



Krishna—The Embodiment of the Absolute Self

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The Puranas and Itihasas abound with the stories of Divine Incarnations such as Rama and Krishna. The rich poetic literature of these scriptures is meant to bring the subtle spiritual truths of the Vedas and the Upanishads within the reach of the masses. They are, in fact, artistic commentaries on the teachings of the Vedas. And Upanishadic philosophy presents the cream of the philosophical insight of the Vedic literature; therefore, it is called Vedanta—the end of the Vedas, the consummation of the Vedic thought. The teachings of the Upanishads contain deep insight into the paths of devotion, meditation, action and wisdom. However, they cannot be understood and appreciated by the masses without the aid of commentaries and supplementary texts such as the Puranas and Itihasas.

Here I will give some glimpses from the rich literature of the Bhagavata Purana (also known as Srimad Bhagavata) to illustrate how the life of Krishna presented in this text promotes the realization of the wisdom that *Brahman* (the Absolute) alone exists. This world is illusory. The soul in man is essentially *Brahman*—the Non-dual Self.

The Self that is beyond the three *gunas* of nature, and beyond the reach of the mind and senses, is portrayed in the most inspiring personality of Sri Krishna. To a devotee, the historicity of Krishna's life is of very little importance. Krishna is the ever-present reality of the spiritual movement—an ever growing awareness of the Divine Essence in man. Every episode in Krishna's life, every movement of his personality, every story that is associated with him, everything about him is, in fact, a living commentary on the Life that flows to the Divine Realization of the Self.

There is a tendency among neophyte aspirants to give greater importance to the Upanishads for their clear and concise presentations of the philosophical truths of life, and to consider the Puranas and Itihasas as a superfluous development, meant only for the mediocre on the spiritual path. This tendency is erroneous. The rich spiritual meaning of the Upanishad cannot be fully comprehended without the study of the Puranas and Itihasas, and without the development of the devotion that these scriptures intend to awaken in the hearts of men. The Gita is a portion from an Itihasa, the great epic work, the Mahabharata, in which Sri Krishna declares: "Among the devotees, a wise person who sees all as the Self is the best. Because he never loses Me from his inner awareness, and he is never lost by me."

Brahman, the Absolute, is *Ananda Swaroopa*—the very embodiment of Bliss. The Upanishads describe *Brahman*: "*Raso Vai Saha*"—"That *Brahman* is Nectar." The Upanishads further declare: "All is loved for the sake of the Self." This understanding of *Brahman* is the basis of devotional movement in human personality. *Brahman* is not merely the Truth beyond all names and forms, but the Love and Bliss that bring light and life into human existence. A rational movement that is unable to bring Divine sweetness to the human sentiments is defective and, therefore, will not bloom into intuitive realization of the Self. Similarly, a devotional movement that fails to promote pure reason will not mature into the Divine Love that overflows with sweetness.

The interrelation between reason and emotion, between wisdom and devotion, is artistically

revealed in the texts of the Puranas and Itihasas. The life of a Divine Incarnation provides the best basis for uplifting human sentiments and rational thoughts to the lofty heights of intuition in which reason and emotion blend into an awe-inspiring experience of the Cosmic Self.

Keeping these points in view, one can find a new meaning in the stories of Krishna and Rama, and other Divine Incarnations. Sri Krishna was born in the dark hours of the night, during the rainy season when the sky was filled with rumbling clouds, and the downpour of rains had bathed the earth with a terrible noise. This setting of nature gives a poetic insight into the birth of Divine Vision in the human heart. Without an awareness of the rumbling clouds of karmic impressions that gather in the unconscious, and the consequent downpour of afflictions in the life that lingers on this relative plane of the world, one cannot see the birth of aspiration in the prison-house of one's heart. An awareness of the abounding pain in life that flows through this mortal world is the basis of spiritual unfoldment. While listening to the story of Krishna's birth, and entertaining the mind with the suspenseful events that led to Krishna's incarnation, a rational aspect in human personality is led to the recognition of the "birth" of the Divine Self in one's own heart as aspiration for Self-realization begins to grow in one's consciousness.

As a child, Krishna thrilled his foster parents (Nanda and Yashoda) with his childish sports. In the eyes of a devotee, even Krishna's simple movements in the courtyard of Nanda's house are a reminder of the Transcendental Self that is beyond the reach of even great ascetics and intellectual philosophers, and is the underlying basis of all that exists. This very Transcendental Self plays as a mere child by the force of the devotion that surges in the hearts of Nanda and Yashoda, and in the hearts of the pure-minded *gopis* (cowherdesses) and *gopas* (cowherds of Gokula). With this vivid imagery of an innocent child that awakens tender emotions in a motherly heart, the various sports of the child Krishna have become the basis of a rich devotional literature

presented by Surdas, Tulsidas, Mira, and other Saints and Sages.

The child Krishna steals butter, breaks pots, talks with his own reflection that is cast in marble pillars, and is frightened by his foster mother, Yashoda. His cunning sports are endless. He swallows mud, and when scolded by his foster mother, he opens his mouth to reveal the three universes existing within him—like the particles of mud that exist in a child's mouth. Artistically and with a deep poetic insight, Sage Vyasa (who wrote the Bhagavata Purana) shows how it is possible for a highly advanced Yogi to comprehend the Transcendental Self close to his heart by the force of growing love. The Vision of Self, as it unfolds, steals one's heart, which has turned itself into butter through spiritual tenderness. It breaks the pots of limitations, and talks with the reflected self in the marble pillars of the mind. The child Krishna begins to sport with the soul, even as a child would tease its mother. It swallows the world of multiplicity even as a child swallows mud in mere fun.

Human love expresses itself in five major forms of sentiments. The loving sentiment of a mother for her child, of a servant for his master, of a friend for his dear friend, of a lover for her beloved, or as a secret stream of love that does not depend upon a definite expression in life. On the path of devotion, these five types of sentiments are allowed to unfold by presenting the Divine Self as the object of all forms of loving movements in life. God is the child to be loved with a self-effacing tenderness. He is the Master whose will must be sought through the turmoils of life. He is the friend in whose company one must move, walk and play at all times. He is the Beloved who must be the center and source of all that is sweet and sublime in one's life. And He is the secret source of infinite bliss.

As Krishna grows, his personality affords ample circumstances for these five types of devotional sentiments to thrive and bloom. The boy Krishna gradually becomes a center of secret love practiced by the cowherd maidens of Vrindabana, the *gopis*. He becomes a source of mystic romance. He is the beloved of the *gopis*. His beauty, which

enchants the three worlds, has captured the hearts of the pure-minded *gopi* maidens. They think of him constantly, they remember his loving glances, his secret smiles, his melodious music that flows across the silvery stream of the Yamuna river, his acts of valor, and the sweet sufferings experienced by them in his absence.

What seems like an amorous story for the uninitiated, is in fact a sublime representation of the blossom of spiritual love that grows upon a highly purified human personality. How can the joys of the Self be well-portrayed unless the similes and symbols are taken from the practical life of this world? And since human consciousness at the impact of passionate love comes to know moments of absorbing involvement and occasions of restless sufferings, it is proper to use this experience as a symbol for that glorious spiritual love in which one's experience is not distorted by the illusions of egoistic passion.

In spiritual love, therefore, the urge to seek the presence of God expresses itself in the form of a blazing fire of spiritual aspiration. Though characterized by pain and restlessness, it is steeped in a secret sweetness. When the heart of man is restless, seeking union with the Divine Self, a mysterious sweetness begins to waft its melody under the outer expressions of sufferings and sorrows. These truths of devotional movement are vividly portrayed in the life of youthful Krishna, who dances with the *gopis* on a full moon night, and disappears from them, leaving them restless, consumed with sorrow, and yet steeped in the sweetness of Divine separation.

The valiant personality of Krishna inspires the *gopa* boys to love him as their close friend. They live contemplating his heroic acts of valor, his victory over numerous demons, his joyous sports by the banks of the Yamuna River, and the secret, friendly bond of love that existed between themselves and Krishna.

As Krishna grows up, and plays the role of a powerful warrior, a skilled statesman, an inspiring leader, and a dutiful husband to his numerous queens, his personality reveals various facets of the devotional movement. He becomes

a friend of Arjuna and leads him in the midst of the Mahabharata War, where he teaches him the most profound wisdom through the Gita. He urges him to overcome his cowardliness and to attain victory over the forces of darkness. This presentation of Krishna's personality is most unique in its rich imagery. The soul becomes Arjuna as it experiences increasing awareness of the Divine Self. However, it finds itself in a world of confusion, a world that is like a battlefield wherein the forces of virtue and those of vice continue to battle among themselves. In the chariot of the body, the Divine Krishna (representing the enlightened intellect) controls the horses (senses) with the reins of a purified mind. He guides the soul to the destination of Self-realization through the battles of life.

After the Mahabharata War, when Krishna wanted to return to his own country, Dwaraka, Kunti prayed, "O Lord, please continue to give us adversity, because during adverse conditions of life, we have enjoyed the sweetness of your Divine Grace." When a devotee gains an insight into the Divine Plan that operates through

human life, for him even adverse conditions carry the sweet message of Divine Grace. In fact, a Sage rises beyond adversity and prosperity.

The Grandfather of the Pandavas and Kauravas, the great Bhishma, is a towering example of a highly integrated personality. Bound by the sense of duty, he does not hesitate to fight Krishna and Arjuna. However, a stream of sweet devotion towards Krishna continues to flow in his heart. By the force of his purity and righteousness, he had acquired the power of dying at his will. Though pierced by many sharp weapons, lying on a bed of arrows, he gave the wisdom of the Vedas through various stories and illustrations to Yudhishtira after the war. During the time of his departure from this world, he prayed to Krishna, recalling His splendorous form when He had rushed towards him to kill him during the Mahabharata War. Bhishma represents that majestic process of devotion that is heroic in confronting the divine Reality of Life. He fights, as it were, with God Himself. He uses the arrows of love, and compels Him to come down from the seat of transcendence to the world of this relative reality.

*From the beginning to the end,
the life of Krishna is a boundless
ocean of devotional movement
with all its rich variations.
Even the termination of the
physical personality of Krishna
is illustrative of the fact
that devotion flourishes with
the support of a Divine Form,
but in the ultimate
state of development,
it does not need any support.
The devotee becomes
one with God.*

