru and Saindhavayana, and by the disciple of Saindhavayana, named Savarna. Among the *acharyas* of the *Atharva Veda* are also remembered Nakshatrakalpa, Santikalpa, Kashyapa and Angirasa.

The compilation of the *Puranas* was given to Trayyaruni, Kasyapa, Savarni, Akritavrana, Vaisampayana and Harita; each one of them studied one of the six antologies from Romaharshana, my father, who was a disciple of Vyasadeva. Romaharshana organized the *Puranas* in four categories, entrusting them to me, Kashyapa, Savarni and Akritavrana, disciple of

Rama. The main characteristic of the *Puranas* is they elaborate on ten subjects: the primary creation of the universe, the subsequent creations, the protection and maintenance of the living beings, the reign of the various Manus, the dynasties of the great kings and their activities, the destruction of the universe, the purpose of life and the supreme shelter. The eighteen main *Puranas* are called *Brahma* (10,000 verses), *Padma* (55,000), *Vishnu* (23,000), *Shiva* (24,000), *Linga* (11,000), *Garuda* (19,000), *Narada* (25,000), *Bhagavata* (18,000), *Agni* (15,400), *Skanda* (81,100), *Bhavisya* (4,500), *Brahma-vaivarta* (18,000), *Markandeya* (9,000), *Vamana* (10,000), *Varaha* (24,000), *Matsya* (14,000), *Kurma* (17,000) and *Brahmanda* (12,000), for a total of 400,000 verses."

The sages assembled at Naimisharanya thanked Suta for his exhaustive elaboration and asked him to speak about Markandeya Rishi, the son of Mrikandu, who is said to be the only survivor at the end of Brahma's day. Within the waters of the universal flood, he sees an extraordinary child that floats alone on a banyan leaf.

Saunaka said, "I know that Markandeya, the famous descendant of Bhrigu, was born in my family in this very day of Brahma and therefore he has not faced the destruction of the universe yet. How can we explain this?"

Suta replied, "After his initiation, performed by his father, Markandeya studied the Vedic hymns, strictly following the prescribed rules and remaining a *naistika brahmachari*, a life-long celibate student. He wore the dress characteristic of his *ashrama*, and at the three *sandhyas* he faithfully performed the worship to the Lord in five forms: the sacrificial fire, the Sun, the spiritual master, the *brahmanas* and the Supreme Soul. Morning and evening he went out to beg alms, and after presenting his collection to the spiritual master, he ate what he was given. In this way he lived for millions of years, to the great amazement of the heavenly beings.

After six *manvantaras*, Indra started to become concerned about the austerities of Markandeya and to break them he sent Kamadeva, accompanied by an escort of Apsaras and Gandharvas, together with spring and its sandalwood scented breezes, and the personifications of intoxication and lust. Indra's envoys arrived at Markandeya's ashrama, that is north of the Himalayas, where river Pushpabhadra flows beyond the Citra mountain. The hermitage of the saintly *brahmanas* was already beautiful, decorated with

virtuous trees and sacred ponds, bees intoxicated with the nectar of the flowers and melodious birds. Kamadeva and his court tried in vain to disturb the senses of the Rishi, and suddenly they felt very uncomfortable, as if they were going to be burned alive. Indra was very surprised.

The Lord wanted to bless Markandeya personally, so he appeared before him in the form of Nara and Narayana Rishi, one with a white complexion and the other with a black complexion. The two divine personalities were dressed with the traditional ascetics' garb, had four arms and emanated a golden radiance. Markandeya offered his homage and prayers of praise, recognizing their divinity and thanking them for their mercy. The Lord granted a boon to the Rishi, and Markandeya expressed the wish to be able to see the action of God's illusory potency.

After some time, while Markandeya was engaged in his evening meditation on the river bank, a terrible howling wind rose, dragging dreadful clouds, loaded with lightning and thunder. Torrents of rain started to fall, and from all sides came such a great flood that four oceans seemed to have arrived to cover all the directions, with high waves, whirlpools and frightening sea monsters. The Rishi saw that all the inhabitants of the universe were suffering like him because of the storm and the inundation, that was covering all lands, the islands and the mountains and even the sky and the interplanetary space. Soon only Markandeya was left, tossed here and there by the waves, besieged by large fishes, tortured by hunger and thirst, exhausted and confused by a darkness without limits. Innumerable millions of years passed in that situation, and he experienced many emotions, until at some point the Rishi arrived at an island, where a young banyan tree was blossoming and producing fruits.

On one branch he saw a very small child, lying on one leaf. The radiance of that baby dissipated the darkness: his complexion was the color of emeralds, his body was beautiful and perfectly proportioned. Markandeya watched him in awe. The child grabbed one of his own small feet, put his big toe in his mouth and started sucking.

The Rishi felt instantly free from all fatigue and inexplicably happy. He approached the baby and was sucked into his breath, entering his body as if he were a tiny insect. There he found the entire universe, exactly as it was before destruction - the sky and the earth, the oceans, the continents, the

forests, the cities and the cultivated fields, and all the inhabitants of the many worlds. He also saw his own ashrama on the bank of river Pushpabhadra, where he had been blessed by the *darshana* of Nara Narayana Rishi. Just then the child exhaled and Markandeya was expelled from his body, and found himself again in the ocean of the dissolution of the universe, next to the banyan tree with the baby, who glanced at him in a sort of affectionate oblique way and then disappeared.

Then Markandeya Rishi understood what had happened, and took shelter in the Supreme Personality of God. Just at that time Shiva was traveling in the sky, accompanied by his consort Parvati, and decided to stop and meet the sage. Markandeya's material mind was not active, therefore he did not notice the arrival of Shiva, but the Lord entered directly into his heart, manifesting himself to his awareness.

In his meditation, Markandeya saw Lord Shiva - tall, with a body as radiant as the rising sun, golden hair like lightning, ten arms and three eyes. He was dressed in a tiger skin and carried a trident, a bow, arrows, a sword and a shield, as well as a *japa mala*, a *damaru* drum, a skull and an axle. Markandeya opened his eyes and saw the Lord and his consort before him, and greeted them very respectfully, offering the ritual worship and prayers of praise. Pleased, Shiva praised him in turn and offered him a boon. Grateful, Markandeya Rishi asked to be able to always have a deep devotion to God, and Shiva also granted him great fame and freedom from old age and death to the end of the cycle of creation, the perfect knowledge of past present and future, and the transcendental realization of the Supreme."

Suta concluded his speech to the sages of Naimisharanya describing the Lord in his universal form of Mahapurusha, because by meditating on this form it is possible to always remember the Lord. After summarizing the various topics of the *Bhagavata Purana*, he praised its great qualities and transcendental virtues and explained the benefits that one can obtain by honoring and studying it regularly. Finally, he offered his homage to the Supreme Lord and to his own spiritual master, Sukadeva.

About the Author

Mataji Parama Karuna Devi is a writer, a teacher, a social worker and a religious person, who came to reside in Purushottama kshetra in 1994.

She was born in Italy in 1957. She started studying and practicing Vedic religion in 1970, in Italy. In February 1979 she received her Diksha name with a Vedic homa consecration ceremony to dedicate herself completely to spiritual life and service to all living entities as the family of God. From 1978 to 1986 she lived full time in local ashramas as a dedicated *brahmacharini*, engaging in the direct ritual worship of Deities and religious rituals, and serving in the ashrama's gurukula by teaching an introductory course on Sanskrit and the Vedic scriptures. In 1980 she was one of the core Sevakas during the organization and the celebration of the first Ratha Yatra in Italy (Viareggio). In the same period she also worked at translating most of the books written by the founder of the ashrama organization. In a later period, she also worked at the translation and publication of various other texts distributed by other religious organizations and publishing houses. In 1989 she founded a Vegetarian Society in Italy based on spiritual and ethical ideals, and developed it to about 3000 members, through several initiatives such as cooking courses, social dinners, presentations, radio programs, conferences etc. From 1989 to 1993 she authored and published a series of very successful small manuals called Libretti Verdi ("Green Booklets"), covering various subjects and especially ethical vegetarianism, vegetarian recipes and techniques, international vegetarian cooking, Indian cooking, nutritional information, natural medicine, yoga, karma, reincarnation, devotional songs, sustainable development, etc.

From 1986 onwards she has traveled extensively in India meeting religious teachers from many lineages and traditions and visiting and living in many holy places, also participating to the 1989 Kumbha Mela. Under the guidance of Sj Bhagavan Mishra (Deula purohita of Sri Jagannatha Puri Mandir) and Sj Jagannatha Mahapatra (Mukti mandapa *brahmana* of Sri Jagannatha Puri Mandir) and other prominent *brahmanas* of the orthodox community in Puri, she underwent the traditional ceremonies called *suddhi*, *prayaschitta*, *vratyastoma* and *diksha*, thus officially becoming a Vratya member of the orthodox Hindu community.

In 1994 she started the Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Center, for the production and publication of religious and spiritual literature. She has written and published several books, including a pilgrimage guide to Jagannatha Puri entitled "Puri the Home of Lord Jagannatha" (2008), a translation and commentary of Adi Shankara's "Prasnottara ratna malika" (1998), "The power of Kalpa Vriksha" (1998), "Sustainable Development in Rural and Tribal Areas" (1996), "Spiritual Vegetarianism" (2000), "Vegetarian World" (2001), "*Bhagavata purana*" (2011), "Introduction to Vedic Knowledge" (4 volumes, 2012-2014), an extensive translation with commentaries on *Bhagavad gita* (19 volumes, 2014-2016) and the first of a 7 volume series on "The Life and Teachings of Krishna Chaitanya" (2015).

In 1995 she founded PAVAN (a non-profit organization for vegetarian awareness based on spiritual ideals), and developed a rural development center outside Puri. In 2005 she established the Jagannatha Vallabha Ashram, near Puri, with charitable primary school for the local children and a small temple with traditional worship.

She is presently working at several new publication projects, such as "Guide to Religious Observances" (a 3 volume puja manual for different levels of sadhakas), a book on "The Global Dharma for the Third Millennium", a manual on "Integration of past life memories and astral traveling", and others. She regularly publishes spiritual articles on internet, also corresponding with her students of different nationalities who reside both in India and abroad.