

## **Bondage and Liberation are only in the Mind**

(An episode from Devi Bhagavatam)

(By S.N.Sastri)

The purpose of the Puranas is to expound the abstruse teachings of Vedanta in a manner easily intelligible to the common man. This is done through the medium of stories which convey profound truths under a very attractive garb. It happens sometimes that the same episode is narrated with substantial differences in different Puranas. This is because the stories themselves are not important; what are important are the lessons we derive from them. This is being stated here at the very outset because the story of Suka as it appears in Devi Bhagavatam, which is going to be narrated here, will be found to be totally at variance with what is found in Srimad Bhagavatam.

The main Puranas are eighteen in number. The authorship of all of them, except one, Vishnupurana, is attributed to sage Vyasa. Sage Parasara, father of sage Vyasa, is considered to be the author of Vishnupurana. Of these, the two which are considered to be the most important are Srimad Bhagavatam and Devi Bhagavatam. The former is devoted to a description of the various incarnations of Lord Vishnu and the narration of His glories. The latter extols the glory of Bhagavati or Parasakti. Each of these Puranas contains about 18000 verses divided into twelve Skandhas. In Srimad Bhagavatam there are 335 chapters and in Devi Bhagavatam there are 318 chapters.

Lord Vishnu (or Narayana) and Bhagavati (or Narayani) are two aspects of the same Supreme Reality known as Brahman in the Upanishads. The concept of the Supreme Being as the Divine Mother of the universe has its basis in the Vedas themselves. The Rigveda contains the famous Devi Sukta, proclaimed, significantly, by a woman seer, Rishi Ambhrini. This hymn may be said to have laid the foundation for the whole doctrine of the manifestation of Chit-sakti as the universe and Her immanence in it.

After composing Devi Bhagavatam, sage Vyasa taught it to his son Suka. At this time Vyasa had a disciple who is referred

to merely as 'Suta'. While Vyasa was teaching the Devi Bhagavatam to Suka, his disciple, Suta, who was present, also learnt it. It was Suta who narrated the Devi Bhagavatam to Saunaka and other sages in Naimisharanya, a very sacred spot.

The Devi Bhagavatam begins with a verse reminiscent of the Gayatri Mantra:--

"Om. May we meditate on that Primordial Vidya in the form of the all-pervading Consciousness, Who enlivens our intellect".

### **Vyasa and Suka**

The episode narrated below appears in chapters 10 to 19 of Skandha I of Devi Bhagavatam.

Suka, the son of sage Vyasa, was the very incarnation of Vairagya (detachment). Soon after his birth he became the disciple of Brihaspati, the preceptor of the gods. After completing the study of all the scriptures within a very short period, he returned to his father's hermitage. In course of time Vyasa began to think of getting his son married, as only then would he become entitled to perform the religious duties prescribed in the Vedas for a house-holder. One day sage Vyasa told Suka, "My son, you have mastered the Vedas and all the other scriptures. You must now enter the stage of the grihasta by taking a wife. Only a grihasta can properly propitiate the manes and the gods. Your duty to me will also be fulfilled only if you marry. The scriptures say that one who has no son cannot get access to heaven. I am therefore very eager that you should marry. You were born as my son as the result of intense austerities practised by me. It is therefore your duty to fulfil my wish by getting married".

### **Bonds of Samsara stronger than iron chains**

Suka replied: "Father, it is no doubt true that a son should act according to the wishes of his father. But, at the same time, the father has a duty to give such advice to his son as would lead the latter to the highest good. I am surprised that you, who are so learned, are talking like an ignorant man bewildered by the power of Maya. You say that you want me to be happy. The happiness produced by worldly enjoyments is always mixed with sorrow. Is that real happiness? If I get

married, I will have to act according to the wishes of the woman I marry. How can there be happiness when there is dependence on the will of another? One who has been bound by an iron chain may at some time be able to free oneself, but one can never free oneself from the bonds of his wife and children. Will one whose mind is set on the supreme bliss find any attraction in the pleasures of the flesh which are trivial and always mixed with sorrow? Instead of rescuing me from this ocean of Samsara, why are you trying to immerse me deeper into it? It is only the ignorant who will find happiness in worldly life, just as worms are happy in filth. One who, even after having attained a human birth which is so difficult to get and having, in addition, studied all the scriptures, is still attached to the world, is no better than a dog or a pig. Only that person is really learned who strives for liberation from Samsara".

To this Vyasa said: "What you say may, on the surface, appear to be quite logical, but the fact is that you are labouring under some wrong notions. What binds a man is not wife or children or home but the mind. One who is mentally free is not bound even if he has a family and one who is not mentally free is in bondage even if he is outwardly in the Sannyasa Ashrama. Whether a person lives in a house or a hermitage or in the forest, it is the mind that is the cause of bondage as well as of liberation. A householder who does not swerve from the path of righteousness, performs all the duties ordained by the scriptures and does not harm any creature is truly a liberated person. All the other three Ashramas depend on the householder for sustenance. How exalted the Grihastashrama is! Heaven and liberation are within easy reach of one who conducts his life according to the scriptures, in whatever Ashrama he may be. One who transgresses the tenets of the scriptures has no hope of spiritual evolution, even if he is a Sannyasi. The stage of the householder is as difficult as it is exalted. The way to the fourth stage, Sannyasa, is through that of the householder. There is a great risk in jumping from Brahmacharya to Sannyasa. The right path is to live the life of a householder in accordance with the scriptures, then hand over the responsibility of the household

to the son, take Vanaprastha and then Sannyasa. You know that the mind and the senses are very powerful. They are likely to make a man go astray. A Brahmachari should, therefore, get married at the proper time. It is very difficult to control the senses when one is young. For your own good, therefore, you should get married. There is nothing wrong whatsoever in this course".

On hearing these words of his father Suka replied: "Whatever you may say, I will not marry. Marriage is undoubtedly a bondage. It can never bring real happiness. One who gets married will have to worry about the means of earning wealth. One whose mind is occupied with the thought of acquiring wealth can never be happy. If he is not able to earn money and remains poor, his relations will treat him with contempt. If he earns wealth, there will be other problems. To earn wealth one has to deviate from the path of righteousness. One who strictly adheres to the path of righteousness can never become rich. Indra, the king of the gods, has all the wealth of the three worlds at his command. But is he happy? He is afraid even of the starving ascetic. You know all this as well as I do. And yet you are trying to push me deeper into this terrible Samsara. The sorrow caused by birth, old age, disease and stay in the mother's womb can all be borne. But the sorrow caused by desire is worse than all these. Because of desire, even those who have mastered the Vedas and all the other scriptures wait at the door of the rich to get something. They bow low before him. They praise him to the skies. All this is just to fill the belly. Cannot the belly be filled with some fruit or root or leaf which can be got in the forest? Instead of that, why should one build a prison for oneself with wife and children? I am not in the least attracted by the Karma Kanda of the Vedas. Please therefore impart to me Jnana or Yoga. Tell me the means by which I can destroy all my Karma--Sanchita, Prarabdha and Agami. Please do not talk to me again about the bondage that marriage undoubtedly is".

On hearing these words of his son Vyasa was overwhelmed by grief. Tears came streaming down his cheeks. His body began to tremble. Seeing all this Suka said to himself--" O God! My father is reacting as if what I am proposing to do is a

heinous crime. He is the author of the Vedanta sutras, the Puranas and the Mahabharata. He has divided the Vedas into four. He is reputed to be omniscient and a man of perfect discrimination. But see how Maya has overpowered even him! None can conquer this Maya. Even the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Siva) act according to the commands of the Devi, who is Mahamaya".

Then he spoke to Vyasa thus: "You who are so learned are grieving like an ignorant man. How strange! What is the meaning of the words 'father', 'son' and the like? Who is the father and who is the son? Think who I, now your son, was in a previous birth. Is it not mere delusion to think "I am so and so"? Give up your grief, knowing that all this is Maya. What good can accrue to you from me? Each one has to undergo the consequences of his past actions. It is therefore meaningless to think that one can benefit or suffer due to the actions of some other person. A human birth on the earth is extremely difficult to get and even more so is birth in a noble family of learned persons. What a great pity it will be if one wastes such a birth by being overpowered by Maya!".

Vyasa was astonished to see such intense detachment in his son. He said: "O child, I am very happy to see your firm detachment. If it is still your desire to take Sannyasa you may do so. Such intense detachment is very rarely to be found. The scriptures say that persons with such total detachment can take Sannyasa direct from Brahmacharya. All the same, it will be good for you to study the Bhagavatam which I have composed. It is equal to the Vedas themselves.

Following Vyasa's advice, Suka studied the Bhagavatam. But even that did not clear his doubts and give him satisfaction. Vyasa then told him, "If my Bhagavatam has not cleared all your doubts, I advise you to go to the kingdom of Mithila. A king by name Janaka, who is a liberated soul, is governing that kingdom. He will clear all your doubts".

### **How can a ruler of a kingdom be a Jivanmukta?**

Suka was surprised to hear this and told his father: "O father, what you say is very strange. A king who is governing a country is a Jivanmukta! You say that he will clear my doubts which even you have not been able to clear! Do you want me to

go for advice to a householder, and that too a king who is ruling a country? To say that a Jivanmukta is ruling a country is as absurd as saying that a barren woman has given birth to a son. How can a king conquer his senses? Can one who is free from the notions of 'I' and 'mine' rule a country? How can a ruler who enjoys kingly pleasures, who distinguishes between heat and cold, pleasant and unpleasant, friend and foe, be a Jivanmukta? Can he look upon saint and sinner, sage and thief, friend and foe with an equal eye? If he can, how can he function as a ruler? If he cannot, how can he be a Jivanmukta? No one has seen a king who is also a Jivanmukta. All the same, I shall take your advice and go and see this Janaka".

### **Suka leaves for Mithila**

So saying, he prostrated before his father and, after receiving his blessings, set out for Mithila. Before he left, Vyasa made him promise that he would return to Vyasa's hermitage from Mithila.

Suka walked through town and country, hills and dales, forests and fields; he passed through places inhabited by people following diverse customs and religious practices. At the end of three years he reached Mithila. At the entrance to the kingdom of Janaka the guards stopped him and asked him who he was and why he had come there. Suka stood motionless, without uttering a word in reply. The guards told him that they had orders from the king not to let anybody into the country without making full enquiries and finding out what he wanted.

Suka then told them, "My object in coming here has been achieved by your stopping me. It appears that even a Sadhu cannot enter the kingdom of Janaka who is said to be a Jivanmukta!. I have come here after crossing two huge mountains and braving great odds. It was none other than my father who prompted me to come here. But I do not blame him. It is the result of my own karma. Men are generally tempted by money, but I have absolutely no desire for money. It is only my Prarabdha karma that brought me here. It is strange that in this country which is ruled by a Jivanmukta even a Sadhu is not allowed to enter!". So saying, Suka

continued to stand there. The guards then said, "O revered sir, we have now realised that you are a Mahatma. Please go in and forgive us for having stopped you".

Suka replied, "You have not done anything wrong. It is the duty of a servant to obey implicitly the orders of his master. You have been very correct in the performance of your duty and you should be commended for that. Nor is the king at fault. It is the duty of the king to find out whether a person entering his kingdom is worthy or not, whether he is an honest man or a thief, and so on. Without thinking about all this I have come here. It is wrong to enter another's house without being invited. That is what I have done. The fault is, therefore, entirely mine".

The guards then wanted to know from him the real import of the terms 'happiness', 'unhappiness', 'honour', 'dishonour', 'friend', 'enemy', etc,. Suka explained that when a person finds his wife, son and others behaving in the manner in which he wants them to behave, he feels happy. If not, he feels unhappy. In other words, happiness arises when a person finds other persons and things around him to be favourable to him and unhappiness when they are unfavourable. Every one is all the time engaged in actions which are expected to bring happiness. Those who help him in this are considered to be friends and those who hinder him are considered enemies. A wise man is one who does not crave for worldly pleasures which attract the ignorant. For a man free from desires happiness lies in being alone and meditating on the Self. Contentment is his friend. Desire, anger and the like are his enemies.

Suka then entered the country of Mithila and continued to walk. When he reached the gates of the king's palace, he was stopped by the guards there. As before, he stood motionless, without uttering a word. Soon the king's minister went to the gate, having heard of the arrival of Suka. He saluted Suka and took him inside. There, in one of the inner chambers of the palace, a number of beautiful young damsels came to attend on him. The minister left, leaving Suka with the damsels. Suka sat down and went into meditation. All the efforts of the

damsels to distract him and make him take interest in them failed.

### **Suka and Janaka**

King Janaka himself then came there and after respectfully bowing before Suka he took Suka to his assembly hall. The king then asked Suka the reason for his visit. Suka said, "O king, you have perhaps by now come to know that I am the son of sage Vyasa. After completing my studies under Brihaspati, I returned to my father's hermitage. My father then asked me to get married, saying that the Grihasthashrama is the greatest of all the four Ashramas. I felt strongly that marriage is a bondage and that it takes one away from liberation. I was not convinced by all the reasons given by my father in favour of marriage. He then asked me to approach you and get my doubts cleared. I have come in obedience to his words. O king, kindly tell me what is the means to liberation-- austerities, performance of yajnas, etc., or knowledge".

Janaka said: "I shall tell you what an aspirant for liberation should do. After being invested with the sacred thread, he should go to a Guru and study the Vedas. After completing his studies and having given Gurudakshina, he should enter the stage of the householder by getting married. He should then perform the rites laid down in the Vedas without attachment. He should be truthful, compassionate and free from all desires and cultivate purity of mind and body. He should also beget progeny. He need remain with his family only till his first-born son gets married. Thereafter he may enter the Vanaprastha Ashrama. After conquering the six internal enemies, namely, desire, anger, greed, delusion, pride and envy, he may take Sannyasa. It should be noted that Sannyasa is only for those who have attained total detachment. Out of the 48 Samskaras laid down in the scriptures, 40 are for householders and the remaining 8 are for Sannyasis".

Suka asked: "For a person who has attained Jnana, Vijnana and Vairagya, is it compulsory to go through all the four Ashramas one after another? Can he not go straightaway to the Sannyasa Ashrama from Brahmacharya?"



Janaka: "O young sage! understand that the senses are very powerful. They cannot be relied upon. Disaster may befall the immature. If a person who is not yet fit takes Sannyasa and if thereafter desire for food, wealth, children or other comforts arises in his mind, what is the way out for him? Since vasanas will not get extinguished by themselves, a wise man should first eradicate them before taking Sannyasa. The impact of a fall is greater for a person who is at a height. A person at the lowest level cannot fall; he can only go up. A person who wants to climb up has to be very careful. If a Sannyasi falls, there is no remedy for him. The senses cannot be subdued by force. To attain complete control over the senses one should go through the Ashramas, one by one. A man of wisdom will not be affected by the pairs of opposites such as heat and cold, honour and dishonour, or gain and loss, even if he is a householder. Look at me. I rule the kingdom, I perform all my duties, I eat what I want and experience everything. At the same time, am I not liberated? You can also be like that. Bondage and liberation are both in the mind. If the mind is impure, nothing will be achieved by bathing in all the sacred rivers. If the mind is controlled, there can be no talk of bondage or liberation. It is only the mind that makes distinctions such as friend and foe, and the like".

Suka: "You say that the rituals laid down in the Karmakanda of the Vedas should be performed meticulously. But how can the cruel deed of sacrifice of animals be the means to liberation? Is not the drinking of soma juice in a sacrifice clearly contrary to Dharma? Are not killing of animals and eating their flesh unrighteous acts? Moreover, all that can be attained through these Vedic rituals is enjoyment of the pleasures of heaven for a limited period. They cannot confer liberation. Heaven is only a chain made of gold, which can bind a man as effectively as an iron chain. My mind is not at all attracted by such transient pleasures, which ultimately lead only to sorrow".

### **The secret of Karma**

Janaka: " O wise young sage! You have not yet understood these matters correctly. You have been looking only at the external appearance of things. That way you get only

superficial knowledge. You have to go deeper to understand subtle truths. It is not the outward appearance that decides what is righteous and what is not. This is the secret of Karma. The same action may amount to injury to a living creature in one situation, but not so in another.

The Vedas declare that the killing of an animal in a Vedic sacrifice is not violence. If it is done without attachment and craving for the fruit, it is not violence, but even that would become violence if there is attachment and desire for the fruit. Any action done without attachment and without the sense of doership is no action at all and it does not create any bondage.

Suka: "What you say may be true in the case of a person who is free from desire. But how can one who is under the control of Maya become free from desire? When even those who have mastered the scriptures are not free from attachment and aversion, what to speak of the ordinary man? Mere study of the scriptures will not destroy nescience (ignorance of the Self). Can darkness be removed by merely shouting 'light, light'? You said, "Look at me". I have looked at you carefully. I do not find you to be in any way different from other worldly men. I see you only as a king possessed of wealth, fame, power and all objects of enjoyment. Notions of friend and foe, happiness and sorrow, likes and dislikes-- you have all these as much as anyone else. And you call yourself Videha (meaning Jivanmukta). This is nothing but vanity. It is like an illiterate fool bearing the name 'Vidyadhara', a blind man being named 'Divakara' (which means sun) or a beggar having the name 'Lakshmidhara'. The name 'Videha' given to you is as meaningless as these. It is only a title that you have inherited from your ancestors who got it somehow, without any reason to justify it. Whatever that may be, as far as I am concerned, I am not at all interested in home, wife, children or wealth. I wish to remain free from all such bondage".

Janaka replied: "O sage, you think you can be free from all bondage if you go and dwell in the forest. Remember that there are animals there also and you can develop likes and dislikes towards them. The same five elements which are here are present in the forest also. How can you be free from any connection with them? As long as you have a body, you will

need food. The thought about food will be with you even in the forest. Can you become free from thoughts about your yogadanda (staff), your deer-skin and your water pot? The thoughts I have about my kingdom are also only of the same nature. It is not the quantity or quality of what one has that makes for bondage, but it is the sense of possession. A renunciate attached to his loincloth is not less in bondage than a king attached to his kingdom. It is the thought that this body is yours that is the fundamental bondage. Being free from all sense of possession and knowing that I am not bound, I remain happy all the time, whatever I do. You, on the contrary, are always sad, thinking that you are in bondage. Giving up this wrong notion, know that you are never in bondage and that you are ever free and be at peace with yourself. If you understand this truth, you will realise that a man fully engaged in action can still be completely liberated".

### **Conclusion**

On hearing these words of Janaka, Suka realised that bondage does not arise from action, that none can remain without performing any action and that it is one's attitude towards action that creates the distinction between bondage and liberation. He took leave of Janaka and returned to his father's hermitage. He married Peevaree, the daughter of the manes. He begot four sons and a daughter. Thereafter he left for Kailasa and did penance there. Finally he cast off his body and attained Videhamukti.

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