

Extracts from the Srimad Bhagavatam

Book Eight

XV — XXIII - Vamana Avatara

This discourse is between Lord Vamana (an avatar of the Supreme Vishnu in the form of a dwarf) and King Bali.

Without loss of time Vamana went to meet Bali, who was then performing an aswamedha on the banks of Narmada and was received with great respect by his priests, who thought he resembled the four Kumaras in spiritual splendour and youth. Bali welcomed him affectionately, washed his feet and sprinkled his own head with the washing and finally requested him to name his wish, land, gold, a comfortable house, a cow, elephant, horse, or, “perhaps, a girl,” which he vowed to grant readily. Greatly pleased, the dwarf answered that Bali’s speech was worthy of him and his race, wherein no one was known to have lacked generosity or broken a promise. He remembered the host’s grandfather Prahlada, who was a perfect model in the practice of dharma, and his great-grandfather Hiranyakasipu, whose renowned valour made even Lord Vishnu run away from Vaikuntha and, it was said, finding no place where He could hide, entered the nostril of the pursuer himself, where alone He felt Himself safe, and concluded with:

“Like your celebrated forefather, you have, O King, been foremost in the observance of the rules of dharma and lavish charity. Of you, the great giver, I ask a small bit of land which measures not more than three of my own (dwarfish) paces: for to take more than he needs the wise man transgresses.”

The ridiculous pettiness of the demand greatly amused Bali, who could not resist reminding his guest that he was too young to be alive to his interest in asking for such a tiny bit when he could have a whole continent, and added that now that he was disposed to be generous, Vamana could take as much land as would secure him a decent living.

The divine dwarf answered:

“The possession of all the three worlds cannot satisfy a man of unrestrained ambition. He who cannot be satisfied with three paces will not be satisfied with a whole continent. Prithu, Gaya and other kings who ruled over all the seven continents could never have enough, so great was their greed. The contented person can easily live on what chance places at his disposal. The hunger for wealth and sense-enjoyment is responsible for rebirth, whereas contentment inherits the great treasures of Liberation. I ask, therefore, O Protector of men, for only three paces of land which will cover my bare necessity.”

Bali laughed and, pouring water in the palm of one hand, he pronounced his solemn promise to grant the gift demanded. Sukracharya warned Bali against this grant, the pettiness of which appeared to him to be very ominous. It might conceal a serious design on the part of Vishnu Himself to dispossess the asuras in favour of the celestials. He foresaw what was actually to take place and advised Bali to retract, which, he said, was legitimate to do when one’s life and the lives of one’s dependants were exposed to grave danger. But Bali was not prepared to go back on his pledged word and, with great respect to his preceptor, magnanimously answered:

“It is true, O worshipful Brahmin, that a householder must not part with his means of livelihood; but, having promised, I cannot be guilty of breach of promise to a holy Brahmin, like a base swindler, out of greed. I do not fear hell, poverty, loss of throne or even death as much as I fear playing false to a Brahmin. In any case all the wealth in the world has to be abandoned at death. Time has taken away all the

enjoyments of the daityas (my forefathers), who owned the whole universe, but could not extinguish their fame as heroes, who had never known what retreating in battle was. The fame of the magnanimous man who gives away all his fortune to needy supplicants, more so to knowers of Brahman, like your good self and this dwarf, and turns poor is far greater than even that of warriors, who lay down their lives on the battlefield. I will give to the Brahmin the land promised, be He Lord Vishnu Himself Whom we daily worship, or an enemy.”

Sukracharya got very enraged at Bali’s disobedience and, impelled by destiny, cursed him in the words, “Because you have shown arrogance to me your guru, you shall, O fool, soon fall from your royal splendour,” which did not in the least deflect Bali’s resolve to grant the promised gift. He washed the feet of Vamana from a golden vessel of water, which his queen herself had carried for the purpose. All the celestials applauded the magnanimity of Bali and showered celestial flowers on him. They beat their drums and sang hymns in his praise. But lo! the dwarf started expanding at such a rate that in a little time he filled all the spheres. Bali and his priests were staggered to see the whole creation in his body and, when he started measuring the three paces, he covered the whole earth and the cardinal points with one. His second covered swarga and stretched to the highest satyaloka, leaving no room for his third pace. There rose a great outcry among the daityas and the danavas at the deceit of Vamana, who proved a traitor to their cause, and rushed with weapons to attack him, but Vamana’s attendants gave them a good beating and Bali, remembering the curse of his guru, knew that his fall was inevitable. He ordered his followers to retreat, saying that Vishnu, who had brought him to power by the Viswajit sacrifice was now standing against him, because time was now favourable to the celestials and advised them to wait patiently when time will turn in their favour and they will have the upper hand. The righteous Bali was bound by ropes and taken prisoner, to the sorrow of both the gods and the asuras.

Lord Vamana charged Bali with perjury for having promised three paces of ground but gave only two, and sentenced him to imprisonment in the nether regions. Bali bore the sentence with equanimity and calmly answered:

“I did not intend, O Illustrious Lord, to deceive You. You have taken everything I possess, yet if You think that I owe You some more space for Your third step, You may be pleased to place it on my head. Fallen that I am, I am not afraid of the infernal regions nor of the loss of my kingdom, nor of any punishment, which the Great may deem fit to inflict on me. You now pose as our enemy, but I know You to be our greatest benefactor — You Who have blessed us with a vision of Yourself on the pretence of causing our downfall, having had which vision many an asura attained Liberation. In his profound wisdom my illustrious grandfather Prahlada, of universal fame, suffered all the variety of torture to preserve his firm devotion to You, although You exterminated his kinsmen the asuras, *knowing full well that no lasting benefit can be gained from relatives who are disposed to rob one of ones wealth, or from wife who is the cause of transmigration, or even from one’s own body which abandons one at death.* How good is my destiny to bring me in direct contact with You, disguised as enemy though You may be!”

Suddenly Prahlada appeared and prostrated himself before the Lord and with tears of joy addressed Him:

“O Lord, it was by You that the exalted office of Indra was conferred on Bali and by you that it has now been taken away. Whatever You do is always for one’s good. *Especially the taking away of one’s possessions which usually corrupt the mind, must be deemed to be a great favour: for no man of wealth can make any attempt to seek his true nature. Even men of learning fall victims to delusion if they are wealthy. Hail to You, Lord of the universe and Witness of all things!*”

Brahma, who also arrived, interceded on Bali’s behalf. The glorious Lord replied:

“Whomever I want to favour with My Grace I divest him of his fortune — the fortune which hardens the heart against living beings and against Me. *If pride of lineage, wealth, physical graces, learning and power*

do not appear in the man who owns them, it must be considered as a favour from Me. My devotee who deserves these advantages is not corrupted by them as the foolish man is.

“This leader of the daityas and danavas (Bali) has already conquered My invincible Maya, which is the reason why he is unperturbed by the calamity which has befallen him and stood firm by his promise even at the great cost of disobeying his guru and suffering his curse. He deserves to dwell in My own Vaikuntha, but he will have first to occupy the seat of Indra under My guardianship in the next Manvantara (the eighth) of Savarni Manu, ruling in the meantime Sataloka, whose natural beauty has been enhanced by the art of Viswakarma, the celestial architect, where no anxiety, disease, fatigue, disappointment and other afflictions exist.

“O great Indrasena (Bali, Indra elect), may you flourish! Go now with your kinsmen to Satala, which is envied even by the celestials, where none can harm you. My discus will destroy the daityas who will disobey your command and will protect you, your followers, and all your possessions. You will shed your demoniacal dispositions at the sight of My glory, which will be ever present there.”