

Book One

Book One Chapter 1

Śaunaka and other sages said to Sūta: O sinless Sūta: We have assembled here in holy Naimiśāranya, to conduct this great sacrifice. We shall spend every spare moment in listening to discourses, for our own spiritual advancement and for the salvation of humanity.

In this dark age, blessed Sūta, people are short-lived. Yet even this short life-span is occupied by the pursuit of fleeting pleasures and consequent sufferings. Even when disgust for such pleasures arises in the heart of man, he is too dull-witted and lazy to apply himself to the scriptures that map out the path to liberation.

Beloved one, these scriptures are numerous, divergent in their message, conflicting in their conclusions, confusing and laborious. They have to be studied over a long period of time: but time destroys what it builds, leaving one running around in an endless circle, vainly endeavouring to put the fragmented personality and life into order.

Loving and benevolent Sūta! You are a master of all the scriptures and are therefore in the best position to help us. Give us the quintessence of these scriptures, equipped with which man will instantly be delivered from this ever-whirling cycle of birth and death. Instant integration of our whole personality and life is surely the only way to end the darkness of ignorance and the consequent sorrow.

We know, dear Sūta, that the Lord's descent on this earth (especially as Kṛṣṇa, the son of Vasudeva and Devakī) is intended for

the protection and the prosperity of all beings: please explain this to us. Thus shall we remember him and his name. If one utters the Lord's name even unintentionally, one is instantly freed from fear; for fear itself is afraid of the Lord.

We are never tired of hearing of the Lord's incarnations and his countless exploits; therefore, narrate them to us. Through a succession of sages, these truths will reach all men for all time to come. Thus, contemplating the feet of the Lord while listening to his stories, man will instantly be freed from sin and sinfulness, and attain liberation. O Sūta! Sages who have enshrined the lotus feet of the Lord in their hearts are pure and perfectly peaceful; those who come into contact with them are instantly purified and their hearts are filled with peace.

In this dark age which has just commenced, when purity of heart is the first casualty in the conflict between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, association with sages and listening to this story of God narrated by them are the only means of liberation. This story captivates the mind and fills the heart of man with the love of God and thus effects an instant and integral transmutation of his whole personality.

We therefore bless the divine providence that has brought you to us at this vital juncture. Pray, commence your blessed discourse!

Book One Chapter 2

Sūta Ugraśravā said: Holy ones! Verily, your requests are highly praiseworthy, for they will inevitably lead to the narration of the glorious life of lord Kṛṣṇa. Man should constantly endeavour to do that which generates devotion to lord Kṛṣṇa—devotion which is motiveless, which knows no obstruction, and as a result of which one realises the all-blissful God.

Tradition grants man four goals—duty, wealth, enjoyment and liberation. A duty, however well performed, is but wasted labour if it does not generate eagerness to listen to God's glory. One should not perform one's duty for the sake of wealth alone. Wealth must be dedicated to a righteous life, and not be squandered on sensual pleasures. Sensual enjoyment is pleasure natural to living; it is not an end, or object to be pursued. Life itself is meant for the attainment of the highest knowledge, which is reality. It has been described as the absolute, the supreme self, and the Lord.

Now listen to the steps that lead one to this self-realisation. When one visits the holy places of pilgrimage, one meets and serves

holy men. From them one hears the stories and the glories of lord Vāsudeva (Kṛṣṇa). The evil propensities in one's heart are thereby destroyed and in that pure heart there arises unwavering love for God. The Lord being pure satva, the base qualities born of rajas and tamas are eradicated altogether by such love. Without doubt and without delay one realises God as one's very self, the sole reality.

This reality or lord Kṛṣṇa is the very goal of all veda, all rites and rituals, all yoga, all spiritual activities, of all austerities, of righteousness, of the highest wisdom and of all life and activity. In fact, he alone exists. In the beginning he manifested his own nature, characterised by the three qualities (satva, rajas and tamas—purity, dynamism and inertia). Just as fire assumes different forms in accordance with the burning object, so lord Kṛṣṇa, who alone is all this, appears in infinite forms. He is the entire manifest creation, all the elements. He alone appears as the angels, human beings and the lower forms of creation; he alone is the creator (Brahmā), the protector (Viṣṇu) and the redeemer (Śiva). Yet, the supreme felicity and salvation of man are obtained through devotion to Viṣṇu alone, for he is pure satva, absolute purity.

Book One Chapter 3

Sūta said: O devout sages! When the Lord willed the creation into being, the cosmic consciousness (which is the unmanifested cosmic being) became the cosmic puruṣa, the manifest being. He had sixteen parts—the ten senses, the five elements and the mind. Simultaneously, as it were, myriads of forms were made manifest—human, subhuman, superhuman, vegetable and mineral. Hence the Lord is said to possess myriads of heads, eyes, feet, hands and mouths. The infinite was not exhausted by this infinite manifestation. Only a small part went into creation.

Lord Nārāyaṇa repeatedly descended into this creation to fulfil the divine purpose of creation. Listen to a few of such incarnations: The sanatkumārā (the eternally enlightened four brothers), the divine boar (who lifted up the earth), Nārada (who promulgated the code of worship), Nara and Nārāyaṇa (the eternal exemplars of penance), Kapila (the first metaphysician), Dattātreya (the foremost expounder of the science of the self), yajña (the spirit of self-sacrificing service), Rṣabhadeva (the first and foremost paramahansa-ascetic), Pṛthu (who made the earth fruitful), the divine fish (which rescued the earth from the deluge), the divine tortoise (which helped in the production of nectar), Dhanvantari (who emerged

with the nectar), Mohinī (who ensured that only the gods had the nectar and not the demons), the man-lion (who destroyed the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu), the dwarf (who assumed the cosmic form and redeemed king Bali), Paraśurāma (who routed unrighteous kings), Vyāsa (who edited the vedā and wrote the purāṇā or legends), Rāma (who exemplified in himself the ideal man), Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa (who re-established dharma), Buddha (the enlightened); and he who will come at the end of the present age, as Kalki.

Besides the above there are innumerable other incarnations of the divine such as sages and saints, and men of great power. All these are rays of the supreme being; but Kṛṣṇa is the Lord himself. All of them appear in order to protect the forces of light from the forces of darkness. He who recalls this morning and evening will be freed from all suffering.

Yet, O men of wisdom, it is wrong to conclude that the supreme being is born, lives and dies. The infinite forever remains infinite, even as space is never affected by the presence or absence of clouds. Creation is considered the 'sport of the Lord', because he who is ever full needs nothing, lacks nothing and desires to achieve nothing by this sportive activity. Yet, this has a purpose—to protect the forces of light. Only he who is ever devoted to the lotus feet of the Lord is able to comprehend the mystery of the Lord's incarnations.

Blessed ones, I myself heard the Lord's incarnations described by the renowned sage, Śukadeva. He heard it from his father Vyāsa and he imparted this great secret to king Parīkṣit who had been condemned to death.

Book One Chapter 4

Śaunaka asked Sūta: O blessed Sūta! You have whetted our appetite by what you have just told us. We wish to hear in detail the story of the Lord's incarnations and glories. When and why did the sage Vyāsa compose the scripture? You said that the sage Śuka learnt it from Vyāsa and then in his turn narrated it to king Parīkṣit. The sage Sūka was born with the highest wisdom of non-duality, living constantly immersed in the realisation of oneness.

It is said that once Vyāsa followed his son Sūka as the latter walked away. Śuka was naked and young; Vyāsa was aged and clothed. Yet, some women bathing in a roadside pond were unashamed when Śuka passed by but were ashamed when Vyāsa approached. When questioned, they revealed that whereas Śuka had risen above sex-distinctions, Vyāsa had not! Sage Śuka was wander-

ing about as if mad, dumb and dull-witted. How could Parīkṣit and others recognise him as a sage?

O beloved Sūta! How was it that king Parīkṣit was condemned to death? He was so valiant and so good that he was invincible. He was beloved of his people. Why did he renounce his kingdom and its royal pleasures and sit at the feet of sage Śuka and listen to the stories and the glories of the Lord? Kindly enlighten us.

Sūta replied: O sages! During the age preceding this kali age, Vyāsa who could see the past, present and future, foresaw that during the kali age confusion of duties would set in, resulting in a decline of righteousness. So Vyāsa took upon himself the colossal task of editing the vedā, and he instructed four sages in four different branches of these. For those unable to learn and recite the vedā, Vyāsa composed the Mahābhārata which is considered the fifth vedā. However in spite of dedicating himself to the welfare of all people, the holy one was restless at heart.

Vyāsa mused: "I have studied the vedā, served the elders, worshipped the sacrificial fires, performed all the ceremonies and strictly adhered to the code of righteousness. I have perpetuated the study of the vedā and revealed their essence in the Mahābhārata. Still my soul has not realised its oneness with the supreme being! Is it because I have not fully recounted the Bhāgavata Dharma, the path that leads to God-realisation, which is dearest to the paramahatmā, or holy men, and which is dear to the Lord himself?" While the sage Vyāsa was thus sitting dejected, sage Nārada appeared upon the scene. Vyāsa rose and welcomed Nārada, and worshipped the celestial sage whom even the gods adored.

*Nārada's Previous Life
Book One Chapter 5*

Celestial Sage Nārada said: O Vyāsa! You are a ray of the Lord. Through austerities and the practice of yoga you have plunged into self-knowledge and knowledge of the scriptures. You have elaborated the duties of man. These concepts of duty and the performance of ceremonies may still be misunderstood by unwary souls because they appear to grant reality to the ego and spiritual value to their egotistic actions. Only a few wise men will perceive that liberation lies in transcending these scriptural injunctions and being wholly devoted to the Lord.

O chief of sages! Only that speech, scriptural composition, wisdom or action is worthy which has the Lord's stories and glories

for its content and which has the Lord himself as its subject and its object. One who is devoted to the Lord and from whom worldly duties have dropped away, even if he dies without reaching his goal or suffers a spiritual downfall, such a person is not touched by evil; whereas one who neglects devotion to the Lord on the pretext of 'worldly duties' achieves no purpose at all. Verily, the servant of the Lord does not return to this world of birth and death.

Hear now, O sage, the story of my past birth when I was the son of a maidservant of the brāhmaṇā. Once I happened to serve them and they were kind to me. Once a day I ate what was left of their dishes. All this purified my mind. At their feet I listened to the soul-absorbing stories of lord Kṛṣṇa. My heart longed for the Lord. I soon realised that this world, including heaven, is māyā, a product of my own ignorance. Constant hearing of the Lord's glories eradicated passion and ignorance from me. When the sages were about to depart, they imparted to me their most esoteric wisdom which they had gained directly from the Lord himself. Through this wisdom I realised the glory of lord Vāsudeva.

O Vyāsa! Ordinarily action leads to reaction, but when action is performed out of love of God, it leads to liberation. Hence, one should bow mentally to the Lord, uttering the mantra: "Obeisance to you, O lord Vāsudeva, we meditate on you. Obeisance also to Pradyumna, Aniruddha and Saṅkarṣaṇa." This mantra is the Lord's body. He is without form. He alone is a man of true insight who works and worships him uttering this mantra and constantly remembering him.

O Vyāsa, sing the Lord's glories and your heart will find supreme peace and eternal bliss. Your heart is restless only because you have failed to attain this so far.

Book One Chapter 6

The Celestial Sage Nārada continued: At that time I was five years old and was dependent on my mother who was greatly attached to me, her only child. She struggled hard to provide a comfortable living for me—but in vain. Who can transgress what is decreed by divine will? All are mere puppets in God's hands. It was out of regard for her that I continued to live in the village, though I was not attached either to it or to her. One night my mother was bitten by a snake; she died.

I welcomed this as a boon from the Lord though I had not wished it. So I wandered away until I reached a dense forest. There I

began to practise meditation as I had been instructed by the holy ones.

As I contemplated the Lord's lotus feet, overpowered by love for him, he gradually appeared in my heart. I was thrilled. I experienced the bliss and the peace that passeth all understanding. But, alas, the vision disappeared and I became disconsolate. Then the Lord of mercy and love spoke: "In this birth you are not fit to realise me. It is possible to realise me only when one attains perfection in yoga and when all the impurities of one's heart have been burnt away. I revealed my form once in order to make you realise that one who desires to attain me is gradually freed from all the desires which are latent in his heart. Your service of the holy ones, even though it was for a short period, has fixed your heart on me. You will soon cast off this physical body and will then become one of my attendants. You will never cease to remember me. Even during the ensuing cosmic dissolution, by my grace you will not forget me nor your present existence." Thus spoke the Lord and I bowed to his will.

When the karma which had given birth to my physical body had been exhausted, death ensued. Immediately I became an attendant of the Lord himself. Soon after this there was the cosmic deluge. The entire creation, with its creator (Brahmā), was withdrawn into the Lord. I, too, entered his body. After a very long time the Lord willed creation into being once again, and Brahmā created me along with the other sages. Since then I have roamed freely throughout the universe, playing upon this vīṇā and singing his names and glories, and the Lord has revealed himself in my heart.

Singing the stories and glories of the Lord is the surest raft to cross this terrible ocean of worldly existence for those whose minds are disturbed by craving for sensual pleasures. Hence I commend that you recount the incarnations of the Lord.

Aśvatthāmā and Draupadī's Children
Book One Chapter 7

Sūta said: After sage Nārada's departure, Vyāsa sat in his hermitage and contemplated the Lord. Knowing that the love of lord Kṛṣṇa is the best cure for spiritual blindness which is the cause of all human suffering, he composed the Bhāgavataṁ. He who listens to this is filled with the love of lord Kṛṣṇa. This god-love instantly dispels grief, infatuation and fear. Kṛṣṇa is the supreme being himself; hence sages like Śuka who are established in non-dual consciousness, love

him and listen to the Bhāgavataṁ. Having composed it Vyāsa imparted it to Śuka and other sages. I shall now narrate to you how Śuka imparted this knowledge to king Parīkṣit.

The great war of the Mahābhārata had concluded. Duryodhana lay dying on the battlefield. His friend Aśvatthāmā, a brāhmaṇa and son of Droṇa, unchivalrously murdered the young sons of the pāṇḍavā while they were asleep and offered their heads to Duryodhana (much to his distaste) as a parting gift! The infuriated Arjuna chased Aśvatthāmā, intending to kill him in revenge. In utter despair Aśvatthāmā released the mightiest missile, the brahma-sīra. Bewildered, Arjuna prayed to Kṛṣṇa: "O Kṛṣṇa, you remove the fear of your devotees. You are the sole saviour of those who in this world of pain and death are scorched by the fire of sin and suffering. You have incarnated here to remove earth's burden and to provide your devotees with an object of constant meditation. Lord, I do not know what this dreadful fire is, which burns me from all sides." Kṛṣṇa revealed the nature of the missile and, impelled by Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna released a counter-missile. The two missiles seemed to burn the entire earth, but out of compassion for all living beings Kṛṣṇa now asked Arjuna to neutralise the missiles and then capture Aśvatthāmā alive.

Arjuna captured Aśvatthāmā. In order to fathom and to reveal Arjuna's devotion to righteous conduct, Kṛṣṇa urged him to kill the villain: "A noble man would not kill an enemy who is unguarded, asleep or tender of age. Aśvatthāmā did just that. It is proper to execute such a wicked person; or else he would persist in his evil." However, Arjuna did not kill him. In the pāṇḍava camp they discussed the punishment to be meted out to the war criminal. Some favoured execution but others favoured something less severe. Draupadī, although disconsolate at the murder of her innocent children, showed supreme wisdom and compassion. She pleaded that Aśvatthāmā, being a brāhmaṇa and the son of the preceptor, should not be killed in punishment, as the war had ended and peacetime justice should prevail. She reminded him, "This Aśvatthāmā is the son of your worshipful preceptor, Droṇa, who lives in his progeny. Let not his mother grieve for him, as I grieve for my children killed by him." However, Bhīma was impatient to kill Aśvatthāmā. Finally, Kṛṣṇa said: "He is a brāhmaṇa who should not be killed. But he is a villain who should be put to death. Draupadī and Bhīma should both be pleased. Do what is appropriate." Arjuna divined the Lord's intention. He cut off the gem on the brāhmaṇa's head along with the locks of hair, and let him go. This was tantamount to capital punishment.

Sūta continued: His mission accomplished, Kṛṣṇa was about to return to Dvārakā when Uttarā (widow of Abhimanyu, Arjuna's deceased son) ran screaming toward him, seeking his protection against a burning missile. Simultaneously the paṇḍavā were also afflicted by the most powerful Brahmā-missile released by the ungrateful and evil-minded Aśvatthāmā to destroy the very ones who had released him—even their unborn grandson in Uttarā's womb. Kṛṣṇa, however, surrounded the foetus with his grace. What evil power, however mighty, can defy it!

Kuntī, mother of the pāṇḍavā, was overcome by a great wave of devotion. She praised lord Kṛṣṇa:

“Lord, thou art the supreme being, but one with perverted vision cannot recognize you as such. Salutations, salutations unto thee. You protected us against all calamities, including the missile released by Aśvatthāmā. Yet, I pray thee, O master of the universe, may many calamities continue to befall us so that we may turn to you and, by doing so, be released for ever from the cycle of birth and death. They who are proud of their ancestry, power, learning and wealth do not even utter your name. You can be seen only by those who call nothing their own, and who have no sense of possession.

“Lord, thou art beginningless and endless time itself. Who can fathom your glory even when you manifest in human form? Thou art impartial, though the finite mind of man attributes diversity to you. Thou art the soul of the universe, the reality that appears as the universe. Thou art birthless, yet you assume numerous forms. Giant intellects advance various reasons for your incarnations. But you descend to earth to perform deeds which people will love to remember and to recount and which will bring them to thy lotus feet and confer upon them final liberation from birth and death.

“Lord, I take refuge in thy lotus feet. Cut asunder the ties that bind me and let my thoughts incessantly dwell only on thee. This is my heartfelt prayer, O Kṛṣṇa.”

The Lord smiled and said: “So be it.” Yudhiṣṭhira's turn came. He was inconsolable with grief and self-reproach for the destruction of so many warriors. “Even the declaration in the scriptures that a king does not incur sin by killing the enemies of the people in a righteous war does not satisfy me,” he said.

Sūta said: Yudhiṣṭhira, son of the god of righteousness, was haunted by thoughts of war (which is always a source of unrighteousness) so he sought the presence of his grandfather, Bhīṣma. O sages, this was one of the rarest moments in history. Gods, angels and men assembled at the feet of Bhīṣma, the greatest warrior known to history, whose body had been pierced by so many arrows that when he fell to the ground his body did not touch the earth. He had the power to leave his body at will and was waiting for the sacred Uttarayana, or winter solstice, to do so. On this day the pāṇḍavā and lord Kṛṣṇa arrived.

Though on account of his loyalty to Duryodhana, Bhīṣma had fought against Yudhiṣṭhira in battle, Bhīṣma lovingly consoled Yudhiṣṭhira: “O king! I consider that whatever happened was brought about by that inscrutable power that directs events here on earth. What a wonder it is that where you, the embodiment of dharma, rule, with such warriors as Bhīma and Arjuna and with lord Kṛṣṇa himself as the supreme friend and well-wisher—even there such adversity could prevail! Know, therefore, that all this was the work of unseen and mysterious powers.”

Bhīṣma continued: “Śrī Kṛṣṇa is God himself, though he lives incognito veiling his divinity with the power of illusion. He is the same to all. Yet, how compassionate he is to come to me just when I am about to leave the body! A yogi who casts off his body after entering his mind into the Lord, while reciting his names with his lips, is freed from cravings and karma (action-reaction chain).”

O sages, at Yudhiṣṭhira’s request Bhīṣma then discoursed upon the duties of man in great detail, for Bhīṣma was the greatest among the knowers of truth. The sacred hour arrived. Bhīṣma looked at Kṛṣṇa with unwinking eyes and burst into rapturous hymn:

“At the hour of my departure I offer my mind to Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the supreme being, who assumes various forms for his own divine purpose. May my heart ever rest in Kṛṣṇa, whose radiant face is hallowed by hair laden with the dust of the battlefield, who volunteered to serve as Arjuna’s charioteer, who taught him the Bhagavad Gītā, who protected the pāṇḍavā in numerous ways, and whose gaze fell on all those on the battlefield so that those who were killed (whether they were ‘friend’ or ‘foe’) would attain freedom from mortal existence and be endowed with a form similar to the Lord’s.”

Bhīṣma, the enlightened, became one with the absolute. Yudhiṣṭhira and the others, accompanied by lord Kṛṣṇa, returned to the capital, where Yudhiṣṭhira became king.

Sūta continued: Lord Kṛṣṇa rejoiced that the evil-doers had been conquered, and the righteous Yudhiṣṭhira had been crowned king. Yudhiṣṭhira had regained his equanimity and wisdom from Bhīṣma's discourses, and ruled the kingdom with love and justice. The gods rejoiced, for prosperity smiled on the country. Rid of evil and the fear of evil, people lived in peace, in physical and mental health.

Lord Kṛṣṇa obtained the permission of the pāṇḍavā to return to Dvārakā, his own capital (on the west coast of India). Parting was extremely painful and difficult. He who even listens to the stories of Kṛṣṇa longs to hear them without interruption. The pāṇḍavā were with him in person. How could they bear to live without him? Yet, it had to be.

The pāṇḍavā gave him a royal send-off. They went with him to the outskirts of their capital, Hastināpura. The simple, god-loving womenfolk of the country feasted their eyes on the Lord and sang his praises:

“Ah, my friend! Is this not the Lord himself who playfully creates, sustains and withdraws into himself the entire universe? Is this not the Lord whose glory is sung by saints and sages, by the vedā and scriptures? Indeed, he is the Lord himself whose lotus feet are realised by enlightened beings who have fully conquered their senses and have controlled their vital airs, whose minds yearn for his vision and whose hearts are thoroughly cleansed by unceasing devotion—for he alone can cleanse our hearts and fill them with purity. Whenever the rulers of the earth, their intellects clouded by tamas, live unrighteous lives and thus promote unrighteousness on earth, then he (who is purity itself) descends on earth in various forms, manifesting the divine attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience and also truth, justice, compassion and divine activity. Blessed is Dvārakā, his own city; blessed are the people among whom he was born; blessed are the women espoused by him, who are the pride and glory of womanhood.”

Lord Kṛṣṇa smiled—for these simple womenfolk, with pure love in their hearts had discovered the truth which had been veiled from the eyes of haughty kings and mighty warriors. After taking leave of the pāṇḍavā, lord Kṛṣṇa travelled through different states of central India and reached western India. Everywhere in this journey the people worshipped Kṛṣṇa.

Sūta continued: As he neared the outskirts of his capital city, lord Kṛṣṇa announced his return by blowing his conch. This signalled the commencement of the festivities. The city wore a festive appearance. People lined the main road to feast their eyes upon the ever radiant and beautiful face of the Lord. They welcomed him with words which expressed their love and devotion to him, their wisdom and reverence:

“O Lord, we bow down to your lotus feet, adored by the gods themselves, which are beyond the flux of change or becoming, and which are sought by those who aspire for liberation. You are our father, mother, our dearest friend, our preceptor and our supreme deity. Indeed we are the most blessed people on earth for we have been chosen to be close to you. Yet, such is your glory, O Lord, that even this familiarity augments our love for you. Every moment you are away seems an aeon!”

As the Lord passed through the flags and festoons, banners and buntings that adorned the roads to welcome him, there was a shower of flowers from above. The brāhmaṇā recited the vedā; muscians sang and women danced. There was great rejoicing in the air.

In the midst of all this, the Lord passed through the main thoroughfare of the city, bowing to all the people (even those who were considered low!), greeting them, clasping them to his bosom in great love and affection, holding their hands, smiling and casting endearing looks, granting them boons of their choice and blessing them. He himself received the blessings of the holy men and women, aged folk and others.

Lord Kṛṣṇa first entered the palace of his parents and bowed at their feet. Then he went into his own palace and was lovingly received by his wives who had been constantly thinking of him even in his absence. He had returned to them after witnessing the destruction of evil-minded people who had destroyed themselves by their mutual enmity. The same Lord now appeared as the husband of his consorts, though he is completely free from all taints of worldliness. How mysterious is the power of ignorance: ignorant people, finding the Lord engaged, like themselves, in various activities, regard him as a human being full of attachment! Such indeed is the divine glory of the Lord that though he seems to live like mortals subject to nature, he is not tainted by the qualities of nature, (satva, rajas and tamas). Even they who take refuge in him are untainted by the qualities of nature.

Śaunaka prayed: O Sūta, you said lord Kṛṣṇa protected the foetus of Uttarā. Tell us how Parīkṣit was born and what he did!

Sūta said: While being scorched by the fire of the great missile in the womb of his mother, the unborn son of Uttarā saw a being the size of the thumb, blue in colour, radiant and charming, clad in yellow robes that were brilliant like lightning and wearing a golden crown. It was lord Kṛṣṇa himself! The unborn child saw this being disperse the scorching rays of the missile with a divine weapon he wielded. When the fire had been quenched, this person vanished, even as the child looked on!

At an auspicious hour, Uttarā was delivered of the baby, the sole survivor of the pāṇḍavā clan. His grandfathers rejoiced greatly. Immediately after the birth, the king gave generously in charity.

Those well versed in the language of the stars predicted that the child would grow up to be a great and noble king. He would rule his subjects justly like Ikṣvāku, adhere to truth like Rāma, be charitable like Śibi, become famous like Bharata, be an archer like Arjuna, be heroic like the lion, enduring like the earth, forbearing like parents, a refuge like the Himālaya, even-minded like Brahmā, gracious like Śiva, protect all like Viṣṇu, possess excellent virtues like Kṛṣṇa, be generous like Rantideva, pious like Yayāti, firm like Bali and devoted to Kṛṣṇa as Prahāda was. He would subdue the wicked.

In course of time, he would be subject to the curse of brāhmaṇā. Calmly awaiting his death by snake-bite, the king would renounce all worldly attachments and listen to the story of God narrated by the foremost among sages—Śuka himself. Thus established in the Lord, the king would cast off his mortal coil.

Since he was “protected at birth by lord Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu)” he would be known as Viṣṇu-rāta. Since he would continue to look throughout his life for the person whom he saw in his mother’s womb, he would be known as Parīkṣit (one who is always looking for something).

Suta continued: At about the same time, O sages, Vidura (the younger brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra) returned to Hastināpura from a long pilgrimage. After the whole family had joyously welcomed him back,

Yudhiṣṭhira enquired about Vidura's pilgrimage: "Blessed uncle, tell us what places you have visited. Surely places acquire sanctity when saints and god-men like yourself visit them."

Vidura gave a detailed account of his pilgrimage, excluding the destruction of the yādava-race which, he knew, would hurt them. Time passed by quickly. One day, filled with supreme love and concern for the ultimate good of his elder brother Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura said to him: "Brother, why are you still leading a householder's life, attached to kinsmen and kingdom? Do you not see that all-powerful time is stealing days and months from our life-span? Don't you realise that soon we shall be overtaken by death? I consider him a hero who, having dedicated his whole heart and soul to the love of lord Kṛṣṇa, frees himself from worldly attachments, attains true knowledge and drops his body wherever it happens to fall—unknown, unwept and unsung". Hearing this Dhṛtarāṣṭra was awakened inwardly. He and his devoted wife, Gāndhārī, slipped away from the palace unnoticed and went to the forest.

When Yudhiṣṭhira discovered the absence of the royal couple, he was sorely distressed. Just then, the celestial sage, Nārada, arrived upon the scene. In answer to Yudhiṣṭhira's enquiry concerning his uncle and aunt, Nārada said:

"Grieve not for anybody, O king, for the entire world is in the control of God. All the worlds and their rulers adore the Lord. He himself brings people together and he brings about their separation. Whether you regard human beings here as the eternal spirit, as ephemeral living objects, as both eternal and ephemeral, or as neither eternal nor transient (as the indescribable and transcendent absolute), you should not grieve for them. Can one protect another in this world, O king? When one's own body is but a composition of the elements, and subject to disease, old age and death, how foolish it is to assume responsibility for others! Can one who is being swallowed by a python offer protection to another? O king, your uncle and aunt have gone to the forest and are spending their time in constant remembrance of the Lord, having completely gone beyond māyā and her three qualities. Shortly a fire will consume your uncle's body along with the hut in which he resides; and your aunt, devoted as she is to your uncle, will enter the burning hut. Hearing of this your other uncle Vidura will again leave on a pilgrimage. So, give up this meaningless sorrow."

As these words of wisdom, Yudhiṣṭhira regained his composure.

Sīta continued: Arjuna had gone to Dvārakā to ascertain lord Kṛṣṇa's welfare and that of other relatives. Several months had elapsed. Arjuna had not returned. The king grew anxious and began to notice bad omens.

The worst of these omens was that so soon after the Mahābhārata war in which all evil-doers had been killed, people had again taken to unrighteous living. Hypocrisy characterised their relationships. They were ruled by greed, anger and falsehood. There was hatred between friends and even between husband and wife. Yudhiṣṭhira feared that the dark age (kali) had set in. He said to Bhīma, his brother:

“Why has Arjuna not yet returned? May it be that lord Kṛṣṇa to whom we owe our fortune, our kingdom, nay our life itself, has left this world and ascended to his celestial kingdom? The strange behaviour of the animals, the way the seasons have changed and the throbbing of parts of the left side of my body, make me anxious. The horizon is smoky. The sun and the moon look dull. There are frequent earthquakes and violent thunderstorms accompanied by blinding lightning. There are strong winds which raise the dust and darken the whole earth. The sun has lost its brilliance. Heaven and earth seem to be set on fire. Rivers and lakes are agitated. There is gloom and sorrow in the very air. From these grave forebodings I infer that the earth has lost its charm, having been deprived of the touch of the feet of lord Kṛṣṇa.”

One day as Yudhiṣṭhira was thus musing, Arjuna arrived. He collapsed at Yudhiṣṭhira's feet, which was quite unlike him. His face indicated terrible sorrow. This greatly aggravated the king's own grief and he questioned Arjuna:

“What is the cause of your agony, Arjuna? Are all our kith and kin in Dvārakā in good health? How is lord Kṛṣṇa himself? Why do you not talk? Why do you not answer? Why do you appear grief-stricken? Is there something wrong with your health, O Arjuna? Were you insulted or ill-treated by somebody? Have you failed in your duty in any way: did you fail to offer protection to the needy—you who have never turned away anyone who sought your protection? Did you ever unwittingly eat before ensuring that the aged and the children who were hungry were fed? Or did you do anything at all unbecoming? Or—I shudder at the very thought—have you been separated from the most beloved Lord and intimate friend, śrī Kṛṣṇa? Kindly tell me.”

Sūta continued: Arjuna, in a state of deep shock, replied to Yudhiṣṭhira, his voice choked with grief: “Brother, I had fallen prey to the Lord’s deluding power. The Lord himself was with us as śrī Kṛṣṇa. It was he who enabled me and Bhīma to perform those heroic deeds admired even by gods. He saved us from several terrible pitfalls. It was by his grace I fought with lord Śiva and Indra, and later enjoyed a holiday in Indra’s celestial abode. How can I describe the many mysterious ways in which he saved us, and particularly me, during the war! Seated in front of me in my chariot, he robbed all our adversaries of their strength and of their hearts, too! Seated safely behind him, I was immune to attack. But, alas, how foolish of me to have chosen the supreme Lord as my charioteer when sages of wisdom worship his feet in order to attain final liberation. He treated me as his friend: but, alas, I treated him as a friend, too, and took undue liberties with him. In his unlimited generosity, he tolerated such behaviour.

“Now I am deprived of him, the supreme Lord, dearest friend and companion: I have lost my heart; I am lifeless. I came to this shameful realisation when I was defeated by wicked and weak cowherds who attacked me and the Lord’s spouses whom I was escorting! With him nothing was impossible; without him nothing is possible.

“O king, you asked about our kith and kin in Dvārakā. He had used the powerful yādavā to destroy the wicked ones; in the end, he brought about internecine hostility to destroy them. Having accomplished his mission he left, even as one extracts a thorn with another thorn and throws that away, too. Such are the Lord’s mysterious ways that sometimes he appears to promote love and at others destruction.”

As Arjuna uttered these words he recollected what Kṛṣṇa had taught him on the battlefield (the Bhagavad Gītā), and was instantly released from ignorance and grief. Hearing this terrible news and realising that the very day Kṛṣṇa left this earth, kali yuga (the age when unawakened people indulge in unrighteous actions) had set in, king Yudhiṣṭhira quickly crowned his grandson Parīkṣit as king, and renounced the world. By the laya yoga process of absorption he dissolved each element into its source, ultimately into cosmic nature which he merged in the supreme being. He then wandered in a northward direction like a deaf, dumb and dull man. His brothers followed his example. Vidura cast off his body near Dvārakā, the

Lord's own city. Draupadī concentrated her whole mind on the Lord and attained final liberation, or union with the Lord.

O sages, such in brief is the account of the ascension of the pāṇḍavā to heaven—which narrative bestows devotion and final liberation on the listener.

Book One Chapter 16

Sūta continued: In course of time, the devout and righteous king Parīkṣit married and begot four sons (Janamejaya and others). When he offered worship to the gods during the performance of three Aśvamedha rites, they manifested themselves to receive his offerings personally.

While the king was living in the kuru-jāngala region, he heard that kali (the dark age) had invaded his country in the form of unrighteous living. Deeply disturbed by this news the king made a tour of inspection of the whole kingdom. He was pleasantly surprised to hear people singing the glories and the glorious exploits of his grandparents (the pāṇḍavā) and of lord Kṛṣṇa. They even narrated the thrilling story of how lord Kṛṣṇa saved the king even while he was in his mother's womb. The village folk had woven these sublime episodes into sweet and inspiring songs. The king was highly pleased with these recitations and bestowed rich presents on the people who sang them, so that the history of Kṛṣṇa and the pāṇḍavā might never be forgotten.

Then, the king beheld an awe-inspiring spectacle. A bull, standing on one foot, was consoling a weeping cow. The bull was the embodiment of righteousness and the cow, of mother earth. As the king stood transfixed by this unearthly vision, the bull (dharma) asked the cow (earth) the cause of her grief: "Are you weeping because I am deprived of three legs and I stand on only one? Are you weeping because you, the earth, will soon come to be ruled by uncultured, unwise and unrighteous people? Or, are you sorry that spiritual knowledge has fallen into corrupt hands and that the men of learning and wisdom (brāhmaṇā) are selling it to gain wealth and political power?"

Earth (the cow) replied: "Dharma, you know the answers! Lord Kṛṣṇa by whose grace you had all your legs and by whose grace my burden was reduced, has left the world. Truthfulness, purity, compassion, forbearance, liberality, contentment, guilelessness, calmness, control of the senses, austerity, non-irritability, endurance,

peace, knowledge, self-realisation, dispassion, lordship, heroism, majesty, strength, right judgment, independence, dexterity, loveliness, fortitude, gentleness, intelligence, modesty, amiability, quickness of mind, acuteness of the senses, bodily vigour, fortune, sobriety, steadiness, reverence, reputation, respectability and absence of egotism—these and other virtues which great men seek are present in him. Hence I am concerned for you and other divinities and the holy ones. In a godless world how can there be virtue? This is why I grieve—wicked people are a burden on me (earth).”

Book One Chapter 17

Sūta continued: The king Parīkṣit also beheld an uncultured and irreligious man in the guise of a king beating the bull and kicking the cow. Enraged, the monarch challenged the brigand, arrested him and then spoke to the bull. “Who are you, O bull, hopping along on one leg? Who cut off your other legs? How can such a thing happen in my kingdom? For it is said that the reputation, life-span, fortune and heavenly enjoyment of a king are destroyed if in his kingdom the people are oppressed by the wicked. Tell me who is the cause of your suffering and I shall destroy him!”

The wise bull, however, replied: “I thank you, O king, for your offer of protection. But how can I judge who is responsible for my suffering? Some say one is responsible for one’s own suffering, others say it is providence, others say that it is the nature of the world, and yet others believe the cause to be beyond speech and intellect!” Interrupting the bull, the king said: “O bull, you are indeed dharma! You know that finding fault with evil is evil, too. In a former age you had four supports—austerity, purity, compassion and truthfulness. Unrighteousness has robbed you of the first three. Now kali, this dark age, is threatening the last leg. I know that the cow is mother earth bemoaning the departure of lord Kṛṣṇa.”

Turning to the irreligious man (who was none other than kali), Parīkṣit said: “You have no quarter in my kingdom, O man of evil! Ever since you began to reside in the body of kings, unrighteousness has increased on earth. In my kingdom, however, lord Kṛṣṇa abides eternally, in the form of righteous actions and devotion to the Lord.” Trembling before the king, Kali begged: “I pray to you: show me the places where I may abide without ever coming into conflict with you.”

After deep thought, king Parīkṣit replied: “O Kali, you are the embodiment of unrighteousness and evil! Hereafter dwell in gam-

bling dens, intoxicating drinks, lustful women, slaughter houses and gold. Residing in these five abodes, you will manifest as falsehood, intoxication, passion, slaughter and animosity.”

O sages, a seeker after holiness should in every way avoid these five abodes of evil.

The king then restored to the bull the other three legs, comforted mother earth and returned to his palace.

*A Sage Curses Parīkṣit
Book One Chapter 18*

Sūta continued: O sages, king Parīkṣit was protected even before birth by the Lord. He fearlessly subdued the spirit of unrighteousness, kali, which had no quarter in his kingdom. Even when death knocked at his door, he faced it fearlessly. For, no confusion arises even at the hour of death in the hearts of those who constantly think of the lotus feet of lord Kṛṣṇa and speak about him. The water that touched his lotus feet is the holy river Gaṅgā that purifies the world and even the gods. The goddess of wealth and prosperity worships the dust of his feet.

Sages! I shall narrate to you how king Parīkṣit met with his mortal end. One day he was hunting in the forest. It was hot and he was extremely thirsty. He saw the hermitage of sage Śamīka, which he entered. The sage was seated in meditation. The king asked for water. The sage did not open his eyes. The thirsty king was annoyed, and for once in his life he entertained feelings of anger and hostility towards the holy ones. With the tip of his bow he picked up a dead snake lying there and threw it around the sage’s neck as if to ask: “Are you really meditating, with mind and senses withdrawn, or are you merely trying to avoid me, on account of your arrogance?” Even then the sage did not open his eyes. The king went away.

The sage’s son heard of the indignity perpetrated on his father and became exceedingly angry. “How dare these kṣatriyā (rulers) thus misbehave towards their masters! Their duty is to protect the holy men in all humility. These wicked kings misbehave like this because lord Kṛṣṇa is not here to chastise them. However, I shall myself punish the miscreant.” The young man cursed the king: “May the terribly venomous snake, Takṣaka, bite the king seven days from now.” He returned to the hermitage and wailed aloud. Śamīka’s meditation was disturbed by this and he opened his eyes. The son told him all that had happened. Śamīka was not pleased! “O child! You have sinned against the king, who is lord Viṣṇu himself.

For a little error you have pronounced a terrible curse. If the king dies robbers will flourish, religion will decline and there will be confusion in society. All these sins arise from your rash action and will therefore assail us. Moreover, the devotees of the Lord never retaliate even when reproached, deceived, abused, disregarded or struck by others though they are capable of doing so. May the almighty Lord forgive the sin committed by this child of immature understanding!”

Book One Chapter 19

Sūta continued: As soon as the king’s thirst was quenched, his temper cooled; he recalled with intense remorse his sinful conduct toward the holy hermit. He knew in his conscience that as a result of this misdemeanour shown to the holy man, who was the Lord himself, a great calamity would befall him. And, sure enough, he soon heard of the young brāhmaṇa’s curse. He had anticipated it. He was ready for it. He welcomed it, as it would restrain him from further evil conduct. The curse awakened the intensest dispassion in him. Blessed was he that he knew the hour of his death seven days beforehand.

King Parīkṣit abdicated his throne in favour of his son, Janamejaya, and resolved to fast unto death on the bank of the holy Gaṅgā. When he sat down there, several holy sages reached the same spot. The king welcomed them, worshipped them, and told them of his noble resolve and the reason for it. He prayed to them to bless him: “To one such as I am, a sinful ruler of a kingdom, the young sage’s curse is the grace of the Lord. Bowing to you, O holy ones, I pray: each time I take birth may I be endowed with devotion to the eternal lord Kṛṣṇa and the constant company of noble souls who are devoted to him, and may I also be blessed with friendship for all.”

The sages applauded the king’s decision and approved of his prayer. They resolved to spend the last week of his life in his company.

Meanwhile, sage Śuka arrived on the scene. He looked like a boy of sixteen. He had an extremely charming body, well built, well proportioned and perfect in every way. He was stark naked. There was no mark on the body to indicate to which caste he belonged (as he had gone beyond all castes) nor to which order of life (for he had reached the goal of life). Though he had the external appearance of a lunatic, the sages seated in the king’s company recognised him and welcomed him.

Bowing to sage Śuka, king Parīkṣit greeted him. He considered himself supremely blessed to be visited by the sage. “Surely, lord Kṛṣṇa himself is pleased with me. That is why one who is awaiting death is granted the privilege of meeting a holy sage like you. Your very presence wipes out our sins. My Lord! Please tell me what should be done by a man who is about to die? Also, tell me what should be done by people in general—what should they listen to, recite, do, remember, resort to and avoid?”